

# **RUSSIA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, equal rights irrespective of religious belief, and the right to worship and profess one's religion. The law states government officials may prohibit the activity of a religious association for violating public order or engaging in "extremist activity." The law lists Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country's four "traditional" religions and recognizes the special role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Authorities continued to enforce the Supreme Court's 2017 ruling that criminalized the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist" and reportedly detained at least 47 Witnesses and put 72 under investigation. Authorities banned Jehovah's Witnesses literature, raided homes, seized personal property and religious literature, and subjected individuals to lengthy interrogations. Authorities continued to detain, fine, and imprison members of other minority religious groups and minority religious organizations for alleged extremism, including followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi. At least 11 of his followers were tried or jailed during the year, with four convicted of allegedly belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir, and seven more detained on the suspicion that they were members of the organization. In one case, according to the nongovernmental human rights organization (NGO) Memorial, authorities beat and verbally abused an individual allegedly from Hizb ut-Tahrir in a pretrial detention facility. Memorial stated the government held 177 political prisoners who were jailed because of their religious beliefs, the majority of whom were Muslim. Authorities convicted and fined several individuals for "public speech offensive to religious believers." In some cases, it was difficult for minority religious organizations to obtain state registration. The government prosecuted members of many Christian denominations and others for alleged unlawful missionary activity under the amendments to antiterrorism laws passed in 2016, known as the Yarovaya Package. Police conducted raids on the private homes and places of worship of religious minorities. Religious minorities said local authorities used anti-extremism laws to add to the government's list of banned religious texts. Local officials continued to prevent minority religious organizations from obtaining land and denied them construction permits for houses of worship. The government continued to grant privileges to the ROC not accorded to any other church or religious association, including the right to review draft legislation and greater access to public institutions. The government fined and issued deportation orders for foreign nationals engaging in religious activity, including a rabbi and two African Pentecostals.

Media, NGOs, and religious groups reported a number of attacks on individuals based on their religious identity. For example, since the 2017 Supreme Court ruling classifying the religion as “extremist,” Jehovah’s Witnesses reported beatings, arson attacks on their homes, and employment discrimination. Reports also indicated that hundreds fled the country in fear of persecution. According to the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis (SOVA Center), a local NGO, there were several reported cases of vandalism during the year targeting religious properties. These included unknown assailants knocking down crosses and desecrating Jewish cemeteries. In separate instances, arsonists attacked two Orthodox churches and set fire to a Jewish leader’s vehicle.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials met with a range of government officials to express concern over the treatment of religious minorities, particularly the use of the law on extremism to restrict the activities of religious minorities, and the revocation of the registration of some minority religious organizations. Throughout the year, the Ambassador met with representatives of the ROC and minority faiths to discuss concerns about religious freedom in the country, including with leaders of the Russian Jewish Congress (RJC), the National Coalition of Supporting Eurasian Jewry, the Church of Scientology (COS), and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ). In addition, consular officers participated in many administrative hearings involving U.S. citizens accused of violating visa or other administrative requirements. Some of the U.S. citizens in these cases said the government targeted them because they were members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or other religious minorities. Other representatives from the embassy and Consulates General in Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok met regularly with religious leaders and representatives from multiple faiths to discuss developments related to religious legislation, government practices, and specific religious freedom cases. The embassy sponsored visits of members of different faiths from several regions of the country to the United States to engage in the topics of religious freedom and countering violent extremism. The embassy also used its social media platforms during the year to highlight religious freedom concerns.

On November 28, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Russia on a Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 142.2 million (July 2018 estimate). A 2015-2016 poll by the Pew Research Center reported 71 percent of the population is Orthodox, while 10 percent identify as Muslim. Religious groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population each include Buddhists, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Baha'is, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), pagans, Tengrists, Scientologists, and Falun Gong practitioners. The 2010 census estimates the number of Jews at 150,000; however, the RJC stated in October that the actual Jewish population is nearly one and a half million, most of whom live in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Immigrants and migrant workers from Central Asia are mostly Muslim. The majority of Muslims live in the Volga Ural region and the North Caucasus. Moscow, St. Petersburg, and parts of Siberia also have sizable Muslim populations.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution stipulates the state is secular and provides for religious freedom, freedom of conscience, and freedom of religious worship, including the right to “profess, individually or jointly with others, any religion, or to profess no religion.” It provides the right of citizens “to freely choose, possess, and disseminate religious or other beliefs, and to act in conformity with them,” and provides equality of rights and liberties regardless of attitude toward religion. The constitution also bans any limitation of human rights on religious grounds and prohibits actions inciting religious hatred and strife. The constitution states all religious associations are equal and separate from the state. The law acknowledges Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country's four “traditional” religions, constituting an inseparable part of the country's historical heritage. The law recognizes the “special contribution” of Russian Orthodox Christianity to the country's history as well as to the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture.

The law states the government may restrict religious rights only to the degree necessary to protect the constitutional structure and security of the government; the morality, health, rights, and legal interests of persons; or the defense of the country. It is a violation of the law to force another person to disclose his or her opinion of a religion, or to participate or not participate in worship, other religious ceremonies, the activities of a religious association, or religious instruction.

The law states those who violate religious freedom will be “held liable under criminal, administrative, and other legislation.” The administrative code and the criminal code both punish obstruction of the right to freedom of conscience and belief with imprisonment of up to three years and fines of up to 200,000 rubles (\$2,900) or 500,000 rubles (\$7,200), depending upon which code governs the offense.

Incitement of “religious discord” is punishable by up to four years in prison. Under the criminal code, maximum fines and prison sentences for “actions directed to incite hatred or enmity” on the basis of religion may be punished by fines of 300,000 to 500,000 rubles (\$4,300 to \$7,200), compulsory labor for up to four years, or imprisonment for up to five years. If these actions are committed with violence by a person with official status (a term which applies to anyone working for the government or state-owned entities, as well as people in management roles at commercial or nongovernment entities), or by a group of individuals, the punishment is 300,000 to 600,000 rubles (\$4,300 to \$8,600), compulsory labor for up to five years, or imprisonment for up to six years.

