RUSSIA

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

During 2018, Russia accelerated the repressive behavior that led USCIRF to recommend its designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for the first time in 2017. The government continued to target "nontraditional" religious minorities with fines, detentions, and criminal charges under the pretext of combating extremism. Russian legislation targets "extremism" without adequately defining the term, enabling the state to prosecute a vast range of nonviolent, nonpolitical religious activity. The Jehovah's Witnesses, whom the government banned outright in 2017, faced severe persecution by the state. By the end of the reporting period, hundreds of members remained in detention, had travel restrictions imposed, or were under investigation, and church property estimated at $90 million had been confiscated. The leadership of the St. Petersburg Church of Scientology remained under house arrest, while numerous adherents of the Islamic missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat and readers of the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi were sentenced to lengthy prison terms for peaceful religious expression. In the North Caucasus, security forces acted with complete impunity, arresting and kidnapping persons suspected of even tangential links to Islamist militancy. In Russian-occupied Crimea, the Russian authorities continued to kidnap, torture, and imprison Crimean Tatar Muslims at will. Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, often referred to as the Donbas, continued to expropriate church buildings and intimidate religious communities.

In 2019, USCIRF again finds that Russia merits designation as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). In November 2018, the U.S. Department of State for the first time placed Russia on its "Special Watch List," a new category created by December 2016 amendments to IRFA. Unlike a CPC designation, the Special Watch List carries no penalties, sanctions, or other commensurate actions. USCIRF recommends that the State Department designate Russia as a CPC under IRFA and impose sanctions specific to its religious freedom violations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Russian government to amend its extremism law in line with international human rights standards, such as adding criteria on the advocacy or use of violence, and to abandon its religious registration laws, which are frequently used to harass and prosecute religious minorities;
- Implore the Russian government to release Dennis Christensen, Ivan Matsitsky, and all other religious prisoners of conscience in Russia;
- Urge the Russian government to permit the establishment of an international monitoring presence in occupied Crimea to verify compliance with international human rights and religious freedom standards;
- Identify Russian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, freeze those individuals' assets, and bar their entry into the United States, as delineated under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and related executive orders, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Work with European allies to use advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions to pressure Russia to end religious freedom abuses.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME
Russian Federation

GOVERNMENT
Presidential Federation

POPULATION
142,000,000

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS
Technically a secular state with complete religious freedom. In practice, the government gives preference to Orthodox Christianity, Hanafi Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism.

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*
68% Russian Orthodox
7% Muslim
25% Other (including Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, and Baha'is)

*Estimates compiled from the U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

The Russian government views independent religious activity as a major threat to social and political stability as well as to its own control, while simultaneously cultivating significant relationships with the country's so-called "traditional" religions. The government maintains and frequently updates laws that restrict religious freedom, including a 1996 religion law and a 2002 law on combating extremism. The religion law sets strict registration requirements on religious groups and empowers state officials to impede their activity. Its preface, which is not legally binding, singles out Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and especially Orthodox Christianity as the country's four traditional religions; other religious groups are treated with suspicion. This is consistent with the longstanding tendency of the Russian Empire, and later the Soviet Union, to coopt representatives of the dominant religions and use their institutions as de facto organs of the state.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, religion has dramatically increased in popularity across the region. While in 1991, just 30 percent of Russian adults identified as Orthodox Christian, by 2008 this number had risen to 72 percent of the population. Over time, the Russian government has come to favor the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (MPROC) as the de facto state church. This favoritism has fostered a climate of hostility toward other forms of Christianity, which are increasingly perceived as foreign. This has accelerated since President Vladimir Putin's reelection in 2012 and his strategic alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church.

