

# **RUSSIA: Danish Jehovah's Witness sentenced to six years in prison**

By Anton Troianovski

The Washington Post (06.02.2019) – <https://wapo.st/2Sdlfl0> – A Russian court sentenced a Danish Jehovah's Witness to six years in prison for extremism Wednesday, one of the harshest verdicts in years against a Western citizen here and the latest incident in Russia's crackdown on personal freedoms.

The Jehovah's Witness, Dennis Christensen, was detained in May 2017 after a police raid on his congregation in the city of Orel, south of Moscow, and has been in jail ever since. On Wednesday, the district court ruled he was guilty of "organizing the activity of an extremist organization," according to the Russian branch of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Russian Supreme Court ruled Jehovah's Witnesses to be an extremist organization in 2017, ordered its activities banned, and said its property could be seized. Christensen is the first member of the religious group to be sentenced for extremism, said Tanya Lokshina, the Moscow-based associate director for Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia division.

The ruling comes amid an ongoing crackdown on personal and civil liberties in Russia and sends the message that people's

prominence or foreign citizenship won't protect them from prosecution.

"Six years in jail for peacefully practicing your own religion is something that comes right out of the history book on Soviet dissent," Lokshina said. "It sends a very strong signal to all those who are ready to stand up that there will be no mercy."

Christensen will appeal the decision, the Russian branch of Jehovah's Witnesses said.

Danish Foreign Minister Anders Samuelsen said his country would continue to assist Christensen and called on Russia "to respect freedom of religion." Yaroslav Sivulsky, a representative of the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, said Christensen was punished for "reading the Bible, preaching, and living a moral way of life."

Russian authorities have described Jehovah's Witnesses – the group says it has about 170,000 believers in Russia – as a threat to public order. At the Russian Supreme Court, the government brought in former followers to testify that top church officials took "total control" of their "intimate life, education and work." The Jehovah's Witnesses' lawyers have denied those allegations.

Founded in the United States in the 19th century, Jehovah's Witnesses reject subservience to the state and believe God to be the only true ruler. They do not serve in the military or

vote.

Scores of other Jehovah's Witnesses are in detention around the country, watchdog groups say.

In a meeting with human rights activists in December, Russian President Vladimir Putin described extremism charges against Jehovah's Witnesses as "nonsense," leading to speculation that legal pressure on the religion's believers would soon stop. Wednesday's ruling, however, shows this is not the case.

Russia's current crackdown extends beyond religion. It comes as the Kremlin faces growing signs of public discontent amid persistent reports of official corruption and a deeply unpopular government plan to raise the retirement age. Putin's approval ratings have fallen to their lowest level since before his annexation of the Ukrainian territory of Crimea in 2014, which was widely lauded at home. They are still at 64 percent, according to the independent Levada-Center, but well down from earlier levels in the 80s.

Oyub Titiev, head of the human rights organization Memorial's Chechnya office, has spent more than a year behind bars on drug charges that his lawyers insist are fabricated. In December, Russia detained an American, Paul Whelan, on spy accusations – though officials haven't said what he was spying on or on whose behalf.

In January, authorities in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don charged activist Anastasia Shevchenko for "repeated

participation in the activities of an undesirable organization” – the first time ever that such criminal charges have been filed in Russia, according to Amnesty International. The “undesirable organization” in question is Open Russia, a human rights group founded by exiled former oil tycoon and Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

The state may now be laying the groundwork for an even more far-reaching crackdown on dissent. A draft law pending in the lower house of parliament, the State Duma, would create the groundwork for the Russian Internet to be isolated from the rest of the world.

“We’ve seen very dire developments where freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association are concerned,” Human Rights Watch’s Lokshina said.

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