

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	281
Land:	Rusland
Kilde:	U. S. Department of State
Titel:	2011 International Religious Freedom Report – Russia.
Udgivet:	30. juli 2012
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	14. august 2012

Title	2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Russia
Publisher	United States Department of State
Country	Russian Federation
Publication Date	30 July 2012
Cite as	United States Department of State, <i>2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Russia</i> , 30 July 2012, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/5021058fc.html [accessed 9 August 2012]
Disclaimer	This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Russia

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
July 30, 2012

[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, other laws and policies restrict religious freedom by denying some groups legal status and misidentifying their literature as extremist. In practice the government generally respected religious freedom, but some minority denominations continued to experience difficulties. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. The most significant constraints on religious freedom during the year included the use of extremism charges to target minority religions and a broad range of speech and activities, in addition to efforts related to denial of registration, preventing access to places of worship, denial of visas for religious visitors, and detention of members of religious organizations. There is no state religion, but the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and other "traditional" religious communities receive preferential consideration.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Religious matters were not a source of social tension or problems for the large majority of citizens, but there were some problems between majority and minority groups. Because ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

The U.S. ambassador addressed religious freedom in his consultations with government officials, and other U.S. government officials raised the treatment of minority religious groups with officials on many occasions. The U.S. government engaged a number of religious groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and others in a regular dialogue on religious freedom. Embassy officers looked into possible violations of religious freedom, discussed visa issues affecting U.S.-based religious workers with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and discussed registration of religious organizations and the use of the law on extremism with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ).

Section I. Religious Demography

Of the 138 million people who live in the country, an estimated 100 million citizens identify themselves as Russian Orthodox, although only 5 percent of citizens describe themselves as observant, according to polls. Muslims, who number between 16.4 million and 20 million, form the largest religious minority. The majority of Muslims live in the Volga-Ural region and the North Caucasus; Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and parts of Siberia also have sizable Muslim populations. Groups that each constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Buddhists, Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Buddhists primarily live in the regions of Buryatiya, Tuva, and Kalmykiya. Protestants make up the second largest group of Christians, with approximately 5,000 registered organizations and more than two million adherents. The Roman Catholic Church estimates that there are 600,000 Catholics. The 2002 census estimated the number of Jews living in the country to be 233,500; however, according to the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, the Jewish population could be as high as one million. Most of the country's Jewish population is concentrated in Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for religious freedom, but other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. By law the country is a secular state without a state religion, where all religious organizations are equal before the law. The preamble to the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations acknowledges Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country's four "traditional" religions, which constitute an inseparable part of the country's historical heritage. The law also recognizes the "special contribution" of Russian Orthodox Christianity to the country's history and to the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture.

The law provides the right to believe individually or with others, the right to spread religious and other convictions, and the right to act in accordance with those convictions. These rights may be restricted 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. No one may be forced to disclose his or her attitude toward religion, or to participate or not in worship, other religious ceremonies, the activities of a religious association, or the teaching of religion.

The law states that those who violate religious freedom will be "punished to the full extent possible," but does not specify what that punishment will be nor under what circumstances it will be imposed. The administrative violations code and the criminal code both punish obstruction of the right to freedom of conscience and belief; however, there were no reports of any instances in which these articles were enforced.

The law creates three categories of religious communities with different levels of legal status and privileges: groups, local organizations, and centralized organizations. Groups that fail to register may be subject to legal dissolution (often translated as "liquidation"), that is, deprivation of legal status. According to an annual MOJ report, as of year's end, there were 24,624 registered religious groups operating in the country, 56 percent of which were affiliated with the ROC.

The most basic unit is a "religious group," which has the right to conduct worship services and rituals and to teach religion to its members. Such groups are not registered with the government and consequently do not have legal status to open a bank account, own property, issue invitations to foreign guests, publish literature, enjoy tax benefits, or conduct worship services in prisons, state-owned hospitals, or the armed forces. Individual members of a group, however, may buy property for the group's use, invite personal guests to engage in religious instruction, and import religious material. In principle, groups are thus able to rent public spaces and hold services, but in practice this was sometimes difficult.

