

World Watch Research

Russian Federation: Background Information

September 2024



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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Russian Federation: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
143,957,000	120,215,000	83.5

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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 armed 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. The World Russian People's Council, led by Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill, has labeled President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine as a "holy" endeavor, seemingly aiming to bring the region under Russian dominion. The declaration frames the war as a key moment in Russia's battle against the "criminal Kiev regime" and Western "Satanism," calling it a "special military operation." The decree, published by the Moscow Patriarchate, emerged from a synodal congress on 27 March 2024 at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, with Patriarch Kirill presiding (Source: [Christian Post, 6 April 2024](#)).

From 15 July 2022 to 1 December 2023, Russian troops damaged or wholly destroyed at least 630 churches, prayer houses and other religious facilities in Ukraine. The [Institute for Religious Freedom](#) published this data in the February 2024 report entitled "The Impact of the Russian Invasion on Faith-Based Communities in Ukraine." Some Christian leaders are also being killed, tortured and abducted in parts of Ukraine that are occupied by Russia (Source: [Christian Today, 25 March 2024](#)).

Elsewhere at the international level, Russia's participation in the Syrian conflict since 2017 has led to a significant change in the situation on the ground. The stalemate between President Assad's government forces and the various opposition groups has now been broken and by August 2018 President Assad regained control over large parts of the country.

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 are 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](#)).

People who do not agree publicly with the policies of the Russian government are under increasing pressure. They are detained, sentenced to labour camps or jail, and some unexpectedly died in police custody. A good example is imprisoned Kremlin critic Vladimir Kara-Murza. On 21 May 2024, the Moscow City Court rejected an appeal filed against a lower court's refusal to consider his lawsuit against Russia's Investigative Committee for failing to fully investigate his suspected poisoning (Source: [RFE/RL, 21 May 2024](#)). This also shows that Russia's judiciary is not independent from the government of President Putin.

Vladimir Putin claimed a fifth presidential term with a landslide victory in a tightly controlled election that has been condemned by the West as neither free nor fair as the Russian leader seeks to prove overwhelming popular support for his full-scale invasion of Ukraine and increasingly repressive policies. With 99.75% of ballots counted, Putin won another six-year term with a post-Soviet record of 87.29% of the vote - with turnout at a "record" level of 77.44% of eligible voters casting ballots (Source: [AsiaNews, 18 March 2024](#)).

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 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 2022 authorizes creation of a confidential database of materials defined as extremist and a "unified register" of individuals in organizations defined as terrorist or extremist. Another 2022 law requires certain organizations, including religious groups and individuals, to publicly identify themselves as foreign agents, which critics say is intended to discredit them. 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)."
- "A 2020 constitutional amendment cites the ancestral history of the country and the "ideals and faith in God" passed on by those ancestors. The language is the only explicit reference to God in the constitution. According to a Constitutional Court ruling, the amendment's reference to God does not contravene the secular nature of the government or undermine freedom of religion but only emphasizes the significant sociocultural role of religion in the formation and development of the nation."

- "A law that took effect in December 2022 expands the scope of the country's foreign agent law, which previously required the government to show that an individual or organization had received financial or material assistance from a foreign source. According to some Russian scholars, the new law is vaguer than the previous law in the definition of a "foreign influence," defining foreign influence as "the provision of support by a foreign source to a person or influencing a person including by coercion, persuasion, or other means." The law requires organizations falling under its coverage to publicly identify themselves as foreign agents, which critics say is intended to discredit them."
- "Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) again reported authorities investigated, detained, imprisoned, tortured, and physically abused persons and seized their property because of their religious belief or affiliation or membership in groups designated "extremist," "terrorist," or "undesirable." Targeted groups included 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, the leader of a Saint Petersburg Church of Scientology received a sentence of six-and-a-half years in prison for incitement to hatred or enmity by an organized group and creation of an extremist community."
- "According to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), some ROC priests and members of other religious communities quietly opposed the country's war on Ukraine, fearing fines or prohibition against performing their religious duties if they made their views public. ROC Patriarch Kirill continued to express support of government actions in Ukraine."

