

FAITH IN THE CROSSFIRE

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM UNDER
THE KREMLIN REGIME IN RUSSIA



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EURASIA

FAITH IN THE CROSSFIRE: Religious Freedom Under the Kremlin Regime in Russia



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FOREWORD

“...and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (2 Cor. 3:17)

For more than three decades, I have walked alongside churches and Christian leaders across the former Soviet Union. Born and raised as a believer in the USSR, I have experienced seasons of spiritual openness and also the heavy hand of state control. Yet even with that history, what is happening today in Russia represents a deeply troubling new chapter.

This report, *Faith in the Crossfire: Religious Freedom Under the Kremlin Regime in Russia*, carefully gathers and analyzes facts, cases, and firsthand testimonies of religious persecution. It exposes a reality too often hidden behind propaganda and carefully crafted narratives. Under the current Kremlin regime working hand in hand with the Russian Orthodox Church, religious freedom is no longer simply restricted. It is being deliberately weaponized.

Even more alarming is the growing fusion of political power and the Russian Orthodox Church. What should be a spiritual institution has been transformed into a tool of state ideology. The Kremlin promotes an exclusive vision of the “Russian World” that equates patriotism with Orthodox nationalism. In this system, anyone who does not conform is labeled “foreign,” “extremist,” or “dangerous.”

The consequences are devastating. Protestant pastors and leaders of other religious groups are fined, harassed, imprisoned, and forced into exile. Catholic priests are expelled. Young believers are punished simply for praying together. Churches are shut down. Families are torn apart.

As the leader of a mission organization that, for over 35 years, has invested in equipping the national Church in Russia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet countries, this issue is very close to my heart. We are now in the fourth year of Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine. This war is not only fought with weapons that kill innocent people — it is being justified from pulpits, blessed by clergy, and framed as “holy” inside Russia. That should grieve every person of faith.

And if, God forbid, Russia were to succeed in completely occupying Ukraine, we already know what would follow. What is happening today in Russia would be imposed across the entire country. Ukraine’s vibrant spiritual freedom would be crushed, and all expressions of Christianity outside of the Orthodox Church would be systematically targeted. This is not speculation; it is the pattern we already see.

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.” (Proverbs 31:8)

Our goal with this research initiative is to mobilize the global Church and international community to pray, support, and intervene. This report is the fruit of careful research, firsthand testimonies, and ongoing relationships with those suffering under repression. For their safety, many voices remain anonymous — but their pain is real, and their courage undeniable.

I invite you to read this report with open eyes and an open heart. May it move you to pray, advocate, and stand in solidarity with those whose only “crime” is faithful obedience to God. May we never forget: where faith is under fire, our response must be courage.



SERGEY RAKHUBA
President & CEO, Mission Eurasia

WORD FROM THE RESEARCH DIRECTOR

Faith in the Crossfire: Religious Freedom Under the Kremlin Regime in Russia continues Mission Eurasia’s long-term monitoring and research on religious freedom across the former Soviet Union. This report is part of our ongoing effort to document patterns of repression, amplify silenced voices, and provide credible analysis for policymakers, faith leaders, and human rights advocates.

This particular report focuses on raising awareness of the current and escalating persecution of religious communities inside Russia. For the Kremlin, the collapse of the Soviet Union never became a closed chapter in history. For much of today’s ruling political and spiritual elite — including leadership within the Russian Orthodox Church — it remains an unhealed trauma: a sense of lost empire and forfeited control. As former republics chose independent paths, Moscow, under Vladimir Putin’s leadership, perceives their freedom as a threat. Rather than reassessing the past, the Kremlin has sought to rebuild imperial influence using ideology and religion as primary tools.

With communist ideology discredited, the Russian Orthodox Church has been elevated as an instrument of social control and political legitimization. Around the triad of “state, church, and traditional values,” a repressive system is being constructed step by step.

This report seeks to expose how religious repression in Russia is structured and sustained. It examines legislation, law-enforcement practices, the role of compliant religious officials, state propaganda, and the export of repression beyond Russia’s borders. Together, these elements form a single system built not on faith or values, but on control and obedience. What is happening in Russia today is dangerous not only for Russians. Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine have already experienced the consequences of the Kremlin’s imperial ambitions.

This issue is deeply personal to me. After 30 years of pastoral ministry in democratic Ukraine, I endured six months under Russian occupation. Our church in Melitopol was seized for the third time in its 120-year history. I witnessed propaganda, hatred, and violence firsthand, and I was eventually detained and forced by Russian occupation authorities to leave my own city and home. This experience confirmed that repression in today’s Russia is not a relic of the past.

This report is based on months of research, legal analysis, and dozens of interviews. Individual sections examine persecution of various religious communities across Russia, repression in Ukrainian territories occupied by Russian forces, and the export of Russia’s model of religious control to neighboring states. The conclusion outlines key findings and provides direction for future monitoring and advocacy.

In today’s environment, gathering information like this is increasingly dangerous. I express my deep gratitude to those who shared their stories — many of whom were forced to flee and became refugees. I honor those who remain faithful to God despite threats and pressure. This report is a platform for those the authorities are trying to silence inside Russia.

May Christ’s words strengthen them: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:10. May the voice of truth be heard.



MYKHAILO BRYTSYN
Director, Religious Freedom Initiative
Mission Eurasia

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The report is based on data Mission Eurasia obtained through long-term monitoring of various sources: in-depth interviews with victims, their family members, and witnesses; materials from Ukrainian and international human rights organizations; consultations with lawyers and experts; as well as an analysis of official data and media publications.

Throughout 2025, the Research Director conducted more than 60 in-person interviews (referenced in the footnotes as “PI”) to gain information directly from victims and witnesses of ongoing repression and those subjected to interrogations by authorities and soldiers. The report also draws on materials produced by human rights organizations and on consultations with representatives of Russia’s Christian community and civil society. A separate part of the study is based on a detailed analysis of changes in Russian legislation and relevant court practice.

To ensure the source’s safety, Mission Eurasia applied protective measures in the report. Some sources are cited anonymously, and in certain direct quotations the names of locations, religious communities, and other identifying details have been omitted.

Representatives of the Mission Eurasia Department of Religious Freedom remain in ongoing communication with those facing persecution, as well as with individuals who, as a result of repression, were forced to leave the country. This research is part of Mission Eurasia’s ongoing, systematic effort to document developments in religious freedom across the Eurasian region; previous findings are available on Mission Eurasia’s website, cited below.¹

¹“Religious Freedom”, Mission Eurasia, <https://missioneurasia.org/religious-freedom/>



ACRONYMS

- DPR / LPR: Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic. These refer to the unrecognized entities or “local occupation authorities” in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine
- ECHR: European Court of Human Rights
- EU: European Union
- FSB: Federal Security Service
- HRW: Human Rights Watch
- HRWF: Human Rights Without Frontiers
- NGO: Non-governmental organization (also referred to as non-commercial organizations)
- OCU: Orthodox Church of Ukraine
- OHCHR: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
- ROC: Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate
- UN: United Nations
- USCIRF: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
- USRLE: Unified State Register of Legal Entities
- USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

PART 1: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Religious repression in Russia did not emerge overnight. In fact, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia experienced a brief period of robust religious pluralism. However, in the last 20 years, several inflection points have progressively restricted religious freedom and subordinated religious life to the Kremlin's objectives. Legacies of the Soviet Union have resurfaced in the form of state paranoia regarding foreign influence and the creation of expansive surveillance powers. Under President Vladimir Putin, these dynamics have intensified as he uses "Russian World" ideology to justify the unification of a "divided Russia."

What is the "Russian World" Ideology?

The "Russian World" ideology, or "Russkiy Mir", was first developed in the 1990s as a neutral way to make sense of Russia's identity after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Today, it is a doctrine used to justify Russia's aggressive foreign policy and the Kremlin's political and religious control within Russia.

Russian political scientists first defined the phrase as **"a network structure of large and small communities abroad who think and speak Russian"** and who could provide assistance to Russia.² This included diaspora groups, Russian cultural houses, and civic organizations. The original "Russian World" ideology did not have a religious dimension and mainly provided a framework for Russia's cultural diplomacy.

In 2001, Putin introduced the concept into official discourse and created the state-sponsored Russkiy Mir Foundation in 2007 to formally establish and coordinate a network of cultural and educational centers abroad.³ Shortly after,

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill adopted the "Russian World" rhetoric and expanded it to include a "common historical memory" and "common civilization" among Russian-speakers around the world who belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (ROC). In speeches and official documents, Putin began to assert that Russia's strength in the world was only as strong as its spiritual traditions and cultural unity. By incorporating a religious element, Putin and Patriarch Kirill found common cause in the promotion of the "Russian World." As a result, preferential treatment for the ROC gradually displaced the relative religious freedom of the late 1990s.

As Russia increased its aggressive territorial claims, the Kremlin adopted the narrative of a common Orthodox civilization into its propaganda. Immediately after the 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine into the Russian Federation, Putin gave a speech directly appealing to the "Russian World" doctrine. He justified the invasion as a pursuit of "historical Russia" – a civilizational space whose loss of territorial integrity after the collapse

of the USSR, in his words, turned Russians into "the largest divided people."⁴ Putin also emphasized Crimea's "sacred civilizational significance...like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem."⁵ Meanwhile, the ROC framed the annexation as the "return of sacred territory" linked to the baptism of Prince Vladimir, the symbolic founder of "Holy Russia." This rhetoric gave the "Russian world" ideology an explicitly religious and imperial dimension.



Today, the "Russian World" ideology promotes Russia as a distinct and exceptional civilization with spiritual and moral foundations in the ROC and a messianic role to play in world affairs. Russia's responsibility is to promote

Orthodox civilization against Western civilization, to politically unify the Russian world including Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, and Ukraine, and to strengthen the influence of countries with significant Russian-speaking populations. The implications for foreign policy are clear.

"Russian World" Ideology Promoted Through Diplomacy and Propaganda

Russia presents itself as a bulwark of traditional values, resisting the "degradation" of the West. Under this guise of defending traditional values, Russia claims to offer a "moral alternative" to the Western liberal political model.⁶ This messaging is designed to target conservative circles around the world, with "traditional values" strategically reinterpreted in different contexts to match the prevailing religious values of the intended audience. Russian propaganda and online influence networks specifically stoke division around immigration, LGBT issues, and antisemitism, creating opportunities to build alliances with key media, political, and religious figures also engaged in culture wars using the rhetoric of traditional values and order.⁷ While this propaganda appears as solidarity with universal conservative movements, it contains a key contradiction: a "Russian World" implies the supremacy of the ROC, with no room for non-Orthodox religious practice.

One question to consider is whether Russia's elite truly believe in the "Russian World" they promote. Despite the rhetoric of "fighting the West," the

⁴Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," March 18, 2014, transcript, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, <https://tinyurl.com/3t5t29uh>.

⁵"Putin compared Crimea to the Temple Mount," *Lenta.RU*, December 4, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/38crxe9x>.

⁶Antonio Graceffo, "Russia's Religious Offensive in Africa," *Providence Magazine*, September 19, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/4ae6a5pw>.

⁷Alan Suderman and Ali Swenson, "Right-wing influencers were duped to work for covert Russian operation, US says," *Associated Press*, September 5, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/2n2mhpypf>; "Russia's State-Run RT News Network Developed and Federal Security Service Operated the Artificial Intelligence-Enhanced Bot Farm to Disseminate Disinformation to Sow Discord in the United States and Elsewhere," U.S. Department of Justice, July 9, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/mrx2wd36>.

²Petr Shchedrovitsky, "The Country That Never Was," *Shchedrovitskiy*, <https://tinyurl.com/45rjn26r>.

³Igor Zevelev, "Russian World in Moscow's Strategy," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, August 22, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/ten6jbnz>.

Russian elite actively outsource the education of their children to European institutions and invest in Western real estate, reaping the economic and cultural benefits of the very West they denounce. This profound contradiction demonstrates that the “Russian World” is not a sincere spiritual project, but rather a tool of strategic propaganda justifying aggressive expansionism and disruption of global order.



The Role of the “Russian World” Ideology Within Russia

Domestically, the “Russian World” ideology is used for:

- **Social consolidation:** The creation of a unified national identity based on Orthodoxy, Russian culture, and “traditional values” implies unity around shared ideals, loyalty to the government, and resistance to external threats.
- **Legitimizing authoritarian government:** Imbuing the ruling regime with sacred and historical significance. The government, acting

as the defender of the “Russian world,” gains additional legitimacy and is perceived as the continuer of the great Russian tradition.

