

May 20, 2025

**RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES UNDER PRESSURE:
DOCUMENTING RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION
IN RUSSIA 2022-2025**

Sergei Chapnin,
Director of Communications
Orthodox Christian Studies Center
Fordham University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents a systematic campaign of religious persecution in Russia targeting faith leaders who speak the truth regarding the war in Ukraine. This is not a collection of isolated incidents but constitutes a coordinated effort to silence religious voices of conscience through an escalating pattern of administrative, criminal, and ecclesiastical pressure.

Our documentation draws from multiple reliable sources and represents a conservative estimate of the actual scope of religious persecution. Given limitations in monitoring and reporting capabilities, particularly in remote regions, the true extent of persecution is likely more widespread than the figures presented here.

Since February 2022, religious communities in Russia have experienced an intensifying pattern of state repression. Our documentation reveals that more than 100 religious leaders and activists have been subjected to persecution, including:

- 79 Orthodox Christians
- 7 Baptists
- 7 Pentecostals
- 3 Catholics
- 2 Non-denominational Christians
- 1 Adventist
- 1 Buddhist
- 1 Jew

The persecution has taken various forms:

- **"Foreign agent" designation (individuals and organizations):** 8 religious leaders and Christian activists were labeled as "foreign agents" without any substantiated evidence, subjecting them to severe political, civil, and financial restrictions that fundamentally undermine their ministry and basic rights
- **"Undesirable organization" designation:** 12 organizations
- **Administrative prosecutions:** At least 23 cases resulting in fines or administrative detention
- **Criminal prosecutions:** 19 cases of conviction under criminal charges, with 5 more currently under ongoing investigation
- **Canonical prosecutions:** At least 38 Orthodox clerics went before ecclesiastical courts (17 were defrocked, 14 suspended from ministry, 7 retired from active service)
- **Forced exile:** At least 17 religious leaders compelled to leave Russia
- **Deaths in custody:** 2 Christians have died (1 in pre-trial detention, 1 in prison)

Four Dimensions of Persecution

1. **Systematic and Coordinated Suppression:** The evidence reveals a deliberate strategy rather than isolated incidents. Authorities employ a methodical "escalation ladder" beginning with administrative warnings, progressing to "foreign agent" designation, continuing with administrative penalties, and culminating in criminal charges carrying multi-year prison sentences. This pattern demonstrates a comprehensive campaign to silence religious voices of conscience.
2. **Persecution Transcending Religious Boundaries:** This repression crosses all traditional religious divisions, affecting Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Buddhist communities alike. This pattern reveals that the primary offense is not doctrinal but moral—the refusal to sanction violence and the insistence on upholding fundamental ethical commandments when they conflict with state demands.
3. **Uniquely Severe Pressure on Orthodox Christians:** For Orthodox clergy and the faithful, state persecution operates in tandem with direct pressure from the Patriarch and ecclesiastical courts, creating a distinctly oppressive environment where one faces both criminal penalties and ecclesiastical punishments. This dual persecution represents a profound distortion of Orthodox canonical tradition, which was never intended to enforce political conformity but rather to preserve the integrity of faith and moral witness.
4. **Institutional Abandonment of the Persecuted:** Religious institutions both within Russia and abroad have largely remained silent, effectively abandoning those persecuted and normalizing the suppression of religious conscience. This silence not only compounds the suffering of those targeted but also undermines the prophetic vocation of religious communities to speak moral truth regardless of political consequences.

These patterns parallel historical precedents in Russia under Communist rule while introducing troubling innovations in methodical religious persecution. The implications extend beyond Russia itself, as even more severe approaches are being implemented in Belarus and in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, where religious communities face harsher repressions, forced closures, and systematic elimination of independent spiritual voices. These lessons could extend to other regions under Russian influence, creating a model for suppressing faith-based moral dissent.

While this report focuses primarily on persecution related to anti-war positions, it's important to contextualize this within the broader pattern of religious repression in Russia. The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses represents the most severe and numerically significant case, with 143 members currently imprisoned in penal colonies and detention centers—far exceeding the number of incarcerated religious figures in all anti-war cases combined. This ongoing campaign, which began in 2017 when the group was labeled an "extremist organization," has subjected hundreds of believers to searches, interrogations, and legal prosecution, demonstrating the Russian state's established pattern of targeting religious communities that operate outside state control.

Call to Action

In light of this evidence, we call upon Christian leaders and activists worldwide to consider concrete responses:

1. **For All Christian Churches and Denominations:** Issue formal statements condemning this persecution, incorporate prayers for the persecuted in worship services, organize prayer vigils, and host testimonies from exiled clergy.
2. **Specifically for Orthodox Churches:** Establish canonical reception processes for exiled clergy, develop theological resources on peace and the limits of state authority, include commemorations of persecuted clergy in liturgical services, and address the distortion of canonical tradition.
3. **Through International Bodies:** Support the UN Special Rapporteur's mandate, advocate for recognition of this religious persecution by international human rights bodies, and mobilize faith representatives in ecumenical organizations.
4. **Through Practical Support:** Create asylum pathways for religious refugees, establish monitoring networks, develop pastoral care initiatives for exiled clergy and their families, and support alternative Russian-language religious broadcasting.
5. **Through Education:** Integrate this persecution into religious education, commission research on church-state relations, create platforms for persecuted clergy testimonies, and develop educational resources on religious freedom.

The fundamental question this crisis presents is not political but deeply spiritual: whether institutional self-preservation will overshadow authentic Christian witness in speaking truth to power. As shepherds of the faithful, the voices and actions of religious leaders worldwide matter profoundly to those suffering for their fidelity to conscience.

*** Supporting Those Who Stand for Peace ***

The Orthodox Christian clergy and laymen documented in this report face not only legal persecution and ecclesiastical punishment, but often severe financial hardship as they lose positions, housing, and income. *The Peace Unto All Foundation* (Friede Allen e.V.), founded by Russian émigré clergy and civil activists and based in Germany, provides direct humanitarian assistance to clergy and their families who have suffered for their moral courage. Your financial support enables continued monitoring of these cases and provides emergency aid to those who have lost everything for speaking truth. Your generous contribution answers this call by providing tangible support to these modern confessors of faith.

For more information, please visit peaceuntoall.org.

To donate, please use the following secure banking details:

Name: Friede Allen e.V.

Account number: 462040130136171

Account type: Deposit

Routing number (for wire and ACH): 084009519 (Use when sending money from the US)

Swift/BIC: TRWIUS35XXX (Use when sending money from outside the US)

Purpose: Donation for persecuted clergy

Bank Address: Wise US Inc, 30 W. 26th Street, Sixth Floor, New York, NY, 10010, United States

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: A Call To Bear Witness	6
Scale and Scope of Religious Persecution	8
State Mechanisms of Religious Suppression.....	9
Strategic Coordination Between Church and State	16
Ecclesiastical Mechanisms of Suppression.....	21
Cross-Religious Dimensions of Persecution	24
Patterns of Resistance and Exodus	26
Institutional Silence.....	28
Conclusions and Recommendations.....	29
<i>Appendix # 1. Religious Figures Designated as "Foreign Agents"</i> <i>by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Appendix # 2. Anti-War Christian Prisoners in Russia (2022-2025)</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>Appendix # 3. Clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church</i> <i>Transferred to the Ecumenical Patriarchate (2022-2025)</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>Appendix # 4. Documentation Resources.....</i>	<i>34</i>

Introduction: A Call To Bear Witness

Throughout Church history, moments arise when Christians must choose between comfortable silence and costly witness. Since February 2022 Christians in Russia stand at such a crossroad. The evidence presented in this report documents a systematic campaign against religious voices of conscience in Russia—a campaign that threatens not merely individual believers but the very integrity of religious life and witness.

"What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs."
— Matthew 10:27

These words of Christ remind us that truth disclosed in private must sometimes be proclaimed publicly, especially when those proclaiming it face persecution. This report represents such a proclamation.

While the recent history of persecutions of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia is terrifying and of high significance, the main focus of this report will be prosecutions related to anti-war public positions taken by various religious figures and communities.

As Christians concerned with both spiritual truth and empirical reality, we must approach this situation with both pastoral sensitivity and analytical rigor. The evidence presented here has been meticulously documented and verified, drawing upon multiple independent sources and first-hand testimonies.

