

Institution: King's College London		
Unit of Assessment: 31 Theology and Religious Studies		
Title of case study: Minority Religions and Human Rights: Shaping Evidence-based Policy and Legal Practice on Minority Religions in Russia, Eastern Europe and the UK		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2006 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Marat Shterin	Reader in the Sociology of Religion, Head of Department	From 2006
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Shterin's sociological research on minority religions, focused on Russia and East European states, has shaped new legal precedents for defence against inaccurate charges of extremism; created best-practice guidelines for the provision of expert evidence; and influenced training of government and legal officials. His research showed that policy and judicial decisions relating to minority religions are often driven by political and media-led framings rather than reliable evidence. In particular, anti-extremism legislation is routinely used to ban and prosecute non-violent religious groups. In collaboration with the educational charity Inform, Shterin has worked with legal professionals and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to protect the human rights of members of minority religious groups in several post-communist states, including Russia, Estonia and the Slovak Republic. His research has redirected Inform's policy towards a new focus on extremism and radicalisation, reorienting its collaboration with the UK government and civil service.

2. Underpinning research

Shterin's sociological research on minority religions has:

1. Identified competing epistemologies in public understandings of minority religions and new religious movements and clarified how political bias and moral panic have prejudiced policy and judicial decisions in Russia. This research established the need for a research-informed approach to judicial and government decision-making in Russia and other post-communist states.
2. Reframed and broadened academic approaches to the study of 'extremism' and 'radicalisation'. This has demonstrated the need to replace normative psychological and ideological approaches with evidence-based frameworks drawn from sociological research on minority religions.

1. Identifying and assessing competing epistemologies in the public understanding of religious minorities

Between 2006 and 2009, Shterin's sociological research, partly funded by the Academy of Finland, revealed considerable discrepancies between available research-based evidence and public representations of religious minorities, in particular newer religious groups in Russia. Shterin demonstrated that political agendas, cultural assumptions and interests of particular groups were among the key factors accounting for these epistemological discrepancies. His research showed that policymaking, formation of public discourse and outcomes of litigation were dependent on how and why particular individuals and groups came to be seen as 'experts' on religious minorities.

Shterin elaborated these findings within the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded collaborative project, Politics and Practice of Religious Diversity (2014–16), which conducted discourse analysis of political, legal and media representations, triangulated with ethnographic work in three Russian regions. This research demonstrated that Russia's restrictive measures towards minority religions are the result of the competing interests of political elites, religious institutions with their hierarchies and minority religions themselves. In this environment, public representations of minority religions have significant influence in framing policy and legal decisions on minority religions. Shterin's study concluded that mass media and state-recognised

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'experts' play a crucial role in the formation of legislative policy and judicial decisions in Russia [1,2].

Shterin's project Academic Expertise in 'Anti-Extremism' Litigation Involving Minority Religions (2017–current; partly funded by King's Global Engagement Partnerships) extended these research findings specifically in terms of the engagement of public and policy agents. Shterin analysed which 'voices' are sought as 'expert opinion' on religious minority groups by law courts, and how this opinion is used to validate legislative and judicial decisions. Deploying a pioneering, impact-oriented engaged methodology, Shterin established direct collaboration with Russia's human rights lawyers, NGOs and independent scholars, who were both participants in and beneficiaries of the research [3].

2. Reframing academic approaches to improve public understanding of religious minorities, extremism and 'radicalisation'

Shterin's project Religiously Motivated Violence in the Contemporary World: Public Debates and Academic Research' (2006–07; partly funded by the British Academy) systematically established interdisciplinary dialogue and generated empirical studies across the fields of Anthropology, Sociology and Religious Studies. This collaboration revealed systematic differences between academic, evidence-based conclusions and public framings of the link between minority religions and religiously motivated violence. In particular, this project elaborated how concepts and methodologies developed in the study of new religious movements can be fruitfully applied to investigating the processes of 'radicalisation' and violence commonly attributed to radical Islamic groups [4].

