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Russian Authorities Move Toward Unprecedented Shutdown of Witnesses' National Headquarters

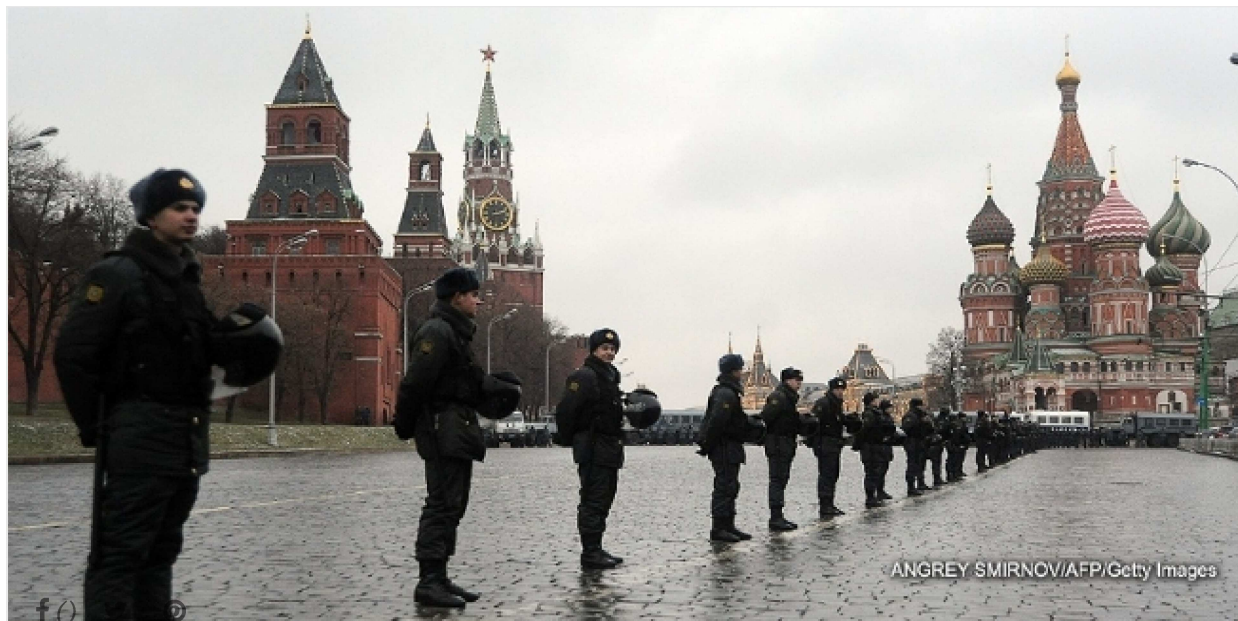
An official warning letter from Russian authorities signals a potential ban on the Witnesses' peaceful worship in Russia.

Apr 08, 2016, 08:35 ET from Jehovah's Witnesses' Office of Public Information (<http://www.prnewswire.com/news/jehovah%27s+witnesses%27+office+of+public+information>)



ST. PETERSBURG, Russia, April 8, 2016 /PRNewswire/ -- In an unprecedented move, Russian authorities have threatened to close the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

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The Prosecutor General's Office of the Russian Federation issued a formal warning letter dated March 2, 2016, stating that "the religious association shall be subject to liquidation" if the administrative center fails to eliminate within two months the "committed violations" framed by the government as "extremist." Yaroslav Sivulskiy, a spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, states: "This closing of our national entity would include a confiscation of any properties we own and ultimately place a ban on the religious activities of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout Russia."

Ironically, the move comes during the 25th anniversary of the first legal registration of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia: the Administrative Center was registered on March 27, 1991, and was reregistered on April 29, 1999. The threat to close the Witnesses' national headquarters in Russia, located in the village of Solnechnoye about 40 kilometers (25 miles) northwest of St. Petersburg, is the latest instance of the government's aggression against the Witnesses. Within the past year, Russian authorities blocked imports of the Witnesses' religious literature, as well as Russian-language Bibles, and made Russia the only nation in the world to ban the Witnesses' official website, jw.org. "The anti-extremism laws are being misapplied toward the worship of Jehovah's

Witnesses in Russia," comments Mr. Sivulskiy. "Jehovah's Witnesses are contesting these decisions. We want to freely carry out our worship and our Bible education work peacefully, as we have been doing for 125 years in Russia."

However, Russian authorities have been increasingly hostile to Jehovah's Witnesses largely due to what has been described as the government's symbiotic relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church. International media outlets have reported that this "close alliance between the government and the Russian Orthodox Church," as *The New York Times* characterized it, appears to fuel aggressive acts and legislation aimed at suppressing the Witnesses' activities as well as those of other religious minorities in Russia. *The Associated Press* reported that the government's "moves against the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia [have] also alarmed religious-freedoms activists." A report from *Reuters* stated that such acts are being carried out "against Jehovah's Witnesses and scores of others caught up in the widening net of criminal prosecutions brought under Russia's anti-extremism law." In December 2015, *The Independent* reported that Russia's legislation was to help "prevent terrorist attacks and ultranationalist violence." Yet, it has also been used "to prosecute members of such peaceful faiths" as Jehovah's Witnesses, as described by *The Huffington Post* on March 20, 2016. Although the Witnesses are seeking legal redress in both domestic courts and the European Court of Human Rights, *The Moscow Times* of March 25, 2016, reported that Russia passed a new law "giving Russian courts the right to overrule international courts' decisions."

The Witnesses use the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to organize and support free Bible education programs for Russian citizens. Experienced ministers at the administrative center also assist and communicate with Witness volunteers in Russia working to provide relief aid for victims of disasters. There are more than 175,000 Witnesses in Russia, a country with a population of over 146,000,000.

David A. Semonian, international spokesman for the Witnesses at their world headquarters in New York, states: "It is greatly disappointing to us that the government would even threaten to shut down our branch office in Russia. Jehovah's Witnesses and many others around the world are taking a keen interest in how this matter develops."

Media Contacts: