

RUSSIA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, equal rights irrespective of religious belief, and the rights 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 lists Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country's four "traditional" religions and recognizes the special role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The law distinguishes between "religious groups," which have the right to conduct worship services but may not engage in many other activities, and two categories of "religious organizations," which obtain legal status through registration with the government to conduct a full range of religious and civil functions. The Supreme Court ruled to criminalize the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist," effectively banning their activities and literature, and ordered their headquarters property to be liquidated. Authorities continued to detain and fine members of minority religious groups and minority religious organizations for alleged extremism. In one case, there were reports that authorities tortured an individual in a pretrial detention facility. Authorities convicted and fined several individuals for "public speech offensive to religious believers." The government prosecuted individuals of many denominations for unauthorized missionary activity under the amendments to antiterrorism laws passed in 2016, known as the Yarovaya Package. Police conducted raids on the private homes and places of worship of religious minorities. Religious minorities said local authorities used the country's anti-extremism laws to add to the list of banned religious texts. Local officials continued to prevent minority religious organizations from obtaining land and denied them construction permits for houses of worship. There were reports of Jehovah's Witnesses facing discrimination from school officials following the organization's ban. 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 increasingly fined and issued deportation orders for foreign nationals engaging in religious activity, including a rabbi, four Korean citizen Baptists, and an Indian citizen Pentecostal pastor.

Media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and religious groups reported a number of attacks on individuals based on their religious identity. There were physical assaults on Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims, as well as other attacks on individuals, possibly based on both their ethnicity and religion. NGOs reported

overall there were fewer instances of violence based on religious identity than in prior years. In separate instances, arsonists attacked a Jehovah's Witnesses' home and place of worship. Acts of vandalism motivated by religious hatred continued to occur, including against Jewish, Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal, and Buddhist religious sites.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials met with a range of government officials to discuss the treatment of religious minorities, particularly the use of the law on extremism to restrict the activities of religious minorities, and the revocation of registration of some minority religious organizations. Embassy officials raised consular cases with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs involving the discriminatory enforcement of the law against U.S. citizens who had engaged in religious activity, including preventing them from obtaining legal counsel, not allowing them to speak in their own defense at legal hearings, and not providing adequate translation into English. Consular officers attended several court hearings involving a U.S. citizen accused of violating the law on missionary activities. The Ambassador met the patriarch and the head of external relations of the ROC, the Chief Rabbi of Russia, the head of the Russian Jewish Congress, and the papal nuncio to discuss interfaith cooperation and ways to promote religious tolerance. Embassy officers met regularly with ROC clergy and staff and with representatives of minority religious groups, including rabbis, muftis, Protestant pastors, Catholic priests, U.S. missionaries, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as with NGOs and civil society leaders, to discuss religious legislation and government practices with regard to religious minorities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 142.2 million (July 2017 estimate). The most recent figures from a 2015-2016 poll by the Pew Research Center report 71 percent of the population consider themselves Orthodox, while 10 percent identify as Muslim. Religious groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population each include Buddhists, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, members of The Church of Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Bahais, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), pagans, Tengrists, Scientologists, and Falun Gong adherents. The 2010 census estimates the number of Jews at 150,000; however, the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities (FEOR) stated in February 2015 the actual Jewish population is nearly one million, 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 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 to religion. The constitution also bans any limitation of human rights on religious grounds and prohibits actions inciting religious hatred and strife. The constitution 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 contribution” of Russian Orthodox Christianity to the country’s history as well as the establishment 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 (\$3,500) or 500,000 rubles (\$8,600), depending upon which code governs the offense.

Incitement of “religious discord” is punishable by up to four years in prison. Under the criminal code, maximum fines and prison sentences for “actions directed to incite hatred or enmity” on the basis of religion may be punished by fines of 300,000 to 500,000 rubles (\$5,200 to \$8,600), compulsory labor for up to four

years, or imprisonment for up to five years. If these actions are committed with violence, by a person with official status (a term which applies to anyone working for the government or state-owned entities, as well as people in management roles at commercial or nongovernment entities), or by a group of individuals, the punishment is 300,000 to 600,000 rubles (\$5,200 to \$10,400), compulsory labor for up to five years, or imprisonment for up to six years.

The law criminalizes offending the religious feelings of believers; actions “in public demonstrating clear disrespect for society and committed with the intent to insult the religious feelings of believers” are subject to fines of up to 300,000 rubles (\$5,200), 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 (\$8,600), compulsory labor for up to three years, or a prison sentence of up to three years.

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 extremism, including incitement to “religious discord” and “assistance to extremism,” but the law does not precisely define extremism or require that an activity include an element of violence or hatred to be classified as extremism.

Being a member of a banned religious association designated as extremist is punishable by up to six years in prison for individuals and up to 12 years for persons with official status. 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 the regions of Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan ban “extremist Islamic Wahhabism.”

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 or public security.

In June 2016 the Russian Supreme Court upheld a 2014 order liquidating the Moscow branch of the Church of Scientology (COS) on the grounds it did not qualify as a religious organization.

The “religious group” is the most basic unit and does not require state registration; however, when a group first starts its activities, it must notify authorities in the “location of the religious group activity,” typically the regional Ministry of Justice (MOJ) office. A religious group may conduct worship services and rituals (but the law does not specify where or how) and to teach religion to its members. 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. Individual members of a group may invite foreigners as personal guests to engage in religious instruction, and may import religious material. According to the law, a religious group may use property bought for the group’s use by its members, or residential property owned or rented by its members, or public spaces rented by its members, to hold services.

A “local religious organization” (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.

“Centralized religious organizations” (CRO) may register with the MOJ at the regional or federal level by combining at least three LROs of the same denomination. In addition to having the same legal rights as LROs, centralized organizations also may open new LROs without a waiting period.

Registration of an LRO or CRO requires an association provide the following: a list of the organization’s founders and governing body, with addresses and passport information; the organization’s charter; the minutes of the founding meeting; certification from the central religious organization (in the case of LROs); a description of the organization’s doctrine, practices, history, and attitudes towards family, marriage, and education; the organization’s legal address; a certificate of payment of government dues; and a charter or registration papers of the governing body in the case of organizations whose main offices are located abroad. The law imposes reporting requirements on CROs and LROs receiving funding from abroad. They are required to report an account of their activities, a list of leaders, the source of foreign funding, and plans for how the organization intends to use any funds or property obtained through foreign funding. Reports are annual by default, but the MOJ may require additional ad hoc reports.

