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2022 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 July to counter "extremist activities" authorizes creation of a database of materials defined as extremist and a "unified register" of individuals in organizations defined as terrorist or extremist. 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) reported authorities continued to investigate, detain, imprison, torture, physically abuse persons, and seize their property because of their religious belief or affiliation or membership in groups designated "extremist," "terrorist," or "undesirable," including 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, an NGO reported that in July, a court in Kemerovo upheld a seven-year prison term in a labor camp for a disabled member of Jehovah's Witnesses for organizing the activities of an extremist organization. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses annual report for the period September 2021 through August 2022, there were 93 criminal convictions, mostly in cases brought in previous years, as well as 39 new cases involving 101 defendants. The report stated that 60 individuals were in pretrial detention and cited six cases of police torture and 239 home searches conducted in 52 locations. During the year, courts sentenced numerous Jehovah's Witnesses to lengthy prison terms on charges of participating in an extremist organization and convicted many of conducting or participating in religious services. Members of Hizb ut-Tahrir received lengthy prison sentences, and authorities undertook prosecutions of followers of Said Nursi. During the year, ROC priests and members of other religious communities were fined or banned from continuing in their religious duties for "discrediting the Russian armed forces" after making comments critical of Russia's war in Ukraine while ROC Patriarch Kirill expressed support of government actions. At a May press conference, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov compared Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is Jewish, to Hitler and accused Jews of antisemitism. In August, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) opened judicial proceedings against the Jewish Agency for Israel in

Moscow for allegedly violating data privacy laws. The government opened 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.

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. On March 1, the former editor of a prominent Moscow radio station, who is Jewish, found a pig's head and a Ukrainian coat of arms sticker with antisemitic statements written on it outside his Moscow apartment. On September 26, a gunman with a swastika on his shirt killed 17 persons, including 11 children, and wounded 24 at a school in Izhevsk. The SOVA Center, a Moscow-based NGO, reported several incidents of vandalism at Jewish religious sites as well as other incidents of religiously motivated vandalism.

The U.S. Ambassador and U.S. embassy representatives advocated 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 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 Russian government engaged in extreme repression of civil society and dramatically curtailed freedom of expression following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and has 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.

On November 30, 2022, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State redesignated Russia a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom 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 142 million (midyear 2022). A poll conducted in April by the independent Levada Center found that 71 percent of the population identified as Orthodox Christian and 5 percent as Muslim, while 15 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, members of 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, as of August, of the approximately

165,000 Jews residing in the country at the beginning of the year, an estimated 20,500 emigrated since March. 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.”

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 (\$7,000) or 1,000,000 rubles (\$14,000), 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.

Antiextremism 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 (\$280) for individuals and up to 500,000 rubles (\$7,000) 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 (\$8,400), 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 (\$11,200) 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 (\$9,800). 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.

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, 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 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), 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).

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 (\$4,200), 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 (\$7,000), 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.

An LRO may register with the MOJ 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.

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 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, as well as “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 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 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. 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 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 (\$1,400).

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 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 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 (\$70-\$700) for individuals and 100,000 to 1,000,000 rubles (\$1,400-\$14,000) 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 (\$420-\$700) and are subject to 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 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 MOJ is required to remove the material 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.

On July 14, President Putin signed a new law to facilitate the ability of federal authorities to counter “extremist activities.” The new law authorizes the creation of an 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 the administrative code, mass distribution, production, and possession with the aim of mass distribution of extremist materials by private individuals may result in 15 days' imprisonment or a fine of 1,000 to 3,000 rubles (\$14-\$42), or 2,000 to 5,000 rubles (\$28-\$70) 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 (\$1,400-\$14,000). 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, to lead or take 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, the law entitled individuals and organizations to take religious freedom cases to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg, France. On September 16, however, the country ceased to be party to the European Convention on Human Rights, six months after its exclusion from the Council of Europe. On June 11, President Putin signed two bills approved earlier that month by parliament, one removing the country from the ECHR's jurisdiction and a second retroactively setting March 15 as the cut-off point, with rulings against Russia made after that date not to be implemented.

Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 is compulsory, but the constitution provides for alternative civilian 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.

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

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

According to 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. On April 5, the First Court of Appeals confirmed the Supreme Court's December 2021 decision to liquidate Memorial, one of the country's best-known NGOs, resulting in the organization's closure in the country. The organization was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October. Following its court-ordered liquidation, Memorial reestablished its human rights center support program outside of the country. As of the end of the year, Memorial had identified 394 persons prosecuted for their religious belief or affiliation whom it 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. Memorial's list of political prisoners included 281 persons accused of involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir, an organization Memorial characterized as a "nonviolent international Islamic organization," and 486 Jehovah's Witnesses. According to Memorial, none of the political prisoners being prosecuted for their religious belief or affiliation called for violence or planned violent acts.

