

## Country Profile

# Russia

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This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

**Countries covered in this series:**

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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Total population: 146.8 million

### Religious affiliation (percent)

Russian Orthodox Christianity	74
Islam	7
Atheism	5
Catholicism, Protestantism	2
Judaism	1
Other	1
No affiliation	10

Source: Levada-centre. Russians about religion. <https://www.levada.ru/2013/12/24/rossiyane-o-religii/>

### Role of religion in state and government

Formally, Russia is a secular country. However, the large number of believers (see table above) make it impossible for the state to ignore religion. This is evident at the highest political level. The country's political leaders regularly attend important Christian religious services. They also demonstrate respect to Muslims, Russia's second largest community of believers, congratulating them during their religious celebrations. Moreover, the state involves the two main religions into its foreign affairs. For instance, while attempting to secure a membership in the organization Islamic Conference, Mr. Putin claimed that "Russia is a Muslim country".<sup>i</sup>

However, Russian Orthodox Christianity in this sense has a more important role. The state uses it in its attempts to mobilize the wide network of Soviet expats to influence the population of neighboring countries. In 2014 Russian state TV broadcast an address by Patriarch Kirill in which he stated: The "Russian world is a particular civilization, to which belong the peoples who call themselves by the different names – the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Byelorussians."<sup>ii</sup> Russia also stressed unity through the Orthodox Church in its affairs with Ukraine and Georgia, when both those countries decided on their pro-western political course. During military missions religious authorities bless Russian weapons and personnel before deployment and conduct special services for the victory.

In domestic affairs, the role of religion is rather minimal. It is considered a tool to help keep control over the population. Hence, there is a high level of collaboration with the state security services. The success in such collaboration can be explained by the long years of the state control over the religion executed by the Soviet Union (Souleimanov 2015).

Thus, the religious institutions in Russia can hardly be considered independent. They are rather an important tool of the government in its domestic and international affairs.

## Freedom of religion

Officially, Russian citizens and inhabitants are free in their choice of religious beliefs. This right is ensured by the Constitution (Article 14). However, some religions are less regulated than others. The broad formulations found in Russian law allow this flexibility. For instance, the restriction to propagate anything that creates social, racial, national or religious hatred made it possible to prohibit the publishing and spreading of Islamic literature (Gordeev 2015). An opinion expressed by one Russian human right activists illustrates this situation:

“If the police or FSB (Russian special service) wants to build a case against somebody accusing him or her in spreading extremist literature, they need to prove that the literature is extremist. So they search for an expert, who can confirm this. They already have their pool of "experts", who do this for them. If no one is available at the hand, they try to trick independent experts. Usually, they do it by asking their opinion about an excerpt, taking it out of context and then the label the whole text as “extremist”. That’s how sometimes a scholarly book ends up in the list of extremist literature and the author of it ends up in court...” (Moscow 18/03/2019).

Russia is a federal state and some regions (usually autonomous republics) are allowed to have their own legislation, which should not contradict the Federal Law. This possibility results in differing local laws, attitudes towards the religious communities, and the actions of the law enforcement bodies regulating their activities. For instance, two Volga “Muslim” autonomous areas – Bashkortostan and Tatarstan - are preoccupied with the activities of “Hizb ut-Tahrir” and “Tablighi Jamaat”. Despite relatively small numbers of followers and their non-aggressive approach in spreading their beliefs, the organizations are forbidden in Russia. However, the adherents of Salafism, the branch of Islam which is considered the main threat in the North Caucasian republics, feel quite free there.

In contrast to the Volga region, those who practice Salafi Islam in the North Caucasus are under constant threat of being detained or killed. Particularly strict measures against this branch of Islam are empowered in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Ingushetia and other republics of the North Caucasus have a more tolerant approach, towards Salafists.

It must be acknowledged that non-Muslim believers can also fall victim to repression. Especially vulnerable are those branches that do not belong to the main Orthodox Church.

In summary, despite the official declaration that people in Russia are free in their religious choices, the state is very selective in its tolerance. The believers that do not follow the officially supported religions risk persecution and repressions.

