

Scholars call out Russian persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses

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VILNIUS, Lithuania (RNS)—An international group of religion scholars—including a Baylor University professor—is calling on President Vladimir Putin and his administration to end the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

The scholars' statement, released Oct. 1, followed the [Center for Studies on New Religions](#)' one-day conference, "Jehovah's Witnesses and Their Opponents: Russia, the West, and Beyond," held online from Vilnius, Lithuania.

"As institutions and individuals concerned with religious freedom, we have followed the events in Russia with increasing alarm," the center's statement reads.

Among those events is a reported armed raid of 110 homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia's Voronezh region in July that the scholars call the "largest number of coordinated raids on Jehovah's Witnesses in modern Russia" and an "escalation" in the persecution of Witnesses in the country.

More than 170 Jehovah's Witnesses have reportedly been imprisoned or put in pre-trial detention in Russia since 2017 for practicing their faith.

That's when the Russian Supreme Court labeled Jehovah's Witnesses an "extremist" group. Witnesses are a religious minority in the country, where the Russian Orthodox Church has the backing of the state.

“We are left with the impression that Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia are being punished for their success in gaining new adherents, and because they are perceived as a ‘foreign’ religion. Freedom to proselytize and to persuade members of other religions is, however, an integral part of freedom of religion under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” the statement reads.

Signers include conference speakers J. Gordon Melton of Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion in Waco; Massimo Introvigne of the Center for Studies on New Religions in Torino, Italy; Raffaella Di Marzio of the Center for Studies on Freedom of Belief, Religion and Conscience in Rome; and other international scholars of religion.

There are an estimated 175,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia.

Jehovah’s Witnesses are not recognized as Christian by Orthodox and some other Christian traditions, primarily because they do not believe in the Trinity. They also do not salute the flag, bear arms or participate in politics.