

World  
Watch  
Research

Russian Federation:  
Full Country Dossier  
February 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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[research@od.org](mailto:research@od.org)

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	35	34	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

# WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Russian Federation

## Brief country details

Russian Federation: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
145,629,000	120,066,000	82.4

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

## Map of country



Russian Federation: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	58	62
WWL 2023	57	61
WWL 2022	56	62
WWL 2021	57	58
WWL 2020	60	46

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Russian Federation:	
Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties
Islamic oppression	Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Christian denominational protectionism	One's own (extended) family, Political parties, Religious leaders of other churches, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs

*Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.*

### Brief description of the persecution situation

Many ethnic Russians have left Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia due to the fighting and churches have seen the number of their members drop. However, of all the Christian communities it is the Russian Orthodox churches who experience the least problems from the government. Unregistered churches active in evangelism may face obstructions in the form of surveillance and interrogation by the local authorities. However, it is the indigenous Christians with a Muslim background in the Muslim majority regions who are bearing the brunt of persecution both at the hands of family and friends and from the local community; in some areas they have to keep their faith secret for fear of being attacked and possibly executed. The “military campaign” launched by Russia in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has led to an increase in state surveillance. Any form of criticism (even from Christians who opposed the invasion of Ukraine on religious grounds) was immediately attacked.

### Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- October 2022:** Russian Orthodox (ROC) priest Nikandr Pinchuk became the first person to receive a criminal conviction for opposing Russia's war in Ukraine on religious grounds. A court in the Urals fined him two months' average local wage for a social media post condemning the "horde of the Antichrist" attacking Ukraine. Neither Verkhoturys District Court nor Prosecutor's Office replied to Forum 18's questions on why expressing religious views on the war in Ukraine should be considered "discreditation" of the Armed Forces and incur such a large fine. (Source: [Forum 18, 18 October 2022](#))
- March 2023:** The Kirovsky District Court of Omsk, Russia, sentenced Pastor Stanislav Moskvitin on 12 March to one and a half years to be spent in a penal colony. Moskvitin had been arrested in July 2021. He is the pastor of the Apostolic Center Church “New Creation,” which is part of the Russian Council of Christian Evangelical Churches. Russian media reported that the Ministry of Justice had conducted an inspection of Moskvitin’s church and

decided that the Apostolic Center Church “New Creation” should be closed down. (Source: [Human Rights Without Frontiers, 24 April 2023](#))

- **April 2023:** Following a media campaign and a Moscow Justice Department inspection and court case, a judge has ordered that the Moscow-based SOVA Center for Information and Analysis (one of Russia's leading organizations monitoring freedom of religion or belief violations) cease to operate. (Source: [Forum 18, 28 April 2023](#))

## Specific examples of positive developments

- **March 2023:** A court in Russia's second-biggest city St Petersburg upheld for the first time the right of a soldier conscripted during the military campaign in Ukraine to perform alternative civil service, a rights group said. The group Voenniy Ombudsmen (Military Ombudsman) said the Leningrad Region Court ruled on Thursday that Pavel Mushumansky was entitled to perform alternative service on the grounds of his religious beliefs. Media reports from St. Petersburg said Mushumansky was an evangelical Christian and had already done alternative service in 2019 in place of his military service. He was called up under President Vladimir Putin's "partial mobilisation" order in September, but his request for a similar arrangement was rejected by military authorities. He was sent to a military unit. A court outside St. Petersburg subsequently upheld his right to alternative service and Thursday's ruling threw out an appeal launched by military officials on grounds that his right was not applicable to the special call-up. (Source: [Reuters, 16 March 2023](#))

## External Links - Situation in brief

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Forum 18, 18 October 2022 - [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2783](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2783)
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Human Rights Without Frontiers, 24 April 2023 - <https://hrwf.eu/russia-russia-pastor-moskvitins-church-headed-for-liquidation/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Forum 18, 28 April 2023 - [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2828](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2828)
- Specific examples of positive developments: Reuters - <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-court-upholds-conscripts-right-alternative-service-religious-grounds-2023-03-16/>



# WWL 2024: Keys to understanding

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 country report – covering 156 countries	AI Russia 2022	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/russia/report-russia/">https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/russia/report-russia/</a>	1 September 2023
BBC News Russia profile - updated 6 March 2023	BBC Russia profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17839672">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17839672</a>	1 September 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – Russia	BTI Russia Report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/RUS">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/RUS</a>	1 September 2023
Crisis24 Russia report (Garda World) - 2023 update	Crisis24 Russia report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/russia">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/russia</a>	1 September 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2022 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2022 Eastern Europe pp.50-54	<a href="https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/DI-final-version-report.pdf">https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/DI-final-version-report.pdf</a>	1 September 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Russia	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	1 September 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries	Democracy Index 2023 Russia	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/nations-transit/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/nations-transit/2023</a>	1 September 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Russia	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2023</a>	1 September 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Russia	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-net/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-net/2023</a>	28 February 2024
Girls Not Brides Russia report	Girls Not Brides Russia	<a href="https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/russia/">https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/russia/</a>	1 September 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Russia country chapter	HRW 2023 Russia country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/russia">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/russia</a>	1 September 2023
Internet World Stats 2023	IWS 2023 Russia	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm#ru">https://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm#ru</a>	1 September 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Russia	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/russia">https://rsf.org/en/russia</a>	1 September 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Russia	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/rus">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/rus</a>	1 September 2023
UNDP Human Development Report Russian Federation - updated 8 September 2022	UNDP HDR Russia	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/RUS">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/RUS</a>	1 September 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Russia	IRFR 2022 Russia	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/russia/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/russia/</a>	1 September 2023
USCIRF 2023 country reports – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL	USCIRF 2023 Russia CPC	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Russia.pdf">https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Russia.pdf</a>	1 September 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Russian Federation - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook Russia	<a href="https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d5f32ef28464d01f195827b7e020a3e8-0500022021/related/mpo-rus.pdf">https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d5f32ef28464d01f195827b7e020a3e8-0500022021/related/mpo-rus.pdf</a>	1 September 2023
World Bank Russia - Country At a Glance – October 2022	World Bank Russia overview	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia</a>	1 September 2023
World Bank Russia data – 2021	World Bank Russia data	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=RUS">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=RUS</a>	1 September 2023
World Factbook Russia - updated 29 August 2023	World Factbook Russia	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/russia/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/russia/</a>	1 September 2023

## Recent history

Russia stands out among the countries of Europe in that it never directly experienced the influences of the Renaissance, Reformation or the Enlightenment. Individualism, human rights, freedom of religion and other typical Western ideals are not indigenous to Russian culture and people. Slavery, or rather serfdom, was not abolished in Russia until February 1861, but many farmers continued to bear huge obligations to their landlords. Parliamentary democracy as it developed in Western Europe (and later in the USA) never took hold in Russia. Instead, the country has known only authoritarian forms of government ever since the early Middle Ages.

The demise of the USSR in 1991 is keenly felt as a loss of face for Russia which needs to be undone. States that had been conquered over the centuries all of a sudden became independent. This had a huge impact on Russian self-esteem. Russia has been and is working hard to restore its former position in various ways to rebuild its sphere of influence in its former empire.

Russia is taking on an increasingly dominant role in the area once covered by the Soviet Union - often under the cover of offering protection to ethnic Russians who are being threatened by “ultra-nationalists and fascists”. In March 2014 Russia annexed the Crimea peninsula after pro-Russian rebels had taken over the territory in February 2014 from Ukraine. This annexation has not been recognized by most countries. In May 2014 Russian rebels in the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk started an armed rebellion against the government in Kiev. Russia has always denied having any involvement, but the rebels could never have achieved so much without Russian support (in whatever form). Internationally, the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine isolated Russia enormously. At the start of 2022, tensions rose concerning Russian arm-

ed forces positioned at the Ukraine border. On 24 February 2022, President Putin sent armed forces into Ukraine. The war is still continuing to this day and has caused a high death-toll, great displacement of citizens and the destruction of many religious buildings and homes of Christians. On 20 March 2023, [Human Rights Without Frontiers](#) reported that 500 religious buildings had been damaged in the first year of fighting, and more than 20 religious leaders (not all Christians) had been deliberately killed.

Elsewhere at the international level, Russia's participation in the Syrian conflict since 2017 led to a significant change in the situation on the ground. The stalemate between President Assad's government forces and the various opposition groups was broken: By August 2018 President Assad had regained control over large parts of the country. In a remarkable statement, President Vladimir Putin suggested that the era when the USA and Russia decided the world's most important questions is in the past. According to Putin, China and Germany were now heading for superpower status. (Source: [Reuters](#), 22 October 2020)

## Political and legal landscape

According to the [Constitution of Russia](#), the country is a federation and semi-presidential republic, with a president as the head of state and prime minister as head of government. Elections for the presidency are held every four years and March 2018 saw the re-election of Vladimir Putin. In 2020, the Russian government worked on changing the Constitution and other laws to lift all restrictions on the presidency. These changes were then accepted by [referendum](#), allowing President Putin to potentially stay in power until 2036 (BBC News, 2 July 2020).

