

Moscow – Beijing: the anti-cult axis of evil

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HRWF (14.02.2019) – On 6 February, Dennis Christensen, a Danish Jehovah's Witness living in Russia, was sentenced to 6 years in prison for leading a religious service in Oryol.

The United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Union, the U.S. Department of State, the US Commission of International Religious Freedom have strongly denounced the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017 and have called for "Mr. Christensen to be released immediately and unconditionally". They have also urged Moscow to allow Jehovah's Witnesses "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."

The Office of Public Information of the World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses has just published an impressive 28-page report about the magnitude of the repression they victims of: **"Russia: State-sponsored Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses continues"** (<https://bit.ly/2tmTqIW>).



A week ago, official authorities and anti-cult activists in Russia started to launch a counter-offensive to justify the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses. For this purpose, they have mainly used the media agency Interfax-Religion in Moscow which defends the viewpoints of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin.

A first: They have been joined in their fight by China (!) as Bitter Winter has just discovered.

Moscow's support

Alexander Dvorkin, vice-president of FECRIS: "Jehovah's Witnesses use prison term of the Danish citizen to blacken Russia"

Professor of Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University of Humanities, Alexander Dvorkin, an anti-cult activist who is well-known for his hate speech towards a number of non-Orthodox religions, supports the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and makes the religious movement responsible for the sentencing of Dennis Christensen.

"As a human, I feel pity for Kristensen. He is another victim of heartless totalitarian sect, which prudently and cynically put him at risk, hoping that he will receive a prison term. Now they will use this case for their propaganda, and as a reason for increasing pressure on ordinary members of the sect: let your indices grow - Dennis Kristensen is suffering

for you! Certainly, they use his imprisonment for intensifying the campaign on defamation of our country," Dvorkin told Interfax-Religion in Russia on 7 February.

Dvorkin wished Kristensen enlightenment and liberation "not only from the camp, but also from sectarian manipulations with minds," and supposed that Danish Jehovah's witness violated the law consciously.

For many years, Dvorkin has been the vice-president of the FECRIS (European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism), which is massively funded by the French authorities. This issue should be seriously questioned by those who in the current French government have been tasked in these difficult times to make the best use of the state budget and save money.

Source: <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=14935>

Roman Silantyev: "The ban of Jehovah's Witnesses is justified"

On 12 February, Interfax-Religion in Russia interviewed Roman Silantyev, Professor and director of a special laboratory studying destructive challenges in Moscow State Linguistic University.

Commenting the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses, he considered the ban as justified and noted that "this sect promotes external and inner extremism, inciting hatred to those who think and believe in a different way and bullying their own members."

"Recognizing this sect as extremist gave a possibility to dozens of our citizens to leave this concentration camp", he said.

"As to judicial decisions referring to Jehovah's Witnesses I have information that this sect consciously pushes their members to crimes of such kind, in order to have a certain group of people really convicted for participating in them, to create a halo of martyrs for them and to exert pressure on Russia. So, I would urge the judicial authorities to use all opportunities in order not to give them real terms," Silantyev told Interfax.

According to him, in this situation it is better to fine sectarians, to conscript them to forced labor, but minimize the number of people really imprisoned for such cases. "We should not play along with Jehovah's Witnesses", Silantyev believes.

Source: <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=14946>

Russian Justice Ministry: "The rulings of Russian courts are founded and lawful"

The Russian Justice Ministry has described the rulings of Russian courts which branded Jehovah's Witnesses as an extremist organization and prohibited its activity in Russia as founded and lawful, the ministry press service said in a statement seen by Interfax.

The court ban on the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia is not an act of religious persecution; the sole reason is their violation of Russian laws.

Source: <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=14953>

Russian Supreme Court Chairman Vyacheslav Lebedev: "Nobody is being persecuted for religious reasons"

"Nobody is being persecuted for religious reasons. The organization has been banned for activity which is against the law. Revoke the law and there's no problem," Lebedev said.

