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Russia Releases First Jehovah's Witness Imprisoned for 'Extremism'

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Updated at 5:00 p.m. on May 25 to add Christensen's arrival in Denmark.

A Danish Jehovah's Witness has been released from Russian prison five years after he became the first member of the religious group to be jailed on extremism charges in Russia, the organization said Tuesday.

Dennis Christensen, 49, was arrested at a prayer meeting in the city of Oryol south of Moscow in May 2017, a month after Russia's Supreme Court accused the Jehovah's Witnesses of "propaganda of exclusivity" and labeled it a banned "extremist organization."

An Oryol court sentenced Christensen to six years in prison in 2019.

With two years deducted from his sentence for time spent in pre-trial detention, he was released after spending a total of five years in Russian jail.

Related article: A Russian Jehovah's Witness Vows to Keep Worshipping Despite Crackdown

Some 62 of the 625 persecuted adherents of the pacifist Christian denomination have been sentenced to prison since Russia banned the group, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia's database.

International human rights NGOs have condemned Russia's crackdown on the Jehovah's Witnesses in recent years.

In the Soviet era, the group's refusal to take up arms and serve in the military led the state to prosecute followers for anti-communist activities by exiling thousands to Siberia.

Jehovah's Witnesses spokesman Jarrod Lopes confirmed to The Moscow Times that Christensen had arrived safely in Denmark on Wednesday after being deported from Russia.

"Jehovah's Witnesses around the world couldn't be happier for Dennis and his wife, Irina. However, Jehovah's Witnesses continue to be arrested, imprisoned, and sometimes tortured simply for the peaceful practice of their Christian faith. Just this Monday, a disabled 53-year old man, Andrey Vlasov, was sentenced to seven years in prison and yesterday, Lyudmila Shchekoldina, 45, was sentenced to four years," Lopes said.

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