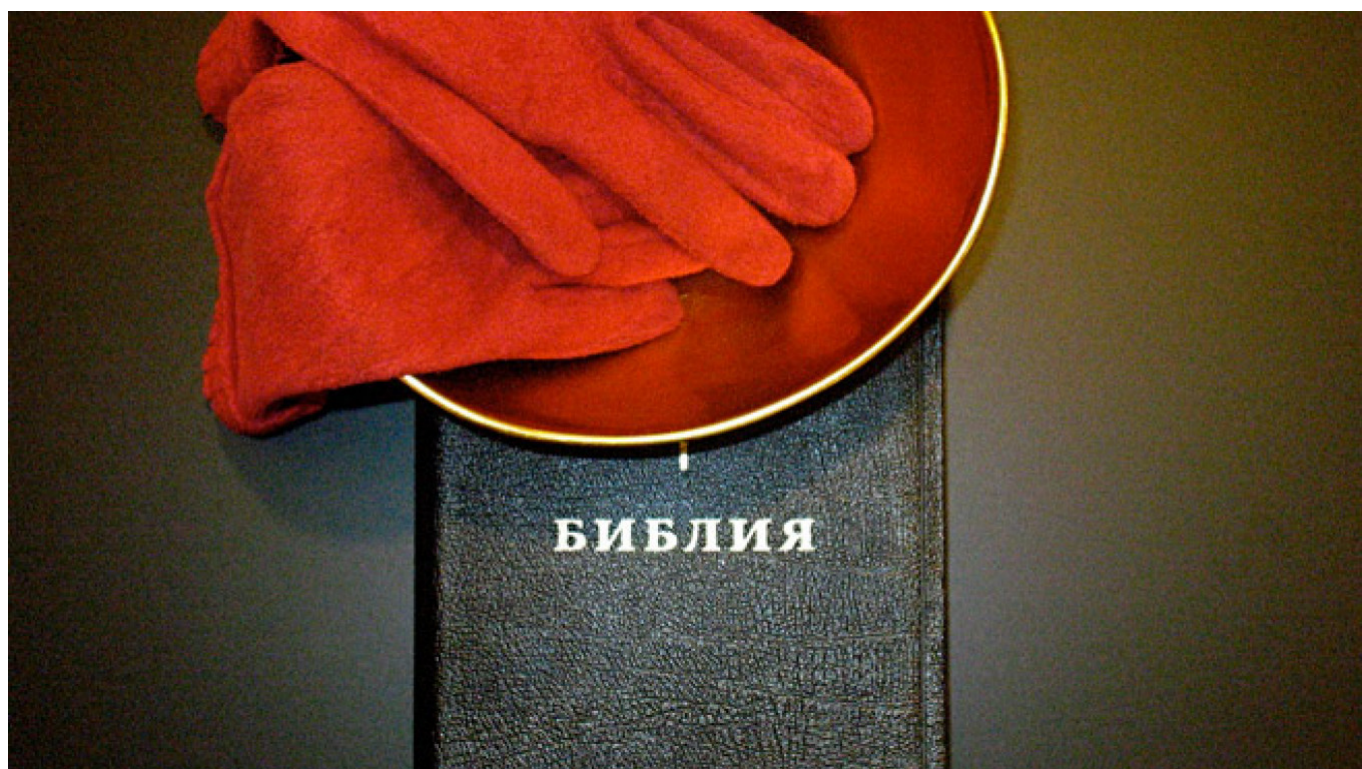


Russian Court Overturns Fine for Public Bible-Reading by Protestant Pastor

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During the reading, about 25 participants recited and discussed passages from the Bible, the MediaZona news site reported Tuesday.

A district court in the Russian city of Sochi has overturned a \$560 fine levied on a Protestant pastor who organized a Bible-reading at a cafe without first notifying the authorities.

The reading took place in September at the Bel Canto cafe in the Black Sea resort, during which about 25 participants recited and discussed passages from the Bible, the MediaZona news site reported Tuesday.

Toward the end of the meet, plain-clothed FSB officers interrupted the discussion and detained Pastor Alexander Kolyasnikov, who heads a local religious group called Community of Christians.

The following month, a magistrates' court found Kolyasnikov guilty of organizing a public meeting without first notifying the authorities and fined him the maximum sum stipulated by the law: 30,000 rubles (\$560).

The district court ruled Tuesday to overturn the fine because "the magistrates' court had no legal right to consider the case," the pastor's lawyer Alexander Popkov was cited as saying by MediaZona.

Popkov added that the case has now been sent for review and will be considered again at a hearing scheduled for Dec. 9.

A Sochi FSB general wrote to prosecutors after the Bible-reading asking that they dispatch representatives of the health and safety watchdog to inspect the cafe where it took place, the opposition-minded newspaper Novaya Gazeta reported last Wednesday, citing a copy of the letter.

In the letter, Kolyasnikov was reportedly described as representing people whose "religious beliefs are based on the ideology of pro-Western Protestant religious movements that have the financial support of NATO and the European Union."

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