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Ukrainian Orthodox priest and nun killed

Russian Orthodox Church upset by murders of clergy in Kiev

RIA Novosty (29.07.2015) - The murders in Kiev of two representatives of the clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow patriarchate in the past several days, against the backdrop of the slanderous campaign in several Ukrainian news media directed against it, provokes concern, RIA Novosti was told by the vice-chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow patriarchate, Archpriest Nikolai Balashov, commenting on news reports appearing on Wednesday about the violent death of Sister Alevtina of the St. Florus convent.

"This news evokes profound sorrow and concern for the fate of the clergy and persons religious of the Ukrainian Orthodox church. Today news has arrived about the death in the hospital of priest Roman Nikolaev, who also was a victim of criminals acting in not completely clear circumstances. Considering that this is happening against the background of a slanderous campaign in several Ukrainian news media, directed against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, such incidents evoke special alarm," Balashov said.

Sister Alevtina was found "dead with marks of violence in Kiev," the synod's Information Department of the Moscow patriarchate reported on Wednesday. Its chairman, Vladimir Legoida, expressed condolences to the sisters of the St. Florus Holy Ascension convent located in the center of Kiev and a relative of the deceased nun. Legoida said, "those who did this horrible crime placed themselves outside the Ukrainian people, who from antiquity have revered those who are standing before God."

"Sister Alevtina was a 62-year-old teacher who was tonsured not long ago. We have been told that she was supposed to go to the hospital and she asked her nephew to

transport her, but before visiting the doctor she stopped in at her apartment. And there her nephew found her murdered," the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church/ Moscow Patriarchate press service, Vasily Anisimov, told RIA Novosti. He said the church does not yet know whether a criminal case has been opened.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church/ Moscow Patriarchate website reported that Wednesday a 41-year-old Kievan priest, Roman Nikolaev, died without recovering consciousness. He was the rector of the church of the Great Martyr Tatiana of the Obolonsk deanery, who in the night of 26 July was shot twice in the head in Kiev by unidentified persons. One of the reasons for the attack was a visit by residential thieves, although news media reported that this version has not been confirmed, since nothing was stolen from the priest's home. (tr. by PDS, posted 30 July 2015)

Targeted for religious beliefs in Eastern Ukraine

JW.ORG (10.07.2015) - Motivated by religious hatred, armed groups in eastern Ukraine have abducted and mistreated 26 of Jehovah's Witnesses since August 2014. Many Witnesses live in the region, and they are well-known for their public ministry and political neutrality. Some members of armed groups have capitalized on the recent lack of law and order in the region and have singled out the Witnesses for brutal treatment. *

Incidents of violence

- On May 21, 2015, police officers in the town of Stakhanov detained two male Witnesses, both over the age of 60, because of their religious activity. They were charged with "disturbing the peace" and given a 15-day sentence. While in police custody, the two Witnesses were accused of espionage and were repeatedly interrogated about the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses. Congregation members pleaded with the local prosecutor to release the men, but he refused to grant their request. Family and fellow Witnesses were initially denied access to the two men but were later allowed to provide food, clothing, and medicine three times a week. One of the Witnesses was released on June 2, 2015, and the other the next day—with an order to leave the region.
- On May 17, 2015, armed men in the Novoazovsk area detained four of Jehovah's Witnesses, blindfolded them, and took them at gunpoint to the local military headquarters. For two hours they viciously beat the Witnesses and subjected them to mock executions. They demanded that the youngest Witness join their army and that all of the Witnesses confess the Orthodox faith as the only true religion. The Witnesses were released after spending a night in a cramped, makeshift jail.



Some of the injuries to two of the Witness men abducted and beaten in the Novoazovsk area

- On January 22, 2015, three armed men kidnapped a Witness from his workplace in Donetsk. His family was unable to confirm where he had been taken or under what pretext. While detained, he repeatedly explained his politically neutral position and was released after nine days.
- On August 9, 2014, an armed member of the local militia abducted two Witnesses in Stakhanov, Luhansk region. Held captive for six days, they were beaten repeatedly and subjected to mock mutilation and staged executions. They were also denied adequate food, water, clothing, and medical care. Their abductors attempted to force them to renounce their faith, repeat Orthodox creeds, and venerate icons, making it clear that religion was the issue. Despite this cruel treatment, the Witnesses refused to compromise.

Jehovah's Witnesses live by their religious beliefs and refuse to fight, campaign, or provide monetary support for either side of the military conflict in Ukraine. Armed groups have attacked the Witnesses because of their neutral stand and because they do not adhere to Orthodox beliefs. The assaults are a brutal attempt to force them to renounce their faith.

Perseverance in spite of persecution

Since control of this region is still in dispute, no legal remedies are currently available to the Witnesses. They have reported these and similar incidents to the international community, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture.

Despite the difficulties that Jehovah's Witnesses may endure in eastern Ukraine, they are determined to remain neutral, and they continue to worship discreetly. They remain hopeful that local authorities will uphold the fundamental human right to freedom of religion.

Muslims not persecuted like many Christians in Ukrainian rebel regions

Mufti: Muslims in occupied Donbass territory not pestered

RISU (28.05.2015) - In the occupied territories of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, Muslims in the main are not pestered and their treatment on the part of militants is neutral. This was said in an interview with Radio Liberty by the mufti of the Ecclesiastical Board of Muslims of Ukraine "UMMA," Said Ismagilov of Donetsk.

"Muslims of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions in the main are not pestered. I do not know why. Possibly because Islam is recognized as an official state religion in Russia, or they are not viewed as 'agents of the State Department,' or because there are many Muslims from the Caucasus and other regions of Russia among the militants," he said.

The mufti said that the attitude toward Muslims in the occupied territory now is cautious.

