

KEY FINDINGS

During 2017, Russia showed no signs of wavering from the repressive behavior it demonstrated in 2016 that led USCIRF to recommend its designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for the first time in April 2017. The government continued to target “nontraditional” religious minorities, including Jehovah’s Witnesses and Scientologists, with fines, detentions, and criminal charges under the pretext of combating extremism. Most notably, the Jehovah’s Witnesses were banned outright, as was their translation of the Bible, and their followers persecuted nationwide. Adherents of the Islamic missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat, members of the Islamic fundamentalist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, and readers of the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi were sentenced to prison terms of between three and 18 years for peaceful religious expression. In the North Caucasus, security forces

acted with total impunity, arresting and kidnapping persons suspected of even tangential links to Islamic militancy. Russia is the sole state to have not only continually intensified its repression of religious freedom since USCIRF commenced monitoring it, but also expanded its repressive policies to the territory of a neighboring state by means of military invasion. A visit by USCIRF to Ukraine in December 2017 confirmed that in Russian-occupied Crimea, the Russian authorities continued to kidnap, torture, and imprison Crimean Tatar Muslims at will, while Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, often referred to as the Donbas, continued to hold expropriated church buildings and intimidate religious communities. Based on these particularly severe violations, in 2018 USCIRF again finds that Russia merits designation as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Russia as a CPC under IRFA;
- Work to establish a binding agreement with the Russian government, under section 405(c) of IRFA, on steps it can take to be removed from the CPC list; should negotiations fail, impose sanctions, as stipulated in IRFA;
- Urge the Russian government to amend its extremism law in line with international human rights standards, such as adding criteria on the advocacy or use of violence;
- Press the Russian government to ensure that laws such as the extremism, religion, and foreign agents laws are not used to limit the religious activities of peaceful religious groups, and to implement European Court of Human Rights decisions relating to freedom of belief;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the “specially designated nationals” list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Raise concerns on freedom of religion or belief in multilateral settings and meetings, including at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and urge the Russian government to agree to visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the OSCE Representatives on Tolerance, and to establish an international monitoring presence in occupied Crimea;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the release of prisoners of conscience, and press the Russian government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith;
- Ensure the U.S. Embassy, including at the ambassadorial level, maintains appropriate contacts with human rights activists, and that the ambassador meets with representatives of religious minorities;
- Encourage increased U.S. funding for Voice of America (VOA) Russian and Ukrainian Services and for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s (RFE/RL) Russian and Ukrainian Services, so that uncensored information about events inside Russia, including those related to religious freedom, continues to be disseminated;
- Call on the Russian government to stop persecuting religious minorities in the occupied areas of Crimea and Donbas, beginning by reversing the ban on the Crimean Tatar Mejlis and abolishing repressive religious registration requirements; and
- Include violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights in all relevant discussions with the Russian government over Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and support of rebels in the Donbas, and work closely with European and other allies to apply pressure through advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Russian Federation

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Federation

POPULATION

142,000,000

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

68% Russian Orthodox

7% Muslim

25% Other (including Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, and Baha'is)

*U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

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

The anti-extremism law lacks a clear definition of extremism, and the use or advocacy of violence is not necessary for activity to be classified as extremist. Because virtually any speech can be prosecuted, the law is a powerful way to intimidate members of religious and other communities. Books may be placed by court order on a list of banned materials. Religious and

other communities can be financially blacklisted or liquidated, and individuals can be subjected to criminal prosecution for a social media post.

In July 2016, the Russian government adopted a package of amendments, known as the Yarovaya Law, that significantly enhanced the scope and penalties of the religion and anti-extremism laws. The religion law now broadly defines "missionary activities" to forbid preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and even answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites. With no independent judiciary in Russia, any religious speech or activity not explicitly sanctioned by the authorities now has the potential to be criminalized, depending on the whims of local law enforcement and prosecutors. Those convicted of extremism are now subject to up to six years' imprisonment, major fines equivalent to several years of average annual wages, and/or bans on professional employment.

The Federal List of Extremist Materials, maintained by the Ministry of Justice, is a key feature of the extremism law. Any Russian court may add texts to the list; as of the end of 2017 there were over 4,000 items on that list, including many with no apparent connections to militancy.

