



**JUBILEE CAMPAIGN  
ECOSOC Special Consultative Status (2003)**

**United Nations Human Rights Council  
Universal Periodic Review – FOURTH CYCLE**  
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**The Russian Federation**

**A Vital Voice for Those Suffering in Silence**  
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**United Nations Human Rights Council  
Universal Periodic Review of the Russian Federation**

**I. Background**

1. **Jubilee Campaign**, in special consultative status with ECOSOC, submits this analysis of religious freedom and human rights in the Russian Federation as a contribution to the Universal Periodic Review.

**II. Scope of international obligations and cooperation with international human rights mechanisms and bodies.**

2. Russia has ratified the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict; the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children child prostitution and child pornography; and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
3. Russia has not ratified the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aiming to the abolition of the death penalty; the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; the Interstate communication procedure under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

**Recommendation(s)**

We urge the Russian Federation to:

4. Ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aiming to the abolition of the death penalty; the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; the Interstate communication procedure under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

**III. Violations of international human rights obligations, considering applicable international humanitarian law**

## A. Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion

5. The 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation in Article 14 identified the nation as a secular state and prohibits the designation of any faith as the state religion. It also outlines the separation of church and state affairs. Article 19 guarantees citizens equality before the law regardless of various identities, including religious affiliation, and prohibits “limits of human rights” on faith-based grounds. Article 28 provides all citizens the right to freedom of conscience and religion, including the right to manifest their faith privately or publicly, individually or with others. It also states that citizens can freely share their faith with others. Article 29 prohibits “propaganda or agitation [...] which arouses social, racial, national or religious hatred and hostility” or claims “religious [...] supremacy”. Article 59-3 provides the right to conscientious objection and alternative service.<sup>1</sup>
6. Russia’s first faith-based legislation was the 1929 Law on Religious Associations which required registration of all religious communities and associations, prohibited worship and activities undertaken outside of designated buildings, and criminalized the theological education of minors and the dissemination of religious literature.
7. In 1997, Russia passed the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, which echoed the Constitution’s assertion of equality of all religious before the law; it also prohibits government’ intrusion on matters of faith. However, the 1997 Law maintains all of the 1929 Law’s persecutory policies and adds new stipulations including requiring religious groups to provide (1) the biographical and personal information of its founding members; (2) the identification of the group’s foundational/guiding religious literature; and (3) evidence of the faith community’s existence in Russia for at least 15 years. The law additionally requires religious associations to frequently report to government officials regarding the group’s activities.<sup>2</sup> In 2009, Russia amended the law to grant the newly-established Council of Experts full purview over registered religious groups’ activities, leadership, and literature/material.
8. In 2002, Russia ratified the Law on Combating [Countering] Extremist Activity, which justly criminalizes certain activities such as establishing militias; vandalism; and carrying out violent acts of terrorism. However, it also considers the following vaguely-defined [and therefore more easily punishable ] activities as extremist: “destruction of the integrity of the Russian Federation” and “propaganda of exclusivity, advocating either superiority or inferiority on the basis of religion”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Constitute Project, [Russian Federation 1993 \(rev. 2014\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> Aid to the Church in Need, [Religious Freedom in the World Report 2021: Russia](#), 2021.

<sup>3</sup> [Russia] [Federal Law No. 114/FZ of 25 July 2002 – On Countering Extremist Activity \(O protivodeystvii ekstremistskoy deyatel’nosti\)](#).

9. In 2016, Russia passed the Yarovaya Law which introduced multiple legal amendments, including one which characterized sharing one's faith, distributing religious literature, and inviting people to worship services as illegal missionary activities. Additionally, "all printed, audio and video content distributed by a religious association must have proper marking and bear the association's full name"; however, sharing information about the faith to non-members via the Internet and print is prohibited and criminalized.<sup>4</sup>
10. In early 2017, the Russian Supreme Court banned the association of Jehovah's Witnesses on the grounds of "extremist" identity and activity, though there was no further clarification regarding what activities caused their proscription and new illegal status. Some Jehovah's Witnesses expressed that perhaps the group's "assertion that theirs is the only true religion" was misconstrued as intention to "promote 'religious discord'". However, many faith groups consider themselves to be the only legitimate religion: "this is the nature of any religion, otherwise, why [would] you [be] following a false religion?"<sup>5</sup> Other speculations regarding why Russia targets Jehovah's Witnesses for charges of extremism include their evangelistic activities, their historical ties to the United States and the West, their conscientious objection to military service and blood transfusions [despite that people of faith have the right to refuse mandatory military service as outlined in Article 59-3 of the Constitution], or their sizable membership which might be perceived as a threat to political authority.<sup>6</sup>
11. Russian authorities have used the 2002 Law on Countering Extremist Activity to arrest and imprison Jehovah's Witnesses for up to six years [though leaders and community organizers are liable to ten years' imprisonment], raids of their homes and houses of worship; and physical torture.<sup>7</sup> Many were arrested in unwarranted raids in which police officers and security forces, dressed in armor and wielding guns and other various weapons, barged in on peaceful worship services to arrest peaceful praying individuals. Multiple previously imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses have testified to the horrendous torture they were subjected to by Russian state actors during interrogation and imprisonment. Forms of torture include electrocution, physical beatings, suffocation, forced injections of unknown substances, and threats of rape.<sup>8</sup>
12. In December 2022, it was reported that this past year, Russian courts sentenced 40% more Jehovah's Witnesses than last year. In 2022 alone, 121 Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted for extremism, an increase from 111 in 2021, 39 in 2020, and just 18 in 2019. Out of the 121 convicted, 45 were sentenced to imprisonment for an average of six years. Unfortunately, even after completing

