

RUSSIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, equal rights irrespective of religious belief, and the right to worship and profess one's religion. The law states government officials may prohibit the activity of a religious association for violating public order or engaging in "extremist activity." The law identifies Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country's four "traditional" religions and recognizes the special role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Throughout the year, authorities continued to enforce the Supreme Court's 2017 ruling that banned and criminalized the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist" by raiding homes, seizing personal property, detaining hundreds of suspected members, and sentencing individuals to prison. There were reports that authorities physically abused Jehovah's Witnesses and members of other religious minority groups in detention. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and media reports, on February 15, Investigative Committee officials in Surgut detained seven male Jehovah's Witnesses. The detainees said that during their interrogation, authorities put bags over their heads, sealed the bags with tape, tied the men's hands behind their backs, beat them, stripped them naked, doused them with water, and shocked them with stun guns. Authorities continued to fine, detain, and imprison members of other religious minority groups and organizations for alleged extremism, including individuals belonging to the banned Islamic organization Hizb ut-Tahrir. As of the end of the year, the human rights NGO Memorial identified 245 persons who were imprisoned for their religious beliefs or affiliation, an increase from 177 in 2018. The majority were Muslim, including 157 detained as of October for alleged involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir. The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses estimated between 5,000 to 10,000 members had fled the country since the start of the government's crackdown and related societal violence in 2017. Reports persisted that local officials fined members of religious groups for using land, including private homes, for religious services. On November 14, the Constitutional Court ruled providing residential premises to religious organizations for worship "does not constitute a violation of the law and cannot serve as the basis for prosecuting citizens under [the administrative code]." Critics said the court's ruling, which included limitations based on the rights of neighbors and health and safety requirements, was vague and gave law enforcement too much discretion to stop home worship activities. Authorities continued to fine, arrest, and prosecute individuals under the Yarovaya Package, a set of legislative amendments passed in 2016 that prohibits, among other things, "unauthorized missionary activity."

Authorities fined a Buddhist man for organizing a meditation meeting at a boathouse without a permit, and a Baptist pastor for publicly baptizing a new congregant in a river. Officials continued to delay and/or prevent minority religious organizations from obtaining land, and denied renovation or construction permits for houses of worship. They also continued to deny religious organizations ownership of property expropriated during the Soviet era, such as churches and church-affiliated schools. The government continued to grant privileges to the ROC not accorded to any other church or religious association, including the right to review draft legislation and greater access to public institutions. The government fined and issued deportation orders for foreign nationals, including a Baptist pastor from Germany, for what authorities said was illegal religious activity.

A December 2017 opinion poll by the independent Levada Center, however, found that approximately 10 percent of the population held negative views about Jews. According to the Levada Center poll, approximately 15 percent held negative views about Muslims. Jehovah's Witnesses reported they were harassed at their workplaces and in some cases dismissed or forced to resign when their coworkers became aware of their religious beliefs. According to the NGO SOVA Center for Information and Analysis (SOVA Center), there were 19 reported cases of religiously motivated vandalism during the year, compared with 34 in 2018. These included individuals setting fire to Russia's largest yeshiva, located in the Moscow Region, as well as unknown individuals knocking down a cross at the site of a tenth century Christian church near Stavropol, defacing the grave of a 19th century rabbi in Kaliningrad, and damaging 13 headstones in an Islamic cemetery in the Astrakhan Region. According to the SOVA Center, national and local media, including state-run media, continued to publish and/or broadcast defamatory material about minority religious groups, shaping the public perception that certain religious minorities were dangerous.

During the year, the U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials met with a range of government officials to express concern over the treatment of religious minorities, particularly the use of the law on extremism to restrict their activities. The Ambassador also met with representatives of the ROC and minority faiths to discuss concerns about religious freedom in the country. In June senior officials from the Department of State met with the chairman of the Religious Board of Muslims of the Russian Federation to discuss the status of the Muslim community in the country. Representatives from the embassy and consulates general in Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok met regularly with religious leaders and representatives from multiple faiths to discuss legislation impacting religious

liberty, government practices, and specific religious freedom cases. The embassy organized speakers and programs designed to promote religious tolerance and used its social media platforms to highlight religious freedom concerns. On September 10, the U.S. government imposed visa restrictions on two members of the Investigative Committee in Surgut for their involvement in “torture and/or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment of Jehovah’s Witnesses” held in detention there in February.

On December 18, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again placed Russia on a Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 141.9 million (midyear 2019 estimate). A poll conducted during the year by the Public Opinion Foundation found that 65 percent of the population is Orthodox Christian, and 7 percent identify as Muslim. Religious groups constituting approximately 1 percent or less of the population each include Buddhists, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hindus, Baha’is, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), pagans, Tengrists, Scientologists, and Falun Gong practitioners. The 2010 census estimates the number of Jews at 150,000; however, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia states the number of Jews is approximately one million, most of whom live in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The Russian Jewish Congress (RJC) estimates the Jewish population is nearly 1.5 million. According to Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin, chairman of the Religious Board of Muslims of the Russian Federation, the Muslim population reached 25 million in 2018, approximately 18 percent of the total population. 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 Framework

The constitution stipulates the state is secular and provides for religious freedom, freedom of conscience, and freedom of religious worship, including the right to “profess, individually or jointly with others, any religion, or to profess no

religion.” It provides the right of citizens “to freely choose, possess, and disseminate religious or other beliefs, and to act in conformity with them,” and provides equality of rights and liberties regardless of attitude toward religion. The constitution bans any limitation of human rights on religious grounds and prohibits actions inciting religious hatred and strife. It states all religious associations are equal and separate from the state. The law 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 recognizes the “special role” of Russian Orthodox Christianity in the country’s “history and the formation and development of its spirituality and culture.”

The law states the government may restrict religious 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 opinion of a religion or to participate or not participate in worship, other religious ceremonies, the activities of a religious association, or religious instruction.

The law states those who violate religious freedom will be “held liable under criminal, administrative, and other legislation.” The administrative code and the criminal code both punish obstruction of the right to freedom of conscience and belief with imprisonment of up to three years and fines of up to 200,000 rubles (\$3,200) or 500,000 rubles (\$8,000), depending upon which code governs the offense.

By law, officials may prohibit the activity of a religious association on grounds such as violating public order or engaging in “extremist activity.” The law criminalizes a broad spectrum of activities as extremist, including “assistance to extremism,” but the law does not precisely define extremism or require an activity include an element of violence or hatred to be classified as extremist.

