

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	668
Land:	Rusland
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	Russia 2020 International Religious Freedom Report
Udgivet:	12. maj 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	21. maj 2021

RUSSIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, equal rights irrespective of religious belief, and the right to worship and profess one's religion. The law states government officials may prohibit the activity of a religious association for violating public order or engaging in "extremist activity." The law identifies Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country's four "traditional" religions and recognizes the special role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). A constitutional amendment approved in a July referendum cites the "ideals and faith in God" passed on by the country's ancestors, the first and only reference to God in the constitution. Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported authorities continued to investigate, detain, imprison, torture, and and/or physically abuse persons or seize their property because of their religious faith, including members of groups the government classified as extremist and banned, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, and followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi. The human rights NGO Memorial identified 228 persons it said were persecuted for their religious beliefs or affiliation and whom it considered to be political prisoners, compared with 245 in 2019. Memorial said the actual total was likely three to four times higher. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, authorities again detained hundreds of its members and physically abused some of them, including one whom law enforcement agents beat, strangled, and electrically shocked to force a confession and elicit false statements against his fellow members. Five other Jehovah's Witnesses detained during raids reported that law enforcement agents beat them while in custody. Religious groups said the government continued to use antiterrorism regulations to restrict religious freedom, including proselytizing and banning religious literature. Authorities designated seven NGOs associated with Falun Gong as "undesirable" foreign organizations and barred them from working in the country. Additionally, a court in Novosibirsk declared an independent regional branch of Falun Gong "extremist" and prohibited it from operating there. The NGO SOVA Center said that proposed amendments to the law regulating religion, pending at year end, might allow for arbitrary government interference among minority religious groups due to vague language prohibiting religious institutions from having connections with individuals the country's courts declared "undesirable" or "extremist." A fraud case against representatives of the Church of Scientology remained pending in St. Petersburg. The government continued to grant privileges to the ROC not accorded to other religious groups, including the right to review draft legislation and greater access to public institutions.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported workplace harassment of members again increased, and forced resignations continued at some of their workplaces when employers discovered their religious affiliation. The country's chief rabbi stated anti-Semitism was at a historic low, but the President of the Federation of Jewish Communities said levels of latent anti-Semitism in the country remained high. The Russian Jewish Congress reported that authorities arrested two persons suspected of planning to assassinate the leader of the Jewish community of Krasnodar in September. According to the SOVA Center, media continued to issue defamatory reports about minority religious groups. The same group reported 29 incidents of religiously motivated vandalism. Incidents included setting fire to a synagogue in Arkhangelsk, destroying headstones at a Jewish cemetery in St. Petersburg, vandalizing a monument to Holocaust victims in Rostov-on-Don, and breaking a Buddhist *stupa* near Sukhaya. A priest and former member of the ROC hierarchy made numerous anti-Semitic remarks from the pulpit during the year; he was subsequently expelled from the ROC and a court fined him 18,000 rubles (\$240).

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy and consulate representatives advocated for greater religious freedom in the country, highlighting the government's misuse of the law on extremism to restrict the peaceful activities of religious minorities. The Ambassador spoke on the importance of remembering the Holocaust and combating religious persecution at a multifaith gathering at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow in January. In March, the Ambassador discussed cooperation to promote religious freedom with ROC Metropolitan Kirill of Yekaterinburg and Verkhoturye. The embassy condemned the attack on the Jewish synagogue and cultural center in Arkhangelsk and called for a thorough investigation. In November, the embassy coordinated with the Department of State to release tweets condemning raids against Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow and 20 other regions. The Ambassador then met with Jehovah's Witness representatives to discuss the group's ongoing persecution and reiterated the U.S. commitment to religious freedom. The embassy also made extensive use of its social media platforms to disseminate messages advocating for religious freedom.

On December 2, 2020 in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again placed Russia on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 142.3 million (midyear 2020 estimate). A poll conducted in September by the independent Levada Center found that 63 percent of the population identified as Orthodox Christian and 7 percent as Muslim, while 26 percent reported having no religious faith. Religious groups each constituting approximately one 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 (ISKCON), pagans, Tengrists, members of the Church of Scientology, and Falun Gong practitioners. The 2010 census estimates the number of Jews at 150,000. The Russian Jewish Congress (RJC) estimates the Jewish population is 172,500, while the Federation of Jewish Communities assesses there are approximately 1.5 million persons of Jewish heritage. 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 at 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.”

Among a set of constitutional amendments approved in a July referendum is one citing the ancestral history of the country and the “ideals and faith in God” passed

on by those ancestors. The new language is the first and only explicit reference to God in the constitution. In March, prior to the referendum, the Constitutional Court ruled that the proposed amendment's reference to God did not contravene the secular nature of the government or undermine freedom of religion but only emphasized 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 another person to disclose his or her opinion of a religion or to participate or not participate in worship, other religious ceremonies, the activities of a religious association, or religious instruction.

The law states those who violate 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 (\$6,700) or 1,000,000 rubles (\$13,400), 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 the law does not precisely define extremism or require that an activity include an element of violence or hatred to be classified as extremist.

Anti-extremism legislation stipulates 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 or administrative fines of up to 20,000 rubles (\$270) for individuals and up to 500,000 rubles (\$6,700) 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 (\$8,100), compulsory labor for up to five years, or imprisonment for up to six years.

The law criminalizes “offending the feelings of religious believers.” 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 (\$4,000), compulsory labor for up to one year, or imprisonment for up to one year. If these actions are committed in places of worship, the punishment is a fine of up to 500,000 rubles (\$6,700), compulsory labor for up to three years, or a prison sentence of up to three 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 (\$10,700) or imprisonment for a term of six to 10 years, with deprivation of the right to hold “certain positions” or engage in “certain activities” (without specifying what these might be) 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 which 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 (\$9,400). First-time offenders who willingly forsake their membership in banned religious organizations are exempt from criminal liability if they committed no other crimes.

