



RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AT GUNPOINT

Russian terror

in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine

September 2018



Religious Freedom at Gunpoint:

Russian Terror in the Occupied Territories of Eastern Ukraine

Analytical report on the situation in regard to religious freedom and religiously motivated persecution in the separate territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine, temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation.

The report was prepared by the Institute for Religious Freedom with the support of the Institute of Geopolitical Dimension and the Mission Eurasia.

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Institute for Religious Freedom (IRF) is an NGO defending human rights, founded in 2001 in Kyiv, Ukraine. The IRF's main goal is to protect and promote religious freedom and other related human rights, facilitate inter-faith cooperation and a church-state dialogue, and strengthen democratic foundations and civil society in Ukraine.

The IRF has 17 years of independent, non-denominational, non-political monitoring of the religious situation in Ukraine, and has provided analysis and recommendations for public authorities and faith-based organizations and been involved in the legislative process. Supported by a massive network of experts, scientists and volunteers, the IRF seeks to respond quickly and effectively to the current challenges in the field of religious freedom: to promote compliance with high standards of freedom of conscience and religion, and to prevent religious discrimination and religiously motivated crimes.

Disclaimer: The views and conclusions presented in the Report are the author's vision and may not necessarily represent the official position of the Institute for Religious Freedom or the Institute of Geopolitical Dimension.

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1. History of terror against believers and religious organizations in eastern Ukraine

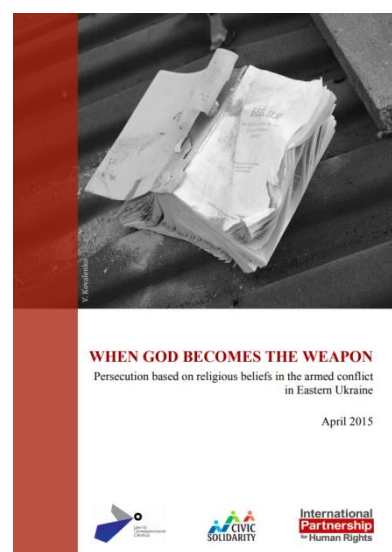
With the armed aggression of the Russian Federation, the situation in regard to human rights, including religious freedom, has radically changed in the territories of Ukraine occupied by Russian troops and Russian-backed militarized forces. Russia's direct military intervention began with the occupation of the Ukrainian Crimean peninsula in February 2014 and continued with its covert subversive and provocative activities in the East and South of Ukraine. However, since July 2014, the Ukrainian government's attempts to stabilize the situation in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions have been countered by Russian regular troops with their heavy artillery and multiple launch rocket systems, which were used in military operations (often without identification marks) against the law enforcement authorities and military forces of Ukraine.

As soon as power in Donetsk was seized by pro-Russian separatists in April 2014, the Institute for Religious Freedom began to be reliably informed about the facts of religious intolerance, in particular about anti-Semitic leaflets from the leaders of the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic," and then about unprecedented religiously motivated crimes. Kidnapping and illegal imprisonment, emotional abuse, physical torture and even murders of unwelcome clergymen and believers of "non-traditional denominations" – all this has become a real nightmare for local religious communities that did not experience such persecution even during the Soviet terror times. This was also accompanied by the seizure of churches and houses of worship, some of which were used as firing positions and barracks for militants, mercenaries and regular Russian troops.

The Institute for Religious Freedom has presented the specific facts of such crimes in several of its publications, as follows:

- [Terrorists kidnapped, tortured and threatened believers in eastern Ukraine](#)¹
- [Chronicle of terror: Religious persecution by Russian militants in eastern Ukraine](#)²

These facts and other personal testimonies of victims of religious persecution in eastern Ukraine are documented in the [report "When God Becomes the Weapon"](#)³ prepared by a coalition of human rights organizations based on the results of monitoring visits and personal interviews with the victims. Since that report was published as early as April 2015, the present Report aims to show the current situation and trends in regard to religious freedom in the occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, analyse and recommend some actions to protect believers from further harassment.



