

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation continued to deteriorate, with the government accelerating its persecution of “nontraditional” religious minorities. Russian authorities punished peaceful Jehovah’s Witnesses with [record-breaking prison sentences](#) of up to eight years for alleged “extremism.” During the year, the state convicted [105 Jehovah’s Witnesses](#), including [elderly](#) and [disabled](#) members as well those residing in [Russian-occupied Crimea in Ukraine](#). Since the group was banned in 2017, there have been 1,678 raids and searches of members’ homes, with 404 occurring in 2021.

The Russian government continued to use an array of problematic legislation to persecute religious minorities, including Muslims, Protestants, members of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, [Falun Gong](#), and adherents of [indigenous religions](#). The [1996 religion law](#) sets strict registration requirements and empowers state officials to impede and monitor religious groups’ activities. It also broadly defines and prohibits “missionary activities,” including preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites. On April 5, President Vladimir Putin [signed](#) amendments to this law that further expanded the state’s ability to restrict religious practice, including more frequent reporting requirements for religious organizations, a mandate for all foreign-educated clergy to be recertified within Russia, and prohibitions for anyone on the government’s expansive [extremism and terrorism list](#) from participating in or leading religious groups. Other Russian legislation criminalizes “extremism” without adequately defining the term, and charges of “terrorism” require no advocacy or participation in violence, enabling the state to target a vast range of nonviolent religious activity. In 2021, the Russian government began applying the vague “[undesirable organization](#)” label to religious entities, including [four Evangelical](#)

[groups](#) and several organizations linked to the [Church of Scientology](#). Although the legal consequences of this designation remain unclear, it is widely perceived as a step toward an eventual ban on the peaceful religious activity of those targeted.

In 2021, as in past years, peaceful Muslims comprised the majority of political [prisoners](#) persecuted in connection with the realization of their right to freedom of religion, according to the Memorial Human Rights Center. Numerous prison sentences were given to peaceful [adherents](#) of the moderate Muslim theologian Said Nursi and the Tablighi Jamaat missionary group. Crimean Tatar Muslims opposed to the Russian occupation of their Ukrainian homeland continued to receive [lengthy prison sentences](#) for unsubstantiated charges of terrorism based on their Muslim identity and alleged involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), a nonviolent Islamist group that is legal in Ukraine and most Western countries. Russia considers HT a terrorist group despite the lack of any corroborating evidence, and its prosecution of alleged members is often characterized by allegations of torture during interrogation, planted evidence, and the use of “[secret witnesses](#)” with links to Russian security services.

In the Republic of Chechnya, the authoritarian dictatorship of Ramzan Kadyrov maintained domination through the imposition of an official version of Islam that [venerates the Kadyrov family](#) and falsely claims to defend local belief and culture and combat violent extremism. President Kadyrov, who was recently reelected with an alleged [99.7 percent of the vote](#), oversaw or condoned egregious abuses based on his religious views, including against women and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community. In 2021, authorities continued to force Chechens to apologize publicly in humiliating televised confessions for a variety of offenses, including [witchcraft](#) and criticizing Kadyrov.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate 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, including Chechen Minister of Information and Press Akhmed Dudaev and Blagoveshchensk City Court Judge Tatyana Studilko, 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
 - Incorporate religious freedom concerns into Russia-facing diplomatic strategy with European allies, including the use of 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:
- Engage with affected religious communities in Russia and occupied Ukraine and raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, or other actions for community representatives to inform the U.S. government and/or public of existing conditions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Violations in the Republic of Chechnya](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Concerned by Russian Prosecution of International Memorial Society](#)
- **Podcast:** [Abuses of Traditional Religion in Russia](#)
- **Podcast:** [Unrest in Russia](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project:** [Dennis Christensen](#)

Background

The Russian government views independent religious activity as a threat to stability and to its own control, yet it simultaneously cultivates relationships with what it deems “traditional” religions. The country’s population is religiously diverse: around 68 percent identify as Russian Orthodox Christian; seven percent identify as Muslim; and 25 percent comprise an array of communities, including Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, Baha’is, and followers of indigenous religions.

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 authorities broad powers to define and prosecute any religious speech or activity or to ban any religious literature they deem harmful.

