

Russia

The Russian Federation is the world's largest country by land area. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, beset by corruption and cronyism, Russia has struggled in efforts to build a new democratic political system and market economy.

This country is found to be declining under the renewed Putin regime; with numerous new failures to uphold rights and provide accountability, the president has plunged the country into new international crises for the sake of national pride. The role of clericalism as an aspect of social control is expanding.

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
	<u>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative</u>	<u>Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination</u> <u>Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views</u> <u>Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans)</u> <u>Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters</u>	<u>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is severely restricted</u> <u>'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</u>
<u>There is systematic religious privilege</u> <u>State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions</u>		<u>Some religious courts rule in civil or family matters on a coercive or discriminatory basis</u> <u>Discriminatory prominence is given to religious bodies, traditions or leaders</u>	
<u>Official symbolic deference to religion</u>			

Legend

Constitution and government

The Constitution of the Russian Federation does conform with the principle of separation of powers into legislative, executive and a judicial branch, which is independent (Article 10). The constitution also promotes the principle of state secularism (neutrality in terms of belief) (Article 14).

However, in practice, the power of the state is heavily centred on the role of the president.

And the Russian government has demonstrated a clear preference towards the Russian Orthodox Church. After the collapse of the Soviet Union there was a large upsurge in religious affiliation.

<berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/religious-freedom-in-russia>

The President

According to Article 4 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the President is the head of state, guarantor of the Constitution, human and civil rights and freedoms. He takes measures in order to protect the sovereignty of the Russian Federation, ensures coordinated functioning of public authorities, and determines the main goals of domestic and foreign policy, while acting as Commander-in-Chief. The president addresses citizenship issues, gives national awards, and grants pardons. Numerous federal ministries, services and agencies work under direct supervision of the President of the Russian Federation.

In spring 2016, powerful National Guard of the Russian Federation was created and appointed a federal executive body. The members of the National Guard not only have the right to check documents, personal belongings and transport, but to use physical force and firearms against suspects without warning, if delay “threatens somebody’s life and has staggering implications”. The Guard also reports to the President of the Russian Federation. The Guard has subsequently been used in the suppression of protest activities alongside police forces.

The President has a predominant role across the state system, having the right to dissolve the State Duma, and, controlling all branches of the government. In fact, Russia has a presidential government with a pronounced imbalance of power, coupled with authoritarian tendencies in the person of Vladimir Putin, who has been President since the year 2000, except 2008 to 2012 when he was Prime Minister.

Legislative authorities violating secularism

The legislative branch on the federal level consists of the State Duma and the Federation Council. The legislative branch provides the foundation for executive and judicial branches, and creates a framework of society and government.

However, the violation by legislative authorities of the secularism guaranteed in the Constitution, as well as a low level of legal awareness, have given rise to bad law and human rights abuses. Freedom of conscience, religion or belief has been degraded under the Putin regime, usually with the agreement or to the benefit of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). State-run religious organizations (called “traditional”) are often used to legitimize unconstitutional initiatives. Relations between the legislative body of the secular state and religious organizations remains very close. Both parties take part in joint events: for example, Christmas Parliamentary Meetings, held in the premises of the State Duma of the Russian Federation and attended by the deputies and ROC representatives.

On 14 December 2016, at the plenary meeting of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, the deputies unanimously decided to create a new Committee on Development of Civil Society and Civic

and Religious Associations, as well as to appoint Sergei Gavrilov a chairman of the Committee.

On January 26, 2017, in the course of Christmas Parliamentary Meetings, the a State Duma committee (on Development of Civil Society and Civic and Religious Associations), in cooperation with Synodal Department for Media and Public Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, held a roundtable meeting on the topic "Religion. Society. State." While First Deputy Chairman of the Committee Ivan Suharev pointed out the necessity of regulating activities of "pseudo-religious" organizations and associations, the Chairman Sergei Gavrilov (elected into that office only the previous month) emphasized "joint constructive activities" between the government and "traditional" Russian churches.

While defending the arguably unconstitutional cooperation between state and church, Sergei Gavrilov has also said, "we will call sin a sin, evil an evil, we will create and codify the opportunity for Russia's stable development in the spirit of religious values, for us, Orthodox Christians... Only development in this direction will make Russia truly interesting and useful for Europe and the world, it is the only way to save ourselves and the others in the stormy sea of world sin, permissiveness, egoism and hedonism."

The legislative bodies of Russia, instead of following constitutional principles of secularity and freedom of conscience, maintain a close relation with the Russian Orthodox Church, and officials have pledged to continue on this course. Already predominant socially, many initiatives seem designed to remove the ROC's competitors.