In December 2018, the government amended anti-extremism legislation, stipulating speech or actions aimed at “inciting hatred or enmity” on the basis of group affiliation (including religion) are punishable by administrative, rather than criminal, penalties for first-time offenses. These penalties include administrative arrests of up to 15 days or administrative fines of up to 20,000 rubles (\$320) for individuals and up to 500,000 rubles (\$8,000) for legal entities. Individuals who commit multiple offenses within a one-year period are subject to criminal penalties, including fines of up to 500,000 rubles (\$8,000), compulsory labor for up to four years, or imprisonment of up to five years.

The law criminalizes “offending the feelings of religious believers.” Actions “in public demonstrating clear disrespect for society and committed with the intent to insult the feelings of religious believers” are subject to fines of up to 300,000 rubles (\$4,800), compulsory labor for up to one year, or imprisonment for up to one year. If these actions are committed in places of worship, the punishment is a fine of up to 500,000 rubles (\$8,000), compulsory labor for up to three years, or a prison sentence of up to three years.

Participating in or organizing the activity of a banned religious organization designated as extremist is punishable by a fine of up to 800,000 rubles (\$12,800) or imprisonment for a term of six to 10 years, with deprivation of the right to hold “certain positions” or engage in “certain activities” (without specifying what these might be) for up to 10 years and restrictions on freedom for a period of one to two years. These restrictions may include house arrest or constraints on travel within the country. For persons with official status, a term which applies to anyone working for the government or state-owned entities, as well as to persons in management roles at commercial or nongovernment entities, the prescribed prison term is seven to twelve years, or a fine of up to 700,000 rubles (\$11,200). First-time offenders who willingly forsake their membership in banned religious organizations are exempt from criminal liability if they committed no other crimes.

Local laws in several regions, including Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan, ban “extremist Islamic Wahhabism” in the territories of these republics but do not define the term. Authorities impose administrative penalties for violating these laws.

A Supreme Court 2017 ruling declared the Jehovah’s Witnesses Administrative Center an extremist organization, closed the organization on those grounds, and banned all Jehovah’s Witnesses activities, including the organization’s website and all regional branches. The court’s ruling states the constitution guarantees freedom of religious beliefs, but this right is limited by other rights, including “existing civil peace and harmony.”

The Supreme Court has banned the activities of several Islamic organizations on the grounds of extremism, including Hizb ut-Tahrir in 2003; Nurdzhular (a russification of the Turkish for “followers of Said Nursi”) in 2008; and Tablighi Jamaat in 2009. In 2015 the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) added the Fayzrakhmani Islamic community to its Federal List of Extremist Organizations.

The law creates three categories of religious associations, with different levels of legal status and privileges: “religious groups,” “local religious organizations” (LROs), and “centralized religious organizations” (CROs). 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 or public security.

The “religious group” is the most basic unit and does not require registration with the state. When a group first begins its activities, however, it must notify authorities, typically the regional MOJ, of the location of its activity, its rites and ceremonies, and its leader(s) and members. A religious group may conduct worship services and rituals and teach religion to its members with proper notification to authorities. It does 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. A religious group may use property bought for the group’s use by its members, residential property owned or rented by its members, or public spaces rented by its members to hold services.

An LRO may register with the MOJ if it has at least 10 citizen members who are 18 or older and are permanent local residents. 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, hospitals, and the armed forces. CROs may register with the MOJ at the regional or federal level by combining at least three LROs of the same denomination.

To register as an LRO or CRO, an association must provide the following: a list of the organization’s founders and governing body, with addresses and internal travel document (“internal passport”) data; the organization’s charter; the minutes of the founding meeting; certification from the CRO (in the case of LROs); a description of the organization’s doctrine, practices, history, and attitudes toward family, marriage, and education; the organization’s legal address; a certificate of payment of government dues; and the charter or registration papers of the governing body in the case of organizations whose main offices are located abroad. Authorities may deny registration for reasons including incorrect paperwork, failure to meet different administrative requirements, national security reasons, or placement on the list of extremist or terrorist organizations. Denial of registration may be appealed in court. By law, CROs and LROs receiving funding from abroad must report an account of their activities, a list of leaders, the source of foreign funding, and plans for how the organization intends to use the foreign funds or property

obtained through foreign funding. Reports are annual by default, but the MOJ may require additional ad hoc reports. LROs and CROs may invite foreign citizens to carry out professional religious activities. LROs and CROs may produce, acquire, export, import, and distribute religious literature in printed, audio, or video format, “and other religious items.”

The Expert Religious Studies Council, established by the MOJ, has wide powers to investigate religious organizations. Some of the council’s powers include reviewing organizations’ activities and literature and determining whether an organization is “extremist.” The council also advises the MOJ on the issue of granting religious organization status to a religious group.

Foreign religious organizations (those created outside of the country under foreign laws) have the right to open offices for representational purposes, either independently or as part of religious organizations previously established in the country, but they may not form or found their own religious organizations in the country and may not operate houses of worship.

The government (the MOJ or the Prosecutor General’s Office) oversees a religious organization’s compliance with the law and may review its financial and registration-related documents when conducting an inspection or investigation. With advance notice, the government may send representatives to attend a religious association’s events, conduct an annual review of compliance with the association’s mission statement on file with the government, and review its religious literature to decide whether the literature is extremist. The law contains ongoing reporting requirements on financial and economic activity, funding sources, and compliance with antiterrorist and anti-extremist legislation. The government may obtain a court order to close those associations that do not comply with reporting or other legal requirements.

The law allows the government to limit the places where prayer and public religious observance may be conducted without prior approval. LROs and CROs may conduct religious services and ceremonies without prior approval in buildings, lands, and facilities owned or rented by these associations, as well as in cemeteries, crematoria, places of pilgrimage, and living quarters. Baptism ceremonies in rivers and lakes, as well as services conducted in parks, open spaces, or courtyards, do not fall under this exemption. In these cases, LROs and CROs must seek government approval at least one week in advance and provide the government with the names of organizers and participants, as well as copies of any written materials to be used at the event.

The Ministry of Defense chaplaincy program requires members of a religious group to comprise at least 10 percent of a military unit before an official chaplain of that group is appointed. Chaplains are not enlisted or commissioned, but are classified as assistants to the commander. Chaplains are full-time employees of the Ministry of Defense, paid from the defense budget. The program allows for chaplains representing only the four traditional religions. Currently, there are more than 120 chaplains in the program.

The country's 83 federal subjects (excluding Russian-occupied Crimea and Sevastopol) have varying policies on wearing the hijab in public schools and/or government institutions. Hijabs are banned in public schools in Stavropol and Mordovia, rulings that have been upheld by the Supreme Court. The law in Chechnya permits schoolgirls to wear hijabs.

