

World
Watch
Research

Russian Federation:
Full Country Dossier
March 2023



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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Contents

Introduction	3
World Watch List 2023	3
Copyright note.....	4
Sources and definitions.....	4
WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Russian Federation	5
Brief country details	5
Map of country.....	5
Dominant persecution engines and drivers	6
Brief description of the persecution situation	6
Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period	6
Specific examples of positive developments	7
External Links - Situation in brief	7
WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Russian Federation.....	7
Links for general background information.....	7
Recent history	8
Political and legal landscape	8
Religious landscape	12
Economic landscape.....	13
Social and cultural landscape.....	14
Technological landscape	15
Security situation	17
Trends analysis.....	17
External Links - Keys to understanding	18
WWL 2023: Church information / Russian Federation.....	19
Christian origins.....	19
Church spectrum today.....	20
Areas where Christians face most difficulties	21
Christian communities and how they are affected	21
WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics	22
Reporting period	22
Position on the World Watch List	22
Persecution engines	22
Drivers of persecution.....	23

The Persecution pattern.....	25
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life.....	25
Violence.....	30
5 Year trends	32
Gender-specific religious persecution / Female	34
Gender-specific religious persecution / Male	35
Persecution of other religious minorities.....	35
Future outlook.....	39
External Links - Persecution Dynamics.....	40
Further useful reports.....	40

Introduction

World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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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 2023 reporting period was 1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Russian Federation

Brief country details

Russian Federation: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
145,806,000	120,131,000	82.4

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Map of country



Russian Federation: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	57	61
WWL 2022	56	62
WWL 2021	57	58
WWL 2020	60	46
WWL 2019	60	41

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019–2023 reporting periods

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.

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- December 2021:** In Ramenskoe near Moscow police arrived at a conference of pastors of "New Generation"* protestant churches and arrested up to 200 persons. This was reported by Pastor Albert Ratkin in a video on YouTube. He described how in the evening of 2 December 2021, security agents with automatic weapons stormed the conference and arrested all of the participants. (Source: [Human Rights Without Frontiers, 9 December 2021](#))
- April 2022:** As Catholic parishioners announced on social media: On Holy Saturday "the Russian authorities gave Catholics an Easter gift, ordering the expulsion within 24 hours of the priest of the Moscow parish of Saints Peter and Paul, Father Fernando Vera, without even allowing him to celebrate the Vigil and Easter Day liturgies". The Mexican Opus Dei parish priest, who had been serving in Russia for the last seven years, had his residence permit withdrawn without any explanation, giving him only one day to return to Mexico. (Source: [Asia News, 19 April 2022](#))

- **June 2022:** Defrocked Orthodox priest Ioann Kurmoyarov faces up to 10 years in prison for allegedly discrediting the army of the Russian Federation. He publicly condemned the idea of building a church honoring the Armed Forces of Russia and the court of Novosibirsk deprived him of his priesthood. Afterwards, he was arrested and detained by the FSB awaiting trial. However, on 10 June 2022, his lawyer dramatically announced that his client had disappeared. (Source: [Human Rights Without Frontiers, 13 June 2022](#))

Specific examples of positive developments

- **March 2022:** Russian Orthodox clerics have called for an immediate stop to the ongoing war in Ukraine in an open letter issued on 1 March 2022. At least 176 Orthodox clerics said that they "respect the freedom of any person given to him or her by God," adding that the people of Ukraine "must make their own choices by themselves, not at the point of assault rifles and without pressure from either West or East." The letter says the clerics "bemoan" the suffering that has been "undeservingly imposed on our brothers and sisters in Ukraine." (Source: [RFE-RL, 1 March 2022](#))

External Links - Situation in brief

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Human Rights Without Frontiers, 9 December 2021 - <https://hrwf.eu/russia-russia-acts-against-evangelical-movement-with-international-ties/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Asia News, 19 April 2022 - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Catholic-missionary-expelled-from-Moscow-55613.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Human Rights Without Frontiers, 13 June 2022 - <https://hrwf.eu/russia-a-pacifist-orthodox-priest-defrocked-arrested-and-facing-10-years-in-prison/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: RFE-RL, 1 March 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31730667.html>

WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Russian Federation

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22 (pp. 309-314)	https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf	30 June 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17839672	30 June 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/RUS	30 June 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/russia/	30 June 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/russia	30 June 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (pp. 43-47)	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf	30 June 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	26 August 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index – covering 29 countries	Democracy Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/nations-transit/2022	30 June 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2022	30 June 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-net/2022	15 March 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries	HRW 2022 country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/russia	30 June 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	https://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm#ru	30 June 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	https://rsf.org/en/russia	30 June 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/rus	30 June 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/RUS	30 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom (country profile)	IRFR 2021	https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/russia/	30 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL	USCIRF 2022	https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20Russia.pdf	30 June 2022
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank overview 2022	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia	30 June 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=RUS	30 June 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries (divided per region)	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 (pp. 34-35)	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d5f32ef28464d01f195827b7e020a3e8-0500022021/related/mpo-eca.pdf	30 June 2022

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, a war that is currently on-going.

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. The outcome of the crudely manipulated elections 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](#))

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 will come into force on 1 December 2022. (Source: [RFE-RL, 14 July 2022](#))

According to US State Department IRFR 2021:

- "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. 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 constitutional amendment cites the 'ideals and faith in God' passed on by the country's ancestors. Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported authorities continued to investigate, detain, imprison, torture, physically abuse persons, and/or seize their property because of their religious belief or affiliation or membership in groups designated 'extremist', 'terrorist', or 'undesirable', including Jehovah's Witnesses, Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi, Church of Scientology, Falun Gong, and multiple evangelical Protestant groups."

According to USCIRF 2022:

- "In 2021, religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation continued to deteriorate, with the government accelerating its persecution of 'nontraditional' religious minorities. Russian authorities punished peaceful Jehovah's Witnesses with record-breaking prison sentences of up to eight years for alleged 'extremism'. During the year, the state convicted 105 Jehovah's Witnesses, including elderly and disabled members as well those residing in Russian-occupied Crimea in Ukraine. Since the group was banned in 2017, there have been 1,678 raids and searches of members' homes, with 404 occurring in 2021."

- “The Russian government continued to use an array of problematic legislation to persecute religious minorities, including Muslims, Protestants, members of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Falun Gong, and adherents of indigenous religions. The 1996 religion law sets strict registration requirements and empowers state officials to impede and monitor religious groups' activities. It also broadly defines and prohibits 'missionary activities', including preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites. On April 5 [2021], President Vladimir Putin signed amendments to this law that further expanded the state's ability to restrict religious practice, including more frequent reporting requirements for religious organizations, a mandate for all foreign-educated clergy to be recertified within Russia, and prohibitions for anyone on the government's expansive extremism and terrorism list from participating in or leading religious groups. Other Russian legislation criminalizes 'extremism' without adequately defining the term, and charges of 'terrorism' require no advocacy or participation in violence, enabling the state to target a vast range of nonviolent religious activity. In 2021, the Russian government began applying the vague 'undesirable organization' label to religious entities, including four Evangelical groups and several organizations linked to the Church of Scientology. Although the legal consequences of this designation remain unclear, it is widely perceived as a step toward an eventual ban on the peaceful religious activity of those targeted.”

According to HRW 2022 country pages:

- The legislative crackdown that started in November 2020 intensified ahead of the September 2021 general elections. Numerous newly adopted laws broadened the authorities' grounds to target a wide range of independent voices. Authorities used some of these laws and other measures, to smear, harass, and penalize human rights defenders, journalists, independent groups, political adversaries, and even academics. Many left Russia for their own safety or were expelled. Authorities took particular aim at independent journalism.
- Amendments expanding and harshening 'foreign agents' and 'undesirable foreign organizations' legislation were among the newly adopted laws. Authorities continued to add more groups to the 'foreign agents' registry, which imposes a toxic label and burdensome labelling and reporting requirements. They also expanded their registry of 'undesirable organizations', blacklisting international and foreign organizations, including prominent rights group, and used the 'undesirable' law to prosecute people.