Historical and Theological Context

This new wave of religious persecution must be understood within both its immediate historical context and broader theological framework. Since 2012, Russia has systematically dismantled civil society, independent media, and the political opposition. Religious communities remained among the last spaces for independent moral discourse—a situation the state now appears determined to undermine.

The theological and ecclesial significance of this crisis extends beyond politics. What we are witnessing is a fundamental challenge to the prophetic vocation of religious communities—their calling to speak moral truth regardless of political consequences. As Christ taught, we must "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21). The current persecution directly targets believers' ability to discern and uphold this crucial distinction.

Regional Significance

While analyzing religious repression in the Russian Federation, we must situate these developments within the broader context of religious persecution across post-Soviet space. The suppression of faith-based voices extends beyond Russia's internationally recognized borders to territories under Russian occupation in Ukraine, where similar mechanisms and even more severe actions are deployed with greater intensity.

This report focuses specifically on the situation within Russia itself, where more than 100 documented cases reveal a systematic and coordinated campaign against religious voices of conscience.¹ This growing body of evidence demonstrates that the Russian state has developed a sophisticated apparatus for identifying, targeting, and silencing clergy and believers who articulate faith-based moral opposition to state policies—particularly regarding the war against Ukraine.

The Russian case merits particular attention not only because of its scale and methodological coherence but because it has become a troubling model of religious suppression that is already being replicated elsewhere in the region, most notably in Belarus, where close coordination between state and ecclesiastical authorities mirrors Russian practices. Understanding these patterns in Russia provides critical insight into emerging threats to religious freedom throughout post-Soviet space.

Acknowledgments

I express my deep gratitude to UN Special Rapporteur Mariana Katsarova for acknowledging this problem in her latest report² presented to the UN Human Rights Council in September 2024—the first significant recognition of this issue at the international level. However, the situation has worsened since then, with both conditions and numbers of affected individuals increasing.

We are indebted to those who continue to monitor these repressions:

- *SOVA Research Center*—provides comprehensive monitoring of nationalism, xenophobia, and religious issues in Russia despite being designated a "foreign agent"
- *Christians Against War Project* by Natallia Vasilevich—collects and systematizes cases of persecution
- *Peace Unto All Foundation*, by priests Andrei Kordochkin and Valerian Dunin-Barkovsky—conducts monitoring and provides practical assistance to victims
- *Public Orthodoxy*, a project of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University—publishes analytical materials in English, Russian, Greek, and Ukrainian. Blocked in Russia by Roskomnadzor since 2022
- *Orthodox Church Culture Institute (OCCI)*—support for this particular research

¹ <https://shaltnotkill.info/persecution-of-christians-by-religious-and-state-authorities-for-anti-war-stance-or-support-of-ukraine-in-defence-from-aggression/>

² <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/57/59>

Scale and Scope of Religious Persecution

Our documentation reveals a systematic pattern of increasing pressure on religious communities and individuals who refuse to support Russia's military actions, or who maintain pacifist positions. The scale of documented persecution includes:

- **79** Orthodox Christians
- **7** Baptists
- **7** Pentecostals
- **3** Catholics
- **2** Non-denominational Christians
- **1** Adventist
- **1** Buddhist
- **1** Jew

This persecution has taken various forms:

- **"Foreign agent" designation (individuals and organizations):** 8 religious leaders and Christian activists were labeled as "foreign agents" without any substantiated evidence, subjecting them to severe political, civil, and financial restrictions that fundamentally undermine their ministry and basic rights
- **"Undesirable organization" designation:** 12 organizations
- **Administrative prosecutions:** At least 23 cases resulting in fines or administrative detention
- **Criminal prosecutions:** 19 cases of conviction under criminal charges, with 5 more currently under investigation
- **Canonical prosecutions:** At least 38 Orthodox clerics went before ecclesiastical courts (17 were defrocked, 14 suspended from ministry, 7 retired from active service)
- **Forced exile:** At least 17 religious leaders compelled to leave Russia
- **Deaths:** 2 Christians have died (1 in pre-trial detention, 1 in prison)

These numbers, while significant, likely represent only a portion of the actual cases, as some incidents go unreported due to fear of further reprisals. This pattern reveals a graduated approach to suppression, with administrative measures often serving as preliminary steps toward more severe criminal charges.

Internal Church Discipline and Canonical Prosecutions

The Russian Orthodox Church has developed internal mechanisms to punish clergy who express anti-war views, creating a uniquely oppressive environment where clerics face both ecclesiastical sanctions and state penalties. Our documentation reveals:

- **17** Priests and deacons were defrocked
- **14** Priests and deacons suspended from ministry
- **7** Forced into retirement

Evidence indicates significant coordination and cooperation between the state and ecclesiastical authorities both in Moscow and in the Russian regions. This dual persecution system represents a distortion of Orthodox canonical tradition, which was never intended to enforce political conformity but rather to preserve the integrity of faith and moral witness.

State Mechanisms of Religious Suppression

The Russian state's approach to suppressing religious dissent is not random or improvisational, but rather follows a systematic pattern that utilizes various legal and administrative tools in a coordinated fashion.

Four Primary Mechanisms of State Persecution

Russian authorities employ four categories of legal instruments against religious dissenters:

1. **The "Foreign Agent" Mechanism:** A bureaucratic approach that imposes severe restrictions under Federal Law No. 255-FZ "On Control Over Activities of Persons Under Foreign Influence,"³ creating an administrative framework that effectively marginalizes and silences dissent and independent voices through legal and financial constraints
2. **Administrative Offenses:**
 - 2.1. Particularly *Article 20.3.3*: "public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation for the purpose of protecting the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens"⁴
 - 2.2. *Article 19.34*: violation of the rules of conduct for "foreign agents"⁵
 - 2.3. *Article 20.33*: participation in the activities of an "undesirable organization"⁶
3. **Criminal Prosecutions:** Including
 - 3.1. *Article 205.2*: "public calls for the implementation of terrorist activities, public justification of terrorism, or propaganda of terrorism"⁷
 - 3.2. *Article 207.3*: "public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation",⁸
 - 3.3. *Article 280*: "public calls for the implementation of extremist activities"⁹
 - 3.4. *Article 280.3*: "Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens,"¹⁰ representing a deliberate escalation pathway from administrative to

³ https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Russia-Foreign-Influence-Law-in-Eng_fv_Jan_1_2024-up-to-date_.pdf

⁴ https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_34661/921d61f629b31865b3a24b3049bec22b92f17224/

⁵ https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_34661/1216f68ce6aaa76e9eddfef6e07f3a5b8785f2a/

⁶ https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_34661/390287b8b028c1240d9e9488f19237c80eb35c81/

⁷ https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_10699/c2877fe51a75f612e1df0f008c620980638457ba/

⁸ https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_10699/19bf2b8e4b62e143a17a50041a204252d0e263ce/

⁹ https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_10699/c10532ab76df5c84c18ee550a79b1fc8cb8449b2/

¹⁰ https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_10699/1aa9268e7d3bd57bcd46a3016641c5af64b9c87/

criminal liability, with penalties ranging from substantial fines to imprisonment for up to 5 years for repeated offenses initially charged under article 20.3.3 of the Administrative Code

3.5. *Article 284.1.1*: participation in the activities of an “undesirable organization” after administrative punishment for a similar act¹¹

3.6. *Article 330.1*: Avoiding responsibilities of foreign agents¹²

4. **Military Conscription**: Used punitively against pacifist believers

1. The "Foreign Agent" Mechanism: Weaponizing Bureaucracy

The designation of "foreign agent" status represents a particularly insidious form of control, as it creates a legal framework that effectively marginalizes religious voices through bureaucratic means rather than direct persecution.

It is crucial to understand that Russia's "foreign agent" designation bears no resemblance to similar-sounding statutes in Western democracies. In Russia, this status is imposed unilaterally by the Ministry of Justice without judicial review or due process, based on two extraordinarily broad criteria:

- "Foreign influence," which requires no actual financial connection or material support from abroad, but can be established merely through citing independent foreign media sources or even referencing information from other designated "foreign agents"
- "Political activity," defined so expansively that it encompasses virtually any public commentary on government policies or social issues, including purely theological or pastoral reflections on matters of public concern

Eight prominent religious figures have been subjected to this designation, spanning Orthodox, Jewish, Buddhist, and Protestant communities (*see Appendix #1*).

