



## **Russian expert comments on US State Department's 2017 report on religious freedom in the world, which points out cases of oppression of religious minorities in Russia**

*US Commission on International Religious Freedom has issued an annual report containing data on 'violations of religious freedom in the world'. According to the Interfax-Religion portal, the chairman of the Council of the Russian Association for the Protection of Religious Freedoms A. I. Kidryavtsev has commented on the US State Department's Russia 2017 religious freedom report stating in particular the oppression of religious minorities in Russia. Below is the full text of his comment.*

The US State Department's annual report on religious freedom in the world in 2017 tracks similar documents issued in previous years continuing to cover the religious situation in Russia in an engaged manner. As before, the main stress in the text of the report is made on the protection of minority religious organizations and groups while ignoring the history and tradition of the presence of majority religious communities in society.

The document is focused on the Jehovah's Witnesses, scientologists and other religious organizations of sectarian nature. Considering the recent ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses, the report describes with a detailed elaboration the coercion measures taken against this organization, which produces on the reader an impression that representatives of this structure are actually co-authors of the document. Obviously, the case made in this context by the law-enforcement has found no reflection.

The criticism against the Russian state authorities is once again focused on the legislation on opposing extremist activity. The authors have reported in detail about measures taken against extremists acting under the cover of Islam, for some reason considering it to be a violation of religious freedom.

The report contains information about the sentence given to blogger R. Sokolovksy for 'playing the game Pokemon Go in an Orthodox church and posting antireligious videos online', as well as a similar case in Sochi (the case of Viktor Nechevnov sentenced to a fine for reposting anti-Christian pictures in social media). It makes it evident that the facts set forth in the above-mentioned sentence have remained outside the authors' field of examination.

There is a traditional criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church, either pointing to the alleged unlawful granting of privileges to it or imputing to it an interest in the persecution of religious minorities.

At the same time, the indisputable role of Orthodoxy in the development of Russian statehood, spirituality and culture is ignored.

Another peculiarity of the report in its part devoted to Russia lies in an attempt to accuse her authorities of anti-Semitism. And this in our country where the Jewish community, by the admission of its own leaders, feels free and in no way derogated in their rights as compared to other historical religious communities. Thus, the document describes in detail the scandal caused by the statements of some State Duma deputies concerning the role of Jews in protests against the handover of St. Isaac's Cathedral to the Church and the story about 'a ritual murder' of the Tsar's family. These cases just as artificially selected statements of representatives of Judaism are groundlessly offered to the reader as a proof of anti-Semitism.

At the same time, it is always passed over in silence that the USA is one of the main centers of the activity of Holocaust deniers, who are safely protected from criminal prosecution by the First Amendment to the Constitution on the freedom of speech.

The report was and is an extremely politicized means of drawing a generalization of the views of opposing groups and engaged media resources for criticizing Russia's policy in the area of religion. At the same time, to verify their generalizations the authors use a dialogue only with religious minorities, noting though their meeting with leaders of traditional religions. Regrettably, the results of their meetings with the latter do not find any reflection in the text of the published document.

Generally, the content of the regular report of the US State Department is as usual conditioned by political aims and priorities of the American state and serves as an instrument of pressure that allows interfering in the domestic affairs of states in which the realization of freedom of conscience cuts across its American understanding.

Experts of the Russian Association for the Protection of Religious Freedoms, whose principle task is to monitor the observance of freedom of religion in Russia and today's world, will continue advocating the principles of peaceful interreligious co-existence in our country and opposing attempts to use the religious situation in Russia for external pressure.