A "local religious organization" (LRO) can be registered if it has at least 10 citizen members and is either a branch of a centralized organization or has existed in the

locality as a religious group for at least 15 years. LROs have legal status and may open bank accounts, own property, issue invitation letters to foreign guests, publish literature, enjoy tax benefits, and conduct worship services in prisons, state-owned hospitals, and the armed forces. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has declared that the 15-year requirement violated the European Convention on Human Rights' provisions on the freedoms of religion and association. The government has not complied with the court ruling.

"Centralized religious organizations" can be registered by combining at least three LROs of the same denomination. In addition to all of the legal rights enjoyed by LROs, centralized organizations also have the right to open new local organizations without a waiting period.

Representative offices of foreign religious organizations are required to register with state authorities, and they may not conduct services or other religious activities until they have acquired the status of a group or organization. In practice many foreign religious representative offices opened without registering or were accredited to a registered religious organization.

The law prohibits religious associations, but not their members, from participating in elections of government officials, political parties, and movements and providing material or other aid to political groups.

The law gives officials the authority to ban religious groups on various grounds, such as violating public order or engaging in extremist activity, thereby prohibiting all of the activities of a religious community. For example, the 2002 Law on Countering Extremist Activity can affect religious groups by criminalizing speech and a broad spectrum of activities. Among the forms of "extremist activity" is "incitement to social, racial, national, or religious discord."

The organizations Nurjular and Tablighi Jamaat remained banned. The government maintains that Nurjular is a Muslim religious organization of followers of Turkish theologian Said Nursi. Muslims who read Nursi's books maintain that there is no Nurjular organization. The ban on Nurjular rests on the conclusion that Said Nursi's works are "extremist" and promote intolerance. As for Tablighi Jamaat, the general prosecutor maintained that it is a radical organization whose goal is the reestablishment of an Islamic caliphate, but Tablighi Jamaat and some human rights activists claimed the organization follows the law and exists solely to educate persons about Islam.

The government's visa rules allow foreigners (including religious workers) with business or humanitarian visas to spend no more than 90 of every 180 days in the country. These rules severely restrict religious groups that rely upon foreign religious workers. The 90-day limit on a foreigner's stay in the country impacts the ability to work and significantly increases expenses. Many organizations continued to report difficulties associated with the visa rules.

Courts often request expert analyses of religious literature in cases in which the government alleges extremism. The choice of experts appears to be a matter of the court's discretion. Within the MOJ, the Scientific Advisory Board reviews some religious materials for extremism. Composed of academics and representatives of the four "traditional" religions, the board reviews materials referred either by judicial and law enforcement authorities or by private citizens and organizations. If the board identifies what it considers extremist material, 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 review religious materials for extremism. The quality of scholarly expertise varies from region to region; however, regional courts utilize the opinions, giving them great legal weight.

By law publications declared extremist by a court are automatically added to the federal

list of extremist materials. Those who publish or distribute these texts face a four-year prison term. The current list includes certain Islamic religious texts, a series of neo-pagan materials intolerant of other religious groups (Christianity in particular), and texts that are explicitly racist or anti-Semitic. The list, which was established in July 2007, increased from 768 items to 1,072 by year's end. In total the government has banned 68 Jehovah's Witnesses publications, 15 Russian translations of Muslim theologian Said Nursi, and three Falun Gong publications.

Some provisions of the Law on Public Associations – also known as the NGO law – also apply to religious organizations. The NGO law grants the MOJ the authority to obtain certain documents, send its representatives (with advance notice) to attend religious organization events, and conduct an annual review of an organization's compliance with its mission statement on file with the government. The NGO law contains extensive annual reporting requirements that many groups find burdensome. For example, each religious organization must supply the full names, addresses, and passport details of members belonging to its governing body. The government may obtain a court order to close organizations that do not comply.

The 2009 National Security Concept of the Russian Federation states that "ensuring national security includes countering extremist activity by nationalist, religious, ethnic, and other organizations and structures directed at disrupting the Russian Federation's unity and territorial integrity and destabilizing the domestic political and social situation in the country."