Russian Orthodox privilege

In 2010 the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) approved the 200-Churches-Project in Moscow, which led to significant tensions between the church and the residents of Moscow, especially those living in districts where the new churches have already been built or are due to be built, arguing that not enough thought had been put into where the churches would be built and that parks and squares should remain untouched.

rbth.co.uk/society/2013/03/26/200_new_orthodox_churches_in_moscow_causes_public_stir_24285.html

Religious organizations are awarded additional benefits, included exemptions from VAT and from income tax on profits generated from economic activities. Exemptions from property tax are granted to religious organizations that use the property for religious activities.

cof.org/content/russia

Yarovaya Law

In 2016, President Putin adopted the 'Yarovaya law' which took effect on 20 July 2016, ostensibly aimed at tightening measures in the fight against terrorism. The law increases security agencies' access to private communications, requiring telecom companies to store all telephone conversations, text messages, videos, and picture messages, making it available to authorities. But the law also puts "more restrictions on religious groups" activities in the name of fighting "extremism". The measure echoes the sweeping powers wielded by the KGB to repress opposition activists throughout the Soviet era. The new law requires religious groups to obtain official permits and bars activities such as prayer meetings from taking place anywhere except for officially recognized religious buildings. Members of a religious group would also potentially be barred from e-mailing invitations to people interested in services. Violators could be fined, or potentially expelled from

Russia. christiantoday.com/article/how.russia.is.increasingly.violating.minority.religious.rights.while.its.orthodox.church.increases.its.power/108025.htm

These new restrictions “will make it easier for Russian authorities to repress religious communities, stifle peaceful dissent, and detain and imprison people,” said Thomas J. Reese, who heads the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Moreover, he says that “Neither these measures nor the currently existing anti-extremism law meet international human rights and religious freedom standards.”

<rferl.org/a/russia-yarovaya-law-religious-freedom-restrictions/27852531.html>

Education and children’s rights

The government introduced mandatory classes in Orthodox Christianity in all public schools. In 2013 the president Vladimir Putin has signed a bill into law that makes religious education mandatory in all schools in the country.

<themoscowtimes.com/news/article/putin-approves-new-education-law/473783.html>

The curriculum includes a course on the fundamentals of religion. A federal law guarantees that religious educational establishments can receive accreditation.

<eng.kremlin.ru/news/18002>

Family, community and society

Religious tension

Muslims are the second largest religious group in Russia and there are severe tensions between Muslims and Russian Orthodox adherents. Ethnic Muslims account for between 21-23 million of Russia’s population. The murder of an ethnic Russian Yegor Shcherbakov by a Muslim from Azerbaijan led in October 2013 to huge anti-migrant disturbances, vandalism and assaults, where 1,200 were arrested. The number of Muslims is increasing by 0.6% a year during the number of Christians is decreasing by the same percentage.

<meforum.org/4702/muslim-russia>

Muslim leaders in Russia say that attempts to build more mosques in Moscow have been rejected or blocked by local officials who fear angering the ethnic Russians in the capital. Russia has the largest Muslim community, where about 2.5 million Muslims live in Moscow. They are complaining that there are not enough mosques (only four) to serve the Muslim community in Russia’s capital. For many ethnic Russians, the fact of becoming a minority in their country is unthinkable, and nationalist sentiments are dramatically on the rise. Attacks on mosques have been increasing.

<sfgate.com/news/article/Russia-has-a-Muslim-dilemma-Ethnic-Russians-2466527.php>

Foreign enemies

In 2012 the Russian government adopted a law that required nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to register as “foreign agents” with ministry of justice if their actions can be defined as political activities and they receive foreign funding. Since the definition of “political activity” is wide, it can also be extended to all activities of advocacy and human rights work. The following link provides a list of nongovernmental organizations which are registered as such agencies:

<hrw.org/news/2014/11/20/russia-government-against-rights-groups>

Enemies within

A major threat to religious freedom is the new anti-extremism law, which defines extremism in a religious context and does not need to prove the use of threat or use of violence. The Russian

government uses the law as a tool against the opposition.

In 2012 more persons were convicted for hate speech than for hate crimes, which has never happened before in the post Soviet time. The prosecutors and the courts have now serious difficulties in determining what should be banned or prosecuted.

<wilsoncenter.org/publication/anti-extremism-policies-russia-and-how-they-work-practice>

Ukraine conflict

In November 2013 a wave of demonstrations in neighbouring Ukraine began, protesters demanding closer European integration, following the suspension of the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement with the European Union, in order to seek closer economic relations with Russia. Pro-Russian counter-protests began and the political crisis escalated. Russia illegally annexed Crimea in March 2014. There is ongoing pro-Russian unrest in the eastern part of Ukraine.

Homophobic attacks

LGBT people face violence and harassment in Russia. The adoption of the federal law “against the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors” led to a huge spread of homophobic violence. Violating the law is punishable by a range of fines. Homophobic crimes count a high number of murders, grave physical violence. Foreigners who violate the law are subject to fines, up to 15 days in detention and deportation. There are many gangs in Russia who feel empowered to hunt and to bully, attack and even kill gay people.