Federal law, as amended by the Yarovaya Package, defines missionary activity as the sharing of one's beliefs with persons of another faith or nonbelievers with the aim of involving these individuals in the "structure" of the religious association. According to the law, in order to share beliefs outside of officially sanctioned sites (which include buildings owned by a religious organization, buildings whose owners have given permission for activities to take place, pilgrimage destinations, cemeteries and crematoria, and indoor spaces of educational organizations historically used for religious ceremonies), an individual must have a document authorizing him or her to share beliefs from a religious group or registered organization. The law explicitly bans any beliefs from being shared in residential buildings without such documentation (unless in the form of a religious service, rite, or ceremony), or on another organization's property without permission from that organization. Materials disseminated by missionaries must be marked with the name of the religious association providing the authorization.

Engaging in missionary activity prohibited by law carries a fine of 5,000 to 50,000 rubles (\$80 to \$800) for individuals and 100,000 to 1,000,000 rubles (\$1,600 to \$16,100) for legal entities, which includes LROs and CROs. Foreign citizens or stateless persons who violate restrictions on missionary activities may be fined 30,000 to 50,000 rubles (\$480 to \$800) and are subject to administrative deportation.

The law does not provide precise criteria on how written religious materials may be classified as "extremist." Within the MOJ, the Scientific Advisory Board reviews religious materials for extremism. Composed of academics and

representatives of the four traditional religions, the board reviews materials referred to it by judicial or law enforcement authorities, private citizens, or 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 may review religious materials for extremist content.

Prosecutors may take material to a court and ask the court to declare it extremist, but materials introduced in court during the consideration of administrative, civil, or criminal cases may also be declared extremist *sua sponte*, i.e., of the court's own accord. By law, publications declared extremist by a federal court are automatically added to the federal list of extremist materials. Courts may order internet service providers to block access to websites containing materials included on the federal list of extremist materials. There is no legal procedure for removal from the list, even if a court declares an item should no longer be classified as extremist, but lists are reviewed and reissued on a regular basis and publications may be dropped from lists. The law makes it illegal to declare the key texts (holy books) of the four traditional religions in their original languages – Old and New Testaments of the Bible, Quran, and Tibetan Buddhist Kangyur (Kanjur) – to be extremist. The law does not specify that foreign language translations of these texts cannot be declared extremist.

According to the administrative code, mass distribution, production, and possession with the aim of mass distribution of extremist materials by private individuals may result in 15 days' imprisonment or a fine of 1,000 to 3,000 rubles (\$16 to \$48), or 2,000 to 5,000 rubles (\$32 to \$80) for public officials, as well as confiscation of these materials. Courts may suspend for 90 days the operations of legal entities found to be in possession of extremist materials and fine them 100,000 to 1,000,000 rubles (\$1,600 to \$16,100). Individuals who produce materials later deemed extremist may not be punished retroactively but must cease production and distribution of those materials.

The law allows the transfer of state and municipal property of religious significance to religious organizations, including land, buildings, and movable property. The law grants religious organizations using state historical property for religious purposes the right to use such property indefinitely. The law prohibits the transfer of living quarters for religious use and the use of living quarters for

missionary activity, unless the activity is a part of a “religious service, rite, or ceremony.”

The law allows religious organizations to use buildings that were not originally authorized for religious purposes if they are part of a property that serves a religious purpose. The law allows, for example, a group to establish a Sunday school in a warehouse on the property of a church. If a structure (e.g., the warehouse) does not meet legal requirements and is not made legal by submitting proper paperwork by 2030, it will be destroyed.

Religious education or civil ethics classes are compulsory in all public and private secondary schools. Students may choose to take a course on one of the four traditional religions, a general world religions course, or a secular ethics course. Regional and municipal departments of education oversee this curriculum at the local level in accordance with their capacity to offer the courses, and according to the religious makeup of the given location. There is no requirement for representatives of religious organizations to be licensed to conduct religious education in schools affiliated with a religious organization or in home schools. Religious instructors in any other state or private school must be licensed to teach religious courses.

The Office of the Director of Religious Issues within the Office of the Federal Human Rights Ombudsman handles complaints about the government’s actions on religious freedom. The ombudsman may intercede on behalf of those who submit complaints; however, the ombudsman may not compel other government bodies to act or directly intervene in complaints not addressed to the government.

The law entitles individuals and organizations to take religious freedom cases to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg. The state must pay compensation to a person whose rights were violated as determined by the ECHR and ensure his or her rights are restored to the extent possible. The Constitutional Court determines whether judgments by international and regional courts, including the ECHR, are consistent with the constitution.

Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 is compulsory, but the constitution provides for alternative service for those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience, including religious belief. The standard military service period is 12 months, while alternative service is 18 months in a Ministry of Defense agency or 21 months in a nondefense agency. Failure to perform

alternative service is punishable under the criminal code, with penalties ranging from an 80,000 rubles (\$1,300) fine to six months in prison.

By law, LROs and CROs may not participate in political campaigns or the activity of political parties or movements, or provide material or other aid to political groups. This restriction applies to religious organizations and not to their individual members.

The ROC and all members of the Civic Chamber, a state institution composed of representatives of public associations, are granted the opportunity to review draft legislation pending before the State Duma, the lower house of parliament, on a case-by-case basis. No formal mechanism exists for permanent representation of religious organizations in the Civic Chamber, but individuals from both traditional religions and other religious groups may be selected to serve in the chamber, initially by the president. Subsequently, the selectees themselves choose additional members to serve in the group. The State Duma passed legislation in 2007 barring any member of an organization that had been accused of extremism from serving in the Civic Chamber.

The law states foreigners or stateless individuals whose presence in the country the government deems “undesirable” are forbidden from becoming founders, members, or active participants in the activities of religious organizations. The same is true for individuals whose activities are deemed extremist by the courts or who are subject to prosecution under the law on combating money laundering and the financing of terrorism. The law restricts any foreign citizen or person without citizenship from entering the country if he or she “participates in the activities of the organizations included in the list of organizations and individuals in respect of whom there is information about their involvement in extremist activities or terrorism[.]”

Foreigners engaging in religious work require both a contract with a legally registered religious organization and a work visa. Religious work is not permitted on “humanities visas,” which allow foreigners to enter the country to strengthen academic or cultural ties or take part in charitable work. There are no missionary visas.

Amendments to the law enacted in May and July grant religious organizations the exclusive right to manage pilgrimage activities, both on a paid and free-of-charge basis.

