

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING  
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN RUSSIA

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Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Vicky Hartzler, Chair  
Asif Mahmood, Vice Chair  
Maureen Ferguson  
Stephen Schneck

C O N T E N T S

	<u>PAGE</u>
Opening Remarks	
Vicky Hartzler, Chair	4
Asif Mahmood, Vice Chair	7
Panel I	10
Stephen Capus President and CEO Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)	11
Q&A	18
Panel II	28
Willy Fautre Director and Co-Founder Human Rights Without Frontiers	28
Jarrold Lopes Regional Director of Communications World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses	34
Dan Storyev English Managing Editor OVD-Info	40
Halyna Coynash Journalist Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group	47
Q&A	54
Adjourn	75

P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR HARTZLER: Good morning, everyone, 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 chair for the Commission.

I want to thank our distinguished witnesses for taking time to be here today and providing 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, six years, six months' imprisonment.

Vlasov Andrey, seven years' imprisonment.

Amet Suleymanov, 12 years' imprisonment.

Bakhrom Khamroev, 13 years, nine 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 prisoners in Russian custody today, right now.

These 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 freedom of religion or belief 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 religious peaceful organizations, and their members can face lengthy prison time for their religious activities, despite no evidence or even allegations that they have called for or engaged in violence.

Human rights organizations and independent media working on freedom of religion or belief 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, their language, their 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 Russian freedom and 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 freedom of religion or belief prisoners are at stake.

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



VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: Thank you, Chair Hartzler.

I would also like to welcome everyone to today's hearing and express my gratitude to our witnesses for sharing their experience.

This year, USCIRF once again recommended that the United States 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 United States 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—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 freedom of religion or belief prisoners have been 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, the 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 freedom of religion and belief prisoners through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedom 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 improvement in religious freedom in Russia.

Thank you again for being here.

I will now turn the floor back over to Chair Hartzler.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you, Vice Chair Mahmood.

I would like to now 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 Fautre, 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.

So, Mr. Capus, you may now begin your

testimony.

MR. CAPUS: Chair Hartzler, Vice Chair Mahmood, and distinguished members of the Commission, thank you so much for hosting this important hearing and inviting me to speak today. I'm honored to join you.

Last September, I was honored to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty's Ukrainian Service in Kyiv.

Along with current and former RFE/RL journalists, Ukrainian officials, diplomats and NGO leaders, we were joined at this event by representatives of Ukraine's diverse religious community, including the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine, and senior Ukrainian Greek Catholic officials.

We were joined by the presence at the celebration—we were honored by their presence at this celebration, but even more so by their statements of support.

Said the Metropolitan Epiphanius, and I

quote:

"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." End quote.

The organization I am honored to lead just marked 75 years since our first broadcast to Czechoslovakia on July 4, 1950.

Since then, RFE/RL journalists, often exiles driven out of their home country by ideological and religious repression, have continued to report to their compatriots back home with messages of hope, resilience, and faith.

Our journalists do the job because our service was created 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. And it is supported entirely by the taxpayers of the United States.

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 malignant propaganda of our adversaries, these programs also nourished the spiritual needs of people robbed of their traditional ties to their faiths and communities.

RFE/RL made sure that audiences did not feel abandoned or alone, abandoned to the whims of anti-religious authoritarians.

We filled the empty spiritual spaces left by Soviet-era propagandists with broadcasts of religious services, roundtable discussions, issues of faith, and reporting on the repression of religious extreme—I'm sorry—of repression of religious expression, as well as government plots to subvert and harness religion for malign

purposes.

Issues of faith, religion and freedom continue to occupy a prominent place in all of our programming for Russia and neighboring regions.

Religious freedom in Crimea—illegally annexed by Russian in 2014—and the Russian-occupied portion of Ukraine's Donbas region have been a consistent focus of our journalism.

We have 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.

Our reports on the prosecution of Muslim activists who refuse to work with the government, 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.

Our Tatar-Bashkir service has tracked the persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses labeled by Russian authorities as an "extremist organization" in 2017 and other Protestant groups for decades.

They have covered criminal cases brought against Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country. To help listeners understand why Jehovah's Witnesses suffer such persecution, the Russian Service also 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 Putin's invasion of choice a, quote, "holy war"—end quote. And priests offering blessings of Russian weapons of war.

RFE/RL's Russian language services have spoken to Orthodox priests in Russia who oppose the war and spotlighted the impact of anti-war opposition on individual priests.

The elevation of Orthodoxy to a near-state religion in Russia has helped accelerate the persecution of political activists, artists, and cases documented by our Russian Service and Current Time television.

In conclusion, 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, our commitment to

enlightening audiences to the truths, and the falsehoods, of faith in Russia remains strong.

We believe the words engraved on the Freedom Bell in 1950 still ring true, and they say: "This world under God shall have a new birth of freedom."

Wherever we are needed, and with the continued support of the United States Congress, RFE/RL will serve as a beacon of hope, leading audiences out of information darkness for at least another 75 years. Let's hope.

I look forward to your questions.

Thank you, Chair.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you very much, Mr. Capus, and congratulations on 75 years of providing free and unbiased information, especially into countries that they're not experiencing that. It's really amazing.

Now, we're going to turn to questions from different commissioners. First, I'll turn to our Vice Chair Mahmood for any questions he may have.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: Thank you so much.

Such a wonderful presentation and full grasp of what has been going on.

I have a very simple and to-the-point question. I know you guys have been doing the service for 70 years, and that's really incredible, especially, everywhere, but especially in countries like Russia and North Korea, it is extra hard and requires a lot of skill, knowledge, expertise and resources.

How does the present situation of cutting USAID and other funding has impacted your work and work of other organizations like you, and how can this Commission be helpful or streamline things so that you can continue your normal work and for so many oppressed and repressed?

MR. CAPUS: Well, Vice Chair, thank you for the opportunity to address our current situation.

