
Karpitsky Nikolai

**Persecution of Christians in
the Donbas (Eastern Ukraine, 2014)**

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Предложен краткий обзор положения верующих Донбасса в условиях продолжающегося военного конфликта. Автор рассказывает о проявлении нетерпимости, пытках и убийствах христиан.

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This brief overview is about the situation of believers in Eastern Ukraine. The author tells us about the brutal intolerance, repression and murder of Christians.

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Introductory. The Threat of Freedom and Threats to Freedom

By Dr. Mykhailo Cherenkov

There is so much talk about religious freedom in the West that it is considered a given, however it most certainly is not a given, at least not everywhere and not for everyone. If we look closely at the map of the world and consider what is happening, we will see that the world is becoming less free. We have to talk about freedom in an unfree world, where freedom is increasingly perceived as a problem and a threat. This is a remarkable paradox of our time - while we are concerned about threats to freedom, a number of religious and political leaders are talking about the threats of freedom, i.e., about the dangers to religion, state and society that freedom brings. Why is this so? Because freedom creates diversity and diversity stimulates competition in which the more promising compete with the more authoritative, the more intelligent with the more powerful, the more flexible with the greater. It is strange but true that in the twenty-first century, the number of supporters of religious freedom are much fewer than its opponents, and almost all of its adherents live in the West.

Religious freedom is one of the conditions of diversity. As Baptists, we consistently uphold the values of religious freedom because it is the only way that we can obtain a place alongside larger and more influential churches. We value freedom and diversity because we tend to emphasize the individual's personal relationship with God, personal choice, and personal or group characteristics and preferences. We cannot accept the division of whole territories and countries, people and cultures by religions or denominations. We emphasize internal differences and freedom of choice in order to avoid violence, coercion and assimilation.

Today, diversity is under the threat. We have not even thought about how fragile freedom is and how vulnerable diversity is.

I want to highlight the three main threats to religious freedom - an aggressive secularism, radical Islam and political Orthodoxy.

The first threat to the Western world is well known, though there do not appear to have been any effective measures taken to protect the freedom of those who continue to believe and adhere

to their traditions. The rights of the minority are in conflict with the tradition of the majority, the freedom to criticize tradition destroys the freedom to belong to it and trust it, the freedom not to believe violates the freedom to believe. The fact that the aggressive minority has managed to impose its non-traditional concept of marriage on a passive majority is a very significant and alarming precedent.

The second threat comes from the East, encompassing the so-called «Global South,» and its influence on Europe is growing. Recent events in Hungary and the discussion surrounding the issue of refugees in Europe involves a religious component. Europe, in offering tolerance to others, is losing its own identity, and is now dealing with violence on the part of refugees under the flag of the Islamic State. Of course, we should not succumb to Islamophobia, but we should also not close our eyes to the dangerous connection between religion and violence in Islam. Aggressive followers of Islam talk about freedom for themselves and then deny freedom to everyone else. Religious freedom and aggressive Islam are unlikely to be compatible.

The third threat is the newest for all of you, and we have experienced it in Ukraine and other former

Soviet countries. For decades, Western Christians prayed for spiritual revival in this region. But today we can confidently say: it was not Orthodox Christianity that revived but political Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy replaced the atheist ideology and has become a major link in Putin's public policy. Icons of Stalin are not a sensation, but a symbol of our time. Today the Russian Orthodox Army is fighting in the east of Ukraine, brutally persecuting Protestants and Catholics, all those who are not Orthodox.

Thus, religious freedom is a fragile value that has a lot of enemies in the West and in the East. At the same time there is no alternative to it because for us, Christians, this freedom is God-given. Perhaps we have to accept that the world will become increasingly less free, but we can create and cultivate oases and communities of freedom, primarily in and around our communities.

How do threats to religious freedom affect the Christian mission? They bring us back again to the original situation: Christ ascended to Heaven and left the Great Commission; the disciples are few and lost; the outside world is hostile. Then the apostles were denied «the kingdom,» but promised something much more important: «But you will receive

power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

We cannot consider democracy eternal and religious freedom universal and inviolable. We have to be ready to bear our witness in a variety of circumstances, including in an environment antagonistic to freedom. But this does not prevent us from confessing the principle of religious freedom as our own, building and strengthening the community and culture of freedom,

demonstrating the benefits of freedom, and reminding others that freedom is God’s gift and our responsibility to Him.

