

[translation from Russia]

Religion society fell under the wheel of the struggle with extremism

by Daniel Shchipkov

Nezavisimaia gazeta, 29 March 2004

The US State Department issued a sharp criticism of the decision regarding the liquidation of the Moscow congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses that was made by the Golovin court of Moscow last Friday. As reported by Associated Press, a representative of the State Department, Richard Boucher, made this statement on this matter: "We regret that the court made the decision to prohibit the religious activity of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow and for liquidating this organization as a legal entity. . . . We call local authorities and the Russian government to observe their obligations to respect the right of everyone to freedom of religion confession." The trial of the Moscow congregation of "Witnesses" began in 1998 on a suit from the prosecutor of the Northern District of Moscow. The last of the investigations of the activity of this religious organization came to the conclusion that it incites religious strife, breaks up the family, and induces seriously ill people to suicide by means of refusing blood transfusions on religious bases.

In 2001 this same Golovin court issued a decision in the Jehovahists favor. The Moscow City Court overturned it and in the spring of 2002 a second trial began, during which a philological-psycholinguistic expert study of the "Witnesses" literature was conducted. As reported to NG by the congregation's attorney Galina Krylova "the court issued its decision in a resolution form. The complete decision will be prepared some time later. Thus for now it is even impossible to say precisely what was the basis on which it was made. For now it is unknown whether it is based on all of the accusations proffered by the prosecutor or only on some of them." According to Krylova, "for Jehovah's Witnesses the decision of the court can have sad consequences; for example, police will begin to arrest them on the street."

On the day when the Golovin court issued the decision on the Jehovahists' case, Vladimir Putin spoke in Sochi in a forum of the peoples of the Caucasus and south Russia and declared the necessity of "pursuing any extremism, including religious extremism." And he specified: "This should not draw us into the sphere of violation of human rights. . . . We will work out such forms that will not interfere with the development of democracy in the country.":

However, according to an Interfax report, the other attorney for the Jehovahists, Artur Leontiev, is sure that the trial bore an ideological character. And Galina Krylova again confirmed for NG that the defense plans to appeal this decision and the attorneys' complaint is already at the European Court on Human Rights. (tr. by PDS, posted 29 March 2004)