



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Russia's Persecution of Religious Groups and FoRB Actors

Overview

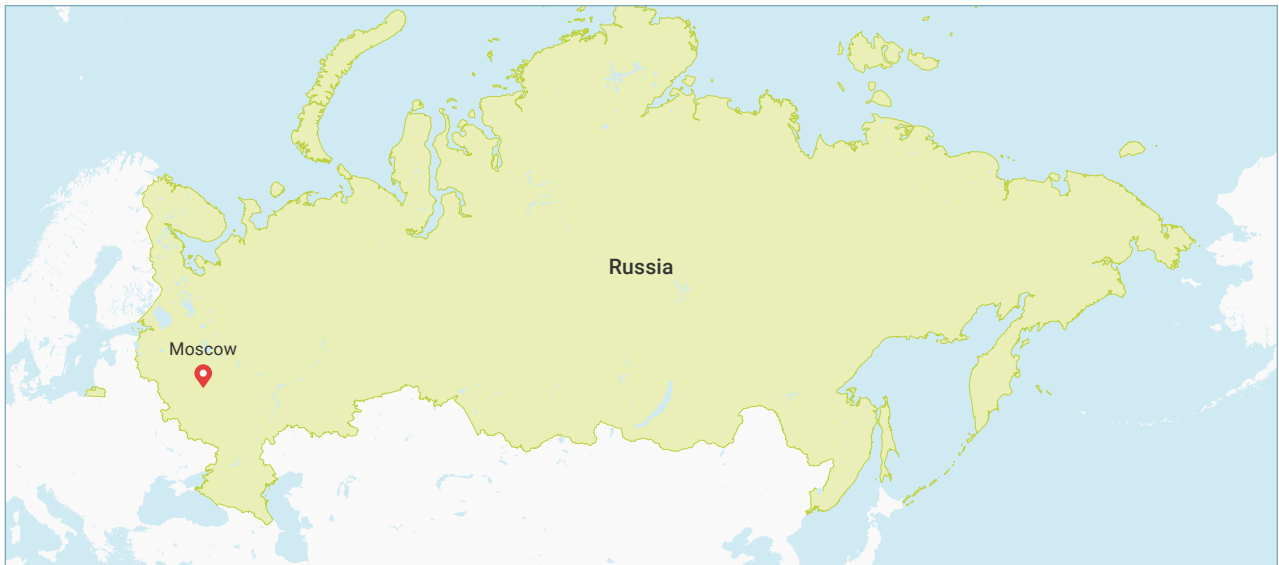
The Russian government perpetrates [*particularly severe violations*](#) of religious freedom against a range of religious groups and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) actors, in blatant violation of international law. Throughout 2024 and the first half of 2025, Russia prosecuted members of several perceived “non-traditional” religious organizations for their religious activities in both Russia and Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine. Authorities also targeted independent civil society organizations, human rights activists working on FoRB, and dissidents expressing opinions involving religion. Human rights organizations have identified hundreds of prisoners in Russian custody unjustly imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

This report provides updates on persecuted religious groups and other FoRB actors in [*Russia*](#) and [*Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine*](#) and highlights recent cases of FoRB violations.

Persecution of Religious Groups and FoRB Actors

Background

According to a 2023 [*poll*](#) from the independent Levada Center, 72 percent of Russia's population identify as Orthodox Christian, seven percent as Muslim, five percent as atheist, and 13 percent as having no religious affiliation. Several other religious groups each constitute one percent or less of the population, including Baha'is, Buddhists, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Falun Gong practitioners, Hindus, followers of indigenous religions, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Scientologists, and Tengrists. Russia's religion law defines Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as “traditional” religions. The government [*grants*](#) special recognition and privileges to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (ROC-MP), such as security guards and access to official government vehicles. Such privileges are not afforded to other religious groups, and the ROC-MP has reportedly received more government-granted property than other religious organizations.