On December 7, President Dmitry Medvedev signed amendments augmenting punishments under Criminal Code Article 282, Part 1 ("Actions directed to incite hatred or enmity, as well as the humiliation of an individual or group of persons on the basis of ... attitude to religion, ... conducted publicly or through the media.") Punishment now includes fines from 100,000 rubles to 300,000 rubles (\$3,170 to \$9,510), imprisonment for up to three years, compulsory labor for up to 360 hours (previously up to 180 hours), corrective labor for up to one year, or forced labor for up to two years. Most penalties are in force; the penalty of forced labor comes into force in 2013.

While neither the constitution nor the law accords explicit privileges or advantages to the four traditional religions, in practice the ROC cooperates more closely with the government than do other religious groups. The ROC has entered into a number of formal and informal agreements with various government ministries that give the ROC greater access than other religious groups to public institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, police, and the military. Nearly all of the religious facilities in prisons are Russian Orthodox.

Furthermore, on November 21, Patriarch Kirill consecrated patriarchal chambers in the Faceted Palace in the Kremlin. President Medvedev granted the patriarch use of the palace for meetings, receptions, or negotiations. The government also provides him security guards and access to official vehicles, a privilege reserved mainly for state officials. Additionally the ROC has the opportunity to review draft legislation pending before the State Duma.

Through the nongovernmental Interregional Religious Council of the Russian Federation, the Russian Orthodox Church maintains a cordial, professional relationship with representatives from other "traditional" religious groups – Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. Through the Presidential Advisory Council for Cooperation with Religious Organizations, representatives from these four "traditional" religious organizations work together with the Protestant Pentecostal Church to review and comment on draft legislation on social issues such as gambling, abortion, and narcotics. Additionally, the Christian Consultative Committee is an NGO that includes representatives of the ROC, Catholic Church, Baptist Church, and Lutheran Church that facilitates dialogue among religious organizations and the government.

At a meeting with representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church in Nizhniy Novgorod on November 5, President Medvedev credited Orthodox Christianity with helping the

country preserve its traditional values and counteract doctrines that give rise to social strife, hostility, violence, and instability. He spoke of the fruitfulness of cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church, the government, and public institutions, and called the revival of Orthodox Christianity in Russia in the past decade a miracle.

A government pilot program on religious education that began in April 2010 is scheduled to be fully implemented by September 2012. Children will be able to choose among courses on the four "traditional" religions or a course on ethics, although there is concern there may not be enough qualified instructors to teach those children who choose not to study Orthodox Christianity.

The Russian Ministry of Defense introduced the uniformed chaplaincy to the armed forces during the year. By executive order, an official chaplain can only be appointed if a religion makes up 10 percent of a military unit. According to the Slavic Law Center, the military has not yet carried out this executive order uniformly and has made little effort to recruit and employ chaplains.

The Office of the Federal Human Rights Ombudsman has a religious freedom department, which receives and responds to complaints. The ombudsman often intercedes on behalf of those who submit complaints. He cannot compel other government bodies to follow the law, but his attention has yielded improvements in religious freedom.

Redress was frequently sought through the ECHR in Strasbourg, which makes rulings based on violations of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Constitutional Court has declared that "[d]ecisions by the European Court of Human Rights are binding for Russia. The State must pay compensation to a person whose rights were violated as determined by the European Court and make sure his/her rights are restored in as far as possible." The government continued to pay compensation in line with ECHR decisions, but has yet to enact reforms.

There is a universal military draft for men, but the constitution provides for alternative service for those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience. The standard military service period is 12 months, while alternative service in a Ministry of Defense agency is 18 months and alternative service in a nondefense agency is 21 months. Students attending religious training institutions are not eligible for education deferrals from military service.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Orthodox Christmas and the adoption of Christianity in Russia in 988. Muslim lawmakers have asked for a similar national holiday to mark the arrival of Islam in the country. Several regional governments, including Muslim-majority Chechnya and Tatarstan, celebrate other Islamic religious days as official holidays.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including detentions; the government selectively enforced existing legal restrictions on religious freedom. Certain laws and policies restricted religious freedom by discriminating against particular religious groups and denying them legal status.

Most detentions for religious practices involved Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses. There were occasional reports of short-term police detentions of religious groups' members on religious grounds, but such incidents generally were resolved within 48 hours.

