

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation remained severe as authorities targeted members of religious minorities on spurious charges related to their peaceful religious activities. Muslims, including Crimean Tatars detained in Russian-occupied Crimea, faced unsubstantiated terrorism charges for possessing religious materials and meeting together to discuss religion as alleged members of [Hizb ut-Tahrir \(HT\)](#). Human rights organization Memorial reported in December that at least 335 people were in prison, faced prosecution, or were under investigation for such alleged affiliations; of these prisoners, 128 had received prison sentences between 10 and 15 years, and 115 had received sentences of 15 years or more. In June, a court sentenced Crimean Tatar activist [Ansar Osmanov](#) to 20 years in prison on charges related to possessing religious literature and organizing religious meetings. In February 2023, Crimean Tatar [Dzhemil Gafarov](#) died in prison after officials refused to transfer him to a hospital. Imprisoned Muslims [reported](#) experiencing torture, medical neglect, forced beard shavings, the confiscation of religious materials, prayer bans, and pork-filled food.

Since the Supreme Court declared Jehovah’s Witnesses “extremist” in 2017, law enforcement has [subjected](#) the group to more than 2,000 home searches and opened criminal cases against nearly 800 members. In April 2023, a court [fined](#) four Jehovah’s Witnesses \$24,095 (2,195,000 rubles) for gathering. In November, a court sentenced [Yevgeny Bushev](#) to seven years’ imprisonment after he discussed his religious beliefs with an undercover agent. At the end of the year, nearly 150 Jehovah’s Witnesses remained under house arrest or in pretrial detention or prison.

The government prosecuted several individuals on charges of blasphemy, including persons perceived to have insulted Islam. In May, authorities arrested 19-year-old [Nikita Zhuravel](#) after he allegedly burned a Qur’an and mocked Muslims on video. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov’s 15-year-old son Adam Kadyrov beat Zhuravel after he was transferred to a detention center in Chechnya.

Federal officials [refused](#) to investigate the beating, despite the existence of video evidence, and Adam subsequently [received](#) nearly a dozen awards for “defending” faith and traditional values.

The Ministry of Justice waged a relentless campaign against civil society organizations that report on religious freedom issues. In April 2023, a court [liquidated](#) the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that monitors religious freedom violations in Russia and Crimea. Human rights activists similarly faced criminal prosecution in connection with their work. In May, a court sentenced [Bakhrom Khamroev](#), a lawyer who defended Muslims charged in HT cases, to 14 years in prison.

In 2023, state retaliation against those who spoke out against Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine using religious language or on moral grounds continued at startling heights. The government declared the Supreme Lama of Kalmykia and representative of the Dalai Lama in Russia [Telo Tulku Rinpoche](#) and the Chief Rabbi of Moscow [Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt](#) as “foreign agents” for openly opposing Russia’s invasion. In March 2023, a court sentenced Orthodox Christian [Mikhail Simonov](#) to seven years in prison for an antiwar social media post that invoked God.

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, there has been an increase in antisemitic rhetoric by government officials. In 2023, officials [failed](#) to adequately address rising domestic antisemitism following several alarming incidents, including a mob [attack](#) at a Dagestan airport targeting “refugees from Israel.” Russia also continued to severely curtail religious freedom in the parts of Ukraine that it invaded and occupied. In Russian-occupied territories, de facto authorities banned religious groups, raided houses of worship, and disappeared religious leaders. Russian artillery damaged Ukrainian religious sites, including the [Orthodox Transfiguration Cathedral](#) in Odesa. By December, the United Nations (UN) Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [verified](#) damage to at least 125 religious sites, although other organizations [reported](#) damage to approximately 630 sites since the war began in February 2022.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Russia as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Russian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the

United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and

- Allocate greater funding to programs supporting civil society and independent media that report uncensored information, counter Russian disinformation and antisemitism, and monitor and document religious freedom and related human rights violations in Russia.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Engage with repressed religious communities in Russia and occupied Ukraine and raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, and other actions for community representatives to inform the U.S. government and/or public of existing conditions.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Religious Freedom](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Condemns Russia’s Closure of the SOVA Center](#)
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in the Russian Federation](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Russia’s Religious Freedom Violations in Ukraine](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Russia](#)

## Background

According to a 2022 [poll](#) by the independent Levada Center, 71 percent of Russia's population identify as Orthodox Christian, five percent as Muslim, and 15 percent as having no religious faith. Several other religious groups each constitute one percent or less of the population, including Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Baha'is, Falun Gong practitioners, Scientologists, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Tengrists, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and followers of indigenous religions. Russia's 1997 religion law considers Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as "traditional" religions. Over time, the Russian government has granted special recognition and privileges to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

In 2023, Russia increased the penalties for violating criminal and administrative code [articles](#) commonly used against religious minorities, dissidents, and human rights defenders. President Vladimir Putin signed legislation that [increased](#) the penalties for "discrediting" the armed forces, [deprived](#) the acquired citizenship of those convicted of collaborating with an "undesirable organization," and [criminalized](#) working with unregistered NGOs. In December, the Supreme Court [recognized](#) a so-called "international LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] movement" as an "extremist organization" for inciting "social and religious hatred."

