

# Russian Authorities Put Pressure on Jehovah's Witnesses

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Russian authorities have turned up the pressure against the Jehovah's Witness religious group in a series of Russian regions. Law enforcement officials have reportedly interfered with the group's congregations in the cities of Yekaterinburg, Asbest, Taganrog and Murmansk.

On July 16th, the Federal Security Service (FSB) led a search of a building used by the Jehovah's Witnesses in Yekaterinburg, the [ANN Information Agency reports \(Rus\)](#). Officers initiated the search in connection with a [criminal case against the Witnesses](#) launched in Asbest, a city some 70 kilometers away. The local prosecutor's office believes that books, flyers and magazines distributed by the group are "extremist". FSB agents seized literature, to investigate the prosecution's assertion that it is "overtly, clearly and directly aimed at inciting hatred, propaganda of the exclusivity of the Jehovah faith, and the humiliation of human dignity on account of a person's attitude towards religion."

Meanwhile, proceedings against another branch of the Jehovah's Witnesses were being seen by a regional court in the southern Rostov oblast. As the the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis reported, "Jehovists" from the city of Taganrog were being similarly tried for "extremism" under article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code ("Incitement of National, Racial, or Religious Enmity").

Several days later, "Jehovists" in the northern city of Murmansk were [prevented from holding services in a local stadium](#), set to take place between July 18th and 20th. The Rosbalt Information Agency writes that prosecutors broke a contract with the group, citing a law that sporting facilities cannot be used for religious purposes. Authorities had previously refused to grant the group land for a religious center in May 2007.

Sergey Mozgovoy, the head of a committee on freedom of conscience in the [opposition National Assembly](#), commented on the rising pressure against religious groups to the Sobkor@ru news agency. The Jehovah's Witnesses, he said, were the last in a series of organizations to be rolled over by the "compactor of state repression."

"'Religious safety.' 'Spiritual safety.' Lately, leading officials have started using such concepts in their speeches," Mozgovoy said, "clearly drawing a parallel with 'national safety.'"

Regarding the accusations of "extremism" handed down to the Jehovists, Mozgovoy said that the texts of nearly all religions have fragments which could be taken as "propaganda of exclusivity," or seen as

“inciting enmity.”

The expert believes there are two fundamental reasons why the Jehovah's Witnesses have been targeted by authorities. “First of all, the authorities cannot use them for their interests,” he said, “ since they distance themselves from politics and official bureaucratic structures out of principle. Secondly, this denomination is expanding dynamically.”

The Jehovah's Witnesses are an international religious group with a Christian foundation, although the organization's dogmatic teachings differ significantly from those of other mainstream Christian denominations. The group is known for its aggressive door-to-door evangelism.

According to its own figures, the organization numbers around 7 million members, with more than 101 thousand congregations.

In 2004, the Moscow congregation was stripped of its registration and banned by the Moscow Golovinsky District Court, after a multi-year trial. This has not kept the Witnesses from meeting openly for prayers.

In January 2007, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg [ruled in favor of an appeal by a group of Jehovah's Witnesses](#) from Chelyabinsk, whose service was interrupted by the government. The court awarded the group 30 thousand euro (982,000 RUB or 47,400 USD) as compensation for psychological damages, and more than 60 thousand euro (1.96 million RUB or 94,800 USD) for costs.