"This cannot compare with the attitude toward protestants and Orthodox of the Kiev patriarchate. With regard to the attitude toward Muslims, there is not targeted persecution on religious grounds," the clergyman added.

Mufti Said Ismagilov also noted that Muslims have managed to retain their property in the occupied territories.

"The fact is that religious property is most often owned by the local religious communities. Periodically they receive instructions on what to do. Representatives of the so-called DPR say that pretty soon a code will be developed and it will be necessary to reregister in accordance with rules adopted on the occupied territory. However, when believers ask what will be its legal basis and by what kind of laws it will be done, they do not receive a specific answer. Today the property of Muslim communities remains in the hands of Muslim communities," the mufti emphasized. (tr. by PDS, posted 29 May 2015)

Moscow Patriarchate rapidly losing out in Ukraine and beyond

By Paul Goble

Jamestown Foundation, Volume 12/ Issue 94 (20.05.2015) - The Moscow Patriarchate is rapidly losing influence in Ukraine and may be dissolving from below. These trends could open the way to the formation of a single autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church, independent of Moscow, and undermine the influence of Patriarch Kirill and his Church at home and abroad. More than half of all the parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate and a significant share of its bishoprics, including many whose incumbents were selected by Kirill, are in Ukraine. Thus, the likelihood that many if not most of them will soon shift their allegiance to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church not only will represent a significant reduction in the size and wealth of the Moscow Patriarchate but also will reduce Kirill's influence in the Kremlin and in Orthodox Church discussions worldwide.

Were the Moscow Patriarchate to lose all of its parishes and bishoprics in Ukraine—something that is not likely to happen overnight—the Russian Church would cease to be the largest Orthodox denomination in the world. But even if only a sizeable share of them do—and there are indications that is already happening—the influence of the Moscow Church and Patriarch Kirill, personally among the Orthodox and as a spokesman for Orthodoxy in conversations with the leaders of other Christian denominations, will fall. Furthermore, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church emerging from this shift would become a major player in the Orthodox and Christian worlds. As a result, Moscow is going to fight this as much as possible and deny the obvious as long as it can.

In late April 2015, Patriarch Filaret, the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, called for the unification of all Orthodox churches in Ukraine so that Russia could no longer influence that country through its religious institutions. In turn, the Ukrainian GORDON news agency asked four experts to discuss these developments, which have the potential to determine not only the outcome of the struggle for Ukraine but also the fate of Orthodoxy as a political and moral force in Russia and more generally. Their judgments, rather than the notoriously unreliable statistics about religious affiliations, are especially valuable in that regard (Gordonua.com, May 12).

Vladimir Fesenko, the head of the Kyiv Center for Applied Political Research, argues that “the current leadership of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate has made a very serious error by shifting from formal neutrality” about the conflict in Ukraine to open support for the Russian side and opposition to the Ukrainian. “This can have very sad consequences for this Church and for its place” in Ukraine. As he asserts, it has already alienated many of the Orthodox parishioners, who are voting with their feet, as well as part of the clergy, who are increasingly critical of their bishops and of the Moscow patriarchate.

Andrey Zubov, a Russian commentator who used to teach at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), says that the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine is falling so rapidly that even many of the hierarchs in Ukraine itself are now thinking about shifting to the Ukrainian Church. Unfortunately for them, their parishioners do not know that their priests and bishops feel this way and are leaving the Russian Church even more rapidly than the hierarchy is shifting its own feelings. For rank-and-file members of the Moscow Patriarchate churches in Ukraine, he says, the key event was the decision of Patriarch Onufria not to stand in honor of those Ukrainians who had died defending their country. That was an insult that few are prepared to forget and that many feel they must respond to by leaving the Russian Church.

Father Bogdan Timoshenko, the head of the social services department of the Peryaslav-Khmelnytsky and Belotserkovsky bishopric of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate, says that his experience tells him that over the course of the last year, churches subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate “are losing their positions very quickly.”

Moscow Patriarchate churches are not so much transferring their alliance, although that is happening, as losing their memberships to Kyiv Patriarchate congregations. What that means, Father Timoshenko says, is that the Moscow Church is disintegrating and dissolving and is ever less in a position to talk about uniting with the Ukrainian one.

As a result, the Ukrainian priest continues, there will soon be “a single Orthodox church in Ukraine, strong and recognized by the entire world,” the product of the collapse of the Moscow Church there and the shift of its members, priests and hierarchs to the Kyivan one, rather than any formal unification.

And finally, Aleksandr Paliy, a Ukrainian political scientist and historian, argues that the Moscow Patriarchate has brought all this on itself by becoming a political weapon for the Kremlin rather than an organization supporting genuine religious faith. Ever fewer Ukrainians identify with the Moscow Patriarchate. When people cease to believe in a Church, he suggests, it ceases to exist—and that is what is happening to the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine.

Evidence of religious persecution in the occupied Donbas

IRF (13.05.2015) - A new report, "When God Becomes The Weapon", provides a detailed, unsettling first-hand account of religiously motivated persecution in rebel-controlled areas in eastern Ukraine.

The report has been prepared by the Center for Civil Liberties (CCL) and International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) in the framework of the Civic Solidarity Platform with assistance of the Institute for Religious Freedom, Kyiv.

The new report, which is based on field monitoring undertaken by the CCL and IPHR, documents widespread and serious violations of the rights of religious believers, except the Moscow patriarchy Orthodox Church, in the conflict-affected areas of Ukraine.

The Orthodox religion is used as an ideological foundation of 'state building' by the rebel groups and anything that is non-Russian Orthodox is seen as alien. Since the conflict began in 2014, dozens of places of worship have been seized.