Several other laws punish peaceful religious expression, nonconformity, or human rights activity. These

include a 2012 law that effectively bans unsanctioned public protests, a 2012 law that requires nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that receive funds from abroad to register as “foreign agents,” and a 2013 amendment that criminalizes offense to religious sentiments.

In March 2014, Russia illegally annexed the Ukrainian Black Sea peninsula of Crimea. Almost all of the 300,000 Crimean Tatars, an indigenous Muslim ethnic group, oppose Russian occupation owing to their Soviet-era experiences—Joseph Stalin deported the entire community to Central Asia in 1944, resulting in the death of up to half of the Crimean Tatar population. In March 2014, Russian-backed separatist forces also began asserting control over the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk, sparking ongoing warfare that has claimed over 10,000 lives as of the end of 2017. In December 2016, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution recognizing the Russian Federation as an “occupying power” in Crimea and condemning “serious violations and abuses” in the occupied areas, including restrictions on freedom of religion or belief.

In December 2017, USCIRF Commissioners and staff traveled to Kyiv, Ukraine, to gather information on the situation for religious groups in Russian-occupied Crimea and southeastern Ukraine.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

The Extremism Law and the Jehovah’s Witnesses

In April 2017, at the request of the Ministry of Justice, the Russian Supreme Court banned the Jehovah’s Witnesses as an extremist organization. This decision, which was upheld on appeal in July 2017, marked the first time Russia banned a centralized religious organization, and effectively criminalized all Jehovah’s Witness activity in the country. In August 2017, the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, the translation of the Bible used by Jehovah’s Witnesses, was itself banned. Since the ban, Jehovah’s Witnesses were subjected to a nationwide campaign of discrimination, mistreatment, and expropriation. Dozens of prayer meetings were raided and

participants threatened with prosecution. Witnesses were dismissed from their jobs, schoolchildren and their parents were interrogated and threatened, and the community’s buildings and property were burned and vandalized. Jehovah’s Witnesses also were no longer permitted to request alternative service as conscientious objectors and were ordered to report for military service.

At year’s end, Jehovah’s Witness Dennis Christensen, a Danish citizen arrested in May during a prayer service in the city of Orel, remained detained, awaiting trial. Another Jehovah’s Witness, Arkady Akopyan, has been on trial since May 2017 in the province of Kabardino-Balkaria; the two prosecution witnesses against him claim he encouraged fellow believers to distribute religious literature, but his lawyer pointed out that both prosecution witnesses were far away from Witness buildings at the time of the alleged infraction, according to cellphone records.

In November 2017, the Russian Supreme Court ruled that children may be taken away from parents who have involved them in extremist activity, which would include religious activities of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. At the end of the reporting period, the Russian authorities were finalizing the legal steps to seize all property belonging to Jehovah’s Witness communities, including their headquarters buildings outside of St. Petersburg. Although many of these buildings were registered under foreign ownership to prevent their seizure, Russian courts have simply invalidated these transfers of title.

The Extremism Law and Other Nontraditional Religious Groups

In June 2017, Russian security services raided the St. Petersburg headquarters of the Church of Scientology

and arrested five members, including director Galina Shurinova, on charges of “illegal business operations” and extremism. As of the end of the year, the two male defendants—Sakhil Aliev and Ivan Matsytski—were still in jail, while the three female defendants—Shurinova, Anastasiya Terentyeva, and Konstantia Saulkova—were under house arrest

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awaiting trial. The Russian human rights organization Memorial has recognized all five as political prisoners.

Anti-Missionary Punishments

Since the Yarovaya Law was passed, the Russian authorities have used the amended Administrative Code to punish a large number of religious believers for sharing their beliefs. According to Forum 18, from November 2016 to July 2017, 133 fines were levied against individuals or their religious communities, the majority of them Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses. At least eight foreign citizens were ordered deported for violating prohibitions against missionary activity.

