

The Russian Campaign Against the Jehovah's Witnesses and Its Influence in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT: In Central Asian countries, courts have penalized the Jehovah's Witnesses for allegedly damaging the mental health of their victims and propagating "religious extremism." These accusations did not originate in Central Asia but were imported there from Russia. After examining some specific court cases, the paper discusses three main Russian accusations against Jehovah's Witnesses: "brainwashing," extremism, and anti-patriotic attitudes. It then considers why the Jehovah's Witnesses have been singled out for persecution that Putin's Russia has consistently tried to export abroad.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses in Central Asia, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan, Jehovah's Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia.

A Strange Incident in Kazakhstan

Yergali Abishov and his wife Irina Kvan left the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2019, after having been members of their Kazakh branch for some twenty years. Almost immediately after leaving, they established an anti-cult organization called Terra Libera. In a country where NGOs consistently face problems and delays in getting registered, they obtained registration in a few weeks. Just one month after having been registered, they went to Warsaw to speak against the Jehovah's Witnesses and call for a law against "cults" in Kazakhstan at the September 2019 OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (Corley 2021, from which I derive all references and quotes in this paragraph, unless otherwise indicated).

That they could organize all this in a few weeks was all more surprising because the Abishovs claimed that they were suffering of mental health problems. Upon leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses they, again almost immediately, found a lawyer

and told her that their years as Jehovah's Witnesses had irremediably damaged their mental health. They then sued the branches of the Jehovah's Witnesses both in Nur-Sultan and in the city of Taraz, where they had previously lived, in the Saryarka District Court in Kazakhstan's capital, which was then called Nur-Sultan (and has now reverted to the old name of Astana), asking for damages.

Kazakhstan is not exactly renowned for its fast-moving court system, yet the Abishovs case proceeded as quickly as the registration of their NGO, and even more. Their lawyer requested a report from the Almaty branch of the Justice Ministry's Centre for Judicial Expert Analysis on 26 June 2019. She asked the experts to study 16 publications of the Jehovah's Witnesses and report on whether they might damage the mental health of their readers. Such "expert reports" are normally used both in Russia and Central Asia to prosecute minority religions, and in fact the Kazakh "experts" had already assisted in prosecuting, among others, a Seventh-day Adventist and even Muslims critical of the government (Corley 2020).

However, in most cases these "experts" ask for several months, or at least several weeks, to complete their analysis of publications by the so-called "cults." In the case of the Abishovs, the experts completed a detailed analysis in just eight days. The lawyer filed her request on 26 June, and they gave her their final report on 4 July.

The "expert" team included two psychiatrists (Zhannat Tatykhodzhayeva and Altinai Babykpayeva) and one psychologist (Aizhan Kudaibergenova), and concluded that between the lines of Jehovah's Witnesses books and magazines were "hidden commands for the full subjugation" of the "victims." In other words, it was enough to read these publications and one would automatically be "brainwashed" and compelled to obey all "orders by the elders."

According to the "experts," the Jehovah's Witnesses were able to produce these truly diabolical publications by using the most advanced Western techniques of mental manipulation. Their study, the three "experts" said,

reveals a clearly structured process carried out with the use of a consistent change and combination of various methods of psychological and psychotherapeutic influence on adepts, with the use of the technology of "the provoking of cognitive dissonance," "hypnotic trance," "neurolinguistic reframing," "modelling, and "informational overload."

Unfortunately, the “experts” added, the influence of this “brainwashing” process was not temporary. The technology of mind control used in the Jehovah’s Witnesses publication, they claimed,

leads to a change in the mood or indeed to the “modification of the mood” and as a whole to the violation of the personal construction and could become a cause of social de-adaptation and neurotization of the personality.

They added that reading these publications is “addictive.” Readers develop a “dependency” and cannot stop reading them. This is precisely the effect the publications are programmed to achieve, the report said. The results of reading the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ literature was

an individual’s low tolerance for frustration, inability to adapt to society, running away from reality and overcoming psychological discomfort by means of addictive realization, that is by receiving subjective positive emotions leading to an artificial change in the mental state, which in turn leads to mental disorder or the exacerbation of mental illnesses.

It was thus perfectly possible, the “experts” concluded, that the Abishovs, or other Jehovah’s Witnesses, had developed serious mental disorders by being exposed for years to a literature that included “hidden commands” and other sophisticated tools for mental manipulation.