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. Foreign religious organizations able to obtain the required number of local adherents may register as local religious organizations.

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. The government may send representatives (with advance notice) 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.

A 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 out of the defense budget. The program allows for chaplains from the four traditional religions only, and calls for at least 250 chaplains.

The Yarovaya Package also amends federal law with regard to missionary activity, which the law defines 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 this 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 the individual to share beliefs from a religious group or registered organization. This letter must be provided to the authorities and the individual must carry a copy of it. 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 the amended law carries a fine of 5,000 to 50,000 rubles (\$86 to \$860) for individuals and 100,000 to 1,000,000 rubles (\$1,700 to \$17,300) for legal entities (which includes both LROs and CROs). Foreign citizens or stateless persons who violate restrictions on missionary activities may be fined 30,000 to 50,000 rubles (\$520 to \$860) and are subject to administrative deportation.

Several regional governments have their own restrictions on missionary activity.

Republics in the North Caucasus have varying policies on wearing the hijab in public schools. Hijabs are banned in public schools in Stavropol and Mordovia, rulings that have been upheld by the Russian Supreme Court. In March the Chechen parliament adopted amendments to the regional law on education to allow schoolgirls to wear hijabs.

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 extremism.

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 their 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 no longer classified as extremist, but lists are reviewed and re-issued on a regular basis and publications may be dropped from lists. The law makes it illegal to declare the key texts, or “holy books” of the four traditional religions to be 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 (\$17 to \$52), or 2,000 to 5,000 rubles (\$35 to \$87) for public officials, as well as the 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 (\$1,700 to \$17,300). 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 state 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.”

Religious education or civil ethics classes are compulsory in all secondary schools, public and private. 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 Sunday schools and home schooling. 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 dealing with 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.

There is compulsory military service for men, 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 ruble (\$1,400) fine to six months in prison.

By law religious associations 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 associations and not to their individual members.

The ROC and all members of the Public Chamber (a state institution made up of representatives of public associations) are granted the opportunity to review draft legislation pending before the State Duma on a case-by-case basis. No formal mechanism exists for permanent representation of religious organizations in the Public Chamber. Individuals may be invited into the Public Chamber from both traditional religions and other religious groups.

The law states foreigners or stateless individuals whose presence in the country is deemed “undesirable” are forbidden to become 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 government, through its visa regulations, has increasingly limited the ability of non-Russian citizens to engage in religious activity. Religious work is no longer permitted on humanitarian or missionary visas. Those engaging in religious work now require both a contract with a legally registered religious organization and a work visa.

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

Summary paragraph: Authorities continued to detain and fine members of minority religious groups and organizations for alleged extremism. In one case, there were reports that authorities tortured an individual in a pretrial detention facility. The Supreme Court ruled to criminalize the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist," and ordered their headquarters property be liquidated. In various cities across the country authorities dissolved or disbanded minority religious associations, often on grounds they were conducting "extremist activity." The authorities convicted and fined individuals for public speech they said was offensive to religious believers. Police continued to raid the private homes and places of worship of religious minorities, disrupting religious services. Under the Yarovaya Package, the government continued to prosecute individuals of several denominations. Religious minorities continued to state local authorities used the country's anti-extremism laws to add to the list of banned religious texts. Local officials continued to prevent minority religious organizations from obtaining land and denied them construction permits for houses of worship. As in prior years, the government granted privileges to the ROC accorded to no other church or religious association, including greater access to public institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, police, and the military forces. The government also fined and deported several foreign nationals engaging in religious activity including a rabbi, four Korean citizen Baptists, and an Indian citizen Pentecostal pastor.

According to the NGO Forum 18, the federal government increasingly restricted the exercise of freedom of religion since the re-election of President Vladimir Putin in 2012, enacting laws and prosecuting individuals for exercising their freedom of religion or belief.

In its yearly October report, the NGO Memorial published a list of political prisoners in the country that included 70 persons (at least three of whom are Crimean Tatars) persecuted because of their religion. According to Memorial, more than half its reported number of political prisoners in the country were imprisoned because of their religious activities, though it stated the overall list was incomplete, and the total number may be two to three times larger. The report noted an increase in political prisoners in recent years in connection to religious freedom. It stated none of the individuals on the list used violence, called for violence, or planned violent acts. The majority on the list are Muslims, many of whom were accused of participating in the organization Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, as well as followers of Turkish theologian Said Nursi. Jehovah's Witnesses joined the list of victims persecuted for religious reasons following the Supreme Court ban.

According to Forum 18, authorities continued to pursue multiple cases against Muslims on extremism charges for reading the works of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi. On December 8, Forum 18 reported that during the year, at least 12 Muslims were on trial or under investigation for being members of "Nurdzhular," an organization banned as extremist reportedly based on Nursi's teachings. Others reported that no such organization existed.

In November Forum 18 reported Yevgeny Kim was tortured while in pretrial detention in 2015. The report stated he suffered an attempted rape, was beaten, and had multiple ribs broken. On June 19, the Blagoveshchesk City Court found him guilty of organizing activities of a banned extremist organization and inciting hatred for meeting to study the works of Said Nursi. The court sentenced him to three years and nine months in a penal colony.

In the December 8 article, Forum 18 reported that, on December 7, a court sentenced three Dagestani Muslims to prison terms, Ziyavdin Dapayev to a four-year term and Sukhrab and Artur Kaltuyev to three-year terms. They were being held without bail pending appeals. The government stated they and other Nursi readers belong to the banned organization Nurdzhular, which the government deemed extremist. The court also ordered the destruction of many of Nursi's works. A Turkish company, Sozler, which published Nursi's works in Russian, accused law enforcement agencies of falsifying witness testimony and appealed to the General Prosecutor's Office to investigate.