- **Suppression of dissent and pluralism:** Defining the “Russian world” as the only true and correct development model allows for the suppression of any alternative ideologies and religious movements that do not conform to this concept. This is achieved through legislative restrictions, state propaganda, and the creation of an atmosphere of intolerance.
- **Population mobilization:** The ideology of the “Russian world” is used to mobilize the population around foreign policy goals, justify the strengthening of security forces, and a readiness for confrontation with the West.
- **Cultural and moral control:** The proclamation of the “Russian world” as the guardian of “traditional values” gives the state and the ROC carte blanche to interfere in the spheres of education, culture, family, and morality, ensuring ideological control over society.

Mutually Beneficial Relationship Between Church and State

The Kremlin gains legitimacy when spiritual language is used to portray Russia as the defender of traditional values. The ROC gains power and influence when backed by the Kremlin. This has resulted in a mutually beneficial alliance between the ROC and the Russian state, though the partnership is primarily utilitarian rather than spiritual. The Church provides the state with religious blessing and infallibility in the eyes of Russian citizens. In return, the State eliminates all religious competition and grants the Church political influence.

Clear examples of integration between the State and the ROC:

- ROC leaders receive significant financial support from state corporations for cultural and historical projects.⁸
- ROC priests are granted positions on public councils subordinated to government ministries.
- School curricula include courses on the “Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture.”
- Orthodox religious symbols are used in the army and government bodies.
- Non-orthodox faiths face legal, financial, and administrative restrictions under the pretext of fighting extremism.

This close alliance has helped fuel an authoritarian nationalism that tightens the government’s grip on power and pushes out competing voices. Unlike in a strict theocracy, religious freedom is limited in Russia for political, cultural, and legal reasons rather than spiritual reasons. As a result, non-Orthodox and non-religious groups face routine restrictions on their rights as Russia’s religious diversity is steadily pushed to the margins of public life.

The Religious Dimension of the “Russian World” Ideology

Ultimately, the Kremlin’s “Russian World” ideology equates being a citizen with being an Orthodox nationalist. Orthodoxy is the only approved way to be Russian. Any deviation from this profile is therefore viewed as foreign. To the Kremlin, foreign influence is a significant threat to social order, moral control, and unquestioned state authority. Therefore, religious groups who do not belong to the Orthodox Church, especially Protestants, Muslims, Hare Krishnas, Jews, and Catholics, are

determined to be outsiders incompatible with the country’s culture and values.

Inflection Points for Religious Freedom in Russia

Over the last twenty years, the Kremlin has developed a comprehensive system of legislation and propaganda to pressure religious groups to conform.



Foreign Agent Law of 2012

In 2012, the Russian parliamentary Duma adopted a “**Law on Foreign Agents.**”⁹ This law marked a turning point for religious freedom as it gave federal, regional, and local authorities an expanded toolkit for domestic repression. The original law required non-commercial organizations that receive foreign funding and engage in political activities to register as “foreign agents.” Amendments in 2019 and 2022 broadened the scope to include media outlets, journalists, and private individuals who were deemed to be under foreign influence regardless of traditional foreign funding. While registered religious organizations were formally exempted from the law’s purview, its practical implementation has been much broader.

⁸ “Metropolitan’s Projects: Initiatives linked to ‘Putin’s confessor’ received \$332 million from Russia in state and state-building companies,” *Meduza*, August 2, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/muutdbn8>.

⁹ Russian Federation, *Law on Non-Commercial Organizations Performing the Functions of Foreign Agents*, Federal Law No. 121-FZ (July 20, 2012).

The specifics of the law and its application against religious communities are detailed in Part 2, “Domestic Tools of Repression.” In short, the “foreign agent” label creates cascading administrative, financial, and social difficulties. Many houses of worship and religious organizations report landlords refusing to rent spaces for worship, donors distancing themselves to avoid legal risk, difficulty publishing materials in print or online, frequent bank account freezes, and other complications. Religious leaders deemed to be “foreign agents” such as Yuri Sipko, Albert Ratkin, and Andrei Kuraev have been ostracized, arrested, and falsely demonized by state media for their actions.

The law has a significant impact on the activities of religious and non-religious NGOs in Russia, forcing many to cease or modify their operations. Many organizations engaging in interreligious dialogue and receiving international funding are under focused pressure as a result. Furthermore, the state’s tightening control over religion after 2012 led to many independent interfaith initiatives curtailing their activities or being integrated into state structures. Representatives of Protestants, Catholics, and Hare Krishnas were excluded from public councils in the regions. Where so-called



¹⁰Andriy Starodub, “‘Special Military’ Holy War: Russian Manipulation of Religious Narratives in 2022-2024,” *Institute for Northern Eurasia Transformation*, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/mwntenh8>.

¹¹N. Zhdanova, “From pulpit to propaganda machine: tracing the Russian Orthodox Church’s role in Putin’s war”, <https://tinyurl.com/2ry5e6ww>.

“interfaith councils” were formed, they included only representatives of religious communities loyal to the government.

Yarovaya Law of Measures Against Terrorism and “Extremism”

From 2016 to 2020, the Kremlin regime resorted to tightening legislative pressure on non-Orthodox groups. Adopted in 2016 as part of a sweeping “anti-terrorism” legislative package, **the Yarovaya Law** amended Russia’s Criminal Code, the Code of Administrative Offenses, and the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations. While framed as a national security measure, the law severely limited “missionary activity” and criminalized ordinary religious practice for many religious minority groups in Russia. By radically expanding the definition of “missionary activity” to include nearly any sharing of religious beliefs outside officially designated religious premises, including private homes and online, missionary activity was restricted to individuals registered with the government. The law imposed tight controls on religious literature, public religious rites, and foreign religious workers, while effectively banning home worship unless groups complied with onerous registration and notification requirements.

In practice, the Yarovaya Law’s counterterrorism rationale targets peaceful religious activity rather than violent extremism. Its vague and broad definitions treat ordinary worship, prayer meetings, sermons, and even private religious conversations as administrative offenses, giving authorities wide discretion to target disfavored groups.



2022-2024: Mobilization of Society in Support of Russia’s War in Ukraine

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 ushered in a new level of cooperation between the ROC and the Russian state. Patriarch Kirill repeatedly framed Russia’s military aggression as a “metaphysical battle” and a “struggle between good and evil.”¹⁰ Prayer books distributed to Russian soldiers called Vladimir Putin an archangel, a heavenly figure representing divine authority and action in moments of cosmic importance. In addition, the Patriarch announced that the death of Russian soldiers at the front “washes away sins” and “is equal to the sacrifice of Christ.” This sacrilegious rhetoric was likely intended to bolster public support for a widely unpopular Russian mobilization campaign of September-October 2022 and stigmatize any anti-war voice as “god-defying”.¹¹

These statements are not the isolated and extreme views of Patriarch Kirill alone. ROC leadership worked with the Russian Ministry of Defense and public councils to rename the “special military operation” to be a “holy war” in which Russia defends the world from “the onslaught of globalism and the

victory of the West, which had slid into Satanism.”¹² Today, any criticism of the war or calls for peace can be interpreted as “inciting hatred” or “hatred” against the military or government officials, which is a criminal offense. A number of independent pastors and Christian community leaders who regularly published anti-war information faced blocking of their social media accounts and website malfunctions, limiting their public influence. Additionally, the state exerts pressure on the leadership of religious organizations, demanding loyalty and support for official policies. Clergy who refuse to toe this line are subject to disciplinary action, including defrocking.

In Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, these dynamics have intensified into systematic repression, including the forced displacement of non-Moscow-aligned faiths such as the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Greek Catholics, and Protestant communities, the killing of civilian clergy, and the seizure of religious buildings for military or administrative use. Mission Eurasia’s Faith Under Russian Terror details violence and religious repression in the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine.¹³

¹² One conference, “Holy War: The Transformation of Russia,” was held in January 2024 and dedicated to the “special military operation.” The theses voiced during this event were later developed and codified in the “Instruction” of the XXV World Russian People’s Council (WRPC). WRPC brings together government, religious, civic, and cultural figures and is headed by Patriarch Kirill. See “Instruction of the 25th World Russian People’s Council “THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE RUSSIAN WORLD,” *Official Site of the Moscow Patriarchate*, March 27, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/58rcd9d5>.

¹³ Michael Brytsyn and Maksym Vasin, “Faith Under Russian Terror”, *Mission Eurasia*, February 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2025-ME-report-on-Ukraine-ENG>.

PART 2: DOMESTIC TOOLS OF REPRESSION

The Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church jointly implement a specific algorithm for suppressing religious communities that progressively increases pressure over time.

The Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church jointly implement a specific algorithm for suppressing religious communities that progressively increases pressure over time. Pressure often begins with administrative measures such as burdensome requirements and fines applied to religious communities and local religious leaders. Authorities and local media will then portray religious organizations as “foreign influences,” designating them as “undesirable,” and, if necessary, “extremist,” paving the way for ordinary religious activity to be subject to criminal prosecution. Religious voices that do not support the Russian government’s ideology regarding the invasion of Ukraine are especially targeted. Subsequently, criminal cases are opened against religious leaders, resulting in convictions. Ultimately, accused individuals are left with two options: either imprisonment on trumped-up criminal charges or exile from Russia. Those who are willing to demonstrate political loyalty may remain, while those who disagree are repressed, intimidated, or forced to leave the country.

It’s worth noting that the severity of repression varies across Russia. This is due both to the country’s size and the differences in historical and cultural characteristics of individual regions, which influence local authorities’ attitudes toward religion and religious communities. In the absence of standardization, local authorities frequently make

extrajudicial decisions that directly restrict religious freedom.

Stage 1: Administrative Pressure

Administrative penalties are widely used to undermine the authority of spiritual leaders, interrupt operations, limit resources, destabilize community life, suppress morale, and pave the way for more serious charges.¹⁴

Registrations: Given the threat of “Foreign Agent” designations, religious organizations often seek to be registered in Russia. The Kremlin has turned the registration process itself into a source of repression. Registration requirements are often onerous, time consuming, and expensive. Denial of official registration, delays, or the threat of cancellation leave groups in limbo and deprive them of access to legal protection, the ability to rent premises for worship, and the ability to conduct direct financial activities. Multiple refusals, protracted procedures, and threats of liquidation transform the very possibility of a religious community’s legal existence into a lever of coercion and allow local authorities to selectively favor preferred religious actors.

Property Rights: There are strict regulations on where religious communities are allowed to operate. Local authorities regularly cite minor

administrative infractions, compromised safety standards, and improper construction as a convenient pretext for closing and demolishing houses of worship. These infractions can be levied and implemented in a matter of hours or days, leaving little opportunity for response or legal defense.

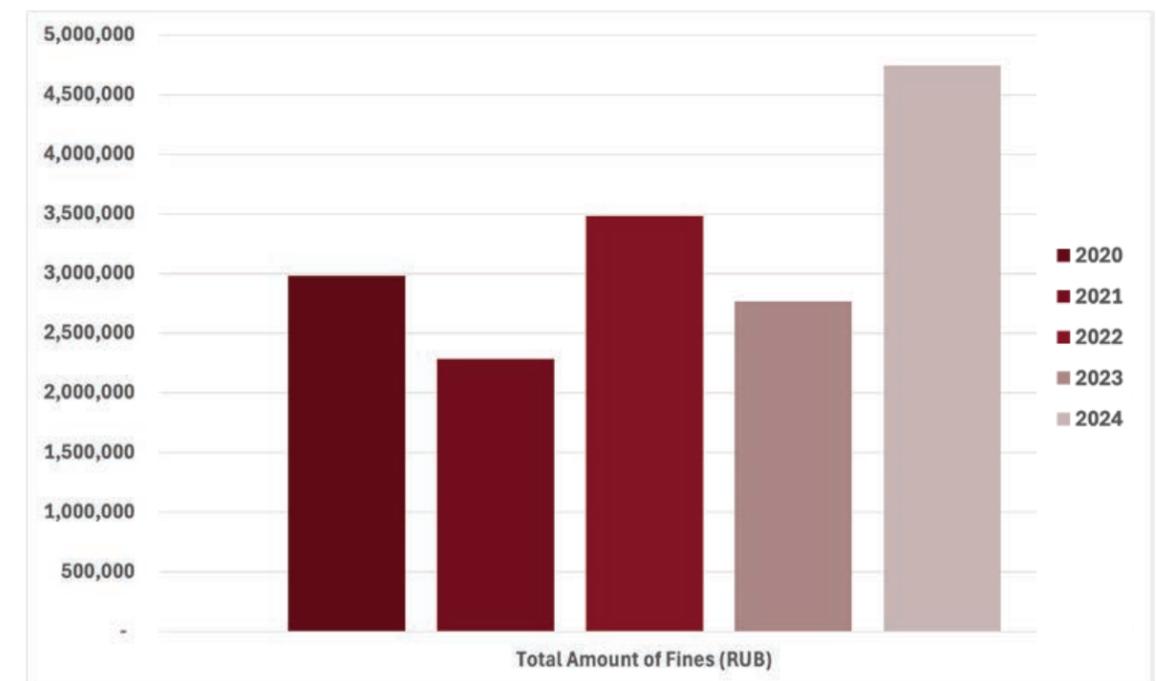
Financial Penalties: Financial penalties are often used to increase pressure. This can include freezing accounts, increasing tax burdens, or imposing fines for minor administrative violations. Restrictions on access to banking services make those religious communities that maintain international ties and independent social activity particularly vulnerable. The loss of the ability to conduct transparent financial activities hinders not only the organization of religious services but also the implementation

of social projects and the construction or rental of meeting spaces for parishioners.

