

RUSSIA: Dennis Christensen behind bars for 6 years: Outcry of the international community

– Human Rights Without Frontiers calls upon the European Parliament to adopt a resolution denouncing the egregious violations of religious freedom in Russia and to ask for the release of Dennis Christensen

– HRWF (11.02.2019) – HRWF joins the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Union in demanding Mr Christensen to be released immediately and unconditionally and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Additionally, HRWF urges the European Parliament to adopt a resolution denouncing the egregious violations of religious freedom in Russia.

Council of Europe: Russia monitors express concern at sentencing of Jehovah's Witness for 'extremism'

CoE (07.02.2019) -The co-rapporteurs of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) for the monitoring of Russia, Telmo Correia (Portugal, EPP/CD) and Angela Smith (United Kingdom, SOC), have expressed serious concern at the conviction and sentencing to six years imprisonment, by the Zheleznodorozhniy District Court, of Dennis Christensen for "organising the activity of an extremist organisation" on the grounds that he is a practising Jehovah's Witness.

"Mr Christensen's conviction and imprisonment for nothing more

than peacefully practising his faith is an unacceptable violation of the right to freedom of religion,” said the co-rapporteurs. They emphasised that the European Court of Human Rights has already, on previous occasions, ruled in favour of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ right to worship without interference from the Russian authorities.

In addition, the co-rapporteurs reiterated concerns expressed by PACE about the abuse and arbitrary application of the so-called “extremism law” by the Russian authorities. They expressed their hope that Mr Christensen’s conviction would be overturned without delay by the appeals court and called on the Russian authorities to release him pending an appeal.

Source:

<http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=7366&lang=2&cat=3>

EU: Statement by the Spokesperson of Federica Mogherini on the sentencing of Dennis Christensen

EEAS (06.02.2019) -Today, a Russian court in the city of Oryol sentenced Mr Dennis Christensen, a Danish citizen, to 6 years of imprisonment.

Mr Christensen was arrested in 2017 when Federal Security Service agents raided a peaceful religious meeting of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Oryol. He has been convicted on grounds of ‘organising extremist activity’, which amounts to exercising his right to freedom of religion as a Jehovah’s Witness. A number of other criminal cases against Jehovah’s Witnesses are also currently pending. No one should be imprisoned for peaceful acts of worship in the expression of their religious beliefs.

The European Union expects Mr Christensen to be released immediately and unconditionally. Jehovah’s Witnesses, as with all other religious groups, must be able to peacefully enjoy

freedom of assembly without interference, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation, as well as by Russia's international commitments and international human rights standards.

Source:

https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/57728/statement-spokesperson-sentencing-dennis-christensen-russia_en

USA: USCIRF condemns Russian conviction of Danish prisoner of conscience Dennis Christensen

USCIRF (07.02.2019) – [Kristina Arriaga](#), Vice Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)), today condemned the decision by a Russian court to convict and sentence [Dennis Christensen](#), a Jehovah's Witness, to six years imprisonment on charges of "organizing the activity of an extremist organization."

"Dennis Christensen's conviction represents the continued deterioration of religious freedom in Putin's Russia," said Arriaga, who advocates on behalf of Mr. Christensen as part of USCIRF's [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#). *"Evidently, it's not enough for the state to brand peaceful groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses 'extremist'; it must also imprison their members. Russia must enter the 21st century and respect religious freedom as a fundamental human right."*

In June 2016, following a trend of repression of religious minority communities throughout Russia, a regional court in Oryol, where Mr. Christensen resides, branded the local Jehovah's Witnesses branch an "extremist" group. On May 25, 2017, state security forces disrupted a Jehovah's Witness prayer service, detaining some 70-80 people for several hours and arresting Mr. Christensen, alongside 15 Russian citizens. Mr. Christensen had appeared in court more than 50 times before being convicted on February 6. He has already spent

more than 622 days in Detention Facility No. 1 in the Oryol Region.

In 2018, USCIRF again [recommended](#) that Russia be designated a “country of particular concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act. In November 2018, the U.S. State Department [placed Russia on a Special Watch list](#) for “engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom.”

