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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

The Anti-cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union

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Introduction

Religious regulation in Russia and the countries of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) presents a complex landscape that is easily misinterpreted or oversimplified. Advocates for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the region are often frustrated by attempts to communicate with government officials, who claim their discriminatory measures are intended to defend religious freedom and human rights, or argue such measures are a democratic response to the needs and concerns of citizens. Such rhetoric draws on a specific historical experience that must be understood to be effectively countered. This report provides essential context and recommendations to enable advocates and policymakers to more effectively respond to FoRB abuses in the region. Effective solutions must prioritize education about the value of FoRB for social stability, as well as information about existing obstacles to its implementation.

Anti-cultism

By the time the Russian government banned the Jehovah's Witnesses in April 2017, Alexander Dvorkin, a Russian anti-cult activist, had spent years lobbying for strong measures against groups he frequently refers to as "totalitarian cults" and "destructive sects"—and the Jehovah's Witnesses were at the top of his list. In an [interview](#) with state media shortly after the ban, Dvorkin claimed that the group maintains "strict control over every aspect of its members' lives, including even the most intimate moments of their family lives as spouses have to report on one another." Just as in the days of Stalin, "All members have to keep an eye on each other, to spy on one another," he said. Dvorkin believes that the international human rights community, especially those who advocate for freedom of religion and belief, enable these destructive organizations to prey on society. According to him, "the struggle for human rights is being supplanted with the struggle for the rights of organizations which violate human rights." Banning the Jehovah's Witnesses, to his mind, was not a violation of fundamental freedoms, but rather an essential step for their preservation.

The contemporary Russian anti-cult campaign has diverse roots. It is an oversimplification to attribute contemporary Russian religious regulation to a vague "Soviet mentality" or to the desire of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) for spiritual hegemony. Indeed, the rhetoric of "brainwashing," "mind control," "zombification," and "totalitarian sects," which is frequently used to justify harsh measures, draws on fears

about the Soviet past and its subjugation of the individual to a malevolent collective. And while the ROC has been a major supporter of the anti-cult movement, there is ongoing opposition to its aims and methods among both clergy and laity.

While both the Soviet legacy and the ROC are major influences, current attitudes about and approaches to religious minorities also stem from other factors, including post-Soviet socio-economic developments, the Putin regime's desire for national unity, individual fears about family security or change generally, and transnational concerns about the perceived dangers from new religious movements (NRMs). The anti-cult movement, an international network supported locally by the ROC, the government, and concerned citizens, unites all these factors.

The anti-cult movement first emerged in the West during the 1970s and 80s, after traumatic events such as the Jonestown Massacre (1978) raised fears about the perceived threat of secretive groups. In France, the movement found fertile ground in the nation's secular ethos and historical struggle of reason versus superstition. In the late-1990s and early 2000s, a fragile Russian state eager for stability and unity adopted the message, fueling a crackdown on religious minorities that has yet to diminish or end.

In turn, the Russian model has had a significant impact in other countries of the FSU, such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, where anti-cult ideas influence both religious regulation and policies related to anti-terrorism and the fight against "extremism." In that context, the anti-cult movement continues to conduct a highly effective disinformation campaign against religious minorities with devastating consequences for their human rights. To adequately address the ongoing violation of religious freedom in Russia and Central Asia, it is essential to understand the logic of this movement and its enduring appeal in the region.

Religious Regulation in the Soviet Union

Contrary to popular perception, the Soviet Union never outlawed religion: it regulated it. Both Karl Marx, philosopher, and Vladimir Lenin, founder of the Soviet Union, were convinced that old beliefs were rooted in human suffering and would simply fade away as the attainment of communism removed any underlying need for them. Yet as the Russian revolution developed into civil war and famine, Soviet animosity towards religion in general, and the ROC in particular, intensified. Anti-religious campaigns accelerated over the course of the 1920s, culminating in a 1929 Law on Religious Associations that set the pattern for religious regulation

for the rest of Soviet history and beyond. The law required all religious groups to register with the state in order to receive legal status, made all religious activity outside the confines of a recognized church illegal, and banned the religious instruction of minors or the distribution of religious literature.

