

Six-year prison sentence for Jehovah's Witness in Russia sparks outcry

Dozens of Jehovah's Witnesses have been charged with participating in or organizing the group's activities since since the Supreme Court outlawed the group two years ago.

by [Marc Bennetts](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue

A Russian court sentenced a Jehovah's Witness to six years in prison. He is the first member of the group to be incarcerated since Russia's Supreme Court declared the pacifist Christian denomination an "extremist organization" in 2017.

The court cited the Jehovah's Witnesses for promoting the "exclusivity and supremacy" of their beliefs.

Dennis Christensen, a 46-year-old carpenter and Danish national who has lived in Russia for more than two decades, was sentenced in February by a court in Oryol, a city some 200 miles south of Moscow. His wife, Irina Christensen, a Russian national, said the allegations against her husband were "absurd."

Christensen had spent almost two years in a pretrial detention facility after being detained during a raid on a Jehovah's Witness prayer hall in Oryol in May 2017. Prosecutors said Christensen had organized the religious activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Oryol, an offense that carries a maximum sentence of ten years behind bars.

"Nothing Christensen did posed any danger to society," said Anton Bogdanov, Christensen's attorney. The court's decision effectively criminalized "peaceful religious practices" such as praying, singing hymns, and Bible study, said Bogdanov

Dozens more Jehovah's Witnesses have been charged with participating in or organizing the group's activities; 25 are behind bars awaiting trial or being tried, while another 24 are under house arrest.

There are an estimated 175,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. Around 5,000 have fled since the Supreme Court outlawed the group two years ago. Many say they fear that their children could be taken away from them by the state.

Alyona Vilitkevich, whose husband, Anatoly, is also facing prison after being charged with organizing the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses said she was afraid after the sentencing.

"Will I really have to be apart from my husband for six years just because we are ordinary believers who read the Bible and try to live by it?" she said.

The Kremlin's crackdown on the Jehovah's Witnesses has been accompanied by a wider state campaign against "foreign religions" amid tensions with the West over Syria and Ukraine. In 2016, Russian president Vladimir Putin approved of vaguely worded antiextremism and terrorism legislation, which outlawed missionary work carried out in Russia by the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Baptists.

While there was little doubt that Christensen would be found guilty of the charges against him—very few criminal cases end in an acquittal in Russia—the harshness of the sentence came as a surprise, because Putin said in January that it was "complete nonsense" to classify the Jehovah's Witnesses as an extremist organization.

"Jehovah's Witnesses are Christians, too; I don't quite understand why they are persecuted," Putin said at a meeting with human rights defenders in Moscow.

Valery Borshchev of the Moscow Helsinki Group, a human rights organization, warned that the imprisonment of Christensen could trigger a wave of arrests of members of other minority religious groups in Russia: "Adventists, Baptists, and so on, should be very concerned." —Religion News Service

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Six-year prison sentence for Jehovah's Witness in Russia sparks outcry."