The law criminalizes offending the religious feelings of believers; actions “in public demonstrating clear disrespect for society and committed with the intent to insult the religious feelings of believers” are subject to fines of up to 300,000 rubles (\$4,300), compulsory labor for up to one year, or imprisonment for up to one year. If these actions are committed in places of worship, the punishment is a fine of up to 500,000 rubles (\$7,200), compulsory labor for up to three years, or a prison sentence of up to three years.

By law, officials may prohibit the activity of a religious association on grounds such as violating public order or engaging in “extremist activity.” The law criminalizes a broad spectrum of activities as extremism, including incitement to “religious discord” and “assistance to extremism,” but the law does not precisely define extremism or require that an activity include an element of violence or hatred to be classified as extremism.

Being a member of a banned religious association designated as extremist is punishable by up to six years in prison for individuals and up to 12 years for persons with official status. First time offenders who willingly forsake their membership in banned religious organizations are exempt from criminal liability if they committed no other crimes.

Local laws in several regions, including Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan, ban “extremist Islamic Wahhabism” in the territories of these republics but do not define the term. Administrative penalties are applied for violating these laws.

A Supreme Court’s 2017 ruling criminalized the activity of Jehovah’s Witnesses as “extremist” and banned their activities. The court’s ruling says that the constitution guarantees freedom of religious beliefs, but this right is limited by other rights, including the “existing civil peace and agreement.”

The law creates three categories of religious associations with different levels of legal status and privileges: groups, local organizations, and centralized organizations. Religious groups or organizations may be subject to legal dissolution or deprivation of legal status by a court decision on grounds including violations of standards set forth in the constitution or public security.

The “religious group” is the most basic unit and does not require registration with the state; however, when a group first starts its activities, it must notify authorities in the “location of the religious group activity,” typically the regional Ministry of Justice (MOJ) office. A religious group may conduct worship services and rituals (but the law does not specify where or how) and teach religion to its members. It does not have legal status to open a bank account, own property, issue invitations to foreign guests, publish literature, receive tax benefits, or conduct worship services in prisons, state-owned hospitals, or the armed forces. Individual members of a group may invite foreigners as personal guests to engage in religious instruction, and may import religious material. According to the law, a religious group may use property bought for the group’s use by its members, or residential property owned or rented by its members, or public spaces rented by its members, to hold services.

A “local religious organization” (LRO) may register with the MOJ if it has at least 10 citizen members who are 18 or older and are permanent local residents. LROs have legal status and may open bank accounts, own property, issue invitation letters to foreign guests, publish literature, receive tax benefits, and conduct worship services in prisons, hospitals, and the armed forces. “Centralized religious organizations” (CROs) may register with the MOJ at the regional or federal level by combining at least three LROs of the same denomination. In addition to having the same legal rights as LROs, CROs also may open new LROs without a waiting period.

To register as an LRO or CRO, an association must provide the following: a list of the organization's founders and governing body, with addresses and passport information; the organization's charter; the minutes of the founding meeting; certification from the CRO (in the case of LROs); a description of the organization's doctrine, practices, history, and attitudes towards family, marriage, and education; the organization's legal address; a certificate of payment of government dues; and a charter or registration papers of the governing body in the case of organizations whose main offices are located abroad. Authorities may deny registration for reasons including incorrect paperwork, failure to meet different administrative requirements, national security reasons, or placement on the list of extremist or terrorist organizations. Denial of registration may be appealed in court. The law imposes reporting requirements on CROs and LROs receiving funding from abroad. They are required to report an account of their activities, a list of leaders, the source of foreign funding, and plans for how the organization intends to use any funds or property obtained through foreign funding. Reports are annual by default, but the MOJ may require additional ad hoc reports.

Foreign religious organizations (those created outside of the country under foreign laws) have the right to open offices for representational purposes, either independently or as part of religious organizations previously established in the country, but they may not form or found their own religious organizations in the country and may not operate houses of worship. Foreign religious organizations able to obtain the required number of local adherents may register as local religious organizations.

The government (the MOJ or the Prosecutor General's Office) oversees a religious organization's compliance with the law and may review its financial and registration-related documents when conducting an inspection or investigation. The government may send representatives (with advance notice) to attend a religious association's events, conduct an annual review of compliance with the association's mission statement on file with the government, and review its religious literature to decide whether the literature is extremist. The law contains ongoing reporting requirements on financial and economic activity, funding sources, and compliance with antiterrorist and anti-extremist legislation. The government may obtain a court order to close those associations that do not comply with reporting or other legal requirements.

The law allows the government to limit the places where prayer and public religious observance may be conducted without prior approval. LROs and CROs

may conduct religious services and ceremonies without prior approval in buildings, lands, and facilities owned or rented by these associations, as well as in cemeteries, crematoria, places of pilgrimage, and living quarters. Baptism ceremonies in rivers and lakes, as well as services conducted in parks, open spaces, or courtyards, do not fall under this exemption. In these cases, LROs and CROs must seek government approval at least one week in advance and provide the government with the names of organizers and participants as well as copies of any written materials to be used at the event.

A Ministry of Defense chaplaincy program requires members of a religious group to comprise at least 10 percent of a military unit before an official chaplain of that group is appointed. Chaplains are not enlisted or commissioned, but are classified as assistants to the commander. Chaplains are full-time employees of the Ministry of Defense, paid out of the defense budget. The program allows for chaplains from the four traditional religions only, and calls for at least 250 chaplains.

