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U.S. Report Critical of Religious Freedom in Russia

By The Moscow Times

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The authors of the report said the Russian Orthodox Church receives “preferential consideration,” despite Russia having no official state religion.

Russian authorities broadly respect religious freedoms, but some minority faiths suffer discrimination locally, a new U.S. State Department report said.

The International Religious Freedom Report for 2011, accessible on the State Department website, found that while the Russian Constitution guarantees the right to practice the religion of one's choice, "laws and policies restrict religious freedom by denying some groups legal status and misidentifying their literature as extremist."

Among the most significant charges against authorities' religious tolerance, the report cited the use of extremism charges to target minority faiths and efforts to detain nonconforming believers or to deny them access to places of worship.

On Monday, the same day the report was released, 10 Jehovah's Witnesses in Chuvashia were charged with inciting hatred and extremism for distributing banned literature among residents of four Volga region towns and cities.

The authors of the report also said the Russian Orthodox Church receives "preferential consideration," despite Russia having no official state religion.

Of Russia's roughly 138 million people, about 100 million are Russian Orthodox believers, according to the report.

Other prominent religions include Islam (up to 20 million believers), Protestantism (more than 2 million adherents), Judaism (up to 1 million followers) and Buddhism.

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