On October 11, police in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk detained a group of about 15 Muslims dining at the home of Kamil Odilov. Police accompanied six of them to their homes, which were searched. While five were released that evening, Ilham Merazhov, a professor at a local university and member of the Science and Education Committee of the Muslim Board of Asiatic Russia, was detained for 40 hours while his home was

searched. No banned materials were found.

Police across the country participated in raids on various minority religious groups, often confiscating religious literature and other property. For example, on August 4, government officials, including officers from the Federal Security Service (FSB), Special Operations State Militia (OMON), and Moscow police, entered the Moscow Scientology offices, destroyed office property, and reportedly assaulted several staff members, leading to one hospitalization. During the 13-hour raid, the security forces verbally abused and insulted the Scientologists and allegedly removed cash, cameras, personal computer equipment, and mobile telephones. Office computers and 63 hard drives were confiscated and not returned. After the raid, authorities summoned 45 Scientology staff and family members to the prosecutor's office for questioning, including about the theological foundation of Scientology. Authorities previously interrogated Scientologists and confiscated literature at the center in March 2010.

Publications declared extremist by a court were automatically added to the federal list of extremist materials. It was often difficult to remove an item from the list and court decisions on removal were not always consistent.

On December 28, Judge Galina Butenko of Tomsk's Lenin district court rejected a suit from the prosecutor's office to place a Russian translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*, a holy book of the Hare Krishnas, on the federal list of extremist materials. An analysis completed in October 2010 by three academics at Tomsk State University at the request of the FSB found that the book "contains signs of incitement of religious hatred and humiliation of an individual based on gender, race, ethnicity, language, origin, or attitude to religion." On December 15, three experts from Kemerovo State University examined the book and one expert found no evidence of extremism. Russian Ombudsperson for Human Rights Vladimir Lukin commented that "the struggle with terrorism is a struggle with real terrorist planning and creation of groups, not with the interpretation of ancient holy books, of whatever faith." The ruling was appealed by the prosecutor's office and a decision will be made in 2012.

On April 14, the Surgut City Court of the Khanty-Mansiysk region overturned a 2010 ruling that classified the works of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard as extremist. Due to the ruling, all 29 Church of Scientology publications previously on the federal list of extremist materials were removed on April 26. However, the government appealed the decision, which was expected to be heard in the Moscow regional court in 2012. As of year's end, no Church of Scientology publications were on the list.

Often at the behest of representatives of the majority religion, some regional officials used contradictions between federal and local laws and varying interpretations of the law to restrict the activities of religious minorities. The federal government only occasionally intervened to prevent or reverse discrimination at the local level.

On April 22, the Pervomaysky district court in the city of Krasnodar published a ruling finding four publications of Jehovah's Witnesses to be "extremist," despite a Rostov regional court ruling on September 11, 2009, that at least one of the publications had "no signs of extremist material." According to the law, facts established by a court of law shall not be disputed by another court at the same or lower level.

On June 28, the Supreme Court ruled that prosecutions of individuals on extremism charges should be carefully and narrowly framed. It ruled that it was important to consider an individual's intention in distributing written material, and if the intention was not to incite hatred or enmity or to humiliate the human dignity of others, the case should not be brought. Despite this ruling, the government continued to target minority religions on extremist-related charges.

For example, as of year's end, 19 Muslim groups were labeled as terrorist organizations and banned. According to human rights groups, bans on Muslim groups for alleged ties to international terrorism made it easier for officials to detain some individual Muslims arbitrarily for alleged connections to these groups. The regions of Kabardino-Balkaria

and Dagestan have laws banning "extremist Islamic Wahhabism."

Muslims who read the works of Said Nursi continued to face criminal charges of extremism, in addition to detentions, raids, and fines during the year. On May 18, Ziyavdin Dapayev was convicted on extremism-related charges and given a three-year suspended sentence. On September 20, after denying Dapayev's appeal, Judge Magomed Onzholov of Makhachkala's Lenin district court decided the 1,820 copies of books written by Said Nursi confiscated from Dapayev in 2010 should be handed to the Dagestan Muslim Board to decide whether or not the materials should be destroyed. Magomedrasul Omarov, spokesperson for the board, stated that they "can conduct an expert analysis of books according to the canons of Sharia, but we can't destroy books" and they would reject any order to destroy religious books. At year's end, no further information was available.

