

URGENT ACTION

SIXTEEN MEMBERS OF RELIGIOUS GROUP SENTENCED

Sixteen members of the religious group Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted of "religious extremism" solely for peacefully practising their religious beliefs.

On 30 November, a court in the city of Taganrog, in Rostov Oblast, southern Russia, found **16 members** of the local community of Jehovah's Witnesses guilty of organizing and participating in a banned "extremist organization".

Three of them, **Nikolai Trotsiuk, Yuri Baklushin and Aleksandr Skvortsov**, who are community elders, were given five-and-a-half years' suspended prison sentences each. A fourth man, also an elder, **Aleksei Koptev**, was given five years and three months' suspended prison sentence. The court issued other convicted women and men with heavy fines and ruled that they will not have to pay them as the limitation period for the crime has expired. All were found guilty under Article 282.2 of the Russian Criminal Code ("organization of activities of an extremist organization"). The four elders were also found guilty of involving minors in criminal activities (Article 150 of the Criminal Code).

In 2009, a court in Rostov-on-Don, the administrative centre of Rostov Oblast, found the local registered religious community Jehovah's Witnesses - Taganrog to be an "extremist organization" and closed it down. Since then, its members have not been allowed to congregate and worship, or distribute their publications, many of which, are banned as "extremist" in Russia.

The prison sentences will only remain conditional for Nikolai Trotsiuk, Yuri Baklushin, Aleksandr Skvortsov and Aleksei Koptev so long as they do not meet with other Jehovah's Witnesses for worship. If they break this rule they may have to serve real prison sentences instead.

Throughout the trial, some of the accused lost their jobs due to being labelled "extremist" and having to attend numerous court hearings during working hours.

Please write immediately in Russian or your own language:

- Urging the authorities to respect and protect the right to freedom of religion and belief for all in Russia;
- Calling on them to ensure that the convictions of the members of Jehovah's Witnesses - Taganrog are overturned;
- Urge the authorities to refrain from bringing charges against members of Jehovah's Witnesses and outlawing their groups as "extremist" solely for peacefully practising their religious beliefs.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 20 JANUARY 2016 TO:

Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation

Yurii Yakovlevich Chaika
Prosecutor General's Office
ul. B. Dmitrovka, d.15a
125993 Moscow GSP- 3
Russian Federation
Fax: +7 495 987 5841 / +7 495 692 1725

Salutation: Dear Prosecutor General

Director

Viacheslav Viktorovich Konushkin
Office of the Prosecutor General of
Russia for the Southern Federal District
Per. Gvardeiskii 2/51
344011 Rostov-on-Don, Russia
Fax: +7 863 287 7001

Salutation: Dear Director

And copies to:

Minister of Justice
Aleksandr Vladimirovich Kononov
Ministry of Justice of Russia
Ul. Zhitnaya 14
119991 Moscow, GSP-1, Russia
Email: via:
<http://government.ru/en/letters/>

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please insert local diplomatic addresses below:

Name Address 1 Address 2 Address 3 Fax Fax number Email Email address Salutation Salutation

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Russian courts have banned several local communities of Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist". In 2010 the European Court of Human Rights found that the rights of the members of the Moscow community of Jehovah's Witnesses to freedom of religion and freedom of association had been violated when the authorities banned the religious organization as "extremist".

Nevertheless, other local communities have also been declared "extremist" and banned by courts, and dozens of publications of Jehovah's Witnesses included in the register of "extremist" materials held by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. The distribution of such materials is forbidden in Russia. In December 2014, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation ordered the blocking of the Internet site of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia as "extremist".

The court decisions that recognised Jehovah's Witnesses local communities as "extremist" blamed them for advocating refusal to undergo blood transfusion and do military service, and for criticising others' beliefs and describing their own as superior and thereby inciting "religious hatred and promoting inimical attitude towards other religions". For instance, the Rostov-on-Don Regional Court referred to 68 publications by Jehovah's Witnesses classified "extremist" when it ruled that the community Jehovah's Witnesses – Taganrog is an extremist organisation. It cited sentences such as "Jesus did not allow to replace God's law with human traditions", or "[i]n case of a war, we should be prepared to go to prison or face death rather than taking up arms against others" as a call to disobey the laws of the country. Sentences such as "[t]hose, who want to please God, do not celebrate Christmas or other holidays, which have its roots in paganism or are part of false religions" were cited by the Court as incitement of religious hatred.

Jehovah's Witnesses publications banned in Russia as "extremist" have been written elsewhere, and been read and distributed by Jehovah's Witnesses around the world.

In 2011, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation held that the preference of one's own religion above other religions cannot be considered "extremist". Despite this, local courts across Russia continue to ban literature of Jehovah's Witnesses and bring criminal procedures against members of this religious group on the grounds of "inciting hatred" or being members of an "extremist organization".

The latest of these decisions was on August 2015, when the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation upheld an earlier decision by the Krasnodar Regional Court, which had banned the Jehovah's Witnesses community in Abinsk, Krasnodar Region, as "extremist".

Name: 16 members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Taganrog (m and f), including Nikolai Trotsiuk (m), Yuri Baklushin (m), Aleksandr Skvortsov (m) and Aleksei Koptev (m).

Gender m/f: both