In contrast with religious minorities, the legal protection of the ROC is evident. This is most notable in laws regulating the transfer of property, the inclusion of the ROC in educational programs, and direct state funding. Federal and regional government agencies exhibit bias and will often exclusively work with representatives and adherents of the ROC.

Key examples of administrative pressure include:

- In 2024, Edgar Babayan of the Pentecostal Church “New Life” in Yalta, Crimea was fined 30,000 rubles for holding religious events without registration¹⁵
- The leader of a Mormon community in Taganrog, Rostov Oblast, was fined under Part



Total Fines by Courts Each Year

¹⁵ Oksana Kovalenko, “Pentecostals fined in Crimea for illegal missionary activity”, *Word About Word*, October 8, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/5yypb6y6>.

¹⁴ opendoors.org+1

DOMESTIC TOOLS OF REPRESSION



to prosecutorial inspections and attempted closures under Article 239 of the Russian Criminal Code, despite no violations, for several years. The pressure is accompanied by accusations of disseminating “dangerous religious ideas.” This case is important because it demonstrates that even in the absence of identified violations, a Christian rehabilitation center can be subject to repeated inspections and closure attempts, including those using overtly anti-sectarian rhetoric.²⁴

- The Agape Foundation in St. Petersburg was liquidated by court order following a prosecutor’s investigation. There were allegations of financial irregularities and misappropriation of funds. This case demonstrates that Christian foundations working with vulnerable groups are under close scrutiny by law enforcement agencies, and the risk of criminal prosecution and liquidation is very high.²⁵
- In 2009, the Komi Republic Prosecutor’s Office conducted an inspection of the Renaissance Foundation and its drug rehabilitation centers. The investigation uncovered violations related to the organization of treatment and the living conditions of residents; the foundation was forced to distance itself from some of its centers’ practices.²⁶
- In 2020, a Protestant congregation in the

Krasnodar region was denied permission to hold a service at a rented site, citing “non-compliance with sanitary standards.”

Stage 2: Designation and Censorship

As religious communities and leaders accumulate fines and infractions, authorities will begin to distribute designations of foreign influence and apply direct pressure to censor overt religious activity. Not only does the designation approach allow for more restrictions to be enforced, but it also opens the door to future criminalization and eventual removal from Russia.

“Foreign Agent” Designation

Federal Law 255-FZ, more commonly known as the “foreign agents” law, explicitly prohibits the designation of duly registered religious organizations as foreign agents. However, the authorities create barriers that prevent religious communities from successfully registering themselves, thus enabling them to receive a foreign agent designation. Receiving an official “foreign agent” status for religious leaders entails serious legal, social, and missionary risks that make full-fledged religious activity virtually impossible. This status can be assigned for minimal connections to foreign entities - from receiving donations

4 of Article 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses for holding a meeting without a sign displaying the full official name of the religious organization, setting a precedent for using formal signage requirements as grounds for punishment.¹⁶

- In 2022, a priest of the Roman Catholic Church in Yalta Crimea named Tomasz Vyrval was fined 30,000 rubles for failing to include the full official name of the religious organization on parish materials, despite the Russian Supreme Court’s position that this rule applies to organizations, not individuals.¹⁷
- In Simferopol, Crimea between 2020-2021, an evangelical congregation was fined because the sign “House of Prayer. Church...” did not contain the full official name of the legal entity. This also qualified as a violation of Article 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses.¹⁸
- In 2022, the branch of the Evangelical Church in Karelia was denied registration.¹⁹
- The Samara “Good News” Pentecostal Church has, since the late 1990s, been consistently denied land rights and ultimately faced attempts to demolish the building as an “unauthorized structure” despite its long-standing use for religious services.²⁰
- In 2018, Novorossiysk city authorities demolished the evangelical Christians’ prayer house, Love Your Neighbor community. President Vladislav Kusakin noted that the demolition continued despite the fact that

church parishioners were praying around the building at the time. The reason for the demolition was allegedly illegal reconstruction.²¹

- In the city of Severodvinsk, Arkhangelsk Region, in June 2025, the Word of Life Evangelical Church came under pressure. Slanderous posts, including those directed at the congregation’s pastor, began spreading on Telegram channels and in the VKontakte community. Amid this campaign, the city administration received an anonymous complaint about the allegedly dilapidated condition of the building. As a result, the church was banned from holding services there without any inspection, and the building was closed. The church appealed. Services are temporarily being held in rented premises at a different address.²²
- According to the Unified State Register of Legal Entities (USRLE), the legal entity of the Omsk religious organization “Omsk Church of Evangelical Christians” was liquidated on December 8, 2023. The church existed for approximately three years, and its registration date is listed as 2021. This is the third liquidation of religious organizations in Omsk this year. In the summer of 2023, the Omsk “Bible Mission” Church of Evangelical Christians-Baptists and the “New Creation” Church of Evangelical Christians also ceased operations.²³
- The “Source of Life” rehabilitation center in Kaltan, Kemerovo Region, has been subject

¹⁶ Olga Sibireva, “Freedom of Conscience in Russia: Restrictions and Challenges in 2018”, SOVA, April 17, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/mr6dhhyw>.

¹⁷ Felix Corley, “CRIMEA: Religious freedom survey, September 2022”, *Forum 18*, September 22, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/3dehgz8w>.

¹⁸ A. Sedov, O. Skrypnyk, and M. Budzar, “Freedom of Religion and Belief in Crimea”, March 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/3aasawuu>.

¹⁹ Mushfig Bayram, “UZBEKISTAN: More Muslims jailed, tortured, arrested,” *Forum 18*, February 4, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/yewedd26>.

²⁰ Victoria Arnold, “RUSSIA: Mosque demolished, church to follow?”, *Forum 18*, September 17, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/bdefvsnh>.

²¹ “‘Freedom of religion’ Putin-style. In Novosibirsk, authorities demolished a Pentecostal prayer house,” *Espresso TV*, March 24, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/yymx7zje>.

²² *Telegram*, June 14, 2025, <https://t.me/icerkov/7011>.

²³ *Telegram*, December 22, 2023, <https://t.me/icerkov/4243>.

²⁴ “In the Kemerovo region, the prosecutor’s office is proposing to close a Christian rehabilitation center for “infringing on the identity and rights of citizens,” SOVA, July 27, 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/35bm293b>.

²⁵ “Svyatoslav”, “How sectarians opened a charitable foundation,” *LiveJournal*, September 5, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/4pmax27s>.

²⁶ “The Renaissance Foundation in Komi disavows its ties to duplicate organizations that engage in religious propaganda,” *KomiOnline*, August 18, 2009, <https://tinyurl.com/5xj7c46s>.

to publishing in foreign media. Human rights reports indicate that the regulations also apply to religious figures who publicly oppose the war or are critical of state religious policy.²⁷

Any public material produced by individuals designated as “foreign agents” - whether a sermon, recording, post, lecture, book, video, or even a speech - must be accompanied by a special marking. Failure to do so is considered “illegal missionary activity” and results in fines of up to 50,000 rubles (~\$600 USD) for individuals and up to 500,000 rubles (~\$6,000 USD) for organizations. The law also effectively restricts the right to teach and conduct missionary activities, especially if they are of a public or educational nature.

Although there is no direct ban on participation in religious services, religious leaders with the “foreign agent” status find themselves in a constant risk zone: any speech or religious initiative can be interpreted as a violation of the “foreign agent” regime.

Furthermore, individuals with “foreign agent” status are required to regularly submit detailed financial reports, which requires the involvement of a lawyer or accountant. Banks are required to monitor all transactions of “foreign agents,” which often results in account freezes and denials of service. Such individuals are barred from participating in grants, social projects, and government funding, and many private donors withdraw their support due to the risk of audits and pressure from regulatory authorities.

Violating reporting or labeling rules may result in criminal liability under Article 330.1 of the Russian

Criminal Code, and in some cases, other articles on “inciting hatred,” “extremism,” or “illegal missionary activity” are also applied to religious leaders recognized as “foreign agents.” (UPR info) Moreover, while criminal liability initially arose after a repeat violation, in June 2025, the Russian government approved a bill allowing criminal proceedings against a foreign agent to be initiated after the first administrative offense. The “foreign agent” status also leads to profound

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social isolation. In the eyes of society, it is perceived as a sign of disloyalty or hostility, which inspires fear and caution even among loyal parishioners. Many believers, volunteers, and partners begin to distance themselves, fearing the attention of law enforcement. Missionary and church activities are also under threat: renting premises for worship services and meetings becomes difficult, and owners fear problems with the authorities and inspections.

Thus, the status of “foreign agent” has effectively become a tool for marginalizing and ousting religious leaders and communities from the public sphere.²⁸

²⁷ “Annual Report 2025, Russia”, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/suvxp7pc>.
²⁸ “The ICJ joins other international human rights NGOs in demanding the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation”, *International Commission of Jurists*, September 5, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/ychkjvva>.

Foreign Influence, Undesirable, and Extremist Designations

Since registered religious institutions cannot legally be labeled as “foreign agents,” authorities may use alternate labels to place pressure on them.

The first tier of designation is one of “foreign influence,” meaning the organization is working in the interests of other states. This designation is often given without any evidence, and ostracizes a religious community as an untrustworthy and hostile sect.

Foreign influence designations pave the way for recognition as an “undesirable organization,” or a foreign and international organization whose activities “pose a threat to the foundations of the constitutional order and security of the Russian Federation.”²⁹ When designated, the organization is added to the list of undesirable organizations by the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor General’s Office.³⁰ Subsequently, any activity within Russia must be stopped, and participation in the activities of such an organization is subject to administrative liability under Article 20.33 of the Code of Administrative Offenses and criminal liability under Article 284.1 of the Criminal Code.³¹ In practice, this is an informal ban on the organization.

This designation has many trickle-down effects, including a ban on the creation or continued operation of a religious community’s branches, a ban on the distribution of their materials, and a ban on participation in the organization’s programs. Members of such organizations may be subject to fines and imprisonment. The law does not

contain clear criteria for declaring an organization undesirable, which has drawn criticism from human rights activists.

Children’s and youth ministries are a particular target. In the case of Pastor Telus, he was fined under Article 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses for holding a “children’s camp without permission,” which was classified as illegal missionary activity.³²



Sometimes, the designations end here and authorities will simply continue to persecute individuals for any continued ties to undesirable organizations. However, for many internal religious organizations, the law on extremism becomes the primary instrument.³³ In these instances, the Prosecutor’s Office or the Ministry of Justice files a lawsuit with the Supreme Court to label a religious organization as “extremist,” and the Supreme Court or regional court liquidates the legal entity, prohibits the activities of all its divisions, and forfeits its assets to the state. Participation in the activities of such an organization becomes a criminal offense under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code, even if the activities involve peaceful religious services.³⁴

²⁹ “The activities of four New Generation organizations have been deemed undesirable in Russia,” SOVA, August 30, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/5vdwwvbe>.
³⁰ *Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation*, <https://minjust.gov.ru>.
³¹ Olga Sibireva, “Challenges to the implementation of freedom of conscience in Russia in 2022,” SOVA, March 24, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/33pfzx8m>.
³² “Russia, Freedom of religion and belief,” Forum 18, October 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/yckdfsjv>.
³³ “The Structure of Russian Anti-Extremist Legislation,” SOVA, November 2010, <https://tinyurl.com/bdhz4esu>.
³⁴ Victoria Arnold, “RUSSIA: Religious freedom survey, March 2024”, Forum 18, March 13, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/zr66hh4n>.

