

Cross-Party Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief

11th November 2024, 1830 to 1945

Minute

Present

MSPs

John Mason MSP
Stephen Kerr MSP
Murdo Fraser MSP

Invited guests

John Kinahan from Forum18

Non-MSP Group Members

Craig Horne
Maureen O'Neill
Maureen Sier
Malcolm MacLeod
Brian Miller
Hajra Ilyas
Oleksii Tyshchenko
Sameer Hussain
Oliver Lane
Chris Ringland
Lorraine McMahon
Shaw Paterson
Susana McIntyre

Apologies

Alan Meldrum
Ravinder Kaur Nijar
James Fraser
Michael Veitch

Agenda item 1

As John Mason MSP, Stephen Kerr MSP and Murdo Fraser MSP were present, the meeting was quorate.

John Mason opened the meeting by welcoming everyone. He then introduced John Kinahan from Forum 18.

Agenda item 2

John Kinahan gave a detailed presentation on the current challenges faced by people of faith or belief in Russia and in Russian-controlled parts of Ukraine.

Forum 18 is a Norwegian/ Danish organisation which monitors violations of freedom of religion or belief in Russia, Central Asia, Belarus etc. The presentation outlined some of the most serious violations committed in Russia and Ukraine.

Before the invasion of Ukraine, the most serious violations were against Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims who study Said Nursi. Typically, there would be surveillance followed by raids on homes from riot police. Officials would search people's homes, seize objects like computers and some of those targeted would then be taken into custody. Those targeted are typically put on an official list which impedes fundamental elements of life including employment.

Torture has also taken place against many Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims who study Said Nursi. Tortures take place at every stage of the investigation and judicial process. Most victims have injuries documented and do make complaints to the authorities, but no action is taken against those involved. Instead of being penalised by the authorities, those who have been accused of taking part in torture have even been received commendations for their work.

Conscientious objection to military service is another issue. Internationally there is an enshrined right to object to military service. It is a non-derogable right. However within Russia this has not been providing protection. There is no alternative to military service. One Russian soldier refused to return to the Ukrainian frontline after converting to Buddhism. A court jailed him for 2 years and 2 months.

After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine many people of faith and religious leaders have been targeted for their objections to the war. Russian Orthodox religious leaders mostly support, the war at least in their public statements.

Foreign agents laws are common in Russia. These laws are used against individuals and organisations that attract the attention of the Russian state.

There is also ever-increasing Russian internet censorship for sites including those that promote LGBT equality, discuss the Ukrainian conflict, or support religious minorities etc.

There is also a transnational dimension to the behaviour. Russia runs a list of targeted people which is shared with other states friendly to Russia. If a person on the list is identified in one of the countries, they will be sent to the country which is seeking them.

There has also been extensive persecution on the grounds of religion and belief in illegally occupied parts of Ukraine, including the closure of churches and mosques.

Questions and discussion

Q - Is it clear which religious organisations are banned?

A - The mechanism used to ban is the extremism law. But there is such a broad range of things that people can be prosecuted for it can be very widely applied. For example, people can be arrested for simply owning certain books or anything else which is defined as extremist.

Q - Is there an International day of Religious Freedom?

A - Yes there are such days, but they do not tend to make an impact on the states who violate rights. But of course, it is important to draw attention to violations of rights. Those who have their rights violated often show deep appreciation for any informed attention in their case. It shows they are not alone.

Q - Are Muslims studying Said Nursi and Jehovah's Witnesses engaging in interfaith engagement?

A - No they are both groups who are persecuted but separately.

Q - Is there a role for UN special rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief?

A - The UN special rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief are not invited into Russia but they do show great concern in the case of Russia.

Q - What was the temperature for Freedom of Religion or Belief before the war?

A - Things were gradually declining before the war but they had been declining already, alongside other reductions in rights.

Q - Are there privileges to being officially recognised by the Russian state?

A - Yes there were examples of this before the war. Before 2009 you could meet together as an unregistered group. That is no longer the case.

Q - Are you able to give an update on the persecution facing Christians and other minorities in Turkmenistan?

A - Giving a truly current report is very difficult because it is such an extremely repressive state. Among the most repressive states in the world. All Human Rights monitors find it extremely difficult to monitor events in Turkmenistan. Tajikistan is similar in its level of repression.

Q - What is your relationship with the Russian state, do you find officials answer any questions from Forum18?

A - Generally, the officials err on the side of not talking to us. We have to focus very much on the safety of those who share information with us. So we know that what we have is never a complete picture. It would be impossible for anyone to present a really detailed account of what is happening in Russia.

Q - Does it make any difference to the Russian state how they are perceived in a country like Scotland for example

A - They invest a great deal of effort in shaping what is thought of them which suggests they do value it. It is important that we affirm that we are all one people and that we do show solidarity with those who are targets of persecution.

Agenda item 3

The meeting closed with approval of the previous meeting's minutes on 27th March. Maureen Sier seconded the approval. John Mason also explained that there would be an AGM in the coming days to ensure that it happened within the required period.