Under the criminal code, an individual convicted of committing an act of vandalism motivated by religious hatred or enmity may be sentenced to up to three years of compulsory labor or prison.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Religious groups and human rights NGOs reported authorities continued to investigate, detain, arrest, imprison, torture, and/or physically abuse individuals on account of their religious beliefs or affiliation. Authorities continued to accuse religious minority groups of extremism.

As of December 31, Memorial identified 245 persons persecuted for their religious belief or affiliation whom it considered to be political prisoners, meaning they were either already imprisoned or were in custody or under house arrest awaiting a sentence to enter into force. This was an increase from 177 in 2018. In October Memorial's list of persons it identified as political prisoners included 66 Jehovah's Witnesses and 157 persons accused of involvement with the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir, an organization that Memorial characterized as a "non-violent international Islamic organization." According to Memorial, none of the political prisoners being persecuted for their religious beliefs or affiliation called for violence or planned violent acts. In October Memorial also identified an additional 140 Jehovah's Witnesses as "victims of politically motivated prosecutions" whom it did not consider to be political prisoners because they had not been placed in custody.

Authorities continued to enforce the Supreme Court's 2017 ruling that criminalized the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses as extremist. Jehovah's Witnesses and human rights NGOs reported authorities raided homes, seized personal property, and detained hundreds of suspected members. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, human rights NGOs, and media, authorities physically abused adherents while in detention. On February 15, Investigative Committee officials in Surgut in west Siberia's Khanty-Mansiysk Region detained seven male Jehovah's Witnesses. According to the men, during their interrogation at the police station, authorities put bags over their heads, sealed the bags with tape, tied their hands behind their backs, and beat them. Authorities stripped the men naked, doused them with water, and shocked them with stun guns for two hours. Authorities demanded to know where local Jehovah's Witnesses met and who attended the meetings. Multiple domestic and international human rights groups, including Amnesty

International, Human Rights Watch, and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Jehovah's Witnesses called for an investigation into the accusations of abuse. In March the Khanty-Mansiysk Investigative Committee division said after an internal investigation it found no evidence its staff had used unlawful force. The Jehovah's Witnesses filed a case with the ECHR.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that on June 26, law enforcement officers in Kaluga raided the home of Roman Makhnev and took him and Dmitriy Kuzin into custody. At the station, officers handcuffed Makhnev to a pipe and left him there overnight. For the next three days, officers denied him food while they interrogated him. Authorities charged Makhnev and Kuzin with organizing extremist activity and held them in pretrial detention for six months. On December 25, a judge approved their release from the facility, but according to Jehovah's Witnesses, the case remained pending at year's end.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, on February 6, authorities in Uray conducted searches of eight Jehovah's Witnesses' homes and took Andrey Sazonov into custody. The officers beat the man on the palms of his hands, forced him to kneel during his interrogation, and threatened him. According to Sazonov, when he would not answer questions about fellow believers, investigators turned off the recording machine, beat him more severely, and then resumed the interrogation. Two days after the search, Sazonov's mother was expelled from the marketplace where she sold goods and her market stand was destroyed. On August 22, an appellate court banned Sazonov from participating in Jehovah's Witnesses religious activities.

According to the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, while exact numbers were unavailable, 5,000 to 10,000 adherents had fled the country in fear of persecution since the start of the government's crackdown and related societal violence in 2017. The association estimated more than 150,000 adherents remained in the country. One source estimated there were at least 26,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Siberia continuing to worship clandestinely.

The SOVA Center reported criminal charges against Jehovah's Witnesses were initiated in 21 new regions, meaning criminal prosecutions were ongoing in 52 regions at year's end. The SOVA Center stated authorities accused 313 individuals of belonging to the group and filed charges against 213 of them during the year. Jehovah's Witnesses reported as of November, 287 members were subject to ongoing criminal prosecution. Of these, 46 adherents were in pretrial detention, 23 were under house arrest, and at least 135 were under travel restrictions.

According to the SOVA Center and Jehovah's Witnesses representatives, 18 Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted of extremism for practicing their religion during the year in criminal cases; nine of them were sentenced to prison, including three who received six years in a penal colony. The remainder received suspended sentences, probation, fines, and/or community service. According to media and Jehovah's Witnesses sources, on February 6, a judge in Oryol sentenced Danish citizen Dennis Christensen to six years in prison, making him the first Jehovah's Witness to receive a prison term for "organizing the activity of a banned extremist organization." Authorities had detained Christensen since May 2017. On May 23, the Oryol Regional Court denied his appeal and on June 6 authorities transferred him to a penal colony in Lgov, Kursk Region.

Media and Jehovah's Witness representatives said that in September the Leninsky District Court in Saratov sentenced six Jehovah's Witnesses to prison terms of between two and 3.5 years for organizing the activity of a banned extremist organization. In November a judge in Tomsk sentenced local resident Sergei Klimov to a six-year prison sentence for the same offense. Klimov had been held in pretrial detention since June 2018. In December a court in Penza sentenced Vladimir Alushkin to six years in prison, also for organizing the activity of a banned extremist organization.

According to the international human rights NGO Forum 18, a court in Khabarovsk sentenced Valery Moskalenko to two years' forced labor followed by six months' probation for "participating in the activity of a banned extremist organization." Forum 18 reported the prosecution based its argument on a 10-minute recording of Moskalenko reading Jesus' Sermon on the Mount at a Jehovah's Witnesses gathering.

Jehovah's Witnesses stated the Investigative Committee, Federal Security Service (FSB) agents, officers of the Interior Ministry's Center for Countering Extremism, police officers, and riot police carried out raids in the homes and places of worship of Jehovah's Witnesses in 44 regions between January 2018 and October 2019. Citing Jehovah's Witness sources, Human Rights Watch reported 491 raids on homes and apartments during the year, compared to 289 in 2018. According to Jehovah's Witness sources, during these raids, authorities entered homes, often in the early morning, and conducted unauthorized, illegal searches, and verbally and physically abused members. Authorities often entered the residences by forcing open the door. They held individuals, including children and the elderly, at

gunpoint and seized personal belongings, including religious materials, personal correspondence, money, mobile phones, and other electronic devices.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, on April 19, agents from the Center for Countering Extremism and FSB agents disrupted a religious meeting in the home of an 81-year-old adherent and searched her home for five hours, during which the woman fell ill and required medical attention. On April 3 in Porkhov, Jehovah's Witnesses reported masked FSB agents dressed in camouflage broke into the apartment of one Jehovah's Witness couple. They struck the man several times on the head and legs and knocked him to the floor. Officers accessed his online accounts and seized electronic devices and money. They took the couple into custody and interrogated them. Authorities charged the man with participating in the activities of an extremist organization. The Jehovah's Witnesses also reported that on October 10 in Sochi, groups of armed and masked security officers, some with dogs, conducted 36 home searches of Jehovah's Witnesses. Authorities took Vyacheslav Popov and Nikolay Kuzichkin into custody and charged them with "organizing the activity of a banned extremist organization."

