

**U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**  
**Hearing:**  
**“Unregistered Religious Groups in Russia”**

---

April 14, 2005

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

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 140,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia.

Jehovah’s Witnesses desire to worship freely as do other recognized religions in Russia. However, after the banning decision in Moscow, we have strong reasons to believe that steps are being taken to ban our activity throughout Russia and in particular, to attack the Administrative Center of Jehovah’s Witnesses in St. Petersburg. We believe that the ban is having a negative impact on the worship of Jehovah’s Witnesses in other republics of the former Soviet Union as well.

During the Moscow trial and in other court cases throughout Russia, the prosecution has turned slander into a legal argument. False statements have also been spread about Jehovah’s Witnesses to incite religious intolerance. Herein I would like to share with you some information about the situation facing Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia.

Effects on Congregations in Moscow

After the Moscow courts banned the activity of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Moscow in June 2004, the anti-cult organizations, which provided much of the so-called “evidence” in the case, filed an application with the Russian Prosecutor General. The application requested that widespread criminal investigations be initiated into the activities of the religious communities in all the regions of the Russian Federation with the goal to ban their activity.<sup>1</sup> The prosecutor in the Moscow case, Tatiana Kondratyeva, declared at one point during the trial that a court decision to ban Jehovah’s Witnesses in Moscow would “be the basis for further banning decisions”<sup>2</sup> of religious communities of Jehovah’s Witnesses.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Jehovah’s Witnesses in Moscow now face major problems with holding their weekly religious meetings. Only one building in Moscow, obtained in 1995 by the

---

<sup>1</sup> Application of Public Committee for Human Rights (Chair T. A. Kvitkovskaya), of August 9, 2004. (Russian only)

<sup>2</sup> Case materials, volume 3, page 308. (Not attached)

<sup>3</sup> Statements of Yevgeniy Mazur and Dmitriy Sizykh.

Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses, is still in use for religious meetings.<sup>4</sup> It is inadequate for the over 11,000 of Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow.

The Moscow City Committee for Culture has ordered the management of all meeting rooms, sports facilities, and conference halls not to sign rental agreements with Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>5</sup> As a result, almost all the rental agreements for holding weekly religious meetings that had existed prior to the banning decision have been cancelled, including many locations where congregations had been holding meetings for many years. In several cases, the decision of the Golovinsky District Court banning the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses was given as the reason for canceling the agreements. As a result of this, many Jehovah's Witnesses have been forced to travel many miles to places outside of Moscow for worship, gather in small groups in private homes, and meet in a forested section of a park, as they did when under ban during the Soviet era.<sup>6</sup>

#### Problems with Holding Large Assemblies in Moscow and in Other Parts of Russia

In addition, Jehovah's Witnesses regularly encounter problems with holding their larger religious assemblies. For example, in Moscow, on November 14 and 20, 2004, assemblies with over 4,000 invited delegates were scheduled to be held in the Izmailovo Sports and Performance Complex, where such gatherings had previously been held for ten years. However, the local chief of police, Major-General Dubenskiy, canceled the religious assemblies and declared that events of Jehovah's Witnesses could not be held in the Complex because they were a banned sect.<sup>7</sup>

Jehovah's Witnesses also regularly face similar problems in other parts of Russia. For instance, on July 24, 2004, an assembly in Yekaterinburg was interrupted by 25 young men. The men ran onto the field while the stadium management turned up music so loudly that it was impossible to continue the program. The police simply stood by watching.

On August 6, 2004, when 1,500 delegates arrived at the Voskhod Sports Complex in Chelyabinsk for a three-day assembly, they found that all the entrances to the stadium were locked. Police officers stood guard both outside and inside the stadium to prevent access. The stadium director refused to meet the convention organizers.<sup>8</sup>

#### Harassment by Moscow Police

While sharing their faith with others, Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow are now regularly detained and questioned by the police. For instance, just three weeks ago, on March 26, 2005, 60-year-old Tatiana Safonova and another Witness were arrested and held behind bars for two hours in the Kotlovka Police Department. Police officers ordered them not to preach in the area. On releasing them, police failed to provide them with any documents confirming the reason for their arrest and detention.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Chairman of the Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses, Ivan Chaykovskiy, was summoned to the Golovinsky District Prosecutor's Office to explain why meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses were still taking place in this building in spite of the ban on the activity of the community.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from the Press Center of the Moscow Committee for Culture.

<sup>6</sup> Statement of Oleg Khalzov, December 15, 2004 and photograph of meeting in park, September 12, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Statement of Vasily Kalin, December 13, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Statement of Dmitry Gashkov, Sergei Karpushenko, Vladimir Kozhushko, August 12, 2004, and photographs.

## Misinformation Campaigns

National newspapers and major Russian television stations continue to spread negative information, inciting aggressive behavior towards the Witnesses. As a result, there have been several incidents of assault on Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow. However, in many cases the law-enforcement agencies have failed to take any action whatsoever against the perpetrators of these attacks.

In the city of Nalchik, a slanderous leaflet entitled *Danger—Jehovah's Witnesses* was widely distributed. As a result, there have been attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses and their literature, including two arson attacks on November 23, 2004, and February 20, 2005, where large amounts of literature were destroyed and serious damage was sustained to the premises rented for meeting purposes and for storing literature.<sup>9</sup>

## Problems with Literature Importation and Audio/Video Production

On April 7, 2004, the Russian Ministry for Culture informed the St. Petersburg customs office that all printed matter of Jehovah's Witnesses no longer qualifies for exemption from valued added tax.<sup>10</sup> Prior to this, for several consecutive years, the Ministry for Culture had recognized the religious literature of Jehovah's Witnesses as covered by the Florence Agreement of 1950 and thus was exempt from this tax. Therefore, in 2004, Jehovah's Witnesses paid \$771,000(US) in value added tax in order to import their religious literature. Separately, companies that had previously assisted with audio- and video-production for Jehovah's Witnesses refused to do further business.

## Conclusion

Local tax authorities are currently carrying out audits of the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in St. Petersburg. The St. Petersburg prosecutor's office has initiated investigations against the Administrative Center based on complaints lodged by anti-cult organizations.<sup>11</sup> However, such actions present a warning sign, since the prosecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow began the same way, with similar investigations by law enforcement agencies.

It is our hope that the European Court of Human Rights considers the application of the Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses promptly. If the Court makes a clear statement condemning the violations of the rights and freedoms taking place in Moscow and in other parts of Russia, the situation will improve with regard to the rights of all religious minorities.

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.

---

<sup>9</sup> Photographs.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Ministry of Culture to Saint Petersburg Customs

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Kurortny District Prosecutor's Office.