

TESTIMONY
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For the U.S. Commission on International religious Freedom
“Freedom of Religion or Belief in Russia”

July 10, 2025

Chair Hartzler, Vice Chair Mahmood, and distinguished Members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, thank you for hosting this hearing and inviting me to speak today.

Last September, I was honored to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of RFE/RL’s Ukrainian Service in Kyiv, the capital of war-torn Ukraine. Along with current and former RFE/RL journalists, Ukrainian officials, Western diplomats and NGO leaders, we were joined at this event by representatives of Ukraine’s diverse religious community, including Metropolitan Epiphanius of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Chief Rabbi of Ukraine Moshe Reuven Azman, and senior Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church official Father Taras Zheplinsky. We were honored by their presence at the celebration, but even more by their statements of support. Said Metropolitan Epiphanius,

“In the Gospel of John there are these words of Christ: ‘You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ ...The word of truth, which overcame the Iron Curtain, which reached the ears and hearts of millions, was successful...The work of previous generations of Radio Liberty journalists was fruitful, the seeds of truth that they sowed have borne fruit.”

The organization I lead just marked seventy five years since its first broadcast to Czechoslovakia on July 4, 1950. Since then, RFE/RL journalists, often exiles driven out of their home countries by ideological and religious repression, have continued to call to their compatriots back home with messages of hope, resilience, and faith.

Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were created by the U.S. government to provide what came to be known as “surrogate” broadcasting, an unbiased, professional substitute for the free media that countries behind the Iron Curtain lacked. Produced in the local languages by natives of these countries, The Radios produced programs focused on local news not covered in the state-controlled media, as well as religion, science, sports, literature, and music.

The Soviet Communist leaders of the day feared these broadcasts, and the messages they carried to audiences throughout the region. Along with building intellectual resilience to

the malign propaganda of our adversaries, these programs also nourished the spiritual needs of people robbed of their traditional ties to their faiths and their communities. RFE and RL made sure their audiences did not feel alone or abandoned to the whims of anti-religious authoritarians.

RFE/RL filled the empty spiritual spaces left by Soviet-era propagandists with broadcasts of religious services, roundtable discussions about issues of faith, and reporting on the repression of religious expression, as well as government plots to subvert and harness religion for its malign purposes. Radio Liberty tracked how the KGB co-opted Orthodox Church and other religious officials, as well as the anti-religion campaigns that would periodically impact the faithful across the Soviet Union – Orthodox and Muslim, Jewish and Pentecostal, official and not.

Issues of religion, faith, and freedom continue to occupy a prominent place in RFE/RL's programming for Russia and its neighboring regions.

Religious freedom in Crimea – illegally annexed by Russia in 2014 -- and the Russian-occupied portions of Ukraine's Donbas region have been a consistent focus of coverage for RFE/RL's Russian-language journalism. RFE/RL has focused on the repression of religious minorities by Russian-installed authorities, including the widespread jailing, harassment, and intimidation of members of the Muslim Crimean Tatar minority. The RFE/RL Ukrainian Service's award-winning 2024 documentary [Silent Deportation](#) chronicled dozens of criminal cases and administrative penalties that have targeted Crimean Tatars.

RFE/RL has covered the [conflict](#) in Ukraine between Ukrainian Orthodox adherents still loyal to Moscow and members of the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which led to a weeks-long [standoff](#) in 2023 at the famed Kyiv-Pechersk Monastery. The Ukrainian Service exposes the plight of churches and priests in Russia-occupied Ukraine, where Catholic and Protestant ministers and congregations have been targeted by Russian forces.

RFE/RL reports on the persecution of Muslim activists who refuse to work with the official government agencies that regulate Islamic affairs in Russia. We have exposed [raids by Russian security forces](#) on non-compliant mosques, harassment of Muslims serving sentences in [Russian prisons](#) and [correctional colonies](#), and the [persecution of devout Muslims for praying in public](#).

RFE/RL's [Russian Service](#) and [Tatar-Bashkir Service](#) have tracked the persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses – recognized by Russian authorities as an “extremist organization in 2017 – and other Protestant groups for decades. They have covered numerous criminal

cases brought against Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country. To help listeners understand why Jehovah's Witnesses suffer such persecution, the Russian Service produced a [documentary](#) last year examining Russia's judicial assault on Jehovah's Witnesses, while the Tatar-Bashkir Service published a [podcast](#) that described what Jehovah's Witnesses believe, and what authorities accuse them of.

And religion has been a potent source of motivation and propaganda for the Russian invaders of Ukraine, with the top official of the government-aligned Russian Orthodox Church [calling Vladimir Putin's invasion of choice "a holy war"](#) and priests offering blessings of Russian weapons of war and [absolution to Russian troops that die in that war](#). RFE/RL's Russian-language services have spoken to [Orthodox priests in Russia who oppose the war](#), and spotlighted the [impact of antiwar opposition](#) on individual priests. The elevation of Orthodoxy to a near-state religion in Russia has helped accelerate the [prosecution of political activists and artists](#), cases documented by RFE/RL's Russia Service and Current Time television.

Despite the passing of the years, RFE/RL's commitment to the spiritual well-being of our audiences in Russia has never wavered. In an era when religion is again being used by Russian authorities to justify death and destruction in foreign lands, RFE/RL's commitment to enlightening its audiences to the truths – and falsehoods – of faith in Russia remains strong. We believe the words engraved on the Freedom Bell in 1950 still ring true, "That this world under God shall have a new birth of freedom." Wherever we are needed – and with the continued support of the U.S. Congress – RFE/RL will serve as a beacon of hope, leading audiences out of information darkness. For at least another 75 years.

I look forward to your questions.