According to Jehovah's Witnesses representatives, at year's end the group had 49 applications pending with the ECHR and five complaints against the government pending with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, including for detentions of practitioners, censorship of religious literature and the organization's website, and raids on or other interference with religious meetings.

According to Memorial, during the year, the government detained, arrested, and/or sentenced at least 25 individuals it accused of belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir. This number excluded individuals from Ukraine's Crimea peninsula who were initially detained by Russian occupation authorities in Crimea before being transferred to Russia where they were tried and sentenced. While banned in Russia, Hizb ut-Tahrir was legal in Ukraine.

On September 12, media reported authorities completed a criminal investigation of Eduard Nizamov, whom the government alleged to be the head of the country's branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir, and charged him with financing terrorism and "preparing for a violent seizure of power." Nizamov denied the charges. Authorities arrested Nizamov in October 2018 and, according to Memorial, beat and verbally abused him while in pretrial detention. As of year's end, his trial was pending.

Individuals continued to receive harsh sentences for their alleged involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir. According to the human rights monitoring and reporting outlet

OVD-Info, on March 13, the Volga District Military Court sentenced five men from Tatarstan to between 14 and 22 years in a maximum-security prison. The judge found one of the men guilty of participating in the activities of a terrorist organization and the others guilty of organizing the activities of a terrorist organization.

The courts continued to sentence individuals for what authorities said was membership in other Islamic organizations. Local media reported that on September 25, a court in Tatarstan sentenced three persons to prison terms of between two and six years for their involvement in Tablighi Jamaat, which Memorial characterized as a peaceful international Islamic missionary movement. On October 4, the FSB detained a Kyrgyz preacher whom authorities said was linked to Tablighi Jamaat. A court in Smolensk subsequently ruled that the man, a Kyrgyz national, be deported to the Kyrgyz Republic.

Although the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi continued to be banned, authorities did not pursue any new cases against his followers during the year. Experts from the SOVA Center continued to state that Nurdzhular, an organization purportedly based on Nursi's teachings and banned as extremist by the authorities, did not actually exist in the country, and a number of individuals accused of belonging to the organization also denied its existence as part of their defense.

Several individuals continued to serve out prison sentences for what authorities said was their adherence to Nursi's teachings. According to Forum 18, Ziyavdin Dapayev, Sukhrab Kaltuyev, Artur Kaltuyev, and Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev continued to serve prison sentences ranging from three to eight years for organizing the activities of a banned religious organization. Imam Komil Odilov was released in March after serving nine months of a two-year sentence in a labor camp, but was ordered to spend the next eight years on probation and under curfew (not allowed to leave his home between 10 PM and 6 AM). According to Forum 18, Odilov remained on the government's list of terrorists and extremists.

In May the SOVA Center reported authorities stripped Yevgeny Kim, a naturalized Russian citizen since 2005, of his citizenship due to what they said was his allegiance to Nursi. This decision rendered Kim, who was nearing the end of a four-year prison sentence, stateless, since he had previously given up his Uzbek citizenship. At year's end it was unclear whether authorities deported him; experts believed he remained in a detention center in Russia.

On June 19, a district court in Kazan sentenced five members of the Fayzrakhmani Islamic community to five to seven years in prison. Although the Fayzrakhmani group was considered an extremist organization, the SOVA Center described it as a “typical closed religious community” that lives a secluded life and maintains religious practices different from traditional Islam.

Media reported in May that Sahib Aliyev, an accountant in the St. Petersburg branch of the Church of Scientology (COS), pled guilty to organizing an extremist community, illegal entrepreneurship, and “humiliation of human dignity.” Authorities arrested Aliyev and four other members of the COS in June 2017 as part of a probe into what police said was possible “illegal entrepreneurship,” incitement of hatred, and organizing an extremist conspiracy. According to *Newsweek*, in March police raided the offices of the COS in Moscow and St. Petersburg in connection with fraud investigations. Authorities accused the COS of raising approximately 2.8 billion rubles (\$45 million) in seminars and other events around the country and sending the money to the United States. They also said the group stole money from investors. The state news agency *TASS* reported that in November authorities released from custody Ivan Masitsky, the head of the COS in St. Petersburg, after he spent more than two years in a pretrial detention facility. At year’s end, the case against Masitsky and COS officers Konstantsiya Yesaulkova, Galina Shurinova, and Anastasiya Terentyeva remained pending.

Media continued to report official harassment against Muslims. *Moskovskaya Gazeta* reported on March 27 that police detained 27 Muslims praying at a mall in Moscow and accused them of violating the rules for holding public events. According to the SOVA Center, the men received administrative fines.

Authorities continued to refuse to register the St. Petersburg and Moscow COS branches as religious organizations despite a 2014 ECHR ruling that the government’s refusal was a violation of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

According to the Ministry of Justice, at the end of 2018 (the latest year for which information was available) there were 30,896 registered religious organizations (LROs and CROs) in the country, most of which were ROC-affiliated. According to the SOVA Center, laws creating and regulating the activities of religious groups, LROs, and CROs contained imprecise language that left room for interpretation by local and national authorities.

The SOVA Center, independent media, and religious groups continued to say the Expert Religious Studies Council members lacked appropriate academic and religious credentials to advise the MOJ about which groups should be permitted to register as religious organizations or to review an organization's literature and activities to determine whether the organization was "extremist."

Representatives of minority religious associations and NGOs continued to state the Yarovaya Package, enacted for the stated purpose of enhancing the country's antiterrorism capability, was employed by authorities to limit religious freedom. They said officials often cited concerns about missionaries being sources of foreign influence. They said the broad definition of missionary activity in the legislation included not only proselytizing, but also disseminating religious materials, preaching, and engaging in interfaith discussions about religion, including in private residences, without prior authorization. In 2018, Forum 18 said the legal framework for an individual exercising his or her beliefs outside a designated place of worship was unclear and authorities applied the law inconsistently.

The SOVA Center stated in its annual report, "Persecution of religious organizations for 'illegal' missionary activity on the basis of the Yarovaya-Ozerov amendments package continued, although, judging by the Supreme Court data for the first half of 2019 [the time period for which data was available], its intensity ha[d] slightly diminished." The majority of the 174 cases initiated under "violation of the law on freedom of conscience, religion, and religious associations" during the first six months of the year were for missionary activity. Seventy-four individuals, two officials, and 26 legal entities received penalties, mainly in the form of administrative fines. The SOVA Center calculated the total amount of fines imposed by courts in the first six months was 1,899,100 rubles (\$30,500), compared with 2,471,000 rubles (\$39,700) for the same period in 2018.