Additionally, the December 8 Forum 18 article said there were two separate, ongoing criminal cases in Krasnoyarsk against Muslims Andrei Dedkov and Andrei Rekst on extremism charges related to studying Nursi readings. Authorities accused Dedkov of organizing gatherings to study Nursi works and accused Rekst of participating in the gatherings. On December 8, Forum 18 reported there already had been eight hearings in Dedkov's case and 13 in Rekst's case. Authorities held Dedkov in pretrial detention from April 2016 until March 3, and he was under house arrest and under travel restrictions at year's end. Rekst remained free on bail at year's end.

In the same article, Forum 18 reported six other cases in Novosibirsk for alleged participation in the banned "extremist" organization Nurdzhular – two that authorities closed, two investigations that remained in progress, and two awaiting court hearings. On November 15, the October District Court in Novosibirsk closed the cases of pensioner Uralbek Karaguzinov and undergraduate student Mirsultan Takhir-ogly Nasirov after fining them each 90,000 rubles (\$1,500). Two other Muslims remained under investigation, but they were unavailable to stand trial. One was abroad and the whereabouts of the other was unknown. The two awaiting court hearings included Uzbek citizen Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov, whom authorities originally treated as a witness but formally charged on October 31. Forum 18 reported Tukhtamurodov had refugee status in Russia but if found guilty, could lose this protection and be forced to return to Uzbekistan.

On April 19, police arrested Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev in a nighttime raid in Dagestan. Authorities accused him of holding classes involving a group of Nursi adherents. He faced up to 10 years in prison.

On December 22, the Oryol Regional Court denied an appeal to release Dennis Christensen, a Danish citizen and elder of the Jehovah's Witnesses Oryol Congregation detained on "extremist activity" charges on May 25, when at least 15 armed persons, including Federal Security Service (FSB) personnel, raided the religious services of the congregation. On September 28, the Oryol Regional Court had denied a similar appeal. In June authorities dissolved the Oryol LRO on extremism charges. On July 20, the Sovietskiy District Court extended Christensen's pretrial detention to November 23 and on November 20 the court again extended his pretrial detention until February 23, 2018. If convicted, Christensen faced six to 10 years in prison. On September 4, the ECHR began an examination of the case after Christensen appealed to it.

On May 11, Ruslan Sokolovsky, a blogger from Yekaterinburg, received a 3.5-year suspended sentence, during which time he is banned from attending mass gatherings. Since his arrest he was in pretrial custody twice and otherwise under house arrest. In September 2016 authorities arrested him for “inciting enmity and hatred” and “offending the feelings of believers” by playing the game *Pokemon Go* in an Orthodox church and posting antireligious videos online. Authorities added other criminal charges in January.

According to COS representatives and media, on December 4, the Nevskiy District Court extended the pretrial detention of five COS leaders in St. Petersburg to March 2018. Authorities arrested the five on June 6, when security services raided the St. Petersburg COS branch and homes of its leaders as part of a probe into what they said was possible “illegal entrepreneurship” (i.e., selling religious books), extremism, and incitement of hatred; these charges were punishable by six to 10 years’ imprisonment. Police arrested, interrogated, and detained the Church employees, four of whom received two months’ pretrial detention; the fifth was put under house arrest. On October 19, the court changed the pretrial detention conditions to house arrest for two of the individuals. The prosecution appealed the ruling for house arrest for one of them, Sahib Aliyev, and on November 22, he was taken back to prison. At year’s end, the executive director of the religious group, Ivan Matsitsky, and Aliyev remained in prison.

The COS petitioned the ECHR following the Supreme Court’s 2016 decision upholding a 2014 order liquidating its Moscow branch on the grounds it did not qualify as a religious organization. The case before the ECHR was pending at the end of the year.

In March media reported that the Moscow District Military Court sentenced Imam Makhmud Velitov of Moscow’s Yardam Mosque to three years in a prison colony on terrorism charges for a 2013 sermon at a funeral in which he publicly advocated the “doctrine of political Islam,” said to be a characteristic of the Hizb ut-Tahrir organization, which was banned by the government as a terrorist organization in 2003.

According to *Eurasianet*, in January the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of Imam Magomed Nabi Magomedov but reduced his sentence by six months. The nonprofit SOVA Center for Information and Analysis reported that in October 2016, the Caucasus Regional Military Court found Magomedov guilty of making statements in a sermon justifying terrorism and hatred and sentenced him to five

years in prison. Memorial said it studied the sermon and did not find it to contain any calls to acts of violence or terrorism.

In November police detained approximately 25 mosque attendees in Makhachkala, capital of Dagestan, according to the online news site *Caucasian Knot*. They were subsequently released. According to an eyewitness, police stopped both drivers and pedestrians near the mosque. Those detained were brought to the police station and divided into two groups. Those whose names had previously been included in the police extremism-prevention registration lists were questioned, photographed, and released. Those whose names had not been on the lists were questioned for a longer time. Authorities recorded their personal data, including information about their family members, and put them on the police extremism-prevention registration lists. In June *Caucasian Knot* reported the Ministry of Internal Affairs confirmed that Dagestan removed from the police extremism-prevention registration lists followers of “unconventional Islamic concepts.”

On November 27 the Kurgan City Court acquitted for a second time Imam Ali Yakupov of the Kurgan Mosque on charges of inciting hatred. According to the SOVA Center, on June 22 the Kurgan Regional Court granted an appeal from the prosecutor’s office to overturn an April acquittal, and returned the case to the Kurgan City Court.

In August the Central District Court of Sochi found Viktor Nochevnova guilty of insulting the feelings of believers and fined him 50,000 rubles (\$860) for reposting seven cartoon depictions of Jesus on his social media vKontakte page.

In February a court in Stavropol dismissed a criminal case against atheist blogger Viktor Krasnov whom authorities charged in March 2016 with offending the feelings of believers for comments he posted on a website in 2014 describing the Bible as a “collection of Jewish fairytales” and denying the existence of God.

Media reported in October First Deputy Chairman of the Duma Committee on Public Associations and Religious Organizations Ivan Sukharev requested the prosecutor general to take action against the Satanic Church of the Russian Federation. According to Sukharev, the organization’s activities offended the religious sensibilities of those adhering to traditional faiths. The Moscow Times reported the Satanic Church of Russia was established in 2013 and received legal recognition in May 2016.

Media, NGOs, and religious minorities reported continued attempts by authorities to dissolve minority religious associations, often on the grounds they were conducting extremist activity.