¹ Available at: <https://goo.gl/g5PCPv>

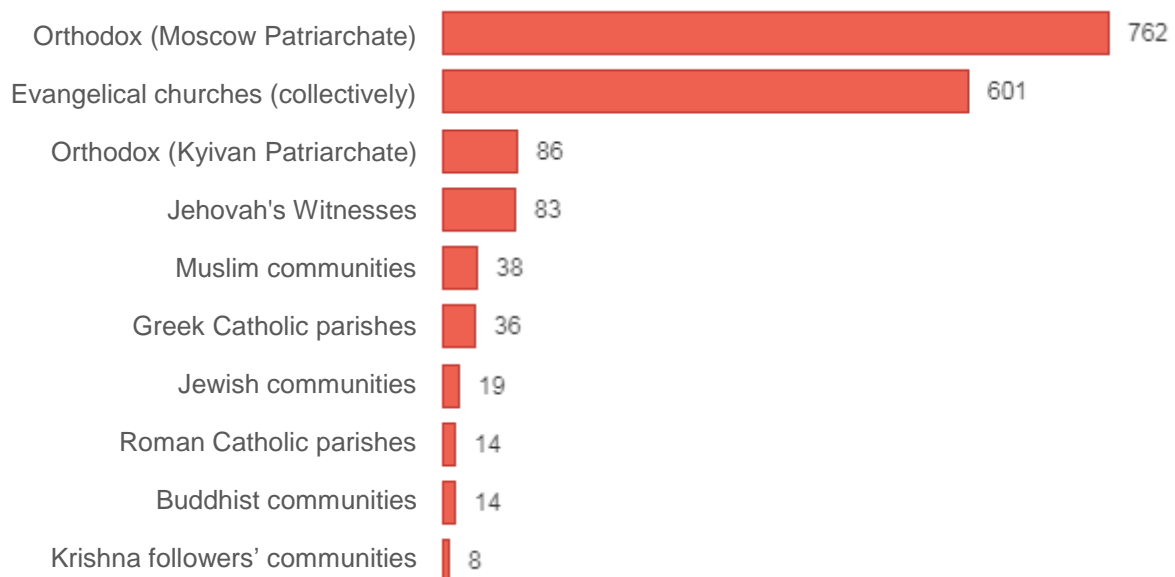
² Available at: <https://goo.gl/3BA8iv>

³ Available at: <https://goo.gl/9ZFAFh>

2. An overview of the religious situation in eastern Ukraine: before and after the armed aggression of Russia

Religious pluralism, the participation of religious organizations in public life and the provision of religious rights according to international standards of freedom of religion or belief – that is what the believers in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine are currently deprived of. All these benefits of Ukraine as a democratic state, acquired and developed since the proclamation of independence in 1991, are now available to the rest of the population. It is, in particular, possible for religious communities to operate without state registration, including the printing and distribution of religious literature; to organize peaceful public gatherings; to teach their religion to children and adults; and to disseminate their beliefs through the media and take part in public life.

Religious diversity was also characteristic of the eastern Ukrainian regions. According to official statistics, at the beginning of 2014 (before the Russian occupation) there were 1,797 religious organizations in the Donetsk region. Of these: 762 Orthodox parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate, 366 Evangelical Christian communities (Pentecostals, Charismatics, etc.), 186 Christian Baptist churches, 86 Orthodox parishes of the Kyivan Patriarchate, 83 Jehovah's Witnesses organizations, 49 Seventh-Day Adventist churches, 38 Muslim communities, 36 Greek Catholic parishes, 19 Jewish communities, 14 Catholic parishes, 14 Buddhist and 8 Krishna followers' communities.



Religious communities' denominational structure in the Donetsk region at the beginning of 2014

There were 835 religious organizations in the Luhansk region. They were: 423 Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox parishes, 131 Evangelical Christian communities (Pentecostals, Charismatics, etc.), 99 Baptist churches, 35 Kyivan Patriarchate's Orthodox parishes, 39 Seventh-Day Adventist churches, 28 Jehovah's Witnesses organizations, 14 Jewish communities, 13 Muslim communities, 6 Greek Catholic parishes, 6 Buddhist communities.⁴

⁴ Official statistics of the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine: <https://goo.gl/Mtsezq>

In the example of the Donetsk region, it is obvious that despite the Orthodox self-identification of the majority of Ukrainians, the diversity of other denominations was present in this region. And although the number of Orthodox parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate took a prominent place in the Donetsk region (42% of the total), at the same time, one third of all religious communities were the Evangelical Christians of different denominations (33%) and Orthodox parishes of the Kyivan Patriarchate (11%).

However, the Russian-backed militants almost at once began to establish their power by combating the dissent: no manifestations of loyalty to both the Ukrainian government and Ukraine as a state and nation were tolerated. On the other hand, apart from the motive of winning increasing influence through terror, Russian propaganda popularized the myth that the Ukrainian authorities oppressed the Orthodoxy of the Moscow Patriarchate and Russian language, and that was why they allegedly demanded armed protection. Deceitful propaganda has greatly influenced the attitude of Russian-backed militants, mercenaries and separatists towards believers of other denominations. And some of them, for example, illegal detachments of the so-called “Russian Orthodox Army” and Russian Cossack detachments, in particular, the “Most Glorious Legion of Don,” openly set out to build a so-called “Orthodox state” in the occupied territories.

“There is only one faith – it is Orthodoxy. Because I took up arms so that we could have an Orthodox state.”

In this manner a militant of the self-proclaimed “DPR” commented on his attitude towards other denominations to a VICE News correspondent in March 2015. He added that he would not have allowed “*either Baptists, or Jehovah's Witnesses, or Catholics, or Greek Catholics*” to return to their churches and houses of worship.⁵



Interview of the "DPR" militant on the background of the building of the "Word of Life" Bible Institute of the Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church, seized by the separatists in August 2014

⁵ Secret Protestant Churches in Donetsk: Ukraine's Religious War (VICE News): <https://youtu.be/mhEe2PSaEWO>

The above mentioned dominance of Orthodox parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate in eastern Ukraine refutes the thesis of Russian propagandists on the justification of military intervention by the motives for the protection of Orthodox believers, since the Ukrainian government in every way provided religious freedom for any denomination here. Instead, the occupation authorities imitated Russian experience, using a religious factor to strengthen their illegal power. An example was the methods of terror of pro-Ukrainian communities and the elimination of any opposition and dissent which were used by the Russian authorities in occupied Crimea.⁶

As a result, after the influence of Russia the residents of the non-government controlled Ukrainian territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions found themselves isolated from law and order, out of the influence of domestic and international human rights-based approaches – without any guarantees of respect for their human dignity, without ensuring human rights in general and freedom of religion in particular.