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<sup>4</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], *Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right of freedom of opinion and expression; the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*, [OL RUS 7/2016](#), 28 July 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Jason Slotkin, "[Top Russian Court Bans Jehovah's Witnesses, Claiming 'Extremist Activities'](#)", NPR, 20 April 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Reevell, "[Russia's mysterious campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses](#)", ABC News, 18 July 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Reevell, "[Russia's mysterious campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses](#)", ABC News, 18 July 2021. ; Amnesty International, [Urgent Action: Three Jehovah's Witnesses at Risk of Torture](#), EUR 46/9943/2019, 28 February 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Massimo Introvigne, "[Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia Escalates to Torture](#)", *Bitter Winter*, 12 October 2021.

their prison term and being released, Jehovah's Witnesses face additional punishments, such as being identified on the List of Terrorists and Extremists, prolonged house arrest, frozen access to their bank accounts, exclusion from various occupations, and travel restrictions.<sup>9</sup>

13. Throughout 2021 and 2022, hundreds of Christians have been charged with illegal missionary activity and heavily fined for such simple practices as: recruiting believers on the Internet; posting religious-based audiovisual material online; distributing religious literature; leading sermons; displaying not-for-sale religious literature in stores; and more. Russian authorities have even targeted Christian churches and institutions, including the Church of the Unification of Perm (motion to liquidate filed), Good News Presbyterian Church in Mekhzavod (demolished), and the Theological Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria (operation license suspended).<sup>10</sup>
14. Many Christian leaders have faced fines and charges for expressing their views about Russia's violent incursion into Ukraine, pursuant to a recently-ratified law prohibiting criticism of and spreading misinformation about the Russian armed forces. In April 2022, Mexican native and Catholic priest Fernando Vera was expelled from Russia for criticizing the military's atrocities in Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> In March 2022, a Pentecostal senior pastor of the Church of Christians of the Evangelical Faith in Bryansk faced charges for labeling Russia as an "aggressor" and condemning specific Russian political figures. Also in March, Priest John Burdin of the Church of the Resurrection of Christ in Karabanovo was charged for conducting a sermon in which he condemned the incursion into Ukraine and promoted a link to an anti-war petition on his parish website.<sup>12</sup> Father Burdin faces charges on account that he, "while in a public place, on the premises of the Church of the Resurrection of Christ, during a religious service was he was conducting in the presence of about ten parishioners, carried out public actions aimed at discrediting the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation".<sup>13</sup> That very same month, an unidentified Christian woman was arrested for standing outside of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow and holding a sign stating "The 6th Commandment: Thou shalt not kill."<sup>14</sup> Also around that time, a Protestant woman named Nina Belyayeva became the first individual convicted for condemning the Ukraine incursion on religious grounds and characterizing the offensive as a war crime.<sup>15</sup> As a result of these multiple arrests, numerous Christian pastors and leaders have encouraged their congregations to pray for Ukraine privately rather than publicly so as to avoid being charged.

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<sup>9</sup> The European Times, "[Russia has set new records in 2022 in its campaign of persecution against Jehovah's Witnesses](#)", 29 December 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Stetson University, "[Russia Religion News](#)", Updated 22 August 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Luxmoore, "[Priest's unexplained expulsion from Russia fuels fears for foreign clergy](#)", *Crux Now*, 22 April 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Jo Siedlecka, "[Russia: Orthodox priest fined for preaching about peace](#)", *Independent Catholic News*, 10 March 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Victoria Arnold, "[RUSSIA: Patriarchate priest fined for condemning war in Ukraine](#)", *Forum 18*, 11 March 2022.

<sup>14</sup> @AvtozakLIVE, "[In Moscow, near the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, a girl was detained for picketing against the war.](#)" [Tweet], Twitter, 15 March 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Victoria Arnold, "[RUSSIA: First known criminal investigation for opposing Ukraine war on explicitly religious grounds](#)", *Forum 18*, 5 May 2022.

