

Freedom of Religion and Belief in Russia: 2014-2015

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Arbitrary detentions, travel restrictions and administrative fines for violating obscure legislation – these are examples of the problems religious minorities in the Russian Federation face. Many religious groups are deprived of adequate places of worship, and do not have resources to secure legal protection when they are persecuted by authorities. Consequently, freedom of thought, freedom of religion, as well as the freedoms of assembly and association – as set by the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms – face serious challenges in Russia. The obvious bias of Russian officials in support of the Russian Orthodox Church disadvantages minority religious groups and subtly manipulates the attitudes of the general public. Such social conditioning is perpetuated by the disingenuous reporting of national and regional news outlets. The result is a limited social space in which members of minority religions can observe their beliefs and traditions free from harassment.

Overall, religious discrimination was characterized in 2014 – 2015 by bias against Muslims and members of new religions, as well as several instances of discrimination against Protestants.

The privileged status of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) can be illustrated by the following:

- Orthodox churches enjoy the full backing of local and regional authorities in constructing new places of worship. (For instance “Program-200” – the construction of 200 churches in Moscow). Municipal authorities have been known to back construction even when local communities oppose it, and would instead prefer to preserve green spaces and historic areas.
- In 2014 the ROC received the majority of state funds for the restoration of religious sites. There are numerous examples of property being transferred to ROC by municipal authorities. Some of these transfers resulted in the ROC receiving property that was previously owned by cultural organizations and museums.
- There are also multiple cases when authorities take the side of Russian Orthodox activists who claim that cultural events are hurting their religious feelings. For instance, artists in the city of Perm were made to pay a fine on charges of hooliganism for having painted graffiti “Gagarin Crucifix”.

Religious groups often face challenges from the discriminatory policies of the state authorities and intimidation by civic groups.

- **Deprivation from places of worship.** In 2014 Muslim communities faced obstacles in constructing new religious sites. Authorities routinely revoked permits for the construction of mosques, or even demolished partially completed mosques. However, hurdles faced by Muslim communities are caused not only by discriminatory state policies, but also by prejudiced public opinion. Right wing political groups were often behind the protests against construction of Mosques.
- **Disbandment of religious organizations.** SOVA center believes that the most dangerous practice is officially recognizing religious groups as extremist, which results in their disbandment. In several cases, groups deemed to be “extremist,” such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, were banned. A madrasa attached to the Zangar mosque in Kazan was also closed, as was the Christian charity fund AGAFE in St Petersburg. The latter two were charged with violations of the Administrative code.
- **Violence.** Religious intolerance manifested itself in physical violence on several occasions. Two people were killed and six were injured in a shooting at an Orthodox church in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. In Moscow, a woman in Muslim dress was stabbed and a yeshiva student was beaten. The majority of the victims of physical violence were Jehovah’s Witnesses while conducting door-to-door missionary work. The conflicts around construction of Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow also led to violence. In Arkhangelsk a synagogue was shelled.
- **Persecution of preachers.** Jehovah’s Witnesses going door-to-door were detained in 24 different regions throughout the country. The preachers were routinely taken into custody, their identifying information was recorded and they were subject to questioning.
- **Intimidation by police.** Members of the Falun Gong faced police harassment and questioning. In more than one instance, offices of Falun Gong members were searched by police and their computers were seized. In one case, the FSB raided a kindergarten directed by a member of the Falun Gong.

- **Arbitrary detentions.** On 15 August 2014 in Moscow no fewer than 100 Muslims were detained before Friday prayers, held at various police stations and subsequently released with no charges or explanation. Several of those detained were beaten. In another case, Muslim community members were rounded up by a Special Forces team after freeing a member of their community who had been arbitrarily detained by police.
- **Restriction of freedom of assembly.** In Sochi the leader of an Evangelical group was fined for “conducting a public event without filing a notice in the prescribed manner” because he was reading and discussing the Bible in a café.
- **Abusive applications of anti-extremist policy, especially against alternative religious opinions.** Elvira Sultanakhmetova was sentenced to public works for hate speech, namely the statement that Muslims should not celebrate New Year or other non-Muslim holidays.
- **Targeted regulations and selective law enforcement.** The government of Mordovia approved the regulation which effectively outlawed wearing the hijab in school. The Muslim community appealed to the court, but the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation upheld the restrictions as lawful. It should be noted that in other regions of the Russian Federation girls are allowed to wear hijab in class. And in the Chechen Republic it is obligatory, which is another restrictive approach.

Recommendations:

The international community should urge the Russian Federation to:

- Uphold the right to freedom of religion and belief of all individuals in the Russian Federation;
- Investigate all incidents of violence and police brutality resulting from religious intolerance and consistently prosecute such violations to the full extent of the law;
- Clarify registration procedures and non-discriminatory application of laws governing the acquisition of premises for religious purposes;
- Accept that religious tolerance should be protected by the same mechanisms as other forms of tolerance, and refrain from creating special rules that restrict other freedoms only for religious tolerance;
- Prevent the enactment of new laws and other legal acts that are aimed at restricting public expression of religious beliefs.