3. Religiously motivated persecutions as an instrument for consolidation of occupation authorities' power

Most churches and faith-based communities in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, with the exception of Orthodox parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate, are now forced to cease their religious activities or to significantly restrict them and to act in the underground. In particular, for most denominations, it became impossible to practice worship in their own temples or houses of worship either because their religious buildings were seized by the occupation authorities, or because of the threat of identification and further prosecution of parishioners. Peaceful street gatherings (sacred processions, praying and evangelization events) also became impossible, as well as the distribution of religious literature, outreach and awareness-raising work among kids and youth, and chaplaincy services in hospitals and penitentiary institutions.

Both large and small religious communities in eastern Ukraine, first of all, Evangelical Christians, Orthodox of the Kyivan Patriarchate, Greek Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses, are perceived by the separatists as a threat to their undivided and arbitrary power. At the same time, the ideological basis of the occupation authorities is the Moscow concept of the "Russian World" – a construction of an "Orthodox state," where the main place is occupied by the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Combating "sects"

In May 2015, the head of the self-proclaimed "DPR" Oleksandr Zakharchenko declared at a press conference in Donetsk that only four denominations – the Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), Catholicism, Islam and Judaism – were recognized by the occupation authorities. All other believers, including the Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate, Greek Catholics and Evangelical Christians, were classified as "sectarians."

⁶ Report of the OSCE Mission assessing the state of human rights in the Crimea: <https://goo.gl/5syHX2>

Later, according to the Russian model, they began to be accused of extremism, espionage in favor of Ukraine or the United States, subversive activities, etc., that was accompanied by illegal arrests and the confiscation of church property.

On December 1, 2016, representatives of the so-called “Ministry of State Security” of the “Luhansk People's Republic” (LPR) declared the beginning of an active struggle with non-traditional religious organizations, referring to them as “sects,” which allegedly represented a security threat of the “LPR”. There was no specific list of denominations ending up in the crosshairs of the “LPR” security forces, but during the press conference they mentioned the Evangelical Faith Christians (Pentecostals) and the Baptist Church.⁷

Oppression of the Muslim communities

Religious persecution is also experienced by Muslims. On June 28, 2018, representatives of the so-called “Ministry of State Security of DPR” (MSS DPR) raided the mosque al-Amal at 2 Berestovska Street in Donetsk, confiscated prayer books and other religious literature, sealed the premises, and then took the imam and parishioners of the mosque to interrogation. Information on the closure of a single mosque in Donetsk was confirmed by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine.⁸ Earlier, in May 2016, the occupation authorities of Donetsk recognized religious literature of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Donbas (also called the Donbas Muftiate) as extremist and banned it from being distributed, and several Muslims of this community were arrested. The activities of these Muslim communities were banned.

“Before 2014, in Donetsk there were our communities and the Islamic University branch. However, neither communities nor university operate there any more” – reported the IRF sheikh Rustam Gafuri, Deputy Mufti of the Religious Administration of Ukrainian Muslims.

Sheikh Said Ismagilov, Mufti of the “UMMAH” Ukrainian Muslims Spiritual Directorate, reported to the IRF that after Russian occupation, their communities functioned as autonomous. He told that subsequently, under the pressure of the “MSS DPR,” their largest community in Donetsk, which carried out a significant amount of spiritual and charitable activities among Muslims, was closed. Also, the occupation authorities have banned the imam of this community from leaving this region, keeping him under their surveillance. Now only one of four Muslim communities is left in the Donetsk region, in Snizhne. In the occupied part of the Luhansk region the situation is slightly better; there are still four Muslim communities – in Luhansk, Stakhanov, Kirovsk and Brianka.

Other religious minorities

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), according to the separatists themselves, disappeared from the occupied territory, which is due to complete hostility to this denomination because of its American origin, and also in connection with the seizure of all its houses of worship.

⁷ Video of the “LPR” representative's statement: <https://youtu.be/KO3w6j-enhM> (accessed 31/08/2018)

⁸ The OSCE SMM to Ukraine news: <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/386561>

In a private interview, a representative of the Buddhist community reported the IRF that in the occupied territories, Buddhist communities could not act publicly and went underground.

3.1. Evangelical Christians, Kyivan Patriarchate, Greek Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses: the main targets of religious persecution

Evangelical Christians

Baptists, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Adventists and other Evangelical Christians (Protestants) are experiencing the greatest oppression by the occupation authorities in eastern Ukraine. In 2014 there were frequent reports of illegal arrests, beatings, tortures and even the killings of Evangelical Christian pastors and clergymen.

The most brutal of the known facts took place when the city of Sloviansk in the Donetsk region was occupied, when the Russian militants were commanded by Igor Girkin (Strelkov), a retired Russian military forces officer. On June 8, 2014, a group of "DPR" militants arrested Albert and Ruvim Pavenko, two elder sons of the pastor of the Evangelical Faith Christians Church "Transfiguration of the Lord," as well as two deacons of this Church, Viktor Brodarskyi and Volodymyr Velychko, threatening them with guns immediately after the worship service. The following day, the separatists simulated their death allegedly from the shelling of Ukrainian military forces, blasting all of them with a grenade dispenser in a car. Those who survived were shot at point-blank range.



