

# **RUSSIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, guaranteeing equal rights irrespective of religious belief and the right to worship and profess one's religion, but by law officials may prohibit the activity of a religious association for violating public order or engaging in "extremist activity." The law states Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism are the country's four "traditional" religions and recognizes the special role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The government generally did not restrict the activities of Jewish or Christian groups with a longer presence in the country but imposed restrictions limiting the activities of Muslims and other religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and Scientologists. Government actions included detaining, fining, and imprisoning members of minority religious groups. Police conducted raids on minority religious groups in private homes and places of worship, confiscating religious publications and property, and blocked their websites. Authorities applied anti-extremism laws to revoke the registration of minority religious groups and imposed restrictions that infringed on the practices of minority religious groups and their ability to purchase land, build places of worship, and obtain restitution of properties confiscated during the Soviet era. The government continued to declare some religious materials of minority religious groups extremist, adding two Muslim publications to the extremist list. A prosecutor also seized books from a Jewish school to examine them for extremist content. The government later amended the law to make it illegal to declare the key texts, or "holy books" of the four "traditional" religions as extremist. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) declared a Jewish charity organization a "foreign agent," requiring the organization to add this designation to its website and all its publications. The government granted privileges to the ROC that were accorded to no other religious group.

There were incidents of violence related to religion, including attacks on religious adherents resulting in death or severe injury and vandalism of synagogues, cemeteries, and mosques. In Dagestan, an imam was shot and killed in front of a mosque, and in Moscow the director of the Museum of the History of Jews in Russia survived after being shot in the head outside of his office. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts or slogans during nationalist demonstrations.

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The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials met with a range of government officials, including the foreign ministry's special representative for human rights, to discuss the treatment of minority religious groups, the use of the law on extremism to restrict the activities of religious groups, and the revocation of registration of some religious organizations. The Ambassador met with senior representatives of the four "traditional" religious groups, including the patriarch and the head of external relations of the ROC, the chair of the Federation of Jewish Communities, the chair of the Russia Muftis Council, and the Papal Nuncio to discuss religious freedom issues. Embassy representatives regularly engaged with officials from "traditional" and minority religious groups, including rabbis, muftis, Protestant pastors, Catholic priests, U.S. missionaries, Mormons, Buddhists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, Falun Gong adherents, Hare Krishnas, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to promote interfaith cooperation and religious tolerance and discuss religious freedom developments, including specific cases.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 142.4 million (July 2015 estimate). The most recent figures from a 2013 poll by the Levada Center, an NGO research organization, reports 68 percent of Russians consider themselves Orthodox, while 7 percent identify as Muslim. Religious groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population each include Buddhists, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Bahais, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas), pagans, Tengrists, Scientologists, and Falun Gong adherents. The 2010 census estimates the number of Jews at 150,000; however, the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia stated in February the actual Jewish population is nearly one million, most of whom live in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Immigrants and migrant workers from Central Asia are mostly Muslim. The majority of Muslims live in the Volga Ural region and the North Caucasus. Moscow, St. Petersburg, and parts of Siberia also have sizable Muslim populations.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

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The constitution stipulates the state is secular and provides for religious freedom, guaranteeing the right to freedom of conscience and to freedom of religious worship, including the right to “profess, individually or jointly with others, any religion, or to profess no religion.” It guarantees the right of citizens “to freely choose, possess, and disseminate religious or other beliefs, and to act in conformity with them” and equality of rights and liberties regardless of attitude to religion. The constitution also bans any limitations of human rights on religious grounds and prohibits actions inciting religious hatred and strife.

The constitution states the country is secular without a state religion, and all religious associations are equal and separate from the state. The law acknowledges Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country’s four “traditional” religions, constituting an inseparable part of the country’s historical heritage. The law also recognizes the “special contribution” of Russian Orthodox Christianity to the country’s history and to the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture.

The law also provides the right to profess, or not to profess, any religion, individually or with others; the right to spread religious and other convictions; and the right to act in accordance with those convictions. The government may restrict these rights only to the degree necessary to protect the constitutional structure and security of the government; the morality, health, rights, and legal interests of persons; or the defense of the country. It is a violation of the law to force another person to disclose his or her attitude toward religion or to participate or not participate in worship, other religious ceremonies, the activities of a religious association, or religious instruction.

The law states that those who violate religious freedom will be “held liable under criminal, administrative, and other legislation.” The administrative code and the criminal code both punish obstruction of the right to freedom of conscience and belief with imprisonment for up to three years and fines of up to 200,000 rubles (\$2,710) or 500,000 rubles (\$6,776), depending upon which code governs the offense.

Local laws in the regions of Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan ban “extremist Islamic Wahhabism.”

