



Religious Persecution in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea 2014

Ukraine Summary 2014

Christians are suffering religious persecution in Crimea and in the regions of eastern Ukraine where pro-Russian separatists maintain control. This persecution is largely due to religious militancy and ecclesiastical arrogance. This is very different from religious persecution in other parts of the former Soviet Union, where totalitarian paranoia and Islamic extremism are the main causes of persecution.

The following groups are the most responsible for religious persecution in Crimea and eastern Ukraine:

- Religious leaders of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate
- Fanatical movements, such as the Russian Orthodox Army
- Pro-Russian separatists (revolutionary groups)

In April - September 2014, hundreds of believers were abducted in territories controlled by pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. These believers were abducted solely because they were not members of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. We interviewed some of the believers who were abducted, and they all shared that they were tortured on religious grounds. Some of them were released, often in return for a ransom, but they all suffered various injuries from beatings, stab wounds, broken bones, dislocated joints, or burns from electric shocks. During this period, we also learned that four evangelical ministers were killed in Slavyansk. More than 40 believers are still listed as missing, and their fates remain unknown.

Additionally, in the past six months, 54 churches of various Christian denominations were taken over or destroyed in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Several of these churches were burned to the ground. Large buildings belonging to Protestant churches and schools have also been confiscated and used by the pro-Russian separatists as barracks, warehouses, and storage for weapons. Some buildings have also been transferred to the Orthodox clergy of the Moscow Patriarchate. For example, on July 9, armed militants seized Donetsk Christian University, and on August 13, members of the People's Republic of Donetsk (DPR or DNR) took over the worship hall of the Word of Life Church.

About 100 churches, Christian missions, orphanages, rehabilitation centers, educational institutions, research centers and charities have been closed in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Today, tens of thousands of believers in these regions live in fear of being kidnapped, tortured, or killed. In Mariupol, Republic Pilgrim, one of the most well known centers for orphans, has even been evacuated due to the continuous threat of a Russian invasion.

Research Methods

Gathering Information

- Identifying victims of religious persecution
- Locating victims of religious persecution
- Interviewing victims of religious persecution
- Collecting evidence from victims of religious persecution
- Interviewing witnesses to crimes of religious persecution

A. Identifying Victims of Religious Persecution

- Victims are Christians who were imprisoned, tortured, had their property confiscated or damaged, were forced to leave their place of residence, or were killed solely because of their religion.

B. Locating Victims of Religious Persecution

- We maintain contact with Christian leaders in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, who provide us with information about incidents of religious persecution. These leaders also provide us with contact information for victims of religious persecution in their communities.
- We ask the victims that we interview if they know of anyone else who has experienced persecution for their faith.
- We search the news and social networks to find victims of religious persecution.
- We use social media networks to urge victims of religious persecution to contact us.

C. Interviewing Victims of Religious Persecution

- We conduct short phone interviews with victims to determine if they have evidence to support their claims, and if there at least three witnesses who can confirm that these victims did indeed suffer religious persecution. If victims have evidence and witnesses to support their claims, then we schedule face-to-face interviews with them.

D. Collecting Evidence from Victims of Religious Persecution

- We first obtain proof of identity, usually a passport.
- We then ask for evidence to support their claims, such as pictures, a doctor's note, any documents confirming loss of property, etc.

E. Interviewing Witnesses to Crimes of Religious Persecution

- We interview the witnesses provided by the victims of religious persecution to confirm the victims' claims and obtain any additional information that they have about incidents of religious persecution.

Summary of Persecutory Atrocities Committed Against Christians

Overview

Since April 2014, hundreds of Christians in eastern Ukraine and Crimea have suffered religious persecution at the hands of pro-Russian separatists. This persecution has included the following atrocities: abduction, torture, arson, property confiscation, death threats, physical violence, expatriation and even murder. The following is a summary of the various atrocities presented in this report, as well as our efforts to develop strategies for increasing religious freedom in Ukraine.