Gender issues:

- 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	120,131,000	82.4
Muslim	17,883,000	12.3
Hindu	43,500	0.0
Buddhist	554,000	0.4
Ethno-religionist	1,031,000	0.7
Jewish	129,000	0.1
Bahai	20,500	0.0
Atheist	689,000	0.5
Agnostic	5,317,000	3.6
Other	6,590	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Despite decades of atheistic propaganda by the Communists during the Soviet era, most Russians consider themselves to be Christians - 82.4% according to WCD 2022 estimates, over 96% 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 the World Bank's country data profile:

- **GDP (current US\$) (trillion):** 1,78 (in 2021)
- **GDP growth (annual %):** 4.8% (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. 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 issues: 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 HDI profile). 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 CIA Factbook and UNDP's HDI profile:

- **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:** 75.1% of total population (2022)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.7% (male: 99.7%, female: 99.7%) (2018)
- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.824 (0.832 for females, 0.817 for males), ranking 52

- **Life expectancy at birth:** 72.6 years (77.8 for females, 67.1 for males) (2019)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 15.0 years (15.3 for females, 14.8 for males) (2019)
- **Gender Inequality index:** 0.225 (2019)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 54.8, Male: 70.2 (2019)

COVID-19: The crisis surrounding the pandemic made the social situation worse. As trade collapsed and as many people lost their jobs when the country went into lockdown, it was widely held that the government was doing too little to support those who had lost their source of income since the measures were introduced (Source: [RFE-RL, 22 April 2020](#)). The deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council reported that more criminal incidents were occurring due to the mass unemployment on account of the COVID-19 measures. Medvedev told a meeting of the Security Council on 3 August 2020 that about 40% of migrants in Russia had lost their jobs by the end of July 2020 (Source: [RFE-RL, 3 August 2020](#)).

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 issues: 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 pandemic ([International Bar Association, 3 July 2020](#)). Within this context of subordination and widespread acceptance of domestic violence, female converts 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 2022):

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

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Mobile cellular subscriptions:** 163.6 per 100 people (2020)

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (Most recent update: 13 January 2020):

- "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 2022 report:

- Russia is listed as 'not free' with a score of 23 points.
- "The already restrictive online environment in Russia deteriorated dramatically during the coverage period. After Russian authorities launched a brutal military invasion of Ukraine, the government moved to block prominent social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and issued massive fines to other platforms that refused to remove content and localize user data. Beyond social media platforms, the government restricted access to over 5,000 websites after the invasion was launched, including Ukrainian and other foreign news sites and domestic news sites that provided accurate coverage of the war."
- "Authorities also passed legislation that expanded the powers of state bodies tasked with regulation of the internet, as well as the grounds for what content could be deemed illegal."
- "Among other changes, the government expanded its foreign agents law and mandated that media outlets refer to the war as a 'special military operation', developments that prompted many prominent independent news outlets to close rather than risk penalties for continued reporting."
- "Authorities opened several administrative and criminal proceedings under a new law that punishes 'knowingly spreading false information' with up to 15 years in prison."
- The launching of 5G services has been postponed to 2024.

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.

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.

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 an 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 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 restrictions 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: 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: 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
- Political and legal landscape: Russia's Supreme Court - 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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- Political and legal landscape: RFE-RL, 14 June 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/chechnya-taramova-woman-abducted-rights-lgbt-purge-kadyrov/31306400.html>
- Political and legal landscape: HRW, 8 March 2021 - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/08/russias-deadly-negligence-domestic-violence>
- Economic landscape: Jamestown Foundation, 3 February 2020 - <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-struggles-with-the-chinese-challenge/>
- Economic landscape: RFE-RL, 13 June 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-oil-gas-exports-revenues/31896553.html>
- Economic landscape: RFE-RL, 22 April 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/with-little-government-support-some-russians-under-lockdown-are-resorting-to-protest----both-online-and-offline/30570735.html>
- Economic landscape: RFE-RL, 1 August 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-s-small-businesses-are-struggling-to-survive-and-many-blame-the-government/30761235.html>
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WWL 2023: Church information / Russian Federation

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	115,822,000	96.4
Catholic	706,000	0.6
Protestant	1,516,000	1.3
Independent	1,981,000	1.6
Unaffiliated	281,000	0.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-174,000	-0.1
Total	120,132,000	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,339,000	1.1
Renewalist movement	3,479,000	2.9

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

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 of April 2022 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: 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 2023: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

Position on the World Watch List

Russian Federation: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	57	61
WWL 2022	56	62
WWL 2021	57	58
WWL 2020	60	46
WWL 2019	60	41

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

The rise in overall score (1 point) was due to an increase in pressure. The scores for pressure in *National* and *Church spheres of life* went up and remained more or less the same in the other three *spheres of life*. All over the country, the government imposes restrictions on non-Russian Orthodox church activities. In Russia, pressure is highest in the *Private* and *Church spheres of life*. *Islamic oppression* is particularly evident in the *Private, Family and Community spheres of life* (especially in the northern Caucasus). The score for violent incidents, however, fell.