This research informed two further projects: a collaborative (Shterin and Yarlykapov) ethnographic study of the New Muslims Jamaat in the Northern Caucasus (2009–2011), followed by a sociological analysis of the idea of Caliphate among young Muslims, developed through a broad range of empirical cases from around the globe (2012–13; partly funded by the European Research Council (ERC)). Rather than narrowly focusing on the role of ideological persuasion, these two cutting-edge studies showed that the appeal of 'radical Islam' for some young Muslims can only be explained by considering the interplay of socio-demographic characteristics, political settings, religious motivations and societal reactions. These two projects contributed to reframing academic approaches to the study of 'radicalisation' and terrorism by demonstrating the importance of explanatory frames that are interactive, contextualised and focused on human agency [5,6].

Shterin's research findings on minority religions were disseminated to academics and policymakers in London at the Westminster Faith Debates (2012) and at the House of Commons (2017), and in continental Europe at the European Forum Alpbach (Religion and Violence) and Religion and (In)Equality seminars (2010 and 2016) and the European Summer School on Religion and Violence, funded by the European Parliament (2015).

3. References to the research

1. Shterin, M. (2015). With Fear and Favour: minority religions and the state in contemporary Russia. In Kirkham, D. (Ed.), *State Responses to Minority Religions* (pp. 183–198). New York and London: Routledge. ISBN 9781409465799. doi:10.4324/9781315242446.
2. Shterin, M. (2016). Friends and Foes of the 'Russian World': Post-Soviet State's Management of Religious Diversity. In Andrew Dawson (Ed.), *Politics and Practice of Religious Diversity: Global Issues, Local Contexts* (pp. 29–48). New York and London: Routledge. ISBN 9781138791817. doi:10.4324/9781315762555.

These two publications are widely respected in the international academic community. [1] is a core text for the Science and Community Cohesion course at the University of Helsinki, and [2] was the focus of a Sociology seminar series at the Université d'État de Saint-Pétersbourg in 2016.

3. Shterin, M. & Dubrovsky, D. (2019). Academic Expertise in Anti-Extremism Litigation in Russia, *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 46(2), 211–236. doi:10.1163/18763324-04602006.

The *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* is a peer-reviewed journal based in the USA. When this paper was published, the authors immediately received a request from a group of Russian scholars and human rights lawyers (see sections 2 and 4) to translate and publish it in Russian, as they found it "highly illuminating" and a "significant contribution" to legal practice in Russian law courts [A,B]. Shterin was subsequently asked to contribute a chapter on Western experience of adjudication on

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minority religions for a specialised practical manual for Russian human rights lawyers; this chapter is now in print.

4. Shterin, M. & Al-Rasheed, M. (2009) *Dying for Faith: Religiously Motivated Violence in the Contemporary World*. London: Bloomsbury I.B. Tauris. ISBN 1845116879. doi:10.5040/9780755625024.

This volume received international recognition within the academic community; in his review Jack David Eller noted that the volume demonstrated “*what we can accomplish when we go beyond the usual terrorism cases to ask deeper questions and take a more inclusive approach to religious violence*” (*Journal of Peace Research*, 48(1), 127, 2011). Further recognition was evidenced by high-profile speaking invitations in the wake of its publication, including an invitation to lead a seminar series on Religion and Violence at the prestigious European Forum Alpbach in 2010.

5. Shterin, M. & Yarlykapov, A. (2011) Reconsidering Radicalisation and Terrorism: the New Muslims Movement in Kabardino-Balkaria and Its Path to Violence. In Shterin, M. & Spalek, B., *Muslim Young People in UK and Russia: the intersections of faith, biography, and society*, *Journal of Religion, State & Society* (special issue), 39(2–3), pp. 303–325. doi:10.1080/09637494.2011.604512. As a consequence of this publication, Shterin was invited to be a keynote speaker and seminar leader in a joint seminar series in Edinburgh and Novgorod (near St Petersburg), funded by the AHRC and the Russian Science Foundation. Shterin was subsequently invited to speak on What Have We Learned About Radicalisation? at the 2012 Westminster Faith Debates.

6. Shterin, M. & Yarlykapov, A. (2014). The Caliphate in the Minds and Practice of Northern Caucasian Muslims. In M. Al-Rasheed, C. Kersten & M. Shterin, M. (Eds) *Demystifying the Caliphate: historical memory and contemporary contexts* (pp. 247–271). New York: Columbia University Press/London: Hurst & Co. ISBN 9780199327959.

