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European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses

T R A N S N I S T R I A

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ISSUES

STATEMENT BY THE  
EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF  
JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

**OSCE Human  
Dimension  
Implementation  
Meeting, Warsaw**

**16-27 SEPTEMBER 2019**



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# Transnistria

The government of Transnistria restricts the rights of Jehovah's Witnesses to freely practise their faith.

- Transnistria authorities refuse to grant legal status to congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses.
- Only two of the Witnesses' 34 congregations in Transnistria have been allowed legal registration—in Tiraspol and Rybnitsa. However, the authorities have not allowed either congregation to re-register under the 2009 religion law and are now moving to liquidate the Rybnitsa Religious Community of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The refusal to grant registration effectively criminalises the Witnesses' peaceful religious activity and leaves them vulnerable to discrimination. However, there were no incidents of police interference with the Witnesses' worship during the reporting period.

- The government has enacted amendments to its military service law that restrict the rights of Jehovah's Witnesses who are conscientious objectors.

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## Abuses and Restrictions of Religious Freedom

### DENIAL OF REGISTRATION

On **19 February 2009**, the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations in the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic came into force in Transnistria and required the re-registration of all religious associations (communities) by 31 December 2010. All religious associations that fail to re-register are subject to liquidation.

#### 1. Denial of Re-registration of the Tiraspol Religious Community.

In 2009, 2013 and January 2014, Jehovah's Witnesses attempted to re-register their religious community. The Ministry of Justice refused their requests. On 14 March 2014, the Community again submitted their charter to the Ministry for re-registration. After the Ministry refused to re-register the charter, the Community filed a complaint against the

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Transnistrian  
authorities  
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Ministry in the Tiraspol City Court. On 28 July 2014, the Tiraspol City Court ruled in favour of the Witnesses. However, the Supreme Court of Transnistria overturned the decision on 25 September 2014.

On 30 June 2016, Jehovah's Witnesses filed complaints against both Moldova and the Russian Federation with the UN Human Rights Committee concerning the refusal by the Transnistria authorities to grant re-registration. The complaint is still pending.



### Rybnitsa Kingdom Hall

Transnistrian authorities are now moving to liquidate the Rybnitsa Religious Community of Jehovah's Witnesses.

**2. Attempted Liquidation of the Rybnitsa Religious Community.** In 2009, and again in 2013, Jehovah's Witnesses tried to re-register the Rybnitsa Religious Community. The Ministry of Justice refused their requests on each occasion. On **12 April 2018**, the Ministry filed a claim in the Rybnitsa City Court against the Community and requested that it be liquidated. The case is ongoing.

On **14 August 2018**, the Witnesses in Rybnitsa again submitted the Community's charter to the Ministry of Justice, based on the Ministry's stated reasons for denial of registration. On **11 February 2019**, the Ministry found new reasons to deny registration. On **10 April 2019**, the Community submitted a revised charter to the Ministry. This matter is also ongoing.

### THE AMENDED RELIGION LAW

On 16 November 2016, amendments to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations went into effect. As is true of Russia's July 2016 law, the aim is to curb missionary activity. Article 18 of the law states:

For the purposes of this federal law, missionary activity is recognized as the activity of a religious association, aimed at disseminating information about its beliefs among people who are not participants (members, followers) in that religious association, with the purpose of involving these people as participants (members, followers). It is carried out directly by religious associations or by citizens and/or legal entities authorized by them, publicly, with the help of the media, the internet or other lawful means.

The law affects the subject of conversations, where literature can be distributed (only in houses of worship) and the registering of religious groups (communities, associations and organisations).

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## CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION TO MILITARY SERVICE

On 12 February 2014, the Alternative Civilian Service Law came into effect, which allowed for conscientious objectors to perform alternative civilian service in lieu of military service. Before this date, conscientious objectors were prosecuted for their neutral stand or chose to relocate and carry out alternative civilian service in Moldova or Ukraine.

Rostom Aslanian, a Witness conscientious objector who was unjustly imprisoned in Transnistria, appealed his case to the European Court of Human Rights in 2011.\* His appeal is pending.

**On 28 February 2018**, the Universal Military Service Law was amended to require conscientious objectors who visit their homeland to perform military service, even though they no longer live in Transnistria.

→ Witness conscientious objectors Iury Emelyanov, Vladimir Cotovschi and Mihail Eremeev were called upon to perform military service and are not permitted to leave Transnistria. Two of the Witnesses, Mr Cotovschi and Mr Eremeev, have already performed alternative civilian service in Moldova. On **25 May 2019**, the three men contested the decision of the Military Enrolment Committee and filed complaints in the appropriate courts for their place of residence. Their cases are ongoing.

Further amendments to the Alternative Civilian Service Law are being considered that will require that all alternative service be under military control and supervision. If these amendments become law, Jehovah's Witnesses who are conscientious objectors in Transnistria will no longer have the option of performing an alternative service that is genuinely civilian in nature.

## Meetings With Officials

Numerous attempts to arrange meetings with the Ministry of Justice have been unsuccessful.

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Aslanian v. Moldova and Russia, no. 74433/11, filed 28 November 2011, on the issue of conscientious objection.



**Rostom Aslanian**

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**Vladimir Cotovschi**

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**Mihail Eremeev**

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# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM OBJECTIVES

## JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES RESPECTFULLY REQUEST THE GOVERNMENT OF TRANSNISTRIA TO:

- Grant Jehovah's Witnesses full registration throughout Transnistria;
- Respect the Witnesses' right to assemble, worship and manifest their belief publicly; and
- Respect the right of conscientious objection by maintaining an alternative service programme that is truly civilian in nature.

Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses welcome the opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue with representatives of the Transnistria government.

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**For more information:**

Please contact the Office of Public Information for Jehovah's Witnesses at [OPIGov@jw.org](mailto:OPIGov@jw.org).



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