

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation remained poor. Muslims, including Crimean Tatars detained in Russian-occupied Crimea, faced unsubstantiated terrorism charges for possessing religious materials and holding religious gatherings as alleged members of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Human rights organization Memorial reported that at least 352 people were in prison, faced prosecution, or were under investigation for alleged HT affiliation. Of these prisoners, 131 had received prison sentences between 10 and 14 years, and 119 had received sentences of 15 years or more. In March, a military court sentenced [Vadim Nasyrov](#) and [Marat Bazarbayev](#) to 18 and 14 years in prison, respectively, for their alleged HT religious activities. Imprisoned Muslims reported experiencing torture, medical neglect, forced beard shavings, the confiscation of religious materials, prayer bans, pork-filled food, and other ill treatment.

Authorities also prosecuted and imprisoned members of religious groups—including Allya Ayat, Tablighi Jamaat, Jehovah's Witnesses, and followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi—under spurious “extremism” charges for engaging in peaceful religious activities. In June, a court sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses [Nikolai Polevodov](#) to eight years and six months, [Vitaliy Zhuk](#) to eight years and four months, and [Stanislav Kim](#) to eight years and two months in prison, surpassing the record length of eight years' imprisonment for a Jehovah's Witness. Around 150 Jehovah's Witnesses reportedly endured detention, forced labor, or imprisonment by the end of the year. In December, a court in St. Petersburg declared the local Church of Scientology “extremist.”

Law enforcement targeted other religious minorities and organizations by designating them as “undesirable.” Authorities raided the homes of Falun Gong practitioners and detained several of them for their religious affiliation and possessing Falun Gong literature. A court sentenced one man to a year of forced labor for posting on social media the content of an “undesirable” Protestant

church. Prosecutors ramped up their enforcement of blasphemy laws, targeting perceived insults against religion and religious texts, including online content related to Christianity and other traditions. In February, a court sentenced [Nikita Zhuravel](#) to three and a half years in prison for allegedly burning a Qur'an.

Authorities targeted and suppressed independent civil society reporting on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In February, a court sentenced [Oleg Orlov](#), co-chair of Memorial, to two and a half years in prison for his criticism of Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine; under Orlov's leadership, Memorial defended and documented FoRB prisoners in Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea. Authorities prosecuted individuals expressing opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on religious grounds, labeled religious leaders “foreign agents” for opposing the war publicly, blocked online religious content, and placed other religious minority members and dissidents on its wanted list. In April, a court fined 87-year-old Orthodox Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov 150,000 rubles (\$1,553) for calling the invasion “satanic.”

Russian forces involved in the ongoing invasion and occupation of Ukrainian territory, including Crimea, committed gross violations of religious freedom against Ukrainians by banning religious groups, criminalizing religious materials, and raiding houses of worship. While several Russian-abducted Ukrainian religious leaders returned to Ukraine, Russian forces and de facto authorities reportedly killed or imprisoned others. In February, Russian forces allegedly abducted and tortured to death Stepan Podolchak, a priest with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. In August, a court in Russian-occupied Ukraine sentenced Ukrainian Orthodox Church priest [Kostiantyn Maksimov](#) to 14 years' imprisonment for espionage, following his arrest in May 2023 for refusing to transfer his parish to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (ROC). Ukrainian nongovernmental organizations have reported damage to hundreds of religious sites since the war began in February 2022.

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, including the Federal Security Service (FSB), 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
 - Allocate greater funding to programs supporting civil society and independent media that monitor and document religious freedom and related human rights violations in Russia.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, and other actions; and
 - Advocate for FoRB prisoners of conscience, including supporting individuals in the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedom Project.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Urges Sanctions on Russian Officials Abusing FoRB Prisoners](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Protection of Religious Sites during Armed Conflict](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Misinformation and Disinformation: Implications for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah's Witnesses](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

According to a 2023 Levada Center [poll](#), 72 percent of Russia's population identify as Orthodox Christian, seven percent as Muslim, and 18 percent as having no religious faith. Several other religious groups each constitute one percent or less of the population, including Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Baha'is, Falun Gong practitioners, Scientologists, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Tengrists, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and followers of indigenous religions. Russia's 1997 religion law defines only Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as "traditional" religions. The government also grants special recognition and privileges to the ROC.

