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Report on persecution religious minorities in Russia

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Executive Summary

This report outlines the persecutions of religious minorities in today's Russia. The principle of religious freedom enshrined in the Russian Constitution, as well as in other laws passed in the beginning of the 1990s in the wake of democratic changes in Russia, is currently seriously endangered. The effect of this principle has been largely offset by numerous modifications of Russian legislation in recent years.

First, the so-called Yarovaya law, named after one of its drafters, Irina Yarovaya, the MP from the ruling political party United Russia, subjects the freedom of religion to excessive regulation and imposes numerous restrictions on the activities of religious organisations, particularly foreign organisations.

One of the novelties introduced by the Yarovaya law is a new definition of missionary activity, which equates such activity with the dissemination of religious convictions and views. Now, any activities aimed at dissemination of one's faith can only be carried out under the aegis of a religious association, which must comply with endless bureaucratic requirements. Failure to comply with the requirements of the new legislation on missionary activity now constitutes an offence punishable by the imposition of substantial fines.

In addition to fines, religious associations in Russia are subject to other kinds of pressure, such as the coercive confiscation of land parcels and buildings used for worship services on the pretext of incorrectly completed documents. The number of such cases in Russia is rapidly increasing.

Another recently introduced tool for the prosecution of religious minorities in Russia is so-called anti-extremist legislation". Already notorious in criminal cases against personae non grata with extreme political views, it is now actively used against representatives of religious organisations that are not part of the pre-eminent Russian Orthodox Church. Implementation of the law follows this pattern: a religious organisation is declared extremist; its activities on the territory of Russia are banned; and its members, if they continue to jointly teach their religion, are persecuted as extremists. A prominent example is the declaration of the Jehovah's Witnesses Management Centre in Russia an extremist organisation, its ban, and the subsequent persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. The persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses in contemporary Russia is comparable only persecution of this group in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

Aside from the Jehovah's Witnesses, the representatives of non-Orthodox Christian confessions (Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Pentecostals and Seventh-Day Adventists), Krishna, Muslims, and even Orthodox Christians who are not part of the pre-eminent Russian Orthodox Church, are subject to the coercive power of the State.

A particularly unfavourable situation has developed on the territory of the annexed Crimea. Dozens of pastors have had to flee the occupying authorities. Their communities have been forced to register under the leadership of church unions loyal to the Kremlin, while the registration of certain associations, such as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate, has been unjustly thwarted by the occupying powers.

The main governmental organisations responsible for the persecution of representatives of religious minorities are the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB), the successor of the KGB of the USSR, and the General Administration for Combating Extremism, housed within the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation. These two organisations serve as the political police in Russia. It is the members of these organisation who look for potential victims among believers, fabricate criminal cases and perform operational support in cases against the representatives of religious minorities.

In addition to the direct perpetrators, there are also clients who order political persecutions against religious minorities. Among them are the drafters of the laws that restrict the freedom of religion, the MPs who vote for the adoption of such laws, and, last but not the least, President Putin, who endorses these laws.

The aforementioned facts present evidence of a catastrophic situation for freedom of religion in Russia. Religious organisations are regularly banned, declared extremist, their members subject to criminal and administrative sanctions, and their houses of worship demolished. Meanwhile, the absence of real democracy in Russia makes it impossible to exert influence on the situation from within. It is becoming increasingly clear that without external intervention of powerful national and international organisations, the repression of religious minorities in Russia cannot be stopped.

Preamble

The expansion of freedom of religion that unfolded in Russia at the beginning of the 1990s, in tandem with the democratic changes of that period, is currently under serious threat. Putin's regime is characterised by a high degree of state interference in various areas of public life, including the sphere of religion. The penetration of the Russian state into the area of religion intensifies each year, subjecting the activities of religious communities and associations to regulation and control, entangling them in bureaucratic webs and standing in the way of their free operation and development.

In recent years, the Putin regimes interference has escalated further, marking a transition from a policy of control to the open persecution of religious minorities. Freedom of religion is still formally in force, as promulgated in the Constitution of the Russian Federation, but it has been deprived of almost any practical significance. A rising tide of repression, comparable to the persecution of religious minorities in the Soviet Union, is sweeping Russia.