I lead Radio Free Europe, as I mentioned. My partners in the effort to extend the programming

of U.S. international broadcasting include the heads of Radio Free Asia, the Middle East Broadcasting, the Voice of America, and also Cuban Broadcasting, as well as the Open Technology Fund devoted to allowing access to the Internet.

We have been in a difficult situation for much of this year, while our source of funding, which comes from Congress but gets passed through U.S. government agency, has been restricted and has been targeted, and through it all, we have received an outpouring of support, bipartisan support for this vital mission.

We believe that any effort to silence these important services would be a gift to the likes of the Russian government, the Chinese government, anywhere where authoritarians use tactics to try to keep the truth away from these important audiences.

So we are continuing, we are determined to continue to offer these services, and but it has become more difficult. I cannot deny that these

are challenging times for our staff.

We've had to go through serious restrictions on spending and place a number of our people on furlough and things like that until this dispute gets resolved.

But through it all, we're encouraged by people who understand and respect the mission, especially during these critical times.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you very much.

Commissioner Ferguson.

COMMISSIONER FERGUSON: Well, I would just like to echo the thanks for your 75 years of speaking the truth.

And I find it so, I find your courage and that of your colleagues to be very inspiring. We certainly need these messages of resilience, faith and hope.

So I guess I'd like to follow up on Commissioner Mahmood's question to drill down into that a little bit. I guess I'm curious what is your current reach into Russia and what are some of

the specific impacts of the cuts, and I'm glad to hear you're having, you're getting the ear of members of Congress on a bipartisan basis for the restoration of the cuts.

But I guess I'm just interested in some more specifics on that, but what is the current status? And what are some specific ways that our Commission might be helpful?

MR. CAPUS: Well, I appreciate the opportunity to talk about our reach especially. We reach on average, during normal times, roughly eight to nine percent of the Russian population every single week.

Whenever there are big events, and there have been many of them in recent years, the audiences spike.

We are in a-Russia doesn't make it easy to reach inside their territory. Our feeds are blocked. There are things to try to silence, or to block our websites.

Our feeds are blocked, but we've also, I

have to say, we've also been hindered by actions that were taken earlier this year to shut down some of the frequencies that the U.S. government has used to distribute Voice of America and Radio Free Europe programming, and also Radio Free Asia into certain areas.

Contracts have been severed for distribution. Satellite feeds have been disrupted. Radio transmissions have been halted, and one example I would give you is that, of course, over the last month things have been very challenging in the Middle East, and with President Trump and Israel leading efforts on the military side to target inside Iran, we have a large service that reaches roughly ten percent of the Iranian population every week.

However, when the Internet was blocked, our safety net of backup radio transmissions had been severed earlier this year by a decision made at USAGM.

So that was something that we've had to



overcome. We've had to look to the outside and contributions from people who have offered us access to their airwaves so that we can continue to spread the word, the priorities, say, of President Trump and our foreign policy leaders.

We think at this time having Iranians have access to this vital information is absolutely an essential.

So we continue to work, but the challenges are difficult right now. Again, I can't understate that.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you.

Chair-former Chair Schneck.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Chair Hartzler.

Just everyone else has asked the questions that I was going to ask, but let me just ask a very specific question.

Could you report just a little bit on the reporting that you do, specifically regards to religious freedom issues in Russia itself?

MR. CAPUS: There's a, there's a tremendous amount. I should begin by saying that we have a 24-by-7 channel devoted to Russian language programming called Current Time. It has now been going strong continuously for the last ten years.

It is a religious freedom, freedom of expression. Access to information is a core focus of our programming initiatives, both inside Russia and also in areas like Chechnya, and we program in Chechen and in Bashkir and Tatar languages to encompass the entire region.

In addition, the North Caucasus Service is one of the only independent outlets reporting on the predominantly Muslim religion in that area, and I can even extend it further.

What we're seeing right now in Georgia, and the quest for freedom by large numbers of the population, that has also been an acute focus of ours.

We have a large operation based in

Tbilisi, and part of the I would say the goals and objectives of the brave people who have taken to the streets in Georgia are that they want to have freedom of expression.

They want to have free access to their, to the religions and the faith that they would like to follow, and that they fear that this is eroding before our eyes.

We, we, our people who speak the same languages of our audiences, who are based, who are covering the events that affect their neighbors, their families, are uniquely situated to convey the truth and to demonstrate to the world what the United States holds near and dear, which is religious freedom is a core tenant of what makes this country great.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you.

Let me add my voice to the chorus of praise for the 75 years of work of your tremendous organization. Thank you very much.

MR. CAPUS: Thank you, sir.

CHAIR HARTZLER: I just, I appreciated your remarks and your testimony sharing about how you have exposed how the Russian government has basically co-opted the Russian Orthodox Church and made them a tool of the government, and how Radio Liberty has tracked how the KGB has co-opted the Church and other religious officials, as well as anti-religion campaigns that would periodically impact the faithful across the Soviet Union.

Could you expound a little bit more on what you have found and what you are broadcasting about some of this, the Russian government using the Russian Orthodox Church, and some of the ways that they are maligning legitimate peaceful religions there in the country?

MR. CAPUS: It's such an important issue, Chair. I think that I made a couple of trips last year to Ukraine, and one of them was to the very heart of the Orthodox Church there in Ukraine in Kyiv, the Kyiv Pechersk Monastery, which was the site of a 23-day or weeks-long standoff in 2023,

with the Russian Orthodox officials, who were on the very same campus, the presence there.

And it is very tense, and there was coming from the Russian side, there was an appalling lack of intolerance for any views outside of the Russian Orthodox Church, and I was honored to meet with Church officials who stood their ground, who have I think been voices for peace, voices for and proponents of free expression.

And I will tell you that I'm based here in the Czech Republic, but when I went there, this was not the first time that those brave church leaders were meeting our on-the-ground journalists in Kyiv.