Over the lifespan of the Soviet Union, official policies about religion continued to evolve. In 1943, at the height of World War II, Stalin rehabilitated the ROC's standing in Soviet society in order to harness the Church's popularity for the state. The ROC was allowed to restore its depleted hierarchy, but the state would now approve or appoint most leaders through the newly-formed Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs. The ROC became a quasi-state religion with privileged status. Other traditional religions like Islam enjoyed similar status in regions where they dominated and were regulated by the Council for Religious Affairs. Religion was increasingly treated as a marker of ethnicity and, if tightly controlled, was cited as a testament to the supposed diversity of Soviet socialism. Later laws reinforced the primacy of legal registration, carefully delineating the eligibility requirements and permitted activities. Registered religious groups were generally deemed safe and even useful, while those who failed or refused to register, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, were deemed "enemies of the state."

As the once dynamic Soviet economy stagnated in the 1960s and 70s, Soviet citizens began to question their system, and many found meaning in religion and spirituality—both traditional faiths like Orthodox Christianity, as well as new groups previously unknown in the region. For instance, in 1971, the founder of the Hare Krishna movement visited a Moscow "orientalist" and helped to inspire profound interest in the group among disillusioned Soviets. The state tried to curtail this trend through propaganda and harsher measures but it continued, and in 1988, Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, symbolically embraced the ROC, allowing a massive celebration of the Church's thousand-year anniversary. In September 1990, the Soviet Union officially ended its policy of state-sponsored atheism and [approved](#) a surprisingly tolerant law on freedom of conscience at a time when people were "flocking to church in record numbers." One month later, the Soviet Republic of Russia passed a law on freedom of worship that guaranteed religious freedom for all.

This law shaped official policy towards religion in Russia for much of the 1990s, even after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. The collapse of the union was accompanied by an even more dramatic collapse of post-Soviet economies and societies, as a few private individuals monopolized former state assets and average

citizens saw incomes and pensions disappear. At the same time, the trickle of religious interest during the late-Soviet era became a flood as beleaguered citizens sought stability and reassurance. In 1991, the Jehovah's Witnesses received legal status and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which had only 300 members in 1991, grew to 2,000 by early 1993. Although the majority of society remained non-religious, most religious groups experienced a dramatic increase in membership: especially NRMs like the Church of Scientology, the Unification Church, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Psychics and faith-healers became television icons. In 1992, a man claiming to be Jesus Christ moved to Siberia with 5,000 of his followers and established the first of many growing communities.

This growth of religious diversity was particularly alarming to the ROC, which despite its privileged status in the Soviet Union had also suffered under the atheist regime. In 1996, the same year that the religion law was introduced in the Russian Duma, the future Patriarch Kirill complained about "invading missionary organizations" with multi-million-dollar budgets who fought the ROC like "boxers in a ring with their pumped-up muscles" and "used their financial resources to the utmost in order to buy people."

Alexander Dvorkin and the Russian Anti-cult Movement

Moscow native Alexander Dvorkin left the Soviet Union in 1977 at the age of 20 to study in the United States, where he remained until 1992. While in the United States, he embraced Russian Orthodox Christianity and spent time working at the U.S. government-sponsored news outlet, *Voice of America*. His years in the country coincided with a growing anti-cult movement informed by pseudo-scientific concepts like "brainwashing" and "mind control" and the theories of psychologist Robert Jay Lifton and anti-Communist activist Edward Hunter. This movement described NRMs as "fanatic" or "bizarre," and portrayed individual members as helpless victims without their own free will or ability to save themselves. This rhetoric enabled groups to justify the forced removal of friends and relatives from the religions of their choice, and even advocated for "deprogramming" regimens that used coercive (and highly questionable) psychological techniques.

Dvorkin brought many anti-cult ideas with him when he returned to a newly-independent Russia in 1992 to work at the ROC's new Department of Religious Education. He arrived in Moscow with a Ph.D. in Medieval Studies and began organizing a Russian anti-cult movement that quickly gained popular support from Russians alarmed

by the sudden shift in social norms. Many Russians perceived any and all religion as somewhat strange, and NRMs as particularly so: especially if their friends or family members had joined one of these groups. In 1993, Dvorkin founded the [*Saint Irenaeus of Leon Information-Consultation Center \(SILIC\)*](#) under the auspices of the ROC and with the blessing of then Patriarch Alexey II. Almost 30 years later, SILIC remains the propaganda center of the anti-cult movement in Russia and maintains an online database of NRMs, as well as an archive of writings.