The Campaign against Extremism and Muslims

As in the other former Soviet countries reported on by USCIRF, the harshest punishments and greatest scrutiny are reserved for Muslims whom the government deems extremist. In the case of Russia, the preoccupation with Muslims can be attributed to the long and complicated relationship with restive Muslim-majority provinces in the northern Caucasus; to recent geopolitical factors, including the attempt to portray Russian intervention in Syria as primarily driven by counterterrorism concerns; and to the need of the security services to stay relevant by fabricating cases, a practice inherited from the Soviet era. The disparity in treatment is clear in the ratio of persons deprived of liberty for exercising religious freedom, according to a list compiled by Memorial at the end of the reporting period; of 86 persons detained, only six—three of whom are under house arrest—are non-Muslims.

Characteristic “soft targets” for the Russian security services are readers of the Qu’ranic commentary of Said Nursi, a Turkish Islamic revivalist theologian and ethnic Kurd who advocated for the modernization of Islamic learning. Although Nursi followers have been targets of Russian law enforcement since the early 2000s, the severity of the persecution has increased. Nursi readers are typically charged with belonging to a supposed “Nurdzhular” terrorist movement, which was officially banned in 2008 as extremist but is widely believed to

be a fiction invented to prosecute Nursi adherents. In June 2017, Yevgenii Kim was sentenced to three years and nine months in prison for reading Nursi’s works—the first prison sentence for this activity since 2015. In November 2017, three men from Dagestan were sentenced to between three and four years in prison for the same crime. Memorial has recognized all four men as political prisoners.

Nevertheless, the number of Muslims arrested for reading Nursi’s works pales in comparison to the number arrested for belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir, an Islamic fundamentalist movement banned in Russia. Sixty of the 86 prisoners on Memorial’s list were arrested for affiliation with Hizb ut-Tahrir; throughout 2017, at least 19 men were sentenced to prison terms of between 10 and 19 years. In April 2017, a Moscow imam, Makhmud Velitov, was sentenced to three years in prison on charges that he had encouraged worshippers to pray for the memory of a murdered member of Hizb ut-Tahrir.

In 2017, at least 14 members of the Islamic missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat were sentenced to prison terms of between one year and

nine months and four years and seven months. One man received a suspended prison sentence.

Other Muslims were targeted for guilt by association or because of pressure to work for the security services. For example, in August 2017, RFE reported on the case of Russian citizen Parviz Muradov, an ethnic Tajik who was kidnapped from his place of work by the Russian security service (FSB) in June and held for 34 days on charges of “using profanity in a public space,” while his captors demanded that he spy on a former cellmate suspected of being an Islamic radical. Since then, Muradov has been unable to leave the country and lives in constant fear of being charged as an extremist. In February 2017, Kavkaz Reali, the Caucasus Service of RFE/RL, reported on a similar case of a young ethnic Ingush woman and her husband, an ethnic Russian convert to Islam, who were arrested in January while attempting to travel to the country of Georgia on their honeymoon. Although they were charged with drug trafficking, their detention is believed to be connected

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to the alleged extremist beliefs of the family member of an acquaintance.

Blasphemy Law Enforcement

One consequence of the government-MPROC relationship has been the 2013 blasphemy law, enacted in response to a 2012 political protest in Moscow's main MPROC cathedral that offended many Orthodox believers. The law imposes up to three years' imprisonment or the confiscation of up to three years' salary for "offending religious convictions and feelings." In May 2017, social media activist Ruslan Sokolovsky was convicted of blasphemy for having played the popular smartphone game *Pokémon Go* in an MPROC cathedral in Yekaterinburg in protest against the blasphemy law. He was given a suspended prison sentence of three and a half years—later reduced to two years and three months—and placed on the Finance Ministry's list of extremists and terrorists, blocking his use of the banking system. In August 2017, a man from Sochi was fined for posting satirical images involving Jesus on his social media account.

In February 2017, after almost a year of proceedings, the blasphemy trial of social media user Viktor Krasnov was terminated due to the statute of limitations. Krasnov was indicted after he engaged in an argument over religion in 2014 on the Russian social network VKontakte in a Stavropol-area discussion group. Krasnov posted that there was "no God" and that the Bible was a "collection of Jewish fairy tales," for which he was denounced to the authorities.

