

  
**WATCH TOWER**  
Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania  
Office of General Counsel  
100 Watchtower Drive, Patterson, NY 12563-9204, U.S.A.  
Phone: (845) 306-0711 Fax: (845) 306-0709  
E-mail: generalcounsel@jw.org

Transcript of the oral testimony by:  
Mr. Sergey Cherepanov, Deputy Chairman of the Presiding Committee, Administrative  
Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia

**June 23, 2009**  
**Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Hearing:**  
**“The Medvedev Thaw: Is it real? Will it last?”**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe for allowing me to testify on behalf of the more than 153,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

First, I would like to describe to you the challenges that Jehovah's Witnesses are facing with the present Russian administration. Then, I will summarize the goals that have been recently declared by the Russian administration that could result in a “thaw” for our organization.

The precious fundamental freedoms Jehovah's Witnesses gained following the collapse of the Soviet Union have never been more threatened. We are experiencing a deep freeze—not a thaw—in the Russian government's treatment of our organization. During the 1960's and 1970's, the KGB considered Jehovah's Witnesses to be a foreign religion and a threat to Russia's national security. The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities during that time is well documented. After the fall of the Soviet Union, we experienced considerable relief and obtained national registration in 1991. Up to now, we have also been able to register 409 Local Religious Organizations in 73 regions of Russia. However, the Russian government is sadly reverting to dealing with us as it did during the Soviet era.

Events began to escalate in 2007 after all prosecutors' offices in Russia received a letter on methods for preventing religious extremism signed by Deputy Prosecutor V. Ya. Grin. Jehovah's Witnesses were specifically mentioned as a religion that the Russian authorities suspect of being guilty of so-called “extremist activity.” In essence, the letter declared “open season” on our faith with the mandate for local prosecutors to find some pretext to ban our religious activities.

Days after this letter was sent out, 45 warnings were issued to our Local Religious Organizations across Russia. Individual Witnesses were searched, detained, and forcibly photographed. Individual rights were violated as private information was being gathered

on the religious beliefs of school children, school teachers, and other professionals who are Jehovah's Witnesses.

In June 2007, the St. Petersburg Prosecutor's Office wrote to the Public Health Committee of the St. Petersburg Government and required them to provide medical information on Witness patients. Without their knowledge or consent, three Witnesses who at the time were hospitalized, had their confidential medical information unlawfully disclosed by the doctors to public authorities. One of the patients was subsequently refused treatment and discharged from the hospital where she was to undergo major surgery.

Local prosecutors are working together with FSB offices to file claims of extremist activity against Jehovah's Witnesses throughout Russia. By misapplying the revised 2007 "Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity", they are trying to ban our religious literature and liquidate our Local Religious Organizations. We are already defending eight lawsuits filed by local prosecutors across Russia on the extremist issue alone. They are also seeking any pretext to close our national office near St. Petersburg with the overall goal of banning our worship throughout Russia. This was the initial goal of the Golovinsky trial which liquidated our legal entity in Moscow in 2004.

Local prosecutors are specifically targeting our religious literature. They have hired their own so-called "experts" to study our religious literature knowing that these so-called "experts" will support their claims that our religious literature promotes extremist activity. The conclusions of these so-called "experts" would be laughable if they were not so serious. If just one regional court judge anywhere in Russia rules that an item of our literature promotes extremist activity, it will be posted on a federal list of extremist literature and banned throughout the country. Once literature is placed on this list, it is nearly impossible to have it removed.

This year, events have escalated further. In February 2009, the Russian Federation General Prosecutor's Office ordered local prosecutors' offices throughout Russia to gather any negative information they could find on Jehovah's Witnesses. They were authorized to involve agencies of the FSB, police, public health agencies, local departments of justice, and military commissariats to try and find such negative information. As a result, over 500 investigations have been initiated against individual Witnesses and our Local Religious Organizations. Thus, the General Prosecutor's Office is orchestrating a witch hunt on Jehovah's Witnesses that will lead to the criminal prosecution of individuals simply because of their religious convictions.

For instance, on May 24, police in the city of Asbest raided a religious meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses, without a warrant or legal basis, and unlawfully detained 50 Witnesses. A female congregation member who was present was subjected to police interrogations that were so coercive that shortly afterward she was hospitalized and suffered a miscarriage.

On April 23, Mr. Yuriy Panov and his companion were discussing the Bible with local residents in the town of Ramon, in the Voronezh Region when they were stopped by three police officers. The police stated that there were burglaries reported in the neighborhood and falsely accused them as suspects. Both men were then taken to the police station, and the police singled out Mr. Panov for torture. Because Mr. Panov refused to admit to the false accusations, the police handcuffed and beat him. They also forced him to wear a gas mask and cut off the oxygen supply so that he could not breathe. After they also threatened to administer electric shocks and sexually assault him, Mr. Panov was so intimidated that he admitted to the burglary he did not commit in order to avoid further torture. The police then abruptly ended his torture and one of the police officers stated that they had made a mistake in stating that Mr. Panov had committed any crime.

In addition to these negative developments, our Administrative Center near St. Petersburg has been subjected to repeated intrusive investigations by the local prosecutor's office and numerous other state authorities, with the apparent intent of unlawfully closing it. Although the prosecutor's office has repeatedly stated that no violations have been found, it refuses to end the investigation which has continued since November 2004. Our appeals to the Russian courts to stop this prosecutorial abuse have been denied and our domestic legal remedies have been exhausted. In March of this year we filed an application with the European Court of Human Rights concerning this matter.

In recent months, Russian authorities have also attempted to obstruct the legal representation and support that we receive from Russian, U.S. and Canadian attorneys in defending our rights in Russian courts. For example, in September 2008, the FSB initiated a disciplinary case against our Russian attorney, Yegiazar Chernikov, who is defending Witnesses in Asbest and Yekaterinburg. On April 5 of this year, two Canadian attorneys who are Jehovah's Witnesses were deported over an alleged minor travel restriction offense they unknowingly committed and that would normally result in a small fine. And just last month, James Andrik, an attorney with our Office of General Counsel in New York, was deported on charges that were completely false. These actions by Russian authorities have made it more difficult for us to defend ourselves against the growing number of orchestrated claims filed against us by local prosecutors.

In his November 11, 2008, *Address To The Federal Assembly Of The Russian Federation*, President Medvedev highlighted all the changes that must be made to the present system in Russia so as to promote such worthy values as 'honest courts and responsible leaders,' 'freedom of religion,' and 'dignity of human life.' The President stated that 'Any infringements of civic freedoms' would be pronounced 'not only amoral but also illegal.' He also stated: "The worst thing that could happen in the current situation is to descend into settling scores and dishonest competition, including through use of the administrative resources." Likewise, the new *Strategy of Russia National Security Until 2020* connects religious tolerance to national security. President Medvedev's pronouncements of the need for freedom of religion and religious tolerance are commendable. If these words become reality, then there is hope that the "thaw" will be felt by us. Sadly though, the current reality is that Jehovah's Witnesses are being

harassed, deprived of their freedom to assemble peacefully together in worship, slandered, coerced, physically abused, and charged as extremist by the Russian authorities.

Once again, I would like to thank the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe for allowing me to testify about the current situation facing Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.