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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Russia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution declares the state is secular and guarantees 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 allows the government to criminalize a broad spectrum of activities as extremist but does not precisely define extremism. A law enacted in 2022 authorizes creation of a confidential database of materials defined as extremist and a "unified register" of individuals in organizations defined as terrorist or extremist. Another 2022 law requires certain organizations, including religious groups and individuals, to publicly identify themselves as foreign agents, which critics say is intended to discredit them. The law identifies Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country's four "traditional" religions and recognizes the special role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).

Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) again reported authorities investigated, detained, imprisoned, tortured, and physically abused persons and seized their property because of their religious belief or affiliation or membership in groups designated "extremist," "terrorist," or "undesirable." Targeted groups included Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, followers of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, the Church of Scientology, Falun Gong, and multiple evangelical Protestant groups. In one example, the leader of a Saint Petersburg Church of Scientology received a sentence of six-and-a-half years in prison for incitement to hatred or enmity by an organized group and creation of an extremist community. According to Jehovah's Witnesses representatives, as of December 18, 115 individuals were imprisoned under the charge of extremism. During the year, courts sentenced numerous Jehovah's Witnesses to lengthy prison terms on charges of participating in an extremist organization and convicted many for conducting or participating in religious services. Members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which describes itself as an international Islamic political organization seeking to unite Muslims under a single caliphate through nonviolent means, received lengthy prison sentences. Authorities also undertook prosecutions of followers of Said Nursi.

According to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), some ROC priests and members of other religious communities quietly opposed the country's war on Ukraine, fearing fines or prohibition against performing their religious duties if they made their views public. ROC Patriarch Kirill continued to express support of government actions in Ukraine. In September, the *Washington Post* reported that President Vladimir Putin, referring to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, stated, "The Western masters put a person at the head of modern Ukraine (who is) an ethnic Jew, with Jewish roots, with Jewish origins" to cover up "the antihuman essence that is the foundation ... of the modern Ukrainian state" and "the glorification of Nazism."

During the year, the Ministry of Justice continued to deliberate whether the Jewish Agency for Israel should be designated as a foreign agent. The government continued to open criminal cases against members of smaller religious groups for what it called illegal missionary work and the distribution of extremist materials. The government continued to grant privileges to the ROC not accorded to other religious groups. In August, the government ordered the dissolution of the SOVA Center for Information Analysis, a Moscow-based human rights organization focusing on freedom of religion and belief, among other human rights. The organization's leaders subsequently created the SOVA Research Center (SOVA Center) to replace it.

There were widespread reports Russia's armed forces, Russia-led forces, and Russian occupation authorities in Ukraine engaged in numerous abuses of religious freedom (see the Department of

State's 2023 International Religious Freedom Report for Ukraine).

There were reports of societal violence and vandalism with antisemitic overtones, as well as increasing reports of openly antisemitic rhetoric entering the country's mainstream media. The SOVA Center reported several incidents of vandalism of Jewish religious sites as well as other incidents of religiously motivated vandalism. On October 28, in reaction to Israeli military actions directed at Hamas in Gaza following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack, hundreds of persons broke past security at the Dagestan airport to protest the arrival of an Israeli El Al passenger flight, with some shouting antisemitic slogans. In another incident, protestors mobbed a hotel after they heard Jews were lodged there.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy representatives and Department of State officials advocated greater religious freedom in the country, highlighting the government's misuse of the law on extremism to restrict the peaceful activities of minority religious groups. The embassy also used social media to disseminate messages advocating religious freedom. In recent years, the government has expelled U.S. diplomats and prohibited the embassy from employing Russian and third-country nationals. In addition, the government engaged in extreme repression of civil society groups and dramatically curtailed freedom of expression following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and sought to stigmatize and criminalize interactions between its nationals and foreign governments. For these reasons, the embassy's outreach to the religious community was constrained. Department of State officials continued to monitor the situation of U.S. citizens working with religious institutions and organizations in the country to determine whether authorities were improperly targeting them for their faith or religious work.

Since 2021, Russia has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended for having engaged in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated Russia as a CPC and identified the following sanctions that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing sanctions issued for individuals identified pursuant to section 404(a)(2) of the Russia and Moldova Jackson-Vanik Repeal and Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012 and section 11 of the Support for the Sovereignty, Integrity, Democracy, and Economic Stability of Ukraine Act of 2014, as amended by Section 228 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the act.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 141.5 million (midyear 2023). A poll published in May by the independent Levada Center found that 72 percent of respondents identified as Orthodox Christian, 7 percent as Muslim, and 18 percent reported having no religious faith. Religious groups, each constituting approximately 1 percent or less of the population, include Buddhists, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Baha'is, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, pagans, Tengrists, members of the Church of Scientology, and Falun Gong practitioners.

The 2010 census, the most recent for which data is available, estimates the number of Jews at 150,000. In 2021, the Russian Jewish Congress (RJC) estimated the Jewish population was 172,500. According to statistics from the Jewish Agency for Israel, 44,631 of the approximately 165,000 Jews residing in the country at the beginning of 2022 emigrated to Israel during that year. The *Jerusalem Post* reported in June that approximately 60,000 citizens had emigrated to Israel since May 2022, with approximately 40,000 additional individuals having already qualified to emigrate, and thousands more awaiting appointments at the Israeli embassy or at a consulate.

According to Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin, chairman of the Religious Board of Muslims of the Russian Federation, there were 25 million Muslims in 2018, approximately 18 percent of the population. Immigrants and migrant workers from Central Asia, which experts estimate to number six to seven million, are mostly Muslim. Most 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 for the right of citizens “to freely choose, possess, and disseminate religious or other beliefs, and to act in conformity with them,” and it provides for equality of rights and liberties regardless of attitude toward religion. The constitution bans any limitation of human rights on religious grounds and prohibits actions inciting religious hatred and strife. It 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 role” of Russian Orthodox Christianity in the country’s “history and the formation and development of its spirituality and culture.”

A 2020 constitutional amendment cites the ancestral history of the country and the “ideals and faith in God” passed on by those ancestors. The language is the only explicit reference to God in the constitution. According to a Constitutional Court ruling, the amendment’s reference to God does not contravene the secular nature of the government or undermine freedom of religion but only emphasizes the significant sociocultural role of religion in the formation and development of the nation.

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 a person to disclose his or her opinion of a religion or to force a person 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 the law on freedom of conscience, religion, and religious associations 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 500,000 rubles (\$5,600) or 1,000,000 rubles (\$11,200), depending upon which code governs the offense.

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 extremist, including “assistance to extremism,” but it does not precisely define extremism or require that an activity include an element of violence or hatred to be classified as extremist.

Anti-extremism laws stipulate that speech or actions aimed at “inciting hatred or enmity” based on group affiliation (including religion) are punishable by administrative penalties for first-time offenses if the actions do not contain a criminal offense. These penalties include administrative arrests of up to 15 days and administrative fines of up to 20,000 rubles (\$220) for individuals and up to 500,000 rubles (\$5,600) for legal entities. Individuals are held criminally liable if they commit multiple offenses within a one-year period or for the first offense if they threaten to use violence or

use their official position to incite hatred. The criminal penalties include fines up to 600,000 rubles (\$6,700), compulsory labor for up to five years, and imprisonment for up to six years.

