

KEY FINDINGS

Russia represents a unique case among the countries in this report—it is the sole state to have not only continually intensified its repression of religious freedom since USCIRF commenced monitoring it, but also to have expanded its repressive policies to the territory of a neighboring state, by means of military invasion and occupation. Those policies, ranging from administrative harassment to arbitrary imprisonment to extrajudicial killing, are implemented in a fashion that is systematic, ongoing, and egregious. In mainland Russia in 2016, new laws effectively criminalized all private religious speech not sanctioned by the state, the Jehovah’s Witnesses stand on the verge of a nationwide ban, and innocent Muslims were tried on fabricated charges of terrorism and extremism. In the North Caucasus, particularly in Chechnya and Dagestan, security forces carried out arrests, kidnappings, and disappearances of

persons suspected of any links to “nontraditional” Islam with impunity. In Crimea, occupied by Russia since 2014, Russian authorities have coopted the spiritual life of the Muslim Crimean Tatar minority and arrested or driven into exile its community representatives. And in the Russian-occupied para-states of eastern Ukraine, religious freedom is at the whim of armed militias not beholden to any legal authority. Nor did Russia show any tolerance for critics of these policies in 2016; the two most prominent domestic human rights groups that monitor freedom of religion or belief were officially branded as “foreign agents.” Based on these particularly severe violations, in 2017 USCIRF for the first time finds that Russia merits designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. USCIRF has been monitoring and reporting on Russia since its first annual report in 2000.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Russia as a CPC under IRFA;
- Work to establish a binding agreement with the Russian government, under section 405(c) of IRFA, on steps it can take to be removed from the CPC list; should negotiations fail, impose sanctions, as stipulated in IRFA;
- Urge the Russian government to amend its extremism law in line with international human rights standards, such as adding criteria on the advocacy or use of violence, and to ensure the law is not used against members of peaceful religious groups or disfavored communities;
- Press the Russian government to ensure other laws, including the religion law and the foreign agents law, are not used to limit the religious activities of peaceful religious groups, and encourage the Russian government to implement European Court of Human Rights decisions relating to freedom of belief;
- Under the Magnitsky Act, continue to identify Russian government officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom and human rights, freeze their assets, and bar their entry into the United States;
- Raise concerns on freedom of religion or belief in multilateral settings and meetings, such as meetings of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and urge the Russian government to agree to visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the OSCE Representatives on Tolerance, as well as the establishment of an international monitoring presence in occupied Crimea;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the release of prisoners of conscience, and press the Russian government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith;
- Ensure the U.S. Embassy, including at the ambassadorial level, maintains appropriate contacts with human rights activists, and that the ambassador meets with both representatives of religious minorities as well as of the four “traditional” religions;
- Encourage increased U.S. funding for Voice of America (VOA) Russian and Ukrainian Services and for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s (RFE/RL) Russian and Ukrainian Services;
- Call on the Russian government to stop the persecution of religious minorities in the occupied areas of Crimea and Donbas, beginning with the reversal of the ban on the Crimean Tatar Mejlis and the abolition of repressive religious registration requirements; and
- Ensure violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are included in all relevant discussions with the Russian government over Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and its support of rebels in the Donbas, and work closely with European and other allies to apply pressure through advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions.

BACKGROUND

Russia is the world's largest country by land mass. Its estimated population of 146 million is 81 percent ethnic Russian but officially counts over 190 other ethnicities. A 2013 poll reports that 68 percent of Russians view themselves as Orthodox Christian, while 7 percent identify as Muslim. Other religious groups—each under 5 percent—include Buddhists, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Baha'is, Hare Krishnas, pagans, Tengrists, Scientologists, and Falun Gong adherents.

In March 2014, Russia illegally annexed the Ukrainian Black Sea peninsula of Crimea, justifying it as necessary to save the peninsula's ethnic Russian population from the alleged "fascism" of the Ukrainian government. Almost all of the 300,000 Crimean Tatars, an indigenous Muslim ethnic group, oppose Russian occupation owing to their Soviet-era experiences; Joseph Stalin deported the entire community to Central Asia in 1944, resulting in the death of up to half of the Crimean Tatar population. In March 2014, Russian-backed separatist forces also began asserting control over the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk, sparking ongoing warfare that has claimed close to 10,000 lives as of early 2017.