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	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.

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

In the Caucasus region, this is the most important Persecution engine. 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.

Dictatorial paranoia (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 religious Christian groups.

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	-	-	STRONG	-
Government officials	Weak	-	-	Weak	Weak	-	-	Strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	-	Weak	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Russian Federation:									
Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	WEAK	STRONG	STRONG	-	-	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	-

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 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 Dictatorial paranoia

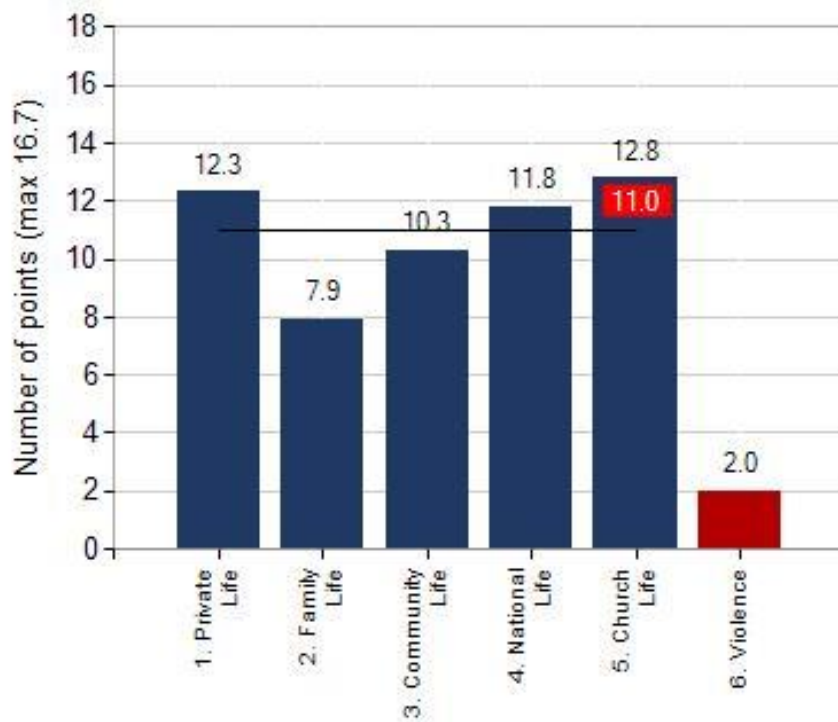
- **Government officials (Strong):** State agents at various levels carry out surveillance and impose restrictions. Legislation in Russia is being adapted and bringing in new restrictions constantly.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** All over Russia, local communities oppose openly evangelistic activities 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 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

WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Russian Federation



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for the Russian Federation shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a high level (11.0 points), increasing from 10.7 in WWL 2022. 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 *Private sphere of life* (which reflects the effect of *Islamic oppression blended with Clan oppression*) and in the *Church sphere of life* (reflecting the influence of *Dictatorial paranoia*).
- The score for violence is low (2.0 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 2023 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 social networking sites. 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. However, Christians from non-registered churches tend not to use Facebook, mainly because they fear being accused of illegal missionary activities.

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

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.00 points)

In the northern Caucasus, and to a lesser extent also in the mid-Volga, pressure from family, friends and community on converts obliges converts to live as secret believers. The hurdle preventing a convert from revealing his/her faith to guests or outsiders is immense as this will automatically be linked to shaming the family. Protestants are also careful not to talk about their faith in these areas, since this will automatically be regarded as a form of evangelism. Generally, people discussing their faith in Russia will draw unwanted attention. But the state will not prevent this from happening.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.3: Christians have been hindered in celebrating a Christian wedding for faith-related reasons. (2.75 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. (2.75 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 2.7: 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 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (2.75 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 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.75 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 maximum pressure to make the convert recant his/her faith. It affects Protestants as they are under constant pressure of being considered "sects", which is a category understood to mean "dangerous, foreign-influenced traitors of Russia".

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.). (3.50 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 3.13: 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. Church leaders are likely to be interrogated and fined if their church members are accused of illegal missionary activities.