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The Ideology of the “Russian World”

Separatists came to Donbas armed with the ideology of “Russkiy Mir”, the Russian World, in its most aggressive version that was enshrined in the «Constitution of the Donetsk People’s Republic» adopted on May 14, 2014. Its preamble states that the «Supreme Council» adopts the «Constitution,» «confessing the Orthodox faith (the Holy Greek Orthodox Christian faith of the Eastern Rite) of the Russian Orthodox Church (of the Moscow Patriarchate) and acknowledging it to be the keystone of the «Russian World.» By doing so, the separatists, under the guise of Orthodoxy, introduced a special doctrine providing the foundation for the Russian World and opposed not only to the Christian religion as such, but also to all other Orthodox Churches. The ninth chapter of the «DPR Constitution» declares this creed to have a commanding status: «In Donetsk People’s

Republic, the leading and dominant faith is the Orthodox faith (the Holy Greek Orthodox Christian faith of the Eastern Rite) as professed by the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). The historical importance and the role of Orthodoxy and the Russian Orthodox Church (of the Moscow Patriarchate) are acknowledged and respected, primarily, as systemically important pillars of the Russian World.»

This provision also puts the separatists in opposition to most believers of Donbas, where diversity has always been an important feature. The number of local Protestant communities registered there before the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war was just a little below the number of parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate. In these circumstances, a religious conflict was inevitable.

Religious Diversity in the Donbas

The Donetsk Regional State Administration reported that, as of the end of 2014, 1,795 religious organizations, including 1,723 religious communities, were registered in the Donetsk region (including the occupied territories). Orthodox religious organizations accounted for about 49% of those

(42.9% of them being religious organizations of the Moscow Patriarchate). Protestants of all denominations had over 700 organizations, or 40.9% of the total number, including charismatic churches accounting for more than 12%, and Baptists having more than 10%. The rest were 38 Muslim, 19

Jewish, 14 Buddhist and 8 Vaishnav religious organizations registered in the oblast. Additionally, there were a number of domestic churches and communities with no official registration, as permitted by Ukrainian law. Some churches in the occupied territories had to close down because of the violence on the part of the separatists. The Donetsk Oblast State Administration (currently based in the Ukraine-controlled Mariupol) also reported that 26 religious missions were officially registered in the Donetsk Oblast. All of them represented Protestant denominations (Baptists,

Evangelical Christians, Full Gospel Church, Church of Christ, Church of God Pentecostal, Association of Independent ECB Churches, and the Association of Missionary Churches of Evangelical Christians of Ukraine). The following missions were very actively engaged in evangelism and charitable activities: Ark (ECB, Makeyevka), Path to the Heart (ECB, Khartsyzsk), Ark (CEF, Slavyansk), Opportunity (CEF, Mariupol), Assembly of God in Ukraine (CEF, Donetsk), Share Thy Bread with the Hungry (Full Gospel Church, Makeyevka), City of Refuge (CEF, Donetsk), and Blue Cross (ECB, Makeyevka)¹.

The Beginning of the War and the First Tests

The war in Eastern Ukraine was preceded by a massive pro-Russian propaganda campaign but people with firm beliefs were more resistant to it than others. That is why, at the beginning of the war, most Protestants of Donbas sided with Ukraine. With the Orthodox, the situation is more complicated, since many believers consider themselves to be Orthodox not on religious, but on ideological grounds. In fact, all those who were guided by their values, whether Protestants, Orthodox, Vaishnav or Muslim,

seemed to be immune to propaganda and, therefore, were perceived by the adherents of the «Russian World» as potential enemies.

