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In the Shadow of Russia: Jehovah's Witnesses and Religious Freedom in Central Asia. Some Introductory Considerations

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ABSTRACT: This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* contains the proceedings of an Internet Seminar that was held on 2 December 2022, entitled *In the Shadow of Russia: Jehovah's Witnesses and Religious Freedom in Central Asia*. The papers by Šorytė, Introvigne, and Richardson present a general overview of the situation of religious liberty in the five countries of Central Asia, all marked by Russian influence. Willy Fautré surveys Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The papers by Central Asian scholars Beissembayev, Sinyakov, and Aslanova, discuss specific issues in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The papers demonstrate that the situation for the Jehovah's Witnesses in the area is not good, and it is worse in some Central Asian countries than in others. But it is better than in some neighboring countries, and there are signs that it is improving.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses, Jehovah's Witnesses in Central Asia, Religious Liberty in Central Asia, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, Brainwashing.

It is probable that some kind of legal structure is necessary to ensure human rights such as the freedom to manifest one's religion, but these structures are rarely if ever sufficient. Those in positions of power, and indeed those with apparently little power, can usually manage to prevent members of unpopular religions from enjoying those rights that, at first sight, we might assume the law guarantees. Nearly all the Declarations, Conventions, Constitutions, and ordinary laws that pronounce the rights of all peoples to practice their religion freely have a clause that can be used to restrict such rights.

For example, Article 2.1. of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (1992) affirms that persons belonging to religious minorities:

have the right to profess and practice their own religion in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination.

Article 4.2. then adds the proviso:

States shall take measures to create favorable conditions to enable persons belonging to minorities to express their characteristics and to develop their [...] religion [...] except where specific practices are in violation of national law and contrary to international standards.

Article 9 of *The European Convention of Human Rights* affirms in clause (1) that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

Then, in clause (2), it adds that:

Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

And this is understandable. The right of members of a religion to sacrifice virgins on an altar is not an acceptable right in contemporary societies. Clearly, the rights of others also need to be considered.

But where does one draw the line? What, we might ask, happens when members of a religion take seriously the commandment found in both the Torah and the New Testament (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17; Matthew 5:21; Matthew 19:18; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20): “Thou shalt not kill”? What *has* happened is that thousands of believers have been imprisoned, tortured and killed for doing that very thing—refusing to take up arms against fellow human beings (King 1982; Knox 2018; Liebster 2003; Wontor-Cichy 2006).

I am, of course, referring to the Jehovah's Witnesses, one of the more controversial religions of modern times, but just as controversial are the social reactions to which they have given rise in the numerous countries throughout the globe in which they are to be found. Rarely are they greeted with open arms by governments—at best, they are tolerated and left to their own devices; but even then, they are unlikely to be welcomed by the general population. A recent YouGov poll of a random sample of a thousand United States adults indicated that, out of 35 religious groups, organizations, and belief systems, only Satanism

and the Church of Scientology had a higher percentage than the Jehovah's Witnesses having an unfavorable attitude towards them (YouGov 2022).

Nonetheless, the Witnesses are persistent in their proselytizing efforts, and are able to attract new members wherever they go, in even the most restrictive of countries, and in the full knowledge that they are risking their freedom and possibly their lives by so doing.

This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* contains the proceedings of an Internet Seminar that was held on 2 December 2022, entitled *In the Shadow of Russia: Jehovah's Witnesses and Religious Freedom in Central Asia*. With the collapse of the USSR, all five countries of Central Asia became independent states, each adopting a Constitution in the 1990s that clearly proclaimed freedom of religion for all its citizens, the vast majority of whom are Sunni Muslims. Yet, within these pages we can find a wide range of examples of ways in which these new states have managed to circumvent the freedom of religion clauses that they had embodied in their Constitutions.

It is rare for the countries of Central Asia to hit the headlines of Western media; and it is unlikely that a majority of either Europeans or Americans could name the five countries that comprise it, let alone point them out on a map. Luckily, the contributors do not take prior knowledge for granted. The paper by the internationally renowned human rights advocate, Massimo Introvigne, provides a remarkably wide-ranging overview, briefly introducing us to the geography, demography, economy, politics, religion, legislation, and history of the region in general and the five countries in particular, paying particular attention to the changing relationships that have existed between them and their near neighbors, Turkey, China, and Russia.

As the title of the issue suggests, it is the role that Russia has played in the region which underlies the content of the papers, demonstrating ways in which it has had, and continues to have, significant consequences for the lives of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have been active in the region for over the past hundred years. While the first three papers contain references to the whole region, the next four are more focused on specific countries.

Unfortunately, for health reasons, Artur Artemyev was unable to join the Seminar. This was a disappointment as Professor Artemyev is an internationally respected scholar from Kazakhstan who, among his many scholarly projects, has

carried out an extensive study of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan. His impressive book on the subject can, however, be freely downloaded in both Russian and English (Artemyev 2021).

The first paper, by Rosita Šorytė (who has a diplomatic background and, as a native of Lithuania, has experienced life under Soviet rule), sets the scene by recounting how a Kazakh couple left the Jehovah's Witnesses after twenty years' membership and managed to register, with unprecedented speed, an "anti-cult" movement directed against their former religion. Again, with unprecedented speed, they were in a court of law, claiming damages for the mental ill-health they maintained they were suffering from as a result of their years with the Witnesses. It took three "expert witnesses" only few days after being presented with sixteen publications of the Jehovah's Witnesses for analysis to produce a detailed report declaring that the couple had been "brainwashed" by the Witnesses and that their literature contains subliminal messages that had the effect of manipulating the minds of any who read it. As a result, the Witnesses were ordered to pay the equivalent of two years' salary.

Šorytė goes on to explain how it was discovered that the "expert report" was the exact same report as that which had been used in another case, and that *that* report had itself relied on publications of the Russian anticult movement, some of which were lifted from Western anti-cult literature. Furthermore, Šorytė tells how she had encountered a similar example of expert testimony being a copy of a copy of a copy in a case in Kyrgyzstan, reminding her of the Russian Matryoshka dolls, nesting into one another.

Jehovah's Witnesses, like other individuals and organizations, can be faced with an assortment of legal jurisdictions. These can be at the international (United Nations) level, the continental (European) level, the governmental level, and/or the regional and local level. Normally the more extensive level of law trumps a lower level of law, but this is by no means always the case. The Jehovah's Witnesses have been discriminated against at the local, regional level in a number of cases that are not necessarily sanctioned at the state level.

The paper by James Richardson, who has expertise as both a lawyer and a sociologist of religion, describes how the Witnesses have had considerable success in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in cases they have taken against the Russian Federation. Faced with decisions instructing it to release prisoners and compensate for property seized, Russia has simply ignored

the Court's orders and has now removed itself from the jurisdiction of the Court. Not being members of the Council of Europe, the countries of Central Asia have no recourse to the ECtHR; the Court's rulings on the Russian treatment of Witnesses can, nonetheless, send a signal about what is not considered acceptable in Europe. They are, however, members of the United Nations, and Jehovah's Witnesses have successfully turned to the UN Human Rights Committee (HRC); and Richardson cites some cases that can give them hope that discriminatory government rulings can be overturned.

Willy Fautré is the founder and Executive Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers International, an organization that documents information about violations of religious freedom throughout the world. His paper provides examples of how Jehovah's Witnesses have had their religious freedoms violated in Tajikistan (where, as in Russia, they are banned), Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (where they have been imprisoned and their ability to practice their religion has been severely curtailed). His paper illustrates how, in a country which guarantees freedom to manifest one's religion, the government might add the rider that this is only so long as the religion is officially registered, then make it impossible to register unless there is a large number of members in any particular association, and/or find various spurious reasons why it should not register the religion. One reason offered in Central Asia is that Russia has declared that the literature provided by the Jehovah's Witnesses is extremist; this means that the Witnesses, as readers of such literature, are themselves extremist, and therefore dangerous, and should not be allowed to operate in the country.

It is true that Jehovah's Witnesses are extremist in some ways. They are extremely non-violent; and they are extremely meticulous in following the law of the land, unless it goes against God's law as they understand it, as in the case of obeying the Ten Commandments. They are not, however, violent—quite the opposite in fact. Yet they can find themselves being imprisoned, having their property confiscated, and, sometimes, being tortured, without there being a shred of evidence that they have harmed a single soul.

The next two papers are written by scholars from Kazakhstan. Serik Beissembayev's paper presents the preliminary findings of an online survey he has conducted with over 1,500 Kazakh Jehovah's Witnesses respondents. Among the many interesting findings, is that just over half of his respondents identified themselves as Russian, with only 28 per cent identifying as Kazakhs.

Furthermore, over three quarters said they spoke only Russian in their homes, with 11.5 per cent speaking both Russian and Kazakh. Over two thirds had received some kind of further education, around three quarters considered their life had improved considerably since they had become a Jehovah's Witness, and most of the respondents indicated that they were happy or confident about the future. Not surprisingly, practically all of them placed primary importance on the role of God in their life. It will be interesting to see what further findings can be revealed by the survey, and it is to be hoped that further surveys, asking yet further questions, with, perhaps, a control group of non-Witnesses, may be undertaken in the future.

Oleg Sinyakov's paper presents a qualitative analysis of the situation in contemporary Kazakhstan, where, we learn, 3,834 religious associations within 18 confessions are registered. Nearly two thirds of the associations are Islamic, but there is a fair number of Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic associations as well as a number of minority religions including the Hare Krishnas, the Bahá'í, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Unification Church (Family Federation), and, with 60 registered associations and 57 Kingdom Halls, the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Sinyakov then gives us a brief account of the history of the Witnesses in Kazakhstan, which began in 1892 when a Witness was exiled from Russia to Kazakhstan because of his commitment to his religion. During World War II, Witnesses imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps converted hundreds of fellow prisoners to their faith, and after the war many found themselves in Soviet camps where again, under conditions of severe hardship, they continued their successful proselytizing. Further trials awaited them, but following the collapse of the Soviet Union, life for the Witnesses and other religions was considerably easier in Kazakhstan than in most neighboring post-Soviet countries, including Russia. Nonetheless, there were still quite a few challenges that faced the registration of associations in several of the Kazakh regions.

However, since 2013 all the Jehovah's Witnesses' associations have been reregistered, and Kazakhstan's authorities have officially stated that despite the ban on Witnesses in Russia they did not consider the believers to be extremists and they would not ban them. Sinyakov includes the results of some of the research he has been conducting into the conversion of Jehovah's Witnesses and ends his paper with a rejection of accusations made about them, pointing out that,

in opposition to what the media and anti-cultists claim, the Witnesses are perfectly rational and, although not everyone will agree with their beliefs, their actions pose no threat to fellow citizens.

The final paper is by Indira Aslanova, a scholar at the Kyrgyz Russian Slavic University in Bishkek. Concentrating on Kyrgyzstan, Aslanova returns to the subject initially raised by Šorytè: the role of forensic experts in the repression of both Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities, such as the Church of Scientology, when, she tells us, "expert" assessment is based on the assumption that (real) religions are monotheistic, have a Holy Scripture, and the institution of the church and clergy. She cites a case in which the Ahmadiyya community of Kyrgyzstan was denied reregistration after expert witnesses representing the "traditional" Muslim clergy declared the organization to be a "destructive cult."

It is not only in Central Asia that religions are judged according to the beliefs and practices of a region's predominant faith. Today, for example, the majority of Christian churches, including the Russian Orthodox Church, accept the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and, like many in the UK and elsewhere, consider non-Trinitarians are not "real Christians" but heretics. Yet the doctrine is not explicitly stated in the New Testament and only came to be widely accepted after several church councils had debated the nature of God throughout the first few centuries of Christianity. An expert witness in a secular court can explain what the doctrine is, which religions accept it, and which do not, but s/he cannot claim any expertise in deciding whether or not the doctrine is true.

To take another example of a common accusation, the concept of brainwashing is, of course, a metaphor. No one is suggesting that Jehovah's Witnesses actually wash the brains of their members with soap and water. The concept of mind control is slightly more plausible, but there are now numerous studies demonstrating that, although members of a religion may certainly influence those with whom they communicate (anyone living in a society is constantly being influenced by others to a greater or lesser extent), proselytizing religions are rarely as effective as they might like to be in persuading others to accept their beliefs.

Those who use a concept such as brainwashing are frequently judging the outcome rather than the process by which the outcome is reached. They are really arguing that it is difficult to accept that anyone could reach that outcome of their own free will. However, most people who are approached by enthusiastic

proselytizers do not convert, and nearly all religions have a significant turnover, with those who had joined later leaving of their own free will. This is as true of the Jehovah's Witnesses as it is of many other religions that have been accused of employing "brainwashing" techniques. Indeed, the Kazakh couple who left the Witnesses to set up an anti-cult movement managed to leave after twenty years of so-called indoctrination.

A rough estimate of turnover can be made by adding the number of baptisms in year X to the peak number of publishers (Jehovah's Witnesses: see jw.org 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021), then subtract the projected deaths (1% per annum: The World Bank 2022); the result can be compared to actual peak publishers for the following year ($X+1$), which will indicate whether there have been members leaving over the period. Data about both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—and the worldwide Jehovah's Witnesses community as a whole—show that members do leave on a more or less regular basis. However, it is true that we cannot tell from these figures whether such people have left, have been disfellowshipped or, in the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, emigrated to another country.

Aslanova concludes her paper by saying that Kyrgyzstan (and, we could add, the rest of Central Asia) "located in the infosphere of Russia, very organically absorbed the anticult rhetoric." It is time, she says, for investigators and judges to rely on factual evidence of illegal acts rather than fabricated and/or irrelevant information.

In conclusion, the opportunity for Jehovah's Witnesses (and some other religions) to enjoy religious freedom in Central Asia is not good, and it is worse in some Central Asian countries than in others. But it is better than in some neighboring countries, and there are signs that it is improving. There is clearly a growing number of Central Asians who are aware of the problems and are trying to rectify them by rejecting the more negative influences of Russia and its anti-cult movement, and by recognizing the value of social science in combatting both ignorance and misinformation through educating governmental bodies, the media, the courts, and the general public.

It is clear that external influences can also contribute to the reduction of prejudice and discrimination through passing judgements in international organizations such as the United Nations, the US State Department, and the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), and by providing expert witnesses to give evidence alongside local experts in the courts. Seminars

and publication of papers such as those in this issue can also play a role in highlighting some of the obstacles to, and potential solutions for, the realization of religious freedoms in an ever-changing and increasingly pluralistic world.

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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 irretrievably 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 (Auyezov 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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The Central Asian Context and the Jehovah's Witnesses: An Overview

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ABSTRACT: The five republics of Central Asia that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union face problems of democracy, of constructing their national identities, of managing religion, and of dealing with the hegemonic projects of China, Russia, and Turkey. They have generally looked for authoritarian solutions, creating serious problems of human rights and religious liberty, although attitudes to minority religions are somewhat different in the five countries. How Jehovah's Witnesses are, or are not, allowed to freely practice their religion in Central Asia is a consequence of this general context, and at the same time an indicator of each country's progress (or lack of it) towards democracy and the respect of human rights.

