

To the Presidential Council of the Russian Federation for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights

Honorable Mikhail Aleksandrovich! Honorable members of the Human Rights Council!

This open letter to you is a cry of despair. The people who are dear to us — husbands, breadwinners, the fathers of our children, peaceful, honest, and kind-hearted people — have been thrown behind bars on the suspicion that together with us, our children, and our friends, they read the Bible's commands and prayed to God, whose name is recorded in the Bible as Jehovah.

As of today, seventeen believers languish in Russia's detention centers. One of them has been detained for more than a year already. Dozens more believers in eleven different regions of the Russia find themselves under house arrest or recognizance agreements. Their number grows with each passing day. Considering that there are 175,000 followers of the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, a question concerns us: how many more dozens, hundreds or even thousands of prisoners of conscience will be necessary for this unjust criminal prosecution of people because of their faith in God to end?

Under the pretext of fighting extremism, many of us, and even our children, have been threatened by OMON officers with weapons and been forced to lay on the floor. Searches have been conducted in our homes and our telephones and computers have been taken away, which does not allow us to live normal lives or to work. Our family photographs, passports and other documents have been confiscated, as well as Bibles. The law enforcement agencies are trying to force us to live in fear and to be startled by every knock at the door or the sound of sirens, expecting to be arrested merely because of our faith. They have driven some believers from their places of employment after many years of excellent work simply because the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is banned in Russia. We are unable to find an answer to the question: why are we being subjected to such bullying in our own country, and which religion's representatives will be made the next victims after us?

Law enforcement uses the April 20, 2017, decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation as the basis to explain the persecution of our husbands for their faith. With this decision, all the legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia were liquidated.

At the same time, Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation during the judicial proceedings in the Supreme Court and the government of the Russian Federation after the judgment was handed down have both officially stated on multiple occasions that the judicial decision would not lead to the violation of the right of citizens to freedom of religion.

The aforementioned decision by the Supreme Court in fact did not ban the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, and it relates solely to legal entities. Why then are law enforcement agencies acting contrary to the will of the government of this country? Who benefits from a mass repression of believers in our country today? Why are our family members accused of serious crimes with the prospect of spending at a minimum anywhere from six to ten years in prison for sham charges of extremist activity under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation? Why is law enforcement mistakenly interpreting the peaceful practice of one's faith

in God as participation in an extremist organization?

Honorable members of the council, help us get answers to these questions.

This appalling situation causes many of us to fear for our children's future. Conditions have been put into place in our country for the removal of children from their parents whose faith in God is considered "wrong." Considering this, reports of educational and medical facilities collecting information about children from families of Jehovah's Witnesses sound very disturbing. It is unsurprising that practically every week entire families of our fellow believers abandon everything and flee to foreign countries seeking political asylum with the goal of saving their children.

Some suggest that we renounce our faith in exchange for our freedom and a peaceful life. This is not a figure of speech — the investigators have literally suggested we sign such papers to avoid punishment for "extremism!" Alternatively, they say that no attorney will help us. We cannot stop believing in God, though. It is a right that belongs to every person from the moment of birth. The Russian Federation is a multiconfessional state, and we, as citizens of Russia, have the right to expect that the government will respect and protect our rights. We are not asking for any special privileges. We are only asking for one thing — please, protect our rights.

Honorable members of the council! Real terror has been unleashed against an entire religion, one of the largest Christian religions in Russia! Basic human rights are being trampled on: the right to liberty and security of the person, the right to personal dignity, the right to privacy, the right to the inviolability of the home, freedom of conscience and freedom of thought, freedom of religion, and the right to private property.

If you do not stop the approaching catastrophe, it will take place right before your eyes. We are sure that you can do something about this right now! We ask you to present this information to the president of the Russian Federation, and to use all legal means to restore the rights of believers!

Respectfully, the wives of those individuals currently in custody:

Alena Vilitkevich (Republic of Bashkortostan)
Anna Zyablova (Magadan Region)
Yuliya Klimova (Tomsk Region)
Galina Kochneva (Orenburg Region)
Irina Christensen (Orel Region)
Svetlana Markina (Murmansk Region)
Tatyana Petrova (Magadan Region)
Anastasiya Puida (Khabarovsk Territory)
Nataliya Suvorova (Orenburg Region)
Yuliyana Trofimova (Murmansk Region) and others