According to Forum 18, the government increasingly used Interpol Red Notices, which seek the arrest and extradition of individuals named by the government, as a means to request third country officials to detain and return those who left Russia to avoid criminal prosecution, including for exercising freedom of religion or belief. In June, the Federal Security Service (FSB) sought to have an Interpol Red Notice issued for Imam Ilkhom Merazhov. On September 8, a court in Novosibirsk issued a detention order for Merazhov in absentia. Merazhov left Russia in 2015 after being named as a suspect in a 2015 criminal case against several Novosibirsk Muslims accused of operating a "Nurdzhular" cell in the city.

In May, Forum 18 reported that since the government banned Jehovah's Witness organizations as "extremist" in 2017, investigators had opened criminal cases against more than 600 persons in 70 of the country's 83 regions (not counting Crimea, which Russia illegally annexed from Ukraine), of whom more than 200 were convicted and only one acquitted in trial court (later overturned on appeal by prosecutors). Nearly 60 persons received prison terms ranging from one to eight years.

The 2022 annual report of the Jehovah's Witnesses, covering the period September 2021 through August 2022, stated that Russia continued to "wage a harsh, unrelenting campaign of persecution." During that period, the report said there were: 93 criminal convictions, mostly from cases brought in previous years, as well as 39 new cases involving 101 defendants, 60 individuals being held in pretrial detention, six cases of torture by the police, and 239 home searches in 52 locations. The reported stated 643 Jehovah's Witnesses had been subjected to criminal prosecution.

In a June 7 judgment, the ECHR found that series of actions taken by the government culminating in the 2017 ban were in violation of multiple articles of the European Convention on Human Rights and ordered Russia to discontinue criminal proceedings against Jehovah's Witnesses, release those imprisoned, return confiscated properties, and pay compensation. The judgment came just before final passage of Russian legislation stating that the country would not implement ECHR rulings issued after March 15.

NGOs also stated that 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. The NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers stated authorities had raided more than 1,789 homes of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country between early 2017 and November 2022. 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.

According to the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Russian-language website, on September 8, authorities detained Dmitry Dolzhikov, a member of Jehovah's Witness, in Chelyabinsk and two days later placed him in a pretrial detention center in Novosibirsk, more than 900 miles away. According to the website of the Jehovah's Witnesses, as of that date, 32 Jehovah Witnesses were in correctional colonies and 68 in pretrial detention centers.

Throughout the year, multiple sources, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Russian human rights NGO OVD-Info, RFE/RL, the SOVA Center, and Forum 18, reported a stream of lengthy prison or penal colony sentences handed down to Jehovah's Witnesses for organizing or participating in the activities of an "extremist organization," while numerous other individuals received suspended sentences or were subjected to house arrest. On January 17, the Pavlovsky District Court of Krasnodar Territory sentenced Maxim Beltikov to two years in prison; on January 19, the Seversky City Court of Tomsk Region sentenced Alexei Ershov to three years; on January 25, a court in Astrakhan sentenced Anna Safronova to six years; on February 2, the Oktyabrsky Court of Krasnoyarsk sentenced Anatoly Gorbunov to six years; on April 19, the Stavropol Regional Court sentenced Konstantin Samsonov to seven-and-a-half years; on May 23, the Central District Court of Prokopyevsk in Kemerovo Region sentenced Andrei Vlasov to seven years; on June 6, the Central District Court of Chita sentenced Vladimir Ermolaev, Igor Mamalimov, and Aleksandr Putintsev to six and-a-half-years; on June 27, the Oktyabrskiy District Court of Krasnoyarsk sentenced Yevgeniy Zinich to six years; on August 25, the Leninsky District Court in Saransk sentenced Vladimir Atryakhin, Georgy and Elena Nikulin, Alexander Shevchuk, Denis Antonov, and Alexander Korolev to prison terms of two to six years; on September 5, the Vologda City Court sentenced Nikolai Stepanov to four years; on September 19, the Gukovsky City Court of Rostov Region sentenced Alexei Gorelom, Oleg Shidlovsky, Nikita Moiseev, Alexei Dyadkin, Vladimir Popov, and Evgeny Razumov to terms ranging from six-and-a-half to seven years; on October 6, the Krasnodar Regional Court sentenced Lyudmila Shchekoldina to four years and one month; on October 20, the Krasnodar Regional Court upheld the sentence of Alexander Nikolaev of two-and-a-half years; on October 24, the Tyndinsky District Court of the Amur Region sentenced Vladimir Bukin, Valery Slashchev, Sergei Yuferov to six-and-half years and Mikhail Burkov to six years and two months; on November 7, the Rubtsovsky City Court of Altai Krai sentenced Andrei Danielyan to six years; and on December 28, the Oktyabrsky District Court sentenced Sergei Gruzdev to six years in a penal colony.

According to Forum 18, on December 19, after a legal process lasting more than four-and-one-half years, the Birobidzhan District Court sentenced four Jehovah's Witnesses to lengthy prison terms for organizing the activities of their banned and liquidated local congregation, and for financing extremist activity by collecting donations. The court sentenced Valery Kriger and Sergei Shulyarenko to seven years' imprisonment, sentenced Alam Abdulaziz to six years and six months, and sentenced Dmitry Zagulin to three years and six months.