KEYWORDS: Religion in Central Asia, Jehovah's Witnesses in Central Asia, Religious Liberty in Central Asia, Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan, Jehovah's Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan, Jehovah's Witnesses in Tajikistan, Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan, Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan.

An Overview of Central Asia

Central Asia is an area once part of the Soviet Union that includes five countries, with a total population of 73 million. Uzbekistan, accounts for almost half of the population (35 million). The largest country, Kazakhstan, as large as all Western Europe, has a population of 19 million. Tajikistan follows, approaching 10 million, and Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, with 6.5 million each.

It is not a rich area. Only in the oil- and gas-rich Kazakhstan the GDP per capita in 2021 was \$10,041.5, not so far away from the Russian Federation (\$12,172.8) and the poorest European Union country, Bulgaria (\$11,635). Yet, the GDP per capita in Kazakhstan exceeded by almost thirteen times the

corresponding figure in the poorest of the five countries, Tajikistan (\$897.1) (The World Bank 2022).

The relevance of Central Asia cannot be measured only by looking at its present GDP. For several centuries, Central Asia has played a central role in the history of humanity, as evidenced by the archaeological remnants and marvelous historical monuments one can still admire in several parts of the region.

The five states are different in terms of geography, demographics, and economics. What they have in common is that they were once part of the Soviet Union, and that the majority of the population in four states, and a sizeable minority in Tajikistan (which has a Persian majority), is Turkic by ethnicity. In all five countries, Sunni Islam is the dominant religion. One could add that the languages most spoken in Central Asia (except Tajik) are also Turkic, but in fact most inhabitants speak Russian, many even at home, and Russian continues to function as a lingua franca throughout the region. Central Asians also have common problems, which I would summarize in four groups.

1. The problem of democracy

Unlike in the Baltic States or Georgia during Mikhail Gorbachev's (1931–2022) perestroika, there was no strong movement advocating for independence in any of the Central Asian Soviet Republics. Independence did not exactly catch them by surprise, but it was not the result of popular movements either. In all of the countries except Kyrgyzstan the first secretaries of the Soviet Communist Parties, who had not been among the most enthusiastic supporters of the perestroika, became the presidents of the new independent republics: Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, Saparmurat Niyazov (1940–2006) in Turkmenistan, Islam Karimov (1938–2016) in Uzbekistan, and Rahmon Nabiyeu (1930–1993) in Tajikistan. In Kyrgyzstan, it was not the Communist Party's local first secretary but another member of the Soviet nomenklatura, the President of the Academy of Sciences, Askar Akayev, who was elected as the first president of the newly established independent Republic.

Their successors as presidents came from the same background. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who succeeded Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan in 2019 after the latter had ruled the country for more than 27 years, is a former Soviet diplomat. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, who succeeded Niyazov in Turkmenistan and,

like his predecessor, established there a bizarre cult of personality, was an obscure Soviet dentist but was rumored to be the illegitimate son of Niyazov. Berdimuhamedow stepped down from the presidency in 2022, only to be succeeded to his son Serdar. Emomali Rahmon, who emerged from a civil war in Tajikistan that followed Nabyev's death as the country's president and has remained in office to this day, was a Soviet military man and a member of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan before independence. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who succeeded Karimov in Uzbekistan, had also been a member of the Supreme Soviet of his republic.

Kyrgyzstan was somewhat different, as it went through two revolutions, called "of the Tulips" in 2005 and "of the Melons" in 2010, and six different presidents. Although not all the hopes of the local democratic movement have been realized, Kyrgyzstan's elections are regarded by international observers as somewhat more believable than those of the other Central Asian countries, where incumbent presidents, or the heirs they have designated, are re-elected with suspiciously high majorities, and international bodies such as the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) routinely refuse to certify the elections as fair. There is no freedom of the press, human rights organizations have often denounced the jailing and even torture of political opponents, and organizations critical of the regimes are harassed or liquidated (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2006, 23–31).

All republics adopted ostensibly democratic Constitutions, recognizing the separation of powers and human rights. In fact, with the partial exception of Kyrgyzstan, the best one can say of Central Asia is that it is "differently democratic" with respect to full-blown democracies.

2. The problem of identity

The question of national identity in the five countries is politically sensitive. Each has its share of nationalist historians, who claim that present-day republics are the legitimate heirs of late medieval or early modern khanates. Museums and exhibitions proudly display the rich historical and artistic heritage of each country. There is no reason to deny the splendor of this heritage, yet most Western and Russian historians maintain that there was no sense of a national identity in any of the five countries before the 20th century, and "they owe [...]"

their conception of nationhood to Soviet border demarcation and nation-building policies” (Dave 2007, 21). There were linguistic differences, and there had been khanates and other forms of independent states. But, when Russian colonialism achieved the conquest of Central Asia in the 1860s, there was no sense of five distinct national identities in the Muslim area the Czarist Empire simply called Turkestan, where a sizeable part of the population consisted of nomads.

In the 20th century, movements to promote the local languages and cultures emerged, until the Bolsheviks came. They played a decisive, if complicated, role in creating the five national identities of Central Asia (Tillett 1969). The regime clearly delimited five distinct Soviet Republics, and fixed their borders, thus creating the very problem of nationalities they then tried to solve by promoting a brutal “Russification” and eradicating the local languages and culture. On the other hand, in trying to resist Russification some intellectuals consolidated or created nationalist movements that were small but not insignificant.

It should also be remembered that in the memory of Central Asians, particularly Kazakhs, national identity is connected with a catastrophe. Ukrainian national identity (and anti-Russian feelings, which are crucial to understand present attitudes) are inextricably connected with the Holodomor. In 1932–33, Stalin (1878–1953) organized an artificial famine in a large area of Ukraine, with troops preventing Ukrainians from moving elsewhere. In Stalin’s mind, the famine should have exterminated the Ukrainian small landowners, the backbone of the anti-Soviet opposition. The Holodomor, the Ukrainian holocaust by starvation, killed at least 3.5 million Ukrainians, and is now widely, if not unanimously, recognized as a genocide (Boriak 2001).

Even more forgotten than the Holodomor is the parallel Asharshylyk, which killed 2 million Central Asians, including 1.5 million Kazakhs, between 1930 and 1933. It is less well-known because, unlike their Ukrainian counterparts, local governments have been less keen to promote its study, preferring not to antagonize the Russians, although they have locally commemorated it. It is a sign of the times that, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, President Tokayev of Kazakhstan presided over a more solemn commemoration, claimed the victims were 5 million, and called for further studies (Kussainova 2022).

Many Central Asians call what happened “the Goloshchyokin genocide,” after the name of the then First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party, Filipp Goloshchyokin (1876–1941) who had largely organized it. Goloshchyokin had

previously been the main organizer of the killing of Czar Nicholas II (1894–1917) and his family in Ekaterinburg in 1917, and was himself later executed by Stalin. One of the reasons was that he was homosexual, and Stalin had decided to eradicate homosexuality from the Communist Party. As a Ukrainian Jew, he was also a victim of Stalin’s purge of Jewish Communist leaders suspected of being Trotskyists (Kindler 2018; Cameron 2018).

Later, Stalin conveniently blamed the Great Kazakh Famine on Goloshchyokin only. Historians still debate whether the Asharshylyk was caused, as the Ukrainian Holodomor, by the deliberate will of Stalin, to destroy a class of nomads and sedentarized ex-nomads who resisted collectivism and Sovietization (Conquest 1986), or was just the result of an ill-advised and catastrophic attempt to transform nomads into kolkhoz farmers overnight. 40% of all Kazakhs died in the Kazakhstan Asharshylyk. Thousands of Kazakhs and Kyrgyz who survived escaped to Xinjiang, where their descendants have remained to this day only to become victims of the current Chinese repression.

Stalin replaced the Central Asians who had died with Russians and other non-Muslim Soviet citizens who were encouraged or compelled to settle there. In the 1950s, Kazakhstan came to have a majority of Russians and Ukrainians, with ethnic Kazakhs reduced to 30%, although they became the majority again in the 1980s, being more prolific than the Western settlers (Dave 2007, 60).

The use of local languages was actively discouraged, and many Central Asian became *mankurts*, a term invented by Kyrgyz novelist Chinghiz Aitmatov (1928–2008) in his 1980 novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (English translation, Aitmatov 1983) to designate a class of slaves. The word came to identify those citizens of Central Asia who had lost their cultural heritage and had accepted being both Sovietized and Russified (Dave 2007, 3).

After what American scholar Martha Brill Olcott famously called their “accidental independence” (Olcott 2002, 5), the Central Asian political elites tried to turn the problem of national identity into a resource, in essence claiming that *mankurtizatsiia* was reversible (Dave 2007, 3). Speaking the local languages, something that was regarded as suspicious in Soviet times, became an asset. Presidents were compared to Emperor Timur (1336–1405) and other great rulers of the past, and efforts were made to connect to an often-mythological pre-Soviet and pre-Russian past. When I visited the mausoleum of the late

President Karimov in Uzbekistan, in 2018, the iconography comparing him to Timur was obvious. Even transforming prints were on sale where, by moving the object, the image of Karimov changed into a portrait of Timur.

The mythical past rulers rely on can only be Turkic (Persian in Tajikistan) and Muslim. Yet, Central Asian presidents also understand they should not antagonize Russia.

3. The problem of religion

Museums and exhibitions, including the one Tajikistan organized in Paris in 2021–22 (Musée Guimet 2021), emphasize pre-Islamic religious pluralism in Central Asia, with the presence of Melkite, Jacobite, and Nestorian Christians (Dauvillier 1956, Colless 1986, Sims-Williams 1992, Lala Comneno 1997), Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, as well as local cults, subsumed under the increasingly controversial label of Shamanism. However, when Imperial Russia started its military conquest of Central Asia, it found a society that had been totally Islamized.

From Ivan IV “the Terrible” (1530–1584) to Peter the Great (1672–1725), the Czars of Russia believed that it was possible to convert all Muslims within their Empire to the Russian Orthodox Church, through a combination of missionary work, tax incentives for those who converted, and forced baptisms. Catherine the Great (1729–1796) abandoned this policy, not so much because she was influenced by liberal Enlightenment ideas but because she realized that eradicating Islam was impossible. She decided to control it by creating a Muslim Spiritual Assembly that should have been a counterpart of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, equally controlled by the state (Keller 2001, 2–3).

After Russia conquered most of the present-day five states in the 1860s, the first governor-general of Russian Turkestan, General Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufmann (1818–1882), inaugurated the politics of *ignorirovanie*, based on the two pillars of dismantling the Islamic political institutions and ignoring the private practice of Islam and the reputedly non-political Sufi brotherhoods. Although von Kaufmann, despite his German ancestry, was a fanatical Orthodox believer who, unlike Catherine the Great, refused to see any spiritual value in Islam (Keller 2001, 7), he prohibited Russian Orthodox missionaries from entering Turkestan, believing missions would fuel anti-Russian protests. Von

Kaufmann was persuaded that Islam would eventually disappear, not through violent eradication but through the arrival in Central Asia of a growing number of Russian Orthodox colonists, who would one day become the majority of the population and whose “superior” lifestyle Muslims would acknowledge and imitate (Keller 2001, 6–7).

Von Kaufmann’s policies were criticized but substantially maintained by Russian administrators until the anti-Russian revolts, which had occasionally erupted before but became widespread when Russia tried to conscript Central Asians to fight in World War I, persuaded them that Islam, including Sufism, had never ceased to be active underground as a political force. By then, the Czarist Empire was approaching its end, which created in Turkestan a myriad of local revolts that made the territory effectively ungovernable.

Lenin (1870–1924) tried to reassert control of the territory by promising to respect the religion and identity of Central Asian Muslims. In a way, Lenin kept his promises, not because he liked Islam but because he believed he could not consolidate his fragile control of the former Turkestan without it.

Things, changed dramatically with Stalin, however, who in 1927 launched the first campaign to “de-Islamize” Central Asia and impose atheism. Thousands of Muslim clergy were arrested and executed, several thousand mosques were destroyed or converted to secular halls, the use of Arabic script and the veil for women was prohibited. Stalin’s campaigns lasted until 1941, when the needs of the Patriotic War persuaded him that he needed the support of Muslim clergy to conscript Central Asians into the Red Army without problems. Just as he did with the Russian Orthodox Church, Stalin freed from jail those Muslim clergymen who were willing to collaborate, and resurrected the state-controlled Islamic institutions that dated back to Catherine the Great (Keller 2001, 251).

Although there were periodic campaigns to promote atheism, and ethnic Central Asians who achieved leadership positions in the Soviet pro-atheist organizations, Russia after Stalin continued with a policy dating back to Catherine the Great and General von Kaufmann, controlling institutional Islam through state Muftis and clergy (an attitude Putin is continuing today: Bekkin 2020), while it ignored Sufism and individual piety. One of the results was that, as Alexandre Bennigsen (1913–1988) and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejays (1926–2018) noted in their celebrated 1986 book *Le Soufi et le commissaire*,

Sufi brotherhoods actually grew, and became a force to be reckoned with in the later years of the Soviet Union (Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay 1986).

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the newly formed five independent states all proclaimed the end of official atheism and inscribed religious liberty in their Constitutions. Most political leaders, their backgrounds in the Soviet Communist Party notwithstanding, publicly proclaimed their Islamic faith, made pilgrimages to Mecca, and hailed Sufism as a force for harmony and peace. Uzbekistan's Karimov even swore on the Quran (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2006, 50).

On the other hand, they kept in place the Soviet institutions created to control Islam, often putting at their head relatives or close associates of the presidents (Peyrouse 2004). They also controlled Islamic education, in some cases insisting that institutions training clergy also used as textbooks the writings of the presidents themselves, presented as great philosophers, including works of Karimov in Uzbekistan and, as long as he was alive, the *Roukhnama* of Turkmen president Niyazov, which was proclaimed "the second Holy Book" to be studied together with the Quran (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2006, 54).

Since the 1990s, and even more after 9/11, Central Asian presidents came to see radical Islam as the main threat to their power, and imposed stricter policies. Before 9/11, Karimov had already closed 4,000 of the 6,000 mosques operating in Uzbekistan (Abdullaev 2002). To some extent, the threat was real. On the other hand, some Presidents used the rhetoric of "Islamic terrorism" to justify the repression of all political opponents and strict control of religion. Hizb ut-Tahrir, an international fundamentalist movement founded in Jordan, whose relationship with violence and terrorism remains controversial (Mayer 2004), has been banned in all five states and accused of all sort of wrongdoings.