Key examples of strategic designation

- In 2023, Protestant Pastor Nikita Ivanovich was included in the list of foreign agents.³⁵
- In June 2025, Sergei Stepanov, a journalist and Baptist missionary from Tambov, minister of the local “Source of Life” Baptist Church, was added to the list of foreign agents.³⁶ In the spring of 2022, he was fined 40,000 rubles for discrediting the Russian army.³⁷

Targeted Censorship

Censorship can be enforced through the designations listed above, as well as through targeted legislation. Authorities have the right to confiscate and block resources deemed extremist or a security threat without a court order, including blocking religious websites, banning publications, and confiscating materials from libraries. Religious communities using the internet are forced to coordinate and register their materials, which severely limits freedom of communication and sharing of educational resources.

In 2016, parliament passed Federal Law No. 374-FZ, requiring telecom operators to store all traffic content for six months and metadata on all traffic exchanges for three years. The law obligated telecom operators and internet companies in Russia to store all information about users’ telephone conversations, SMS messages, and internet traffic. This applied to both voice traffic and data on the content of correspondence and internet connections. The law made it easier for regulatory

authorities to identify users and access personal information without a court order. The law was criticized for threatening citizens’ privacy, rights, and freedoms, providing extensive opportunities for surveillance of communications, and placing vast amounts of private data in the hands of the state and telecom operators.

As a result, the following resources are systematically blocked or severely controlled in the Russian Federation and occupied territories for being “extremist:” independent media and human rights resources, pages and websites of opposition and anti-war initiatives, and foreign platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X.³⁸ Notable blocked resources include most Jehovah’s Witnesses sites, materials on Said Nursi, the largest Russian-language Christian interfaith portal InVictory, religious resources “Christians Against War,” Baznica.info, Public Orthodoxy, and Christianity Today.³⁹

This censorship and control make the population extremely vulnerable to disinformation and the victims of religious persecution invisible.⁴⁰

Key examples of censorship of religious dialogue and text:

- Blocking of religious YouTube channels and websites between 2022–2024.⁴¹
- In April 2025, six agencies from the prosecutor’s office to the Russian National Guard inspected the Novocherkassk Evangelical Christians-Baptist Church. Following the visit, several

administrative cases were opened, three of which are already being heard in court. Officials alleged “violations during the restoration of the building” and deemed the presence of unmarked religious literature inside the church illegal. In 2024, a court had already confiscated dozens of Gospels and hymnbooks from the church—and even after the fine was overturned and the court’s decision was upheld on appeal, the Federal Property Management Agency burned all the literature.⁴²

- In 2024, Imam-Khatib Bulat Shigabutdinov in the village of Novaya Otradovka, Sterlitamak District, was fined under Article 20.29 of the Russian Federation Code of Administrative

real consequences, believers are highly motivated to self-censor.

Community leaders understand that any sermon, anti-war statement, work with children, even home worship can become a formal basis for administrative or criminal prosecution.⁴⁴ Believers avoid public statements and are cautious about discussing political and morally sensitive topics even in private. A significant number of faith communities retreat into “inner exile,” concentrating on personal spirituality, abstract theological reflection, and distancing themselves as much as possible from discussions of social processes. This intensifies feelings of loneliness, undermines social connections, and weakens the capacity of communities to act in solidarity.

Some religious believers report a loss of trust between the clergy and the laity. One Catholic priest interviewed in field research notes, “If people see that a priest is loyal to the authorities, they hesitate to go to him for confession. And since Communion is impossible without confession, people either confess perfunctorily or don’t go to Communion at all. For sincere believers, it’s a loss in either case.”

Stage 3: Criminalization and Imprisonment

At this stage, religious organizations have already accrued significant administrative offenses and social exile. All of these soft pressures prime the pump for authorities to take the most radical form of state pressure on a religious organization: criminal prosecution of its members for ordinary

A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF FAITH COMMUNITIES RETREAT INTO “INNER EXILE”

Offenses for “mass distribution of extremist materials.” The books “The 40 Hadiths of Imam al-Nawawi,” “Stories of the Righteous Caliphs,” and “The Fortress of a Muslim,” which are included on the federal list of extremist materials, were found in the mosque.⁴³

Self-Censorship

Religious believers exist in an environment of fear due to the threat of persecution for dissent, including religiously motivated criticism of the war against and occupation of Ukraine. In the face of

³⁵ Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, 2023, <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/>.

³⁶ Telegram, February 2, 2024, <https://t.me/icerkov/4480>.

³⁷ Natalya Vasilevich, “Believer SERGEY STEPANOV, Baptist (Tambov, Russia),” *Christians Against War*, <https://tinyurl.com/bdk9b2su>.

³⁸ “Russia Criminalizes Independent War Reporting, Anti-War Protests,” *Human Rights Watch*, March 7, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/4fnf6xhb>.

³⁹ Victoria Arnold, “RUSSIA: Wide-ranging blocking of religious-related websites,” *Forum 18*, October 4, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/y24yr58d>.

⁴⁰ Mariana Katzarova, “A/HRC/54/54: Situation of human rights in the Russian Federation - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation,” September 18, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/3hgzsp2>.

⁴¹ Roskomsvoboda, <https://roskomsvoboda.org/>.

⁴² Telegram, June 15, 2025, <https://t.me/icerkov/7019>.

⁴³ “In Bashkortostan, an imam-khatib was fined for displaying banned literature in a mosque,” SOVA, May 27, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/bdxamaf9>.

⁴⁴ Mykhailo Brytyn, Personal Interview 14, *Mission Eurasia*, 2025.



A PROTESTANT PASTOR WAS FINED FOR ALLOWING CHILDREN TO USE A PLAYGROUND NEAR THE CHURCH DURING A SERVICE

religious activities like reading religious literature, participation in prayer meetings, giving religious talks, and the distribution of religious materials.

Key examples of criminalization and imprisonment

- In late November 2024, four Baptists—Anatoly Mayevsky, Igor Khyugay, Iosif Leskov, and Denis Skalyg—were arrested in the Kursk region for distributing Bibles to military personnel. They were reportedly released after their identities were established, but were later re-arrested and sentenced to 12 days in jail.⁴⁵
- Many cases documented by Forum 18 and USCIRF in Naberezhnye Chelny, Nizhny Novgorod, and the Krasnodar Territory involve nighttime searches, confiscation of equipment and religious literature, summons for questioning, and short-term detentions of pastors and activists without subsequent criminal convictions.⁴⁶
- In 2025, a court in Bryansk fined Viktor Seregin 10,000 rubles (~\$124 USD) for holding a religious service in his home, which authorities

said was “illegal missionary activity” despite the fact that the service was held without any campaigning, public calls, or outside listeners, and the congregation of Baptists prayed together, sang psalms, and read the Bible.⁴⁷

- In November 2024, Dmitry Berdnikov, who attended prayer meetings in a private home at the owner’s invitation, was fined 5,000 rubles for “illegal” missionary work. Along with other believers, Berdnikov attended Sunday services in the home of a fellow believer.⁴⁸
- The Greek Catholic community in Omsk and the case of Igor Maksimov (2024): Igor Maksimov, a member of the Greek Catholic parish of the Intercession of the Holy Virgin, was placed under house arrest on charges including “rehabilitation of Nazism” for using a stylized image resembling an icon with Ukrainian figures. Human rights activists consider the case politically motivated and linked to an attempt to de facto eliminate the Greek Catholic presence in the region.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Telegram*, March 28, 2025, <https://t.me/icerkov/6516>.

⁴⁶ “Russia, Freedom of religion and belief,” *Forum 18*, October 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/yckdfsjv>.

⁴⁷ “Baptist fined in Russia for worshipping in his own home,” *RISU*, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9tvdzw>.

⁴⁸ *Telegram*, December 18, 2020, <https://t.me/icerkov/10>.

⁴⁹ Massimo Introvigne, “Russia: Towards a Liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church?,” *Bitter Winter*, June 4, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/3pt5sp35>.

- Pastor Alexei Telus (Russia, 2016), a Protestant pastor, was fined for allowing children to use a playground near the church during a service; the incident is seen as an example of an overly formal approach to “disturbances of order” in religious activity and pressure on children’s and youth ministries.⁵⁰
- A typical example of staged persecution is the case of priest John Burdin, which demonstrates the classic pattern of escalation from administrative to criminal measures.
 - On March 6, 2022, Priest Ioann Burdin, in his sermon, stated that he was praying for peace in Ukraine. About 10 people attended the sermon, one of whom reported it to the police. Two hours later, the police arrived at the church. A report was filed against the priest for discrediting the Russian Armed Forces.⁵¹ Priest Ioann Burdin was fined 35,000 rubles for his anti-war sermon.

- The priest was suspended from service by the diocesan leadership and forced to leave his parish.

- On June 16, 2023, the Kostroma Diocesan Court heard the case of Priest John Burdin. The diocese stated that “his actions may in the future be classified as a criminal offense.” Priest John Burdin refused to repent before the church court. Burdin was forced to leave the country. In Yalta, Crimea, Catholic priest Tomasz Vytrval was fined 30,000 rubles in 2022 under Part 3 of Article 5.26 of the Code of Administrative Offenses for “illegal missionary activity.” Sova News Agency considers this case an example of the application of anti-missionary laws to minorities, including Catholics.

- On August 2, 2024, Magistrate Court No. 127 of the Belorechensky District of Krasnodar Krai fined Daniil Litovkin for “illegal missionary work.” The charge stemmed from a visit by a group of Baptists to the city hospital. The believers congratulated the patients on Easter, sang Easter hymns, and distributed gifts.⁵²
- In 2022, evangelical Christian Andrei Kapatsyna was sentenced to nearly three years in prison for refusing to go to war on religious grounds.⁵³
- In July 2023, Pentecostal pastors Nikolai Ulitin and Svyatoslav Yugov were sentenced to 3.5 years in prison for collaborating with the New Generation Church, which Russian authorities have designated an “undesirable organization.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ “Weekly Report,” *Today’s Martyrs*, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/5xt9v23y>.

⁵¹ “Article 3. Right to Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of Religion”, *Consultant*, <https://tinyurl.com/zm2fuyr2>.

⁵² “A Baptist in Belorechensk was fined for congratulating hospital patients on Easter,” *SOVA*, September 9, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/5cb4ncrx>.

⁵³ Dylan Schexnaydre, “Russia’s Persecution of Religious Groups and FoRB Actors,” *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*, July 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2n88ar7y>.

⁵⁴ “RUSSIA: Persecution denounced at the OSCE by a “foreign agent,” *HRWF*, June 10, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/bdenxmwj>.

- In 2025, the Omsk Regional Court liquidated the Greek Catholic parish of the Intercession of the Holy Mother of God for “gross violations of the law,” and a criminal case was opened against its minister, Igor Maksimov, under Article 354¹ of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.⁵⁵
- In 2023, in Naberezhnye Chelny, the city court sentenced Khunar Agayev and Aidar Sageev to 2.5 years in a general regime penal colony and Amrakh Akhmedov to 1.5 years probation for hosting readings of Islamic scholar Said Nursi’s works with foreign students.⁵⁶
- From 2014 to 2021, in Tatarstan, Nakiya Sharifullina, Ilnur Khafizov, and Fidayil Salimzyanov (sentenced in 2014), then Nail Vakhit and Salavat Muzafarov (sentenced

in 2019), as well as Nakiya Sharifullina and former imam and lecturer at the Russian Islamic University Gabdrakhman Naumov (sentenced in 2021), were prosecuted under Article 282.2 of the Russian Criminal Code for studying the works of Said Nursi.⁵⁷

- Omsk, 2016: Stanislav Moskvina was accused of creating a religious organization “whose activities involve violence against citizens.” In March 2023, the Kirovsky District Court of Omsk sentenced him to 1.5 years in a general regime penal colony. Media outlets and human rights activists note that “violence” was interpreted as “psychological pressure” and “inducing a trance” during religious services.⁵⁸
- In 2024–2025, a new criminal case was opened against Moskvitin under Article 284.1, Part 3

of the Russian Criminal Code—for allegedly organizing the activities of the international structure “Covenant of Churches (TCCN),” which has been deemed “undesirable” in the Russian Federation. According to investigators, he held closed meetings called “Meeting with God” and showed video recordings of the services of the organization’s pastors. In January 2025, he was placed in pretrial detention, and the human rights project “Memorial” recognized him as a political prisoner.⁵⁹

- In early 2024, a criminal case was opened in Izhevsk against Sergei Artemyev, pastor of the “Light to the World” Pentecostal Church under Article 239, Part 1 of the Russian Criminal Code. The Industrial District Court placed him under house arrest, accusing him of conducting paid religious services “from 2019 to 2024,” using “psychological pressure techniques” and “psychological violence” against parishioners.

such statements are no longer being made. Some were fined, some were threatened, some left. And some were threatened by their own “brothers” not to speak out. They’ve essentially returned to the old Soviet system of “authorized representatives (representatives of the authorities - M.B.) for religious affairs,” who tell pastors what to do and how to do it. Only now these authorized representatives are openly called “curators.”⁶¹

The Inevitable: Emigration and Expulsion

Tightening legislation, criminal cases, threats of mobilization, and pressure from the security services are leading some religious leaders to leave Russia and continue their ministry in the diaspora. While deportations of Russians from Russia for violating religious regulations are rare, expulsions do occur. These measures most often affect foreigners and have been used to expel foreign students and clergy.