1. The legislative framework of the persecution of religious minorities

Freedom of religion was enshrined in the Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993, which proclaims that everyone shall be guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion, including the right to profess individually or collectively any religion or not to profess any religion, and freely to choose, possess and disseminate religious and other convictions and act in accordance with them."

This constitutional principle is defined in more detail in the special Federal Law No 125-FZ of September 26, 1997, On the freedom of conscience and religious associations." Its original version confirmed everyones right to freedom of conscience and association, as well as equality before the law irrespective of their religion and beliefs; furthermore, it clearly emphasised that Russia is a secular state.

This law specifies that the Russian Federation guarantees the freedom of conscience and faith, including the right to profess individually or jointly with others any religion or to profess no religion whatever, to perform religious services, other rituals and ceremonies, to instruct in religion and offer religious education, to freely choose and alter, have and disseminate religious and other convictions and act in accordance with them, including creation of religious associations. It also emphasises that "the establishment of privileges, restrictions or any other forms of discrimination depending on one's attitude to religion shall not be allowed." Moreover, the law stipulates that religious associations in Russia are separate from the state and are equal before the law.

Religious associations in Russia are divided into two types: religious groups and religious organisations.

A **religious group** is any voluntary association of citizens set up with the objective of joint profession and dissemination of faith, carrying on its activities without the registration with the state authorities and without the acquisition of capacity of a legal entity. Despite the fact that, formally, a religious group does not require state registration, it is under legal

obligation to notify the state registration authority about its establishment the basis of its faith, the facilities used for worship, other religious rituals and ceremonies, its leader (representative), and citizens who are members (including their names, surnames, patronymics and residence addresses).

A religious organisation, on the other hand, is a voluntary association of citizens and other persons residing permanently and legally in the territory of the Russian Federation, which has been set up for the purposes of joint profession and dissemination of faith and which has been duly registered as a legal entity. The established procedure of setting up of a religious organisation and state registration is complex.

Despite certain bureaucratic restrictions, by and large this law conforms to the standards of a democratic state. However, the introduction of the so-called Yarovaya package drastically changed the situation. The Yarovaya package or the Yarovaya law are two federal bills declared by their authors to regulate counter-terror measures, adopted in Russia in July 2016 under the name of one of their creators, Irina Yarovaya, the Russian MP from the ruling political party United Russia.

The Yarovaya package comprises two laws:

- Federal Law No N 374-FZ of June 6, 2016, Amending the Federal Law on Counterterrorism and Select Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation with Regards to Creation of Additional Measures Aimed at Countering Terrorism and Protecting Public Safety
- Federal Law No 375 of 6 June 2016, Amending the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and the Criminal Procedural Code of the Russian Federation with Regards to Creation of Additional Measures Aimed at Countering Terrorism and Protecting Public Safety

We will address only the first of these two federal laws, as it is this law that addresses the activities of religious associations in Russia.

Federal Law No 125-FZ of September 26, 1997, On the freedom of conscience and religious associations, is among the laws that are subject to amendments under the Yarovaya package. These amendments have severely restricted the activities of religious organisations in Russia, foreign religious organisations in particular.

For example, the legal norm regulating the activities of the representatives of a foreign religious organisation was altered. Now, representatives of a foreign religious organisation are forbidden from engaging in missionary activities (Article 13(2)(2) of the Law On the freedom of conscience and religious associations.)

The Yarovaya law also establishes that the literature, printed, audio- and video-materials produced by religious organisations and disseminated for the purposes of performance of missionary activities on its behalf shall have the marking bearing the official name in full of the given religious organisation. This requirement is theoretically enforceable, but ridiculous in practice. It also remains unclear why every copy of the Bible, every publication and every video on the topic of religion must state the full name of a religious organisation.

To further develop this provision, the Yarovaya law introduces amendments to Article 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation (CAORF), stipulating that performance of activities of a religious organisation without indication of its full official name, including publication or dissemination in the context of missionary activities of literature, printed, audio- and video-materials that do not bear the marking of its name or bear its incomplete name or knowingly false name shall be punishable by an administrative fine accompanied by confiscation of the literature, printed, or audio- and video-materials.