Tablighi Jamaat, a large conservative missionary organization with millions of members, created in India in 1926 within the revivalist Deobandi movement (Masud 2000), has also been banned in four Central Asian states and in Russia. Kyrgyzstan, where the movement has an important presence, has so far resisted Russian pressure to crack down on it. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have both banned Yakyn Inkar, which emerged in 2014 as a more radical schism of Tablighi Jamaat. Members of the latter in Kyrgyzstan have supported the repression of Yakyn Inkar (Najibullah 2022).

German and Slavic populations settled in Central Asia in the 19th century with the support of the Czars, and more were forcibly deported or relocated there by Stalin. One result was an increased Christian presence. Buddhists from other parts of the Soviet Union were also relocated in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and there remains a small presence of the so-called Bukhara Jews, although most of them emigrated to the United States and Israel.

Relations with Russia guaranteed the legal existence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Central Asia. Catholicism has a significant presence in Kazakhstan, with some 250,000 devotees, mostly of Lithuanian, Polish, German, and Korean heritage (Peyrouse 2003). Some arch-conservative Catholic bishops have been a problem for the Vatican, whose recent reforms they have opposed (see e.g. Pullella 2022), but they have been generally supportive of the government. Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) visited Kazakhstan in 2001. Pope Francis went one step further in September 2022, when he participated in the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, held in the Kazakh capital, thus legitimizing the ambitious interreligious initiatives inaugurated by Nazarbayev—who proclaimed the Pyramid built in Astana by the celebrated British architect Norman Foster “the world centre for interconfessional dialogue” (Aitken 2009, 200–1)—and continued by his successor Tokayev (Chambon 2022).

The relationship of the five states with Protestant groups has been much more difficult. These actively try to convert both Muslims and Orthodox and Catholic Christians, and are accused of being agents of the United States and the West, particularly by Russian propaganda (Peyrouse 2003). The repression of these groups has been harsh, and has become worst in the 21st century, with churches closed, converts fired from their jobs, heavy fines imposed for allegedly illegal proselyting activities, and the arrest and even torture of pastors and believers (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2006, 53). Repression, however, is not the same in all countries. Kyrgyzstan may offer the best situation for Protestants, Turkmenistan the worst; with the other three republics somewhere in the middle, and with some signs of improvement.

4. The problem of the neighbors

Issues of religious liberty and human rights in Central Asia cannot be examined without considering the role of three key neighbors: Russia, China, and

Turkey. All are important commercial and military partners of the five republics, with which they have different historical ties. All try to exert their influence on Central Asia, including in the religious sphere.

— Russia

Russia is, of course, the former colonial power, but relations with it are ambiguous among the five countries' cultural elites. While some intellectuals and academics are influenced by Western postcolonial studies and criticize Russia's historical role in the region, others refuse to call Russia's activities "colonialism" and emphasize that being incorporated in the multinational and multicultural Czarist and Soviet empires also had advantages. The same Kyrgyz novelist Aitmatov who coined the word *mankurt*, stated in a controversial 1993 post-independence speech that:

We cannot attain progress by isolating ourselves from Russia... Our development is part of one organic whole. The Russian language and culture are an integral part of the psyche of the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, offering them an access of civilization (Dave 2007, 51).

Like many Central Asian intellectuals and politicians, Aitmatov was struggling to keep together a celebration of independence and national identity with the idea that Kyrgyzstan was not just another third world state emerging from colonialism, but part of a Eurasian culture that used Russian language as a bridge to Europe.

These feelings, of course, have been used by Russia for its own purposes and to present itself as the "elder brother" of the five republics, with a right to tell their leaders what is best for them. Russia also believes it has both a right and a duty to offer military assistance in case of riots and instability, as most recently happened in Kazakhstan in January 2022. Russia expects the five republics to follow its ban of religious organizations deemed "extremists," including Tablighi Jamaat and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Russia gladly offers its "experts" to teach Central Asian authorities and courts which movements should be considered "extremists."

In turn, Russia is ready to ban new religious movements born in Central Asia and outlawed there as hostile to the local governments. This has happened to Allya Ayat (SOVA Center 2019), an esoteric movement that was established in Kazakhstan in 1990 by an ethnic Uyghur called Farhat Mukhamedovich Abdullayev (1937–2007), as well as the syncretic movement based on Sufism, Ata Zholy, founded by Kadyrali Tarybaev (1961–2009) in Kazakhstan in 1999,

from where it expanded to Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Russia (Schwab 2014; Dubuisson 2017).

The situation changed somewhat with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the influx of some 350,000 Russian refugees who escaped conscription and arrived in four of the five republics since September 2022 (only Turkmenistan kept its borders closed) (Goble 2022). To Putin's surprise, Central Asian Presidents refused to support his invasion and annexation of parts of Ukraine, maintaining at best a neutral stance amid fears that their independence, too, may be called into question. It is too early to predict whether this more cautious attitude towards Russian policies will also extend to the sphere of religion and affect attitudes towards religious organizations banned in Russia.

— China

China is glad to replace Russia as trusted partner and elder brother of the Central Asian states, although not all the citizens of the latter welcome closer ties. When visiting Kyrgyzstan in March 2018, my wife and I happened into an exhibition of drawings by schoolchildren in Bishkek. One represented a huge red dragon threatening the country. A schoolgirl confirmed the dragon was indeed China.

One stumbling block is the treatment of Turkic and other Muslims in Xinjiang by the Chinese regime. Uyghurs are a Turkic population, but among Xinjiang's re-education camps inmates there are also ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Tajiks, some of them descendants of those Central Asians who moved to China when escaping the Asharshylyk of the 1930s.

In turn, some individuals today escape from the camps and persecution in Xinjiang and seek political asylum in the Central Asian states where they have relatives and whose national languages they still speak. Indeed, some of the internationally famous survivors of Xinjiang camps who testified about torture and rape are ethnic Kazakhs who escaped to Kazakhstan (see e.g. Sauytbay and Cavellius 2021). Some are ethnic Kyrgyz, including Ovalbek Turdakun, a Christian who was persecuted for his religion in Xinjiang, giving the lie to the Chinese theory that those detained in the camps are all "Islamic radicals" (Bhuiyan 2022). These refugees are a political embarrassment for the Central

Asian governments, which are eager to maintain economic ties with China and to play the Beijing card to balance the influence of Moscow.

There have been rumors, some of them confirmed, of ethnic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs who are Chinese citizens kidnapped in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and taken back to China (Akmatov 2022). *Bitter Winter*, a daily magazine on religious liberty of which I am the editor, regularly reports about the pressures exerted by Chinese embassies in these countries, which result in both asylum seekers who escaped China, and Kazakh and Kyrgyz citizens who protest on behalf of relatives detained in the Xinjiang camps, being beaten, arrested, and effectively compelled to leave and seek asylum in Europe or the United States.

— Turkey

A third important player is Turkey, which has played the card of common Turkic heritage and language. The Organization of Turkic States (formerly the Turkic Council), whose headquarters are in Istanbul, includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, with Turkmenistan as an observer (Tajikistan, which regards its cultural heritage as Persian rather than Turkic, does not participate).

A problematic aspect of Turkish influence has to do with religion. Until the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the most effective vector of Turkish cultural influences in Central Asia was the educational system implanted there by Hizmet, the Islamic revivalist religious movement founded by Turkish scholar Fethullah Gülen. Tens of thousands of the most well-off Central Asians passed through these schools in the post-Soviet era, and alumni of the Gülen education system are now an important segment of those in the local elites who are in their thirties and forties.

In 2013, however, Gülen spectacularly broke with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who later accused him of having organized the failed coup of 2016 in Turkey and nicknamed Hizmet the FETÖ (Fethullah Terrorist Organization). While the United States refused to ban Hizmet and extradite Gülen, who lives in Pennsylvania, Turkey persuaded Pakistan and the Gulf states to outlaw the group as a terrorist organization, and continues to exert strong diplomatic pressures to achieve the same aim in Central Asia.

Turkey convinced Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to cooperate, but not Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, notwithstanding both blandishments and threats

(Kenez 2022); although Gülen schools there have been renamed and their ownership in part transferred to locals. However, a serious incident happened in 2021, when on May 31, Orhan Inandi, a Kyrgyz citizen and the founder and leader of the Gülen school system in Kyrgyzstan, which also includes an accredited university, suddenly disappeared. While the Turkish embassy at first denied any involvement, on July 5, President Erdoğan himself confirmed that Inandi had been abducted in Kyrgyzstan and was detained in Turkey (Putz 2021). His lawyers claimed he had been tortured (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Kyrgyz Service* 2022).

Kyrgyzstan authorities claimed they had not been involved, but many in the country found it hard to believe that the local intelligence services had not at least been informed. This poisoned the relationship between Turkey and the Kyrgyz elite, where many are alumni of the Gülen schools, or send their children there. The Hizmet-related schools were once the best resource for Turkish cultural and religious influence in Central Asia. Paradoxically, they now make exerting this influence more difficult.

The Problems of Jehovah's Witnesses in Central Asia in Context

Jehovah's Witnesses have a venerable history in Central Asia. Semyon Kozlitsky (1835–1935), the first known Russian convert to the Bible Students, the predecessors of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and a former Orthodox seminarian (Baran 2014, 16), was exiled to the village of Ust-Bukhtarma, in Kazakhstan, in 1892 (Zhapisheva 2019).

Similar to the Catholics from Lithuania, Jehovah's Witnesses later came to Central Asia because they were deported there by Stalin. There were an "Operation North," deporting Jehovah's Witnesses from Ukraine and the Baltic States, and an "Operation South," deporting their co-religionists from Moldova. Although most were taken to Siberia, some ended up in Kazakhstan (Baran 2014, 34 and 61). Just as Jehovah's Witnesses continued their activities underground in Moldova or Ukraine, those deported in Central Asia converted others, both in the camps and outside of them, and the clandestine activity of the Jehovah's Witnesses expanded. Historian Emily Baran reports how one Pavlo Rurak, sent to a camp in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, in 1951, recalled the secret meetings he was able to organize with co-religionists there (Baran 2014, 58).

In the Kengir revolt of 1954, also in Kazakhstan, when the inmates seized the control of a camp, some 80 Jehovah's Witnesses refused to take up arms and participate in the rebellion. As a result, they were:

locked in a barracks on the edge of the camp by the rioters. When Soviet troops stormed the camp, they spared the Witnesses from the bloodshed that followed. One Witness who lived through these events reflected that the revolt taught him to "wait on Jehovah" and not seek solutions to problems elsewhere (Baran 2014, 79).

In Uzbekistan, the first Jehovah's Witnesses who were arrested and sent to the labor camps were Serafim Yakushen, and Yekaterina Kobzar from Fergana, in 1957 (Atabaeva 2019). In 1961, a governmental report claimed, perhaps inaccurately, that there were by then more Jehovah's Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan (377) than in Kazakhstan (286) (Baran 2014, 111).

The repression in Central Asia (and other parts of the Soviet Union) continued in post-Stalin years, and in fact the anti-religious campaign of Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971) in 1962–64 included a concerted effort to eradicate the Jehovah's Witnesses altogether (Baran 2014, 95–8). Baran reports that the KGB in Kazakhstan tried to fabricate compromising information on the elders of the local congregations (Baran 2014, 288), and at one stage even tried, ultimately without great success, to create a schism and promote a national organization of Jehovah's Witnesses, separated from the Brooklyn headquarters (Baran 2014, 91–8).

Today, there are 257 congregations and 17,541 Jehovah's Witnesses who preach and teach in Kazakhstan, and 5,282 with 89 congregations in Kyrgyzstan (jw.org 2022a, 2022b). Statistics for other Central Asian countries are not released, but the Jehovah's Witnesses are present in all five republics.

It is not my aim here to present a history of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Central Asia, nor a detailed list of the violation of their human rights. The Jehovah's Witnesses themselves submit annual reports to the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) for each country (see European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e). Their situation is also discussed in the yearly reports on religious liberty of the U.S. Department of State, whose sections on the five countries devote their largest coverage to the Jehovah's Witnesses (see e.g. U.S. Department of State 2022).

I will rather present the main problems the Jehovah's Witnesses are confronted with in Central Asia, and discuss how they are related to the general issues I examined in the first part of the article. This analysis does not imply that the

situation of the Jehovah's Witnesses is the same in each of the five countries. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan they are free to operate, although with limitations. They are subject to substantial restrictions in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and banned in Tajikistan.

1. Democracy and Conscientious Objection

Human rights scholars and bodies of the United Nations have acknowledged that a full-blown democracy should recognize conscientious objection to military service as a right. The states that make serving in the military compulsory do not only need soldiers. They also have an inherently non-democratic view of how all citizens should pass through mandatory indoctrination in the military.

As authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states, some Central Asian republics share this attitude. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan recognize religion-based conscientious objection as ground for opting out of military service. However, in Kyrgyzstan conscientious objectors must pay a fee equivalent to \$210, even if their refusal to serve in the military is based on bona fide religious motivations (U.S. Department of State 2022, Kyrgyzstan, 6).

Kazakhstan regards military service as mandatory, but allows an exemption for religious ministers. According to the report Jehovah's Witnesses submitted to the OSCE in 2022, during the previous year 43 of their ministers faced difficulties in obtaining the exemption, and five were detained by enlistment officials (European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses 2022a, 4).

After Turkmenistan lost ten cases at the United Nations Human Rights Committee between 2015 and 2016, in 2021 it freed the 16 Jehovah's Witnesses who were in jail for their refusal to serve in the military, and since then has not prosecuted any of their co-religionists for the same reason. The Jehovah's Witnesses, however, complain that adherents of draft age are interviewed by law enforcement officers, who try to talk them out of conscientious objection, sometimes slandering Jehovah's Witnesses in the process (European Association of the Jehovah's Witnesses 2022d, 3).

In 2021, Tajikistan introduced the possibility of replacing compulsory military service with "mobilization conscription reserve," which can be accessed by paying a certain amount to the Ministry of Defense and undergoing one month of military training. This solution is not acceptable to Jehovah's Witnesses, nor does

it meet the standards of the UN Human Rights Committee since the alternative offered is not really non-military. There is still one month of military training, and the payment must be made to the Ministry of Defense (European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses 2022c, 9).

An alarming form of control of their citizens in countries that suffer a deficit of democracy is the refusal, on various pretexts, to allow access to regular banking services to individuals and groups whom the governments regard as undesirable. In 2022, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported to the OSCE that

In the past four years, registered religious associations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan have faced insurmountable difficulties in obtaining basic banking services. Current legislation requires that religious associations engage such services to qualify as a legal entity. The banks' discriminatory actions thus constitute a direct attack on Jehovah's Witnesses' religious rights. Complaints to government agencies have gone unanswered (European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses 2022a, 6).

However, after the intervention of the General Ombudsman for Human Rights, the problem has now been largely solved.

2. Identity and discrimination

The identity of the newly established Central Asian states is perceived as fragile by their authorities, which makes them hostile to those who for reasons of conscience opt out of its symbolic reaffirmation.