The "DPR" occupational authorities organized a rally against the "sects" near the Baptists' house of worship in the city of Shakhtarsk in the Donetsk region, September 29, 2015



The hostile inscriptions and calls to get out were left on the Baptists' house of worship (Shakhtarsk of Donetsk region, September 29, 2015)

Such intimidation took place both in Donetsk and Luhansk: pastors of Evangelical Christian churches were arrested, beaten, subjected to simulated shooting and other tortures, and their private homes were barged into and raided. At best they were induced to leave the occupied territories. Thus, the Russian-backed occupation power strove for full control over the civilian population. Evangelical Christians were perceived as enemies, “Western spies” or Ukrainian “special agents” – that is, as a threat to the occupation authorities. In addition, the separatists and Russian militants are profit-motivated, because in most cases religious persecution in eastern Ukraine is closely related to the desire to take possession of a church property – the real estate and valuable sound equipment, believers’ cars and other valuables.

In an interview for the IRF, Leonid Padun, Senior Bishop of the Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church, reported that the Evangelical Christians in the occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions are actually in the underground:

“Since it can still be threatening for the believers’ lives to come together for worship, the local religious communities have to do it secretly, without publicly announcing the place of their meetings. It is all the more dangerous to hold any street activities, to pray and preach the Gospel publicly, or distribute Christian literature – all these kinds of religious activity have become dangerous for Evangelical Christians in this region. In addition, the seized church buildings are not simply taken away from the believers, but completely looted.”

This information was also confirmed to the IRF by the Ukrainian Pentecostal Church (UPC). On September 27, 2015, in the city of Sverdlovsk in the Luhansk region, the “LPR” militants arrested Taras Sen, a pastor of the local Pentecostal community. The occupation authorities accused him of cooperating with the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission. However, four days later, the pastor was released, because the incident gained publicity at the annual OSCE high-level meeting in Warsaw.⁹

Recently, in July 2018, the “MSS DPR” representatives surrounded a settlement doing a house-to-house search and listed the names of everyone. When they found food packages for those in need in the house of the UPC missionaries, these believers were locked up until evening because the products were from Ukraine.

Also, the UPC representatives reported that in August 2018, after holding activities at the children’s summer camp, its three ministers – two women and a man – were arrested by the occupation authorities on suspicion of subversive activity. Pentecostal children’s ministers were interrogated with threats, brutally beaten and then released.

“Throughout the war period, our churches are semi-legal. Although the believers can gather, they still have no rights and guarantees of security. And charity is forbidden” – reported the Ukrainian Pentecostal Church.

On July 26, 2018, the “MSS LPR” in Luhansk banned the All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUC ECB). The religious organization was declared “extremist,” and its activities were described as “destructive.” The AUC ECB leadership reported the IRF that the activities of the Baptist churches in the occupied territories of the Luhansk region became considerably more complicated after the introduction by the occupation authorities of the mandatory re-registration requirements.

Earlier, in September 2017, without explanation, the occupation authorities banned entry to the militant-controlled territory of the Donetsk region to two Baptist pastors.

Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate (UOC KP)

From the very beginning of the Russian aggression, the bishops, priests and believers of the UOC of the Kyivan Patriarchate became targets of the occupation authorities. The pro-Ukrainian position of the Kyivan Patriarchate in general, pastoral care of believers in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and humanitarian service to war-affected people were perceived by the separatist leaders as a direct threat to their power in eastern Ukraine. Because of intimidation, arrests, and threats of being shot by the Russian-backed militants, all the bishops of the Kyivan Patriarchate gradually left the occupied region.

Shortly after the beginning of the aggression, on May 15, 2014, in a special statement the Kyivan Patriarchate reported about *“numerous cases of threats to the life and health of the clergy and believers of the UOC KP and the obstructiveness to the activity of the*

⁹ The “LPR” fighters released from captivity the pastor of the Evangelical Church: <https://goo.gl/xauEYG>

Church in eastern Ukraine by terrorist and separatist forces, controlled and encouraged from Russia.” The statement said that armed individuals broke into the temples of UOC KP demanding that the clergy immediately turn themselves over to the Moscow Patriarchate’s command. The militants declared “death sentences” to the priests of the Kyivan Patriarchate, indicating a real threat to the life of the clergy and believers of UOC KP in the occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.¹⁰

In February 2015, the archbishop of the Donetsk Eparchy of the UOC KP stated that thirty of the forty eparchy parishes in the occupied territories had ceased their activities because of the separatists’ pressure. In particular, in 2015, Russian militants from the Vostok brigade illegally arrested and imprisoned in the so-called “hole” the priest Pavlo Minkov because of his belonging to the clergy of the UOC KP. Until now, the priests of UOC KP still cannot carry out their ministry openly, and most of the parishes of the Kyivan Patriarchate are closed due to a lack of security guarantees for believers. For example, on June 10, 2018, the representatives of the so-called “State Property Fund of DPR” closed down the Holy Spirit Church of UOC KP in Donetsk without any explanation.

Greek Catholics

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) also became an object of targeted attacks by the occupation authorities. The UGCC believers in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine are still faced with labelling as a “sect,” incitement to religious hatred against them and various kinds of threats. All this was accompanied by a ban on activities until re-registration, which became a problem for most religious organizations in this region.

The unlawful arrest and torture of the priest Tikhon (Serhii) Kulbaka in Donetsk in July 2014, whom the militants forced to suffer without water and necessary diabetes medications, and also simulated his execution, has found the greatest resonance. In addition, the head of the UGCC reported about one of the priests being tortured on an electric chair by the “DPR” militants. However, the occupation authorities did not stop there, and the incitement of religious intolerance toward Greek Catholics became public.

