

RUSSIA: BAN OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES: SOME STATEMENTS OF SUPPORT

HRWF (21.07.2017) – Since the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses was confirmed by the Supreme Court on 17 July, the US State Department and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom as well as a number of scholars (See <https://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/russia>) have condemned this unprecedented denial of religious freedom to about 175 000 people in Russia. Unfortunately, the EU institutions, parliaments of EU member states, well-known human rights NGOs and organizations defending religious freedom have totally kept silent about this serious issue..

Let us not forget the famous statement of anti-nazi theologian and **pastor Martin Niemöller**:

First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist

Then they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out

Because I was not a Trade Unionist

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out

Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.

Similarly, we could say nowadays about prisoners in Russia:

They came for Tablighi Jamaat Muslims, and I did not speak out
Because I was not a Tablighi Jamaat Muslim

Then they came for Said Nursi followers, and I did not speak out

Then they came for Jehovah's Witnesses, and I did not speak out

Because I am not a Jehovah's Witness

Then they came for Scientologists, and I did not speak out

Because I am not a Scientologist

Then, they came for me, and there was no-one left to speak for me.

Sign our petition online for the release of Dennis Christensen, a Danish JW imprisoned since May in Russia:

<http://bit.ly/2smGyAl>

US State Department: Respecting Religious Freedom in Russia

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Washington, DC

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The Russian Supreme Court's decision this week against the Jehovah's Witnesses is the latest in a disturbing trend of persecution of religious minorities in Russia. We urge the Russian authorities to lift the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses' activities in Russia, to reverse the closing of the Jehovah's Witnesses Administrative Center, and to release any members of religious minorities that continue to be unjustly detained for so-called "extremist" activities.

We further urge Russia to respect the right of all to exercise the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. All religious minorities should be able to enjoy freedom of religion and assembly without interference, as guaranteed by the Russian Federation's constitution.

For video and imagery of the hearing, please use this link:<http://bit.ly/2uH4Qck>

Daniel Mark, assistant professor of political science, Villanova University; and chairman of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), United States

"The Russian Supreme Court's rejection of the Witnesses' appeal is, sadly, not a surprise. Russia remains actively hostile to many independent religious groups and unconcerned with international human rights norms and practices. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which I chair, has recommended to the President and Secretary of State that they designate Russia a 'Country of Particular Concern' because of its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. This latest development confirms that our 2017 Annual Report recommendation is, unfortunately, well deserved. Russia continues to intensify its religious

repression at home while also extending its repressive policies to neighboring states.”

Sir Andrew Wood, former British ambassador to Russia (1995-2000), United Kingdom

“The Russian decision to label Jehovah’s Witnesses as extremists, just confirmed after an appeal to the country’s Supreme Court was rejected, underscores the arbitrary nature of the country’s legal system. The Witnesses threaten no one. They have practiced their faith in Tsarist, Soviet and now Federal Russia without injury to anyone. That there are those who disagree with their doctrines is no reason to suppress them, let alone in practice to present them to the Russian public as deserving scorn or even violent rejection. Russia claims to be guided by spiritual values and Christian principles. Not in this case.”

Derek H. Davis, former director of the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies, Baylor University, United States

“Russia’s recent Supreme Court decision banning the Jehovah’s Witnesses across Russia is another step backward for an increasingly isolationist and repressive Russia. The Witnesses are one of the most caring, loving, peaceful Christian groups in the world today, yet Russia bans them as ‘extremists’ because they dare to publish literature that compassionately mentions other groups whom they believe fall short of God’s standards. Other nontraditional religious groups in Russia should brace for the possibility of similar treatment as Russia continues to ignore internationally recognized rights of free speech and religious freedom, becoming in the process an increasingly repressive state.”

Roman Lunkin, senior researcher, Institute of Philosophy, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia

“So, as the appeal of JWs was rejected by the Supreme Court the situation for the believers became really tragic. Now the activity of every community or group is banned and believers waiting for the confiscation of religious property—that could be the most massive seizure of church buildings since Soviet repressions in the 1920-30s. That ban of JWs is the source of mass fears among the most lawful and numerous communities. The ban of JWs also means that all religion in Russia is terrified and frightened. And that is not a good missionary field for any religious movement Christian or non-Christian, that is a

way for new Russian secularization – the continuation of the Soviet secularization in the new circumstances.”

Mathew N. Schmalz, associate professor of religious studies, the College of the Holy Cross, United States

“The Jehovah’s Witnesses I have known have always been caring and supportive neighbors and good citizens who contribute to the community. Two Jehovah’s Witnesses have played especially important roles in my life, supporting me in times of need. Labeling Jehovah’s Witnesses an extremist group is not only inaccurate, it is an insult. Religious freedom in Russia is under threat—as it is worldwide. The aim of the Russian government seems to be to target vulnerable minority religious groups, but larger religious groups should be deeply concerned. It is important that all religious groups—regardless of their doctrinal differences—support the efforts of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia to affirm the basic values of freedom of worship and assembly.”

George D. Chryssides, former head of religious studies, University of Wolverhampton; honorary research fellow in contemporary religion, York St. John University and University of Birmingham, United Kingdom

“I am sorry, although not surprised, to hear that the Supreme Court has rejected the appeal by Jehovah’s Witnesses. Governments do not seem to learn from history. Jehovah’s Witnesses have always had the courage of their convictions, and persisted in worshipping and spreading their message, regarding Jehovah’s law as having precedence over any laws devised by humans. Jehovah’s Witnesses have never been deterred by sanctions, and will continue in their endeavours to propagate their teachings, whatever civil governments and their law courts decide. They are only a minute proportion of Russia’s population, and it is difficult to see why the authorities should go to such lengths to stop their activities.”

Emily B. Baran, assistant professor of Russian and Eastern European history, Middle Tennessee State University, United States

“Certainly this outcome is hardly surprising. At this point, the Russian state will have to decide how much resources to invest into prosecuting a small community of religious believers that pose no security threat. No matter what it

decides, it cannot eliminate Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia. All it can do is push them back to the margins of society, a position they occupied for decades under Soviet rule. Even if Witnesses will continue to exist, however, their designation as "extremists" is likely to have negative repercussions as they go about the daily practice of their faith. Already, we have seen arrests and harassment of Witnesses simply for meeting as a congregation and sharing their faith with others. Such instances will almost certainly increase in the immediate future. In the long run, the European Court of Human Rights will have a chance to hear the case, and its case law on Witnesses is a fairly settled matter. I cannot see the ECHR ruling in favor of Russia. It will be up to Russia to decide whether to ignore the court or accept its decision."