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## Jehovah's Witnesses targeted by Russia's anti-extremism laws simply for practising their pacifist faith, say campaigners

They have the same legal status as Isis jihadists after nation's register of materials deemed extreme grows from 1,000 entries to more than 3,000 in the past four years

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Alexei Koptev, with his wife Lyubov, faces six years in prison after being found guilty of trying to revive the 'extremist' Jehovah's Witnesses in Taganrog *Alexander Aksakov/Washington Post/Getty Images*

A little good news on the doorstep can be a dangerous thing. In an increasingly intolerant Russia the evangelical Jehovah's





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 Witnesses are, according to a landmark court ruling this week, extremists to be feared – or jailed.



Laws against extremists enacted in 2002 under President Vladimir Putin and then extended to non-violent groups in 2007, were touted as a way to prevent terrorist attacks and ultranationalist violence. But campaigners say the legislation is being used to target faith groups.

One of Russia's largest anti-extremism trials in recent memory centred on Alexei Koptev. On Tuesday, a judge in Taganrog, a small port 600 miles south of Moscow, convicted the 71-year-old and 15 co-defendants for trying to revive the Jehovah's Witnesses of Taganrog.

Mr Koptev's transformation from respected Soviet factory foreman to alleged extremist began when two Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on his front door to ask whether he kept a Bible at home. The visit sparked a religious revival in Mr Koptev and his wife, Lyubov, and they converted two years later in a seaside baptism.



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Mr Koptev became the target of an undercover police sting because of his ties to the Christian group, which now shares the same legal status as Isis or the neo-Nazi National Socialist Society. "Why me? Who did nothing illegal, who read nothing illegal, why was I secretly filmed and listened to?" he told the *Washington Post* before the trial finished.

"We will keep preaching," his wife added. "It's faith."

Four senior members of the congregation, most of them retired, were given five-and-a-half-year suspended prison sentences for leading the Jehovah's Witnesses movement. The remaining 12 defendants were issued with fines but were exempted from payment due to a technicality.


Activity as a Jehovah's Witness can carry up to six years in prison. Activists consider this proof of how the anti-extremism legislation has spun out of control in the regions.

Russia's register of materials deemed extreme has grown from 1,000 entries to more than 3,000 in the past four years.


Earlier this year, a court in Russia's Far Eastern Sakhalin decided to ban a text including quotes from the Koran for being "extremist", sparking outrage among the Muslim population.


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“Knowing that the Rostov Regional Court finds [Jehovah’s Witnesses] an extremist group which is banned in Taganrog, the four organisers continued to engage in its activities,” said the prosecutor’s official representative, Oxana Sukhareva. “Moreover, they involved minors in their banned organisations.”

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Jehovah’s Witnesses have been officially banned from Taganrog since 2009, after a local court ruled the organisation guilty of inciting religious hatred by “propagating the exclusivity and supremacy” of their religion, something which activists say is typical of almost all religions.

“We will appeal against the decision,” said Nikolai Troysyuk, one of the four senior members of the group. Born into a family of Jehovah’s Witnesses in western Ukraine, Mr Troysyuk, now a pensioner and part-time handyman, said that he hoped to avoid being sent to prison.

“If the charge holds and we end up in jail, then I think the experience will alter the way in which I’m able to practise my religion, because it will restrict my freedom as a person, my freedom as a religious man,” he told *The Independent*.

Mr Troysyuk, whose daughter and son-in-law, both Jehovah’s Witnesses also on trial for extremism, said that while the suspended prison sentence still allows him to move freely in the area, that could change “if they get proof that we are carrying on with our faith”.

“But my religion isn’t at all connected to the extremism for which I’m charged. My religion is separate, connected to the Bible, to the reading of religious texts. For that reason, no court will be able to forbid my belief,” he said. Unlike in the past, he said he now encounters situations “where my religion is deemed illegal”.

Anton Omelchenko, a lawyer working for the defendants, told *The Independent*: “This isn’t the first such case, unfortunately.”

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According to Mr Omelchenko, a number of other cases brought against Jehovah's Witnesses in other parts of Russia began in 2008. But almost all of them ended in exoneration and rehabilitation for the believers, he said.

"From what I've noticed, the top of the court, the deputy general prosecutor, is actually indifferent to all this," Mr Omelchenko said. "It's the prosecutors who are really going for it."

In a sign of how Russia's tough anti-extremism law was being abused in places far from Moscow's reach, Mr Putin has passed a law making four religious texts – the Bible, the Koran, the Tanakh and the Tibetan Buddhist Kangyur – exempt from being found extremist.

A report published by the Sova Centre of Information and Analysis, an organisation that watches for abuse of Russia's anti-extremism legislation, asserts that the decree, ratified in September 2015, serves to reinforce the status quo while offering no security to lesser-known religions.

In August this year, more than one million Jehovah's Witness brochures were seized by customs officers as they were being transported into Russia, prompting a transport prosecutor to file a criminal case asking for the literature to be recognised as extremist. Evidence used against the Jehovah's Witnesses in court came mostly from footage captured in secret by the city's police, who installed hidden cameras to secretly film religious services given by the defendants.

Speaking about another trial of Jehovah's Witnesses in Taganrog, Mr Omelchenko said: "I think that the evidence gathered by the investigators couldn't actually lead to them sitting in jail.

"The court knows that they can't actually send them to jail for this, so they're trying to frighten them. But who knows? I suppose that could change," he said.

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