

## December 14, 2006: Russia: USCIRF Releases New Policy Focus on Russia

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-MEDIA ADVISORY-WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan federal agency, today released its new Policy Focus on Russia at a panel discussion held in collaboration with the National Endowment for Democracy on "The Threat to Civic and Religious Freedom in Russia."

In the new Policy Focus, the Commission recommends measures to combat xenophobia, intolerance and hate crimes in Russia, and to ensure the equal legal status and treatment of Russia's various religious communities. The Russia Policy Focus is available in English and Russian on the Commission web site, [www.uscirf.gov](http://www.uscirf.gov).

The Commission also recommends reforming or withdrawing the 2006 Russian law on non-commercial (non-governmental) organizations, which may be used to restrict severely the NGOs' ability to function. Sergei Movchan, the director of Russia's Federal Registration Service (FRS), confirmed to the Commission that some of the law's most intrusive provisions apply to religious organizations, to charitable and educational entities set up by religious organizations, as well as to groups defending human rights. Other Commission recommendations in the new Policy Focus include measures to address the crisis in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. The Commission has received increasing reports of unwarranted official government detention and prosecution of Muslims in Russia, which are described in the Policy Focus.

Since Vladimir Putin gained the presidency of Russia in 2000, the Russian government has steadily retreated from democratic reform, endangering significant gains, including in the areas of freedom of religion or belief. Such developments include: curtailments of media freedom and of the independence of political parties; tighter restrictions on non-governmental organizations, religious communities, and other civil society groups; harassment of human rights organizations; legal restrictions on freedom of assembly; constraints on the use of popular referenda; and President Putin's decision to end the direct popular election of regional governors.

A Commission delegation visited Russia in July 2006, meeting with senior government officials, religious leaders, human rights monitors, civil society representatives and journalists.

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