Atrocity Reports

Abduction & Torture

While compiling our research, we encountered a great number of people reporting that they had been abducted and/or tortured by pro-Russian separatists. In every case, the separatists never offered the victims any sort of legal consultation, and in most cases the victims were subject to severe physical punishment, as well as emotional and psychological trauma. The motivation for these arrests centered on paranoia of American spies and a perceived betrayal of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

For example, in the case of Gennady Lysenko (pg. 1), a minister and volunteer at the Good News Church in Slavyansk, he was abducted while attempting to evacuate families out of the city. He was taken out of his car, harshly blindfolded with tape, and locked in a separatist-controlled basement for three hours before being interrogated. The separatists accused him of betraying Orthodoxy, feeding the Ukrainian army, and selling out to America. Gennady was then told that he was sentenced to execution, but after three days of confinement in the basement, he was released.

In a similar case, armed men abducted Anatoly Vitalyevich Onishchenko (pg. 15), the former pastor of Living Water Church in Krasny Luch, during his church service. He was handcuffed and beaten repeatedly, resulting in serious damage to his hands. After being accused of being an American spy, he was locked in a shed for the night. The next day he was taken to an Orthodox priest who told him that anyone who is not a member of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is an enemy. Because he has four children, Anatoly was eventually released, and he and his family are now living as refugees in Slavyansk.

In a much harsher case, Viktor Cherniyavsky (pg. 28), an independent businessman and a minister in the Word of Life Church in Lugansk, was abducted when attempting to pass through a separatist checkpoint. He was detained for 25 days, during which time he was interrogated eight times and tortured severely. This torture included beatings with baseball bats and electric shocks, which caused Viktor to suffer heart problems. He was repeatedly degraded for being Protestant, and he was eventually taken to a basement with 50 other prisoners to await execution, however he was released a few days later.

In another harsh case, Father Tikhon (Sergey Kulbaka) (pg. 41), was abducted outside of a

supermarket by a group of separatists, who took him to a building where he was blindfolded and left in a room alone. Father Tikhon suffers from diabetes and other health issues, which require medication. On day two of his twelve-day confinement, the separatists took away this medication, which caused him to suffer from kidney stones. He was given very little water, and was forced to endure gunfire shot over his head while he was blindfolded. Throughout his confinement, the separatists and a religious “expert” repeatedly told Father Tikhon that God does not recognize anyone outside of the Orthodox Church, and that God would not accept him after his death. On day 12, he was left in the woods in his car, and he was able to escape with his family to western Ukraine.

In each of these cases, the victims were abducted by force, and were given no explanation as to where they were being held, or on what charges. Each victim also endured some sort of torture, almost always while blindfolded, which suggests that the separatists do not want their identities and actions to be reported. The victims’ reports of extreme pro-Orthodoxy expressed by the separatists are very disconcerting, as Ukraine was once a nation dedicated to religious freedom. Because the Ukrainian Government has been unable to quell the fighting in eastern Ukraine, it is likely that the abduction and torture of Christians will continue in the region so long as the separatists maintain control.

Arson

In addition to reports of abduction and torture, we also received information about two churches that were burned by pro-Russian separatists. While one of these churches was in Crimea, and the other in Lugansk, both were set fire by separatists claiming to support the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. In both cases, the pastors of the churches also received threats before the crimes took place.

For instance, in the case of Father Yaroslav (Yaroslav Gontar) (pg. 71), Priest of the church that was burned in Crimea, he received threats from the Orthodox Church for a year before his church was set fire on December 23, 2013. This is particularly disturbing, as the threats began a year before Russia’s annexation of Crimea, which implies that separatists were already preparing for action against Christians in Crimea long before the Ukraine crisis began. Father Yaroslav also shared that many priests in the area were questioned to ensure that they were not taking action to refute the new government in Crimea, following Russian’s annexation on March 16, 2014. This is also alarming, as it suggests that religious freedom will now be highly restricted in this region.