On January 29, 2016, the occupation authorities organized a rally against “sects” near the UGCC cathedral in Donetsk (even involving school children). Participants of the rally were given posters declaring “Say no to the sects in DPR,” “Greek Catholic Church is the leader of anti-republican activity,” and “DPR is a sectless territory.” Among the accusations against the so-called “sectarians,” among which the Greek Catholic Parish was meant first of all, were “funding from CIA” (US intelligence service), assistance to the Ukrainian army and “brainwashing” of the youth.

On the same day, word leaked out that the famous religious scholar Igor Kozlovskyy was arrested in Donetsk. Subsequently, the occupation authorities “condemned” the scientist for fraudulent materials. Igor Kozlovskyy was able to free himself only after nearly two years of unlawful detention – thanks to arrangements in the Minsk format on the prisoners swap between the Ukrainian government and the occupation authorities.

¹⁰ Donbas and Crimea: New Challenges for Religious Freedom in 2014: <https://goo.gl/Wb4vYU>



The “DPR” occupation authorities organized a rally against “sects” near the Greek Catholic cathedral in Donetsk on January 29, 2016

Jehovah’s Witnesses

In July 2015, Jehovah's Witnesses reported that since August 2014, 26 members of their community in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine had been abducted by the occupation authorities and abused. In 2016, Jehovah's Witnesses stated the abduction and torture of another 15 of their fellow believers, including the elderly. Having released them, pro-Russian militants banned them from continuing their religious activities in the occupied territories under the threat of arrest and fines.

In August 2017, the so-called “prosecutor's offices” of Novoazovsk and Debaltseve in the Donetsk region sent letters to local Jehovah's Witnesses warning that the religious magazines “Watchtower” and “Wake up!” may not be distributed without permission of the occupation authorities. After a while such a warning was received by the community in Makiivka. Along with this, the “DPR” authorities had previously recognized a number of Jehovah's Witnesses’ religious materials as extremist and forbidden them.

On August 4, 2017, the so-called “anti-terrorist special forces unit of LPR” together with armed militants interrupted Jehovah's Witnesses’ worship in Alchevsk of the Luhansk region and Luhansk, explaining this by an alleged bomb threat in the houses of worship. After the believers were taken out of the buildings, the “LPR” security officers checked the documents of all those present at the worship services. However, in addition to that, the searches ended with the “detection” of fake propaganda leaflets calling against the “LPR”, which militants themselves had planted in the Jehovah's Witnesses’ Kingdom Halls. A few weeks after these raids on the Kingdom Halls, the occupation authorities of Luhansk publicly proclaimed Jehovah's Witnesses as enemies.



Armed Russian militants search Jehovah's Witnesses' Kingdom Halls in the Luhansk region, wearing masks on their faces, August 2017

On August 28, 2017, the so-called “deputy minister of LPR state security,” Oleksandr Basov, accused Jehovah's Witnesses of terrorist activities and supporting Ukrainian special services and neo-Nazi organizations. He referred to the fake propaganda materials planted during a search in Alchevsk and Luhansk. This became the reason for further banning Jehovah's Witnesses in the occupied territories of the Luhansk region.

“The growing wave of religious discrimination and the pressure exerted on Jehovah's Witnesses in some parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions can no longer be considered as mere hostile acts – these are true religious persecutions and the threat to religious freedom.”

This is how the official representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses commented on the situation in which their fellow believers found themselves in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine.¹¹ In their opinion, the actions of local authorities are influenced by judicial decisions recently adopted in Russia, where Jehovah's Witnesses' religious activities were completely banned.¹²

3.2. The “laws” of self-proclaimed republics: implementation of Russia’s religious policy

The religious situation in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine is further aggravated by the fact that the Russian-backed occupation authorities have begun to “legalize” their crimes against believers and religious communities, trying to hide them

¹¹ Jehovah's Witnesses' official website: <https://goo.gl/c1J7i4>

¹² Repressions in Russia: banning Jehovah's Witnesses and the confiscation of their property: <https://goo.gl/eaQd5t>

from the international community under the umbrella of legitimacy. The authorities “DPR” and “LPR” adopted so-called “laws” on religious activities and on combating extremism, which, like in Russia, have become instruments for terrorizing religious minorities, combating dissent and any expressions of opposition.

In June 2016, occupation authorities in Donetsk introduced their own “law of DPR” on freedom of conscience and religious associations. For two years, this document was not used until May 2018, when it was amended requiring all religious communities in the region to re-register no later than March 1, 2019. The Russian-backed militants compel religious communities to re-register under the threat of banning any of their activities, fines and confiscation of their temples, houses of worship and other religious property.

The mentioned document also stipulates that for the purpose of re-registration of existing religious organizations, religious scholarly examination is obligatory. This demand will obviously become the main instrument that the occupation authorities in eastern Ukraine will use to refuse the registration of religious communities and groups. In the event of successful registration, the religious communities and groups are required to provide to the occupation authorities of Donetsk a notice on the continuation of their activities at least once a year.

It is worth adding that these requirements for obligatory re-registration and religious scholarly examination are not applied to the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. For this denomination, the occupation authorities of Donetsk provided for a special simplified procedure of “legalization.”

A similar pattern is repeated in the Luhansk region, where the occupation authorities also walked the path of copying the legislation of the Russian Federation in order to use legal instruments for total control over religious organizations and legitimize repressions for religious beliefs. On February 2, 2018, the so-called “Law of LPR” on freedom of conscience and religious associations was adopted. However, on top of everything else, this document prohibits any activity of religious groups, which refers to any five-person organization that is not directly related to any of the “traditional denominations.” At the same time there is no list of such denominations, which allows the “LPR” power structures to act arbitrarily.