Forum 18 and the SOVA Center reported that on January 15, authorities in Yoshkar-Ola fined Sergei Roshchin and Valery Turkin, members of an unregistered Baptist group, 5,000 rubles (\$80) each for passing out literature at a bus stop in Ryazan without a permit; on March 6, a district court ruled their actions constituted illegal missionary activity and upheld the fine. On February 7, authorities fined a Buddhist man in Sochi 5,000 rubles (\$80) for organizing a meditation meeting at a boathouse without a permit.

According to the SOVA Center, in November a municipal court in Ryazan fined a man identified as Oleg Alekseyevich K. 5,000 rubles (\$80) for illegal missionary activity for distributing Bibles at Ryazan State Radio Engineering University. The

SOVA Center also reported that in August, the Mufti of Moscow, Ildar Alyautdinov, and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Moscow were fined 30,000 rubles (\$480) each for distributing literature without proper markings. According to *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, in February authorities in Novosibirsk fined two Jewish lecturers, one from the United States and one from Israel, 2,000 rubles (\$32) each for conducting missionary work while on tourist visas. The men spoke at a seminar for Jewish youth hosted by the Beit Menachem Jewish Community Cultural Center. The SOVA Center and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported that on April 7, authorities, including police and FSB officers, firefighters, and representatives of the city administration, disrupted services in a house in Verkhnebakansky, a town near the Black Sea, at which Pastor Yuri Korniyenko and 50 Baptist congregants were celebrating the Annunciation. On April 9, the prosecutor charged Korniyenko with engaging in illegal missionary work. Authorities sealed the house and banned the pastor and congregants from using it for religious purposes.

RFE/RL also reported that in November authorities fined a Baptist pastor in Tatarstan 20,000 rubles (\$320) for organizing an unsanctioned public gathering in June at which a group of adherents assembled to watch him baptize a new member in the Kama River. On December 11, *Kommersant* reported a judge in the city of Satka fined the New Generation Church of Evangelical Christians (Pentecostals) 50,000 rubles (\$800) for holding weekly meetings in a cafe without proper documentation.

On October 10, the Constitutional Court overturned a lower court 2018 decision imposing a fine on the Reconciliation Church of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, registered in Yoshkar-Ola, for illegal missionary activities for distributing printed materials outside the borders of the municipality in which the group was registered. The Constitutional Court ruled the scope of missionary activities of religious associations was wider than the territorial scope of their main religious activities.

In December the Russian Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptist reported that a Baptist pastor from Germany who had lived in Sverdlovsk Region since 1994 was deported after the regional office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs revoked his residence permit. The group said that without evidence, the FSB alleged he “advocated a violent change of the constitutional system of the Russian Federation” and “urged citizens to refuse to fulfill their legal duties and to confront the Russian Orthodox Church.” According to media reports, in March two American volunteers from the Church of Jesus Christ were detained in

Novorossiysk, fined 30,000 rubles (\$480), and deported for teaching English without a license and violating the terms of their visas.

Religious minorities said local authorities continued to use the country's anti-extremism laws to ban sacred religious texts and other books relating to religion, other than the four holy books recognized by law. The MOJ's list of extremist material grew during the year to 5,003 as of December, compared to 4,514 as of October 2018. There were reportedly no new Islamic or Jehovah's Witnesses materials added to the list during the year but there were additions of anti-Semitic and anti-Orthodox Christian materials. During the first six months of the year, authorities imposed 1,964 sanctions for distribution of extremist materials, compared with 1,133 during the same period in 2018. According to Forum 18, in some cases, those in charge of places of worship and other public or semipublic spaces were held responsible for distribution of banned religious publications, which could have been left at the site by anyone at any time, including before the ban. The government's ban on all Jehovah's Witnesses websites, imposed in 2017, remained in effect.

As of year's end, the government did not act on the 2018 ECHR finding that court decisions to prohibit Nursi's books violated the guarantee of the right to freedom of expression contained in the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The ECHR ruled the country's courts did not provide sufficient and relevant grounds for interfering with the applicants' right to freedom of expression, and their intervention could not be considered necessary in a democratic society. The court further ruled the government should pay one of the plaintiffs 7,500 euros (\$8,400) in compensation for non-pecuniary damages.

The SOVA Center reported that on September 11, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev signed a decree requiring religious organizations to alter their places of worship to conform with specific counterterrorism measures in order to qualify for safety permits for their real property. Among other requirements, all facilities had to be guarded during services by members of public organizations. Facilities with maximum building occupancy limits between 500 and 1,000 had to have "panic buttons" and video surveillance systems. Buildings with occupancy limits of more than 1,000 had to be guarded by private security guards or Rosgvardiya (National Guard) personnel. The SOVA Center stated, "It is obvious that few religious organizations have the financial ability to meet these requirements, and the penalty for noncompliance is high: fines of up to 100,000 rubles [\$1,600]."

Reports persisted that local officials fined members of religious groups for using land, including their homes, “not for its intended purpose,” i.e., for religious services. Officials reportedly continued to prevent minority religious organizations from obtaining land, and continued to deny construction permits for houses of worship. Forum 18 stated in September, “Since municipal authorities are usually unwilling to permit the construction of purpose-built churches and mosques, congregations can be obliged to meet in residential, agricultural, or commercial buildings. This leaves them vulnerable to the complexities and contradictions of the legislation which regulates the use of land.” Forum 18 reported that between January and October there were 21 known instances of individuals being fined for using homes as places of worship, compared with 10 in 2018. Forum 18 reported on November 14, however, that the Constitutional Court ruled that providing residential premises to religious organizations for worship and/or for use as a legal address “does not constitute a violation of the law and cannot serve as the basis for prosecuting citizens under [the administrative code].” The court stated religious use of residential premises must take into account the rights and legitimate interests of residents and neighbors, as well as health, safety, and environmental requirements. The court further stated it would be “unacceptable” for a dwelling to lose the features of a residential premises and acquire those of a religious or administrative building. The case involved a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Rostov who allowed the congregation to use her home as its legal address and meet there for four hours per week for religious purposes. According to Forum 18, on November 20, human rights lawyer Vasily Nichik said in a blogpost, “Some words in the ruling do not have regulatory certainty, which leaves ample room for interpretation by law enforcement.”