The Russian government uses several [vague, problematic laws](#) to target religious individuals and groups it perceives as a threat. The country's religion law penalizes individuals and organizations for engaging in broadly defined "missionary activities" that lack government approval. Authorities criminalize the activities of several peaceful religious organizations by designating them as "[extremist](#)," "undesirable," or "terrorist" despite a lack of evidence or even specific allegations that those accused promoted, participated in, or plotted violence. Additionally, the government penalizes human rights activists documenting FoRB violations, those engaging in perceived religiously offensive expression, and religiously grounded anti-war protesters through the country's foreign agents law, [blasphemy law](#), and war censorship laws.

People Engaging in So-Called Illegal Missionary Activities

According to statistics published by the Russian Supreme Court, Russian courts in 2024 considered 431 cases of religion law violations—including against so-called illegal missionary activities—which resulted in fines totaling 4,747,000 rubles (\$58,388). In April 2025, the Savelovsky District Court of Moscow fined two Muslim migrants 30,000 rubles (\$369) each for inviting metro riders to perform *namaz* (the five daily Islamic ritual prayers) with them, which the court deemed "illegal missionary work." Authorities also deported foreign citizens for their so-called illegal missionary activities. In September 2024, the Central District Court of Sochi fined and ordered the deportation of an 85-year-old Polish Roman Catholic

priest—who had reportedly served in Russia for almost 30 years—for "illegal missionary work" after he lost his documentation permitting him to preach in Sochi.

Authorities have closed houses of worship for those engaging in so-called illegal missionary activities. In May 2025, the Fourth Cassation Court of General Jurisdiction upheld a ban on the activities of a Baptist house of prayer in Kurganinsk. According to authorities, the house of prayer had failed to properly register as a religious organization and thus had conducted illegal missionary activities for its roughly 1,500 attendees. Authorities sealed the building shut following the most recent ruling.

Blasphemy-Accused

Authorities [prosecute](#) individuals for their perceived offensive expression toward religion, religious texts, and religious leaders. In September 2024, the Novoaleksandrovsky District Court of 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 days of suspended imprisonment after a video circulated online of the three of them burning a copy of the New Testament and making perceived offensive remarks. In April 2025, a court in Dorogobuzh sentenced an individual to 100 hours of community service for attempting to record himself burning a Bible. Many blasphemy-accused remain imprisoned, including [Nikita Zhuravel](#) and [Eduard Sharlot](#).

Anti-War Protesters and Religious Leaders

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, authorities have targeted anti-war protesters and religious leaders for expressing opposition to the war in religious terms. In October 2024, law enforcement reportedly physically assaulted and arrested Pentecostal Pastor Nikolay Romanyuk at his home because of a sermon he gave during Sunday worship in September 2022 that called on fellow Christians not to participate in Russia's war against Ukraine. In April 2025, the Nevsky District Court in St. Petersburg fined Apostolic Orthodox Church Archbishop Grigory Mikhnov-Vaitenko 30,000 rubles (\$369) for posting in March 2022 an anti-war video in which he discussed Russia's invasion of Ukraine using a Biblical story. The Ministry of Justice has also sought to delegitimize prominent anti-war religious leaders—including Mikhnov-Vaitenko, Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, Buddhist leader Erdni-Basan Ombadykov (Telo Tulku Rinpoche), and Pentecostal Bishop Albert Ratkin—by adding them to the country's foreign agents registry.

Human Rights Activists and Independent Media

Authorities target independent activists and organizations, including those working on FoRB issues. In August 2024, the Supreme Court upheld the prison sentence of 13 years and nine months against human rights lawyer [Bakhrom Khamroev](#). Authorities arrested Khamroev—who was well known for providing legal defense to Muslims accused of involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT)—in February 2022 over posts he allegedly made on social media discussing religion and referring to HT. Since his imprisonment, prison authorities have allegedly beat him, taken away his Qur'an, and subjected him to other mistreatment. Khamroev's health has also seriously deteriorated reportedly due to inhumane living conditions and medical neglect. In May 2025, the Ministry of Justice labeled Crimean Tatar journalist and human rights defender Lutfiye Zudiyeva a "foreign agent." Zudiyeva has reported extensively on the arrest and mistreatment of Crimean Tatars Muslims in Russian-occupied Crimea.