Source:

<https://www.uscirtf.gov/news-room/press-releases-statements/uscirtf-condemns-russian-conviction-danish-prisoner-conscience>

HRWF Database of FORB Prisoners contains documented cases of

- 29 JW who were in prison last year (some were afterwards put under house arrest but most of them are still detained)
- 7 cases of Said Nursi Followers (Muslim) and 4 cases of Tabligh Jamaat Muslims
- 5 Scientologists

In all, more than 40 peaceful believers were in prison in Russia in 2018. Russia is Nr 3 after China and Iran in Tier 1.

**RUSSIA: President Putin
mitigates punishment for**

extremism

– By Alexei Druzhinyn –

– RAPSI (28.12.2018)

– http://rapsinews.com/legislation_news/20181228/293092110.html -Russian President Vladimir Putin has signed a law mitigating punishment for extremism and incitement of hatred and enmity.

The Federation Council approved the document on December 21. The State Duma passed it on December 19.

Under the legislative initiative submitted by Putin in October, criminal punishment would be imposed for extremist acts in public, on the Internet or media committed repeatedly within a year. They would be punished with prison terms ranging from 2 to 5 years.

The first extremist violation is to be punishable in accordance with the Code of Administrative Offences by fines of up to 500,000 rubles (\$7,500) for companies; and fines of up to 20,000 rubles, community service for up to 100 hours or detention for up to 15 days for individuals.

These cases are to be launched by prosecutors and reviewed by courts. Statute of limitations for administrative liability is to be set for one year, instead of three months as of now. If a person commits an extremist crime within a year after being brought to administrative liability, he or she faces criminal punishment.

Amendments don't apply to cases committed by an organized group or with the use of violence, threats of violence or abuse of office. In these cases, criminal liability is immediate and punishment may reach up to 6 years.

In September, the Supreme Court of Russia in its Plenum resolution explained that courts considering extremism cases should proceed from a level of public danger and hazard mode.

The Criminal Code of Russia attracts a criminal sentence for incitement of enmity but not for reposts on social networks. If a publication is extremist, malice of the repost must be proven, the Supreme Court's Judge Vladimir Davydov said during the Plenum's session.

Russian Human Rights Commissioner Tatyana Moskalkova in turn stated that criminal sentence including imprisonment is disproportionately tough punishment for unintentional "likes"

and reposts.

RUSSIA: Amendment of law may affect Jehovah's Witnesses

– By Oleg Krasnov and Liudmila Maratova –

Kavkazskii Uzel / Russia Religion News (28.12.2018) – <https://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/181228b.html> – The sentence of Jehovah's Witness* Arkady Akopian should be cancelled because of the decriminalization of the article concerning extremism, his attorney declared. Akopian became the first follower of Jehovah's Witnesses* to be convicted of arousing religious strife.

As Kavkazskii Uzel reported, on 27 December a court found Arkady Akopian, an adherent of the teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses* from Prokhladnyi, guilty on the basis of part 1 of article 282 of the Criminal Code of the RF (arousing hatred and enmity) and sentenced him to 120 hours of compulsory labor. Akopian's defense insists on his complete innocence.

On 27 December, the Russian president signed a law amending article 282 of the Criminal Code, and these amendments make the sentence of Akopian baseless even from the position of the prosecution, Anton Omelchenko, the attorney of the defendant, declared. He intends to appeal the sentence in the Supreme Court of Kabardino-Balkaria by 29 December. After the mitigation of part 1 of article 282, it is now impossible to convict adherents of the Jehovah's Witnesses* based upon it, agrees a representative of the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses,* Yaroslav Sivulsky.

After the partial decriminalization of article 282, criminal cases based upon it may be opened only in the event of a repeated violation. The only remaining exceptions are crimes posing a serious threat to the foundations of the constitutional order or to the security of the state. The article was mitigated after a number of cases that were opened for reposting on social networks, Pravo reported today. The amendments will have retroactive force: after the law takes effect, sentences that were in effect on the basis of this article will be cancelled and cases that have been opened will be suspended, Interfax reported today.

The case of Arkady Akopian is unique: only six followers of the teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses* have been tried on the basis of part 1 of article 282 of the CC, and only Akopian's case culminated in a conviction, noted Alexander Verkhovsky, the director of the Sovva Center for News and Analysis. "The overwhelming majority of criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses* were opened on the basis of article 282.2 (participation in an extremist organization). Akopian was accused of inciting religious hatred," he told a Kavkazskii Uzel correspondent.