Authorities continued to demolish houses of worship. According to Forum 18, on May 22, authorities demolished an Islamic prayer house located on private farmland in Chernyakhovsk District of Kaliningrad Region after several raids by FSB agents. Officials said the mosque violated planning regulations by being used for nonagricultural purposes.

Authorities continued to confiscate the property of the Jehovah’s Witnesses Administrative Center. In February the Syktyvkar City Court seized a house of worship after ruling the real estate agreement concluded in 2007 transferring the property to the Jehovah’s Witnesses was void, and returned the building to the municipality.

Media in August reported Sverdlovsk regional authorities rejected proposals made by members of the Buddhist Shedrub Ling Monastery to preserve the stupas and

outdoor Buddha statues around the monastery on Mount Kachkanar. A court ordered the religious buildings and statues to be demolished to allow for mining operations in the area. On October 18, the Sverdlovsk Region vice governor announced the mining company and the Buddhist community had signed an agreement whereby the community would relocate to a different area but would have periodic access to the religious structures on Mount Kachkanar until their demolition. A Buddhist leader interviewed by *Novaya Gazeta* stated the agreement was contrary to his community's interests but there was no other way to avoid conflict with the company and the local population. Under the agreement, the Buddhists must leave the area permanently by November 2020, after which the company plans to demolish most of the religious structures.

Forum 18 reported that on January 25, a Moscow court ordered the Moscow Theological Seminary of Evangelical Baptists to suspend all activities for 60 days after the federal education inspectorate Rosobrnadzor found fault with the organization's theological bachelor's degree program and the qualifications of its staff. In February the seminary was prohibited from admitting new students. Representatives of the seminary told Forum 18 Rosobrnadzor inspectors said staff had not undergone required medical examinations and the seminary was not following approved curricula. The seminary stated it was allowed under the education law and the religion law to develop nonaccredited courses that were not subject to the same requirements as state-accredited equivalents. The court subsequently suspended the seminary's license to engage in educational activities indefinitely. At year's end, the case was pending.

In December media reported Rosobrnadzor posted on its website that it had prohibited the Theological Seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in St. Petersburg from admitting new students for "failing to comply with requests in a timely manner." Rosobrnadzor did not provide further details.

As in years past, according to NGOs and independent experts, the government continued to cooperate more closely with the ROC than with other religious organizations, with officials often interpreting the law recognizing the "special role" Orthodox Christianity plays in the country's "history and the formation and development of its spirituality and culture" as granting special privileges or benefits to the ROC as an institution. The ROC continued to benefit from a number of formal and informal agreements with government ministries that gave it greater access than other religious organizations to public institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, the police, and the military. The government also continued to provide the ROC patriarch with security guards and access to official

vehicles, a privilege accorded to no other religious organization. In its annual report, the SOVA Center stated the ROC was the most frequent recipient of properties the government granted to religious organizations. During the year, Saratov Region authorities transferred the former Old Believers Kazanskaya (Gorinskaya) Church to the Russian Orthodox Gymnasium after refusing to return it to the Old Believers community. Per a decision by the Property Relations Committee of St. Petersburg, authorities gave the building housing the School of Olympic Reserve Specializing in Nordic Combined to the Orthodox Spaso-Pargolovsky parish over the objection of school staff and parents. No archival documents confirming that the ROC had previously owned the building were presented to the parents or school staff.

Some government officials continued to make anti-Semitic statements publicly. According to media, during a visit to Jordan in August, Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov told a group of expatriate ethnic Chechens that Jews were “the main enemies of Islam.” The meeting was broadcast on Chechen state television. The month prior, he told a group of Chechen police that Israel was a “terrorist organization.” In an op-ed published on the *Zavtra* news website on May 6, Sergey Glazyev, an advisor to President Vladimir Putin, wrote that Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, together with American and “extreme right-wing forces in Israel,” could orchestrate a “massive relocation” to replace the ethnic Russian population of eastern Ukraine with “inhabitants of the Promised Land.” Glazyev denied the op-ed was anti-Semitic, saying it did not mention Jews. On April 24, the acting mayor of Lipetsk, Yevgeniya Uvarkina, responded to a question at a public hearing from a local resident seeking to halt local stadium construction by wondering aloud whether the resident had a “Jewish last name.” She apologized for the remark the next day.

Multiple officials supported the construction of Orthodox churches, stating the country was an Orthodox nation. According to the *Moscow Times*, Yekaterinburg City Deputy Alexander Kolesnikov expressed public support for a proposed plan to build a new cathedral in a popular central park. Kolesnikov said, “If there is no cathedral, there will be mosques, and you will get another Switzerland. The government will work better if church bells are ringing.” According to media, in May thousands demonstrated for several days to protest the municipal government’s unilateral decision to locate the cathedral in the park without consulting local residents. Following a referendum, municipal authorities made plans to construct the cathedral at an alternate location.

The government continued to withhold property expropriated during the Soviet Union from minority Christian groups. Media reported Father Grigory Zvolinsky, a Catholic priest in the city of Kirov, had lost five court appeals since 2011 for the return of the Alexander Church, a Catholic church built by the Polish community in 1903. For several years, the church has been used as a concert hall. The city administration allowed Zvolinsky to rent the church for Mass on certain days but informed his lawyer near the end of the year that he would be allowed to continue doing this only if he dropped his court case altogether. Zvolinsky refused and declared his intention to continue trying to reclaim the church, despite being subject to official harassment and surveillance.

The SOVA Center reported authorities returned some properties to religious communities during the year. In June in the Altai Region, following lengthy litigation with the Barnaul city administration, the Catholic community regained ownership rights to its church building that had for many years housed a pharmacy. Media reported that in August the municipality of Syzran in the Volga Region returned a synagogue to the local Jewish community approximately 90 years after Soviet authorities had closed it. The community of approximately 150 members requested the return of the synagogue in 1943. Its request was denied at the time and the synagogue became a cultural center. The reports stated the community planned to rededicate the synagogue within two years.

Among issues cited by the Jehovah's Witnesses were government seizures of properties valued at 79.2 million euros (\$89 million), which remained pending before the ECHR at year's end.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In November the Anti-Defamation League released the results of a survey on anti-Semitic views of the country's residents. The survey cited stereotypical statements about Jews and asked respondents whether they believed such statements were "probably true" or "probably false." The proportion agreeing that various statements were "probably true" was: 39 percent that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to Russia; 50 percent that Jews have too much power in the business world; and 50 percent that Jews talk too much about the Holocaust.