Muslims currently make up approximately seven percent of the population, or roughly 6.5 million people. This number is also rising, largely driven by migration from Central Asia and the Caucasus. The government defines acceptable Islamic practice, favoring clerics, institutions, and traditions perceived to be indigenous while persecuting those deemed to be foreign. In addition to Muslims and Christians, there are approximately 1.5 million Buddhists and 176,000 Jews in Russia. As with their "traditional" counterparts, these communities tend to be tolerated as long as they refrain from political activity and do not have foreign ties.

The 1996 religion law has since been amended numerous times and supplemented by a series of laws prosecuting so-called "extremism," missionary activity, blasphemy, and "stirring up religious hatred." These laws are typified by their vagueness and give Russian authorities broad powers to define and prosecute activity it deems harmful. The anti-extremism law, for example, lacks a clear definition of extremism, and the use or advocacy of violence is not a prerequisite for such

a designation. Because virtually any speech can be prosecuted, the law is a powerful way to intimidate members of religious communities. Religious and other communities can be financially blacklisted or liquidated, and individuals can be subjected to criminal prosecution for social media posts that are arbitrarily determined to offend the religious sensibilities of others.

In July 2016, the Russian government adopted a package of amendments, known as the Yarovaya Law, that significantly enhanced the scope and penalties of the religion and anti-extremism laws. The religion law broadly defines "missionary activities" as preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and even answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites, all of which are prohibited. Any religious speech or activity not explicitly sanctioned by the authorities has the potential to be criminalized, depending on the whims of local law enforcement and prosecutors. At the end of the reporting period, there were 4,847 items on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, maintained by the Ministry of Justice.

In 2018, Russian occupation authorities in both Eastern Ukraine and Crimea continued to systematically persecute religious minorities in their efforts to maintain social and political control.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

"Extremist" Islam

Security and terrorism concerns in Russia are real. However, the government frequently exploits these fears to persecute political dissidents, critics, and nonsanctioned religious groups, especially those perceived to be foreign. The label of "extremism" is broadly applied to many Islamic groups with no links to violence or revolution, whose only common denominator is their non-Russian origin. As with Christianity, Buddhism, and Judaism, the Russian government privileges Islamic practice that is perceived to be indigenous, while remaining suspicious of movements originating elsewhere.

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Characteristic "soft targets" for the Russian security services are readers of the Qur'anic commentary of Said Nursi, a Turkish Islamic revivalist theologian and ethnic Kurd who advocated for the modernization of Islamic learning. Although Nursi followers have been targets of Russian law enforcement since the early 2000s, the severity of the persecution has increased in recent years. Nursi readers are typically charged with belonging to a supposed "Nurdzhular" terrorist movement, which was officially banned in 2008 as extremist but is widely believed to be a fiction invented to prosecute Nursi adherents.

In May 2018, Ilgar Aliyev, a Muslim from Dagestan in the Russian North Caucasus, received an eight-year prison sentence and two years' additional restrictions for leading a Nursi study group. The verdict was the most severe yet handed to an accused Nursi follower. Aliyev was one of three Nursi followers prosecuted in 2018: Komil Odilov was sentenced to two years in prison, and Andrei Dedkov was fined the equivalent of more than six months' average wages. A fourth man, Sabirzhin Kabirzoda, was given a two-year suspended sentence at the end of a trial lasting more than six months.

The charges leveled against Nursi and his followers claimed that the theologian's work incites hatred by proclaiming the superiority of Islam and the exclusivity of the Qur'an. In August 2018, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Russian government's banning of Nursi's commentaries constituted a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights. Numerous expert witnesses attested to the essentially humanistic and peaceful character of Nursi's work.

During the year, Russian authorities also frequently targeted members of the Muslim missionary movement, Tablighi Jamaat. The group, which originated in India, focuses on calling existing Muslim communities to a more pious religious life. Human rights and other groups that monitor conditions in Russia have found no evidence linking Tablighi Jamaat to terrorism or acts of violence. The group is widely considered to be pacifist, as one of its primary tenets is noninvolvement in politics.