Local laws in several administrative regions, including the republics of Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan, ban “extremist Islamic Wahhabism” but do not define the term. Authorities impose administrative and criminal penalties for violating these laws, in accordance with federal legislation.

According to the 2017 Supreme Court ruling declaring the Jehovah’s Witnesses Administrative Center an extremist organization, all Jehovah’s Witness activities, including the organization’s websites and all regional branches, are banned. The court’s ruling states the constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief, but this right is limited by other rights, including “existing civil peace and harmony.”

The Supreme Court has banned the activities of several Islamic organizations on the grounds of extremism, including Hizb ut-Tahrir; Nurdzhular (a Russification of the Turkish for “followers of Said Nursi”); Tablighi Jamaat; and the Fayzrakhmani Islamic community. These organizations are on the Federal List of Extremist Organizations.

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 public security.

The “religious group” is the most basic unit and does not require registration with the state. When a group first begins its activities, however, it must notify authorities, typically the regional Ministry of Justice (MOJ), 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. A religious group may use property bought for the group’s use by its members, residential property owned or rented by its members, or public spaces rented by its members to hold services.

An LRO may register with the MOJ if it has at least 10 citizen members who are 18 or older and are permanent local residents. LROs have legal status and may open bank accounts, own property, issue invitation letters to foreign guests, publish literature, receive tax benefits, and conduct worship services in prisons, hospitals, and the armed forces. CROs may register with the MOJ at the regional or federal level by combining at least three LROs of the same denomination.

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 travel document (“internal passport”) data; 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 different 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 MOJ may require additional *ad hoc* reports. 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, and “other religious items.”

The Expert Religious Studies Council, a committee established by the MOJ 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 does not provide precise criteria on how written religious materials may be classified as “extremist.” The council also advises the MOJ 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 MOJ or the Prosecutor General’s Office) oversees a religious organization’s compliance with the law and may review its financial and registration-related documents when conducting an inspection or investigation. 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. Facilities with maximum building occupancy limits between 500 and 1,000 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 (\$1,300).

The Ministry of Defense chaplaincy program requires members of a religious group to comprise at least 10 percent of a military unit before an official chaplain of that group is appointed. Chaplains are not enlisted or commissioned but are classified as assistants to the commander. Chaplains are full-time employees of the Ministry of Defense, paid from the defense budget. The program allows for chaplains representing only the four traditional religions. There are more than 120 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 bans any beliefs from being shared in residential buildings without such documentation (unless in the form of a religious service, rite, or ceremony), or on another organization’s property without permission from that organization. Materials disseminated by missionaries must be marked with the name of the religious association providing the authorization.

Violations of the law regulating missionary activity may be punished by a fine of 5,000 to 50,000 rubles (\$67 to \$670) for individuals and 100,000 to 1,000,000 rubles (\$1,300 to \$13,400) 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 (\$400 to \$670) and are subject to administrative deportation.

Within the MOJ, the Scientific Advisory Board reviews religious materials for extremism. Composed of academics and representatives of the four traditional religions, the board reviews materials referred to it by judicial or law enforcement authorities, private citizens, or organizations. If the board identifies material as extremist, it issues a nonbinding advisory opinion, which is then published on the MOJ website and forwarded to the prosecutor's office for further investigation. In addition to the Scientific Advisory Board, regional board experts also may review religious materials for extremist content.

Prosecutors may take material to a court and ask the court to declare it extremist, but materials introduced in court during the consideration of administrative, civil, or criminal cases may also be declared extremist of the court's own accord. By law, publications declared extremist by a federal court are automatically added to the federal list of extremist materials. Courts may order internet service providers to block access to websites containing materials included on the federal list of extremist materials. Courts review and reissue lists on a regular basis. If the courts determine the material is no longer "extremist," the MOJ is required to remove the material from the lists within 30 days. Very rarely, courts, in response to a legal challenge, may also reverse a decision to blacklist material deemed 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 specify that foreign language translations of these texts cannot be declared extremist.

According to the administrative code, mass distribution, production, and possession with the aim of mass distribution of extremist materials by private individuals may result in 15 days' imprisonment or a fine of 1,000 to 3,000 rubles (\$13 to \$40), or 2,000 to 5,000 rubles (\$27 to \$67) 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 (\$1,300 to \$13,400). Individuals who produce materials later deemed extremist may not be punished retroactively but must cease production and distribution of those materials.

The law allows the transfer of state and municipal property of religious significance to religious organizations, including land, buildings, and movable property. The law grants religious organizations using state historical property for religious purposes the right to use such property indefinitely. The law prohibits the transfer of living quarters for religious use and the use of living quarters for

missionary activity, unless the activity is a part of a “religious service, rite, or ceremony.”

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 made legal by submitting proper paperwork by 2030, it will be destroyed.

Religious education or civil ethics classes are compulsory in all public and private secondary schools. Students may choose to take a course on one of the four traditional religions, a general world religions course, or a secular ethics course. Regional and municipal departments of education oversee this curriculum at the local level in accordance with their capacity to offer the courses and according to the religious makeup of the given location. There is no requirement for representatives of religious organizations to be licensed to conduct religious education in 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 directly intervene in complaints not addressed to the government.

The law entitles individuals and organizations to take religious freedom cases to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg, France. The state must pay compensation to a person whose rights were violated as determined by the ECHR and ensure his or her rights are restored to the extent possible. The Constitutional Court determines whether judgments by international and regional courts, including the ECHR, are consistent with the constitution.

Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 is compulsory, but the constitution provides for alternative service for those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience, including religious belief. The standard military service period is 12 months, while alternative service is 18 months in a Ministry of Defense agency or 21 months in a nondefense agency. Failure to perform

alternative service is punishable under the criminal code, with penalties ranging from a fine of 80,000 rubles (\$1,100) to six months in prison.

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.

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. The State Duma passed legislation in 2007 barring any member of an organization that had been accused of extremism from serving 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 citizen 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

Religious groups and human rights NGOs reported authorities continued to investigate, detain, arrest, imprison, torture, and/or physically abuse persons on account of their religious belief or affiliation. Authorities continued to accuse religious minority groups of extremism.

