

RUSSIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. In practice the government generally respected religious freedom, but imposed restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups. These included the use of extremism charges to ban religious materials and restrict groups' right to assemble, detentions, raids, denial of official registration with the Ministry of Justice, denial of official building registration, and denial of visas to religious workers. There is no state religion, but the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and other "traditional" religious communities received preferential consideration. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Members of minority religious groups continued to experience harassment and occasional physical attacks. Violent extremism in the North Caucasus region and an influx of Central Asian migrant workers led to negative attitudes in many regions toward traditionally Muslim ethnic groups.

The U.S. ambassador addressed religious freedom in consultations with government officials; he also met with religious leaders and participated in events to promote religious tolerance. Other U.S. embassy and U.S. government officials raised the treatment of minority religious groups with government officials on numerous occasions. The U.S. government engaged a number of religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in a regular dialogue on religious freedom. Embassy staff actively monitored possible violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the Government Statistics Agency, the population is 143.2 million. The *Atlas of Religions of Russia* reports that 41 percent of the population is Orthodox Christian and 6.5 percent Muslim. In contrast, a 2012 Levada Center poll reports that 74 percent of Russians consider themselves Orthodox while 7 percent self-identify as Muslim. Religious groups constituting less than five percent each include Buddhists, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, members of other Orthodox groups not affiliated with the Moscow patriarchate

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such of the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church and Old Believers, Bahais, Hare Krishnas, pagans, Tengrists, and Falun Gong adherents. The 2010 census estimates the number of Jews at 150,000; however, according to the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, there may be 750,000 Jews, 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/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for religious freedom, but other laws and policies, such as an anti-extremism law, restrict religious freedom, particularly of members of minority religious groups. By law the country is a secular state without a state religion, and all religious groups are equal. The preamble to the principal law on religion 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 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 "punished to the fullest extent possible," but does not specify the penalty nor under what circumstances it is to be imposed. The administrative violations code and the criminal code both punish obstruction of the right to freedom of conscience and belief.

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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 violation of public security. According to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), there are 25,705 registered religious associations operating in the country.

The “religious group” is the most basic unit. It has the right to conduct worship services and rituals, and to teach religion to its members. Such groups are not registered with the government and consequently do 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 personal guests to engage in religious instruction, and import religious material. In principle, religious groups are able to rent public spaces and hold services.

A “local religious organization” (LRO) can register if it has at least 10 citizen members and is either a branch of a centralized organization or has existed in the locality as a religious group for at least 15 years. 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, state-owned hospitals, and the armed forces.

“Centralized religious organizations” can be registered 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.

Foreign religious associations have the right to open offices for representation purposes. Although required to register in order to conduct religious services and other activities, many foreign religious representative offices open without registering, or avoid registration requirements by being accredited to a registered religious organization.

By law, religious associations may not participate in political parties, political movements, and elections of government officials, or provide material or other aid to political groups. This does not apply to members.

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By law, officials may prohibit the activity of a religious association on grounds such as violating public order or engaging in “extremist activity.” The anti-extremism law criminalizes a broad spectrum of activities, including “incitement to social, racial, national, or religious discord” and “assistance to extremism.” The law includes no stipulation that threats of violence or acts of violence must accompany incitement to religious discord.

Incitement to discord is punishable by up to four years in prison. Being a member of a banned group designated as “extremist” is punishable by up to six years in prison. Possession of “extremist” material could result in 15 days imprisonment or a fine of 3,000 rubles (\$98). Courts may suspend for 90 days the operations of legal entities found to be in possession of “extremist” materials and fine them 100,000 rubles (\$3,257).

Courts often request expert analyses of religious literature in cases in which the government alleges extremism. The choice of experts appears to be at the court’s discretion. Within the MOJ, the Scientific Advisory Board reviews some religious materials for extremism. Composed of academics and representatives of the four “traditional” religions, the board reviews materials referred either by judicial and law enforcement authorities or by private citizens and 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 review religious materials for “extremism.” A court at any level may declare material to be “extremist.” The quality of scholarly expertise varies from region to region.

By law, publications declared “extremist” by any court are automatically added to the federal list of “extremist” materials. Courts order Internet service providers to block access to Web sites that contain 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.”

