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RUSSIA: SOVA Center annual report on freedom of religion in 2020

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*By **Olga Sibireva** is the head of the Religion in Secular Society project at the Moscow-based SOVA Center for Information and Analysis*

SOVA Center (04.05.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3f13YVA> – In this blog post, I will briefly explain some recent Russian

developments regarding freedom of religion or belief protections in 2020. The post is based on the April 2021 report released by the Moscow-based human rights monitor, the SOVA-Center. Generally, Russia did not make any positive progress concerning challenges to freedom of religion or belief that emerged in previous years.

Persecution of Religious Minorities

Since 2017, Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned in Russia as an extremist organization. Leaders and members of Jehovah's Witnesses' communities can be fined and punished criminally for professing their religion. While in 2019 there were 18 criminal sentences of Jehovah's Witnesses, this number increased to 25 in 2020, and 13 people were sentenced to prison time. Overall, more than 400 believers have been prosecuted. New criminal cases were initiated less than a year ago, which means that the authorities will continue to prosecute Jehovah's Witnesses. Additionally, human rights monitors regularly report cases of violence against detained believers.

Jehovah's Witnesses are not the only victims of Russian authorities. The SOVA-Center has identified several cases of criminal persecution against other religious and belief organizations, including the Church of the Last Testament, the Church of Scientology, and the Church of the Flying Macaroni Monster. For example, in the Krasnoyarsk Region, four police helicopters were used to detain three leaders of the Church of the Last Testament, although the religious organization and its leaders preach peace, live in an ecovillage, and have never been reported as being involved in extremist activities. The number of such incidents and the severity of the measures applied against these believers proves that these prosecutions were a pressure campaign conducted by the State.

Many communities and believers were fined for so-called "illegal missionary activities," that is, activities not

licensed or sanctioned by the State following the Yarovaya-Ozerov law that severely restricted missionary activities in Russia. While in 2019 we observed decreasing numbers of such cases, the trend has changed in 2020. Although Islam is legally recognized as one of the “traditional religions” in Russia, in the first half of 2020 Muslims were prosecuted for illegal missionary activities even more often than Protestants, which are the usual targets of the State. Most of the cases were initiated against Muslim believers who belong to Muslim communities that do not recognize the jurisdiction of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Crimea—a central administrative body for Muslims in Crimea that is politically loyal to Russian authorities. This means that their prosecution is part of a broader policy of strengthening pressure on religious minorities considered to be disloyal to the Russian government.

New Restrictive Legislation

In 2020 the Russian religious law was amended with several new provisions aimed to further restrict freedom of religion or belief. In particular, these amendments require that priests and employees of religious organizations who have received spiritual education abroad must pass mandatory recertification and re-education in Russia. Although this requirement only applies to Russian citizens starting their religious activities in Russia after the law comes into effect, it can significantly burden Buddhist and Catholic communities, because these groups do not have religious schools in Russia.

Another amendment replaces the term “member [of a religious group]” with “participant.” This amendment is problematic for many Christian groups whose theology is based on the concept of “church membership.” Now they may be required to amend their charters and exclude the term “church member” from them. Finally, since 2020 persons included on the List of Terrorists and Extremists operated by the Federal Financing Monitoring

Service (*Rosfinmonitoring*) are prohibited from being a leader or even a participant of the religious groups. This prohibition directly contradicts both international standards of religious freedom and the national Constitution which protects the right to practice their religion together with others.

Using Religious Properties

Religious organizations, most often Protestants, often face difficulties with using existing buildings. In some cases, the authorities even demand the demolition of buildings already used by religious organizations. For example, the Kaluga District Court banned the Word of Life Church of Evangelical Christians from using the building of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior for its services. The community appealed the decision to the higher court but failed to prevail.

The construction of new churches, especially church buildings belonging to the dominant Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), remains a source of tension in society, but the level of tension has not increased in 2020. As in the previous year, most of the conflicts over construction were around poor location choices for construction sites (for example, when an Orthodox church building planned to replace a park or a recreation zone) and procedural violations during the construction site selection process. In contrast to previous years, the residents were less successful in convincing the authorities to stop such constructions, but there were almost no cases when the authorities did not take into account the opinion of the locals: as a rule, they managed to find a compromise. For example, residents of Omsk protested against building a church in one of the public parks because it would require cutting down the trees and moving the dog run. The authorities approved the construction but agreed to cut fewer trees and ordered the Orthodox diocese to pay for cutting them down and to plant new trees after the construction.

Freedom of Speech and Protection of Religious Feelings

Criminal and administrative prosecutions for “insulting religious feelings” and similar offenses (Art. 146 of the Russian Criminal Code and Art. 5.26 of the Russian Code of Administrative Offences) were even less prevalent than a year ago. Due to COVID-19, the activity of public defenders of “religious feelings” was also relatively low and usually peaceful. Most of the protests were organized by the same groups of believers who have been active in this area for several years, like an ultra-conservative Orthodox movement “Forty Forties.”

Most of these conflicts were resolved through compromises rather than through criminal prosecution against the organizers of cultural events and performances. We have found almost no cases where religious protests were strong enough to force the authorities or organizers to cancel a certain cultural event.

Anti-Epidemic Measures and Religiously Motivated Violence and Hatred

Anti-epidemic restrictions did not significantly affect the situation with freedom of religion. Most religious groups followed the government’s directives to cancel or restrict in-person meetings and turned their services online. However, the Corona epidemic seems to have worsened the relationship between the ROC and the State. The ROC was the only religious group that publicly and loudly protested against restricting attendance at services. Even now, while the ROC leadership agreed to follow the State’s anti-epidemic policies and called on believers to do the same, many priests remain skeptical concerning the measure applied.

While the level of religiously motivated violence in 2020 was quite low, labeling religious minorities in the media, including the federal channels, remains a serious problem. As

before, the main targets of this labeling are Protestants and new religious movements. A new surge in “anti-sectarian” publications and TV programs was partly inspired by the coronavirus epidemic. For example, in April, the Bryansk regional media, followed by several federal media including the biggest country-wide TV channel, *Channel One*, reported an outbreak of the disease among the parishioners of the Revival Church of Christians of the Evangelical Faith in Bryansk. The believers were de facto accused of intentionally infecting others, while many media outlets incorrectly indicated the confessional affiliation of those who got sick; they misidentified them as Baptists.

Conclusion

Russia remains a country where freedom of religion or belief is severely restricted. The state’s prosecution of and discrimination against religious minorities, actions that deprive believers of their basic religious rights (such as the right to practice religion freely or use their properties for religious purposes), as well as the stigmatization of religious minority believers in the media, including state-controlled media, are widespread. As the country is moving towards a more authoritarian regime and the state continues to strengthen its control over civil society, I see no ground for improving the freedom of religion or belief situation in the short-term view.

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