I think that they are aligned on important coverage of these issues. We do a tremendous amount of programming that is just focused on these areas.

I think at the heart of what's really going on in Ukraine, of course, is their desire to maintain their sovereignty, to maintain their freedom, and at the end of the day, I think that

they've tasted freedom for the last decades, and they don't want to let it go.

And I think freedom of religion, freedom of expression is at the core of this yearning from the Ukrainian people, and we're proud to cover these vital issues.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Great.

We really appreciate you being with us today, Mr. Capus, and providing your insights as well as the great work that you're doing. And we wish you well.

So this will conclude Panel I, and now we will move into our other witnesses who are part of Panel II.

And we'll begin with Mr. Fautre. We would be honored if you would go ahead and start and share your testimony.

Thank you.

MR. FAUTRE: Thank you for your introduction in this first session.

I've called my presentation "From

Spiritual Security to Religious Cleansing in Russia."

In the name of Russia's so-called spiritual security, President Putin has increasingly worsened his legislative arsenal since the beginning of his term to ban non-Orthodox religious books and communities, to criminalize religious organizations as foreign agents, extremists and/or undesirable movements.

This is, in fact, the driving force which has led to a wave to religious cleaning in Russia.

The spiritual security concept in Russia clearly emerged on the radars of Putin's administration in the year 2000 as part of the national security concept, in which it was said, and I quote, "There must be a state policy to maintain the population's spiritual and moral welfare and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries." End quote.

This policy started to be shaped in

reaction to the liberal Law on Freedom of Worship in the early 1990s opening Russia's doors to foreign missionaries of all faiths and provoking the anger of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who complained about the invasion of what they called "hordes of missionaries" on his canonical territory.

The spiritual dimension of national security saw its beginnings in the pursuit of the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, which brought to an end the brief post-Soviet period of religious freedom, religious pluralism and tolerance.

Behind the concept of spiritual security, an authentic religious cleansing has been implemented in the last 25 years and the flow of amendments to existing laws further restricting religious freedom has been accelerating.

Access to foreign non-Orthodox clerics to the Russian territory has been dramatically restricted.



Since the 5<sup>th</sup> of February of this year, summary expulsions by the police without the need for a court decision have become easier due to amendments to the Administrative Code.

Most cases involve foreign Muslim preachers who appear to be Central Asian migrant workers, but last year, an 85-year-old Catholic priest lost his appeal against expulsion for leading worship in his own parish.

Freedom of worship is now the priority target of the repression. Ten days ago, three Protestants holding an inter-church evening of praise in Krasnodar Region were fined for allegedly illegal missionary activities.

Between January 2024 and April 2025, it was found that there had been 124 known cases of prosecutions against Russians and against foreigners conducting missionary activities, according to Forum 18.

First-instance courts convicted 90 percent of them.

Freedom of association and assembly is also a target. Jehovah's Witnesses were the first major minority to be banned in 2017.

Over 140 of them are currently serving prison terms, mainly for organizing religious meetings and Bible studies in private homes. In over 90 cases, their sentences are superior to kidnapping, five years in prison, or rape charges, three to six years.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of June of this year, an amendment to the law "On Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations," was submitted to the State Duma.

The bill prohibits public services, religious rites and ceremonies in residential and nonresidential premises of apartment buildings.

The hunt for extremist and undesirable religious movements is another facet of President Putin's religious cleansing.

Apart from the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses, it is to be noted that the peaceful movement of

Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi and the Scientology Church were declared extremist organizations, and their books were banned.

Several of their members were sentenced to heavy prison terms for studying the works of their religious leaders.

Recently, Brigham Young University and Falun Gong were also declared undesirable organizations, which drastically limits their activities.

In late June, a Falun Gong practitioner was sentenced to three years of imprisonment in a general regime colony with a ban on engaging in social and political activities for three years.

Several others were also prosecuted.

Insulting the religious feelings of believers, which is the equivalent of blasphemy, is penalized by the Criminal Code, although the concept is very vague and undefined and opens the door to fabricated cases.

In April, USCIRF published an extensive

report on this issue. In May, a resident of the Ivanovo Region was sentenced to a heavy fine for allegedly insulting the religious feelings of believers.

Incitement of hatred is also associated with so-called blasphemy issues.

Last, but not least, the authorities have welcomed and supported hard-line Orthodox clerics and anti-cult movements campaigning against a wide range of peaceful and law-abiding religious minorities that they call "harmful, destructive, dangerous and totalitarian cults."

The most notorious activist in this area in Russia is the well-known Alexander Dvorkin, who was also for 12 years the vice president of the European anti-cult umbrella organization FECRIS based in France.

In conclusion, President Putin's implementation of the concept of spiritual security has only one objective: to strengthen the power of the Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox

Church, his close ally in Russia's war on Ukraine, and silence religious movements of foreign origin.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you, Mr. Fautre.

Now we'll turn to our second witness for his testimony, Jarrod Lopes.

MR. LOPES: Chair Hartzler, Vice Chair Mahmood, distinguished commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Today, I speak on behalf of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia who have been criminalized simply for practicing their peaceful Christian faith.

As some know, in 2017, Russia's Supreme Court effectively banned Jehovah's Witnesses for so-called extremist activity.

For more than eight years now, the authorities have continued to wage a calculated campaign of religious repression against our community of some 150,000 throughout Russia.

More than 2,200 homes of Jehovah's

Witnesses have been raided to date. 44 already this year. Officers typically arrive in full combat gear, heavily armed. These raids are then recorded and broadcast to the public to push a false narrative that Jehovah's Witnesses are somehow dangerous.

Jehovah's Witnesses are teachers, pensioners, parents, ordinary people who pose no threat to society. Yet Russian authorities are targeting them unjustly and convicting them as enemies of the state.

As a result, 875 Jehovah's Witnesses have faced legal action since the ban. More than 240 of those are over the age of 60. And at least 20 have documented disabilities.

