



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

ISSUE UPDATE: PROSECUTING BLASPHEMY IN RUSSIA

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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.

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Prosecuting Blasphemy in Russia

Overview

In recent years, Russia has intensified its enforcement of laws targeting perceived offensive expression toward religion, religious texts, and religious leaders. Among the most problematic of such laws is Article 148 of the Criminal Code, which criminalizes “insulting the religious feelings of believers,” a vague, undefined standard that USCIRF has recognized as a [blasphemy law](#). While blasphemy-related prosecutions in the years following Russia’s 2013 amendment of Article 148 remained limited, the government hardened its approach to policing speech and protecting so-called “traditional values” following its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, resulting in an increase in the number and severity of prosecutions for perceived religiously offensive expression. Authorities have subjected those accused of blasphemy to fines, pretrial detention, imprisonment, mandatory community service, deportation, compulsory psychological treatment, and other forms of ill treatment. While certain offensive statements and actions may warrant public rebuke, prosecuting perceived offensive expression toward religion [violates](#) the right to freedom of religion or belief and the right to freedom of opinion and expression under international human rights law.

This report provides an overview of blasphemy enforcement in Russia and highlights recent cases.

International Human Rights Protections against Blasphemy Laws

USCIRF defines [blasphemy](#) as “the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God or sacred things.” Blasphemy laws punish expressions or acts deemed blasphemous, defamatory of religions, or contemptuous of religion or religious symbols, figures, or feelings. International human rights law protects the rights of individuals; it does not protect religious feelings, figures, or symbols from behavior or speech considered blasphemous.

Article 18 of both the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\)](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#) protects every individual’s right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Under international human rights law, freedom of religion or belief includes the right to express a full range of thoughts and beliefs, including those that others might find blasphemous. Article 19 of both the UDHR and the ICCPR similarly protects freedom of opinion and expression for everyone, including orally, in writing, in print, through forms of art, and in other kinds of media. These protections extend to displays of perceived lack of respect for religion or other belief systems.

Origins of Russia's Blasphemy Law

Russia's criminalization of blasphemy followed Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency for a third term (2012–2018), during which he oversaw the passage of several problematic laws used to crack down on human rights. In June 2013, President Putin signed into law a bill that amended Article 148 of the Criminal Code to penalize “insulting the religious feelings of believers,” which had previously only been an administrative offense. In the immediate years following its enactment, prosecutions under the new criminal statute were limited. According to independent Russian news outlet Mediazona, there were only 32 convictions between 2013 and 2020. During this period, courts mostly imposed community service or fines. The first prison sentence under Article 148 reportedly occurred in 2021 after a court sentenced two individuals to 10 months in prison each over a photo of them pantomiming a sexual act against the backdrop of a cathedral.

Blasphemy Enforcement and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Enforcement of Article 148 intensified following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The war refocused the efforts of Russia's domestic security apparatus to aggressively suppress independent civil society and dissent, especially on the internet. Authorities began expending considerable time and resources to surveil online content and investigate complaints from ordinary citizens, including about perceived blasphemous content. Combating perceived religiously offensive expression served a special role in Russia's wartime policy objectives of protecting so-called “traditional values” and bolstering anti-Western sentiments.

For years, President Putin has championed his interpretation of “traditional values” to oppose the West on human rights and justify his authoritarian practices, which include [systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom](#). The Putin administration has used the concept of so-called “traditional values” in an effort to unify Russia's ethnically and religiously diverse population and rally the Global South against the West and what President Putin describes as its “destructive liberal values,” including the acceptance of religiously offensive expression. However, following the invasion, protecting so-called “traditional values” became a matter of national security, taking on new ideological and policy significance for the Russian government. President Putin has used the protection of so-called “traditional values” to justify his country's 2022 invasion and occupation of Ukraine. He has also directed Russia's domestic security services to defend so-called “traditional values” as a national security priority,

as promulgated in his November 2022 presidential decree, the Ministry of Internal Affairs' November 2024 executive directive, and other government measures.

Overall, Russia's prioritization of protecting “traditional values”—coupled with the state's broader crackdown on opposition to the government, especially online—has resulted in law enforcement more rigorously investigating and prosecuting alleged incidents of blasphemy.

Laws Prohibiting Blasphemy and Other Statutes Used to Target Perceived Blasphemous Expression

Russia has two [laws](#) that qualify as blasphemy laws—one in the Criminal Code and another in the Administrative Code.