Similarly, Yelisei Pronin (pg. 106), Pastor of the Revival Church in Lugansk, shared that he received several threatening phone calls from a separatist named Nikolai Milyutin a few months before the church was burned. Nikolai accused Yelisei of being an American spy, and he said that it was his duty to deal with the Baptist traitors in Ukraine. Yelisei appealed to the police for help, but they were in league with Nikolai, and even allowed separatists to conduct three searches of the church. On August 16, 2014, the church was burned to the ground, and Yelisei now devotes his time to helping organize food, shelter, and counseling for refugees in eastern Ukraine.

The longstanding actions of separatists against Christians in Crimea, and their allegiance

with local police in Lugansk show the great danger facing believers, as well as their churches, in these regions.

Property Confiscation

In some reported cases, rather than destroying Christian property, pro-Russian separatists confiscated churches and other facilities to utilize as military bases, weapons storage, and prisons. These buildings were taken at threat of violence, and with no legal authority of any kind. Because the buildings belonged to Christians with no affiliation to the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, the separatists did not view their actions as crimes.

On June 9, 2014, seven armed separatists entered the central offices at Donetsk Christian University, and approached Oleg Shtein (pg. 76), the Vice Rector. They stated that the university was now in the possession of the separatists, and they ordered the 30 people, including children, living in the dormitories to leave. The separatists then confiscated all documents and computers in the facility, and Oleg fled to Kiev. Currently, 150 separatists, along with 20 of their prisoners, remain in the facility.

In a similar case, on June 23, 2014, five or six armed separatists seized the Rock of Salvation Rehabilitation Center in Donetsk. Aleksey Ulyantsev (pg. 131), the Deputy Director of the facility, reported that they ordered everyone in the facility into the basement at gunpoint. They told them that there would only be one faith, Orthodoxy, and all other faiths would not be recognized. They allowed everyone in the facility to go home, but the next day when Aleksey returned, 50-60 militants were living in the center, and they only allowed him to take a printer and some documents out of the office.

Property confiscation was not limited solely to churches and professional facilities. Muslim Mernik (pg. 126), Pastor of the City of Faith Church in Donetsk, shared that separatists seized a private home where his congregation would conduct meetings. Several aggressive separatists entered the house during a meeting on May 16, 2014, and told Muslim and his congregation that they would destroy all non-Orthodox churches. They returned a few days later and began following the congregation members to their homes, which prompted Muslim to appeal to the police for help. The police said it would be easier if he and his congregation left the area, so they fled to Kiev. The separatists looted the house about a month later, causing \$15,000 in damage.

One of the most concerning things about these reports of property confiscation is that the local authorities were unable to do anything to protect the Christians experiencing religious persecution at the hands of separatists. With the police rendered helpless, there is no protection for Christians suffering in eastern Ukraine, and very little that can be done to prevent the separatists from continuing to gain ground in the region.

Death Threats & Expatriation

In some cases that we researched, Christians in eastern Ukraine and Crimea elected to leave their homes before the pro-Russian separatists were able to abduct and/or torture them. These instances of expatriation were preceded by death threats, and in some cases, property confiscation. As in all of the aforementioned cases, the separatists committing the

crimes asserted that their reason for forcing Christians to flee their homes was the supreme authority of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

For example, in the case of Gennady Kitaigora (pg. 118), Pastor of a church in Torez, he endured several threats before fleeing. In early May 2014, a group of separatists entered Gennady's church with guns and knives to intimidate the congregation, so he visited the separatists' headquarters to discuss the reason for this demonstration of force. The separatists asserted that Gennady and his church were sectarians, because the Orthodox Church is the only true faith. After several more acts of intimidation, a group of separatists broke into the church a few weeks later and demanded a meeting with Gennady. They accused Gennady of being an American spy, threatened to shoot him, and called their commander, who demanded that Gennady give her the keys to the church. He handed over the keys and fled from Torez with his family a few days later.