Incitement to “religious discord” is punishable by up to four years in prison. Being a member of a banned religious association designated as extremist is punishable

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by up to seven years in prison. Under the criminal code, maximum fines and prison sentences for “actions directed to incite hatred or enmity” may be punished by fines of 100,000 to 300,000 rubles (\$1,355 to \$4,065), correctional work for up to one year, compulsory labor for up to four years, or imprisonment for up to four years. If these actions are committed with violence or by a group of individuals, the punishment is 300,000 to 500,000 rubles (\$4,065 to \$6,776), correctional work for one to two years, compulsory labor for up to five years, or imprisonment for up to five years.

The law criminalizes offending the religious feelings of believers, and actions “in public demonstrating clear disrespect for society and committed with the intent to insult the religious feelings of believers” are subject to fines of up to 300,000 rubles (\$4,065), compulsory labor for up to one year, or imprisonment for up to one year. If these actions are committed in places of worship, the punishment is a fine of up to 500,000 rubles (\$6,776), compulsory labor for up to three years, or a prison sentence of up to three years.

By law, officials may prohibit the activity of a religious association on grounds such as violating public order or engaging in “extremist activity.” The law criminalizes a broad spectrum of activities as extremism, including incitement to “religious discord” and “assistance to extremism,” but the law does not precisely define extremism or require that an activity include any element of violence or hatred to be classified as extremism.

The law creates three categories of religious associations with different levels of legal status and privileges: groups, local organizations, and centralized organizations. Religious groups or organizations may be subject to legal dissolution or deprivation of legal status by a court decision on grounds including violations of standards set forth in the constitution and of public security.

The “religious group” is the most basic unit and does not require state registration; however, when it first starts its activities, a religious group must notify authorities in the “location of the religious group activity,” typically the regional MOJ office. A religious group has the right to conduct worship services and rituals (but the law does not specify where and how) and to teach religion to its members. It does not have legal status to open a bank account, own property, issue invitations to foreign guests, publish literature, receive tax benefits, or conduct worship services in prisons, state-owned hospitals, or the armed forces. Individual members of a group may buy property for the group’s use, invite foreigners as personal guests to

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engage in religious instruction, and import religious material. According to the law, religious groups are able to rent public spaces and hold services.

A “local religious organization” (LRO) may register if it has at least 10 citizen members who are 18 or older and are permanent local residents. July amendments to the law, based on a 2009 ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) originating from a complaint by Jehovah’s Witnesses, canceled the 15-year residency requirement in the country for LROs to register. LROs have legal status and may open bank accounts, own property, issue invitation letters to foreign guests, publish literature, receive tax benefits, and conduct worship services in prisons, hospitals, and the armed forces.

“Centralized religious organizations” may register with the MOJ at the regional or federal level by combining at least three LROs of the same denomination. In addition to having the same legal rights as LROs, centralized organizations also have the right to open new LROs without a waiting period.

November 28 amendments to the law on religion introduced reporting requirements for religious organizations receiving funding from abroad. Organizations are required to include in the reports an account of their activity, a list of leaders, and plans for how the organization plans to use any funds or property obtained through foreign funding. Religious groups may not receive funding from abroad.

Foreign religious organizations (organizations created outside of the country under foreign laws) have the right to open offices for representational purposes, either independently or as part of Russian religious organizations previously established in the country. Foreign religious organizations may not form or found their own religious organizations in the country and may not operate houses of worship. Foreign religious organizations able to obtain the required number of local adherents may register as local religious groups.

The government (the MOJ or the General Procuracy Office) oversees a religious association’s compliance with the law and can review its financial and registration-related documents when conducting an inspection or investigation, send representatives (with advance notice) to attend its events, conduct an annual review of compliance with the association’s mission statement on file with the government, and review an association’s religious literature to decide whether the literature is extremist. The law contains extensive reporting requirements. For

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example, each religious association must supply the full names, addresses, and passport details of members belonging to its governing body. The law also requires details regarding the history, doctrine, and evolution of the religious association, including its attitudes toward family, marriage, and education. The government may obtain a court order to close those associations that do not comply with reporting or other requirements of the law.

The law allows the government to limit the places in which prayer and public religious observance may be conducted without prior approval. Religious organizations may conduct religious services and ceremonies without prior approval in buildings, lands, and facilities that these associations own or rent, as well as in cemeteries, crematoriums, places of pilgrimage, and living quarters. Baptism ceremonies in rivers and lakes, as well as services conducted in parks, open spaces, or courtyards, do not fall under this exemption. In these cases, religious organizations must seek government approval at least one week in advance and provide the government with the names of organizers and participants as well as copies of any written materials to be used at the event.