Nearly 490 Jehovah's Witnesses have spent some time behind bars, with 173 in prison as of this morning. Why? 66-year-old Olga Panyuta explains it best.

She says: "I'm accused of reading the Bible, praying, and explaining Bible verses. I am

being tried for my faith, that is, for being a believer and calling God by name."

Those were part of Olga's closing words to the judge before he sentenced her to over four years in prison.

Now the consequences extend far beyond prison walls. Nearly 750 Jehovah's Witnesses have been added to Russia's federal list of extremists and terrorists.

Now this designation cripples them. It cripples their ability to work, access to banking services, to own property, or even obtain cellphone service. It is a form of social control designed to isolate, impoverish, and intimidate.

Russian authorities have beaten or tortured 70 Jehovah's Witnesses. Why? Usually it's an attempt to force them to give up the names of their fellow believers.

Now this tactic rarely, if ever, works, which is why in the grand scheme of things there are relatively few reported incidents.

That's why, instead, the authorities have largely resorted to a far more insidious weapon in this campaign—Soviet style infiltration.

The FSB has deployed a network of undercover agents—spies—who feign interest in studying the Bible with the Witnesses. These spies attend the Witnesses' Bible studies for months, or even years, befriending the Witnesses. They secretly record conversations and then offer deceptive testimony in court.

Take, for example, the case of 55-year-old Andrey Shiyan, a former customs officer. On April 29<sup>th</sup> of this year, Andrey was sentenced to over six years in prison. The key witness? A secret agent known only as "Ivanov," who testified from a separate room, shielded from cross-examination.

Another agent in Vladivostok, Ekaterina Petrova. She infiltrated a group of 17 Jehovah's Witnesses, which included elderly ones. Her testimony led to prison sentences of up to eight years.



These are not isolated cases. At least 30 documented prosecutions have relied on the false testimony of spies.

Finally, I just would like to address that the eight years of persecution has been devastating to Witness families. Over 80 families have had multiple members face criminal prosecution.

For example, one young mother, Yekaterina Olshevskaya, told us how heartbroken she was when her toddler asked where his father is. He's in prison. He's serving a six-year sentence. Yekaterina's own 61-year-old father is serving a six-and-a-half year sentence while she herself faces criminal charges.

There are others in prison who have small children, such as 37-year-old Mikhail Moysh. In 2021, Russian authorities raided his home and detained him. He spent two-and-a-half years in pretrial detention.

In his closing words to the court, Mikhail said: "As you already know, I have two little

children, one of whom was only six months old when I was arrested. Now, he does not know his father; he does not know me. He calls his grandfather his father."

The judge ignored Mikhail's plea and sentenced him to seven years in prison.

We're thankful to USCIRF and the rest of the international community, including all of my fellow panelists and their organizations, for tirelessly looking for ways to address these breaches of fundamental religious freedoms in Russia.

Most notably, we're glad that the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2022 that Russia's ban on Jehovah's Witnesses is unjustified and unlawful.

Jehovah's Witnesses will continue to seek an audience with senior officials in Russia to dispel any misunderstandings or misconceptions that they may have regarding our beliefs and practices.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia love their

culture and their communities and want nothing more than to make substantive contributions to society. This is something they cannot do behind bars nor under conditions of the ongoing, unjust opposition.

Thank you.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you, Mr. Lopes.

Now we'll turn to the testimony of Mr. Storyev.

MR. STORYEV: Thank you very much.

Good morning, everybody, and thank you for the invite. It is an honor to speak to you.

I represent OVD-Info. And I would like to give you a broad overview of the situation for civil society in Russia.

The health of civil society in Russia is paramount for maintaining religious freedoms, as the work of civil society ensures safety and visibility for persecuted religious minorities.

OVD-Info is one of the largest human rights projects still operating on the ground in Russia. Founded in 2011, we have continuously

worked on issues relating to freedom of assembly and expression.

We currently provide free legal aid across Russia, and we provide relentless media coverage of the Kremlin's repression, engage in advocacy on the global level, as well as providing cutting-edge research on repression.

Since Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the scope of repression in Russia increased drastically, impacting religious as well as non-religious individuals.

We at OVD-Info currently know of over 1,500 people jailed for political reasons. Particularly, 277 are jailed for standing up to the war in Ukraine. 534 of those are affiliated with a religious organization or jailed for their affiliation with a religious organization.

This crackdown on freedom of expression would be impossible without the destruction of vital civil society structures.

The Kremlin embarked on a destruction of

free media and civil society at least a decade before its full-scaled invasion of Ukraine.

That destruction intensified in 2021. There was a massive crackdown on supporters of now-murdered dissident Alexei Navalny, as well as on civil society more broadly.

For example, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Memorial Center was liquidated, and OVD-Info, my organization, was also designated as a foreign agent that year.

The Kremlin also encouraged what I call uncivil society, which is state-controlled supported funded groups which put extrajudicial pressure on vulnerable groups like activists, Muslims, migrants, and so on.

Once the full-scale invasion began, a large part of civil society was driven into exile abroad, and some jailed under the hastily designated, hastily designed wartime legislation, such as the law on "spreading fake information about the military."

The law effectively outlaws all criticism of Russian military. For example, Orthodox priest, Ioann Kurmoyarov, spent three years in jail under this law after posting a video where he said that "those who begin aggression do not go to heaven."

It is important to know that prisoners in Russia are kept in atrocious conditions, sometimes lacking access to basic medicines or appropriate food, often facing humiliation or torture.

Take the case of Jehovah's Witness Valeriy Baylo. He was accused of "participating in an extremist organization."

Baylo, who was 67, was deeply ill, in urgent need of knee surgery and suffering from stomach and tooth pain. For months, he was not allowed to see a medic. On March 21<sup>st</sup> of this year, Valeriy died. His lawyer blames prison administration, saying that the believer "most likely died from hunger and exhaustion."