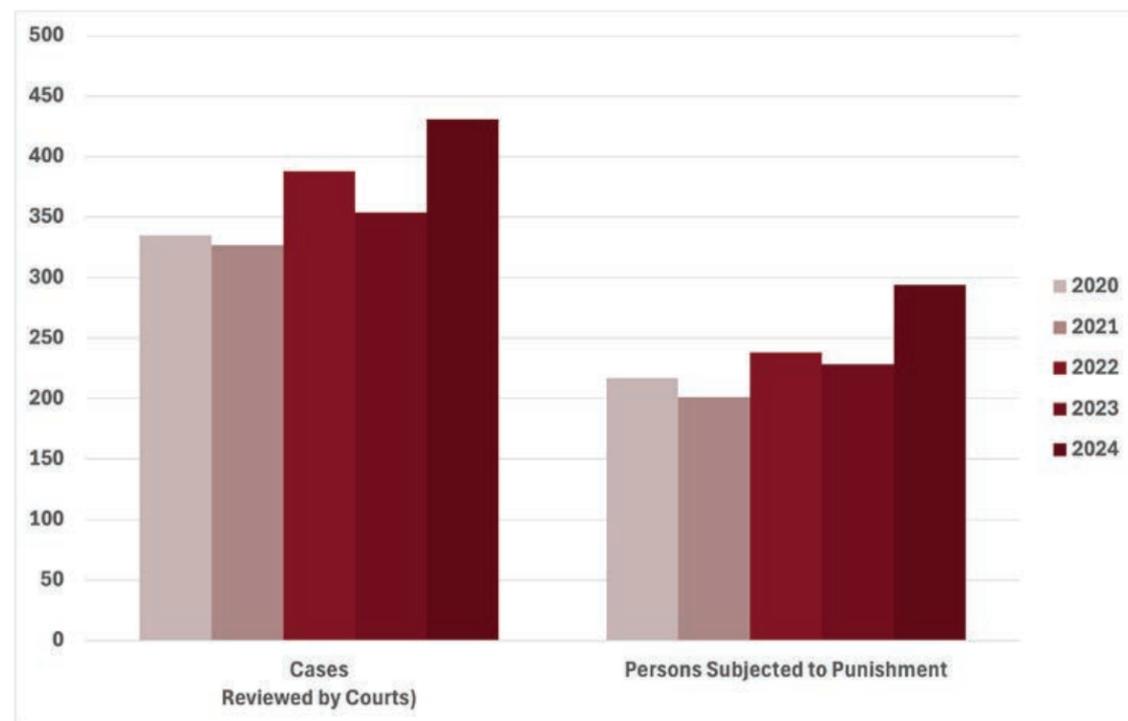
Key examples of expulsions:

- At least seven Catholic priests have been expelled from Russia over the past two and a half years.⁶²
- Father Fernando Vera, a Mexican priest, was expelled from Russia in mid-April 2022 after he was informed that his residence permit had been revoked. He headed the Moscow parish of Saints Peter and Paul, one of three Catholic parishes in Moscow.⁶³

Even within the ROC, “unreliable ministers” who opposed the war or publicly criticized state policy may experience canonical criminalization such as bans from ministry, and defrocking.

Examples of Canonical Criminalization

- Hieromonk Tikhon (Sokolovsky) was gradually restricted in his ministry and then defrocked in 2025, which was a consequence of his independent position and transfer to an alternative jurisdiction.⁶⁰
- In 2022, there were still some brave enough to speak out against the attack on Ukraine. Now,



Cases and Punishments by Courts Each Year

⁵⁵ Olga Sibireva, “Challenges to the implementation of freedom of conscience in Russia in 2024,” SOVA, April 14, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2wxzatu>.

⁵⁶ “Followers of Said Nursi from Naberezhnye Chelny have been sentenced,” SOVA, March 13, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/y888h3yh>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “An Omsk resident who founded his own church was sentenced to 1.5 years in prison,” Omsk-Inform, March 13, 2023, <https://omskinform.ru/news/175056>.

⁵⁹ “A new criminal case has been opened against an Omsk pastor,” SOVA, January 16, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3yrndu3n>.

⁶⁰ Olga Sibireva, “Challenges to Freedom of Conscience in Russia in 2024,” SOVA, June 5, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3sr65t3b>.

⁶¹ Mykhailo Brytysn, Personal Interview 36, Mission Eurasia, 2025.

⁶² Ivan Slobodenyuk, “Church of Silence 2.0: How Catholics in Russia are being stripped of their priests,” *Port Media*, December 7, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/ms7ry53f>.

⁶³ Felix Corley, “OCCUPIED UKRAINE: “Disappeared” Greek Catholic priests in Russian Investigation Prisons?” *Forum 18*, February 2, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/4snj88yp>.

- In 2024, a court ordered the expulsion of Roman Catholic priest Vladislav Klots (Sochi) from Russia. The charge was “preaching without proper permission,” despite the priest having lived in the country for 28 years.⁶⁴
- In October 2024, 85-year-old Catholic priest Vladislav Klots lost his appeal against a fine and expulsion for conducting a service in his parish.⁶⁵

Dozhd, Novaya Gazeta, Meduza, The Insider, and dozens of regional publications—were closed in Russia, declared “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations,” and forced to operate from exile. Nearly all major independent news outlets are blocked, criminal charges were introduced for “fakes” about the army and “discrediting” the Russian Armed Forces, and journalists and editorial staff faced the threat of criminal prosecution.⁶⁸



MEDIA IS NOW A POWERFUL TOOL USED BY RUSSIA

Media is now a powerful tool used by Russia domestically to promote preferred “Russian World” narratives, burnish the image of the ROC, and portray many non-ROC religious communities as extremists or dangerous sects. Russia is systematically presented as a defender of traditional values in opposition to the decaying West and heretical Ukrainian nationalism. The ROC is highly praised as the moral authorities of Russian society, connecting their statements with the educational, foreign policy and military agenda, and presenting their ideas as an expression of the will of the people and the historical mission of Russia.

- On March 12, 2025, it was reported that a 19-year-old foreign student from a local educational institution in Bryansk was fined 30,000 rubles (~\$380 USD) for “illegal missionary work” and deported from the country. According to media reports, the young man had set up a prayer room in a dormitory.⁶⁶

The Role of Media

The Kremlin maintains a near-monopoly on all media in Russia. At least 58 journalists have been killed in Russia since 1992.⁶⁷ Independent platforms have been institutionally eliminated. By the 2020s, the leading independent voices—Echo of Moscow,

⁶⁴ “A Sochi court has ordered the expulsion of a Catholic priest who lived in Russia for 28 years,” *OVD Info*, November 8, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/ymyrhmw7>.

⁶⁵ Victoria Arnold, “RUSSIA: Foreigners face summary expulsion for illegal ‘missionary activity,’” *Forum 18*, June 17, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3kkeacbe>.

⁶⁶ “In Bryansk, a foreign student was fined and deported for ‘illegal missionary work,’” *SOVA*, March 13, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/muxbanre>.

⁶⁷ Anush Avetisyan, “Russia ranked 10th in the Global Impunity Index for journalist killings,” *Voice of America*, October 28, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4w5a5x2v>.

⁶⁸ “Russia Criminalizes Independent War Reporting, Anti-War Protests,” *Human Rights Watch*, March 7, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/4fnf6xhb>.

Examples of strategic media promotion of Russian Orthodoxy:

- Vladimir Solovyov (Russia-1 TV channel) regularly uses the language of “holy war,” contrasting Russia’s “Orthodox civilization” with the “satanic” West and “Nazi” Ukraine. The EU and the US have imposed personal sanctions against him specifically as a key TV host who justifies aggression and incites hatred.⁶⁹



- Dmitry Kiselev, head of the RT media group, is known for his statements that Russia “could turn the United States into radioactive ash,” which is presented as a readiness to “defend spiritual values” at any cost. His program “National Interest” devoted separate episodes to the “threats posed to Russia by totalitarian sects,” which included neo-Pentecostals and some evangelical communities. The program featured experts in the fields of psychiatry and “sect studies.” This presentation creates a perception of Protestant and charismatic churches as psychologically dangerous structures requiring strict control and potential bans.
- Yulia Chicherina, a rock singer who actively

performs in the war zone, has repeatedly described the war in Donbas as “sacred” and promotes the image of an Orthodox crusade against “Ukrainian Nazis.”⁷⁰

At each stage of escalating pressure on religious minorities, media is also used to directly attack and undermine religious communities.

Media broadcasts describe religious minorities as dangerous through rhetoric like “extremists,” “foreign agents,” “sectarians,” and “traitors to the faith,” which prepares public opinion for criminal cases against Jehovah’s Witnesses, Protestants, independent Orthodox priests, and Muslims, and makes repression socially acceptable.

Examples of media used as a tool of religious repression:

- In November 2014, the Rossiya-1 television channel’s Vesti program aired a report about Alexei Ledyayev, pastor of the New Generation Church. The journalists called him “the owner of nightclubs and brothels” and claimed that the church was a “profitable business with a political slant” and the “shock force” of Ukraine’s “Orange Revolution.” The report thus linked the evangelical church to crime and foreign interference, creating an image of Protestants as a “sect” politically loyal to the West.⁷¹
- NTV aired the film “Lords of Demons” in its “Profession: Reporter” series. Protestant rehabilitation centers are presented as “totalitarian sects” that allegedly employ “psychotechnics,” “extortion,” and “recruitment.” One of the subjects of the story,

⁶⁹ Grace Ryan, “Fighting Fire with Fire: A critical examination of the European Union’s ban on Russian state media,” *Trinity College Dublin*, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/5x8a4n99>.

⁷⁰ “Chicherina gave a concert at the Luhansk hospital for wounded soldiers,” *Public News Service*, June 22, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mr2c7ft6>.

⁷¹ “NTV and Rossiya-1 aired ‘anti-sectarian’ reports,” *SOVA*, December 2, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/bdcwmpay>.

boxer and deputy Nikolai Valuev, plays the role of “fighter against the sectarians.” Another NTV story (“Emergency Incident”) portrays rehabilitation centers in Krasnodar and Rostov-on-Don as a threat to life and health, focusing on their Protestant nature rather than specific violations.⁷²

- In a Channel 5 report on the events at the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, the OCU was called a “schismatic structure” “created by the authorities,” and the seizure of the church was attributed to “schismatics” with the support of “radicals from the terrorist Right Sector.”⁷³
- In a number of materials about the “young people’s republics” of Donbas, cited by researchers, occupational authorities

characterize Protestant churches as a “significant threat” and “sects” as objects of “special control.” The formula, “if sects appear, they must be placed under special control,” is used as a justification for restricting their activities.⁷⁴

- A study on disinformation against Crimean Tatars shows that Russian media, including Kommersant, regularly refer to Crimean supporters of Hizb ut-Tahrir as “Crimean extremists” who were “preparing a coup,” which creates a persistent image of Muslim terrorists.⁷⁵

Russia’s domestic repression escalates step by step until communities self-censor, shrink, or shut down.

