



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# BACKGROUND: RUSSIA

March 2022

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### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

## Religious Freedom in Russia and Regions under Russian Occupation

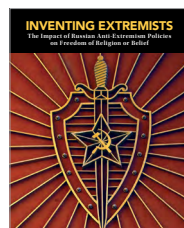
*By Jason Morton, Senior Policy Analyst*

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) monitors and reports on the Russian Federation's use of religious freedom violations to consolidate authoritarian control, repress civil society and political opposition, and spread disinformation about the Russian state's supposed role as defender of traditional religious values at home and abroad. Since 2017, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. Department of State 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). In 2021, the State Department implemented this recommendation, recognizing the Russian government as one of the world's worst violators of religious freedom.

The brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine raised important questions about the Russian leadership's use of religious rhetoric and symbolism to justify the state's geopolitical ambitions, including the violent destruction of a neighboring country and the attempt to erase its ethnic and religious identity. USCIRF will continue to report on these tragic developments. In this background, we summarize and link to our relevant coverage for all who wish to better understand these complex and critically important issues—including domestic religious freedom violations in Russia, and the use of similar violations to expand Russian influence in Belarus and repress opposition to its occupation of Crimea in Ukraine.

### Publications

[Inventing Extremists: The Impact of Russian Anti-Extremism Policies on Freedom of Religion or Belief \(2018\)](#)



Russia's vague and expansive "extremism" legislation effectively enables the authorities to prosecute a wide array of speech or activity for political and repressive purposes. The law contains no clear definition of "extremism," and a 2012 study by SOVA Information Center found that religious organizations constituted the majority of those accused under this law. Since that time, numerous religious and civil society organizations have been targeted on the pretext of "extremism," including independent journalists, the Crimean Tatar Majlis (or parliament), opposition politicians, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. This contracted research project, written by Maria Kravchenko of the SOVA Information Center, details these policies and their place in the wider government project to establish ideological control over Russian society.



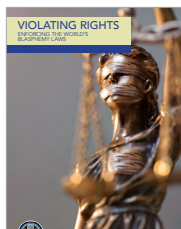
[The Anti-Cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union \(2020\)](#)



This issue update explains the legacy of Soviet-era legislation as well as the substantial influence of the Western anti-cult movement on contemporary religious regulation in Russia and Central Asia. The report provides a broad historical overview of religious

regulation in the Soviet Union and its successor states, describes the institutions and individuals driving ongoing restrictions of religious freedom and civil society, and offers policy recommendations to the U.S. government to address the challenges undermining these essential rights in the region.

[Violating Rights: Enforcing the World’s Blasphemy Laws \(2020\)](#)



Blasphemy laws criminalize non-violent expression that insults or offends religious doctrines. This global survey of blasphemy laws focuses on a five-year period from 2014 to 2018, providing extensive data and illustrative examples

demonstrating how governments’ enforcement of blasphemy laws undermines human rights, including

freedom of religion or belief. The report ranked Russia third in the world among states enforcing criminal blasphemy laws during the period studied, behind only Pakistan and Iran. The report also found that Russia led the world in criminal blasphemy enforcement cases related to social media and had the highest incidence of criminal blasphemy enforcement cases among countries without an official state religion.

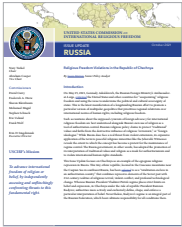
[The Global Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses \(2020\)](#)



This update describes governmental discrimination against Jehovah’s Witnesses around the world, with a particular focus on countries where members have been imprisoned for their beliefs, including Russia. On April 20, 2017, the Jehovah’s

Witnesses were banned in Russia, based on the accusation that the church was an “extremist organization.” Because of their uncompromising stance against participation in typical rituals of state, the Jehovah’s Witnesses are a frequent target for authoritarian governments, who always require a baseline of participation in state symbolism. USCIRF considers the persecution of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia a strong indicator of rising authoritarianism.