On August 17, the MOJ formally placed the Jehovah's Witnesses' parent organization in the country and 395 related LROs on its list of "extremist" groups, a procedural move following the Supreme Court's decision on April 20, upheld by the Appellate Chamber of the Supreme Court on July 17, which criminalized the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses. The decision terminated all activity of the Jehovah's Witnesses' legal entities throughout the country, effectively banning their worship.

A court on December 6 ordered the confiscation of the St. Petersburg headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses (25 acres of real estate in the town of Sestoresk), in a decision based on the April 20 Supreme Court ruling. Since 2010 the property was owned by U.S. citizens based in Pennsylvania. The Jehovah's Witnesses had a month to appeal in the St. Petersburg City Court and said they would take their case to the ECHR. On December 14 authorities broke into the Kolomyazhskiy Assembly Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses in St. Petersburg, cordoned off the building, and took control of the property. According to *jw.org*, no Jehovah's Witnesses in the hall were injured during the raid, and the building appeared to be undamaged. Prior to the April Supreme Court ruling, authorities continued to disband Jehovah's Witnesses communities across the country. In addition to communities in Taganrog, Samara, Abinsk, Belogorod, Stary Oskol, Elista, and Orel, which had been ruled extremist and dissolved in previous years, authorities disbanded the Jehovah's Witnesses community in Birobidzhan following a February 9 Supreme Court ruling, and ordered the liquidation of the community in Cherkessk, Karachai-Cherkessia on February 10. Forum 18 also reported that in January the Arkhangelsk Jehovah's Witness community voluntarily dissolved after heavy pressure from authorities and ROC Moscow Patriarchate (ROC-MP) "antisect" activists.

According to the SOVA Center, in August the ECHR accepted eight complaints related to the ban or denial of registration of several religious organizations and prosecution for religious activities. The court took the complaints, filed between 2011 and 2017, into consideration simultaneously. Among them was a complaint from nine followers of Said Nursi for the banning of several Nursi texts and extremism charges.

In some cases, it was difficult for minority religious organizations to obtain state registration. In October the SOVA Center reported that since April the parish of St. Maria Gatchinskaya in the Leningrad Region unsuccessfully tried three times to register with the local authorities. The parish belonged to the Suzdal Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church.

According to the MOJ, in 2015, the most recent year for which figures were provided, the government approved 1,335 new registrations of religious organizations, most of which were ROC-affiliated.

Unlike previous years, the government did not designate any religious groups or organizations as “foreign agents.”

In addition to the order that criminalized the activity of Jehovah’s Witnesses as “extremist” and ordered their headquarters property to be liquidated, individual Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 19 cases of interference in church members’ private lives. In most of these cases, according to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, officers of government agencies raided the homes of Jehovah’s Witnesses, often carrying out unauthorized and illegal searches and seizure of private belongings, such as in Novouzensk, Saratov Region on January 19. In at least six cases, large numbers of officers took part in the raids; in at least five cases, officers reportedly planted “extremist” literature to fabricate charges against the Witnesses, such as on February 21 in Mikhaylovsk, Stavropol Territory. Authorities also broke into homes, often did not declare their purpose or show a court order, and ordered people around at gunpoint.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 25 cases of police raids on Kingdom Halls or on other meeting places. In almost all cases, the police officers disrupted religious services in progress or denied the Witnesses the opportunity to conduct their scheduled services. In many cases, the officers questioned those in attendance, recorded their identification information, and photographed or video recorded them. On May 4, the prosecutor’s office issued a warning to the chairman of the Krymsk Jehovah’s Witnesses LRO, stating the chairman and members of the LRO could be subject to administrative and criminal liability for holding religious services. According to *jw.org*, as of June 16, at least five other LROs had received similar warnings since the Russian Supreme Court ruling to ban Jehovah’s Witnesses.

On May 8, an independent foreign Baptist preacher, who had lived in Oryol since 2005, and his wife left the country permanently, according to his website. In May

he had filed an appeal with the ECHR after the Supreme Court denied his appeal January 20 of a 2016 conviction for allegedly advertising and holding religious services in his home. At year's end the ECHR had not ruled on the appeal.

Caucasian Knot reported that on June 2 the Lazarevskoe District Court of Sochi found former chairman of the Board of Elders of the Circassians-Shapsugs Ruslan Gvashev guilty of organizing an unsanctioned action, a prayer service, on the Adygs' Memory Day, and fined him 10,000 rubles (\$170). (The Adygs are a mostly Sunni Muslim people of the northwest Caucasus region.) On May 21, Gvashev took part in a mourning prayer at the Tulip Tree, a place considered sacred by the Adygs. According to witnesses, 67-year-old Gvashev was taken to court in a state of hypertensive crisis and the judge would not postpone the session despite a doctor's recommendation he be hospitalized. In October the Krasnodar Territorial Court dismissed a complaint filed by Gvashev. According to his defense attorneys, the Tulip Tree is a place of worship and the Memory Day mourning for Adygs who suffered during the Caucasian War is a ritual action not requiring approval.

Authorities issued Aleksei Presbyter of the Evangelical Christian Baptists an administrative fine for holding religious meetings in the village of Chara. Presbyter had not sent the MOJ notification of either the place and or the start of the religious activity. On March 10, the Uritsky District Court of Orel Oblast (province) fined three representatives of the Evangelical Christian Baptists 5,000 rubles (\$86) each for violating the law on missionary activity. The court convicted them of illegally distributing religious literature and inviting people to their religious meetings, without notifying the MOJ as required by law.

NGOs and religious figures criticized Education Minister Olga Vasilyeva for her January call to ban hijabs in public schools across the country.

Regional governments continued to restrict missionary activity, with officials often citing concerns about missionaries as sources of foreign influence.

Representatives of minority religious associations and NGOs continued to state that the Yarovaya Package, enacted for the stated purpose of enhancing the country's antiterrorism capability, gave the authorities a range of powers to limit civil society. They said the broad definition of "missionary activity" in the legislation meant it 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 January the chairman of the Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, a consultative body to the president, released the council's draft expert conclusion that the Yarovaya Package restricted the constitutional rights of citizens and the restrictions were disproportionate to their effectiveness in combating terrorism. The council also said the law was arbitrarily enforced, with a focus on Protestants.