Note also that those who are lucky to flee Russia are often unsafe. Exiles are forced to live

in fear of transnational repression—especially if they are unable to move to a safe country.

These safe countries tend to also have more stringent immigration rules, like the USA, the EU, UK, Canada, et cetera. Thus, those who have to flee to, for instance, more open Kyrgyzstan might find themselves in the same situation as activist Lev Skroryakin, who was kidnapped in Bishkek, Kyrgyz capital, beaten and brought to Moscow, where our OVD-Info lawyer had to retrieve him.

Now, speaking of extremist organization charge, currently the Kremlin uses a wide variety of techniques to hamper civil society activities.

The authorities might designate people or groups with so-called toxic statuses of “undesirable,” “extremist,” or “foreign agent.”

These statuses can make groups’ operations significantly difficult or outright impossible on the ground, meaning that they will eventually lead to wholesale closure.

13 religious organizations have toxic

statuses—including Jehovah's Witnesses and Falun Gong.

The Kremlin by doing so masterfully targets operations of civil society institutions, going after the crucial ability to fundraise. And this became especially apparent after the end of USAID and similar programs.

This change in U.S. foreign policy has endangered key independent media which cannot legally fundraise in Russia without putting their donors at risk.

Take Meduza, which is an "undesirable" organization, meaning that they can't fundraise on the ground, the New York Times estimated that roughly 15 percent of their annual budget came from U.S.-funded projects.

That means that the current administration's policy thus led a key institution of Russian human rights press into financial trouble.

There are many recommendations one could



make based on this, but the two key ones would have to be the following:

Number one is enabling refugees to find shelter in the U.S. While there is often little to no leverage the U.S. can have on Russia's treatment of believers, they can indeed help the religious individuals who flee Russia by allowing them to live in the U.S. where they can practice their religion freely or by facilitating other safe countries to take them in.

And connected to the above point, the U.S. can also help promote religious freedom and tolerance by enabling human rights organizations through funding and platforms.

It is also paramount that the international community keeps an eye on the information shared by human rights defenders and organizations; that data from OVO-Info and other key human rights groups is included in policy-making calculations.

We encourage you to continue using our

data in reports and white papers.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you very much, Mr. Storyev.

And now our final witness is Halyna Coynash. You may begin your testimony.

MS. COYNASH: Am I there?

CHAIR HARTZLER: You are there, and we're happy to have you here. Thank you for sharing.

MS. COYNASH: Thank you very much for allowing me the opportunity to speak.

I'd like to begin by saying that Russia began its assault on all faiths, except the Russian Orthodox Church, basically from when it invaded Crimea with the same offensive seen in all-occupied Donbas.

Since 2022, Russia has clamped down on religious freedom, diversity and independence in any part of Ukraine, which came under its occupation.

Freedom House in 2025 assessed Russian-

occupied Ukraine as lower even than North Korea and significantly lower than in Russia itself.

I think it's important to stress that the mounting repression in occupied Ukraine is linked with Russia's attempt to eradicate all that is part of Ukrainian identity on occupied territory.

The Russian Orthodox Church actively supports so-called Russian world ideology and the war against Ukraine, with all other churches viewed with hostility as supposedly spying for Ukraine or somehow western agents.

Crimean Tatars, who have strongly always identified with Ukraine, have been disproportionately persecuted, especially those involved in the human rights movement in Crimea or Muslim communities who have distanced themselves from the Russian-collaborating Directorate of Muslims in Crimea.

And some of the methods have been mentioned by Willy. I mean one method first used in occupied Crimea, now being spread, is the

requirement that all religious communities re-register under Russian legislation.

Obviously, many do not want to register as Russian on principle, but the requirements are also—Ukraine has a very strong history of religious freedom and diversity, and the requirements, the Russian requirements are much more difficult to fulfill, and it's very easy for Russia to actually refuse registration.

They did this with the Crimean congregation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and by 2015, in Crimea, not one Protestant community had reportedly received full registration.

There are lots of other restrictions, other forms of oppression. Many of them have been mentioned. There's also FSB surveillance and infiltration, as Jarrod mentioned.

Administrative prosecution for so-called "unlawful missionary activity" is, in Crimea is not just used against the leaders of unregistered communities but even against imams who are leading

Friday prayers in their own mosques.

Seizure of property, illegal breaching of lease agreements, et cetera, all of this has been used on basically all occupied territory to strip religious communities of their places of worship and essentially drive them out, drive them into underground or drive them out all together.

A particularly vicious thing that Russia is doing is using so-called "extremism" and "terrorism" legislation as a cover for religious persecution. This is particularly against Crimean Tatars and Jehovah's Witnesses, which Jarrod has mentioned.

Huge sentences against Crimean Tatars, well, against Crimean Muslims, most of whom are Crimean Tatars, are regularly passed without any recognizable crime whatsoever on the basis of a secretive Russian Supreme Court ruling from 2003 declaring the Muslim organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, an organization which is legal in Ukraine, "terrorist."

Secret witnesses, fake experts and other fabricated evidence are then used to pass sentences of up to 20 years in the most horrific conditions.

Since 2017, Russia has been using such so-called "Hizb ut-Tahrir trials" to try to crush the Crimean Solidarity human rights movement with a huge number of its journalists and activists currently serving these massive sentences.

Although I think I'll jump a little bit and say that there have been, as well as all the legislative means that Russia is using, there are also the straight terror methods, which have involved abductions, torture of people, some of whom have been tortured to death.

In as far as Crimea is concerned, or as far as Crimean Tatars are concerned, one Crimean Tatar political prisoner, who was imprisoned essentially for his membership of a human rights organization, though it was Hizb ut-Tahrir trial, has been, was, died in Russian captivity because he was, he shouldn't have been there in the first

place.

