



EUROPEAN UNION

**OSCE Permanent Council N° 1191
Vienna, 5 July 2018**

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

The European Union is deeply concerned by the reports of continued systematic persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, including police raids of private homes, intimidation, arbitrary detentions and criminal prosecution. Since our last statement in the Permanent Council on 10 May, 18 persons have reportedly been detained while several others are under house arrest or subject to travel restrictions. This is in strong contrast with Russian authorities' statements that individual Jehovah's Witnesses believers are free to profess their faith.

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, UN Special Rapporteur on Peaceful Assembly and Association and UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief stated in relation to the nationwide ban on Jehovah's witnesses: "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."

The EU also notes that the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights has requested the General Prosecutor's Office to investigate the legality and validity of the criminal prosecution of Jehovah's Witnesses and to take steps to protect their constitutional right to freedom of religion. The Council stated that, and I quote: "There is a clear contradiction between the stated position of the Government of the Russian

Federation and law enforcement practice. This is a cause for concern, as criminal prosecutions and arrests have become endemic." Unquote.

The EU shares this concern and reiterates its call on Russia to ensure the respect for our international and OSCE commitments on freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. The EU requests Russia to provide information whether the General Prosecutor's Office is going to investigate the legality and validity of the criminal prosecution of Jehovah's Witnesses. If so, we would be interested to know when the investigation is anticipated to be concluded and whether the results will be made public.

Moreover, going back to the Russian statement in this Permanent Council of 10 May, which stated that: "According to the results of the expert appraisal of the Jehovah's Witnesses brochures, the specialists came to the conclusion that they contained information posing a threat to public health and detrimental to public security", we would like to know the specific threat to public health and public security the Russian authorities are referring to.

The freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is a fundamental right of every human being. This right is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and our shared OSCE commitments. Freedom of religion or belief includes the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief, individually or in community with others, in public or private, through worship, observance, practice and teaching.

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.

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, LIECHTENSTEIN and NORWAY, members of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE, GEORGIA, SAN MARINO 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.