Many residents of Donbas met the victory of the Maidan with suspicion, even though their attitudes varied. Many did not like the corrupt Yanukovich government, but still prayed for it. Students being beaten up and later people shot down on Maidan, as well as Viktor Yanukovich fleeing – all those events raised certain questions: to what extent

¹Data provided to the author of the Regional state administration of the Donetsk region in April 2015.



the authorities can be considered legitimate, for how long it is necessary to pray for them, and how the new government should be perceived? Some of the bishops had their own standpoint, and others did not, but since neither priesthood nor episcopate had a clear understanding of the situation, it was deemed neces-

sary to refrain from stating any political positions. However, the outbreak of the war urged many to self-determination, expressing their position not only in word, but also in deed and helping

residents of the combat zone in need of assistance, as well as the Ukrainian military.

In different cities of Donbas, after the outbreak of the war, the events followed one and the same scenario. First, rumors that

the Right Sector is coming; later, seizure of administrative buildings, with police being absolutely inert; then, mobilization of lumpenprols who considered themselves to be the masters of the streets; then, the arrival of mercenaries with military skills who forced out the lumpen; and finally, the emergence of heavy weapons and unidentified military professionals. In these circumstances, even those pastors who previously had not supported Maidan became supporters of Ukraine. Gradually, the mood of the population began to change, and today most Donbas residents in the liberated territories



remember the occupation period only as a nightmare.

Aleksey Palchenko, the Deacon of a small Love of Jesus Pentecostal church located on the outskirts of Kramatorsk in the Donetsk Oblast, said that only one

Protestant church out of twenty active in the city supported the separatists. He himself, during the occupation, would deliver the aid gathered by the parishioners of his church to Ukrainian checkpoints.

This aid was collected by elderly pensioners, who helped the Ukrainian military from their meager pensions, cooked, and made sauerkraut².

The First Persecution of the Christians in Slavyansk

There were no arrests of Christians in Kramatorsk, but some pastors were warned that they were on the arrest list and therefore had to leave the city. In Slavyansk, however, the arrests of ministers and active parishioners of Protestant churches began very soon.

On May 16, 2014, at the order of the city's military authorities, the Bishop of the Ukrainian Church of God Evangelical Association

and the senior pastor of the Good News Pentecostal church in Slavyansk, Aleksey Demidovich, was arrested by the separatists. Before that, separatists came after pastor Sergey Demidovich, and searched his home and garage, saying that he «worked for Americans.» Fortunately, Sergey Demidovich was in Kyiv at that time and escaped arrest, but Aleksey spent seven hours in the basement, blindfolded. After that,



The Transfiguration Pentecostal Evangelical church (Slavyansk)

²Interview with A. Palchenko, 10.05.2015

the separatist-appointed mayor of Slavyansk, Vyacheslav Ponomarev, came and ordered the release of Aleksey Demidovich. A former drug addict, Ponomarev underwent a rehabilitation course at one of the Protestant churches and was therefore familiar with Protestant activities. Pastors took the first arrest as a warning, and quickly left the occupied city. Members of the «militia» who sympathized with them later confessed to parishioners: «Had the pastors not left then, they would have never been able to do so.»

The separatists made no bones of the «dissenters» - all Orthodox priests not belonging to the Moscow Patriarchate were expelled from the city right away (which probably saved their lives), but there was no general solution to the question of what to do with the Protestants. Natalya Bradarska, widow of the Deacon of Transfiguration Pentecostal Evangelical church, who was gunned down, described how the militants came to them. They liked the grand church building with columns located in the town center. «Americans? A pro-American church?» the separatists asked. They could not believe that the building of the

former House of Culture was fully restored by parishioners with just donations: «You receive assistance from Americans, Americans are our enemies, and we are the Russian Orthodox Army.» First, the militants hesitated whether to seize the building or not, but then they said: «Keep praying for now.» And they seized another church, Good News, which was located on a hill and therefore was more valuable from a military point of view. The pastor of Good News Church, Petr Dudnik described how the separatists chased everyone out of the church, saying that the barracks would be located there. After the separatists fled, the Ukrainian military removed three truckloads of weapons from the church building.



Pastor Petr Dudnik

³Interview with N. Bradarska, 16.04.2015.