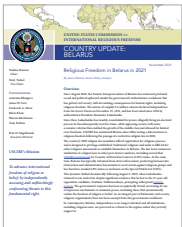
## [Religious Freedom Violations in the Republic of Chechnya \(2021\)](#)



The government of Chechnya—a tiny ethnic enclave in the North Caucasus region of Russia—is a highly authoritarian regime that perpetrates a wide array of human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom. This

report focuses on Chechnya as an example of the egregious religious repression in Russia. The dictatorship of Ramzan Kadyrov maintains control through the imposition of a purported “traditional” version of Islam, which falsely claims to defend local belief and culture, and combat violent extremism. In reality, Kadyrov has coopted Chechen religion and culture to support his brutal regime, which violates the secular constitution of the Russian Federation and international standards of freedom of religion or belief.

## [Religious Freedom in Belarus \(2021\)](#)



Religious freedom conditions in the Eastern European country of Belarus have deteriorated dramatically amidst a brutal government crackdown on civil society following widespread anti-government protests starting in August 2020. Since then,

the regime of Alexander Lukashenko has purged Catholic and Orthodox Christian clergy critical of his authoritarian tactics, raided Catholic and Protestant worship services, and publicly promoted antisemitic conspiracies and rhetoric. This report also provides insight into the geopolitical influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has jurisdiction over the Belarusian Orthodox Church and has used this influence to remove priests “disloyal” to the Lukashenko regime.

## [USCIRF Hearing](#)

### [Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia](#)

On September 26, 2020, USCIRF convened a panel of expert witnesses for a hearing on the decline of religious freedom conditions in Russia and former-Soviet republics in Central Asia and its implications for the region, including Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine. Witness testimony can be accessed through the link provided above.

## [USCIRF Spotlight Podcast](#)

### [Implications of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine Part 1: The “Denazification” Narrative](#)

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has shocked the world and created a geopolitical and humanitarian crisis with profound effects for the region and beyond. Among the reasons Russian President Vladimir Putin has listed to justify the invasion is that it will “seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine.” Putin’s accusation that modern Nazism exists in the form of antisemitism in Ukraine is not only patently false, but also has religious implications that pose grave concerns.

Bernard-Henri Levy, the noted French philosopher, commentator, and writer who has spent decades reporting on human rights abuses and conflict around the globe, joined USCIRF to discuss the intersection of religious freedom with this ongoing, brutal invasion.

### [Implications of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine Part 2: The Religious Regulation Framework](#)

The Russian government has long used religious freedom violations in its efforts to discourage non-conformity and facilitate its brutal occupation of Crimea and the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine. Russia’s restrictive religious regulation is an important tool in the Kremlin’s ongoing efforts to dominate the domestic ideological landscape and extend Russian control over occupied territories in Ukraine by justifying endless raids, arbitrary confiscation of property, and arbitrary detention of supposed “extremists.”

Russia’s religious regulation framework has been used to target Jehovah’s Witnesses, Crimean Tatar Muslims, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and other groups that are seen as posing a threat to the Kremlin’s authority. This episode explored what this means for the rest of Ukraine now that it is under attack from Russia.

### [Abuses of Traditional Religion in Russia](#)

While all faiths are supposedly equal in Russia, in practice the government privileges so-called “traditional” religions with a long historical presence in the country and strong ties to the state. “Traditional” clergy work closely with the government, and their congregations are largely immune from the suspicion, surveillance, and outright persecution that ‘non-traditional’ religions face on a regular basis.

This episode examined the uses and abuses of “traditional religion” in Russia, discussing both officially sanctioned Islam in Chechnya and the exclusion of indigenous regional religions, like the Mari faith and folk medicine, from the “traditional” category.



## Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project

### Advocacy on Behalf of Religious Prisoner of Conscience Dennis Christensen

Since 2018, USCIRF has advocated for religious prisoner Dennis Christensen through its [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#). Mr. Christensen, a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, was arrested in Oryol, Russia, on May 25, 2017, following the raid on a prayer service in which he was participating. On January 30, 2019, the prosecution demanded Mr. Christensen be sentenced to six and a half years under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 for "continuing the activities" of an extremist group.

On February 6, 2019, after appearing over 50 times in court and being detained for over 600 days, Mr. Christensen was sentenced to six years' imprisonment. On May 23, the Oryol Regional Court denied his appeal and upheld the February decision to sentence him to six years in a penal colony. USCIRF Commissioner James W. Carr advocates on behalf of Mr. Christensen to raise public awareness about his case.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.