The Russian government views independent religious activity as a major threat to social and political stability, an approach inherited from the

Soviet period. It maintains and frequently updates laws that restrict religious freedom, including a 1997 religion law and a much-amended 2002 law on combating extremism. The Russian religion law sets strict registration requirements on religious groups and empowers state officials to impede their activity. The religion law's preface, which is not legally binding, singles out Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and especially Orthodox Christianity as the country's four traditional religions. Religious groups not affiliated with state-controlled organizations are treated with suspicion. Over time, the Russian government has come to treat the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (MPROC) as a de facto state church, strongly favoring it in various areas of state sponsorship, including subsidies, the education system, and military chaplaincies; this favoritism has fostered a climate of hostility toward other religions.

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The anti-extremism law lacks a clear definition of extremism and the use or advocacy of violence is not necessary for activity to be classified as extremist; the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee has called for this law's reform. Because virtually any speech can be prosecuted, the law is a powerful way to intimidate members of religious and other communities. Books may be placed by court order on a list of banned materials. Religious and other communities can be financially blacklisted or liquidated, and individuals can be subjected to criminal prosecution for a social media post.

Several other laws punish peaceful religious expression, nonconformity, or human rights activity. These include a 2012 law that effectively bans unsanctioned public protests, a 2012 law that requires nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that receive funds from abroad to register as “foreign agents,” and a 2013 amendment that criminalizes offense to religious sentiments.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2016–2017

The Extremism Law and Non-Orthodox Christians

Alleged violators of the religion law face monetary fines, but individuals alleged to have infringed the extremism law risk prison. With the July 2016 passage of the Yarovaya amendments, those convicted of extremism are now subject to up to six years’ imprisonment, major fines equivalent to several years of average annual wages, and/or bans on professional employment.

The Federal List of Extremist Materials, maintained by the Ministry of Justice, is a key feature of the extremism law. Any Russian court may add texts to the list; as of late 2016 there were over 4,000 items on that list, including many with no apparent connections to militancy, such as the Qu’ranic commentaries of Ottoman-era Kurdish theologian Said Nursi, numerous Jehovah’s Witnesses publications, and a 1900 sermon by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Archbishop Andrey Sheptytsky, who was venerated by Pope Francis in 2015. Individuals who own even a single banned text face a potential fine or imprisonment for up to 15 days.

Classifying religious texts as extremist is often the prelude to further persecution of religious communities. In particular, the Jehovah’s Witnesses became the target of a sustained campaign in 2016, which appears to be aimed at permanently eliminating their legal existence in Russia. In March 2016, the Russian Prosecutor General’s Office warned the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ national headquarters that the organization could be banned and its activities shut down nationwide if further

alleged evidence of extremism was found within a year. Since then, there have been repeated “discoveries” of extremist literature at official Jehovah’s Witness religious sites, including in September 2016, when a surveillance video recorded police planting evidence. In January 2017, an appellate court rejected the Witnesses’ appeal of the earlier warning, and after the end of the reporting period, the Ministry of Justice filed a formal request for the Russian Supreme Court to designate the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ headquarters as extremist. If granted, this designation would mark the first time that Russia has banned a centralized religious organization, and would effectively criminalize all Jehovah’s Witnesses’ activity nationwide. Separately, in January 2017, two Jehovah’s Witness elders in the Moscow region, Andrei Sivak and Viacheslav Stepanov, were ordered to stand trial again for “inciting religious hatred,” even though they had been acquitted of the same charges in March 2016.

The Campaign against Extremism and Muslims

As in the other former Soviet countries reported on by USCIRF, the harshest punishments and greatest scrutiny are reserved for Muslims whom the government deems extremist. In the case of Russia, the preoccupation with Muslims can be attributed to the long and complicated relationship with restive Muslim-majority provinces in the northern Caucasus, to recent geopo-

litical factors (including the attempt to portray Russian intervention in Syria as primarily driven by counter-terrorism concerns) and to the need of the security services to stay relevant by fabricating cases when actual

crimes are lacking, a practice inherited from the Soviet era. The disparity in treatment is clear in the ratio of persons deprived of liberty for exercising religious freedom, according to a list compiled by the New Chronicle for Current Events—a human rights monitoring group—of approximately 120 persons detained, only one, under house arrest, is a non-Muslim.

