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**Statement for the  
OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting (SHDM) I:  
Freedom of Religion or Belief  
22-23 June 2017, Vienna/Austria**

## **RUSSIA: Condemn Jehovah's Witnesses Ban**

**By the Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe  
and Human Rights Without Frontiers**

**Vienna, 23 June 2017 - The Russian Federation's ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses is arguably the most flagrant assault on religious freedom to occur in the Euro-Atlantic region since the end of the Soviet Union and its satellite communist regimes in Eastern Europe.**

The ban was confirmed by the Russian Supreme Court on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April. The ban makes it a crime for about 170,000 Russian citizens to practice their faith. The denomination has faced increasing persecution in Russia for decades. Recently, Dennis Christensen, a Danish citizen, has been arrested for attending a religious meeting of Jehovah's Witness and was sentenced to a 2-month pretrial detention. Russia has thus started to incarcerate prisoners of conscience.

Yet this unprecedented restriction on the fundamental human right to freedom of religion, a right the Russian Federation is legally and politically committed to protect, has been met with only limited and muted criticism, and more often than not, by silence indicating indifference.

International reaction has not been consistent with the gravity of this massive violation of human rights, and compels us to ask, why not?

What would have happened had the Russian Federation banned the Catholic Church, or the practice of Judaism or Islam?

The weak reaction to the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses reflects enduring prejudice against minority religions, and what are categorized as "sects." Indeed, it reflects the same ignorance and condescension that motivated Russian authorities, at the behest of the Russian Orthodox Church, to outlaw the group.

Our organizations applaud numerous activists, experts, international officials, and governments, and the few human rights organizations, which have voiced their objections.

But not enough have done so. The issue has not been afforded the importance it deserves, but has largely remained underreported. We can only conclude that weak international criticism and action to counter this assault on freedom of religion will be taken as a “green light” for further legal discrimination against religious communities not only in Russia, but in other states where authoritarian regimes seek to impose cultural and spiritual harmony upon their citizens.

We are thus calling on the participating States of the OSCE to raise your voices against the ban on the Jehovah’s Witnesses by the Russian Federation. Without exaggeration, the future of religious freedom in the region depends on it.

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## **RUSSIA: Dennis Christensen, a Danish prisoner of conscience in Russia**

**Full name :** Dennis Ole Christensen

**Birthdate:** 1972, December 18

**Citizenship:** Danish

**Residency:** He has resided in Russia for about 17 years

**Civil state:** Married to Irina Christensen (Russian citizen) on August 3, 2002 – no children.

**Occupation:** Works as a carpenter. His wife has no resource or financial support. Their banks accounts have been frozen and their bank card confiscated.

**Circumstances of the arrest:** On the evening of May 25, 2017, Dennis Christensen – a baptized Jehovah’s Witnesses since July 25, 1989 - was arrested along with 15 Russian citizens at a peaceful worship service held in a privately owned building in Oryol. The valid rental contract was presented to the investigation leader during the raid. At least 15 masked and armed police together with Federal Security Service (FSB) officers disrupted the religious service. The police collected copies of the identification documents of the 70-80 people in attendance and seized their electronic devices. Mr. Christensen was immediately taken to the detention in Oryol.

Most of the attendees were detained for some hours. Then the older ones and families with children were allowed to leave. The remaining (about 20) persons were detained in the Hall the whole night or were released about 9:00 a.m. the following morning. Several felt ill during the night, had nothing to eat, one even had an epileptic seizure and was taken to the hospital. An ambulance arrived and the paramedics were ordered to stay during the night. None got any sleep or something to eat.

**Charges:** Mr Christensen has been charged with organizing an illegal religious activity under article 282.2 of the Russian Criminal code and he faces up to 10 years of imprisonment. It is unclear at this stage on which factors the judge relied to consider that Mr Christensen was organizing the meeting.

**Current place of detention:** His postal address to the detention is Krasnoarmeiskaja 10, SIZO-1, City of Orel, 302040, Russia.

**Conditions of detention:** According to his lawyer, Mr. Christensen was not given any food during the 36 first hours following his arrest, with the exception of some water. He was kept awake and constantly interrogated during the first night, and appeared at a hearing in the afternoon the following day before the court that decided over his pre-trial detention. Mr. Christensen was exhausted (he had been kept awake for almost 40 hours) when he appeared before judge Svetlana Naumova in Soviet District Court of Oryol. The court ruled to keep Mr. Christensen in detention until July 23 pending the investigation for fear that he being a foreigner would flee the country. He is now kept in detention in a cell he shares with 2 criminals. Only his lawyer and the consul from the Denmark Embassy in Moscow have been able to visit him. Despite repeated requests, the wife of Mr. Christensen could not exercise her right to visit him since his arrest until now. The representatives of the Danish Embassy reported him being in good health.

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