The criminal code augments penalties on “actions directed to incite hatred or enmity, as well as the humiliation of an individual or group of persons on the basis of...attitude to religion...conducted publicly or through the media.” Penalties include fines from 100,000 to 300,000 rubles (\$3,257 to \$9,772), imprisonment for up to three years, compulsory labor for up to 360 hours, corrective labor for up to one year, or forced labor (coming into force in 2013) for up to two years.

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Under the law, an individual convicted of committing an act of vandalism motivated by ideological, political, national, racial, or religious hatred or enmity can be sentenced to up to three years in prison.

The regions of Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan have local laws banning “extremist Islamic Wahhabism.”

The government’s nonimmigrant visa rules allow foreigners with business or humanitarian visas, including religious workers, to spend no more than 90 of every 180 days in the country.

Republics in the North Caucasus have varying policies on wearing the hijab in public schools. In Chechnya, the law requires women to wear a hijab in public buildings.

Some provisions of the law dealing with public associations also apply to religious associations. The law grants the MOJ the authority to obtain certain documents from a religious association, send its representatives (with advance notice) to attend its events, and conduct an annual review of compliance with the mission statement on file with the government. The law contains extensive annual reporting requirements that many religious associations find burdensome. For example, each religious association must supply the full names, addresses, and passport details of members belonging to its governing body. The government may obtain a court order to close those that do not comply.

A recently adopted law imposes additional restrictions on religious associations. In June the government significantly increased administrative penalties from 1,000 rubles (\$33) to 300,000 rubles (\$3,257) for individuals and up to 1 million rubles (\$32,573) for organizers for violating the law against unsanctioned demonstrations. While the law is intended to restrict political dissent and does not apply to religious rites, some local authorities broadly interpret the law to cover the activities of some religious associations.

The ROC is the only religious organization allowed to review draft legislation pending before the State Duma.

Public schools offer religious education classes through a Ministry of Education and Science program that began in September. Parents can choose between

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courses on one of the four “traditional” religions, world religions in general, or a course on the fundamentals of secular ethics.

A new Ministry of Defense chaplaincy program for the armed forces requires that a religious group comprise at least 10 percent of a military unit for an official chaplain of that group to be appointed. Chaplains are not enlisted or commissioned, but are assistants to the commander and generally are only embedded with troops on overseas missions. The program allows for chaplains from the four “traditional” religions. Rabbis and imams offer services to troops occasionally. The program calls for at least 240 chaplains, with 24 positions filled at year’s end. Most chaplains are priests from nearby churches who visit troops in their regions on occasion. The program remains under development.

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

The law entitles individuals and organizations to take religious freedom cases to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg, which rules based on violations of the European Convention on Human Rights. According to the Constitutional Court, “Decisions by the European Court of Human Rights are binding for Russia. The State must pay compensation to a person whose rights were violated as determined by the European Court and ensure his/her rights are restored in as far as possible.” The government complies with this ruling and continues to pay compensation in line with ECHR decisions.

There is a universal military draft for men, but the constitution provides for alternative service for those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience. The standard military service period is 12 months, while alternative service in a Ministry of Defense agency is 18 months and alternative service in a non-defense agency is 21 months. A presidential decree that took effect in October makes deferrals for military service available for 150 conscripts who are already priests or deacons.

The government observes Russian Orthodox Christmas as a federal holiday. Several regional governments, including Muslim-majority Chechnya and Tatarstan, celebrate Islamic religious days as official holidays.

Government Practices

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There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including reports of detentions and onerous financial penalties, and the government imposed numerous restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups. The authorities continued to detain and charge with “extremism” Jehovah’s Witnesses and adherents of the Islamic theologian Said Nursi, generally referred to as “Nursi readers.” The authorities continued to search and seize the property of members of minority religious groups such as Scientologists and Falun Gong. The MOJ’s list of “extremist” materials grew to 1,589 titles. The authorities continued to restrict the rights of minority religious groups to meet publicly and continued to limit the ability of religious organizations to register.

In February the authorities detained Nursi reader Amir Abuyev for 48 hours after raiding a private home in Kaliningrad where a group of Nursi readers were beginning prayers. In March and again in May, the Federal Security Service (FSB) sought to have Abuyev forcibly detained for psychiatric testing.

In January the authorities freed Nursi reader Asylzhan Kelmukhambetov after he served seven months of an 18-month sentence for “extremism” and hosting a madrasa for 15 students in his home. The court reduced his punishment to a fine, which does not have to be paid due to changes in the criminal code.