On January 17, Jehovah's Witnesses member Maksim Kalinin was charged with incitement to hatred and enmity. In 2010 Russian Special Forces received a warrant to install audio and video surveillance equipment in Kalinin's home and linguistics experts from Kemerovo State University used the recorded conversations to corroborate Kalinin's "extremist beliefs." On September 27, 2010, the Yoshkar-Ola city court in the Mari-El Republic ruled that the personal searches made by police during the raid were unlawful. Nonetheless investigators filed criminal charges against Kalinin. Kalinin is scheduled to be tried on January 25, 2012.

On December 22, an Altay Republic Supreme Court overturned the guilty verdict in a case against Aleksandr Kalistratov, a Jehovah's Witness convicted in November of inciting religious hatred and sentenced to 100 hours of community service in a second trial. He had been declared innocent earlier in the year on the same charges, but prosecutors appealed the first verdict and were granted a retrial.

The government continued to use administrative resources to restrict religious freedom, particularly for minority religions. These restrictions included failure to register religious organizations, denial of access to places of worship (including land and buildings), denial of visas for foreign religious personnel, lack of notification of court hearings, and government raids on religious organizations and detentions of individuals from those organizations.

Several religious groups faced difficulties in holding public activities, including the Falun Gong and Jehovah's Witnesses. The government denied Falun Gong practitioners permission to hold public activities, citing Article 8 in the 2001 Treaty of Friendship with China. For example, in October a scheduled art exhibit was disrupted when authorities demanded that the paintings be removed and they cut electricity to the building showing the exhibit.

The Church of Scientology continued to face difficulties registering its religious organizations. The government continued to ignore three ECHR rulings that it must register the Church of Scientology in Moscow, Surgut, and Nizhnekamsk. The ECHR declared that the 15-year requirement for registering an LRO violated the European Convention on Human Rights' provisions on the freedoms of religion and association and awarded monetary compensation for damages and legal costs to the groups. As of the year's end, the government compensated the church for damages and legal costs but did not register the church.

There were credible reports that individuals within the FSB and other law enforcement agencies harassed certain minority religious groups, investigated them for purported criminal activity and violation of tax laws, and pressured landlords to renege on contracts with those groups. In some cases the security services were thought to have influenced the MOJ to reject registration applications.

Since December 2009, authorities denied the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church (ROAC), which does not recognize Patriarch Kirill, access to at least 15 churches in Suzdal that the ROAC claims the government gave it in the 1990s. On March 28, the

Federal Service of Court Bailiffs of the Vladimir region replaced the locks on the confiscated St. John the Baptist church to prevent ROAC members from continuing to use the facilities. An investigation into the property rights of the ROAC was ongoing at year's end.

Law enforcement officials, the ROC, and legislative bodies called for protecting the "spiritual security" of the country by discouraging the growth of "sects" and "cults." Within the MOJ there is a council of experts for conducting state religious studies expert analysis. The head of the council, Alexander Dvorkin, was an outspoken proponent of categorizing minority religious groups as "extremist cults" and "totalitarian sects." Among the groups so labeled were Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, neo-Pentecostals, and Mormons.

During the year, the Slavic Center for Law and Justice and a number of minority "nontraditional" religious leaders asserted that the government and majority religious groups increasingly used the mass media, conferences, and public demonstrations to foment opposition to minority religious groups, characterizing them as threats to physical, mental, and spiritual health, and asserting that these groups threatened national security. Television channels broadcast several programs about "dangerous cults and sects" and implied that these groups included Pentecostals and other proselytizing religious groups.

Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who declared in 2010 that Chechnya "would be better off" if it were ruled by Sharia (Islamic law), ceased public support during the year for vigilantes who assaulted women who did not wear headscarves, but successfully enforced a rule that women who work in or enter government buildings (including offices, libraries, and schools) must wear headscarves.