Participating in or organizing the activity of a banned religious organization designated as extremist is punishable by a fine of up to 800,000 rubles (\$9,000) and imprisonment for a term of six to 10 years, with deprivation of the right to hold “certain positions” or engage in “certain activities” (not well specified but including a prohibition on running for public office) for up to 10 years and restrictions on freedom for a period of one to two years. These restrictions may include house arrest or constraints on travel within the country. For persons with “official status,” a term that applies to anyone working for the government or state-owned entities as well as to persons in management roles at commercial entities or NGOs, the prescribed prison term is seven to 12 years or a fine of up to 700,000 rubles (\$7,900). First-time offenders who willingly forsake their membership in banned religious organizations are exempt from criminal liability if they committed no other crimes as defined by the law.

A law the State Duma passed in September in the first reading (of three) introduces liability for “public justification or propaganda of extremism.” The law defines the justification of extremism as “a public statement recognizing extremist ideology and practices as correct and in need of support and emulation.” The law defines “propaganda” of extremism as “the dissemination of information aimed at radicalizing a person to adopt an extremist ideology, convincing a person of its appeal, or convincing a person that it is permissible to carry out extremist activities.” This crime carries a fine of 100 to 300 thousand rubles (\$1-\$3,400) or imprisonment for up to five years.

The country’s National Security Strategy, approved in 2021 and covering a period of six years, includes the prevention of the spread of religious radicalism, destructive religious movements, and formation of ethnic and religious enclaves as measures to ensure security.

Antiterrorism laws authorize law enforcement agencies to regulate evangelism, requiring permits and restricting the locations in which faith-related information may be shared with others. These laws also allow security agencies to access private communications, which requires telecommunications companies to store all telephone conversations, text messages, videos, and picture messages for six months and make this data available to authorities.

The Supreme Court has banned the activities of several religious organizations on the grounds of “extremism” and “terrorism,” including a regional branch of Falun Gong, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars, Hizb ut-Tahrir (“Party of Liberation”), Nurdzhular (a Russification of the Turkish term “followers of Said Nursi”), Tablighi Jamaat, and the Fayzrakhmani Islamic community. These organizations are on the Federal List of Extremist Organizations or the Federal List of Terrorist Organizations. Designations as extremist or terrorist organizations may be appealed in court.

Local laws in several administrative regions, including the republics of Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan, ban “extremist Islamic Wahhabism” but do not define the term. Authorities impose administrative or criminal penalties (the former entail a maximum sentence of 15 days in prison, while sentences for the latter may be much longer) for violating these laws, in accordance with federal legislation.

By law, the government may designate an international religiously affiliated organization or foreign religious group “undesirable.” The designation allows the closure of foreign and international organizations on the grounds of “presenting a threat to the foundation of the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, the defense capability of the country, or the security of the state.” The designation may also lead to fines or jail time for organization members. Religious organizations designated undesirable include seven Falun Gong-associated organizations (World Organization to Investigate the Persecution of Falun Gong; Coalition to Investigate the Persecution of Falun Gong in China; Global Mission to Rescue Persecuted Falun Gong Practitioners; Friends of Falun Gong; Doctors Against Forced Organ Harvesting; Dragon Springs Buddhist; and the European Falun Dafa Organization), the World Institute of Scientology Enterprises International and the Church of Spiritual Technology (from the United States), the New Generation International Christian

Movement and the New Generation Evangelical Christian Church (from Latvia), and the New Generation Spiritual Directorate of the Evangelist Christians and the New Generation International Biblical College (from Ukraine). Since the country's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian authorities have labeled as undesirable the All-Ukrainian Spiritual Center Renaissance Religious Organization (in November 2022) and its charitable arm, the Transformation Center Church International (in June 2023).

A law adopted in April distinguishes between citizens from birth and naturalized citizens. The law makes it possible for authorities to strip naturalized citizens of their citizenship if they participate in "actions that pose a threat to Russia's national security," including acts of extremism or terrorism or being part of an "undesirable organization."

The law criminalizes "offending the feelings of religious believers," including atheists and followers of "nontraditional religions." Actions "in public demonstrating clear disrespect for society and committed with the intent to insult the feelings of religious believers" are subject to fines of up to 300,000 rubles (\$3,400), compulsory labor for up to one year, and imprisonment for up to one year. If these actions are committed in places of worship, the punishment may include a fine of up to 500,000 rubles (\$5,600), compulsory labor for up to three years, and a prison sentence of up to three years.

The law creates three categories of religious associations with different levels of legal status and privileges: "religious groups," "local religious organizations" (LROs), and "centralized religious organizations" (CROs). 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 protection of public security.

A "religious group" is the most basic unit and does not require registration with the government. When a group first begins its activities, however, it must notify authorities, typically the regional ministry of justice, of the location of its activity, its rites and ceremonies, and its leader(s) and members. A religious group may conduct worship services and rituals and teach religion to its members with requisite notification to authorities. 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. To hold services, a religious group may use property bought by its members for the group's use, residential property owned or rented by its members, or public spaces rented by its members.

A law that took effect in December 2022 expands the scope of the country's foreign agent law, which previously required the government to show that an individual or organization had received financial or material assistance from a foreign source. According to some Russian scholars, the new law is vaguer than the previous law in the definition of a "foreign influence," defining foreign influence as "the provision of support by a foreign source to a person or influencing a person including by coercion, persuasion, or other means." The law requires organizations falling under its coverage to publicly identify themselves as foreign agents, which critics say is intended to discredit them.

An LRO may register with the Justice Ministry if it has at least 10 citizen members who are 18 or older and are permanently residing in the region where the LRO applies to register. 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. CROs may register with the ministry at the regional or federal level by combining at least three LROs of the same denomination.

LROs and CROs may invite foreign citizens to carry out professional religious activities. LROs and CROs may produce, acquire, export, import, and distribute religious literature in printed, audio, or video format, as well as "other religious items." By law, LROs and CROs may not participate in political campaigns or the activities of political parties or movements or provide material or other aid to political groups. This restriction applies to religious organizations but not to their individual members.

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 "internal passport" data (the mandatory identity document for all citizens older than the age of 14 residing in the country); 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 toward family, marriage, and education; the organization's legal address; a certificate of payment of government dues; and the 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 administrative requirements, national security reasons, or placement on the list of extremist or terrorist organizations. Denial of registration may be appealed in court. By law, CROs and LROs receiving funding from abroad must report an account of their activities, a list of leaders, the source of foreign funding, and plans for how the organization intends to use the foreign funds or property obtained through foreign funding. Reports are annual by default, but the Justice Ministry may require additional ad hoc reports.

The Expert Religious Studies Council, a committee established by the Ministry of Justice to advise it on religious groups, has 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 law provides several examples of extremist activities, such as "incitement to violence," but does not precisely define how organizations or religious materials may be classified as "extremist." The council also advises the ministry on the issue of granting religious organization status to a religious group.

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.

The government (the Ministry of Justice 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. With advance notice, the government may send representatives 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 and facilities or on lands 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 prime ministerial decree requires religious organizations to conform to specific counterterrorism measures to qualify for safety permits for their real property. Among other requirements, all facilities must be guarded during services by members of public organizations. A public organization is defined as a membership-based organization of individuals who associate on the basis of common interests and goals stipulated in the organization's charter. Facilities with maximum building occupancy limits of between 500 and 1,000 persons must have "panic buttons" and video surveillance systems. Buildings with occupancy limits of more than 1,000 must be guarded by private security guards or National Guard personnel. Religious groups are responsible for defraying the costs of these measures. The penalty for noncompliance is a fine of up to 100,000 rubles (\$1,100).

The Ministry of Defense chaplaincy program only allows for chaplains representing the four traditional religions, and the 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 neither enlisted nor commissioned but are classified as assistants to the commander. Chaplains are full-time employees of the Ministry of Defense, paid from the defense budget. There are approximately 250 ROC chaplains in the program.

Federal law 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, 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 from a religious group or registered organization authorizing him or her to share beliefs. The law explicitly prohibits sharing of any beliefs on another organization’s property without permission from that organization. It also prohibits missionary activity in residential buildings and the rezoning of any building from residential to nonresidential for the purpose of conducting religious activities. Materials disseminated by missionaries must be marked with the name of the religious association providing the authorization.

Violations of the law regulating missionary activity may be punished by a fine of 5,000 to 50,000 rubles (\$56 to \$560) for individuals and 100,000 to 1,000,000 rubles (\$1,120 to \$11,200) for legal entities, which includes LROs and CROs. Foreign citizens or stateless persons who violate restrictions on missionary activities may be fined 30,000 to 50,000 rubles (\$340 to \$560) and are subject to deportation.

Within the Ministry of Justice, 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 ministry website and forwarded to the prosecutor’s office for further investigation. In addition to the Scientific Advisory Board, regional board experts also may review religious materials for extremist content.

Prosecutors may present material to a court and petition the court to declare it extremist, but a court may, on its own accord, declare as extremist materials introduced during the consideration of administrative, civil, or criminal cases. 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. Courts review and reissue lists on a regular basis. If the courts determine the material is no longer “extremist,” the Justice Ministry is required to remove it from the lists within 30 days. Very rarely, in response to a legal challenge, courts may reverse a decision to designate material as extremist. The law makes it illegal to declare the key texts (holy books) of the four traditional religions in their “original languages” – Old and New Testaments of the Bible, Quran, and Tibetan Buddhist Kangyur (Kanjur) – to be extremist. The law does not define what constitutes an original language nor does it specify that foreign-language translations of these texts may not be declared extremist.

A 2022 law facilitates the ability of federal authorities to counter “extremist activities.” The law authorizes the creation of a confidential information database of extremist materials to provide the government with operational-search activities, investigative actions carried out as part of countering extremist activity, and the organization of preventive measures aimed at preventing extremism. The law also establishes a “unified register” of information about individuals involved in the activities of an extremist or terrorist organization. The unified register includes information about any individual who was a founder, member of a collegial governing body, head, deputy head, head of a regional or other structural unit, deputy head of a regional or other structural unit, participant, member, or employee of an extremist or terrorist organization. According to news articles, the database was scheduled to be operational by July.

According to the administrative code, mass distribution, production, or 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 (\$11 to \$33), or 2,000 to 5,000 rubles (\$22 to \$55) for public officials, as well as 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 (\$1,100 to \$11,200). Individuals who produce materials later deemed extremist may not be punished retroactively but must cease production and distribution of those materials.

The law prohibits individuals suspected of financing terrorism, or whose actions have been deemed extremist by a court, from leading or taking part in religious groups. The amendments also impose extra training and recertification requirements on clergy, religious teachers, and missionaries who have been trained abroad. Such personnel must take part in a course in "state-confessional relations in the Russian Federation" and be recertified by a CRO.

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 property indefinitely. The law prohibits the transfer of living quarters for religious use and the use of living quarters for religious activity, unless the activity is a part of a "service, rite, or ceremony."

The law allows religious organizations to use buildings that were not originally authorized for religious purposes if they are part of a property that serves 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 such a structure does not meet legal requirements or is not brought into legal compliance by submitting proper paperwork by 2030, the law specifies it shall be demolished.

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 schools affiliated with a religious organization or in-home schools. 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 intervene in complaints not addressed to the government.

Until March 15, 2022, the law entitled individuals and organizations to take religious freedom cases to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg, France. On that date, the country filed a notice of its voluntary withdrawal from the Council of Europe. In September 2022, in accordance with the six-month notice period set out in the European Convention on Human Rights, the country ceased to be party to this convention. In June 2022, President Putin signed two related bills, one removing the country from the ECHR's jurisdiction and a second retroactively setting March 15, 2022, as the cut-off point, with rulings against the country made after that date not to be implemented or recognized.

Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 is compulsory, but the constitution provides for alternative civilian service (ACS) for those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience, including religious belief. The standard military service period is 12 months, while ACS is 18 months in a Ministry of Defense agency or 21 months in a nondefense agency. Failure to perform ACS is punishable under the criminal code with penalties ranging from a fine of 80,000 rubles (\$900) to six months in prison.

Both the ROC and all members of the Civic Chamber, a state institution composed of representatives of public associations, are granted the opportunity to review draft legislation pending before the State Duma, the lower house of parliament, on a case-by-case basis. No formal mechanism exists for permanent representation of religious organizations in the Civic Chamber, as the chamber convenes for three-year terms. Individuals from traditional religions and other religious groups may be selected to serve in the chamber for a term, either in the initial selection of 40 representatives by the President of the Russian Federation or in one of the subsequent rounds of selection, where existing chamber members choose an additional 128 representatives representing national and regional civil society groups. By law, a member of an organization that had been accused of extremism may not serve in the Civic Chamber.

The law states foreigners or stateless individuals whose presence in the country the government deems “undesirable” are forbidden from becoming 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 law restricts any foreign national or stateless person 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.”

Foreigners engaging in religious work require a contract with a legally registered religious organization and a work visa. Religious work is not permitted on “humanities visas,” which allow foreigners to enter the country to strengthen academic or cultural ties or take part in charitable work. There are no missionary visas.

The law grants religious organizations the exclusive right to manage pilgrimage activities.

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

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

Religious groups and human rights NGOs again reported authorities investigated, detained, arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and physically abused persons on account of their religious belief or affiliation. Authorities continued to accuse minority religious groups of extremism and terrorism.

There were widespread reports Russia’s armed forces, Russia-led forces, and Russian occupation authorities in Ukraine engaged in numerous abuses of religious freedom (see the Department of State’s 2023 International Religious Freedom Report for Ukraine).

With regard to the proposed law on “liability for public justification or propaganda of extremism” which passed the first of three readings in the State Duma in September (elements as defined in Legal Section above), a legal expert told the BBC that even without adoption of the proposed law, such criminal liability was already prescribed under law. The legal expert further stated that the legislation would add criminal sanctions for expressing sympathy in any form for persons recognized as extremists; that the definition was so broad that many actions could be construed and justified by authorities as being extremist; and that under the proposed law, citizens would have to become even more careful to steer clear of arbitrary charges made by individual law enforcement officers.

According to Norway-based international religious freedom NGO Forum 18, the government used increasingly strict legislation on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations” to monitor,

curtail, complicate, or prohibit the activities of organizations that promote human rights, including freedom of religion and belief. In March, authorities searched the homes of several of the leaders of Memorial, one of the country's best-known NGOs, which was forced to formally close in 2022 after its court-ordered liquidation, although it continued to operate informally. Among these was the home of Oleg Orlov, cochair of Memorial's human rights center, whom authorities charged with "discrediting" Russia's military due to his criticism of the country's war against Ukraine. In January, authorities opened a criminal case against unspecified Memorial members on "justification of Nazism" charges. Supporters of Memorial continued its work documenting political prisoners in the country through the initiative "Support for Political Prisoners – Memorial," and during the year, Memorial had identified 420 persons it said were persecuted for their religious belief or affiliation and whom Memorial considered to be political prisoners, meaning they were already imprisoned or were in custody or under house arrest waiting for a formal sentence to begin. During the year, the initiative identified 362 persons (compared with 281 in 2022) who had been detained or imprisoned for involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir, an Islamic political organization Memorial had characterized as a "nonviolent international Islamic organization."