There is some evidence of the blasphemy laws being used to punish political dissent. In April 2017 in the Siberian city of Irkutsk, Dmitrii Litvin, a young anticorruption activist who had been involved in nationwide protests organized by opposition blogger Aleksei Navalny, was arrested and charged with blasphemy, allegedly because of a photo on his social media account of him making a profane gesture at a church. Litvin and five fellow activists were detained in nighttime raids on their apartments by heavily armed police. As of the end of 2017, Litvin was under a gag order.

The Situation in the North Caucasus

While legal repression is the norm in much of Russia, Memorial has described the situation within Russia's North Caucasus area, particularly Dagestan and Chechnya, as "legalized terror." There, anyone suspected of practicing "nontraditional" Islam or of having any link to the ongoing Islamic insurgency is at risk of being disappeared by the security services. Ironically, as Maria Kravchenko of the SOVA Center has pointed out in a report commissioned by USCIRF, Russia's anti-extremism legislation is used less often in the North Caucasus simply because a state of virtual martial law exists there, and hence there is less need for "peacetime" laws. The Main Office for Countering Extremism of the FSB, known as "Center E," has particularly wide latitude in policing and intelligence gathering in the North Caucasus.

In Chechnya, the Kremlin-appointed leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, oversees a private army that engages in mass violations of human rights, conducts collective reprisals against the families of suspects, and suppresses all dissent. Kadyrov also enforces his own views of Islam, under which women must wear Islamic dress and may be forced into illegal polygamous marriages. Throughout 2017, Chechen security forces are believed to have kidnapped dozens of people, some of whom

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were summarily executed; Kadyrov's tight control over the province and his practice of retaliating against extended families makes it impossible to know the true number of these kidnappings or the guilt of the detainees.

Shortly after the end of the reporting period, in January 2018, the director of Memorial in Chechnya, Oyub Titiev, was arrested and charged with drug possession; that same month, the offices of Memorial in the neighboring province of Ingushetia were burned, as was the car of the hired driver who chauffeured Memorial representatives visiting from outside the region. In January 2017, Kadyrov's deputy publicly threatened to "cut out the tongue" of Grigory Shvedov, the editor of the independent Caucasian Knot News Agency, which often reports on religious issues.

In Dagestan, kidnapping by the security forces is a regular occurrence, as is the discovery of the corpses of kidnapping victims. The need to demonstrate success against Islamic terrorism in the North Caucasus has led to the targeting of both peaceful Muslim dissidents and innocent bystanders with no connection to politics. Violations of religious freedom also result from the use of “prophylactic measures” such as the maintenance of blacklists of alleged extremists, including secular dissidents, and frequent raids on Salafist mosques. In September 2017, the son of the imam at the Tangim Salafist mosque in Makhachkala was the victim of an attempted kidnapping. Although the provincial authorities announced in June 2017 that they had abolished the blacklist, Caucasian Knot reported that some people believe the abolition to be a ruse.

Dagestan is notorious for the intertwining of business, politics, religion, and score settling. In one example, in July 2017, the Dagestani human rights activist Khiramagomed Magomedov was sentenced to nine years in prison for membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir. However, other Russian human rights activists believe his sentence was in retaliation for his civil society work, and Memorial has recognized him as a political prisoner.

In June 2017, a court in the Krasnodar region fined ethnic Cherkess activist Ruslan Gvashev and issued him a suspended sentence of eight days in jail for having publicly performed a commemoration ritual of the traditional Adyge Khabze belief system at a tree sacred to the Cherkess people. According to the court, this contravened the law against illegal public gatherings.

Official Attitudes toward Religious Minorities

In November 2017, RFE reported on a conference attended by senior law enforcement officials and the Russian Orthodox hierarchy, including Patriarch Kirill, to discuss a new investigation into the 1918 murders of the family of Tsar Nicholas II, who was canonized in 2000. Speaking at the conference, a senior investigator from the State Investigative Committee confirmed that officials were looking into the possibility that the kill-

ings were a ritual murder. Although she did not mention Jews, the idea that the murder of the tsar’s family was a “Jewish ritual killing” is a longstanding anti-Semitic conspiracy theory in Russia.

In November 2017, police raided a Moscow-area Hindu spiritual center and the home of its religious leader, Shri Prakash Ji. Although no charges were filed, Ji and his center appear to have been targeted following accusations made against them by Russian

“anti-cult” activist Alexander Dvorkin. Dvorkin is one of a large network of radical Russian Orthodox activists who have grown considerably in influence over the last 10 years due to the Russian

government’s increasing patronage of the Russian Orthodox Church and the government’s Soviet-era paranoia about the subversive potential of independent religious groups.