In September authorities fined a bookstore in Tolyatti 50,000 rubles (\$1,629) for stocking an Islamic book that was on the federal list of “extremist” materials entitled *Life of the Prophet*.

According to a recent Jehovah’s Witnesses report, from September 2009 to December 2012, there were 1,511 cases of violations of the rights of Jehovah’s Witnesses. The report also states that law enforcement officials detained 1,425 Witnesses, carried out 151 searches, and disrupted 38 religious services. At year’s end, there were six open criminal cases against Jehovah’s Witnesses for “inciting hatred or enmity” and 12 civil cases regarding “extremist” publications. In May Jehovah’s Witnesses in Taganrog in the Rostov region were indicted for participating in the religious services of a dissolved religious organization. In July authorities in the Chuvash Republic placed four Jehovah’s Witnesses in pre-trial detention for “extremism.” Also in July, the Yoshkar-Ola city court in the Mari-El Republic acquitted Jehovah’s Witnesses member Maksim Kalinin of charges of “inciting religious hatred or enmity.” In October the prosecutor’s office sent a letter of apology to Kalinin for subjecting him to prosecution. The letter stated that

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he had the right to monetary compensation and the right to demand the publication of his exoneration by media that published information about his criminal trial.

The authorities continued to ban the Nurjular and Tablighi Jamaat organizations. The government maintained that Nurjular was a Muslim religious association of followers of Said Nursi, and banned it after concluding that Nursi's works were "extremist" and promoted intolerance. Muslim adherents of Nursi stated that there was no Nurjular organization. The general prosecutor asserted that Tablighi Jamaat was a radical group whose goal was to reestablish an Islamic caliphate, but Tablighi Jamaat representatives and some human rights activists stated the organization followed the law and existed solely to educate persons about Islam.

Police across the country participated in raids on minority religious groups, often confiscating religious literature and other property in connection with the raids. In May investigators in Orenburg searched 15 homes and places of worship of Jehovah's Witnesses. Also in Orenburg, authorities seized Islamic literature. In July officials in Vladivostok searched the homes of four Falun Gong members, detained them, and seized Falun Gong literature. Authorities seized Scientology literature in Kaliningrad, Vladivostok, and Novosibirsk, and searched the Scientology premises in Yekaterinburg.

The MOJ's current list of "extremist" materials includes certain Islamic religious items, 68 Jehovah's Witnesses items, four Falun Gong items, seven Scientology items, a series of neo-pagan materials deemed intolerant of other religious groups (Christianity in particular), and other media that are explicitly racist or anti-Semitic. Established in 2007, the list increased from 1,066 titles in 2011 to 1,589 at year's end.

In March a court in Orenburg banned more than 65 Islamic works, the largest such ban of religious literature in a single court case.

Publications declared "extremist" by a court were automatically added to the federal list of "extremist" materials. In some cases, items were not immediately added if an appeals process was underway. In March the Tomsk Regional Court rejected an appeal of a lower court's ruling that the *Bhagavad Gita as It Is*, a holy book of the Hare Krishnas, was not extremist. The prosecutor's office had attempted to have the book declared "extremist" after a group of officially designated academic experts, at the request of the FSB, analyzed the text and stated that it incited religious hatred. Although 29 Church of Scientology publications were removed from the federal list of "extremist" materials in 2011, seven

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Scientology publications were added to the list during the year. In May Falun Gong practitioners appealed the ban of their literature to the ECHR.

In June the Council of Europe's Venice Commission expressed serious concern about the anti-extremism law, noting that the vague definition of "extremism" lent itself to broad interpretation and arbitrary application by authorities.

The government continued to decline to comply with an ECHR ruling that the requirement for a religious group to have existed in a community for at least 15 years in order to be registered as an LRO violates the European Convention on Human Rights' provisions on the freedoms of religion and association.

In May the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church (ROAC) lost an appeal of a lower court's decision to award 800-year-old saints' relics to the plaintiff, the Vladimir Territorial Authority in Suzdal. The plaintiffs argued that the relics were part of a government museum during the Soviet period and alleged the ROAC removed them illegally. Picketers from the Labor and Democratic Party demonstrated against the ROAC in Suzdal for its stance on the relics. The ROAC alleged systematic discrimination by authorities based on its refusal to acknowledge the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate.