Monitors dispatched by the CCL and IPHR have also collected evidence of abductions, unlawful deprivation of liberty, torture and ill-treatment and even killings in the "crusade" against non-Orthodox believers. Because of these attacks believers have been forced to flee or to practice their religion in secret.

The methodology used in preparing the report includes: witness and victim testimony, interviews with clergy from the region and church authorities, interviews with experts and specialists on religion, desk research, as well as an analysis of available audio and video material.

The CCL and IPHR urge the Ukrainian authorities to formalize the process of instituting a declaration under Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute, which would confer jurisdiction to the International Criminal Court for the prosecution of crimes against humanity committed on Ukrainian territory. This would serve the interest of the victims affected by the current conflict, including religious believers, and help put an end to rampant impunity in the region.

The report is available here:

http://www.irf.in.ua/files/publications/2015.04_Report_Religious_persecution_in_occupied_Donbas_eng.pdf

Survey depicts Christian population of Ukraine

Sociologists: Majority of population of Ukraine identify themselves with Kiev Patriarchate

Religiia v Ukraine (10.04.2015) - On the website of the foundation "Ilya Kucheriv Democratic Initiative" the results of a study were published, which was conducted in 11 regions of Ukraine by the foundation jointly with the sociological service "Ukrainian Sociology Service" from 25 December 2014 to 15 January 2015, commissioned by the International Center of Policy Studies. The data published give evidence that a majority of the population of Ukraine identify themselves primarily with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev patriarchate, Religiia v Ukraine reports.

During the study, 4413 respondents were questioned (400 in each of the regions of Ukraine, 401 in Transcarpathia and Bukovina, 402 in the center, and 410 in Polesie).

Project developers identified eleven historical regions for the survey: (1) Volhynia (Volyn and Rovno provinces); (2) Galicia (Ivano-Frankovsk, Lvov, and Ternopol provinces); (3) Southwest (Transcarpathia and Chernovitsy provinces); (4) Podolie (Vinnitsa and Khmel'nitskii provinces); (5) Polesie (Zhitomir, Kiev, Sumy, and Chernogov provinces); (6) Center (Cherkasy, Kirovograd, and Poltava provinces); (7) Slobozhanshchina (Kharkov province); (8) Lower Dniepr (Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporozhie provinces); (9) Black Sea Coast (Nikolaev, Odessa, and Kherson provinces); (10) Donbass (Donetsk province); (11) City of Kiev.

The survey was not conducted in Luhansk province and in annexed Crimea. The survey used a quota selection that represented the population of identified regions of Ukraine by region, type of settlements, age, and sex, over the age of 18. The maximum margin of error for each region does not exceed 5%.

Among the conclusions reached are the following:

"The majority of the population of Ukraine identify themselves primarily with the Orthodox Church of the Kiev patriarchate—44%; 21% identify themselves with the Orthodox church of the Moscow patriarchate; with the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, 11%; 8% are followers of other religions and 9.5% are atheists. . . .

"Laity of a majority of the regions identify themselves with the Orthodox Church of the Kiev patriarchate. The only region where a clear majority consider their allegiance to be to the Orthodox Church of the Moscow patriarchate is the Donbass—55% (represented in the survey by Donetsk province). In Galicia, the majority of the population belong to the Greek Catholic Church (67%). The most heterogeneous complex of believers turns out to be in the Southwest, where 34% identify themselves with the Greek Catholic Church, 32% with the Orthodox Church of the Moscow patriarchate, and 22% with the Orthodox Church of the Kiev patriarchate. Atheists are just in Slobozhanshchina (19%) and the Donbass (17%).

"The idea of the creation of a United Local Orthodox Church finds support in the west of Ukraine, in Volhynia, Galicia, and the Southwest. In the other regions, indifference or an ambivalent attitude predominates, but a negative attitude toward this is also insignificant. On the whole, throughout Ukraine 28% support the idea of the creation of a United Local Orthodox Church, 14% oppose it, 35% are indifferent, and another 23% do not have a settled opinion.

"As to the recognition of which church would be able to have a claim to be a "united church of the Ukrainian people," the greatest percentage was given to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev patriarchate, 37%, although 31% think such a church is "one of many churches of Ukraine." In Galicia, the "church of the Ukrainian people" is considered to be the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. But the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow patriarchate is not recognized to be "the one Ukrainian [church]" in any of the regions.

"In all Ukraine, with the division of believers among several Christian churches, there is no substantial prejudice by believers toward other churches. Thus, only 7% of Ukrainians consider the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev patriarchate to be "schismatic," and 19% consider the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow patriarchate to be "the church of the aggressor state" (the only region where this position predominates is Galicia, where 42% maintain this idea)."

In addition, according to the data of this study, the volunteer movement has outpaced the church in terms of the trust of the population of Ukraine. (tr. by PDS, posted 11 April 2015).

A Ukrainian Orthodox priest (Kyiv Patriarcate) from Kherson released from captivity in Donetsk People's Republic (DPR)

RISU (08.04.2015) http://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/community/terrorism/59672/ - Chaplain Father Ihor Petrenko, Kherson resident, was released from captivity of DPR fighters. This was reported in the Cathedral of Purification of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Kyiv Patriarchate in Kherson, where the released clergyman serves.

"So far we know only that Father Ihor will come to Kyiv along with other 15 released prisoners. We do not know when he can return to Kherson," we were told in the temple.

According to Radio Liberty journalist, the priest disappeared on February 14 on Mariupol - Donetsk highway, 30 kilometers from Donetsk. In a car there was the priest's assistant, Kherson volunteer Vadym Perepada, they were carrying humanitarian aid for Ukrainian military servicemen. Father Ihor went to administer the sacraments of confession and Communion to soldiers.

According to locals, a car, resembling Father Ihor's car, got to one of the DPR checkpoints near the village of Olenivka. A few days ago it was reported that the priest was alive.

