



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Tony Perkins, Vice Chair

Thank you very much, Vice Chair Bhargava.

USCIRF is again recommending the Department of State designate Russia as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) this year. We make this recommendation based on the repressive policies and actions that my colleagues just described, and especially because of Russia's gross human rights violations against faith communities in Ukraine. We were very grateful to see Congress introduce H.R. 5408 and S. 3064, known as the Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act, which calls on the President to take into account Russia's religious freedom violations in Russian-occupied Crimea and Russian-controlled Donbas when determining CPC designations under IRFA. We urge Congress to swiftly pass this legislation.

As the Russian Federation has exported its repressive religious regulation to neighboring Ukraine, its occupation regime in Crimea has used religious regulations to terrorize the general population and to particularly target opposition activists in the predominantly Muslim Crimean Tatar community, charging them with extremism and terrorism.

Since the occupation began in 2014, Russia has deprived at least 65 Crimean Tatar Muslims of liberty in this manner, with some receiving sentences of up to 19 years. Observers claim no evidence of violent intent is provided, or even needed, and note that most of those individuals charged are affiliated with the secular opposition movement, Crimean Solidarity.

Furthermore, Russian officials press Muslim residents of Crimea to offer bribes in order to keep their religious facilities open. Mosques are frequently raided, and video cameras have been placed in houses of worship across the region, creating a constant state of surveillance. Members of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Crimea report similar persecution, including the confiscation of church property and the systematic harassment of clergy and congregants.

In Eastern Ukraine, Russian-backed separatists pursue an exclusionary religious policy that privileges the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. In the so-called Luhansk People's Republic, rebel authorities have effectively banned all religious groups that failed to meet their registration requirements, including all Protestant communities, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Back inside Russia's borders, Jehovah's Witnesses currently report that 10 of their members are imprisoned for their faith, while 31 are in pre-trial detention and 28 are under house arrest. Since Russia formally banned the community in 2017, there have been 1,086 searches of private homes and 372 members have been accused of criminal activity. In February 2019, Russian law enforcement [detained and tortured](#) a group of 19 Jehovah's Witnesses, who were beaten, suffocated and subjected to electric shocks while in custody. Sadly, similar reports of torture continue at present.

Meanwhile, hundreds of peaceful Russian Muslims remain in prison under vague or fabricated charges of extremism and terrorism, which often target those who stray from what the government has deemed the "traditional" version of Islam. Victims of such repression include followers of the moderate Kurdish theologian Said Nursi and members of the Muslim missionary organization Tablighi Jamaat.

Before concluding, USCIRF's consideration of religious freedom in Central Asia also lends importance to the recent and substantial progress that Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have made in recent years. Both governments have been actively reforming their approach to religious freedom in cooperation with U.S. officials and the international community, and USCIRF currently recommends them for Special Watch List status. There is real hope that their examples can have a positive spillover effect in the region, as a much-needed contrast to Russia's malign influence.

Thank you again to our witnesses, and I look forward to hearing your analysis and recommendations. I will now turn the floor back to Chair Manchin.