"The situation is actually being presented as if these people are being persecuted for their belief and religious activity. Yet the decision, which was made by the Supreme Court amongst others, is unrelated to religion. It is about a violation of the law, which religious organizations have no right to breach," Lebedev said.

Source: <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=14949>

China supports Russia's persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses

In an article entitled "China supports Russia's persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses" published on 10 February by Bitter Winter, Massimo Introvigne writes **"While the world condemns the sentencing of Witnesses in Russia to harsh jail penalties for the only crime of practicing their faith, China applauds the persecution"** and goes on saying

"Russia, however, can count on an "immediate and unconditional" ally of its own — China. The CCP is aware that the notion of "extremist religious movements" in China is substantially the same as the category of xie jiao in China.

As Hong Kong scholar Ed Irons has noted, the "Chinese anti-cult Web site" is regarded in China as the voice of the CCP in matters regarding any group identified as a "cult" and its declarations enjoy a semi-official status. While the world was awaiting Christensen's sentencing, this CCP-connected Web site published a detailed article in support of the Russian position on Jehovah's Witnesses. "It is reasonable for Jehovah's Witnesses to be strictly controlled or even completely banned", the article stated. A laundry list of anti-cult accusations against Jehovah's Witnesses was mentioned.

There is a difference between the Russian persecution of "extremist groups" and the Chinese repression of xie jiao. While the CCP tries to protect itself against any possible threat from religious movements it regards as hostile to the Party, Russia tries to protect the monopolistic position of the Russian Orthodox Church, a staunch ally of the regime, against any unwelcome competition.

The Chinese anti-cult Web site seems not to fully appreciate this difference. It supports the Russian position that Jehovah's Witnesses should be banned because "they threaten the Russian mainstream religion: the reputation and living environment of the Orthodox Church" and are "eroding the foundation of the Orthodox Church". That the Orthodox Church should be protected against its critics is a curious remark in a CCP publication, although within the CCP there are some who argue in a similar way that the monopoly on the Christian Protestant faith of the CCP-controlled Three-Self Church should be equally protected.

There is an underground presence of Jehovah's Witnesses in China, with numbers difficult to evaluate. They are not included in the list of the xie jiao, but their activities are regarded as illegal and Bitter Winter has reported about the crackdown on Witnesses' missionary activities coming into China from Korea.

Sources: <https://bitterwinter.org/china-supports-russias-persecution-of-jehovahs-witnesses/>

https://cesnur.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/tjoc_2_1_3_irons.pdf

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet disagrees with Russian authorities and anti-cult activists

On 7 February, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet issued the following comment on the criminalization of the right to freedom of religion for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia:

"We are deeply concerned about the sentencing in a Russian court on Wednesday of a Jehovah's Witness to six years in prison on charges of 'organising the activity of a banned extremist organisation'.

Dennis Christensen was detained in May 2017, a month after Russia's Supreme Court declared the Jehovah's Witnesses to be an extremist group. Christensen was accused of continuing to ensure the work of the organization in Oryol, in the west of the country, despite knowing it had been banned. Criminal cases have since then been opened against more than 100 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, including at least 18 who are held in pre-trial detention. Others have been subjected to various measures of restraint, including house arrest and travel restrictions.

The harsh sentence imposed on Christensen creates a dangerous precedent, and effectively criminalises the right to freedom of religion or belief for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia – in contravention of the State's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Various UN human rights bodies, including the UN Human Rights Committee and a number of UN Special Rapporteurs, have raised similar concerns in recent years.

We urge the Government of Russia to revise the Federal Law on Combating Extremist Activity with a view to clarifying the vague and open-ended definition of 'extremist activity', and ensuring that the definition requires an element of violence or hatred. We also call on the authorities to drop charges against and to release all those detained for exercising their rights to freedom of religion or belief, the freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association."

HRWF recommends that

- The United Nations deprive **FECRIS** of its ECOSOC status as its vice-president, **Alexander Dvorkin**, supports Russia's ban of Jehovah's Witnesses and the prohibition of any of their individual and collective religious activities,
- The French government stops financing FECRIS.