The Ministry of Justice recently added two FoRB-oriented human rights organizations to its foreign agents registry: the SOVA Research Center in November 2024 and "Support for Political Prisoners. Memorial" in January 2025. The Ministry of Justice had previously [liquidated](#) the [predecessors](#) of both organizations under spurious pretenses. Several independent media outlets who report on FoRB issues remain criminalized. In

February 2024, authorities declared Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty "undesirable."

Muslims Accused of Terrorism

Russian authorities have targeted Muslims for their involvement in HT since the Supreme Court declared the group a "terrorist" organization in 2003. HT members face terrorism charges—despite no evidence or even allegations that defendants called for or committed violence—for possessing religious literature, discussing religion and politics, and recruiting members to the group. Human rights organization Memorial reported in September 2024 that Russia had prosecuted at least 352 people, including Crimean Tatar Muslims, for HT affiliation. Out of the 280 convicted, Russian courts had sentenced 131 to between 10 and 14 years in prison and 119 to 15 years or more.

In May 2024, the Central District Military Court in Yekaterinburg sentenced Rais Mavlyutov to 10 years in prison for trying to convince a fellow prisoner to join HT. Detained since September 2019, Mavlyutov was sentenced in April 2021 to 23 years in prison for his HT activities, which included organizing meetings, discussing religion and politics, and reading religious literature. Mavlyutov's combined sentence now totals 27 years in prison. In September 2024, Federal Security Service (FSB) agents detained four women in Kazan for organizing and participating in HT activities, including holding religious meetings. That same month, United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation Mariana Katzarova [identified](#) human rights abuses throughout Russia, including its prosecution of alleged HT members in both Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea.

Conscientious Objectors

Authorities have denied alternative civilian service to conscientious objectors refusing to serve in the military on religious grounds. Article 59 of Russia's Constitution grants every citizen the right to alternative civilian service; however, this right does not extend to mobilized men whom military authorities are calling up to fight in Ukraine. In January 2024, Pentecostal Christian Maksim Makushin arrived at prison to begin serving his sentence. In September 2023, the Murmansk Garrison Military Court sentenced Makushin to two years and eight months in prison for refusing to serve in the military, citing his religious beliefs. In November 2024, the Berezovka District Court fined a Baptist Christian

60,000 rubles (\$738) for refusing military service. Other conscientious objectors, including Protestant Christians [Vyacheslav Reznichenko](#) and [Andrey Kapatsyna](#), remain in prison.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Since the Russian Supreme Court declared Jehovah's Witnesses "extremist" in 2017, Russian law enforcement has reportedly searched nearly 2,200 member homes and brought criminal charges against more than 860 for their religious beliefs and activities. As of May 2025, roughly 180 Jehovah's Witnesses remain in Russian custody, either in pretrial detention, imprisoned, under house arrest, or subjected to forced labor.

In February 2025, the Yoshkar-Ola City Court in the Republic of Mari El fined nine Jehovah's Witnesses 600,000 rubles (\$7,380) each and another one 500,000 rubles (\$6,150) for their involvement in worship meetings. That same month, the Cherkessk City Court of Karachay-Cherkessia sentenced Yevgeniy Semenov to six years and three months in prison for sharing his religious beliefs with others. In March 2025, the Altai Regional Court replaced on appeal the suspended sentence of Sergey Lukin with four years and six months of forced labor for holding meetings to discuss Jehovah's Witness religious beliefs.

Imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses face prohibitions on their religious activities, mistreatment, and gross medical neglect. In March 2025, 67-year-old Valery Bailo died while serving a two-and-a-half-year sentence for his Jehovah's Witness religious activities. According to his family, prison authorities failed to provide Bailo with adequate medical care despite his repeated visits to the prison hospital.

In Russian-occupied Crimea, the Russian-controlled Gagarin District Court of Sevastopol in January 2025 sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses Sergey Zhigalov and Viktor Kudinov to six years in prison each for organizing religious activities. As of May 2025, 13 Jehovah's Witnesses from Russian-occupied Crimea remain imprisoned, with all of them serving sentences of six years or more.

