



## **Russia - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 16 March 2011**

### **Information on the treatment of Catholics in Russia?**

The opening sentences of the United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report state:

“The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respected this right in practice; however, religious minorities, in particular Muslim followers of Turkish theologian Said Nursi's work, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Scientologists, faced bans on their religious literature and difficulties registering their legal entities. Although the constitution provides for the equality of all religious groups before the law and the separation of church and state, the government did not always respect these provisions.” (United States Department of State (17 November 2010) *2010 International Religious Freedom Report – Russia*)

This report states under the heading ‘Religious Demography’:

“Approximately 100 million citizens identify themselves as Russian Orthodox, although only 5 percent of Russians call themselves observant. Muslims, with a population estimated between 10 million and 23 million, form the largest religious minority... There are an estimated one million Buddhists, the majority of whom live in the traditionally Buddhist regions of Buryatiya, Tuva, and Kalmykiya. According to the NGO Slavic Center for Law and Justice, Protestants make up the second largest group of Christian believers, with 3,500 registered organizations and more than two million adherents. The Roman Catholic Church estimated that there are 600,000 Catholics, most of whom are not ethnic Russians. Estimates of the country's Jewish population range between 250,000 and one million, with the majority living in Moscow and Saint Petersburg.” (Ibid)

This report also states under the heading ‘Legal/Policy Framework’:

“The government's visa rules allow foreigners (including religious workers) with business or humanitarian visas to spend only 90 of every 180 days in the country. The effect of these rules has been to restrict severely religious groups that rely upon foreign religious workers. The Catholic Church, which relies almost exclusively on priests from outside the country, and the Mormons, with more than 300 foreign missionaries, have been particularly hard hit by this provision.” (Ibid)

This report states under the heading ‘Restrictions on religious freedom’:

“The Catholic community reported 44 disputed properties, including the Saint Peter and Saint Paul Cathedral in Moscow. While most state-owned property was returned, the community had no success with buildings that had been privatized. A Moscow Catholic leader stated that some problems had been resolved positively and that the Catholic

community would continue to work with authorities at the federal and local levels to resolve these problems.” (Ibid)

This report states under the heading ‘Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom’:

“Federal and regional governments often allocated funding for the restoration of religious buildings. While the majority of religious organizations receiving support were Russian Orthodox, some Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant organizations also received financial support.” (Ibid)

This report states under the heading ‘Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom’:

“According to the SOVA Center, in 2009 approximately 71 persons were killed and 33 injured in attacks based on race or religious affiliation. There were 42 documented violent attacks motivated by religious hatred on individuals from January 2009 to April 2010: 20 on Jehovah's Witnesses, 17 on Muslims, two on Protestants, and two on Russian Orthodox priests. In addition from January 2009 until April 2010, there were 65 documented acts of vandalism against the property of religious communities: 27 against Russian Orthodox property; 23 against Jehovah's Witnesses' property; seven against Jewish property; three against Muslim property; and one each for Protestants, Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Mormons, and pagans.” (Ibid)

This report states under the same heading:

“Conservative activists claiming ties to the ROC [Russian Orthodox Church] disseminated negative publications and occasionally staged demonstrations throughout the country against Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other minority religious groups.” (Ibid)

The introduction to the 2010 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom report states:

“Religious freedom conditions in Russia continue to deteriorate. In the past year, the government increased its use of anti-extremist legislation against religious groups that are not known to use or advocate violence. National and local government officials also harass religious groups they view as non-traditional and Muslims through enforcement of other laws. Difficulties include: denials of registration; detention and harassment of members of religious communities; and delays and refusals to permit construction of or grant permits to rent places of worship. Russian officials continue to describe certain religious and other groups as alien to Russian culture and society, thereby contributing to a climate of intolerance. Continued high levels of xenophobia and intolerance, including anti-Semitism, have resulted in violent and sometimes lethal hate crimes. Despite increased prosecution for violent hate crimes, the Russian government chronically has failed to address these serious problems consistently or effectively.

Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Russia on its Watch List in 2010. The Commission has reported on Russia every year since 1999, but placed Russia on the Watch List for the first time in 2009.” (United States Commission on International

Religious Freedom (29 April 2010) *USCIRF Annual Report 2010 - The Commission's Watch List: Russian Federation*)

This report also states under the heading 'Restrictions on Places of Worship':

"Building or renting worship space remains difficult for a number of religious communities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Pentecostal congregations, Orthodox groups that do not recognize the Moscow Patriarchate, Molokans, and Old Believer communities. Protestant, Catholic, Muslim and some Orthodox congregations also allege inordinate official interest in fire safety and other details in regard to their worship buildings, which may result in court-ordered fines, temporary closures or official demolition threats." (Ibid)

This report also states under the heading 'Restrictions on Foreign Religious Workers':

"Over 50 foreign religious workers, including Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists and Jews, have been barred from Russia since 1998 and only a small number have since been allowed to return. New visa rules introduced in October 2007 for business or humanitarian visas, including religious work, permit visa holders to spend only 90 out of every 180 days in Russia; procedures to extend visas are lengthy and complex. These visa regulations have had a harsh impact on many religious organizations, particularly those which for historical reasons depend upon foreigners, such as the Catholic Church and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints." (Ibid)

This report also states under the heading 'Hate Crimes against Persons and Property':

"In addition, from January 2009 until April 2010 there were 65 documented acts of vandalism against the property of religious communities: Russian Orthodox (27); Jehovah's Witnesses (23); Jewish (7); Muslim (3); and one each for Evangelical Protestants, Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Mormons, and pagan." (Ibid)

This report states in relation to attacks by neo-Nazi groups:

"Most officials and NGOs agree that many of these attacks are motivated largely by ethnic intolerance, although religious and ethnic identities often overlap. Nevertheless, members of Muslim, Jewish, Russian Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic, and other religious communities have been subjected to attacks apparently motivated by religious factors. MPROC priest Daniil Sysoev was shot by a gunman at his Moscow church in November 2009; Sysoev was known for his missionary activity, including among Russia's Muslim community, neo-pagans, and Protestants. In December 2009, a Moscow court sentenced a Muscovite to a 14-year term of imprisonment for the October 2008 murder of one of two Roman Catholic priests. Religious minority leaders have concerns that Russian government officials provide tacit or active support for a view held by many ethnic Russians that their country should be reserved for them. Civil society leaders link this to a perception that Russian identity is threatened by a declining birthrate and high mortality among ethnic Russians." (Ibid)

A report from Forum 18 states:

“Russian Jehovah's Witnesses and Armenian Catholics continue to struggle gain registration - and so legal status - from the authorities of the capital Moscow, Forum 18 News Service has learned...Moscow's Armenian Catholic congregation continues to be unable to gain registration.” (Forum 18 (1 March 2011) *Russian Federation: European Court of Human Rights "obviously ignored"*, Rosemary Griffin)

Another report by Forum 18 states:

“A Catholic church in Kaliningrad, the capital of Russia's Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, which the local parish has been trying to get back in vain since the early 1990s, was among a number of religious properties suddenly handed to the Russian Orthodox Church in October. Other properties handed over, which likewise never belonged to the Orthodox, include former Lutheran churches and castles originally built by the Teutonic knights. Handing such property to the Orthodox is ‘fully justified’, Inna Moreva, spokesperson for the Kaliningrad Government told Forum 18 News Service on 14 December.

Asked why it was right that property confiscated during the Soviet period from Catholic and Lutherans was handed to another religious community, she responded: ‘You're not Russian, you won't understand.’ Similarly defending the transfers is Tatyana Sharova, deputy head of the Kaliningrad Government's Property Agency. ‘This property belonged to Kaliningrad Government. The transfer was decided by Kaliningrad Duma (parliament). All was done in accordance with the law,’ she insisted to Forum 18 on 14 December.” (Forum 18 (14 December 2010) *Russia: Orthodox can get Catholic and Lutheran churches - but Catholics and Lutherans can't*)

## References

Forum 18 (1 March 2011) *Russian Federation: European Court of Human Rights "obviously ignored"*, Rosemary Griffin

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response

is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

**Sources consulted**

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