A December 2017 opinion poll by the independent Levada Center concluded that attitudes toward various religious denominations remained relatively unchanged over the past 10 years. Nearly all Russians held positive views about Christians, and the majority held positive or neutral views about members of the other

religions included in the survey (Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus). Approximately 10 percent admitted to holding negative views about Jews and approximately 15 percent admitted to holding negative views about Muslims.

Media reported that in August a group of Krasnodar residents entered a synagogue and interrogated a rabbi for an hour, accusing him of spreading alien religious practices. The group's leader later announced that she would commence "partisan actions" against a Jewish community center.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to report adherents were increasingly harassed at their workplaces and in some cases dismissed or forced to resign when their coworkers became aware of their religious beliefs. The European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses reported that in April a Jehovah's Witness working as a psychotherapist in Chelyabinsk was forced to resign after a woman posted on the website of the city's health department that the therapist had used her professional role to promote a banned organization. In February authorities dismissed a firefighter in Surgut after two decades on the job due to his religious affiliation as a Jehovah's Witness.

The SOVA Center reported 19 incidents of religiously motivated vandalism during the year, compared with 34 incidents in 2018, continuing the general downward trend of such vandalism over the past decade (from a high of 177 incidents in 2010).

The SOVA Center reported that on April 18, the day before the beginning of Passover, unidentified individuals set fire to the country's largest yeshiva, Torat Haim, located in the Ramensky District of Moscow Region, and drew swastikas on the walls. No one was injured, but a storehouse burned down. In March unknown individuals in Kaliningrad defaced the grave of Israel Salanter, a 19th century rabbi, drawing on the tombstone a swastika and abbreviations associated with a neo-Nazi movement. The same month, unknown persons near Stavropol knocked down a granite cross erected on the site of a tenth century Christian church; the cross had been previously defaced with swastikas and pagan runes in October 2018. On June 2, unknown individuals set fire to a building belonging to the Jehovah's Witnesses in Kabardino-Balkaria. In September police arrested a man accused of setting fire to an Orthodox church in St. Petersburg. On June 18, unknown individuals damaged 13 headstones in an Islamic cemetery in the village of Osypnoy Hill in Astrakhan Region. On June 17, police arrested a woman who attempted to set fire to the door of a Catholic church in St. Petersburg.

According to the SOVA Center, national and local media continued to publish and/or broadcast defamatory material about minority religious groups, shaping the public perception that certain religious groups were dangerous. The state-owned television channels *Rossiya-1* and *Zvezda* broadcast negative stories about Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Scientology, respectively. In April the St. Petersburg TV channel 78 broadcast a story about Falun Gong practitioners, accusing them of extremism and espionage. According to the SOVA Center, in October the Tatarstan-based internet information agency *Sobytiya* made defamatory and xenophobic statements about Jehovah's Witnesses when announcing an upcoming October trial of the organization's members in Naberezhnye Chelny. The former head of the Department of Religious Studies at Kazan State University, Larisa Astakhova, invited as one of the experts, said that Jehovah's Witnesses "had to be disposed of" since the government had made the decision to ban them.

Many congregations said they pursued ties with other faith communities. A leader in the Catholic Church in Yekaterinburg said his church had ongoing relationships with local ROC, Muslim, and Protestant communities, as well as with immigrant communities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and embassy representatives met with a range of government officials throughout the year and expressed concern regarding the treatment of religious minorities, particularly the use of the law on extremism to restrict the activities of religious minorities. They also urged authorities to investigate the credible claims of torture and abuse that Jehovah's Witnesses and alleged members of Hizb ut-Tahrir made against local law enforcement officials.

In June senior officials from the Department of State met with Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin, chairman of the Religious Board of Muslims of the Russian Federation, to discuss the status of the Muslim community in the country.

Consular officials attended many administrative hearings of U.S. citizens accused of violating visa or other administrative requirements. Some of the U.S. citizens in these cases stated they believed the government targeted them for being members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, or other religious minorities.

The Ambassador and embassy representatives met with members of religious and nongovernmental organizations and held discussions with leaders from multiple

religious organizations to emphasize a commitment to religious freedom and the value of interfaith dialogue. In April the Ambassador met with Dr. Yuri Kanner, president of the Russian Jewish Congress, to discuss interfaith relations and combating anti-Semitism. The Ambassador also participated in events with other Jewish leaders, including Chief Rabbi of Russia Berl Lazar, emphasizing the U.S. commitment to combating anti-Semitism, and discussing the challenges the Jewish community faced. Throughout the year, the Ambassador also met with representatives of the ROC, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses, legal representatives of the COS, and a leader of the Church of Jesus Christ to discuss concerns about religious freedom in the country. In November the Charge d'Affaires held a roundtable with representatives from Muslim, Jewish, Baptist, and Orthodox Christian organizations to explore how the embassy could facilitate better cooperation among them. The embassy also partnered with religious organizations, such as the Russian Jewish Congress, for a number of events, including one honoring American citizens recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.

Representatives from the Consulates General in Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok met regularly with the ROC, rabbis and leaders of the Jewish community, muftis and other Islamic leaders, Protestant pastors, Catholic priests, and representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ and Jehovah's Witnesses. These discussions covered developments related to legislation affecting religious liberty, government practices, and specific religious freedom cases.

The embassy used its social media platforms during the year to highlight issues related to religious freedom, including expressing specific concern on Twitter over the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses. On February 6, the embassy spokesperson posted on Twitter, "Deeply concerned by the six-year sentence imposed on Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen. We agree with President Putin that persecuting peaceful believers is utter nonsense, and call on Russia to respect freedom of religion. #ReligiousFreedom." The embassy also invited speakers and organized programs designed to promote religious tolerance and interfaith understanding, especially through art and music. In June the embassy funded the visit of the Chicago-based theater company Silk Road Rising to Moscow and St. Petersburg to perform American playwright Jamil Khoury's play *Mosque Alert* in Russian. The play addressed the topics of anti-Muslim sentiment and Muslim-American relations. In November the embassy sponsored performances by Joseph Malovany, a leading American cantor, at the Moscow Conservatory to promote the importance of Jewish musical traditions.

On September 10, the U.S. government imposed visa restrictions on Vladimir Petrovich Yermolayev, Head of the Investigative Committee in Surgut, and Stepan Vladimirovich Tkach, Senior Investigator at the Investigative Committee in Surgut, and their immediate family members, for Yermolayev and Tkach's involvement in "torture and/or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment of Jehovah's Witnesses" held in detention in Surgut in February. When making the announcement, the Department of State spokesperson said, "Russia should end its unjust campaign against the Jehovah's Witnesses and immediately release the over 200 individuals it currently has imprisoned for exercising their freedom of religion or belief."

On December 18, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again placed Russia on a Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.