A good example of the intersection of foreign policy and the internal logic of the Russian security services is

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the persecution of readers of the Qu'ranic commentary of Said Nursi, a Turkish Islamic revivalist theologian and ethnic Kurd who advocated for the modernization of Islamic learning. Nursi, who died in 1960, has been praised by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and was an inspiration to Fethullah Gülen, the prominent exiled Turkish Islamic preacher. Although Nursi followers have been targets of Russian law enforcement since the early 2000s, a wave of arrests ensued after Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet over Turkish territory in late 2015. According to Forum 18, nine members of Nursi study groups are awaiting trial in Russia as of early 2017 on charges of belonging to a supposed “Nurdzhu-lar” terrorist movement, which was officially banned in Russia in 2008 as extremist but is widely believed to be a legal fiction invented for the purpose of prosecuting Nursi adherents. One Nursi follower convicted in 2015, Bagir Kazikhanov, is serving a term of three and a half years in prison.

Nevertheless, the number of Muslims arrested for reading Nursi's works pales beside those arrested for belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir, an Islamic fundamentalist movement banned in Russia. One hundred sixteen of the approximately 120 prisoners on the New Chronicle List are persons arrested for affiliation with Hizb ut-Tahrir; according to the SOVA Center, a prominent Russian NGO that monitors xenophobia and freedom of religion or belief, the number of Hizb ut-Tahrir adherents convicted in 2016 almost doubled compared to the previous year, with 37 men given sentences of up to 17 years.

Moreover, not all those targeted because of their faith appear on political prisoner lists since, in some instances, those arrested were not engaged in any political or religious activity. In April 2016, for example, 15 Russian Muslims, mostly from the Caucasus, were sentenced to prison terms of between 11 and 13 years on charges of planning a suicide bombing in a Moscow movie theater; the men had been arrested in 2013 during a raid on an illegal hostel for migrant laborers. The Russian human rights group Memorial, which represented some of the defendants, considered them randomly chosen victims of a fabrication intended to demonstrate the success of official counterterrorism efforts. Memorial pointed out numerous inconsistencies, including contradictory evidence regarding traces of explosives,

testimony placing defendants at notorious terrorist attacks that took place when they were still children, and the fact that state television announced the verdict five hours before the court. In February 2017, Kavkaz Reali, the Caucasus service of RFE/RL, reported on a similar case of a young Ingush woman and her husband, an ethnic Russian convert to Islam, who were arrested in January 2017 while attempting to travel to the country of Georgia on their honeymoon. Although charged with drug trafficking, the reason for their detention is believed to be connected to the alleged extremist beliefs of the family member of an acquaintance.

Blasphemy Law Enforcement

One consequence of the government-MPROC relationship has been the 2013 blasphemy law, enacted in response to a 2012 political protest in Moscow's main MPROC cathedral that offended many Orthodox believers. The law imposes up to three years' imprisonment or the confiscation of up to three years' salary for “offending religious convictions and feelings.” In November 2016, police raided and briefly detained 13 civil society activists involved in numerous public protests over the construction of an MPROC church in a Moscow park on suspicion of blasphemy. In February 2017, after almost a year of proceedings, the blasphemy trial of social media user Viktor Krasnov was terminated due to the statute of limitations. Krasnov had been indicted after he engaged in an argument in 2014 on the Russian social network VKontakte in a Stavropol-area discussion group. In response to several Bible verses, Krasnov responded that there was “no God” and that the Bible was a “collection of Jewish fairy-tales,” for which he was denounced to the authorities. After the reporting period in March 2017, six months after his arrest and after three months in prison, social media activist Ruslan Sokolovsky went on trial for having played the popular smartphone game “Pokémon Go” in an MPROC cathedral in Yekaterinburg in protest against the blasphemy law. At the end of the reporting period, the Russian State Investigative Committee also was examining whether protests against the Russian government's impending handover of St. Isaac's Cathedral in St. Petersburg to the MPROC amounted to a violation of the blasphemy law.

Not all prosecutions under the blasphemy law are for offending MPROC sentiments—a “Buddha Bar”

restaurant was forced to close in Krasnoyarsk after paying a heavy fine in November 2016. That same month, an investigative commission in the republic of Tuva announced the launch of a criminal search for a young woman who took a “selfie” photo while allegedly posing on a ritual Buddhist drum.

The Situation in the North Caucasus

While legal repression may be the norm in much of Russia, the situation within Russia’s North Caucasus area, particularly in Dagestan and Chechnya, has been described by Memorial as “legalized terror.” There, anyone suspected of practicing “nontraditional” Islam or of having any link to the ongoing Islamic insurgency is at risk of being disappeared by the security services; in Dagestan, Memorial recorded 13 disappearances linked to the security services between September and November 2016 alone. Peaceful Muslims, human rights lawyers, independent journalists, and religious freedom activists have been threatened, assaulted, and killed. In a report commissioned by USCIRF in 2016, Russian ethnologist Denis Sokolov described how the majority of the north Caucasian Muslim intelligentsia has been driven into exile, either in Turkey or Western Europe, by the pervasive climate of fear and repression. The Russian Interior Ministry’s Main Office for Countering Extremism, known as “Center E,” has particularly wide latitude in policing and intelligence gathering in the North Caucasus.