Good News Church (Slavyansk)

The Seizure of Churches, and Arrests, Torture and Murder of Christians

The scale of repressions is difficult to assess so far, since fragmented information comes from various sources and still needs to be summarized. The press center of the “Vsi razom!” (All Together) civic movement published the results of their monitoring of persecution on religious grounds in the occupied territories of Donbas in March 2015: «The facts of the murders of seven members of the clergy have been established reliably. More than 40 church ministers have been taken captive, interrogated and beaten. Also, in 2014, militants seized buildings and premises of 12 Christian communities, a church

orphanage, a Christian university, and three rehabilitation centers for alcohol and drug abusers. Additionally, shelling damaged five church buildings, three of which burnt down.»⁴ It is safe to say that the repressions had a much larger scale than these numbers show. Despite the fact that the separatists were relatively tolerant towards the Baptists, according to the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, as of September 2014, seven of their churches were seized and three more were destroyed.⁵ The relatively «tolerant» attitude towards the Baptists was manifest in the fact that in the city of

⁴ Гоніння на християн в «ДНР» та «ЛНР»: священнослужителів вбивають, церковні будівлі відбирають // Information portal “Vsi razom!”, 11.03.2015. URL: <http://www.vsirazom.ua/vchinki/155-goninnya-na-khristiyan-v-dnr-ta-lnr-svyashchennosluzhiteliv-vbivayut-tserkovni-budivli-vidbirayut.html>

⁵ Разрушили жертвенники твои... // Information portal of All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUC ECB). URL: http://ecbua.info/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3213%3Arazushili-zhertvenniki-tvoi3czar1914&catid=13%3As-&Itemid=53&lang=ua

Anratsit, the separatists seized the building of the House of Prayer for all Nations Baptist Church twice, later giving it back.⁶

Pastor Sergey Kosyak provided information on the seizure of church buildings: In May 2014, the separatists seized church buildings in Gorlovka and Snezhnoye and the Evening Light rehabilitation center in Donetsk, taking captive 29 people, some of whom were beaten. In June 2014, they seized churches in Torez, Shakhtyorsk and Druzhkovka, two churches in Gorlovka, the Rock of Salvation rehabilitation center and the entire premises of Donetsk Christian University in Donetsk. In August 2014, they seized church buildings in Donetsk, Elonovka and Gorlovka, and in September 2014, in Donetsk and Rovenky. The seizure of churches was often accompanied by the arrests of pastors.⁷

While Protestant churches were seized selectively, those of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church were taken consistently and systematically.

The administrator of the Donetsk Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, Archbishop Sergey (Gorobtsov) said in February 2015 that “30 of the 40 parishes on the currently occupied territory have stopped operating. Most clergy and their families had to be evacuated from the region due to their names appearing on the ‘execution lists’ of the DPR. Some of those who remain behind in the war zone organize clandestine gatherings for worship.”⁸

The persecution of Christians in the occupied territories is not uniform. Arrests were carried out systematically in the cities where structures were created: Slavyansk, Donetsk, and Gorlovka. In other places, such as Kramatorsk, such structures were established, but never started working. In some provincial towns, separatists did not interfere in the life of the citizens, while elsewhere, autonomous groups of Russian mercenaries and units of Russian Cossacks terrorized the population.

Slavyansk suffered the most under the repressions. On

⁶ Жизнь церквей Восточного региона // Information portal of All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUC ECB). URL: http://ecbua.info/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3317%3Azhizn-cerkvej-vostochnogo-regiona&catid=13%3As-&Itemid=53&lang=ua

⁷ URL: <https://www.facebook.com/sergey.kosyak.3/posts/992039267477489>

⁸ When God Becomes a Weapon. Report prepared by the Center for Civil Liberties and International Partnership for Human Rights in the framework of the Civic Solidarity Platform. April 2015. URL: http://www.irs.in.ua/files/publications/2015.04_Report_Religious_persecution_in_occupied_Donbas_eng.pdf. P. 15.