In a similar case, Sergey Zhuravlev (pg. 184), Bishop of the Word of Life Church in Rovenky, was forced to flee his home after receiving death threats. In late May 2014, Sergey received a call from a separatist who threatened to kill Sergey's family if he didn't leave town. Sergey fled Rovenky with his family, but he remained in contact with the church caretakers, who informed him that separatists continued to visit the church to look for him. During one visit, the separatists told the caretakers that their church was a sect that needed to be eradicated, because Orthodoxy was the only true faith. On August 29, a group of separatists entered the church and told the caretakers that they had to be moved out of the building within two days, because it was being nationalized. Today, the church is used as a separatist military base, and Sergey and his family have not returned to Rovenky.

In a more severe case, Mikhail Reshetnikov (pg. 140), Minister at the Word of Life Church in Donetsk, was participating in the Prayer Marathon in Donetsk until he was forced to flee the city. On March 20, 2014, a group of about 200 people armed with baseball bats and knives approached Mikhail's tent, which bore a Ukrainian flag, claiming that Ukraine doesn't exist anymore. The police were able to prevent the crowd from harming Mikhail and his ministry partners, but several other groups approached the tent in the next few months. On May 24, 2014, armed separatists threatened to shoot them if they didn't take down their tent. The tent was torn down, and from then on, cars with blacked-out windows followed Mikhail wherever he went. Mikhail fled to Kiev, but he could not afford to bring his family with him.

Just as in the cases of property confiscation, the cases of expatriation show that local authorities are not able to sufficiently protect Christians in eastern Ukraine and Crimea from the pro-Russian separatists. It is likely that Christians will continue to flee the violence that is taking place in these regions, which will only allow the separatists to gain more control. Because Christians are the only institution working to care for refugees in these regions, their diminishing presence will also leave more and more refugees with no source of aid.

Physical Violence & Expatriation

Two of the Christians that we interviewed reported that they suffered physical violence at

the hands of pro-Russian separatists, but they were not abducted for systematic torture. In these cases, the separatists went beyond the threats used against Christians in the previous section, even though their actions also led to the Christians' expatriation. The physical violence used in these cases was motivated by the Christians' affiliation with "sectarianism" rather than with the Orthodox Church, and in both cases, the violence was coupled with excessive verbal threats.

In the case of Yana Gulyaeva (pg. 163), she and her husband were participating in the Prayer Marathon in Donetsk in March 2014, when three men in civilian clothing followed them to their car. The men opened fire, and a bullet hit Yana in the head, but she was not seriously injured. Yana and her husband refused to give in to fear and they continued to serve in the Prayer Marathon, where they experienced several other attacks during the next few months. In one instance, a woman repeatedly accused them of being the children of Satan, and she yelled that she wished they could be burned at the stake. Another man yelled that the Christians had sold out to America, and that they would be lined up against the wall and shot. The police removed the man and woman, but neither of them was arrested. On June 18, 2014, Yana, her husband, and their children left Donetsk.

Petr Martyschenko (pg. 172) was also participating in the Prayer Marathon when he was subjected to several instances of violence. On March 13, 2014, a crowd of people dressed in black threw stones, bottles, and eggs at the Prayer Marathon participants. A few days later, a group of armed separatists approached Petr's tent and beat it with baseball bats. On March 30, 2014, a group of about 150 people with bats and iron bars surrounded the tent, yelling that the Christian God is not needed, because they have the Orthodox God of Russia. The crowd dispersed before attacking the tent, but on May 3, 2014, two separatists severely beat Petr and his son, leaving them with traumatic brain injuries. After recovering for several weeks, Petr received a threatening phone call, so he fled to Chernigov Oblast, along with his son and several other Christian children from local churches.