At the same time, Arkady Akopian became the first adherent of Jehovah's Witnesses* to be convicted after the total ban of this organization in Russia, Verkhovsky pointed out. This was confirmed also by Yaroslav Sivulsky. "There are now 90 Jehovah's Witnesses* in a SIZO. Not a single case begun after the total ban has reached trial. At the same time, many cases that were considered after regional bans led to sentences," Alexander Verkhovsky said.

Sivulsky thinks that Akopian's sentence will not affect other cases of Jehovah's Witnesses.* He noted that the investigation has managed to persuade the court on only one point of an accusation: mass distribution of forbidden literature.

"In April 2017, back before the liquidation of the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses,* searches were conducted in Akopian's home. But law enforcement agents did not manage to find anything forbidden and they went silent for a year. And suddenly the case was revived and there appeared witnesses of a speech by Akopian that insulted Christians and Muslims. Among other things, people suddenly appeared who were inspired by Akopian and who began distributing forbidden publications. In all, five publications were distributed, which was regarded as 'mass distribution.' All this-from beginning to end-was fabricated; there was nothing to it," the representative of the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses* declared.

During punishment, Akopian's freedom of movement is limited

This kind of punishment as corrective labor is considered in legal circles as lenient, noted Evgeny Chernousov, an attorney and retired colonel of the MVD. He explained that the convict is supposed to be given a time for conducting such public work like cleaning up an area. The convict's start of labor and its completion should be noted. In addition, while serving the punishment, the convict may not leave the region of his residence unless it is necessary for doing the public labor, Chernousov told a Kavkazskii Uzel correspondent.

Since Akopian's sentence still has not taken effect, no restrictions have been imposed on him, attorney Anton Omelchenko noted. "Conviction on article 282 of the CC of the RF places a person on the list of extremists, which makes it impossible to use bank accounts for a long time and difficult to get insurance and use a vehicle. This does not affect the retired Akopian, but it is worth defending his good name," he added.

Arkady Akopian himself refused to comment on the court's decision for a Kavkazskii Uzel correspondent.

*The organization was ruled to be extremist and its activity is prohibited in Russia by court decision.

(tr. by PDS, posted 31 December 2018)

UKRAINE: Textbook for Russian patriots. How to destruct ideological dissent?

– A screening of the feature-documentary "License for Crimes" is being planned in Kyiv for February 2019. According to the organizers of the project, Ukrainian non-governmental

organization Cavalier, the documentary is dedicated to the history of religious extremism in the Russian Federation.

The director of the Brussels-based NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), Willy Fautre, will act as an expert in the project. This is not the first time that Cavalier and HRWF have worked together. In 2016, the NGOs released a documentary entitled "Protect your dignity", which was dedicated to the protection from and prevention against manifestations of religious extremism in modern society.

One of the key elements of the "License for Crimes" documentary is a so-called 'Russian Federation patriot instruction manual in pre-war period'. Interestingly, the textbook is dated in the year of 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea, a first step to the military conflict in eastern Ukraine. As a consequence, the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) and the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) appeared on the map of Ukraine as separatist entities (although they are not recognized by the international community).

The textbook is said to originate from Russia. In accordance with the terms under which this textbook was shared with us, we have no right to publish the full version of this manual yet. However, we will provide a description of the key blocks of the textbook and use several of the most vivid pages to demonstrate the methodology.

According to the authors of the textbook, the Russian Federation has four types of enemies:

- Enemies of the State;
- Enemies of the Church;
- Enemies of the State policy;
- Enemies of the undeclared State policy.

The authors of the textbook call those falling under one of these four categories a "special contingent", which must either have their activities terminated or be destroyed.

Onward, there is a detailed description of three levels of training and methods to be used by Russian 'patriots'; methods which strictly correspond to the way Jehovah's Witnesses were eliminated from the map in Russia.