The Yarovaya law further amended the Federal Law No 125-FZ of 26 September 1997 On the freedom of conscience and religious associations by introducing a new Chapter III, which, as opposed to the previous version, provides a definition of missionary activity. Missionary activity is defined as the activity of a religious association aimed at disseminating information about its doctrine among individuals who are not participants of the religious association, with the purpose of including these individuals in the ranks of its participants; this activity is carried out directly by religious associations or authorised individuals and/or legal entities, publicly and with the help of the media, the internet or other lawful means.

As a result, the right, which is still guaranteed to citizens by Article 28 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation and Article 3 of the Federal Law No 125-FZ of 26 September 1997 On the freedom of conscience and religious associations, to freely disseminate their faith and convictions, is now called missionary activity and is subject to regulation. Basically, the law adopted reduces dissemination of religious convictions and missionary activity to one concept, while individual freedom of religion is linked by the lawmakers with a citizens membership in a religious association. If a person disseminates his or her faith and others believe and convert, the former has engaged in missionary activity. The aim of religious teaching, is in fact, to convert people. That said, the teaching of the Gospel is the fundamental part of the practice for the majority of Protestant denominations.

Article 24.2 of the Federal Law On the freedom of conscience and religious associations determines the procedure for carrying out missionary activity. Individuals engaged in missionary activity on behalf of a religious group are required to possess written acknowledgement of the decision from a general meeting of the group granting them the appropriate authority. This written acknowledgement must include details of the establishment and beginning of the religious group's activities, issued by the territorial body of the federal registration authority.

Missionary activity on behalf of a religious organization may be carried out by the head of a religious organisation, a member of its collegial body and/or a priest of the religious organisation.

Other individuals and legal entities shall have the right to carry out missionary work on behalf of a religious organisation if they have a document issued by the governing body of the religious organization confirming their authority to carry out missionary work on behalf of the religious organization. This document must contain details confirming the entry of the religious organization into the Unified State Register of Legal Entities issued by the federal body of state registration or one of its regional agencies.

Foreign nationals and stateless persons lawfully residing on the territory of the Russian Federation shall have the right to carry out missionary work:

- on behalf of a religious group, only on the territory of the subject of the Russian Federation in which the territorial body of the federal body of state registration issued a written acknowledgement of the establishment and the beginning of activity of the said religious group, subject to the availability of the document referred to in paragraph 1 of this Article;
- on behalf of a religious organisation, only on the territory of the subject or subjects of the Russian Federation in accordance with the territorial scope of the activities of this religious organisation subject to the availability of the document referred to in paragraph 2 of this Article.
- foreign nationals who entered the territory of the Russian Federation at the invitation of a religious organisation in accordance with Article 20 of this Federal Law shall have the right to carry out missionary work only on behalf of the said religious organisation on the territory of the subject or subjects of the Russian Federation in accordance with the territorial scope of its activity subject to the availability of the document referred to in paragraph 2 of this Article.

The indicated provision of the law regarding missionary activity practically obliges any person engaging in dissemination of their faith to carry a special document substantiating his/her authorisation, which is, to say the least, absurd. An exception is made for the heads of a religious organisation, members of its collegiate body and/or priests of the religious organisation. However, these individuals must still be able to confirm their authority, position and place of work. Basically, they are still obliged to produce a licence.

Moreover, the provisions of Article 20 of the Law On the freedom of conscience and religious associations basically sets missionary activity equal to professional religious activities and stipulates that foreign nationals may be invited by a religious organisation to carry out missionary work only under an employment or civil agreement with the organisation. Thus, missionary activity carried out by a foreign national in Russia is made contingent on the availability of formally documented employment or civil relations with a Russian religious organisation.

Therefore, missionary activity, and more broadly and by extension, the dissemination of faith, have become a serious bureaucratic challenge demanding acquisition of a permit and authorisation and the carrying of strictly prescribed documents. In such conditions, there can be no talk about free dissemination of one's faith. As Russian history repeats itself, the formal constitutional right to freedom of religion ends up entangled in a web of bureaucratic restrictions.