On April 6 in the night separatists released 16 Ukrainian soldiers from captivity. Advisor to the Chairman of the Security Service of Ukraine Markiyanyan Lubkivskyy reported that militants are still holding prisoners about 400 citizens of Ukraine.

Churches will obtain right to establish educational institutions

Risu (20.03.2015) http://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/state/legislation/59495/ - The Committee on Science and Education decided to support Bill No.1447 on the establishment of national standard education institutions by religious organizations.

The lively discussion on this matter took place during a meeting of March 18, 2015, the Institute of Religious Freedom reports.

The initiators of the Bill were MPs Pavlo Unguryan, Lilia Hrynevych and Victor Yelenskyy (Popular Front fraction).

The law draftsmen propose to equalize religious organizations in rights with the public, charitable and other organizations and individuals who have the right to establish private schools. They cite the extensive experience of church schools in the developed countries such as the UK, Germany, France, USA, Belgium, and Poland.

"Previously the Parliament ignored this world experience because of the perception of Lenin's antagonistic principle of separation of church and state when religious organizations were ousted from public life. So far the principle of equality and non-discrimination has been ignored, as only the right of churches to establish educational institutions remains restricted," said co-author of the initiative Victor Yelensky.

In response, the First Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine Inna Sovsun said: "The Ministry of Education adheres to Lenin's position on the separation of church and state."

She said religious organizations have the right to establish religious schools to train priests, and as for the rest, it is necessary to observe the constitutional principle of "separation of church and learning process." The official Ministry of Education suggested that high quality education in church schools in Western countries is related only to the fact that they are the oldest, and at the time of their creation there had been no other options for establishing educational institutions.

Among the threats that the granting of right to churches to found schools is fraught with, Inna Sovsun noted "the issue of content of learning and how religious schools will be able to provide adequate teaching of the evolution theory, and how it will coincide with religious teachings, which will also be included in the educational program."

Supporting Bill No. 1447, Executive Director of the Institute for Religious Freedom Maksym Vasin said that the right of parents to raise a child according to their own religious or philosophical beliefs is enshrined in international treaties ratified by Ukraine. The expert also gave the example of Slovakia, where the right of churches to establish schools was restored only in 1990, but since then they have become the most successful in the country.

Committee members also raised the issue of abuse on the part of the so-called sects and problems of politicization of some religious organizations.

UGCC priest Roman Nebozhuk replied that abuse can occur in different schools founded by whomsoever and the state should prevent religious hatred or violation of children's rights in any and all schools through its regulatory authorities.

As a result, the Committee on Science and Education decided to support the bill as a basis in the first reading with the aim of further improvement.

"Educational institutions founded by religious organizations will be licensed and shall comply with national standards to ensure the scientific nature of education. The issues of interaction of church and state are not excluded by the provisions of the Constitution of Ukraine," said Committee's chairman Lilia Hrynevich.

Ukrainian rebels seize Baptist house of worship

Baptist church building commandeered a second time in Luhansk Province

Baznica.info (05.03.2015) - The pastor of the "House of Prayer for All Peoples" church of the city of Antratsit, in Luhansk province, reports that yesterday, 4 March, unidentified persons with weapons arrived at the church and left after sizing up the building. Somewhat later, at 16.00, they arrived again and announced that it was necessary to

evacuate the building. The armed people said that the reason for the seizure is that the building is necessary for housing fighters from the vicinity of Debaltsevo.

At the present time, the church is attended by 70 adults as well as children. In a week various worship services are conducted here: two Sunday, prayer, sister, children's, and youth services. The church regularly distributes free lunches for residents of Antratsit. "Pray for us and help us to recover the House of Prayer," the pastor asks.

It is known that back in September 2014 the church faced an illegal invasion of the House of Prayer. At that time, three persons entered the building with weapons in their hands and identified themselves as Don cossacks. They rudely "requested" that the premises be vacated within 20 minutes and they declared that the building already did not belong to the church. Then all attempts to get a response from local representatives of militias and cossacks proved unsuccessful. But after some time the House of Prayer was nevertheless returned to the church. Whether the building will be returned to the church this time or not is unknown. Believers are asked to support them in prayer. (tr. by PDS, posted 5 March 2015)

Russian forces destroy one of Donbas' largest Orthodox churches



One of the largest Orthodox churches in Ukraine's Luhansk Oblast was destroyed by heavy shelling by the Russian army and its proxy terrorist forces.

Village Troitske in Luhansk Oblast in Ukraine's Donbas was on the frontline during the fighting for Debaltsevo, so it suffered from practically non-stop shelling and witnessed several tanks assaults by terrorists and the Russian regular army. Most village residents have left their homes to safer areas, there are only about 300 people in Troitske now, compared to over 1000 before the war. The power lines are broken down, electricity poles toppled, stores are closed, public transportation is absent. Food to Troitske is being delivered with humanitarian aid cargo. One of this deliveries (20 tons of food) was accompanied by Hennadiy Moskal, head of Luhansk regional state administration.

"Since the beginning of February, Troitkse was shelled by Grads and artillery mercilessly, there are many destroyed residential houses, there are casualties among civilians," says Hennadiy Moskal.

"Moreover, the terrorists severely damaged a stone orthodox church that was constructed in 1840. There are numerous shell craters around the church, some shells landed directly into the building, piercing the roof, and exploded inside. The altar is completely destroyed, icons were cut with shrapnel, holy books are lying on the ground... It is one of the biggest orthodox churches in Luhansk Oblast, which survived two wars – a civil war and World War II, and also Soviet rule. Neither German occupants nor

communist atheists managed to destroy it. It was destroyed by those who call themselves protectors of the 'orthodox world'. There was no sense of shelling church and school. Ukrainian troops were not stationed here. The nearest army location is 3 km away, on the outskirts of Troitske."