Part 1 of Article 148 of the Criminal Code criminalizes “public actions expressing obvious disrespect for society and committed with the purpose of insulting the religious feelings of believers” with up to a year in prison or a fine of up to 300,000 rubles (\$2,906). Part 2 of Article 148 allows for harsher punishments for incidents committed “in places specially designated for worship and other religious observances and ceremonies” with a prison term of up to three years or a fine of up to 500,000 rubles (\$4,843). Courts may also sentence those accused under Article 148 to community service or forced labor.

Part 2 of Article 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (Administrative Code) punishes the “intentional public desecration, damage, or destruction of religious or liturgical literature, items of religious worship, signs, or emblems of belief symbolism and attributes” with a fine of up to 50,000 rubles (\$484) or up to 120 hours of community service.

Authorities sometimes utilize other laws—often in tandem with these blasphemy laws—to prosecute and punish perceived religiously offensive speech and conduct. Article 213 of the Criminal Code criminalizes hooliganism, including hooliganism motivated by “religious hatred.” Article 282 of the Criminal Code and Article 20.3.1 of the Administrative Code punish “incitement of hatred or enmity,” including on the basis of religion. While states have a duty to combat hate speech and incitement to discrimination, hostility, and violence against individuals or groups, international law sets a high [standard](#) for restricting freedom of expression—including on the basis of religion—which Russia does not consistently meet when prosecuting religiously motivated cases through its hate speech laws.

Examples of Blasphemy Enforcement and Related Developments

The Case of Nikita Zhuravel

Among the most egregious examples of Russia's crackdown on blasphemy is the case of [Nikita Zhuravel](#). In May 2023, authorities in Volgograd arrested 19-year-old Zhuravel after a video was posted online of an unidentified individual burning a Qur'an against the backdrop of a mosque and seemingly mocking Muslims. According to investigators, Zhuravel had confessed to burning the Qur'an and carrying out surveillance on Russian military facilities in exchange for money from Ukrainian Security Services, a confession about which human rights activists have cast doubts. Authorities charged Zhuravel under Part 2 of Article 148, despite the fact the purported Qur'an burning did not occur inside a place of worship as the statute requires. Prosecutors later charged Zhuravel under Part 2 of Article 213, as well.

Soon after Zhuravel's arrest, law enforcement announced the transfer of his case to Chechnya due to complaints about the incident from residents there. Lawyers and human rights activists at the time said such a move would violate Russian law, which requires that crimes be investigated and tried in the jurisdictions where they occur. They also argued that Zhuravel would be at reasonable risk of torture in Chechnya, which is known for its abhorrent human rights record, including gross [religious freedom violations](#) committed in the name of upholding state-backed "traditional values." According to Russian media, President Putin publicly supported Zhuravel's transfer to Chechnya, stating that those found guilty of burning the Qur'an must serve their sentences in one of Russia's Muslim-majority regions.

In August 2023, Zhuravel claimed that Adam Kadyrov, the 15-year-old son of the Head of Chechnya [Ramzan Kadyrov](#), physically assaulted him in state custody. Following the accusation, Chechen government officials came out in support of Adam's alleged actions. In September 2023, Ramzan Kadyrov posted a video of the assault, praising his son for doing the "right thing." In October 2023, Ramzan Kadyrov posted a video of himself meeting with Zhuravel, in which Zhuravel purportedly tells Ramzan of his desire to convert to Islam. In December 2023, Ramzan Kadyrov said it "would have been good" if Adam had killed Zhuravel instead of merely beating him. By the end of 2023, federal officials had refused to investigate the beating despite the existence of video evidence, and Adam Kadyrov received nearly a dozen state awards for "defending" faith and "traditional values" in relation to the incident.

In February 2024, the Visaitovsky District Court in Grozny sentenced Zhuravel to three years and six months in prison and 300 hours of community service under Articles 148 and 213. In October 2024, the Prosecutor's Office of the Volgograd Region announced treason charges against Zhuravel for allegedly sending videos of a train transporting Russian military equipment and vehicles to Ukrainian Security Services. In November 2024, the Volgograd Regional Court sentenced Zhuravel to 13 years and six months in prison for "high treason" under Article 275 of the Criminal Code. Zhuravel will reportedly serve 14 years in prison taking into account his first sentence.

Imprisonments and Detentions

Courts have sentenced others to prison time and pretrial detention for blasphemy. In September 2024, a court in the Stavropol Territory sentenced an individual to two years and two months in prison, another to two years in prison, and a minor to one year and 10 months of suspended imprisonment under Articles 148 and 213. In May 2024, police had arrested the three after a video circulated online of them burning a copy of the New Testament on a grill and making perceived offensive remarks. In November 2024, an appeals court upheld the verdict.