On December 21, Forum 18 reported that the Blagoveshchensk City Court sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses Sergei Afanasyev, Sergei Kardakov, Adam Svarichevsky, Sergei Yermilov, and Anton Olshevsky to prison terms of more than six years each for organizing and financing activities of an extremist organization.

According to various sources, including official Jehovah's Witnesses sources, the activities for which the individuals were convicted amounted to normal religious practice and conducting basic activities of

religious organizations. For example, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the basis of the conviction of the four individuals sentenced on October 24 for organizing the activities of an extremist organization was holding worship services and conducting home-based Bible studies. *Novaya Gazeta* reported that in investigating the activities of Anna Safronova, it found that she "took part in online meetings through video conferencing, using conspiracy measures," and "controlled the flow of donations and compiled financial reports." Her six-year sentence was reportedly the longest given to a woman member of Jehovah's Witness. In another case, Valery Kriger commented on the basis for his seven-year sentence handed down in December, stating, "in fact it all boiled down to the fact that I, along with fellow believers, read the Bible, prayed, and sang religious songs."

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, prior to his sentencing for organizing the activities of an extremist organization, Andrei Vlasov, who has a disability that severely limits his movement, was under long-term house arrest that prevented him from receiving medical care. When Forum 18 asked prosecutors why Vlasov received a seven-year sentence in a penal colony, given his state of health and further asked who was harmed by his actions, the prosecutors replied that the sentence was consistent with the provisions of the criminal code and the court verdict had taken into account Vlasov's state of health and case circumstances. In his statement before sentencing on May 23, Vlasov told the court, "The essence of the accusation boils down to the fact that after 2017 I remained a believer and profess the Jehovah's Witness religion.... If we look the facts in the eye, how many people suffered from the so-called 'extremist' activities that I 'intentionally' carried out? [In this situation] only one person was injured! This person is me."

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that Nikolai Merinov, who according to Russian human rights NGO OVD-Info was stabbed and beaten unconscious during a September 2021 search in Irkutsk by the National Guard and the Ministry of Interior's special forces, remained under preliminary investigation for extremism.

On October 6, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, authorities in Yaroslavsky Village in Primorsky Territory searched 12 homes of Jehovah's Witnesses. Authorities detained Boris Andreev and Natalya Sharapova on October 7, and Anatoliy Lee on October 12, on suspicion of organizing the activities of a banned organization.

According to OVD-Info, on July 7, authorities in Surgut searched the homes of five Jehovah's Witnesses, including those of Kirill Severinchik and Yevgeny Kairyak. OVD-Info stated that in 2019, Severinchik and Kairyak were beaten and forced to incriminate themselves. It also stated that authorities initiated five criminal cases in the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug against 23 Jehovah's Witnesses, 19 of whom lived in Surgut.

On September 20, the Partisan City Court of Primorsky Krai sentenced Jehovah's Witness Liya Maltseva to two years and three months of suspended imprisonment, with restriction of liberty for seven months, for her participation in the activities of an extremist organization.

According to the SOVA Center, in December 2021, during a search of 10 homes in Samara, authorities forced Nikolai Vasilyev and another unnamed Jehovah's Witness to hold a heated kettle and poured boiling water on him after he refused to provide the authorities access to a laptop. The Jehovah's Witnesses reported that Vasilyev remained in pretrial detention at year's end without a set trial date.

In September, according to OVD News, authorities conducted mass searches of the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Chelyabinsk, searching 13 premises and detaining one person. Security forces

broke into some of the homes through windows and confiscated bank cards, passports, electronic devices, and in one case personal savings. In July, the same source reported that officials conducted mass searches of 16 premises in Yaroslavl Region. On February 13, authorities also conducted body searches on more than three dozen Jehovah's Witnesses in Krasnodar Territory.

Jehovah's Witnesses representatives said group members continued to flee the country as a result of what they described as increasing government persecution since the 2017 Supreme Court ruling banning the organization. In March, a Jehovah's Witnesses spokesman was quoted as stating that almost 5,000 Witnesses had left and estimated that approximately 170,000 remained.

On May 25, Jehovah's Witness and Danish citizen Dennis Christensen was released after five years in a penal colony and deported on the same day with his Russian-citizen wife. Detained since 2017, Christensen received a six-year prison sentence in 2019.

On May 4, authorities released Jehovah's Witness member Valentina Baranovskaya from prison following a Supreme Court of Khakassia decision upholding a lower court ruling to release her due to ill health. The Abakan City Court in the Republic of Khakassia in 2021 sentenced her to two years' imprisonment, and her son, Roman Baranovsky, to six years in a penal colony, based on the government's designation of the group as extremist. At year's end, Roman Baranovsky remained imprisoned.

