

From spiritual security to religious cleansing

USCIRF Hearing on Freedom of Religion or Belief in the Russian Federation
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In the name of Russia's so-called spiritual security, President Putin has increasingly worsened his legislative arsenal since the beginning of his term to ban non-Orthodox religious books and communities, to criminalize religious organisations as foreign agents, extremist and/ or undesirable movements. This is the driving force which has led to a wave of religious cleansing in Russia.

The spiritual security concept in Russia clearly emerged on the radars of Putin's administration in the year 2000 as part of the "Russian National Security Concept" in which it was said "There must be a state policy to maintain the population's spiritual and moral welfare... and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries." This policy started to be shaped in reaction to the liberal Law on Freedom of Worship in the early 1990s opening Russia's doors to foreign missionaries of all faiths and provoking the anger of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church who complained about the invasion of "hordes of missionaries" on his canonical territory.

The spiritual dimension of national security saw its beginnings in the pursuit of the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations which brought to an end the brief post-Soviet period of religious freedom, religious diversity and tolerance.

Behind the concept of spiritual security, an authentic religious cleansing has been implemented in the last 25 years and the flow of amendments to existing laws further restricting religious freedom has been accelerating.

Access of foreign non-Orthodox clerics to the Russian territory has been dramatically restricted.

Since 5 February of this year, summary expulsions by the police without the need for a court decision have become easier due to amendments to the Administrative Code. Most cases involve foreign Muslim preachers who appear to be Central Asian migrant workers but last year an 85-year-old Catholic priest lost his appeal against expulsion for leading worship in his parish.

Freedom of worship is now the priority target of the repression. Forum 18 recently found out that between January 2024 and April 2025 there had been 124

known cases of prosecution against "Russians conducting missionary activity" and "Foreigners conducting missionary activity." First-instance courts convicted 107 of them.

Freedom of association and assembly is also a target. Jehovah's Witnesses were the first major minority to be banned in 2017. Over 140 of them are currently in prison, mainly for organising religious meetings and Bible studies in private homes. In over 90 cases, their sentences are superior to kidnapping (5 years in prison) or rape charges (3 to 6 years).

On 16 June of this year, an amendment to the law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" was submitted to the State Duma. The bill prohibits public services, religious rites and ceremonies in residential and non-residential premises of apartment buildings.

The hunt for 'extremist' and 'undesirable' religious movements is another facet of President Putin's religious cleansing.

Apart from the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses, it is to be noted that the peaceful movement of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi and the Scientology Church were declared extremist organizations, and their books were banned. Several of their members were sentenced to heavy prison terms for studying the works of their religious leaders.

Brigham Young University and Falun Gong were also declared undesirable organizations, which drastically limits their activities. In late June, a Falun Gong practitioner was sentenced to three years of imprisonment in a general regime colony with a ban on engaging in social and political activities for three years. Several others are being prosecuted.

Insulting the religious feelings of believers, the equivalent of blasphemy, is penalized by the Criminal Code although the concept is very vague and undefined, and opens the door to fabricated cases. In April, USCIRF published an extensive report on this issue. In May, a resident of the Ivanovo region was sentenced to a heavy fine for allegedly insulting the religious feelings of believers.

Incitement of hatred is also often associated with so-called blasphemy issues.

Last but not least, the authorities have welcomed and supported hardline Orthodox clerics and **anticult movements** campaigning against a wide range of peaceful and law-abiding religious minorities they call "harmful, destructive, dangerous and totalitarian cults." The most notorious activist in this area in Russia

is the well-known Alexander Dvorkin who was also for many years the vice-president of the European anti-cult umbrella organization FECRIS.

In conclusion, President Putin's implementation of the concept of spiritual security has only one objective: to strengthen the power of the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, his close ally, and silence religious movements of foreign origin.