On February 19, members of the rock group Pussy Riot staged a punk protest song, "Virgin Mary, Redeem Us of Putin" in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior. On August 17, Moscow's Khamovniki District Court sentenced three of the band members to two years in prison for "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred," a sentence widely criticized by human rights groups.

Some regional officials used contradictions between federal and local laws and varying interpretations of the law to restrict the activities of minority religious groups. The federal government only occasionally intervened to prevent or reverse discrimination at the local level. Some local authorities broadly interpreted the law prohibiting unsanctioned demonstrations to allow restriction of public worship. Lack of access to adequate places of worship and increased numbers of members meant that many Muslim groups spilled out onto the street during Friday prayers and had to rent special premises for major holidays. Several Muslim groups, including those in Maloyaroslavets (Kaluga Region) on the island of Sakhalin and in Primorye reported government insistence that public worship in spaces not designated for religious purposes required advance clearance under the law.

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The struggle with Islamic separatists in some regions led to indiscriminate actions against Muslims on the part of local officials. Following the July 19 attempted assassination of a cleric and murder of his deputy in Kazan, Tatarstan, members of civil society and media reported that authorities conducted approximately 160 to 200 searches without warrants and detained between 400 and 600 Muslim men. Most were held for a few hours and released.

The government continued to use administrative resources to restrict religious freedom, particularly for members of minority religious groups. These restrictions included refusal to register religious organizations, denial of access to places of worship (including land and buildings), and lack of notification of court hearings.

The government continued to refuse to register fully the Church of Scientology and the Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow. Although the Church of Scientology was registered with the federal tax office, the MOJ continued to refuse to reregister its charter. And while a total of 407 local religious organizations of Jehovah's Witnesses are registered in the 72 districts of the Russian Federation, the MOJ continued to tell the group that there was no legal basis to reregister it in Moscow.

On September 6, in the presence of police, unidentified persons razed the three-story Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church in Moscow. A 2011 Supreme Court ruling upheld a 2010 court order allowing removal of the building, constructed without permission on land given to the church in 1992 by the Moscow city government. Although a court order allowed the demolition, those who demolished the church were reportedly intoxicated and intimidated church members while looting the premises. Mikhail Odintsov, Religious Affairs Director in the office of the Human Rights Ombudsman, publicly called the midnight demolition "barbarism" and "unacceptable." Shortly after the demolition, police questioned Pastor Vasily Romanyuk for leading an unapproved service among the church's ruins.

Many "nontraditional" denominations complained they were unable to rent or buy venues for worship from public or private vendors. Officials also denied construction permits. In the greater Moscow region, Muslim groups reported that the authorities limited them to only four official mosques despite the Council of Muftis' plan to build 12 new mosques. The Moscow mayor stated that two-thirds of mosque attendees were not registered as Muscovites and argued against building more mosques to accommodate non-registered residents. In September city authorities in a Moscow suburb cancelled plans for a new mosque after several thousand people protested against it. The plans were in flux at year's end.

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Muslims outside of Moscow reported persistent difficulties building mosques to meet growing numbers of Muslim worshippers. Sochi, a city in which 20,000 Muslims reside, has no mosque. The deputy mayor of Sochi denied a 2010 request to construct a mosque, stating that a mosque 20 kilometers away was sufficient for the needs of the city's Muslims. During the year, authorities denied multiple requests for land plots for a future mosque.

Border authorities denied entrance to two Falun Gong members from Ukraine who planned to attend an annual Falun Gong conference.

The authorities denied the requests of several religious groups, including Falun Gong and Jehovah's Witnesses, to hold public activities. On July 18, authorities in the Chelyabinsk region denied an application from a group of Jehovah's Witnesses to hold an annual conference involving more than 2,000 individuals on the grounds that the wildfire danger was too high.

On January 18, Kachkanar Buddhists in Sverdlovsk region petitioned federal authorities to protect their monastery from the expansion of an adjacent factory's operations, approved by local authorities in 2007. The regional government continued to refuse to register the monastery. At year's end, the federal government had not responded to the Buddhist community.

While neither the constitution nor the law accord explicit privileges or advantages to the four "traditional" religions, in practice the government cooperated more closely with the ROC than with other religious organizations. The ROC had 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. Nearly all religious facilities in prisons were Russian Orthodox.