Dvorkin has long provided the anti-cult movement with a veneer of intellectual credibility. Since 1999, he has taught Sectarian Studies at the ROC's University of St. Tikhon; yet, his degree in Medieval Studies provides no academic grounding in religious studies or the sociological and psychological concepts on which he

so frequently relies. At a seminar in 1993, he allegedly coined the term "totalitarian sect," a concept which effectively merged Western anti-cult ideas with the post-Soviet context, where anxiety about the return to the Stalinist past competed with fears about an unstable present. Totalitarian sects, Dvorkin [*explained*](#), were

"authoritarian organizations whose leaders strive to dominate and exploit their followers" through various deceitful "masks." He has compared such leaders to Hitler and Lenin, equated religious communities with the Stalinist Gulag, and said that NRMs had more in common with totalitarian political regimes than "real" religions like the ROC.

Such jargon, alongside other favorite terms like "destructive cult" or the prefix "pseudo" (as in pseudo-Christianity or pseudo-religion), reveals the anti-cult movement's pretension to standing as the final arbiter of religious truth. For example, Dvorkin claimed in an [*interview*](#) that the Jehovah's Witnesses "cannot really be called a religious sect" but are really "a commercial cult organized like a pyramid scheme that exists off of the sale of its publications and multimedia productions." It is a short leap from assuming the ability to define religious truth to asserting a duty to intervene in cases of heresy.

Russian Religious Regulation

On September 26, 1997, the Russian Federation passed Federal Law No. 125-FZ, On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, which ended the state's permissive treatment of religious minorities and introduced regulations based on previous Soviet policy. The law pressured all religious groups to obtain legal registration from the state. While technically allowing the continued existence of non-registered groups, these now occupied a risky legal grey area that grew steadily more precarious with the subsequent passage of "extremism" laws. The new legislation effectively enshrined the privileged status of "traditional" religions into law. The arduous process required all applicants to provide the names and personal information of founding members (all of whom had to be Russian citizens), turn over

founding documents and religious literature, and prove that the organization had existed on the territory of Russia for at least 15 years. Many religious minorities [struggled to register](#) in a system that could delay or deny their claim through an array of bureaucratic mechanisms.

The law was effectively designed to bolster established faiths and limit the spread of NRMs. The [preamble](#) acknowledged “the special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia and in the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture” as well as that of traditional religions like Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, which constituted “an integral part of the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia.”

The ROC, the anti-cult movement, and Dvorkin in particular, had intensely lobbied and mobilized supporters to push for the law’s passage. Dvorkin’s ideas about the need to rescue helpless citizens from the clutches of totalitarian sects through repressive religious regulations found allies in a government eager to reassert its control over society. Moreover, the advent of Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, and his United Russia party at the turn-of-the-century only increased Dvorkin’s influence. Putin’s image was based on ending the chaos of the 1990s—a period when NRMs had thrived—and establishing unity and stability. In his [2000 Russian National Security Concept](#), Putin claimed that “protection of the cultural, spiritual and moral legacy, historical traditions and the norms of social life” was a matter of national security and argued for “the formation of government policy in the field of the spiritual and moral education of the population.”

Since then, Putin’s administration has implemented this policy of “spiritual security” to steadily constrict the moral/spiritual sphere, including under the guise of the Global War on Terror. Russia has indeed faced a legitimate threat from Islamist terrorism, but the laws it adopted go [well beyond the scope](#) of counterterrorism. In 2002, Russia adopted the Law on Combating Extremist Activity, which contains no clear definition of “extremism,” and allows for the prosecution of “incitement of social, racial, ethnic or religious hatred” or “propaganda of exclusiveness, superiority or inferiority of an individual based on his/her social, racial, ethnic, religious or linguistic identity, or his/her attitude to religion.” A [2012 study](#) by SOVA Information Center found that religious organizations constituted the majority of those accused under this law.

Dvorkin’s official influence increased significantly in the late-2000s. In 2009, he was appointed head of the government’s Council of Experts, tasked with monitoring religious activity and approving legal registration. The Council was created in 1998 to help

enforce the 1997 law. The amended law of February 18, 2009 expanded the Council’s reach, giving it authority over the activity, structure, and religious content of registered organizations alongside its oversight of the registration process. These developments caused the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which has monitored and reported on religious freedom conditions in Russia since [1999](#), to include Russia on its [Watch List](#) of serious religious freedom violators for the first time in 2009.