15. Russia's persecution of people of faith extended to Ukraine following the February 2022 incursion. Only one month after the start of the offensive, an estimated 60 houses of worship and religious heritage sites had been targeted by Russian shelling and left completely destroyed. Despite Russia's claims that civilian infrastructure – including churches, homes, hospitals and clinics – that serve as shelters for local residents. The State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of Conscience, which releases reports periodically regarding Russian troops' attacks on religious sites, found that, as of January 2023, 307 sites had been partially damaged or wholly destroyed. This includes churches, mosques, synagogues, theological institutions. The vast majority of attacked sites were Christian (297 sites, 97%), followed by Muslim sites (5 total, 1.5%) and Jewish sites (5 total, 1.5%). The Christian sites affected were affiliated with: Protestantism, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Catholic Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>16</sup>
16. Other sources, including advocacy and humanitarian non-governmental organizations have estimated the number of Russian-attacked religious sites in Ukraine to be higher. In January 2023, the Institute for Religious Freedom reported that 494 sites had been “wholly destroyed, damaged, or looted by the Russian military”. Additionally, Russian troops have in some cases seized religious buildings in Ukraine which they then used as barracks or firing locations.<sup>17</sup> IRF interviewed numerous religious leaders who personally observed Russian attacks on places of worship. They reported the following: use of heavy weaponry to break into buildings; shelling of cemeteries; abduction and interrogation of building staff and caretakers; burning of theological literature; looting of food, clothes, tools, computers.<sup>18</sup>
17. IRF also spoke with Ukrainian religious leaders who had been illegally detained, interrogated, and tortured to extract information. Priest Sergiy Chudinovich of the Church of the Intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos in Kherson was abducted by Russian troops and accused of colluding with Ukrainian military forces; he was subjected to suffocation, deprivation of food and water, threats to his families welfare and threats of rape, baton beatings and strangling. Oleg Bondarenko, Minister of an Association of Churches-affiliated rehabilitation facility, was abducted and tied to a vehicle and dragged to a Russian military base where he was then beaten until he suffered spinal damage and was questioned about Ukraine defense strategies. Oleg was rescued by Ukrainian forces but still suffers from physical injuries and mental trauma from the assault. Clergy leader Vasyl Vyrozub of the Odesa Holy Trinity Cathedral of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine was detained for seventy days by Russian troops

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<sup>16</sup> State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of Conscience, [“11 months of Russia's full-scale attack: 307 religious sites ruined in Ukraine”](#), 27 January 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Institute for Religious Freedom, [“Almost 500 religious sites were destroyed in Ukraine as a result of Russian aggression”](#), 3 February 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Institute for Religious Freedom (IRF), [Russian Attacks on Religious Freedom in Ukraine: Research, Analytics, Recommendations](#), September 2022.

who shaved his head, placed him in a small cell and forced him to strip naked, and beat him.<sup>19</sup>

18. When Russian forces reached Irpin, designated the “Evangelical Hub of Ukraine”, in early March 2022, it became clear that many of the civilian and infrastructure casualties in this city would be from the faith community; regrettably, many casualties ensued during the evacuation itself. 26-year-old Christian husband and father, Anatoly, died when the bridge he assisting a family – a mother and her two young children – in crossing collapsed due to Russian shelling; all four were killed, and the bridge which operated as a humanitarian corridor was destroyed. In early April, Mission Eurasia’s Field Ministries Headquarters in Irpin was completely destroyed and Russian troops had burnt all of the building’s religious literature. Eric Mock of the Slavic Gospel Association (SGA) explained that civilians had flocked to the SGA seminary building for shelter but that after a first round of mortars which set fire to the building, Russian forces returned the following day, launching a second round of mortars which obliterated the entire building and caused casualties.<sup>20</sup>

### **Recommendation(s)**

We urge the member and observer states of the United Nations Human Rights Council to

19. Unequivocally condemn in the strongest possible terms Russia’s violations of its own citizens’ rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and Russia’s dereliction of its obligations to protect and promote such freedoms as signatory to international treaties including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
20. Level stronger, coordinated, multilateral sanctions upon the Russian Federation for its human rights violations, including religious persecution and torture of faith minorities and anti-war activists domestically, and its campaign of violent killings, bombings, sexual violence and rape, civilian infrastructure destruction, and torture of civilians in Ukraine.
21. Establish an independent and impartial monitoring committee to track, investigate, collect evidence, and report on cases of religious persecution and rights violations in Russia, as well as the human rights atrocities committed by Russian armed forces in Ukraine and other occupied regions.
22. Continue providing financial and humanitarian support to all communities in Ukraine, including those who remain in their homes, those who have been

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Kevin Zeller, “[Russian invasion destroys ministry centers in Irpin](#)”, *Mission Network News*, 1 April 2022.

internally displaced, and those who have had to flee the nation into neighboring countries.