At year's end, Memorial identified 228 persons persecuted for their religious belief or affiliation whom it considered to be political prisoners, meaning they were either already imprisoned or were in custody or under house arrest awaiting a sentence to enter into force. The figure represented a seven percent decrease from the 245 reported in 2019. Memorial stated that the actual number of cases of persecution was likely three to four times higher, given the number of cases the organization identified as similar to those designated as political prisoners; however, the organization said it lacked the supporting, corroborating evidence to make designations in those instances. Memorial's list of political prisoners included 61 Jehovah's Witnesses and 142 persons accused of involvement with the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir, an organization that Memorial characterized as a "non-violent international Islamic organization." According to Memorial, none of the political prisoners being persecuted for their religious belief or affiliation called for violence or planned violent acts.

At year's end, a case filed in 2019 by Jehovah's Witnesses with the ECHR stating the government violated their members' freedom of thought, conscience, and religion remained pending.

Jehovah's Witnesses and NGOs stated Federal Security Service (FSB) agents, officers of the Interior Ministry's Center for Countering Extremism, police officers, and riot police continued to carry out raids in the homes and places of worship of Jehovah's Witnesses and again detained hundreds of suspected members. Jehovah's Witnesses stated authorities had raided more than 1,100

homes of members between early 2017 and November throughout the country, including in Moscow for the first time. The group reported 477 searches of homes and apartments during the year, compared to 489 in 2019 and 289 in 2018. According to Jehovah's Witnesses sources, during these raids, authorities entered homes, often in the early morning, conducted unauthorized, illegal searches, and verbally and physically abused members. Authorities often entered residences by forcing open the door. They held individuals, including children and the elderly, at gunpoint and seized personal belongings, including religious materials, personal correspondence, money, mobile phones, and other electronic devices.

In February, Jehovah's Witnesses and various media sources reported the FSB and other law enforcement personnel searched 50 houses in the city of Chita and other towns of the Transbaikal Region and committed numerous abuses. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses reported security forces handcuffed and beat a minor in front of his family. They also stated authorities beat and strangled Vadim Kutsenko, as well as subjected him to electric shocks while handcuffed to force a confession and elicit false statements against fellow Jehovah's Witnesses. Authorities released Kutsenko from detention after five days and placed him under house arrest. After 50 days, authorities released him on his own recognizance. At year's end, Kutsenko remained a suspect in the ongoing investigation connected to the raids.

Jehovah's Witnesses and the international religious freedom NGO Forum 18 also reported authorities took five other Jehovah's Witnesses seized in the raids in the Transbaikal Region to Orenburg Labor Camp No. 1, where they beat them. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, because of the abuse, one Witness suffered a broken rib, a punctured lung, and damage to his kidneys. The European Union (EU), joined by six non-EU states, issued a statement expressing deep concern over the incident and calling upon the government to permit the peaceful expression of religion by all persons, including Jehovah's Witnesses.

In April, according to Jehovah's Witnesses, Viktor Malkov, a 61-year-old Smolensk resident, died three months after his release from eight months in detention, during which he was denied care for chronic health problems.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that two of their members, Roman Makhnev and Dmitriy Kuzin, whom authorities had arrested and detained for six months in Kaluga in 2019, were released in late December of that year. After their release, a court sentenced the two to a further two months of house arrest. By year's end, both were released from house arrest and were awaiting the results of a preliminary investigation.

On May 27, Jehovah's Witnesses reported the FSB conducted raids of adherents' homes in Khabarovsk and Vyazembsky. Jehovah's Witnesses stated one masked FSB agent entered the house of 68-year-old Yen Sen Li, struck him, and injured his hands while placing him in handcuffs. The FSB detained Li for 13 hours before releasing him after he agreed to sign a statement of self-incrimination. He was alleged to have organized a worship group among Jehovah's Witnesses.

On July 13, according to widespread media reports and an official press release from the government of the Voronezh Region, investigators, local police, and National Guard troops carried out 110 raids on the homes of dozens of Jehovah's Witnesses in that region. Jehovah's Witnesses said authorities physically abused adherents during the raids and that security forces tortured five Witnesses while in detention, demanding that they incriminate themselves. Jehovah's Witnesses Yuri Galka and Anatol Yagupov stated the security forces placed bags over their heads and beat them during their interrogations, and in the case of Galka, twisted his arms behind his back, tightened the bag on his head until he began to suffocate, and broke one of his ribs. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, security forces also repeatedly put a plastic bag over Alexander Korol's head and tied it around his neck to coerce him to divulge information about other Witnesses until the bag broke. Korol said agents hit him in the face several times and threatened "to use needles" before transporting him 40 kilometers (25 miles) to another location for further interrogation and placing him in a holding cell for 48 hours. Jehovah's Witnesses reported Korol was forced to ask strangers for funds to return home when authorities released him without explanation after confiscating his phone.

On November 24, law enforcement officers carried out raids on Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow and more than 20 other regions across the country. The Federal Investigative Committee said the raids and subsequent arrests were part of a new criminal case against Jehovah's Witnesses, which they stated had illegally been carrying out activities at the organization's headquarters in Moscow and at its regional branches since June 2019, charges the group denied. The committee did not say how many worshippers had been detained, stating only that they were both organizers and participants in the movement. Jehovah's Witnesses said there were at least 10 raids and four detentions in Moscow. During one of the raids, Jehovah's Witnesses reported law enforcement officers hit Vardan Zakaryan in the head with an automatic rifle. Zakaryan was hospitalized before being placed into custody. A court released Zakaryan from detention and placed him under house arrest on November 30.

Forum 18 reported officials tortured individuals detained for exercising freedom of religion or belief with impunity. Following accusations of torture by Jehovah's Witnesses in Blagoveshchensk, Surgut, and Kaluga, Forum 18 said authorities had taken no steps to hold the officials accountable, as none had been arrested or tried in court.