According to [USCIRF 2024 Russia chapter](#):

- USCIRF classifies Russia as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).
- "In 2023, religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation remained severe as authorities targeted members of religious minorities on spurious charges related to their peaceful religious activities. Muslims, including Crimean Tatars detained in Russian-occupied Crimea, faced unsubstantiated terrorism charges for possessing religious materials and meeting together to discuss religion as alleged members of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Human rights organization Memorial reported in December that at least 335 people were in prison, faced prosecution, or were under investigation for such alleged affiliations; of these prisoners, 128 had received prison sentences between 10 and 15 years, and 115 had received sentences of 15 years or more."
- "The Ministry of Justice waged a relentless campaign against civil society organizations that report on religious freedom issues. In April 2023, a court liquidated the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that monitors religious freedom violations in Russia and Crimea. Human rights activists similarly faced criminal prosecution in connection with their work. In May, a court sentenced Bakhrom Khamroev, a lawyer who defended Muslims charged in HT cases, to 14 years in prison."
- "Russia also continued to severely curtail religious freedom in the parts of Ukraine that it invaded and occupied. In Russian-occupied territories, de facto authorities banned religious groups, raided houses of worship, and disappeared religious leaders. Russian artillery damaged Ukrainian

religious sites, including the Orthodox Transfiguration Cathedral in Odesa. By December, the United Nations (UN) Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization verified damage to at least 125 religious sites, although other organizations reported damage to approximately 630 sites since the war began in February 2022.”

According to Forum 18 Religious [Freedom Survey March 2024](#):

- “Russia's government seriously violates its freedom of religion and belief obligations, along with interlinked human rights such as the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. A presidential election is due to take place on 15-17 March. Vladimir Putin has ruled Russia as either President or Prime Minister from 1999, and his rule has been marked by multiple serious human rights violations and the invasion of Ukraine.”
- Serious freedom of religion or belief violations documented by Forum 18 within Russia's internationally recognized borders include (but are not limited to):
 - a) "extremism"-related criminal prosecutions and jailings of Jehovah's Witnesses and of Muslims who meet to study the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi. Both groups have been outlawed as "extremist organizations", but adherents continue to meet without state permission in each other's homes to pray and sing together, study sacred texts, and to discuss shared beliefs;
 - b) eight interlocking consequences related to "extremism" investigations and criminal convictions for exercising freedom of religion or belief;
 - c) torture, and impunity for officials suspected of torture;
 - d) prisoners of conscience deprived of Russian citizenship and deported from Russia after their sentence;
 - e) a Federal Wanted List of over 95,000 individuals, including at least 42 individuals facing criminal charges to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief or for reporting on violations of this right;
 - f) new specific Criminal Code and Administrative Code penalties for allegedly "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces and "volunteer formations" and Criminal Code penalties for spreading alleged "false information" about the actions of the Armed Forces, "volunteer formations", and state bodies (these are aimed at punishing criticism of Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine);
 - g) prosecuting, fining, and jailing Russians who protest against the invasion from a religious (and non-religious) perspective;
 - h) no legal or practical provision for alternative civilian service (ACS) during mobilization, leading to conscientious objectors being sent to fight in Ukraine;
 - i) closing the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis for holding events outside Moscow.

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 Pekhteleva, who was killed by her boyfriend ([HRW, 8 March 2021](#)). The draft law on domestic violence remains stalled in parliament.

Religious landscape

Russian Federation: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	120,215,000	83.5
Muslim	15,511,000	10.8
Hindu	44,700	0.0
Buddhist	553,000	0.4
Ethnic religionist	1,060,000	0.7
Jewish	132,000	0.1
Bahai	20,600	0.0
Atheist	811,000	0.6
Agnostic	5,603,000	3.9
Other	6,480	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024), 83.5% of the population are Christian. Despite decades of atheistic propaganda by the Communists during the Soviet era, most Russians consider themselves to be Christians, 95.1% 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 (10.8% 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](#) (accessed 21 May 2024):

- **GDP (current US\$) (trillion):** 2.24 (in 2022)
- **GDP growth (annual %):** -2.1% (in 2022)