Federal law, as amended by the so-called Yarovaya Package passed in 2016, defines missionary activity as the sharing of one's beliefs with persons of another faith or nonbelievers with the aim of involving these individuals in the "structure" of the religious association. According to the law, in order to share beliefs outside of officially sanctioned sites (which include buildings owned by a religious organization, buildings whose owners have given permission for activities to take place, pilgrimage destinations, cemeteries and crematoria, and indoor spaces of educational organizations historically used for religious ceremonies), an individual must have a document authorizing the individual to share beliefs from a religious group or registered organization. This letter must be provided to the authorities and the individual must carry a copy of it. The law explicitly bans any beliefs from being shared in residential buildings without such documentation (unless in the form of a religious service, rite, or ceremony), or on another organization's property without permission from that organization. Materials disseminated by missionaries must be marked with the name of the religious association providing the authorization.

Engaging in missionary activity prohibited by law carries a fine of 5,000 to 50,000 rubles (\$72 to \$720) for individuals and 100,000 to 1,000,000 rubles (\$1,400 to \$14,400) for legal entities (which includes both LROs and CROs). Foreign citizens or stateless persons who violate restrictions on missionary activities may be fined 30,000 to 50,000 rubles (\$430 to \$720) and are subject to administrative deportation.

Several regional governments have their own restrictions on missionary activity.

Republics in the North Caucasus have varying policies on wearing the hijab in public schools. Hijabs are banned in public schools in Stavropol and Mordovia, rulings that have been upheld by the Supreme Court. The law in Chechnya permits schoolgirls to wear hijabs.

The law does not provide precise criteria on how written religious materials may be classified as “extremist.” Within the MOJ, the Scientific Advisory Board reviews religious materials for extremism. Composed of academics and representatives of the four traditional religions, the board reviews materials referred to it by judicial or law enforcement authorities, private citizens, or organizations. If the board identifies material as extremist, it issues a nonbinding advisory opinion, which is then published on the MOJ website and forwarded to the prosecutor’s office for further investigation. In addition to the Scientific Advisory Board, regional experts also may review religious materials for extremism. In 2009 the MOJ established the Expert Religious Studies Council and gave it wide powers to investigate religious organizations. Some of the council’s powers include reviewing organizations’ activities and literature and determining whether an organization is “extremist.” The council also advises the MOJ on the issue of giving religious organization status to a religious group.

Prosecutors may take material to a court and ask the court to declare it extremist, but materials introduced in court during the consideration of administrative, civil, or criminal cases may also be declared extremist *sua sponte* (i.e., of the court’s own accord). By law, publications declared extremist by a federal court are automatically added to the federal list of extremist materials. Courts may order internet service providers to block access to websites containing materials included on the federal list of extremist materials. There is no legal procedure for removal from the list even if a court declares an item no longer classified as extremist, but lists are reviewed and re-issued on a regular basis and publications may be dropped from lists. The law makes it illegal to declare the key texts (holy books) of the four traditional religions – the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, Quran, and Tibetan Buddhist Kangyur (Kanjur) – to be extremist.

According to the administrative code, mass distribution, production, and possession with the aim of mass distribution of extremist materials by private individuals may result in 15 days’ imprisonment or a fine of 1,000 to 3,000 rubles (\$14 to \$43), or 2,000 to 5,000 rubles (\$29 to \$72) for public officials, as well as the confiscation of these materials. Courts may suspend for 90 days the operations



of legal entities found to be in possession of extremist materials and fine them 100,000 to 1,000,000 rubles (\$1,400 to \$14,400). Individuals who produce materials later deemed extremist may not be punished retroactively but must cease production and distribution of those materials.

The law allows the transfer of state and municipal property of religious significance to religious organizations, including land, buildings, and movable property. The law grants religious organizations using state historical property for religious purposes the right to use such state property indefinitely. The law prohibits the transfer of living quarters for religious use and the use of living quarters for missionary activity, unless the activity is a part of a “religious service, rite, or ceremony.”

In July the State Duma adopted, and on August 3 the president signed, a new law allowing religious organizations to use buildings that were not originally authorized for religious purposes to be used as such if they were part of a property which served a religious purpose. The law allows, for example, a group to establish a Sunday school in a warehouse on the property of a church. If a structure (i.e. the warehouse) does not meet legal requirements and is not made legal by submitting proper paperwork by 2030, it would be destroyed.

Religious education or civil ethics classes are compulsory in all public and private secondary schools. Students may choose to take a course on one of the four traditional religions, a general world religions course, or a secular ethics course. Regional and municipal departments of education oversee this curriculum at the local level in accordance with their capacity to offer the courses, and according to the religious makeup of the given location. There is no requirement for representatives of religious organizations to be licensed to conduct religious education in Sunday schools and home schooling. Religious instructors in any other state or private school must be licensed to teach religious courses.

The Office of the Director of Religious Issues within the Office of the Federal Human Rights Ombudsman handles complaints about the government’s actions on religious freedom. The ombudsman may intercede on behalf of those who submit complaints; however, the ombudsman may not compel other government bodies to act or directly intervene in complaints not addressed to the government.

The law entitles individuals and organizations to take religious freedom cases to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg. The state must pay compensation to a person whose rights were violated as determined by the ECHR

and ensure his or her rights are restored to the extent possible. The Constitutional Court determines whether judgments by international and regional courts, including the ECHR, are consistent with the constitution.

There is compulsory military service for men, but the constitution provides for alternative service for those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience, including religious belief. The standard military service period is 12 months, while alternative service is 18 months in a Ministry of Defense agency or 21 months in a nondefense agency. Failure to perform alternative service is punishable under the criminal code, with penalties ranging from an 80,000 ruble (\$1,100) fine to six months in prison.

By law, religious associations may not participate in political campaigns or the activity of political parties or movements, or provide material or other aid to political groups. This restriction applies to religious associations and not to their individual members.