Historically, the Jehovah's Witnesses have claimed the right not to sing national anthems nor to salute national flags, as they regard these practices as contrary to the biblical prescription of venerating and worshiping God only. In the United States, the Jehovah's Witnesses established the right to this behavior through several landmark cases they litigated up to the Supreme Court (Stevens 1973).

However, in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Jehovah's Witnesses continue to run into problems for their attitude towards national flags and anthems. In Kyrgyzstan, on 25 May 2022, the State Committee of Religious Affairs refused to allow the importation of the Jehovah's Witnesses' book *Examining the Scriptures Daily* because its teachings about the anthem and the flag were regarded as contrary to a local law provision that prohibits "desecration of the State Flag of the Kyrgyz Republic, the State Emblem of the Kyrgyz Republic and the State

Anthem of the Kyrgyz Republic” (European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses 2022b, 3–4).

After years of efforts to explain their position, in 2022 Jehovah’s Witnesses still saw incidents in Kazakhstan where their children were harassed at school for their refusal to sing the national anthem or participate in patriotic ceremonies, although these incidents were later resolved (European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses 2022a, 6).

The national identity of the five republics is believed to be rooted either in their largely Sufi and “moderate” Islamic tradition, or in the harmony between different “traditional” faiths. Although in fact it is not a recent import into Central Asia, the religion of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is considered as “non-traditional.” Proselytization is regarded with suspicion, as something denying the official narrative about identity and potentially threatening it. Even where there are no anti-proselytization laws, Jehovah’s Witnesses engaged in missionary activities have been harassed in different ways and even detained.

3. Religion and control

The Soviet-style control of religion is perpetuated by systems where religious organizations must be registered to freely operate, and religious buildings must be registered or designated as such to be legally able to host religious activities and ceremonies.

In Kazakhstan, a 2021 amendment to the 2011 Religion Law at article 7.1 mandates that religious activities can only take place either in buildings designated and registered as religious, or in buildings whose owners have notified the authorities in writing ten days before holding a religious activity and have received no objections. Article 7.1 has been used to prevent the Jehovah’s Witnesses celebrating their annual memorial of Christ’s death in rented premises, intimidating landlords who rent to them, and raiding peaceful meetings for alleged violations of the statute (European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses 2022a, 3–4).

The Jehovah’s Witnesses have often faced idiosyncratic situations with respect to registration. In Turkmenistan, registration has so far proved impossible to obtain. They were duly registered as a religion in Tajikistan in 1994, and re-registered in 1997. However, their registration was suspended in 2002, and

cancelled in 2007. Their activities were banned in Tajikistan, and several Jehovah's Witnesses have been arrested, beaten, and deported.

In Kyrgyzstan, the Jehovah's Witnesses obtained national registration in 1998, but local authorities also require local registration. The latter has been consistently denied, notwithstanding the favorable decisions obtained by the Jehovah's Witnesses at the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

Uzbekistan considers that the registration the Jehovah's Witnesses obtained only covers their Kingdom's Hall in Chirchiq, a city in the Tashkent region. Any activity or distribution of literature outside of this specific building is thus deemed illegal. Attempts to register additional local organizations of Jehovah's Witnesses have consistently failed, including under the new 2021 law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations," which according to some international observers should have made registration easier.

In Kazakhstan, the Jehovah's Witnesses obtained registration in 1991, and were re-registered in 2012 under a new law on religion. Their local organizations are also registered, and the only present concern is that voices emerge from time to time calling for more restrictive legislation.

4. Neighbors and "extremism"

Jehovah's Witnesses are not without problems in both Turkey and China. In Turkey, their Kingdom Halls are not recognized as places of worship, in addition to problems with conscientious objection (Yıldırım 2022, 28). China has not included the Jehovah's Witnesses in the list of the movements it bans as *xie jiao* ("heterodox teachings," sometimes less correctly translated as "evil cults"). Nonetheless, at least one court of law has applied Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code, which prohibits being active in a *xie jiao*, to the Jehovah's Witnesses (Korla City People's Court 2020). The website of the mammoth China Anti-Xie-Jiao association (chinafxj.cn), which rightly regards itself as the largest anti-cult organization in the world and is directly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, routinely translates and posts articles by Western and Russian anti-cult groups slandering the Jehovah's Witnesses.

While it is unlikely that anything good for the Jehovah's Witnesses will derive from Chinese or Turkish influence in Central Asia, Russia is an active source of

inspiration and often a direct player in most of the campaigns against them in the five republics.

Since the issue has been discussed by others (Šorytė, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*; Corley 2021), I limit myself to noting how both two main themes of the Russian anti-Jehovah's Witnesses campaigns, and a key tool of the repression, have been systematically imported into Central Asia. The tool is the appointment by administrative authorities of purported "experts" who rely on Russian (and sometimes Western) anti-cult literature to render opinions legitimizing the repression of the Jehovah's Witnesses (Corley 2021, 2022; Aslanova, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

The two themes are that the Jehovah's Witnesses psychologically manipulate and disturb their "victims," causing them "psychological harm;" and that they are "extremists" because they argue through their preaching and literature that their religion is superior to others. These are typical, and faulty, Russian arguments. Accusing the Jehovah's Witnesses of causing "psychological harm" is just another way of reintroducing the pseudo-scientific and discredited theory of brainwashing (see Introvigne 2022a). All religions present their doctrines as superior to others—otherwise, why should anybody convert to them? Yet, Russian anti-cultists and courts only regard this attitude as evidence of "extremism" when dealing with the Jehovah's Witnesses and other minority religions, while similar claims by the Russian Orthodox Church or Islam are not found objectionable.

Ignoring this criticism, Tajikistan liquidated the Jehovah's Witnesses even before Russia did, and Kazakh courts have sided with the local anti-cult associations Centre to Support Victims of Destructive Religious Cults (Corley 2022) and Terra Libera (European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses 2022a, 5). Supported by the usual "experts," they have penalized the Jehovah's Witnesses for inflicting "psychological harm." Jehovah's Witnesses' literature has been censored, or excluded from importation as "extremist," throughout the region. On 25 March 2021, the headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan was raided.

This Russian influence, however, also met with resistance, both domestically and internationally, which allows for a concluding remark. In a landmark decision, the United Nations Human Rights Committee ruled on 7 September

2022, that Tajikistan's decision to liquidate the Jehovah's Witnesses was illegal (see Introvigne 2022b). On 2 December 2021, the Pervomayskiy District Court of the City of Bishkek ruled against the Prosecutor General's Office of the Kyrgyz Republic, which had asked the court to ban several books and brochures of the Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremists." The decision was rendered on procedural reasons, but after the Jehovah's Witnesses had produced a detailed defense supported by expert witnesses, including the undersigned and Rosita Šorytė (see Introvigne 2021).

Together with others, these are signs that improvements in the situation of the Jehovah's Witnesses and other minority faiths in Central Asia are not impossible, the more so in a context where Russia has lost authority and credibility after the aggression against Ukraine. Scholars and human rights activists should continue their work, without losing hope or assuming that the anti-religious-liberty attitudes prevailing in certain countries are eternal or irreversible.

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Jehovah's Witnesses Use of the United Nations Human Rights Committee to Fight Discrimination in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT: The article summarizes the efforts of the Jehovah's Witnesses to make use of an alternative non-judicial venue to promote and protect their beliefs and way of life in Central Asian nations that have been under the influence of Russia for many decades. They have submitted a number of cases to the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations, which is the enforcement arm of the UN for the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The efforts have been somewhat successful, with a number of judgments of the HRC in favor of the Witnesses, and there have been some positive effects of these rulings.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses in Central Asia, Religion in Kazakhstan, Religion in Kyrgyzstan, Religion in Tajikistan, Religion in Turkmenistan, Religion in Uzbekistan, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Religious Liberty, Human Rights Committee and Religious Liberty.

Introduction

The Jehovah's Witnesses have fought many successful legal battles in various national judicial systems around the world, especially in Western nations such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and others (Côté and Richardson 2001; Richardson 2020, 2021). The group has also amassed an impressive record with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), which is the court of last resort on human and civil rights issues for citizens of the 46 member nations of the Council of Europe. The Witnesses have gained favorable outcomes in over 60 cases to date with the ECtHR (Richardson 2015, 2017b). Indeed, an argument can be made that Witness cases have been used by some court systems to extend

their authority in substantive areas of law and over geographic areas (Richardson 2017a).

This admirable record championing religious freedom notwithstanding, a question can be raised about how the Witnesses defend themselves and their beliefs and practices in regions of the world that do not have functioning judicial systems (or systems with no real independence or authority). This report will detail one such situation where the Witnesses have attempted to use a non-judicial, treaty based, venue to further their goals, that being by making use of the United Nations and its committee structure, especially those portions charged with protecting and enforcing human and civil rights.

Virtually all nations in the world are members of the United Nations, and most are signatories to the very important International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). This includes five nations in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, most of which have had numerous instances of various types of harassment of Jehovah's Witness members and organizations over recent decades (Fautré, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). Included are claims of censorship of publications, refusal to register Witness organizations, arrest and deportation for preaching, fabrication of charges and unfair trial, and, especially in Turkmenistan, denial of opportunity for an alternative of purely civilian nature to military service.

Russian Influence in Central Asian Region

All the Central Asian nations being discussed herein were formerly part of the Soviet Union and only gained a degree of independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union over three decades ago (see Massimo Introvigne's detailed history in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, as well as Rosita Šorytė's presentation on Russian influence in the region, also in this issue). However, there remains a considerable cultural affinity with Russia, and it is not surprising that Russia's treatment of the Witnesses has been emulated to some extent by the Central Asian nations. Thus, as background for this report it seems worthwhile to discuss what has happened recently concerning Russia's treatment of the Witnesses.

Russia had declared the Jehovah's Witnesses an extremist organization in 2017, and has been prosecuting members and seizing Witness property since

that decision (and even before the official ruling). Witness publications have been seized, the Witness website was shut down, many meetings in homes and churches were raided, and dozens of members have been arrested using violent tactics. Long prison sentences have been given against dozens of members, and those incarcerated have experienced much ill treatment, including torture.

Russia was earlier this year still a member of the Council of Europe (CoE) and still is subject to the European Court of Human Rights for cases relating to events up to six months from the date of leaving, under exit provisions in the relevant treaties. Given this situation the Witnesses had filed dozens of cases against Russia in the ECtHR, and have won a number of them, most recently in a very unusual and sweeping decision on June 7, 2022. The ECtHR ruled in favor of the Witnesses in a decision that consolidated numerous pending cases against Russia brought by the Witnesses (19 cases with 1,444 applicants, which included 430 legal entities): violations were found of Articles 9, 10, 11, and Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 (European Court of Human Rights 2022).

In this 191-page ruling, the Court ordered that all Jehovah's Witnesses be released from prisons, further legal proceedings be discontinued, and that Russia return all property or pay 64 million Euros for damages to the Jehovah's Witnesses. However, Russia, although a member of the CoE at the time of the ruling (and until December 31, 2022), has refused to take any action to implement the decision, despite its treaty obligations. The decision is very important symbolically, however, and may have influence over former Soviet nations including those in Central Asia.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee

The Human Rights Committee (HRC) of the United Nations is charged with investigation of alleged instances of violation of provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); and it does so, issuing public reports of its findings that sometimes can make a difference in how a member nation of the UN deals with such matters.

Key provisions of the ICCPR include Article 18:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and

freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

There are other provisions of the ICCPR that are also relevant and which have been used in efforts to defend the activities and beliefs of religious groups in signatory nations. They include Article 7 (dealing with torture), Article 9, (arbitrary arrest), Article 10 (treatment of prisoners), Article 14 (fair trial requirement), Article 22 (freedom of association), and Article 22 (equal treatment before the law).

The Witnesses first made efforts to avail themselves of the UN's HRC in 2012 when a number of conscientious objection cases were filed that involved Turkmenistan's refusal to allow alternatives to military service. Since then, a number of additional cases have been submitted against all five Central Asia nations, and in 19 such cases strongly worded rulings have been obtained against four of the nations. All 19 cases cited a violation of Article 18, and several other articles mentioned above were cited in specific cases.

Kazakhstan has been ruled against by the HRC in a case dealing with censoring Witness publications. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have lost cases dealing with registration, and Tajikistan has also lost a case dealing with arrest and deportation of a Witness preacher. Turkmenistan has lost 12 cases dealing with conscientious objection and refusal to perform military service. Rulings in a few cases filed against Uzbekistan have not been finalized; thus, no record is available of the outcome of those cases.

Has This Approach Had Any Effects?

According to reports received from the Jehovah's Witnesses, in recent months Turkmenistan has refrained from further imprisonments of young Witness men

for refusing to accept military service, and it has released some from prison. The government also has proposed a new alternative service program, but this does not meet international standards, so does not completely resolve the issue there. There have been no further arrests for preaching in Tajikistan, and there have not been other efforts to stop importation of Witness literature into Kazakhstan. There are continued problems with registration in Kyrgyzstan in some regions but there has been recognition of the Witnesses at the national level.

Thus, it seems that making use of the venue has had some positive effects but there are remaining problems (and, as noted, the cases from Uzbekistan have not been fully adjudicated as of this writing).

The generally positive reactions to the rulings of the UN's HRC indicate some movement by these Central Asian nations away from the shadow of Russia and its extremely punitive treatment of the Jehovah's Witnesses in that country. This movement, however slow and halting, is a welcome outcome for those who value religious freedom in all nations of the world.

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Note: The article also refers to the texts by Willy Fautré, Massimo Introvigne, and Rosita Šorytė published in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*.

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Religious Freedom in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan and the Jehovah's Witnesses

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ABSTRACT: The three post-Soviet Central Asian republics of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan do not grant full religious liberty to the Jehovah's Witnesses. In Tajikistan, they have been officially banned since 2007, although the United Nations Human Rights Committee concluded in 2022 that the ban is unlawful. Tajikistan and Russia are the only two post-Soviet countries that have actually banned Jehovah's Witnesses, and in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, their activities are severely limited. This paper traces the roots of these attitudes back to both the Soviet heritage and the strongly negative Muslim attitude towards conversion from Islam to other faiths. It also notes that some improvements have occurred in recent years, after Jehovah's Witnesses took cases from the three countries to the U.N. Human Rights Committee, and the United States criticized the lack of religious liberty there.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses, Jehovah's Witnesses in Central Asia, Jehovah's Witnesses in Tajikistan, Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan, Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan.

Introduction

With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, a number of Soviet Republics became independent. They adopted their own Constitutions and put in place laws to regulate relations between the state and their various religious communities. This was the case for the five post-Soviet republics of Central Asia. All of them are member states of the United Nations and participating states of the OSCE, but they are not member states of the Council of Europe. Consequently, their citizens do not have access to the European Court of Human Rights. I will analyze here the evolution of legislation and its implementation in the light of international standards in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan respectively.

Tajikistan

1. Legal Status of the Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses have been practising their religion in the territory of Tajikistan for over seventy years. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, they operated underground, and were subject to persecution by the Communist regime.

