

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation continued to decline. Authorities increasingly prosecuted members of religious minority communities using a range of legal mechanisms, including a 1996 religion law; laws on terrorism, extremism, and “undesirable organizations”; provisions criminalizing blasphemy; and others. These vague laws continued to give authorities broad powers to outlaw religious groups, prosecute individuals based on their religious speech or religious activities, and ban religious literature deemed “extremist.” The government also continued to fine Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Old Believers, and others for illegal missionary activities and other violations of various restrictions.

Russian authorities frequently relied on the country’s extremism statutes to punish individuals for participating in so-called “extremist” organizations—without adequately defining “extremism.” In 2022, the government detained, imprisoned, and fined adherents of Muslim theologian Said Nursi, members of the Muslim group [Tablighi Jamaat](#), and Jehovah’s Witnesses on such charges. Since the Supreme Court declared Jehovah’s Witnesses “extremist” in 2017, authorities have subjected the group to 1,874 home searches, with 201 occurring in 2022. In June, the European Court of Human Rights concluded that Russia had violated Jehovah’s Witnesses’ rights and ordered the government to pay pecuniary damages. By the end of the year, more than 100 Jehovah’s Witnesses remained in Russian custody.

Officials continued to detain and sentence Muslims on unsubstantiated terrorism and sedition charges for their real or alleged affiliation with [Hizb ut-Tahrir \(HT\)](#), an Islamist group that Russia has designated a terrorist organization. International human rights organization Memorial reported in December that at least 328 people were in prison or faced prosecution or investigation for such alleged affiliations, of whom 108 had received

prison sentences between 10–15 years and 105 had received sentences of 15 years or more. In Russian-occupied Crimea, occupation authorities have regularly imprisoned predominantly Muslim Crimean Tatars who oppose the Russian occupation, charging them in connection with their Muslim identity and religious activities.

In February, Russian military forces launched a full-scale and unjustified invasion of Ukraine with the purported goal of the “demilitarization and denazification” of the country. This “denazification” rhetoric often [resulted](#) in antisemitic Russian propaganda and remarks from government officials, including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. As part of its war propaganda, the Russian government also pointed to the alleged flourishing of “satanism” and other religious movements—so-called “cults”—in Ukraine, with one official [calling](#) for the “desatanization of Ukraine.” Dissidents within Russia voicing opposition to the war on religious grounds [faced](#) fines and detention for allegedly discrediting and disseminating false information about the Russian army. Religious leaders who refused to voice support for the invasion, such as the [chief rabbi](#) of Moscow, were [forced](#) to flee Russia.

Ukrainian religious communities living in areas invaded by Russia experienced gross religious freedom violations perpetrated by Russian forces. Several [reports](#) document Russian military personnel threatening, detaining, disappearing, and torturing religious figures in order to exert control and influence over local populations. In the first six months of the war, at least 20 religious figures were [reported](#) killed and another 15 kidnapped. Russian artillery and gunfire regularly destroyed and damaged Ukrainian places of worship and other religious facilities. By December, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) had [verified](#) damage to at least 102 religious sites, with other organizations [reporting](#) damage to more than 300.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate 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 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
 - Allocate greater funding to programs supporting:
 - Russian civil society, including Russian civil society actors in exile, that monitors and documents human rights and religious freedom violations in Russia; and
 - Independent media that counters Russian disinformation and antisemitism and reports uncensored information about events inside Russia, including those related to religious freedom.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Engage with repressed religious communities in Russia and occupied Ukraine and raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, and other actions for community representatives to inform the U.S. government and/or public of existing conditions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Backgrounder:** [Religious Freedom in Russia and Regions under Russian Occupation](#)
- **Podcast:** [Implications of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: The Religious Regulation Framework](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Welcomes European Court Judgment against Russia on Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Podcast:** [Russia’s Religious Freedom Violations in Ukraine](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Welcomes Release of Religious Prisoner of Conscience Dennis Christensen](#)

Background

According to a 2020 [poll](#), 63 percent of Russia's population identify as Orthodox Christian, seven percent as Muslim, and 26 percent as having no religious faith. Less than one percent belong to other various communities, including Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Baha'is, Falun Gong practitioners, Scientologists, and followers of indigenous religions. Russian law considers Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as "traditional" religions and grants special recognition and privileges to the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 2022, Russia enacted legislation that threatened to further curtail religious freedom by expanding already broad, vague terms such as "extremism," "propaganda," and "foreign influence." In July, President Vladimir Putin [signed](#) amendments to the country's extremism law that created a database of "extremist materials" and a unified register of individuals involved in "extremist" or "terrorist" activities. In December, a new version of the country's foreign agents law went into effect [permitting](#) authorities to label individuals considered to be under "foreign influence" as agents of another country. That same month, Putin signed into law a bill [punishing](#) anyone who promotes "LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] propaganda" and another bill [banning](#) rallies and demonstrations in proximity to certain places, including churches and religious sites. Russia's widening crackdown on civil society following its invasion of Ukraine led the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to [adopt](#) a resolution in October appointing a special rapporteur to monitor human rights in Russia.