Authorities continued to pursue cases under the Yarovaya Package during the year. According to Forum 18, there were 193 legal cases against 136 individuals and 57 religious communities for unauthorized missionary activity between July 2016 and July 2017. Religious communities and individuals involved included Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Baptist Union, the Council of Churches, ISKON, Muslims, individuals associated with the Bible distribution organization the Gideons, Seventh-day Adventists, the Federation of Jewish Communities, a Kabbalah teacher, Buddhists, the Salvation Army, the Administrative Center of the New Apostolic Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Lutheran Church, the Mormons, the Ukrainian Reformed Orthodox Church, and the ROC abroad. Of these, 143 cases resulted in initial convictions, with 140 fines imposed. Of the foreigners prosecuted, five were ordered deported, the first in February, and one had the deportation order overturned on appeal. Authorities in more than half the regions in the country initiated at least one prosecution under this law. The individuals charged with unauthorized missionary activity reportedly were prosecuted for activities such as holding prayer meetings at home, posting worship times on a religious community's website, and giving a lecture on yoga. In these cases, authorities confiscated religious literature from 11 religious communities. In three of the cases, judges ordered the literature destroyed, although two of these rulings were subsequently overturned. Those convicted were fined from 5,000 to 100,000 rubles (\$86 to \$1,700). According to Forum 18, authorities did not initiate charges against any individuals or communities associated with the ROC-MP.

Between September 2016 and August, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 58 cases in which police officers arrested Witnesses for talking to others about their beliefs. In most cases, they were detained for a time at the police station and police often initiated an administrative case for engaging in missionary activity. On March 22 the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy Jehovah's Witnesses community unsuccessfully appealed a February 10 Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy Court ordered fine of 100,000 rubles (\$1,700) for carrying out illegal missionary activity aimed at public dissemination of information about their beliefs among people who were not participants. According to Forum 18, authorities also accused the group of

“activity with extremist goals” because of the alleged presence of materials from the federal list of extremist material.

Forum 18 reported that on May 24, a Tomsk court fined the Northern Tomsk Jehovah’s Witnesses community 100,000 rubles (\$1,700) for carrying out illegal missionary activity. The community allegedly held a worship meeting where nonmembers were present. On June 19, the October District Court of Tomsk rejected the community’s appeal without consideration.

According to Forum 18, on May 23, the Kurchatov District Magistrate’s Court in Chelyabinsk fined ISKON leader Aleksandr Kulikov 5,000 rubles (\$86). The court accused Kulikov of missionary activity among underage children without parental permission after his group’s religious procession reportedly passed nine-year-olds.

On March 13, as reported in independent media outlet *Dozhd*, the Smolny District Court of St. Petersburg denied a February appeal by a police officer of a ruling that yoga teacher Dmitry Ugay was not a missionary. In January the judge had dropped the case, in which Ugay was charged with illegal missionary activity under the Yarovaya legislation for giving a talk about the philosophy behind yoga at a festival in St. Petersburg.

Religious minorities said local authorities used the country’s anti-extremism laws to ban sacred religious texts and other books relating to religion. According to the SOVA Center, during the first half of the year authorities added seven nonviolent texts criticizing the ROC and religion, and one text by a Christian human rights organization criticizing Islam to the MOJ’s list of extremist materials. The list grew to 4,345 entries at the end of the year from 4,015 at the end of 2016. Forum 18 reported that other texts added during the year, included the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ *New World Translation* of the Bible, other Jehovah’s Witnesses and Islamic books, several Jewish texts, two Christian books, and an atheist slideshow. According to Forum 18, on August 31, the ECHR began considering two cases brought against the government by Aslambek Ezhayev and Sozler, publishers of Islamic religious texts ruled “extremist.”

On July 14, the MOJ added Jewish author Markus Leman’s book *The Forcibly Baptized* to its list of extremist materials. According to Interfax, on March 22 the Central District Court of Sochi ruled the book extremist because it contained information aimed at inciting hatred of Christians and propagating the superiority and exclusiveness of Judaism over Christianity. FEOR spokesman Borukh Gorin

condemned the ruling, stating it was part of a judicial policy in Sochi to limit the growth of Jewish spiritual life.

On December 20, the Leningrad District Court upheld a Vyborg City Court August 17 ruling that the Jehovah's Witnesses *New World Translation* of the Bible is "extremist literature." Jehovah's Witnesses representatives said members who use the Bible therefore could be subject to criminal prosecution. In court, lawyers for the Jehovah's Witnesses said the expert panel should recuse itself, and presented evidence that the three expert panel members (a mathematician, a linguist, and a political scientist whose study was the basis for the August 17 ruling) had previously published opinions prejudicial toward the Jehovah's Witnesses. In the December case, the expert panel also determined the *New World Translation* was not a Bible. The head of the Leningrad District Court rejected the premise that the experts should recuse themselves and allowed the proceeding to continue.

A court confiscated Nizhny Tagil Evangelical Christian Church's Bibles (including an edition used by the ROCMP) and ordered their destruction. In the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region, a court ordered the destruction of Hindu texts, including the Bhagavad Gita.

Internet providers throughout the country continued to block access to the *jw.org* website.

The Salsk District Court fined the Salsk Jehovah's Witnesses community 40,000 rubles (\$690) and confiscated literature on April 27 for carrying out activities of a religious organization without displaying its full official name on its building. The community argued it did not own the building and therefore could not alter its facade.

On May 12 the Lenin District Magistrate's Court fined the Moksha-Erzyan Evangelical Lutheran Church 30,000 rubles (\$520) for not displaying a sign showing its full official name.

Reports persisted that local officials continued to prevent minority religious organizations from obtaining land and continued to deny construction permits for houses of worship.

Muslim leaders continued to state Moscow's four mosques were inadequate for the city's Muslim population. In August media reported Mufti Albir Krganov announced a fifth mosque would be built in Moscow in the future and land

allocation was being discussed. In December the mufti told media that he had discussed the issue with Moscow city officials.