In total, 8 Ukrainian orthodox churches were damaged by Russians in Luhansk region, reports [Religious Information Service of Ukraine](#).

Jehovah's Witnesses religious buildings seized in Eastern Regions of Ukraine

RISU (04.03.2015) - http://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/community/vandalism/59335/ As of January 2015, armed groups have forcibly taken possession of 14 Kingdom Halls (houses of worship) belonging to Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine, [informs their official page](#) and gives full list of buildings seized. The seized buildings are located in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in the eastern part of the country, where a violent conflict has raged for many months. These armed men have targeted Jehovah's Witnesses because of prejudice and disregard for the Witnesses' right to freedom of religion and association.

The seizures of Kingdom Halls are not random acts but are discriminatory attacks against the Witnesses and their religious beliefs. The commander of one group of men declared his intention to "get rid of all Jehovah's Witnesses" because, in his view, the Orthodox Church is the sole religion permitted in the region. Another commander stated, "It's all over for Jehovah's Witnesses." Despite these threats, Jehovah's Witnesses are determined to remain active throughout Ukraine.

For more than 20 years, Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine have enjoyed freedom of worship. Vasyl Kobel, one of Jehovah's Witnesses at their branch office in Lviv, stated: "We have regularly gathered in our houses of worship for Bible reading and prayer, and we have always endeavored to be a positive influence in the community in which we live. But in recent months, the lives of the Ukrainian people have been adversely affected by the turmoil in the east of the country. Jehovah's Witnesses are no exception; we are also victims of the violence."

Mr. Kobel spoke on behalf of the 150,000 of Jehovah's Witnesses who live in Ukraine. Thousands of Witnesses have fled the war zone in recent months. But the approximately 17,500 Witnesses who remain in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions are trying to carry on their daily activities in the midst of a violent conflict. Because their Kingdom Halls have been seized, thousands of Witnesses have no building in which to gather for worship, and they are forced to meet in cramped conditions in private homes. Other Witnesses must now travel up to two hours each way to attend religious services.

List of Jehovah's Witnesses places of worship seized in the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions

HRWF (10.03.2015) – Since July 2014, armed men representing the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) have seized 14 Kingdom Halls (places of worship) built and paid by Jehovah's Witnesses and are establishing the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) as the sole authorized religion in the regions under their control. *Human Rights Without Borders Int'l* condemns this religious cleansing policy implemented against all non-Orthodox religions in the territories of Ukraine conquered by the separatists. Jehovah's Witnesses are

against the use of violence and refuse to perform military service. Noteworthy is that a number of their confiscated places of worship have been converted into military barracks. Pictures of the seized Kingdom Halls are to be found at <http://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/ukraine/donetsk-luhansk-religious-buildings-seized/>. The list hereafter comes from the same source.

**Town of Horlivka Donetsk Region
75 Akademika Koroliova St.**

On July 5, 2014, armed men seized the Kingdom Hall. They used it as their barracks and to store ammunition, but abandoned it in September 2014. The Witnesses returned and used the Kingdom Hall for their religious meetings.

On October 12, 2014, armed men interrupted a religious service at the Kingdom Hall and ordered all in attendance to stop their religious activities. They stated that the Orthodox religion was the only religion permitted in the region and that they would soon "get rid of all of Jehovah's Witnesses." The men use the Kingdom Hall as their barracks.

**City of Donetsk
10 Karamzina St.**

On August 13, 2014, armed men broke into the Kingdom Hall and used it as their barracks.

On August 19, 2014, the men stole the sound equipment and vacated the building. The Witnesses returned and again started using the Kingdom Hall for their religious meetings.

On October 18, 2014, after a religious service, representatives of the 4th Oplot battalion came to the Kingdom Hall and announced to the Witnesses present that they were seizing it.

On November 18, 2014, armed men demanded that the Witnesses sign a certificate transferring ownership of the Kingdom Hall to the Commandant's Office of the Pertovskiy and Kirovskiy District. The men use the building as barracks.

**Town of Rovenky
Luhansk Region
84-A Dzerzhynskoho St.**

On September 23, 2014, armed men from the George battalion broke into the Kingdom Hall and forbade the Witnesses to return. The armed men use it as their barracks.

**Town of Antratsyt
Luhansk Region
4 Komunarska St.**

On September 16 and 26, 2014, unknown individuals broke into the Kingdom Hall, stole electronic equipment, and wrote on the wall, "Orthodox Cossacks!"

On September 25, 2014, a local TV channel reported that the Kingdom Halls of Jehovah's Witnesses have been seized to serve other purposes, e.g., as a kindergarten.

Town of Horlivka

**Donetsk Region
3a Viliamsa Akademika St.**

At the end of June 2014, armed men broke into the Kingdom Hall, stole electronic equipment, and installed new locks. They use it as their barracks.

**Town of Horlivka
Donetsk Region
4 Hertsena St.**

Since 2013, this building has repeatedly been the object of vandalism and arson attacks. The last attempted arson took place on June 5, 2014.

On September 30, 2014, a local TV station interviewed the "new owner" of the building, who stated that the building was seized from Jehovah's Witnesses for use as a boxing school.

**Town of Zhdanivka
Donetsk Region
14 Komsomolska St.**

On October 7, 2014, referring to a commandant's order, men of the Horlivka armed group seized the Kingdom Hall. The Horlivka Deputy Commandant stated that the Orthodox religion is the only religion permitted in the region and that all others are forbidden.

On November 21, 2014, the squad commander of another armed group took control and told Jehovah's Witnesses that his subordinates would now take charge of the Kingdom Hall since it is now on Russian soil.

**City of Donetsk
53-A Ostrovskoho St.**

On October 26, 2014, armed men from *Shakhtar* battalion of the DPR broke into the Kingdom Hall and now use it as their barracks.