Certain restrictions are also present in other legal acts. Article 17(3) of the Housing Code of the Russian Federation prohibits carrying out missionary activities in the residential premises, except in cases provided for in Article 16 of the Federal Law No 125-FZ of 26 September 1997 On the freedom of conscience and religious associations. However, Article of the Law On the freedom of conscience, which the Housing Code refers to, provides

that religious worship and other rituals and ceremonies can be carried out unimpeded on residential premises. That said, it is still unclear how to distinguish between worship and religious rituals and the missionary activity that has been so heavily regulated by Russian lawmakers. How should it be determined what is to be treated as a religious ritual and ceremony and what is considered to be missionary activity?

The aforementioned Article 5.26(3) of the CAORF raises serious concerns, as it provides for punishment of the performance of activities of a religious organisation without indication of its full official name." It remains unclear how and where the religious organisation must state its official name. For example, in cases of worship services on rented premises, should there be a banner on the door, or should the priests wear special badges on their robes that state the full name of the local religious organisation (or perhaps the name of the central religious organisation, or both)? Similar ambiguities of the legal prohibitions leave too wide of a space for interpretation of the law and abuse on behalf of the law enforcement authorities. This is exactly what we witness in law enforcement practices in Russia in other domains.

Another major tool for the prosecution of religious minorities in Russia has become so-called anti-extremist legislation." Having already become notorious in criminal cases against extremists, it is now being actively used against the representatives of religious organisations that are not part of the pre-eminent Russian Orthodox Church. This legislation consists primarily of the Federal Law On combating extremist activities and the anti-extremist articles of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation: Articles 280, 282, 282.1 and 282.2. The law on combating extremist activities prohibits operation of those public and religious organisations that perform activities aimed at undermining state security, issuing propaganda, arousing national or religious discord, and promoting the exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens on the basis of their religion. As regards the said articles of the Criminal Code, they criminalize public calls to extremist activity, incitement to hatred or enmity, and the setting up of extremist associations or extremist organisations. These restrictions are interrelated and typically applied as follows: a religious organisation is declared extremist, its activities on the territory of Russia banned, and its members, if they continue to jointly teach their religion, are persecuted as extremists. An example is the designation of the Jehovah's Witnesses Management Centre in Russia an extremist organisation, its banning and the subsequent persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

2. Law enforcement practice

According to the data of the monitoring team on the rights and freedoms of believers under the Human Rights Committee of the Free Russia Forum, in 2016, 91 cases on so-called illegal missionary activities were brought before the courts, 47 persons were subject to punishment, and RUB 505,000 in fines was invoked in accordance with the judgements enforced in this reporting period. In 2017, as many as 488 cases on illegal missionary activities were brought before the courts, with 274 persons subject to punishment and RUB 3,594,700 in fines invoked. This means that in the period of 2016-2017, 321 persons incurred administrative liability. The amount of fines imposed comprises RUB 4,099,700.

This analysis of judicial decisions demonstrates a catastrophic situation for constitutional principles of freedom of conscience. The majority of the affected were representatives of non-Orthodox Christians confessions (Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Pentecostalists and Seventh-Day Adventists), as well as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Krishna Consciousness Society, and occasionally Muslims.

Special mention should be made of the situation on the territory of the occupied Crimea. Dozens of pastors had to flee the occupying authorities. Their communities were forced to register under the leadership of church unions loyal to the Kremlin, while the registration of certain associations (such as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate) has been unjustly thwarted by the occupying powers.

A new worrying trend has emerged this year: the confiscation and demolition of Protestant houses of worship. Authorities charge believers and religious organisations with misuse of the land parcels that come with residential houses, which, according to the authorities, constitute places of worship. At the same time in Article 16 of the Federal Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" clearly states that that religious associations are free to perform religious rites in residential buildings. Every religious association is entitled to determine what in the framework of its teaching and other internal regulations constitutes a rite, ceremony and worship. The inspection bodies sometime succeed in disallowing the use of residential buildings as a place of worship on the grounds of missing registration documents, as a result of which the building is treated as an unauthorised construction (one example is the case of the House of Prayer of the Pentecostal Church in Novorossiysk this past March; there was a similar case in Abinsk).