Republics in the North Caucasus have varying policies on wearing the hijab in public schools. Hijabs are banned in public schools in Stavropol, while in Chechnya, the law requires women to wear a hijab in all public spaces and buildings.

The law does not provide precise criteria on how materials may be classified as extremist. Within the MOJ, the Scientific Advisory Board reviews religious materials for extremism. Comprising academics and representatives of the four “traditional” religions, the board reviews materials referred by judicial or law enforcement authorities, private citizens, or organizations. If the board identifies material as extremist, it issues a nonbinding advisory opinion, which is then published on the MOJ website and forwarded to the prosecutor’s office for further investigation. In addition to the Scientific Advisory Board, regional experts also may review religious materials for extremism.

By law, publications declared extremist by a federal court are automatically added to the federal list of extremist materials. Courts order internet service providers to block access to websites containing materials listed on the federal list of extremist materials. There is no legal procedure for removal from the list even when a court declares an item is no longer classified as extremist, but lists are reviewed and re-issued on a regular basis, and publications may be dropped from lists.

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According to the administrative code, mass distribution, production, and possession with the aim of mass distribution of extremist materials by private individuals may result in 15 days' imprisonment or a fine of 1,000 to 3,000 rubles (\$14 to \$41), or 2,000 to 5,000 rubles (\$27 to \$68) for public officials, as well as the confiscation of these materials. Courts may suspend for 90 days the operations of legal entities found to be in possession of extremist materials and fine them 100,000 to one million rubles (\$1,355 to \$13,550). Individuals who have produced materials that are later found to be extremist are not punished retroactively but must cease production and distribution of those materials.

An October amendment to the criminal code makes it illegal to declare the key texts, or "holy books" of the four "traditional" religions extremist.

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

Religious education or civil ethics classes are compulsory in all secondary schools, public and private. Students may choose to take a course on one of the four "traditional" religions, a general world religions course, or a secular ethics course. Regional and municipal departments of education oversee this curriculum at the local level in accordance with their capacity to offer the courses, and according to the religious makeup of the given location. Amendments to the law, enacted in July based on a 2009 ruling of the ECHR in a case brought by the Jehovah's Witnesses, cancel the requirement for representatives of religious organizations to be licensed to conduct religious education activities in Sunday schools and home schooling. Any other state or private school has to be licensed to teach religious courses.

A Ministry of Defense chaplaincy program requires members of a religious group to comprise at least 10 percent of a military unit before an official chaplain of that group is appointed. Chaplains are not enlisted or commissioned, but are classified as assistants to the commander. Chaplains are full-time employees of the Ministry of Defense, paid out of the defense budget. The program allows for chaplains from the four "traditional" religions only, and calls for at least 250 chaplains.

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The Office of the Director of Religious Issues within the Office of the Federal Human Rights Ombudsman handles complaints about the government dealing with religious freedom. The ombudsman can intercede on behalf of those who submit complaints, but cannot compel other government bodies to act, and cannot directly intervene in complaints not addressed against the government.

The law entitles individuals and organizations to take religious freedom cases to the ECHR in Strasbourg. The state must pay compensation to a person whose rights were violated as determined by the ECHR and ensure his or her rights are restored as far as possible. In December, however, President Putin signed legislation allowing the Constitutional Court to determine whether or not judgments by international and regional courts, such as the ECHR, can be carried out consistent with the Russian constitution.

There is compulsory military service for men, but the constitution provides for alternative service for those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience, including religious belief. The standard military service period is 12 months, while alternative service is 18 months in a Ministry of Defense agency and 21 months in a nondefense agency. Failure to perform alternative service is punishable under the criminal code, with penalties ranging from an 80,000 ruble (\$1,084) fine to six months in prison.

By law religious associations may not participate in political campaigns or the activity of political parties and movements or provide material or other aid to political groups. This restriction applies to religious associations and not to their individual members.

The law states foreigners or stateless individuals whose presence in the country is deemed undesirable, or whose activities are deemed either extremist by the courts or fall under the law on combating money laundering and the financing of terrorism, are forbidden to become founders, members, or active participants in the activities of religious organizations.

The government's nonimmigrant visa rules allow foreign religious workers to spend no more than 90 of every 180 days in the country.

Under the criminal code, an individual convicted of committing an act of vandalism motivated by religious hatred or enmity may be sentenced to up to three years of compulsory labor or prison.



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The ROC and all members of the Public Chamber (a state institution made up of representatives of public associations) are granted the opportunity to review draft legislation pending before the State Duma on a case-by-case basis. No formal mechanism exists for permanent representation of religious organizations in the Public Chamber. Individuals have been invited into the Public Chamber from both “traditional” religions and minority denominations.