According to information provided by the European headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses, the first known court trial took place in 1955, in the city of Stalinabad (Dushanbe). A certain Ernst Fridrikhovich was sentenced to seven years, to be served in camps, for leading the activities of a group of believers. In 1956, he was released as unjustly convicted. Numerous other trials of Jehovah's Witnesses took place during the Soviet era.

On 9 September 1991, Tajikistan declared itself an independent sovereign nation. Soon after independence, civil war broke out between regional groups supporting the government formed by President Rahmon Nabiyeu (1930–1993) and rebel groups. This lasted for five years. Since 1994, the country has been led by President Emomali Rahmon, who rules within the framework of an authoritarian and repressive regime. According to the Constitution, the state is officially secular, but Sunni Islam is adhered to by over 90% of the 9-million population (U.S. Department of State 2022).

The number of Jehovah's Witnesses is said to be more than 600, although no official statistics are released.

The current Constitution of Tajikistan dates back to 1994, and guarantees freedom of religion in Article 26:

Everyone shall have the right to freely determine his position toward religion, to profess any religion individually or jointly with others or not to profess any, and to take part in religious customs and ceremonies.

In the same year, the first Law on Religion provided the legal basis for religious practice. It demanded that religious groups acquire state registration to be permitted to operate under the protection of the Constitution.

Jehovah's Witnesses were officially registered as a religious community in 1994, by the then State Committee on Religious Affairs, pursuant to the Law

“On Religion and Religious Organizations” of 8 December 1990 (the “1990 Religion Law”), and were thus allowed to exercise freedom of religion. In January 1997, all religious communities were ordered to re-register.

On 11 September 2002, the State Committee on Religious Affairs suspended the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses for three months, allegedly because of their door-to-door proselytism and their propaganda in public places.

On 11 October 2007, the Ministry of Culture banned the association of Jehovah’s Witnesses, annulled its charter, and determined that the former registration was invalid. It concluded that the association had repeatedly violated national legislation, including the Constitution of Tajikistan and the 1990 Religion Law.

The official reasons were Jehovah’s Witnesses’ conscientious objection to military service; their belief that their religion is the only true one; and their public missionary activities, including the distribution of religious publications in public places and door-to-door, which allegedly caused discontent on the part of the population. All appeals against the ban were turned down until a final request in 2014 (Slupina 2021, 187–94). Apart from Russia in 2017, Tajikistan is the sole former Soviet Republic that has banned the organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses after legally registering it.

In the meantime, on 26 March 2009, President Rahmon signed a new law on religion, which became effective a few days later, on 1 April. This law breaks international human rights standards because it explicitly makes the exercise of freedom of religion or belief illegal without state permission.

All legal channels being closed in Tajikistan itself, Jehovah’s Witnesses continued their legal campaign for their right to religious freedom at the international level, especially through various UN mechanisms.

2. UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR) and Tajikistan

In a landmark ruling in the case *Adyrkhayev v. Tajikistan*, Communication no. 2483/2014, 7 September 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (CCPR) concluded that Tajikistan’s 2007 ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses was unlawful (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2022b; see Introvigne 2022). The CCPR stressed that “none of the reasons” given by

Tajikistan “to justify the decision to ban” the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses are acceptable.

The CCPR noted that the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses are entirely peaceful and that there was no evidence that they had resulted in “numerous complaints,” as the government had alleged. The CCPR directed Tajikistan to reconsider the re-registration application of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and also directed Tajikistan to pay financial compensation for the violation of their rights (see also European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses 2022a).

3. Impact of the Ban on the Religious Life of Jehovah’s Witnesses: Conscientious Objection to Military Service

The banning of Jehovah’s Witnesses has had a negative impact on their young people of draft age.

Two years’ military service is compulsory for almost all able-bodied men between the ages of 16 and 27. Article 1 of the November 2000 Universal Military Obligation and Military Service Law includes the provision:

In accordance with the law, a citizen has the right to undergo alternative service in place of military service. The procedure for undergoing alternative service is determined by the law.

However, no law on alternative service has ever been adopted. Consequently, objectors are charged under Criminal Code Article 376, Part 2: “Refusal to perform military service duties with the purpose of evading it completely” (Corley 2021).

In 2017, Daniil Islamov was the first Jehovah’s Witness to serve a prison term as a conscientious objector to military service. He was sentenced to six months’ jail but was released after serving one year in prison, the call of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention to release him having originally been ignored.

On 13 August 2019, Khujand’s Military Conscription Office summoned 19-year-old Jehovah’s Witness Jovidon Bobojonov. He replied with a written request to perform alternative civilian service but on 4 October officers took him into custody and, against his will, sent him to a military unit where he was tortured. On 1 April 2020, he was sentenced by a military court to two years in prison. He was

released after spending nine months in detention, within the framework of an amnesty declared by the president.

The latest conscientious objector to be arrested is Rustamjon Norov, a 22-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Dushanbe who had also offered to perform alternative civilian service. On 1 October 2020, he was taken "by force under a false pretext" to the District Conscription Office. On 3 October, officials sent Norov to military units in Khujand in the northern Sogd Region, and on 17 October the Military Prosecutor's Office accused him of falsifying his medical history to evade military service, which he denied. On 7 January 2021, a military court sentenced him to three and half years in a labour camp. After serving 11 months and 21 days in detention, he was released under a general amnesty on 21 September 2021 (Slupina 2021, 193).

4. Freedom of Assembly

On 4 June 2009, sixteen Jehovah's Witnesses peacefully gathered in a private apartment in Khujand to read and discuss the Bible. Eleven officials, including officers of the State Committee on National Security, forced their way into the apartment, searched both it and the participants of the gathering, and seized Bibles, as well as other religious publications. Several participants were subsequently taken to the headquarters of the State Committee on National Security, where they were interrogated for six hours.

On an unspecified date, a criminal case was initiated against participants in that gathering. It was dismissed in October 2009, after it had been raised at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. However, the prosecutor later reopened the criminal case on other charges.

5. The Case of Shamil Khakimov, Sentenced to Seven years and Six Months in Prison

Shamil Khakimov is a 71-year-old widower. He was born in the small village of Koltush, in the district of Rudaki. In 1976, he married and moved to the capital city of Dushanbe, where for 38 years he worked for OJSC Tajiktelecom as a cable lines engineer. Khakimov had two children, a son and a daughter. In 1989, when his son was 12 and his daughter was seven, his wife, Olya, died from cancer. He

took care of his children and never remarried. Khakimov became one of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1994.

In February 2019, Shamil Khakimov was imprisoned for his religious activities. In September 2019, a court in the northern city of Khujand jailed him for seven years and six months for allegedly "inciting religious hatred," though the sentence was subsequently twice shortened under general amnesty.

No evidence was produced that Khakimov or the Jehovah's Witnesses community had harmed anyone, and his real "crime" seems to be that the regime considered he led Khujand's Jehovah's Witnesses.

In September 2021, while Khakimov was in prison, his son died from a heart attack. He was not allowed to attend his funeral.

During the 1990s, Khakimov developed chronic sciatica. Since 2007, he has suffered from severe circulatory problems in his lower limbs, which required surgery in 2007. His condition worsened in 2017, requiring additional surgery. Owing to poor vascular circulation, his surgical wounds did not heal and he had an open leg ulcer when he was arrested on 26 February 2019, and subsequently placed in pre-trial detention.

Khakimov also suffers from heart disease (left ventricular hypertrophy). He no longer has vision in his right eye, and he can barely see out of his left eye because of progressive glaucoma. On 31 October 2022, he received a certificate attesting that he is now classified as having a group two disability (Bayram 2022).

On 8 November 2022, Shamil Khakimov filed a formal petition for his release to the President of Tajikistan. Additionally, the same petition was filed with the General Prosecutor's Office, the Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs, and the Ombudsman.

On 10 November 2022, an appeal was filed with the Supreme Court, requesting that his case be re-opened and reversed, based on the 2022 judgment by the UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR) that declared Tajikistan's ban on Jehovah's Witnesses unlawful and baseless (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2022b).

On 11 November 2022, a private complaint was filed against a trial court decision that refused to release Khakimov based on his poor health.

US Senator Marco Rubio and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom have also called for Khakimov's release (USCIRF 2022).

Turkmenistan

1. Legal Status of the Jehovah's Witnesses

Turkmenistan has a population of about 5.6 million inhabitants (as of midyear 2021), and about 89% of these are Sunni Muslims (U.S. Department of State 2022).

Jehovah's Witnesses have been present on the territory of Turkmenistan since the late 1980s. At that time, adherents mainly lived in Ashgabat, the country capital, and in the province of Lebap. So far, their religious community has been denied state registration. Hence, no overall membership figures are available (Slupina 2021, 195–200).

From Turkmenistan's declaration of independence on 27 October 1991, to the death of President Saparmurat Niyazov (1940–2006) in December 2006, Jehovah's Witnesses enjoyed some degree of religious freedom despite their lack of registration.

In 2003, after several amendments to the 1991 Religion Law, faith communities were obliged to obtain state registration before being allowed to undertake religious activities. The situation deteriorated with the enactment of the "Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations" in 2013, along with amendments to the Administrative Code adopted on 1 January 2014 (Slupina 2021, 198). State authorities, in particular officers of the Ministry of National Security (KGB), started to interrogate Jehovah's Witnesses about the practice of their religion, and ordered them not to engage in any further "illegal activities." Heavy fines began to be imposed on their members for missionary activities.

Jehovah's Witnesses are still unrecognized, despite repeated applications for registration since 2008.

2. Impact of the Denial of Registration on Jehovah's Witnesses' Religious Life: Freedom of Assembly and Expression

Because of the state's refusal to register Jehovah's Witnesses, heavy fines have been imposed on adherents who were practising their faith, even in private.

Police and public officials have violently broken up religious meetings in private apartments. Several of the attendees, including children and elderly people, have been interrogated at police stations. Some were kept in custody for several days, even together with their young children. Their Bibles, religious literature, computers, and passports were confiscated. In some cases, officers seized and examined cell phones of Jehovah's Witnesses, and deleted all publications or apps attributable to their religion. They were told not to engage in any further "illegal activities" by meeting with fellow believers or sharing their beliefs.

Because some considered these sanctions unjustified and illegal, and refused to pay, bailiffs were commissioned to proceed with compulsory enforcement, including confiscation of personal belongings (Slupina 2021, 197–200).

3. Conscientious Objection to Military Service

Turkmenistan has repeatedly imprisoned young Jehovah's Witnesses for their conscientious objection to military service. The government refuses to recognize the right of conscientious objection despite calls to comply with international standards.

Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 generally lasts for two years.

Between 2014 and 2017, the authorities punished conscientious objectors with corrective labour or suspended prison terms, rather than imprisonment.

From January 2018 until April 2022, courts in Turkmenistan handed down 33 known convictions of conscientious objectors, who were sentenced to jail terms (Slupina 2021, 199).

All legal channels being closed in Turkmenistan itself, Jehovah's Witnesses continued their legal campaign for the right to conscientious objection at the international level, especially through the UN Human Rights Committee.

4. UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR)

In 2015 and 2016, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (CCPR) issued ten decisions against Turkmenistan, in response to communications filed by individual Witnesses who had been prosecuted and imprisoned for conscientious objection. These decisions obligated Turkmenistan to provide alternative civilian service, outside the military sphere and not under military control (European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses 2022b).

Since then, the regime has rejected repeated United Nations calls to introduce a genuinely civilian alternative service.

In April 2017, the CCPR repeated its concern about Turkmenistan's continued failure to recognize the right to conscientious objection to compulsory military service and the repeated prosecution and imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses (quoted in United Nations Human Rights Committee 2022a).

On 11 March 2022 the CCPR published its Views on Communication No. 3272/2018, *Begenchov v. Turkmenistan*. It reiterated that

the right to conscientious objection is inherent in the rights guaranteed by article 18 (1) of the Covenant and is not subject to any justification under article 18 (3) of the Covenant (par. 3.3) (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2022a).

By the end of the year 2022, no new criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses' conscientious objectors had been handed to Prosecutor's Offices. However, on several occasions, law enforcement officers interviewed Witnesses of draft age and tried to dissuade them from abiding by their personal religious convictions about military service.

There is still no sign that Turkmenistan is planning to provide a civilian alternative for those unable to perform compulsory military service on grounds of conscience.

5. Recent Positive Developments

On 8 May 2021, Turkmenistan released from prison all sixteen Jehovah's Witnesses who had been convicted for conscientious objection to military service (U.S. Department of State 2022).

At the end of 2022, no Jehovah's Witnesses were known to be in detention.

Uzbekistan

1. Background and Legal Status of the Jehovah's Witnesses

Uzbekistan has a population of about 35 million inhabitants, according to the national government's latest statistics. Sunni Islam is the predominant religion, with Muslims representing about 96% of the population. Islam is considered to be an important element of the Uzbek national identity. The percentage of Russian Orthodox adherents has been dwindling, from 3.5% in 2019 to 2.2% in 2021 (U.S. Department of State 2022).

Jehovah's Witnesses have been carrying out their religious activity in the territory of Uzbekistan for approximately seventy years. During the Soviet era, and especially in the 1940s, the authorities deported numerous Witnesses from other republics of the USSR. These internally displaced Soviet citizens were the founders of their first religious communities.

The first known trial of two Jehovah's Witnesses dates back to the Soviet Union era, and took place in 1957 in Dzhar-Kurgan District, Surkhan Daya Region, on the border with Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. It concerned two women. The largest known trial happened in Angren city and concerned fourteen Jehovah's Witnesses.

Uzbekistan declared independence on 31 August 1991, about four months before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. National Independence Day was formally proclaimed on 1 September. Islam Karimov (1938–2016), previously first secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, was the first president of independent Uzbekistan.

Official separation of state and religion, inherited from the Soviet Union, is formally inscribed in the Uzbek Constitution. Article 31 guarantees freedom of religion, and Article 29 assures unimpeded spread of one's beliefs.

The main restrictions were introduced in 1998 with the "Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations." The latter criminalized all unregistered religious activities, banned missionary activities and proselytizing, and gave the authorities the power to approve the content, production, distribution, and storage of religious publications. The law allowed religious instruction only in government-sanctioned schools; any religious schooling in private homes was banned. Religious groups were not allowed to operate outside

the areas where they were registered, and needed to obtain government approval for all religious activities not included in formal worship.

Under Karimov's rule, in 2004/2005 alone, 238 cases were documented in which Jehovah's Witnesses were beaten and imprisoned, or heavily fined, because of their religious activities. And between 2007 and 2019, 2,741 Jehovah's Witnesses were searched, fined, ill-treated, detained, and imprisoned (Slupina 2021, 220–27).

After his death in 2016, Karimov was replaced by his long-time Prime Minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

On 15 September 2020, a draft bill came before the Uzbek parliament (Supreme Assembly). This was intended to align the country with international standards, but the new Religion Law adopted in 2021 was disappointing as it retained many of the repressive features of the existing law. Article 3 identifies “illegal religious activity” as

activities without registration as a religious organization, the implementation by a religious organization of activities outside its [legally allowed] location, religious educational activities privately outside religious educational institutions.

