



Freedom of Religion or Belief in Russia

Opening remarks as prepared for delivery

Vicky Hartzler, USCIRF Chair

Good morning and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing, *Freedom of Religion or Belief in Russia*. I'm Vicky Hartzler and currently serving as the Chair for the Commission.

I want to thank our distinguished witnesses for taking the time to be here today to provide your testimony regarding freedom of religion or belief in Russia.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. legislative branch agency created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

Mikhail Simonov, 6 years, 6 months' imprisonment.

Vlasov Andrey, 7 years' imprisonment.

Amet Suleymanov, 12 years' imprisonment.

Bakhrom Khamroev, 13 years, 9 months' imprisonment.

Kostiantyn Maksimov, 14 years' imprisonment.

These are just some of the names and sentences of the hundreds of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) prisoners in Russian custody today. The prisoners include Jehovah's Witnesses, human rights lawyers, blasphemy accused, Crimean Tatar Muslims, conscientious objectors, Protestants, Falun Gong practitioners, Ukrainian clergy, Muslims falsely accused of extremism and terrorism, anti-war religious leaders and protesters, and many others punished for freely exercising their FoRB rights as guaranteed under international law.

Russia remains among the world's worst violators of religious freedom, targeting religious groups and dissidents it perceives as a threat. Russia prohibits the activities of multiple peaceful religious organizations, and their members can face lengthy prison time for their religious activities, despite no evidence or even allegations that they called for or engaged in violence. Human rights organizations and independent media working on FoRB issues in Russia also face bans and other legal obstacles hindering their crucial work.

Additionally, Russia has exported its gross religious freedom violations to the territories it illegally occupies in Ukraine, coupling enforcement of its religiously repressive legal system alongside war crimes. Since 2022, Russian military forces have bombed hundreds of houses of worship. They have banned Ukrainian religious communities and expropriated their houses of worship in areas under Russian control. They have also threatened, abducted, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered Ukrainian religious leaders who refused to renounce their faith, language, and culture.

Since 2021, the U.S. Department of State has followed USCIRF's recommendation and designated Russia as a Country of Particular Concern for its particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Given the scale and scope of these violations, the U.S. government must redesignate Russia once again as a CPC and prioritize Russia's religious freedom violations in its foreign policy. The lives of FoRB prisoners are at stake.

With that, I would like to now turn the floor over to USCIRF's Vice Chair Asif Mahmood.

Asif Mahmood, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you, Chair Hartzler. I'd also like to welcome everyone to today's hearing and express my gratitude to our witnesses for sharing their expertise.

This year, USCIRF once again recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate Russia as a Country of Particular Concern. We also included several other policy recommendations that the U.S. government could implement that would advance religious freedom in Russia.

First, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government impose sanctions on Russian government agencies and officials involved in severe violations of religious freedom. As Chair Hartzler just highlighted, Russia is imprisoning hundreds of individuals because of their religion or beliefs. Many of those imprisoned have accused Russian officials of perpetrating torture, orchestrating prison violence against them, and subjecting them to punitive solitary confinement or inhumane living conditions. Several FoRB prisoners have even needlessly and unjustly died due to gross medical neglect. In March, 67-year-old Jehovah's Witness Valery Bailo died in Russian custody after reportedly being denied medical care for nearly a year. The mistreatment of these prisoners is inexcusable and unacceptable, and the United States must hold perpetrating officials accountable.

Second, the United States must maintain and allocate greater funding to support independent civil society and media that monitor and document religious freedom and related human rights violations in Russia. The outside world only knows of Russia's religious freedom violations because of the brave and tireless work human rights activists and journalists do to spotlight these abuses, and they face a formidable, well-financed Russian propaganda machine.

Lastly, Congress must use its voice to focus the world's attention on Russia's religious freedom situation. That includes holding hearings, meeting with impacted religious groups, and advocating for FoRB prisoners through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project.

Russia cannot be given a pass on its horrendous religious freedom record. The U.S. government must pursue accountability and coordinate with its allies on new and creative ways that could lead to improvements in religious freedom in Russia.

Thank you again for being here. I will now turn the floor back over to Chair Hartzler.

Vicky Hartzler, USCIRF Chair

Thank you, Vice Chair Mahmood. I would now like to introduce our witnesses.

First, we will hear from Stephen Capus, President and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Then on our second panel, we will hear from Willy Fautré, Director and Co-Founder of Human Rights Without Frontiers. His testimony will be followed by Jarrod Lopes, Regional Director of Communications at the World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses, and then Dan Storyev, the English Managing Editor of OVD-Info. Lastly, we will hear from Halyna Coynash, a journalist with the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group. Full witness testimonies can be found on USCIRF's website.

Mr. Capus, you may now begin your testimony.