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects that Russia's economy will grow 3.2% in 2024, significantly more than the UK, France and Germany. Oil exports have "held steady" and government spending has "remained high" contributing to growth, the IMF said (Source: [BBC News, 16 April 2024](#))

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 migrant 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 Human Development Report Russia](#), updates as of 13 March 2024). 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](#) (accessed 21 May 2024):

- **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:** 75.3% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.7% (male: 99.7%, female: 99.7%) (2018)

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Russia](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.821 (0.829 for females, 0.811 for males), ranking 56 (2022)
- **Total population:** 144.7 million (2022).
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 70.1 years (75.7 for females, 64.7 for males) (2022)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 15.7 years (15.8 for females, 15.5 for males) (2022)
- **Gender Inequality index:** 0.178 (2022)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 55.4, Male: 70.3 (2022)

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](#)).

On 20 October 2023, the Russian state statistical agency, Rosstat, issued a second report predicting that Russia's population will continue to decline and be down more than seven million people by 2046. Rosstat's first report came at the end of September 2023 and presented estimates that the Russian population (not including the occupied portions of Ukraine) would fall by three million people by 2030. Both projections suggest that Russia's demographic decline—long predicted by experts—will be far deeper, last longer, and hurt more than the Kremlin has expected (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 24 October 2023](#)).

In the aftermath of the Crocus City Hall terrorist attacks (on 22 March 2024), the Russian government has responded with a sweeping crackdown on Central Asian migrants. Labor migrants from Central Asia became subject to lengthy checks before being allowed into the country or turned away upon being found ineligible. Those already residing within Russia face heightened scrutiny and surveillance. Central Asian migrants are experiencing harsh treatment despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's statement that the terrorist attacks in Crocus City should not "provoke a rise in xenophobia and Islamophobia" (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 15 May 2024](#)).

Christians 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 [DataReportal Digital 2024: Russian Federation](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 90.4% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 73.5% of the total population. As of January 2024, 54.8% of Russia's social media users were female, while 45.2% were male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 152.5% of the total population

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (updated 13 January 2020 – accessed 21 May 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 challenges for 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](#)).

Russia, Ukraine, and China have been named as the world's cybercrime hotspots in a new study ranking the most significant sources of cybercrime threats. The World Cybercrime Index, published in the journal PLOS One, said Russia housed the greatest cybercrime threat, followed by Ukraine, China, the United States, and Nigeria. The ranking -- compiled by academics working with the University of Oxford and the University of New South Wales Canberra -- was based on surveys of almost 100 cybercrime experts who were asked to identify the most significant sources of five major types of cybercrime (Source: [RFE/RL, 10 April 2024](#)).

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. 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](#)). Ukraine continues to attack Russia with drones, for instance targeting the city of Kazan in Tatarstan, more than 800 km east of Moscow (Source: [RFE/RL, 23 May 2024](#)). Ukraine also launched a counter-offensive into Russian territory in August 2024 (Source: [BBC News, 11 August 2024](#)).

As a result of the war in Ukraine the distance between Russia and the West is growing. On 13 March 2024 President Putin warned the West that Russia was technically ready for nuclear war and that if the USA sent troops to Ukraine, it would be considered a significant escalation of the conflict (Source: [Reuters, 13 March 2024](#)).

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 did not stop 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. However, Islamic terrorism moved closer to the capital in 2024: On 22 March 2024 the Islamic State-Khorasan group active in Afghanistan and Central Asia, claimed responsibility for the attack on Crocus City Hall near Moscow (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 May 2024](#)). The attack killed over 150 and injured hundreds more (Source: [AsiaNews, 25 March 2024](#)).

In general, Christian civilians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted for their faith. 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.

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	114,335,000	95.1
Catholic	684,000	0.6
Protestant	1,506,000	1.3
Independent	1,886,000	1.6
Unaffiliated	2,214,000	1.8
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-410,000	-0.3
Total <small>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</small>	120,215,000	100.0

Evangelical movement	1,286,000	1.1
Pentecostal-Charismatic	3,363,000	2.8

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024) 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.

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/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- [https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Russian Federation](https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Russian+Federation)
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