

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Russia deteriorated. The government continued to target “nontraditional” religious minorities with fines, detentions, and criminal charges. Russian legislation criminalizes “extremism” without adequately defining the term, enabling the state to prosecute a vast range of nonviolent religious activity. In 2020, the state brought 188 criminal cases against [Jehovah’s Witnesses](#), who were banned as an extremist group in 2017. Since that time, there have been 1,274 raids and searches of members’ homes, with 477 occurring in 2020. Raids and interrogations included instances of [torture](#) that continue to go uninvestigated and unpunished. During the year, 72 Jehovah’s Witnesses—including at least six from Russian-occupied Crimea—were detained under pretrial detention, house arrest, or incarceration. In 2020, the government also used its anti-extremism law to persecute religious minorities, particularly Muslims.

A 2020 [USCIRF report on blasphemy laws](#) determined Russia to have the world’s third-highest number of criminal blasphemy cases, behind Pakistan and Iran. It also found that Russia led the world in criminal blasphemy enforcement cases related to social media and had the highest incidence of such cases among countries without an official state religion between 2014 and 2018. Such cases [continued](#) in 2020, as did cases of enforcement of the religion [law](#), which also sets strict registration requirements and empowers state officials to impede and monitor religious groups’ activities. It also broadly defines and prohibits “missionary activities,” including preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites.

In the North Caucasus, security forces acted with impunity, arresting or [kidnapping](#) persons suspected of even tangential links to Islamist militancy as well as for secular political opposition. Chechen

leader Ramzan Kadyrov oversaw or condoned egregious abuses based on his religious views, including against women and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community. Chechens routinely appear in humiliating televised confessions in which they must publicly apologize for a variety of offenses, including [witchcraft](#), [insulting Islam](#), and criticizing Kadyrov, in a ritual reminiscent of customary political and religious practice in the region. One young critic of the leader was kidnapped and forced to [confess](#) on video before sitting naked on a glass bottle. Chechen Minister of Information and Press [Akhmed Dudaev](#) advocates such policies, recently accusing two LGBTI bloggers arrested in April for insulting religion of aiding Islamist militants. Police across the North Caucasus have broadly targeted and harassed attendees at regional mosques, demanding their personal information and subjecting them to questioning. One mosque in Dagestan has been [targeted](#) so regularly that government [raids](#) are referred to as part of Friday services. Rather than effectively combatting violent extremism, these practices create resentment and lead some individuals to seek information about Islam from disreputable online sources.

In [Russian-occupied Crimea](#), the occupation authorities continued to enforce Russia’s repressive laws and policies on religion, which has resulted in the prosecution of peaceful religious activity and bans on groups that were legal in Crimea under Ukrainian law. At least 16 Crimean Muslims were sentenced to prison on made-up charges of extremism and terrorism, primarily based on religious discussions that prosecutors linked to the now-banned group Hizb ut-Tahrir. In the spring, the Russian government began to transfer ownership of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) [Cathedral of St. Vladimir and Olga](#) to the state; it is the most important property of the UOC in Crimea and its congregation has already been evicted.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Russia as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Russian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, including Chechen Minister of Information and Press Akhmed Dudaev and Abinsk district court judge Aleksandr

Kholoshin, by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and

- Work with European allies to use advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions to pressure Russia to end religious freedom abuses, release religious prisoners of conscience, and permit the establishment of an international monitoring presence in occupied Crimea.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass the [Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act](#) (H.R. 496), which calls on the U.S. administration to consider Russia’s religious freedom violations in Crimea and Donbas when determining CPC designations; and
- Hold briefings and hearings highlighting the Russian government’s failure to bring its religion and extremism laws in line with international human rights standards.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [The Global Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Issue Update:** [The Anti-Cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union](#)

Background

The Russian government views independent religious activity as a threat to social and political stability and to its own control, yet it simultaneously cultivates relationships with what it deems “traditional” religions. The population is religiously diverse: around 68 percent identify as Russian Orthodox Christian; 7 percent identify as Muslim; and 25 percent comprise an array of communities, including Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, Baha’is, and indigenous religions.