The government provided the Russian Orthodox patriarch with security guards and access to official vehicles, a privilege accorded no other religious organization.

The Slavic Center for Law and Justice and several "nontraditional" religious leaders asserted the government and "traditional" religious organizations increasingly used mass media, conferences, and public demonstrations to foment opposition to minority religious groups, characterizing them as threats to physical, mental, and spiritual health, and asserting that they threatened national security. State television broadcast programs about "dangerous cults and sects" and implied that these groups included Pentecostals and other proselytizing religious groups.

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Religions organizations continued to seek restitution of property. The Russian Orthodox Church noted that the government had acquired many of its pre-revolution structures and sold them to private entities, complicating the restitution process. According to Forum 18, as of June the government had reportedly transferred 22 items of property: 19 to the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), two to the Catholic Church, and one to a Muslim organization.

Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists in Vladivostok received a favorable ruling from a higher court regarding a church building city officials had attempted to acquire for use as municipal property. The two churches had occupied the building since 1976 and 2010, respectively. Pursuant to the federal law on restitution, the city had earlier transferred the property to the church organizations.

The Ministry of Justice added numerous anti-Semitic items to its list of “extremist” materials, including a video clip entitled “The Truth about Jews and Hebrews.”

In a meeting with Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar of the Chabad community, President Putin said, “For us, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, it is very important that members of even the smallest nation, the smallest ethnic group, feel and perceive Russia as their homeland. This is only possible when every individual, no matter what denomination, no matter what ethnic group he belongs to, feels completely comfortable and protected, and that his rights are protected socially and legally.” President Putin also stated that anti-Semitism has been eliminated at the level of the state but remained a societal problem.

Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin and Religious Affairs Director Odintsov made public statements in support of the rights of Jehovah’s Witnesses, readers of Said Nursi, and Hare Krishnas. Odintsov received 2,500 to 3,000 complaints, most of which concerned registration of land, law enforcement, the anti-extremism law, returned religious property, and educational texts on religion in schools. Lukin frequently interceded on behalf of those filing complaints.

In October a United Russia deputy in the Smolensk City Council resigned amid controversy about an anti-Semitic comment recorded during a city council meeting and posted on the Internet. During a debate on whether to allow transport privileges for Holocaust survivors, he reportedly asked, “Why? For the simple reason that they were not finished off?” United Russia officials condemned the comment.

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The government supported construction of a new state-of-the-art Museum of Jewish History and Tolerance Center in Moscow. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Israeli President Shimon Peres opened the museum in November.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including physical attacks on individuals and groups because of religious affiliation. Violent extremism in the North Caucasus region and an influx of Central Asian migrant workers led to negative popular attitudes in many regions toward traditionally Muslim ethnic groups. Hostility toward non-ROC religious groups sparked harassment and occasional physical attacks. Because ethnicity and religion were often inextricably linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

The SOVA Center, a nonprofit organization tracking extremism and racism, reported 94 acts of vandalism motivated by religious, ethnic, or ideological hatred in 39 regions of the country during the year. Acts of vandalism against religious sites included 38 attacks against the Orthodox churches and 12 attacks against Jehovah's Witnesses facilities. In August vandals used chainsaws to cut down four Orthodox wooden crosses in two regions.

According to the TASS news agency, six imams were killed, including four in the North Caucasus region of Dagestan. In August a female suicide bomber in Dagestan reportedly killed renowned Islamic scholar Said Atsayev and six others. Atsayev was working to find common ground among rival Muslim groups. *The Caucasian Knot*, an online news source specializing in the Caucasus, reported that a source from the al-Sunnah scholars of Islam in Dagestan stated the murder was "planned to occur specifically when intra-faith dialogue between different groups of Muslims in Dagestan was gaining strength. This murder benefits the enemies of both Islam and Russia."

Activists claiming ties to the ROC disseminated negative publications and occasionally staged demonstrations throughout the country against Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other minority religious groups. Muslims continued to encounter social discrimination and antagonism in some regions.

In November, the Young Guard, a social organization with ties to the ruling United Russia party, protested in front of Mormon houses of worship throughout the country. In Moscow, protesters held signs with slogans such as "No to Totalitarian

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Sects.” The Young Guard also characterized Hare Krishnas and Jehovah’s Witnesses as “totalitarian sects.”