Block 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.25 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 the church), possessing Christian literature (without full details of publisher) and for holding illegal religious meetings (e.g. house prayer meetings and Bible studies).

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.75 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 network sites. 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.

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

Since the invasion of Ukraine on 25 February 2022, Russia has been 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. In addition, Russia's diplomatic isolation from those states which have been supportive of human rights and civil soci-

ety in Russia, make it increasingly difficult for Russian human rights defenders, religious activists, and civil society organizations to engage with the international community. It also means 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 4.5: Christians have been discriminated against when engaging with the authorities (local administration, government, army, etc.) for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Protestants faced discrimination even before the Yarovaya Law came into force; now that this law is in force, discrimination has become more widespread. The government favors ROC; Protestants are treated differently since they are regarded as belonging to (potentially dangerous) sects.

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 anti-terrorist Yarovaya legislation, 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 evangelistic tools. They will confiscate 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 5 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.*

3. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor’s article dated 13 November 2013 available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. The use of symbolic numbers: In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

Russian Federation: Violence Block question		WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1	How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2	How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	1	1
6.3	How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	200	2
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?	0	0
6.5	How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	1	0
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)?	32	21
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	5
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	5
6.12	How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	1	0

In the WWL 2023 reporting period:

- **Church attacked:** On 2 December 2021, a conference of Protestant churches in Ramensky (near Moscow) was [raided](#) by security forces (Source: VK, 2 December 2021)
- **Christians detained:** In the incident above, more than 200 people were arrested. Also, several Orthodox clergymen who protested against the war in Ukraine were detained.
- **Christians abducted:** A Ukrainian-American pastor was abducted by Russian forces.
- **Christians attacked:** At least 32 converts were abused and beaten by their families and local community.
- **Christians expelled from the country:** A Catholic missionary was expelled from Moscow. (Source: [Asia News 19 April 2022](#))

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 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	11.0
2022	10.7
2021	10.6
2020	10.7
2019	10.8

As can be seen from the table above, the average pressure on Christians over the 5 spheres of life has been stable within the range of 10.6 - 11.0 points - a borderline high/very high level.

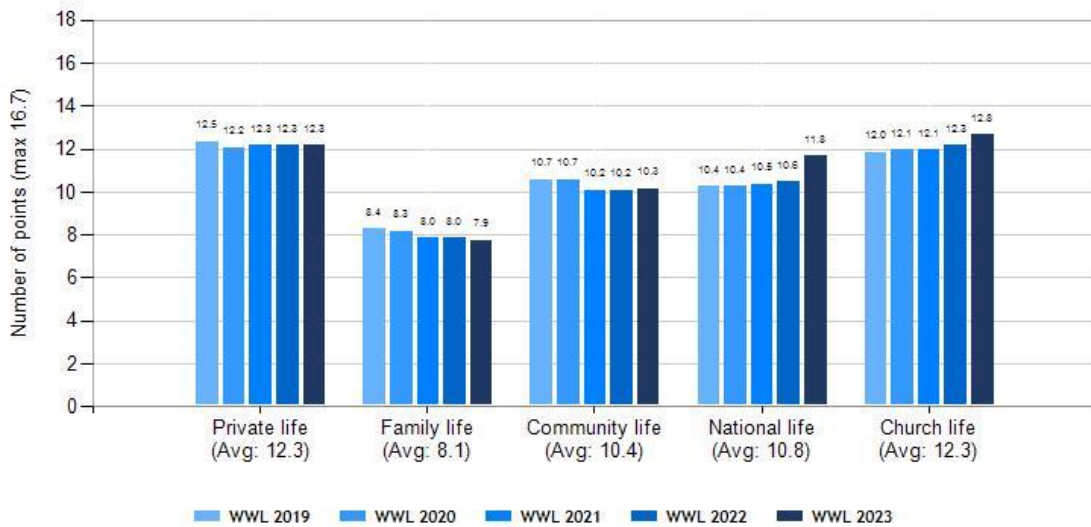
5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

As can be seen in the chart below:

- *Private and Church life* have always been the highest scoring *spheres of life*.
- 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.
- Pressure in the *Community sphere of life* is fairly stable at a high level. Again, most affected are converts in the Muslim regions.