Another one is currently in grave, grave danger, Amet Suleymanov. In occupied, other occupied territory, Father Stepan Podolchak, a priest of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, was almost certainly tortured to death because he had refused to transfer his parish's affiliation to the Russian Orthodox Church.

It is likely that the same type of reasons were used to sentence Father Kostiantyn Maksymov, whom I think somebody mentioned, to 14 years on absolutely grotesque spying charges.

We can't know what these are because everything happens behind closed doors, but it is safe to believe that in his case, it was again because he refused, well, he opposed the transfer of the Donetsk diocese to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Russia has abducted huge numbers of civilians. I mean thousands. And while religious people are not the only people who are targeted, it

has been, it has been the case that many of them have been targeted simply for being members of religions that are not linked to the Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church.

Two Ukrainian Catholic, Greek Catholic priests, were held for almost two years with Russia trying to pretend that they were somehow terrorists. It was absolutely absurd.

Russia does not brook any religious diversity. It's determined to crush Ukrainian identity. It views all of the Ukraine, the rich diversity of Ukrainian religious communities, as somehow a threat to it. They're all viewed as somehow being too pro-Ukrainian.

They speak Ukrainian. This is already counted as being somehow suspect, and I believe that all of it can only worsen until all of those areas are liberated.

I have four recommendations, which I had intended to lead up, but, in fact, I would like to reiterate what other people have said about Radio



Free Europe and Radio Liberty because I think if USCIRF can help provide recommendations, that will stop any of drowning of the funding.

Russia in Crimea and even more so in other occupied parts of Ukraine has tried to create an information blockade. In occupied Crimea, the reason for so many civic journalists for Crimean Solidarity being imprisoned now for 19 years, 20 years, is because they were trying to talk about persecution. They were trying to talk about the repression, and Russia has sentenced them to these horrific sentences in order to, to try to silence the human rights movement.

In all of these years of occupation, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, has played an absolutely pivotal role. It has been so important, and I completely agree that the only people that would be helped would be Moscow and its war machine if, if radio freedom is allowed to be silenced.

Thank you.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you. Appreciate

your testimony and all of your testimonies, and now we'll, I believe our Commission may have some questions for you all.

So first I'll turn to Vice Chair Mahmood.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: First of all, thank you so much. Really every single testimony and statement was full of so much information, and I know it takes a lot of work and a lot of effort to get here.

I have two basic things. Number one, which I wanted, I know everybody covered somewhat on this thing, but maybe more specific. Russian authorities and their government use one phrase, and this question is for everybody, and they try to do as much as possible religious violation and persecution is their traditional values.

So they can go to every aspect of society, whether it's related to religion or religious factors, or religious affiliation, or doing something which religion tells us, and they go and oppress them, repress them, and limit them.

In your view, whoever wants to jump on, how badly that is affecting? I mean with my knowledge and whatever I have read is I think there is one single strongest tool they're using to just use patriotism and Russian sincerity and involvement if anybody does anything to their religion, and how we can counter that and how we can basically address that?

Anybody can start.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Mr. Fautre.

MR. FAUTRE: Yes. Of course, the traditional values and the defense of the traditional values is at the heart of that philosophy of defense of a spiritual security of Russia, and there is there an alliance between Patriarch Kirill, on the one hand, and Vladimir Putin, on the other hand, a deal, in fact, that should be a win/win operation.

Patriarch Kirill supporting the war and, on the other hand, the president of the Russian Federation protecting by laws, by amendments to

criminal codes, administrative codes, et cetera, shrinking increasingly the space of freedom, but giving more power in this way to the Orthodox Church to keep away any foreign influence because traditional values, of course, is Russian, and all those missionaries, Mormons, Scientologists, Jehovah's Witnesses, are perceived as threats to the identity of the nation and to the spiritual values.

Also those issues with LGBTQI and so on. So there is that deal, that operation, special operation, I would say, between Putin and Kirill.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you.

Any other witnesses want to jump in on that question? Yes, Mr. Storyev.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: I have one more follow-up.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Asif, I believe Mr. Storyev has a comment first.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: Please, yes.

MR. STORYEV: I can go after the follow-

up. That's fine.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: No, no. I want to move on a different area so I can--

MR. STORYEV: Oh, okay. Yeah, no, I was just going to say that it's also important to note that even though Russian Orthodox Church is stereotyped as ardent supporters of the war against Ukraine, and, of course, the official Russian Orthodox Church is definitely in that category, but there are, nevertheless, quite a few anti-war Orthodox Christians, priests and regular believers alike.

Ioann Kurmoyarov, whom I already mentioned, is a great example of that. I believe there are currently three anti-war Christians, kind of Christian activists, who are jailed in Russia right now. So that's also good to keep in mind.

MR. FAUTRE: Yeah, but also the fact that at the beginning of the war against Ukraine, there were more than a hundred members of the Orthodox clergy in Russia that were against the war, but

they were very quickly silenced, sanctioned, and totally repressed.

Now, you just hear a few left voices that, as you have mentioned.

MR. STORYEV: Very true, yes.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: Thank you.

So actually my follow-up question was related to Ukraine war. We have seen that religious persecution and repression has been there a long time in Russia, even at the time of USSR.

But lately with the war with Ukraine, it has gone to a different level, and I think part of that is relating to the war, who is supporting the war and who is trying to raise a voice.

Two questions I have. There is one issue which we hear from the other side is the Russian Orthodox, who have a huge presence in Ukraine, they are either being limited, either being restricted, either being closed or basically completely banned.

How would we address that, that what is happening in Ukraine on the Russian Orthodox

Christians, is justified, which we cannot justify with Russia, and what we need to do and how we need to highlight that?

And number two is I have seen there's quite a big split on Muslims because there are a large part of Russian territories which are either majority or a lot of them are Muslims.

And I think they are split between either loyalty to Russia indeed with the war or they are against it, and people who are against it are being really persecuted, like Tatars and some of the people who are in Chechen region where it seems to be right now peace, and how are they going to play a role with other extremist organizations?