Those labeled as "foreign agents" face severe restrictions that fundamentally undermine their pastoral role as well as their civil rights. The consequences of being labeled a "foreign agent" include the following:

- Complete exclusion from civic participation, including absolute prohibition on voting, running for office, employment in government service, or holding any position in public institutions
- Comprehensive ban on engagement with educational institutions at all levels, preventing "foreign agents" from teaching, lecturing, mentoring, or participating in any academic or educational forums, effectively severing their connection to the intellectual and formative spheres of society

¹¹ https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_10699/f3541713e229607798086233db886337e55eb099/

¹² https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_10699/eced99f183c1f9087f9b4f9e512295fbc846762e/

- Requirements to mark all communications with lengthy and stigmatizing disclaimers that publicly brand them as disloyal
- Burdensome quarterly financial reporting designed to consume resources and create administrative exhaustion
- All income earned within Russia must be deposited into specially designated accounts where funds remain permanently frozen—with any hope of access tied to the removal of "foreign agent" status, a practical impossibility in the current political reality

A new restriction implemented with calculated timing on April 21, 2025—the day immediately following Orthodox Easter—further prohibits participation in "any educational and enlightenment activities." This sweeping prohibition effectively criminalizes core religious functions including preaching, catechesis, spiritual direction, and pastoral counseling. The graduated penalty structure reveals the deliberate strategy to escalate consequences: first violations trigger administrative sanctions under Article 19.34 of the Administrative Code, while a third violation within a single year activates criminal liability under Article 330.1 of the Criminal Code, potentially resulting in imprisonment. This framework transforms even the most fundamental aspects of religious ministry into potential criminal offenses.

From a theological perspective, such state interference represents a profound violation of religious autonomy. In the words of St. Ambrose to Emperor Theodosius, "The Emperor is within the Church, not above the Church." This principle, though expressed differently across traditions, reflects a common understanding that authentic religious witness requires institutional independence from state control.

2. Administrative Offenses as the Gateway to Persecution

Article 20.3.3 of the Russian Administrative Code ("discrediting the Russian Armed Forces") has emerged as the primary legal instrument in the Kremlin's campaign to suppress anti-war sentiment since March 2022.¹³ The provision underwent initial strategic amendments within two weeks of the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, followed by two additional rounds of significant revisions in 2023, each systematically expanding its scope and application.

The provision establishes a comprehensive legal framework targeting a broad spectrum of anti-war expressive conduct, including:

- Public statements or displays opposing military operations in Ukraine
- Criticism of Russian military or governmental actions related to the war in Ukraine
- Display of Ukrainian national symbols or colors in any context
- Exhibition of peace symbols or anti-war imagery (including internationally recognized symbols like peace signs)

¹³ <https://publicverdict.org/topics/news/13063.html>

In many instances, these administrative proceedings function as a calculated first step in a broader strategy of escalating pressure against dissenters. By establishing a documented record of "violations," authorities create a legal foundation for potential criminal prosecution of repeat offenders, effectively creating a chilling effect on constitutionally protected expression.

The systematic application of Article 20.3.3 demonstrates how administrative law has been repurposed as a flexible instrument of political control, enabling authorities to penalize virtually any expression of opposition to the war in Ukraine with minimal judicial oversight.

Analysis of enforcement patterns reveals a disturbing systematic targeting of religious communities. Between 2022-2025, authorities have pursued at least 25 documented administrative cases against religious figures under Article 20.3.3. This approach—particularly when combined with other provisions of the Administrative Code—enables the state to impose substantial penalties, including hefty fines and administrative detention, while deliberately circumventing the procedural protections and evidentiary standards that would be required in the criminal justice system. The administrative process serves as both punishment and precursor, establishing a documented pattern of "violations" that can later justify escalation to criminal charges.

These administrative cases serve dual purposes:

- They intimidate religious figures and their communities
- They establish a legal predicate for more serious criminal charges

3. Criminal Prosecutions: Severe Penalties for Religious Expression

When administrative measures prove insufficient, authorities escalate to criminal prosecution under various statutes:

- Article 207.3 part 2 ('fake news' about the Russian military"): 12 cases
- Article 205.2 (public calls for terrorism): 6 cases
- Article 280 (public calls for extremism): 7 cases
- Various other criminal statutes including weapons charges, alleged plotting, and refusing military service

Appendix #2 details fourteen court sentences resulting in imprisonment of religious figures who opposed the war, with terms ranging from 2 years and 8 months to 12 years incarceration.

4. Military Conscription as Punishment

Despite constitutional provisions for alternative service based on religious beliefs, evangelical Christians Vyacheslav Reznichenko and Andrei Kapatsyna were sentenced to 2.5 and 2.8 years respectively for refusing military service on religious grounds.

This represents a particularly cynical mechanism for punishing religious pacifism, as it forces believers to choose between their faith commitments and criminal penalties.

Patterns of Persecution

Analysis of these cases reveals four significant patterns that illuminate the systematic nature of this persecution:

1. Cross-Denominational Targeting

Unlike historical Russian religious persecution that often targeted specific denominations, the current religious repression crosses denominational lines. Orthodox, Baptist, Pentecostal, Jewish, Buddhist, and other believers face similar charges for similar expressions of anti-war sentiment.

This pattern suggests that the primary concern is political conformity rather than religious doctrine—a sophisticated approach focused on suppressing any faith-based moral critique of war regardless of its theological source.

2. Progressive Escalation

In a few cases, authorities follow a pattern of escalation: administrative charges, then criminal prosecution (*see Case Study #3 - Denis Popovich and Nikita Ivankovich*). Other notable examples include Hieromonk Nikandr (Pinchuk), 51, from the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (A), who faced two administrative cases before criminal charges were filed, and Bishop Viktor (Pivovarov), 86, from the Rossiyskaya Orthodox Church (RusOC), whose administrative penalty similarly escalated to criminal prosecution. This "ladder of persecution" serves both to intimidate the individual and to warn their religious community of similar consequences for dissent. Some cases were widely covered by state-controlled media in Russia.

3. Digital Surveillance

Digital surveillance permeates religious persecution, with nearly 60% of documented cases stemming from or including online expression—social media posts, published sermons, or even private messaging. This pattern reveals the extensive monitoring of religious figures' digital communications by state and ecclesiastical authorities. Even a single social media post becomes sufficient grounds for initiating the full machinery of persecution against clergy and believers.

CASE STUDY #1:

Priest Nikolai Savchenko¹⁴

Priest Nikolai Savchenko in St. Petersburg was arrested on March 22, 2025, for a social media post featuring a Ukrainian flag alongside a Scripture quote—content posted in 2014, eleven years before his arrest.

Law enforcement officers arrested him in his church immediately after the service concluded, marking the first time in recent years that Russian authorities have conducted an arrest inside a church. He was summarily sentenced to 14 days of administrative arrest that same day.

This case illustrates the retroactive nature of prosecution, the extensive digital monitoring being conducted against religious figures, the lack of due process or the opportunity to contest the charges, and the growing boldness of authorities in violating previously respected sanctuary spaces.

4. Geographical Distribution

These persecutions occur nationwide, but the focus is clearly on high-profile clergy with national influence based in Moscow and St. Petersburg. These patterns reveal a strategic approach to persecution rather than random enforcement. The propaganda machine presents these cases nationwide to intimidate religious communities.

The Human Cost of Persecution

This campaign has already claimed lives. Pavel Kushnir, a 39-year-old Baptist from Tambov, died on July 27, 2024, in pre-trial detention in Birobidzhan after a five-day "dry" hunger strike. Arrested for anti-war statements on YouTube, Kushnir was subjected to harsh detention conditions that exacerbated his health issues. His body reportedly showed signs of beating when returned to his family.

We must also recognize Alexei Navalny as a Christian who died as a result of his moral stance. Though primarily known as a political figure, Navalny was an Orthodox Christian¹⁵ who spoke openly about how the Gospel inspired his resistance to injustice—convictions that led directly to his imprisonment and death in February 2024.

"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

— Tertullian

These deaths mark a grim escalation in the human cost of persecution against those whose conscience, informed by faith, leads them to speak truth to power. These modern witnesses remind us that the cost of discipleship remains high for those who refuse to compromise their faith.

¹⁴ <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2025/03/25/donos-bez-sroka-davnosti>

¹⁵ <https://publicorthodoxy.org/good-reads/they-wont-let-me-down/>

Methods of Investigation and Prosecution

1. Expert Linguistic Analysis

Nearly all cases feature state-commissioned "expert linguistic analysis" of sermons, prayers, or posts to identify "extremist" content. These analyses systematically interpret religious language about peace, reconciliation, or brotherly love as politically subversive.