Violations of religious freedom in the North Caucasus often result from the use of “prophylactic measures” such as the maintenance of blacklists of alleged extremists, including secular dissidents, who are subject to constant search, harassment, and possible disappearance. According to Kavkaz Reali, young Chechens can land on the blacklist for minor infractions such as years-old reposts on social media of the songs of a popular Chechen singer, a few of whose compositions are on the extremist materials list; once on the blacklist, official harassment often makes normal life impossible, forcing the young people into exile or the militant underground.

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In October 2016, Daniial Alkhasov, a doctor in Dagestan suspected of radical sympathies, successfully sued to be removed from the blacklist. While Salafism and Wahhabism are not banned in Russia, adherents to these Islamic movements come under intense pressure. In September and October 2016, police detained around 270 worshippers at two Salafi mosques in Dagestan and placed them on the blacklist. In January 2017, the imam of another Salafi mosque in Dagestan, Magomednabi Magomedov, was sentenced to four and a half years for inciting hatred toward Communists and law enforcement officials in a YouTube video of a sermon in which he criticized official repression of Salafis. But even adherents of traditional Islam are not exempt from suspicion: in November 2016, imams from five traditional Sufi mosques in the Dagestani capital of Makhachkala reported being threatened by police officers, who demanded that they inform on congregants.

Persecution in the North Caucasus takes much more overt forms. In Chechnya, the Kremlin-appointed leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, oversees a private army that engages in mass violations of human rights, conducts collective reprisals against the families of suspects, and suppresses all dissent. Kadyrov, who is implicated in several of the most notorious political assassinations of the post-Soviet era, also enforces his own views of Islam, under which women must wear Islamic dress and may be forced into illegal polygamous marriages. In February 2016, Kadyrov warned that two prominent Salafi imams from the neighboring province of Ingushetia, Isa Tsechoev and Khamzat Chumakov, would “lose their heads” if they ever entered Chechnya; subsequently, the two men survived car bomb attacks in Ingushetia in March and August 2016. In January 2017, Kadyrov’s deputy publicly threatened to “cut out the tongue” of Grigory Shvedov, the editor of the independent Caucasian Knot News Agency, which often reports on religious issues.

The need to demonstrate success against Islamic terrorism in the North Caucasus has led to the targeting of both peaceful Muslim dissidents and innocent

bystanders with no connection to politics. In one particularly notorious incident in Dagestan in August 2016, a pair of teenaged brothers, Nabi and Gasangu-sein Gasanguseinov, failed to return from shepherding in the mountains; they were discovered the next day, shot dead, dressed in fatigues and with weapons beside them. Although the security services insisted that they were militants, the bizarre circumstances of their deaths and the absence of any evidence connecting them to the insurgency led to a public outcry and an ongoing court case to clear their names. In neighboring Stavropol Province in September 2016, an ethnic Nogai imam, Ravil Kaibaliev, who had reported being pressured by the authorities after his activism in support of hijabs in schools, was found shot to death on a highway shoulder; subsequently, law enforcement blocked mourners from attending his funeral.

2016 Religion Law Amendments

In July 2016, the Russian government adopted a package of amendments for the ostensible purpose of combating terrorism. These amendments, popularly known as the Yarovaya law, also significantly enhanced the scope and penalties of the religion and anti-extremism laws. The religion law now broadly defines “missionary activities” to forbid preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and even answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites. With no independent judiciary in Russia, any religious speech or activity not explicitly sanctioned by the authorities now has the potential to be criminalized, depending on the whims of local law enforcement and prosecutors. By the end of the reporting period, at least 53 individuals or organizations had been prosecuted, of which 43 were non-Orthodox Christian groups. Thirty-four convictions have resulted, including substantial fines for activities as varied as conducting baptisms to advertising prayer groups online to singing Hare Krishna songs. In January 2017, Victor-Immanuel Mani, an Indian citizen working as a Protestant pastor and

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married to a Russian woman, was deported after being found guilty of giving religious literature to an unregistered visitor to his church.

