



Persecution of Religious Minorities in Occupied Territories of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea

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2014 marked the emergence of serious challenges to religious freedom in Ukraine, triggered by the aggressive actions of the Russian Federation: its annexation of Crimea, support for the separatists, and the “hybrid war” in eastern Ukraine. Because of these actions, Ukraine has, for the time being, lost control over Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions (Donbass), and has also been forced to mobilize the Ukrainian army to defend its independence and territorial integrity.

Against this backdrop, it is notable that, in spite of external aggression, the military operations in Donbass, and the political transformations it was undergoing, in 2014 Ukraine demonstrated ***a high level of religious freedom in the territory under its control***. The same cannot be said about the status of religious freedom in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine (Crimea and areas within the separate Donbass regions).

After Crimea was annexed, the Russian authorities ordered all religious organizations to re-register in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation (RF Federal Law № 124-FZ of 05/05/2014). As of January 1, 2014, there were 2,220 religious organizations operating in Crimea, of which 1,546 were legal entities, and 674 were operating without this status. Initially, the deadline for re-registration was January 1, 2015, but later this was extended to January 1, 2016.

At present, some religious organizations have passed through re-registration. Russian legislation and religious policies dictate that most Crimean-based religious organizations, with some exceptions, have to be associated with Russian religious centers (unions) to qualify for official re-registration. Currently, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea (SMMC), which includes more than 1,000 religious organizations, is in the process of re-registering, along with religious organizations representing other faiths. The re-registration of religious communities falling under the Kiev Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in Crimea has proved to be problematic. However, the Crimean Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) has been granted the formal right to operate under the Kiev Metropolis.

Since the capture of Crimea, the occupying power has used various pretexts, such as the fight against terrorism and extremism, to persecute believers who belong to pro-Ukrainian-minded religious organizations. Searches are conducted where believers and religious communities meet and hold services, religious literature is banned and seized, and believers are subjected to "preventive conversations" and other actions. Many priests in the Greek Catholic and the Catholic churches have been forced to flee Crimea for various reasons: threats to their life, citizenship issues, and difficulties related to the Russian Federation's migration policy. A number of churches and buildings in Crimea belonging to the Kiev Patriarchate were transferred to the Moscow Patriarchate. Russia is enacting a variety of measures to attempt to subjugate religious organizations to Russian religious centers.

In particular, the Crimean Tatars, who represent the largest Muslim Ummah in Crimea, have been subject to difficulties. A wide range of religious literature, which was freely used in Crimea's mosques, has been banned, and has been used as a formal cause for conducting searches, confiscating religious books, and harassing Muslims as potential extremists.

In general, Russia's religious policy in Crimea is to ensure that local religious organizations are brought into the legislative framework of the Russian Federation, and into the general context of Russian policy towards freedom of religion. Religious freedom in Crimea reflects the status of religious freedom in Russia, itself. In this regard, its status in Crimea is somewhat better than in the territory of Donbass, which is controlled by pro-Russian militants.

According to official statistics from the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, at the beginning of 2014 there were 1,797 religious organizations in the Donetsk region. Of these, 762 are communities under the UOC (Moscow Patriarchate), 601 belong to the Evangelical Church, 86 are Kiev Patriarchate parishes, 83 belong to the Jehovah's Witnesses, 38 are Muslim communities, 36 are Greek-Catholic parishes, 19 are Jewish, 14 are Catholic, 14 are Buddhist, and 8 are Hare Krishna, among many others. Such religious diversity was also to be found in the Lugansk region, where there were 835 different religious organizations.

It should be noted that since February 2014, the separatist incursions in Donbass and Crimea have been justified in the Russian media by the alleged suppression of the Russian language, culture, Moscow Orthodoxy, etc. In a joint statement on March 1, 2014, the leadership of the largest churches and religious organizations of Ukraine said: *"In our country there is no harassment on the basis of language, nationality, and religion. Therefore, we testify that all the attempts of Russian propagandists to portray the events in Ukraine as a 'fascist coup' and 'victory for the extremists' do not at all correspond to reality."*

On May 16, 2014, the representatives of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR or DNR) adopted their own version of a "constitution," in which the religious intolerance at the core of the separatists' policies is laid out. Article 9 of this document

states: *"The foremost and dominant faith is the Orthodox faith...as professed by the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). The historical experience and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) are recognized and respected, including as systemically important pillars of the Russian World."* It was also in Donetsk that a battalion was formed by the name of the "Russian Orthodox Army," which is a clear indication that the aim of the separatists bearing arms in Donbass was to establish the "predominant faith."

Since that time, and to this very day, a spike in religious intolerance toward all Christian churches has been recorded in the territories of eastern Ukraine controlled by the rebels, except for the religious communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). The target for religious persecution by the militants has been the believers and clergy of the Protestant evangelical churches, and the parishes of the Kiev Patriarchate, Greek Catholics, and Catholics.

Holding a pro-Ukrainian position, or employing the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian symbols, has also given rise to threats to the life and health of the citizenry from the xenophobically motivated DNR separatists. This state of affairs is mirrored in the cities of the Lugansk region, which are under the control of the local separatists of the self-proclaimed Lugansk People's Republic (LPR, LNR, or LR) and Russian military forces.

In the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine, targeted kidnappings of pastors and priests have become the norm, along with brutal interrogations, involving beatings and torture, and also the seizure of churches and houses of worship, which are then used for the military and other needs of the separatists.

