



EUROPEAN UNION

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EU Statement on the situation of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia

The European Union has been following the developments of the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia closely and has raised the issue multiple times here at the Permanent Council.

We are deeply concerned about the recent sentencing in Russia of a Danish Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen to six years in prison on charges of "organising the activity of a banned extremist organisation". We agree with Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, that "the harsh sentence imposed on Christensen creates a dangerous precedent, and effectively criminalises the right to freedom of religion or belief, for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia – in contravention of the State's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."

As we have stated previously in many other occasions, all people, including members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, must be able to peacefully enjoy freedom of religion or belief as well as freedom of assembly without discrimination, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation and Russia's international commitments.

As the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the UN Special Rapporteur on Peaceful Assembly and Association and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief stated in relation to the nationwide ban on Jehovah's witnesses in April 2017, "the use of counter-extremism legislation in this way to confine freedom of opinion, including religious belief, expression and association to that which is state-approved is unlawful and dangerous, and signals a dark future for all religious freedom in Russia."

We note the Russian response of 5 July 2018 to our statement, in which the delegation stated “there is nothing to stop the Jehovah’s Witnesses from freely practising their faith in Russia”. We also note their confirmation that the Russian Prosecutor General’s Office is examining the legality and justification for criminal prosecution of persons belonging to the Jehovah’s Witness faith. However, we remain concerned that this is in contradiction to the situation of many Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia who face persecution and criminal investigations. We would therefore welcome information on the research.

The EU reaffirms its resolute commitment to respect and promote freedom of religion or belief everywhere based on the principles of equality, non-discrimination and universality. We also reiterate our previous statement that all people, including members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, must be able to peacefully enjoy freedom of religion or belief as well as freedom of assembly without discrimination, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation and Russia’s international commitments, including Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. In light of this, we call upon the authorities to drop charges against and to release all those detained for exercising their rights to freedom of religion or belief, the freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

The EU will continue to raise its concerns regarding violations of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights, including the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Russian Federation and expect a substantive response.

Thank you.

The Candidate Countries the FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA countries ICELAND and NORWAY, members of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE, GEORGIA, ANDORRA, SAN MARINO, AUSTRALIA and CANADA align themselves with this statement.

* The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.