During the year, Memorial identified 836 Jehovah's Witnesses, compared with 486 in 2022, who had been subjected to criminal prosecution, with 385 individuals awaiting sentencing (25 of whom were in detention, 16 under house arrest, and 344 under other preventive measures or wanted), 353 individuals sentenced (108 in prison or performing forced labor, 193 for whom imprisonment was suspended, and 52 of whom were fined); and 98 individuals whose criminal cases were completed (with 69 individuals having served their term of imprisonment, 20 having had their criminal prosecution terminated, and 9 having died). According to the initiative, none of the political prisoners detained or imprisoned for their religious belief or affiliation had called for violence or planned violent acts.

According to various sources, including official Jehovah's Witnesses sources, courts convicted individuals for activities that amounted to normal religious practice and for conducting basic activities of religious organizations.

In January, RFE/RL reported that authorities in Adygea had decided to extend until July the pretrial detention of Jehovah's Witnesses member Nikolai Voischev, whom authorities arrested in October 2022 on extremism charges. In the same month, the Altai Regional Court upheld the sentence of six years in a penal colony for Jehovah's Witness Andrei Danielyan, who was sentenced by a municipal court in November 2022 for allegedly organizing the activities of an extremist organization. A Primorsky court sentenced four Jehovah's Witnesses – Dmitry Malevany, Alexey Trofimov, and Olga Panyuta – to seven, six-and-a-half, and four-and-a-half years in prison, respectively, for organizing the activity of an extremist organization and involving others in it. In February, a court in Kazan sentenced Jehovah's Witness Konstantin Sannnikov to six-and-a-half years in a penal colony for organizing the activities of a banned organization and financing an extremist organization. Another court in Kazan sentenced Andrey Bochkarev to three years and one month in prison. The court subsequently released Bochkarev because he had already served this amount of time in pretrial detention.

In February, Mordovia authorities sent three Jehovah's Witnesses to a pretrial detention center on charges of organizing an extremist community, including for organizing conference calls to share their religious beliefs with others. Also in February, authorities detained six members of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Leningrad Region and searched their homes, accusing them of organizing the activities of an extremist organization. Authorities in Saransk jailed three members of Jehovah's Witnesses on charges of organizing the activities of an extremist organization. In April, a court in Astrakhan Region sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses Sergei Korolev, Rinat Kiramov, and Sergey Kosyanenko to seven years in a penal colony for financing and organizing the religious activities of an extremist organization. In March, a Moscow court found four Jehovah's Witnesses – Yuri Chernyshev, Sergei Shatalov, Vitaly Komarov, and Ivan Tchaikovsky – guilty of organizing the activities of an extremist organization, sentencing each to six years and three months in a penal colony. In April, a Vladivostok court sentenced Jehovah's Witness Dmitry Barmakin to eight years in prison. A court had acquitted him in 2021, ruling he was exercising his "right to freedom of

religion enshrined in the Russian Constitution,” but a regional court later overturned the acquittal and ordered a new trial.

Courts in several regions convicted numerous Jehovah’s Witnesses for organizing or participating in the activities of an extremist organization. In March, a court in the Khabarovsk Region sentenced Aleksey Ukhov to six-and-a-half years in prison. In June, a Taganrog city court sentenced Aleksandr Skvortsov to seven years in prison. Also in June, the Central District Court of Sochi sentenced Danil Suvorov to six years in prison for participating in the activities of an extremist organization and for involving others in the organization’s activities. Also in June, an Amur Region court sentenced Vladimir Bukin, Valery Slashchev, and Sergei Yuferov to six years and four months and Mikhail Burkov to six years and two months in prison. In July, the Savelovsky District Court of Moscow issued prison terms to three Jehovah’s Witnesses: Anatoly Marunov for six-and-a-half years, Sergei Tolokonnikov for five years, and Roman Mareev for four-and-a-half years. In July, a Vladimir Region court sentenced Boris Simonenko to two years and seven months in prison.

Forum 18 reported that despite having lived half his life in the country and his marriage to a citizen, authorities deported Jehovah’s Witness Rustam Seidkuliyeu to his native Turkmenistan in September after he completed a prison term for practicing his religion. In 2021, a court convicted Seidkuliyeu of participating in activities of a banned extremist organization. According to Forum 18, officials did not explain why his Russian citizenship, which he obtained in 2000, had been revoked in 2022, despite his long residence in the country, the fact there were no victims in his criminal case, and that his family had left Turkmenistan because their ability to practice their religion there was restricted.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

Statistics from different sources varied on the numbers of Jehovah’s Witnesses reportedly serving prison terms for practicing their faith. According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, as of December 18, a total of 115 individuals were imprisoned in Russia and Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine under the charge of extremism. According to the Brussels-based NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers International (HRWF), as of December, 127 Jehovah’s Witnesses were imprisoned for practicing their faith, including those imprisoned in Russia-occupied Crimea in Ukraine.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, since the beginning of the year, several Jehovah’s Witnesses received fines and prison sentences. In February, an appeals court upheld the seven-year sentence of Andrey Vlasov, who has a physical disability and health issues. In March, a court sentenced Sergey Ananin of the Kemerovo Region to six years in prison for organizing the activity of an extremist organization. Ananin’s home had been searched by security forces in February 2021, only two months after he suffered a massive heart attack. He was placed under house arrest for more than two years, during which time he was unable to receive quality medical care for his heart condition. Also in March, a court sentenced four Jehovah’s Witnesses to more than six years in prison and a fifth to more than four years in prison for participating in organizing and recruiting activities.

On September 21, the Krasnoyarsk Regional Court upheld Jehovah’s Witness Ivan Shulyuk’s seven-year suspended sentence. In May, a court imposed a seven-year suspended sentence on Shulyuk with a four-year probationary period, finding that Bible discussions, prayer, and the singing of religious songs with friends were part of organizing the activities of an extremist organization.

NGOs also stated that Federal Security Service (FSB) agents, officers of the Ministry of Interior’s Center for Countering Extremism, police officers, and riot police continued to monitor, detain, search, and carry out raids in the homes and places of worship of Jehovah’s Witnesses. HRWF stated authorities had raided more than 2,000 homes of Jehovah’s Witnesses throughout the country between early 2017 and September 2023, with 730 persons criminally prosecuted and nearly 400 incarcerated at one time during that period. They said that during these raids, authorities entered homes, often in the early morning, conducted unauthorized, illegal searches, and tortured and verbally and physically abused members. Authorities often entered residences by forcing open the

door. They held individuals at gunpoint, including children and the elderly, and seized personal belongings, including religious materials, personal correspondence, money, mobile phones, and other electronic devices. In December, media reported a statement from the organization that of those investigated or charged, 205 were individuals over age 60, including one 85-year-old.