Articles 240, 216-2 Part 1, 201 Part 2 and 216 provide for prison terms and heavy fines.

After the new Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations was adopted, Jehovah's Witnesses submitted a new application to begin the registration process of communities in Tashkent and Samarkand.

2. Impact of Restrictive Measures on the Religious Life of Jehovah's Witnesses, and Advocacy at the UN: Freedom of Association

The minimum membership required to register a religious association is one hundred people. In most cities, Jehovah's Witnesses do not meet this requirement, and every attempt to increase their number through proselytism is seen as illegal, despite Article 29 of the Constitution, which protects the right to spread one's faith and make new members.

Jehovah's Witnesses have made fifty-four attempts to register local religious organizations (LRO) in various cities, yet their efforts have been repeatedly thwarted by officials.

Often, local authorities set their own standards of governance, following procedures that are neither uniform nor prescribed by law, making it impossible for Witnesses to acquire the permission and documentation needed for registration.

In 1994, Jehovah's Witnesses managed to register two communities, in Fergana and Chirchiq, but registration for the one in Fergana was cancelled in 2006.

On 31 January 2022, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses filed a new submission on Uzbekistan with the CCPR. In all, 14 complaints have been submitted to the CCPR against court decisions that imposed fines for peaceful religious activities.

3. Access to, and Import of, Religious Literature

To be able to manifest their religious beliefs and make new members, religious communities must first be able to have access to information about their religion. In their submissions to the CCPR, Jehovah's Witnesses stressed that religious publications are censored by Uzbekistan's Committee of Religious Affairs (CRA).

4. Sharing One's Faith with Others

In 2008, three Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to four years in prison for sharing their beliefs with others.

On 29 April 2022, one of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi was summoned to the police station. There, a law enforcement officer took her phone and began interrogating her. The Witness was shown a screenshot printout of the Telegram messaging chat, where she allegedly shared her beliefs. The officers said the complaint against her came from the "Virtual Reception of the President." They demanded that she write an explanatory note confirming that she sent the messages. She refused. Then the officers confiscated her phone and said an administrative case would be filed against her (European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses 2022c).

On 10 February 2022, two Jehovah's Witnesses, a married couple, were peacefully talking with sales assistants in Tashkent, and in casual conversation

spoke about the Bible. At that moment, a man approached them, introduced himself as a law-enforcement officer and asked the wife to go outside. He then began questioning the male Witness, verified his passport, and attempted to check the Witness's phone. He stated that Jehovah's Witnesses' activity is banned in Russia, and claimed the couple was engaged in missionary activity.

5. Some Positive Developments

Progress has been very limited in the last few years.

In May 2020, the official website of Jehovah's Witnesses was unblocked and became available throughout the country.

In 2019, the celebration of the Memorial of the death of Jesus-Christ was permitted to take place unhindered in the cities of Chirchiq, Fergana, Karshi and Urgench, although the Jehovah's Witnesses are not registered in cities other than Chirchiq.

6. Jehovah's Witnesses' Advocacy at the OSCE

In the conclusions of their submission to the OSCE/ ODIHR Human Dimension Meeting in September 2022 in Warsaw (European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses 2022c), Jehovah's Witnesses asked the Government of Uzbekistan to

- allow them to register local religious organizations throughout the country;
- end the censorship of religious literature;
- enforce media standards prohibiting libel and slander;
- receive an international delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Tashkent, establishing regular contacts for meetings on all emerging issues;
- ensure that police and other officials do not interfere with the peaceful manifestation of their beliefs.

Conclusion

Since the independence of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, expectations of democratization and opening up to a human rights culture have progressively evaporated. Two main elements have contributed to this trend.

The three countries are former Soviet Republics, where atheism was the official ideology for some seventy years and where religions were merely tolerated in the last decade of existence of the USSR, especially when it was thought that they might be instrumentalized for foreign political purposes.

This underlying anti-religious culture still exists in their respective parliaments and governments, as well as among law enforcement administrations and agents, especially when religious groups of foreign origin are concerned. Such groups generate suspicion, as they are perceived as a possible threat to the national identity and traditions. The main instrument of repression is anchored in denial of state registration, which automatically makes it impossible to exercise the rights of freedom of association, assembly, expression, as well as the right of conscientious objection.

These three countries have an overwhelming majority Muslim population: 90% to 96%. In traditional Muslim culture, it is unacceptable to change one's religious beliefs, even when that is not forbidden by law. Therefore, domestic missionary activities by non-Muslim religions are perceived by the population as a threat to their social belonging and their national identity. Hence, converts to Jehovah's Witnesses mainly have a Russian Orthodox background.

However, despite the rigidities of the culture, a ray of hope exists. In Uzbekistan, presidential amnesties have been used several times to release Jehovah's Witnesses without the administration losing face. At this stage, only one Witness remains in prison, in Tajikistan, while over the last three decades there have been many more in Central Asia. This indicates that those countries are not deaf to complaints from the international community. The ongoing legal and diplomatic advocacy of Jehovah's Witnesses in Central Asia needs to be supported because any legal gain will potentially be beneficial to all religions in the region.

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Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan: Preliminary Results of a Survey

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ABSTRACT: Between June and September 2022, the author carried out an Internet survey among Kazakh Jehovah's Witnesses, collecting 1,571 valid responses. The results of the survey are presented here as a preliminary summary, leaving analyses and comments to further studies.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses, Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan, Surveys in Kazakhstan, Religion in Kazakhstan, Minority Religions in Kazakhstan.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present the preliminary results of a survey conducted among Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan. The survey was conducted between June and September 2022. The method used was an online survey, where all adult Kazakh Jehovah's Witnesses from randomly selected congregations were invited to participate, and respondents were asked to fill out an online questionnaire. A total of 1,661 responses were reviewed. 1,570 questionnaires were accepted for processing and analysis.

Demographics

The majority of the respondents are women (75%). This disparity might reflect the fact that, based on our experience, women appear markedly more willing than men to participate in online surveys in Kazakhstan.

	Frequency	%
Male	392	25.0
Female	1178	75.0
Total	1570	100.0

Table 1. Respondents by gender.

The ethnicity of respondents is as follows: every second respondent is a representative of the Russian nationality (50.6%), over a quarter are Kazakhs (28%). And every fifth respondent identified himself as a representative of another nationality (21.3%).

	Frequency	%
Kazakhs	440	28.0
Russians	795	50.6
Other nationalities	335	21.3

Table 2. Respondents by ethnicity/nationality.

The dominant language of communication among the respondent Jehovah's Witnesses is Russian. 77.1% of them speak in Russian at home and with family members. 11.5% of the respondents use Kazakh and Russian equally. Roughly every tenth respondent speaks in Kazakh at home. And less than 2% of the respondents use another language at home.

	Frequency	%
Kazakh	154	9.8
Russian	1210	77.1
Russian and Kazakh equally	180	11.5
Other	26	1.7

Table 3. Respondents by language spoken at home.

The vast majority of the respondent Jehovah's Witnesses live in urban areas (85.1%). The percentage of rural residents is 14.9%.

	Frequency	%
In a city	1336	85.1
In rural areas	234	14.9
Total	1570	100.0

Table 4. Respondents by residency.

If we compare the age structure of the respondent Jehovah's Witnesses and the general population of Kazakhstan, we can see that the Witnesses exhibit a shift towards the older generations. This is most likely due to the ethnic structure of the community, or rather the predominance of Russians. In Kazakhstan, the Slavic ethnic groups have a much older age structure than the Kazakh and other non-Slavic groups.

	% of respondent Jehovah's Witnesses	% of the general population of Kazakhstan
18–29	14.7	22.9
30–39	16.6	23.4
40–49	22.2	18.5
50–59	23.5	15.8
60+	23.0	19.5

Table 4. Respondents by age.

About half of the Witness respondents have at least a secondary vocational education. 18.6% have some college education.

	Frequency	%
Have no official education	19	1.3
Primary education	19	1.3
Secondary, incomplete secondary education	396	26.5
Technical and vocational education	712	47.7
Incomplete higher education	69	4.6
College education	276	18.5
Academic degree	1	0.1

Table 5. Respondents by education.

The organizational structure of the Witnesses, based on the responses, is as follows: 42.2% are “publishers” and 40.9% are “regular pioneers.” The proportion of “auxiliary pioneers” is 6.4%. Elders are 6.3%.

	Frequency	%
Publisher	655	42.2
Auxiliary pioneer and/or another type of part-time ministry	99	6.4
Regular pioneer or another type of full-time service	635	40.9
Special pioneer	18	1.2
Ministerial servant	47	3.0
Elder	98	6.3
Total	1552	100.0

Table 6. Structure of the community based on the responses.

Social wellbeing

Jehovah's Witness respondents are characterized by a high level of satisfaction with their lives. On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is completely unsatisfied and 10 is completely satisfied, about 40% gave the highest rating. The average rating was 8.38

The question asked was, "Considering all aspects, rate on the scale below how satisfied you are with your life overall currently?" Table 7 shows the answers.

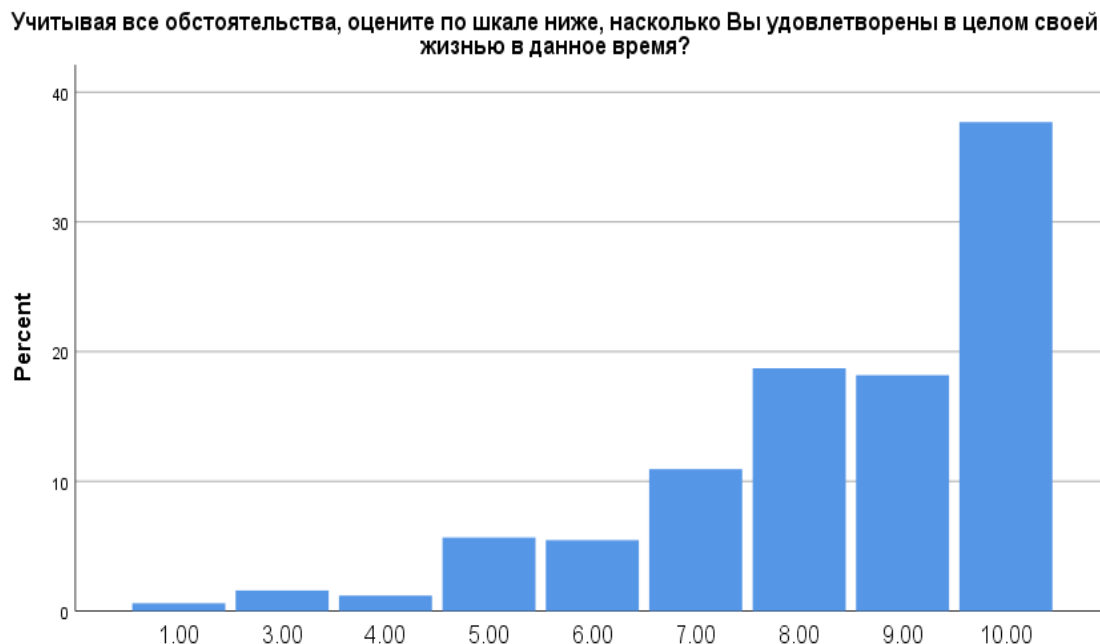


Table 7. Life satisfaction among the Jehovah's Witnesses according to the survey.

Most Witness respondents (55.7%) feel hope when they think about the future. 40% of those surveyed look to the future with confidence. Only slightly more than 3% of respondents report negative feelings about the future.

Confidence	39.7
Hope	55.7
Indifference	0.2
Anxiety	2.9
Fear	0.4
Not sure	1.2

Table 8. Expectations about the future among respondents.

The question was, “How do you feel when you think about tomorrow and about your future?” and the distribution of the answers is also illustrated in Table 9.

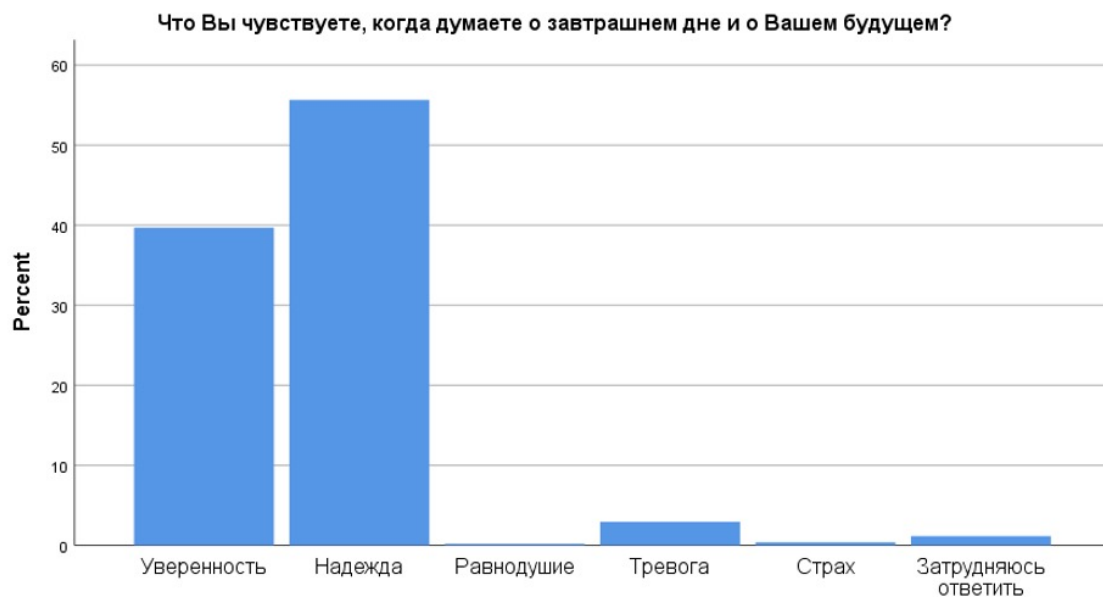


Table 9. Distributions of feelings about the future (from left to right: confidence, hope, indifference, anxiety, fear, and answers “not sure”).

What are the primary concerns of Jehovah’s Witnesses? The survey showed that Witnesses are most concerned about their families’ and their own health (61.5%). Spiritual growth (47.1%) and safety (42.5%) were the next most pressing concerns for the respondents. At the bottom of the top five concerns are their children’s and their own future, as well as environmental issues (31.6% and 28.8%, respectively). The respondent Witnesses are less concerned about

employment, the political situation in the country, and education of their children.