The court moved quickly, too. In October 2019, the Abishovs obtained (at their own expenses) a supplementary analysis, which confirmed that the publications caused dependence. On 10 March 2020, the judges rendered their verdict, ordering the Nur-Sultan branch of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to pay 1,168,366 Tenge (Euro 2,441), and the Taraz community was ordered to pay 4,468,366 Tenge (Euro 9,336). These were not small amounts in Kazakhstan, where the average monthly salary is now around Euro 650 but was under Euro 500 in 2020 (CEIC 2022).

The Jehovah’s Witnesses appealed, but on 23 June 2020, the Nur-Sultan City Court rejected the appeal and praised the high quality of the “expert” report. On 21 September 2020, the Supreme Court declined to review the case.

In fact, the “expert” study of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ literature in the case of the Abishovs was regarded as so beautiful and persuasive that it was used in another case. In 2020, Maksat Bekbembetov and his wife Alina, who had left the Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2016 and 2018 respectively, joined the Abishov’s anti-cult organization, Terra Libera. They published on YouTube videos showing

them demonstrating against the Jehovah's Witnesses and the "cults," together with the Abishovs and others. It appeared that they had obtained permission to stage public demonstrations, again in a record time, and in a country where very few such protests are authorized.

The Bekbembetovs also claimed that their mental health was perfectly sane before joining the Jehovah's Witnesses but had deteriorated after being exposed for years to their "sinister" literature. The Bekbembetovs used an unofficial copy of the "expert" study for the Abishov case, and the "experts" of the Forensic Study Institute of the Zhambyl region subsequently based their conclusions on that document. They concluded that the Jehovah's Witnesses' literature had ruined the Bekbembetovs' mental health through "a medical technique of psychotherapeutic and psychological influence."

Armed with this report, and a second one on the alleged addictiveness of the books and magazines, the Bekbembetovs, who live in Taraz, sued the local branch of the Jehovah's Witnesses, in the Taraz City Court. On 26 April 2021, a local judge ordered the Jehovah's Witnesses to pay 2,380,964 Tenge (Euro 4,975). On 2 September 2021, the verdict was confirmed on appeal by the Zhambyl Regional Court, and subsequently by the Supreme Court on 4 April 2022.

The interesting question is how the Almaty "experts" were able to examine an important corpus of Jehovah's Witnesses literature in just eight days, and come to the strange conclusion that these books and magazines include "hidden commands" and have the magical power of "brainwashing" their readers. Happily, this question has been answered. When the "expert" report was used for the second time, in the Bekbembetovs case, the Jehovah's Witnesses hired an expert of their own, Kazakh scholar Galina Mustakimova. She quickly discovered that the work of the Almaty "experts" was not original. The vast majority of it had simply been copied from a report prepared in Russia eleven years earlier, for the case in Siberia that led to the liquidation of the Jehovah's Witnesses branch of Gorno-Altaysk, the capital city of the Altai Republic. The report had been signed in 2008 by two lecturers at Gorno-Altaysk State University, Yuliya Khvastunova and Margarita Dolgovykh.

The story does not end here. The Gorno-Altaysk report itself had been prepared in a record four days. Rather than analyzing the publications of the Jehovah's Witnesses themselves, the local "experts" had, in turn, relied on

publications by the leading Russian anti-cultist, Alexander Dvorkin, and other luminaries of the Russian anti-cult movement (Corley 2010).

This entire incident is clear evidence that in Kazakhstan the attack against the Jehovah's Witnesses is conducted by parroting claims originating with the Russian anti-cult movement, which were used in Russia to liquidate the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017.

This does not happen in Kazakhstan only. In December 2021, I was myself an expert witness in a case in Kyrgyzstan, where the Prosecutor General had asked the Pervomayskiy District Court of the City of Bishkek to ban several books and brochures of the Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist." Eventually, and surprisingly, the judge ruled in favor of the Jehovah's Witnesses. In preparing my expert opinion, I had to read a report prepared by Kyrgyz "experts," which accused the Jehovah's Witnesses publications of creating mental health problems in their readers, in addition to being "pseudo-Christian" (a strange claim in a secular court), anti-patriotic, and extremist. Once again, it was clear that the Kyrgyz "experts" had simply cut and pasted from Russian sources, including an obscure polemical Russian blog that accused the Jehovah's Witnesses of rape, murder, organizing prostitution rings, and other crimes (*Babyblog.ru* 2013). Incredibly, this was taken seriously by the "experts" who signed the Kyrgyz report.

