



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

October 2020

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN RUSSIA AND CENTRAL ASIA

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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.

On September 16, 2020, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing on [Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia](#). This hearing examined the regulation of religious activity through surveillance and repressive legal systems in Russia and in former Soviet countries, including but not limited to Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan.



USCIRF Chair [Gayle Manchin](#) led the hearing, which convened [four witnesses](#) from a variety of perspectives on Russia and former Soviet countries' persecution of religious minorities. [Representative Joe Wilson](#), the Ranking Member in the U.S. House of Representatives on the Helsinki Commission and the sponsor of the Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act ([H.R. 5408](#)) also provided remarks.

In her opening statement, Chair Manchin stressed the significance of the region's interconnectedness in the expansion of religious registration and extremism laws. "Russia and Central Asia's mutual reinforcement of religious repression is a key to the dynamic in that region," she said. "Turkmenistan passed its own repressive religion law in 1996—one year prior to Russia. In 1998, Uzbekistan followed suit." While the shared Soviet legacy is clearly a common factor, other dynamics to consider include the significant influence established religions have on religious policies, Western anti-cult ideas, and the worldwide anti-terrorism campaign post-September 11, 2001.

Representative Wilson emphasized that the United States cannot remain silent about the egregious violations of religious freedom in Russian occupied areas of Ukraine. He said, "Since 2014, Russia has been illegally occupying and controlling Crimea and parts of the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine" where the targeting and persecution of religious minorities has been well documented.



Vice Chair [Anurima Bhargava](#) highlighted the structural divide that privileges "traditional" religions at the expense of "non-traditional" faiths. The Yarovaya Law of 2016 "characterizes sharing religious faith, or extending invitations to religious services, as illegal missionary activity if it occurs outside of the officially registered spaces, including in private homes or even over the Internet," she stated. This Russian policy, emulated in Central Asia, is justified as a means of "spiritual security," which enables authoritarian regimes to define what is considered acceptable religion and suppress political opposition.



Vice Chair [Tony Perkins](#) reiterated that USCIRF is once again recommending the Department of State designate Russia as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) this year. “We make this recommendation based upon the repressive policies and actions that my

colleagues just described, and especially because of Russia’s gross human rights violations against faith communities in Ukraine,” he said.



[Elizabeth Clark](#), the Associate Director for the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University, addressed legislation in Russia and Central Asia that affects religious freedom. The regulation of religion in Russia and

Central Asia during both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras has been marked by three themes:

- First, efforts were made by Russia and Central Asian governments to eliminate religion’s potential as a rival source of influence and authority, particularly in post-Soviet Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyz Republic, which all experienced an initial period of comparative openness before reverting to a consolidation of state control and elimination of pluralism.
- Second, historically, the dominant ethnic based religion was permissible so long as it supported the state.
- Third, there is a sense that the beliefs of minority religious groups, especially so-called “foreign” or new religious movements, undermine state security. The fear of non-traditional minority groups has been conflated with concerns of violent extremism, resulting in broad restrictions on religious life for peaceful minority religions.



[Emily B. Baran](#), an Associate Professor and the interim Chair of the History Department at Middle Tennessee State University, provided an overview of the historical persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia:

- Since World War II, Jehovah’s Witnesses have been the subject of misinformation and propaganda. Witnesses were described as terrible people guilty of criminal activity and even in collaboration with the Nazis.

- Although the 1990s saw more religious freedom, during this period new propaganda was spread about the dangers of minority religions. This campaign, often referred to as the anti-cult movement, imported Western rhetoric about cults to make bold and false claims about the Witnesses.
- The Russian government used the threat of terrorism to pass the 2002 anti-extremism law and to deny the Witnesses the right to worship.
- In April 2017, the Russian Supreme Court ruled that the entire organization of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia was extremist and ordered its dissolution. As of August 2020, 10 Witnesses have been criminally charged for engaging in extremism.



[Maria Kravchenko](#), Director at the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, discussed the anti-extremism legislation that emerged in Russia and was adopted by several post-Soviet countries, including Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and

Tajikistan. Russia’s 2002 anti-extremism law “defines ‘propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of a person on the basis of their religious affiliation or attitude toward religion’ as an extremist activity.” This definition provided Russian law enforcement agencies with a mandate to suppress any unwelcome religious group regardless of whether they are a threat to society:

- In 2019, Russia ratified the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Convention on Countering Extremism, which imposes an obligation to penalize extremist actions and denies refugee status to all those involved in extremist crimes.
- Muslims, ranging from the Tablighi Jamaat missionary movement to Salafiyas, are the main targets of Russia and Central Asia’s anti-extremism policies.
- Targeted religious groups of Western origin include Jehovah’s Witnesses, Scientologists, Baptists, and Pentecostals. Following the complete ban on Jehovah’s Witness organizations in 2017, believers in Russia face criminal prosecution for the continuation of their religious activities.



[John E. Herbst](#), the Director of the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center, testified on Russian religious policy and its impact on Ukraine. Russian legislation in 1997, 2002, and 2015 has provided a legal basis for taking measures against non-traditional

religious groups. A close relationship has existed between the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate (MP) of the Russian Orthodox Church since 1589. The MP plays a key role in Moscow's soft power efforts. The MP combines Russian Orthodoxy with Russian culture to induce ethnic Russians to support the Kremlin and to consolidate political power in neighboring countries:

- During the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in late 2004 and the Maidan Revolution nine years later, MP clerics offered support for Moscow's preferred Ukrainian politician, Victor Yanukovich.
- The MP and the Kremlin itself tried unsuccessfully to prevent the recognition of the Unified Ukraine Orthodox Church (OCU) by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, the senior hierarch in World Christian Orthodoxy. Since the recognition of the OCU, 600 parishes have moved from the Moscow Patriarchate to the Ukrainian Church.
- Once Russia annexed Crimea and began its war in Donbas in 2014, Moscow designed religious policies to consolidate Russian control. In Crimea, the goal was to reduce the presence of the Kyiv Patriarch, the Greek Catholic Church, and Islam. In Donbas, repressive policies effectively drove out Protestants and OCU believers.

- Russian policy toward Islam has implications in Crimea, Donbas, and elsewhere in Russia's "near abroad." Islamic religious activity is kept within desired bounds through the creation of a Spiritual Association of Muslims (SAM). Russian law and practice provide the means to restrict, harass, and control Islamic groups with dubious charges of extremism.

Russia's "religious policies are sadly part and parcel of its aggression in Ukraine," Herbst concluded. "These measures justify designating Russia as a Country of (Particular) Concern."

USCIRF recommends the U.S. government:

- Designate Russia a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Pass the Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act ([H.R. 5408, S.3064](#)) in the U.S. Congress, which calls on the President to take into account Russia's religious freedom violations in Russian-occupied Crimea and Russian-controlled Donbas when determining designations under 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 prisoners of conscience, and permit the establishment of an international monitoring presence in occupied Crimea.



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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 threats to 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.