A blatant example of religious intolerance occurred in the city of Slavyansk in the Donetsk region, where on June 8, 2014, two sons of Pastor Alexander Pavenko, and two deacons of the Transfiguration of Christ Pentecostal Church, were taken hostage by armed DPR militants during worship on the Holy Trinity. The next day all four believers were shot and buried in a collective grave.

In 2014, the Kiev Patriarchate repeatedly issued statements about "the widespread incidences of threats to the lives and health of the clergy and the faithful of the UOC KP, the creation of barriers to the activities of the Church in the eastern regions of Ukraine by terrorist and separatist forces being controlled and supported by Russia." They also stated that armed men had broken into the churches of the UOC KP in Donbass, demanding that the clergy immediately submit to the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate. Separatists have passed "death sentences" on the priests of the Kiev Patriarchate, which, in the current situation, pose a vital threat to the lives of the clergy and the faithful of the UOC KP in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions.

Similar problems (interrogations, torture, humiliation, threats) have been faced, and still are being faced, by the clergy and faithful of Protestant churches, Greek-Catholics, and Catholics. For these reasons, a number of the clergy (bishops, pastors, priests) and

believers have been forced to leave the territory controlled by the DPR and LPR and move to other regions of Ukraine.

The militants' capture and "sealing" of temples, houses of worship and other church premises is an emblematic element in the activity of the DPR and LPR. Evangelical Christians-Baptists have reported that, as of September 23, 2014, pro-Russian militants had seized and damaged 10 ECB churches and prayer houses in the Lugansk and Donetsk regions. Among them the Baptist House of Prayer for All Peoples Church in the city of Antratsit in the Lugansk region, the premises of the IUCECB Church in Lugansk, the Bethany Baptist Church in Donetsk, the building housing the church community of the Brotherhood of Independent Baptist churches and ECB missions in Donetsk, and the building of the Church of Renewal belonging to the Union of Free Pentecostal churches in the city of Krasny Luch in the Lugansk region.

In the Donetsk region, separatists seized a building with 1,000 seats in the city of Donetsk from the faithful of the Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church, along with the facilities housing a rehabilitation center for people suffering from different kinds of dependencies. DPR fighters captured the complex of buildings comprising the Donetsk Christian University just outside their military base. Also, the premises of the Evangelical Word of Life churches in Shakhtersk and Gorlovka, as well as the house of worship belonging to the evangelical New Generation Church in Gorlovka, were seized.

In the Lugansk region, LPR separatists confiscated the houses of worship of the Pentecostal communities in the cities of Lugansk, Lutugino, and Georgievka. In August and September of 2014, the local bishop reported that in Rovenki and Lugansk, pro-Russian gunmen confiscated all churches and houses of worship belonging to Evangelical Christians.

Religious buildings are used for a variety of military and other needs of the pro-Russian separatists, including weapon storage, spot artillery fire, and cover from shelling. Shelling has already damaged a number of structures, housing places of worship. These include the Church of God house of worship in Slavyansk, the Greek Catholic Church in Donetsk, the Orthodox churches in Donetsk, Lugansk, Kirov, and Gorlovka, the Protestant houses of worship in Gorlovka, Shakhtersk, Ilovaisk, Lysychansk, and Pervomaisk, the mosque in Donetsk, and numerous others. There are cases where militants stored weapons in religious buildings belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), and when they were shelled in response to their own shelling from these emplacements, they accused the Ukrainian military of firing upon Orthodox churches.

There have been notable attempts by the DPR and LPR to establish so-called "Commissioners for Religious Affairs," but due to internal fragmentation, these attempts have not yielded tangible results for believers and churches. Despite the difficulties, religious organizations are trying to contact and meet with representatives of the self-proclaimed republics to solve problematic issues. There are individual cases by way of exception where, as a result of such contacts, the decision was made to return a religious building or halt the seizure of church premises.

It should be noted that, despite the difficulties and persecution, most of the churches in the territories controlled by the DPR and LPR continue to operate with the support of fellow believers in Ukraine, who are rendering humanitarian aid to various people suffering in the war zone.

Religious leaders from Ukraine and Russia have been holding meetings targeted at achieving peace and religious freedom, and providing humanitarian assistance to people in the conflict zone. These meetings help convey accurate information about the conflict and the situation to the parties involved, who will then have the ability to report this information to their denominations, as well as to the politicians and the public in their countries. At the same time, it is evident that the Russian party engaging in dialogue with the representatives of Ukrainian denominations is continuing to follow the official policy of Russia and the clichés put forth in the Russian media. Despite this, it is beneficial to maintain this dialogue between religious leaders from Ukraine and Russia.

Recommendations:

1. In order to protect the clergy and the faithful residents of the occupied territories of Crimea and eastern Ukraine from religiously motivated persecution, these issues should be raised at the highest international level, including before the Security Council and the United Nations Human Rights Committee, and before the OSCE and its special monitoring mission. The U.S. Congress, the State Department and the Commission on International Religious Freedom should also address these issues.
2. The World Council of Churches, including the Russian Orthodox Church, should discuss religious persecution in eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Also, facilitating dialogue between the Ukrainian Council of Churches and religious organizations in Russia in order to minimize and prevent further escalations in religious intolerance would be worthwhile.