Tablighi Jamaat Members

Since the Supreme Court recognized the Muslim missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat as "extremist" in 2009, the Russian government has prosecuted its members. In January 2024, the Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk City Court—in two separate cases—sentenced one man to six years in

prison and another to two years and six months in prison for organizing meetings, distributing religious literature, and engaging in missionary activities. FSB officers had "stopped" their activities in February 2023. In July 2024, the Gorodishchensky District Court in the Penza Region sentenced one individual to six years' suspended imprisonment and four others to three years and six months' suspended imprisonment for their Tablighi Jamaat activities. In March 2025, Memorial reported the sentencing of 10 Tablighi Jamaat members in 2024 to unknown prison sentences. FSB officers had detained the men in the Moscow Region in July 2023 and confiscated religious literature during searches of their homes.

Said Nursi Followers

Authorities have used a 2008 Supreme Court ruling declaring a so-called "Nurdzhular" organization "extremist" to prosecute Muslims who meet to study the writings of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi. In July 2024, the Kuzminsky District Court in Moscow sentenced Zurab Dzhabrailov to six years in prison and Dzheykhun Rustamov to two years and nine months in prison for publishing, translating, and distributing Said Nursi's works and creating groups to study them. According to nongovernmental organization Forum 18, the two men had been under state surveillance since 2017. FSB officers arrested them in August 2023. As of May 2025, several other Muslims remain in prison for their religious activities tied to Said Nursi, including [Yevgeny Tarasov](#), [Urdash Abdullayev](#), [Parviz Zeynalov](#), and [Mukazhan Ksyupov](#).

Falun Gong Practitioners

The government has targeted Falun Gong practitioners for holding meetings, practicing qigong exercises, and distributing religious literature since the Prosecutor General's Office declared several Falun Gong entities "undesirable" in 2020. In November 2024, the Pyatigorsk City Court of the Stavropol Territory sentenced Oksana Shchetkina to two years in prison for leading a local branch of a banned Falun Gong organization. Law enforcement had arrested her in March 2024. In December 2024, the Lyambirsky District Court in Mordovia sentenced a man to 400 hours of community service over his Falun Gong activities. Law enforcement had detained him in September 2024 after searching the homes of Falun Gong practitioners in Mordovia. As of January 2025, several other Falun Gong practitioners arrested in 2024 remain in Russian custody awaiting trial.

Protestants

The government has prosecuted members of several Protestant organizations for their perceived close ties to foreign religious communities. In April 2024, the Central District Court of Prokopyevsk in the Kemerovo Region sentenced an individual to one year of forced labor with related financial penalties for posting materials on social media of the banned New Generation Church. Authorities had designated the church “undesirable” in 2021. Several Protestant Christians remain imprisoned for their affiliation with New Generation Church, including [Nikolai Ulitin](#) and [Svyatoslav Yugov](#).

In January 2025, authorities detained Pastor [Stanislav Moskvitin](#)—who had previously served prison time for his religious activities—for allegedly showing videos of pastors from the banned Transformation Center Church International (Transformation Center Covenant Network) during a meeting. Authorities had designated the church “undesirable” in 2023. In March and April 2025, courts in the Republic of Bashkortostan sentenced an individual to 360 hours of community service and another to two years’ suspended imprisonment for collecting donations for the banned religious organization All-Ukrainian Spiritual Center Renaissance and its charitable arm. Authorities had declared the two entities “undesirable” in 2022.

The government has recently criminalized other Protestant organizations, groups, and literature. In June 2024, authorities declared three affiliates of the nondenominational Great Commission Media Ministries “undesirable,” and in March 2025, authorities designated “extremist” the book *The New Testament: The Restoration Translation*, which the Local Church distributes.

Scientologists

Authorities have prosecuted leaders and members of the Church of Scientology. In 2021, the Prosecutor General’s Office designated two Scientologist institutions as “undesirable.” More recently in December 2024, authorities declared the St. Petersburg branch of the Church of Scientology as “extremist,” increasing the range of possible penalties for affiliating with the Church of Scientology. In March 2025, sources reported that FSB agents in Kaliningrad had arrested an individual for his Scientologist activities.

