



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

### Fifty-second session

27 February–31 March 2023

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Jubilee Campaign, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[3 February 2023]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## **The Persecution Of People Of Faith In The Russian Federation**

Jubilee Campaign would like to raise to the Council's attention the persistent and expanding persecution of people of faith in the Russian Federation, in particular Jehovah's Witnesses, Christians, and Muslims.

### **Legal and Historical Background**

The Russian Federation's history of encroaching upon religious freedom can be traced back to the early 1920s when, following the Russian revolution and subsequent war and famine, anti-faith campaigns and sentiment grew in the nation. The 1929 Law on Religious Associations was the Russian Federation's first ever legislation regulating faith; this law required all faith groups to register with the nation, prohibited all faith-based activity conducted outside of a designated religious building, and banned both the religious instruction of children and the dissemination of faith-based literature.

Between the 1960s and 1990s, Russian governance took a surprising turn and generally respected spirituality and even passed legislation which outlined freedom of conscience, worship, and religion. However, following the collapse of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Moscow intellectual Alexander Dvorkin returned to the Russian Federation from the United States of America and established an "anti-cult" rhetoric which permeated the culture and has persisted to this day. By 1997, the Russian Federation had reversed its religious freedom legislation and passed a law which was even more restrictive than the 1929 Law on Religious Associations; this new bill included its predecessor's restrictions and additionally required religious groups to provide the biographical and personal information of the founding members of the group, identify the faith-based literature to which they abide, and provide evidence of the faith group's existence in the Russian Federation for no fewer than 15 years.

In 2002, the nation passed the Law on Combating Extremist Activity, which prohibited 'incitement of religious hatred' and 'propaganda which elevates one faith above another' or vice versa. In 2009, the Russian Federation amended the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations in order to give the newly-established Council of Experts full purview over registered religious groups' activities, leadership, and faith material. The Russian Federation's most recent legal crackdown on religion occurred in 2016 when the Yarovaya Law introduced multiple legal amendments, including one which characterized sharing one's faith, distributing religious literature, and inviting people to worship services as acts of 'illegal missionary activity'.

### **Jehovah's Witnesses**

In early 2017, the Russian Federation formally outlawed Jehovah's Witnesses on the ridiculous allegations that the faith is extremist in nature. Many individuals are mystified by the campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses and the false claims of extremism, as the faith is widely regarded as peaceful and shares many overlapping religious views with other faith groups. It is speculated that the reasons for targeting Jehovah's Witnesses may include their evangelistic activities, their historical ties with the United States of America and the Western World, their conscientious objection to military service and blood transfusions, or perhaps even their sizable membership which may be viewed as a threat to political authority.

In the years since, followers have been subjected to church and house raids, arrests and imprisonment for up to six years for 'extremism' (with Jehovah's Witnesses leaders and community organizers liable to ten years' imprisonment), and physical and sexual torture in detention. Many were arrested in unwarranted raids in which police officers and security forces, dressed in armor and wielding guns and other various weapons, barged in on peaceful worship services to arrest peaceful praying individuals. Multiple previously imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses have testified to the horrendous torture they were subjected to by Russian state actors during interrogation and imprisonment. Forms of torture include

electrocution, physical beatings, suffocation, forced injections of unknown substances, and threats of rape.

In December 2022, it was reported that this past year, Russian courts sentenced 40% more Jehovah's Witnesses than last year. In 2022 alone, 121 Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted for extremism, an increase from 111 in 2021, 39 in 2020, and just 18 in 2019. Out of the 121 convicted, 45 were sentenced to imprisonment for an average of six years. As of June 2022, approximately 200 Jehovah's Witnesses were engaged in criminal trials for alleged extremism. Unfortunately, even after completing their prison term and being released, Jehovah's Witnesses face additional punishments, such as being identified on the List of Terrorists and Extremists, prolonged house arrest, frozen access to their bank accounts, exclusion from various occupations, travel restrictions,

## **Evangelical, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal Christians**

While Jehovah's Witnesses are generally persecuted for their incorrectly perceived extremist views and activities criminalized by the 2002 Law on Combating Extremist Activity, Christian communities are generally targeted under the 2016 Yarovaya Law on allegations of conducting illegal missionary activities. One youth pastor formerly active in the Russian Federation, Andrei, explained that any Christian who publicly declares their faith or invites someone to attend church or any other religious event can be subjected to a maximum of three years in prison (pastors and church leaders can face a fine of up to one million rubles and five years' imprisonment). Andrei reported that as a pastor himself, he was refused jobs and visited frequently by Russian security forces who ambushed peaceful church services and held worshipers hostage, interrogated him about specific congregants' personal information, and even threatened the safety of his children.

Throughout 2021 and 2022, hundreds of Christians have been charged with illegal missionary activity and heavily fined for such simple practices as: recruiting believers on the Internet; posting religious-based audiovisual material online; distributing religious literature; leading sermons; displaying not-for-sale religious literature in stores; and more. Russian authorities have even targeted Christian churches and institutions, including the Church of the Unification of Perm (motion to liquidate filed), Good News Presbyterian Church in Mekhzavod (demolished), and the Theological Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria (operation license suspended).

Finally, many Christian leaders have faced fines and charges for expressing their views about the Russian Federation's violent incursion into Ukraine, pursuant to a recently-ratified law prohibiting criticism of and spreading misinformation about the Russian armed forces. In April 2022, Mexican native and Catholic priest Fernando Vera was expelled from the Russian Federation for criticizing the military's atrocities in Ukraine. In March 2022, a Pentecostal senior pastor of the Church of Christians of the Evangelical Faith in Bryansk faced charges for labeling the Russian Federation as an "aggressor" and condemning specific Russian political figures. Also in March, Priest John Burdin of the Church of the Resurrection of Christ in Karabanovo was charged for conducting a sermon in which he condemned the incursion into Ukraine and promoted a link to an anti-war petition on his parish website. That very same month, an unidentified Christian woman was arrested for standing outside of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow and holding a sign stating "The 6th Commandment: Thou shalt not kill." Also around that time, a Protestant woman named Nina Belyayeva became the first individual convicted for condemning the Ukraine incursion on religious grounds and characterizing the offensive as a war crime. As a result of these multiple arrests, numerous Christian pastors and leaders have encouraged their congregations to pray for Ukraine privately rather than publicly so as to avoid being charged.

## **Conclusion & Recommendations**

Jubilee Campaign urges members and observer states of the Human Rights Council to:

1. Unequivocally condemn in the strongest possible terms the Russian Federation's violations of its citizens' rights to freedom of thought, conscience,

and religion, and the Russian Federation's dereliction of its obligations to protect and promote such freedoms as signatory to international treaties including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

2. Level stronger, coordinated, multilateral sanctions upon the Russian Federation for its human rights violations, including religious persecution and torture of faith minorities and anti-war activists domestically, and its campaign of violent killings, bombings, sexual violence and rape, civilian infrastructure destruction, and torture of civilians in Ukraine.
3. Establish an independent and impartial monitoring committee to track, investigate, collect evidence, and report on cases of religious persecution and rights violations in the Russian Federation, as well as the human rights atrocities committed by Russian armed forces in Ukraine and other occupied regions.

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