### Government Practices

Government authorities continued to detain, imprison, and fine members of minority religious groups. Police conducted raids on the private homes and places of worship of minority religious groups, disrupting religious services and confiscating religious publications they deemed “extremist.” Authorities revoked the status of some minority religious groups, forcing them to suspend their activities, and imposed a number of restrictions that infringed on the religious practices of other minority religious groups, in particular Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals, and Scientologists, including limiting their ability to obtain land and build places of worship. The MOJ declared a Jewish charity organization to be a “foreign agent.” The government granted privileges to the ROC that were accorded to no other religious group.

In June the Moscow District military court convicted eight people for cooperating with the international pan-Islamic political organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, issuing sentences ranging between approximately five and 10 years’ imprisonment in a penal colony. They were found guilty under provisions of the law dealing with participating in the activity of an extremist organization and organizing and participating in the activities of a terrorist organization.

In August police in Stavropol Kray detained five members of the Old Russian Ingilistic Church of Orthodox Old Believers-Ingilings, a neopagan group, on suspicion of inciting religious and ethnic hatred. Authorities said the detainees, whose organization’s activities they had previously declared extremist and banned, were spreading their teachings on the internet and holding regular meetings. The investigation was ongoing at year’s end.

In February Federal Security Service (FSB) officers detained more than 20 Muslims suspected of belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir in Ufa and a number of municipalities in Ufimsky and Chishminsky Districts of Bashkortostan, in

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connection with a criminal case under the section of the criminal code dealing with organizing the activities of a terrorist organization. FSB agents searched 30 homes, seizing what they deemed to be extremist literature, leaflets, and electronic media. The detainees included Rustem Latypov, the head of the Center for Research of Muslim Issues, an NGO, and Lenar Vakhitov, the leader of the For the Rights of the Muslims movement.

In August news media reported authorities charged Semyon Tykman, a teacher at an Ohr Avner Foundation-sponsored Jewish school, with “instigation of hatred and humiliation of human dignity.” If convicted, Tykman could face up to four years’ imprisonment. The Sverdlovsk Oblast branch of Russia’s Investigative Committee refused to provide further information on the case.

The FSB made more than 25 raids against suspected Hizb ut-Tahrir groups, confiscating what it said was extremist literature and communications equipment. In October the FSB detained 22 Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Moscow during a joint raid with the Interior Ministry. The SOVA Center, a research NGO focused on nationalism, xenophobia, and state-religious group relations, considered this case to be pretextual, in line with its view that terrorist accusations against Hizb ut-Tahrir followers were illegal if based solely on party activities such as reading literature or conducting meetings.

In November a court in Novosibirsk dismissed charges against 15 of 16 followers of Tablighi Jamaat who had been indicted for participating in the activity of an extremist organization, because the statute of limitations had expired. All 16 had been accused of disseminating ideas of a banned organization, recruiting followers, and participating in Tablighi Jamaat meetings. The trial of the remaining defendant, Dzhurahudzhaeva Ibrahim, a citizen of Tajikistan charged with illegally crossing the border, was pending at year’s end.

Two years after police raided two Muslim homes in Krasnoyarsk during celebrations of the end-of-Ramadan festival of Eid al-Fitr, prosecutors dropped criminal charges of “extremism” against Yelena Gerasimova, as the two-year statute of limitations to complete cases had expired. The other homeowner, Tatyana Guzenko, was fined three months’ average local wages (100,000 rubles, \$1,355). Also in Krasnoyarsk, the criminal trial of three other Muslim men on extremism charges began in July.

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In April Baptist pastor Pavel Pilipchuk was imprisoned for five days in Orel after refusing to pay a fine for organizing an open air meeting for worship without informing the city administration beforehand. He was initially fined 20,000 rubles (\$271) in 2014, and the court doubled the fine for nonpayment.

In January a member of the Church of Evangelical Christians-Baptists was arrested in Tomsk and charged with holding an unauthorized public event after police found him handing out copies of the New Testament and Psalms to people on the street. A court fined the man 10,000 rubles (\$136).

A 50-year-old woman in Krasnoyarsk was convicted of extremism and sentenced to pay a fine of 10,000 rubles (\$136) August 13 for reading and discussing works of Sunni Muslim theologian Said Nursi. She was also found to have materially supported the “organization” of Nurjular by conducting meetings. The government continued to ban Nurjular, which it stated was a religious association of followers of Nursi. Religious rights advocates and followers of Nursi said a Nurjular organization did not exist.

On November 23, the Moscow city court banned the activity of the Church of Scientology of Moscow and ordered that it be dissolved. The court accepted the MOJ’s argument that the term Scientology was trademarked and thus could not be considered a religious organization covered by the constitution’s freedom of religion clause. The MOJ also stated the Church of Scientology conducted its business in St. Petersburg, contrary to the charter identifying Moscow as the location of all activity.

