

# Russia severely violates religious freedom, report says

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The Russian government continues to violate the rights of religious groups “in blatant violation of international law,” a new report from the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) reported.



Russian troops destroyed the library of Tavriski Christian Institute in Kherson, Ukraine. However, the school is committed to continuing its mission. (Courtesy Photo)

“Throughout 2024 and the first half of 2025, Russia prosecuted members of perceived ‘non-traditional’ religious organizations for their religious activities in both Russia and Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine,” policy analyst Dylan Schexnaydre wrote.

Russian law defines Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism as “traditional” religions, while it grants special recognition and privileges to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

“Authorities also targeted independent civil society organizations, human

rights activists working on [freedom of religion or belief], and dissidents expressing opinions involving religion,” the report stated.

The report—“[Russia’s Persecution of Religious Groups and FoRB Actors](#)”—said human rights groups have identified hundreds of people in Russian custody who were imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

## **Closing churches, arresting religious leaders**

Russian authorities continue to perpetrate “particularly severe violations of religious freedom against a range of religious groups and freedom of religion or belief actors,” the commission report said.

Violations cited include closing houses of worship and assaulting, arresting and even torturing religious leaders.

The report cites the example of a ban on activities the Fourth Cassation Court of General Jurisdiction imposed on a Baptist house of prayer in Kurganinsk.

“According to authorities, the house of prayer had failed to properly register as a religious organization and thus had conducted illegal missionary activities for its roughly 1,500 attendees. Authorities sealed the building shut following the most recent ruling,” the report stated.

Last September, the Central District Court of Sochi fined and ordered the deportation of an 85-year-old Polish Roman Catholic priest who had served in Russia close to 30 years, the commission report noted. He was charged with “illegal missionary work” when he lost the documents that permit him to preach in Sochi.

# Authorities criminalizing peaceful religious actions

Russian courts last year considered 431 cases of religion law violations—many related to alleged “illegal missionary activities”—resulting in fines totaling more than 4.7 million rubles (more than \$58,000), the report said.

“Authorities criminalize the activities of several peaceful religious organizations by designating them as ‘extremist,’ ‘undesirable,’ or ‘terrorist’ despite a lack of evidence or even specific allegations that those accused promoted, participated in, or plotted violence,” the commission report stated.

“Additionally, the government penalizes human rights activists documenting [freedom of religion or belief] violations, those engaging in perceived religiously offensive expression, and religiously grounded anti-war protestors through the country’s foreign agent laws, [blasphemy law](#), and war censorship laws.”

Authorities have cracked down on dissenting religious speech since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, adding anti-war religious leaders to its foreign agents registry, the commission report stated.

Last October, law enforcement officers assaulted and arrested a Pentecostal pastor at his home after he preached a sermon calling on Christians not to participate in the war against Ukraine.

In November, the Berezovka District Court fined a Baptist 60,000 rubles for refusing to serve in the Russian military, and other religious conscientious objectors have been imprisoned.

# ‘Intense persecution’ in Russian-occupied Ukraine

In Russian-occupied Ukraine, religious communities—including some Christian groups—have been subjected to “intense persecution,” the report stated.

“Russian de facto authorities have banned the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and various Protestant groups, including Baptists, Pentecostals, and Seventh-day Adventists,” the report said.



A Russian airstrike on Palm Sunday killed at least 34 people in the northeastern Ukrainian city of Sumy in the deadliest attack of the conflict so far this year. (Photo distributed by the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations)

Ukrainian nongovernmental organizations report at least 47 religious leaders have been killed, and more than 640 [houses of worship and other religious sites have been damaged or destroyed](#) in Russian-occupied

Ukraine since February 2022.

At least one Orthodox Church of Ukraine priest and two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests reportedly were tortured.

Since 2017, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended Russia be named a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in “systematic, ongoing and egregious” religious freedom violations.

The U.S. Department of State designated Russia as a Country of Particular Concern the first time in 2021 and redesignated it as such the two following years.

Most recently, the commission not only called on the State Department to [continue to designate Russia as a Country of Particular Concern](#), but also impose targeted sanctions on Russian government agencies and officials responsible for violations of religious freedom.

The commission also urged Congress to advocate on behalf of prisoners of conscience in Russia.