The Russian Federation is structured as a multi-party representative democracy, with the federal government composed of a legislative, executive and judicial branch. Leading political parties include United Russia (the party of both President Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev), the Communist Party and the Liberal Democratic Party. There are notable opposition groups, however these are constantly obstructed and members have often been given prison sentences.

In the period 17-19 September 2021, [parliamentary elections](#) were held in Russia. There was evidence of manipulation and the outcome was never in question: The Kremlin executed rigid control over the campaigning and vote-counting. But it was somewhat surprising to see how far the authorities would ultimately go to crush the supporters of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who encouraged influencing the results through so-called 'smart voting' - casting a ballot for anyone who might stand a chance against the United Russia candidate. Many of his backers were forced into exile and labeled 'foreign agents'. Government agencies even threatened to punish Google's and Apple's employees in Russia unless the companies removed Navalny's voting app from their stores. Whether President Putin intended it or not, the elections signified a big step in the ongoing transformation of his regime from populist authoritarianism to a dictatorship that treats any dissent as a security challenge. (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 20 September 2021](#)) A healthy Alexei Navalny died under suspicious circumstances in prison on 16 February 2024. (Source: [CNN, 16 February 2024](#)) He was 47 years old and a confessed convert from atheism to Christian faith (Source: [America magazine, 22 February 2022](#))

Over the past years, the Russian parliament (Duma) has passed a number of laws and amendments that have imposed restrictions on society, including religion:

- **13 July 2012:** The State Duma overwhelmingly approved a bill concerning [foreign-funded NGOs](#) active in the political field. Christian charitable activities were also affected (RFE-RL, 21 July 2018). Before 2012, corruption, bureaucracy and taxes were hampering such work, but now Christian charities fully depend on donations from Russian citizens.
- **6 July 2016:** President Putin signed [amendments](#) - referred to as “anti-terrorism” restrictions - to the country’s law on religion which came into effect on 20 July 2016 (World Watch Monitor, 15 July 2016). These amendments are also known under the name of one of the authors: Irina Yarovaya. The first consequences of this new legislation could be seen in the charges brought against various Christians as reported by [Forum 18](#) on 26 August 2016. Since then, the Yarovaya law has had growing impact on Russian Christians. It affects especially three areas: Religious literature, missionary activities and house meetings for prayer or Bible study. Hundreds of Christians have been interrogated, most them Protestants. There have been hundreds of court hearings and fines - again, the majority against Protestants. It has become practically impossible to carry out any religious activities outside church buildings - including sharing information on social media networks - without having to apply to the authorities for special written permission. It has also become much more risky to work with children. After the Yarovaya law came into force, the state authorities began to investigate whether religious organizations were lawfully in possession of their property. These investigations also affected churches.
- **20 April 2017:** [Russia's Supreme Court](#) in Moscow officially categorized the Jehovah's Witness national headquarters in St Petersburg and all 395 local branches as "extremist", banned all their activity immediately, and ordered their property to be seized by the state (Forum 18, 20 April 2017). Russia's Roman Catholic Church [condemned](#) the ban claiming the move represents a threat to religious freedom in general (Newsweek, 2 May 2017). In contrast, the ban was [welcomed](#) by representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (Asia News, 4 May 2017). Officially, Christians do not play a role in Russian politics and there are no Christian political parties. But, as the Asia News report above indicates, it is clear that there are times when the ROC and the Russian government work hand in hand.
- **22 July 2020:** The Russian government sent a new law to parliament that prohibits foreign participation (or guidance) in activities of Russian religious associations. The intention would seem to be aimed at blocking Christians in Russia - except the ROC - from having contact with Christians abroad (Source: [Asia News, 23 July 2020](#)).
- **14 July 2022:** President Putin signed into law a bill expanding the definition of so-called foreign agents to include anyone who is "under foreign influence". Critics say this will make it easier for the state to target its domestic critics. The law signed on 14 July came into force on 1 December 2022. (Source: [RFE-RL, 14 July 2022](#))

Another indication that Russia is becoming increasingly authoritarian can be seen in the rising levels of surveillance by the FSB (in the Soviet era known as KGB). On 19 December 2022 President Putin ordered the Federal Security Services to step up surveillance of Russian society and the country's borders to prevent risks from abroad and traitors at home. Putin instructed the FSB to maximize their "use of the operational, technical and personnel potential" to tighten

control of the society. The FSB, headed by Putin ally Alexander Bortnikov, will also increase oversight of mass gatherings, strategic facilities and energy infrastructure. (Source: [Reuters, 20 December 2022](#))

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Russian Federation):

- "The constitution declares the state is secular and guarantees freedom of religion, equal rights irrespective of religious belief, and the right to worship and profess one's religion. The law states government officials may prohibit the activity of a religious association for violating public order or engaging in 'extremist activity'. The law allows the government to criminalize a broad spectrum of activities as extremist but does not precisely define extremism. A law enacted in July to counter 'extremist activities' authorizes creation of a database of materials defined as extremist and a 'unified register' of individuals in organizations defined as terrorist or extremist. The law identifies Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country's four 'traditional' religions and recognizes the special role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)."
- "Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported authorities continued to investigate, detain, imprison, torture, physically abuse persons, and seize their property because of their religious belief or affiliation or membership in groups designated 'extremist', 'terrorist', or 'undesirable', including Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, followers of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, the Church of Scientology, Falun Gong, and multiple evangelical Protestant groups. In one example, an NGO reported that in July, a court in Kemerovo upheld a seven-year prison term in a labor camp for a disabled member of Jehovah's Witnesses for organizing the activities of an extremist organization."
- "During the year, ROC priests and members of other religious communities were fined or banned from continuing in their religious duties for 'discrediting the Russian armed forces' after making comments critical of Russia's war in Ukraine while ROC Patriarch Kirill expressed support of government actions."

According to USCIRF 2023 Russia CPC:

- "In 2022, religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation continued to decline. Authorities increasingly prosecuted members of religious minority communities using a range of legal mechanisms, including a 1996 religion law; laws on terrorism, extremism, and 'undesirable organizations'; provisions criminalizing blasphemy; and others. These vague laws continued to give authorities broad powers to outlaw religious groups, prosecute individuals based on their religious speech or religious activities, and ban religious literature deemed 'extremist'. The government also continued to fine Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Old Believers, and others for illegal missionary activities and other violations of various restrictions."
- "Russian authorities frequently relied on the country's extremism statutes to punish individuals for participating in so-called 'extremist' organizations - without adequately defining 'extremism'. In 2022, the government detained, imprisoned, and fined adherents of Muslim theologian Said Nursi, members of the Muslim group Tablighi Jamaat, and Jehovah's Witnesses on such charges. Since the Supreme Court declared Jehovah's Witness-

es ‘extremist’ in 2017, authorities have subjected the group to 1,874 home searches, with 201 occurring in 2022. In June, the European Court of Human Rights concluded that Russia had violated Jehovah's Witnesses' rights and ordered the government to pay pecuniary damages. By the end of the year, more than 100 Jehovah's Witnesses remained in Russian custody.”

- “In February 2022, Russian military forces launched a full-scale and unjustified invasion of Ukraine with the purported goal of the ‘demilitarization and denazification’ of the country. This ‘denazification’ rhetoric often resulted in antisemitic Russian propaganda and remarks from government officials, including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. As part of its war propaganda, the Russian government also pointed to the alleged flourishing of ‘satanism’ and other religious movements - so-called ‘cults’ - in Ukraine, with one official calling for the ‘desatanization of Ukraine’. Dissidents within Russia voicing opposition to the war on religious grounds faced fines and detention for allegedly discrediting and disseminating false information about the Russian army. Religious leaders who refused to voice support for the invasion, such as the chief rabbi of Moscow, were forced to flee Russia.”

According to HRW 2023 Russian Federation country chapter:

- In 2022: “In addition to being suspended from the United Nations Human Rights Council and leaving the Council of Europe, Russia at home adopted a 'besieged fortress' mentality, amplifying its rhetoric of malevolent foreign influence, and adopted bills akin to the Soviet-era ban on foreign contacts. The scope of these new laws varies from drastic expansion of the 'foreign agents' legislation to include individuals or organizations 'under foreign influence', to branding political candidates as 'affiliated with foreign agents', and introducing strict control over international academic cooperation programs. Authorities also continued to add more individuals and groups to the 'foreign agents' registry and blacklist foreign organizations as 'undesirable'.”