The ROC and all members of the Public Chamber (a state institution established in 2005 and made up of representatives of public associations) are granted the opportunity to review draft legislation pending before the State Duma on a case-by-case basis. No formal mechanism exists for permanent representation of religious organizations in the Public Chamber, but individuals from both traditional religions and others may be selected to serve on the Chamber, first by the president, then subsequently the selectees themselves select additional members to serve in the group. The Duma passed legislation in 2007 barring any member of an organization who had been accused of extremism from serving on the Public Chamber.

The law states foreigners or stateless individuals whose presence in the country is deemed “undesirable” are forbidden to become founders, members, or active participants in the activities of religious organizations. The same is true for individuals whose activities are deemed extremist by the courts or who are subject to prosecution under the law on combating money laundering and the financing of terrorism. The Duma passed a bill in September restricting any foreign citizen or person without citizenship from entering the country if he or she “participates in the activities of the organizations included in the list of organizations and individuals in respect of whom there is information about their involvement in extremist activities or terrorism[.]”

Religious work is not permitted on humanitarian visas, nor are there missionary visas. Those engaging in religious work require both a contract with a legally registered religious organization and a work visa.

Under the criminal code, an individual convicted of committing an act of vandalism motivated by religious hatred or enmity may be sentenced to up to three years of compulsory labor or prison.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

Reports indicated authorities continued to physically abuse individuals on account of their religious beliefs or affiliation. For instance, authorities detained Eduard Nizamov, the purported head of the Russian branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir, in Kazan on October 11, and, according to Memorial, beat and verbally abused him while in pretrial detention. He was charged with organizing a terrorist organization. Hizb ut Tahrir remained banned by the government as a terrorist organization, but according to Memorial, it was a “non-violent international Islamic organization.” On October 12, the Vakhitovsky District Court of Kazan ordered Nizamov detained until November 21. Nizamov refused to testify, and remained in detention at year’s end. At the same time, authorities arrested Ildar Akhmetzyanov and Raisa Gimadeev as alleged leaders of the Hizb ut-Tahrir regional group in Tatarstan, and also charged them with organizing a terrorist organization, according to Memorial.

According to Memorial, in December the North Caucasian Military District Court in Rostov-on-Don sentenced Crimean Tatar Remzi Memetov to 17 years in a penal colony. The court also sentenced Crimean Tatar Enver Mamutov, Rustem Abiltarov, and Zevri Abseitov to nine years each in a penal colony. The four were arrested in Crimea, Ukraine in 2016, accused of belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir and “preparing for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order,” and transported to Russia. Human Rights advocates noted that the case appeared to be retaliation against these men for their opposition to Russia’s occupation of Crimea.

Memorial reported that in December Babushkinsky district court in Moscow found eight Muslims guilty of “organization and participation in an extremist organization” for their involvement in Tablighi Jamaat, an organization designated by the Supreme Court as “extremist” which Memorial characterized as an

international Islamic missionary movement. The district court sentenced the men to prison terms ranging from four to six and a half years.

In its annual October report, Memorial published a list of political prisoners in the country, which included 177 persons persecuted for their religious beliefs or affiliation (meaning they were in custody or under arrest and being criminally prosecuted) – more than double the previous year’s figure of 70. The report stated that none of the persons on the list used violence, called for violence, or planned violent acts. The majority of persons included in Memorial’s list were Muslims. Memorial also published a separate list of approximately 240 people in detention as of the end of the year for alleged involvement with the banned organization Hizb ut-Tahrir.

According to the international religious freedom NGO Forum 18, the government continued to restrict the exercise of freedom of religion during the year. Forum 18 found that authorities continued to pursue multiple cases against Muslims on extremism charges for reading the works of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi, many of which were banned as extremist. On August 21, the NGO reported that three Muslims were on trial or under investigation, and another three were sentenced to prison terms for being members of “Nurdzhular,” an organization reportedly based on Nursi’s teachings banned as extremist by the authorities. Experts from the SOVA Center continued to maintain that “Nurdzhular” did not actually exist in the country.

Forum 18 reported that on August 14, a Krasnoyarsk court handed Sabirzhon Kabirzoda a two-year suspended sentence for “extremism” after participating in a meeting to study Nursi’s works. FSB (Federal Security Service) “experts” said he had incited religious hatred by comparing Muslims to non-Muslims. According to the NGO, a suspended sentence could include a travel ban and voting restrictions. District court staff, however, told Forum 18 they were not “authorized” to specify the conditions of the court’s decision. In the town of Sharypovo, criminal cases against Andrei Rekst in Krasnoyarsk and Yevgeny Sukharev in connection with reading Nursi’s teachings were ongoing at year’s end. Andrei Dedkov of Krasnoyarsk, also an alleged member of Nurdzhular, was released in July after paying a 250,000 ruble (\$3,600) fine for organizing the activity of a banned religious organization in connection with extremism. Prosecutors lodged an appeal in June and argued for a longer jail sentence.

The ECHR found in August that court decisions to prohibit Nursi’s books violated the guarantee of the right to freedom of expression contained in the European

Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. It ruled that the country's courts did not provide sufficient and relevant grounds for interfering with the applicants' right to freedom of expression and that their intervention could not be considered necessary in a democratic society. The court further ruled that the government should pay one of the plaintiffs 7,500 euros (\$8,600) in compensation for non-pecuniary damages. As of year's end, the government had not acted on the ECHR ruling.

The SOVA Center, Memorial, and the media reported that during the year at least six Muslims were serving prison terms on charges connected to reading Nursi's work: Ziyavdin Dapayev was serving a four-year term; brothers Sukhrab and Artur Kaltuyev three year terms; Yevgeny Lvovich Kim, a three year, nine-months term; Ilgar Aliyev an eight-year term after losing his appeal in July. On June 29, a court sentenced Komil Odilov to two years in prison.

The media reported official harassment against Muslims. In October police officers wearing masks and fatigues surrounded approximately 100 Muslims exiting a mosque in Mytishi, Moscow Oblast. The police told the crowd they were not arresting anyone, but detained them on a bus for five hours. The worshipers were subsequently released without explanation.