Additionally, in February, Mufti Sultan Mirzayev, the spiritual leader of Chechnya, requested that women dress more "modestly" and only show their face and hands. While his requests carry no legal weight, they are generally followed due to his status within the Muslim community and his close relationship with Chechnya's leader, Ramzan Kadyrov.

Many religious groups were unable to regain property confiscated during the Soviet era or acquire new property. The 2010 law granting religious organizations ownership of all historical property in their use was implemented inconsistently. Although authorities have returned many properties used for religious services, including churches, synagogues, and mosques, all four "traditional" religious groups continued to pursue restitution cases. The SOVA Center, an NGO that seeks to combat extremism and nationalism, reported that problems with property restitution were most prevalent among Muslim and Protestant groups.

On December 28, the Vladivostok city administration notified the Vladivostok Central Church of Evangelic Christian-Baptists and the Seventh-day Adventist Church that they must vacate their building by January 2, 2012. The notice to vacate came shortly after the churches requested that the city cede the building permanently to them in accordance with a law to provide property to religious groups. The churches have jointly used the two-story building, owned by the city, since 1976. The city of Vladivostok asserted that it was time to return the property to its "rightful owner." Deputy Mayor Aleksey Sukhov explained that the property was not for religious use, although a local Baptist minister contended that the building registration document established it as "a house of prayer."

Many "nontraditional" denominations frequently complained that they were unable to rent or buy venues for worship from public or private vendors. Officials also have denied construction permits. For example, in the greater Moscow region, Muslim groups complained that they had been limited to only four official mosques. By the end of 2010, there were 241 official mosques throughout the country. According to public comments by Mufti Gainutdin, 7,200 unofficial mosques have been built in the country in the last 20 years.

Seventh-day Adventists reported continuing challenges for schoolchildren who observe Saturday as their Sabbath day. Saturday is a partial school day throughout most of the country. In some schools, authorities refused to allow these children to take exams on a different day.

According to the SOVA Center, unlike in previous years, authorities have increased prosecution and sentencing of those arrested for attacks and vandalism against religious minorities, including hate crimes.

In May the website *antisemitism.org* reported on a plan by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to send "spiritual and ethical literature" to Russian diplomatic representatives in 25 countries, including the anti-Semitic texts *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and *Kabbalah: Conspiracy against God*. According to the ministry, the plan was abandoned and the anti-Semitic literature was never purchased.

There were reports that the government prosecuted individuals for anti-Semitic crimes, including statements and publications, during the year. On June 22, the central regional court of Khabarovsk convicted Vyacheslav Kravchenko and Yevgeniy Smolyakov of committing arson on a local synagogue and attacking a police officer who had been investigating cases of extremism in 2009. Kravchenko and Smolyakov received 24- and 27-month conditional sentences, respectively, and were released on probation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including some physical attacks against individuals and communities because of the victims' religious affiliations. Violent extremism in the North Caucasus region led to negative popular attitudes in many regions toward traditionally Muslim ethnic groups. Hostility toward non-ROC religious groups sparked harassment and occasional physical attacks. Because ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

According to the SOVA Center, there was a sharp reduction in the scale of vandalism motivated by religious, ethnic, or ideological hatred: 89 acts of vandalism were reported in 34 regions of the country during the year, while 176 and 180 acts were recorded in 2010 and 2009, respectively. There were several acts of vandalism against religious sites, including 16 attacks against Jehovah's Witnesses facilities, 15 against Jewish community institutions, 15 against Muslim sites, 12 attacks against Orthodox churches, four against Protestant sites, and one against a pagan site. Under the law, an individual convicted of committing an act of vandalism motivated by ideological, political, national, racial, or religious hatred or enmity can be sentenced to up to three years in prison.

According to Reuters, between June and September, at least three imams were killed in the North Caucasus province of Dagestan. In one such case, according to the investigative committee of Dagestan, on November 11, members of illegal armed formations (IAFs) killed Akhmed Osmanov, 53, imam assistant in the village of Mutsalaul, Khasavyurt District. Caucasian Knot, an online news source specializing in the Caucasus, reported a committee source stated "Osmanov was actively involved in religious activities; he taught the Koran to children and advocated the traditional Islam. According to the investigation, it was for this work that he was shot dead by extremists." A Web site which supports IAF members posted a statement saying that the imam assistant was executed for his alleged connections with spiritualism.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses general counsel's office, on July 17 in Akhtubinsk a group of assailants entered a Jehovah's Witnesses meeting and began to harass the parishioners. Several assailants grabbed women by their hair, punched them, threw chairs at them, and specifically threatened to kill one member with a knife. Two Jehovah's Witnesses women required emergency medical treatment.