### **Gender perspective**

Whilst by law women and men have the same rights to enter marriage, a [2015 CEDAW report](#) highlighted concerns about the prevalence of harmful practices towards women in the predominately Islamic North Caucasus, where forced marriages (including abduction for forced marriage), so called ‘honor crimes’ and polygamy are common. Escaping such marriages can be problematic, as women fear losing access to their children; in the North Caucasus region local court decisions often reflect community beliefs that children belong with their father ([RFE/RL, 8 May 2021](#)).

Working to prevent and combat domestic violence – an endemic issue in Russia - can be considered a ‘political activity’ which results in state harassment and intimidation ([HRW, 16 December 2020](#); [RFE/RL, 14 June 2021](#)). Perpetrators of violence often enjoy impunity and the police have come under criticism for failing to adequately respond to cases when they are reported, as in the case of 23-year-old Vera Pekhteva, who was killed by her boyfriend ([HRW, 8 March 2021](#)). The draft law on domestic violence remains stalled in parliament (AI country report 2021/2022).

## Religious landscape

Russian Federation: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	120,066,000	82.4
Muslim	18,227,000	12.5
Hindu	43,300	0.0
Buddhist	553,000	0.4
Ethno-religionist	1,014,000	0.7
Jewish	126,000	0.1
Bahai	20,700	0.0
Atheist	575,000	0.4
Agnostic	4,995,000	3.4
Other	6,590	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Despite decades of atheistic propaganda by the Communists during the Soviet era, most Russians consider themselves to be Christians - 82.4% according to WCD March 2023 estimates, 96.4% of them belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). However, many Russians are not likely to have read the Bible and few attend church services. Outreach activities by non-Orthodox denominations are not welcomed by the ROC.

The second biggest religious group in Russia - according to WCD - are Muslims, who are mostly Sunnis. They live mainly in the northern Caucasus (in southern Russia) and in the mid-Volga region around the city of Kazan, 800 kilometers east of Moscow. While the Muslim communities in the Caucasus region tend to be conservative and have been involved in armed fighting against the Russian army, the Muslims in the mid-Volga region are more moderate. A further group of Muslims not included in these statistics are the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from the Central Asian countries. Most are living under poor conditions on low wages and are regarded with suspicion (since they could be Muslim militants). While working abroad, these migrant workers are often open to outreach by Christians.

The northern Caucasus is a Muslim region with a strong, radical Islamic culture. Many Christians fled from this region during the Chechen wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2009). Pressure on Christians who have converted from Islam is enormous and comes mainly from family, friends and the local community. Radical Islam is present in the region with two competing organizations: The so-called Caucasus Emirate and the Islamic State group (IS). Since June 2015 IS has been dominant.

The number of agnostics and atheists can be regarded as the result of 70 years of atheist indoctrination by the Communists during the Soviet era.

Russia's Buddhists are mainly found in Kalmykia (near the Caspian Sea) and Tuva Province (bordering on Mongolia).

## Economic landscape

According to World Bank Russia data:

- **GDP (current US\$) (trillion):** 1,78 (in 2021)
- **GDP growth (annual %):** 4.7% (in 2021)

Russia has vast natural resources, mainly located in isolated regions like Siberia. Oil, gas, gold, uranium and many other materials abound. However, only after 1991 was the state in a position to exploit such wealth and open up new markets. Western Europe became dependent on (cheaper) Russian gas and oil – which also meant these European countries could be more easily manipulated. The economic crisis of 2007-2013 dealt a serious blow to the Russian economy and things became worse when the fighting in the Crimea broke out in early 2014, with the USA and Western Europe imposing economic sanctions. The huge income Russia enjoyed from its gas and oil exports plummeted in 2015 as the oil price dropped from around 100 dollar per barrel to less than 50 dollars. From then on, the Russian economy began to go into decline.

The sudden disruption to trade with China in early 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak highlighted the depth of dependency of Russia's economy on the increasingly unequal deals with its large southern neighbor. The price of oil continues to be the key determinant of Russia's economic performance. But the drop in Chinese demand drove the price down even more. (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 3 February 2020](#))

After Russia sent its armed forces into Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Western countries imposed many economic sanctions against Russia which only had limited effect. At the same time, Russia used its natural resources (oil and gas) to put pressure on the West by increasing prices enormously. As a result, Western economies suffered, while the Russian economy was far less affected. (Source: [RFE/RL, 13 June 2022](#))

Christians in Russia suffer like the rest of the population from the deteriorating economy. The economic effects of the lockdown measures imposed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic were serious. In March 2020 alone, 67,000 businesses closed down, according to the financial newspaper Vedomosti - a 77% increase in closures over the same period in 2019. (Source: [RFE/RL, 22 April 2020](#)) The COVID-19 crisis left many of Russia's small businesses struggling to stay afloat with a level of state support that pales in comparison to packages offered in many Western countries. (Source: [RFE/RL, 1 August 2020](#))

In response to mounting COVID-19 infections in Russia, President Putin signed a decree on 17 April 2020, providing financial support for the majority of the 7-8 million foreign migrant workers believed to be still residing in the country with little or no savings to survive on. In particular, this measure affected the approximately 2 million migrant workers from Uzbekistan and 700,000 from Tajikistan, the two Central Asian countries who send the largest numbers of mi-

grant workers to the Russian Federation. The Kremlin decree allowed for a three-month long "financial holiday" (back-dated from 15 March to 15 June 2020) during which migrant workers were freed from buying work permits to legally stay and work in Russia. Around 600,000 migrants from Kyrgyzstan were already exempted from having to buy these permits because of their country's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, a Russian-led regional economic bloc. (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 23 April 2020](#))

### Gender perspective

Whilst there is gender parity in relation to access to education, and the female labor force participation rate is relatively high – particularly among the younger generation - women remain broadly economically disadvantaged compared to men (UNDP HDR Russia). This is primarily due to customary patrilineal inheritance practices (particularly in North Caucasus) and social norms which place women within the domestic sphere rather than positions of high-responsibility. Christian men also experience economic pressure, however, and are more likely to be imprisoned or fined by the state.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Russia:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Russian 77.7%, Tatar 3.7%, Ukrainian 1.4%, Bashkir 1.1%, Chuvash 1%, Chechen 1%, other 10.2%, unspecified 3.9% (2010 est.) Note: nearly 200 national and/or ethnic groups are represented in Russia's 2010 census
- **Main languages:** Russian (official) 85.7%, Tatar 3.2%, Chechen 1%, other 10.1% (2010 est.) Note: data represent native language spoken (2010 est.)
- **Urban population:** 73.5% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.7% (male: 99.7%, female: 99.7%) (2018)

According to the UN Human Development Report Russia:

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.822 (0.828 for females, 0.815 for males), ranking 52 (2021)
- **Total population:** 145.1 million (2021).
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 69.4 years (74.8 for females, 68.8 for males) (2021)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 15.8 years (16.0 for females, 15.6 for males) (2021)
- **Gender Inequality index:** 0.203 (2021)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 54.5, Male: 69.7 (2021)

In various Russian cities, there are millions of migrant workers (mainly from Central Asia) who send remittances to their families back home. The presence of so many 'foreigners' has provided opportunities for Russian Christians to evangelize. But there have also been nationalist protestors demanding the expulsion of the migrant workers.

Due to the old Soviet educational system, practically all Russian citizens can read. As a result, Christian materials have a sizable market. There are hardly any restrictions on the printing and distribution of Christian materials in the Russian language. However, the availability of Christian literature in the languages of other ethnic groups in the country is limited.



Due to Western sanctions imposed after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, shopping malls became increasingly empty of shoppers, retail food shops began to close down, and a large number of shops had empty shelves. Some of the missing goods were no longer being imported, others were sold out in the general consumer panic. (Source: [Asia News, 16 March 2022](#))

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background in the northern Caucasus and mid-Volga regions.

### Gender perspective

As noted in a [2015 CEDAW report](#), "the roles and responsibilities expected of women and men within the family and society remain entrenched in patriarchal and stereotypical attitudes and social norms which reinforce the status of women as mothers and caregivers and their submission within family relations". Domestic violence remains an ongoing issue of concern, particularly as cases reportedly soared during the COVID-19 crisis ([International Bar Association, 3 July 2020](#)). Within this context of subordination and widespread acceptance of domestic violence, female converts from Islam are vulnerable to physical and psychological abuse if their faith is discovered. Victims of abuse are hesitant to report crimes due to fear of reprisals, the shame attached to sexual assault and a lack of trust in the justice system.

### Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023):

- **Internet usage:** 85.3% penetration - survey date: January 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 49.7% penetration - survey date: January 2022

According to the World Bank Russia data:

- **Mobile cellular subscriptions:** 169.0 per 100 people (2021)

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (updated 13 January 2020 – accessed 28 February 2024):

- "Russia has the largest mobile market in Europe, with the number of subscriptions standing at about 231 million at the beginning of 2020. Mobile SIM card penetration is high, at around 158%, although actual mobile user penetration is lower due to the popularity of multiple SIM card use. There is pressure on operator revenue from the poor economic climate, lower pricing resulting from intense competition, and regulatory measures introduced in 2018 which saw the end of roaming charges."
- "Several mobile network operators are active, although the market is dominated by four major operators (MTS, VEON, Tele2 Russia/Rostelecom and MegaFon). These have expanded their footprints widely through the acquisition of smaller regional service providers. Tele2 Russia has undergone several changes of ownership in recent years. It became a significant player following its merger with Rostelecom, which it hosted as an MVNO. In late 2019 Rostelecom acquired the 55% stake in Tele2 Russia which it did not already own."

- "Competition in the key markets of Moscow and St Petersburg is particularly fierce, due to the size of the cities' populations and the higher concentration of wealth there."
- "The extensive deployment of LTE infrastructure has supported growth opportunities through mobile broadband and data services, which make up a growing proportion of overall mobile revenue. Investments in carrier aggregation and LTE-A technologies have further boosted network capabilities, while operators are also partnering with vendors to prepare for 5G later in 2020."

According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report:

- Russia is listed as 'not free' with a score of 21 points.
- "Internet freedom in Russia continued to plummet during the coverage period, as the government implemented even more restrictive laws to control the information space and sought to eliminate criticism of the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. Authorities continued to block prominent social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and issued fines to other platforms that refused to remove content and localize user data. The government further expanded the 'foreign agents' law, broadening the definition to effectively include anyone and enabling the Ministry of Justice to block the websites of designated foreign agents without a court decision. The Ministry of Justice also began adding news outlets and civil society organizations to the list of 'undesirable organizations', criminalizing participation in or support of them. Authorities also employed March 2022 measures that outlaw 'discrediting' or 'knowingly spreading false information' about the military to imprison people who criticized the Ukraine invasion on online news sites or social media."
- "Power in Russia's authoritarian political system is concentrated in the hands of President Vladimir Putin. With loyalist security forces, a subservient judiciary, a controlled media environment, and a legislature consisting of a ruling party and pliable opposition factions, the Kremlin is able to manipulate elections and suppress genuine dissent."
- "The government introduced laws that oblige telecommunications operators to work more closely with the Federal Security Service (FSB); introduced fines for operators that refuse to install the Technical Measures to Combat Threats (TSPU) system, which facilitates website blocking and surveillance; and increased fines for those that had not yet installed surveillance tools required for a systems of operational-search activities (SORM) program."
- "According to Roskomsvoboda, a digital rights organization, the government blocked over 247,000 web pages in 2022, including websites of Russian news outlets, foreign news outlets, human rights organizations, and LGBT+ sites, among others."
- "Throughout the coverage period, Roskomnadzor, the media regulator, issued fines to social media platforms that refused to remove content and localize user information."
- "New legislation expanded the scope of the 'foreign agents' law, allowing the government to list anyone deemed to be 'under foreign influence' as a foreign agent. Additionally, the Ministry of Justice began adding civil society organizations and news outlets, including the independent online news outlet Meduza, to the list of 'undesirable' organizations, effectively criminalizing them."

- “Individuals and journalists who criticized the Russian military were sentenced to prison and fined for violating 2022 amendments to the Criminal Code and Administrative Code, which prohibit ‘discrediting’ or ‘knowingly spreading false information about’ the military. For instance, Ilya Yashin, a politician, was sentenced to eight and a half years in prison in December 2022 for sharing a YouTube video about atrocities committed by the Russian military in Bucha, a city in Ukraine's Kyiv Oblast.”
- “Investigations based on leaked data from Roskomnadzor revealed the extent to which government agencies monitor individuals’ social media activity for the purpose of cracking down on opposition, and the automated systems they deploy to detect critical content.”

One of the greatest technological issues in Russia is the sheer size of the territory, making it very hard to cover the entire area with television, radio, telephone and Internet access. Many regions have to rely on satellite connections. In this context, the distribution of Christian materials can be quite a challenge too.

Russia is a modern country which aspires to be a world power. Technological progress is pushed by the regime, but they also try to control the flow of information as much as possible. Negative reporting from abroad is quickly countered by state propaganda. The state secret service – FSB – is equipped with the latest technology. This organization plays a prominent role in monitoring and infiltrating activities and especially those where foreigners are involved. They are a worthy successor of the infamous KGB and many Christians are likely to be on their radar.

An exodus by independent Russian and foreign media outlets, which had started shortly after the invasion of Ukraine, continued after the laws' adoption, due to concerns for journalists' security. Several prominent outlets relocated outside Russia or switched to alternative platforms for broadcasting such as social media. (Source: HRW 2023 Russian Federation country chapter)

In December 2022, Russian authorities blocked almost 15,000 websites in just one week. The websites were blocked at the request of the Prosecutor-General's Office and the Federal Tax Service. (Source: [RFE/RL, 12 December 2022](#))

## Security situation

Fighting in eastern Ukraine (the Donbas area), where rebels supported by the Russian Federation have created their own 'country', has broken out regularly over the past years. Negotiators from Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reached an agreement for a cease-fire in eastern Ukraine from 27 July 2020 (Source: [RFE/RL, 23 July 2020](#)). However, tensions rose again at the beginning of 2022 with Russia threatening with an [invasion](#) (BBC News, 3 February 2022). This took place on 24 February 2022 with Western countries soon taking sides with Ukraine. Though most of the war was taking place in Ukraine, from time to time regions in Russia itself were hit as well. The mutiny of the Wagner Group mercenaries at the end of June 2023 was a totally unexpected setback for the Kremlin. (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 27 June 2023](#))

Another hot topic is the Crimea peninsula: The annexation of this peninsula by Russia in 2014 resulted in international political tensions and sanctions, but this has not stopped the Russian government from completely integrating the area into Russia. This meant that the Yarovaya laws have also been implemented in Crimea (as well as the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses). Russia has also begun to restrict the ethnic minority of the Crimean Tatars. (Source: [RFE/RL, 7 July 2020](#))

A third region where security risks are above average is the northern Caucasus region. The population in this region is predominantly Islamic and very conservative. Chechnya and Dagestan are the two best-known republics in this region.

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background in the northern Caucasus and mid-Volga regions.

## Trends analysis

### 1) The government is stable despite opposition to the invasion of Ukraine

The regime headed by President Vladimir Putin has not experienced any significant opposition in ruling Russia over the past years. Constitutional barriers to limit the number of terms a president could be in power were removed. The September 2021 parliamentary elections resulted in a overwhelming win for Putin's United Russia party. No political changes are to be expected in the short-term. At the same time, Russia has continued to increase its influence in all former Soviet republics, which Moscow considers to be part of the Russian world (Russky mir). The ultimate aim is to wipe out the shame of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union – i.e. the Russian Empire. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine needs to be seen in this context. Russia is cooperating closely with China to achieve its goals.

### 2) The Russian economy is in bad condition

Due to Western sanctions, falling prices for oil and natural gas and the effects of the COVID-19 crisis, Russia is facing serious economic and social problems. Widespread corruption is an additional problem. The fact that the Russian government is spending a large part of its budget on defense and the war in Ukraine does not help the economic situation. The worldwide energy crisis that began in 2021 and continued through 2022 gave the regime of President Putin the chance to control the export of natural gas and oil to Western countries, making Russia's influence clear.