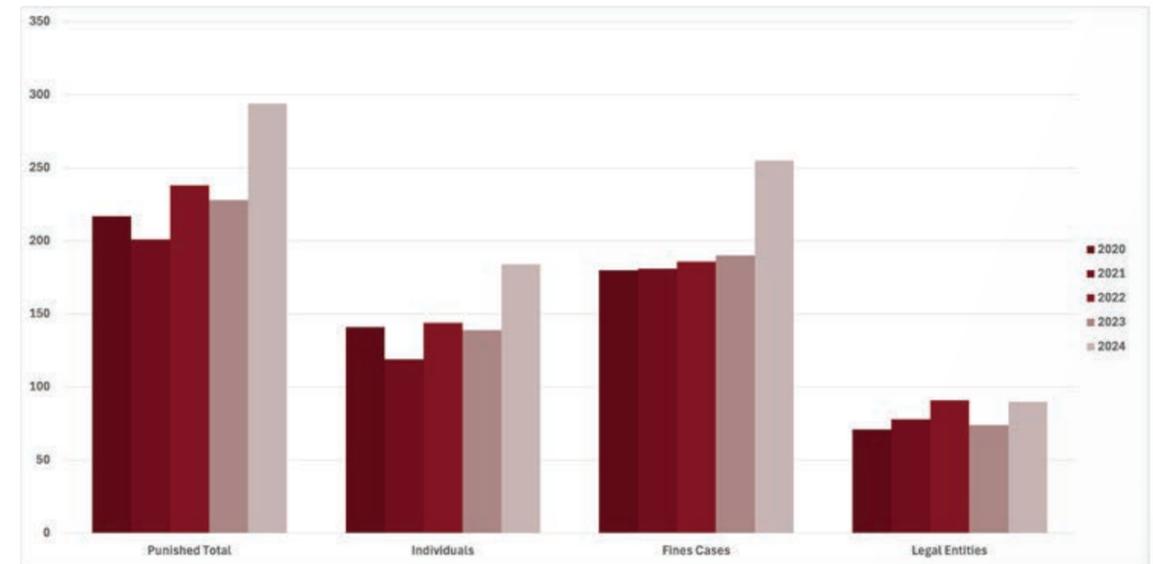
The graphs show rising warnings, interventions, fines, and cases targeting both individuals and religious legal entities. Together, these trends reveal a deliberate strategy to normalize state intrusion and make independent religious life increasingly costly.

⁷² Ibid.

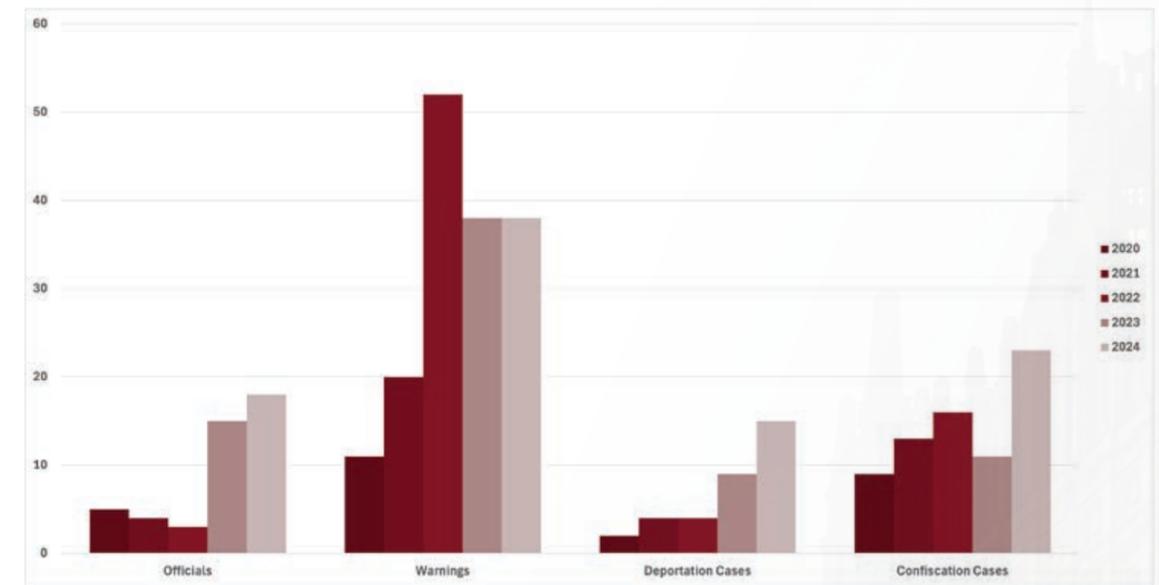
⁷³ Channel 5, “An Old Nazi Tradition: What Happens in the Caves of the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra,” April 2, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3f53rs9t>.

⁷⁴ A. V. Bredikhin, “Analysis of anti-Protestant rhetoric in the ‘People’s Republics,’” <https://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=29777486>.

⁷⁵ Lesia Bidochko, “Disinformation against Crimean Tatars in Russian Social Media: Communication Dynamics During the First Year of Russia’s FullScale Invasion of Ukraine,” *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/32keh5a>.



Administrative Penalties Imposed (SOVA Center), 2020–2024



Additional Administrative Penalties Imposed (SOVA Center), 2020–2025

PART 3: BEARING WITNESS: PERSONAL STORIES FROM THE GROUND

Testimony: Yuri Sipko

Yuri Kirillovich Sipko is a prominent Russian Protestant pastor, theologian, and spiritual mentor who also served as President of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists and Vice President of the Baptist World Alliance. He often represented Russia's largest Protestant denomination at official Kremlin receptions, speaking as a face of "free Russia" and promoting dialogue, peace, and faith.



When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Yuri Sipko openly spoke out against the war. He called the military operation a sin, condemned the Kremlin's actions, expressed concern for the Ukrainian people, and encouraged Christians to be peacemakers and not accomplices to violence.

On August 8, 2023, the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation opened a criminal case against Sipko under Article 207.3 of the Criminal Code for "public dissemination of knowingly false information" about the Russian military based

on videos and publications in which he criticized Russia's actions in Ukraine. Sipko then received a tip that Russian authorities were going to carry out a raid of his apartment in Moscow and fled. That same day, dozens of security officers and FSB agents with automatic weapons forcefully entered his home and interrogated Sipko's son while media representatives broadcasted the entire raid for public view "so the country will know its enemies."

Security services began actively searching for Sipko across the country, circulating wanted notices and mobilizing law enforcement and security forces. His name was entered into Interior Ministry databases, and his photograph was posted at airports and train stations. State television and pro-government media began to portray him as an "anti-patriotic pastor" who "discredits Russia abroad."

Yuri escaped Russia before law enforcement could detain him. His wife, ten children, and many grandchildren suffered under the pressure of being "relatives of a most wanted criminal." Under threat of repression, surveillance, and possible arrests, many family members were also forced to leave the country.

Independent monitors and human rights defenders have noted that, in Sipko's case, authorities attempted to use so-called "false information about the state" legislation to silence a religious leader who spoke out against the regime's actions and against the war. The persecution of Yuri Sipko

showcases how a pastor's words about peace and justice can become grounds for criminal prosecution.

Testimony: Nikolai Romanyuk

Nikolai Romanyuk is a minister of the "Holy Trinity Church" Pentecostal congregation in the Moscow region, as well as a father of nine children and nineteen grandchildren. Romanyuk was initially fined for "discrediting" the army after speaking in a sermon about the pain and suffering caused by the war. On September 25, 2022, he gave a sermon stating that war against Ukraine was evil, killing is sin, and that Christians are called to be peacemakers. Someone in the congregation reported the sermon to local authorities.

YOUNG MEN WERE FORCED TO LIE FACE-DOWN FOR TWELVE HOURS

At 6:20AM on October 18, 2024, authorities conducted an aggressive raid of his home as well as the houses of members of his family and church, the House of Prayer in Popovka, and another site in Volokolamsk. Armed special forces operated in shield formation with weapons raised, destroying private property and violently entering homes with children present. At the homes of Pastor Nikolai's sons, Ilya and Sergey, the young men were forced to lie face-down for twelve hours. For ninety of those minutes, they were held barefoot outside in light clothing, lying on cold ground with automatic weapons aimed at them.



Security forces confiscated laptops, phones, flash drives, documents, bank cards, passports, and even pension IDs. When FSB officers found nothing illegal, they pressured Romanyuk to record an incriminating "statement" on camera, which he refused. That evening, he was taken away in a special police vehicle.

Two days later, a closed court hearing was held. Only Romanyuk's lawyer was present, with no family members allowed inside. The court ordered pretrial detention; thus began nearly two years in prison in which Romanyuk's health declined. During this time, state-controlled media launched a smear campaign to label Romanyuk an enemy, an extremist, and a traitor to the nation.

In 2025, Romanyuk was charged for "disseminating knowingly false information about the Russian army" and was given four years in a penal colony and a four-year ban on engaging in preaching activities. Four years for a sermon.

Pastor Nikolai Romanyuk's story is a warning and a portrait of modern Russia where pastors are labeled

as political enemies, prayer becomes suspicious, peacemakers are branded extremists, and churches that refuse to follow Kremlin ideology and the state-controlled Russian Orthodox hierarchy become targets.

Case Study: Jehovah's Witnesses

The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia has become a model example of the most severe repressive scenario. Since the early 2000s, communities have faced raids, inspections, registration and re-registration denials, the inclusion of their literature on the list of "extremist materials," and prosecutorial warnings. In 2009, the liquidation of the community in Taganrog set an important legal precedent.

In 2017, the Supreme Court declared the Administrative Center and all 395 Jehovah's Witnesses communities an extremist organization, liquidated them, and confiscated their assets. Since then, hundreds of criminal cases, dozens of prison sentences, mass searches, and arrests have been recorded across the country.

Stage 1: Administrative repression

Since the early 2000s, Jehovah's Witnesses have faced raids, inspections, and denials of registration and re-registration of their communities. Some of their publications were included in the list of extremist materials, and the communities received prosecutorial warnings. In 2009, the Rostov Regional Court, and then the Supreme Court, upheld the liquidation of the Taganrog community as "extremist"—the first major precedent (forum18.org). This set the stage for the subsequent nationwide ban.

Stage 2: Recognition as a "foreign agent" and censorship

Formally, religious organizations cannot be designated as "foreign agents," so this stage was not applied to Jehovah's Witnesses: the state immediately relied on anti-extremism mechanisms. "Undesirable" organization. The "undesirable organization" status was not applied to Jehovah's Witnesses, as their Russian structures were registered as domestic religious organizations, not foreign NGOs. A more severe measure—the designation of "extremist organization"—was immediately chosen for them.

Stage 3: Ban and Criminalization

In March 2017, the Ministry of Justice filed a lawsuit with the Supreme Court to liquidate the "Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia" as an "extremist organization."⁷⁶ On April 20, 2017, the Supreme Court declared the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses extremist, liquidated all 395 local branches in the Russian Federation, and ordered the forfeiture of their assets to the state.⁷⁷ In July 2017, the appellate board of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation upheld this decision. Since then, hundreds of criminal cases have been opened under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code, dozens of believers have received prison sentences, and searches and detentions continue until 2024–2025.⁷⁸

Examples of Jehovah's Witness repression:

- Forum 18 has documented dozens of criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses in numerous regions (Amur Oblast, Magadan, Khanty-Mansi

Autonomous Okrug, Karelia, Kemerovo, Orenburg, and others) under Articles 282.2 and 282.3 of the Russian Criminal Code. Punishments range from arrest and detention in a pretrial detention center to house arrest and travel restrictions. Individuals are included on the Rosfinmonitoring list of "extremists and terrorists."⁷⁹

- Danish citizen Dennis Christensen, an elder in the Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in Oryol, was one of the first to be convicted after the organization was designated as extremist. In 2019, he was sentenced to six years in prison under Article 282.2, Part 1 of the Russian Criminal Code for "organizing the activities of an extremist organization"—effectively for conducting religious services and leading the congregation.⁸⁰
- Fifty-nine-year-old Anna Safronova, sentenced to six years in prison for practicing the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses, was subjected to cruel treatment for refusing to wear a St. George ribbon. She was held in a stuffy, windowless room for two days, forced to stand for 10 to 13 hours at a time, unable to sit down. Furniture had been removed, and sitting on the floor was "prohibited by regulations." She

was allowed to use the restroom only once during this time. When asked why she was being tortured, the guards said, "You haven't been tortured yet." After her lawyer called an ambulance and contacted the police, she was sent to a punishment cell for 20 days instead of receiving medical attention.⁸¹

- A court sentenced 16 Taganrog Jehovah's Witnesses to fines and suspended sentences.
- The Lesosibirsk City Court in Krasnoyarsk Krai sentenced two Jehovah's Witnesses. Andrei Shiyan was sentenced to six years and one month in a general regime penal colony, one year of restricted freedom, and a two-year ban on participation in and leadership of associations for holding meetings, disseminating doctrine, and teaching evangelism. Anna Matveeva was fined 400,000 rubles for participating in online meetings.⁸²
- Konstantin Sannikov, a doctor and father of four from Kazan, received a 6.5-year prison sentence for participating in Jehovah's Witnesses services.⁸³



⁷⁹ Victoria Arnold, "Justice Ministry seeks complete Jehovah's Witness ban," *Forum 18*, <https://tinyurl.com/mr3nhu98>.