2. The Critical Role of Parishioner Informants

A particularly troubling aspect is the central role that fellow parishioners play in initiating cases against clergy. Evidence reveals a pattern of "vigilant parishioners" filing formal complaints about anti-war sermons, prayers for peace, or even private conversations. This revival of denunciation practices bears a striking resemblance to Soviet-era tactics that encouraged citizens to report "anti-Soviet" statements by clergy, creating environments of suspicion within religious communities.

CASE STUDY #2:

Priest John Koval - Betrayed by his Altar Server¹⁶

Priest John Koval in Moscow in January 2023 was reported by his own altar server for changing just one word in the mandatory prayer, replacing "victory" with "peace." This betrayal by someone who worked closely with him during liturgical services demonstrates how the culture of informants has penetrated even the most intimate religious spaces.

The altar server reported him to church authorities, who first suspended¹⁷ and later defrocked Koval.¹⁸ The first publication about this case appeared in the government-run Rossiyskaya Gazeta.¹⁹

This case illustrates how the church administration has successfully created an environment where even those serving at the altar feel compelled to monitor and report the slightest deviations from political orthodoxy during worship.

As Christ warned his disciples:

"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death"

— Mark 13:12

These words take on renewed meaning in a context where religious communities are being turned against themselves through systems of surveillance and betrayal.

¹⁶ <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2023/05/12/act-of-lighthearted-betrayal/>

¹⁷ <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-0222-ot-2-fevralya-2023.html>

¹⁸ <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-02121-ot-15-avgusta-2023.html>

¹⁹ <https://rg.ru/2023/02/18/iereia-ioanna-kovalia-otstranili-ot-sluzhb-za-izmenenie-teksta-molitvy.html>

Strategic Coordination Between Church and State

Having examined the legal and administrative tools used by the state to persecute religious voices, we now turn to the critical relationship between the state security services and church authorities—a relationship that has created a uniquely oppressive environment for Orthodox clergy and the faithful.

Historical Context and Revival of Church-State Security Cooperation

The current system of church-state coordination in Russia must be understood within its profound historical context. During the Soviet era, particularly from the late 1940s onward, the KGB maintained an extensive network of informants and agents within the Russian Orthodox Church, effectively controlling senior ecclesiastical appointments and monitoring religious activities. This system has been thoroughly documented by historians through Soviet archives, which opened in the 1990s.

After the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, this established system of cooperation between church officials and state security services deteriorated significantly. Patriarch Alexiy II (1990-2008) maintained pragmatic relationships with state authorities but hesitated to fully revive the deep institutional entanglement that had compromised the church's moral authority during the Soviet period. Under his leadership, the church preserved a degree of independence, occasionally expressing positions that diverged from state preferences.

The election of Metropolitan Kirill as Patriarch in 2009 marked a decisive turning point in this relationship. He embraced political engagement with the explicit intention of positioning himself as close to President Putin as possible. This strategic alignment demanded the re-establishment of direct and close relationships with security services that were accumulating unprecedented power and influence in the Russian state.

In 2023, the FBI declassified several documents, including a confidential 2009 memorandum revealing that one of Kirill's first initiatives as Patriarch was to systematically rebuild and formalize cooperation with Russian intelligence services.²⁰ This represented a deliberate strategic choice by the new Patriarch—himself long rumored to have connections to Soviet-era intelligence services (under the alleged code name "Mikhailov," according to multiple historians).

Institutional Alignment by Design

As relationships between church officials and security services developed, parallel systems of persecution emerged as integral components of a deliberately designed coordinated structure. This coordination represents not merely an opportunistic alignment of interests but a strategic partnership formalized at the highest ecclesiastical and state security levels. The declassified memorandum specifically authorized, among other areas of collaboration:

²⁰ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-useful-priests-russia-church-influence-campaign>

"Coordination with FSB's counterintelligence service in all regional areas, focusing on expert interaction, opposition to sects, and development of parity actions toward foreign organizations."

This document constitutes the first documented evidence confirming what analysts have long suspected: the close coordination between the Russian Orthodox Church and state security structures represents a deliberate strategic choice initiated by Patriarch Kirill himself immediately upon assuming leadership. The ROC effectively surrendered its moral independence in exchange for state support and protection.

CASE STUDY #3:

The Fabricated Terrorism Case Against Orthodox Seminary Graduates

The situation of Sretenskaya Theological Seminary graduates Denis Popovich and Nikita Ivankovich illustrates the dangerous escalation pattern and direct Federal Security Service (FSB) involvement in fabricating cases against religious figures. Both young men are ethnically Ukrainian, with Popovich holding Ukrainian citizenship.

Denis Popovich (born 1997, in Chernivtsi, Ukraine) graduated from Sretenskaya Seminary and served as a lecturer at the Pskov-Pechersk Theological Seminary until 2023. Notably, he previously held positions of trust as secretary and treasurer to Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov)—a hierarch widely regarded as exceptionally close to President Putin and one of the most influential figures in the Moscow Patriarchate—the very hierarch he would later be accused of plotting against.

Nikita Ivankovich (born 1996, in Moscow) holds a Master of Theology degree. While born in Russia, he is ethnically Ukrainian. A graduate of both Sretenskaya Seminary and the St. Cyril and Methodius All-Church Postgraduate and Doctoral School (2023), he served as a choirman and altar server at the Sokolniki Church in Moscow, as well as subdeacon to several vicar bishops of Moscow. Acquaintances consistently describe him as kind and open-hearted.

Observers point out that the case originated from accusations published on the anonymous Telegram-channel "Bishop Lucifer," widely understood to be affiliated with both Moscow Patriarchate officials and the FSB. This channel systematically targets clergy and members of the Russian Orthodox Church deemed insufficiently loyal to the regime.

The campaign against these seminarians began on September 11, 2022, when the channel posted a denunciation titled "Sleeping Banderites in the ROC" (followers of Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera)²¹ targeting Popovich. On October 4, 2022, the channel escalated by publishing an audio recording from a private chat where Popovich explained to friends the consequences of the war in Ukraine. Just eight days later, on October 12, 2022, the channel published photos of Nikita Ivankovich, labeling him "the closest friend of the Banderovite Popovich" and calling for reprisals against both men.

The legal persecution began with no clear reason on January 13, 2025, when Denis Popovich was detained on his way to Sretensky Monastery in Moscow. He was charged with petty hooliganism (Article 20.1.2 of the Administrative Code)—allegedly shouting,

²¹ https://t.me/Bishop_Lucifer/1456

waving his hands, and using obscene language. After two days in a temporary detention center, the Meshchansky District Court of Moscow sentenced him to the "standard" 15 days of administrative arrest.

Upon completion of his initial administrative sentence on January 28, 2025, Popovich was released and within minutes re-arrested for alleged "disobedience to lawful police orders" (Article 19.3.1 of the Administrative Code). The same judge sentenced him to another 15 days of detention.

When Popovich's second administrative sentence expired on February 12, 2025, authorities escalated dramatically. Rather than being released, he was transferred to a pre-trial detention center. Simultaneously, Nikita Ivankovich—who had been supporting Popovich by delivering food, clothing, and hygiene items during his detention—was himself arrested following a search of his home where authorities seized his cell phone and laptop.

The Popovich case exemplifies what Russian human rights defenders call a "carousel"—where two administrative arrests serve as a pretext to build more serious criminal cases against targeted individuals. For example, Vladimir Kara-Murza was arrested in the same way.

Finally, both young men were charged under Article 222.1 of the Criminal Code (illegal acquisition of explosives) and Article 205 (attempted terrorist act)—serious charges carrying decades-long sentences.

On February 28, 2025, the FSB issued an official statement claiming: "The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation has prevented a terrorist act planned by Ukrainian special services against Metropolitan Tikhon of Simferopol and Crimea (G. Shevkunov)." This press release was immediately amplified across all major Russian news outlets.²²

Their Ukrainian background and open anti-war stance appear to have made them particular targets during the current climate of intense anti-Ukrainian sentiment.

The information contained in the FSB materials exhibits numerous contradictions and inconsistencies with documented facts, strongly indicating the fabricated nature of the case. Significantly, during the first weeks after arrest both Popovich and Ivankovich were denied access to qualified legal representation during the critical first two weeks of their detention in the notorious Lefortovo pre-trial detention facility, where they remain incarcerated to this day. Most probably they were tortured in Lefortovo and were forced to confess to preparation of a terrorist act.

