

FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE IN RUSSIA IN 2017

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For several years now, we have noted a tightening of state policy towards Protestant organizations and new religious movements. This tendency was continued in 2017 as well. The ban against the centralized organization and 395 local organizations of Jehovah's Witnesses became the main event of the past year when the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation recognized them as extremist on 20th of April 2017.

This ban became the largest repressive action against believers in the entire post-Soviet period: to the right to freedom of conscience is no longer applied to the tens of thousands of Russian citizens. What does this ban mean in practice? First of all, it places Jehovah's Witnesses under the threat of criminal prosecution for professing of their religion. Secondly, the property belonging to their communities is being confiscated in different region. It is happening despite of the lawyers of Jehovah's Witnesses have taken all necessary measures in accordance with the Russian legislation to prevent it. Thirdly, the ban against Jehovah's Witnesses has provoked an increase in non-state discrimination against them. Immediately after the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses, a wave of vandalism towards them swept across the country. Believers were denied the right to alternative civilian service. There are facts when Jehovah's Witnesses were fired or forced to leave their jobs, referring to the "wrong" religion. Even cases of pressure on children of believers are known.

In addition, the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses continued as part of the anti-extremist struggle. This campaign has been going on for at least nine years: believers are detained by police, interrogated, fingerprinted, imposed administrative penalties, and seized religious literature.

The amendments adopted in 2016 in accordance with the law package of Yarovaya-Ozerov which restrict missionary activity are still actively applied. Like a year earlier, they were applied to believers of Protestant

organizations and NRMs (New Religious Movements). Usually an illegal missionary activity implies a fine. At the same time, the concept of “illegal missionary activity” is interpreted by law enforcers in many different ways. It is important to note that the first time when some believers were punished for illegal missionary activity on the Internet was in 2017. For example, in Kirov, a pastor was imposed a fine for the fact that his parishioner preached on the Internet. A journalist from Tambov was fined for publishing in a social network an invitation to the Baptist Church for the Easter service. This means that now almost any citizen might be brought to justice for any mention of a religious organization on the Internet if he does not have permission for missionary activity in accordance with the “amendments of Yarovaya”.

In March 2018, believers of a “traditional” religion were brought to justice for illegal missionary activity for the first time: Kabbalists, citizens of Israel, were fined for burning candles at Hanukkah in their office in Moscow.

Tension around construction of religious buildings, Orthodox churches in the first place, are still high. In Moscow, there are less conflicts around the government-supported program concerning construction of standard temples in “walking distance”. However, in other regions of Russia construction of such temples is often accompanied by conflicts. Most often, such conflicts are caused by inappropriate locations chosen for the temples. Authorities, contrary to the will of local residents, give permissions to built temples in parks or in places where people would like to see, for example, a kindergarten or polyclinic. Sometimes, in case of mosques, xenophobia was added: local residents were afraid that the mosque would become a center of attraction for migrants and “extremists”. In the last years, the scale of protests against construction of “walking distance” temples led to the fact that authorities began to take into account the wishes of citizens and seek a compromise. However, there were a lot of cases when a compromise was not found.

In 2014, the so-called “law on protection of feelings of believers” was adopted. It was not immediately put into action, but for the last two years people have been brought to justice and even prosecuted for insulting these feelings. Mostly this law is used to protect the feelings of the Orthodox. In addition, defenders of feeling of believers from the community are very active in Russia. In 2017, these activists resumed the use

of force which they refused in 2016. In some cases their forceful actions were more hazardous than before. The fact that these actions have not yet resulted in human casualties is a fluke.

Forceful actions were used to prevent a screening of the film "Matilda" directed by Alexei Uchitel. This movie is about an affair between Nikolay II, a Russian Emperor, and Matilda Kshesinskaya, a ballerina. Some Orthodox considered this film as sacrilegious because the Russian Orthodox Church recognizes Nikolay II as a saint. Members of "The Christian State" group threw a Molotov Cocktail at the office of Alexei Uchitel in St. Petersburg and set fire to the cars near the office of Alexey's lawyer in Moscow. In St. Petersburg, an enemy of the movie drove a truck into a cinema where the movie was approved for screening. Despite these actions, as well as peaceful protest actions by Orthodox in other regions, the film was released and screened at cinemas around the country. Only a small number of cinemas refused to screen this movie. However, it is very likely that cinemas, exhibition halls, museums and other cultural institutions will more often reject films, exhibitions and concerts which are questionable from the point of view of the defenders of religious feelings to avoid becoming a target for "The Christian state".

Every year I, summing up, try to find positive moments. This time it was a difficult task as every positive moment had its butts. For example, we hardly saw the public "anti-sectarian" activity such as pickets, rallies, etc. But, it happened because the state put so much pressure on "non-traditional" religions that the fighters with the "sects" had nothing to do. Also we almost did not observe discrimination against Muslims outside the boundaries of the fight against extremism. But anti-extremist policy remains a very significant source of problems for many Muslim groups.

Perhaps the only unambiguously good tendency of the last year was the tendency of the religious organizations to improve their legal literacy and defend their rights through the court. Until recently, religious organizations managed to win cases mainly concerned their religious buildings. Now, we know many cases of illegal missionary activity that have been won. And this applies not only to Protestant organizations, but to NRMs as well. Thus, the religious organizations learn to respond to new forms of pressure.