The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses

The most catastrophic example of persecution of religious minorities in Russia has been the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The organization has been subject to repression that can be compared only to repression in Hitler's Germany or Stalin's USSR.

On April 20, 2017, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation declared the Jehovah's Witnesses Management Centre in Russia an extremist organisation, banning its activities and the activities of all its 395 divisions on the territory of Russia. The property of the Jehovah's Witnesses Management Centre in Russia became subject to confiscation or forfeiture. On June 17, 2017, the appeal of the Jehovah's Witnesses Management Centre in Russia against the declaration that it was an extremist organization, to be liquidated and banned within Russia, was rejected by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation.

On August 17, 2017, the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation placed the Jehovah's Witnesses Management Centre in Russia and 395 of its local religious organisations on the list of organisations banned in Russia.

Thus, more than 171,000 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation have been threatened with accusations of extremist activities, solely on the grounds of their religion and desire to practice it together with their fellow believers.

Examples of the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses

The first criminal persecutions of the Jehovah's Witnesses started back in 2015. In November 2015, 16 Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted in Taganrog for participation in activities of their religious organisation after the authorities liquidated its local division.

One of the highest-profile cases against the Jehovah's Witnesses is the case of Dennis Christensen, a Danish citizen who has been detained since May 25, 2017. At the moment of his arrest, Christensen was living in Orel and was in possession of a residence permit in the Russian Federation. He is charged with an offence under Article 282.2(1) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, Organising the activity of a religious organisation. He has been charged with extremist activity due to his membership in the community of Jehovah's Witnesses. Christensen has been granted the status of a political prisoner because of the unsubstantiated nature of the charges against him, the violation of his right to a fair trial and a detention period disproportionate to his alleged offences.

In 2018, the prosecution of Jehovah's Witnesses reached mass levels.

On April 19, law-enforcement officers arrested a resident of Vladivostok in his home. He was apprehended on suspicion of organisation of activities of a religious organisation declared extremist (Article 282.2(2) of the Criminal Code).

On April 20, two citizens were detained in Murmansk on suspicion of organisation of activities of Jehovah's Witnesses (Article 282.2(2) of the Criminal Code). The inspectors conducted a search at six locations, including confiscation of literature and electronic media.

Also on April 20, three homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Shuya (Ivanovo Oblast) were raided. One of the residents was apprehended and placed in police custody.

On April 24, the leader of the religious association of the Jehovah's Witnesses Management Centre in Ufa was arrested. He has been charged under Article 282.2(2) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.

On May 7, searches were conducted in four towns in Orenburg Oblast, with a total of 18 raids of the homes of those whom law enforcement authorities consider to be Jehovah's Witnesses. Eight individuals were accused of organisation of activities of the extremist organisation. Six people signed the ROR with travel restrictions; Vladislav Kolbanov was placed under home arrest. By court decision, Vladimir Kochnev and Aleksandr Suvorov were placed in a pre-trial detention facility.

On May 22, Aleksandr Solovyov, resident of Perm, was removed from a train and placed in a pre-trial detention facility. Aleksandr and he wife were on their way home from a trip abroad. Their home was searched.

On May 30, three followers of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Ilham Karimov, Vladimir Myakushin and Konstantin Matrasho, were apprehended and placed in a pre-trial detention facility in Naberezhnye Chelny. The arrests preceded the raids of 10 apartments of Jehovah's Witnesses.

On June 3, officers of the Federal Security Service (FSB) apprehended 44-year-old Andrey Stupnikov, a member of the Jehovahs Witnesses church in Krasnoyarsk. On June 6, Andrey Stupnikov was detained. Criminal proceedings were initiated against him under Article 282.2(1) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (Organising the activities of an extremist organisation). The intelligence agencies submitted to the court the materials of the criminal intelligence and surveillance operations, according to which Stupnikov was planning to attend the international congress of Jehovahs Witnesses in Germany. In the arrest warrant, the judge stated that Stupnikov could be offered political asylum in Germany, knowing that he is subject to criminal proceedings.

