

THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Religious freedom conditions in Russia continue to deteriorate, with the government increasingly using an anti-extremism law against religious groups and individuals not known to use or advocate violence. National and local government officials regularly apply other laws to harass Muslims and religious and other groups they view as non-traditional and therefore alien to Russian culture and society. These actions, along with high levels of xenophobia and intolerance, including anti-Semitism, have resulted in violent and sometimes lethal hate crimes. Despite increased prosecutions for these acts, the Russian government has failed to address these issues consistently or effectively. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Russia on its Watch List in 2011. The Commission has reported on Russia every year since 1999, and placed Russia on the Watch List for the first time in 2009.

BACKGROUND

Russia's weak judicial system, inconsistent adherence to the rule of law, and local officials' personal views and arbitrary decisions have contributed to chronic problems for the country's diverse religious communities. Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Russian Orthodoxy are the only religions considered to have "traditional" status in Russia. The Russian Orthodox faith, through the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church (MPROC), receives *de facto* favored status among these four recognized faiths. The sharp deterioration in recent years of human rights in Russia appears directly linked to the Russian government's increasing authoritarian stance as well as the growing influence of violent chauvinistic or extremist groups in Russian society. Increasingly, Russian journalists, lawyers and others who defend human rights—particularly those who seek to bring violations to international attention—have been subjected to brazen killings and attacks, with the perpetrators acting with impunity.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

The Russian government uses the vague and broad provisions of its Extremism Law to restrict the activities of religious groups that are viewed, sometimes unjustifiably, as security threats. Other laws place onerous requirements on religious communities in order for them to practice their faith freely and legally. Building or renting worship space remains difficult for a number of religious communities. Human rights violations, including violations of religious freedom, continue to occur in Chechnya. Violent hate crimes against persons and property are increasing across Russia.

Application of the Extremism Law and other Legal Restrictions: The government applies Russia's 2002 Extremism Law against Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants for vague reasons and the courts use this law to ban religious literature designated as extremist. Religious organizations can face lawsuits after one warning for alleged extremist activity and can be closed within two months if they do not correct the alleged violation. The Russian government's arbitrary application of the law against religious adherents and others who pose no credible threat to security is problematic, despite the security challenges that Russia faces.

Muslims who are viewed as "overly observant," especially in the North Caucasus region of Russia, have been arrested on vague official accusations of alleged religious extremism, "disappeared," or even killed. The Russian government has equated the practice of Islam outside of government-approved structures with extremism and even terrorism. Hundreds of Russian Muslims reportedly have been imprisoned on the basis of planted evidence, including banned religious literature, drugs, or weapons. Persons suspected of involvement with Muslim extremist groups reportedly have been subjected to torture and ill-treatment in pretrial detention, prisons, and labor camps. In 2007, a Russian court banned the Russian translations of Turkish theologian's Said Nursi's commentaries on the Koran and Islam, because they were deemed extremist. Authorities have initiated criminal charges against some individuals suspected of reading or owning Nursi's works, and one has been convicted.

Russia's 2006 NGO law empowers the Ministry of Justice to interfere with NGO activities, such as examining their documents and requiring them to submit documentation of foreign donations and the full names, addresses, and passport details of executive board members. Russia's 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience also has problematic provisions, including a requirement that registered groups must re-register annually. In March 2011, the Interior Ministry's Department against Extremism sent letters to the Association of Evangelical Christian Churches requesting a plethora of

private information, including any possible “instances of religiously motivated conscription avoidance.” In the past year, numerous raids, detentions, and literature seizures have occurred against Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Restrictions on Places of Worship: Building or renting worship space remains difficult for a number of religious communities, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Pentecostal congregations, Orthodox groups that do not recognize the Moscow Patriarchate, Molokans, and Old Believer communities. Many of these groups report inordinate official interest in fire safety and other aspects of their worship facilities that can result in court-ordered fines, temporary closures, or demolition threats. Most recently in the exclave of Kaliningrad, Russian officials also have confiscated buildings used by Catholics and Protestants, and turned the sites over to the Russian Orthodox Church. Muslims have encountered difficulties in gaining official permission to open and maintain mosques, particularly in Moscow and other large cities.

Violent Hate Crimes against Persons and Property: Chauvinist groups have stepped up their campaign, including death threats, against individuals, groups, and government officials that defend the rights of religious and ethnic minorities and migrants. While Russian police have offered some assistance to these defenders, their efforts are inconsistent and often ineffective. In many cases involving Russia’s ethnic and religious minorities, Russian authorities, particularly at the local level, have not treated hate crimes seriously. In recent years, human rights groups have expressed alarm over the high rate of hate crimes in Russia, often the result of attacks by “skinhead” racist groups, particularly against people from Central Asia who are predominantly Muslim, as well as against Russian Jews.

Chechnya: Mass violations of human rights, including religious freedom violations, continue to be condoned or overseen by the Russian-appointed leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who rules a corrupt and lawless republic. Kadyrov also stands accused of involvement in the murders of political opponents and human rights activists and exploits Islam, distorting Chechen Sufi traditions to justify his arbitrary rule. Over the past three years, nine women reportedly have been killed, most recently in January 2011, for “immodest behavior,” and their killers are not known to have stood trial. In 2007, Kadyrov decreed that all women must wear headscarves in public buildings, and he has encouraged attacks on those refusing to wear the hijab.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

In response to the violations of religious freedom that continue in Russia, the U.S. government should:

- Make freedom of religion or belief a key human rights and security concern in the U.S.-Russia relationship as part of the “reset” of bilateral relations;
- Press Russia to reform its overly broad Extremism Law and ensure it is not used against peaceful religious communities;
- Implement the “Smith Amendment” included in the FY 2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act to prohibit U.S. financial assistance to the Russian Federation government due to its official policies on religious groups, especially the Extremism Law;
- Include in U.S.-funded exchange programs participants from Russian regions with sizeable Muslim and other religious minority populations and initiate an International Visitor’s Program for Russian officials on the prevention and prosecution of hate crimes; and
- Institute a visa ban and freeze the assets of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov due to his continued gross human rights violations and alleged links to politically-motivated killings, and urge the U.S.’s European partners to do the same.

Please see USCIRF’s 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Russia.