In the wake of the Pussy Riot verdict, vigilantes reportedly patrolled the streets of Moscow to defend Orthodox Christian sites and clergy against attack.

Anti-Semitism remained a significant problem. Anti-Semitic literature and publications were widely sold and distributed. At Moscow’s International Book Fair in September, anti-Semitic books with titles such as *Notes about the Ritual Murders* and *The War against Jewish Oppressors* were on display.

According to the SOVA Center, the total number of neo-Nazi groups was difficult to track because most had no more than 12 members; the center estimated that there were 15,000 to 20,000 active members of neo-Nazi groups nationwide. Nationalist groups organized an estimated 40 “Russian Marches” throughout the country on National Unity Day on November 4. At the Russian March in Moscow, the approximately 5,500 attendees displayed banners with Nazi and Hitler Youth emblems and anti-Semitic slogans such as “Down with the Jewish Masonic Elite.” Marchers gave the Nazi salute. Police arrested 25 men wearing swastikas.

Vandals desecrated Jewish synagogues and cemeteries and defaced Jewish religious and cultural facilities. In May vandals painted a swastika on a St. Petersburg synagogue’s fence and in July vandals painted a swastika on a synagogue wall in Irkutsk. In October vandals painted graffiti on the walls along Kostroma’s main street which read “no ZOG” (which stands for Zionist Occupation Government) and also “Death to the Regime” with one of the letters replaced by a Star of David.

Through the Interreligious Council of the Russian Federation, the Russian Orthodox Church maintained a cordial relationship with representatives of Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, the other “traditional” religions. The Christian Consultative Committee facilitated dialogue among religious organizations and with the government.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government engaged government officials, religious groups and organizations, NGOs, and religious freedom advocates in regular discussions on religious freedom. The ambassador and embassy officers met with a range of government officials, including the human rights ombudsman and his religious

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affairs director, to discuss adherence to international standards of religious freedom. Embassy officials raised questions about the separation of church and state during deliberations about a proposed law that would criminalize offenses to the “religious feelings” of believers. Embassy officials also expressed concern about alleged abuses of the anti-extremism law. The embassy discussed religious freedom with the leaders of both “traditional” and minority religious groups.

A visiting Department of State official spoke with the government’s special envoy for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law about promoting religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

Embassy staff conducted public outreach, advocacy, and training, and sponsored events, such as a conference on racial and religious tolerance, to encourage the government to protect religious freedom, particularly for members of minority and vulnerable religious groups.

Consular officers routinely assisted U.S. citizens involved in criminal, customs, and immigration cases. Officers were sensitive to any indications that these cases involved possible violations of religious freedom. U.S. officials raised such issues with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and met with representatives of the MOJ to discuss the law on extremism, registration of religious organizations, and the contents of the Federal List of Extremist Material.

Because U.S. missionaries and religious workers constituted a significant component of the local U.S. citizen population, the embassy conducted a vigorous outreach program to provide consular services, maintained contact for emergency planning purposes, and inquired about the missionaries’ experiences with immigration, registration, and police authorities as a gauge of religious freedom.

The ambassador met with ROC Patriarch Kirill in March and Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the Department of External Relations, in October to discuss ways to promote religious tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and bilateral relations.

The ambassador visited the Choral Synagogue and discussed religious freedom with Chief Rabbi of Moscow Pinchas Goldschmidt. In February the ambassador delivered a speech at a candle-lighting ceremony in remembrance of Holocaust survivors at the Jewish Community Center. In November the ambassador visited the Jewish Museum and Center of Tolerance and met with the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities, Rabbi Aleksandr Boroda.

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In April the ambassador met with Mufti Ravil Gainutdin, Chairman of the Council of Muftis of the Russian Federation.

Embassy representatives attended the annual Russian National Prayer Breakfast, an interfaith gathering, in March. Embassy representatives as well as representatives from the consulates in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, and Vladivostok met with rabbis and leaders of the Jewish community, muftis and other Islamic leaders, Protestant pastors, Catholic priests, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, Falun Gong adherents, and Buddhists.

Embassy officers also met with civil society and human rights leaders regarding freedom of religion, including Forum 18, Portal-Credo, the Slavic Center for Law and Justice, the Institute of Europe, and the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis.