

Russian Court Bans Jehovah's Witnesses, Rules They're 'Extremist'

Russia's Supreme Court ruled on Thursday that Jehovah's Witnesses were an "extremist" organization and must disband and hand over all property to the state, local media said.

The religious grouping confirmed the ruling about its "liquidation" in Russia.

"We are greatly disappointed by this development and deeply concerned about how this will affect our religious activity," Yaroslav Sivulskiy, a spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, said in emailed comments.

"We will appeal this decision, and we hope that our legal rights and protections as a peaceful religious group will be fully restored as soon as possible."

Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia have 30 days to submit their appeal for consideration by a three-person panel.

Religious life in Russia is dominated by the Orthodox Church, which exerts considerable political influence and enjoys the support of President Vladimir Putin. Some Orthodox scholars view Jehovah's Witnesses as a 'totalitarian sect'.

Interfax news agency quoted Sergei Cherepanov, a Jehovah's Witnesses representative, as saying that the group will appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

"We will do everything possible," he said.

Russian authorities have put several of the group's publications on a list of banned extremist literature, and prosecutors have long cast it as an organization that destroys

families, fosters hatred and threatens lives.

The group, a United States-based Christian denomination known for its door-to-door preaching and rejection of military service and blood transfusions, says this description is false.

The religious organization has expanded around the world and has about eight million active followers. It has faced court proceedings in several countries, mostly over its pacifism and rejection of blood transfusions, but Russia has been most outspoken in portraying it as an extremist cult.

The ruling was issued after the justice ministry applied for an order to shut down the group's national headquarters near St Petersburg.

Its Russian branch, based near St. Petersburg, has said a ban would directly affect around 400 of its groups and have an impact on all of its 2,277 religious groups in Russia, where it says it has 175,000 followers. {eoa}

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