Allya Ayat Members

Authorities have targeted members of the spiritual movement Allya Ayat since various courts declared its religious literature and local branches “extremist” throughout the 2010s. In January 2024, FSB officials raided the homes and other meeting places of Allya Ayat members in the Altai Republic, reportedly identifying some 150 members and confiscating religious literature. In March 2024, authorities reported detaining several Allya Ayat members in Rostov-on-Don. In March 2025, the Sovetsky District Court and the Central District Court of Novosibirsk sentenced four women to suspended imprisonments ranging from six years to six years and eight months for their religious activities, collecting donations, and distributing religious literature.

Ukrainian Christians

Russia’s 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine have brought about the intense [persecution](#) of Ukrainian religious communities, including various Christians groups. Russian de facto authorities have banned the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and various Protestant groups, including Baptists, Pentecostals, and Seventh-day Adventists. Russian de facto authorities often commit religious freedom violations as a means to facilitate the ROC-MP’s dominance in these territories, such as by pressuring Orthodox Christian communities and leaders to transfer to the ROC-MP. According to Ukrainian nongovernmental organizations, at least 47 religious leaders have been killed, and more than 640 houses of worship and other religious sites have been damaged or destroyed since Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022.

In February 2024, Russian forces allegedly abducted and tortured to death OCU priest Stepan Podolchak. In July 2024, Russian de facto authorities reportedly demolished the last remaining OCU church in Russian-occupied Crimea. In August 2024, the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court sentenced Ukrainian Orthodox Church priest [Kostiantyn Maksimov](#) to 14 years in prison on fabricated espionage charges related to his refusal to transfer his church to the ROC-MP. In December 2024, a UN human rights report [highlighted](#) Russia’s torture and ill treatment of Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests [Ivan Levitsky](#) and [Bohdan Geleta](#) during their detention from November 2022 to June 2024. One of the priests had accused Russian forces of subjecting him to regular beatings, prolonged stress positions, and long-distance crawls on asphalt.

Crimean Tatar Muslims

Since Russia illegally took control of Crimea, Ukraine, in 2014, Russian de facto authorities have [targeted](#) Crimean Tatar activists on the basis of their Muslim religious identity. Russian military courts imprison Crimean Tatar Muslims on unsubstantiated terrorism charges in connection to their alleged affiliation with HT. While the Russian Supreme Court declared HT a “terrorist” organization, the group operates legally in Ukraine. Russian authorities have prosecuted Crimean Tatar Muslims for allegedly possessing religious literature and talking about religion and politics. In June 2024, the European Court of Human Rights [ruled](#) that Russia had committed multiple human rights violations throughout its occupation of Crimea, including related to the imprisonment of Crimean Tatars for their alleged HT membership. As of August 2024, the Crimean Tatar Research Center had identified 110 people from Crimea in Russian pretrial detention or prison for their alleged HT affiliation.

In February 2025, FSB officials in Crimea detained five Crimean Tatars for their alleged HT involvement. Families of the detained had accused Russian security forces of planting banned religious literature during the searches of their homes. In April 2025, the Southern District Military Court in Rostov-on-Don sentenced Ekrem Krosh, Leman Zekeryaev, Osman Abdurazakov, Refat Seidametov, and Khalil Mamebetov to 14 years in prison each and Aider Asanov to 11 years in prison for their alleged HT membership, which prosecutors reportedly determined on the basis of a secretly recorded conversation about religion. Russian law enforcement had detained the six in January 2023. During the trial,

Krosh had accused officers at his pretrial detention facility of prohibiting him from performing *namaz*, forcing him to recite the Russian national anthem, and beating him repeatedly when he refused to do so.

Imprisoned Crimean Tatar Muslims have reported mistreatment, inhumane living conditions, and rampant medical neglect, resulting in the severe deterioration of health for many prisoners. Crimean Tatar Muslims have also repeatedly accused prison authorities of violating their religious rights, including by imposing bans on performing *namaz*, forcing prisoners to shave their beards, and not accommodating their Ramadan religious observances.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Russia continued to perpetrate particularly severe religious freedom violations against a wide range of religious groups in Russia and Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine as well as civil society activists and human rights defenders who work on freedom of religion or belief issues. Since 2017, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate 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 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.

In 2025, USCIRF also [recommended](#) that the State Department impose targeted sanctions on Russian government agencies and officials responsible for religious freedom violations and that Congress advocate for FoRB prisoners of conscience imprisoned by Russia.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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