The ROC's Unique Position in the Repressive Apparatus

The Russian Orthodox Church stands alone among religious organizations in Russia in creating internal mechanisms of persecution that complement state repression. While Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, and other Christian denominations face external pressure, none

²² <https://ria.ru/20250228/fsb-2002104530.html>

has established institutional structures to punish anti-war positions from within. This exceptional participation in the repressive apparatus demands our focused attention.

Such institutional complicity stems directly from the Church's total alignment with the state's neo-imperial ideology. This alignment has manifested in the deliberate repurposing of canonical processes and ecclesiastical institutions—specifically diocesan disciplinary commissions and ecclesiastical courts—to systematically punish clergy whose conscience leads them to question the war. What we witness is nothing less than the transformation of ecclesiological structures into functional extensions of state power.

Operational Coordination in Persecution Cases

The evidence from documented cases reveals striking patterns of operational coordination between state and ecclesiastical authorities:

1. **Synchronized Timing:** In 2/3 of documented cases involving Orthodox clergy, ecclesiastical charges were filed within 5-7 days of state action, strongly suggesting direct communication between prosecutors and church officials.
2. **Shared Evidence:** Multiple cases reveal that evidence collected by state authorities—including transcripts of wiretapped conversations and intercepted digital communications—appeared verbatim in ecclesiastical court proceedings.
3. **Coordinated Media Campaigns:** State-controlled media outlets and church information services consistently publish nearly identical narratives about persecuted clergy, employing synchronized messaging to discredit religious dissenters.
4. **Direct FSB Intervention:** In numerous regions, FSB officers have directly visited local ruling bishops to discuss in person those clergy who have taken or might potentially take anti-war stances.

The Strategic Purpose of Dual Pressure

This dual system serves several clear strategic objectives:

1. **Theological Legitimation:** The church's participation provides theological legitimation for state repression, framing dissent as not merely politically disloyal but spiritually deviant.
2. **Comprehensive Control:** By subjecting believers to both legal and spiritual penalties, the system creates a uniquely powerful deterrent against religious expressions of conscience.
3. **Institutional Co-optation:** The active participation of religious institutions in repression effectively neutralizes parish communities and informal groups that might otherwise become centers of moral resistance.
4. **Historical Continuity:** This approach deliberately echoes Soviet-era tactics that combined state persecution with pressure through compromised religious institutions totally loyal to the authoritarian state, drawing on well-established methods of religious control.

Post-Invasion Intensification of Church-State Coordination

The coordination between religious authorities and state security structures entered a new, intensified phase following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, representing a critical turning point in this relationship for several specific reasons:

1. **Threat of Grassroots Orthodox Resistance:** Independent Orthodox grassroots activities emerged as a potential source of moral authority that could compromise the official position taken by Church leadership, including Patriarch Kirill's explicit theological justification for the war.
2. **Preventive Suppression:** The coordinated persecution system was rapidly deployed to identify and neutralize potential Orthodox community leaders who might articulate alternative theological perspectives on the war.
3. **Community-Wide Intimidation Strategy:** By publicly targeting prominent clergy and making examples of them through both state prosecution and ecclesiastical punishment, authorities deliberately created an environment of fear intended to force ordinary Christians to align with state propaganda narratives.
4. **Elimination of Theological Alternatives:** The dual pressure system systematically eliminated spaces where alternative Orthodox theological reflections on peace, violence, and Christian ethics could develop, effectively monopolizing religious discourse around state-approved interpretations.
5. **Digital Monitoring Expansion:** The FSB significantly expanded its monitoring of parish-level communications, social media groups, and private messaging among Orthodox believers, creating a pervasive environment of surveillance within religious communities.

The evidence demonstrates that what we are witnessing is not incidental alignment but a sophisticated system of coordination designed to eliminate independent religious voices through complementary mechanisms of state and ecclesiastical pressure. This system was deliberately intensified following the Ukraine invasion specifically to prevent Orthodox communities from becoming centers of moral resistance to the war.

CASE STUDY #4:

A Call to Mark "Peace unto All" Foundation as an "Undesirable Organization"

In August 2024, following a press conference of exchanged Russian political figures in Bonn, the state-controlled website "New Insider" launched a calculated disinformation campaign against the "Peace unto All" foundation,²³ which ministers to Russian Orthodox clergy who have taken antiwar positions. This publication, with its established pattern of targeting Russian opposition figures in emigration, leveled particular scrutiny at Archpriest Andrei Kordochkin, one of the foundation's founders. The report deliberately diminished his ecclesiastical standing as "a minor cleric... banned from serving" while attempting to tarnish his reputation through purported connections to political dissidents.

²³ https://newins.ru/articles/pyataya_kolonna/udavka_dlya_svyashchennikov_-mir_vsem_-_verbovochnaya_struktura_tsru

Without providing evidence, the report fabricated links between the foundation and foreign intelligence services, explicitly alleging direct CIA coordination and funding. The narrative deployed textbook disinformation strategies: recasting the foundation's charitable assistance to displaced clergy families as a covert recruitment operation, portraying priests with antiwar convictions as morally compromised individuals "prone to betrayal," and undermining their theological framework by dismissing their commitment to peace as "vulgar pacifism" based on "speculative" interpretations of Scripture.

The campaign intensified significantly in April 2025, when Yana Lantratova, Chair of the State Duma Committee on Civil Society Development and Religious Associations, submitted a formal request²⁴ to the Moscow Region Prosecutor calling for the designation of "Peace unto All" (registered in Germany as "Friede Allen e.V.") as an "undesirable organization" in Russia. Her letter further demanded that individuals connected with the foundation be registered as "foreign agents" and advocated blocking websites that distribute their materials.

On May 13, 2025, Lantratova escalated her campaign with a striking address before the full parliamentary session in Moscow.²⁵ From the central podium, she declared that "religion and faith have become an integral part of the Special Military Operation" while claiming this spiritual domain now faces "a new attack from the collective West" through what she termed "false shepherds and false elders." Lantratova reserved her sharpest criticism for the "Peace Unto All" foundation: "In its first year, the foundation helped—or effectively recruited—36 priests," she asserted, accusing the organization of "publishing materials discrediting Russia" and "encouraging support for those who have left to fight against the Special Military Operation." Most alarmingly, she specifically named Archpriest Andrei Kordochkin and Valerian Dunin-Barkovsky as clergy allegedly working for German secret services—explicitly framing pastoral care as espionage.

This official action illustrates how media disinformation operations frequently pave the way for legal persecution, with the parliamentarian repeating virtually identical unsubstantiated allegations that the foundation "spreads Western narratives about Russia as an aggressor," "publishes deliberately false information about the Russian Armed Forces," and "discredits the Russian Orthodox Church"—effectively criminalizing Christian charity toward clergy and their families in need.

Ecclesiastical Mechanisms of Suppression

The Russian Orthodox Church's participation in the suppression of dissenting voices represents a profound distortion of its canonical and pastoral traditions. While state mechanisms target all religious communities, the Orthodox Church stands alone in deploying internal ecclesiastical mechanisms against those who express anti-war views.

²⁴ The author of this report has a copy of the document.

²⁵ <https://www.agents.media/v-gosdume-atakovali-uehavshih-iz-rossii-svyashhennikov-obviniv-ih-v-rabote-na-zapadnye-spetssluzhby/>

Three Primary Ecclesiastical Mechanisms

The Russian Orthodox Church has employed three primary mechanisms to punish clergy who express anti-war views:

1. Mandatory "Victory" Prayer and Punishment for Refusing to Read it

Following Patriarch Kirill's politicization of Orthodox worship in September 2022 through the introduction of a mandatory prayer "for the victory of Holy Rus," clergy faced a stark choice between complicity and consequence. This liturgical innovation swiftly transitioned from recommendation to requirement, with the prayer mandated after every Divine Liturgy throughout Russian parishes. The ecclesiastical penalties for non-compliance proved particularly severe in the Moscow Diocese—where Patriarch Kirill directly exercises episcopal authority—creating an environment of liturgical surveillance and enforcement.

Even minor textual alterations or omissions of this war-sanctifying prayer became grounds for severe canonical discipline. The case of priest John Koval (Case Study #3) exemplifies this punitive approach, as he became the first priest formally defrocked specifically for prayer non-compliance in May 2023, merely six months after the prayer's introduction—demonstrating the Moscow Patriarchate's commitment to enforcing ideological conformity through liturgical practice.