On April 8, the Primorye Regional Court nullified the November 2021 acquittal of Jehovah's Witness Dmitry Barmakin and remanded his case for retrial. The court ruled that Barmakin's acquittal was wrongly determined, stating that materials collected by investigators suggested he was involved in the activities of an organization determined to be an extremist group.

Individuals continued to receive long prison sentences for their alleged involvement with Hizb-ut-Tahrir. On August 4, the SOVA Center reported that the Central District Military Court sentenced 10 persons for involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir. Marat Saybatalov and Alim Timkanov received sentences of 17 and 18 years in prison, respectively. Eight other defendants – Damir Abdrafikov, Ruslan Bariev, Rafis Idrissov, Farrukh Makhkamov, Shahboz Makhmudov, Turatbek Osmonkulov, Aidar Tashbulatov, and Ruslan Fomin – received sentences of between 11 and 14 years in prison. The SOVA Center stated the organization was not involved in terrorism and the prosecutions on terrorist grounds were unlawful, since the individuals were only carrying out activities such as holding meetings and reading and distributing literature. On September 13, Memorial reported that the Central District Military Court sentenced Rail Abdrakhmanov, Vyacheslav Vankov, Lenar Mukhamadeyev, and Ilsur Galeev, all from Kazan, to prison terms of 11 to 18 years for involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir. In total, as of November, Memorial recognized 267 defendants in cases of involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir as political prisoners. Of these, 222 were serving their sentences, and 45 had been released after serving their sentences.

Novaya Gazeta, citing RIA Novosti, reported that on June 9, the FSB detained 13 "Islamists who recruited Muslims at the behest of Ukraine." According to the FSB, the detainees spread what it termed the terrorist ideology of the Hizb ut-Tahrir in coordination with emissaries in Ukraine. During secret meetings, they recruited Russians and labor migrants, according to the FSB.

The SOVA Center reported that on April 12, the Altai Regional Court upheld the prison sentence of a member of the banned Tablighi Jamaat, thought to be Ramiz Fashiev, to five years and 20 days in a

penal colony. According to the SOVA Center, during a previous term in a penal colony, Fashiev held secret meetings promoting the teachings of Tablighi Jamaat.

According to information made available in August, the SOVA Center reported that the Nikolaevsky District Court of the Ulyanovsk Region sentenced four supporters of Tablighi Jamaat – M. Rafikov, S. Salkin, A. Shabanov, and M. Sadykov – to suspended sentences of from two years and eight months to six years and two months, for organization of activities of an extremist organization. According to law enforcement officials, Rafikov “held secret meetings [and] coordinated preaching trips to mosques in other regions of Russia to process and involve Muslims in extremist activities.”

On December 28, the SOVA Center reported that in mid-November, the Volgograd Regional Court reviewed the prosecutorial appeal of the sentence issued to five local residents for their participation in Tablighi Jamaat and increased their sentences. The court revised the sentences of Amanat Lukpanov, Batr Urazov, and Gilman Nitaliev from suspended terms to imprisonment in a minimum-security colony. The sentences for the two remaining defendants, Aslan Vakuev and Alexander Kolesnikov, did not change. The court sentenced all five to an additional 10 months of restriction of freedom.

Authorities continued to prosecute organized followers of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi (whose organization they called “Nurdzhular,” although followers denied such an organization exists). The Supreme Court in 2008 declared Nurdzhular to be extremist and banned Nursi’s works. The SOVA Center reported that on June 8, the Republic of Tatarstan announced the referral to the court system of the case of three residents of Naberezhnye – Kunar Agayev, Aidar Sageyev and Amrah Akhmedov – whom authorities detained and arrested in November 2021. According to the investigation, in 2020-21 Agayev and Sageyev organized what authorities termed a Nurdzhular cell in the city, attracting new participants, and possessing relevant literature. According to authorities, Agayev was head of the cell and Sageyev his assistant, with Akhmedov playing an active role.

According to Forum 18, in June, the FSB reopened a criminal case against Imam Ilkhom Merazhkov, accused of operating a Nurdzhular cell in Novosibirsk, although he had been living outside Russia since 2015. The FSB in Novosibirsk suspended its investigation of Merazhkov in 2018 after it became clear that he had moved abroad, but the Novosibirsk regional prosecutor’s office overturned this decision in June and returned the case to investigators. Forum 18 reported that the FSB sought to have an Interpol Red Notice issued for Merazhkov’s return to Russia for prosecution.

On May 31, the SOVA Center reported that the Investigative Committee for the Republic of Dagestan initiated criminal cases against four Said Nursi followers for participation in the activities of an extremist organization. In March, the SOVA Center reported that authorities in Dagestan initiated three similar cases.

On July 21, according to RFE/RL, the Sixth Court of Cassation in Samara, which hears appeals on points of law, denied the appeal of Tatar Islamic scholar Gabdrakhman Naumov, whom the court sentenced to six-and-one-half years in prison in November 2021 for running a Nurdzhular cell. Authorities arrested Naumov in March 2020 and charged him with being the leader of the Nurdzhular movement in Tatarstan.

