

Note: most of the data here comes from OVD-Info databases. You can see public versions [here](#), [here](#) or [here](#).

Good morning to all. I represent OVD-Info. I won't focus solely on the issues of freedom of religion — rather, I would like to give you a broad overview on the situation for civil society in Russia. The health of civil society in Russia is paramount for maintaining religious freedoms, as the work of civil society ensures safety and visibility for persecuted religious minorities.

OVD-Info is one of the largest human rights projects still operating on the ground in Russia. Founded in 2011 we have continuously worked on issues related to freedom of assembly and expression. We currently provide free legal aid across Russia, provide relentless media coverage of the Kremlin's repression, engage in advocacy on the global level as well as providing cutting-edge research on repression.

Since Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the scope of repression in Russia increased drastically — touching religious as well as non-religious people. We at OVD-Info currently know of 1597 people jailed for political reasons. Particularly, 277 are jailed for standing up to the war in Ukraine. 534 are affiliated with religious organizations.

This crackdown on freedom of expression would be impossible, without the destruction of vital civil society structures. The Kremlin embarked on a destruction of free media and civil society at least a decade before its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. That destruction intensified in 2021. There was a mass crackdown on supporters of now-murdered dissident Alexei Navalny, as well as on civil society more broadly — for instance, the Nobel Prize-winning Memorial Center was liquidated. OVD-info was also designated as a foreign agent that year.

Once the full-scale invasion began, a large part of civil society was driven into exile abroad, and some jailed under the hastily designed wartime legislations — such as the law on “spreading fake information about the military”. The law effectively outlaws all criticism of Russia's military. Orthodox priest Ioan Kurmoyarov spent 3 years in jail under this law after posting a video where he said that “those who begin aggression don't go to heaven”.

It is important to note that prisoners in Russia are kept in atrocious conditions, sometimes lacking access to basic medicine or appropriate food, often facing humiliation or torture. Take the case of Jehovah's Witness Valeriy Baylo. He was accused of “participating in an extremist organisation”. Baylo, 67, was deeply ill, in urgent need of a knee surgery and suffering from stomach and tooth pain. For months he was not allowed to see a medic. On March 21 of this year Valeriy died. His lawyer blames prison administration saying that the believer “most likely died from hunger and exhaustion.”

Note also, that those who are lucky to flee Russia are often unsafe. Exiles are forced to live in fear of transnational repression — especially if they are unable to move to a safe country. These safe countries tend to also have more stringent immigration rules: USA, EU, UK, Canada, etc. Thus, those who have to flee to, for instance, more open Kyrgyzstan, might find themselves in the same situation as activist Lev Skroryakin, who was kidnapped in Bishkek, beaten and brought to Moscow, where an OVD-Info lawyer had to retrieve him.

Toxic statuses

Speaking of the “extremist organization” charge, currently, the Kremlin uses a wide variety of techniques to hamper civil society activities. The authorities might designate people or groups with so-called toxic statuses of “undesirable”, “extremist” or “foreign agent”. These statuses can make ground operations significantly difficult or outright ban them, leading to a wholesale closure. 13 religious organizations have toxic statuses — including Jehovah’s Witnesses and Falun Gong.

The Kremlin masterfully targets operations of civil society institutions going after their crucial ability to fundraise. This became especially apparent after the end of USAID and similar programmes. This change in US foreign policy had endangered key independent media which cannot legally fundraise in Russia without putting their donors at risk. Take Meduza — an “undesirable” organization, they have been on the forefront of reporting on human rights in Russia. The New York Times [estimated](#) that roughly 15% of their annual budget came from US-funded programmes. The current administration’s policy thus led a key institution of Russian human rights press into financial trouble.

Policy recommendations.

There are many policy recommendations one could make, but the two key ones would have to do with the following:

Enabling refugees to find shelter in the US. While they are often little to know leverages the US has on Russia’s treatment of believers, the US can indeed help the religious individuals who flee Russia by allowing them into the US where they can practice their religions freely — or by facilitating other safe countries to take them in.

Connected to the above point, the US can also help promote religious freedom and tolerance by enabling human rights organisations through funding and platforms. It is also paramount that the international community keeps an eye on the information shared by human rights defenders and organisations: that data from OVD-Info and other key rights groups is included in policy making calculations. We encourage you to continue using our data in reports and white papers.

— ORAL TESTIMONY END —

Key religious groups persecuted by the Kremlin include:

Hizb ut-Tahrir Muslims

Hizb ut-Tahrir is a global Islamic organization, legal in Ukraine but outlawed in Russia. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Kremlin embarked on a crackdown against alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members, often using fabricated charges — some would argue that the Kremlin's authorities are instrumentalizing the charge to come after Crimean Tatar self-determination.