As a result of what they described as increasing government persecution since a Supreme Court ruling banning the Jehovah's Witnesses organization in 2017, representatives of the group said that their members continued to flee the country but that there were still more than 150,000 adherents remaining.

The SOVA Center reported authorities had initiated criminal cases against 424 Jehovah's Witnesses in 60 regions throughout the country since 2017; 110 new criminal cases were opened during the year, compared with 213 in 2019. Jehovah's Witness representatives said that of those accused, 49 adherents were placed into pretrial detention and another 23 spent a few days in temporary detention facilities before being released.

The SOVA Center reported that of previously initiated cases, courts passed at least 25 sentences against 46 Jehovah's Witnesses. Representatives from Jehovah's Witnesses stated district courts convicted 39 adherents of extremism; of these, 21 were awaiting appellate hearings. At year's end, the representatives said 46 adherents remained behind bars, including 36 in pretrial detention facilities and 10 in penal colonies.

Prior to the sentencing of Gennady Shpakovsky to 6.5 years in prison in February, the longest prison term given to a Jehovah's Witness was the six-year sentence Danish citizen Dennis Christensen received in 2019, in the Kursk Region. In June, Christensen was scheduled for early release after agreeing to pay a fine in lieu of his remaining prison time. According to various media sources and NGOs, however, the prosecutor's office, which had previously endorsed the early release, filed a last-minute appeal to reverse it, stating Christensen had violated prison rules, including by failing to wear a special prisoner's jacket and being in the prison canteen at the wrong time – assertions Jehovah's Witnesses and human rights NGOs said were spurious. Christensen reported that during his ongoing imprisonment, he suffered from numerous health problems, including pneumonia, and was repeatedly refused treatment because his medical card was “lost.” In October, the Lgov District Court denied Christensen's appeal for early release. Christensen, detained since May 2017, remained in prison at year's end and was

reportedly scheduled to complete his sentence in May 2022, which included time served during pretrial detention.

Forum 18 reported that on September 2, the Beryozovsky City Court sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses Sergey Britvin and Vadim Levchuk to four years' imprisonment at a labor camp for organizing the activities of a banned extremist organization. The two men had already spent more than 520 days in detention and 250 days under house arrest prior to the judge's decision. They appealed the court's decision and at year's end were awaiting the decision while detained in Investigation Prison No. 4 in Anzhero-Sudzhensk.

On October 7, the Kabardino-Balkaria's Maisky District Court acquitted Jehovah's Witness Yuri Zalipaev, who had been charged with possession of extremist materials and inciting others to violence. Prosecutors appealed the decision, and, as of November, the case was pending in the appellate court. On October 9, according to Jehovah's Witnesses, a court in the Kostroma Region, near Moscow, pronounced suspended jail sentences of eight and seven years, respectively, for Sergei and Valeria Rayman, a married Jehovah's Witnesses couple. Sergei's sentence was longer than the seven-year conditionally suspended sentence requested by the prosecutor and was the longest conditionally suspended jail sentence yet given to a Jehovah's Witness. As part of their suspended sentences, the Raymans remained subject to multiple restrictions, including on personal travel and access to telephones and the internet. After a 2018 house raid, authorities had charged the Raymans with participating in religious extremism and holding a Bible discussion in their home.

The trial of Vyacheslav Popov and Nikolay Kuzichkin, two Jehovah's Witnesses whom authorities arrested in 2019 and charged with "organizing the activity of a banned extremist organization," remained pending. On April 16, the Krasnodar Regional Court ordered Kuzichkin released from pretrial detention and placed him under house arrest, where he was prohibited from correspondence and contact with other persons. On December 18, a district court in Sochi found Popov and Kuzichkin guilty of organizing extremist activities, sentencing Kuzichkin to 13 months and Popov to 22 months in prison. The court credited the time spent in pretrial detention and under house arrest towards both men's sentences. Popov was subsequently released into house arrest from the pretrial detention center on December 29, where he had been held for 15 months.

Authorities charged 10 Jehovah's Witnesses detained as a result of the July 13 raids in Voronezh with organizing an extremist community, preaching, and

recruiting new members between 2018 and 2020. In December, a Voronezh city court released six of the Witnesses from pretrial detention and the other four from house arrest. The 10 Witnesses still faced restrictions on their personal travel and communication with others. At year's end, the investigations remained open and trials had not been scheduled.

For the first time, authorities stripped a member of Jehovah's Witnesses of his citizenship. Felix Makhammadiev had moved to Saratov from Uzbekistan with his mother as a minor and subsequently became a Russian citizen. Makhammadiev had been convicted in 2019 of organizing extremist activities. While serving his sentence, Makhammadiev reported he was tortured and had to undergo surgery to drain fluid from his lung caused by a beating. The Ministry of Internal Affairs in Saratov nullified Makhammadiev's citizenship on April 17, citing his conviction for extremist activity. On December 31, authorities released him from prison before immediately placing him in a deportation center. Authorities in Saratov stripped Konstantin Bazhenov, who was convicted in the same case as Makhammadiev, of his citizenship on April 20. Bazhenov, who was born in Russia but moved to Ukraine as a child, had both Russian and Ukrainian citizenship.

According to Jehovah's Witness representatives, at the end of the year, the group had 59 applications pending with the ECHR, 12 pending complaints under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights with the UN Human Rights Committee, and six complaints against the government pending with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, including for detentions of practitioners, censorship of religious literature and the organization's website, and raids on or other interference with religious meetings. On May 6, the UN Human Rights Council Working Group on Arbitrary Detention released a nonbinding decision concerning 18 Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, calling the cases brought against them unlawful and urging the authorities to immediately release those arrested. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives said delays in the ECHR process were at least partially due to COVID-19.