In the fall, the Muslim community in Kaliningrad went to court seeking compensation for its financial losses following a court-ordered halt to the construction of its mosque in 2013. The community stated it had been trying to build a mosque since 1993. At the September 19 hearing, the city administration recognized the validity of the Muslim community's claims, but it disputed the requested monetary compensation. According to the *New Kaliningrad* news, the Muslim community revised its claim from 98 million rubles (\$1.7 million) to 85 million rubles (\$1.5 million), while the city administration said the damages amounted to 60 million rubles (\$1 million). The community also appealed to the ECHR against the city administration for blocking the mosque. Media reported in December the Central District Court awarded the Muslim community 66 million rubles (\$1.1 million) in compensation. The head of the organization told media that the community did not need money, but rather a mosque.

In a long-running case, Forum 18 reported the demolition of a Buddhist monastery on top of Kachkanar Mountain (in the Ural Mountains approximately 125 miles north of Yekaterinburg) was tentatively scheduled for some time in the winter of 2017-18. According to Forum 18, on September 25 the senior Sverdlovsk Region bailiff said demolition would be postponed until the region received federal funding to cover the costs. In a November article, *Interfax* reported that authorities denied the Buddhists of Kachkanar Mountain registration as a religious organization.

In September the Supreme Court dismissed a suit brought by the ISKON for compensation for the 2014 loss of a temple near Dinamo metro station in Moscow. In October a lawyer for the ISKCON told Forum 18 the religious group had abandoned plans to build more places of worship in the country. "We are not building temples in the traditional Indian style now, because it is very difficult to get permission. After the fiasco with our temple in Molzhaninovo District [in Moscow], we do not undertake such projects." He referred to the Moscow Property Department's unilateral termination of the group's lease in 2013 resulting in the group's inability to proceed with building its new temple and the subsequent refusal to overturn the decision in 2015. The Moscow authorities did not offer any alternative sites, according to the community's lawyer, nor did courts approve financial compensation for the approximately 73 million rubles (\$1.3 million) the community said it already spent on the project. The community's lawyer said it was renting space for worship and had not experienced any problems.

While difficulties remained, religious organizations said there was some movement in reclaiming former properties confiscated during the Soviet era. On October 25, in an official ceremony that included the President of Germany, the government returned the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul to the Lutheran Church. The occasion coincided with the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

On November 14, the Supreme Court confirmed a recommendation to “abridge the parental rights of people who involved children in sects, extremist organizations, or terrorist organizations.” The court order specified that it was parental abuse to involve a child in activity of a public or religious association which has been banned.

According to media accounts, there were cases of Jehovah’s Witnesses facing discrimination in schools. In the village of Bezvodnoye in Kirov Oblast, a teacher reportedly humiliated two young students whose mother is a Jehovah's Witness. The teacher justified her actions by stating that the Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in the country. On May 17 in the Moscow Region, a school principal issued a written warning to the parents of an eight-year-old student who had spoken about God to a classmate. The document referred to the April Supreme Court decision and prohibited on school grounds “all actions that do not relate to the educational process.” The principal threatened to report the matter to the police and “to raise the issue of transferring the child to another form of training.”

On May 15, the management of a chemical factory in the Smolensk Region dismissed all of its Jehovah’s Witnesses employees. According to *jw.org*, management said they received an order from the FSB to dismiss all of the Witnesses because “extremists” cannot work at the factory.

According to the SOVA Center, on October 24, it became known that prosecutors in Blagoveshchensk asked students of the College of Culture and Arts whether their teachers attended the New Generation Church. The students had to answer in writing questions about whether they were inclined to join the church and, if they were members, whether they were forced to raise money for the needs of the church. The questionnaire also identified which teachers and students attended church meetings.

According to *Russian Religion News*, public schools in the country became more receptive to religious teaching, specifically of the ROC. Minister of Education and Research Igor Skubenko of Arkhangelsk Oblast welcomed in August the

involvement of the ROC in all spheres of life, including in education, stating, “When the Church is nearby that is healthy. In this way the people are cleansed from an alien ideology.”

In February media reported the deputy head of the Federation Council’s Committee on Constitutional Legislation and State Development, Yelena Mizulina, would lead a working group to fight the influence of more than “500 destructive sects” operating in the country. Mizulina noted the existing legislation lacked a definition of the term “sect.” She said the MOJ reported 52 sects were banned and dissolved in the country in 2015 and 2016, but “such a large-scale spread of sectarian organizations clearly shows that something is wrong with the existing legislation.” According to the SOVA Center, the working group included several “experts on sects” from the Russian Association of Centers for the Study of Religions and Sects, including its president Alexander Dvorkin; representatives of the ROC-MP; representatives of the security services, including the FSB; and Larisa Astakhova, head of the religious studies department at Kazan Federal University, whose expert testimony on the activities of the Moscow COS served as one of the grounds for liquidating it.

As in years past, according to NGOs, the government continued to cooperate more closely with the ROC than with other religious organizations. Although neither the constitution nor the law explicitly accorded privileges or advantages to the ROC, they said the ROC continued to benefit from 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, the police, and the military forces. 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

There were reports of multiple denials of religious minorities’ members’ requests for alternative civil service. According to Forum 18, a draft commission in the Chuvash Republic rejected Jehovah’s Witness Avel Lukin’s plea for alternative civil service. The commission cited the Supreme Court’s decision to liquidate the religious organization. The Shumerlya District Court rejected Lukin’s appeal on July 4, but Jehovah’s Witnesses stated that he would continue to challenge the decision. According to *jw-russia.org*, he was drafted into the strategic missile forces. The status of any appeal was unknown at year’s end.

Human rights activists and Jewish community leaders criticized as anti-Semitic comments made by officials regarding protests against the handover of St. Isaac’s