### **Religiously inspired radicalisation**

Contrary to what might be imagined, cases of religiously inspired violence do not happen very often in Russia. The country witnessed the appearance of religiously radicalised movements only at the beginning of the 20th century when the Ultra-Orthodox movement “The Black Hundred” organized pogroms against Russian Jews. The movement was short-lived, but it found its continuation in the 1980s when “The Society of Memory” appeared, spreading nationalist ideology and antisemitism.

Radicalisation then surged during the First Chechen War (1994-1996). The declaration of jihad by the Chechen side attracted volunteers from Arab countries, who contributed to the Islamisation of the conflict. However, this dimension is often exaggerated in western scholarship. For instance, in his book *Russia's Islamic Threat* (2007) Hahn interprets the Russo-Chechen conflict almost exclusively within the frame of religious terrorism. In fact, as other studies demonstrate, Islam played rather a functional role for the Chechen fighters (see Moore and Tumelty 2008, Wilhelmsen 2005). Mostly, the religion was used to mobilize the population, to attract funds, and to receive political support from Muslim countries. The later Islamisation of the conflict happened due to the efforts of the Arab volunteers. They managed to boost the importance of the Islamists' agenda in the conflict, which at the beginning was largely secular. This transformation of the conflict is tracked down very well by Speckhard and Akhmedova (2006).

All in all, it can be concluded that religiously-inspired radicalisation is rather a consequence of other issues that people face in their quotidian life. These issues can be broadly united into four categories: socio-economic, socio-political, cultural-ideological, and personal-psychological.

**Religious diversity governance assessment**

State governance of religion differs from region to region. Even though the Constitution of the Russian Federation and the federal laws are supposed to ensure the same rights to the people everywhere, the local administrations often interpret the Federal legal norms quite freely. This results in different consequences for the believers. For instance, the Salafi branch of Islam can be practiced freely in Tatarstan, while in the North Caucasus followers of this branch of Islam can be accused of religious extremism and severely punished. Exterior attributes such as a beard or short trousers are regarded as suspect. Salafi organizations and mosques can be closed without any legal basis.

The loose interpretation of the federal laws can be seen in other cases too. For instance, the norms of the Federal Law N273 “About education in the Russian Federation” are ignored in Chechen Republic. The law (adopted in 2013) foresees a possibility for the pupils to study religion in the school. It also ensures the option to choose a religious course of preference (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism) or, alternatively, the class of ethics. None of these are followed in Chechnya, where the teaching of Sufi Islam was made compulsory in the schools.

In general, the situation is improving. The number of places designated for believers in public places (airports, train stations, offices) is growing. People can freely express their religious belonging through following a certain dress-code or by carrying religious attributes, without facing the threat of persecution.

However, there are still many areas where the governance of diversity can be improved. For instance, federal laws do not protect or ensure the rights of the believers in the state prisons or other federal institutions. The beliefs of the conscripts of compulsory military service are not being considered either. There is a general scarcity of places for conducting religious rituals. For instance, Moscow has only four mosques, not enough to accommodate everyone for obligatory Friday prayers. This is disproportionate to both the numbers of Muslim believers the number of Orthodox churches.<sup>v</sup>

<sup>i</sup> V. Putin: "Rossiya – Islamskaya strana". Media portal Utro.ru Available <https://utro.ru/articles/2003/08/05/220244.shtml> accessed 10/09/19.

<sup>ii</sup> His speech is also available on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate. See <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3730705.html> accessed on 03/09/2019.

<sup>v</sup> Pryanikov P. 05/06/2019 "Zasil'e Islama? Da prosto mechetei ne xvataet". Novye Izvestiya. Available Accessed 09/09/2019.

<sup>vi</sup> Semioshina V. "Gde tut u vas v musul'mane zapisyvayut?" (Where I can join Islam?). Available <https://takiedela.ru/2019/09/gde-u-vas-tut-v-musulmane-zapisivvayut/> Accessed 09/09/19.

<sup>vii</sup> Karmodi O. 05/01/2019 "Gosudarstvo sletelo s katushek. Za chto v Rossii presleduyut migrantov?" Radio Liberty. Available on <http://ru.krymr.com/a/presledovaniye-sektantov-v-rossii/29692687.html> accessed 09/09/19.

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### About the GREASE Project

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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