According to this “Law of the LPR,” all religious communities operating in the occupied territories of the Luhansk region must undergo an obligatory registration procedure within six months. Otherwise, their activities will be considered illegal and, accordingly, will be criminally liable. That said, for the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, this document also provides for a special simplified “legalization” procedure.

It should be noted that the occupation authorities of Luhansk extended the deadline for re-registration, which ended on August 2, 2018, for additional two and a half months to October 15, 2018.

Concurrently, in February 2018, the occupation authorities introduced the so-called “Law of LPR” on counteraction to extremist activity, which is a verbatim copy of a similar law of the Russian Federation. Also, the same “law” was introduced by occupation authorities in Donetsk in June 2015. Thus, Russian-backed militants use the same methods of religious freedom restriction and control of religious organizations in eastern Ukraine as in Russia.

As Serhii Moroz, the deputy head of the All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christian-Baptists (AUC ECB), told the IRF, at the moment none of the Baptist community has undergone any re-registration – there is neither a positive decision nor rejection on the part of occupation authorities. In addition, the negative conclusion of the so-called “religious scholarly examination” may become a hindrance to re-registration.

He also said that after the proclamation of the AUC ECB as an extremist organization on the occupied territory of the Luhansk region, many Baptist communities have now ceased to conduct worship and any activity even in their own houses of worship for fear of persecutions for their activities without re-registration.

In August of 2018, the IRF received evidence that the “LPR” militants arrested all the clergymen of the Christian Pentecostal community in the Luhansk region who gathered at a joint church meeting. They identified each of the clergymen, rewrote their personal data and imposed a fine on them up to \$20-100 USD for unregistered religious activities.

The IRF also received reports from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church on similar problems with re-registration at the request of the occupation authorities. It is obvious that this problem is common to all religious organizations in the region, except for the Orthodox parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate.

3.3. Seized temples and houses of worship

Illegal confiscation of religious buildings has become a widespread practice of occupation authorities in eastern Ukraine, which pursued two goals. The first is to physically stop the activity of ideologically unreliable denominations, which do not fit the “Russian World” ideological concept headed by the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Secondly, the purpose is to rob temples and houses of worship due to the desire for personal profit by those who commit these crimes.

On July 9, 2014, the “DPR” militants seized a complex of the Donetsk Christian University (DCU) buildings at 106-A Ilich Avenue in Donetsk. Shortly after the seizure, according to former rector Mykhailo Cherenkov, the Russian militants allowed the workers to take out computers, documents and personal belongings. This higher educational institution was founded by three Ukrainian church unions of Christian Baptists. The total area of the DCU is 8.5 hectares (21 acres), including a campus and a hostel with 75 rooms. Until

now, the DCU complex of buildings remains the military base of Russian-backed illegal militant groups and Russian mercenaries.

“A territory of faith has become a territory of hatred, a house of prayer – a den of robbers. There is nothing sacred for the terrorists. The seized temples are dozens and counting” – Professor Cherenkov said.



The Russian militants and mercenaries in the premises of the seized Donetsk Christian University, July 2014

The Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church (UCEC) informed the IRF that since August 2014 the 1,000-seat main church building of the UCEC at 100 Tkachenko Street in Donetsk has been still seized. There the “Word of Life” Bible Institute of the UCEC was located and the current activities of the Donetsk local church of the UCEC, which numbered 5,000 members, took place. Moreover, 13 buildings of the rehabilitation center in Donetsk, affiliated with the UCEC, are still under the illegal control of the occupation authorities of Donetsk.

In 2014 and early 2015, the occupation authorities’ armed representatives seized 17 Kingdom Halls which belong to Jehovah's Witnesses. Some of these buildings were later returned to believers. To date, 12 Kingdom Halls have been seized: 7 of them are in the Donetsk region (in Donetsk, Telmanove, Yenakiieve, Kirovske and three in Horlivka) and 5 of them are in the Luhansk region (in Luhansk, Alchevsk, Brianka, Perevalsk and Krasnyi Luch).

Repressions against religious communities that did not undergo re-registration were not long in coming. On March 27, 2018, Russian-backed militants robbed a house of worship of Evangelical Christian Baptists at 15 Telmanov Lane in the city of Stakhanov in the Luhansk region. According to eyewitnesses, in the evening, people in military uniform

came in two cars and entered the building of the Baptist house of worship, where at that time there were no believers. The “LPR” militants turned on the light and began to plunder the church property.