In December the NGO Free Russia Forum said that during the year "the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses reached mass levels." A report by Jehovah's Witnesses stated that police, Special Purpose Police Unit (OMON) forces, and Federal Security Service (FSB) personnel raided the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses during the year. During these raids authorities reportedly entered homes, sometimes by forcing the door open; conducted unauthorized and illegal searches; failed to declare their purpose or show a court order; ordered people (including children and the elderly) around at gunpoint and pushed them to the floor or against the wall; seized personal belongings, including mobile phones, tablets, Bibles and Bible-related literature, documents, and money; brought adults and children to police stations for interrogation; and charged some with extremist activity and held them in pretrial custody.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, at 7:00 A.M. on July 4 in Omsk, police forces raided the homes of at least four Witnesses and searched their houses, land plots, outbuildings, and vehicles until the late afternoon. In one instance, a couple was asleep when the police invaded their home. The Jehovah's Witnesses stated that although the husband offered no resistance, the police beat him severely.

From January through April authorities raided the homes of more than 45 Jehovah's Witnesses in Shuya, Vladivostok, Polyarny, Zaton, Oryol, Belogorod and Kemerovo, according to the official Jehovah's Witnesses' website *jw.org*. This was twice the number reported during the corresponding period in 2017. In May Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported that a Jehovah's Witnesses spokesman said that 150 law enforcement personnel raided more than 20 Witnesses home in Birobidzhan in the Jewish Autonomous Region on May 16.

The Investigative Committee, the FSB, and officers of the Interior Ministry's Center for Countering Extremism carried out raids on Jehovah's Witnesses in 22 regions between January and August. As of year's end, 79 Jehovah's Witnesses were subject to criminal investigations, according to Forum 18. Of these, 22 were in pretrial detention, 17 were under house arrest, and 30 were under travel restrictions. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, authorities detained 72 individuals during the year, including minors.

According to the SOVA Center, in October alone, authorities arrested two Jehovah's Witnesses in Smolensk and another five in Kirov, ordered two who had been arrested in April in Murmansk to remain in detention, and told seven not to leave Orenburg. In the same month, authorities began auctioning Jehovah's Witnesses' properties in Krasnodar, Tatarstan, and Buryatia, and voided initiatives by Jehovah's Witnesses to transfer properties to foreign affiliates.

International media reported that Denis Christensen, a Danish citizen and elder of the Jehovah's Witnesses Oryol Congregation who was detained in May 2017, remained in detention and on trial in Oryol's Railway District Court at year's end for "extremist activity." According to Forum 18, between October 2017 and September 2018 Christensen appeared in court 38 times.

On February 14, the Supreme Court rejected an appeal by Ruslan Sokolovsky, a blogger from Yekaterinburg, who was arrested in 2016 for "inciting enmity and hatred" and "offending the feelings of believers" by playing the game *Pokemon Go* in an Orthodox church and posting antireligious videos online. In 2017, the Sverdlovsk District Court on appeal upheld his conviction of incitement to hatred and offense of religious feelings but overturned his convictions on other charges and reduced his suspended prison sentence to two years and three months.

According to COS representatives and media, in October authorities extended through February 2019 the detention of Ivan Matsitsky and Sahib Aliyev, director and accountant, respectively, of the St. Petersburg branch of the COS. Matsitsky

and Aliyev were arrested in June 2017 along with three other COS St. Petersburg leaders as part of a probe into what police said was possible “illegal entrepreneurship” (i.e., selling religious books), incitement of hatred, and organizing an extremist conspiracy. As of the year’s end, two other defendants in the case remain under house arrest, and one was released from house arrest in June but remained under investigation. Authorities continued to refuse to register the St. Petersburg and Moscow COS branches as religious organizations despite a 2014 ECHR ruling that the government’s refusal was a violation of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

According to the Russian Legal Information Agency, the government opened a criminal case in April against one of the COS leaders in St. Petersburg, who was alleged to have laundered 17 million rubles (\$244,000), but the agency did not name the individual.

Imam Makhmud Velitov of Moscow’s Yardam Mosque filed a case with the ECHR in October 2017 related to his conviction in 2017 on terrorism charges for advocating the “doctrine of political Islam” of the Hizb ut-Tahrir organization. The ECHR communicated the complaint to the government in January and in October the government asked the ECHR to reject the case. The ECHR’s decision remained pending at year’s end.

In January the Kurgan Regional Court dismissed a prosecutor’s appeal of the acquittal of Imam Ali Yakupov of the Kurgan Mosque, who was charged in 2015 with inciting hatred for comments he allegedly made saying God would punish Chinese Communists for prohibiting hijabs. According to the SOVA Center, the court found that the case had already been thoroughly investigated by lower courts.

In January the Magistrate Court of Sochi dismissed a case against Viktor Nochevnova, who was found guilty in 2017 of insulting the feelings of believers and fined 50,000 rubles (\$720) for reposting seven cartoon depictions of Jesus on his social media VKontakte page.

Maria Motuznaya, from Barnaul, was put on trial on August 6 for publishing two side-by-side images on her VKontakte page, one depicting Jesus Christ expelling cigarette smoke through a hole in his palm, and another depicting a religious procession along a broken road, accompanied by the comment, “Two main evils of Russia.” The government charged her with “demeaning the dignity of race and insulting the feelings of believers.” On October 9, a court returned the case to the prosecutor for further development. The case remained pending at year’s end.

According to the SOVA Center, Motuznaya said in October she had left the country for Ukraine, and intended to seek political asylum abroad.

According to the Ministry of Justice, at the end of the year there were 31,054 registered religious organizations in Russia, most of which were ROC-affiliated.

In some cases it was difficult for minority religious organizations to obtain state registration. In September the SOVA Center reported that the parish of St. Maria Gatchinskaya in the Leningrad Region convinced the city court to invalidate the MOJ's opinion blocking its registration as a religious organization. While the court directed the MOJ to reconsider the registration, it refused to require the MOJ to register the parish. The parish belonged to the Suzdal Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church, which is not affiliated with the ROC.