According to HRWF, in September, the Court of Appeal in Novosibirsk upheld the verdict and sentence for Dmitriy Dolzhikov, who was convicted of being a practicing Jehovah's Witness and sentenced to two years of forced labor. In his appeal, Dolzhikov stated, "The law does not consider practicing, including together with others, the religion to which the liquidated religious associations belonged as a sign of extremism."

On September 28 the Court of Cassation in Vladivostok upheld lower court verdicts against five Jehovah's Witnesses from Blagoveshchensk, Sergey Afanasiyev, Anton Olshevskiy, Sergey Kardakov, Adam Svarichevskiy and Sergey Yermilov, and sentenced each to more than six years in a penal colony for practicing their faith. In 2022, the Blagoveshchensk City Court had sentenced the five men to prison for organizing and financing activities of an extremist organization.

According to the SOVA Center, in August, the Yugorskiy District Court of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area, acquitted Jehovah's Witnesses Ivan Sorokin and Andrey Zhukov of the charge of extremism. The prosecutor had requested the court sentence Sorokin to nine years and Zhukov to eight-and-a-half years in a penal colony. In November, a higher court granted the prosecutor's appeal and overturned the Yugorskiy District Court's acquittal, sending the case back for reconsideration.

In December, media reported the Cheremushkinsky District Court in Moscow sentenced three Jehovah's Witnesses to lengthy prison terms, in addition to the 28-month presentencing detention already served. Aleksandr Rumyantsev received a sentence of seven and one-half years; Jehovah's Witness Sean Pike, a native of Guyana, received seven years; and Eduard Sviridov received six-and-one-half years. Jehovah's Witness representatives reported a total of 127 individuals were serving prison sentences at year's end.

Individuals continued to receive long prison sentences for their alleged involvement with the Islamic political organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, which the government defined as a terrorist organization. According to the project "Support for Political Prisoners – Memorial," authorities had harassed and investigated at least 362 persons in connection with their involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir. Of these, at least 271 were prosecuted and convicted, of which 115 were sentenced to terms of 15 years or more in prison.

In January, the Southern District Military Court found Crimean Imam Raif Fevziev guilty for his involvement in Hizb-ut-Tahrir. The court sentenced him to 17 years in confinement, the first three years in prison and the remainder of the term in a high-security penal colony. Also in January, the Southern District Military Court sentenced five Crimean Muslims to 13 years in confinement, including the first two years in prison and the remaining, in a high-security penal colony. The court found the individuals – Servet Gaziyeu, Dzhemil Gafarov, Alim Karimov, Seyran Murtaza and Erfan Osmanov – guilty of participating in the activities of a terrorist organization and of "preparing for actions aimed at the forceable seizure of power." In February, Gafarov died of a heart attack after suffering prolonged medical neglect while in confinement.

In March, the Southern District Military Court sentenced Crimean Tatar activist Ametkhan Abdulvapov to 10 years and six months in prison for his alleged involvement in Hizb-ut-Tahrir. He was found guilty of participation in the activities of a terrorist organization. In May, the Southern District Military Court sentenced four Crimean Tatars to a high-security penal colony for their involvement with Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Povara Jebbar Bekirov was sentenced to 17 years for organizing the activities of a terrorist cell and Rustem Tairov, Rustem Murasov, and Zavur Abdullayev were sentenced to two years each for their participation. Police arrested all of these Crimean Tatars while in Crimea.

In July, the Central District Military Court sentenced Radik Talipov to 12 years and Timur Khabibullin to 11 years in a high-security penal colony for participating in the activities of a terrorist organization. The court sentenced Farit Kharisov to 16 years in a maximum-security prison for organizing the activities of a terrorist cell.

In April, authorities in the country took Crimean Tatar Amet Suleimanov into custody, and he began serving a 2021 sentence of 12 years in prison for “participating in the activities of an organization...recognized as terrorist” and “preparing for actions aimed at the forcible seizure of power or the forcible retention of power.” In February, the UN Committee against Torture called on the country not to imprison Suleimanov due to his poor health.

In May, the Southern District Military Court sentenced Ernes Seytosmanov, whom authorities detained in 2022, to 18 years in prison for “organizing the activities of an organization...recognized as terrorist” and “preparing for actions aimed at the forcible seizure of power or the forcible retention of power.” In June, the Southern Military District Court sentenced Ansar Osmanov and Ametkhan Abdulvapov, whom authorities detained in 2022, to 20 years and 10 years and six months, respectively, in prison on the same charges. In April, the Southern District Military Court sentenced Murat Mustafayev to four years in custody on charges he engaged in the activities of a terrorist organization and was preparing for the violent seizure of power; the court ordered him to serve two years in prison followed by two years in a maximum-security penal colony.

In July, the daily business newspaper *Vedomosti* reported authorities detained nine members of the banned Tablighi Jamaat movement in the Moscow Region after finding religious literature with extremist content in their possession. Press reported authorities had initiated a criminal case based on allegations of “participation in the activities of an extremist organization.”

According to news reports, authorities continued to prosecute organized followers of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, whose organization government officials call “Nurdzhular,” although Nursi followers continued to deny such an organization existed in the country. In 2008, the Supreme Court declared Nurdzhular to be extremist and banned Nursi’s works. In June, a district court in the Moscow Region sentenced six persons to prison, with sentences ranging from two years and seven months to six years and six months, for allegedly creating a branch of Nurdzhular in the region. The accused denied having created a formal organization.

According to HRWF and the SOVA Center, in March, the Zvenigovsky District Court fined Rafail Safin, an imam from the Mari El Republic, for storing Said Nursi’s banned books in a mosque, an action considered as storage of extremist materials for the purpose of mass distribution. In June, the Supreme Court of Mari El upheld the lower court’s decision to impose a 2,000-ruble (\$22) fine on Safin.

In August, a court in Saint Petersburg found five members of the local Church of Scientology guilty of various crimes connected to a case that began in 2017. Church leader Ivan Matsitsitsky received a sentence of six-and-a-half years for incitement to hatred or enmity by an organized group and creation of an extremist community; the court released him after considering time spent already in custody and under house arrest. The court fined church executive director Galina Shurina 1.3 million rubles (\$14,600), and head of security Anastasia Terentyeva 1.2 million rubles (\$13,500) under the same charges. The court fined accountant Sahib Aliyev 1 million rubles (\$11,200) under the same articles and also charged him with money laundering. The court fined Terentyeva’s deputy, Constance Yesaulkova, 600,00 rubles (\$6,700) for participating in an extremist community.

A court in Altai banned the activities of the Allya-Ayat religious group. The court found that the practices of self-healing used by the followers of this group did not have any medical justification. According to the court, the group’s ideology was aimed at instilling the idea that all diseases can be cured using mantras, drawing on the energies of the sun and moon, and other techniques and that medicine was unnecessary and a form of indirect coercion for individuals to abandon traditional methods of treatment. In October, authorities in Orenburg also sought a court order to ban Allya-Ayat, stating the group promoted treatment methods that posed health hazards and advocated refusal to use medications. Press reported in December that authorities opened a criminal case

against a resident of Orenburg for organizing and directing Allya-Ayat activities. Authorities accused the resident under the criminal code's article on creation of a religious or public association, the activities of which involve violence against citizens or other harm to their health, as well as management of such an association.