Nevertheless, Russian members of Tablighi Jamaat were routinely arrested and charged with "extremism." In May 2018, two residents of the Russian province of Bashkortostan were sentenced to two years' imprisonment for membership in the group. In December, a Moscow court convicted four Tablighi Jamaat members of missionary activity and sentenced them to two years and two months in a penal colony, followed by six months of additional restrictions, such as not being permitted to leave their home town without special permission from authorities.

After the reporting period, on January 22, 2019, after more than 15 months in pretrial detention, 49-year-old Crimean Tatar Renat Suleimanov was sentenced to four years in prison for his alleged leadership of a Tablighi Jamaat cell in Crimea. Three other Muslim Tatars sentenced with him were given suspended sentences of two and a half years. At the end of January 2019, after the reporting period, five farmers in the Saratov region of southern Russia were arrested and charged with possession of extremist literature and plotting to establish a local cell of Tablighi Jamaat.

By far the greatest number of Muslims arrested in Russia are accused of belonging to the banned Islamist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). The group is secretive; it has not condemned acts of terrorism and declares its ultimate goal to be the replacement of all non-Islamic states with an Islamic caliphate, and its members have been vocally anti-Semitic. However, the group has never publicly advocated—or claimed responsibility for—an act of terrorism, violence, or revolution, and its members have emphasized individual religious practice over engagement in politics. Russian human rights groups have argued that the Russian government routinely fails to provide reliable evidence that those arrested for membership in HT have any plausible links to terrorism. Those HT members who have been prosecuted were only shown to have met for prayer, scripture reading, and the discussion of HT ideology.

More Russian citizens are arrested for their ties to HT than to any other religious or political group. The sentences handed down to suspected HT members are significantly more severe than those given to others deemed as extremists, and typically range between 10 and 19 years. During 2018, authorities arrested and prosecuted HT members nearly every month; in July alone, there were 21 arrests. While the Russian government has legitimate security concerns about Islamist extremism, the charges brought against HT members have been predicated on scant evidence and, in many instances, appeared primarily motivated by a desire to discourage Islamic practice or coerce local Muslim populations. For example, accusations of belonging to HT are frequently used to arrest ethnic Tatar activists in occupied Crimea. Russian human rights groups consider those incarcerated for membership in HT to be political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.

Jehovah's Witnesses

On April 20, 2017, Jehovah's Witnesses became the first religion to be banned outright across Russia, based on the accusation that the church is an "extremist organization." The designation purportedly derived from the fact that Jehovah's Witnesses discourage their members from donating blood or receiving blood transfusions. Since the beginning of 2018, Russian law enforcement agents raided the homes of Witnesses across the country. Witnesses were dismissed from their jobs, schoolchildren and their parents were interrogated and threatened, and the community's buildings and property were burned and vandalized. By the end of the reporting period, the estimated value of church property seized by the state was $90 million.

At the end of the reporting period, there were 23 Jehovah's Witnesses in prison, 27 under house arrest, 41 forbidden from leaving their home towns, and 121 under investigation.

Since the ban, Jehovah's Witnesses have no longer been permitted to request alternative service as conscientious objectors and have been ordered to report for military service. Targeted individuals have been subject to search and seizure of property, detainment, interrogation, and travel restrictions. At the end of the reporting period, there were 23 Jehovah's Witnesses in prison, 27 under house arrest, 41 forbidden from leaving their home towns, and 121 under investigation.

On February 15, 2019, after the reporting period, at least seven Jehovah's Witnesses in northern Siberia were allegedly tortured at the hands of local police after being detained on extremism charges. The victims were reportedly stripped naked, bound, suffocated, beaten, doused with cold water, and subjected to electric shocks. Investigators demanded information about local membership, meeting places, and leadership; three local members remained in prison and 19 were under active investigation following the February 2019 incident.

