



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**

**Hearing on  
“Human Rights in Russia on the 5th Anniversary of the Nemtsov Assassination”  
Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

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10:00 a.m.  
2200 Rayburn House Office Building

Thank you, Co-Chair McGovern and Co-Chair Smith, for holding this hearing on human rights in Russia and for inviting the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, to testify.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government body that is dedicated to promoting the universal right to freedom of religion or belief around the world. USCIRF is led by nine Commissioners who are appointed by the White House and the leadership of both chambers of Congress from both parties, supported by a non-partisan professional staff of about 20. USCIRF seeks to defend religious freedom internationally for people of all faiths, and for those who hold no faith at all. Throughout the year, we monitor religious freedom conditions abroad and make policy recommendations to the President, Department of State, and Congress.

Russia’s malign activities around the globe are clearly evident, yet its systematic, ongoing, and egregious repression of religious freedom is less well known. The government maintains, frequently updates, and enforces an array of laws that restrict religious freedom, including a 1996 religion law, a 2002 law on combating extremism, and more recent laws on blasphemy and “stirring up religious hatred”. These laws are typified by their vagueness and give Russian authorities broad powers to define and prosecute any religious speech or activity, or ban any religious literature, that they deem harmful.

The religion law, for example, sets strict registration requirements on religious groups and empowers state officials to impede their activity. It also broadly defines and prohibits “missionary activities,” including preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and even answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites. The anti-extremism law lacks a clear definition of extremism, and the use or advocacy of violence is not a prerequisite for such a designation. Because virtually any speech or activity can be prosecuted, the law is a powerful way to intimidate members of religious communities. In addition to individual

prosecutions, religious communities can be financially blacklisted or liquidated. In short, any religious speech or activity not explicitly sanctioned by the authorities has the potential to be criminalized, depending on the whims of local law enforcement and prosecutors.

Among the groups most brutally targeted under these laws in recent years are the Jehovah's Witnesses. Since the Russian government banned the Jehovah's Witness community as "extremist" in 2017, it has been reported that 313 individual Jehovah's Witnesses are under investigation and facing criminal charges. As of today, 35 people are in prison, 25 are under house arrest and 29 have been convicted. And these violations are escalating, spreading throughout the country and even across its borders. The Jehovah's Witnesses reported 489 raids on the private homes of Russian members in 2019, and so far in 2020, Russian law enforcement has already raided over 70 Jehovah's Witness homes across Russia and within the territory of Russian-occupied Crimea.

The Russian government also uses its extremism laws to prosecute Muslims, particularly adherents of the Islamic missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat and readers of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi, and Scientologists for peaceful religious activity.

Russia's repression of religious groups also extends to Russia-occupied Crimea. When Russian forces invaded Crimea in 2014, they brought with them and implemented Russia's repressive laws and policies on religion, which has resulted in the prosecution of peaceful religious activity and bans on groups that were legal in Crimea under Ukrainian law.

The Muslim community in occupied Crimea has been targeted in particularly vicious ways through persistent harassment, mass surveillance of mosques, registration requirements to celebrate religious holidays such as Ramadan, and raids on homes. In March 2019, for example, heavily armed security personnel stormed the homes of multiple Crimean Tatars, arresting 24 people under charges of terrorism. Authorities allegedly tortured four men and planted evidence, including Islamic literature banned in Russia. All of these people were affiliated with a secular human rights group opposed to the Russian occupation.

USCIRF recommended in 2017, 2018, and 2019 that the State Department designate Russia as a "country of particular concern", or CPC, under IRFA. We also have recommended that the U.S. government impose targeted sanctions on responsible Russian government agencies and officials by freezing those individuals' assets and/or banning their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations.

The State Department has not designated Russia as a CPC, although in 2018 and 2019 it placed Russia on its "Special Watch List" of religious freedom violators. Additionally, in September 2019, the U.S. State Department imposed U.S. visa bans on two high-ranking regional officers in Russia's Investigative Committee for torturing seven Jehovah's Witnesses in the city of Surgut.

In closing, I would like to thank USCIRF's Russia policy analyst, Jason Morton, who was not able to be here today, for his extensive research documenting Russia's persecution of religious communities. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to your questions.