The language and excessive violence used by pro-Russian separatists in these cases are particularly disturbing, as they took place in public places in plain view of several police officers. The harsher tactics used in these cases suggests that separatists are aware that police are afraid to defend Christians, so they know that they can use violence without fear of punishment. This knowledge is leading to even harsher treatment of Christians throughout eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

Murder

The most disturbing report that we received concerns the murders of four parishioners from the Divine Transfiguration Church in Slavyansk. As in all other cases presented in this report, pro-Russian separatists were responsible for committing this crime. Due to the fact that Christians are already being murdered in eastern Ukraine, it is imperative that we recognize the severity of the atrocities taking place in the region before murder becomes the norm.

Elena Velichko's (pg. 94) husband, Vladimir, and Natalya Bradarskaya's (pg. 99) husband, Viktor, were two of the four male parishioners detained after a service held at the Divine

Transfiguration Church on June 8, 2014. The other two men were Ruvi and Albert Pavenko, the sons of Senior Pastor Aleksandr Pavenko. Following the service, several armed separatists ordered the four men into their cars as they were leaving the church. They were then ordered to follow a car driven by one of the separatists. Their families were not provided with any information regarding their whereabouts, so Elena and Natalya went to the separatist headquarters in Slavyansk, where they were told that their husbands' locations were unknown. The separatists accused them of being part of an American church full of spies.

Natalya was determined to find her husband, so she visited several of the buildings where the separatists' prisoners were being held, but everyone refused to give her any information. One Orthodox priest told her that Protestantism was a bad religion, and that her husband was accused of transporting weapons to the Ukrainian Army. After a month of searching, the charred bodies of the four men were found in a mass grave just outside of Slavyansk. Autopsies revealed that they had been shot the day after they were abducted, after which they were placed inside of a burning car, before ultimately being buried. Elena, Natalya, and Pastor Pavenko were able to bury their loved ones a few days after their bodies were discovered.

The cruelty used in the murders of Vladimir Velichko, Natalya Bradarskaya, and Ruvi and Albert Pavenko show the depth of the pro-Russian separatists' hatred for Christians. If they are permitted to continue persecuting Christians in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, it is likely that murders of this nature will become more common as the separatists grow more powerful.

Implications/Next Steps

The numerous reports of religious persecution suffered by Christians in eastern Ukraine and Crimea at the hands of pro-Russian separatists show the dire need for greater religious freedom in these regions. Since April 2014, we have received numerous reports of abduction, torture, arson, property confiscation, death threats, physical violence, expatriation, and even murder enacted against Christians in these areas. The separatists claim that these atrocities were committed in defense of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, and to combat American spies.

Given that the local police in eastern Ukraine and Crimea are unable to quell the atrocities committed against Christians by pro-Russian separatists, it is likely that religious persecution will continue to increase in these regions. In order to combat this escalating persecution, we must pursue all possible avenues to advocate for increased religious freedom in these regions.

One such avenue is our Roundtable/Consultation on Religious Persecution in Occupied Territories in Ukraine, which will take place in Washington, DC on February 4, 2015. This Roundtable/Discussion will include presentations from experts analyzing religious persecution in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, as well as several discussions to develop strategic ideas for improving religious freedom in these regions. It is our hope that, through these discussions, the Roundtable/Consultation participants will develop solutions and

recommendations that will help to create awareness about religious freedom issues in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, as well as accomplish the following objectives:

1. Mobilize the US Congress to propose legislation that will assist victims of religious persecution through relocation, granting of refugee status, etc.
2. Mobilize experts in the area of religious freedom to enlist the support of their networks and advocate on behalf of those persecuted for their faith.
3. Inform the general public about the state of religious persecution in Ukraine, as well as encourage them to support those suffering religious persecution, both prayerfully and financially.

By mobilizing the US Congress and religious freedom experts from around the world to take action in Ukraine, we can help to influence a global effort to combat religious persecution in the nation. Informing the general public about the severity of religious persecution in Ukraine will also allow us to raise more adequate support for those who are suffering for their faith. These efforts are opportunities for us to care for both the short-term and long-term needs of the Christians suffering religious persecution in eastern Ukraine and Crimea.