Russia [maintains](#) several laws that negatively impact FoRB. The religion law permits fines on individuals engaging in broadly defined "missionary activities" such as preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and answering questions about religion to non-members of religious associations or outside of officially designated sites. Russia also criminalizes the activities of several peaceful religious groups by designating them as "terrorist," "extremist," or "undesirable," despite no evidence or even specific allegations that those accused have promoted or participated in violence. In 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed into law amendments that legalize the deportation of foreigners involved in "illegal missionary work" without a court order, require trademarks to undergo assessment for "offending religious feelings," and expand the scope of organizations that qualify as "undesirable" to include foreign government entities.

International Accountability

Special Procedures at the United Nations (UN) frequently raised Russia's human rights abuses, including against FoRB. In January, UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB Nazila Ghanea disclosed a joint letter sent to the Russian government [inquiring](#) about religious freedom violations in Russian-occupied Ukraine. The UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine further [concluded](#) in its March report that Russian forces had committed "indiscriminate" attacks damaging Ukraine's Transfiguration Cathedral and other buildings in Odesa's historic center, in violation of [international law](#).

In September, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation Mariana Katzarova [documented](#) human rights abuses throughout Russia, including FoRB violations against Jehovah's Witnesses, alleged HT members, anti-war Russian Orthodox clergy and laypersons, and lawyers defending Crimean Tatars. Her report referenced several FoRB prisoners by name, including [Aleksandr Gabyshev](#), [Mikhail Simonov](#), and [Bakhrom Khamroev](#). In a separate report, Katzarova also [documented](#) Russia's widespread systematic torture and ill treatment of prisoners of conscience at home and abroad, [including](#) the use of punishment isolation cells against alleged HT members such as [Teimur Abdullayev](#). In October, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [reported](#) its documentation of cases in which Russian-occupation authorities

in Ukraine arbitrarily detained individuals in apparent connection to their legitimate exercise of FoRB.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled against Russia in several cases this year, including some related to FoRB. In June, the ECHR ruled that Russia had [committed](#) multiple human rights violations in its decade-long occupation of Crimea, including unlawful harassment and intimidation of non-Russian Orthodox religious leaders, arbitrary raids of places of worship, confiscation of religious property, and imprisonment of Crimean Tatar Muslims for alleged HT affiliation. ECHR also ruled in two separate cases that Russia's ["undesirable" organizations](#) and ["foreign agents"](#) laws violated the European Convention on Human Rights. Russian authorities have used both laws to target religious groups, anti-war religious leaders, and human rights organizations and independent media that regularly report on religious freedom conditions.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government [continued](#) to [sanction](#) Russian individuals and entities involved in supporting that country's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. In February, the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden [announced](#) more than 500 new sanctions, including against Russian prison officials connected to the death of opposition leader Aleksey Navalny. The sanctions also [coincided](#) with the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the 10th anniversary of its invasion of Crimea. In August, the United States and Russia completed a 24-person prisoner swap that secured the release of several Americans and Russian civil society actors, including Oleg Orlov.

The U.S. government worked to expose and combat Russian propaganda and misinformation, including against religious minorities. In January, the U.S. Department of State's Global Engagement Center [released](#) a report documenting Russia's decades-long incorporation of antisemitism into its propaganda and misinformation.

The U.S. Congress raised Russia's religious freedom violations in Ukraine through meetings, congressional delegation visits, and hearings throughout the year. In February, Speaker of the House of Representatives Mike Johnson (R-LA) met with Ukrainian Protestant religious leaders to discuss Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In April, a bicameral congressional delegation [visited](#) Ukraine and toured Odesa's damaged Transfiguration Cathedral. In July, the Helsinki Commission held a [hearing](#) led by Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC) on Russia's persecution of Ukrainian Christians, and in September, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a [hearing](#) led by Representative Jim McGovern (D-MA) on Russia's efforts to erase Ukrainian culture and identity, including through the destruction of Ukrainian religious sites. In December, the Russian government declared "undesirable" the Helsinki Commission and the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which is now known as the Article 18 Alliance.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Russia as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.