**Town of Perevalsk
Luhansk Region
9-A Kosinova St.**

On November 5, 2014, armed men led by the Deputy Chief of the Military Commandant's office, entered the building and announced to the Witnesses present that they were seizing it for use as a dining hall. The deputy chief stated "It's all over for Jehovah's Witnesses", and then told them they would no longer be able to engage in their religious activity.

**Town of Makiivka
Donetsk Region
17 Pecherska St.**

On November 5, 2014, armed men from the Rus battalion, broke into the Kingdom Hall. They ordered the Witnesses to give them the keys to the Hall and never to return. The following day, the commander's deputy removed the Kingdom Hall sign and replaced it with the battalion's flag.

On November 26, 2014, the battalion abandoned the building.

**Town of Krasnyi Luch
Luhansk Region
37 Radianska St.**

On December 5, 2014, armed groups broke into the Kingdom Hall. They placed the building under armed guard and parked military vehicles in the yard.

**Village of Telmanove
Donetsk Region
112 Pervomaiska St.**

On November 4, 2014, armed men broke into the building, and placed it under armed guard.

On December 11, 2014, the men brought ammunition into the building and now use it as their barracks.

**Town of Zuhres
Donetsk Region
1 Cherniahovskoho St.**

On December 20, 2014, the town's commander announced that he was siezing the building. He ordered Jehovah's Witnesses to give him the keys to the Hall and never to return.

**Town of Horlivka
Donetsk Region
105a Vitchyzniana St.**

On November 29, 2014, armed men entered the Kingdom Hall and announced to the Witnesses present that they were seizing it. One of the men stated that the DPR government forbids the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses and permits only the Orthodox religion in the region. He ordered all the religious literature of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Hall to be burnt and forbade the Witnesses from returning to the building. The men used it as their barracks.

In December 2014, the armed men abandoned the building.

Court of Appeal upheld a believer's right to alternative service

RISU (02.03.2015) -
http://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/community/faith_and_weapon/59297/ -
Dnipropetrovsk Regional Court of Appeal upheld the judgment of acquittal for a believer who asked to enroll to alternative service during mobilization.

The court's decision was announced on February 26, 2015 after the second appeal hearing, according to the Institute of Religious Freedom.

Thus, the Court of Appeal disagreed with the arguments of the Prosecutor of Novomoskovsk, Dnipropetrovsk region, who sought a guilty verdict for a member of Jehovah's Witnesses religious community for avoiding military service. Representatives of the prosecution are convinced that the law on mobilization clearly defines the categories of people who may be relieved of military duty, and believers in the list there.

Instead, the defendant relied on the provisions of part 4 of Article 35 of the Constitution of Ukraine and the European Court of Human Rights, which established the right of believers to assign to alternative (non-military) service as a substitute for military service.

The decision of the Court of Appeal has entered into force. However, given the persistence of prosecutors in this case, it can be expected that the prosecution will use the given time limit of three months for filing an appeal with the High Specialized Court for Civil and Criminal Cases.

"In this case, the provisions of the Constitution of Ukraine should be used as norms of direct effect, even in the presence of inconsistencies in other legislation. Thus, judicial decisions and cassation appeal is entirely predictable," believes executive director of the Institute for Religious Freedom Maksym Vasin.

As reported by the IRS, in November 2014, the court acquitted the believer of Novomoskovsk and confirmed his right to alternative service. The first meeting of Dnipropetrovsk Regional Court of Appeal in this case will be held on 19 February 2015.

In March 2014, the Institute for Religious Freedom published on its website the 'Clarifications for believers on mobilization and conscription for military training'.

The war and the Orthodox churches in Ukraine

By Maksym Bugriy

Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume 12, Issue 30 (18.02.2015) - On January 28, a village parish of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate) in Ternopil province published a letter to the Ukrainian Church's primate, Metropolitan Onufriy. In the letter, the priests and lay activists strongly criticized recent controversial statements made by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill I of Moscow. The authors of the letter added that Onufriy's inaction was adding to the split in Ukrainian Orthodoxy ([Religion.in.ua](#), January 28).

This conflict is one example of the ambiguous situation in which the Ukrainian Orthodox Church finds itself, especially following Russia's aggression and war against Ukraine last year. The Ukrainian Church's affiliation with the Moscow Patriarchate has caused ever more people to negatively associate the former with the Kremlin's policy. In contrast, Patriarch Filaret, the leader of Kyiv Patriarchate Church, which is not formally recognized as a "canonical" Orthodox Church internationally, acts particularly pro-actively in support of the Ukrainian authorities in Kyiv. On February 3, Patriarch Filaret campaigned for United States security assistance for Ukraine during his visit to Washington, DC ([Religion.in.ua](#), February 4). At the same time, Patriarch Filaret denies any accusations of him being engaged in politics, justifying his Church's activism as supporting the Ukrainian nation ([Censor.net.ua](#), October 22, 2014).

Yet, political considerations may explain the growing numbers of Ukrainian Orthodox Christians moving to the Kyiv Patriarchate and away from the Moscow-linked Church. According to a May 2014 opinion poll by Razumkov Center, 70 percent Ukrainians considered themselves Orthodox faithful. But among those, the share belonging to the Kyiv Patriarchate Church increased from 26 percent to 32 percent year-on-year. Whereas, the share of the Moscow Patriarchate-affiliated slightly decreased from 28 to 25 percent ([Dzerkalo Tyzhnia](#), May 15, 2014).

The complexity of the situation has since prompted 30 parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to transfer their allegiance to the Kyiv Patriarchate; although a Moscow Patriarchate representative stated the number was actually only ten. Furthermore, several clerics of churches in Rivne, western Ukraine signed a declaration calling for the creation of a single Orthodox church in the province—a move promoted by the Kyiv Patriarchate. Later, they withdrew their signatures (Patriarchia.ru, January 15).

