

Joint statement on the freedom to religion or belief in Russia

We, the members of the NGO coalition Civic Solidarity Platform, express our deep concern for the deprivation of the right to freedom of religion or belief towards Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and the persecution of the Community members. We urge the Russian authorities to stop deprivations, interrogations and criminal investigations for peaceful religious activity of Jehovah's Witnesses. We ask the international organizations and governments of the democratic states to call on the Russian government to end the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses.

As a result of the national campaign against extremists, the legal entity of Jehovah's Witnesses was banned in the Russian Federation in 2017 and about 400 local religious organisations over the country were liquidated in accordance with the Supreme Court decision. It immediately placed a lot of believers in danger of criminal prosecution for their faith. The Witnesses continue to practise their religion and, as a result, the places of their meetings are searched and the attendees are arrested. As of January 2019, 25 Witnesses are placed in the pre-trial detention, 9 are placed under house arrest and 31 persons are not entitled to leave the residence place. There are also 2 foreign citizens in detention.

The statement calls particular attention to the following cases of pre-trial detention and criminal investigations. Andrzej Onishchuk, a 50-year-old citizen of Poland, was arrested on October 9, 2018 in Kirov during the police raid of 15 Witnesses' houses. The criminal case is at the level of the pre-trial investigation.

- On October 12, 2018 he was sentenced to detention by the Pervomayskiy District Court in Kirov.
- He is being charged in "organizing and financing the activity of an extremist organization" with the reference to Articles 282.2(1), 282.3(1) of the Criminal Code. If convicted, he will be sentenced for the term up to 10 years.
- On December 2, 2018 the detention was extended. His current stay is in the detention centre Nr 1 in the city of Kirov. The correspondence with him is allowed in the Russian language only.

Dennis Christensen, a 45-year-old Danish citizen, was arrested on May 25, 2017 in Oryol. The criminal case is being heard in court and the verdict is expected in the beginning of 2019.

- The heavily armed police and Federal Security Service agents raided a peaceful religious meeting in Oryol, where Christensen was attending. He was detained and placed to the detention centre in Oryol.
- He is being charged under Article 282.2 (1) of the Criminal Code for "organizing extremist activity".
- As of January 1, 2019 he has stood in court about 50 times; his detention was extended 5 times.
- In July 2017 the Witnesses submitted the application to the European Court of Human Rights concerning Christensen's pre-trial detention and the arbitrary deprivation of his liberty as a result of his religious activity.

Background information:

After Russia outlawed the Jehovah's Witnesses, the number of acts of intolerance, violence and discrimination based on religion or belief are increasingly perpetrated towards the members of the community. The private property is armed searched, the meetings for worship are regularly interrupted by the OMON forces and FSB agents. The state carries censorship of the religious literature. The Witnesses are often denied the right to the alternative civil service instead of mandatory military service. The individuals practising their faith are severely persecuted and regularly face different obstacles at the workplace resulting in the forced dismissal or unwilling resign. The authorities are engaged in appropriating property and land belonging to Jehovah's Witness communities.

The right to freedom of religion or belief is enshrined in numerous international and regional human rights treaties. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and other legal instruments create a framework of acceptable actions and due obligations that the state-members are to commit in order to guarantee the realisation of the human right. Article 28 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation clearly defends freedom of conscience and religion. Nevertheless, the Russian authorities breach their duties enshrined in the national as well as international provisions.

Acknowledging that everyone is free in their thought, conscience and religion,

Recognizing the freedom to change his or her religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest the religion or belief, in worship, teaching practice and observance,

Reaffirming the significance of obeying the commitments rooting from the international human rights treaties where the Russian Federation is the state-member as well as the national legislation concerning the right of freedom of religion or belief,

We urge the governmental authorities in Russia:

- to release immediately and unconditionally Andrzej Onishchuk, Dennis Christensen and other Witnesses in detention and to drop the charges for the involvement in extremism;
- to uphold the obligations enshrined in the international and domestic law on discrimination, inequality and religious intolerance;
- to ensure to the members of Jehovah's Witnesses community the full enjoyment of their rights.
- We also ask the international organizations and governments of the democratic states:
- to call on the Russian government to end the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses;
- to condemn the adoption and application by the Russian authorities of the national "anti-terrorism and anti-extremism" legislation which is inconsistent with the international standards and human rights law.

Signed by the following organisations:

1. ARTICLE 19 (United Kingdom)
2. Association of Ukrainian Human Rights Monitors on Law Enforcement (Ukraine)
3. Belarusian Helsinki Committee (Belarus)
4. Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (Bulgaria)
5. Bir Duino (Kyrgyzstan)
6. Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)
7. Center for Participation and Development (Georgia)

8. Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights (Russia)
9. Citizens' Watch (Russia)
10. Crude Accountability (United States)
11. DRA -Berlin (Germany)
12. "Helsinki Association" human rights NGO (Armenia)
13. Helsinki Citizens' Assembly – Vanadzor (Armenia)
14. Helsinki Committee of Armenia (Armenia)
15. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland)
16. Human Rights Center "Viasna" (Belarus)
17. Human Rights Information Center (Ukraine)
18. Human Rights Matter (Germany)
19. Human Rights Monitoring Institute (Lithuania)
20. Humanrights.ch (Switzerland)
21. International Partnership for Human Rights (Belgium)
22. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law (Kazakhstan)
23. Kharkiv regional foundation "Public Alternative" (Ukraine)
24. Legal Transformation Center (Belarus)
25. Libereco - Partnership for Human Rights (Germany/Switzerland)
26. Macedonian Helsinki Committee (Macedonia)
27. Memorial (Russia)
28. Netherlands Helsinki Committee (Netherlands)
29. Protection of Rights without Borders (Armenia)
30. Public Association "Dignity" (Kazakhstan)
31. Public Verdict Foundation (Russia)
32. SOLIDARUS (Germany)
33. Sova Center (Russia)
34. The Swedish OSCE-network (Sweden)
35. Truth Hounds (Ukraine)
36. Women of the Don (Russia)