

Jehovah's Witnesses Charged with Extremism

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Ten Jehovah's Witnesses in Chuvashia were charged Monday with criminal acts including the incitement of hatred and extremism in a case that is raising new worries about religious freedom in Russia.

"This situation is a serious breach of the rights of believers in Russia," said Sergei Tarasov, a Chuvash human rights activist following the case.

"This is something new — we have not seen anything like this before," he said by phone. "It creates instability amid an effort to establish an atmosphere of calm and tolerance in our country."

The 10 suspects, ages 31 to 64, are accused of distributing banned literature among residents of the towns of Cheboksary, Novocheboksarsk, Kanash and Alatyry. The literature, which is included on a federal list of extremist materials, spreads ideas of exclusivity and superiority

and brands those with alternative religious beliefs as inferior, the Investigative Committee said in a statement.

According to investigators, the suspects organized a network in the Chuvash towns in November 2009 that spread a religious message denying traditional cultural and moral values and facilitating the incitement of religious and social hostility among residents.

Authorities became aware of the "extremist community" during the course of a separate criminal investigation involving one of the suspects, a 39-year-old Cheboksary resident, the statement said.

The Jehovah's Witness community in Russia, which numbers over 130,000 members, has endured a continuous struggle with authorities over its religious beliefs. In 2004, the country's highest court labeled 34 of the group's publications extremist and banned the activities of its Moscow branch.

Tarasov said 29 Jehovah's Witness groups have recently ceased activities in Russia through personal choice or because of state intervention.

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