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OSCE Permanent Council N° 1185, Vienna

HRWF salutes the continuous efforts of the European Union and the OSCE to defend the rights of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia but regrets that many faith-based organizations defending religious freedom and human rights NGOs keep silent about the ban of their movement in Russia (170,000 JW deprived of the right to religious freedom), the confiscation of all their property (395 congregations), the numerous criminal cases opened against them (20, as of 25 May) and the imprisonment of 7 of their members.

EU (10.05.2018) - <https://www.osce.org/permanent-council/381820?download=true> - The European Union is deeply concerned by the recent reports of increased government harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, which includes police raids of private homes, arbitrary detentions and intimidation.

As we have stated previously in many other occasions, members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, like all other individuals, 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.

On April 20, 2017, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation banned the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses and all 395 of the Witnesses' local legal entities on grounds of "extremism". The Russian government claimed that although it was liquidating the legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses, individual Witnesses would be free to practice their faith. However, the government's claim is inconsistent with its actions. Over the past year, authorities have launched nine criminal investigations and five Jehovah's Witnesses are currently in detention. All could face possible prison sentences of up to ten years merely for meeting together for peaceful worship. In addition to the criminal cases, around 90-100 properties belonging to Jehovah's Witnesses have been confiscated by the Russian state based on court decision, and an additional 100 properties are currently in court proceedings. The Russian authorities have also threatened to deprive Jehovah's Witnesses of parental rights.

The EU reiterates its call on Russia and all other OSCE participating States to respect its international commitments on freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. OSCE participating States have repeatedly affirmed the importance of freedom of religion or belief as a pillar of the concept of comprehensive security.

The EU will continue to follow closely the developments concerning the Jehovah's Witnesses across the OSCE region and are worried about information received concerning several participating States limiting Jehovah's Witnesses' right to practice their faith.

The freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is a fundamental right of every human being, without discrimination. This right is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political 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 continues to promote freedom of religion or belief, a right that must be respected and promoted everywhere on the basis of the principles of equality, nondiscrimination and universality.

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 and SAN MARINO align themselves with this statement.*

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