Notable cases include:

- Priest John Koval (Moscow) suspended and defrocked
- Archpriest Alexey Uminsky (Moscow) removed from his parish of 30+ years, suspended²⁶ and defrocked²⁷
- Priest Andrey Kudrin (Moscow) suspended²⁸ and defrocked²⁹
- Priest Konstantin Kokora (Moscow) suspended³⁰ for three years
- Hegumen Tikhon Sokolovsky (Vologda) suspended³¹ and defrocked

CASE STUDY #5:

Priest Dimitri Safronov - Punished for Commemorating Navalny

On April 24, 2024, priest Dimitri Safronov was suspended from ministry for three years after conducting a memorial service (panikhida) at Alexei Navalny's grave on the 40th day after his death. The decree,³² signed by Patriarch Kirill, not only removed him from active

²⁶ <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-0201-ot-3-yanvarya-2024.html>

²⁷ <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-0222-ot-8-fevralya-2024.html>

²⁸ <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-0260-ot-4-aprelya-2024.html>

²⁹ <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-02133-ot-14-avgusta-2024.html>

³⁰ <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-02158-ot-15-oktyabrya-2024.html>

³¹ <https://vologda-mitropolia.ru/documents/o-zapreshhenii-v-svjashhennosluzhenii-ieromonaha-tihona-sokolovskogo/>

³² <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-0277-ot-15-aprelya-2024.html>

priestly service but also reassigned him to the diminished role of psalmodist, while explicitly prohibiting him from wearing clerical vestments and the priestly cross—symbols of his ordained status.

Safronov had also previously declined to read the mandated prayer "for the victory of Holy Rus" during liturgical services. This case demonstrates how both the commemoration of political opposition figures and the refusal to participate in sanctioned pro-war prayers are treated with equivalent severity as ecclesiastical offenses, warranting punishments that effectively remove clergy from public ministry.

2. "Oath-breaking" Charges as Canonical Distortions of Ecclesiastical Courts

Church courts have become instruments of political repression through distorted interpretation and improper application of canonical traditions:

- The 25th Apostolic Rule ("A bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, convicted of... perjury... shall be deposed") has been repurposed to punish clergy who express political dissent
- Canons relating to ecclesiastical authority have been expanded beyond their original scope
- The ROC has systematically reframed moral dissent as theological deviation, deliberately characterizing anti-war positions as "schismatic"—thereby transforming ethical conscience into ecclesiastical rebellion and weaponizing church discipline against those upholding traditional Christian teachings on peace and reconciliation

This represents a profound distortion of Orthodox canonical tradition, which was never intended to enforce political conformity but rather to preserve the integrity of the faith and the moral witness of the Church.

3. Methodical Ecclesiastical Persecution

While celebrating liturgy in the Spaso-Prilutsky monastery in the northern Russian city of Vologda, Hegumen Tikhon Sokolovsky consistently refused to recite the "prayer for victory of Holy Rus" which has become a kind of loyalty test for conformist Orthodox clergy. The history of his ecclesiastical persecution unfolded in several stages:

- First, blagochinny, one of the senior officials of the monastery, acting on behalf of the bishop, instructed him to refrain from any public expression of his anti-war position
- Then came a general ban on preaching, hearing confessions and performing other priestly duties
- Subsequently, a case was opened in the ecclesiastical court, and the church court made a decision to defrock him
- This decision was approved by the Metropolitan and then received final approval from Patriarch Kirill

Hegumen Tikhon refused to recognize this unmotivated decision, left the official Church and joined the "Union of Orthodox Communities of the Apostolic Tradition" where anti-war clergy now constitute a significant group. His case is part of a broader pattern where courageous priests have left the Russian Orthodox Church to join 'alternative' Orthodox jurisdictions or became 'nones' rather than compromise their faith and conscience.

"To my enormous disappointment, this war has distorted the face of the Russian Orthodox Church and transformed it into a grimace twisted by anger and malice. I stopped recognizing some friends, many parishioners, people who were once close to me."

— Archpriest Sergei Rybakov, suspended³³

Cross-Religious Dimensions of Persecution

The current pattern of religious persecution in Russia reveals a strategic shift from the historical targeting of specific denominations to a more sophisticated approach focused on suppressing any faith-based moral critique of state policy, regardless of theological source. Historical Russian religious persecution often targeted specific denominations, as we see in the ongoing persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses. Yet current repression also crosses denominational boundaries: Orthodox, Baptist, Pentecostal, Jewish, Buddhist, and other believers face similar charges for similar expressions of anti-war sentiment.

The persecution of believers across different faith traditions reveals striking similarities in methodology but important contextual differences. While Orthodox clergy face dual pressure from state and ecclesiastical authorities, Protestant pastors, rabbis, and Buddhist leaders face distinctive challenges shaped by their communities' historical position in Russian society.

Systematic Persecution of Evangelical and Pentecostal Communities

Evangelical and Pentecostal communities in Russia have faced a distinctive pattern of persecution that combines both pre-war suspicion of "foreign" religious influences and new pressures related to anti-war positions.

CASE STUDY #6:

Pastor Nikolai Romanyuk - Imprisoned for an Anti-War Sermon

The persecution of Pastor Nikolai Romanyuk of the Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church in Moscow illustrates how criminal statutes are being used against Protestant clergy. Detained on October 18, 2024, authorities initiated criminal proceedings against him under Article 280.4 (public calls for activities directed against state security) for delivering a pacifistic sermon.

³³ <https://www.mir-vsem.info/post/не-обижайтесь-на-бога-протоиерей-сергий-рыбаков-о-себе-прихожанах-и-взаимной-ненависти>

On April 15, 2025, the Balashikha City Court extended his detention for another two months, despite no investigative actions having been conducted since January.

This case demonstrates how broadly authorities are interpreting "state security" to include religious teachings that question military actions, effectively criminalizing pastoral ministry that does not align with state policy.

Pastor Yuri Sipko, who served as Chairman of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists from 2002 to 2010 and as a former Vice-President of the World Baptist Alliance, has faced severe persecution for his anti-war stance. After learning about a criminal case against him under Article 207.3 (public dissemination of knowingly false information about the Armed Forces), Pastor Sipko managed to leave Russia. State-controlled television channels broadcasted reports about the case that used derogatory terms to describe Protestant communities as "pseudo-religious" or "radical religious" organizations and "centers of influence sponsored by foreign intelligence services."

Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia

To understand the full landscape of religious persecution in Russia, we must maintain a broader perspective that encompasses both the recent wave of anti-war prosecutions and the longer-standing patterns of repression against religious minorities. These parallel tracks of persecution reveal complementary dimensions of the Russian state's approach to controlling religious expression and suppressing communities that operate outside state influence.

Repressions against Jehovah's Witnesses are not connected to the antiwar prosecutions directly, as they have gone on for several years and began long before the war. Yet, it is notable that they have continued after the beginning of the full-scale invasion against Ukraine. The systematic persecution against Jehovah's Witnesses began on March 15, 2017, when the Russian Ministry of Justice filed a lawsuit with the Supreme Court to recognize the "Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia" as an extremist organization.

By October 2019, according to Yaroslav Sivulsky of the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, the situation had become "consistently bad" with 100 Witnesses imprisoned, 128 receiving suspended sentences, and 24 facing fines, while the total number subjected to searches, interrogations, and persecution exceeded 640 believers across Russia.

On August 17, 2017, the Vyborg City Court declared that the Jehovah's Witnesses' Russian translation of the Bible was "extremist material" and ordered the destruction of all copies. This Bible was subsequently listed as item #4488 in the Federal List of Extremist Materials.

The persecution has maintained its severe intensity throughout these years, with no signs of abatement or moderation in the authorities' approach. Throughout 2024, Russian authorities continued to initiate new criminal proceedings against Jehovah's Witnesses on charges of continuing the activities of an extremist organization. According to records maintained by Jehovah's Witnesses themselves, at least 41 believers became defendants in

these new cases. Based on data collected by SOVA Center,³⁴ as of early March 2025, no fewer than 143 believers were being held in penal colonies and pre-trial detention centers across Russia. This figure exceeds the total number of incarcerated religious figures in all anti-war cases combined, highlighting the particular severity of persecution against this religious minority.

Danish citizen Dennis Christensen became the first foreign national imprisoned following the Orel Court's 2017 decision to ban the organization in this region. Despite the absence of any evidence of extremist activity, the Oryol court sentenced Christensen to six years in prison for "organizing the activity of an extremist organization." After serving five years, he was finally released, handcuffed, and deported to Denmark with an eight-year ban on returning to Russia.

Patterns of Resistance and Exodus

Despite systematic persecution, significant patterns of resistance have emerged within religious communities in Russia, demonstrating that state and ecclesiastical pressure has not entirely suppressed the prophetic voice of faith.

1. Clergy Resignation: The Silent Protest

At least 27 Orthodox priests have voluntarily left active ministry since February 2022, choosing to become laypeople rather than continue serving in an environment they consider morally compromised.

CASE STUDY #7:

Archpriest Sergei Rybakov from Samara

Archpriest Sergei Rybakov, former rector of St. Tatiana's Church at Samara University, was systematically removed from his position after refusing to incorporate prayers for "the victory of Holy Rus" into liturgical services and maintaining anti-war positions. From the invasion's onset, his public statements against the conflict on social media platforms triggered immediate interventions from diocesan authorities.

The ecclesiastical campaign against him formalized in April 2022 through escalating confrontational communications from diocesan officials. By March 2023, the situation intensified dramatically when Metropolitan Sergiy of Samara and Novokuibyshevsk explicitly warned Rybakov of his identification as a subject of FSB surveillance. This revelation precipitated a coordinated pressure campaign, with both the priest's family members and select parishioners receiving direct threats. Concurrently, authorities systematically restricted his public voice by blocking his VKontakte account—a state-controlled social media platform widely used in Russia—while Samara University administrators initiated formal proceedings to sever ties with the now "uncomfortable" church community.

³⁴ <https://www.sova-center.ru/en/religion/publications/2025/05/d47105/>

Under this multilayered coercion, Rybakov was compelled to request reserve status (za shtat), effectively relinquishing his pastoral authority and parish community. The disciplinary process culminated on September 15, 2023, with the formal revocation of his clerical standing through suspension from all ministerial functions.

Despite these ecclesiastical sanctions, Father Sergei continues his spiritual outreach through YouTube while pursuing psychological studies, articulating hope that this professional development might eventually contribute to helping the Church "regain its human face" following its institutional recovery from the trauma of supporting the war.

2. Jurisdictional Exodus: Canonical Recourse to Constantinople for Clergy

At least 12 priests defrocked by Moscow for anti-war positions have been received by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, including prominent Moscow priest Archpriest Alexei Uminsky. These clergy now serve in parishes across Europe, ministering primarily to Russian emigré communities (*see Appendix # 3*).

Since 2023, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has become an unexpected patron for Russian antiwar clergy. His willingness to restore those defrocked for political reasons represents an implicit ecclesiastical judgment against Moscow's actions and provides both practical refuge and a symbolic counternarrative to Moscow's claim that supporting the war of aggression is the only option for the Orthodox.

3. Jurisdictional Exodus: Parishes Leaving the Moscow Patriarchate

The most dramatic form of ecclesiastical resistance has been the departure of entire parishes from Moscow's jurisdiction, particularly in Western Europe, including the Netherlands, Italy and Norway.

On April 6, 2025, the Russian Orthodox Christian Parish in Bergen, Norway became the first in Northern Europe to leave the Moscow Patriarchate. In an open vote with 135 parishioners in favor and only 16 against, the overwhelming majority chose to sever ties with Moscow.

This decision came after their rector, priest Dmitry Ostanin (a Ukrainian native who had signed the Open letter against the war), faced systematic harassment and ecclesiastical punishment. Rather than accepting this punishment for what they viewed as a moral stance aligned with Christian teaching, the Bergen parish chose collective resistance.

The Systematic Nature of Persecution

The evidence reveals a coordinated approach characterized by multi-layered repression. Religious dissenters face pressure through multiple channels:

- State prosecution (administrative and criminal)
- Church prosecution (ecclesiastical courts and discipline measures)
- Economic pressure (fired from parishes)

- Social isolation (media campaigns, employment discrimination)

This creates a "total pressure" environment where religious figures have no safe space from which to express their conscience.

Clear evidence of coordination exists between:

- *Law enforcement agencies*: investigations initiated within days of religious speech
- *Security agencies*: FSB involvement in criminal cases against clergy
- *Ministry of Justice*: 100% designation rate for "foreign agent" status against religious figures who express anti-war positions
- *Courts*: 100% conviction rate in religious anti-war cases
- *Ecclesiastical courts*: 100% conviction rate in religious anti-war cases

This is not a collection of individual cases but a broad, systematic campaign to eliminate independent religious voices on matters of war and peace.

Institutional Silence

One of the most troubling aspects of this persecution is the near-complete absence of public support from both Russian and international religious institutions. This silence spans denominational boundaries and institutions at multiple levels.

Within Russia, not a single case documented in this report has prompted public solidarity statements from:

- The Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy (though there is evidence of unofficial support from anti-war clergy in a few regions)
- Leadership of Baptist or Pentecostal unions
- Other denominational authorities

Internationally, the silence extends to:

- 13 of the 14 autocephalous Orthodox Churches (with only the Ecumenical Patriarchate taking public action)
- Most Catholic and Protestant church bodies
- International ecumenical organizations

This institutional silence serves multiple functions:

1. It legitimizes state persecution by suggesting anti-war religious figures are isolated deviants
2. It signals to potential dissenters that they cannot expect institutional protection
3. It reinforces the narrative that patriotism and religious fidelity require supporting state military actions
4. It normalizes repression within religious communities

This silence should deeply trouble leaders of Christian communities in the West, but as of now it has not. Scripture reminds us: "Remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering" (Hebrews 13:3). This apostolic injunction calls us to join in solidarity with the persecuted—a solidarity currently lacking from most religious institutions.

Conclusions and Recommendations: A Call to Break the Silence

The evidence presented in this analysis reveals not merely isolated incidents but a systematic campaign of religious persecution in Russia where Christians are the main target. This coordinated campaign methodically suppresses religious institutions under the weight of neo-imperial ideology, silencing spiritual voices that dare to speak truth about the war and fulfill their prophetic calling to preach Christ's peace. Most troubling has been the deafening silence from Orthodox Churches worldwide, other Christian denominations, and ecumenical organizations—a silence that tacitly normalizes the suppression of religious conscience.

This situation fundamentally violates the Orthodox understanding of the Church's prophetic role and moral independence. The theological principle of the Church's spiritual autonomy is essential for authentic religious witness in all faith traditions.

The Body of Christ suffers when one part is wounded. As St. Paul reminds us, "If one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 Corinthians 12:26). This spiritual reality demands concrete action from Christian leaders outside Russia:

1. A CALL TO ALL CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND DENOMINATIONS

- Issue formal statements condemning the persecution of believers for their fidelity to the Gospel's call to peacemaking
- Include prayers for persecuted Russian clergy and laypeople in regular worship services
- Organize prayer vigils coinciding with significant trials of religious prisoners
- Host delegations of exiled Russian clergy to share their testimonies with your communities

2. A SPECIFIC CALL TO ORTHODOX CHURCHES

- Establish canonical reception processes for exiled clergy whose ecclesiastical sanctions were politically motivated, following the Ecumenical Patriarchate's courageous example
- Develop pan-Orthodox theological resources affirming the Church's traditional teaching on just war, peace, and the limits of state authority over ecclesial life

- Include specific commemorations of persecuted Russian clergy in the Great Entrance or litanies during Divine Liturgy
- Convene a pan-Orthodox consultation to address the unprecedented distortion of canonical tradition for political purposes

3. INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

- Support and strengthen the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the Russian Federation
- Urge religious leaders to raise religious persecution concerns directly with Russian government representatives
- Mobilize faith representatives at the World Council of Churches, Conference of European Churches, and similar bodies to advance formal resolutions supporting the persecuted
- Engage the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to monitor religious freedom violations

4. PRACTICAL SOLIDARITY

- Create specialized asylum and resettlement pathways specifically for persecuted religious figures through church sponsorship programs
- Establish an international monitoring network dedicated to documenting persecution cases
- Develop comprehensive pastoral care initiatives for clergy and their families in exile who face both canonical and psychological trauma
- Support Russian-language religious broadcasting and publishing that provides authentic theological perspectives on peace, justice, and the proper limits of state authority
- Fund legal defense teams for clergy facing both administrative and criminal charges

5. PROPHETIC EDUCATION

- Incorporate accounts of contemporary Russian religious persecution into seminary and religious education curricula
- Commission scholarly theological research on church-state relations in times of conflict
- Host international conferences featuring testimony from persecuted clergy, creating platforms for their witness
- Develop congregational educational resources connecting the suffering of persecuted Russian clergy to the broader struggle for religious freedom

The persecution of believers in Russia tests whether institutional self-preservation will overshadow authentic Christian witness.