Human Rights Without Frontiers reported that on September 22, the trial of six individuals accused of organizing and participating in the activities of Nurdzhular began in Moscow’s Kuzminsky District Court. The six had been in pretrial detention since their arrest in October 2021.

According to members, the government continued to conduct a criminal investigation of the Church of Scientology in St. Petersburg. The church reported that authorities had restricted the freedom of five defendants for more than five years on charges of extremism – organizing an extremist conspiracy, incitement of hatred or enmity, and illegal entrepreneurship. One of the defendants had spent most of this time in jail and partly under house arrest; as of November, he remained in jail, without prosecution or trial. The church stated that none of the criminal charges against him included a crime of violence that would warrant his detention.

On January 13, OVD-Info reported that in Ivanovo Oblast, the FSB detained seven members of the banned Al-Takfir Wal-Hijra. The FSB said in a statement that the security forces detained three Russian citizens and four from Azerbaijan.

The SOVA Center reported that on May 26, the Leninsky District Court of Ufa fined Shamsiddin Sizhaev, the imam of the Mahalla Consent-Rizo religious group, 2,000 rubles (\$28) for the storage of extremist materials for mass distribution. The materials in question were two copies of the book *40 Hadiths of Imam Al-Nawawi* that were found in the group's prayer room.

The SOVA Center reported that in April, the Tagilstroyevsky District Court of Nizhny Tagil fined Imam Fanis Galeev of the Makhhal mosque for the distribution of extremist materials. The Nizhny Tagil prosecutor's office found 23 books that were included in the Federal List of Extremist Materials.

On July 21, OVD-Info reported that the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Novosibirsk Region opened a criminal case against four followers of the Allya Ayat religious group for organizing and participating in the activities of an extremist organization. In 2019, the Samara Regional Court banned the group as extremist.

According to the religious freedom NGO Bitter Winter, on September 14, the trial began in Omsk of Stanislav Moskvitin, the pastor of the New Creation Apostolic Church. Moskvitin was accused of illegally gathering funds to build a church and organizing a religious association causing harm to the health of its members, which, according to Bitter Winter, the authorities interpreted as their mental health. According to Bitter Winter, the FSB raided the church and accused Moskvitin of using psychological techniques to brainwash parishioners. The organization stated that authorities used accusations of brainwashing to target religious groups not falling under the law on extremism but that have gained converts from the Orthodox Church.

On August 15, according to the SOVA Center, the Basmany Court of Moscow ordered that Nikolai Ulitin, the pastor of the Pentecostal Christ the Savior Church, be detained until September 30. Ulitin was accused of organizing the activities of an undesirable organization. The order followed searches of Pentecostal New Generation churches in Moscow, Kemerovo, Novosibirsk, Chelyabinsk, Sochi, and Krasnodar.

According to Falun Dafa practitioners, on November 9, a court in Mezhdurechensk ruled the Falun Dafa books *Essentials for Further Advancement* Vol. 1, 2, and 3 were not extremist. The prosecutor challenged the ruling, and the court scheduled a hearing for March 2023. The prosecutor had initially brought the charges related to the books on February 2. According to Falun Dafa practitioners, practitioners filed complaints against the court in Krasnodar for refusing to review a 2008 MOJ finding that the book "Zhuan Falun" was extremist.

According to Forum 18, authorities used a range of tactics to pressure religious leaders into supporting the country's war against Ukraine, including issuing warnings to senior and local religious leaders, and prosecuting and fining religious believers and clergy who publicly opposed the war. Forum 18 stated that Lutheran Bishop Dietrich Brauer and Moscow Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt left Russia in March after resisting government pressure to support the war. Goldschmidt had been Chief Rabbi for more than 30 years. Forum 18 also said that the FSB warned other religious leaders and quoted one pastor as saying in July that the warnings were no longer taking place, since the warnings in March were sufficient to make their point.

Other religious figures, including Patriarch Kirill of the Moscow Patriarchate of the ROC, Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin of the Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Russia, Old Believer (an Eastern Orthodox Christian group) Metropolitan Kornily, and Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky of the Pentecostal Union, expressed support for Russia's war against Ukraine. Numerous sources noted Patriarch Kirill's support for the war, which they said was causing divisions in the ROC. During a March 7 sermon, Kirill stated that the war in the Donbas region was justified as a "test of loyalty" against a "gay parade," saying that in the Donbas region there was a "fundamental rejection of the so-called values that are offered today." The online magazine *Religion Dispatches* referred to an April sermon Kirill delivered in the Cathedral of the Armed Forces in which he stated that Russia was fighting fascism in Ukraine and referred to a "false division" between Russia and Ukraine. On September 25, following the Kremlin's mobilization announcement, Kirill told ROC followers that "sacrifice in the course of carrying out your military duty washes away all sins."