Meanwhile, Patriarch Filaret has openly declared that priests serving at Moscow Patriarchate churches are supporting the separatists and Russia in the occupied Ukrainian territories of Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, while other confessions have been virtually banned from these territories (Lb.ua, October 12, 2014). Likewise, Filaret's Church as well as other denominations, unlike Orthodox parishes connected with the Moscow Patriarchate, have been encountering numerous problems in Crimea since the peninsula was annexed by the Russian Federation (RISU, September 24, 2014).

A series of public remarks by Russian Orthodox Church leader Patriarch Kirill over the past year have been worrying for both the Ukrainian state and nation. For example, last Christmas, he predicted a split within Ukraine and even referred to the Gospel passage in Mark 3:24, "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand." Furthermore, Kirill publicly questioned the Ukrainian government's Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO), characterizing it as the use of force by political groups (TASS, January 7).

In line with the official Kremlin view, Patriarch Kirill considers the war in Ukraine's east to be an internal conflict—"fratricidal and internecine." He promotes the united people of Rus—a spiritual entity that is broader than ethnic or state concepts in Europe's East (Patriarchia.ru, June 17, 2014). In another instance, Kirill has even called eastern Ukraine the "historical Rus's southern borders" (Patriarchia.ru, August 25, 2014). These views echo Vladimir Putin's numerous statements that the Russians and Ukrainians were a single people and that Moscow has historical claims on "Novorossiya" ("New Russia"—the territory of modern-day southeastern Ukraine) (see EDM, July 2, 2014).

Thus, consistent with the Kremlin's narrative of the West's geopolitical rivalry with Russia, Patriarch Kirill repeatedly blames the Ukrainian Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church and the Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate for seeking to harm "canonical Orthodoxy." Archbishop Yevstratiy, the spokesperson of Kyiv Patriarchate, has speculated that this charge, illustratively published by Kirill in an August 14 letter, was encouraged by a hawkish faction within Patriarch Kirill's circle. While a more moderate group surrounding Kirill presumably encouraged that the letter be deleted from the Moscow Patriarchate's official website out of fears of the backlash such publicly voiced sentiments would inspire in Ukraine (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, August 20, 2014).

Furthermore, Kirill seeks to underscore the Russian Orthodox Church's role in the Soviet Great Patriotic War victory over Nazi Germany. This emphasis helps to accentuate the Russian government's present-day interpretation of the post-Maidan Ukrainian elite as having fallen prey to fascism (Patriarchia.ru, January 22).

But it is not true that the authorities of the Moscow Patriarchate-linked Ukrainian Orthodox Church have simply been unwaveringly repeating Russian dogma. On the contrary, some of the public messages from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have been pro-Ukrainian. In a March 1, 2014, interview, Church spokesperson Archpriest Heorhiy Kovalenko used the term "aggression" and condemned Russia's military intervention in Crimea (Hromadske TV via YouTube, March 1, 2014). On another occasion, Kovalenko rejected his Church's affiliation with Moscow and called the Moscow Patriarchate "the Church of the Soviet Union" (Tsn.ua, October 26, 2014). Father Kovalenko is no longer the Church's spokesperson as of September 2014, but he continues to head the Educational Department.

Additionally, a high-ranking member of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), Metropolitan Antony of Boryspil and Brovary, said in a recent interview that his Church conducts religious services for the Ukrainian military and hospital patients. He also asserted that the Church supplies the Ukrainian military with life supporting and saving equipment, such as warm clothing, medicine or body armor (Patriarchia.ru, January 10). However, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church prays for peace at its liturgies, but not for the Ukrainian government or military, as was a common custom before the conflict.

The controversies around the Ukrainian Orthodox Church allow competing political factions to use the opportunity to raise their own profile. Most recently, the Kyiv City Council deprived the Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox Church of its tax-free status in the capital (Interfax-Ukraine, January 28). However, Mayor Vitaliy Klichko vetoed this decision (Ipress.ua, January 29).

These religious issues could, at some point, present the opportunity to politically undermine Ukraine's social cohesion. But they are even more hurtful to Ukrainian Orthodoxy, which is the second largest Orthodox Church in the world by the number of worshippers. As religious expert Olexandr Sagan notes, "Orthodox institutions in Ukraine (and worldwide) have entered into a stage of depression/stagnation, resulting in the transformation of Orthodoxy into the largest donor to other faiths, including non-Christian faiths" (RISU, January 25).

Ukrainian Orthodox parish transfers from Moscow to Kiev patriarchates

Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) in Poltava joins Kyiv Patriarchate

Glavkom (04.02.2015) - In the small village of Sukhoe in the Kobeliaki district of Poltava province parishioners of the church of the apostles Peter and Paul adopted the decision to change the canonical subordination of the church parish. It previously belonged to the church of the Moscow patriarchate but now it has decided to transfer to the Kiev patriarchate. This was reported on the website of the church of the Holy Pious Prince Yaroslav the Wise.

A parish meeting was conducted and in accordance with the Ukrainian law "On religious organizations" the charter in a new version was submitted for registration.

On 20 January another meeting was held where the subsequent fate of the parish and church building was decided.

After a prayer service and a panikhida, the meeting of the parish decided to address every resident of the village in order to confirm once again its affiliation with the Kiev patriarchate.

