

Brussels, 21 March 2019

RE: Treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses within the Russian Federation

Dear HRVP Madame Mogherini,

We are writing to express our extreme concern at the recent conviction of Dennis Christensen and the increasing marginalisation of Jehovah's witnesses in Russia.

On February 6, 2019, The Zheleznodoroniy District Court of Oryol found Mr Christensen guilty of "organising the activity of an extremist organisation" and sentenced him to 6 years imprisonment. We are concerned about the precedent that this judgment sets for the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout Russia. We have been made aware that 142 Jehovah's Witnesses are currently under criminal investigation, 26 Witnesses are in prison, many more are under house arrest or have been ordered not to leave their hometowns and houses are being searched at random. Additionally, Jehovah's Witnesses have reported that on February 15, investigators in the city of Surgut tortured seven Witnesses after conducting raids in the area. The Witnesses were subjected to electric shocks, suffocation, and beatings.

These developments come following two key court decisions; the first being the declaration of the Local Jehovah's Witnesses Organisation in Oryol Region as an "extremist" organisation, and the second being the decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation to liquidate the Jehovah's Witnesses' national headquarters and all of their entities in Russia. These decisions are in direct violation of the Russian Federation's obligation to protect the right to freedom of thought conscience and religion as per Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In December 2018, during a meeting of the Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, President Putin said the following; "Jehovah's Witnesses are Christians too, and I don't quite understand why they are being persecuted either. So this should be looked into..." We ask you to implore President Putin to stick to his words and to look into the treatment of Jehovah's witnesses in the Oryol Region and throughout the Russian Federation, and to bring a stop to the current wave of persecution.

Freedom of religion, belief, thought or conscience is a fundamental human right that must be afforded to each and every citizen in the world. We call upon you to ensure that the EU does its utmost to ensure its protection in Russia and throughout the world.

Yours Sincerely,

1. Peter van Dalen, Co-Chair of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief & Religious Tolerance

2. Jude Kirton-Darling MEP

3. Brando Benifei MEP

4. Romeo Franz MEP