During the year, ROC priests and members of other religious communities were fined or banned from continuing in their religious duties for "discrediting the Russian armed forces" after making comments critical of the war in Ukraine. Among those religious adherents opposing the war were members of the ROC, including those affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate. On March 1, 293 ROC priests signed an open letter calling for reconciliation and an end to the war.

Following the February 24 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) banned a large number of foreign citizens from entering the country. On May 21, the MFA put many foreign citizens on its entry ban list, including three senior figures (all U.S. citizens) in Agudas Chasidei Chabad, the umbrella organization for the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement.

In a number of cases, the government responded to religious opposition to the war with legal action. On March 10, a court fined ROC priest Ioann Burdin of the Moscow Patriarchate's Kostroma Diocese one month's average local wages for online remarks and a Sunday sermon in church condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine and stressing the importance of the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." In early April, a court fined ROC Deacon Sergei Shcherbyuk nearly one month's average local wages for "discrediting the Russian armed forces" in conversations with parishioners and colleagues. In April, Forum 18 reported that Nina Belyayeva, a Protestant member of the Semiluk District Council in Voronezh Oblast, fled the country after stating at a council meeting that she opposed the war in Ukraine as a Christian and calling into question the stance of Patriarch Kirill.

On October 11, Forum 18 reported that the Sverdlovsk regional court fined Russian Orthodox priest Nikandr Pinchuk 100,000 rubles (\$1,400) for writing social media posts in which he condemned the invasion of Ukraine as "the horde of the Antichrist." Also in October, Orthodox priest Ioann Kurmoyarov was put on trial in St. Petersburg for opposing the war; at year's end, Kurmoyarov was in pretrial detention awaiting his next hearing in January 2023. According to Forum 18, Pinchuk and Kurmoyarov were the first members of the clergy known to be facing criminal prosecution for

protesting against the war from a religious perspective, although other priests were charged with administrative offenses. Kurmoyarov, like Pinchuk, is a member of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (a semi-autonomous part of the ROC), which criticized the Moscow Patriarchate for its support of the war.

The government made no legal or practical provision for alternative civilian service (ACS) following President Putin's September 21 mobilization for reservists whose religious (or other) beliefs would preclude them from bearing weapons or otherwise serving in the armed forces, despite the constitutional guarantee of this right for every citizen. This led to military recruitment offices refusing applications for ACS and sending conscientious objectors to military units. Moreover, an amendment to the 1997 Law on Mobilization, which came into force on November 15, allows those already undertaking ACS in a civilian-run institution after being called up for regular military service to be transferred from the civilian-run institution to a noncombat role within the armed forces.

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, on October 18, the Basmany District Court in Moscow postponed until December 20 hearings on a MOJ application to close the Russian branch of the Jewish Agency for Israel in Moscow. In December, the court postponed the hearings again until March 2023. In August, the MOJ accused the Jewish Agency of violating privacy laws in its storage of data pertaining to Russian citizens.

According to a BBC report on August 17, the Jewish Agency for Israel in Moscow said that 20,500 of what it stated were the country's estimated total of 165,000 Jews had left Russia since March. As reported in the *Washington Post* in July, former Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt tweeted that "Russia did more in promoting emigration to Israel during the last months than the Jewish Agency did for the last 10 years." The article quoted a source as stating that the move to shut down the agency was meant to stem the "brain drain" of skilled Jewish workers from the country, rather than any genuine offense on the Jewish Agency's part. In an interview with Deutsche Welle News in August, Goldschmidt said that Jews should take the opportunity to leave the country, given the rise in antisemitism and the possibility that borders could close.

On November 1, Forum 18 reported that traffic police detained Danara Erendzhenova outside the Gunzechoyney Datsan, St. Petersburg's historic Buddhist temple. She had been holding up a poster reading "Militarism is very expensive – Dalai Lama XIV." Forum 18 stated that Erendzhenova was the first Buddhist and the first non-Christian known by the organization to have been prosecuted for expressing her opposition to Russia's war in Ukraine. In comments to independent media outlet SOTA, she described her action as "a gesture of desperation," and she was using the words of the Dalai Lama to try to persuade her many Buddhist acquaintances who supported the war to rethink their position.

According to the SOVA Center, registration was sometimes complicated by imprecise language in the laws regulating the activities of religious groups, LROs, and CROs, which left room for interpretation by local and national authorities.

Church of Scientology organizations remained closed following a government designation in September 2021 that two church groups – the World Institute of Scientology Enterprises International and the Church of Spiritual Technology – were "undesirable organizations," which effectively banned Scientology in the country. According to the SOVA Center, the designation meant that the church had to stop its activities in the country, and any cooperation with the group would be treated as an administrative or, in some cases, criminal offense.

Authorities sometimes employed surveillance measures against religious groups. On October 11, a panel of judges of the Birobidzhan Regional Court of the Jewish Autonomous Region overturned the conviction of Jehovah's Witnesses Oleg and Agnessa Postnikov and ordered a new trial. In April, the court had sentenced them to five-and-a-half and five-year suspended sentences, respectively. In 2018, officials had conducted a search of their house as part of a wider operation, based on video from a hidden camera that recorded private conversations with other members of the group.