Media, NGOs, and religious minorities reported continued efforts by authorities to dissolve minority religious associations, often on the grounds they were conducting "extremist" activity.

The SOVA Center, the NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers International, and religious groups said the Expert Religious Studies Council members lacked appropriate academic and religious credentials to advise the MOJ about which groups should be permitted to register as religious organizations or to review an organization's literature and activities to determine whether the organization was "extremist." In June the Expert Religious Studies Council recommended the MOJ deny religious organization status to the "Community of Slavic Faith on Vyatka (Kirovskaya)."

The government continued to restrict missionary activity, with officials often citing concerns about missionaries being sources of foreign influence. For example, according to the SOVA Center, in July in Bryansk Region, Vitaly Boksha, a Baptist layperson, was fined for "illegal" missionary work occurring on May 15, when the court said he gave neighbors literature describing evangelical Baptist beliefs. Neighbors stated that they received the literature, but did not attend a service at the church. On July 3, the Mglinsky District Court convicted Boksha and fined him 5,000 rubles (\$72). Boksha filed an appeal with the regional court, and in August the higher court vacated the conviction and fine.

Representatives of minority religious associations and NGOs continued to state that the Yarovaya Package, enacted for the stated purpose of enhancing the country's antiterrorism capability, was employed by authorities to limit religious



freedom. They said the broad definition of “missionary activity” in the legislation meant it included not only proselytizing, but also disseminating religious materials, preaching, and engaging in interfaith discussions about religion, including in private residences, without prior authorization. In April Forum 18 said the legal framework for an individual exercising his or her beliefs outside a designated place of worship was unclear and that the authorities applied the law inconsistently. Forum 18 stated, “This imposes a large burden on individuals and organizations in fines, legal costs, and bureaucratic hurdles – particularly for smaller religious communities.” In April ISKCON attorney Mikhail Frolov told Forum 18, “The fines are large, and where the boundaries of lawful behavior lie is incomprehensible.... [E]veryone has become much more cautious in their public actions. The public activity of religious associations has decreased noticeably.” In April Pentecostal Union attorney Vladimir Ozolin told Forum 18 that “religious associations are also worried because they do not know how to profess their religion now and share it with others without violating the law. Churches face extra problems here, because no one knows what the permission to carry out missionary activity should look like – its form has not been established by law. In addition, state bodies do not conduct explanatory work and do not use warnings, but immediately issue fines.”

Forum 18 said authorities were pursuing more cases under the missionary provisions of the Yarovaya Package and fewer cases using laws regarding procedures for “gathering, meeting, demonstration, procession or picket” during the year, thus yielding potentially larger fines of up to 50,000 rubles (\$720). According to the SOVA Center, the government prosecuted 42 legal entities and 105 individuals during the first six months of the year for missionary activity. In its December report, Free Russia Forum said that in 2017 (the most recent data available) the courts received approximately 488 cases of illegal missionary activity, sentenced 274 people, and imposed fines totaling 3,594,700 rubles (\$51,600). According to Forum 18, in 2017 (the most recent data available) religious communities and individuals prosecuted for missionary activity included Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Baptist Union, the Council of Churches, ISKCON, Muslims, individuals associated with the Bible distribution organization the Gideons, Seventh-day Adventists, Hindus, a Kabbalah teacher, the New Apostolic Church, and the ROC Abroad. Authorities reportedly charged individuals with unauthorized missionary activity for activities such as holding prayer meetings at home, posting worship times on a religious community’s website, and giving a lecture on yoga. Forum 18 reported courts often imposed the minimum fines for first time offenses and larger fines for repeat offenses.

Free Russia Forum said that in 2018 authorities began using new means to restrict so-called missionary activity, including confiscating and demolishing Protestant houses of worship and restricting leaders of certain religious communities from entering the country. According to the SOVA Center, in one instance the Russian Border Service denied entry to Evgeny Peresvotov, a Ukrainian national and pastor of the Russian Christian Center “Vosstanovleniye.”

According to Forum 18, in March the Constitutional Court issued a partial clarification of the Yarovaya Package amendment on missionary activity. The court ruled that providing information about religious events would constitute an “offense” only if it were aimed at attracting people who were not already members of the religious organization.

Religious minorities said local authorities continued to use the country’s anti-extremism laws to ban sacred religious texts and other books relating to religion, other than the four holy books recognized by law – the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, Quran, and Kanjur.

According to the SOVA Center, during the first half of the year, authorities added several Islamic and Jehovah’s Witnesses texts to the MOJ’s list of extremist materials. The list grew to 4,514 entries by October, reflecting a slightly smaller increase than in 2017. During the first six months of the year, authorities imposed 1,133 sanctions for distribution of extremist materials, compared to 1,846 imposed in all of 2017. The SOVA Center also noted 24 cases through November 1 of prosecutors sanctioning library staff of schools, training centers, and prisons for being noncompliant with the Federal List of Extremist Materials. According to Forum 18, in some cases, those in charge of places of worship and other public or semipublic spaces were often held responsible for distribution of banned religious publications, which could have been left at the site by anyone at any time, even before the ban.

In February the SOVA Center reported that the local prosecutor’s office in Kabardino-Balkaria Republic sent four cases to the court in order to restrict access to Jehovah’s Witnesses’ websites. The office noted that the sites included “various sections, publications, magazines, books, videos, [and] news about the religious organization.” Seventh-day Adventist lawyer Vasily Nichik told Forum 18 a month later that Nizhny Novgorod was “among the foremost in terms of persecution in the field of religious freedoms,” and added, “In these matters, very often everything depends on the personalities within the system.”