Throughout the year, authorities attempted to dissolve a number of minority religious associations on grounds they were conducting extremist activity.

On August 5, the Supreme Court confirmed the Krasnodar Regional Court’s decision to ban Jehovah’s Witnesses in Krasnodar Territory. The Krasnodar Regional Court had ruled in March that a local Jehovah’s Witnesses group in Abinsk was an extremist organization and ordered it to disband. The court cited the distribution of brochures included on the federal list of extremist materials by one of the group’s members as a basis for its decision. Following the court ruling, the prosecutor warned the organization to discontinue the activity, but members continued to distribute religious literature. The group’s legal defense had appealed to the Supreme Court, arguing the decision was unlawful and unreasonable, and a violation of constitutional rights.

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In July the government banned JW.ORG, the official website of the Jehovah's Witnesses, when the MOJ added the website to the federal list of extremist materials. Internet providers throughout the country blocked access to the website, and it became a criminal offense to promote it from within the country.

According to the MOJ, the government approved 1,335 new registrations of religious organizations, most of which were ROC-affiliated.

In February the Supreme Court upheld a local government ban on hijabs in schools in the region of Mordovia, dismissing the appeal of the Muslim community of Mordovia. Mordovian Minister of Education Dmitry Livanov said he believed children wearing hijabs should study at religious schools. Representatives of the Mordovian Muslim community stated the ban violated their constitutional right to freedom of faith.

Across the country, police with the support of local authorities conducted raids on minority religious groups, in private homes and places of worship, confiscating and destroying religious literature and other property.

Religious minorities said local authorities utilized the country's anti-extremism laws to ban sacred and essential religious texts. The MOJ's list of extremist materials grew to 3,209 entries from 2,500 at the end of 2014, including 69 texts from the Jehovah's Witnesses, four from Falun Gong, and seven from Scientology. Items added to the list of extremist materials included neo-Nazi internet videos, the book *Islamic Aqeedah* by Jamila Muhammad Zina, and some materials by Archbishop of the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church Andrey Maklakov.

In October security forces raided the offices of the Church of Scientology of Moscow, stating the organization used office recording devices and video cameras to conduct surveillance of members of the church. Authorities opened a criminal investigation, which was continuing at year's end.

In a retrial on November 30, the Taganrog city court convicted 16 Jehovah's Witnesses of extremism, issuing suspended prison sentences to four Church elders and fines for all 16 defendants, ranging from 20,000 to 100,000 rubles (\$271 to \$1,355), which the court also suspended. In the court's previous July 2014 decision, the judge had convicted only the four Church elders and three others,

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finding the remaining nine Church members not guilty. The Rostov regional court had ordered a retrial in December 2014.

In December the prosecutor's office in Shakhti fined two Jehovah's Witnesses for proselytizing in the city's central park, stating they violated the law regulating meetings and failed to submit notification about a public event. The prosecutor's office stated Witnesses also displayed religious literature containing a reference to the banned Jehovah's Witnesses website. The Witnesses were fined 10,000 rubles (\$136) each and warned they could be held responsible for "extremist activity" if they continued their activities.

Authorities utilized laws protecting religious groups to punish individuals protesting against the ROC.

In September a court found a Kaluga resident guilty of "mockery of the institution of monasticism" for posting on his VKontakte social network page pictures "designed to discredit the Christian faith, church traditions...and the very institution of the [ROC] Church." The man pleaded guilty to the charges and received a 350,000 ruble fine (\$5,054).

In November a court in Arkhangelsk convicted a resident for "inciting social hatred against religion" after investigators found he had published texts on his Twitter account directed against the ROC. The court sentenced him to 120 hours of compulsory labor.

In August a court in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk ruled as extremist a 32-page book entitled *The Prayer [Dua] to God: Its Meaning and Place in Islam* for containing "a concealed appeal to commit illegal extremist actions" and stating the "superiority of one group of people to other people on the basis of their attitude to religion, their affiliation with Islam." The ruling prompted protests from the Muslim community, including the Chechen Head (of government), Ramzan Kadyrov. In September Muslims in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk planned to hold demonstrations against the ruling, but cancelled the rallies due to pressure from the FSB, according to a Russian Far East Islamic community news portal. In November a higher court reversed the original court's ruling.

In May the Kirovsky District Prosecutor's Office of Yekaterinburg seized books on Jewish traditions and training notebooks from the library of Or Avner, a Jewish grammar school, in order to examine them for "the presence of extremist materials

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in these books.” According to Rabbi Zelig Ashkenazi, approximately 100 books were seized.

In September the Bashkortostan’s prosecutors office declared 13 Hizb ut-Tahrir texts extremist.

