



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Anurima Bhargava, Vice Chair

Thank you very much, Chair Manchin.

In past Annual Reports, and in a report published this past June, USCIRF has closely monitored the spread of restrictive religious regulation in Russia and Central Asia.

These laws in Russia and the Central Asian states are broadly similar, both to each other as well as to previous Soviet legislation. Under registration laws, the state must approve any and all religious activity; otherwise it is illegal.

Applicants must provide the names and personal information of founding members, and turn over founding documents and religious literature for the review of government “experts” who determine the legitimacy of each faith in closed proceedings with no process of appeal. Many of these so-called “experts” are outspoken critics of religious minorities, and partisans of established faiths like the Russian Orthodox Church.

Russian law requires that all founding members of an approved religious community must be Russian citizens and prove that their community has existed in

Russia for at least 15 years. In the case of previously unregistered groups, this essentially means admitting to illegal activity as a prerequisite for legal registration.

To be eligible, communities must also document a minimum threshold of founding members, consistently resulting in a significant decline in the number of registered groups. For instance, many religious communities failed to register in Kazakhstan after it passed a law in 2011 mandating 50 founding members. Sources have shared that although their communities met the required membership, founding members were simply afraid to identify themselves on the record for fear of official retaliation. The detailed personal information of founding members is stored in a state database, and registered founding members have complained of repeated late-night visits by authorities and even difficulties leaving the country.

The leaders of contemporary Russia and Central Asian states have also sought to position themselves as guardians of traditional religion and values. The preamble to Russia's 1997 Religion Law, for example, recognizes "the special role of Orthodoxy" in the history, culture, and spirituality of Russia, as well as the contribution of other traditional religions like Islam. This contributes to a dynamic that privileges so-called "traditional" religions at the expense of "non-traditional" faiths, which are often treated as foreign and harmful to the national culture.

In his [2000 Russian National Security Concept](#), Russian president Vladimir Putin claimed that the protection of the spiritual and moral legacy and social norms was a matter of national security and argued for "the formation of government policy in the field of the spiritual and moral education of the population." This was soon followed by a broad extremism law in 2002, which enabled authorities to define and prosecute virtually any speech or activity it disagreed with as criminal. A 2012 study by the SOVA Center found that religious organizations constituted the majority of those prosecuted under this law.

The scope of Russian religious regulation has been expanded by subsequent amendments, including the so-called Yarovaya Law of 2016. That law characterizes sharing religious faith, or extending invitations to religious services, as illegal missionary activity if it occurs outside of officially registered spaces,

including in private homes or over the internet, and enables the government to monitor private electronic communications.

This overall Russian policy, referred to by some observers as “spiritual security,” has been widely emulated in Central Asia, where the preeminence of “traditional religion” has likewise been enshrined in law, while authoritarian leaders like President Berdymukhamedov of Turkmenistan writes books describing the proper cultural and spiritual life of the nation and President Rakhmon of Tajikistan imprisons political rivals or cultural non-conformists as “terrorists” and “religious extremists.” In the Russian republic of Chechnya, the so-called protection of traditional culture has resulted in a campaign against LGBTQ+ individuals, who have been tortured, disappeared, and murdered. Domestic violence is widespread across the region, and countries like Russia and Tajikistan do not prosecute it as a criminal offense—considering husbands to be the traditional authority in the home.

Often justified with the rhetoric of anti-terrorism this “spiritual security” goes beyond counter-terrorism—enabling authoritarian regimes to expand their control by defining acceptable religious and cultural practice, and by suppressing political opposition.

I will now turn to my colleague, Vice Chair Tony Perkins, to discuss Russian abuses, including the export of religious repression to neighboring Ukraine.