The rhetoric of the anti-cult movement and the Russian state have converged noticeably over the subsequent decade. Echoing Putin’s concerns about spiritual and moral security, Dvorkin [claimed](#) in 2007 that NRMs deliberately “inflict damage on Russian patriotic feelings.” In 2010, he gave a lecture entitled “Totalitarian Sects as a Threat to National Security” to students at the Institute of the Federal Security Bureau (FSB)—the main successor to the Soviet-era KGB. In 2012, Putin [claimed](#) that “totalitarian sects” were “growing like mushrooms,” and “present[ed] a distinct threat to society” that needed to be addressed by legal mechanisms at both the local and federal levels.

In July 2016, the Russian government adopted a package of amendments, commonly known as the Yarovaya Law, which significantly enhanced the scope and penalties of previous religion and anti-extremism laws. The law characterizes sharing religious faith, or extending invitations to religious services, as illegal missionary activity if it occurs outside of officially registered spaces (including in private homes or over the internet). The law enables the government to monitor private electronic communications in what observers [characterized](#) as a direct “echo [of] the sweeping powers wielded by the KGB.”

On April 20, 2017, Jehovah’s Witnesses became the first religion to be banned outright across Russia, based on the accusation that the church was an “extremist organization.” The same year, USCIRF [recommended](#) Russia for designation by the State Department as a “country of particular concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), as one of the world’s worst violators of religious freedom. Since that time, hundreds of Jehovah’s Witnesses have been subjected to raids, investigations, imprisonment, and even torture. In a press statement released one day after the ban, Dvorkin and the anti-cult movement [welcomed the decision](#) as “a significant step towards defending the rights of all citizens of Russia and the Former Soviet Union.”

Dvorkin continues to hold a leadership position on the Council of Experts tasked with overseeing official registration in Russia, even as he continues to target

religious minorities in his own speeches and articles. In 2018, [Guru Ji](#), a Hindu spiritual leader who has lived in Russia for decades, accused Dvorkin and his followers of an intense campaign of harassment spanning several years. Dvorkin's focus on Guru Ji was eventually followed by a police raid on his home and spiritual center in November 2017 that included the seizure of private documents and computers. Guru Ji stated that one officer told him he was not welcome in Russia, an Orthodox Christian country.

Dvorkin's influence has also extended outside of the post-Soviet orbit. In 2009, the same year in which he was appointed head of Russia's Council of Experts, he also became Vice-President of the European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS), a French anti-cult organization with pan-European influence. The French government provides the majority of FECRIS' funding and the group regularly spreads negative propaganda about religious minorities, including at international forums like the annual Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Human Dimensions conference. Dvorkin's SILIC is the primary associate of FECRIS in Russia and receives significant financial support from both the ROC and the Russian government.

Exporting Intolerance to Ukraine

Russia brought along its restrictive religious regulation framework when it invaded Crimea in 2014, including the symbiosis between anti-cult ideas and national security. The occupation regime in Ukraine frequently has used religious regulations to terrorize the general population as well as to target activists in the Crimean Tatar community, the majority of whom are Muslim, and charge them with extremism and terrorism. Occupation authorities routinely arrest Crimean Tatars on such charges—usually for alleged membership in either Tablighi Jamaat (JT) or Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), both of which are legal in Ukraine, but banned in Russia. In the Russian Federation, alleged membership in HT is frequently used as sufficient cause for charges of terrorism, even without evidence of any actual or planned violence. Merely meeting to pray and discuss Islamic philosophy can result in multi-year prison sentences.

In Crimea, individuals so charged are frequently active members of the political opposition. On March 27, 2019, authorities conducted a [massive raid](#) across the capitol city of Simferopol. Heavily armed security personnel sealed off and violently stormed homes, breaking doors and windows. They seized computer equipment, cell phones, tablets, flash drives, and Islamic literature. Authorities arrested 24 Crimean Tatars and accused them

of membership in HT as well as terrorism. All of the accused had been active in, or affiliated with, Crimean Solidarity, a secular human rights group opposed to the Russian occupation.

The [Crimean Human Rights Group](#) claims that at least 65 Crimean Tatar Muslims have been deprived of liberty in this manner. In some cases, this means a short period of detention, fines, or probation. But in many cases, the penalties are severe. For example, on November 12, 2019, [six Crimean Tatars](#) were sentenced to between 7 and 19 years for alleged membership in HT.

