

*[translation from Russian]*

Moscow Jehovahists lost drawn-out judicial process

by Irina Belasheva

Vremia novostei, 29 March 2004

The congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses of the capital finds itself outside the law after all. Recently the Golovin court of Moscow put the final period to this trial that has dragged on for years, beginning in the previous century, and it prohibited the activity of the congregation. Despite their preaching in Russia for almost 100 years now, the Jehovah's Witnesses are not counted among the religions that are traditional for Russia. However, they are not loved under all regimes and they are prohibited in many countries. After all, members of the sect everywhere refuse to serve in the army, do not vote in elections, and do not respect the state flag.

The years-long trial against the Moscow "Witnesses" has its own long and complex history. Back in 1998 the prosecutor of the Northern District concluded that the preachers of the organization incite religious strife, break up the family, and induce people to refuse medical care (Jehovists, for example, refuse blood transfusions). On this basis the prosecutor accused the congregation of violation of article 14 of the law "On freedom of conscience and religious associations." Whoever has not spoken within the chambers of the court sessions in these years: relatives of converts, respected "witnesses," psychologists, and linguists. At first in 2001 the Golovin court did not find sufficient bases for forbidding the congregation. However the "Witnesses" were not able to celebrate their victory for long. Soon the decision was overturned by the Moscow City Court and the case was sent for a new review. In the spring of 2002 a second trial began which last Friday was concluded in favor of the prosecutors. The Golovin court made the decision to liquidate the Moscow congregation of this religious association.

However, the sectarians actually do not even have rights, so to speak. The question of the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses as a religious society had been postponed until the final decision of the Golovin court was issued.

Upon the conclusion of the trial, Jehovah's Witnesses' attorney Galina Krylova stated their intention to appeal the resolution to the Moscow City Court. In addition, according to her colleague Artur Leontiev, the congregation's attorneys have already appealed to the European Court on Human Rights. "Our complaint against the refusal of reregistration of the congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses by the Ministry of Justice, citing this very trial, which in our opinion bears an ideological character, including a request for a just judicial investigation, is already at the European court," he said. Now the decision prohibiting the congregation's activity and its liquidation as a legal entity will be added to the complaint.

Meanwhile it cannot be ruled out that representatives of traditional religions will get more hospitable conditions in Russia. After all, President Vladimir Putin is on their side, supporting the idea of adopting a law in support of traditional religions in his speech to a forum of peoples of the Caucasus. Recalling that the "state is separated from the church," the president at the same time stressed that "the state must find forms of support of religious leaders of the traditional confessions." (tr. by PDS, posted 29 March 2004)