In December 2024, a Samara court sentenced musician [Eduard Sharlot](#) to five years and six months in prison under Article 148 and Part 4 of Article 354.1 of the Criminal Code, which criminalizes desecrating symbols of Russian military glory on the internet. In November 2023, airport authorities in St. Petersburg detained Sharlot upon his entry into Russia after he posted videos on social media of himself burning his Russian passport, condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and nailing his military ID, a photograph of Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church, and a crucifix to a tree. In July 2024, Russia added Sharlot to the country's list of terrorists and extremists.

In December 2024, a court in Volgograd sentenced a content creator to two years and six months in prison under Articles 148 and 282. Authorities detained him earlier in the year over perceived negative comments he made about God and religious persons and for referring to Russian soldiers participating in the invasion of Ukraine as "cannon fodder."

In June 2024, police in St. Petersburg detained four individuals under Part 2 of Article 244 of the Criminal Code, which criminalizes "desecrating bodies of the deceased and their burial places," for having a photo shoot at a cemetery featuring nudity and Christian imagery. Two months later, a court placed three of the

accused under house arrest and released the fourth on bail. At the end of 2024, prosecutors had also charged them under Part 2 of Article 148.

Fines

Courts have commonly imposed fines for perceived religiously offensive expression. In February 2024, a court in Volgodonsk fined a blogger 80,000 rubles (\$771) under Article 148 for posting a video online of himself tied to a wooden cross and lifted into the air. In April 2024, a court in Rostov-on-Don fined a fashion designer 40,000 rubles (\$386) under Part 2 of Administrative Code Article 5.26 for walking down a runway at a fashion show while wearing a wreath that looked like a crown of thorns and making a blessing gesture. In June 2024, a St. Petersburg court fined a business owner 30,000 rubles (\$289) under Article 148 because she decorated her bars with Christian iconography, including crosses and images of angels and saints, and included religiously themed names and references on her menus. In July 2024, a court in Ulyanovsk fined an artist 100,000 rubles (\$964) under Article 148 for posting images and texts on social media allegedly mocking Christianity, including an image of a woman resembling the Virgin Mary holding a large beer bottle and an image in which a dinosaur replaces Jesus. That same month, a court in Krasnodar fined an individual 30,000 rubles (\$289) under Part 2 of Article 5.26 for posting on social media an image of Patriarch Kirill with the inscription “Love me! And I will not send you to hell.”

Other Punishments

Courts have imposed several other kinds of punishments on those facing blasphemy allegations. In February 2023, a court in Moscow imposed compulsory psychiatric treatment on a woman charged under Article 148 for posting on social media an image of herself naked against the backdrop of a church. In November 2023, a Moscow court issued an arrest warrant under Article 148 against Pussy Riot member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, who served prison time for the group’s 2012 cathedral protest. Authorities had opened a criminal case against her in March 2023 in relation to unspecified online posts she allegedly made. Tolokonnikova currently lives outside of Russia.

In March 2024, a Krasnodar court sentenced a blogger to 440 hours of community service under Part 2 of Article 148 after she danced on a grave at a cemetery, made obscene gestures, and smoked a cigarette. In May 2024, the Omsk Regional Court liquidated the local Greek Catholic parish after a member of the parish displayed stylized icons of Ukrainian historical figures Stepan Bandera, Roman Shukhevych, and Josyf Slipyj. The month prior, authorities had arrested and later placed under house arrest the accused parishioner under Part 2 of Article 148 and Part 1 of Article 354.1 of the Criminal Code, which criminalizes promoting Nazism and discrediting the Soviet Union’s role during World War II.

Law enforcement has also started policing businesses for using religious imagery in perceived offensive ways. In July 2024, President Putin signed into law a bill that requires authorities to evaluate whether trademarks seeking government approval insult the religious feelings of believers. Also in July 2024, a Moscow court banned the web pages of four online stores selling souvenir toilet paper with the image of the thousand-ruble banknote. The court reportedly deemed that the product insulted the feelings of believers because the note includes an image of a monument to a Russian Orthodox saint. In November 2024, authorities opened an administrative case under Part 2 of Article 5.26 against a retailer for selling bathroom cleaning products with images of Buddha.

Conclusion

Russian authorities continue to perpetrate particularly severe violations of religious freedom, including by prosecuting blasphemy and perceived religiously offensive expression.

Since 2017, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate the Russian Federation 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 of 1998 (IRFA). The State Department designated Russia as a CPC for the first time in 2021 and redesignated it as such in 2022 and 2023 for its violations committed in both Russia and Russian-occupied Ukraine.



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