



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: RUSSIA

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

Religious Freedom Conditions in the Russian Federation

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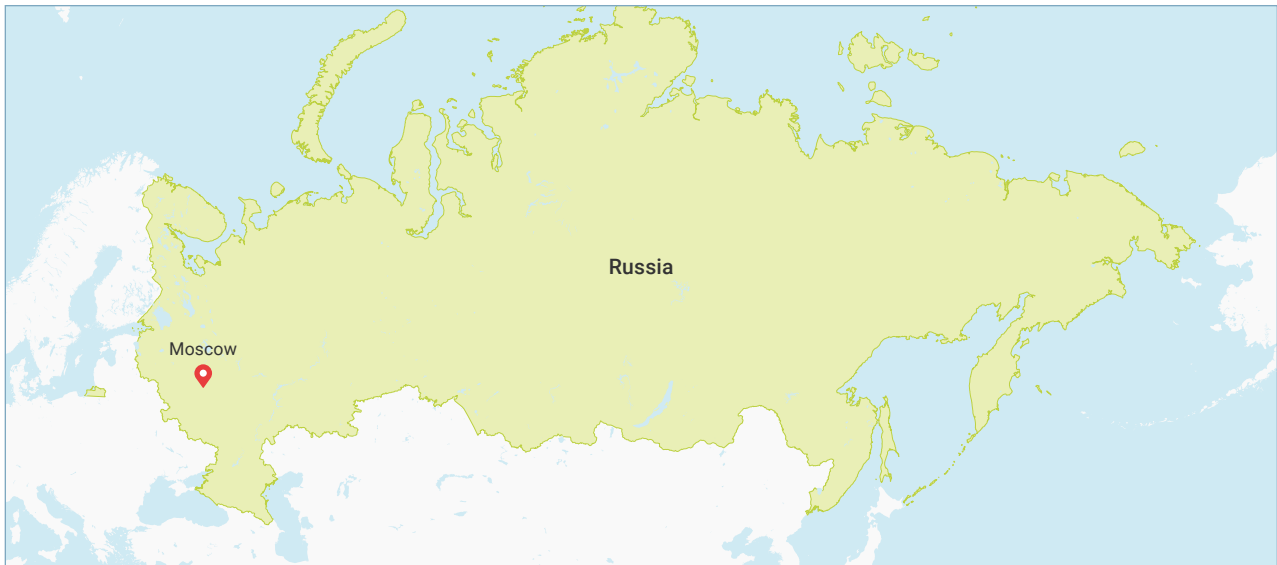
Overview

Since President Vladimir Putin launched his full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russian authorities have continued their systematic harassment and prosecution of religious minority communities within the Russian Federation, while simultaneously undertaking the largest crackdown on independent civil society in decades. Public security officials enforce vague, problematic legislation targeting missionary activities, alleged “extremism” and terrorism, “undesirable organizations,” and blasphemy, among others, to oppress religious communities and fine and imprison members for their religious activities. Authorities have intimidated religious leaders and pressured them to remain silent about the war or to publicly support Russia, despite their own moral or religiously grounded opposition to the war. Furthermore, authorities—through new legislation and policing—have aggressively clamped down on human rights organizations, independent media, and dissenters, including those who document religious freedom violations and peacefully protest Russia’s invasion of Ukraine using religious language.

This country update provides an overview of religious freedom conditions in Russia. It discusses the Russian government’s longstanding religious freedom violations and highlights other religious freedom issues that have emerged since the invasion of Ukraine.

Continued and Widespread Persecution of Religious Communities

According to a 2022 [poll](#) conducted by the independent Levada Center, 71 percent of Russia’s population identify as Orthodox Christian, 5 percent as Muslim, and 15 percent as having no religious faith. Several other religious groups each constitute 1 percent or less of the population, including Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Baha’is, Falun Gong practitioners, Scientologists, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Tengrists, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and followers of indigenous religions. Russia’s 1997 religion law considers Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as “traditional” religions. Over time, the Russian government has granted special recognition and privileges to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which has contributed to the development of an environment hostile



towards other religious groups. The Russian government views independent and “non-traditional” religious groups as disloyal to the state and a threat to political stability.