The government enforces laws that restrict religious freedom, including a 1996 religion law; a 2002 law on combating extremism; and more recent laws on blasphemy, “stirring up religious hatred,” and “missionary activity.” These vague laws give authorities broad powers to define and prosecute any religious speech or activity or to ban any religious literature they deem harmful. The [anti-extremism law](#), for example, lacks a clear definition of extremism and includes no prerequisite for the use or advocacy of violence. The law is a powerful way to intimidate religious communities as it allows for the prosecution of virtually any speech; suspects can be financially blacklisted or liquidated, and they can face criminal prosecutions.

Muslims

In February, seven members of the Muslim missionary organization [Tablighi Jamaat](#) were arrested, and in September at least seven previously arrested members were sentenced to prison for organizing a “[conspiratorial extremist cell](#).” Readers of the moderate Sunni Muslim theologian [Said Nursi](#) were also prosecuted for extremism, including a 62-year-old woman. Evgeny Kim, a convicted Nursi reader [stripped of his citizenship](#) after serving out his sentence, remained in a detention facility for stateless persons at year’s end. In August, the city of Saratov [blocked](#) efforts to reconstruct a historic mosque after local citizens objected. In the Russian republic of Mordovia, police [raided](#) at least two mosques with no explanation beyond the need for “[prophylactic measures](#)” against extremism prior to New Year’s celebrations. The mufti of one of the mosques had previously been fined for distributing literature linked to Tablighi Jamaat. In December, the city of Rostov gifted a [historic mosque](#) building to a jazz school despite objections from local Muslims. Roughly 300 people are serving harsh prison sentences of 10–20 years for their alleged involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir, including 19 men charged with [terrorism](#) in October despite a lack of evidence that they supported violence and amid allegations of torture during their interrogation.

Jehovah’s Witnesses and Other Religious Minorities

At the end of the year, 45 Jehovah’s Witnesses were in prison and 26 under house arrest; between late October and mid-December, 86 [house searches](#) led to investigations against at least 26 members. Jehovah’s Witness prisoner Dennis Christensen was [granted parole](#)

in June, but a state prosecutor immediately challenged the decision. Even though Christensen has been eligible for early release for a year due to time served in pretrial detention, he was instead [placed](#) in a poorly ventilated cell for allegedly violating prison rules. He has already contracted pneumonia once while in prison, and his pulmonary health remains a serious concern amid the continuing threat of COVID-19.

Protestant Christians are frequently fined for “[illegal missionary activity](#)” and have been [accused](#) on state television of spreading COVID-19. There were numerous incidents of vandalism against religious minorities throughout the year, including the burning of a [synagogue](#) in Arkhangelsk, the placing of an Orthodox Christian icon in a [sacred grove](#) of the indigenous Mari religion, and the burning of a site sacred to the indigenous [Khakas](#) religion. Desecration of indigenous religious sites has increased in recent years, leading to the establishment of a [monitoring group](#) in 2020. Although Russia has many indigenous religions, they are not given the privileged status of “traditional religions” like Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Buddhism. In June, a Yakut [shaman](#) who vowed to exorcise Russian President Vladimir Putin was forcibly confined to a psychiatric facility.

Proposed Legislation

In December, the Russian Duma considered new [legislation](#) that would dramatically expand the state’s ability to restrict religious practice, including requiring all foreign-educated clergy to be recertified within Russia and prohibiting anyone on the government’s expansive [extremism and terrorism list](#) from participating in or leading religious groups. At the end of 2020, that list included many individuals who had not been convicted of a crime, since “evidence” of involvement was the only apparent prerequisite. Individuals may remain on the list even after serving out sentences, with their finances frozen or restricted. Although the law was not yet enacted, officials in one region began [demanding information](#) about clergy from local religious groups.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S.-Russia relations remain at a low point amid tensions over Russian military involvement in Syria, the illegal occupation of Ukrainian territory, and allegations of Russian tampering in U.S. elections. The U.S. government has implemented numerous sanctions over the occupation of Crimea, [most recently](#) in January 2020. In December, the U.S. Department of State again placed Russia on its [Special Watch List](#) for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to IRFA. The same month, the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced new sanctions against [Kadyrov](#) and associated individuals and entities, citing his many human rights violations against the LGBTI community and others in Chechnya. In January 2021, the State Department announced sanctions against individuals and entities associated with Andrii Derkach, a Ukrainian citizen with close links to Russian intelligence services, who is accused of running a Russian [disinformation campaign](#) to influence the 2020 U.S. presidential election.