And what will come up from now onwards once hopefully this war goes to end and people get more chance to get together, other operators come in and play their role in religious activities?

CHAIR HARTZLER: Halyna. You need to unmute. You're still muted.

MS. COYNASH: Thank you. Thank you very

much.

And I've just now lost myself altogether.  
Oh, dear.

CHAIR HARTZLER: You're good.

MS. COYNASH: I'm very sorry. And I think I haven't quite managed to—yes, okay. I'll start with the second question first simply because most of I think that is probably to do with Russia, but I would say that in occupied Crimea, and really in most parts of Ukraine, I think the, the persecution of religious believers who are not affiliated to the Russian Orthodox Church, and in Crimea with Crimean Tatars, I think the vast majority of Crimean Tatars are, I mean they may possibly go to mosques which are related to the Russian-collaborating Directorate of Muslims.

But, in general, I think you will find that Crimean Tatars have always associated themselves with Ukraine and are not particularly supporting, certainly not supporting the war at all.



Coming back to the first question, which is an extremely difficult one, Russia is using this as a major form of propaganda, saying that Russian Orthodox people are persecuted.

In fact, I think, you know, I have to say that I don't think the law in Ukraine that was passed and has now come into force is the optimal way of dealing with the situation, but there is a situation which is very serious in Ukraine, which is that the Russian Orthodox Church—sorry—excuse me—the Ukrainian Orthodox Church linked to the Moscow Patriarchate, unfortunately, in 2014, did not take a stand against Russia's aggression.

It was very much seen as being either too quiet or even positively supporting Russia. That purportedly changed in 2022—purportedly.

It purportedly completely dissociated itself from the Moscow Patriarchate. There are strong grounds for believing that actually the dissociation is on paper or even not on paper, but not particularly strong.

Ukraine has demanded, and as I said, I'm not a supporter of the law in question. I think it's probably not overly sensible. It has demanded that Ukrainian congregations make, demonstrate that they are no longer affiliated with the Moscow Church, with the Russian Orthodox Church.

It's not, it has not particularly, it's not a very good law. I don't think it has led to major amounts of persecution. In fact, I don't think really it has—on the ground level, as far as Ukrainian Orthodox believers who were always linked to the Moscow Patriarchate and who now say that they are not, on the ground level, it has not actually affected any of them.

As far as the hierarchy is concerned, yes, there are attempts at the moment. We are talking about a very serious fifth column within Ukraine which has always been very close to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Russian Orthodox Church, in turn, is very closely linked with the current Kremlin

regime. It's a difficult one. I don't think we're doing very well at the moment, but I do not think that people are facing serious amounts of Russian, of persecution for their, for being members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the one that was traditionally linked with Moscow, and unlike the very large number of people who are facing persecution on occupied territory.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Okay. Very helpful there. Thank you.

Now, I'll turn to Commissioner Ferguson for any questions she may have.

COMMISSIONER FERGUSON: I would like to use my question to ask you to elaborate on those four recommendations that you--this is for Halyna.

You, for lack of time, you said you might not go into the four recommendations. You did mention support for Radio Free Europe, but are there other policy recommendations that you would have for us at USCIRF in advising the U.S. government?

What would you prioritize? Sanctions? Or what would, what do you view as most effective?

MS. COYNASH: Thank you very much for the question.

As far as sanctions are concerned, yes, yes, very much, please. If you could, you know, if you could propose such sanctions because I do think the situation really calls for them as far as, especially as far as the, the increasing persecution of people, for example, like Father Maksymov, well, Father Kostiantyn, who is, Maksymov, who is serving the 14 years.

Now there was no way of proving what they mean by spying, but, on the other hand, we know from the cases in Crimea, that all of those, all of those cases are very gravely flawed, and there are no grounds for believing that Father Kostiantyn was in some way a spy for Ukraine.

As far as Crimea is concerned, it would be very, very useful if USCIRF could promote sanctions, which specifically target those

prosecutors, judges, so-called judges. Those will be the security service, who are involved in openly persecuting people who have committed no crimes and particularly targeting human rights people.

My other recommendations, very quickly, I believe that there are very strong grounds for separating analysis and addressing the situation in both Russia and in Russian occupied Ukraine.

There are many reasons for this. Most importantly, I think the fact that the situation is so much worse. I know it's very bad in Russia. I'm not saying it's not. But I think the situation in Ukraine, in occupied parts of Ukraine, is so seriously lawless. Certain, the degradation of everything is so great that it would be good to separate the two.

And something which, I mean the fourth recommendation was the one about information, about breaking the information blockade.

The second recommendation is a reasonably strange one, but I think because Russia has been

occupying Crimea for so long, and because it violates all international law, as a matter of course, I think people forget that actually all of these persecutions, all of the persecution, all of the, all of these prosecutions of Crimean Tatars, of religious figures in occupied Ukraine are in the gravest violation of every aspect, including the fourth Geneva Convention.

And that is, you know, very important to keep repeating because, you know, otherwise there is a temptation, as some political leaders have called, for at least parts of the occupied territory to somehow to be ceded to Russia.

And we are seeing such horrific human rights violations that, well, no Ukrainian could think this was in any way conceivable, and I believe that by concentrating on the terrible violations of international law of things that are completely unacceptable, that can be highlighted.

I hope that was sort of clear. I've tried to make it a little bit clearer in my, in my

follow-on testimony.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Yes, no. We understood and appreciate your expounding on those policy recommendations.

So Commissioner Schneck.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you.

First of all, again, I want to thank all of the witnesses. These testimonies have been tremendously helpful.

I'm really interested in the question of religious nationalism, but, you know, I know that it's been talked about just a little bit. I think that it's ironic that Putin's Russkiy Mir is presented as a defense of religion against the decadence of the West when, in fact, on the ground, it looks as if it's nothing but an effort to repress religion in Russia and in occupied Ukraine.