As for the authenticity of this textbook, the answer is obvious. Everything that is mentioned in the manual has been put into practice by Russia. What is very disturbing is that it gives instructions to 'patriots' for pre-war and war periods. Concerning the pre-war period, we see that Russia has implemented the recommendations of the handbook in Crimea and Donbass. If we look at what has happened in Crimea in the pre-war or pre-annexation period, we see that Russia had prepared the minds of the people in the peninsula, mobilizing them in one way or another to feel closer to Moscow than to Kyiv. They also prepared 'the minds of people' outside Crimea, asserting that it had historically been ruled by Moscow, under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and that it was normal to reintegrate its Russian-speaking population in the current Russian Federation. This was the first step of the pre-war period.

The next step was irregular warfare. Unidentifiable men in arms surprisingly took control of the TV station, and administrative and public buildings, including the local parliament of Crimea. A disturbing situation, as it was originally not understood as the first step of the conquest of Crimea.

We also saw the faithful implementation of the handbook for Russian 'patriots' in Donbass when Putin spread the idea that the Russian world was extending beyond the borders of the Russian Federation and included neighboring territories with Russian-speaking populations. Step by step, while denying any involvement, Russia created a protracted conflict in the Donbass that has made more 10 000 victims in last few years.

The manual for Russian 'patriots' describes strategies that

were implemented before our eyes in the last few years. When it is made public, we expect that the FSB will deny association with it and say it is a provocation of Ukraine.

This textbook is unique and will present opportunities for expert discussions on national and international levels when it is revealed in its entirety.

The movie "License for Crimes" will be screened in Kyiv in February 2019. After this première, it will be shown in film festivals and in international forums, and open for discussion.

For more information about the screening of this film, contact Mr Konstantin Slobodyanyuk/ Слободянюк Константин slobodyanuk.kv@gmail.com

European Parliament: HRWF debate on child marriage on EU REPORTER TV

– Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/wg0K0_XA6Vg

Panelists

Elisa Van Ruiten, a Gender Specialist at Human Rights Without Frontiers International;

Mohinder Watson, a researcher and activist against child marriage, who escaped a forced marriage of her own as a teenager;

Emilio Puccio, the Coordinator of the European Parliament Intergroup on Children's Rights, which is a cross-party and cross-national group comprising over 90 MEPs and 25 child-

focused organizations.

The presenter was EU Reporter's Jim Gibbons.

"Every day somewhere in the world, 39,000 young girls are married before they reach the age of majority; more than a third of them are younger than 15, according to the Council of Europe. We may be well into the 21st century but too many girls are still forced to live in a bygone age of male dominance. Human Rights Without Frontiers has just produced a report on women's rights and the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam and Judaism."

EU Reporter – <https://bit.ly/2CTvNPh>

Next Programme about North Korea (November) –

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UKRAINE: 1030th anniversary of the 'Baptism of Rus' : the ROC and UOC/ Moscow Patriarchate narrative

Pictures: <https://bit.ly/2LKUYHu>

Heads, members of 10 local Orthodox Churches to celebrate 1030th anniversary of Baptism of Rus in Moscow

Moscow, July 27, Interfax – www.interfax-religion.com/ –

Representatives of ten local Orthodox Churches from around the world will come to Moscow to attend celebrations marking the 1030th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus.

Delegations from the Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the Church of Antioch, the Church of Jerusalem, the Orthodox Church of Georgia, the Orthodox Church of Serbia, the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria, the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, the Orthodox Church of Albania, the Orthodox Church of Poland, and the Orthodox Church of Czech Lands and Slovakia are coming to the Russian capital, the Moscow Patriarchate told Interfax-Religion.

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia will meet Patriarch Theodore of Alexandria and All Africa and members of other church delegations on Friday.

“It is very significant that our brothers from all across the Orthodox world are now coming to Moscow and Kiev so that we together can express our unity on this date, which is so important for the Russian Orthodox Church,” the spokesman of the Russian patriarch, priest Alexander Volkov, told Interfax-Religion.

In turn, the deputy head of the Synodal Department for External Church Relations Archpriest Nikolay Balashov, described the Baptism of Rus as “an epoch-making event in Russian history.”

“Everything that happened before is lost in the dark and is known to us only in fragments. A new people and a new civilization were born in the Dnieper baptistery, and this event was accompanied by such a strong creative surge that the newly born Orthodox Rus expanded later to new territories, and we received from God a ‘sixth part of the Earth,’ where different people now live, and new state borders are drawn, but with its own history, its own culture, and its global vision united for many centuries to come,” the priest told Interfax-Religion.

“The Orthodox belief in Christ, the belief that St. Prince Vladimir chose, formed all of us, that is, the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Belarusians, the Moldovans, and all descendants of the Baptism of St. Vladimir, no matter what they call themselves now,” the patriarch’s spokesman said.

“The anniversary of our Baptism is an event of global significance,” and it is not accidental that all of the Orthodox Churches in the world deemed it fitting to attend it, “share their joy with us, sending their hierarchs both to Kiev and to Moscow,” the priest said.

The Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa Theodore will be Russia’s main guest, Father Nikolay said, noting that he “is our long-standing and faithful friend, who wholeheartedly fell in love with the Russians after spending ten years of study and service in Odessa.”

“Let’s pray together, let’s share our joy and troubles, let’s think about how to build up the unity of our global Orthodox family,” the priest said.

The patriarchs of the Alexandrian and Russian Orthodox Churches, accompanied by members of other delegations, will lead a vigil service on Friday evening.

The Day of the Baptism of Rus was declared a state memorial date in Russia in 2010 at the Archbishop Council’s request.

Over 100,000 pilgrims to attend Kiev cross procession – Ukrainian Orthodox Church

Moscow, July 27, Interfax – The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is expecting even more believers to attend the Kiev cross procession marking the 1030th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus than attended last year.

“It is still early to make final assessments, but in any case, there will be more than 100,000 people. I have been on

Vladimirskaya Gorka [Vladimir Hill] for more than an hour, waiting for a religious service, and there's a nonstop flow of people coming here from three streets," Ukrainian Orthodox Church spokesman Vasily Anisimov told Interfax-Religion.

He expressed hope that the festivities would not be marred by provocations. "God can never be cursed. Let's hope that everything will be alright," Anisimov said.

Dozens of buses from western Ukraine were stopped on the Zhitomir Highway leading to Kiev this morning because of they had supposedly been mined, he said.

There were reports of attempts to prevent believers from attending the cross procession in several Ukrainian regions on Thursday.

For instance, Ukrainian Security Service officers have stopped five buses in Zaporozhye for several hours under the pretext that they had been mined, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's press service said.

Cars full of armed people blocked another nine buses from Zaporozhye and Melitopol.

Attempts to keep people from the Kiev cross procession were also undertaken in the Zhitomir and Rovno regions, and obstacles were created for pilgrims from the Nezhin and Odessa dioceses.

Still, tens of thousands of people have come to Kiev, the church's press service said.

The attempts to block the highway have backfired, Archpriest Viktor Zemlianoy of the Rovno Diocese said. "Even more people than expected came because of this resistance," he said.

Kiev cross procession begins

Kiev, July 27, Interfax – A Ukrainian Orthodox Church cross

procession marking the 1030th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus has begun in downtown Kiev.

After the prayer service on Vladimirska Gorka (Vladimir Hill), believers moved across European Square and along Grushevsky Street toward the Kiev Lavra of the Caves, an Interfax correspondent reported.

Clergymen carrying religious banners and icons are leading the column.

Law enforcement officers are providing security.

In attendance are the co-chairs of the Opposition Bloc faction in the Verkhovna Rada, Yury Boyko and Aleksander Vilkul, faction members Vadim Novinsky, Nestor Shufrich, Mikhail Dobkin, and Yury Pavlenko, and Vladimir Litvin, an independent MP.

The situation is calm in downtown Kiev. Due to the high humidity and temperature, some participants sometimes have felt dizzy in the crowd, but ambulances are on site providing aid.

About 250,000 attend cross procession in Kiev – organizers (1)

Moscow, July 27, Interfax – The cross procession held in Kiev on Friday afternoon to mark the 1030th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus brought together 250,000 believers from various Ukrainian regions and from other countries, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's press service said.

"Participants in today's cross procession moved in a mighty flow toward the center of the capital for three hours. It was a marvelously joyful event," church spokesperson Vasily Anisimov told Interfax-Religion.

A total of 100,000 people attended the celebration last year.

(1) HRWF Comment: No alternative reliable source confirms or

denies these statistics. Noteworthy is the fact that the UOC/Moscow Patriarchate in Kyiv and the ROC in Moscow name the event “the baptism of the Rus” and not “the christianization of the Kievan Rus”.