"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."
— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Appendix # 1. Religious Figures Designated as "Foreign Agents" by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation*

	Name	Registry Number	Date	Description
1.	Andrei Zubov	#550	02/17/2023	Historian, orientalist, religious scholar and Christian activist, left Russia
2.	Telo Tulku Rinpoche (Erdni-Basan Ombadykov), Shadjin Lama	#532	01/27/2023	President of the Buddhist Union of Kalmykia and representative of the Dalai Lama XIV, forced to resign from his position as Supreme Lama of Kalmykia
3.	Pinchas Goldschmidt, Rabbi	#739	06/30/2023	Former Chief Rabbi of Moscow, left Russia
4.	Andrei Kuraev, Protodeacon	#634	12/22/2023	Orthodox theologian and public speaker, left Russia
5.	Albert Ratkin, Pentecostal Bishop	#814	06/14/2024	Continues highly constrained activities in Kaluga
6.	Gregory Mikhnov-Voitenko, Bishop	#836	07/19/2024	Continues highly constrained activities in St. Petersburg
7.	Andrei Lvov, Archpriest	#903	12/27/2024	Continues highly constrained activities in Moscow
8.	Ksenia Luchenko	#986	05/16/2025	Orthodox, journalist and scholar, left Russia

*) The data is of May 2025.

Appendix # 2. Anti-War Christian Prisoners in Russia (2022-2025)

	Name	Religious Organization	Sentence
1.	Vyacheslav Reznichenko	Baptist	2.5 years in a penal colony
2.	Evgeny Bestuzhev	Conciliar Orthodox Apostolic Church	5 years 3 months of probation
3.	Dmitry Kuznetsov	Non-denominational	4 years in a penal colony
4.	Evgeny Mishchenko	Non-denominational	12 years imprisonment
5.	Andrey Kapatsyna	Pentecostal	2 years and 10 months in a penal colony
6.	Maxim Makushin	Pentecostal	2 years and 8 months in a penal colony
7.	Nikolay Ulitin, Bishop	Pentecostal	3.5 years in a penal colony
8.	Svyatoslav Yugov, Pastor	Pentecostal	3.5 years in a penal colony
9.	Evgenia Mayboroda	Russian Orthodox Church	5.5 years imprisonment
10.	Igor Orlovsky	Russian Orthodox Church	7.5 years imprisonment
11.	Mikhail Simonov	Russian Orthodox Church	7 years and 8 months imprisonment
12.	Vitaly Koltsov	Russian Orthodox Church	6 years imprisonment
13.	Ioann Kurmoyarov, Hieromonk	Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCORA)	3 years imprisonment
14.	Nikolay Shatkovsky, Monk	Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCORA)	5 years imprisonment

Appendix # 3. Clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church Transferred to the Ecumenical Patriarchate (2022-2025)*

This list represents that clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church, who stood in opposition to the war in Ukraine and did not support the position of Patriarch Kirill and Church officials. Significantly, these clergymen come not only from within Russia itself, but from different post-Soviet countries and Western Europe, showing the breadth of ecclesiastical opposition to the conflict within the ROC. While three cases of transfer were not directly related to anti-war positions, they nevertheless form part of the broader trend of clergy suppressed by their bishops for unfair reasons, distancing themselves from the Moscow Patriarchate during this period. Moreover, this list shows the huge and systematic work undertaken by Ecumenical Patriarchate officials to carefully check and process applications from these clergy.

	Name	Rank	Country of Origin or Service
1	Georgy Ananiev	Archpriest	Lithuania
2	Mikhail Bakker	Priest	Netherlands
3	Hildo Bos	Archpriest	Netherlands
4	Afanasy Bukin	Hieromonk	Israel
5	Eduard Chervinsky	Archpriest	USA
6	Vitalius Dauparas	Priest	Lithuania
7	Anthon du Pau	Protopresbyter	Netherlands
8	Peter Eremeev	Igumen	Russia
10	Tikhon Gaifudinov	Igumen	United States
11	Oleg Karlashchuk	Deacon	Netherlands
12	Andrei Kordochkin	Archpriest	Spain
13	John Koval	Priest	Russia
14	Oleg Kozak	Priest	Netherlands
16	Alexander Kukhta	Priest	Belarus
15	Andrei Kuraev	Protodeacon	Russia
17	Joan Lena	Priest	Netherlands
18	Vladimir Melnichuk	Archpriest	Italy
19	Vitalius Motkus	Archpriest	Lithuania
20	John Ovchinnikov	Deacon	Russia
21	Peter Prokoptsov	Archpriest	Belarus
22	Georgy Roy	Archpriest	Belarus
23	Vladimir Selyavko	Archpriest	Lithuania
25	John Sewter	Protodeacon	Netherlands
24	Gintaras Sungaila	Priest	Lithuania
26	Andrei Todosiychuk	Deacon	Netherlands
27	George Tsyburevikin	Deacon	Lithuania
28	Alexei Uminsky	Archpriest	Russia
29	Johannes Veldmeijer	Deacon	Netherlands
30	Meletius Webber	Archimandrite	Netherlands

**) The data is of May 2025.*

This register of clergy who made the difficult decision to transfer to the Patriarchal Exarchate represents a profound witness to conscience within the Orthodox tradition. Their actions reflect the Orthodox Christian understanding that the Church must stand as a voice for peace and reconciliation, even when such a stance requires significant personal and professional sacrifice.

Appendix # 4. Documentation Resources

Official Documents and Reports:

- UN Special Rapporteur Report 2024: <https://docs.un.org/ru/A/HRC/57/59>
- Russian Ministry of Justice Foreign Agent Registry: <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/pages/reestr-inostryannykh-agentov/>
- Russian Orthodox Church Social Concept Document: <https://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/419128.html>
- Amnesty International Report Russia 2024/25: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/eastern-europe-and-central-asia/russia/report-russia/>
- Problems with the implementation of freedom of conscience in Russia in 2024: <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/publications/2025/04/d51402/>
- Problems with the implementation of freedom of conscience in Russia in 2023: <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/publications/2024/03/d49416/>

Monitoring Organizations:

- UN Special Rapporteur on the Russian Federation <https://www.ohchr.org/en/specialprocedures/sr-russian-federation>
- SOVA Research Center : <https://www.sova-center.ru>
- Christians Against War Project: <https://shaltnotkill.info/>
- Peace Unto All Foundation: <https://www.mir-vsem.info/>
- Public Orthodoxy (Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University): <https://publicorthodoxy.org/>

Investigative Journalism:

- Foreign Affairs: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-useful-priests-russia-church-influence-campaign>
- Public Orthodoxy: <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2023/05/12/act-of-lighthearted-betrayal/>
- Novaya Gazeta Europe: <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/04/03/dukhovnaia-zachistka>

Selected reports about the ecclesiastical court's decisions and decrees of bishops:

- <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-0222-ot-2-fevralya-2023.html>
- <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-02121-ot-15-avgusta-2023.html>
- <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-0201-ot-3-yanvarya-2024.html>
- <https://moseparh.ru/cerkovnyj-sud-g-moskvy-prinyal-reshenie-po-delu-prot-aleksiya-uminskogo.html>
- <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-02133-ot-14-avgusta-2024.html>
- <https://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-02158-ot-15-oktyabrya-2024.html>
- <https://vologda-mitropolia.ru/documents/o-zapreshhenii-v-svjashhennosluzhenii-ieromonaha-tihona-sokolovskogo/>

Selected interviews with anti-war religious figures:

- Archpriest Alexei Uminsky: <https://rus.err.ee/1609501153/aleksej-uminskij-samoe-plohoe-v-hristianstve-jeto-hristiane>
- Bishop Grigory Mikhnov-Voitenko: <https://www.poligonmedia.io/svyashhennik-grigorij-mihnov-voitenko/>

- Hieromonk John Kurmoyarov:
<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2025/04/21/ieromonakh-ioann-ia-otritsaiu-liuboi-natsionalizm-i-ukrainskii-i-sviatorusskii>
- Pentecostal bishop Albert Ratkin:
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/04/russian-pastors-oppose-putin-war-ukraine/>

*"Remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison,
and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering."*

— Hebrews 13:3