Occupied Crimea remains the key focus of Hizb ut-Tahrir persecution but other regions, such as Tatarstan, are also impacted. Right now 289 are jailed because of their alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir connection. 40% of them have been sentenced to 10-15 years in jail.

Consider the case of Alexander Sizikov. As is often the case in Crimean Hizb ut-Tahrir cases the evidence for his case is based on “extremist literature” found by security services in his home. Only Sizikov is legally blind — and the books were not in Braille. The authorities detained Sizikov in 2020 but due to his disability they could not imprison him outright. Only on May 17 2023 he was sentenced to 17 years. In 2025, after years of house arrest, he was sent to jail.

Sizikov's story does have a happy ending. He was freed on May 26 after a medical assessment proving that he is entirely blind, and a prolonged legal battle. This case shows that advocacy and incremental change are still possible, even within the Russian prison system.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses have long been persecuted in the USSR, and after a brief reprieve in the 1990s, persecution resumed under Putin's rule. Since 2012, 935 have been persecuted. 169 are in jail right now. 57% of them have been sentenced to 5-7 years in jail. Russian courts are known to liberally use the “extremism” designation to come after Putin's political opponents and non-violent groups. Jehovah's Witnesses were banned for “extremist” activities back in 2017.

One particularly illustrative case is that of Dennis Christensen. It demonstrates that even western foreigners are unsafe from the repression in Russia. Christensen is a Danish national and a Jehovah's Witness himself, Christensen moved to Russia in 2000 where he said he “felt at home”. Following the aforementioned 2017 designation Christensen was detained by the FSB and, ultimately, jailed for “organizing extremist organization's activity”. He spent 5 years in prison.

Anti-war (Christians and others)

It is important to note that while the Russian Christians are often stereotyped as ardent supporters of the war against Ukraine, there are nevertheless anti-war Christians, priests

and regular believers alike. There are currently 4 religious activists jailed for anti-war activities, 3 of them are Christians of various denominations.

An illustrative story here is that of Ioann Kurmoyarov. He was jailed in 2022 for his public anti-war views — he published videos denouncing the war in Ukraine, saying that “those who initiate aggression do not go to heaven”. Kurmoyarov had served his sentence on August 1 2024 and now lives in France, demonstrating the importance of shelter abroad for Russian anti-war, and religious dissidents.

Banned groups

To come back to the earlier point about various markers, the Kremlin is keen to label groups as “undesirable” “terrorist” or “extremist” which impacts their legal status in a way that they endanger their members, and they cannot operate and fundraise in Russia. Hizb ut-Tahrir was prohibited in Russia in 2003 as “terrorist”, and Jehovah’s Witnesses have been declared “extremist” in 2017.

Other banned religious organizations are:

New Generation.

Neo-Pentecostal Christian Congregation founded in Latvia by Alexei Ledyaev. Prohibited in Russia as an undesirable organisation in 2021.

At-Takfir wal-Hijrah.

A radical Islamist group Jama'at al-Muslimin founded by Shukri Mustafa which emerged in Egypt in the 1960s as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Prohibited in Russia as extremist organisation in 2010.

Falun Gong.

A new religious movement founded by Li Hongzhi in China in the early 1990s. Prohibited in Russia as undesirable organisation in 2020.

Revival Church.

Christian religious association organised by Vladimir Muntean in 1997 in Dnepropetrovsk. Prohibited in Russia as undesirable organisation in 2022.

AllatRa.

A new religious movement founded in Ukraine in 2011. Prohibited in Russia as undesirable organisation in 2023.

Nurcists.

An Islamist movement that was founded in Turkey in the early 20th century and based on the writings of Said Nursi. Nurcular prohibited in Russia as extremist organisation in 2008.

Tablighi Jamaat.

An international Islamic religious movement established in 1926 by Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi in the Mewat region of British India. Prohibited in Russia as extremist organisation in 2009.

Scientologists.

A new religious movement of the Gnostic type founded in the early 1950s in the USA. Prohibited in Russia as undesirable organisation in 2021.

Faisrahmanists.

Islamic community founded in late 1990 in Tatarstan by Faizrahman Sattarov. Prohibited in Russia as extremist organisation in 2013.

Alla ayat.

A religious doctrine founded in the late 1980s in Kazakhstan by Farhat Abdullaev. Prohibited in Russia as extremist organisation in 2013.

TCCN Covenant of Churches.

A new religious movement founded in 2006 in the USA by Andrei Shapovalov. Prohibited in Russia as undesirable organisation in 2023.