



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

August 2025

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN RUSSIA

Vicky Hartzler
Chair

Asif Mahmood
Vice Chair

Commissioners

Ariela Dubler

Mohamed Elsanousi

Maureen Ferguson

Stephen Schneck

Meir Soloveichik

Erin D. Singshinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

On July 10, 2025, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a hearing: [*Freedom of Religion or Belief in Russia*](#). USCIRF Chair Vicky Hartzler and Vice Chair Asif Mahmood led the hearing, which included testimony from members of civil society. Witnesses discussed current religious freedom conditions in Russia as well as potential policy options for the U.S. government. Commissioners Maureen Ferguson and Stephen Schneck also participated in the hearing.

[*Chair Hartzler*](#) opened the hearing by emphasizing the vast and diverse number of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) prisoners currently in Russian custody. She discussed the Russian government's restrictions on religious activities within Russia and its crackdown on Russian civil society, including those working on religious freedom issues. Chair Hartzler also mentioned Russia's religious freedom violations against Ukrainian religious leaders and the destruction of Ukrainian houses of worship following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. She concluded her remarks by calling on the U.S. Department of State to redesignate Russia as a Country of Particular Concern and prioritize Russia's religious freedom record in U.S. foreign policy.

[*Vice Chair Mahmood*](#) provided additional remarks about USCIRF's other policy recommendations to address Russia's religious freedom record. He called for U.S. sanctions against Russian government officials and agencies involved in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, citing the gross mistreatment of FoRB prisoners. Vice Chair Mahmood highlighted the critical role independent media and human rights organizations play to uncover Russian religious freedom violations. He also called on the U.S. Congress to raise its voice on the situation for religious freedom in Russia, including by advocating for FoRB prisoners as part of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project.

[*Stephen Capus*](#), President and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), recounted RFE/RL's history of providing cultural programming and unbiased news to countries behind the Iron Curtain, including related to religion. He discussed RFE/RL's work in recent years documenting religious freedom violations, including against Muslims in Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants. Mr. Capus also discussed how Russia's embrace of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarch (ROC-MP) has coincided with a broader crackdown on political dissent, human rights activists, and independent media like RFE/RL. He ended his testimony by reaffirming RFE/RL's commitment to promoting truth and combating Russian propaganda.

[*Willy Fautré*](#), Director and Co-Founder of Human Rights Without Frontiers, connected Russia's repression of religious freedom to a state policy aimed at protecting the population's "spiritual and moral welfare" from foreign religious organizations. He asserted moreover that this policy forms the basis of Russia's crackdown on religious activities, including restricting missionary work, banning peaceful religious groups as "extremist" or "undesirable," and prosecuting blasphemy. Mr. Fautré concluded his remarks by emphasizing the government's support for the ROC-MP and highlighting the



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role certain Orthodox clergy play in influencing state policy targeting religious minorities.

[Jarrod Lopes](#), Regional Director of Communications of the World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses, testified on Russia's unjust persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses. He said that since 2017, Russian authorities have raided thousands of Jehovah's Witness homes, opened legal proceedings against hundreds, and added members to the federal list of extremists and terrorists. Mr. Lopes highlighted the methods Russian law enforcement use against Jehovah's Witnesses, including undercover agents attending Jehovah's Witness meetings and secretly recording conversations. He mentioned the individual cases of several persecuted Jehovah's Witnesses and underlined the struggles they and their families have had to endure.

[Dan Storyev](#), English Managing Editor of OVD-Info, stressed the connection between Russian independent civil society and persecuted religious groups. He recounted the Russian government's crackdown on civil society in recent years, including the targeting of political opposition supporters, closure or "toxic" labeling of human rights organizations, forced exile of human rights activists, and imprisonments under the country's war censorship laws. Mr. Storyev discussed the challenges Russians face whether in Russian prison or in exile outside the country. He recommended that the U.S. government welcome Russian FoRB refugees and fund programs supporting Russian civil society.

[Halyna Coynash](#), a journalist with the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, discussed Russia's religious freedom violations in the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine. She recounted the impact Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea had on religious communities who were subjected to forced reregistration, surveillance, threats, administrative proceedings, and seizure of property. Ms. Coynash described the government's persecution of Crimean Solidarity civic journalists and activists on bogus terrorism charges tied to their Muslim identity. She concluded her testimony by highlighting the violations Russian military forces have committed against Ukrainian clergy following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Following witness testimonies, Chair Hartzler led a question-and-answer session to discuss religious freedom developments and potential policy options for the U.S. government. During this session, witnesses discussed the impacts of the current U.S. administration's policies on RFE/RL. They also discussed the Russian government's use of the concept of "traditional values," the role the ROC-MP plays in Ukraine, and challenges religious community members face once added to Russia's federal list of extremists and terrorists.

Chair Hartzler concluded the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their testimony.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan legislative branch agency established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on 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.