According to Memorial, authorities had convicted, investigated, or charged 237 persons for alleged involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir since the Supreme Court first labeled the group a terrorist organization and banned it in 2003; of those, 199 had been tried and convicted. Human Rights Watch characterized Hizb ut-Tahrir as a group that aimed to establish an Islamic caliphate, but which renounced violence. Since 2003, courts have sentenced 65 persons to between 10 and 15 years in prison, and 78 to 15 years or more. The total excluded individuals from Ukraine's

Crimea peninsula whom Russian occupation authorities initially detained in Crimea before transferring them to Russia, where they were tried and sentenced. While banned in Russia, Hizb ut-Tahrir remained legal in Ukraine.

On February 10, Human Rights Watch and Memorial reported the Central Military District Court convicted Eduard Nizamov, whom the government stated was the head of the country's branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir, and sentenced him to 23 years in a maximum-security prison. Authorities arrested Nizamov in October 2018 and charged him with financing terrorism and "preparing for a violent seizure of power." Nizamov denied the charges and said authorities beat him and verbally abused him while in pretrial detention.

Individuals continued to receive harsh sentences for their alleged involvement with Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Human Rights Watch and Memorial reported that on February 5, a military court sentenced 10 members of Hizb ut-Tahrir to prison terms ranging from 11 to 22 years. The prosecution asserted the members were involved in the creation of a local terrorism cell, assisted in terrorism, and distributed propaganda that supported terrorism. The prosecution did not allege the defendants planned or carried out any specific acts, but rather that they held meetings to discuss their faith and political views, printed leaflets, and organized public recruitment events. The accused all denied the charges, stating they condemned terrorism and questioned the validity of the evidence brought against them in the court.

On September 21, the Supreme Court upheld the verdicts and sentences of 18 defendants prosecuted for their membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir, according to Memorial. The individuals, all originally convicted in Ufa in 2018, received sentences of between 10 and 24 years in a maximum-security prison colony.

Authorities continued to investigate and detain alleged members of other Islamic organizations. Local media reported on June 6 that FSB agents in Moscow conducted searches and detained several supporters of Tablighi Jamaat, an organization that Memorial characterized as a peaceful, international Islamic missionary movement. FSB investigators opened a criminal case against the individuals on the grounds that they were participating in a banned religious organization. On July 31, local media reported that FSB officers detained six members of Tablighi Jamaat in the Volgograd Region. Authorities said banned extremist literature was found on the individuals and opened a criminal investigation.

In September, according to press reports, the FSB, police, and other security agencies launched a raid in Krasnoyarsk Region in Siberia and arrested Sergei Torop, known to his followers as Vissarion, and two of his aides. Torop is the founder and leader of the Church of the Last Testament. The Novosibirsk Central District Court ordered the detention of Torop, and the prosecutor's office in Krasnoyarsk Territory filed a suit seeking dissolution of the Church. Authorities alleged the Church was an illegal religious organization and that Torop had extorted money from his followers and subjected them to emotional abuse. As of the end of the year, Torop remained in custody while authorities conducted psychiatric evaluations, and his trial date remained pending.

The *Times of Israel* reported October 21 that Jewish prisoner Danil Beglets, sentenced to two years in a penal colony in 2019 for pushing a policeman during a Moscow protest, went on a hunger strike to protest being forced to work on the Jewish Sabbath. Beglets stated authorities punished him for declining to work on the Sabbath and did not provide him with kosher food. Beglets further appealed to Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar to intervene on his behalf.

Memorial said the average length of sentences for religious prisoners on their list continued to increase. The group stated that between 2016 and 2018, the average prison sentence for these persons increased from 6.6 to 9.1 years.

Forum 18 stated authorities also sought to prosecute citizens living abroad who exercised their freedom of religion or belief. The NGO said the government had issued three Red Notices (requests to law enforcement worldwide to locate and detain individuals) through Interpol, two during the year and one in 2018, to attempt to detain and extradite at least three citizens living abroad to face criminal charges under the extremism law. Two of the Red Notices were against followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. At year's end, none of the individuals had been detained or extradited.

The SOVA Center reported in April that Dagestan authorities arrested Ibrahim Murtazaliev for his alleged involvement in Nurdzhular (also known as Nursi Readers), a group the government listed as extremist, and placed him in pretrial detention for two months before eventually releasing him. According to the government, members of Nurdzhular are students of Nursi's works, which are banned. The SOVA Center continued to state that it did not believe the group existed in the country.

Yevgeny Kim, whom authorities stripped of citizenship in 2019 because of what they said were actions that promoted the works of Nursi, remained stateless and in a pre-deportation detention center for foreign nationals. After Kim's release from prison in 2019, authorities had charged him with violating immigration law and ordered his deportation to Uzbekistan. Kim was born in Uzbekistan but did not have Uzbek citizenship.

At year's end, the Neva District Court in St. Petersburg accepted, but did not begin to hear, a case against Ivan Masitsky, head of the Church of Scientology in St. Petersburg, and three other church officers, Konstantsiya Yesaulkova, Galina Shurinova, and Anastasiya Terentyeva; authorities accused them of financial fraud. The case was initially launched in 2017 after an FSB raid on Church offices in which authorities claimed to have found evidence that the group had illegally received 276 million rubles (\$3.71 million) in compensation for Church services.

Authorities also investigated individuals for violating the law prohibiting offending the feelings of religious believers. In January, for example, comedian Aleksandr Dolgoplov left the country after police opened an investigation following media reports that an audience member at one of his shows complained that Dolgoplov had insulted his religious feelings, apparently for making a joke about Jesus and his mother Mary. Dolgoplov returned to the country in March, and the status of the investigation was unknown at year's end.

According to the MOJ, as of December, there were 31,392 registered religious organizations (LROs and CROs) in the country, most of which were ROC-affiliated, compared with 31,379 in 2019 and 30,896 in 2018. In 2019, Orthodox organizations made up more than half of the new organizations, followed by Muslim and Protestant organizations. Among Protestants, Pentecostals, Baptists, and Adventists had the most newly registered organizations. According to the SOVA Center, laws creating and regulating the activities of religious groups, LROs, and CROs contained imprecise language that left room for interpretation by local and national authorities.