### 3) Religious freedom is in decline

The passing of the anti-terrorism legislation on 6 July 2016 resulted in a total ban on all activities associated with the Jehovah's Witnesses in early 2017. On 24 September 2021 Russia's Prosecutor-General's Office declared two organizations linked to the US-based Church of Scientology "undesirable", in a move that is likely to lead to the group being banned. The Prosecutor-General's Office said that the World Institute of Scientology Enterprises International and the Church of Spiritual Technology are religious corporations that "pose a threat to the security of the Russian Federation" (Source: [RFE/RL, 24 September 2021](#)). The re-

strictions brought in by this legislation are increasingly affecting non-ROC Christians in Russia. Any connections Christians in Russia may have with churches and organizations abroad are coming under increasing surveillance and limitations.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: Human Rights Without Frontiers - <https://hrwf.eu/russia-500-religious-buildings-damaged-and-over-20-clerics-murdered-in-ukraine/>
- Recent history: Reuters - <https://www.yahoo.com/news/russia-u-global-dominance-past-152738572.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Constitution of Russia - <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-01.htm>
- Political and legal landscape: referendum - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-53255964>
- Political and legal landscape: parliamentary elections - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Putin-dominates,-but-election-produces-a-few-surprises-54101.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Jamestown Foundation, 20 September 2021 - <https://jamestown.org/program/fake-elections-and-russias-belligerent-foreign-policy/>
- Political and legal landscape: CNN, 16 February 2024 - <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/16/europe/alexey-navalny-dead-russia-prison-intl/index.html>
- Political and legal landscape: America magazine, 22 February 2022 - <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2024/02/22/alexei-navalny-christian-death-247369>
- Political and legal landscape: foreign-funded NGOs - <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-signs-ngo-foreign-agents-law/24652130.html>
- Political and legal landscape: amendments - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/07/russia-church-reacts-as-anti-missionary-bill-becomes-law/>
- Political and legal landscape: Forum 18 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2211](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2211)
- Political and legal landscape: Russia's Supreme Court - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2274](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2274)
- Political and legal landscape: condemned - <http://www.newsweek.com/jehovahs-witnesses-ban-russia-catholic-593082>
- Political and legal landscape: welcomed - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Russian-Orthodox-against-Jehovahs-Witnesses-40640.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Asia News, 23 July 2020 - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/No-foreigners-in-Russian-churches.-Problems-for-Catholics-too-50635.html>
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## WWL 2024: Church information

### Christian origins

The official Christianization of Russia occurred in 988 AD, when Prince Vladimir I of Kiev adopted Byzantine Christianity as the state religion of Kievan Rus. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has played a dominant role in Russian society and culture ever since.

Roman Catholicism reached Russia when Russia expanded westwards at the end of the 18th century, occupying the eastern part of Poland and later Lithuania. Catholicism remained the religion of ethnic minorities in Russia and the USSR and received much hostility from the ROC, who regarded Catholics as a threat to “Russianness”. Protestantism came even later to Russia - at the end of the 19th century – and was met with even more hostility. The ROC accused the Protestants of sheep-stealing and often appealed to the tsarist authorities to stop their activities.

When the Russian Revolution took place in November 1917, an atheist regime was established. Church leaders of all denominations were arrested and sent to labor camps. But during World War II Stalin changed this policy on religion. Churches were reopened and restored. The ROC was allowed to train and appoint new leadership. Baptists, Evangelical Christians and also Pentecostals were merged into a strong union. But a lot of distrust against the authorities remained, since there were still many thousands of Christians and church leaders in labor camps. The infamous KGB infiltrated church organizations, and they had informers in practically all churches and congregations. Some Christians refused to cooperate with the authorities, went underground and were ruthlessly persecuted. In 1988, when the ROC celebrated its 1000th anniversary, Open Doors knew of more than 300 Christians imprisoned for their faith at that time.

## Church spectrum today

Russian Federation: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	115,732,000	96.4
Catholic	708,000	0.6
Protestant	1,520,000	1.3
Independent	2,015,000	1.7
Unaffiliated	281,000	0.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-188,000	-0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>120,068,000</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,359,000	1.1
Renewalist movement	3,519,000	2.9

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

According to the World Christian Database data (accessed March 2023), the largest denominations in Russia are:

- Russian Orthodox Church
- Armenian Apostolic Church
- Ukrainian Orthodox Church
- Pentecostal Union of United Churches
- Russian Association of Christians of the Evangelical Faith
- Roman Catholic Church in Russia
- Old Ritualist Church

When the USSR collapsed in 1991, Communist rule ended. Atheism was no longer propagated and religious persecution from the state came to an end: All religious prisoners were freed; surveillance of churches and Christians stopped. It became normal for Russians to identify with religion again and even state officials were allowed to do this. The ROC has since tried to regain its dominant position in society, but Russia has officially remained a secular state.

Russian people are immensely proud of their culture and history and this has consequences on a religious level as well: While Russian Orthodoxy is regarded as typically Russian, Roman Catholicism and especially Protestantism are seen as Western and alien.

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

From a national perspective, persecution is only caused by restrictions imposed by the government. However, the situation is different in the northern Caucasus region where conservative Islam (Wahhabism) has a stronghold, especially in Chechnya and Dagestan. (See above: *Map of country*). As a result, almost all Russian Christians have left these areas. Converts from Islam are under such immense pressure to recant that most have to hide their new faith. Some have been forced to flee or find refuge in safe houses.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Expatriate Christians are not involuntarily isolated in Russia, hence this category is not included for WWL scoring and analysis.

**Historical Christian communities:** After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the state lost its atheistic zeal and stopped persecuting Christians so severely. Religious prisoners were freed, and most churches belonging to Historical Christian communities could function more or less freely. This resulted in a revival of Christianity in the country, with the state favoring the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Other Christian denominations in this category, however, continue to experience difficulties. For instance, the registration of a Protestant church will take more energy, resources and time, since church members will be investigated by the secret services concerning contacts with the West. If contact with Western churches are discovered, the request for a Protestant church's registration could well be denied.

**Converts to Christianity:** Christian converts with a Muslim background experience most pressure from the Muslim population in the Caucasus region. Here all Christians are facing violence and pressure, but converts from Islam bear the brunt of it. Converts living in Chechnya or Dagestan, for example, are regarded as betraying their national identity. Christianity is associated with the 'Russian occupiers', the ones who are being attacked in the guerrilla war that has been going on for decades. Over the years, dozens of Christian converts have had to flee their homes and spend time in safe houses. It is very difficult for them to return home.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** Non-traditional Christian groups have frequently been targeted by the ROC for so-called sheep stealing. The ROC often considers Protestant groups as sects who are teaching heresy. The state regards these groups as un-Russian and often as Western spies. In Muslim areas, these Christians are often targeted because they are suspected of being active in evangelism.



# WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics

## Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

## Position on the World Watch List

Russian Federation: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	58	62
WWL 2023	57	61
WWL 2022	56	62
WWL 2021	57	58
WWL 2020	60	46

The rise in overall score was due to a rise in pressure, particularly in the *Private, National and Church spheres of life*, which also displayed the highest scores. All over the country, the government imposes restrictions on non-Russian Orthodox church activities and on those Christians opposing the war in Ukraine. *Islamic oppression* (blended with *Clan oppression*) is particularly evident in the *Private, Family and Community spheres of life* (especially in the northern Caucasus). The score for violent incidents decreased.

## Persecution engines

Russian Federation: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Weak
Clan oppression	CO	Strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Strong
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.*

### Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong)

Legislation in Russia is being adapted and many new restrictions have been introduced. The government continues to favor the Russian Orthodox Church at the expense of other Christian groups. Jehovah Witnesses have been banned since 2017. After the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 state surveillance has increased, also of Christians.

### Islamic oppression (Strong), blended with Clan oppression (Strong)

In the Caucasus region, these are the most important Persecution engines. In the various republics on the northern slopes of the Caucasus range (Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia) Islamic militants are fighting against the Russian army to establish a Muslim emirate. Many ethnic Russians have left the area due to the violence. Churches have seen their membership drop. Christian converts with a Muslim background have to keep their faith secret for fear of being discovered and executed. *Islamic oppression* is also active in Tatarstan (with its capital city, Kazan, on the Volga river), a region 800km east of Moscow, where the influence of Islam is growing.

### Christian denominational protectionism (Strong)

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is regarded as typically Russian; Roman Catholics and especially Protestants are viewed as foreign and Western. Outreach activities by non-Orthodox denominations are not welcomed and non-traditional Christian communities have in particular been targeted by the ROC for so-called sheep-stealing – robbing the Orthodox Church of its members – and for false teaching.

## Drivers of persecution

Russian Federation: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	WEAK	STRONG	STRONG	-	-	VERY STRONG	-
Government officials	Weak	-	-	Weak	Weak	-	-	Very strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	-	Weak	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Russian Federation: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	WEAK	STRONG	STRONG	-	-	VERY STRONG	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium	-	Very weak	Medium	Medium	-	-	Medium	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	Weak	Strong	Strong	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	Medium	-	-	Medium	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Very strong):** State agents at various levels carry out surveillance and impose restrictions. Legislation in Russia is being adapted and bringing in new restrictions constantly.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** All over Russia, local communities oppose openly evangelistic activities carried out by Protestant Christians.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Although Russia has a parliament (with elections), it is completely dominated by President Putin's United Russia party. They are constantly tightening existing legislation and imposing new restrictions.

