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CIS has a Poor Record on Religious Freedom

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This month marks the 22nd anniversary of the "August putsch," in which hardline Communists held Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev under virtual house arrest for several days at his dacha in the Crimea. They sought to crush democratic reforms, including expanded autonomy for the Soviet republics. Who can forget Boris Yeltsin standing on a tank in defiance of the coup attempt, or the Soviet Union's dissolution several months later, leading to freedom and independence for the Soviet republics?

Yet a generation later, some of these republics are reminiscent of the old Soviet Union as they commit serious human rights violations, particularly through enacting and enforcing laws against freedom of religion or belief. As the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, detailed in its 2013 annual report, the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan fit the congressionally established criteria for countries of particular concern, or CPC, marking them as some of the world's most egregious religious freedom abusers.

USCIRF has concluded that three more — Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Russia — are on the threshold of receiving CPC status because of their systemic failure to respect religious freedom and related rights.Uzbekistan can fairly be viewed as Central Asia's heart of darkness. Among many other restrictions, its 1998 law on religion penalizes independent religious activity and applies vague anti-extremism laws against many Muslims and others who pose no credible security threat.

Under such laws, the government over the past decade reportedly has sentenced or imprisoned, sometimes in psychiatric hospitals, as many as 10,000 nonviolent individuals for terms of up to 20 years.A USCIRF delegation visiting Tajikistan last December found that its government targets religious activity that is independent of state control and jails people on unproven criminal charges linked to their religious activity or affiliation. Such abuses affect the majority Muslim community and also religious minorities, particularly Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Tajikistan's 2009 religion law and other statutes include stringent registration requirements for religious groups, criminalize unregistered activity, limit the number and size of mosques and impose state controls on publishing and importing religious literature. Turkmenistan's 2003 law on religion imposes similar hardships on religious groups. Turkmenistan remains the former Soviet Union's most isolated country, with major restrictions on foreign and domestic education, foreign travel and telecommunications.

The quasi-religious personality cult of the late Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov dominated the country's public life. Today, Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov is building a cult of personality around himself. Criticism of the president is often tantamount to treason, and teachers and school children are compelled to spend many hours participating in numerous public parades in the president's honor.

Kazakhstan, once Central Asia's bright spot, now is following the lead of these three other Central Asian countries. Onerous registration requirements in Kazakhstan's 2011 religion law have led to a sharp drop in registered religious groups, including Muslim and Protestant groups. The law permits regional and local religious organizations to be active only in their geographic area of registration, requires official permission to build or open new places of worship and restricts the distribution of religious materials to a limited number of government-approved premises.

Since Azerbaijan's government enacted a restrictive religion law in 2009, its religious freedom record has worsened markedly. This nation, which has a Shiite Muslim majority, bans unregistered religious activities, limits religious activities to a community's registered address and requires government permission to produce, import, export and disseminate religious materials after such materials have passed state censorship.

Russia's 1997 law on religion defines three categories of religious communities with varying requirements, legal status and privileges. By singling out Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Orthodox Christianity as the country's four "traditional faiths," the preface to the law sets an official tone that encourages discrimination against Protestants and other religious minorities.

A USCIRF delegation noted deteriorating religious freedom conditions in Russia during its

September 2012 visit. First, the government continues to violate the rights of so-called "nontraditional" religious groups and Muslims. Second, it has implemented an extremism law against religious groups and individuals not known to use or advocate violence, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim reading circles focused on the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi, whose books are banned across Russia. Third, Russia gives outward support for and preference to the Orthodox Church. In June, President Vladimir Putin signed a new blasphemy law with possible criminal penalties against those deemed to have "offended religious sensibilities," thus opening a potential Pandora's box of abuse.

Many of these measures recall the darkest days of the Soviet Union when its republics marched in lockstep. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Russia, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan now all follow Soviet-style imprisonment of those refusing to worship according to state diktat. Soviet-style vetting to establish the legal status of religious literature is practiced by all six nations. The Soviet practice of subjecting religious dissenters to psychiatric evaluations continues, particularly in Uzbekistan.

While during the Soviet era, the false diagnosis of psychiatric illness was used against many who shared their belief in God, today the psychiatric profession is once again being hijacked — this time to persecute and falsely label those who reject a belief in a deity. For example, Alexander Kharlamov, an atheist writer in Kazakhstan, has been held against his will and forced to undergo psychiatric examination.

With the demise of the Soviet Union hastened by democratic opposition across the region a generation ago, we hoped that also meant the end of religious repression in that region of the world. But in too many post-Soviet states today, the ghost of Soviet control over peaceful religious life is alive and well.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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