Other Legal Issues

Laws meant to restrict civil society also have been employed against NGOs that advocate for freedom of religion or belief. In December 2016, the SOVA Center was added to Russia’s list of “foreign agents,” a registry created by a 2012 law that is intended to publicly stigmatize NGOs. In October 2016, Memorial also was labeled a “foreign agent.” Additionally, the law restricting public assembly has been used against Jehovah’s Witnesses and other individuals who publicly demonstrate their faith, including a Baptist who was fined in January 2016.

Official Attitudes toward Other “Traditional” Religious Minorities

In January 2017, the rabbi of the Russian resort city of Sochi, Arya Edelkopf, an American citizen, suddenly was ordered deported, along with his wife. Although the decision of the security services only referenced a vague “threat to national security,” Edelkopf’s lawyer speculated that his expulsion was connected to a dispute with the mayor’s office over a parcel of land intended for a synagogue. As it has for many years, the Russian government continues to deny a visa to the Dalai Lama, apparently out of deference to the government

of China, ignoring longstanding requests from Russia’s Buddhist communities. In the Urals, an unofficial Buddhist temple built on land owned by a mining company is set for demolition in March 2017.

Restrictions on Religious Activity in Occupied Crimea

In 2016, the Russian occupation authorities formalized their policies of harassment, intimidation, and small-scale terror targeting religious groups in Crimea suspected of disloyalty to the Russian state, chief among them Crimean Tatars and other Muslims. Although

Russian repression of the Crimean Tatars is mainly motivated by political concerns, it also disrupts Crimean Tatar religious activities and institutions. In April 2016, the Russian administration in Crimea officially banned as extremist the chief political body of the Crimean Tatars, the Mejlis, a decision the Russian Supreme Court upheld in September 2016. As a result, the two leaders of the Mejlis, Rafat Chubarov and Mustafa Dzhemilev, can no longer enter Crimea, and the Mejlis is cut off from the office of Religious Administration of Muslims in Crimea (DUMK), also known as the Crimean Muftiate. Russian authorities in Crimea also forced the Muftiate to suspend most of its social work as well as its youth activities and organizations, according to Krym.Realii, the Crimean service of RFE/RL. In February 2017, the Mufti of Crimea, Emirali Ablav, whom the exiled Crimean Tatar leadership has condemned as a collaborator with the occupying powers, sought to justify Russian authorities' arrests of Tatars as a necessary part of the struggle against extremism. The exiled Mejlis leaders consider the DUMK to be illegitimate and have elected a new Muftiate-in-exile.

In May 2016, Ervin Ibragimov, a representative of the banned Mejlis, was reported kidnapped; according to the Crimean Human Rights Group, this was the sixth politically motivated disappearance of a Crimean Tatar since the Russian occupation began. Ilmi Umerov, a former senior leader of the Mejlis, was arrested in May 2016 on charges of separatism and held for five months, partly in a psychiatric hospital, a Soviet-era tactic. His colleague Akhtem Chiigoz, arrested in January 2015, remains in prison, awaiting trial along with two others for protesting the Russian occupation.

The Russian authorities also continued their campaign against alleged Crimean adherents of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is banned in Russia but not in Ukraine. Nineteen alleged adherents are currently held, of whom fifteen were arrested in the course of 2016, some after returning from the hajj to Mecca. The four arrested in 2015—Ferat Saifullaev, Rustem Vaitov, Nuri Primov, and Ruslan Zeitullaev—were sent to a court in mainland Russia and sentenced in Septem-

ber 2016 to terms of between five and seven years. Detained Hizb ut-Tahrir members, including Crimean Tatar human rights activist Emir-Usein Kuku, are regularly sent to forced “psychiatric treatment” as part of the investigative process.

Searching for religious texts that are legal in Ukraine but not in Russia, Russian security forces in 2016 conducted periodic raids on private homes, mosques, and public markets. At least 160 Crimean Tatars and other Muslims were held for questioning and fingerprinting. Moreover, administrative pressure has been brought to bear on other religious groups: in January 2016, the Kyiv Patriarchate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was deprived of its last prayer space in

Simferopol, the capital of Crimea, and a Pentecostal church was shut down in Bakhchisaray in December 2016. In December 2016, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution recognizing the

Russian Federation as an “occupying Power” in Crimea and condemning “serious violations and abuses” in the occupied areas, including restrictions on freedom of religion or belief.