In March, media outlets reported the government had updated the list of professions eligible for ACS, which allows conscientious objectors to perform civilian service instead of serving as a conscript in the military. A court in the Leningrad Region confirmed in March the right of a conscripted evangelical Protestant, Pavel Mushumansky, to instead serve under ACS. According to independent press reports, however, there was at least one report of authorities denying an individual his constitutional right to ACS. In May, a court in the Volgograd Region rejected Jehovah's Witness Anton Kuznetsov's request for ACS. In March, the independent media outlet *Meduza* reported that "conscripts are usually denied alternative service – but it is still quite possible to achieve it." In September, media outlets reported the Ministry of Labor was adding 144 new organizations eligible for ACS.

According to a January article in the Christian-associated *Providence* magazine, Putin's call for conscripts focused on individuals from ethnic and religious minorities. The article said Mongols from Buryatia, many of whom practice Shamanism, were particularly singled out for conscription. Other media outlets reported government authorities on multiple occasions raided mosques and took men they found there to military registration and enlistment offices and, under threat of criminal prosecution, forced them to sign military contracts to fight in Ukraine. According to media reports, Russian regions suffering the highest number of casualties in Ukraine were Buryatia and the Republic of Dagestan, home to Turkic Muslims. Other Russian regions that suffered heavy casualties in Ukraine were majority-Muslim Bashkortostan, as well as Krasnodar Krai and Volgograd Oblast, which have Muslim minority populations.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

According to Forum 18, authorities continued to use a range of tactics to dissuade religious leaders and adherents from publicly opposing the country's war on Ukraine on religious grounds. In August, a Saint Petersburg court sentenced ROC priest Loann Kurmoyarov to three years in prison for distributing "false information about Russian Armed Forces" after he posted videos in which he said all Christians should oppose the country's invasion, accused Russian troops of committing crimes, and stated that the invaders would not go to heaven. In March, a Moscow court sentenced Orthodox Christian Mikhail Simonov to seven years in prison for posting two online comments opposing the war ("Killing children and women, on Channel One [television] we sing songs. We, Russia, have become godless. Forgive us, Lord!"; and, "Russian pilots are bombing children").

In October, Forum 18 reported 10 unidentified armed men raided a non-ROC church in the southern area of Krasnodar Region where clergy had spoken out against Russia's war in Ukraine. Police detained a priest, physically abused him, and charged him with "disobeying a police officer" and "discrediting the Russian Armed Force," a member of the clergy reported.

According to RFE/RL, many ROC priests and members of other religious communities quietly opposed Russia's war on Ukraine, fearing fines or prohibition against performing their religious duties if they made their views public. One ROC priest likened the situation in Russia to the persecution early Christians experienced under Roman rule and said that keeping quiet was the only way to avoid drawing government attention. Belarusian theologian Natalya Vasilevich, founder of Christians Against, which monitors repression of Christians in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus for their antiwar positions and aids victims, stated that there were many such priests in Russia. "When priests speak out against war, they do it without attracting attention," she said. According to Andrei Kordochkin, an ROC priest in Spain who signed a letter in 2022 calling for an end to the war, many ROC priests in Russia opposed the war but feared retribution if they spoke out. He cited the example of Father Ioann Koval, a Moscow priest who was defrocked in May for changing the text of the obligatory prayer On Holy Rus to plead for "peace" instead of for "victory."

Numerous sources noted Patriarch Kirill's support for the war. During a May sermon to soldiers on Victory Day, Kirill stated, "Russia is one of the truly independent countries, and our armed forces must be invincible, so that we do not depend on anyone, remain free, and can arrange our lives according to our people's will." In January, Kirill said that the religious schism in Ukraine between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian Orthodox congregations following the invasion would soon end. "No trace will be left of schismatics because they are doing the devil's evil bidding, eroding Orthodoxy in Kyiv's lands," he said after a liturgy at the Kremlin. "The wait won't be too long." According to media reports, in July, during the plenary session of the ROC's Hierarchical Council, participants "sentenced to death with deferred execution" clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) who no longer "commemorated" Kirill in their services. The reference was directed at UOC Primate Metropolitan Onufriy, who according to Kirill, had "lost the courage or conscience" to commemorate Kirill, and therefore his jurisdiction was considered a schism from the ROC.

According to the *Algemeiner*, an online newspaper self-defined as "an independent media voice covering the Middle East, Israel, and matters of Jewish interest around the world," lawyers representing incarcerated Russian Jewish poet Evgenia Berkovich filed a legal complaint on May 25 with the Moscow prosecutor's office against Roman Silantiev, a Moscow State University academic and Justice Ministry advisor, for antisemitic incitement. On May 4, Silantiev stated that Jews, including Berkovich, were supporting ISIS. The same day, authorities arrested Berkovich and playwright Svetlana Petriychuck on charges of "justifying terrorism" with their play, *Finist, the Brave Falcon*. The play, based on real events, narrates the stories of Russian women who married radical Islamists and moved to Syria. According to Berkovich's supporters, her arrest was tied to her activism opposing the country's invasion of Ukraine.

According to press reports, in July, Pinchas Goldschmidt, the former chief rabbi of Moscow, whom authorities in 2022 labeled a "foreign agent" after he left the country and refused to pledge support for the war in Ukraine, said he did not plan on returning to the country and urged Jews remaining in the country to leave. "We're seeing rising antisemitism while Russia is going back to a new kind of Soviet Union," he said, "and step by step the Iron Curtain is coming down again. This is why I believe the best option for Russian Jews is to leave."

According to Human Rights Watch, the government's response to the increase in antisemitism in the North Caucasus Region following the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel and the Israeli response was inadequate. Hugh Williamson, Human Rights Watch Europe and Central Asia director, stated: "Russian authorities have not acknowledged these incidents as antisemitic, called out antisemitism, or taken steps to provide reassurance and improve security for Jews living in the region."

In January, the SOVA Center reported that the Ministry of Justice added the honorary representative of the Dalai Lama in Russia – the Supreme Lama of Kalmykia, Telo Tulku Rinpoche (Erdni Ombadykov) – to the register of individuals acting as a foreign agent. The stated reason for including him in the list was because he "spoke out against the special military operation in Ukraine and openly spoke in support of Ukraine."

According to a February *Jerusalem Post* report, after an ongoing Justice Ministry effort that started in 2022 to close the branch of the Jewish Agency for Israel in Moscow, the organization's activities in the country had diminished significantly. During the year, authorities continued to deliberate whether the Jewish Agency for Israel should be designated as a foreign agent.

In February, RFE/RL reportedly fined Buddhist Danara Erendzhenova 30,000 rubles (\$340) for discrediting the army after she held up a poster outside of a Saint Petersburg Buddhist temple reading "Militarism is very expensive – Dalai Lama XIV."

Church of Scientology organizations remained closed following a 2021 government designation of two church groups – the World Institute of Scientology Enterprises International and the Church of Spiritual Technology – as "undesirable organizations," which effectively banned Scientology in the country. According to the SOVA Center, the designation meant the church had to stop its activities

in the country, and any cooperation with it would be treated as an administrative or, in some cases, criminal offense.

In March, *CNE News* reported that the ECHR had ruled in favor of Baptist Christians Donald Jay Ossewaarde and his wife, both non-Russian citizens living in the country, whom in 2016 authorities fined 40,000 rubles (\$450) for having evangelized in private homes without prior authorization to conduct missionary work. According to the ECHR, new legislation left no room for persons, such as Ossewaarde, to engage in individual evangelism. Furthermore, sanctioning the applicant for his alleged failure to inform authorities of his establishing a religious group was not “necessary in a democratic society” and was in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights. The court ruled the country must pay Ossewaardes approximately 15,000 euros (\$16,500).