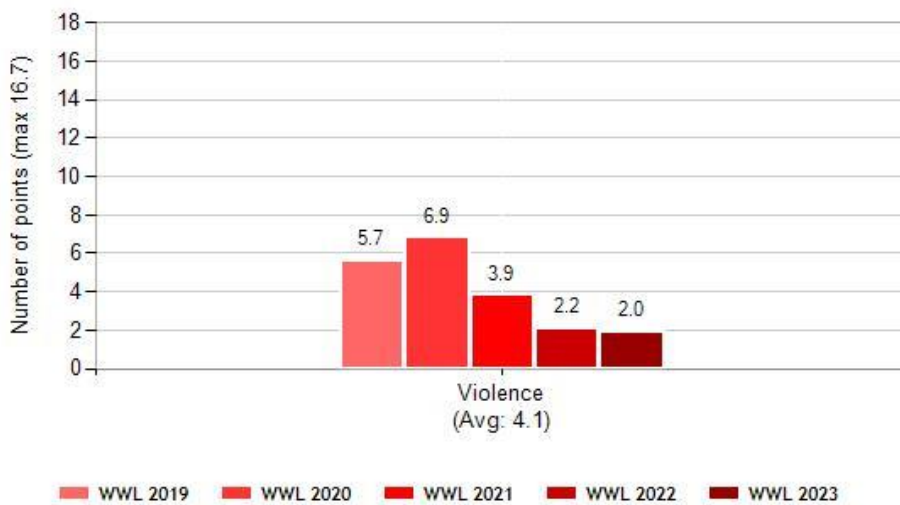
- Pressure in the *National sphere of life* has seen a significant increase in points from 10.4 in WWL 2019 to 11.8 points in WWL 2023. This shows how the government has been working at tightening legislation affecting Christian life.
- Pressure in the *Church sphere of life* is the other sphere of life where there has been a major increase from 12.0 points in WWL 2019 to 12.8 in WWL 2023. 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.

WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Russian Federation (Spheres of life)



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Russian Federation (Violence)



Between WWL 2019 and WWL 202 there was a sharp increase in the score for violence. However, since WWL 2020 there has been a successive downward trend, reaching the lowest score yet in WWL 2023 of 2.0 points. Very few violent incidents were reported. Most reports of violence concerned Jehovah’s Witnesses (who have been officially banned) and not the Christian community.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Forced divorce; Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
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 assault, 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](#)). 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 2023 reporting period.

Those leaving the ROC to join another Christian denomination also face challenges from the community they were once 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; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Denied communal resources; 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 occasional 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".

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 2022 country chapter on Russia:

- "Police continued to raid houses and open new criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses, banned as extremist in Russia since 2017. Russian courts convicted 92 people, 27 of whom were sentenced to prison terms of up to eight years. At time of writing, at least 15 people remained in prison, hundreds under criminal investigation, and 63 in pretrial detention. Those convicted and prosecuted included people in Russia-occupied Crimea. Authorities stripped two Jehovah's Witnesses of their citizenship and deported them."

- “Several persons were convicted 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. In October, authorities raided homes and arrested over 15 alleged Nursi followers.”
- “In August, Yevgeniy Kim, who had been stripped of his Russian citizenship in 2019 following his prison sentence on charges of involvement with Nurdzhular, was released after more than two- and-a-half years in deportation custody. He remains stateless and without identification documents.”
- “Since late 2020, at least 11 people were convicted for alleged affiliation with Tablighi Jamaat, an international Islamic missionary movement banned in Russia as extremist since 2009 although it disavows violence. At least 13 others were detained in 2021, with authorities pressing charges against five and deporting several others.”
- “Since November 2020, at least eight people were sentenced, and several dozen detained over alleged involvement with Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), a pan-Islamist movement that seeks to establish a caliphate but denounces violence to achieve that goal. Russia banned HuT as a terrorist organization in 2003. In May, an appeals court upheld verdicts against 10 people sentenced to 11 to 22 years in prison. According to Human Rights Center Memorial, as of October 2021, over 170 people served prison sentences upon conviction for involvement with HuT, 29 were on trial, at least 61 were under investigation and 27 more were wanted. Memorial's figures include Crimean Tatars.”