Illegal Missionary Activities

Law enforcement officers continue to target religious minorities and other individuals for their religious activities and expression through a wide range of legal mechanisms. These laws are purposefully broad and vague, allowing police, prosecutors, and judges to enforce them however they deem appropriate.

Russia’s 1997 religion law, as amended by the so-called “Yarovaya Law” of 2016, permits fines on individuals engaging in broadly defined “missionary activities” such as preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and answering questions about religion to non-members of religious associations or outside of officially designated sites. In January, a court in Kamchatka *fined* a foreign citizen \$374 (30,000 rubles) for holding religious ceremonies without the required permits and without belonging to a recognized religious organization. In April, it was *revealed* that a Muslim community in Smolensk received a \$374 fine (30,000 rubles) for not properly identifying the name of its religious organization. That same month, another court *fined* the head of an Evangelical Baptist church in Bryansk for allowing non-church members to attend a religious service and distributing religious materials.

Extremism Charges

Russia’s extremism law grants courts broad autonomy to determine whether literature or groups are extremist

and subject them to various legal sanctions including literature bans, liquidation, financial blacklisting, or imprisonment of members who engage in the organization’s activities. The law fails to clearly define “extremism,” and the use or advocacy of violence is not a *prerequisite* to be declared extremist, paving the way for authorities to prosecute virtually any activity or speech they consider threatening. Asserting the truth or superiority of a religion or belief constitutes extremism under the Russian law.

Since the Supreme Court declared Jehovah’s Witnesses extremist in 2017, authorities have *subjected* group members to 2,000 home searches. In 2022, 119 Jehovah’s Witnesses were *convicted* under Russia’s extremism article. Of those convicted, 44 Jehovah’s Witnesses were sentenced to imprisonment, the highest figure since the extremist designation, with an average sentence of five years and six months in prison.

Numerous Jehovah’s Witnesses have received fines and prison sentences since the beginning of 2023. In February, an appeals court upheld the seven-year sentence of *Andrey Vlasov*, who has a physical disability and whose health has reportedly *deteriorated* since his May 2022 imprisonment for hosting Bible discussions. In March, a court in Moscow *sentenced* four Jehovah’s Witnesses to six years and three months in prison and another Jehovah’s Witness to four years and three months. The five were accused of organizing and recruiting for Jehovah’s Witness activities and had already spent more than two years under house arrest. In April, a court in Akhtubinsk *sentenced* three Jehovah’s Witnesses to seven years in prison for discussing the Bible via

videoconferencing, singing songs, and praying. Later that month, a court in Nizhny Novgorod [fined](#) four Jehovah's Witnesses \$27,403 (2,195,000 rubles) for engaging in the group's activities by singing songs, dancing, and playing games. Also in April, a court in Vladivostok sentenced [Dmitry Barmakin](#) to eight years in prison. Barmakin had been acquitted in November 2021; however, an appeals court overturned his acquittal and ordered a new trial.

Other groups targeted under the extremism statute include spiritual movement Allya Ayat. Russian courts have [designated](#) seven issues of Allya Ayat's magazine *Zvezda Selenny* as extremist and banned the activities of the group's local branches as extremist. Since then, its members have faced raids, detentions, and bans for meeting together and possessing literature. In February, authorities [opened](#) a criminal case against alleged Allya Ayat members in Kazan, searching their homes and detaining a member. In March, an appeals court [upheld](#) the Altai Regional Court's ban on the activities of Allya Ayat in the region. While Russian authorities claim that the group's rejection of traditional medicine justifies its ban and extremist designation, the European Court of Human Rights [declared](#) in January that banning Allya Ayat literature on those grounds violated the freedoms of religion, expression, and assembly.