On May 25, 2017, Danish citizen Dennis Christensen was arrested at a peaceful meeting of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the city of Oryol, about 200 miles south of Moscow. The meeting was raided by heavily armed police and agents of the Federal Security Services (FSB), and Christensen was charged with "organizing extremist activity" under article 282.2(1) of the Russian Criminal Code. Christensen, who moved to Russia in 1995 for personal reasons, has never been employed as a missionary by the Jehovah's Witnesses and was not sent to Russia at the behest or invitation of any organization. On February 6, 2019, after the reporting period, he was sentenced to six years in prison. Christensen had spent 622 days in pretrial detention, where Danish Embassy officials affirmed he was not mistreated and remained in good health. USCIRF advocates on behalf of Dennis Christensen as part of its Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project.

The Church of Scientology

The Church of Scientology was designated a "destructive" group by the Russian legislature in 1996. Although never banned outright, the church has been hindered by Russia's strict registration laws. Despite attempting to register as a religion on 12 separate occasions, they were denied each time because of supposed administrative technicalities. On June 6, 2017, Russian police raided the Church of Scientology in St. Petersburg as well as the homes of all five leaders of the group, who were arrested on charges of "illegal business operations" and extremism. During 2018, the three female leaders remained under house arrest or restricted freedom regimes while the two male leaders, Sakhib Aliev and Ivan Matsitsky, remained in prison. According to a complaint filed by Matsitsky's lawyer, his client suffered inhumane conditions while in custody. This included being placed in solitary confinement for 10 days and being forced to share his cell with a convicted murderer who systematically threatened him, pressured him to confess, and tormented him by refusing to close the window in the middle of winter. Although conditions have subsequently improved, Matsitsky remained in pretrial for an indeterminate period and was rarely able to visit with his wife and family. USCIRF advocates on behalf of Matsitsky as part of its Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project.

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Other "Nontraditional" Religious Groups

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Hare Krishnas report a pervasive atmosphere of fear and the need to radically alter their religious practice to avoid violating the 2016 prohibition on missionary activity. Authorities reportedly filed at least 89 court cases for illegal missionary activity over the course of 2018. The chilling effect of official state pressure has had a noticeable impact on religious communities; for example, one Russian member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the city of Tver reported that her congregation has halved in recent years as older members have died, younger members have ceased attending, and newer members have become a rarity.

On April 28, 2018, the Pentecostal "Jesus Embassy" in Nizhny Novgorod was found guilty of permitting members to perform illegal missionary activity and failing to display its full official name on a video being distributed by members. The church was issued fines equivalent to about $457 (or one month's average local wages) and $1,522 for each offense.

On August 10, 2018, Moscow police searched the offices of Alexander Kargin, the leader of the "Shakhar" organization, a Jewish youth movement founded in Russia in 2011 that seeks to cultivate Jewish

identity. During their search, authorities reportedly found "nationalist" literature. Kargin's lawyers claimed that this literature, some of which has a blatantly anti-Semitic character, was planted.

Since October 2018, the Moscow Theological Seminary Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists of Russia (UECBR), the largest evangelical school in the Russian Federation, has faced increased pressure from the government. An official inspection found an "absence of developed and approved curriculums as well as teachers with due qualification and necessary experience." On December 27, 2018, the local court suspended the seminary's activity for 60 days.

Tibetan Buddhism

Three Russian republics—Kalmykia, Buryatia, and Tuva—have Buddhist majorities who follow Tibetan Buddhism and revere His Holiness the Dalai Lama as their foremost spiritual leader. Although the Dalai Lama was permitted to visit these republics several times between 1991 and 2004, he has subsequently been unable to receive a visa from the Russian government despite numerous invitations from prominent members of the Russian Buddhist community. Those Russians wishing to see the Dalai Lama frequently travel to Latvia, where he has made several trips since 2014. Since 2015, local officials have made numerous attempts to remove the Enlightenment Stupa monument in Moscow. The oldest of the only two canonical stupas in Moscow, the monument holds hundreds of sacred relics and is a site of immense significance to the Tibetan Buddhist community in Russia. After their most recent effort to remove the stupa in September 2018, local authorities have hindered attempts to renovate it.

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Blasphemy Law Enforcement

Many of the religious policies enacted in recent years have been motivated by pressure from the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (MPROC). One of the earliest examples of this was the 2013 blasphemy law, passed in response to a 2012 political protest in Moscow's main MPROC cathedral that offended many Orthodox believers. The law imposes up to three years' imprisonment or the confiscation of up to three years' salary for "offending religious convictions and feelings."

In 2018, numerous individuals were charged under the blasphemy law and await potentially harsh convictions. Daniil Markin, a 19-year-old film student, faces up to five years' imprisonment for posting an image likening Jon Snow, a character from the television series *Game of Thrones*, to Jesus. Maria Matuznaya, age 23, also faces up to five years in prison for social media posts mocking religion, including Russian Orthodoxy. Thus far, no one has been imprisoned under the 2013 law for publicly offending the religious sensibilities of others. Those convicted have received either fines or suspended sentences.

The Situation in the North Caucasus

In the heavily militarized zone of the North Caucasus, anyone suspected of practicing "nontraditional" Islam or of having any link to the ongoing Islamist insurgency is at risk of being disappeared by the FSB. In 2018, the region remained in a state of low-level conflict, resulting in 108 casualties, including 82 deaths. Most of these casualties occurred in Dagestan Province, followed by neighboring Chechnya, where Russian forces battled a separatist insurgency with heavy Islamist elements in 1994–1996 and 1999–2000.

Since 2007, Chechnya has been led by the Kremlin-appointed president, Ramzan Kadyrov, who oversees a private army that engages in human rights violations, conducts collective reprisals against the families of suspects, and suppresses all dissent. Kadyrov also enforces his own views of Islam. He is the son of Akhmad Kadyrov, the former mufti and president of Chechnya, whose strategic alliance with Russia helped to reestablish Russian control over the republic

in 2000. Kadyrov actively promotes the image of his father, who was assassinated in 2004, as the political and spiritual father of the Chechen nation—naming the largest mosque in Chechnya after him and proposing his model of a "moderate" but tightly controlled Islam as a beacon for the entire Muslim world. The younger Kadyrov is a vocal opponent of "Wahhabism" and "Salafism," even as he forces Islamic dress codes and polygamous marriages upon Chechen women and oversees a strict regime of traditional Chechen values. On December 21, 2018, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe released a report alleging hundreds of atrocities against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) community in Chechnya, including arbitrary arrests, imprisonment in special camps, forced disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial executions. Those critical of authorities have been publicly shamed on central television (a profound humiliation in Chechen culture), sometimes by Kadyrov himself. In addition, in 2018, Chechen religious authorities announced they would increase the number of theologians accompanying Chechen pilgrims on the hajj to Saudi Arabia and provide each participant with religious reading materials.

The need to demonstrate success against the ongoing threat of Islamist terrorism in the North Caucasus has led security forces to target peaceful Muslim dissidents. Violations of religious freedom also result from the use of "prophylactic measures" such as the maintenance of blacklists of alleged extremists, including secular dissidents; frequent raids on Salafist mosques; and harassment of their members. On November 26, 2018, authorities detained Nigmatula Radjabov, the imam of a Salafist mosque in the Dagestani capital of Makhachkala, and detained and interrogated him before releasing him the same day. Radjabov had previously complained about the attempted kidnapping of his 18-year-old son by members of the local police. During the year, raids on Radjabov's mosque during Friday prayer services were an almost weekly occurrence.

In North Ossetia, the only North Caucasus province without a Muslim majority, there were reports in 2018 of plans to convert the historic Persian Mosque in the capital of Vladikavkaz into a planetarium. The North-Ossetian Muftiate has complained of a chronic shortage of mosques in the province—allegedly only 29 mosques for a population of 200,000 Muslims.