In October 2017, a Falun Gong adherent whose wife and three children are all Russian citizens was arrested in Moscow after applying for asylum; he was ordered deported to China, where he has previously faced persecution for his religious beliefs.

As it has for many years, the Russian government continues to deny a visa to the Dalai Lama, apparently out of deference to the government of China, ignoring longstanding requests from Russia’s Buddhist communities. In the Urals, an unofficial Buddhist temple built on land owned by a mining company was ordered demolished, but the decision had not yet been carried out as of the end of 2017.

Other Legal Issues

Laws meant to restrict civil society also have been employed against NGOs that advocate for freedom of religion or belief. In November 2017, the Russian government charged the SOVA Center with violating the law on “undesirable organizations” for having links on its website to American human rights organizations. In December 2016, the SOVA Center was added to Russia’s list of “foreign agents,” a registry created by a 2012 law that is intended to publicly stigmatize NGOs. In October 2016, Memorial also was labeled a “foreign agent.”

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Restrictions on Religious Activity in Occupied Crimea

In 2017, the Russian occupation authorities continued their policies of harassment, intimidation, and small-scale terror targeting religious groups in Crimea suspected of disloyalty to the Russian state, chief among them Crimean Tatars and other Muslims. Although Russian repression of the Crimean Tatars is mainly motivated by political concerns, it also disrupts Crimean Tatar religious activities and institutions.

As a result of the Russian occupation, the leadership of the Crimean Tatar political community, known as the Mejlis, was forced into exile. The two leaders of the Mejlis, Mustafa Dzhemilev and Refat Chubarov, live in government-controlled Ukraine. The second-most-senior leaders, Akhmet Chiigoz and Ilmi Umerov, remained behind in occupied Crimea and were sentenced to prison terms by Russian courts in September 2017; a month later, they were released and allowed to leave for government-controlled Ukraine in a deal negotiated by Turkey.

The Mejlis traditionally operated in conjunction with the Crimean Muftiate (known also by its Russian acronym DUMK), the supreme spiritual body of Crimean Tatars, but Mufti Emirali Ablaev has chosen to work with the Russian authorities, leading the Mejlis to appoint a mufti-in-exile. Moreover, the head of the FSB in Crimea, Viktor Palagin, is considered an “Islamic specialist,” reflecting the religious prism through which the Russians view security issues on the peninsula.

Over the course of 2017, according to the NGO KrymSOS, at least 184 people were detained during raids by Russian authorities, 89 persons were fined, and 24 were formally arrested. In October 2017, during coordinated raids on activists in and around Simferopol, a well-known 82-year-old activist, Vedzhi Kashka, took ill and died. According to KrymSOS, six Crimean Tatars were killed in politically motivated assassinations since 2014. Eighteen have been disappeared, most recently Ervin Ibragimov, whose kidnapping in May 2016 was captured on surveillance video. Torture of Tatar detainees has been reported; a USCIRF delegation to Ukraine met with Renat Paralamov, who was kidnapped, severely beaten, and shocked with electrodes by

interrogators who demanded that he confess involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir before being released in September 2017. Mejlis leader Ilmi Umerov was forcibly committed to a psychiatric hospital in pretrial detention.

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

The Russian authorities also continued their campaign against alleged Crimean adherents of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is banned in Russia but not in Ukraine. Twenty-one alleged adherents are currently held, and one, Ruslan Zeitullaev, was sentenced in April 2017 to 12 years in prison, later raised on appeal to 15 years. Detained Hizb ut-Tahrir members, including Crimean Tatar human rights activist Emir-Usein Kuku, are regularly sent to forced “psychiatric treatment” as part of the investigative process.

Non-Muslim Minorities in Crimea

The imposition of Russia’s repressive laws has greatly curtailed religious freedom on the Crimean Peninsula. According to the UN, there were roughly 2,200 religious organizations, both registered and unregistered, in Crimea before the occupation; as of September 2017, only around 800 remained. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) has refused to register, considering it to be submission to an illegal occupation. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church

apparently is also unregistered. In June 2017, pursuant to the Russian Supreme Court’s decision to ban the Jehovah’s Witnesses, all 22 local organizations of the

Witnesses in Crimea, representing 8,000 congregants, were officially banned.

