

RUSSIA: Danish Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen loses appeal: 6 years in prison

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Orel Oblast court upholds sentence of Dennis Christensen

Orlovskie Novosti (23.05.2019) – On 23 May, the Orel oblast court left in force the sentence of the Zheleznodorozhny district court with respect to Danish citizen Dennis Christensen, who was found guilty of extremism and sentenced to six years imprisonment, an Orlovskie Novosti correspondent reports.

In his final word, Christensen asked the court to acquit him and to show to the whole world that in the Russian Federation there is real freedom of religious confession. In the debates the prosecution insisted that the sentence of the first instance was legal and reasonable. The debates stretched out into three sessions.

The oblast court took less than an hour to issue the decision on the appeal. Now Christensen will be transported to a penal colony. His defense intends to appeal the sentence in the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation.

Appellate court in Orel leaves in force decision on prison term for Danish citizen Jehovah's Witness

Credo Press (23.05.2019) – On 23 May, a panel of three judges of the Orel oblast court left in force the verdict of the lower-standing Zheleznodorozhny district court by which citizen of Denmark Dennis Christensen was sentenced to six years in a penal colony of general regime for active profession of the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. He was found guilty under article 282.2 (1) of the CC of RF, since he allegedly "continued the activity" of the liquidated organization of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Now, as the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses reported to the portal Credo.Press, Christensen will be transported to the penal colony from SIZO [investigation cell] No. 1 for Orel oblast, where he has already spent almost two years. Meanwhile, preparation for consideration of his appeal in the European Court of Human Rights is underway, with the participation of the government of Denmark as an interested party.

"Today it became clear that the declaration of Russian authorities before international instances to the effect that the liquidation of the legal entity of Jehovah's Witnesses 'does not contain restriction or prohibition of confessing individually the aforementioned teaching,' is nothing more than guile," a representative of the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, Yaroslav Sivulsky, declared. "As we have seen, in order to convict a person of extremism and an assassination attempt upon the constitutional order, and then

to punish him as an equal of thieves and murderers, it is sufficient for law enforcement to prove that he believes in the wrong god and to catch him reading the Bible. Such judicial decisions have been known since back in biblical times. In Russia, we experienced all this in soviet years. But, as history shows, not one of the goals for which such a cruel mechanism of repression has been launched will be achieved.”

Dennis Christensen has been under arrest since 25 May 2017. He became the first Jehovah’s Witness in contemporary Russia to be imprisoned for his faith. After the arrest of the Dane, massive searches and arrests of people, whom law enforcement agencies consider to be extremists merely for their religious confession, began in a majority of regions of the country. Dozens of Russian citizens and one other foreigner are in a SIZO or under house arrest within the frameworks of criminal cases similar to the Orel one. Acting in accordance with a single pattern, law enforcement agencies open cases against peaceful citizens who assemble for prayer and reading the Bible in private homes.

Support for Dennis Christensen, whose case many view as precedent setting, has been expressed by authoritative international and Russian rights advocacy organizations. Denmark acted in the capacity of a third party in the case “Christensen v. Russia,” which is being considered in the ECHR. The believer has been recognized as a prisoner of conscience by the Russian organization Memorial and the American Commission on International Religious Freedom. The European Union urged that Christensen be released “immediately and unconditionally.” In the same spirit, the United Nations has called Russian authorities to release all persons who have been arrested for their peaceful religious convictions.

In April 2017, the Russian Supreme Court ruled all 396 religious organizations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to be extremist, and it liquidated them.