⁸⁰ "Christensen Dennis," *Jehovah's Witness*, <https://tinyurl.com/yzmwjdy>.

⁸¹ OVD Info Live, *Telegram*, April 1, 2025, <https://t.me/ovdinfo/37137>.

⁸² "The verdict was announced for two Jehovah's Witnesses from Lesosibirsk," SOVA, updated

⁸³ "Court in Kazan gave Konstantin Sannikov, a Father of Four, 6.5 Years in a Penal Colony for Reading the Bible," *JW Russia*, February 16, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/3f5ndafr>. April 30, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2eda95ee>.

⁷⁶ Victoria Arnold, "Justice Ministry seeks complete Jehovah's Witness ban," *Forum 18*, <https://tinyurl.com/mr3nhu98>.

⁷⁷ "Russia: Court Bans Jehovah's Witnesses," April 20, 2017, *Human Rights Watch*, <https://tinyurl.com/bddrx2u>

⁷⁸ "Imprisoned for Their Faith—Russia," *Jehovah's Witnesses*, <https://tinyurl.com/4hybruz5>.

PART 4: URGENCY OF ACTION

As Russia exerts additional administrative control over territories in Ukraine, we can expect to see the same domestic methods of religious repression applied to Ukrainians. As all parties attempt to negotiate a settlement to the war, it is imperative to consider the ongoing, deliberate persecution and expulsion of non-ROC religious communities. Decades of religious freedom in Ukraine has nurtured an entire generation of citizens who cannot return to practices reminiscent of the persecution of the Soviet period.

Changing Religious Life in the Occupied Territories

Through more than 60 interviews in 2025 and an accumulated 10 years of data collection, Mission Eurasia's field research reveals dramatic changes in religious life in the occupied Ukrainian territories, especially for the more than 3 million Ukrainians living in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

In Donetsk and Luhansk, local occupation authorities have refused to register most Protestant churches, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and

Jehovah's Witnesses. Baptists, Pentecostals, and Adventists are declared "extremists" and their buildings are seized and used for the needs of the occupation authorities. Literature is also specifically banned, including Gospel editions and Baptist books, which are declared "extremist." According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, the formal annexation of much of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions into the Russian Federation in 2022 has not changed the practice of religious repression in these territories that was already taking place under Russian occupation since 2014.⁸⁴



⁸⁴ "ISSUE UPDATE: RUSSIA'S RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS IN UKRAINE," *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, July 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/mryeaw37>.

Just as Russia has replaced many governors and mayors in the occupied territories, Russia has also been replacing priests with new ones sent from Russian dioceses. According to some sources, only about half of the priests of Orthodox parishes in the occupied territories remain from pre-war times, with the rest appointed after the occupation according to a comparison of Russian and Ukrainian personnel registries.⁸⁵



Arrests and interrogations of clergy by Russian security forces remain widespread, and there have been numerous extrajudicial killings of priests and pastors following prolonged torture and abuse. Mission Eurasia's monitoring identified 57 Christian ministers serving in a civilian capacity who have been killed by Russian soldiers or Russia's targeted bombardment of civilian infrastructure.⁸⁶ In the weeks immediately preceding the publication of this report, two more priests died. In many cases, Russian drones have targeted the civilian vehicles operated by the ministers as they transported humanitarian aid or traveled to tend to the sick and elderly remaining in the war zone.⁸⁷

Additionally, occupation authorities actively use the judicial system to persecute Ukrainian clergy, much as they do within Russia. Religious leaders who refuse to cooperate with the occupiers are charged with "espionage," "terrorism," and "extremism," receiving long prison terms in maximum-security prison colonies after prolonged periods of

incommunicado detention and torture.

Many Ukrainian Christians, unwilling to live under constant surveillance, the threat of persecution, and ideological pressure, are choosing to emigrate to other regions of Ukraine or abroad. The targeted deportations of pastors and active ministers, whom the occupation authorities view as "bearers of Ukrainian identity" or potential leaders of ideological resistance, further weaken communities. Believers avoid public statements about the war and occupation and are cautious about discussing political and morally sensitive topics even in private. People move toward self-censorship.

Evangelism and visible missionary work has been virtually paralyzed due to the severe risks for unregistered and unapproved evangelism activities. Attempts to adapt to the new conditions often mean abandoning traditional forms of street evangelism, children's and youth projects, and public events.

⁸⁵ Maria Erlich, "Submission of Faith: How religion became hostage to the "Russian world" in the occupied territories of Ukraine", *Public Orthodoxy*, <https://tinyurl.com/4w6c7868>.

⁸⁶ Mission Eurasia's monitoring methodology takes the most conservative approach: the database includes only those who served officially in the church and excludes Christians who were simply active members of the congregation without formal ministerial status. A "Book of Remembrance" project with more information about these ministers will be available on the Mission Eurasia website: <https://missioneurasia.org/religious-freedom/>.

⁸⁷ For example, on September 20, 2025, Leonid Skumatov, a pastor of the evangelical Baptist church in Myrnohrad (Donetsk region), was killed in a Russian drone attack as he assisted people. On February 27, 2025, Russian soldiers attacked a civilian vehicle carrying humanitarian aid with a drone in the Dnipropetrovsk region. As a result, Roman Hrygurko, a senior minister of the Ukrainian Evangelical Church in Novokyivka, was killed and his wife was hospitalized in the intensive care unit.

However, many religious communities continue to worship and gather together, albeit in more insular and less visible formats. Worshippers are turning to home groups, small prayer meetings, and small circles of trusted friends. Online communities, closed chats, and online initiatives play an important role, allowing worshippers who remained and those who fled to maintain connections. These gatherings continue to develop underground despite the authorities' attempts to suppress them. This transformation makes religious life less visible to outside observers, but simultaneously limits its public witness and openness to new people.

Compounding Nature of Repression Over Time

The worsening reality for religious freedom in Russia and the occupied territories demands urgent action. Over time, the negative effects compound and accelerate, making it difficult for remaining human rights defenders and religious communities to mount a coherent and unified resistance. As religious adherents increasingly self-censor and adapt their religious practices as described above, the wider society loses sight of religious diversity and becomes accustomed to the state's preferred narrative about religion.

Prolonged repression triggers the mass emigration of independent religious leaders, theologians, and active worshippers. This loss of spiritual capital weakens the ability of remaining worshippers to organize, develop future religious leaders, or document violations of their religious freedom for future justice mechanisms. For example, the systemic closure of independent seminaries and biblical institutes (such as the Tavria Christian

Institute and Donetsk Christian University in occupied Ukraine) and the internet control mechanisms that restrict Russians from accessing theological resources outside of Russia limit religious education and training.

Russia Exports Its Repressive Model

The culture and systems of repression described in this report threaten to seep into other societies around the world. Russia's model of strict control over religion has become an ideological export, with Russia's neighbors copying its repressive rhetoric and practices. International monitoring bodies such as USCIRF, OHCHR, Forum 18, and HRW note that the Russian approach rooted in "traditional values," anti-extremism legislation, and administrative-criminal pressure now appears in many post-Soviet countries.

Mission Eurasia's October 2024 "Faith in Chains" report shows how the Belarusian authorities are largely emulating Russia's religiously repressive practices.⁸⁸ For example, in 2023 Belarus adopted a new law on freedom of conscience that requires all religious organizations to re-register, imposes strict controls on foreign ties, and effectively makes any unregistered activity illegal. Human rights activists describe this law as one of the most repressive in Europe and emphasize its similarities to the Russian model. Secular and majority Islamic states in Central Asia apply similar practices with different religious ends but similar authoritarian objectives to consolidate the state's power over civic life. In Kyrgyzstan, bills strengthening oversight of religious associations have been under discussion for several years with promotion as recently as 2024–2025. These bills raise the bar of registration

for religious communities and introduce additional approvals for missionary activity.

Additionally, Russia state media's calculated strategy to portray Russia as a bulwark of Christian culture and traditional family values has effectively influenced media figures and politicians around the world. In the Balkans, especially in Serbia, pro-Russian political parties and media outlets promote the image of Russia as the "defender of Orthodox civilization" and criticize the "Western model of human rights." Analysts note parallels between Hungarian and Russian anti-NGO and media policies. In the United States and across Europe, some popular pundits and politicians have praised Putin as a defender of family values and suggested that his model of authoritarian leadership is preferable to democracy.⁸⁹

This expansion of the Russian model poses a threat to global democracy and the human rights system. When repression against believers and religious pluralism is presented as an acceptable tool of national security and spiritual protection of ethnonationalist values, it undermines the universality of freedom of conscience standards and sets a dangerous precedent for other authoritarian and populist regimes.

⁸⁸ Michael Brytsyn and Maksym Vasin, "Faith in Chains: Analysis of the Religious and Political Situation in Belarus." *Mission Eurasia*, 2024, <https://bit.ly/2024-Mission-Eurasia-report-on-Belarus>.

⁸⁹ Adrian Karatnycky, "Russia Is No Conservative Haven," *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/m2pyjx5k>.



PART 5: CONCLUSION

This report documents the systematic erosion of religious freedom in the Russian Federation and Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, demonstrating that religious repression is not an unexpected byproduct of authoritarianism but a central mechanism of state control that supports the Kremlin's territorial claims.

Over the past decade, with a notable acceleration since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Kremlin has constructed a multi-layered system of legal, administrative, and ideological pressure designed to subordinate religious life to state objectives and eliminate independent religious communities. The Russian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate (ROC) headed by Patriarch Kirill has been a key partner and beneficiary of this repressive system.

At the core of this system is the ideology of a "Russian World" (Russkiy Mir), which has evolved from a post-Soviet cultural concept into a doctrine that fuses nationalism, imperial ambition, and an exclusive version of Orthodox political theology. Under this framework, Russian identity is defined as inherently Orthodox and politically loyal, while religious diversity is increasingly portrayed as a threat to national security. The ROC's senior

leadership has spiritualized the "Russian World" ideology by presenting Russia's war against Ukraine as a metaphysical struggle, legitimizing violence through religious rhetoric, and ruthlessly cleansing the clergy of priests who speak out against the war or are suspected of harboring "Ukrainian identity."

The consequences for religious freedom are profound. Inside Russia, the state has weaponized a growing body of repressive legislation on "foreign agents," "undesirable organizations," "extremism," "discrediting the army," and "insulting the feelings of Orthodox believers" to criminalize peaceful religious activity. These laws are deliberately vague and selectively enforced, enabling authorities to escalate pressure from fines and inspections to raids, prosecutions, imprisonment, and forced exile. Religious leaders who preach on peace are particularly vulnerable.

At the international level, the Russian state and allied actors export false narratives that portray Russia as a defender of Christianity and Ukraine as a persecutor of Christians. These claims are echoed by pro-Russian voices abroad and obscure the documented reality: Russia is a notable perpetrator of religious persecution in both its own territory and the regions it occupies. This propaganda undermines international accountability and weakens coordinated responses to human rights violations. The findings of this report demonstrate that religious repression and the Kremlin's promotion of an exclusive, nationalist, and Orthodox Russian identity are woven into Russia's domestic and foreign policy ambitions. Russia's model that weaponizes national security and anti-extremism legislation against religious communities is spreading to neighboring countries, threatening to undermine religious freedom for millions.

Governments, policymakers, international religious and civil society organizations, journalists, and social media companies must recognize religious repression as a core component of Russia's authoritarian system and war strategy. We provide a series of suggested responses to this phenomenon and call for unified action to protect freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and the resilience of religious communities in Russia and the occupied territories of Ukraine.

PART 6: RECOMMENDATIONS

Intergovernmental Institutions

1. Refer to repression and propaganda through state media as a singular phenomenon in resolutions and reports on religious freedom in the Russian Federation and the occupied territories of Ukraine. Ensure this topic is covered by special rapporteurs.
2. Strengthen monitoring of the occupied territories as “zones of experimental repression” by creating a permanent mechanism for documenting violations of religious freedom in Crimea, the “DPR/LPR,” and the captured parts of Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, etc., and monitoring how practices developed there (fines for missionary work, closure of communities, confiscation of buildings) are transferred inside the Russian Federation.
3. Use religious freedom as a criterion for sanctions and diplomatic pressure. In particular, link personal sanctions to the participation of officials, security forces, and media managers in the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, Protestants, and in media hate campaigns. The conditions for easing pressure should be set on concrete steps: lifting bans, reviewing extremist/missionary cases, allowing independent monitoring, and returning confiscated buildings and property.
4. Create rapid channels of protection and relocation for religious leaders through special visa/humanitarian programs for persecuted clergy and religious human rights defenders from the Russian Federation and the occupied territories. Provide research and educational grants for those who are forced to continue serving in the diaspora.

