

Oral Testimony for USCIRF Hearing – July 10, 2025

Topic: Russia's Systematic Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses

Chair Hartzler, Vice Chair Mahmood, distinguished Commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Today, I speak on behalf of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia who have been criminalized simply for practicing their peaceful Christian faith.

In 2017, Russia's Supreme Court effectively banned Jehovah's Witnesses for so-called extremist activity. For more than eight years now, the authorities have continued to wage a calculated campaign of religious repression against our community of some 150,000 throughout Russia.

More than [2,200](#) homes of Jehovah's Witnesses have been raided. Forty-four just last month. Officers typically arrive in full combat gear, heavily armed. These raids are often recorded and broadcast to the public to push the false narrative that Witnesses are dangerous.

Jehovah's Witnesses are teachers, pensioners, parents—ordinary people who pose no threat to society. Yet they are being targeted unjustly and convicted as enemies of the state.

As a result, [875](#) Jehovah's Witnesses have faced legal action since the ban. More than [240](#) are over the age of 60. At least 20 of those targeted have documented disabilities.

Nearly [490](#) Jehovah's Witnesses have spent some time behind bars, with [175](#) currently in prison. Why? 66-year-old [Olga Panyuta](#) explains it best: "I am accused of reading the Bible, praying, and explaining Bible verses... I am being tried for my faith, that is, for being a believer and calling God by name." Those were part of her closing words to the judge before being sentenced to four years and four months in prison.

The consequences extend far beyond prison walls. Nearly 750 Witnesses have been added to Russia's federal list of extremists and terrorists. This designation cripples one's ability to work, access banking services, manage property, or even obtain cellphone service. It is a form of social control designed to isolate, impoverish, and intimidate.

Russian authorities have beaten or tortured 70 Witnesses in an attempt to force them to give up the names of their fellow believers. This tactic rarely if ever works, which is why there are relatively few reported incidents. Instead, the authorities have largely turned to a more insidious weapon in this campaign—Soviet-style infiltration.

The FSB has deployed a network of undercover agents—spies—who feign interest in studying the Bible. They attend the Witnesses' Bible studies for months, or even years. They secretly record conversations and then offer deceptive testimony in court.

Take the case of 55-year-old [Andrey Shiyan](#), a former customs officer. On April 29, 2025, Andrey was sentenced to over six years in prison. The key witness? A secret agent known only as "Ivanov," who testified from a separate room, shielded from cross-examination.

Another agent in Vladivostok, Ekaterina Petrova, infiltrated a group of 17 Jehovah's Witnesses, which included elderly ones. Her testimony led to prison sentences of up to 8 years.

These are not isolated cases. At least 30 documented prosecutions have relied on the false testimonies of spies.

The 8 years of persecution has been devastating to families. Over 80 families have had multiple members face criminal prosecutions. For example, one young mother, [Yekaterina Olshevskaya](#), described the heartbreak of watching her toddler ask where his [father](#) is—he's in prison serving a 6-year sentence. Yekaterina's own 61-yr-old [father](#) is serving a 6.5-year sentence, while she also faces criminal charges.

Others in prison have small children, such as 37-year-old [Mikhail Moysh](#). In 2021 Russian authorities raided his home and detained him. He spent 2.5 years in pretrial detention. In his closing words to the court, Mikhail said: "As you already know, I have two little children, one of whom was only six months old when I was arrested. Now he does not know his father, he does not know me, he calls his grandfather his father." The judge ignored Mikhail's plea and sentenced him to 7 years in prison.

We are thankful to USCIRF and the rest of the international community for tirelessly looking for ways to address these breaches of fundamental religious freedom in Russia. Most notably, we are glad that the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2022 that Russia's ban on Jehovah's Witnesses is unjustified and unlawful.

Jehovah's Witnesses will continue to seek an audience with senior officials in Russia to dispel any misunderstandings or misconceptions they may have regarding our beliefs and practices. Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia love their culture and communities and want nothing more than to make substantive contributions to society. This is something they cannot do behind bars nor under conditions of ongoing, virulent opposition.

Thank you.