Representatives of minority religious associations and human rights NGOs stated that authorities continued to prosecute individuals and smaller religious groups for "illegal" missionary work. On multiple occasions, authorities fined missionary organizations for violating legal requirements pertaining to missionary activity. Forum 18 stated that the rate of prosecutions remained high, with Muslims particularly targeted. Individuals were often charged with illegal missionary work for conducting prayers outside of officially designated places of worship. Forum 18 stated that more than 80 percent of defendants whose cases reached a verdict were found guilty and fined. Foreigners also faced possible expulsion. Prosecutions during the year included the fining and deportation of Tajik citizen Uhmedzhon Tozhev on February 16 for leading Islamic prayer. Protestant churches were also targets. On January 11, Adler District Magistrate's Court in Krasnodar Region fined Council of Churches Baptist Presbyter Vladimir Kharchenko 5,000 rubles (\$70) for holding services in his community's prayer house and providing visitors with religious literature.

Human Rights without Borders and the SOVA Center reported that on March 10, the Prokhladnensky District Court of Kabardino-Balkaria found Timofey Boronin, pastor of a Seventh-day Adventist church, guilty of illegal missionary work and fined him 30,000 rubles (\$420). They also reported that the evangelical Reign of Faith Church in Samara Oblast and the Seventh-day Adventist church in Kaspiysk in the Republic of Dagestan were appealing fines levied for illegal missionary work. On June 17, according to Human Rights without Borders, the Urvan District Court of Kabardino-Balkaria approved an earlier ruling imposing a fine for illegal missionary activity on the Seventh-day Adventist church in Nartkal. Among the offenses cited by various courts were delivering a sermon without being a leader of a religious group and distributing religious literature not marked with the full name of the religious organization.

Religious minorities said local authorities continued to use the country's antiextremism laws to ban sacred religious texts and other books related to religion, other than the four holy books recognized by law. According to unofficial sources, the number grew to approximately 5,330 items by the end of the year.

On December 20, the SOVA Center reported that the Cherkess City Court of Karachay-Cherkessia issued multiple rulings against members of religious communities during the year for distribution of materials deemed extremist. On January 12, the court fined Ismoil Nazarov 1,000 rubles (\$14) for possessing the book *The Future Belongs to Islam* by Seyid Qutb, and on September 21, Kemran Bolatchiev was also fined 1,000 rubles for distributing two copies of the same book. On July 27, the court fined Radmir Gasimov 1,000 rubles for possessing the book *The Fortress of a Muslim*, and on March 22, Umar Chomayev was fined 1,000 rubles for possessing the same book. On March 28, the court fined Jehovah's Witness Alexei Ryabtsov 1,000 rubles for possessing the book *The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived*.

According to a July 13 report by digital rights organization Roskomsvoboda, since the February 24 invasion of Ukraine, the government media watchdog Roskomnadzor blocked access to more than

3,000 websites, citing military censorship.

Forum 18 reported that on May 24, Roskomnadzor blocked access to the entirety of the foreign Protestant website In Victory at the request of the general prosecutor's office. It had previously blocked three pages on the site, including an appeal to Russian Christians by a Ukrainian Baptist pastor on April 1 and on May 24, and two articles from March 11 and March 14 about deaths and detentions among Protestant civilians in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol.

According to Forum 18, on May 31, also at the request of the general prosecutor's office, Roskomnadzor blocked the entire Public Orthodoxy website, hosted by the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University in New York. The website published numerous articles criticizing the Moscow Patriarchate's endorsement of the war in Ukraine and Patriarch Kirill's expressed concept of "Russian World" that Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus all constitute a single spiritual and cultural space in opposition to the liberal and secular West.

Forum 18 reported that *Portal Credo*, a religious news website, went offline of its own accord after receiving a warning from Roskomnadzor on March 22, apparently for its coverage of the war in Ukraine. Founded in 2002, *Portal Credo* published news and analytical articles on religion in Russia and abroad and was often critical of the Moscow Patriarchate.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, on May 12, the Leninsky District Court of Nizhny Novgorod gave Kirill Evstigneev, who paid rent for a meeting place for Jehovah's Witnesses, a three-year suspended sentence, after convicting him of providing financial services deliberately intended to support an extremist organization. His appeal was pending at years' end.

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" 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.

In mid-November, according to the SOVA Center, a Tsentralny district court in St. Petersburg fined Andrei Kurdov 80,000 rubles (\$1,100) for insulting the religious feelings of believers. In 2021, Kurdov, 17 at the time, and a younger friend took a photograph of themselves, naked from the waist down, against the background of the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood and posted it on a social network.

