

## **Russia: Over a hundred believers of several faiths behind bars**

By Willy Fautré, director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

Our World (18.12.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2QyzizS> - Russia is the only country on the European continent that imprisons people for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of religion. This issue was at the heart of the statement of Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) at Session 7 of the OSCE/ODIHR Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) in Warsaw on 19 September 2019.

As of 1 September, HRWF's Database of Religious Prisoners included 73 documented cases of detention (both pretrial and post-conviction) in Russia: 62 Jehovah's Witnesses, 2 Mormons, 2 Scientologists, 5 followers of Said Nursi, 1 Tabligh Jamaat Muslim and 1 Sunni Muslim in Crimea. A few Jehovah's Witnesses listed had been released and placed under house arrest, but the criminal charges against them were maintained.

According to the statement of the Crimean Human Rights Group at the OSCE/ODIHR, 36 Tatar Muslims were accused of religious extremism and terrorism, and subsequently deprived of their freedom.

Followers of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi are serving prison terms ranging from three to eight years for being involved in a banned organization. One Tabligh Jamaat Muslim was arrested in 2017 for missionary activities and sentenced to four years in prison.

In March, two American Mormons were arrested and imprisoned for three weeks for allegedly carrying out missionary activities before being expelled from the country.

In 2017, five Scientologists were arrested for allegedly "participating in an extremist organization, inciting hatred and enmity, and violating human dignity" (Criminal Code Article 171 and Articles 282 and 282.1). Two years later, two of them were still in pre-trial detention.

On the same day as the OSCE/ ODIHR session devoted to freedom of religion or belief, six Jehovah's Witnesses from Saratov, whose movement was banned in 2017, were convicted and sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to three years and six months for allegedly organizing activities of an extremist organization. Additionally, they were all banned from holding leadership positions in public organizations for a period of five years and restriction of freedom for one year.

On 6 February 2019, Dennis Christensen, a Danish citizen living in Russia who was in pre-trial detention since 2017, was the first Jehovah's Witness in post-Soviet Russia to be sentenced for exercising his right to freedom of religion. He was condemned to 6 years in a labor camp for his alleged role – denied by himself and his congregation – in leading the local Jehovah's Witness branch in Oryol. His sentence was upheld by an appeals court three months later.

Russia is the only European country where peaceful believers are treated as criminals for reading their religious books in private, meeting for prayer and worship at home, teaching their faith to their children and sharing their beliefs with others.

As of 23 September 2019,

- 252 Jehovah's Witnesses ranging from 20 to 85 years old were facing criminal charges

- 42 were in detention (pretrial or prison)
- 23 were under house arrest

Concerns about human rights violations resulting from the Russian Supreme Court Ruling that banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017 have been raised by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, the European Court of Human Rights and the European Union. The Government of the Russian Federation denies any human rights abuses, but their response lacks credibility. Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia are being massively arrested, detained in pre-trial detention and prosecuted because of their beliefs.

The EU has been very active in the defense of religious freedom in Russia, in particular concerning: the arrest and imprisonment of Dennis Christensen, the ban of the movement of Jehovah's Witnesses, the confiscation of all property belonging to 395 of Jehovah's Witness congregations and the deprivation of the rights of 177,000 Jehovah's Witnesses to practice their religion.

At the OSCE/ODIHR conference, the EU representative reemphasised the EU's commitment to support freedom of religion or belief, stating:

"The EU focuses on the right of individuals, to believe or not to believe, and, alone or in community with others, to freely manifest their beliefs in public or in private, in worship, observance practice and teaching, without fear of intimidation, discrimination, violence or attack. Individuals have also the right to change one's religion or belief or to renounce it. The EU does not consider the merits of the different religions or beliefs, or the lack thereof, but ensures that the right to believe or not to believe is upheld."