According to USCIRF 2022:

- “In 2021, religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation continued to deteriorate, with the government accelerating its persecution of “nontraditional” religious minorities. Russian authorities punished peaceful Jehovah's Witnesses with record-breaking prison sentences of up to eight years for alleged ‘extremism’. During the year, the state convicted 105 Jehovah's Witnesses, including elderly and disabled members as well those residing in Russian-occupied Crimea in Ukraine. Since the group was banned in 2017, there have been 1,678 raids and searches of members' homes, with 404 occurring in 2021.”
- “The Russian government continued to use an array of problematic legislation to persecute religious minorities, including Muslims, Protestants, members of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Falun Gong, and adherents of indigenous religions. The 1996 religion law sets strict registration requirements and empowers state officials to impede and monitor religious groups' activities. It also broadly defines and prohibits ‘missionary activities’, including preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites. On April 5 [2021], President Vladimir Putin signed amendments to this law that further expanded the state's ability to restrict religious practice, including more frequent reporting requirements for religious organizations, a mandate for all foreign-educated clergy to be recertified within Russia, and prohibitions for anyone on the government's expansive extremism and terrorism list from participating in or leading religious groups.”

- “Other Russian legislation criminalizes 'extremism' without adequately defining the term, and charges of 'terrorism' require no advocacy or participation in violence, enabling the state to target a vast range of nonviolent religious activity. In 2021, the Russian government began applying the vague 'undesirable organization' label to religious entities, including four Evangelical groups and several organizations linked to the Church of Scientology. Although the legal consequences of this designation remain unclear, it is widely perceived as a step toward an eventual ban on the peaceful religious activity of those targeted.”
- “In 2021, as in past years, peaceful Muslims comprised the majority of political prisoners persecuted in connection with the realization of their right to freedom of religion, according to the Memorial Human Rights Center. Numerous prison sentences were given to peaceful adherents of the moderate Muslim theologian Said Nursi and the Tablighi Jamaat missionary group. Crimean Tatar Muslims opposed to the Russian occupation of their Ukrainian homeland continued to receive lengthy prison sentences for unsubstantiated charges of terrorism based on their Muslim identity and alleged involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), a nonviolent Islamist group that is legal in Ukraine and most Western countries. Russia considers HT a terrorist group despite the lack of any corroborating evidence, and its prosecution of alleged members is often characterized by allegations of torture during interrogation, planted evidence, and the use of 'secret witnesses' with links to Russian security services.”

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021):

- “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. 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 constitutional amendment cites the 'ideals and faith in God' passed on by the country's ancestors. Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported authorities continued to investigate, detain, imprison, torture, physically abuse persons, and/or seize their property because of their religious belief or affiliation or membership in groups designated 'extremist', 'terrorist', or 'undesirable', including Jehovah's Witnesses, Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi, Church of Scientology, Falun Gong, and multiple evangelical Protestant groups. For example, an NGO reported that in September, while searching houses of Jehovah's Witnesses in Irkutsk, security forces stabbed a man and beat him unconscious and beat another Jehovah's Witness and sodomized him with a glass bottle. According to the NGO, officers also beat the two men's wives while they were in various stages of undress. The human rights NGO Memorial identified 340 persons it said were persecuted for their religious beliefs or affiliation as of November, compared with 228 in all of 2020. Memorial said the actual total was likely three to four times higher. Memorial did not report the number of persecuted persons for all of the year because the Supreme Court ordered the closure of the NGO on December 28 [2021].”

- “The Supreme Court has banned the activities of several religious organizations on the grounds of 'extremism' and 'terrorism', including a regional branch of Falun Gong, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars, Hizb ut-Tahrir; Nurdzhular (a Russification of the Turkish for “followers of Said Nursi”); Tablighi Jamaat; and the Fayzrakhmani Islamic community. These organizations are on the Federal List of Extremist Organizations and/or the Federal List of Terrorist Organizations. Designations as extremist or terrorist organizations may be appealed in court.”
- “In August, Forum 18 reported Jehovah’s Witnesses and Muslims who had been convicted of 'extremism' might suffer post-sentence consequences through *sudimost* (being a convicted person with an active criminal record). The report stated that after their release, these individuals risked harsher punishment if prosecuted again and might experience more limited formal employment opportunities. The courts might also impose restrictions on freedom and administrative supervision, including curfews, restrictions on movement, and an obligation to register with police or probation authorities at specified intervals. These individuals might also be subject to bans on leadership of, or participation in, religious organizations.”
- “Jehovah’s Witnesses and NGOs stated Federal Security Service (FSB) agents, officers of the Interior Ministry’s Center for Countering Extremism, police officers, and riot police continued to monitor, detain, search, and carry out raids in the homes and places of worship of Jehovah’s Witnesses. The NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers stated authorities had raided more than 1,594 homes of Jehovah’s Witnesses throughout the country between early 2017 and November 2021. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 382 searches of homes during the year, compared with 477 in 2020. They said that during these raids, authorities entered homes, often in the early morning, conducted unauthorized, illegal searches, tortured, and verbally and physically abused members. Authorities often entered residences by forcing open the door. They held individuals at gunpoint, including children and the elderly, and seized personal belongings, including religious materials, personal correspondence, money, mobile phones, and other electronic devices.”