Adherents of Muslim theologian Said Nursi and other Muslim groups faced fines and imprisonment for extremism tied to their peaceful religious practices. Authorities opened cases or initiated trials against several Muslims in Dagestan and Tatarstan on Nursi-related allegations. In March 2023, the Naberezhnye Chelny City Court [sentenced](#) two Muslims to two years and six months in prison and another Muslim to one year and six months' suspended imprisonment for being followers of Said Nursi. Authorities originally [detained](#) the three in November 2021, accusing them of possessing religious literature and recruiting new members to a banned religious association.

Muslims Accused of Terrorism

Russia notoriously uses terrorism charges against Muslims based on their religious activities. Since the Supreme Court declared [Hizb-ut-Tahrir \(HT\)](#) a terrorist organization in 2003, its members or alleged members have been sentenced to decades in prison, despite no evidence of the accused individuals participating in or promoting violence. International human rights organization Memorial [reported](#) that at least 333 people were in prison or faced prosecution or investigation

for such alleged affiliations, of whom 121 had received prison sentences of 10–15 years and 110 had received sentences of 15 years or more.

In May 2022, the Central District Military Court sentenced [Marsel Gimaliev](#) to 17 years in prison and in October sentenced [Farit Sharifullin](#) to 18 years in prison for organizing HT meetings and collecting money for the organization. In December, the Central District Military Court sentenced [Ruslan Ilyasov](#) to 19 years in prison for leading an HT group, holding meetings, discussing its literature and ideology, and recruiting new members. Recent reporting in April 2023 indicates that prison authorities have prohibited or deliberately obstructed prisoners convicted for HT affiliation from engaging in religious activities. One such prisoner was allegedly [prohibited](#) from eating before sunrise (suhour) and after sunset (iftar) for several days despite fasting during Ramadan. Another prisoner [claimed](#) that he and other Muslim prisoners were not allowed to pray during Ramadan.

“Undesirable Organizations”

In 2015, Russia passed legislation allowing the Justice Ministry to [label](#) foreign organizations deemed a threat to national security as “undesirable.” This “undesirable” marker bans the organization from operating in the country or distributing information and threatens imprisonment and fines for those who work for the organization, communicate with it, or merely like its social media posts. Prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, authorities declared “undesirable” several entities affiliated with the [Church of Scientology](#), [Falun Gong](#), and the [New Generation Evangelical Christian Church](#). Since the 2022 full-scale invasion, they have labeled “undesirable” the [All-Ukrainian Spiritual Center Renaissance Religious Organization](#) and its charitable arm, the [Transformation Center Church International](#), independent news site [Meduza](#), and Crimean human rights organizations [Crimean Human Rights Group](#) and [CrimeaSOS](#), both of which report on the persecution of Crimean Tatar Muslims and other religious freedom issues in Russian-occupied Crimea. In April, a court in Anapa [sentenced](#) an Evangelical pastor to a year in prison for participating in an “undesirable organization” after he made posts on social media that included New Generation Church symbols. Another court in April [ordered](#) the pre-trial detention of the former pastor of the Chelyabinsk branch of the New Generation Church for organizing the activities of an “undesirable organization.”

Blasphemy Prosecutions

Authorities regularly enforce a 2013 blasphemy law that punishes “offending the religious feelings of believers.” It was reported in March that a 19-year-old had been [sentenced](#) to 200 hours of compulsory labor after burning an icon near a shopping mall in Astrakhan. That same month, authorities [initiated](#) a criminal case against a reported atheist from Suzdal for allegedly mocking Christians on social media. In April, it was reported that authorities in Moscow had [opened](#) a criminal case against an artist over her depictions of Jesus in four paintings. While blasphemy charges are mostly used against individuals who are accused of offending adherents of the Russian Orthodox Church, charges have also been brought for [offending](#) the feelings of members of other religious groups as well.