According to media reports, in April, a court convicted a pastor of the First Church of Evangelical Christian Baptists of Bryansk for “implementation of missionary activity in violation of legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion”, and “religious associations.” The court stated that in January, Mikhail Lipsky and another church pastor conducted a worship service in the Gorky municipal culture center “under the guise of a cultural concert, when nonreligious people were present.”

According to the SOVA Center, on August 10, a court in Novocherkassk found a minister of the Church of Jesus Christ, Andrei Mozol, guilty of carrying out missionary activities in violation of the requirements of the legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations. The court fined Mozol 50,000 rubles (\$560). Authorities closed the church building in June due to what they said were fire safety violations.

In January, a court fined independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* 500,000 rubles (\$5,600) for discrediting the armed forces after it published an interview with a Russian Orthodox clergyman condemning the war.

According to a February 8 report by the digital rights organization Roskomsvoboda, since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the government media watchdog Roskomnadzor had blocked access to more than 10,000 websites, citing military censorship. Among the blocked sites was that of Project HOPE, an international NGO focusing on global health and humanitarian aid.

In March, Forum 19 reported Roskomnadzor continued to block access to websites linked to communities whose activities the regime had long banned, including Jehovah’s Witnesses and sites related to Islamic theologian Said Nursi. In January, Roskomnadzor blocked the Ukrainian Islamic news and information portal “Islam in Ukraine.”

Transnational Repression

According to Forum 18, during the year the government may have again sought Interpol Red Notices, which seek the arrest and extradition of individuals named by the government, as a means to request third country officials detain and return those who left the country to avoid criminal prosecution for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. On March 1, an FSB agent in occupied Crimea told Forum 18 that authorities had issued an Interpol Red Notice for Aleksandr Viktorovich Kostenko, a Jehovah’s Witness from Crimea, where the religion is legal, and refused to explain why the FSB was seeking his arrest. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, authorities accused Kostenko of having organized the activities an extremist organization.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

According to NGOs and independent experts, the government continued to cooperate more closely with the ROC than with other religious bodies, with officials often interpreting the law that recognized the “special role” of Orthodox Christianity as granting special privileges or benefits to the ROC as an institution. The government continued to provide the ROC patriarch with security

guards and access to official vehicles, a privilege not accorded other religious organizations. According to the SOVA Center, the ROC received more government-granted property than any other religious organization.

President Putin and other leaders continued to use Nazi imagery and antisemitic tropes to justify the invasion of Ukraine, repeatedly calling it “denazification” and attempting to draw parallels between the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the fight against Nazi Germany. In September, the *Washington Post* reported that President Putin, referring to Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, stated, “The Western masters put a person at the head of modern Ukraine (who is) an ethnic Jew, with Jewish roots, with Jewish origins” to cover up “the anti-human essence that is the foundation ... of the modern Ukrainian state” and “the glorification of Nazism.” In June, Putin said in an economic forum in Saint Petersburg, “I have a lot of Jewish friends. They say Zelenskyy is not a Jew; he is a disgrace to the Jewish people.” Holocaust experts commented that Putin’s use of Nazi language was antisemitic and disrespected the memory of the six million Jewish persons and other victims who were systematically murdered. Foreign Minister Lavrov also used Holocaust references in accusing western nations of seeking a “final solution” for Russia.

According to the *Times of Israel*, in August, the pro-Putin newspaper *Pravda* published an opinion piece by *Pravda* contributor Sergei Frolov, who suggested President Zelenskyy was sending Ukrainians to die in the war as payback for antisemitic pogroms conducted by non-Jewish Ukrainians in the past.

On August 16, RFE/RL reported Aleksandr Dugin, a pro-Kremlin political scientist considered to be President Putin’s “spiritual mentor,” “a far-right philosopher,” and “ideologist of the ‘Russian world,’” used his Telegram channel to advise Tajik migrants, who are mostly Muslim, to “learn Russian, accept holy Orthodoxy, baptize children, get married, fast, and valiantly defend their homeland in the Northern Military District.”

Authorities in Volgograd detained resident Nikita Zhuravel in May for allegedly insulting the feelings of believers for publicly burning a Quran. On May 21, the head of the Investigative Committee ordered the transfer of the case to Chechnya, citing appeals from residents of this Muslim-majority region who asked to be recognized as the injured party. After several delays, three hearings took place in a Grozny court in November and December, in which 13 imams participated as witnesses. Zhuravel remained in detention at year’s end; with the next hearing scheduled for January 17, 2024. On October 6, media reported Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechnyan Republic, awarded his son Adam Kadyrov the title of “Hero of Chechnya.” In August, Ramzan Kadyrov posted a video on social media showing his son punching and kicking Zhuravel, with the statement, “I beat him and did the right thing.” According to media, the Ministry of Internal Affairs refused to investigate Adam Kadyrov’s actions because he had not reached the age of criminal responsibility. On November 5, Reuters reported Adam Kadyrov was appointed to a senior role in his father’s bodyguard unit.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

In August, the government ordered the dissolution of the SOVA Center for Information Analysis, a Moscow-based human rights organization that focused on monitoring hate crimes, nationalism, xenophobia and racism, freedom of religion and belief, and anti-extremism legislation. Authorities contended they took this action because the SOVA Center was operating in areas of the country outside the jurisdiction where it was registered, the Moscow Region. The organization’s leaders subsequently created the SOVA Research Center (SOVA Center) to replace it.

According to government-run *Russian Gazette* (RGRU), in April, the Ministry of Defense, in cooperation with the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, began drafting legislation under which ROC chaplains serving in the conflict zone in occupied Ukraine would have status – and receive benefits – comparable to that of military personnel. Reportedly the decision to change chaplain status in conflict zones was part of an effort to encourage more chaplains to serve in this capacity. The legislation remained pending at year’s end.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal violence and vandalism with religious overtones. In August and September, individuals accosted or attacked at least three Muslim women wearing headscarves in Moscow. On September 1, a passenger on the Moscow metro reprimanded Elizaveta Baranovskaya, a young woman wearing a niqab. The passenger was reportedly angered by the woman's covered face, which he considered a "terrorist threat." News reports stated that in another incident on August 30 in Moskovsky, New Moscow, several women attacked a Muslim native of the North Caucasus who was on the playground with her children. The women set two dogs upon them, shouting "Eat them!" then beat the woman and her children. The victim said the attackers insulted her because she was wearing a hijab. Residents intervened and stopped the attack. In August, in Kotelniki, Moscow Region, a woman reportedly insulted a local resident in the street because she was wearing a hijab. The victim recorded a video of the incident.

In January, the administration of a medical college in Novocherkassk expelled five female students for wearing hijabs. Administrators said the women would be reinstated if they stopped wearing headscarves on campus. Three of the students resumed their studies after reaching a compromise on their attire with the college's administration. The two other students decided not to continue their studies.