Since the Russian invasion, the larger Muslim community in occupied Crimea has faced persistent harassment. Residents report electricity to mosques being shut off right before Ramadan, and their communities must pay bribes to local authorities to get the electricity restored in time for the holidays. Muslims are not allowed to celebrate holidays like Ramadan without official permits, which are often denied or withheld without similarly paying a bribe. Occupation authorities have installed video cameras in mosques throughout the region, and many communities report constant surveillance and frequent raids.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) is also persistently targeted for its perceived ties to Ukrainian nationalism. On June 28, 2019, for example, occupation authorities seized and closed the Cathedral of Vladimir and Olga in Simferopol, the main Cathedral and headquarters of the UOC in Crimea. At the time of its closure, the church was the sole UOC facility still operating on the peninsula. Members [report](#) that since the occupation, the UOC has faced systematic persecution, including the confiscation of church property and the harassment of clergy and congregants.

Regional Implications in Central Asia

The Russian Federation's return to Soviet-era religious regulation has had a spillover effect in many countries of the FSU. This is especially true of Central Asia, where the transition to liberal democracy has been the least successful and where officials fear the influence of violent Islamist ideologies on majority Muslim populations. Yet this threat has proven to be [vastly overstated](#): Central Asian countries have experienced relatively low levels of recruitment and few incidents of domestic terrorism. The small number of attacks that have occurred tend to target security services and government officials rather than to terrorize the population.

In 1998, seven years after its independence, Uzbekistan passed a law similar to Russia's 1997 law, mandating registration for all religious groups, banning proselytism

and private religious education, and punishing failure to comply with police raids, fines, arrest, and imprisonment. In 2009, the same year that Russia expanded the role of the Expert Council, Tajikistan passed its Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Unions, which set onerous registration requirements; criminalized unregistered religious activity, private religious education, and proselytism; set strict limits on the number and size of mosques; allowed state interference with the appointment of imams and the content of sermons; required official permission for religious organizations to provide religious instruction and communicate with foreign coreligionists; and imposed state controls on the content, publication, and import of religious materials. In 2011 and 2012, Tajikistan further amended its administrative and penal code to set new penalties, including large fines and prison terms for religion-related charges such as organizing or participating in “unapproved” religious meetings; and a 2011 law on parental responsibility banned minors from any organized religious activity except funerals.

Before the enactment of its [2011 religion law](#), Kazakhstan had been one of the least repressive post-Soviet Central Asian states with regard to freedom of religion or belief. The religion law, however, set stringent registration requirements with high membership thresholds, and it banned or restricted unregistered religious activities while subjecting religious groups to police and secret police surveillance. As a result of the law’s registration requirements, the total number of registered religious groups fell sharply after 2011, especially the number of “nontraditional” religious groups, which declined from 48 to 16. Although the religion law considers all religions to be equal, its preamble specifically “recognizes the historical role of Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity” in an echo of the preamble to Russia’s 1997 legislation.

This pattern of legal emulation is likely due to some degree of direct Russian influence in matters of regional security. Russia has retained significant influence in this sphere, providing training and equipment for the military and security services and intervening in local conflicts. But Central Asian leaders hardly needed persuading; most were former Soviet officials. Indeed, the neo-Stalinist state of Turkmenistan, the most repressive in the FSU, passed its first religious regulation law in 1996, when the Russian law was still in process. Similarly, Russia’s 2003 ban on HT was influenced by the Uzbekistani government, and Tajikistan banned the Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2008, almost a decade before Russia did so. The development of “spiritual security” in the FSU has been symbiotic. The common denominator among these countries was the shared desire for stability after the collapse of the Soviet Union—which all of them experienced as a socioeconomic catastrophe—and the

rise of Islamist terrorism. The rhetoric of the Russian anti-cult movement, or the Global War on Terror, helps these governments to justify a return to repressive Soviet legal norms, even as they symbolically distance themselves from that problematic past.

In countries like Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, which share a border with Afghanistan, the emphasis is less on NRMs than on radical Islam, but the logic of religious repression is akin to that of the Russian anti-cult movement. The traditional form of Hanafi Islam is allowed, but highly regulated by the state. Other forms of Islam emanating from the Middle East or the Indian subcontinent are viewed as “non-traditional” and unwelcome innovations. Adherents of Salafism, or the missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat, are seen as hostile invaders taking advantage of the spiritual ignorance produced by Soviet Communism. The state frequently intervenes to “protect” the people; for instance, by [banning](#) the import and sale of clothes from a “foreign national culture,” as Tajikistan recently did in an effort to combat the wearing of hijabs.