June 8, 2014, Trinity Sunday, the separatists abducted four Christians: Viktor Bradarsky (40 y.o., 3 children), two sons of pastor Pavenko, Ruvim (29 y.o., married) and Albert (24 y.o., married), and Vladimir Velichko (8 children, 41

y.o.). They were taken after the service, when people were leaving the Transfiguration church. Within 16 hours they were shot to death, but their murder was concealed from their relatives.⁹



⁹ Interview with N. Bradarska, 16.04.2015.

Persecution of Christians in Donetsk



While Slavyansk was controlled by just one separatist group, in Donetsk there were many of them, which made repressions even more unpredictable. On February 25, 2014, in downtown Donetsk, a prayer marathon «for peace, love and the unity of Ukraine» was launched for representatives of all religious groups. On May 24, 2014, militants raided the prayer tent, threatening to shoot down anyone coming to pray. Marathon participant Sergey Kosyak, pastor of the Assembly of God Evangelical Church of Donetsk, went to the separatists' headquarters to discuss the incident, where he was arrested. After eight hours of tortures, a commander came and started yelling at his subordinates, demanding that they ask for forgiveness and return all his belongings. He then explained to Pastor Sergey that he had undergone rehabilitation at the



New Generation rehabilitation center, but had since then turned away from God, and that by saving Pastor Sergey he hoped that God would show him grace.¹⁰

From this episode, it is clear that the attitude of the separatists to the marathon was hostile, but there were many



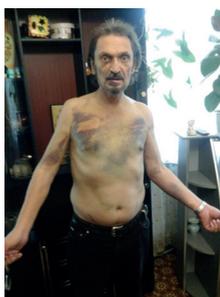
Sergey Kosyak

¹⁰ URL: <https://www.facebook.com/sergey.kosyak.3/posts/1082855535062528>

locals among the militants, who knew the worshipers personally, and this helped restrain them. Nevertheless, attacks and arrests of the worshipers continued, and then in August, under Igor Strelkov, a series of arrests and a direct ban on church assemblies forced them to go underground.

«Alexander Khomchenko, a pastor who was one of the organizers of the interdenominational Prayer Marathon in Donetsk, was kidnapped on August 8, 2014, after leading prayer on the city's Constitution Square, and taken to the neighboring city of Makeyevka. The fighters who detained him accused him of organizing unsanctioned meetings, helping the Ukrainian army and proselytizing a sect. Alexander Khomchenko was told by his captors that, "There shall only be one religion on this land". He spent four days in

captivity and sustained extensive injuries from brutal beatings and torture by suffocation: "They hung me up on a rack and put a gas mask on my face. They would cover the opening at the tube's end and block the airflow so I could not breathe. When I would almost lose consciousness, they would uncover the opening and cover it with a cloth soaked in ethanol. I would take a deep breath because I was nearly unconscious and feel a burning inside my chest. So I would start coughing and gasping for fresh air. That's when they would start beating me with batons on my chest and back. This continued over and over again." The pastor was also subjected to mock execution by firing squad, a torture method very popular among the pro-Russian fighters, according to numerous victims' testimonies."¹¹



Alexander Khomchenko

¹¹ When God Becomes the Weapon. Report prepared by the Center for Civil Liberties and International Partnership for Human Rights in the framework of the Civic Solidarity Platform. April 2015. URL: http://www.irs.in.ua/files/publications/2015.04_Report_Religious_persecution_in_occupied_Donbas_eng.pdf. P. 12-13.

Besides the centralized separatist structure in Donetsk, there are also other autonomous groups, which have no sympathy for churchgoers. One such extremist group, the Russian Orthodox Army, took captive Father Tykhon Kulbaka, a Greek Catholic priest, on July 4, 2014. Father Tykhon, a diabetic, spent 12 days in captivity without medicine. He survived by a miracle. Three times they took him out for execution, each time shooting over his head¹².

Roman Catholic priests were also arrested. On May 27, 2014, priest Pavel Vityok was arrested, spending a day in captivity. On July 15, Viktor Vonsovich was arrested, spending ten days in captivity.¹³

In the first months of the occupation, Donetsk pastors tried to find some kind of a compromise with local militants, many of whom they knew personally. In July 2014,



Father Tykhon Kulbaka

mercenaries started arriving in the city, and the situation worsened for Christians. With the arrival of Igor Strelkov (Girkin), the arrests of Christians in Donetsk grew more frequent. In August 2014, reprisals reached their peak, and subdued thereafter.