Main present concerns	
Health (your own and your family's)	61.5%
My spiritual growth	47.1%
Safety (my personal and my family's)	42.5%
My future and my children's future	31.6%
Environmental issues	28.8%
Relationships with people you love	27.4%
COVID-19 situation	11.4%
Living conditions	10.3%
Getting rid of a bad habit	10.1%
Questions of faith	9.6%
Financial wellbeing	9.6%
Employment	7.8%
Political situation in my country	7.3%
Children's education	5.0%
Other	4.6%
I don't have any concerns	9.6%
Not sure	4.9%

Table 10. “What is your main concern in this moment?”

The Importance of Religion

96% of those surveyed reported that God is very important in their lives.

The question was, “Using this scale, indicate how important God is in your life?” Table 11 shows the answers.

The survey also showed that the respondent Jehovah's Witnesses are very positive about the impact of their religion on various aspects of their lives. For example, when asked about changes in their lives after joining the Jehovah's Witnesses, most respondents reported improvements in both life in general and its certain aspects.

Respondents noted the greatest improvement in their relationships with family members (61.1% described them as “significantly improved”). Improvements in the quality of leisure activities were also reported by 60.7% of respondents. Emotional and mental health was described as “improved” by 58.6% of those who answered the questionnaire.



Table 11. “How important is God in your life?”

Answer	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Relationship with family members (parents, spouses, children)	12.0	5.1	2.1	4.5	11.5	61.1	3.8
2. Relationship with friends	11.2	6.0	4.7	13.7	9.6	49.3	5.5
3. Relationship with colleagues / classmates	11.6	4.0	3.7	21.0	12.4	36.2	11.1
4. Your financial situation	18.8	3.3	1.8	23.5	21.3	25.4	5.9
5. Living conditions	21.6	2.8	1.4	26.9	16.5	26.0	4.8
6. Your health	16.9	4.0	5.4	22.7	16.3	28.9	5.8
7. Your emotional and mental health	10.4	3.7	1.4	5.2	17.5	58.6	3.2
8. Quality of leisure	9.4	3.4	0.6	5.2	17.4	60.7	3.4
9. Your hope for the future	9.4	3.8	0.5	7.9	76.8	1.6	
10. Your life in general	9.3	3.5	0.4	0.7	10.7	73.4	2.0

Table 12. Answers to the question “Please assess how the following aspects of your life have changed since you became a Jehovah’s Witness?”

Answer 1: Did not change / Answer 2: Worsened significantly / Answer 3: Worsened slightly / Answer 4: Neutral answer / Answer 5: Improved slightly / Answer 6: Improved significantly / Answer 7: Not sure, does not apply to me.

Strategy for Interfaith Tolerance in Modern Kazakhstan and the Jehovah's Witnesses

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ABSTRACT: Even though most citizens of Kazakhstan consider themselves to be Muslim, this does not interfere with the full functioning of other religions. There is a wide range of religious associations in the Republic: starting with traditional creeds (Islam and Christianity) and including less conventional religious organizations (the Bahá'í Faith, ISKCON, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and so on). The article discusses the Kazakh model of religious tolerance and how the Jehovah's Witnesses fit within it.

KEYWORDS: Religious Tolerance in Kazakhstan, Religion in Kazakhstan, Religious Pluralism in Kazakhstan, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan's Model of Religious Tolerance

Since Kazakhstan gained its independence, a balanced state policy in the religious sphere has been in place. One of the specific features of modern development is the constantly increasing role of religion in the life of society. Its authority and status are increasing, its functions are expanding, and the number of believers and religious associations is growing. A stable model of interaction between ethnic groups and religions has been established in the Republic, and it provides stability, an atmosphere of creativity and harmony.

For all their differences in nationality, religion, and political leanings, citizens of Kazakhstan share a common opinion that spirituality, morality, culture, and respect for the laws constitute the basis for the purification and transformation of the country.

In the process of building a democratic society, the relationship between the state and religious associations has radically changed.

Although, during the Soviet regime, religion was persecuted by the state, since Kazakhstan gained its independence, according to the Constitution the state recognizes the equality of all citizens, regardless of their ethnic or religious background (*Конституция Республики Казахстан* 1995, Section 2, article 14.) Article 22 of the Constitution declares: “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of conscience” (*Конституция Республики Казахстан* 1995, article 22). Considering the principle of freedom of religion, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 11 October 2011 states:

This Law is based on the fact that the Republic of Kazakhstan declares itself to be a democratic, secular state, confirms the right of everybody to the freedom of conscience, guarantees equal rights to every person regardless of his/her religious opinion, recognizes the historical role of Islam’s Hanafi school and Orthodox Christianity in the development of the culture and spiritual life of the people, respects other religions that are in harmony with the spiritual heritage of the people of Kazakhstan, recognizes the significance of inter-confessional concord, religious tolerance and respect of people’s religious convictions. (*Закон Республики Казахстан “О религиозной деятельности и религиозных объединениях”* 2011).

The Constitution and the 2011 Law prohibit any form of discrimination on confessional, ethnic, and other grounds, and create all the legal foundations for the free functioning of religious associations.

It is very significant that the country has acceded to the most important international agreements and treaties in the field of human rights, including the fundamental UN covenants in this area. Kazakhstan thus recognizes Article 18 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (United Nations 1948).

It is impressive that, thanks to the efforts of UNESCO, the concept of “tolerance” has become an international term, the most important keyword in peace affairs in recent decades. The most accurate definition of “tolerance” is provided in UNESCO’s *Declaration of Principles on Tolerance*. It states that tolerance means “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human” (UNESCO 1995).

The population of Kazakhstan comprises a wide variety of ethnic and religious groups. Peace, the preservation and strengthening of political stability, economic development, and social progress depend on harmony and peaceful cooperation between people of different beliefs and religions. The state fully understands that, and for this purpose it pursues a policy of preserving interethnic and inter-confessional harmony, maintaining an atmosphere of tolerance and constructive dialogue, and preventing manifestations of extremism.

Kazakhstan's experience in the field of religious harmony is in many ways unique, especially considering the circumstances of post-Soviet countries. There is a wide range of religious associations present in the Republic: starting with creeds that have a long history (Islam and Christianity) and including unconventional religious movements.

According to data from the Ministry of Information and Community Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, there are 3,834 religious associations within 18 confessions registered in the country. They include: 2,695 Islamic associations; 345 Orthodox; 88 Catholic; 592 Protestant; 60 Jehovah's Witnesses; 24 New Apostolic Church; 12 ISKCON (Hare Krishna); 7 Jewish; 6 Bahá'í; 2 Buddhist; 2 Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons); 1 Unification Church (Family Federation for World Peace and Unification) (Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022).

In Kazakhstan, followers of all denominations have ample opportunities to meet their spiritual needs, compared with the situation in the neighboring countries.

According to the 2020 Order of the Ministry of Information and Public Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan "Approval of the Rules for the Provision of Public Services in the Field of Religious Activity" (Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2020), foreigners and persons without citizenship may also carry out missionary activity after registration. There are 345 missionaries officially registered, among them 281 foreigners, and 64 citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan. By denomination, there are 225 Catholic missionaries; 41 Orthodox; 6 from Pentecostal Churches; 17 from the New Apostolic Church; 13 from ISKCON; 21 from the Presbyterian Church; 11 Baptists; 3 Seventh-day Adventists; 2 Islamic; 2 Jewish; 6 Jehovah's Witnesses; 1 Lutheran; and 1 Buddhist.

In total, there are 3,603 religious facilities functioning. They include: 2,693 mosques, 303 Orthodox churches, 108 Catholic churches, 407 Protestant houses of worship, 67 Jehovah's Witnesses places of worship (Kingdom Halls), 24 houses of worship of the New Apostolic Church, 6 synagogues, 2 Bahá'í houses of worship, 2 prayer houses of the ISKCON, 1 Buddhist temple (Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022). These statistics show that, even though the majority of the population of Kazakhstan consider themselves to be Muslim, this does not interfere with the full functioning of other denominations.

Despite severe persecution in the past, as well as the persecution of their fellow believers in neighboring countries, Jehovah's Witnesses have settled and act freely in Kazakhstan.

The History of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan

The history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan covers more than 120 years. In 1892, Semyon Kozlitsky (1835–1935) was exiled from Russia to Kazakhstan for his commitment to the teachings of the Bible Students (as Jehovah's Witnesses were called back then). His place of exile was the village of Bukhtarma, now in Eastern Kazakhstan. Thus, he was the first known Jehovah's Witness in Kazakhstan. Until the end of his life (he died in 1935 at the age of 100), Kozlitsky zealously shared his Biblical beliefs, and in time he gathered a group of followers.

The teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses were widely propagated, and congregations were established in Kazakhstan, by the middle of the 20th century in the 1940s and 1950s, that is, during and right after the end of World War II. This is connected to the tragic history of people from the former Soviet Union—mass repression. Widely spread in Europe in the early 20th century, the Witnesses' teachings spread to the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and the territories of Poland and Romania that became part of the USSR. With the new territories, large communities of believers were also brought into the USSR. At the same time, it is important to note that the Bible students were already in the USSR at that time. It is known that Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916) visited Odessa, and there were believers in Russia even before the revolution of 1917

(Ruzmatova 2017). There is still little data on this period. A great archival search in this direction is required.

During World War II, Jehovah's Witnesses being loyal to their principle of political neutrality, refused to serve in Adolf Hitler's (1889–1945) army. Because of this refusal they were subjected to repression, both by Hitler's command and by the authorities of the countries that collaborated with the Nazis. The Nazis imprisoned thousands of Witnesses for refusing to support Hitler and his war of aggression. In concentration camps, the Witnesses behaved with courage and endurance. They also kept on preaching and finding followers of their teachings. For example, in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, 300 people from Russia became Jehovah's Witnesses.

After the war ended, Soviet camps awaited them in their homeland, too. In 1949, about 4,800 Jehovah's Witnesses from Moldova SSR were deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan during the operation called "South." In 1951, the operation called "North" took place, and believers were deported to Siberia. The repressed people were held in extremely unsanitary conditions, starved, worked from dawn to dusk, and were criminally liable for running away from their place of settlement. All members of the organization were under the constant supervision of the state security organs. (Artemyev 2021, 94–5).

As mentioned earlier, in Kazakhstan the doctrine of Jehovah's Witnesses were widely propagated in the 1940s and 1950s, and several congregations were established. Major criminal trials against Jehovah's Witnesses during those years were documented almost all over the country. Karaganda, Saran, Jezkazgan, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Chimkent (now Shymkent), Almaty, Tekeli, Taldy-Kurgan (now Taldykorgan), Petropavlovsk were only some of the cities in the country where the authorities were targeting communities of believers. And their number kept growing. Thus, in 1963, in Kostanay, North Kazakhstan, they already had 50 believers, and, in 1964, according to the reports of the authorities, believers started preaching their teachings "from house to house" in Petropavlovsk.

In 1965, by Order no. 4020-1 of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, "the sect members of Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the True Orthodox Church, Inochentists, Reform Adventists, and members of their families" were released from the administrative supervision of public order authorities, and provisions for their forced settlement were lifted (Corley 1996, 255–57). However, believers were forbidden to return to their places of origin.

Moreover, in the USSR, citizens were required to register at their place of residence, but Jehovah's Witnesses were denied registration, which deprived them of the opportunity to work and pushed them to move to other regions of the USSR. That is why so many believers moved to Kazakhstan. Registration could be granted here, and the hospitality of the local population created good conditions. The people of Kazakhstan were very familiar with hardships, repressions, and grief. And so, there was initially more tolerance here than in other parts of the USSR.

However, the fight against religion and “cults” (*sekty*) had been conducted here, too. We know of many criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses in Soviet Kazakhstan. And the infamous KarLag (Karaganda camp) occupied the territory of almost an entire region. Jehovah's Witnesses from different parts of the USSR served their sentences there. After being released, many decided to stay in Kazakhstan.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Independent Kazakhstan

Attitudes toward believers began to change in the second half of the 1980s. In 1989, Jehovah's Witnesses from the USSR were officially permitted to attend international conventions of Jehovah's Witnesses in Poland. At the same time, they still had no official registration and no recognition from the authorities.

In 1990–1991, Jehovah's Witnesses were officially recognized as victims of political repression and were rehabilitated by an Order of the President of the USSR.

In 1991, the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses, which had already obtained legal recognition in the USSR, acquired official registration. Also in 1991, the first regional convention on the territory of Central Asia was held in Almaty (Kazakhstan).

In 1992, the law “On Freedom of Religion” was passed in Kazakhstan, which had already become independent. And immediately afterwards, several religious associations of Jehovah's Witnesses were registered simultaneously as legal entities in Kazakhstan.

During 1992 and 1993, the first places of worship of believers (Kingdom Halls) were built in Almaty and Zhambyl regions.

In 1997, the Religious Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses was registered in Almaty region (in Esik). From there, they provided religious leadership for all communities of believers in the country.

Since 2007, the Religious Centre was relocated to Almaty, where the construction of their special complex of administrative and religious buildings had been completed.



Figure 1. The Bethel—the main office or administration of the community of Jehovah's Witnesses, Almaty.

Thus, this brief overview shows that the policies of Kazakhstan were much more progressive, tolerant, and democratic than the policies of neighboring post-Soviet countries, including Russia.

At the same time, despite the many permits and relaxations, the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses improved only slightly.

The main “painful” points of dissatisfaction by the authorities remained the same. These are the position of Jehovah's Witnesses in issues of non-acceptance of blood transfusions, non-singing the national anthem, refusal to participate in patriotic and socio-political events and national holidays, refusal to serve in the army, and refusal to receive military training in schools. And, of course, their intense missionary activity.

Thus, for example, in 2007, Jehovah's Witnesses were fined 185,000 tenge by court order, for "illegal missionary activity" in the Almaty region and in the East Kazakhstan region. In 2007, there were cases of registering refusals to participate in public events and celebrations in Ust-Kamenogorsk. In January 2007, a second-year art student of the theory department of the college of arts, A. Citovich, refused to sing the national anthem of Kazakhstan, as well as to take part in social events of the educational institution. A number of graduates of №39 High school (in Ust-Kamenogorsk) expressed their refusal to attend basic military training classes. Conversations with their parents revealed that the students were members of a religious association of Jehovah's Witnesses. Those children's non-attendance was described as "pacifism" (Kosenov 2014).

The law enforcement authorities impose large fines for distributing religious literature and for preaching. The main points of harassment in the media are refusal of blood transfusions, pacifism, not singing the anthem, not worshipping icons, not celebrating Christmas, birthdays, and other days of observance. According to anti-cultist "experts," such actions "undermine statehood and traditions" and are even "destructive."

Scholars and international human rights activists characterize all this as propaganda hype. Exposing the accusations against Jehovah's Witnesses, sociologist Massimo Introvigne and the president of the European Federation for Freedom of Belief (FOB), lawyer Alessandro Amicarelli, state:

Most anti-cult publications rely heavily on press clippings and testimonies by disgruntled ex-members, and rarely if ever are based on academic studies or fieldwork among the religious movements they criticize (Introvigne and Amicarelli 2020, 6).