On November 18, the principal of the private English school PM - Studio in Chelyabinsk was fined 2,000 rubles (\$27) for circulating the book *What is Scientology?* which the MOJ had listed as “extremist material” in 2010, along with several other books by Scientology’s founder.

In August following raids on two mosques, prosecutors in Mordovia seized literature included on the federal list of extremist materials. The titles of the books and pamphlets were not made public.

In January journalists in Kamchatka reported they received a letter from the Kamchatka Krai agency supervising personal data protection, mass communications, and information technology advising them not to publish caricatures of religious figures or reference hyperlinks to other media that published such caricatures. Kamchatka officials warned it would be a violation of federal law “on countering extremist activity” to publish such materials. As of August customs agents had seized at least 10.5 million books and pamphlets from Jehovah’s Witnesses throughout the country, according to a representative of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The representative stated that, beginning in March, the government had stopped the importation of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ liturgical books, based on the suspicion such books might contain extremist material. According to the representative, the government did not recognize the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ version of the Bible as falling under the protection of the October amendment making it illegal to declare key texts of the four traditional religions as extremist. He said seized literature included 4,000 copies of the Bible, of which 1,881 were in the Ossetian language.

In September an Arkhangelsk regional court dismissed an extremism case against Jehovah’s Witnesses members from Kotlas. Following a search of a Jehovah’s Witnesses’ church, authorities had seized 632 copies of religious books they said were on the federal list of extremist materials. The court determined the publications were not extremist in nature.

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Local officials continued to prevent religious organizations from obtaining land and denied construction permits for houses of worship. In some cases, authorities also announced plans to confiscate places of worship. In at least one publicized case, local authorities worked with a minority religious group to approve the construction of a new facility.

The Moscow Cathedral Mosque opened September 23 with a ceremony attended by President Vladimir Putin, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The facility, built with mostly private funds, could accommodate approximately 10,000 people during services, but Muslim leaders stated Moscow's four mosques were inadequate for Moscow's estimated two million Muslims. Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin continued to refuse permits for new mosque construction and the Moscow Muslim community continued to speak out about a lack of mosques in the city.

In July authorities in the city of Ussuriisk began the process of confiscating a newly built mosque, citing a "failure to register" the property, and ordering the mosque be disconnected from the city power grid. Local Muslims said the city intended to auction the property and they had received an invitation to bid on it from the city.

In September St. Petersburg Governor Georgyj Poltavchenko cancelled the construction permit for a new ROC church in the city's Malinovka Park. City officials cited local residents' objections and legal violations by the project's investor as reasons for the cancellation and offered the ROC a different site in the same district.

The federal agency in charge of consumer rights announced plans to appeal to the Supreme Court to revoke the construction permit for a Lutheran church that had received approval to build a church on the grounds of a park in Yekaterinburg. According to the government, the church should not be built in the park because the grounds, which contained an abandoned cemetery, were of historic and cultural significance. The Lutherans argued the construction fully conformed to the law governing the transfer of religious property from municipalities to religious organizations, since the Lutheran community had previously held services in the park. In August the Sverdlovsk Oblast vice prime minister criticized opponents of the construction of the church, calling them "extremists," and accusing them of "creating interethnic and interconfessional tensions."

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The Lutheran Community Council in Yekaterinburg filed a complaint with the regional prosecutor's office, stating protesters who put up a sign reading "Hitler was also a Lutheran" and painted Nazi symbols on the existing Lutheran Church were inciting conflict. In December the mayor of Yekaterinburg prohibited the construction of the church from going forward.

In August Stanislav Bashankaev, a ruling United Russia Party member, announced an agreement with the Chechen deputy minister of economic and territorial development and trade to build the first Buddhist temple in the North Caucasus. The facility was to be named "Paradise Pagoda" and built in Grozny, the Chechen capital.

Unlike in previous years, when only minority religious organizations faced difficulties in obtaining restitution of properties previously confiscated, the ROC reported difficulty in reclaiming its former properties.

In September the St. Petersburg governor's office rejected a proposed return of the iconic St. Isaac's Cathedral (currently a museum) to the ROC. Officials cited public opposition to the transfer and the city's inability to finance maintenance of the historic building without income from admission fees. Church representatives said the decision was illegal and planned to appeal it.

In October the NGO Union of Museums of Russia proposed the introduction of a temporary moratorium on the transfer back to the ROC of former religious buildings currently serving as museums.