On June 6, the spouses Sergey and Anastasiya Polyakov were arrested in Omsk under charges of participation in the activities of an extremist organisation (Article 282.2(2) of the Criminal Code). According to a primary investigation conducted in May 2018, the Polyakovs, residents of Saint Petersburg, arrived at the Azovsky Nemetsky National District of Omsk Oblast, where they conducted propagandistic actions for recruitment of local residents for participation in the activities of the Jehovahs Witnesses organisation.

On June 9, a preliminary hearing of the case of Juriy Zalipaev was held in the Maisky Regional Court of the Kabardino-Balkar Republic. Zalipaev was charged under Article 282(1) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation with incitement of religious hatred and under Article 280(1) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation with calls for extremist behaviour. The proceedings against Zalipayev, head of the local community of Jehovahs Witnesses, were initiated in the summer of 2017. According to a preliminary investigation conducted in August of 2016, Zalipayev, following a warning of the public prosecutor regarding the inadmissibility of conducting extremist activity tasked the church members with dissemination of copies of a publication included on the federal list of extremist literature with the purpose of inciting hatred towards the Christian priests."

On June 13, it became known that four believers in Shuya in Ivanovo Oblast, subject to criminal proceedings, signed the ROR with travel restrictions. According to the available information, Elena Michaylova (the wife of the arrested Dmirtry Michaylov) and Svetlana Shishina were charged under Article 282.2(1) (Organising the activities of an extremist organisation) and Article 282.3 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (Financing the activities of an extremist organisation). One man was charged under Article 282.2(2) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (Participation in the activities of an extremist organisation), and charges were brought against another female under Articles 282.2 and 282.3 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. The investigators informed the accused that the new criminal cases are based on evidence from materials obtained by hidden video surveillance in one of the apartments.

On July 15, large-scale raids of alleged Jehovahs Witnesses took place in Penza. The technical devices, photographs, documents and personal notes of the accused were confiscated from all of the apartments. In the search process, the alleged Jehovahs Witnesses were intimidated and humiliated, and women were forced to take off all their clothes for performance of a body search. Forty people were interrogated following the raids, with criminal cases brought against four of them under Article 282.2(1) and (2) the Criminal Code of the

Russian Federation (Organising the activities of an extremist organisation). Vladimir Alushkin was taken into custody until September 14, while three other alleged Jehovahs Witnesses, Vladimir Kuliasov, Adrej Magliv and Denis Timoshin, were placed under house arrest.

On July 18, the house and land parcels owned by the Jehovahs Witnesses were transferred to the state.

On July 22, at least three apartments of Jehovahs Witnesses followers were searched in Beryozovsky in Kameroovo Oblast. Officers of the Federal Security Service Directorate (UFSB) of Kameroovo Oblast decided to storm the apartment from the balcony, despite the fact that the owner had already opened the door to another group of officers. They broke the window, as a result of which the owner was injured by the shattered glass (forehead and arm lacerations). Later, the believers were interrogated by the officers of the UFSB of Kameroovo Oblast.

On June 24, two followers of the Jehovahs Witnesses were arrested, Sergey Britvin and Vdim Levchuk. A criminal case was opened against Britvin and Levchuk for participation in an extremist organisation (Article 282.2(2) of the Criminal Code). They remained in custody until September 19. This case, just like that of Dennis Christensen, is built on the testimony of a secret witness, whose name the investigators did not disclose.

The provided examples reflect only part of the available information on persecution of Jehovahs Witnesses. In fact, the number of such cases is much higher, and the persecution continues.

Examples of persecution of other confessions

In 2017-2018, the persecution of certain other Protestant confessions, such as the Baptists and Pentecostalists, has also intensified.

Baptists

2018

On January 15 and 16, two representatives of the Baptist church were tried. They were found guilty of committing an administrative offence under Article 20.2(2) of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation: the organisation of a public event, namely a public worship, without the submission of a notice through the procedure established in Article 5(4)(1) and Article 7(1) of the Federal Law No 54-FZ of June 19, 2004, On assemblies, meetings, demonstrations, marches and pickets. They were accused of simply setting up a desk on a street after a morning service and offering Christian literature to anyone who wished to have it.

On January 23, two followers of the religious organisation Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists were charged under Article 20.2(2) of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation, Violating the procedure established for conducting a meeting, rally, demonstration, procession or picket." They were accused of the organisation of a public worship, which was deemed to be an unsanctioned picket.

On March 22, the Tulska District Court ruled to demolish the House of Prayer of the Christians-Baptists. According to the documents, the building where the House of Prayer of the Christians-Baptists was located is a residential building and the community had not been registered as a legal person; thus, it could not register the building in a different manner.

On July 3, V.A. Boksha was charged with illegal missionary activity by the district court judge (Article 5.26(4) of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation). He was accused of carrying out missionary activity in a residential building by disseminating information on the religion of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists among people who were not participants of the said religious association. Boksha was fined.

On August 3, two women were fined for illegal use of a land parcel (Article 8.8(1) of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation). The women were accused of conducting prayer meetings in their private residential home, and thus, according to officials, using the land parcel for purposes other than those allowed in a house with residential status.

Pentecostalists

2018

On January 23, a resident of Chelyabinsk Oblast was fined for illegal missionary activity.

On January 25, a resident of Murmansk was fined for online missionary activity on Vkontakte social network.

On January 25, two residents of Samara Oblast were found guilty of committing administrative offences under Article 5.26(4) of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation, by carrying out missionary activity in violation of the laws on freedom of conscience and religion, as well as on religious associations. They were accused of illegal dissemination of religious literature to passers-by in the centre of Buguruslan in November 2017.

On February 2, the Evangelist Church in Kaliningrad was fined for absence of a sign on the door of its premises.

On February 1, the local Evangelist organisation in Ulyanovsk was fined for an incomplete (abbreviated) sign on its door.

On June 4, it became known that a court in Sochi fined a 60-year-old resident under Article 5.26(4) of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation (Violation of the laws on freedom of conscience and religion, as well as on religious associations) for illegal missionary activity. He was accused of dissemination of his religion without appropriate documents confirming authorisation.

Other confessions:

Scientologists

2016

June searches of 14 offices, residences and a financial institution in Saint Petersburg, Leningrad Oblast and Moscow.

November local Scientologists in Astrachan fined for illegal missionary activity.

2017

February searches of offices and homes of the representatives of the Church of Scientology in Yekaterinburg.

June five representatives of the Church of Scientology were detained in Saint Petersburg. Books and materials declared extremist in Russia were confiscated during the raids. The criminal cases against the Scientologists were initiated under Article 171 (Illegal Enterprise), Article 282 (Incitement of Hatred or Enmity) and Article 282.1 (Organising an Extremist Community) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. One of the leaders of the church was placed into custody.

Krishna

2017

On January 9, a court in Noyabrsk of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous District fined a man for illegal missionary activity because he was offering other citizens literature on the Krishna religion.

On January 18, a court in Saint Petersburg fined a representative of the Krishna religion for illegal missionary activity.

On February 22, a representative of the Krishna religion was fined in Tver for organisation of a march for a healthy lifestyle, which was deemed illegal missionary activity.

Mormons

2017

On February 6, the religious organisation Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Samara was brought to administrative charges for carrying out religious activity without indication of its full official name.

On June 5, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Yekaterinburg was sanctioned for violation of the law on missionary activity, as a result of the absence of proper markings on its religious literature.

On August 10, the religious organisation Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in

Ussuriysk was charged with carrying out religious activity without indication of its full official name.

Pagans

On March 29, 2017, in Novorossiysk, a citizen of the Russian Federation was charged with for carrying out missionary activity in violation of the requirements of the law.

Orthodox

According to the available information, the churches which are not part of the Russian Orthodox Church, such as the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church and the True Orthodox Church, are subject to persecution in the Russian Federation. This persecution is expressed mainly through confiscation of the churches worship buildings and their transfer to the Russian Orthodox Church. There have been several reported cases.

3. State institutions exercising repression of religious minorities

The main state institutions exercising repression of religious minorities in Russia are the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) and the General Administration for Combating Extremism under the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation (Centre for Combating Extremism).