Forum 18 continued to raise concerns about the October 2021 law that requires clergy, missionaries, or religious teachers who received their religious training outside the country to enroll in a class on state-confessional relations and obtain recertification by a CRO. The NGO criticized what it said was the vague wording of the amendments, which left interpretation to law enforcement authorities. According to Forum 18, the majority of religious educational establishments appeared ineligible to offer such courses as they lacked state accreditation. Forum 18 stated the amendments would affect some communities more than others; for example, the majority of the country's Buddhist leaders had trained outside the country.

The country's National Security Strategy, approved in 2021, includes the prevention of the spread of religious radicalism, destructive religious movements, and formation of ethnic and religious enclaves

as measures to ensure security.

Since the start of country's war against Ukraine, President Putin and other leaders used Nazi imagery and antisemitic tropes to justify the invasion, repeatedly calling it "denazification" and attempting to draw parallels between the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the fight against Nazi Germany. In February, more than 140 international historians denounced the country's "equation of the Ukrainian state with the Nazi regime to justify its unprovoked aggression," and called Russian propaganda "factually wrong, morally repugnant, and deeply offensive" to the "victims of Nazism and those who courageously fought against it." Many also noted that such rhetoric distracted from critically important worldwide efforts to combat antisemitism and one of antisemitism's manifestations, Holocaust distortion.

At a press conference in May, Foreign Minister Lavrov compared Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is Jewish, to Hitler and accused Jews of antisemitism. In response to a reporter's question about President Zelensky's Jewish heritage, Lavrov told reporters that Adolf Hitler "had Jewish blood, too," adding that the "wise Jewish people say that the most ardent antisemites are usually Jews." Lavrov appeared to amplify a conspiracy theory that Hitler's paternal grandfather was Jewish. Lavrov's statement received widespread international condemnation.

On September 5, Berel Lazar, one of Russia's two chief rabbis heading the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, accused Aleksey Pavlov, the secretary of the Security Council of Russia, of antisemitic hate speech in connection with the war in Ukraine. In a column in the *Argumenty i Fakty* weekly newspaper, Pavlov spoke of the need to perform "desatanization" in Ukraine, which Pavlov claimed had hundreds of neo-pagan cults. He included the Chabad-Lubavitch sect, as Pavlov called it, on a list of religious groups that he claimed prove his point. Lazar's office responded with an open letter to unspecified "authorities" in Russia, calling Pavlov's column "a piece of vulgar antisemitism," and stating that 90 percent of rabbis active in the country's Jewish communities are Chabad. According to the Jewish Telegraph Agency, Lazar's letter followed reports that following the invasion of Ukraine, expressions of antisemitism increased in state-controlled media in Russia, where they had become taboo since Putin's rise to power more than 20 years earlier.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal violence and vandalism with antisemitic overtones. On September 26, a gunman with a swastika on his shirt killed 17 persons, including 11 children, and wounded 24 at a school in Izhevsk, Udmurtia. The governor of Udmurtia stated that the attacker was registered as a patient at a psychiatric facility.

On March 1, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, Russian journalist Alexei Venediktov, the Jewish editor of the Echo of Moscow radio station in Moscow, a station the authorities banned in March, found a pig's head and a Ukraine coat of arms sticker with the phrase "Judensau" (Jewish pig) written across it outside his apartment in Moscow. The *Jerusalem Post* report said that Venediktov stated on his Telegram channel that he was shocked that such an antisemitic provocation could occur in the country that defeated fascism.

There were increasing reports of openly anti-Jewish rhetoric entering the country's mainstream media. In July, Vladimir Solovyov, a popular talk show host, listed on air the names of Jews whom he faulted for lacking patriotism. On September 18, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* published an article with a list of well-known Jews whom he called "foreign agents," a term that the government frequently

applied to its perceived enemies. The Strategic Culture Foundation, a Russian conservative think tank that is often cited in mainstream media domestically and internationally, published a highly negative antisemitic article about Bernard-Henri Lévy, a prominent French Jewish journalist and philosopher who visited Ukraine.

On August 16, the SOVA Center reported that a vandal broke a window in the building housing the Moscow Choral Synagogue. Synagogue staff reported that they had received letters mocking Jewish culture. The Jewish Telegraphic Society reported on September 18 that a vandal painted a swastika on a monument for Holocaust victims in Aksay, a village outside of Rostov-on-Don.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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

In recent years, the government expelled U.S. diplomats and prohibited the employment of Russian and third-country nationals by the embassy. In addition, the government engaged in extreme repression of civil society 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 in an effort to prevent authorities from targeting them for their faith or religious work.

On October 27, the embassy posted the Secretary of State's statement marking the 24th occasion of International Religious Freedom Day.

On December 15, an embassy representative attended the appellate hearing at the Supreme Court in Moscow for three Jehovah's Witnesses and throughout the year observed criminal proceedings brought against those prosecuted on the basis of religion, especially members of religious minorities.

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. Additional examples included highlighting Department of State messages on the celebration of Passover, Easter, and Eid al-Fitr on embassy social media platforms.

On November 30, 2022, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State redesignated Russia a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom 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

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