Muslims

Russian authorities continued to target followers of Turkish theologian Said Nursi (who died in 1960). Although Nursi’s work emphasizes scientific rationalism and tolerance, the government accuses his followers of trying to establish a Turkic Muslim state. Outside observers find [no evidence](#) of this among those charged or of extremist content in Nursi’s writings. Between October 5 and 6, 2021, at least 16 individuals were [detained](#) in Moscow for supposed ties to Nursi. On November 2, [Gabbrakhman Naumov](#), a respected [Islamic scholar](#) at the Russian Islamic University in Tatarstan, was sentenced to six and a half years in prison for allegedly leading a Nursi group. Also in November, seven individuals in [Dagestan](#) were charged with extremism for supposedly belonging to a Nursi “cell.” On December 17, Nakiya Sharifullina, a [respected teacher](#) and founder of Islamic schools for girls in Tatarstan, remained under house arrest after losing her appeal against charges of possessing Nursi literature.

In occupied Crimea, Russian authorities continued to conflate ethnic Muslim identity with terrorism in their efforts to suppress opposition to their rule on the indigenous Crimean Tatar population. In March 2021, [Mustafa Jemilev](#), a former leader of the Crimean Tatar Majlis (or parliament), was barred from entering Crimea for 13 years. Upon invading Crimea in 2014, Russia labeled the Majlis an “extremist” organization and banned it. On June 1, 2021, [Refat Chubarov](#), another exiled leader of the Majlis was sentenced to six years in prison. In August, four Crimean Tatar activists were sentenced to between 12 and 18 years for [religious studies](#) supposedly linked to HT, which is legal in Ukraine and not credibly linked to acts or advocacy of violence. Imprisoned Crimean Tatars report inhumane conditions, including [rat-infested cells](#) and lack of access to beds, medicine, clean water, and sanitary toilet facilities. In October, four [Crimean Tatar activists](#) were sentenced to between 14 and 17 years for alleged ties to HT. A Crimean Tatar activist, Zekirya Muratov, currently faces 12 years in prison for religious studies supposedly related to HT after refusing pressure to provide [false testimony](#) against fellow activists.

Jehovah’s Witnesses and Other Religious Minorities

As of November 2021, five Jehovah’s Witnesses were [imprisoned](#) in Russian-occupied Crimea, with seven more under house arrest and two forbidden from traveling outside their immediate locale. In 2021, sentences given to Jehovah’s Witnesses were longer than ever, with Judge Tatyana Studilko condemning Aleksei Berchuk in June to eight years in prison, the [harshes sentence](#) to date. On October 28, the Supreme Court ruled that the criminal prosecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses for collective worship was [unlawful](#), but courts subsequently sentenced [eight members](#) to prison. On January 17, 2022, after the reporting period, [father-of-three](#) Maksim Beltikov was sentenced to two years in prison for being a Jehovah’s Witness. On January 19, 2022, Alexei Yershov was sentenced to three years for participating in Jehovah’s Witness [collective worship](#). On January 25, 2022, Anna Safronova received six years in prison, the [longest sentence](#) yet given to a female Jehovah’s Witness.

On September 24, 2021, Russia designated several institutions linked to the [Church of Scientology](#) as “undesirable organizations” that posed “a threat to the security of the Russian Federation.” This designation, which could criminalize possession of Scientologist literature, included the L. Ron Hubbard Library. Members of the indigenous [Mari religion](#) continued to face hostility, with one local official instructing municipal authorities to block the Mari from worshiping on [public property](#), which includes forests sacred to their religion.

Closure of Memorial International Society

On December 29, 2021, the Supreme Court ordered the [liquidation](#) of the Memorial International Society, the umbrella organization for the oldest and most prestigious human rights network in Russia. Memorial documents religious freedom abuses and maintains extensive lists of current political prisoners in Russia, the majority of whom are [imprisoned for their peaceful religious belief or practice](#). The closure of this esteemed institution irreparably harms future efforts by Russian citizens to hold their government accountable for its many abuses of religious freedom.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S.-Russia relations continued to deteriorate in 2021 amid concerns that Russia was poised to expand its invasion of Ukraine, elevating existing tensions over Russian military involvement in Syria, the illegal occupation of Ukrainian territory, and allegations of Russian tampering in U.S. elections. On April 15, 2021, the U.S. government [expanded sanctions](#) against the Russian Federation. On November 15, the U.S. Department of State for the first time [designated](#) Russia as a CPC under IRFA for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. On December 7, President Joseph R. Biden [met](#) with President Putin. U.S.-Russian relations collapsed dramatically in response to Russia’s brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as the United States and its allies levied [unprecedented sanctions](#).