According to Forum 18, since 2017 authorities levied several fines or imposed other rulings against Jesus Embassy, a Pentecostal church in Nizhny Novgorod, and its members. During the year a court fined the church for not specifying its full name in videos of worship services, the posting of which was also alleged to constitute “missionary activity,” resulting in more fines. Authorities also fined and ordered deported two Pentecostal African students for unauthorized “missionary activity.” Kudzai Nyamarebvu, a medical student from Zimbabwe, faced prosecution three times in six months, first for posting a video inviting fellow African students to a “welcome party” at the church, which her attorney maintained was a secular event; second, for reposting a video of another African student talking about how God had helped her recover from an illness; and third, for an interview she gave discussing her first two prosecutions, which was published on the Pentecostal Union’s website. Forum 18 said that in June a Prioksky District Court judge found her guilty of “hidden missionary activity, not expressed in either words or gestures.”

According to Forum 18, an unknown person removed a church sign showing a Seventh-day Adventist church’s full official name in Nizhny Novgorod and replaced it with one bearing an incomplete name. In the morning, a group of police officers arrived, and the community, primarily composed of retirees, was fined 30,000 rubles (\$430) for incorrect signage.

Reports persisted that local officials fined members of religious groups for using land, including their homes, “not for its intended purpose” (i.e., for religious services), continued to prevent minority religious organizations from obtaining land, and continued to deny construction permits for houses of worship. In a March report, Forum 18 stated that, within a contradictory and unclear legal framework, officials increased the numbers of fines for meeting for worship on land designated for residential or commercial use only. Forum 18 reported one defense lawyer said inspections and punishments were like “a lottery.”

In April a senior member of the Presidential Council on Human Rights and Development of Civil Society said there was a new tendency among regional authorities to restrict the construction or restoration of houses of prayer and churches on residential lands. In two separate cases in March, authorities demolished residences on private land that were being used as churches, one in Novorosijsk and one in Abinsk.

Forum 18 reported that after two rounds of appeals, on January 25, a court upheld a 10,000-ruble (\$140) fine imposed on Oleg Leshchenko, owner of a house in the

Rostov Region town of Volgodonsk in which the Rebirth of the Don Missionary Society of Evangelical Christians held services three times per week. The court fined Leshchenko for conducting religious services on premises that were not designated for religious services (his own house).

According to the SOVA Center, in September the ECHR informed the government that it had accepted the complaint of the Trinity Parish of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate) in the Moscow Region concerning a federal court decision to demolish its church in Noginsk. Authorities ordered the church, which was erected in 2015, be demolished after an ROC priest reportedly convinced local officials to bring suit against the church in a local court in 2016. The complaint was pending in the ECHR at year's end.

The SOVA Center said in January that monks in a Buddhist monastery on Kachkanar Mountain (approximately 125 miles north of Yekaterinburg) challenged the findings of a study commissioned by the regional governor that found it was not a legitimate religious community. These developments were part of a long-running case in which a metallurgical company sought the demolition of the monastery, which had been tentatively scheduled to occur during the winter of 2017-18 but had not begun by year's end.

According to a November article in *World Religion News*, the government continued to criticize the Enlightenment Stupa in Moscow. In September local authorities tried to remove the stupa but backed down due to protests. Authorities denied Buddhists access to the stupa in 2017, resulting in it falling into disrepair. The article stated that the International Center of the Roerichs, an art museum, tried to fix the stupa, but authorities prevented its repair. The article said the shrine continued to await possible repair or relocation.

As in years past, according to NGOs, the government continued to cooperate more closely with the ROC than with other religious organizations. Although neither the constitution nor the law explicitly accorded privileges or advantages to the ROC, they said the ROC continued to benefit from a number of formal and informal agreements with government ministries, giving it greater access than other religious organizations to public institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, the police, and the military. The government also continued to provide the ROC patriarch with security guards and access to official vehicles, a privilege accorded to no other religious organization.

In October the Ecumenical Patriarchate released a statement agreeing to grant autocephalous (independent) status to a new unified Ukrainian Church. According to a September 30 article in *The Wall Street Journal*, the Russian government had pressed Patriarch Bartholomew not to take this step. Prior to Patriarch Bartholomew's decision, a group of government-connected hackers, indicted in the United States in July, reportedly stole thousands of email messages from his aides. According to article, the government also "resorted to traditionally bullying, issuing unspecified threats and denouncing Patriarch Bartholomew as an agent of the U.S. and the Vatican."

Members of the Jewish community reported President Vladimir Putin stated during an interview in March that interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections came from "Ukrainians, Tatars, and Jews."

On December 11, at a Kremlin meeting with the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, political scientist Yekaterina Shulman told President Putin, "Of the 489 entries on the list of extremist organizations, 404 of them were Jehovah's Witnesses chapters even though they do not incite violence or carry it out." President Putin responded, "Jehovah's Witnesses are Christians, too. I don't quite understand why they are persecuted. So this should be looked into." According to the state-run news agency TASS, on December 18, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters, "Here we need to analyze each particular case." TASS quoted Peskov as saying, "It is impossible here to solve this problem conceptually because there are various pros and cons, but an additional study on this issue will be carried out at least."

In January the ECHR informed the government that it had accepted Pentecostal pastor Victor-Immanuel Mani's challenge of a fine levied against him under the Yarovaya Package for missionary activity. According to Forum 18, Mani, an Indian national with a Russian-citizen wife and child, had held religious meetings in rented premises in Naberezhnye Chelny and advertised them on the church's social network VKontakte page without necessary authorization documents from the local religious organization. In November 2017, the Supreme Court overturned a deportation order of the lower court but left a 30,000-ruble (\$430) fine in place.

*Novaya Gazeta* and international media reported that in October the Supreme Court upheld the deportation of Chief Rabbi of Omsk Asher Krichevsky, an Israeli-born U.S citizen. In January officials revoked his residency permit, along with those of his wife and six children, after the FSB accused him of planning or supporting "terrorist activity." In May a lower court ordered him deported for

“threatening national security and the constitutional order.” Krichevsky was the ninth foreign-born rabbi deported in the past 10 years, according to *The Jewish Chronicle*.