Apart from slander and false accusations whose source was not even indicated, the blog post mentioned as a source Jerry Bergman, a scholar whose field is microbiology (where he is highly controversial) rather than religion. Although, in 1984, Bergman compiled a useful bibliography on the early years of the Jehovah's Witnesses (Bergman 1984), he currently writes as an angry ex-member who has left the faith rather than as a neutral scholar.

What is at work here is a system of "Chinese boxes" or, to use a metaphor more appropriate to those who produce these accusations, a matryoshka. Central Asian "experts" copy Russian court-appointed "experts." Russian court-appointed "experts" copy Russian anti-cult literature. And sometimes Russian anti-cult literature copies Western "apostate" ex-members and anti-cultists. It remains to be explained what the main accusations against the Jehovah's Witnesses are, and why they are formulated.

Three Main Russian Accusations Against the Jehovah's Witnesses

Although there are other accusations that traveled from Russia to Central Asia and were used against the Jehovah's Witnesses—including that they are not really Christians and their interpretation of Christianity is heretic, which strangely enough is quoted in decisions by secular administrative authorities or courts of law—three assertions formed the main basis used by the Russian government to crack down on their organization, which assertions are also exported abroad: “brainwashing” and causing damage to mental health; “extremism;” and anti-patriotic attitudes.

1. “Brainwashing” and Damage to Mental Health

The two cases in Kazakhstan that I have mentioned are different from the one in which I was involved in Kyrgyzstan. While, in Kyrgyzstan, a ban on allegedly extremist literature was sought by a public prosecutor, in Kazakhstan private citizens sued the Jehovah's Witnesses in civil actions, asking for damages. For this reason, extremism was peripheral to the two Kazakh cases. The main accusation was damage to the mental health of the plaintiffs, caused by “hidden commands” concealed in the literature of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

This is just a variation of the familiar accusation that religious minorities labeled as “cults” practice “brainwashing,” which Eileen Barker and James T. Richardson helped to expose as false and pseudo-scientific in the late 20th century (Barker 1984; Richardson 1991, 1992, 1993, 1996). Courts of law in the United States and other countries have accepted the scholars' criticism and have dismissed accusation of “brainwashing” against religious organizations.

However, the Western anti-cult literature about “brainwashing” rarely went so far as to claim that “victims” can be “brainwashed” simply by having them read books or look at the texts' illustrations. Perhaps the only, comparatively recent, exception is an article by anti-cult scholar Susan Raine and an “apostate” ex-member of Scientology hidden under the pseudonym of “George Shaw.” They claim that in 1968 the Church of Scientology produced new covers for some of its books, asking Canadian artist and Scientologist Richard Borthwick Gorman (1935–2010) to prepare the corresponding drawings. Raine and Shaw write that Gorman prepared special images able to “generate subliminal responses trying to

illicit [sic] positive representations of the group” (Shaw and Raine 2017, 313: “illicit” appears to be a typo for “elicit,” but since the same mistake occurs repeatedly in the text [see Shaw and Raine 2017, 309], it perhaps betrays the authors’ persuasion that what Scientology does is by definition “illicit” in the sense of “illegal”).

The claim that somebody can be “brainwashed” by images is obviously preposterous, and more reminiscent of conspiracy theories about Satanic “subliminal messages” reportedly hidden in contemporary rock music (Vokey and Read 1985; Victor 1993, 161–72), than of serious scholarship.

In general, contrary to the dubious claims of anti-cult literature, no serious statistics support the claim that there are more cases of mental illness among the Jehovah’s Witnesses than among the members of other religious groups or the population in general. Italian psychologist Raffaella Di Marzio, in a study published in 2020, found that Italian Jehovah’s Witnesses appear well-adjusted to the environment, and have no more problems of psychological health than the Italian population in general (Di Marzio 2020).

2. “Extremism”

While in the Kazakh cases the main charge was damage to mental health, in Kyrgyzstan the Jehovah’s Witnesses were accused of being “extremist,” which was also the reason alleged for de-registering and banning them in Tajikistan.

“Extremism” is a word that immediately evokes fundamentalism and terrorism, and the law on extremism used against the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia was originally introduced after 9/11 to combat Islamic ultra-fundamentalist terrorism. However, the law was repeatedly amended to broaden the notion of “extremism” in general and “religious extremism” in particular. Currently, to be prosecuted and eventually liquidated as “extremist” in Russia, a religious organization does not need to be violent or promote violence. The main test to be declared “extremist” is whether a religious group advocates the “superiority” of its doctrines with respect to the beliefs of other religions (Kravchenko 2018).