Forum 18 reported that between January 2019 and June 2020, authorities prosecuted 76 registered religious organizations and 22 individuals for carrying out their activities without indicating their official full name on their materials. According to the Administrative Code, a religious organization's "official name" must include its religious affiliation and its organizational and legal form – the use of abbreviations may incur prosecution. Most of the cases resulted in guilty verdicts and fines, with a conviction rate of 72.5 percent.

The SOVA Center, independent media, and religious groups continued to say Expert Religious Studies Council members lacked appropriate academic and religious credentials to advise the MOJ on which groups should be permitted to register as religious organizations or to review an organization's literature and activities to determine whether the organization was "extremist."

The country's 83 federal subjects (administrative divisions, excluding illegally Russian-occupied Crimea and Sevastopol) had varying policies on wearing the *hijab* in public schools and/or government institutions. Stavropol and Mordovia continued to prohibit the wearing of hijabs in schools, while Chechnya permitted schoolgirls to wear them. In September, the Education Department of Tatarstan instituted a policy permitting Muslim schoolgirls to wear the hijab in all primary schools of the republic after receiving complaints from Muslim parents regarding the prohibition of the hijab in one school.

Representatives of minority religious associations, human rights NGOs, and some independent scholars continued to state authorities at times employed the Yarovaya-Ozerov amendments (Yarovaya package), enacted in 2016 for the stated purpose of enhancing the country's antiterrorism capability, to limit religious freedom. Experts pointed to the government's actions in revoking or suspending the licenses of Christian educational institutions, particularly those of Baptists, Pentecostals, and evangelicals. Experts also noted the government and ROC often viewed these institutions as sources of foreign influence. ROC educational and missionary institutions, by contrast, were not subjected to similar scrutiny by government authorities. NGOs, including the SOVA Center, Amnesty International, and Memorial, issued regular updates on individuals they deemed political prisoners due to what they described as the government's overly broad application of the Yarovaya package.

The SOVA Center stated in its annual report that the persecution of religious organizations for "illegal" missionary activity on the basis of the Yarovaya package appeared to have increased from 2019, according to data available at the end of the year. Despite a slight decrease in 2019 compared to 2018, the 2020 numbers showed 201 cases reviewed by the courts, compared to 174 in the same period in 2019. Ninety individuals, three officials, and 39 legal entities received penalties, mainly in the form of administrative fines. The SOVA Center calculated the total amount of fines imposed by courts was 1,581,000 rubles (\$21,200), compared with 1,452,000 rubles (\$19,500) for the same period in 2019.

In July, according to press reports, the MOJ barred seven NGOs associated with Falun Gong from working in the country, citing unspecified national security concerns, and designated them “undesirable” foreign organizations. Six of the NGOs were from the United States, and the seventh was from the United Kingdom. As a result, the government froze the groups’ assets and banned them from distributing informational materials, implementing projects, and creating branches in the country. On November 10, the Novosibirsk Fifth General Court of Appeal declared a regional branch of Falun Gong “extremist” and barred its activities in the region.

According to the Interfax news agency, the Pushkinsky District Court of St. Petersburg declared informational materials promoting deceased U.S. preacher William Branham’s teachings extremist and prohibited their circulation in the country. The materials related to The Evening Light Christian organization. In its decision, the court cited a 2017 review of Branham’s works by St. Petersburg State University in which the works were deemed to contain elements of “neurolinguistic programing” and insulted the feelings of certain religious believers.

Religious minorities, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Falun Gong, said local authorities continued to use the country’s anti-extremism laws to ban sacred religious texts and other books relating to religion, other than the four holy books recognized by law. The MOJ’s list of extremist material grew during the year to 5,130, compared with 5,003 in December 2019 and 4,514 in October 2018.

The SOVA Center reported that Tartarstan’s Almetvevsk City Court banned two books by Islamic theologians as extremist. According to the center, the two books did not contain any direct appeals for violence or terrorism and, as such, were incorrectly labeled as extremist.

The SOVA Center also reported that in January, the St. Petersburg City Court upheld the May 2019 Nevsky District Court decision to ban the Falun Gong book *Nine Commentaries on the Communist Party* from distribution in the country. The center said the book did not promote violence and that there were no grounds for banning its distribution.

Amendments to the law, initially considered by the State Duma in September, would require clergy who received religious education abroad to undergo mandatory recertification in a Russian educational institution. Proponents said the amendments were intended to prevent the dissemination of “an extremism

religious ideology.” However, after significant opposition from the Buddhist community, which does not have any religious educational institutions in Russia, the proposed amendments were modified so that they would apply only to clergy arriving in the country after implementation of the updated law. The proposed amendments would also prohibit religious institutions from having connections with individuals suspected of financing terrorism and those whom Russian courts declared “undesirable” or “extremist.”

According to the SOVA Center, the vagueness of the proposed amendments might permit the government to arbitrarily interfere with the activities of religious minorities and unpopular religious groups. The ROC was the only religious institution to declare support for the amendments. At year’s end, the State Duma was considering the legislation, which was expected to pass sometime in 2021.

In January, the Constitutional Court upheld the right of the Church of Jesus Christ to hold religious services in an administrative building owned by the Church. The case was an affirmation of a 2019 decision by the Constitutional Court acknowledging the right of an individual to use his or her own residential property to provide a religious organization with a place to conduct worship services and other religious rituals.

Forum 18 reported in February that three Pentecostal churches in different parts of the country – Nizhny Novgorod, Kaluga, and Oryol – faced possible closure and demolition for what local authorities said were building code violations. While the court cases were still ongoing at year’s end, each of the churches said they had resolved any reported issues. According to Forum 18, the congregations were forced to spend time and money to challenge the charges and could lose access to their places of worship during court proceedings. The Jesus Embassy Church in Nizhny Novgorod remained closed after authorities shut it down on December 31, 2019, due to what they said were fire safety violations. Alexander Verkhovsky, SOVA Center director, challenged the idea that authorities were interested in fire safety, given what he said were discrepancies in the number of violations cited and the apparent hostility state security officials had demonstrated toward the church’s operations. The churches in Kaluga and Oryol remained open during the court proceedings.