Further information:

- A court in Russia's southwestern city of Astrakhan sentenced four Jehovah's witnesses to lengthy prison terms amid an ongoing crackdown of the religious group's followers across the country. The Investigative Committee said on 26 October 2021 that three men were sentenced to eight years in prison each, and a woman to 3 1/2 years in prison on extremism charges. (Source: [RFE-RL, 26 October 2021](#))
- A court in Russia acquitted a Jehovah's Witness charged with extremism despite an ongoing crackdown on the followers of the religious group. The website of the Jehovah's Witnesses said that on 22 November 2021 the Pervorechensk district court in Vladivostok acquitted Dmitry Barmakin, who was charged with organizing the activities of an extremist group. (Source: [RFE-RL, 23 November 2021](#))
- A total of 52 people have been given jail terms under the Extremism Law since 2015 for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of religion and belief. (Source: [Forum 18, 7 December 2021](#)). Of this total:

- i. Sentences which have entered legal force:* 20 people (19 Jehovah's Witnesses, 1 Muslim);
 - ii. Sentenced to imprisonment - detained or under house arrest awaiting appeal:* 12 people (12 Jehovah's Witnesses);
 - iii. Deported following imprisonment:* 2 people (2 Jehovah's Witnesses);
 - iv. Released but under restrictions/supervision:* 16 people (12 Jehovah's Witnesses, 4 Muslims);
 - v. Left Russia:* 2 people (2 Muslims).
- The Supreme Court of Russia's Republic of Tatarstan has rejected an appeal filed by Nakiya Sharifullina, a noted teacher and founder of Islamic schools for girls, who was handed a suspended two-year sentence in August [2021] after being convicted of organizing the activities of a banned Islamic group. (Source: [RFE-RL, 17 December 2021](#))
 - After two Crimean Tatars attended Friday prayers and handed recordings to Russia's FSB security service, prosecutors brought a case against Emir Medzhitov under Russia's anti-missionary law. A court in Dzhankoi fined him three weeks' average local wages. (Source: [Forum 18, 5 July 2022](#))

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression/Clan oppression (blended)

In the Muslim regions of the Russian Federation, and especially in the republics of Chechnya and Dagestan, converts will 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.

Dictatorial paranoia

Since there will be no change of government after the elections in September 2021, what has happened in the past five years can be regarded as a guideline to what may be expected in the future. The recent political unrest in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan will make the current regime more determined to stay in power at all costs. 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.

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

- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: raided - https://vk.com/wall-200218108_12011?lang=en
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: Asia News 19 April 2022 - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Catholic-missionary-expelled-from-Moscow-55613.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: submission to men - <http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPPrICAqhKb7yhsnlNnqKYBbHCTOaqVs8CBP2%2FEJgS2uWhk7nuL22CY5Q6EygEUW%2BboviXGrJ6B4KEJr4JalKJZyYib0P1wYeg13mjbxpuvqBQIHs8SaZvXdjX>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: HRW, 8 March 2021 - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/08/russias-deadly-negligence-domestic-violence>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: March 2017 - <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-jehovah-witnesses-extremist-organization-/28374043.html?itflags=mailer>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: RFE-RL, 26 October 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/jehovah-witnesses-russia-prison/31529981.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: RFE-RL, 23 November 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-jehovahs-witnesses-acquitted-/31574952.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 7 December 2021 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2702
- Persecution of other religious minorities: RFE-RL, 17 December 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/tatarstan-nurcular-teacher-sentence-banned/31614255.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 5 July 2022 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2755

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

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