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Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
1-2 April 2019
Session 1

SOVA Center's intervention at Session 1

Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Maria Kravchenko, I represent SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, a Russian NGO focusing on issues of racism, xenophobia, religious conflicts, relations between religious organizations and the state, and misuse of anti-extremism policies.

I will speak on discriminating practices of the Russian authorities. Russian authorities are increasing their pressure against religious organizations and movements of foreign origin, viewing their functioning in Russia as undesirable and not taking into account the notion that Russian citizens have the right, guaranteed by the international human rights law as well as the Russian Constitution, to choose a religion and to profess it individually and collectively.

Following the complete ban on Jehovah's Witnesses organizations as extremist issued in 2017, believers in Russia face criminal prosecutions for continuation of their religious activities interpreted by the law enforcement as continuation of activities of extremist groups. According to the latest data, 400 searches of believers' homes by armed forces were held during the two years; nearly 70 criminal cases have been instigated against 169 Jehovah's Witnesses, 35 of them women, the oldest of the women born in 1934. 27 believers have been put in prison. One of the prosecuted, Dennis Christensen, citizen of Denmark, was sentenced to six years of imprisonment. Even cases of torture of believers by the law enforcement agents have been reported: in the city of Surgut, 7 Jehovah's Witnesses were beaten and tortured with electric shock devices during the interrogation in the local Investigative Committee department.

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witnesses try to defend their rights in the European Court of Human Rights, which, according to their information, had over 40 related complaints filed as of early 2019. The complaints speak of violations of the rights of believers resulting from the bans on literature and community activities, suppression of religious meetings, persecution of individual citizens and withdrawal of their communities' property. The ECHR intends to consider a complaint about the total ban of Jehovah's Witnesses activities as a matter of priority. The ECHR decision which can be issued this summer will give Russia a chance to reconsider the erroneous decision to declare Jehovah's Witnesses' organizations extremist – the decision that lead to an obvious deadlock, in which the state forces itself to prosecute tens of thousands of law-abiding citizens for their peaceful religious activities. However, it is unclear if Russia will implement this upcoming decision.

Jehovah's Witnesses are not the only religious group experiencing arbitrary pressure in Russia. Followers of Islamic movements and associations arbitrarily banned as extremist, such as followers of Turkish theologian Said Nursi and fundamentalist but peaceful Tablighi Jamaat movement, have faced increasingly harsh penalties for continuing their purely religious activities – up to eight years of imprisonment.

SOVA Center calls on the Russian authorities to amend the anti-extremism provisions which allow prosecuting followers of banned organizations irrespectively of whether their activities present any public danger, thus violating their right to freedom of belief. SOVA Center believes that arbitrary bans of religious organizations which are not involved in violence and do not promote it must be revoked and the related criminal sentences should be reviewed.