

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM R O U N D T A B L E

As of July 4, 2017

Letter is still open for signatures

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We write as an informal group of organizations and individuals who are scholars, religious and secular leaders, and human rights advocates to express our deep concern about the deteriorating religious freedom situation in Russia; and urge you and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to raise this issue in public statements and bilateral discussions, and leverage the growing network of foreign institutions that are eager to partner with the United States to advance international religious freedom.

We are a truly multi-faith group of organizations and individuals, representing an extremely broad diversity of theological views and political positions. But we all agree on the importance of religious freedom for all persons and communities, whether they are believers or not. It strengthens cultures and provides the foundation for stable democracies and their components, including civil society, economic growth, and social harmony. This is a major contributor to U.S. national security.

The Russian Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to practice the religion of their choice. Further, as a member of the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations, Russia has international obligations to uphold this right. Russia is a signatory to the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) and the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, and has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and international law instruments take precedence over national legislation according to Chapter 1, Article 15 of the Constitution.

But this fundamental right is in serious peril as the Russian government continues to foster an atmosphere of intolerance, discrimination and persecution against religious minorities throughout the entire country.

International and legal standards mandate that religious minorities be treated fairly and without discrimination in the same way as other religions. But Russia is dominated by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), and, to a much lesser extent, certain denominations of Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, which are regarded as the three “traditional” Russian religions apart from the ROC. This creates a three-tiered hierarchy of religions in Russia, with the Orthodox Church at the top, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism in the middle, and all other “non-traditional” religions at the bottom, to include Protestantism and Catholicism, which face the most discrimination.

The 2002 Extremism Law laid the foundation for an alarming trend in repressions against civil society and the “non-traditional” minority religions. The law was initially passed to combat terrorism after 9/11 but it provides no clear definition for the term “extremism,” thus rendering virtually any group or individual vulnerable to political and legal harassment. In fact, it has been frequently misused to target a vast multitude of peaceful and law-abiding civil society organizations and individuals; to censor religious materials, arrest and detain believers for reading or disseminating Scriptures, refuse to register religious groups, harass and prosecute religious groups that are refused registration, and liquidate and close down places of worship for targeted religious faiths. Such oppressive measures have no place in a democratic society.

Most recently, the Scientology religion, its parishioners and its religious and social organizations have become a primary target of this Russian national campaign of religious repression. The campaign has been chillingly wide-ranging. Russia’s Supreme Court has declared Jehovah’s Witnesses, a Christian denomination that rejects violence, as “extremist,” confirming an order by the Justice Ministry that the group be “liquidated” and thereby banning them from operating on Russian territory. Further, Muslims, Evangelicals, Lutherans, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Presbyterians, Hindus, Buddhists and others have been targeted.

On June 6, 2017, over 60 Federal Security Bureau (FSB) officials and SWAT police raided the premises of the Church of Scientology religious group in St. Petersburg as well as the homes of four of its leaders. Five local leaders of the religious group were arrested, interrogated and detained by the FSB. Four of these individuals—Anastasia Terentieva, Galina Shurinova, Ivan Matsitskiy and Sakhiliev—were sentenced to two months pretrial detention by the Court (the maximum pretrial sentence which may be extended before it runs out—the same pretrial sentence recently handed down against Dennis Christensen, a Danish Jehovah’s Witness, for practicing his faith in Russia). The fifth leader—Konstanci Esaulkova—was sentenced to two months house arrest as she has an elderly mother she cares for at home.

Based on the search warrants and public statements made by the FSB, the raid took place regarding charges concerning Article 171 (illegal commercial activity without registration) and Articles 282 and 282.1 of the criminal code (extremism). If convicted, these five individuals could face a six to ten-year prison term for practicing their faith.

The Church of Scientology operates in 164 countries throughout the world as a peaceful, law abiding group. In Russia, Scientologists have been peacefully practicing their faith for more than thirty years, providing spiritual help to fellow citizens and actively participating in solving the most urgent problems of society.

There have been no decisions by any Court in Russia or elsewhere that Scientology is “extremist.” Yet, the Russian government has routinely refused to register the Church of Scientology as a religious organization; and in the pretrial detention hearings, the Russian Court accepted the prosecutor’s argument, forwarded by the FSB, that the Church of Scientology is an “extremist organization.” This erroneous finding, supported by no evidence whatsoever, provided the basis for the pretrial sentencing, imprisoning religious leaders of a peaceful and law-abiding religious group on the fallacious grounds that they were “dangerous extremists” that would endanger society if released on their own recognizance pending trial.

It appears that the Russian government is attempting to concoct an “extremist” case much like the case that was brought against Jehovah’s Witnesses in April 2017 to shut them down.

In spite of the principles of non-discrimination and equal treatment at the heart of the UN Bill of Rights, the Russian Government is systematically using the Extremism Law to: 1) seize and censor peaceful religious scriptures read without incident the world over; 2) arrest and detain members of minority faiths for reading and disseminating these religious materials; and 3) initiate proceedings to liquidate and shut down religious organizations in order to disrupt and suppress their right to conduct religious activities in contravention of the fundamental human right to religious freedom.

This misuse of the Extremism Law against religions has been widely criticized by the UN Human Rights Committee (28 April 2015), the Parliamentary Assembly Monitoring Committee of the Council of Europe (14 September 2012), and the Venice Commission (1 June 2012), which found the law and its use against religions violated human rights and called on Russia to correct the law.

Over fifty cases regarding Russia’s misuse of the Extremism Law against religions have been filed by numerous religious groups before the European Court of Human Rights.

We urge you to raise this issue in public statements and bilateral discussions, and leverage the growing network of foreign institutions that are eager to partner with the United States to advance international religious freedom, including the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance, and the Commonwealth Initiative for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Greg Mitchell
Co-Chair, International Religious Freedom Roundtable
President, The Mitchell Firm

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21st CENTURY WILBERFORCE INITIATIVE

BOAT PEOPLE SOS

CAPLC (COORDINATION OF ASSOCIATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS FOR FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE - UN ECOSOC MEMBER)

CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY NATIONAL AFFAIRS OFFICE

COALITION FOR A FREE AND DEMOCRATIC VIETNAM

COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN VIETNAM

EUROPEAN INTERRELIGIOUS FORUM FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

GERARD NOODT FOUNDATION FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX AUTONOMOUS CHURCH OF AMERICA

SECULAR POLICY INSTITUTE

UNION OF COUNCILS FOR JEWS IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

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