International Judicial Bodies

1. Consider religious persecution as a possible crime against humanity and investigate episodes of systematic persecution on religious grounds. Make sure to assess state media and propagandist campaigns as part of the context of persecution.
2. Prioritize cases related to the occupied territories of Ukraine by documenting the kidnapping, torture, and murder of clergy, the confiscation of churches, and the forced closure of communities, particularly in Crimea and southern/eastern Ukraine, and how these actions relate to military occupation and changing demographic/religious landscapes.

3. Collect and preserve digital evidence of propaganda to be used in future cases against special officials and media managers by archiving TV programs, talk shows, and online content containing direct calls to violence, dehumanization of Ukrainians, Muslims, “sectarians,” etc.
4. Develop jurisprudence on the abuse of laws on extremism and “foreign agents” so national and international courts can rule that anti-extremist norms, forced registrations, prohibition of unregistered communities, and the status of “foreign agent” to religious activity are violations of the right to freedom of religion and association.

Non-Governmental Human Rights Organizations

1. Build sustainable documentation networks across a variety of religious communities and secure communication channels within the Russian Federation and Occupied Territories to help record cases of searches, fines, criminal cases, and building confiscations.
2. Prepare shadow reports for intergovernmental bodies highlighting “missionary activity,” “extremism,” “foreign agent,” “refusal to serve,” and “occupied territories,” with particular emphasis on the role of state media and local propaganda in launching and justifying religious repression.
3. Provide targeted assistance to persecuted leaders and communities, especially legal support, psychological and spiritual care, and relocation resources for obtaining refugee status or a humanitarian visa.
4. Integrate religious freedom into the broader human rights agenda and demonstrate that cases of missionary activity, “extremism,” and “foreign agents” are part of a general attack on civil society, freedom of speech, and association.

Humanitarian Organizations

1. Include a measure of religious freedom in needs assessments. When working with refugees, internally displaced persons, and vulnerable groups in Ukraine, Russia, and host countries, ask questions about religious affiliation and possible religious persecution, recording cases where people left their homes due to pressure on their community, pastor, mosque, or temple.

2. Train staff to recognize religiously motivated violence, approach religious discrimination sensitively, and establish cooperation with human rights and religious organizations for complex cases.
3. Ensure that assistance is not tied to a particular denomination, but takes into account the specific needs of minorities, including dietary restrictions, providing safe spaces for prayer in camps, and monitoring whether individual groups of believers are subject to secondary pressure or harassment.
4. Use consensual on-the-ground access for anonymously documenting and transmitting information to human rights groups to be used for advocacy. In public communication, emphasize that the humanitarian consequences of war and repression have a religious dimension.

International Religious Associations

1. Take a clear stance against the criminalization of faith and “holy war” by accepting official appeals condemning the use of religion to justify aggression and repression, including the rhetoric of “desatanization,” “holy war,” and emphasizing that persecution of believers is unacceptable, regardless of denomination and political context.
2. Support persecuted ministers and congregations through scholarships, pastoral positions for emigrated ministers, and temporary parishes “in exile,” as well as provide assistance to the families of imprisoned pastors, priests, and imams.
3. Review relations with Russian structures that support repression and war by raising the issue of the status of representatives of the ROC and other structures that legitimize aggression in ecumenical councils and inter-church associations. Until they publicly renounce war propaganda, temporarily limit their participation in governing bodies, joint declarations and dialogue.
4. Use moral authority to advocate at the level of governments and international institutions. Organize joint visits of church/denomination leaders to the UN, the EU, and national parliaments to discuss religious persecution in the Russian Federation and the occupied territories of

Ukraine. Conduct World Days of Prayer and Awareness for Persecuted Communities in Russia and the Occupied Lands.

Tech Corporations

1. Strictly limit the reach and monetization of Russian state propaganda channels by applying a low-distribution mode, limiting “state media” labels, putting a ban on advertising and monetization to accounts affiliated with Kremlin media, and responding quickly to content that incites hatred toward religious groups and Ukrainians under the guise of “fighting sects/Satanism.”
2. Strengthen the protection of users from the Russian Federation and occupied territories by ensuring the availability of tools to bypass blocking and building simple anonymization and anti-doxing mechanisms for religious activists and independent clergy.
3. Provide anonymized open data on the Russian propaganda distribution network to human rights activists to support independent research into the influence of Kremlin content on perceptions of war and religious freedom in the US, EU, Africa, and Latin America.
4. Promote quality content about religious freedom and war in both Russian and Ukrainian languages segments from verified sources covering the persecution of communities and the situation under occupation, and partner with human rights and religious media to create educational materials on critically examining propaganda.

ABOUT MISSION EURASIA

Mission Eurasia is an educational and charitable organization registered in the United States with 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. It was established in 1991, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, by evangelical pioneers Peter and Anita Deyneka. Today, under the leadership of Sergey Rakhuba, Mission Eurasia and its affiliates operate in 15 countries, equipping, training, and mobilizing the next generation of Christian leaders to transform their nations for Christ through holistic ministry.

Throughout these years, the ministry has been dedicated to supporting faith-based communities and the wider public in overcoming the lingering effects of the communist era, responding to current challenges, and fostering new opportunities for holistic development—spiritually, socially, and educationally. In 2014, Mission Eurasia established the Religious Freedom Initiative to monitor the state of religious freedom, coordinate the efforts of Mission Eurasia teams across various countries, and develop recommendations to guide their ministries.

In 2022, following the onset of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Mission Eurasia redirected its efforts to address the humanitarian crisis and meet the critical needs of residents in frontline regions and internally displaced persons. Additionally, it has consistently studied the state of religious freedom in Russia and in Ukrainian territories temporarily occupied by Russia, ensuring timely responses.

The main directions of the Religious Freedom Initiative’s work in the regions where Mission Eurasia operates include:

- Monitoring religious developments and conducting analytical research;
- Assisting church leaders in both occupied and liberated territories of Ukraine;
- Representing and advocating for the interests of faith-based communities and church leaders;
- Providing spiritual and psychological rehabilitation for church leaders;
- Offering advisory assistance to faith-based communities in restoring their activities, governance structures, and documents lost or confiscated by Russian authorities;
- Maintaining internal Ukrainian and international dialogue on protecting religious freedom during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.



MISSION

Mission Eurasia’s mission is to train, equip, and mobilize Christian leadership throughout Eurasia, who will engage in indigenous evangelism, church-planting, holistic ministries, and church growth by developing creative and strategic ministries and by facilitating partnerships between nationals and Western Christians.

ENDORSEMENTS



This report addresses a vital topic often neglected by the U.S. and Western authorities and mainstream media: the heavy-handed and oppressive nature of Russian policy toward faith and churches. The report conclusively demonstrates that the Kremlin monopolized the Church and God, making the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) a key ideological instrument of spiritual and ideological control. It also exhaustively documents the persecution of both Protestants and Catholics and the abuse of law enforcement to punish or push alternative beliefs out of Russia, similarly to what the Soviet regime did for decades.

ARIEL COHEN, Ph.D., *Senior Fellow (Non-resident), The Atlantic Council*



Mission Eurasia is one of the most active organizations engaged in theological education, leadership development, and humanitarian service across the former Soviet Union. The inconsistent development of religious freedom in the region after the collapse of the communist regime in 1991 prompted Mission Eurasia to launch a religious freedom research effort of data collection, expert analysis, and the organization of international religious freedom summits in countries such as Georgia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. I personally participated in several of these fora and witnessed their positive impact on legislative and policy discussions. In this report, Mission Eurasia focuses specifically on the deteriorating state of religious freedom in the Russian Federation. The report presents a sobering and deeply concerning picture. Since 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, repression has intensified not only inside Russia but also in the annexed and occupied territories of Ukraine. The documented evidence clearly demonstrates a systematic erosion of fundamental freedoms. I am confident this report will serve as an important resource for human rights organizations and political leaders in the West, especially in the United States, helping them closely monitor developments in Russia and respond with informed and principled action.

DR. VALERIU GHILETSCHI, *President of the European Christian Political Party, Vice President of the European Baptist Federation, Former Candidate for President of Moldova, and Former President of the Baptist Union of Moldova*



"*Faith in the Crossfire*" is a marvelous, well-documented summary of the systematic suppression of religious diversity in Russia itself and in occupied Ukraine with policy recommendations. Russia has "securitized" the religious sphere—that is, state security agencies such as the FSB and military intelligence now determine what religious activities are permitted or banned. There are dozens, possibly hundreds, of similar cases that the report did not have space to include. All repression is directed at eliminating independent thinking and marshaling support for Russia's war on Ukraine. It is notable that a key crime is being associated with "foreigners" because it is a threat to national security. Meanwhile Russian propagandists tell people in the West that Ukraine is "persecuting Christians" by banning religious organizations subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church—Moscow Patriarchate. The ROC is the primary cheerleader for the "Russian World" doctrine that justifies as "holy" Russia's war to eliminate Ukraine and Ukrainians. Surely that is indeed a threat to Ukraine's national security and completely justified.

LAUREN HOMER, *President of Law and Liberty Trust Page*



As a longtime advocate for persecuted believers worldwide, I have witnessed firsthand how authoritarian regimes weaponize faith to suppress freedom and identity. Mission Eurasia's compelling new report - *Faith in the Crossfire* - meticulously documents the devastating scale of Russia's violations of religious freedom inside Russia itself—through repressive efforts like the Yarovaya Law that criminalize everyday evangelism and missionary activity, the designation of peaceful groups as 'extremist,' fines and imprisonment of evangelical pastors for sharing their faith, and the preferential treatment of the Russian Orthodox Church at the expense of minority faiths. These measures represent a deliberate state effort to suppress religious minorities, particularly evangelical Christians, and stifle genuine spiritual expression. This timely and thorough documentation serves as a vital wake-up call, underscoring the urgent need for the international community to hold Russia accountable as a Country of Particular Concern and to stand firmly in defense of universal religious freedom before these violations deepen further.

SARAH MAKIN, *Principal at Makin Strategies. Former Senior Advisor on International Religious Freedom for the White House*

ENDORSEMENTS



Mission Eurasia's annual reports on religious freedom conditions in occupied Ukraine have been of immeasurable help to policy makers and others interested in the survival of Ukraine over many years. Russian repression and atrocities involving religious leaders and believers in occupied Ukraine belie its claim to be a Christian nation fighting the war to liberate Ukraine from an unholy government. This latest edition will give the reader an in-depth understanding of the key role neo-religious doctrines within the Russian Orthodox Church—Moscow Patriarchate have played in justifying the war and in religious repression at home.

SAM BROWNBACK, Former US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and Co-Chair of the IRF Summit



"*Faith in the Crossfire*," a new report by Mission Eurasia is a must read for anyone interested in Russia's threat to the religious freedom of Ukrainians and the Russian Orthodox Church, itself, and in its implications for American foreign policy. Authored by Pastor Mykhailo Brystyn, who survived Russian persecution, this report shows that, under the Putin regime, the Russian Orthodox Church has become an instrument of the state and advances the Kremlin's war aims, including by promoting the heresy that Russians soldiers will have their sins forgiven by dying in battle. The Russian regime, in turn, persecutes, tortures and kills other Christian leaders within its control to strengthen the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. Most alarming, this policy of territorial and religious conquest is rationalized by the ideology known as "Russkiy Mir" or Russian World, in which Putin's ambitions extend well beyond Ukraine. No American politician will fall prey to Russian propaganda again after reading this detailed report.

NINA SHEA, Senior Fellow of the Hudson Institute and Director of its Center for Religious Freedom



In recent years, concerns about restrictions on religious freedom in Russia have continued to grow. To distinguish verified facts from misinformation, it is vital to carefully examine these critical issues and communicate the findings clearly and transparently to encourage informed and appropriate responses. This detailed report by Mission Eurasia on the state of religious freedom in Russia is designed to equip Western Christian leaders, human rights advocates, policymakers, and government officials with key data and practical recommendations to encourage meaningful engagement on behalf of persecuted believers. As these facts are presented, it is our hope they will be used to support policy initiatives that protect faith communities and ensure they can practice their beliefs freely, without fear of interference or repression. Freedom of worship is a fundamental human right and must be strongly defended to build a just, civil, and harmonious society. This report also points out how Russia exports its model of religious repression to territories it occupies or annexes, extending these violations beyond its own borders and raising serious regional and global concern.

FLOYD A. BROBBEL, CEO of Voice of the Martyrs Canada



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