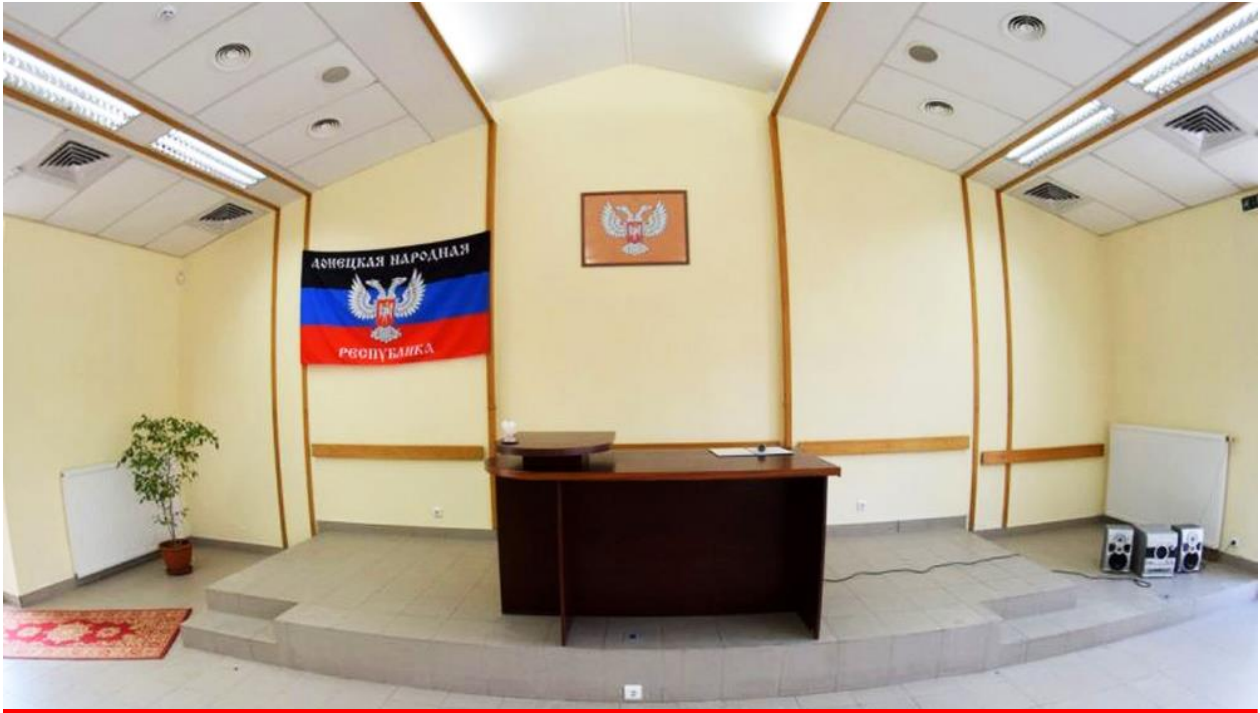
“They took absolutely everything: the tribune, the cup for the Holy Communion performance, tables, benches, sound equipment, air conditioners, musical instruments, gas boiler and heating appliances, voltage regulator, gas and electric ovens, all kitchen furniture, refrigerator, all pots and other dishes, food and conservation, a water storage tank, a pumping station, a bath, sinks, finishing tiles, a baby stroller. Light switches were also pushed up, baguettes and curtains, chandeliers and lamps were removed, as well as MDF panel and all interior doors, linoleum and also a plastic still window” – the Ukrainian Baptist Union’s press service quotes the eyewitnesses.

In Makiivka of the Donetsk region in June of 2018, the occupation authorities of Donetsk without any explanation closed and sealed the house of worship of Pentecostal Christians. And in a month they closed and sealed the house of worship of the “New Life” Evangelical Christian Baptist Church. Moreover, leaders of the All-Ukrainian Union of the Churches of Evangelical Christian-Baptists told the IRF that some of their houses of worship in the occupied territories were closed for formal reasons, since they were privately owned, instead of being registered as religious buildings.

The believers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are reportedly waiting for the return of two of their houses of worship. Earlier it was informed that on November 16, 2016, the occupation authorities of the city of Horlivka in the Donetsk region illegally confiscated the Adventist house of worship at 1 Horlivka Division Street to the “municipal property.” All the property of the church community located at the house of worship, including household equipment, furniture and a library, were illegally confiscated too.¹³

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) encountered open hostility from the occupation authorities, embodied in acts of seizing religious buildings and their exemplary conversion to secular objects. As an example, the Mormon house of worship seized by the occupation authorities, located at 67 Bohdan Khmelnytskyi Avenue of Kuibyshevskyi district in Donetsk, was converted into a wedding palace (Department of Marriage Registration), which separatists reported on July 26, 2018. Sometime before, on September 28, 2017, the opening of a similar wedding palace, at 10 Liashenko Street of Kirovskyi district in Donetsk, took place. On May 18, 2016, the occupation authorities opened the wedding palace at the Mormon house of worship in the Proletarskyi district of Donetsk. In April 2015, the occupation authorities opened the Children’s Activity Center in the Mormons’ premises at 4 Parkhomenko Street of Kalininskyi district in Donetsk. According to Mormon officials, none of their buildings in the occupied region are used by believers because of religious persecutions and threats to their lives.

¹³ Freedom of thought, conscience and religion in Ukraine – 2016. Report of human rights organizations: <https://goo.gl/k3ngS5>



The occupation authorities of Donetsk converted the Mormons' house of worship into the marriage registration department of Kirovskiy district of Donetsk, May 2016

4. Assessment of the international community

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that at least 2,725 civilians, including 140 children, were killed during the entire period of the conflict from April of 2014 until May 15, 2018. In addition, 298 civilians, including 80 children, died on July 17, 2014, during a MN17 flight crash, which eventually increased the number of civilian deaths to 3,023.

According to OHCHR estimates, the total number of civilians injured in the armed conflict is between 7 and 9 thousand. Besides, more than 2 million people have left the conflict zone, including thousands of Jews, Muslims, Protestants and representatives of other religious minorities, which have encountered pressure and discrimination.¹⁴

In July of 2014, OHCHR confirmed the fact of the militants' claim that the main religion in the Donetsk region is Orthodox Christianity of the Moscow Patriarchate, and the activities of “sects” are prohibited.