Restrictions on Religious Activity in Occupied Crimea

In 2018, the Russian occupation authorities continued their policies of harassment, intimidation, and targeting of religious groups in Crimea suspected of disloyalty to the Russian state, chief among them Crimean Tatars and other Muslims. Until November 2018, the FSB in Crimea was headed by Viktor Palagin, a supposed "Islamic specialist." His replacement, Leonid Mikhailyuk, served in Chechnya before distinguishing himself as the head of the FSB in Kaliningrad, where he uncovered an active cell of the terrorist group Islamic Jihad in 2016. The profiles of these officials reflect the essentially religious lens through which the government views security on the peninsula.

> *Despite most opposition to [Crimea's] occupation being political and ethnic in nature, Russian authorities routinely disrupt religious activities and institutions.*

Despite most opposition to the occupation being political and ethnic in nature, Russian authorities routinely disrupt religious activities and institutions. In April 2018, armed FSB officers interrupted Friday prayers in the village of Pavlovka and physically searched everyone present. The officers claimed to be responding to reports that extremist meetings were being held in the mosque. In addition to the prosecution of four Crimean Tatars for membership in Tablighi Jamaat, in 2018 there were numerous prosecutions for alleged membership in HT. Accusations of belonging to HT are frequently leveled against ethnic Crimean Tatars, many of whom are political activists opposed to the Russian annexation of 2014.

Non-Muslim Minorities in Crimea

Religious persecution in Crimea is not limited to Muslims. Russia's repressive laws have greatly curtailed

religious freedom on the peninsula. In 2018, there were 23 prosecutions for "missionary activity" in Crimea, representing a twofold increase since 2016. In addition, 17 cases were brought against religious communities and individuals for failing to use the full legal name of a registered religious community. Nine of these cases resulted in fines equaling roughly two months' average local wages. The majority of those prosecuted were "nontraditional" Christian groups. After the Russian takeover of 2014, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) refused to register, considering this to be submission to an illegal occupation. Russian authorities responded by seizing church property and harassing clergy. By the summer of 2018, only eight of the original 46 parishes remained, while all but four priests had fled. On November 16, 2018, Sergei Filatov became the first resident of Crimea to be prosecuted for being a Jehovah's Witness. Following an FSB search of dozens of homes, Filatov was arrested and charged with being the leader of the local Jehovah's Witness community; his trial was still pending at the end of the reporting period.

Russia's Separatist Enclaves in the Donbas

In 2018, the Russian-occupied separatist parastates of the Lugansk People's Republic (LNR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) in eastern Ukraine remained heavily militarized warzones policed by parallel ministries of state security. The separatist governments were deeply suspicious toward religious groups other than the Russian Orthodox Church and continued to persecute religious minorities through legal restrictions, confiscation of property, prosecution of clergy, and harassment of congregations. In February 2018, the LNR government announced it would require registration of all religious groups in its territory, which experts believed to be a prelude to the official exclusion of religious minorities. All Pentecostal, Seventh-day Adventist, or Baptist communities were denied this compulsory registration by the October 15, 2018, deadline.

During 2018, LNR forces carried out a systematic campaign of repression against local Christian minorities. On March 27, armed militants reportedly looted a Baptist church in the city of Stakhanov, taking everything from sound equipment and kitchen appliances to religious items. On June 3, armed men in ski masks interrupted a Baptist service and detained five members, including the pastor, who was eventually fined $120. The rest of the congregation was forced to provide their names and addresses to the armed men before the building was sealed. On July 26, 2018, the LNR banned the All-Ukrainian Union of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches as an extremist organization, accusing it of plotting to overthrow the separatist government and claiming that local Baptists distributed psychotropic substances to their members. On August 6, a Pentecostal service was raided by armed men, who forced everyone to lie on the floor as they confiscated church property and detained the pastor along with several members of the leadership. Prior to the conflict in 2014, there were 18 Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kyiv Patriarchate churches in the LNR; as of 2018, only two continued to operate. In addition, LNR armed forces seized and sealed five Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls, and on May 30, one of these halls was destroyed by a fire of unknown origin.