Cathedral in St. Petersburg to the ROC. On January 23, Duma Deputy Speaker Pyotr Tolstoy criticized the protests, stating protesters were “continuing the work” of their descendants, “who destroyed our cathedrals ... with revolvers in 1917.” Deputies of the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly condemned the “disgusting phenomenon of anti-Semitism” by Tolstoy. FEOR leaders condemned the statement as an anti-Semitic reference to conspiracy theories about Jews fomenting the Bolshevik Revolution. Tolstoy expressed surprise and stated he was “misunderstood.” On February 12 while criticizing opponents of the transfer, Duma Deputy Vitaly Milonov stated, “Christians survived despite the fact that the ancestors of Boris Vishnevsky and Maksim Reznik boiled us in cauldrons and fed us to animals.” Russian Jewish Congress president Yury Kaner told media: “It is clear ... that these lawmakers [Vishnevsky and Reznik] are of Jewish descent and that he means Jews by his statement.” FEOR spokesman Borukh Gorin told media “for a State Duma deputy, it is unacceptable to make such irresponsible statements.” State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin backed Tolstoy, while head of the Presidential Human Rights Council Mikhail Fedotov criticized the remarks by expressing surprise at hearing a “respected parliamentarian repeating a favorite thesis of anti-Semites.” The government did not censure or punish Tolstoy, although St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly member Boris Vishnevskiy announced plans to refer Tolstoy’s comments to the Investigative Committee for possible extremist content. On January 27, three days after his remarks, Tolstoy was appointed head of the country’s delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The SOVA Center reported that on October 17, the television station Zvezda, owned by the Russian Ministry of Defense, aired a film called *Espionage under the Guise of Religion*. The program used examples of Scientologists and Jehovah’s Witnesses as “proof” that some representatives of religious minorities and “sects” were closely associated with intelligence agencies in the United States.

MOJ official Marina Molodtsova, special investigator on a committee investigating the 1918 killings of Czar Nicholas II and his family, stated on November 28 that her committee would investigate claims that the family was killed in a “ritual murder,” which Jewish community members reported gave new life to an old conspiracy that Jews killed the family in a ritual murder. Russian Orthodox Bishop Tikhon Shevkunov stated he believed these claims. Alexander Boroda, president of the FEOR said, “Accusing Jews of a ritual killing is one of the most ancient anti-Semitic slanders.”

In March President Putin met separately with Metropolitan Kornily, leader of the Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church, and with Central Muslim Spiritual Board head and Chief Mufti Talgat Tajuddin to discuss the communities' activities. The presidential press secretary said the president has "regular communication with members of Russian religious denominations ..."

According to international media, on January 25, the Supreme Court of Tartarstan denied the appeal of Pentecostal Pastor Victor-Immanuel Mani, an Indian national, against deportation; he left the country. In December 2016 the Naberezhniye Chelny City Court in Tartarstan had fined Mani 30,000 rubles (\$520) and ordered his deportation for illegal missionary activity under the Yarovaya Package. According to Forum 18, Mani held religious meetings in rented premises and advertised them on the church's social network vKontakte page without necessary authorization documents from the local religious organization. His wife and child were Russian citizens. On November 11, the Russian Supreme Court overturned the deportation order of the lower court but left the fine in place.

On April 3, a foreign rabbi left the country after a March 23 Krasnodar regional court ordered his deportation, upholding a February order by authorities. In December 2016 the Ministry of Internal Affairs had canceled his residency permit on the grounds that he posed a risk to national security.

In early July four Korean Baptists left the country. According to reports, at the end of June, two men and two women arrived from Irkutsk to a village in the Republic of Buryatia. Media reported that none of the four Baptist communities registered in Buryatia issued a document authorizing them to carry out missionary work. According to the Slavic Center for Law and Justice, a court in Buryatia fined and ordered their deportation for illegal missionary activity and violation of the rules for entry into the country.

The Constitutional Court reviewed the appeal of two foreign Mormon volunteers who were fined 2,000 rubles (\$35) and deported, along with four other volunteers, in August 2016 because they were registered at the location of the Mormon Church instead of at their rented apartment. The court ruled in favor of the two volunteers.

According to independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, since the Yarovaya Package was implemented, evangelical Christian and Baptist churches often came under the scrutiny of law enforcement. In one case, the Ukrainian pastor of the evangelical Restoration Christian Center and his wife were pulled over "two or three times a day" by police in Moscow and twice fined for an illegible license plate. According

to *Novaya Gazeta*, the Federal Migration Service refused the pastor's residency permit (his temporary residency permit expires in December 2018) and informed him that documents for his deportation were already prepared. In August he was summoned to an interrogation and threatened with arrest. *Novaya Gazeta* suggested this harassment was related to a criminal case against the church's charitable foundation, Restoration, which operated rehabilitation centers for drug addicts. In January authorities filed a criminal case against organizers of the foundation, alleging the organizers illegally held six drug addicts and kidnapped two others, despite other drug addicts at the center testifying they were there voluntarily. Authorities detained five of the center's Russian employees, three of whom were later released and placed under house arrest. The residents of the rehabilitation centers told media that during their interrogation, investigators demanded they give evidence against the organizers of the center and against the head of Restoration Christian Center.

Between January and April Jehovah's Witnesses reported 27 negative television reports about their religion. They said state-controlled media regularly reported stories critical of the group, which the Jehovah's Witnesses said negatively influenced public opinion towards them.

The Jewish community again reported fewer government restrictions on their religious activities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Media, NGOs, and religious groups reported physical assaults related to religious identity during the year, although according to data collected by the SOVA Center, there were fewer recorded instances of violence based on religious identity than in prior years. SOVA recorded three acts of violence directed against religious groups compared to 21 such acts in 2016. SOVA also separately recorded 13 acts of violence against Central Asians and individuals from the Caucasus during the same period compared to 31 in 2016. Because ethnicity and religion are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many of these incidents as being solely based on religious identity. The media also attributed some of these attacks to the political or human rights activities of the victims.

On May 2, the SOVA Center reported that in April in Penza Oblast, three unidentified persons beat an imam in his home. The assailants kicked him and hit him with a bat.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses there were 12 cases of physical assaults, one of which included a threat of murder, on adherents between September 2016 and August. In March a man with a dog threatened to set the animal loose on attendees during a religious service in a Kingdom Hall in St. Petersburg. He attacked one individual, shouted insults, and damaged the building. The same month in Moscow, a man threatened two Jehovah's Witnesses with a knife, injuring one of them.

The SOVA Center reported that on August 17, in Nikonovsky village in the Moscow region, a local resident shouted insults and physically attacked a 56-year-old Jehovah's Witness. According to the report, the attacker approached three Jehovah's Witnesses sitting on a bench and holding a Bible in their hands. The attacker shouted, "Get out! You are banned!" and struck one of the Witnesses on the head with a glass jar before scattering the contents of her bag. The victim suffered a concussion and was taken to the hospital. The victims filed a police report, but the results of the case were not known.