<pinknews.co.uk/2014/02/07/the-25-most-shocking-anti-gay-stories-from-russia-so-far/>

Radical groups justify homophobic attacks by equating homosexuality with pedophilia, and in January 2014 before the begin of Olympic winter games in Sochi President Putin said that “gay people are welcome in Sochi but they should leave children in peace”. Human Rights Watch said: “Such a chilling and wrongheaded message about LGBT people from Russia’s head of state is irresponsible and extremely dangerous.”

<hrw.org/news/2014/02/03/russia-sochi-games-highlight-homophobic-violence>

Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values

Secular activism shut down

In protest at creeping clericalism, in 2010 a Russian atheist organization *Zdravomyslie* (“Good Sense Foundation”) tried to erect a series of billboards quoting the Russian constitution. The Moscow city authorities have turned down the application of the foundation. Ten billboard in Moscow should show the quote: “Religious associations are separate from the state and equal before the law. - Constitution of Russia”. But the Moscow city committee sent a letter that the request has been declined. “In this way, the current Moscow leaders are continuing the old policy of merging state government with religious institutions, setting the abstract “feelings of believers” against the letter and spirit of the nation’s founding law,” said the foundation.

<theotherrussia.org/2010/10/19/moscow-rejects-ad-quoting-constitutional-freedom-of-religion/>

Blasphemy

In July 2013 a blasphemy law came into force that sets fines as punishment which account up to US\$ 15,000 and jail terms of up to 3 years for public actions in places of worship that disrespect religious beliefs.

secularism.org.uk/news/2013/06/russian-parliament-passes-new-blasphemy-law-as-protesters-call-for-secular-state>

Propaganda in Russian media

After Crimea's annexation by Russia, Russian government began a battle over Ukraine with diverse means. Russia invests around \$136 million a year in Russia propaganda abroad in order to influence and manipulate the public opinion in the West.

spiegel.de/international/world/russia-uses-state-television-to-sway-opinion-at-home-and-abroad-a-971971.html>

Vitaliy Katsenelson, originally from Russia, and currently living in USA, described his experience with the Russian media after spending 7 days watching Russian news and reading Russian newspapers:

"I have to confess, it is hard not to develop a lot of self-doubt about your previously held views when you watch Russian TV for a week. But then you have to remind yourself that Putin's Russia doesn't have a free press. The free press that briefly existed after the Soviet Union collapsed is gone — Putin killed it. The government controls most TV channels, radio, and newspapers. What Russians see on TV, read in print, and listen to on the radio is direct propaganda from the Kremlin."

stopfake.org/en/i-just-spent-7-days-watching-only-russian-news-and-reading-pravda-here-s-what-i-learned/>

Highlighted cases

On August 17, 2012, three members of **Pussy Riot**, **Nadezhda Tolokonnikova**, **Maria Alyokhina**, and **Yekaterina Samutsevich** were convicted of "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred" and sentenced to two years hard labor. Pussy riot is a feminist punk rock group with a freethinking message including being in favour of church-state separation. Their offense was to stage an impromptu protest performance (which was itself disrupted after only a few moments) called "Punk Prayer: Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!" at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The Russian authorities were widely condemned by human rights organizations around the world for overzealous prosecution and harsh sentencing of the Pussy Riot singers. The judge cited what she regarded as Christianity's dissent from the principles of women's equality (contra the band's explicit feminist values) to back the prosecution claim that the performance was motivated by "religious hatred". After 21 months in prison, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were released on December 23, 2013 after the Duma approved an amnesty. On 6 March 2014, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina were assaulted and injured by youths in Nizhny Novgorod.

Ruslan Sokolovsky, an atheist blogger, faced a possible seven and a half year prison term for playing Pokémon Go in a church. He was convicted in May 2017 and handed a three and half year suspended sentence. The 22-year-old blogger had been held in pre-trial detention since October 2016, after he released a video of himself playing Pokémon Go in a church in Yekaterinburg, central Russia, that August. In the video he explains that a recent news report in Russia highlighted the apparent risks of playing the popular augmented reality video game in churches. However, in the video Sokolovsky discusses his disbelief that such actions would be prosecuted, and decides to test it by filming himself. He said of the threat of prosecution, "for me this is total bullshit, because who can ever be offended by you walking around a church with your smartphone?"

theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/11/pokemon-go-russian-youtuber-convicted-playing-church-ruslan-sokolovsky>

Testimonies

“The public perception of atheism has been transformed in Russia, from the dominant ideology of the Soviet Union, into something that is considered indecent for intellectual people. The common perception is that humanism is wrong, dangerous or anti-spiritual.”

— Anonymous Russian humanist