Several official multifaith meetings took place during the year. President Putin hosted representatives of religious organizations at a meeting in September and issued a press release about their discussion in which he expressed his gratitude "to all of you for supporting the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation... as well as their families and everyone who is fighting for Russia as part of the special military operation." He also stated that "interethnic and interfaith accord is the foundation of the Russian state," and that "any other position is anti-Russian in character." "I know that the spiritual leaders of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and the followers of Judaism believe that harmony in and the unity of our society as an indisputable value," he added. The Council for Interaction with Religious Associations, a body under the President's authority, met in March; the meeting was chaired by Anton Vaino, chief of staff of the Presidential Administration. A press release stated, "In the course of the discussion, a high assessment was given to the work of federal executive bodies on the implementation of programs for the development of theological, spiritual and moral education." Regarding regions of Ukraine claimed by Russia, the statement provided that "The activity of religious organizations of Russia in the sphere of religious education was noted, the issues of their participation in humanitarian projects in the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, in the Kherson and Zaporozhye Regions, as well as in the implementation of social, cultural and humanitarian initiatives of the Russian Federation in foreign countries were considered."

In addition, the Interreligious Council of Russia held an annual meeting in December at which Russian Orthodox Church leader Patriarch Kirill spoke. He said the Interreligious Council had helped "maintain dialogue and represent the interests of believers in relations with the state and society" and that it had been able "to comprehend with one mouth and one heart the problems faced not only by our country and society, but also by religious organizations, and to work out joint solutions." The council was formed in 1998 at the initiative of the ROC, and includes representatives of the ROC, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism.

In May, the U.S.-based NGO Anti-Defamation League (ADL) issued the results of its survey of antisemitic prejudice in the country, based on data collected in November and December 2022. The survey asked approximately 1,000 respondents whether 11 stereotypical statements about Jews were "probably true." Based on responses, ADL estimated 26 percent of all individuals over 18 in the country agreed that six or more statements were "probably true," compared with 31 percent in 2019, and 23 percent in 2015. Among the statements were: "Jews are more loyal to Israel than to Russia" (36 percent); "Jews have too much power in international financial markets" (34 percent); "Jews still talk too much about what happened to them in the Holocaust" (42 percent); "Jews don't

care about what happens to anyone but their own kind” (44 percent); “Jews have too much control over the global media” (28 percent); and “Jews are responsible for most of the world’s wars” (15 percent).

On October 28, according to media reports, in reaction to Israeli military actions against Hamas in Gaza, hundreds of persons in the predominantly Muslim province of Dagestan broke past security at the Dagestan airport to protest the arrival of an Israeli El Al passenger flight, with some protesters shouting antisemitic slogans. The protestors injured nine police officers before security forces removed them and secured the airport, which remained closed until October 30. On October 31, authorities arrested at least 15 individuals who took part in the airport riot, charging them with “hooliganism” which carries a sentence of three to 10 days’ detention.

Following the airport incident, Supreme Mufti of Dagestan Sheikh Adhmad Afandi appealed to residents of Dagestan to remain calm and stop the unrest. In a video, he stated, “You are mistaken. The issue cannot be resolved in this way... [but with] maximum patience and calm...” The regional government also appealed for calm. In another incident in Khasavyurt, Dagestan, protestors mobbed a hotel where they had heard Jews were staying. The rabbi of Derbent, the city in Dagestan with the largest Jewish population, told media outlets that following the hotel attack, the future of hundreds of Jewish families in Dagestan was in jeopardy because people feared for their safety. Government media sources also reported that on October 28, unknown individuals set fire to the construction site of a Jewish community center in the city of Nalchik, in the nearby republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, also a Muslim majority republic, and wrote “death to the [Jewish slur].”

According to an April report from the SOVA Center titled “*Challenges to Freedom of Conscience in Russia*,” there were five instances of religiously motivated vandalism against Russian Orthodox religious sites over the previous year, three of which were arson attacks. There were five incidents of vandalism targeting Jewish religious sites; in two cases, vandals painted antisemitic graffiti. There was one incident of vandalism against an Islamic site and one against a Buddhist site.

According to media reports, in February, the Directorate of the Investigative Committee in Astrakhan opened a criminal case against a local resident for the crime of insulting the feelings of believers. In January, the resident was accused of burning a pocket icon near a shopping center, as seen on security camera footage.

In March, media outlets reported that Moscow authorities detained blogger Stanislav Bazarov after he filmed himself urinating on a church icon. Authorities opened a criminal case on charges of insulting the feelings of believers and producing pornographic materials.

In April, authorities opened a criminal case against an artist from Mordovia, Veronika Polonskaya. According to press reports, government experts determined the works she posted on Telegram “were aimed at deliberately insulting the image of Jesus Christ as the central figure of the Christian religion and objects of Christian veneration, [to] form a negative image of Orthodox Christianity in the eyes of society and offend the religious feelings of Orthodox Christians.”

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, other embassy representatives, and Department of State officials in Washington, D.C. advocated greater religious freedom in the country, highlighting the government’s misuse of the laws on extremism and terrorism to restrict the peaceful activities of religious minorities.

On January 17, the Deputy U.S. Representative to the United Nations told the UN Security Council, “Since 2014, Russian authorities have prosecuted dozens of Crimean Tatars on charges that independent observers characterize as baseless. We urge the Kremlin to respect the human rights of

all and the safety of the civilian population of Ukraine, including of members of all religious communities.” He also noted “Russia’s flagrant violations and abuses of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion or belief, in Russia and in Russia-controlled areas of Ukraine. ... There are numerous reports of Russia’s authorities detaining, physically abusing, torturing, and imprisoning individuals on the basis of their religious beliefs or affiliations, and then wrongfully labeling them as ‘extremists,’ ‘terrorists,’ or ‘undesirable.’”

On May 12, the U.S. Mission to the United Nations delivered a statement that condemned “Russia’s flagrant and pervasive violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, both in Russia itself and in Russia-occupied areas of Ukraine.” The statement cited reports that the government “continues to detain, physically abuse, torture, and imprison individuals on the basis of their religious beliefs or affiliations,” and “continues to ban religious groups and wrongfully label them and organizations it associates with them as ‘extremist,’ ‘terrorist,’ or ‘undesirable.’” The statement added that “Russian authorities apply these unfounded designations to Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars, followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi, multiple evangelical Protestant groups, and many others.” The statement also expressed concern for the safety of members of all religious communities in Ukraine, particularly those living in areas under Russia’s control or occupation, including members of the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Crimean Tatar Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Ukrainian Greek Catholics, Evangelicals, Baptists, and members of other religious groups.

In recent years, the embassy’s outreach to the religious community was constrained for several reasons. The government expelled U.S. diplomats and continued to prohibit the employment of Russian and third-country nationals by the embassy. In addition, the government engaged in extreme repression of civil society groups and dramatically curtailed freedom of expression following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and sought to stigmatize and criminalize interactions between its nationals and foreign governments. Department of State officials continued to monitor the situation of U.S. citizens working with religious institutions and organizations in the country in an effort to prevent authorities from targeting them for their faith or religious work.

The embassy communicated the importance of religious freedom by celebrating major religious holidays of Christians, Jews, and Muslims via its social media platforms. These messages included video greetings from the Ambassador to mark Easter and the end of Ramadan; posts marking the contributions of various religious groups to American history and culture; and posts highlighting events that underscored tolerance and commemorated victims of violence motivated by religious hatred. The embassy also highlighted Department of State messages marking Passover, Easter, and Eid al-Fitr on its social media platforms.

Since 2021, Russia has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated Russia as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing sanctions issued for individuals identified pursuant to section 404(a)(2) of the Russia and Moldova Jackson-Vanik Repeal and Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012 and section 11 of the Support for the Sovereignty, Integrity, Democracy, and Economic Stability of Ukraine Act of 2014, as amended by Section 228 of the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the act.