According to the SOVA Center, in August the Borisoglebsk City Court of the Voronezh Region discontinued proceedings in the case of the pastor of the local religious organization, the Restoration Christian Center. In 2017, authorities filed a criminal case against organizers of the center, alleging they illegally held six drug addicts and kidnapped two others, despite other drug addicts at the center testifying they were there voluntarily. Authorities detained five of the center’s Russian employees, three of whom were later released and placed under house arrest.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, on May 3, the St. Petersburg Court upheld a 2017 ruling by the district court ordering the confiscation of the St. Petersburg headquarters of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Jehovah’s Witnesses said that on August 3, the property was officially registered in the name of the government.

In January the ECHR accepted complaints from Jehovah’s Witnesses related to, among other things, the seizure of properties valued at 79.2 million euros (\$90.8 million). On September 17, Deputy Minister of Justice Mikhail Halperin requested an additional three months to respond to ECHR questions. At end of year, the case was still pending.

Although it lacked legal status as a religious organization, COS of Moscow was able to provide various services such as assistance to drug addicts throughout the country.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

On September 17, two passengers on a subway stabbed a man in the back after they argued with him about Christianity and allegedly took offense at how he wore a cross, according to the SOVA Center. The man was hospitalized.

Reports indicated that hundreds of Jehovah’s Witnesses had fled the country in fear of persecution since the start of the government’s crackdown and related societal violence. Since the 2017 Supreme Court ruling that the religion is “extremist,” Jehovah’s Witnesses have reported beatings and arson attacks on their homes. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, adherents were increasingly harassed at their workplaces and in some cases dismissed or forced to resign when their

coworkers became aware of their religious beliefs. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses said two members were forced to resign in Saint Petersburg and the Sverdlovsk Region, and four were fired, two in the Murmansk region and two in the Smidovichskiy Region.

On July 19 in Razdolnoye, Primorskiy Territory, seven people, including three armed men wearing masks, reportedly broke into the apartment of an elderly Jehovah's Witness couple and their ill daughter. The assailants shouted, "Lie down! Hands behind your back!" They forced the husband's hands behind his back, knocked him down, and bruised his nose and cheek. The 52-year-old daughter lost consciousness during the attack, and the mother suffered severe shock.

The SOVA Center reported 21 incidents of religiously motivated vandalism in 14 regions of the country during the year. These included vandalism in December of the obelisk commemorating concentration camp victims in St. Petersburg and the Church of Elijah the Prophet in Petrozavodsk in the Republic of Karelia. According to the SOVA Center, on November 6, a temporary structure housing the Orthodox Church of St. John the Divine in Moscow was burned beyond repair, with damage estimated at 1 million rubles (\$14,400). In October in Pervouralsk, vandals twice damaged a foundation stone for a church dedicated to a figure revered by the ROC. The local priest said he believed the vandals opposed the building of a church at the site. In the same month, unknown individuals knocked down a cross in Stavropol and painted a swastika and other symbols on it. In August unknown persons left graffiti, including "Jews get out of Russia," on the fence of a Hassidic cemetery in Lyubavichi, Smolensk Region. Several graves were desecrated at a Jewish cemetery in Voronezh in June, as were tombstones in three others in Skopin in April. In March vandals cut down a cross in the Artemye-Verkolsky Monastery, Arkhangelsk. In January unknown individuals set fire to an Orthodox church and a trailer used to teach Sunday school in Mytishchi. In the same month, the vehicle of a Jewish leader in Murmansk was set on fire twice in three days.

According to a study published in May by the SOVA Center and the NGO Fare Network, during the 2017-18 soccer season, the display of discriminatory banners, some of which included neo-Nazi symbols, continued to decline. The number of discriminatory chants, however, including neo-Nazi songs, increased considerably. The report noted soccer league and law enforcement agencies were making efforts to curb the presence of far-right symbolism at matches.

## Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and embassy representatives met with a range of government officials throughout the year and expressed concern regarding the treatment of religious minorities and the revocation of the registration of some religious organizations.

Consular officials attended many administrative hearings of U.S. citizens accused of violating visa or other administration requirements. Some of the U.S. citizens in these cases stated they believed the government targeted them for being members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, or other religious minorities.

The Ambassador and embassy representatives also met with members of religious and nongovernmental organizations, and held discussions with leaders from multiple religious organizations to emphasize a commitment to religious freedom and the value of interfaith dialogue. For example, in January the Ambassador met with Mufti Sheikh Gaynutdin, the head of the Moscow Cathedral Mosque. In October the Ambassador met with the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry and attended the Russian Jewish Congress International Conference on Combating Anti-Semitism. He met with Jewish leaders, including Berel Lazar, Chief Rabbi of Russia, and emphasized the U.S. commitment to combating anti-Semitism, and discussed the challenges the Jewish community faced. Throughout the year, the Ambassador also met with representatives of the ROC, legal representatives of the COS, and a leader of the Church of Jesus Christ to discuss concerns about religious freedom in the country.

Other representatives from the Consulates General in Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok met regularly with the ROC, rabbis and leaders of the Jewish community, muftis and other Islamic leaders, Protestant pastors, Catholic priests, and representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ and Jehovah's Witnesses. These discussions covered developments related to legislation impacting religious liberty, government practices, and specific religious freedom cases.

The embassy sponsored the visits of 10 Russians to the United States on two exchange programs focusing on religious freedom, engagement, and countering violent extremism. The groups were made up of Muslim, Jewish, and Baptist community leaders, and represented four Russian regions. Participants met with U.S. government, nongovernmental, research, and civil society organizations.



The embassy used its social media platforms during the year to highlight issues related to religious freedom, including expressing specific concern over the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses.

On November 28, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Russia on a Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.