The Slavic Center for Law and Justice reported two armed men broke into a Pentecostal church in January, beat two parishioners, and threatened them at knifepoint. The assailants demanded to see a list of church members, identified themselves as "native Orthodox," and promised to eradicate all "sectarians." The assailants reportedly had been known for prior antigovernment internet posts.

Following the March 31 adoption by the Chechen Parliament of amendments to the local law allowing students to wear clothes reflecting their religious beliefs, the head of the ROC-MP legal service said it violated "the principle of secular education in state schools," and should be adjusted. She said "the federal law does not give students the right to wear clothes 'in accordance with religious beliefs.'" According to the presidential press secretary, the Kremlin had not yet taken a position on the legislation. In January the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion reported that according to a poll, 47 percent of Russians saw nothing offensive in the practice of Muslim girls wearing hijabs in schools, compared to 35 percent in 2012. Forty-seven percent were against this practice, down from 53 percent in 2012.

The Press Secretary of the ROC-MP, Patriarch Kirill, said in June it would be desirable to include study of the basics of the Church Slavonic language in the school curriculum for cultural purposes. Earlier in the year, the president of the Russian Academy of Education, Professor Liudmila Verbitskaia, called for consideration of teaching Church Slavonic in schools.

Media and NGOs reported attempted arson attacks by critics of the film *Matilda*, which premiered in October and depicted Tsar Nicholas II, when he was an unmarried crown prince, romantically involved with a ballerina. The Orthodox Church canonized Nicholas II in 2000 and some Orthodox critics called the film blasphemous. According to the news outlet *Znak*, one individual in Yekaterinburg ran his car filled with containers of gasoline into a theater screening the film. According to media outlets, on September 11, arsonists set fire to two cars outside the law firm representing the film's director. *Interfax* reported that on September 12, the Cinema Park and Formula Kino network of movie theaters announced they would not screen the film due to threats against the theaters. There were calls to ban the film by government officials, including head of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov. In a letter to the minister of culture posted online on August 8 by the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Kadyrov stated that tens of thousands of believers of different faiths requested the film not be allowed to air in the country because they regard it as deliberate mockery of the feelings of believers.

The SOVA Center reported 26 acts of vandalism motivated by religious, ethnic, or ideological hatred during the year (compared to 28 such acts in 2016). The majority of the sites belonged to the Jehovah's Witnesses, which the SOVA Center attributed to the Supreme Court ban on the organization. Acts of vandalism included the defacement of 11 Jehovah's Witnesses buildings, eight Orthodox monuments, a Protestant church, and a Pentecostal building. In August in the Murmansk region, unidentified vandals desecrated a Buddhist stupa.

Between September 2016 and August, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 16 attacks on Kingdom Halls, including one resulting in damage from arson, with at least nine of these cases following the April Supreme Court ban. On April 30 in Lutsino, Moscow Oblast, the home of a Jehovah's Witnesses family was burned to the ground, along with the adjoining home of their elderly parents. On May 24, in Zheshart in the Komi Republic, arsonists caused significant damage to a building used by Jehovah's Witnesses for religious services. According to the SOVA Center, the first instance of vandalism occurred within hours of the Supreme Court's decision on April 20, when a group of unidentified men in two cars drove up to a Jehovah's Witnesses building in St. Petersburg and blocked the vehicle exit. One of the assailants shouted threats and threw rocks at the building's glass windows and door.

According to the SOVA Center, on February 3, in Saransk four unidentified men riding a bus yelled obscenities at a Tatar girl wearing a hijab and threatened to hit her with a glass bottle. Witnesses report she exited the bus following the incident.

According to *jw.org*, on May 11 a group of men interrupted Jehovah's Witnesses religious services in Tyumen and threatened to harm the attendees.

The ROC called Jehovah's Witnesses a dangerous, totalitarian, and harmful sect and supported its ban by the government. "The decision on the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses is a positive step in the fight against the spread of cultist ideas, which have nothing in common with the Christian religion...Their doctrine contains a multitude of false teachings...and therefore they cannot in any way be called Christian," the head of the ROC synod's Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion, said on the program *Church and World* on the Rossiia-24 television channel.

According to a study published by the SOVA Center and the Fare Network in June, soccer fans often displayed neo-Nazi symbols at championships hosted by the Amateur Football League and many other amateur competitions. The 2016-17 season was also marked by the appearance of banners featuring anti-Semitic stereotypes and caricatures. The report noted soccer league and law enforcement agencies were making efforts to curb the presence of far-right symbolism at matches.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and embassy representatives met with a range of government officials to discuss the treatment of religious minorities and the revocation of the registration of some religious organizations. Embassy officials raised consular cases with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs involving the discriminatory enforcement of the law against U.S. citizens who had engaged in religious activity, including preventing them from obtaining legal counsel, not allowing them to speak in their own defense at legal hearings, and not providing adequate translations into English so they could understand the nature of the proceedings against them. Embassy officials attended hearings in the Supreme Court case against the Jehovah's Witnesses. Consular officers attended hearings of a U.S. citizen accused of violating laws on missionary activities.

On November 21, in commemoration of the International Day for Tolerance, the Ambassador hosted a group of religious leaders for an interreligious dialogue promoting tolerance.

The Ambassador met with ROC Patriarch Kirill in November and Metropolitan Hilarion in February to discuss ROC-state relations, interfaith cooperation, religion in society, and ways to promote religious tolerance.

In November the Ambassador met with Rabbi Berel Lazar, the Chief Rabbi of Russia, to discuss the state of the Jewish community in the country. The Ambassador had similar meetings throughout the year with representatives of the Russian Jewish Congress.

In November the Ambassador met with Papal Nuncio Archbishop Celestino Migliore.

On October 27, in conjunction with International Religious Freedom Day, the Ambassador engaged with the Russian public in a question and answer video on the importance of religious freedom, which was posted to the embassy's social media pages.

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

Embassy and other U.S. government officials also met with civil society and human rights leaders to discuss religious legislation, government practices, and country-specific cases of religion and religious freedom. The groups included religious charities, members of the Russian Civic Chamber, the Slavic Center for Law and Justice, and the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis.

Embassy officers met with U.S. missionaries and religious workers to inquire about their experiences with immigration, registration, and police authorities, as well as with local populations, as a gauge of religious freedom.