

# Russian courts ban unregistered Baptists' activities

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Russian courts have banned at least 10 unregistered Baptist congregations from meeting without state permission, a Norway-based human rights organization reported.

Six of the 10 lawsuits against Council of Churches Baptist religious communities have been filed in the Krasnodar Region of Southern Russia, [Forum 18](#) news service reported in early November.

The Council of Churches Baptist formed six decades ago in opposition to Soviet religious restrictions. Unregistered congregations affiliated with the council often meet in private homes—or houses of prayer—on private land.

The council asserts the Russian Constitution, the 1997 Religion Law and international human rights laws all provide them the right to meet without government involvement and state registration.

In practice, however, prosecutors and judges in Russia have broad discretion in how they enforce laws regarding religious activities.

Russia's Religion Law requires all unregistered religious associations to notify authorities of their existence and activities.

A religious community's "failure to submit notification" of its activities "cannot in itself be grounds for prohibiting the activities of such a group," a December 2016 Supreme Court resolution stated.

However, the same resolution allows the government to restrict "activities prohibited by law, or in violation of the Constitution of the Russian Federation" or "other repeated or gross violations of the law."

# **Alleged ‘illegal missionary activity’**

As a result, activities of unregistered religious communities often are prosecuted under Russia’s Administrative Code. Administration prosecutions often are pursued for alleged “unlawful missionary activity.”

Among other examples Forum 18 reported, a September 30 court ruling in Armavir City upheld a prosecutor’s request that activities of the local Council of Churches Baptist congregation be prohibited.

The court ruling stated local Federal Security Service operatives observed “the systemic conduct of missionary religious events” by the congregation.

Pastor Vladimir Popov insisted his congregation has “not committed gross violations of the norms of current legislation that entails a ban on carrying out activities.” He further asserted the prosecutor “is not permitted to interfere in the activities of a religious association.”

In a July report on “[Russia’s Persecution of Religious Groups and FoRB Actors](#),” the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom cited the Russian government’s closing of a different Baptist house of prayer for alleged “illegal missionary activity.”

Last year, Russian courts 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.

Since 2017, the commission 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 CPC in 2021, 2022 and 2023.

In its [latest annual report](#), the commission urged the State Department not

only to continue to designate Russia as a CPC, but also impose targeted sanctions on Russian government agencies and officials responsible for religious freedom violations.