With this notion of “religious extremism,” Russia introduced into its laws a tool to prosecute any religion that a prosecutor, or the “experts” employed by prosecutors, i.e. the Russian anti-cultists, regard as undesirable. In fact, this can be applied to all religions. All religious organizations teach that the path they

propose is, if not the only way to salvation, at least a system that is “superior” to others. If it was just the same, or worse, than other religions, one may wonder why should anyone bother to convert? We can add that the application of this notion of extremism in Russia is largely fraudulent. In fact, the Russian Orthodox Church teaches in innumerable texts that its teachings are “superior” to other religions, yet it is not considered “extremist” and is not prosecuted. On the other hand, when the Jehovah’s Witnesses and others try to convert Russian Orthodox believers to their faith, this is immediately presented as a proof that they are “extremist” and should be liquidated (Carobene 2021).

This notion of “religious extremism” is not part of accepted social science and is uniquely Russian. Russia is obviously interested in exporting it, as its adoption by other countries would give it a certain international legitimization. In May 2020, President Vladimir Putin promulgated a new “Strategy to Counter Extremism Until 2025,” which included the promotion and financial support of “international anti-extremist cooperation,” including in the field of “religious extremism,” and combating organizations endangering “traditional Russian spiritual values” (SOVA Center for Information and Analysis 2020b). The authoritative Moscow-based rights advocate NGO, SOVA Centre, confirmed in a 2020 report that, in particular, “Russian [anti-]extremist legislation has been and remains the model anti-extremist legislation for Central Asian countries” (SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis 2020a, 60).

3. Anti-Patriotic Attitudes

The expert report that the prosecutor used in the Kyrgyz case, based again on Russian precedents, claimed that by not voting, and not saluting the flag, or serving in the military, the Jehovah’s Witnesses manifest their “opposition to the state.”

In fact, Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that secular authorities should be obeyed, although they also ask that their rights to conscientious objection be recognized in certain limited fields. In analyzing the literature of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Kyrgyz experts noted statements that, in cases of conflicts of conscience, Christians should obey God rather than human laws, and interpreted them as incitement to rebellion against the state. However, here the Jehovah’s Witnesses are simply quoting a principle common to all Christians who read their Bible, and

find there that Peter and the other apostles stated in *Acts* 5:29 “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (New International Version). The interpretation of this Biblical passage is unanimous among Christians. For example, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is normative for Roman Catholics, states

Citizens are obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order. “We must obey God rather than men” (*Acts* 5:29) (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, no. 2256).

If, when they teach *Acts* 5:29, the Jehovah’s Witnesses are rebels against the state, so are Roman Catholics and indeed all Christians.

One may object that other Christians do vote and salute the national flag, and have no objections to serve in the military. However, this is a matter of interpretation of the Bible, and secular authorities in democratic countries should have no business in interpreting sacred texts and deciding who is right or wrong in matters theological.

Why Is Russia Doing It?

In 2021, the American network *ABC News* broadcasted a major investigative report on the persecution of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia. The network commented that,

Besides its extravagant displays of force and harsh sentences, the campaign has another unusual feature: No one really knows why it is happening. “Nobody knows,” [Human Rights Watch expert Tanya] Lokshina said, “A lot of people have been trying to figure it out, but nobody really knows.” Unlike efforts to outlaw political opponents of the Kremlin, there is no obvious motive for why Russian authorities have targeted Jehovah’s Witnesses (Reevell 2021).

The report also mentioned Putin’s puzzling words of 2018, when he was asked about the liquidation of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which had happened the previous year. He called it “total nonsense,” giving the impression that he would do something and that the Russian attitude would change. On the contrary, the report noted, “since his remarks, the campaign against the Jehovah’s Witnesses has intensified” (Reevell 2021).

The very subtitle of *ABC News’* report was “A campaign no one is able to explain.” It may appear presumptuous of me to claim that I am the one able to finally explain the whys of the campaign against the Jehovah’s Witnesses in

Russia. Much easier to explain is why Russia invests to export its anti-Jehovah's Witnesses propaganda into Central Asia and even to the West, through the participation of its key anti-cult activists in the activities of the international anti-cult federation FECRIS (Berzano and others 2022). If Russia alone launches strange accusations against the Jehovah's Witnesses and persecutes them, it is easy to see this repression as just another piece of evidence that Putin's regime is totalitarian and non-democratic. If Russia, however, can persuade others, including democratic Western governments, that Jehovah's Witnesses are a dangerous and extremist "cult," their repression may be regarded internationally as somewhat "normal," and based on some intrinsic negative features of the Witnesses rather than on the Russian disregard for religious liberty.