“Psychological Abuse”

Dubious allegations of “psychological abuse” have led to the imprisonment of leaders from minority religious communities or the liquidation of the religious communities themselves. In March, the Kirovsky District Court of Omsk [sentenced](#) an Evangelical pastor to one year and six months in prison for alleged “brainwashing” tied to his worship services. The Justice Ministry has reportedly sought to [liquidate](#) his church. In February 2023, an appeals court [upheld](#) the October 2022 liquidation of the Church of the Last Testament after an “expert” asserted that the church’s activities were anti-family and exhibited signs of psychological violence and destructiveness.

Other Legal Developments

Over the last year, several legal statutes commonly used to target religious minorities have been amended to include new penalties for those prosecuted. In July 2022, President 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 April, the Russian parliament [passed](#) an amendment stripping naturalized citizenship from those who are convicted of participation in “actions that pose a threat to Russia’s national security,” [including](#) acts of extremism or terrorism or being part of an “undesirable organization.”

Other legislation may also be used as a pretext to either restrict peaceful religious activities and expression or prosecute individuals on the basis of religion. In December, President Putin [signed](#) a law banning rallies

and demonstrations in proximity to certain places, including churches and religious sites. It is unclear if this law was cited to [prevent](#) a St. Petersburg Roman Catholic community from holding a candle-lighting ceremony outside its church, as it had done in previous years preceding Easter.

President Putin also expanded in December the scope of the country’s [2013 law](#) that criminalized providing “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” to children, [extending](#) its ban on providing such information to the [entire public](#). The law fails to define the term “propaganda” and provides a basis to punish those who express religious beliefs on sexual morality that differ from the views of the state, in [violation](#) of international human rights standards.

Pressure on Religious Communities to Support Russia’s War

Following the February 2022 invasion, Russian authorities have pressured religious leaders to either voice support for the war or say nothing. This has led some religious leaders who opposed the war and refused to stay silent based on their religious and moral principles to resign from their posts or flee the country. Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, who served nearly 30 years as Chief Rabbi of Moscow and who [left](#) Russia in March 2022, has called silence about the war “morally wrong.” Since leaving, Goldschmidt has [warned](#) Jews to leave Russia due to rising antisemitism in the country. Lutheran Bishop Dietrich Brauer also [fled](#) Russia that same month after refusing to support the war. He later said that churches in Russia are not free to “talk about the war, pray for peace, or contact Ukrainian brothers and sisters.” In October, Supreme Lama of Kalmykia and representative of the Dalai Lama in Russia Telo Tulku Rinpoche [condemned](#) Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and criticized other Buddhist leaders for supporting the war. Telo Tulku Rinpoche made the comments from Mongolia, where he had gone to support Kalmyk Buddhists who fled in order to escape military mobilization. As discussed later in this report, he subsequently resigned from his post after the Russian government deemed him a “foreign agent.”

Leaders of other religious communities have not been able to leave and have been forced to adapt to Russian state pressure. Forum 18, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) reporting on freedom of religion or belief in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, [reported](#), based on information from an anonymous Protestant

pastor, that Federal Security Service (FSB) agents had visited clergy and threatened them with prosecution if they spoke out about the war. Several religious leaders, including Russian Orthodox priests, have been forced out of their positions or fined after criticizing the war.

Unprecedented Crackdown on Civil Society Threatens Religious Freedom

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine precipitated the largest domestic crackdown on independent Russian civil society and dissent since the end of the Soviet Union. Such unprecedented repression led the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to [adopt](#) a resolution in October appointing a special rapporteur to monitor the situation of human rights in Russia, [citing](#) the arrests of activists, repressive legislation, and forced shutdown of human rights organizations and independent media. In April, the UNHRC [appointed](#) Mariana Katzarova to the position.

War Censorship and Foreign Agents Laws

In the wake of the invasion, the Russian government quickly codified new laws that sought to silence public opposition to the war and curtail the spread of narratives that challenged or conflicted with its own. In March 2022, President Putin signed two laws [targeting](#) domestic critics of the war with criminal and administrative penalties. These laws [criminalized](#) spreading “knowingly false information” about the Russian armed forces with up to 15 years in prison, “discrediting” the armed forces with up to five years in prison, and calling for sanctions against Russia with up to three years in prison. These criminal code offenses also included hefty fines between \$2,496 (200,000 rubles) and \$62,422 (5 million rubles). Additionally, the laws codified administrative fines between \$374 (30,000 rubles) and \$12,484 (1 million rubles) for discrediting the Russian military and calling for foreign sanctions against Russia. Later amendments signed into law in [2022](#) and [2023](#) expanded the scope of Russian state and non-state entities and individuals protected under the law and increased the punishments for “discrediting” and “spreading false information.” Overall, the laws’ broad language and failure to define key phrases like “knowingly false information” essentially criminalize any speech perceived as opposition to the war or contradicting the government’s narrative. Authorities have furthermore used these laws to target protesters who use religious language or cite their religious beliefs to oppose the war, human rights organizations that

document religious freedom and general human rights violations in Russia and Ukraine, and independent media that report on Russian and Ukrainian affairs, including religious freedom.

The Russian parliament took up other legislation that built on existing, vaguely worded legal statutes to target dissidents. In December, a new version of the country’s foreign agents law went into effect, [granting](#) authorities the power to consider anyone under “foreign influence”—another term not clearly defined—as agents of a foreign government. Previously, the foreign agents law only [applied](#) to organizations and individuals who received financial support from abroad and forced them to register as foreign agents with the state. In January 2023, authorities [included](#) the first religious leader on the foreign agents register, Supreme Lama of Kalmykia Telo Tulku Rinpoche, who subsequently [resigned](#) from his post.

Anti-War Protesters

Authorities weaponized the new laws to charge, fine, detain, and imprison those [speaking out](#) against the war, including those who did so on religious grounds or with religious language. This religious opposition has been expressed in sermons and social media, on posters using religious imagery and quotes, and with several other forms of protest. In March 2023, a Moscow court [sentenced](#) Russian Orthodox Christian Mikhail Simonov to seven years in prison for spreading false information about the Russian military. Simonov, who was arrested in November, had posted on social media “Killing children and women, on Channel One we sing songs. We, Russia, have become godless. Forgive us, Lord!” In June 2022, authorities in St. Petersburg [detained](#) defrocked Russian Orthodox priest [Ioann Kurmoyarov](#) after he posted videos denouncing the war on his YouTube channel. In the videos, Kurmoyarov said that “those who have unleashed aggression will not be in heaven” and “if you are not disturbed by what is going on in Ukraine, this outrage, then...you are not Christians.” Prison authorities have allegedly not [provided](#) Kurmoyarov with adequate medical care despite the deterioration of his health in jail.

Most punishments for religious protesters have fallen under the administrative code for discrediting the military. In March 2022, a court [fined](#) Russian Orthodox priest Ioann Burdin \$437 (35,000 rubles) for condemning the invasion in statements made on his parish’s website and during a sermon, and for sharing anti-war images and a petition. In April, a court in Tambov [fined](#) Baptist preacher and local journalist Sergey Stepanov \$499