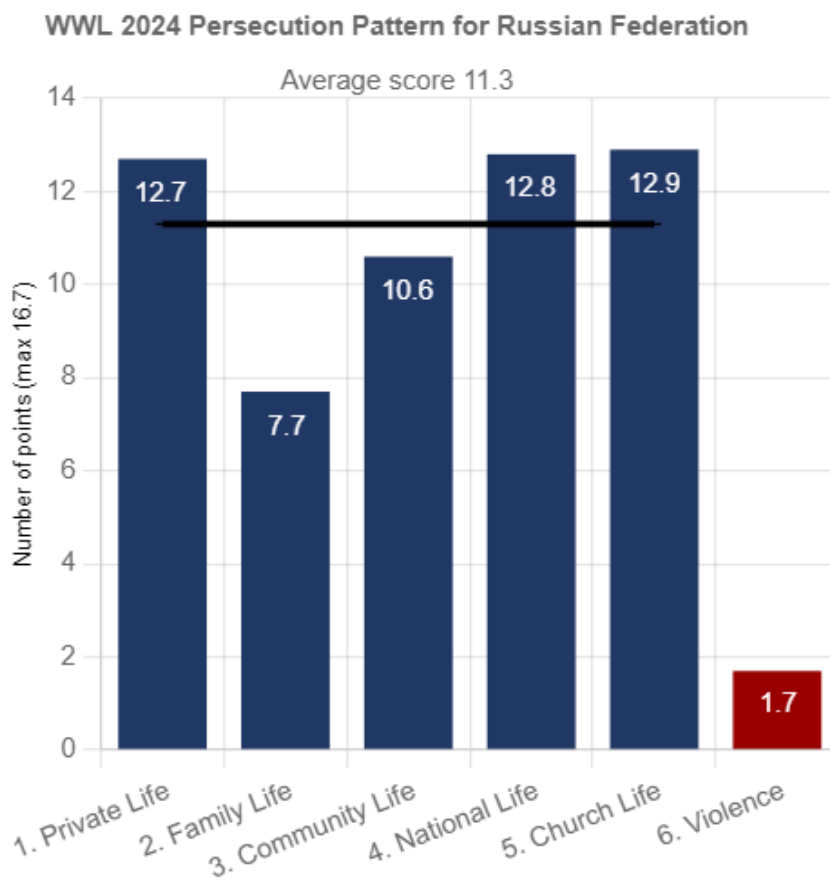
### Drivers of Islamic oppression, blended with Clan oppression

- **Extended family (Strong):** This is only the case in the Muslim areas, with converts from Islam being targeted most.
- **Ethnic or Clan group leaders (Strong):** There is a strong link between religion and nationalism in the Muslim regions of Russia: Conversion to Christianity is strongly opposed.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Muslim clerics will oppose conversion to Christianity.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** This is only the case in the Muslim areas, with converts from Islam being targeted most.

### Drivers of Christian denominational protectionism

- **Extended family (Strong):** Russian Orthodox Christians will oppose anyone in their family turning to Protestantism.
- **Christian religious leaders (Medium):** The ROC has a negative attitude towards other denominations and accuses them of sheep stealing. However, they are not the state church.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** Occasionally, Orthodox priests will encourage citizens to act against Protestants.
- **Political parties (Medium):** The ROC has a favored status among politicians in Russia.

### The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for the Russian Federation shows:

- The average pressure on Christians was at a very high level (11.3 points), increasing from 11.0 points in WWL 2023. Most of the increase in pressure occurred in the *National and Church spheres of life*. The overall trend (already visible since WWL 2020) is that pressure from *Dictatorial paranoia* in the Russian Federation has worsened, while pressure caused by *Islamic oppression* (blended with *Clan oppression*) seems to have reduced slightly.
- Pressure is highest in the *Church and National spheres of life* (reflecting the influence of *Dictatorial paranoia*) and in the *Private sphere of life* (which reflects the effect of *Islamic oppression* blended with *Clan oppression*).
- The score for violence is low (1.7 points). Only very few incidents targeting Christians were reported.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).*

### Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

#### **Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.50 points)**

In the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, converts will avoid letting any Christian materials be discovered by their family or community. The possession of Christian materials is considered to be clear evidence of conversion. The legislation imposes restrictions on religious materials - so Christians can be fined for owning Christian materials that do not meet the state criteria.

#### **Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.50 points)**

In the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, converts will avoid revealing their new faith because they fear the consequences. As a result, many live as secret believers. Protestants are wary of publicly expressing their faith in these regions as well. Religious legislation does not allow information to be posted about church and faith issues on public social network platforms. Christians from registered churches in Russia openly share their faith, although the access to their web-pages would be restricted to a group of friends. Christians from non-registered churches tend not to use Facebook, mainly because they fear being accused of illegal missionary activities.

#### **Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV or Christian materials on the Internet. (3.50 points)**

In the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, converts run a risk of being caught in the act of accessing Christian sources by their families, friends and the community. The state is keeping close watch over all non-Orthodox Christians and may block access to some media.

#### **Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.25 points)**

Conversion is strongly opposed in the Northern Caucasus and less strongly in the mid-Volga region (Tatarstan and Bashkortostan) by the Muslim environment (family, friends, community, local imams). Officially, there is no hindrance to conversion - the laws are secular. In the European part of the Russian Federation, conversion to Catholic and all other non-Russian Orthodox denominations is opposed by Russian Orthodoxy and (local) government supporting Russian Orthodoxy. In Caucasian, Siberian and Far Eastern areas, conversion to Protestant, Catholic and non-Russian Orthodox denominations is opposed by local religious (Islamic or Bud-

dhist) leaders or Russian Orthodoxy and (local) government supporting local religious tradition. The understanding that "Russians are Russian Orthodox" is typical for both secular and religious authorities.

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

### **Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (2.75 points)**

In the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, children of converts are almost always removed from the parents temporarily, if not permanently, by the extended family. Officially, however, Russia is a secular country and does not prevent Christians from raising their children according to their faith.

### **Block 2.3: Christians have been hindered in celebrating a Christian wedding for faith-related reasons. (2.50 points)**

This is a problem for converts in the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga. Muslim families will not tolerate any Christian influence in their lives. Local Muslims will also not allow openly Christian celebrations organized by Protestants. Family weddings will mostly be left alone by the state.

### **Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (2.50 points)**

In the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, baptisms are regarded as the final farewell to the faith of the fathers - the final sign of conversion. Family, friends and community will oppose this fiercely. The state does not block baptisms, but if an unregistered group makes a high-profile event out of baptisms, they will face monitoring and possible interference.

### **Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (2.50 points)**

In cases where children of converts remain in the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, they are often treated badly by family, friends and neighbors. It is usual for them to be put through a process of "re-education" by the family to make sure they know the right way to be Muslim. Children of Protestants may experience being bullied or ousted from the community.

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

### **Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.75 points)**

In the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, converts and Protestants are constantly monitored by the Muslim community. According to the Yarovaya law, it is the responsibility of every Russian citizen to report to police about every religious meeting, or cases

of proselytism etc. Telephone and internet providers are obligated to keep records and contents of conversations and messages and provide these if needed by the police. Not executing this legal obligation is a criminal offence.

**Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.50 points)**

When in the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, it becomes known that a person has become a Christian, the family, friends and community will use intense pressure to make the convert recant his/her faith. It affects Protestants as they are under constant pressure of being considered "sects", which means dangerous, foreign, bad, traitors of Russia.

**Block 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.50 points)**

Fines are usually issued by the state. All over Russia, the local authorities may fine churches that operate without formal registration. After the implementation of the Yarovaya law there were hundreds of court hearings and heavy fines - the majority involving Protestant Christians. They can be fined for illegal missionary activities (e.g. inviting people to attend Christian worship services), possessing Christian literature (without full details of publisher) and for holding illegal religious meetings (e.g. house prayer meetings and Bible studies).

**Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)**

In the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, converts and Christians active in evangelism are under constant surveillance by the Muslim community. After the implementation of the Yarovaya law hundreds of Christians were interrogated, the majority of them Protestants. Pastors can also be interrogated and fined if their church members are accused of illegal missionary activities.

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

**Block 4.3: Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience. (3.75 points)**

This is the case since the general mobilization in September 2022. The government has continually expanded the mobilization age-bracket and has jailed and fined individuals for refusing to join up on grounds of conscientious objection.

**Block 4.16: International monitoring has been hindered when Christians had to stand trial. (3.75 points)**

After the launch of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, Russia was excluded from the Council of Europe. As a result, victims of human rights violations committed by the Russian Federation lost protection under the European Convention on Human Rights. This, together with the fact that Russia's diplomatic isolation from nations which have been supportive of human rights and

civil society in Russia, make it increasingly difficult for Russian human rights defenders, religious activists and civil society organizations to engage with the international community. This has also meant that international monitoring in Russia has been cut.

**Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.50 points)**

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 certain 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 implementation of the Yarovaya law completely undermines the principles of religious freedom of the Constitution. Islam has no impact on legislation in Russia as the influence of the Muslim community does not reach to this level.

**Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.50 points)**

Since the implementation of the Yarovaya law, it has become inadvisable for Christians to express their views or opinions in public even on social media. They can be fined for doing this. In the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, converts and Protestants will experience problems in expressing their views and faith in public. There is no such Muslim influence at the national level, however.

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

**Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.75 points)**

Since the implementation of the Yarovaya law, the level of surveillance of all non-Orthodox Christian churches has increased. Many meetings have been raided, and church leaders and Christian have been fined. In the northern Caucasus, converts will not even attempt to go to church meetings for fear of reprisals from the Muslim community.

**Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.50 points)**

All Christian materials must have detailed information regarding their publisher. All materials will be checked to see if this is the case. In the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, Muslims will regard Christian materials as tools for evangelism. They will usually not hesitate to seize and destroy them and probably also inform the local authorities.



**Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (3.50 points)**

Importing religious literature from abroad implies having contact with (religious) organizations abroad. All organizations that have (non-business) relations with foreign organizations are labelled as foreign agents by the government. In theory, it is not prohibited to import religious literature from abroad, but in practice it is problematic. In the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, the Muslim authorities will oppose any imported Christian materials (especially when it is in their own language) as they regard these as being intended for evangelistic purposes.

**Block 5.16: Churches, Christian organizations, institutions or groups have been prevented from using mass media to present their faith (e.g. via local or national radio, TV, Internet, social media, cell phones). (3.50 points)**

Access by Protestant and Evangelical churches to local or national radio and TV is hindered. The law explicitly prohibits evangelism via the Internet. Since the implementation of the Yarovaya law, Christians and Christian organizations are not allowed to share their faith openly with non-Christians.

## Violence

*Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:*

**1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced.**

*Possible reasons for this may be:*

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

**2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons**

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of*

years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

Russian Federation: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	1
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	4	200
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	5	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	1	1
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	3	32
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	3	1

In the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Christians detained:** At least 4 Christians were arrested for opposing the war in Ukraine.
- **Christians sentenced:** At least 5 Christians were sentenced to jail for opposing the war in Ukraine.
- **Christians abducted:** In January 2023, a Catholic priest from Poland was abducted in Belgorod by people who claimed to be police officers.
- **Christians attacked:** At least 3 Christians with a Muslim background were abused and beaten by their families and local community.
- **Christians expelled from the country:** At least three Christians were forced to leave Russia.

## 5 Year trends

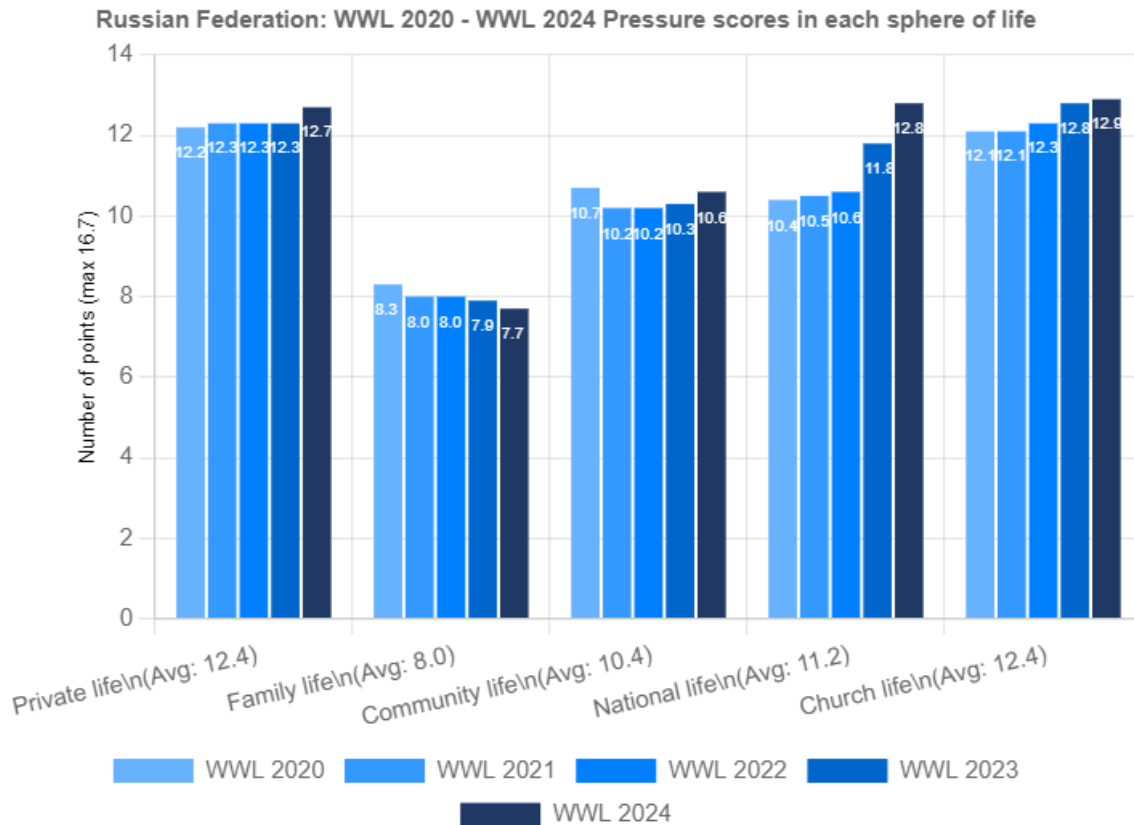
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Russian Federation: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	11.3
2023	11.0
2022	10.7
2021	10.6
2020	10.7

As can be seen from the table above, the average pressure on Christians in the period WWL 2020-2022 had been stable within the range of 10.6 - 10.7 points. Since then, the average pressure score has crept up to the very high level of 11.0-11.3 points.

### 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



*Private and Church spheres of life* have always been the highest scoring spheres of life. In WWL 2024 they were joined by the increase in score in the *National sphere of life* which is a sign of growing state intolerance.

- Pressure in the *Private sphere of life* over the past five years has always been very high - it has never been lower than 12.2 points. This indicates the pressure especially on converts from Islam in the northern Caucasus.
- Pressure in the *Family sphere of life* has always had the lowest score of all five spheres of life. This means that pressure from family members on Christians has been relatively limited and mostly only affects converts in the Muslim regions. In WWL 2024 the score even went down – this being the only sphere of life doing so.
- Pressure in the *Community sphere of life* is fairly stable at a high level. Again, most affected are converts in the Muslim regions.
- Pressure in the *National sphere of life* has seen a significant increase in points from 10.4 in WWL 2020 to 12.8 points in WWL 2024. This shows how the government has been working at tightening legislation affecting Christian life.
- Pressure in the *Church sphere of life* is the other sphere of life where there has been a major increase from 12.0 points in WWL 2020 to 12.9 in WWL 2024. As in the *National sphere of life*, the increase in the *Church sphere of life* is an indication that pressure from the authoritarian government has increased and that it is deliberately making life for (non-ROC) Christians more difficult, and that is clamping down on Christians opposing the war in Ukraine.

## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



Since WWL 2020 there has been a successive downward trend in violence targeting Christians for their faith, reaching the lowest score yet in WWL 2024. Very few violent incidents were reported.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Incarceration by family (house arrest)
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

The most vulnerable Christian women in Russia are converts from a Muslim background. In Russia's Muslim regions, daily life is based on Islamic culture which gives women an inferior status. Traditional culture based on Islamic teaching puts women lower than men and requires obedience and [submission to men](#) in the family (CEDAW, 2015, "Concluding Observations on the Eighth Periodic Report of the Russian Federation"). For that reason, a woman cannot freely choose her own religion and will be persecuted if she converts to Christianity. If her faith is discovered, the first thing her family will do is lock her in the home and put high levels of pressure on her to return to Islam. In the northern Caucasus (and to a lesser extent in the mid-Volga region) converts also run the risk of being kidnapped and married off to a Muslim, particularly if premarital arrangements were made prior to the conversion. Such instances are, however, relatively rare.

Converts may also face threats, verbal insults, physical abuse and sexual assaults, all of which are unlikely to be reported due to a widespread culture of domestic violence, stigma around sexual violence, and impunity for perpetrators ([HRW, 8 March 2021](#)). While domestic violence has moved to a prominent place on the public agenda, it remains a common problem across the country with Russia's North Caucasus regions being a particular hotspot for gender-based violence ([Wilson Centre, December 2021](#)). A culture of masochism and isolation has eroded what few protections survivors of gender-violence have left. Indeed, of all those who die globally from domestic violence each year, 10 percent of them are in Russia - a country which makes up less than 2 percent of the global population ([Harvard International Review, 3 August 2022](#)). A married Christian woman may experience beatings from her husband who can divorce her because of her faith, although no specific instances were reported in the WWL 2024 reporting period.