## Religious Minorities

The government harassed, discriminated against, detained, fined, deported, and imprisoned members of religious minorities because of their religious identities, activities, and affiliations.

Individuals and communities incurred fines for so-called "illegal missionary activities" for [possessing](#) unlabeled religious materials or [engaging](#) in unregistered religious activities as a foreigner. Law enforcement searched the homes and meeting places of Falun Gong practitioners and members of the spiritual movement [Allya Ayat](#). Similarly, security forces raided mosques to [force](#) Muslim migrant men to enlist in the military. In June, a Moscow court [sentenced](#) six followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi to as many as six and a half years in prison for gathering to read religious literature.

In July, a court [sentenced](#) two Protestant pastors to three and a half years' imprisonment for affiliating with the banned "undesirable" New Generation Evangelical Christian Church. During the year, the Prosecutor General's Office also banned the [Transformation Center Church International](#) and the religious group [AllatRa](#) as "undesirable." In August, a St. Petersburg court [sentenced](#) Church of Scientology leader [Ivan Matsitsky](#) to six and a half years in prison and fined four others \$44,858 (4,100,000 rubles) for their work with the church. Matsitsky was released on time served.

Also in August, police in St. Petersburg [handed](#) over to Chechen security forces Seda Suleimanova, who had fled Chechnya out of fear her family may kill her for being "insufficiently religious." In November,

an Ulyanovsk court fined and sentenced [Said Abdelrazek](#) to one and a half years in prison for "offending religious feelings" after he desecrated a Qur'an on video. By the end of the year, courts [sentenced](#) at least four men to prison over their refusal to serve in the military on religious grounds.

## Crackdown on Russian Civil Society and Dissent

The Russian government often took legal action to suppress independent media and human rights organizations that monitor and report on violations of freedom of religion or belief. Law enforcement [raided](#) the homes and offices of Memorial activists, and courts imposed hefty fines on several of Memorial's branches. During the year, authorities closed the [Moscow Helsinki Group](#), designated [SK SOS Crisis Group](#) a "foreign agent," and declared [Meduza](#), [Novaya Gazeta Europe](#), and [CrimeaSOS](#) "undesirable." Police fined and sometimes detained religious leaders and individuals who expressed their religiously grounded opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In August, a St. Petersburg court sentenced Orthodox hieromonk [Ioann Kurmoyarov](#) to three years' imprisonment for posting videos condemning the invasion in religious terms.

## Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

De facto authorities in the parts of Ukraine that Russia occupied rigorously persecuted religious minorities in 2023. In Crimea, Russian authorities fabricated terrorism allegations to incarcerate predominantly Muslim Crimean Tatars who opposed Russian occupation. In May, Russian authorities in Crimea [seized](#) the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's (OCU) Cathedral of Saints Volodymyr and Olha. In the Zaporizhzhia region, Russian authorities [banned](#) the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and [closed](#) OCU, Roman Catholic, and Baptist churches. At the end of the year, the whereabouts of several priests whom Russian forces had detained—including Greek Catholic priests [Ivan Levitsky](#) and [Bohdan Geleta](#), OCU priests [Khrystofor Khrimli](#) and [Andriy Chuy](#), and Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest [Kostiantyn Maksimov](#)—remained unknown.

High-ranking Russian officials and state media also engaged in Holocaust distortion and antisemitism to justify the country's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. President Putin [referred](#) to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a "disgrace to the Jewish people" and [accused](#) the West of putting an "ethnic Jew" in charge to cover up Ukraine's "anti-human nature."

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States [imposed](#) additional rounds of sanctions against Russian individuals and entities supporting the war effort and engaging in human rights violations. The U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Mission to the UN highlighted the Russian government's antisemitic [rhetoric](#) and gross religious freedom [abuses](#). On December 29, 2023, the State Department [redesignated](#) Russia as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed existing ongoing sanctions.