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Representatives of the UOC-KP described to USCIRF how their main church space in Simferopol was seized in August 2017 by bailiffs enforcing a February 2017 court decision transferring its ownership to the Crimean Ministry of Property and Land Relations. According to UOC-KP representatives, who see this as part of a deliberate effort to drive them from the peninsula, the number of UOC-KP communities in Crimea has declined from 40 to nine since the occupation. According to the UN, five UOC-KP churches were officially seized or shut down since 2014. Meanwhile, the July 2016 Yarovaya Laws were used in 2017 to punish believers of various churches for the exercise of their faith. These include three Jehovah's Witnesses fined roughly \$85 each for participating in prayer meetings; a fourth man suffered a heart attack and died in June 2017 the night after his court hearing for "illegal missionary activity." In February and April 2017, the pastors of Seventh-day Adventist and Evangelical congregations received fines of roughly \$850 for "lack of signage" denoting their places of worship.

Russia's Separatist Enclaves in the Donbas

The Russian-occupied separatist parastates of the Lugansk People's Republic (LNR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) in eastern Ukraine remain heavily militarized war zones policed by parallel ministries of state security. The official ideology of the republics is a mixture of Russian nationalism, Soviet nostalgia, and Russian Orthodoxy, to the extent that the DNR constitution recognizes the Russian Orthodox Church as the territory's "leading and dominant" church. As such, for the Christian minorities living in the LNR/DNR, including Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Greek Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses, the initial phase of the occupation was one of outright terror: kidnappings, torture, and robberies were the norm, in the course of which perpetrators openly expressed their contempt for the victims' religious beliefs. More than 50 church buildings have been confiscated and communities are estimated to have declined by 30–80 percent as believers fled rebel-held areas.

Although the worst abuses have declined since 2015, Christian minorities remained subject to raids, harassment, fines, and official slander. Informa-

tion about religious freedom violations is difficult to obtain because communities fear reprisals for complaints to human rights and foreign news organizations. In September and August 2017, two Baptist pastors returning from government-controlled territory to their homes in the occupied areas were denied reentry by separatist forces. In August 2017, LNR security forces videotaped themselves raiding two Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls; they claimed to have found leaflets promoting Nazism and collaboration with Ukrainian intelligence.

In December 2017, DNR security officials released a Donetsk University professor of history and religious studies, Igor Kozlovskii, as part of a prisoner exchange. Kozlovskii had been held since January 2016 and was found guilty of arms possession and sentenced to nearly three years in May 2017 in a case that many believed was connected to his work with Christian minorities.

DNR and LNR authorities remain deeply suspicious toward religious groups other than the Russian Orthodox Church. In February 2018, after the end of the reporting period, the LNR government announced it would require registration of all religious groups in its territory, which experts believe to be a prelude to the official exclusion of religious minorities, similar to Russian practice.

U.S. POLICY

U.S.-Russian relations began to worsen in September 2011, when then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said he would again run for president in March 2012. In December 2012, the U.S. Congress passed—and then President Barack Obama signed—the Magnitsky Act sanctioning Russian officials responsible for gross human rights violations. In response, the Russian government denied U.S. citizens the opportunity to adopt

Russian children, issued a list of U.S. officials prohibited from entering Russia, and posthumously convicted Magnitsky. As of the end of 2017, the U.S. government had

named 49 Russian officials subject to U.S. visa bans and asset freezes under the Magnitsky Act. There is also an unpublished list of sanctioned officials, reportedly

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including Kadyrov, as recommended by USCIRF.

The Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine in 2014 led to a rapid deterioration in Russia's international relations, including with the United States. The United States suspended its role in the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Commission and has issued numerous sanctions against Russian businesses, state entities, and individuals. Russia's decision to join the war in Syria in September 2015 on behalf of President Bashar al-Assad, himself considered by USCIRF to be a severe violator of religious freedoms, as well as the determination of U.S. intelligence agencies that Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential elections, have further worsened relations with the United States.