This ERC-funded research received wide acclaim. Professor Charles Tripp (SOAS University of London) described the volume as “*a book of exceptional scope and erudition [which offered] new light on the many ways in which even a mythical caliphate can exercise a powerful hold on contemporary political imaginations*” (Hurst website, and Jacob Landau (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) described it as “*well-conceived*”, “*erudite*” and “*ambitious*” and expected it to “*remain the standard work on the debate about the restitution of the Caliphate*” (*Middle Eastern Studies*, 49(4), 672–673, 2012).

4. Details of the impact

Shterin’s research has shaped legal practice and protected the human rights of members of minority religious groups in several post-communist states, including Russia, Estonia and the Slovak Republic. In addition to his direct collaboration with Russian NGOs and lawyers, a privileged pathway for the dissemination and use of Shterin’s research has been the close collaboration with Inform (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements), a UK-based educational charity that provides evidence-based consultancy for civil servants and policymakers. Inform was chaired by Shterin from 2017 to 2019 in recognition of how his research-based expertise was crucial to direct the strategy and activities of the charity.

Shterin’s research findings have been disseminated through the biannual Inform seminars, which bring together 70–100 academics, policymakers, lawyers and journalists from the UK, eastern Europe and beyond. For the purpose of illustrating Shterin’s research impact, this impact case study will focus on examples from post-communist states: Russia, Estonia and the Slovak Republic, well known for their difficult relation with freedom of religions and human rights.

Shterin’s research has led to impact in four key areas:

1. Establishing new legal precedents for defence against unwarranted charges of extremism

Shterin collaborated with Baltic Law, the largest legal practice in Russia, in a “*landmark case in the use of anti-extremist legislation against minority groups*” [F]. Drawing on insights from Shterin’s research [1,2,3], the result of this collaboration was “*the development of a sound, research-based legal approach in the case of St Petersburg Prosecutor v. St Petersburg Scientology group*” [F]. Meleshko highlights the significance of the research as pioneering “*a significant step in establishing principles regarding legal evaluation of academic testimonies [...] with considerable ramifications for future litigation*” [F].

In the last decade, Shterin has worked closely with Russian attorney Dr Galina Krylova, who has *“constantly used Shterin’s work in preparing defence strategy in a number of cases involving Jehovah’s Witnesses, Church of Scientology, and International Society for Krishna Consciousness”* [B], tried both in Russia and at the European Court of Human Rights. Krylova highlights the deep ethical and political significance of such cases: *“what is at stake in this litigation is the freedom of conscience and religion in the country as a whole”* [B]. Most recently, in 2020, Shterin provided a 30,000-word expert testimony, based on his research, that Krylova deemed *“highly significant for law courts’ understanding of the difference between legally admissible research-based evidence and politically motivated or ideologically biased allegations”* [B]. Krylova found Shterin’s contribution *“instrumental for preparing an important case [...] in the European Court of Human Rights.”* She also testified to the wider reach of Shterin’s research: *“my specialism in cases [concerning minority religious movements] is in high demand among Russian lawyers and through my legal consultancy Dr Shterin’s work [...] influences them”* [B].

2. Creating best-practice guidelines and informing policymaking

Between 2017 and 2019, Shterin led two workshops for Russian defence lawyers in St Petersburg, organised by two prominent NGOs: the Centre for Independent Social Research and the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis. These workshops led to the creation of a website outlining best-practice guidelines for the provision of expert evidence in litigation involving minority religions [see A]. Alexander Verkhovsky, SOVA’s Director and a member of the presidential advisory board, regards this resource as *“an essential guide in providing rigorous legal challenges to the implementation of the restrictive Russian Law on Combatting Extremism that contravenes International Human Rights conventions on religious freedom”* [A]. Verkhovsky confirms that Shterin’s research *“helps us to focus our monitoring and analysis on specific lobbyists and government agencies that abuse anti-extremist legislation in relation to minority religions”* [A].

Shterin’s research on religiously motivated violence and radicalism [4,5,6] has also been used in Estonia and the Slovak Republic. In 2019 Ringo Ringvee, Chair of the Committee for Religious Organisations at the Estonian Ministry of the Interior, participated in an Inform seminar at KCL. He cited his exchanges with Inform and Dr Shterin’s work as influencing the implementation of a more tolerant and evidence-based policy towards religious minorities. Ringvee confirms that *“Shterin’s research was instrumental in helping [the] Religious Affairs Department at the Estonian Ministry of Interior to develop evidence-based and conceptually sound policies and has shaped communication strategies with religious groups”* [C]. In Slovakia Pavol Kosnáč, the only approved expert on religious extremism at the Slovak Ministry of Justice, has applied Shterin’s research to form evidence-based policies towards religious radicalism: *“Dr. Shterin’s research about Muslim ‘extremists’ in the Northern Caucasus helped me to develop analytical framework and policy recommendations”* [D]. Shterin’s analysis of extremism, disseminated through Inform’s networks, has influenced policy in the Slovak National Strategy for Countering Extremism and led directly to tasking Presidium of Police Corps of the Slovak Republic to *“increase analytical capacities focused on collection, centralization, classification and evaluation of information in the field of combating extremism”*; the authors of the National Strategy were *“directly influenced by advice provided on the problematic divisions between religion and culture highlighted by Shterin’s research”* [D].

3. Training government and legal officials

Inform has provided training for officials and experts in Estonia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Czechia and Poland through its internships and its biannual workshops hosted by King’s. Through Shterin’s collaborative work with Inform, his research on religious minorities has significantly influenced these training programmes. In Estonia, for example, Shterin’s analysis of competing epistemologies in the public understanding of religious minorities and his research reframing academic approaches to extremism and ‘radicalisation’ have shaped the methods and content of training courses provided within the Department for Religious Affairs. In 2014, Inform partnered with this government department to deliver a course on religious minorities and law enforcement at the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences based on Shterin’s research findings. Ringo Ringvee testifies that *“Dr Shterin’s and Inform’s input was essential in shaping the in-house training course for the negotiators in the law enforcement”* [C].

4. Shaping Inform’s policy and extending Inform’s expertise

As outlined above, Shterin’s work with Inform has created new networks to facilitate significant and far-reaching change to policy and practice in Russia, Estonia and the Slovak Republic.

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Shterin's research has also had a decisive impact within Inform itself. The charity was established in 1988 to provide information on new religious movements, or 'cults'; Shterin's work has influenced Inform to reorient its policy towards a focus on extremism and radicalisation. After the publication of Shterin's *Dying for Faith: Religiously Motivated Violence in the Contemporary World* in 2009 [3], Inform "began to reposition its insights and research towards contemporary preoccupations with threats from groups with extremist ideologies. [...] We have applied the insights and approaches pioneered by Dr Shterin's published work in these contexts to shape Inform's approach in improving public understanding of religious minorities, particularly in policy and security contexts" [E].

As a consequence of these changes led by Shterin's research, Inform has provided significant new resources to UK government departments. These include commissioned reports and briefings on far right extremism, extremism on campus and free schools for the Department for Education, as well as reports commissioned by other government offices on potential security threats posed by religious minorities [see E]. Inform Director Suzanne Newcombe confirms that "None of these policy briefings would have occurred without Dr Shterin's inspiration and research on repurposing the insight of new religions into the threats posed by extremist groups" [E]. Shterin ran seminars on religious extremism in Russia at the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2017 and 2018, and during his tenure as Chair of Inform (2016–19) the charity won a Building a Stronger Britain Together award from the Home Office.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, Russia.
- B. Galina Krylova, Attorney at Law, Russia.
- C. Ringo Ringvee, Chair of the Committee for Religious Organisations at the Ministry of the Interior, Estonia.
- D. Pavol Kosnáč, approved expert on religious extremism at the Ministry of Justice, Slovak Republic.
- E. Dr Suzanne Newcombe, Honorary Director of Inform.
- F. Alexander Meleshko, Development Director and Legal Advocate at Baltic Law Offices, St Petersburg – Russia's largest legal practice.