The anti-cult movement is particularly robust in Kazakhstan, the only Central Asian state that retains a significant population of ethnic Russians and correspondingly an influential ROC presence. [In the words of Elena Burova](#), an official “expert” tasked with overseeing religious registration in Kazakhstan, “totalitarian organizations” are easily recognized by their “strict mafioso-party structure” and infallible leaders (here she uses the term *vozhd*, which was commonly applied to Stalin). She accuses these groups of an array of nefarious psychological techniques, including the use of narcotics, to strip adherents of their personalities and turn them into a “threat” to the “social and constitutional order of the country.”

On a Kazakhstani government [webpage](#) that has since been deleted, Burova explained how religious groups use “programming” and “zombification” techniques to prey on young people with psychological problems and turn them against their families and society. To combat this threat, the government funds “anti-sect” centers that distribute information about the dangers of these groups throughout the country, and uses [television news programs](#), such as one in June 2019, to feature government-sponsored characterizations of religious minorities as “destructive” “pseudo-religions.” The government also supports [rehabilitation centers](#) that claim to successfully deprogram victims through a combination of psychological, theological, and pedagogical methodologies. The [first such center](#) was founded in 2007 with the support of Alexander Dvorkin and the Russian anti-cult movement.

Conclusion

The anti-cult movement has had exceptional impact on religious regulation in the FSU, helping to raise the profile of ROC concerns about the spread of NRMs to the level of a regional approach to so-called “spiritual security.” It draws on fears about the shared totalitarian past to justify the imposition of repressive regulations derived from it, trampling on basic rights while simultaneously claiming to defend them. Alexander Dvorkin and his associates have carved out influential roles in government and society, shaping the public discourse on religion across numerous countries. Claiming to be experts in academic fields like religious studies, psychology, and sociology, they are rarely qualified in any of them and often rely on discredited theories and methodologies to promote their ideological agenda.

The official prominence of the anti-cult movement has coincided with, and arguably helped to facilitate, the official fortunes of the ROC. But Dvorkin and his associates do not exercise a monopoly on Orthodox thought and opinion, and dissenting voices within the church have [criticized](#) the anti-cult movement for relying on discredited theories and non-canonical sources. The anti-cult movement is fundamentally a propaganda outlet conducting a highly effective information war against religious minorities throughout Russia and many of the countries in which it retains influence. An effective response to the movement must also engage at the level of information, countering the perverse logic of anti-cult propaganda with hard facts about its lack of credibility and complicity in the suppression of religious freedom.

U.S. government policy on international religious freedom toward Russia and Central Asia includes raising concerns over religious repression, including the treatment of members of NRMs. In September 2019, the U.S. Department of State [imposed](#) visa restrictions on two Russian officials in Surgut for their involvement in the torture and inhumane treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses in their custody and called on the Russian government to end its persecution of the group. In December, the State Department again [designated](#) Tajikistan and Turkmenistan as CPCs, and placed Uzbekistan on its Special Watch List (SWL). At the same time, the State Department placed Russia on the SWL and made no designation for Kazakhstan. In its [2020 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommended Russia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan for CPC designation and Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for inclusion on the State Department’s SWL in 2020.

Recommendations

The U.S. government should:

- Publicly censure Alexander Dvorkin and the Saint Irenaeus of Leon Information-Consultation Center (SILIC)) for their ongoing disinformation campaign against religious minorities;
- Promote education about freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in regional diplomacy and offer training and resources as a component of regional humanitarian assistance;
- Counter propaganda against new religious movements by the European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS) at the annual OSCE Human Dimensions Conference with information about the ongoing involvement of individuals and entities within the anti-cult movement in the suppression of religious freedom; and
- Pressure the governments of Russia and Kazakhstan to remove prominent anti-cult figures from their expert councils and bar them from official positions of influence over religious regulation.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass the Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act (H.R. 5408), which calls on the President to take into account Russia’s religious freedom violations in Russian-occupied Crimea and Russian-controlled Donbas when determining Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designations under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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