"Extremism" and "Nontraditional" Religious Groups

In 2022, Russian authorities sentenced more than 40 Jehovah's Witnesses to prison time for peaceful religious activities portrayed as "extremist." In September, a court in Gukovo [sentenced](#) four Jehovah's Witnesses to seven years in prison and another two Jehovah's Witnesses to six and a half years for praying and singing hymns. All six had been in pretrial detention since August 2020. In November, a court [fined](#) Jehovah's Witness Igor Gusev \$9,921 (600,000 rubles) for discussing the Bible. In October, a court in occupied Crimea [sentenced](#) three Jehovah's Witnesses to six years in prison for holding religious services. In May, [Dennis Christensen](#) was released from prison and deported to Denmark after completing his six-year sentence.

In August, six Muslims [accused](#) of teaching and discussing the works of Said Nursi had their first hearing in Moscow. They were initially detained in October 2021 and charged with extremism. Authorities opened cases or started trials against several other Muslims in Dagestan and Tatarstan on similar Nursi-related allegations. In March, an appeals court in Omsk [sentenced](#) one Tablighi Jamaat member to two years in prison and another two to suspended sentences for giving sermons and spreading Tablighi Jamaat teachings.

Muslims Accused of Terrorism

Muslims accused of involvement in HT face decades in prison, despite no evidence of defendants advocating for or participating in violence.

In November, a military court [sentenced](#) four Muslims from Kazan to between 11 and 18 years in prison reportedly related to their talking about religion and holding meetings, holidays, and tea parties after Friday prayers. In Crimea, Russian authorities often use terrorism allegations connected to religious identity to suppress predominantly Muslim Crimean Tatar civil activists opposed to their rule. In March, a military court in Rostov-on-Don [sentenced](#) five Crimean Tatars to between 15 and 19 years in prison for alleged HT activities. More than a dozen other activists originally arrested alongside the five in March 2019 were also sentenced in 2022 to prison terms ranging from 12 to 15 years. In July, three lawyers known for defending Crimean Tatars were [disbarred](#) in retaliation for their work. Imprisoned Crimean Tatars [reported](#) medical neglect, being served food violating their religious dietary requirements, and inhumane living conditions, including rat-infested cells and a lack of access to beds, clean water, and sanitary toilet facilities.

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

In October, a UNHRC commission [determined](#) that Russia had committed war crimes in Ukraine, including summary executions, torture, and rape. Religious communities in Ukraine experienced these and other human rights violations, with Russian forces targeting religious leaders, religious buildings, and other sites of religious or spiritual importance. In March, Russian soldiers in Kherson reportedly beat, [strangled](#), and sexually assaulted an Orthodox Church of Ukraine priest until he agreed to cooperate with them. In November, Russian forces reportedly abducted, [tortured](#), and killed an Evangelical deacon and his son. In June, Russian artillery [struck](#) the Svyatohirsk Lavra monastery complex in the region of Donetsk, killing two monks and a nun. That same month, Russian forces reportedly [destroyed](#) a mosque while assaulting Severodonetsk, killing 20 people seeking shelter in it.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S.-Russian relations nosedived as the United States rallied the international community against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. The United States [imposed](#) several rounds of sanctions targeting Russia's financial, defense, shipping, and technology sectors as well as Russian government and military officials involved in the war and human rights violations in Ukraine, including President Putin. In September, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) individuals operating as Russia's occupation authorities in Crimea for specifically targeting religious and ethnic minorities. Following U.S. measures, Russia sanctioned and barred entry to several U.S. government officials, including USCIRF Commissioners. In April, President Joseph R. Biden signed into law legislation [suspending](#) trade relations with Russia and [banning](#) the importation of Russian oil. On November 30, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Russia as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action existing ongoing sanctions issued for individuals identified pursuant to the Russia and Moldova Jackson-Vanik Repeal and Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012 and the Support for the Sovereignty, Integrity, Democracy, and Economic Stability of Ukraine Act of 2014, as amended.