To what extent is Patriarch Kirill's Orthodox Church an active and willing partner in this repression of other religions?

And let me address this, first, to Mr.

Fautre, but if others have something to add, I'd be glad to hear. And I have a follow-up question as well.

MR. FAUTRE: Yes, yes. For sure, as I said before, there is a deal, a deal between the Church and the, let's say, and politics, no separation at all.

They want to get rid of anything that is coming from outside Russia because their influence is perceived as a threat to their identity and to their national identity, nationalism, as you said.

That's why they wage war all together, Putin and Kirill, on the Jehovah's Witnesses, on Protestants, as well. Quite recently a number of them have been arrested and will be prosecuted.

Of course, from the point of view of Kirill, they are heretics, and heretics must, let's say, leave the scene and not, cannot be followed by any of their, the members of their, of their church.

But sometimes I make the comparison,



especially with the concept of offending the religious feelings of the believers, and so that is equivalent to the blasphemy laws in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, you have blasphemy laws. They are very well known unfortunately. And on the one hand, you have extremist political, extremist religious groups in Pakistan that aggress the Ahmadis because they are heretics, and the Ahmadis are persecuted, but also Christians and Jews, et cetera, with, on the basis of the blasphemy laws, and we see in Russia the same sort of development.

The Orthodox Church with the political powers accusing, prosecuting, even fabricated cases, people belonging to other religions, like Jehovah's Witnesses and others. That will be my first reaction.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you.

Yes, Dr. Coynash. You're muted.

MS. COYNASH: I'm not anymore.

I just wanted to just add very quickly that as far as Kirill is concerned, he's made his

very-close-to-Putin position as far as the so-called Russian war, world-sorry-the Russian world ideology. Now, Russian world ideology denies really effectively the existence of a separate, sovereign, independent Ukrainian state.

And I think, you know, this is nothing to do with religion obviously. It's to do with politics, but he is the head of the Russian Orthodox Church so, you know, I think we are talking the same kind of diseased delirium that Putin is unfortunately suffering from.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you.

I'm noticing the time so I'll forgo my second question, but just really briefly, I'm very concerned about the situation for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, Mr. Lopes.

And I really would like to learn more about the situation for Muslim populations in places like Chechnya and Dagestan and how they fit into this thing.

But I realize that we do not have the time

so I defer to Chair Hartzler.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you, Commissioner Schneck.

I was just going to mention a couple of quick things. The testimony has been amazing, but, Mr. Fautre, in your testimony, I just think it's worth emphasizing how you portray this as a wave of religious cleansing in Russia, under the concept of spiritual security.

And then just the raw numbers of the number of missionaries that have been prosecuted under, under this law-124 for conducting missionary activities, and 107 of them have been convicted, and then the number of Jehovah's Witnesses that are also experiencing sentences that are more severe than the sentence for kidnapping and rape.

I mean I just think this needs to sink in, the level of targeting of religious cleansing, as you portray it here, and I think the world needs to know that.

I wanted a clarification real quickly on

an amendment you said passed last year. Said that their Duma prohibits public services, religious rites, and ceremonies in residential and non-residential premises and buildings.

So just a quick question. Every, every religion--right--it's not just Jehovah's Witnesses--in the--

MR. FAUTRE: Yes, not--sorry.

CHAIR HARTZLER: So basically it's illegal to have any worship service in your home no matter what the religion is; is that correct?

MR. FAUTRE: It is exactly what it means.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Okay.

MR. FAUTRE: And just to prolong a little bit, now in the occupied territories, Jehovah's Witnesses, of course, are de facto banned under Russian, Russian law.

And in the Orthodox churches in the occupied territories, they are, their jurisdiction has been transferred to Patriarch Kirill.

If they were already before part of the

Moscow Patriarchate or if they are or they were also Orthodox Churches of Ukraine under, in communion with Constantinople, for example.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Okay. Very good.

MR. FAUTRE: So it showed what would happen if the country fell in the hands of Russia, in the whole country.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Um, yeah.

MR. FAUTRE: Really just freedom totally destroyed.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Yes. And one more quick question, Mr. Lopes.

Your testimony with the numbers and stuff is just, it just, just very impactful and staggering, but you said that if they are labeled "extremist" or "terrorism," it cripples one's ability to work, access banking services, manage property, even obtain cellphone services.

Could you expound on that? So how does that work? Are they like crippling one's ability to work? Are they not going to be able to get work

at all or they cannot get a banking service or they cannot get a cellphone?

Could you just expound on what that really means and what that looks like?

MR. LOPES: Sure. Thank you so much, Chair Hartzler.

So when they are posted on this list, just like if they were posted on that list in this country, and immediately when you tried to open up a bank account, they would deny you because they don't want, they don't want to hold money for someone who is even allegedly to be a terrorist.

So anyone that's on that list, it's difficult to open a bank account, and their bank account may be mostly, if not completely, frozen.

They may in some cases be given a very small amount of money that they can, they can supposedly try and live off of, but a lot of people don't have access to their pension.

They're not able to, like we said, get cellphone service or sign legal documents. They

might not be able to receive, if a relative dies and they're bequeathed property or money, they may not be able to receive any of that.

And so that could be held in abeyance, and so it does make the everyday life very difficult, especially for those who are supporting a family, to try to support their children, and then on top of that, if they're imprisoned, it could affect the family even worse once he's not even there.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Okay.

Thank you very much.

And, unfortunately, that's all the time that we have for questions and for discussion today, but I want to, again, thank each one of our witnesses. Your testimonies have been very, very insightful, informative, and helpful.

And so thank you so much for providing that insight on the religious freedom situation in Russia and Russia-occupied Ukraine, and thank you for our audience for joining us today.

This hearing is adjourned.

MR. FAUTRE: Thank you, as well, for  
inviting us.

MS. COYNASH: Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 11:56 a.m. EDT, the hearing  
was adjourned.]