



## **Religious Persecution in Slavyansk, Following Occupation by Pro-Russian Separatists**

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Prior to the outbreak of hostilities in our city, there were no problems related to interfaith relations, and no problems with local authorities. There were, of course, theological differences, but these never approached the level of conflict. The authorities were cooperative with us, as well as with other religious communities, during Christmas and Easter events. The mayor of the city attended monthly prayer breakfasts, and religious freedom was well-protected. We, like other religious communities, operated our ministry in the way we saw fit and no one hindered us.

During the overthrow of President Yanukovich, most religious communities remained neutral towards the events. We held more prayer meetings, where the faithful would come to pray for peace in Ukraine. We tried to keep the doors of the church open to all people, regardless of their political views.

However, not all communities behaved in the same way. The Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate adopted a strong pro-Yanukovich position. They engaged in political activities in support of President Yanukovich's party, and sharply criticized the nascent revolution. The Church of the Moscow Patriarchate actively supported the seizure of Slavyansk by pro-Russian separatists. In fact, they not only supported it, but also were actively involved in the seizure. The militant groups under separatist leader Igor Strelkov would hide in their buildings as they awaited the signal to deploy. The Villa Maria building belonging to one of the Orthodox Churches of the Moscow Patriarchate was the first building to be used by the militants. Priests from the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate consecrated the barricades and banners belonging to the DPR [Donetsk People's Republic], and called for separation from Ukraine.

After the seizure of Slavyansk by the DPR militants, the city witnessed a sharp increase in religious intolerance by pro-Russian separatists and the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. The separatists hailed the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate as the only true religion in the city and announced a hunt for all others (with the exception of Islam, because gangs of Chechens took part in overrunning the city). In his first public speech, the so-called "people's mayor," Ponomarev, said, "we have come to destroy the biblical matrix." It's not quite clear what he meant, but after this, he began a crackdown on Protestant Christians.

The logic used in carrying out persecutory actions against evangelical Christians is as follows: Protestantism is an American faith, Americans are our enemies, and enemies must be destroyed.

Separatists began to identify evangelical Churches and intimidate believers. One day, they forced their way into our building, had everyone lie on the floor, including women and children, and searched the whole building, attempting to find some damaging information. After some time, our church building, rehabilitation center, and the building housing the orphanage were confiscated and turned into military facilities. In the same way, the premises of other religious communities in the city were confiscated. They arrested Bishop Alexey Demidovich, and they detained the employees and ministers of the Church of the Transfiguration. The employees were released after being tortured but the four ministers were shot. Evangelicals, faced with the threat of persecution, began to flee the city. Many churches began to hold underground services.

Following these events, there was a steady increase in religious persecution enacted against religious communities other than the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. More and more believers were kidnapped and tortured simply because they belonged to other denominations. The ubiquitous indictment was, if you are Protestant, then you are an enemy and a spy, because Protestants are Americans. Either convert to the Orthodox faith under the Moscow Patriarchate, or be killed. Against this backdrop, we began to evacuate the faithful from Slavyansk to territories controlled by the Ukrainian military. Our church was converted into a barracks, and a priest of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate began holding Orthodox ceremonies in our facilities. Tanks were stationed where the orphanage once stood, and separatists used them to fire at the Ukrainian army.

After the city was liberated by Ukrainian troops, life returned to normal. Once again, we could freely congregate, organize social work, and produce and distribute Christian literature. The Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate also enjoys these freedoms, despite their support of the separatists. This position has not changed to this day.

We live near the front lines and actively provide humanitarian assistance to people living in the war zone and occupied territories. Based on my observations and personal experience during separatist occupation of Slavyansk, there is no hope for believers who are not members of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in occupied territories of Ukraine. They cannot escape persecution, because the separatist ideology is militant and political Orthodoxy, which does not tolerate other Orthodox affiliations. Those who remain in the occupied territories live under a constant fear of reprisals for their religious beliefs. They have two choices: either to flee to territories controlled by Ukraine or the Ukrainian army, or to consciously choose the path of sacrifice by opting to serve the people in the occupied territories. However, even if people attempt to flee, this does not ensure their safety. The Ukrainian government is unable to provide for the vast number of refugees in the nation, and pro-Russian separatists, who continue to operate in the nation, pose a lethal threat to evangelical leaders.

I want to appeal to the U.S. government to develop efforts to prevent a humanitarian disaster in eastern Ukraine. I also ask them to consider granting refugee status to those who have suffered at the hands of pro-Russian separatists because of their religious beliefs. I also appeal to the U.S. Congress to pursue all possible options to mobilize religious and civil society in the U.S. to stand with the Ukrainian people, who are engaged in a difficult conflict with an aggressor threatening freedom and democracy around the world.