According to press reporting, the city administration in Novorossiysk filed a lawsuit and asked a local court to order the demolition of Baptist community leader Vitaliy Bak’s home in April. The city administration accused Bak of holding illegal religious worship services in the house. Local authorities had closed the

house in July 2019. Following a series of failed appeals, in December 2019, the NGO Alliance Defending Freedom International filed an application with the ECHR on behalf of Pastor Bak, saying the authorities' actions violated freedom of religion. The appeal remained pending at year's end.

The Russian Bible Society reported that Moscow authorities on September 16 ordered the group to demolish the warehouses where it stored its publications within five days. The society said that the letter from the authorities warned the group that if they did not demolish the warehouses and remove the materials therein, the authorities would do it and charge the group for related expenses.

On January 17, members of the Yekaterinburg Muslim community held Friday prayers outside during inclement weather to bring attention to the destruction of the Nur-Usman Mosque, which the government tore down in 2019 to make room for a new ice arena. Members of the mostly migrant community stated city officials had granted a new plot of land for the construction of a mosque but that the plot was smaller than the members believed was appropriate.

According to NGOs and independent experts, the government continued to cooperate more closely with the ROC than with other religious organizations, with officials often interpreting the law that recognized the "special role" Orthodox Christianity plays in the country's "history and the formation and development of its spirituality and culture" as granting special privileges or benefits to the ROC as an institution. For example, in August, religious scholar Roman Lunkin cited the government's interest in promoting the ROC as a source of symbolic patriotism during an interview with online news site *Lenta.ru*. According to Lunkin, the ROC continued to benefit from several formal and informal agreements with government ministries that gave it greater access than other religious organizations to public institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, the police, and the military. The government also continued to provide the ROC Patriarch with security guards and access to official vehicles, a privilege accorded to no other religious organization. In its annual report, the SOVA Center stated the ROC was the most frequent recipient of properties the government granted to religious organizations.

The Moscow Theological Seminary of Evangelical Baptists reopened as the Theological Seminary of Moscow following a 2019 decision by federal education inspectorate Rosobrnadzor to revoke the seminary's status as a nationally licensed graduate school. Authorities allowed it to reopen as a training institution under the

Russian Baptist Church. Rosobrnadzor had reported finding fault with the organization's bachelor's degree program and the qualifications of its staff.

In October, following the killing of teacher Samuel Paty in France by a Russian Muslim immigrant from Chechnya, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov accused French President Emmanuel Macron of inspiring terrorists by justifying cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad as protected by free speech rights. In an Instagram post, Kadyrov said Macron was forcing people into terrorism and creating conditions for extremism to grow.

Claims by Jehovah's Witnesses for government seizures of properties valued at 79.2 million euros (\$97.18 million) remained pending before the ECHR at year's end.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Experts from Russia's Jewish community had varying assessments of the level of anti-Semitism in the country. Chief Rabbi of Russia Lazar stated in January that the level of anti-Semitism was at its lowest point historically. He said the community felt comfortable openly demonstrating its religion and was respected by the state and others. President of the Federation of Jewish Communities Alexander Boroda said in June that he was concerned about the level of latent anti-Semitism in the country, citing public opinion polls showing the number of respondents who openly considered themselves anti-Semitic rose from 15 percent in 2017 to 17 percent in 2019.

The Russian Jewish Congress reported a taxi dispatcher in Tver refused to take an order from a customer in January after learning she had attended a Holocaust exhibition, telling her, "What they did to them [Jews] was all right." The customer complained to the taxi company, and the dispatcher was fired. The congress reported that in September, authorities uncovered a plot to assassinate the leader of the Jewish community of Krasnodar, Rabbi Yuri Tkach, and arrested suspects affiliated with the group "The USSR Citizens." The congress also reported that it and the World Jewish Congress had received threatening emails from an internet user.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to report that employers often dismissed Witnesses who had been detained by authorities, were being investigated, or received suspended sentences, and that those Witnesses were often unable to find another job, given the stigma surrounding them. Jehovah's Witnesses also continued to

report that adherents were harassed at their workplaces and, in some cases, dismissed or forced to resign when their coworkers became aware of their religious belief.

According to the SOVA Center, national and local media continued to publish and/or broadcast defamatory material about minority religious groups, shaping the public perception that certain religious groups were dangerous. The mass-circulation daily *Izvestia*, widely regarded as progovernment, published a piece against Jehovah's Witnesses following the November raids on the group that occurred across the country. The article, citing what it described as an expert in "sectology," stated Jehovah's Witnesses had taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to recruit vulnerable members into the group to acquire their property. The "sectologist" concluded that Jehovah's Witnesses did not value human life and were therefore susceptible to becoming terrorists.

The Russian Jewish Congress reported examples of anti-Semitism in media but stated that a trend toward a reduction in such content, observed in previous years, continued. According to the congress, anti-Semitic content was relatively infrequent on social media and was condemned or was the subject of administrative action when it appeared. The group cited an anti-Semitic statement on television station Russia-1 by Igor Korotchenko, editor-in-chief of *National Defense* magazine, who said that a number of Jewish opposition figures, including musician Andrei Makarevich, in the time of Hitler "could be turned either into ashes in the crematorium or into a lampshade." According to President of the Russian Jewish Congress Yuri Kanner, none of the other participants in the program objected to Korotchenko's remarks. The congress also pointed to anti-Semitism in publications by the North-West Political News Agency.