Religious Conversion Studies and the Case of the Religious Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan

The author of this article is currently engaged in field research on religious conversion, studying the activities of religious associations in Kazakhstan. The study found that the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is one of the fastest growing denominations in Kazakhstan. It is also necessary to note the multinational composition of this organization—Kazakhs, Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Belarusians, Tatars, and others. The question arose as to why people leave their beliefs and become Jehovah's Witnesses.

Classical patterns of religious conversion are based on the following steps:

- 1) an individual's crisis condition;
- 2) divine insight into the way out of the crisis;
- 3) the impact of missionary (or, now, Internet) presence;
- 4) rejecting the old way of life and embracing the new;
- 5) entering a new religion, a new organization (Lofland and Stark 1965)

A change in behavior always goes along with a change in religious beliefs.

People of all ages, from rebellious adolescents to lonely, elderly people, can convert to a new faith. They may also be drug addicts or marginalized people trying to get on the path to moral recovery. But mostly, they are common people looking for meaning and purpose in their life. In religious conversion, a believer goes through the following steps:

- 1) the spiritual quest for a "new" religion;
- 2) defection to a new religious organization;
- 3) reading religious literature, interacting with members of a religious group;
- 4) changes in personality, vocabulary, behavior;
- 5) change in religious attitudes occurs as a result of a change in identity and socialization into a religious organization.

This means that, according to the author's observation, this type of religious conversion occurs in the case of the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses—no one is "dragged" anywhere. There is a rational choice of a given religion as a consequence of the spiritual search for alternatives, guided and "continually controlled" by the community.

There is no doubt that the individual, when engaged in a spiritual quest, experiences cognitive dissonance, which cannot be resolved without the help of a religious group. Therefore, religious associations and organizations serve cognitive and psychological purposes. They are based on the operation of the fundamental mental mechanisms that support human social existence (Tremelin 2012).

Jehovah's Witnesses, working in a style we can compare to American rationalism, offer the adherents a "religious commodity," such as denying

vation of the Cross (icons), which is unusual in the Christian mentality; it is shocking, but this is why it is becoming in demand in our Kazakh market. Or another example—it is very difficult to explain to a modern person what the “Trinity” and the “Holy Spirit” are. But the religious dogmas that are preached by the Jehovah’s Witnesses are understandable and easy to grasp. Jehovah is the One True God, Jesus Christ is God’s son, the Holy Spirit is God’s active force. Thus, the individual, using a rational type of religious conversion, seeks simplification through faith. And the annual increase in number in Jehovah’s Witnesses indicates the effectiveness of this organization. It should also be noted that the members of this organization are honest, principled, and lead a healthy lifestyle.

The Activity of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Modern Kazakhstan

Going back to significant events in the history of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Kazakhstan, the following dates should be mentioned,

In 2013, all communities were re-registered.

In 2017, despite the ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia, Kazakhstan’s authorities officially stated that they did not consider the believers as extremists and would not ban them. This was a key event that is important to mention here.

In 2014, a complete translation of the Bible (*The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*) was released in Kazakh. This was an event of national importance and a huge contribution by believers to the development of the Kazakh language.

In 2017, Almaty hosted an international convention of Jehovah’s Witnesses. That was the second international convention in Central Asia. However, that congress was not held at the city’s stadium, but on their own property. This reduced the number of delegates who could attend. Nonetheless, the government still allowed it to be held.

In 2022, the activity of Jehovah’s Witnesses was officially allowed in our country in all regions and cities of national importance (data from the archive of the religious association of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which I accessed in 2022).

Witnesses are allowed to meet regularly for religious meetings in places of worship and to hold conventions (but only on their own property) without obstacles and without interference from the authorities.



Figure 2. Congress of Jehovah's Witnesses, Petropavlovsk, North Kazakhstan.



Figure 3. The evening of Remembrance of the Death of Jesus Christ (Memorial), Astana.

Over the past thirty years, since the first congregations were registered in Kazakhstan, believers have repeatedly defended their rights in the country's courts. The Supreme Court of Kazakhstan has issued more than ten favorable decisions in their defense.

At present, in Kazakhstan there are more than 17,300 baptized Jehovah's Witnesses, and last year more than 35,000 people attended their annual celebration—the Memorial of Christ's death.

Communities of believers continue to grow. Thus, for example, there are more than 1,000 Jehovah's Witnesses living in Astana and Akmola region, and about 600 of them reside in Astana city proper. About 1,500–2,000 people from across Kazakhstan attend the meetings.

Moreover, believers who live in the capital city have their own Kingdom Hall. The first Kingdom Hall in Astana city was built in 2007, by donations and by the believers themselves. Jehovah's Witnesses lost their religious building in 2015, when the state bought the land beneath it to build a transportation bridge. The new place of worship is now in a renovated two-story building at 6/1 Moskovskaya Street.

It is worth noting that unlike many other religious groups, Jehovah's Witnesses try not to look distinctive in their clothing or in their appearance. And the places of worship of the Jehovah's Witnesses, which are called Kingdom Halls, are usually no different from other buildings and fit in well with the city's image. They are simple, functional buildings without any religious symbols or “religious” architectural elements (spires, crosses, domes, etc.)



Figure 4. Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Astana, Kazakhstan.

Today, authorities and government experts increasingly realize that, although for a person to be one of the Jehovah's Witnesses means non-interference in state policy, as well as not singing the national anthem, nor saluting the flag and the national emblem, and believers also do not participate in political parties and elections, they cannot be accused of disrespecting the very institution of power. That is because much of their worship is actually devoted to the theme of respect for authority and obedience to the laws of the state, and doing anything that would denigrate the symbols of the state is not acceptable for them and is forbidden.

Military service is also unacceptable to them, even if their refusal entails criminal prosecution and imprisonment. But most Jehovah's Witnesses do not refuse alternative civilian service. And although Jehovah's Witnesses refuse blood transfusions, they do not refuse to see doctors, indeed, they themselves actively seek and agree to alternative and bloodless methods of treatment. They do not refuse vaccination. Many medical issues they actually consider as the personal decision of each believer individually ("a matter of conscience").

It is remarkable that during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were among the first to close their Kingdom Halls, and moved their worship services (both small and large) online. They have not been seen by authorities to violate quarantine measures. They even suspended their house-to-house ministry.

This is important to emphasize because it illustrates that their doctrine and practice require careful and deep study. What the media and anti-cultists present to the authorities and to society as "fanaticism," upon a closer and more thorough study turns out to be a quite normal, permissible, and balanced position, a conscious choice, which in no way threatens believers or those around them. Of course, one may disagree with this position and consider it wrong, but this does not make it a "threat" to others. It is a common pluralism of opinions. It exists in all societies where a plurality of religions operate.

It is pleasing to see that believers themselves seek contact with authorities and experts. The information and openness they provide is very helpful in sifting out the lies and myths of the Soviet period. The image created by Soviet propaganda for the Jehovah's Witnesses as "closed, limited, and dangerous 'cultists' who shut themselves off from the world and any knowledge" is gradually disappearing from Kazakh society. And this is very encouraging because it also helps with the development of tolerance.

Jehovah's Witnesses consider that they have earned the right to be part of Kazakh society by their sweat and blood, their labor for the good of the homeland, as well as the time they spent in the camps. They have the right to live as they see appropriate, as long as it does not threaten the state or other people.

At present, state authorities are showing a more lenient attitude to the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses. Thus, the Law of Republic of Kazakhstan does not provide for a universal right to conscientious objection to military duty, but clergymen of recognized religious organizations, including Jehovah's Witnesses, may be exempted from compulsory military service.

The Religious Association of Jehovah's Witnesses is not an extremist organization, and the authorities of Kazakhstan have no plans to ban their activities. In contrast to the popular belief that Jehovah's Witnesses are in constant conflict with the state and do not subject themselves to its laws, Jehovah's Witnesses, like other religious associations registered in Kazakhstan, do not interfere in the affairs of the state, and the state does not interfere in the affairs of religions. It is encouraging to see that Jehovah's Witnesses and the state are engaged in a regular and in-depth dialogue. It is not always easy, in fact it is often difficult. But as long as the dialogue continues, the hope for peace grows stronger. As a local proverb says, "A bad peace is better than a good quarrel."

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The Role of Forensic Experts in the Repression of Religious Minorities in Kyrgyzstan

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ABSTRACT: After the fall of the Soviet Union, authorities in post-Soviet republics relied on “religious experts” who might explain to them the theology and organization of groups they were not familiar with and that were seeking registration. Later, “experts” also played a crucial role in determining which religious organizations and literature should be considered “extremist” and banned. Unfortunately, both in Russia and other post-Soviet countries influenced by the Russian model, the “experts” appointed were, in general, not religious studies scholars and were heavily influenced by anti-cult literature. This article focuses on the situation in Kyrgyzstan and mentions the 2021 case seeking to ban literature of the Jehovah’s Witnesses deemed “extremist,” while noting that the role of “experts” is similar in other Central Asian countries.

KEYWORDS: Forensic Experts in Kyrgyzstan, Experts and Extremist Cases in Kyrgyzstan, Jehovah’s Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, Anti-Cult Movement in Central Asia.

What role do forensic experts play in cases involving religious minorities in Kyrgyzstan? I would like to clarify that I will not discuss here all possible forensic experts, but only those who are engaged in religious or theological expertise. In fact, I will focus on the improper use of purported expertise in determining the legal capacity or “extremism” of religious organizations. I will discuss the practice of conducting such examinations in the Kyrgyz Republic, which largely reflects the reality in other Central Asian countries. I will also cover the subject of reform initiatives, and finally the roles of the experts themselves.

Religious expertise (or theological, since initially no significant distinction was made between these areas) became widespread in the post-Soviet space after the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent changes in the religious landscape of

different countries. The examination, initially used in Kyrgyzstan to determine the religious doctrine of an organization by the body responsible for the state registration of religious organizations, later began to be actively used to determine the “extremist” nature of religious materials or organizations (Aidarbekova 2021).

After independence, the practice of conducting two different types of expert examinations has taken shape in Kyrgyzstan. The first is state religious expertise, conducted by the State Commission for Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic (SCRA) when registering religious organizations and authorizing the import of religious literature into the country. The second is forensic religious examination as part of a comprehensive examination to identify signs of extremism, which is carried out by the state forensic service.

In the latter case, the broad interpretation of “extremist activity” in national legislation, including armed seizure of power, hate speech, and propaganda of the superiority of one religion over another, allowed the state bodies to label law-abiding organizations as extremist. Unfortunately, religious expertise has been used to substantiate such decisions.

An analysis of the judicial practice of recent years has shown multiple and systemic problems in determining the type and body of expertise, posing legal questions to experts, going beyond the competence of the experts themselves, the low quality of expert opinions, the unjustified role of expertise in court, and so on. However, this has not led to a critical reduction in the use of expertise in court. Judges and other judicial actors rarely scrutinise the quality of expertise if its conclusions contain the desired provisions; alternative, and perhaps more authoritative, expert opinions are often ignored.

Within the framework of state religious expertise, defining the religious nature of organizations has become a widespread practice, as was the case, for example, with the Church of Scientology and the Tenirchilik movement (or “Kyrgyz Tengrism”: see Zhaparaliev 2019). At the same time, the assessment was carried out according to the criteria of monotheistic religions, i.e. the presence of a single God, a holy book, the institution of the church and the clergy.

The second widespread trend is declaring organizations as “destructive cults” (Russian *секты*, sekty). Such attempts have mostly related to new religious movements, and Protestant organizations, which were presented in the media and

in public speeches of politicians as “non-traditional” (Štimac and Aslanova 2021, 122–23). Today, the discourse about “non-traditional” or “destructive” religions is still present but is less intense compared with other countries in the region. However, it has now shifted into the realm of accusations of extremist activity.

As an example, we can cite the cases of the Ahmadiyya Religious Community of Kyrgyzstan, which was denied re-registration by the SCRA, referring to the results of a theological expertise. This expert examination, by representatives of the so-called “traditional” Muslim clergy, identified the organization as a destructive “cult.” As a consequence, the registration was withdrawn, and the organization currently does not have the right to conduct any public religious activities, including gatherings. About nine years ago, an attempt was made to declare the literature of the organization extremist (Alisheva 2013, 16).

The Jehovah’s Witnesses also face systematic attempts to shut down their organization, or label their literature extremist, which would unquestionably lead to dissolving the organization. The last known case occurred in November 2021, when the Prosecutor General’s Office filed a lawsuit with the request to declare the religious literature of Jehovah’s Witnesses extremist (Corley 2021a). Examples were handed over to the Prosecutor General’s Office in 2019 by the State Committee for National Security. The examination concluded that the material contained information “inciting religious hatred.”

However, a detailed study of the examinations, carried out by linguistic and “religious studies” experts of the State Forensic Service, shows an abundance of clichés and stereotypes towards the religious organization. The expert study does not stand up to criticism when it comes to the requirements set out in the Law on Forensic Activities of the Kyrgyz Republic for the quality of expert studies. In addition, experts went beyond their jurisdiction by defining legal terms, for example, using conflicting interpretations of extremism from popular science literature; and they undertook to evaluate the dogma of the organization from theological and apologetic standpoints. There are absolutely no references to academic literature on Jehovah’s Witnesses. Moreover, a significant part of the expert study is a verbatim copy of infamous Russian studies, on the basis of which the organization was banned in Russia (see e.g. Corley 2010). To the judge’s credit, the prosecutor’s claim was dismissed (Introvigne 2021; Corley 2021b).

It should be noted that, with the support of international and local organizations, government agencies are taking a number of initiatives to reform the institution of forensic study in the country. Methodological guidelines have been developed, trainings were held for civil servants, judicial actors, and so on (see Gunger 2021). However, the above facts indicate the low efficiency of this work. For example, the experts who provided their opinions on the Jehovah's Witnesses case had undergone such training.

The main problem boils down to the fact that specialists whose qualifications are far from scientific religious studies are enrolled as religious experts, and produce reports considering religious movements from given standpoints: right or wrong, traditional or non-traditional, destructive or formative.

Kyrgyzstan, located in the infosphere of Russia, very organically absorbed its anti-cult rhetoric, and began to view new religious movements and Protestant organizations as a threat to so-called religious or spiritual security. This vision was not only widely disseminated through the media, and in statements by politicians and civil servants, but was also transmitted through textbooks at universities. It is not surprising that specialists who grew up on these narratives, superimposed on the Soviet atheistic understanding of religion, see in every "non-traditional" religious movement a threat to the moral and spiritual heritage of the country. There is an urgent need to create a self-regulated organization of religious scholars that would certify specialists with due regard to their education, academic degrees, seniority and work experience, scientific publications, and so on.

My personal position is that, as it functions in Kyrgyzstan today, this type of expert examination is fabricated and unnecessary. Investigators and judges must rather rely on factual evidence of illegal acts, and on the test set out in the Rabat Plan of Action on the Prohibition of Advocacy of National, Racial or Religious Hatred That Constitutes Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility or Violence (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights 2012).

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