



EUROPEAN UNION

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Vienna, 12 March 2020

EU Statement on the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation and allegations of torture and ill-treatment

The European Union continues to be deeply concerned about the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia who continue to face systemic persecution, including home raids, arbitrary detentions, criminal investigations and sentences up to seven years of prison time. Furthermore, we are deeply concerned about recent specific reports of torture and other ill-treatment of several members of Jehovah's Witnesses in detention or prior to being taken into custody by either prison guards or law enforcement officers.

According to reports from the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, echoed also by Forum 18 and media articles, on 6 February 2020, in Orenburg, five individuals (Aleksey Budenchuk, Gennadiy German, Roman Gridasov, Feliks Makhammadiyev, and Aleksey Miretskiy) were beaten by prison officials of Penal Colony No. 1. All suffered severe injuries and one needed hospitalization. In addition, on 10 February 2020, Vadim Kutsenko was reported to be tortured before being taken into custody, as law enforcement officers repeatedly beat and choked him and applied electric shocks, while demanding information on other Jehovah's Witnesses.

Torture and other ill-treatment are among the most abhorrent violations of human rights, human integrity and human dignity. Torture breaches international human rights law, in particular the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, all of which the Russian Federation is a State Party to. Torture violates the principle of ensuring human security, upon which the OSCE concept of comprehensive security is founded. OSCE and international commitments are abundantly clear: the prohibition of torture is absolute and unconditional. Torture is never justified. All participating States have an obligation to

take effective measures to prevent acts of torture, prosecute perpetrators of such acts, identify victims and ensure effective redress. We therefore call on the Russian Federation to conduct prompt, effective and thorough investigations into all reports of such acts, in order to ensure that anyone responsible or complicit is brought to justice. Furthermore, we call on the Russian Federation to take effective measures to protect the victims and ensure effective redress. We would appreciate an update on these cases from the delegation of the Russian Federation.

On April 20, 2017, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation banned the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses and all local entities on grounds of "extremism". Following this, we have heard the Russian delegation claim more than once in the Permanent Council that Jehovah's Witnesses are, and will continue to be, able to practice their religion freely, and that freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed. However, we continue to see numerous reports about home raids, arbitrary detentions, and criminal investigations concerning Jehovah's Witnesses. Since the liquidation of all local religious organisations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, reportedly 869 houses have been searched, 26 individuals are in pre-trail detention, 23 under house arrest, 316 are charged and 29 already convicted.

As we have stated previously on numerous occasions, all people, including members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, must be able to peacefully enjoy their human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, freedom of association and peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, without discrimination, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation, Russia's OSCE commitments and international obligations. In light of this, we call upon the authorities to drop all charges against individuals who have been unjustifiably prosecuted or imprisoned for exercising their human rights. We call upon the Russian Federation to live up to its international human rights commitments, to respect the freedoms of expression, association, peaceful assembly, religion or belief, as well as the rights of persons belonging to minorities and to guarantee a fair trial.

The EU will continue to follow closely the developments concerning Jehovah's Witnesses across the OSCE region.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA, and the EFTA country ICELAND, member of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE and GEORGIA align themselves with this statement.

* Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.