

# JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

## OFFICE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

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### **Moscow court rules against freedom of worship; Ban of Jehovah's Witnesses in city to be decided on appeal**

MOSCOW—Judge Vera K. Dubinskaya of the Golovinsky Intermunicipal District Court of the Northern Administrative Circuit of the city of Moscow ruled today to liquidate the Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses and to impose a ban on their activity. The Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses is appealing the ruling, which means that the judge's decision has not entered into legal force. The Moscow City (Appeals) Court will consider the appeal in the coming months. As a result, the current legal status of the Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses remains unaltered despite today's decision.

“As in the first trial which we won, this case did not involve any specific facts or alleged incidents of wrongdoing, but dealt exclusively with whether the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses are legitimate,” stated defense counsel Artur Leontyev. “This question has already been decided numerous times by the European Court, which ruled that it is not within a State's prerogative to examine the legitimacy of religious beliefs, much less pass sentence on them. It is clear that this decision cannot stand on appeal and will only serve to accelerate the review of our application filed with the [European Court of Human Rights](#).” This application before the European Court of Human Rights concerns the legal recognition of the Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses and its religious activity. In June 2003, acting on this application, the European Court submitted questions to the Russian government regarding its treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow.

Today's ruling was issued as a result of a civil complaint filed with the court on April 20, 1998 by the Prosecutor of the Northern Administrative Circuit of the City of Moscow. On February 23, 2001, [the complaint was dismissed](#) by Judge Yelena I. Prokhorycheva of the same court as having “no basis whatsoever.” On appeal, the Moscow City Court ordered the current retrial, which began in October 30, 2001. The present Court then ordered a comprehensive expert study of literature published by Jehovah's Witnesses. Contrary to the claims of the prosecutor in the official complaint, the three experts found that the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses encourages members to “preserve the family and the marriage arrangement” and contains “no information urging members to actions aimed at refusal to fulfill the broad spectrum of civic responsibilities.” They also found the claim that the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses incites to religious hatred to be “unsupported.”

Jehovah's Witnesses are an internationally recognized Christian religion. There are over six and a half million worldwide, with more than 133,000 in Russia. They are officially recognized in more than 150 countries, including all those of Europe. The European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly declared Jehovah's Witnesses to be a “known religion.”

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