Those leaving the ROC to join another Christian denomination also face challenges from the community they were once a part of. They are typically excommunicated and isolated (particularly if they marry outside of the ROC), which can traumatize Christian women.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Forced to flee town/country; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Social and Cultural	Denied communal resources; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

The range and forms of discrimination and persecution faced by Christian men in Russia mainly affect Christians from a Muslim background in the predominantly Muslim regions. They may be threatened, beaten, verbally harassed and denied access to communal platforms. Men are considered the heads of their families and are also usually the main financial providers; this means that when a Christian man loses his job due to persecution for his faith, his whole family will suffer. Businesses whose owners are Christians may also experience problems. For example, more frequent visits from officials are not uncommon (e.g. from fire-brigades, health departments etc.).

Men also experience economic pressure through being forced to pay fines and being imprisoned. The state regards non-ROC pastors and church leaders (contextually, mostly men) as primary targets to make a strong impression on the wider Christian community. When churches are raided, it is mostly the leaders who are detained, interrogated and fined. This often has a negative effect on whole congregations and can result in fear spreading among church members. Typical charges against church leaders include "distributing religious literature" and "carrying out unspecified missionary activity". In the northern Caucasus, Muslims will hold church leaders primarily responsible for the conversion of their people; active convert leaders will be attacked even more fiercely.

### Persecution of other religious minorities

The Supreme Court ruled in [March 2017](#) (RFE/RL, 16 March 2017) to criminalize the activity of Jehovah’s Witnesses as "extremist", effectively banning their activities and literature, and ordered their headquarters property to be liquidated. The authorities continue to detain and fine members of minority religious groups and minority religious organizations for alleged "extremism". For groups that are forbidden (like the Jehovah Witnesses), owning religious materials is prohibited.

According to HRW 2023 Russian Federation country chapter:

- “Police continued to raid houses and open new criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses, banned as 'extremist' in Russia since 2017. In 2022, at least 84 Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to up to 7 years in prison, and 68 were behind bars awaiting trial.”

- “In June [2022], Tatarstan's Supreme Court ruled to ban as 'extremist' the All-Tatar Public Center. In 2021 the Justice Ministry had suspended the center's activities on allegations of "ethnic enmity.””
- “Russian courts sentenced at least 20 persons to 11 to 18 years in prison on politically motivated charges of membership of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), a pan-Islamist movement that seeks to establish a caliphate but denounces violence to achieve that goal. At least another 13 persons were detained on the same charges and also face lengthy prison terms. Russia banned HuT as a terrorist organization in 2003.”
- “ Several people were indicted for supposed affiliation with Nurdzhular, a group of followers of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi that Russia banned as extremist in 2008, even though it has no history of incitement or violence.”

According to USCIRF 2023 Russia CPC:

- “Russian authorities frequently relied on the country's extremism statutes to punish individuals for participating in so-called "extremist" organizations - without adequately defining 'extremism'. In 2022, the government detained, imprisoned, and fined adherents of Muslim theologian Said Nursi, members of the Muslim group Tablighi Jamaat, and Jehovah's Witnesses on such charges. Since the Supreme Court declared Jehovah's Witnesses 'extremist' in 2017, authorities have subjected the group to 1,874 home searches, with 201 occurring in 2022. In June, the European Court of Human Rights concluded that Russia had violated Jehovah's Witnesses' rights and ordered the government to pay pecuniary damages. By the end of the year, more than 100 Jehovah's Witnesses remained in Russian custody.”
- “Officials continued to detain and sentence Muslims on unsubstantiated terrorism and sedition charges for their real or alleged affiliation with Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), an Islamist group that Russia has designated a terrorist organization. International human rights organization Memorial reported in December that at least 328 people were in prison or faced prosecution or investigation for such alleged affiliations, of whom 108 had received prison sentences between 10-15 years and 105 had received sentences of 15 years or more. In Russian-occupied Crimea, occupation authorities have regularly imprisoned predominantly Muslim Crimean Tatars who oppose the Russian occupation, charging them in connection with their Muslim identity and religious activities.”

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Russian Federation):

- “A law enacted in July [2022] to counter 'extremist activities' authorizes creation of a database of materials defined as extremist and a 'unified register' of individuals in organizations defined as terrorist or extremist.”
- “Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported authorities continued to investigate, detain, imprison, torture, physically abuse persons, and seize their property because of their religious belief or affiliation or membership in groups designated 'extremist', 'terrorist', or 'undesirable', including Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, followers of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, the Church of Scientology, Falun Gong, and multiple evangelical Protestant groups.

In one example, an NGO reported that in July, a court in Kemerovo upheld a seven-year prison term in a labor camp for a disabled member of Jehovah's Witnesses for organizing the activities of an extremist organization. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses annual report for the period September 2021 through August 2022, there were 93 criminal convictions, mostly in cases brought in previous years, as well as 39 new cases involving 101 defendants. The report stated that 60 individuals were in pretrial detention and cited six cases of police torture and 239 home searches conducted in 52 locations. During [2022], courts sentenced numerous Jehovah's Witnesses to lengthy prison terms on charges of participating in an extremist organization and convicted many of conducting or participating in religious services."

- "Members of Hizb ut-Tahrir received lengthy prison sentences, and authorities undertook prosecutions of followers of Said Nursi."

#### Further information

- "If Russia succeeds in getting back exiled Imam Ilkhom Merazhov, he could be tried and punished with a maximum four-year jail term. He left Russia in 2015, but in June 2022 the Novosibirsk FSB reopened the criminal case to punish him for meeting with others to study the works of theologian Said Nursi. On 8 September, a Novosibirsk court issued a detention order in absentia. The FSB has sought to have an Interpol Red Notice issued, though it remains unclear whether Interpol has approved any request." (Source: [Forum 18, 4 October 2022](#))
- "On 6 October [2022], a Sevastopol court in Russian-occupied Crimea jailed three Jehovah's Witnesses for six years each on 'extremism' charges, followed by a seven-year ban on specific activities. Prosecutor Valery Yazev, who led the case in court, refused to answer Forum 18's questions. The three are appealing, and if this fails are likely to be - against international law - transferred to labour camps in Russia. There are currently 7 Crimean prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief." (Source: [Forum 18, 11 November 2022](#))
- "Eight of nine Jehovah's Witnesses convicted on extremism-related charges in two trials in Russia's Far East in December 2022 received jail terms of 6 to 7 years. An Amur Region Prosecutor's Office official justified the jailings: 'Any missionary activity of members of a religious organization liquidated by a court in connection with repeated violations of the law on countering extremist activity will be illegal in nature and subject to liability established by law.' The 9 were among 124 Jehovah's Witnesses criminally convicted in 2022. Trials continue." (Source: [Forum 18, 24 January 2023](#))

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### **Dictatorial paranoia**

President Putin's position is unchallenged. The clampdown on all forms of independent or opposition thinking has only increased over the past few years. The treatment of those who oppose the war in Ukraine is a good example of that. The regime has fined and jailed those Christians who refuse to serve in the army. The banning of the Jehovah Witnesses in March 2017



is generally regarded as a first step of a policy to impose more legal restrictions, particularly on non-ROC churches.

### **Islamic oppression/Clan oppression (blended)**

In the Muslim regions of the Russian Federation, and especially in the republics of Chechnya and Dagestan, converts will most likely continue to be in danger. They will have to live as secret believers or leave their homeland. Pressure in these regions on other Christians will very likely remain high as well. On top of that, there is always a risk of militant Islamic activities. From time to time attacks and shoot-outs with government forces occur. There is little chance this will disappear.

### **Christian denominational protectionism**

The ROC already enjoys a favored position under current legislation. Recent clashes between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Patriarch of Constantinople over the authority of the Orthodox community in Ukraine seem to be driving the ROC closer to the government of President Putin. The aversion against all non-Orthodox religious activities in Russia is likely to grow.

## **External Links - Persecution Dynamics**

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: submission to men - <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/815381?ln=en>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: HRW, 8 March 2021 - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/08/russias-deadly-negligence-domestic-violence>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Wilson Centre, December 2021 - [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Harmful\\_Traditional\\_Practices\\_in\\_the\\_North\\_Caucasus\\_Russia.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Harmful_Traditional_Practices_in_the_North_Caucasus_Russia.pdf)
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Harvard International Review, 3 August 2022 - <https://hir.harvard.edu/putins-other-war/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: March 2017 - <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-jehovah-witnesses-extremist-organization-/28374043.html?lflags=mailer>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 4 October 2022 - [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2778](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2778)
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 11 November 2022 - [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2789](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2789)
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 24 January 2023 - [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2805](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2805)

## **Further useful reports**

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Russian Federation>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.