Some religious figures made anti-Semitic remarks publicly. Father Sergey Romanov, a former member of the ROC hierarchy, made multiple anti-Semitic statements from his pulpit during the year, calling the Jewish community an "accursed, ignorant" people and accusing the "Jewish regime" of being responsible for the closing of churches in the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. On July 20, the Verkhnepyshminsky City Court fined Romanov 18,000 rubles (\$240) (of a maximum 20,000 rubles, \$270) for "incitement of hatred or enmity, as well as the humiliation of human dignity" stemming from anti-Semitic remarks made during one of his sermons. In September, an ROC court expelled him from the Church, but he continued to perform services at a convent outside of Yekaterinburg, according to press reports. According to press reports, on December 29, authorities arrested him on suspicion of encouraging minors to

commit suicide in a sermon he gave entitled “For Faith in Christ, Let Us Face Death” that was posted on YouTube. At year’s end, he remained in detention, and his lawyer said he was not permitted to communicate with Romanov in private.

The SOVA Center reported 29 incidents of religiously motivated vandalism during the year, compared with at least 20 incidents (revised number) in 2019, 32 in 2018, and more than 100 such incidents at their peak in 2010.

Media reported on April 15 that police detained a woman who broke a Buddhist stupa with a sledgehammer near the village of Sukhaya. The Ministry of Internal Affairs announced it would open a criminal case against her on charges of vandalism and destruction of a religious structure.

Media reported several cases of anti-Semitic vandalism. For example, on April 13, unidentified perpetrators set fire to the Star of the North Synagogue and Jewish cultural center in Arkhangelsk. No one was injured, but a Jewish community leader estimated property damages at 1.5 million rubles (\$20,100). Two months after the incident, police detained a suspect. Authorities initiated a criminal case based on intentional damage to property rather than anti-Semitism. In July, according to press reports, vandals smashed dozens of headstones at Aleksandrovsкая Farm Avenue Cemetery, a Jewish cemetery in St. Petersburg. Police did not identify any suspects. In September, police arrested a man for painting a cross and pouring yellow paint on a monument for Holocaust victims in Aksay, a village outside the city of Rostov-on-Don near the border with Ukraine. Also in September, the Russian Jewish Congress reported that a drunken man shouting anti-Semitic slogans tried unsuccessfully to enter the Shamir Jewish Community Center in Moscow. He then threw down a chanukiah from the front steps, tore off a nameplate, broke a mailbox, and tore off the license plate of the rabbi’s car.

A variety of religious congregations stated they pursued ties with other faith communities. For example, ROC Metropolitan Kirill of Yekaterinburg and Verkhoturye said the ROC held regular meetings with faith leaders in the city, including with leaders from the Muslim and Jewish communities. Kirill also said the ROC regularly communicated with Protestant groups in Yekaterinburg, including the local Methodist, Baptist, and evangelical communities. The leaders of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan said they communicated and cooperated with other faiths, holding interfaith events, such as soccer tournaments, in Kazan.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy and consulate representatives advocated for greater religious freedom in the country, highlighting the government's misuse of the law on extremism to restrict the peaceful activities of religious minorities.

In January, the Ambassador spoke at a multifaith gathering hosted by the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow. In his remarks, the Ambassador underscored the unwavering U.S. commitment to preserving the memory of the Holocaust and doing everything possible to prevent similar acts of genocide and religious persecution from happening again. The embassy also highlighted this message on its social media platforms.

In March, the Ambassador and Yekaterinburg Consul General met with ROC Metropolitan Kirill of Yekaterinburg and Verkhoturye. During the visit, the Ambassador toured the Church on the Blood, built on the site of the 1918 killing of the Romanov family, and he relayed a message of cooperation between the people of the two countries, including in the promotion of freedom of religion.

Embassy officials continued to monitor the situation of U.S. citizens working with religious institutions and organizations in the country to ensure authorities did not improperly target them for their faith or religious work.

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the country, the embassy moved its outreach efforts online and continued to use its social media platforms to highlight religious freedom issues. On February 18, the embassy expressed concerns on Twitter over the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses; the embassy spokesperson posted, "We welcome news that Jehovah's Witness Vadim Kutsenko was released today, after reports that Chita law enforcement abducted & tortured him on basis of his peaceful religious beliefs. We urge Russian authorities to fully investigate incident, respect #humanrights #religiousfreedom," and on June 9, "#JehovahsWitness Gennady Shpakovsky was sentenced today to 6.5 years in prison for reading the Bible and collecting donations for his community. Russia must stop selectively prosecuting believers and let them practice their religion in peace." On April 14, the embassy posted about anti-Semitism on Twitter, writing, "We strongly condemn the April 13 attack on the Star of the North Synagogue and Jewish cultural center in Arkhangelsk, the third such attack since 2015. We urge a thorough investigation into this heinous act. #CombatAntisemitism."

The embassy also 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 religions to American history and culture; and posts highlighting events that underscored tolerance and that commemorated victims of violence motivated by religious hatred.

On September 2, the embassy sponsored a virtual commemoration concert entitled “Music of World War II: Remembering the Shared Sacrifice of the Allied Nations.” Among the repertoire were compositions by Jewish artists of the World War II era: Polish-Jewish composer Mieczyslaw Weinberg’s Piano Quintet, a performance by the Moscow Male Jewish Cappella Choir of the prayer “Ki lekach tov,” and Olivier Messiaen’s “Quartet for the End of Time,” composed and first performed in a concentration camp. The virtual concert attracted 6,400 viewers on Facebook and 1,200 on YouTube, as well as drawing media coverage on various online and broadcast outlets. The embassy also highlighted the liberation of concentration camps during its World War II commemorations, posting videos about the Allied Forces’ liberation of Dachau and Ravensbruck.

On November 25, the embassy coordinated with the Department of State to release tweets condemning the November 24 raids on Jehovah’s Witnesses in Moscow and 20 other regions. On November 30, the Ambassador met with Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives to discuss the most recent raids and the group’s ongoing persecution. The Ambassador said the United States would continue to highlight the government’s violations of the rights of members of their group and reiterated the U.S. commitment to religious freedom.

On December 2, 2020 in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again placed Russia on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.