Discrimination Against Believers after August 2014

The decrease in the level of persecution was due to several factors. Primarily, the separatists solved their property issues, having seized everything they wanted. There were even several cases when buildings were restored to church communities. Secondly, pastors and

priests who irritated the separatists were forced to leave the occupied territory. The activities of the Orthodox churches of the Moscow Patriarchate were not affected. Thirdly, the separatists gradually became used to Protestants and started developing some general

¹² Священник, которого трижды расстреливали // Information portal "62.ua - Site of Donetsk", 15.12.2014. URL: <http://www.62.ua/news/689951>

¹³ Хронология террора: боевики «ДНР» и «ЛНР» преследуют христиан Донбасса // Internet portal of the Institute for Religious Freedom in Kyiv, 06.06.2014. URL: http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1456%3A1&catid=34%3Aua&Itemid=61&lang=ru

principles of overseeing the territories. Fourthly, the separatists saw that the Protestants' assistance to the needy reduces the level of social tension created by the lack of financing and destroyed social infrastructure.

For this very reason, the militants are unusually tolerant of the Vaishnavs, who feed the hungry in the occupied territories as part of their Food for Life program. Nevertheless, the Vaishnavs experienced reprisals alongside other denominations: some of the followers of this faith were arrested, and all public Vaishnav activities were banned. However, they chose not to focus attention on these things, believing their main priority today to be the charitable distribution of food.

The repressions, in any case, never ceased, they only became more systematized and pragmatic. Instead of the seizure of church property, the separatist authorities chose the strategy of forced cooperation, the first step being the requirement to register churches. However, this process is still at an early stage, and there have not yet been any direct reprisals for the refusal to register. Nevertheless, moral pressure increases.

Within religious communities and even church councils,

groups of people emerged who support the separatists and insist on cooperation with the separatist authorities. For pastors and parishioners, it is dangerous to take a pro-Ukrainian stance even inside their churches, since they may be reported to the «Ministry of State Security,» which carries out political reprisals against dissenters.

All these arrests were made on ideological grounds, since, in the separatists' worldview, Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox (outside the Moscow Patriarchate) are enemies of the «Russian World.» Separatist groups were numerous, and the reprisals took the form of chaotic bandit attacks. With time, the ideological basis for the attacks was replaced with a pragmatic one, aimed at retaining power. Therefore, the repression of religious organizations in Donbas will not stop. It will only take another form with a view to strengthening the overall control.



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About the Author



Nikolai Karpitsky is a philosopher and public figure. He was born in 1968 in Tomsk and in 1990 graduated with a degree in philosophy from Tomsk State University. He taught philosophy at Tomsk State University (Tomsk, Russia), Siberian State University (Tomsk, Russia) and Yugra State University (Khanty-Mansiysk, Russia). In 1995 he received his Ph.D. in the “Dialectic of the Human being”. In 2004 he defended a thesis for a Doctor of Sciences degree in “Transcendental Presentiment as a Phenomenon of Human Subjectivity.” Nikolai Karpitsky has participated in the anti-war movement since 1995.

In 1996-1997 he worked in the Tomsk Research Human Rights Center. In the autumn of 1999 he openly came out against war and authoritarianism. In 2011-2012 he testified against an official effort to declare the Bhagavadgita an extremist book and sought to recruit his fellow scholars in Tomsk to defend this Indian classic. In 2014 he publicly opposed the war of Russia against Ukraine. On October 1, 2015 he lost his job at Yugra State University because he took part in an academic conference on religious issues in Ukraine. Now he is teaching at Lugansk National Agrarian University (Kharkiv, Ukraine), and is conducting a field study of the repression of believers in the territory of military actions in Eastern Ukraine.

In the photo Nikolai Karpitsky (center) is pictured together with Christians from the frontline city of Avdeyevka, getting ready to deliver food to disabled and elderly people.

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KARPITSKY NIKOLAI

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