In January 2017, Emil Kurbedinov, a prominent Crimean Tatar human rights lawyer representing Ilmi Umerov and several of the accused members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, was sentenced to 10 days in jail for possessing extremist materials after he was stopped and his home and offices were searched by Center E agents; the client whom he was traveling to visit was also jailed for 12 days. In February 2017, the authorities jailed for 11 days activist Marlen Mustafaev, who was accused of using a Hizb ut-Tahrir symbol in a two-year-old social media post; 10 fellow Muslims who came to film the raid on his home were jailed for five days.

Decline in Registration of Crimean Religious Groups

Russia required all religious groups in occupied Crimea to re-register under Russia's more stringent requirements by January 1, 2016. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), of the over 1,300 religious communities that had legal

[B]asic human rights, including freedom of religious belief, are under intense pressure in these territories.

status under Ukrainian law, only 365 were re-registered. Re-registered groups include the MPROC, the pro-Russian Muftiate, various Protestant churches, Roman Catholics, various Jewish affiliations, Karaites, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Hare Krishnas. According to Forum 18, the Greek Catholic Church was not registered, nor were any Armenian Apostolic parishes. The Kyiv Patriarchate Ukrainian Orthodox Church did not seek registration, considering it to be subjection to the rules of the Russian occupation authorities. Other Crimean religious groups, such as nine Catholic parishes and Yalta's Augsburg Lutheran Church, had to change institutional affiliations or alter their charters to re-register. Other groups denied re-registration include St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Krasnoperekopsk, the Seventh-day Adventist Reformed Church in Yevpatoriya, and the Tavrida Muftiate, the smaller of the two Crimean Muftiates.

Russia's Separatist Enclaves in the Donbas

The Russian-occupied separatist para-states of the "Lugansk People's Republic" (LNR) and "Donetsk People's Republic" (DNR) in eastern Ukraine remain heavily militarized war zones policed by parallel "Ministries of State Security," named after an earlier version of the notorious Soviet KGB. As such, basic human rights, including freedom of religious belief, are under intense pressure in these territories. In recent years, clergy and adherents to Protestant denominations, the Greek Catholic Church, the Kyiv Patriarchate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and smaller Christian groups have been subject to arrest, torture, and murder. Churches were seized or destroyed, and parishioners were intimidated. In January 2016, DNR security officials arrested a Donetsk University professor of history and religious studies, Igor Kozlovskii, ostensibly on suspicion of connections to religious radicals. Kozlovskii, who was charged with possessing explosives in February 2017, remained in prison at the end of the reporting period. Independent reporting from within the DNR and LNR is limited, but according to the Religious Information Service of Ukraine, a Seventh-day Adventist church in Donetsk in Horlivka was seized in November 2016, while OHCHR reported that Jehovah's Witnesses had been threatened and detained in different parts of the DNR, some for several weeks. DNR and LNR authorities remain deeply suspicious toward religious groups other

than the MPROC. In March 2016, the self-proclaimed leader of the LNR, Igor Plotnitskii, publicly ordered the security services to carefully surveil all "sects," while 500 state-sponsored youth activists turned out in the DNR in January 2016 to protest against the Greek Catholic Church, which they denounced for being an alleged tool of "Western intrigue." In December 2016, OHCHR reported that the LNR Ministry of State Security had denounced the Baptist community as a "non-traditional religious organization" engaged in "destructive activity."

U.S. POLICY

U.S.-Russian relations began to worsen in September 2011, when then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said he would again run for president in March 2012. In October 2012, the Kremlin expelled the U.S. Agency for International Development.

In December 2012, the U.S. Congress passed—and then President Barack Obama signed—the Magnitsky Act sanctioning Russian officials responsible for gross human rights violations, including the 2009 death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky in a Moscow prison. In response, the Russian government denied U.S. citizens the opportunity to adopt Russian children, issued a list of U.S. officials prohibited from entering Russia, and posthumously convicted Magnitsky. As of January 2017, the U.S. government had named 44 Russian officials subject to U.S. visa bans and asset freezes under the Magnitsky Act. There is also an unpublished list of sanctioned officials, reportedly including Kadyrov, as recommended by USCIRF.

The Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014, followed by the invasion of the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine later that year, led to a rapid deterioration in Russia's international relations, including with the United States. The United States suspended its role in the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Commission and has issued numerous sanctions against Russian businesses, state entities, and individuals. In December 2016, the United States imposed additional sanctions on Russia over its actions in Ukraine.

Russia's decision to join the war in Syria in September 2015 on behalf of President Bashar al-Assad, himself considered by USCIRF to be a severe violator of religious freedoms, further worsened relations with the United States.