As for the domestic reason for the Russian attitude, I would not presume to answer what others regard as an impossible question, but would suggest four areas for possible future investigation.

The first concerns both the role and the crisis of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). After the end of the Soviet Union, as a reaction to the previous Soviet hostility against religion, the ROC enjoyed a moment of genuine popularity. Many dreamed that the ROC may have in Russia the same role that the Catholic Church had played in parts of Germany and in Italy after World War II, offering a spiritual motivation to those engaged in a post-authoritarian transition to democracy. However, these hopes were short-lived. The ROC came to be dominated by bureaucrats who found it very convenient to applaud the authoritarian drift of Putin and to offer their support to the regime in exchange for financial and other help. In turn, this alienated a sizeable part of the population, particularly among the urban elites, the youth, and the most educated. Rather than reflecting on the real causes of its loss of millions of active members, the ROC conveniently blamed the unfair competition of minority religions whose headquarters are in the West, accusing them of acting as agents of the United States aimed at destroying the spiritual soul of Russia. The Jehovah's Witnesses, being the largest of these religions and having their headquarters in the United States, became the main target of this campaign. As part of its bargain with Putin and his party, the ROC sought and obtained the government's help to get rid of the competition.

The second area that should be investigated is Russia's traditional hostility to those who think independently and adopt a lifestyle different from the majority,

which the government does not understand and is afraid it cannot control. Czarist Russia already repressed as *секты* (sekty), a word better translated as “cults,” several groups that were seen as a threat not only to the ROC but to the state itself. Sometimes, these groups also owned properties, which the government was glad to appropriate and use for its own purposes. Soviet Russia repressed all religions, but not equally. As American historian Emily Baran notes, the Jehovah’s Witnesses were repressed more severely than others because, by refusing to serve in the military, join Party organizations, and participate in village and urban official celebrations and meetings, they “did not conform to even the most basic cultural and political norms of Soviet life” (Baran 2014, 5). Putin’s regime continues the policy of repressing those it perceives as “separate” or “different,” including the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and confiscate their properties.

The third area of investigation is the attitude of a coterie of Russian psychiatrists and psychologists. Many of the “experts” who prepare reports against the Jehovah’s Witnesses come from their fold. The word “brainwashing” was coined during the Cold War by the CIA in the United States, to indicate evil practices it attributed to Soviet and Chinese Communists. However, scholars of the concept of “brainwashing” have indicated that, without using this word, Soviet psychiatrists had already elaborated similar notions before World War II (Dimsdale 2021, 31).

In Soviet times, they might have believed that “brainwashing,” by any other name, was at work in all forms of religious conversion. However, when, shortly before the end of the Soviet Union, some of them started reading Western anti-cult literature, they found there something familiar, i.e. the notion that movements denounced as “cults” recruited their members through “brainwashing” and put members’ mental health at risk.

Putin’s government found this rhetoric appealing, as did other post-Soviet regimes, including in Central Asia. To quote again Emily Baran:

[Western] anticultism provided a critical model for former Soviet states in framing attacks on marginal religions within a democratic [or allegedly democratic] discourse... Further, Russia’s continued influence on former Soviet states meant that, as Russia took the lead in adopting stricter legislation and promoting anticult rhetoric in its press, other countries in the region followed suit (Baran 2014, 9).

Baran wrote these words at the beginning of 2014, and they seem very much appropriate for Central Asia, where a mechanic of anti-Jehovah's-Witnesses discourse inspired by Russia continues to this very day.

On the other hand, however, things have changed since the first months of 2014. Politically and at international institutions, including the United Nations, the Central Asian states have never been uncritical or unconditional supporters of Russia. They are proud of a past in which they resisted Russian colonialism until the late 19th century and even beyond (the Emirate of Bukhara, although it had to accept becoming a Russian protectorate in 1873, remained independent until 1920). Clearly, the two invasions of Ukraine, in 2014 and 2022, have given the Central Asian governments food for thought. Their public opinion and ruling classes have been described in 2022 as both critical and concerned about Putin's aggression against Ukraine (Auyezerov 2022).

One can just hope that this criticism will extend to Russia's attitudes towards religious liberty, and its slander and persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

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