“This approach explains to a large extent, the increasing number of attacks on Protestant, Mormon, and Roman Catholic churches in the areas controlled by the armed groups. Religious leaders have been harassed, threatened and abducted” – the OHCHR notes in its report.¹⁵

¹⁴ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/ReportUkraineFev-May2018_EN.pdf

¹⁵ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/Ukraine_Report_15July2014.pdf

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) found out that the Russian-occupied separatist parastates of the “Luhansk People’s Republic” (LPR) and “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR) in eastern Ukraine remain heavily militarized war zones policed by parallel “ministries of state security.” The official ideology of the republics is a mixture of Russian nationalism, Soviet nostalgia, and Russian Orthodoxy, to the extent that the “DPR constitution” recognizes the Russian Orthodox Church as the territory’s “leading and dominant” church.

As such, for the Christian minorities living in the “LPR/DPR”, including Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Greek Catholics, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, the initial phase of the occupation was one of outright terror: kidnappings, torture, and robberies were the norm, in the course of which perpetrators openly expressed their contempt for the victims’ religious beliefs. More than 50 church buildings have been confiscated and communities are estimated to have declined by 30–80 percent as believers have fled rebel-held areas.

Although the worst abuses have declined since 2015, Christian minorities have remained subject to raids, harassment, fines, and official slander. Information about religious freedom violations is difficult to obtain because communities fear reprisals for complaints to human rights and foreign news organizations.



Russian militants of the “Russian Orthodox army” brigade who participated in the occupation of Donetsk in 2014

“DPR” and “LPR” authorities remain deeply suspicious toward religious groups other than the Russian Orthodox Church. In February 2018, after the end of the reporting period, the “LPR government” announced it would require registration of all religious groups in its territory, which experts believe to be a prelude to the official exclusion of religious minorities, similar to Russian practice.¹⁶

“Russia represents a unique case among the countries in this report – It is the sole state to have not only continually intensified its repression of religious freedom since USCIRF commenced monitoring it, but also to have expanded its repressive policies to the territory of a neighbouring state, by means of military invasion and occupation. Those policies, ranging from administrative harassment to arbitrary imprisonment to extrajudicial killing, are implemented in a fashion that is systematic, ongoing, and egregious” – USCIRF stated in its 2017 report.¹⁷

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Religious persecution in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine is an alien phenomenon both for this region and for the whole of Ukraine. Before Russian occupation, hundreds of religious communities of various Orthodox jurisdictions, Evangelical churches of different denominations, as well as Jews and Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, Buddhists and Krishna followers have coexisted in these territories for decades.

There is no doubt that the religious factor has been used as one of the tools of the Russian hybrid war against Ukraine, in which deceitful propaganda and the destabilization of society motivated by religious, ethnic and language differences play an essential role. By provoking splits and public anger, the Russian authorities paved the way for further military intervention and occupation, as evidenced by examples of the illegal annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea and the invasion to the eastern regions of Ukraine.

However, unlike the situation in Crimea, Russian authorities do not take legal responsibility for everything that is happening in the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk, occupied by them. Despite the fact that the self-proclaimed “republics” would not be able to exist without powerful armed, military, financial and food assistance from Russia, the Kremlin leadership is still trying to hide the Russian presence in this region and its actual control over it.

Thus, the situation in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine is aggravated by the fact that there is no legitimate power there that could bear responsibility for the observance of human rights and for compliance with international obligations in this

¹⁶ The USCIRF report-2018: https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_RUSSIA.pdf

¹⁷ The USCIRF report-2017: <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Russia.2017.pdf>

area. In conditions of actual military occupation, the civilians can't find justice and protection against the arbitrariness of Russian militants or Russian-backed separatists. Religious persecutions and oppression of religious freedom, whose horrendous scale reached unprecedented cruelty in 2014 – 2015, continue in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine today. The atmosphere of fear, created in conditions of arbitrariness and impunity of Russian militants, caused the eradication of entire religious communities that had to escape the occupied territories in order to save their lives. As a result, local religious communities have significantly quantitatively decreased, and many of them have lost their clergy and the opportunity to contact their bishops, as the church leadership were the first to be exposed to reprisals.

Lack of proper international monitoring and proximity for human rights organizations generates complete impunity for the occupation authorities supported by Russia, which is not accountable to anyone for its numerous religiously motivated crimes. This encourages Russian militants and Russian-backed separatists to continue their violence against believers in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine.

In this regard, the Institute of Religious Freedom offers the following **recommendations**:

1. With the efforts of the international community, to establish a comprehensive and impartial international monitoring of the situation regarding the freedom of religion or belief, documenting and promulgating the facts of religiously motivated violations and crimes in the non-government controlled territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, including compelling religious communities to re-register, further religious persecutions for their activities “without registration,” as well as unreasonable accusations of extremist activity;

It should be noted that in the current daily reports of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, even the flagrant facts of religious persecution in the zone of military conflict in eastern Ukraine are rarely mentioned.

2. For the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the results of the work of the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, to prepare a specific report on the situation regarding the freedom of religion or belief in the non-government controlled territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions;
3. To place the issue of the urgency for ensuring the freedom of religion or belief in the non-government controlled territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions on the agenda of the special meeting of the UN Human Rights Committee, and on the agenda of the international negotiations in the Normandy and Minsk formats with the aim of elaborating international agreements on the enforcement mechanism for providing the freedom of religion or belief in this region.