Following accusations of harassment against Muslim prisoners in Kurgan, a July probe by the Kurgan Public Supervisory Commission revealed Muslim inmates were subjected to various forms of religious discrimination. The prison administration banned inmates from attending religious services at the on-site mosque and confiscated Qurans and prayer rugs. Some Muslim prisoners were held in solitary confinement under "contrived" pretenses, according to a relative of one of the prisoners. Human rights activists reported the prison's Orthodox church was always open, but the mosque was frequently closed. Authorities prohibited copies of the Quran in the original Arabic in the prison, stating they needed to examine the contents for extremism.

While neither the constitution nor the law accorded explicit privileges or advantages to the ROC, in practice the government cooperated more closely with



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the ROC than with other religious organizations. The ROC continued to benefit from a number of formal and informal agreements with government ministries, giving it greater access than other religious organizations to public institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, police, and the military forces. The government also provided the ROC patriarch with security guards and access to official vehicles, a privilege accorded no other religious organization. According to a report by the Center for Economic and Political Reforms, a local NGO established in 2015, major presidential grants benefited organizations either directly controlled by or having ties to the ROC as a form of “hidden government support” for the ROC. The report stated the government allocated at least 63 grants totaling more than 256 million rubles (\$3.5 million) from 2013-2015 to ROC-related organizations that were close to the government.

In October the FSB ordered a prominent Tibetan Buddhist lama, Shivalha Rinpoche, who had lived in Tuva for 11 years, to leave the country. In the expulsion order the FSB cited the law regulating entries and departures from national territory, noting foreign citizens could be declared “undesirable” if they posed “a genuine threat to national defense and security, to public order, or to public health,” or if their expulsion ensured “the protection of the constitutional system, of the morals, rights, and legal interests of others.” Shivalha told media “last year, FSB officials came to one of [my] lectures,” where “they listened and then suggested that [I] give fewer sermons.” Shivalha departed the country October 16, despite an announcement by the Tuva government that it would appeal the expulsion order to the Supreme Court.

In September during the Rosh Hashanah holiday, the MOJ designated the Jewish Community Cultural Center Hesed-Teshuva in Ryazan as a “foreign agent.” The cultural center received donations from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). The finding required the organization to indicate this designation on all its publications or face fines of at least 300,000 rubles (\$4,065.) In the past, the connotations of such a designation often hindered the ability of organizations to carry on their work. The MOJ website stated the cultural center was designated as a “foreign agent” due to its “political activities,” which it described as “conducting public events, shaping public opinion.” The cultural center subsequently posted on its website and included in its publications the legally-required language indicating its inclusion on the “foreign agent” list.

In June city authorities in the central city of Nizhnevartovsk wrote several yoga studios, asking them to stop holding classes in municipal buildings in an effort to

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“prevent the spread of new religious cults and movements.” Local authorities scheduled consultations on July 7 to determine whether yoga classes should be permitted in municipal buildings. By year’s end there was no information as to whether the authorities had reached a final determination on this issue.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were attacks on religious adherents resulting in death or severe injury. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts or slogans during nationalist demonstrations. Incidents of vandalism of synagogues, cemeteries, and mosques continued. Because ethnicity and religion are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to the SOVA Center, through June there had been 12 acts of violence recorded during the year directed against religious groups.

There was a series of killings of imams in the North Caucasus, which press reports said highlighted a possible power struggle between Muslim groups. Imam Magomed Khidirov was shot and killed September 9 in front of a local mosque in the Khasavyurt District of Dagestan. According to investigators, two men in masks carried out the killing when Khidirov was on his way to morning prayers. The government’s Investigative Committee, a federal-level security body, told the press the imam was killed because of his “professional religious activities.” Some commentators speculated Khidirov was murdered due to his adherence to Sufi Islam. The people said to be the imam’s killers were later killed in a shootout with law enforcement. A second Dagestani imam, Suleiman Kokreksky, was killed in a December 3 drive-by shooting.

On July 16, an unknown assailant shot Sergey Ustinov, the founder and director of the Museum of the History of Jews in Russia, in the head with an air pistol outside his office in Moscow. Ustinov survived the shooting. Although the motive for the attack was unknown, media speculated anti-Semitism may have played a role.

On February 5 in Nizhny Novgorod, a Jehovah’s Witness in the process of proselytizing door-to-door was severely beaten by a resident of a home. The victim was hospitalized. A second Jehovah’s Witness accompanying the victim was insulted but unharmed.

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On February 6 in Moscow, a man approached Jehovah's Witnesses at an information stand, told them to leave, and then shot an air gun at them.

On February 12 in Kostomushka, two female Jehovah's Witnesses proselytizing door-to-door in an apartment complex were chased onto the street by a possibly intoxicated resident. The resident grabbed one of the women, kicking her repeatedly. The victim did not go to the police.

