



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Gayle Manchin, USCIRF Chair:

Good morning and welcome to today's hearing on *Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia*. I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us to offer their expertise on this important topic.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad, using international standards to do so, and makes policy recommendations to Congress, the President, and the Secretary of State. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this hearing.

Today we will be discussing religious freedom in the Russian Federation and the former Soviet countries of Central Asia, including Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, which USCIRF recommends for designation by the State Department as CPCs, as well as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which we currently recommend for the State Department's Special Watch List. USCIRF has been reporting on religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation and Central Asia since the Commission began in 1998, just one year after Russia passed its [1997 religion](#)

[law](#)—thus ending a brief period of religious tolerance after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The new law, which is still in effect today, was eerily similar to past Soviet practice: it requires all religious groups to obtain legal registration from the state in order to exist and subjects applicants to an arduous and intrusive process that can be delayed or denied through a host of bureaucratic mechanisms.

Since 1997, Russia has steadily increased its repression of religion, and it has wielded significant influence on religious regulation in former Soviet states in Central Asia. It has even exported its oppressive practices to neighboring Ukraine, where highly restrictive religion and extremism laws are a major tool in the illegal occupation of Crimea. USCIRF first recommended CPC status for Russia in 2017, after the government banned the Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist organization."

USCIRF has recommended CPC status for Turkmenistan since 2000, making it one of the longest-standing countries on USCIRF's list of violators. In the 20 years since USCIRF first made this recommendation, Turkmenistan has made no substantial progress. So-called "religious extremists" are imprisoned after closed trials, or simply disappeared into Turkmenistan's vast and brutal prison system, as described in a report that USCIRF just released in August on religious freedom conditions in that country.

Since 2018, the country has renewed its offensive against conscientious objectors to military service, who are offered no civilian alternative service and regularly imprisoned for following their beliefs. In the past month alone, two Jehovah's Witnesses who were previously punished for their conscientious objection were sentenced to two additional years in prison after the government again attempted to conscript them.

USCIRF has recommended CPC status for Tajikistan since 2012, after the country set new administrative and criminal penalties for religion-related charges such as organizing or participating in "unapproved" religious meetings. Tajikistan banned the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2008, and forbid minors from any organized religious activity except funerals in 2011. The authoritarian government casually imprisons

political opponents as “extremists” and “terrorists,” and Tajikistan’s decrepit and overcrowded prison system includes many religious prisoners.

Russia and Central Asia’s mutual reinforcement of religious repression is a key dynamic in the region. For instance, Turkmenistan passed its own repressive religion law in 1996—one year prior to Russia. In 1998, Uzbekistan followed suit. Likewise, Russia’s vague and expansive “extremism” laws, passed in 2002, are echoed in similar legislation passed by Tajikistan in 2003 and Kazakhstan in 2005. The shared Soviet legacy is clearly a common factor but there are other important dynamics to consider as well. Established religions like Orthodox Christianity and Hanafi Sunni Islam have a significant influence on religious policy, which Western anti-cult ideas and the dynamics of the post-September 11, 2001 worldwide anti-terrorism campaign also play a role in shaping.

I will now turn to my colleague, Vice Chair Anurima Bhargava, who will outline prominent features of regional religious regulation in greater detail.