In 2018, DNR forces seized two Baptist churches and a mosque. In a familiar pattern, armed men occupied the buildings and confiscated literature and other property before sealing off the premises. After the June 2018 seizure of the Donetsk mosque, the imam and one other member were interrogated, accused of distributing extremist literature, and forbidden from leaving the city. In addition, on September 26, the DNR followed Russia's lead and banned the Jehovah's Witnesses.

> *[T]he LNR banned the All-Ukrainian Union of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches as an extremist organization, accusing it of plotting to overthrow the separatist government . . .*

Ukrainian Autocephaly

On January 6, 2019, after the reporting period, the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople granted autocephaly, or independence, to

the UOC-KP, which was established in 1992. Prior to this announcement, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which is part of the Russian Orthodox Church, was the only one recognized as an official part of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Current members of the Moscow Patriarchate have the choice of joining the Ukrainian Church or remaining members of a new "Russian Church." In cases where the outcome is unclear, the Ukrainian state will apparently make the final determination about any changes of ecclesiastical status and redistribution of church property.

On September 14, 2018, amid news that Ukrainian autocephaly was imminent, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church declared it would stop offering prayers for Patriarch Bartholomew and temporarily cease all communion with Constantinople. In November 2018, Ukrainian intelligence services raided the home of Metropolitan Pavlo, the cleric who oversees the largest and oldest UOC-MP church in Ukraine. Although no charges have been filed to date, officials justified the raid by claiming Pavlo incited hatred. There were reports of at least a dozen such cases of UOC-MP priests who were interrogated by security services for alleged treason and inciting religious hatred; by the end of the reporting period, no charges had been filed.

U.S. POLICY

U.S.-Russian relations have continued to deteriorate since Vladimir Putin announced his intention to run for reelection in 2012. In December 2012, the United States passed the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act sanctioning Russian officials responsible for gross human rights violations. In response, the Russian government denied U.S. citizens the opportunity to adopt Russian children and issued a list of U.S. officials prohibited from entering Russia. The Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014, intervention in Syria in 2015 on behalf of President Bashar al-Assad, and interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election have deepened strains between Russia and the United States.

In 2018, the U.S. government increased pressure on Russia over its violations of religious freedom. On June 18, the State Department announced it was "deeply concerned" about the growing number of religious prisoners in Russia, specifically mentioning Mr. Christensen, the St. Petersburg Church of Scientology leadership, and followers of Said Nursi. On November 28, 2018, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo added Russia to the State Department's Special Watch List as a country that has engaged in "severe violations of religious freedom." In a December press briefing on the designations, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback explained that since 2016, Russia has "targeted and stepped up its oppression" of religious groups, citing its persecution of Christian minorities and the large number of imprisoned Muslims. He warned Russia that continuing its current trajectory could warrant its designation as a CPC, noting the requisite sanctions that accompany such a designation. USCIRF has recommended this designation for Russia since 2017.

There is evidence that Russia seeks to extend its interference to religious groups within the United States. On July 15, 2018, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) arrested Russian national Maria Butina and charged her with espionage. She is accused of—among other things—using the National Prayer Breakfast to establish contacts between attendees and Russian officials. At the end of December, in a move widely considered to be retaliatory, Russian authorities arrested Paul Whelan, an American citizen, and charged him with spying for the United States. At the end of the reporting period, he remained in Russian custody; State Department and intelligence officials have disputed the charges against him.

Following Mr. Christensen's conviction in February 2019, after the reporting period, the U.S. Embassy in Moscow expressed its concern over his harsh sentence "for simply practicing his faith." The statement was subsequently translated and reissued by Ambassador Brownback.