These two bodies perform the functions of the political police in Russia. The FSB is the legal successor of the KGB of the USSR, and has inherited all the principles and working methods of that organisation.

Notably, it is the FSB that participates in the proceedings against representatives of the persecuted confessions. FSB officers participate even in low-scale administrative cases of violations of the rules imposed on missionary activities and the absence of required markings on religious literature.

The Centre for Combating Extremism is focused on the suppression of dissent, which, due to the nature of Putins regime, is called extremism in Russia. It is particularly focused on so-called extremist associations, which in Russia usually cover any informal opposition associations of citizens. Since the new practice of declaring the entire religious organisation of the Jehovahs Witnesses extremist, the Centre for Combating Extremism is now participating in the proceedings against the new extremists: the Jehovahs Witnesses.

Other authorities involved in the repression of religious minorities are the courts and police. As a rule, the police apprehend religious activists while the courts examine the administrative and criminal cases and deliver judgements.

It must also be emphasised that an important role in the persecution of religious minorities is played by executive state authorities. One notable example will help illustrate this point. The notorious Law of Yarovaya, which introduced significant changes to the activities of

religious organisations in Russia, was adopted by the Russian Parliament on the initiative of the MP from the ruling political party United Russia, and later endorsed by Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia. Clearly, both the Russian Parliament and the President bear direct responsibility for abuses of the rights of religious minorities in Russia.

Conclusions

In 21st century Russia, we are witnessing a large-scale campaign persecuting religious minorities . The scope of this campaign is so extensive that it can be compared only to equivalent persecutions in the USSR or Hitler's Germany. It is particularly well illustrated by the persecutions of more than a thousand followers of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who were declared potential extremists only on the grounds of their religious beliefs.

The representatives of the churches and confessions that are not part of the ruling Russian Orthodox Church are subject to fines, arrests and incarcerations, while their houses of worship are demolished or transferred to the state or the ROC (just like in cases of the Orthodox Churches, which are not members of the ROC).

The activities of religious associations in Russia are subject to harsh constraints as a result of the adoption of extremely restrictive legal and repressive legal practices. This particularly concerns foreign religious organisations, which are practically stripped of the possibility to fully engage in missionary work in Russia, freely disseminate their views and attract new followers.

It is becoming increasingly clear that without external intervention of powerful national and international organisations, the dire situation for religious minorities in Russia is unlikely to change.

Reference:

The Free Russia Forum is an independent platform for Russia's opposition to discuss issues of Russian and international politics, as well as to develop solutions for bringing Russia out of its current political, economic and civilisational crisis.

One of the key focuses of the Forum is the formation of an intellectual alternative to Putin's regime, which would create the framework for building a new Europe-oriented Russia.

The first Free Russia Forum took place in March 2016 in Vilnius, Lithuania. It offered a unique gathering place for Russian politicians, journalists, publicists, international experts, cultural representatives, and regular citizens. A total of five forums have been held since March 2016.

Regular participants of the Forum include:

Garry Kasparov, Arkady Babchenko, Andrey Piontkovsky, Vladimir Ashurkov, Marat Gelman, Andrey Illarionov, Vladislav Inozemtsev, Alfred Koch, Ilya Ponomarev, Artemy Troicky, Mark Feygin, Maria Alekhina, Evgeny Kiselev, Evgenya Chirikova and many others.

As of 2018, the governing body of the Free Russia Forum is the Standing Committee. Following a secret ballot, 11 individuals were elected members of the Standing Committee of the Free Russia Forum: Vladimir Ashurkov, Marat Gelman, Andrey Illarionov, Garry Kasparov, Danil Konstantinov, Leonid Nevzlin, Ilya Ponomarev, Andrey Sidelnikov, Ivan Tyutrin, Mark Feygin and Evgenya Chirikova.

The Free Russia Forum is the largest platform of Russia's opposition outside of the Russian Federation. Hundreds of civil activists are involved in the Forums work, including residents of Russia and those who have emigrated. They include activists from over 50 regions of Russia, representing various opposition and human rights organisations, including the PARNAS party, Mikhail Khodorkovskys Open Russia, Alexei Navalnys team, the Yabloko party, the Memorial Human Rights Centre, and many others.