According to a report by SOVA, on February 12 in Maksatikha, Tver Region, an Orthodox priest, Vitaliy Martyniuk, and several women insulted Jehovah's Witnesses at an information stand. They threatened to pour boiling water on them and attack them with dogs. The priest called the police, stating the Jehovah's Witnesses "called for war." The SOVA report said police at the local precinct supported the Jehovah's Witnesses, telling the officer on the scene they had a right to proselytize.

The SOVA Center reported 44 acts of vandalism motivated by religious, ethnic, or ideological hatred across 27 regions of the country during the year. Acts of vandalism against religious sites included at least two against Jehovah's Witnesses' facilities, one against a pagan site, two attacks against an Orthodox church, three against mosques, and two against synagogues.

On January 12, vandals painted obscene language and Orthodox crosses on Memorial Mosque on Poklonnaya Hill in Moscow's Victory Park.

On May 9, in Berezniki in the Perm Region, unidentified persons painted crosses on the wall of a mosque by the entrance and a swastika on the side of the building that housed the mosque.

On April 20 (Adolf Hitler's birthday) in Vologda, unidentified vandals painted a swastika and wrote insults of a religious and nationalistic nature on the fence of the Imam-Khatib Vologda Cathedral Mosque Al-Juma, according to the mosque's imam.

On April 27 in Kurgan, vandals spray-painted abusive language and a message inciting violence on the walls of a Jehovah's Witness building. On January 30 in Serov, Sverdlovsk Region, unknown individuals threw bottles of champagne at a liturgical Jehovah's Witnesses building, shattering two windows. Church members reported the incident to the police.

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On April 15 in Sosnovka park in the Vyborg District of St. Petersburg, four of 15 wooden totems of Chansyn, traditional Korean spirits, were chopped down at night. An eyewitness wrote on Vkontakte that one of the vandals described it as “a special operation,” adding that “our Orthodox state doesn’t need this.” The wooden totems were made by Korean artists and donated to the city during the 300th anniversary of the founding of St. Petersburg in 2013.

On the night of October 24, vandals painted graffiti on the walls of the Orthodox Church of the Great Martyr George in Saratov. The abbot went to the police, who opened an investigation of the incident as a hate crime.

A poll by the independent polling organization Levada Center published in August reported 7 percent of respondents believed “Jews should have a limited presence in Russia.”

In March unidentified individuals desecrated a monument in Volgograd marking the site of a mass killing of Jews by the Nazis during World War II. The monument had previously suffered similar defacements. The Russian Jewish Congress blamed the government for allowing ultranationalist groups to hold conferences and spread their ideology.

On April 8 during Passover, unidentified persons fired air guns into an Arkhangel'sk synagogue under construction, breaking nine glass windows and leaving anti-Semitic graffiti.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives met with a range of government officials, including Ambassador Konstantin Dolgov, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Special Representative for Human Rights, to discuss religious freedom issues. Embassy officials raised consular cases involving possible violations of religious freedom of U.S. citizens with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Embassy and other U.S. officials discussed religious freedom issues with the leaders of both “traditional” and minority religious groups. The Ambassador met with ROC Patriarch Kirill in October and Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the ROC’s Department of External Relations, in September to discuss ROC-state

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relations, interfaith cooperation, religion in society, and ways to promote religious tolerance. In October the Ambassador invited representatives from religious faiths to a reception to encourage religious freedom and tolerance in honor of the visit of a U.S. Christian evangelist leader to Moscow.

In February the Ambassador met with Rabbi Berel Lazar, Chairman of the Federation of Jewish Communities, to discuss the state of the Jewish community in the country. The Ambassador also had similar meetings throughout the year with representatives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the World Jewish Congress, and the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry.

In January and September the Ambassador met with Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gaynutdin, Chair of the Russia Muftis Council and the Religious Board of Muslims of the Russian Federation, to discuss the state of Islam in the country.

In January the Ambassador met with Archbishop Ivan Yurkovich, the Papal Nuncio, to discuss the state of Roman Catholicism in the country and the relationship between the Catholic Church and the ROC.

Embassy officials met with U.S. missionaries and religious workers to inquire about their experiences with immigration, registration, and police authorities, as well as with local populations, as a gauge of religious freedom.

Representatives from the embassy and the consulates in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, and Vladivostok met regularly with rabbis and leaders of the Jewish community, muftis and other Islamic leaders, Protestant pastors, Catholic priests, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, Falun Gong adherents, Hare Krishnas, and Buddhists. These discussions covered developments related to religion and religious freedom, including legislation, government practices, and specific religious freedom cases.

Embassy and other U.S. government officials also met with civil society and human rights leaders on religious freedom issues, including legislation, government practices, and country-specific cases of religion and religious freedom. The groups included Forum 18, Portal-Credo, the Slavic Center for Law and Justice, the Institute of Europe, and the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis.