

KEY FINDINGS

During 2019, religious freedom conditions in Russia deteriorated. The government continued to target “nontraditional” religious minorities with fines, detentions, and criminal charges under the pretext of combating extremism. Russian legislation criminalizes “extremism” without adequately defining the term, enabling the state to prosecute a vast range of nonviolent religious activity. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, whom the government banned outright as “extremist” in 2017, faced intensified persecution in 2019. By the end of the year, hundreds of members remained in detention, had travel restrictions imposed upon them, or were under investigation. The Jehovah’s Witnesses [report](#) that as of the end of 2019, 313 members had been charged, put on trial, or convicted for involvement in the group, and that Russian authorities conducted 489 raids on the private homes of their members during the year. According to [Human Rights Watch](#), as of January 2020, 32 Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia were imprisoned for their faith. In 2019, the Russian government also continued to use its anti-extremism law to prosecute Muslims—particularly adherents of the Islamic missionary movement [Tablighi Jamaat](#) and readers of the Turkish theologian [Said Nursi](#)—and [Scientologists](#) for peaceful religious activity.

In the North Caucasus, security forces acted with impunity, [arresting and kidnapping](#) persons suspected of even tangential links to Islamist militancy, and [harassing Muslims](#) at prayer services. In September, for example, suspected members of the Chechen Security Services allegedly [abducted](#) Ramzan Shaikhayev. Shaikhayev previously had been detained for what authorities described to his wife as “a check on his religious beliefs.” In December, police in the Dagestani capital of Makhachkala set up checkpoints outside a mosque and demanded the personal information of those leaving the

prayer service. Local Muslims described such operations as typical and designed to intimidate them. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov oversaw or condoned egregious abuses based on his religious views, including against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community and women.

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. In 2019, authorities conducted [mass arrests](#) of politically active Crimean Tatars, whom they accused of membership in the banned Islamic Party Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Many face lengthy prison sentences. On June 28, 2019, occupation authorities seized and closed the [Cathedral of Vladimir and Olga in Simferopol](#), the main cathedral of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in Crimea. Members report that, since the occupation, the OCU has faced systematic persecution for its perceived ties to Ukrainian nationalism, including the confiscation of church property and the harassment of clergy and congregants. On November 6, 2019, a court in the western Crimean city of Yevpatoriya [ordered the destruction](#) of an OCU chapel.

Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine pursue an exclusionary religious policy that privileges the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. In the so-called Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) in eastern Ukraine, rebel authorities supported by Russia have effectively banned all religious groups that failed to obtain legal registration by October 15, 2018, which includes all Protestant communities, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the OCU. On November 26, 2019, the LPR [banned](#) 12 Baptist books as “extremist,” including a Russian translation of the Gospel of John.

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 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 legislation condemning the deteriorating religious freedom environment

in Russia, and highlight—in briefings and hearings—the Russian government’s failure to bring its religion and extremism laws in line with international human rights standards; and

- Pass the Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act (H.R.5408), which calls on the President to take into account Russia’s religious freedom violations in Russian-occupied Crimea and Russian-controlled Donbas when determining CPC designations under IRFA.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project adoption: Dennis Christensen](#)
- [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project adoption: Ivan Matsitsky](#)
- [Press Statement: USCIRF Statement on Travel Ban for Russian Religious Freedom Violators](#)

Background

The Russian government views independent religious activity as threatening social and political stability and its own control, while simultaneously cultivating relationships with the country's so-called "traditional" religions. The population is religiously diverse, with around 68 percent identifying as Russian Orthodox Christian, 7 percent identifying as Muslim, and 25 percent comprising an array of religious minorities including Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, and Baha'is.

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 Russian authorities broad powers to define and prosecute any religious speech or activity or ban any religious literature that they deem harmful. The [anti-extremism](#) law, for example, lacks a clear definition of extremism, and the use or advocacy of violence is not a prerequisite for such a designation. Because virtually any speech can be prosecuted, the law is a powerful way to intimidate religious communities; they can be financially blacklisted or liquidated, and individuals can be subjected to criminal prosecutions. At the end of the reporting period, the Federal List of Extremist Materials (maintained by the Ministry of Justice) contained 5,003 items, the possession of which is criminalized.

The religion law sets strict registration requirements and empowers state officials to impede religious groups' activities. It also broadly defines and prohibits "missionary activities," including preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and even answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites.

Administrative Harassment

For many minority religious communities, acquiring an officially designated place of worship is virtually impossible, forcing them to meet in residential or commercial buildings. Although the 1996 Religion Law allows religious meetings on private property, such communities remain vulnerable to local officials, who can seize, [shutter](#), or [destroy](#) property for alleged usage violations. In a particularly [severe case](#) of government harassment, Yevgeny Kim was stripped of his Russian citizenship after serving out his sentence for studying the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi. As a stateless person without papers, he was incarcerated in a detention center for foreigners.

Jehovah's Witnesses

In 2019, the Russian government accelerated its persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses. In February 2019, a court in Oryol sentenced Dennis Christensen to six years in prison for leading a Jehovah's Witness group. During the same month, local law enforcement in Surgut [detained and tortured](#) a group of 19 Jehovah's Witnesses. In September 2019, five Jehovah's Witnesses from Saratov were given sentences ranging from two to three and a half years. On November 5, 2019, a court in the Siberian city of Tomsk [sentenced](#) another man, Sergei Klimov, to six years in prison for his leadership of a Jehovah's Witness group. On December 13, 2019, a court in Penza [sentenced](#)

Vladimir Alushkin to six years in prison for participating in Jehovah's Witness worship services and sharing his beliefs. In October 2019 alone, there were reportedly [83 house raids](#) against Jehovah's Witnesses across Russia and in Russian-occupied Crimea. On March 20, 2019, in perhaps the biggest raid against Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea to date, armed members of the Russian security service (FSB) raided at least eight homes and detained six members for interrogation. Russian authorities subsequently charged one of them with "extremism," while another remains under investigation.

Occupied Ukraine

On March 27, 2019, authorities conducted [massive raids](#) across the Crimean capital city of Simferopol, arresting 24 Crimean Tatars for alleged membership in HT, as well as terrorism. Authorities allegedly tortured at least four of the men and [planted evidence](#), including Islamic literature banned in Russia. All were active in, or affiliated with, Crimean Solidarity, a secular human rights group opposed to the Russian occupation. On June 10, another eight men were arrested and charged with membership in HT. On November 12, 2019, six Crimean Tatars were given between seven and 19 years in prison for alleged membership in HT. No evidence of involvement in terrorism or acts of violence is necessary for such convictions.

Since the 2014 invasion, the larger Muslim community in occupied Crimea has faced persistent harassment. USCIRF has heard reports of electricity to mosques being shut off right before Ramadan and only restored by bribing local authorities. Communities cannot celebrate holidays like Ramadan without official permits, which are often [denied](#) or withheld unless a bribe is paid. Video cameras have been installed in mosques throughout the region, and many communities report constant surveillance and frequent raids.

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. On March 15, 2019, the United States, Canada, and the European Union [announced](#) sanctions against Russian individuals and companies for their involvement in the occupation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine. On December 23, 2019, John J. Sullivan was [sworn in](#) as the U.S. Ambassador to Russia, having previously served as the deputy secretary of state. The U.S. government has implemented numerous sanctions over the occupation of Crimea, [most recently](#) in January 2020. In September, the State Department [banned](#) two high-ranking regional officers in Russia's Investigative Committee from entering the country for allegedly torturing seven Jehovah's Witnesses in Surgut. The department noted Russia's declining religious freedom environment and called on the government to end its campaign against the Jehovah's Witnesses. On December 18, 2019, 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, as it had in 2018.