Activists claiming ties to the ROC disseminated negative publications and occasionally

staged demonstrations throughout the country against Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other minority religious groups. Muslims continued to encounter societal discrimination and antagonism in some regions.

On July 23, it was reported that approximately 50 people, including members linked to a Russian Orthodox youth center, protested against Jehovah's Witnesses, chanting such slogans as "against the sect" and "refusing blood transfusions is a crime."

During the year 24 people were reported as victims of religious xenophobia, 22 of whom were Jehovah's Witnesses, including three children. According to the SOVA Center, propaganda against Jehovah's Witnesses intensified, while attacks on members of other religious groups declined.

Anti-Semitism remained a significant problem at the societal level. Anti-Semitic literature continued to be sold, and anti-Semitic publications continued to be distributed. For example, a number of small radical-nationalist newspapers that printed anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and xenophobic articles were readily available throughout the country.

According to the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Scientific Research Institute, there were more than 150 neo-Nazi groups in the country, and the number was rising, although the SOVA Center stated that only 15,000 to 20,000 people were members, fewer than in 2010. In October a 22-year-old neo-fascist with links to the Nationalist Socialist Society was sentenced to life in prison for the murder of 15 persons, some of whom were Jewish.

There were reports of vandals desecrating Jewish synagogues and cemeteries and defacing Jewish religious and cultural facilities, sometimes combined with threats to the Jewish community, although the Russian Jewish Congress and the Federation of Jewish Communities report that overt acts of anti-Semitism were minimal. The SOVA Center registered six acts of anti-Semitic vandalism as of December 1. The reduction in vandalism appeared linked to a decrease in the level of activity of nationalist groups Russian Way and Resistance, whose members had previously engaged in such acts.

On July 12, four masked men threw Molotov cocktails at the Darchei Shalom synagogue in northern Moscow. Police believed the attack was in retaliation for the conviction of 12 members of a neo-Nazi group earlier that day.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government continued to engage the government, religious groups, NGOs, and religious freedom advocates in a regular dialogue on religious freedom. Embassy officers met with and actively sought feedback on the status and concerns of representatives of the Office of the Commission on Human Rights in the Russian Federation and representatives of Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Church of Scientology religious groups, among others.

Two positions in the embassy's political section were dedicated to reporting on the status of religious freedom and human rights. These officers worked closely with other U.S. officers in the embassy and consulates general around the country.

Consular officers routinely assisted U.S. citizens involved in criminal, customs, and immigration cases; officers were sensitive to any indications that these cases involved possible violations of religious freedom. U.S. officials raised such issues with the MFA, and senior political officials met with representatives of the MOJ to discuss the use of the law on extremism, registration of religious organizations, and the contents of the Federal List of Extremist Material. Because U.S. missionaries and religious workers constituted a significant component of the local U.S. citizen population, the embassy conducted a vigorous outreach program to provide consular services, maintained contact for emergency planning purposes, and inquired about the missionaries' experiences with

immigration, registration, and police authorities as one gauge of religious freedom.

The U.S. ambassador addressed religious freedom in consultations with government officials. He met with many religious leaders to discuss concerns, both those from within the country, including the most senior members of the ROC, and from the United States.

The U.S. government continued to engage the government on its adherence to international standards of religious freedom by meeting with the human rights ombudsman and other high-ranking officials to make the U.S. position known. Officials in the U.S. Department of State met regularly with U.S.-based human rights groups and religious organizations, as well as with visiting representatives of LROs, the Slavic Center for Law and Justice, and members of the State Service Academy that trains regional officials in charge of registering LROs.

Officials of the consulates general in Saint Petersburg, Vladivostok, and Yekaterinburg met with religious leaders from a range of denominations in several cities.