(40,000 rubles) for circulating on social media the text of an open letter condemning the war on Christian principles. In August, a court in Moscow [fined](#) Roman Catholic Galina Borisova for pinning a piece of paper to a Russian flag hanging outside a Roman Catholic church. The paper read “*No bellum*,” or “no war,” and “There is no place for the flag of an aggressor state beside the flag of the Holy See.” In September, a Moscow court [imposed](#) a \$624 fine (50,000 rubles) on Konstantin Fokin after he held up a poster in Red Square with the phrase “6. THOU SHALL NOT KILL” from the Bible. In October, a court in Sverdlovsk Region [fined](#) Russian Orthodox priest Nikandr Pinchuk \$1,248 (100,000 rubles) for a social media post condemning the “horde of the Antichrist” attacking Ukraine. Pinchuk had been previously [fined](#) \$437 (35,000 rubles) in March for criticizing the war from a reportedly Christian perspective. In December, a court [fined](#) Buddhist Danara Erendzhenova \$374 (30,000 rubles) for holding an anti-war [poster](#) with a quote from the Dalai Lama outside a St. Petersburg Buddhist temple. In March 2023, Archbishop of Slavyansk-on-Kuban and South Russia of an independent Orthodox Church Viktor Pivovarov was [fined](#) \$499 (40,000 rubles) for an anti-war sermon.

Human Rights Organizations and Media

The Russian government has used both the war censorship and foreign agents laws in tandem to target human rights organizations known for their documentation of religious freedom violations in Russia. In April 2022, the Memorial Human Rights Center, a human rights organization that extensively [documented](#) the cases of prisoners of conscience targeted for their religion or belief, officially [closed](#) down [following](#) multiple rejected appeals against its court-ordered closure. In March 2023, authorities raided and [trashed](#) the offices and homes of Memorial’s employees in Moscow under bogus charges of “rehabilitating Nazism” tied to the organization’s documentation of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s human rights abuses. In April, Chairman of Memorial Human Rights Center Oleg Orlov was [charged](#) with discrediting the Russian armed forces under the criminal code for his anti-war writings. A week later, police also [charged](#) the head of the Yekaterinburg branch

of Memorial Alexei Mosin under the administrative code for discrediting the Russian military. In May, authorities [searched](#) the homes of Memorial’s activists in Perm and [charged](#) two of its Perm branch leaders, Alexander Chernyshov and Robert Latypov, for attempted smuggling of cultural property. That same month, the Second Western District Military Court [sentenced](#) human rights activist and former member of the Memorial Human Rights Center [Bakhrom Khamroev](#) to 14 years in prison on fabricated terrorism charges. Khamroev was known for providing legal defense to Muslims charged in HT cases.

Other human rights organizations reporting on freedom of religion or belief have been similarly impacted. In April 2022, the Russian Ministry of Justice [revoked](#) the registration of 15 organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, vaguely citing violations of Russian legislation. In January 2023, a Moscow court [ordered](#) the Moscow Helsinki Group, the country’s oldest human rights organization, to shut down after the Justice Ministry [accused](#) the organization of violating “the confines of territorial activity.” In February, the Supreme Court [refused](#) an appeal by OVD-Info, a Russian human rights NGO, challenging its foreign agent status. In April, a court in Moscow [ordered](#) the liquidation of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, an NGO that conducts research on freedom of religion or belief issues in Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea, after the Justice Ministry accused it of violating its charter by participating in activities outside of Moscow.

Russian authorities [blocked](#) the websites of independent Russian and foreign news organizations and forced them to suspend operations or face penalties under the country’s new war censorship laws. In March 2022, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty—which regularly reports on religious freedom and other human rights violations in Russia—[suspended](#) operations inside the country due to the new laws. In January 2023, a court [fined](#) independent Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* \$6,242 (500,000 rubles) for discrediting the Russian armed forces after it published an interview with a Russian Orthodox clergyman condemning the war.



Conclusion

Russian authorities continue to engage in severe religious repression and have used its war in Ukraine to institute new or amend existing legal mechanisms to further suppress religious communities and decimate independent civil society.

Since 2017, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate the Russian Federation 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 of 1998 (IRFA). In 2021, the State Department for the first time designated Russia as a CPC and redesignated it in 2022 for its violations committed in both Russia and Ukraine, including Russian-occupied Crimea.

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