"Residents of the village, by their decision, confirmed the desire to construct a new and free Ukraine along with the local Orthodox Church of the Kiev patriarchate," the website of the church reported. (tr. by PDS, posted 5 February 2015)

Donbas and Crimea: new challenges for religious freedom in 2014

IRF (03.02.2015)

http://www.irf.in.ua/eng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=424%3A1&catid=36%3Acom&Itemid=55 –

From the very beginning to year of 2014 the Ukrainian society faced extraordinary trials that also affected religious freedom. Previously, the international observers mentioned Ukraine mostly as a state with a high level of religious freedom among the other Eastern European countries. But now there are news from the occupied Crimea and Donbas torn by war, dismaying by brutality of religious persecution and complex issues of survival believers of different faiths.

These areas of Ukraine, which have become targets of Russian aggression in the socio-political crisis and a place of hostilities with the involvement of Russian troops and weapons, are an exception to the national context. In addition to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, other fundamental rights and freedoms that are generally accepted in the democratic world have in fact ceased to operate.

Religious persecution in Donetsk and Luhansk regions controlled by Russian-backed separatists

It should be noted that in February 2014 separatism in the Donbas and Crimea was often justified by the Russian media with alleged harassment of Russian language, culture and Moscow Orthodoxy etc. In a joint appeal as of March 1 heads of the largest churches and religious organizations of Ukraine stated: "In our country there is no harassment on the basis of language, nation or religion. Therefore, we testify that all attempts of Russian propaganda to represent the events in Ukraine as a "fascist revolution" and "the victory of extremists" are completely untrue. "

The Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (UCCRO) also repeatedly stood up to protect the religious peace: "In no case a conflict on religious grounds may be allowed. Our large Ukrainian family must be unique in diversity ." Later, after the formal approval of Russian President's decision to send troops to Ukraine, the AUCCRO stated that "bringing of foreign military forces to Ukraine is a threat not only for our country but for the peace and tranquility on the European continent as a whole."

At the same time, on May 16, representatives of the self-proclaimed "People's Republic Donetsk" (DNR) adopted their own "Constitution," which identified religious intolerance basis for separatists' policy. Article 9 of this document states: "The initial and predominant faith is te Orthodox faith ... practiced by the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). Historical experience and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) are recognized and respected, including the core pillars of the "Russian World". Organization of a battalion of the "Russian Orthodox Army," was announced in Donetsk, indicating the intention of separatists to impose 'dominant faith' with weapons in their hands on the territory of Donbas.

Since then and the end of 2014 in the territories of eastern Ukraine, controlled by militants, the growth of religious intolerance towards all Christian churches, except the communities Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) was recorded. The preferred targets of militants were religious communities of Evangelical Christians (Pentecostals, Baptists, Adventists, Charismatics, etc.), which, according to official statistics, represent about 33% of all religious communities of Donetsk region.

Pro-Ukrainian position, to use of Ukrainian language or symbols also became to source of danger to life and health of citizens from xenophobically motivated separatists of Donbas.

The situation in the cities of Luhansk region, under the control of local separatists of self-proclaimed "People's Republic of Luhansk" (LNR) and Russian military forces is quite similar.

In the occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine motivated kidnapping pastors and priests, their brutal interrogations with beatings and torture, mass seizure of churches and houses of worship and their exploitation for military and other purposes became a standard practice of separatists.

On May 15, the Kyiv Patriarchate issued a special statement that reported the presence of "numerous facts of threats to life and health of clergy and faithful of the UOC-KP, hindering to activities of the Church in the eastern regions of Ukraine by terrorists and separatist forces controlled and encouraged Russia." The statement indicated that armed individuals broke into the temples of the UOC-KP with the requirement to immediately move to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, the terrorists announced death penalty to the Kyiv Patriarchate priests that under current conditions poses a real threat to the life of the clergy and faithful of the UOC-KP in Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

An egregious example of religious intolerance occurred in Slovyansk of Donetsk region, where on June 8, 2014, the two sons of Pastor Olesandr Pavenko and two deacons of the Pentecostal religious community "Transfiguration" were captured hostages and their personal cars were seized by armed militants of DNR during the worship service dedicated to the Holy Trinity. The next day all four believers were shot. In order to hide the traces of the crime, the fighters burned some of the victims in one of the cars, and buried other in a collective grave with the separatists who deceased in fight.

According to local residents and the media, on June 14, a pastor of the Protestant Church "Renovation", head of the City Council of Churches Serhiy Skorobahach died of artillery shelling.

On May 16 in Slovyansk the militants of DNR seized the Bishop of Evangelical Association "Church of God of Ukraine" Oleksiy Demydovych and interrogated him about 7 hours. On May 23, in Donetsk Serhiy Kosyak, pastor of Pentecostal religious community "Assembly of God" was severely beaten at the headquarters of "DNR" after attempts to negotiate the extension of the street prayer marathons in the city center. On May 27, a Roman Catholic priest from Poland Pavel Vitek was kidnapped by armed separatists in Donetsk during the street prayers and was released after one day of captivity through the efforts of diplomats.

On June 21, armed separatists took hostage Mykola Kalynychenko, pastor of the Evangelical Church "Word of Life" in Shakhtarsk of Donetsk region, who was later released, but his car was seized. On June 26, gunmen burst into the room of evangelical "Church of Winners" in the city of Druzhkivka, Donetsk region and took to their headquarters Pastor Pavlo Liska and his wife, who were released after nearly a week of captivity.

On July 3, the DNR militants in Donetsk took captive a Greek Catholic priest Tikhon (Serhiy) Kulbaka, and held him for 12 days, during which they abused him. On July 8, in Donetsk, the separatists kidnapped a UOC-KP archpriest Yuri Ivanov, and held him hostage for three weeks. On July 15, in Horlivka in Donetsk region the DNR militants seized a Roman Catholic priest Victor Vonsovych and held him for 11 days in captivity.

On August 8, in Donetsk, separatists took prisoners two Protestant pastors. Oleksandr Khomchenko was severely beaten and punished five days of forced labor on charges of espionage against the DNR and pastor Valery Yakubenko was released by militants after days of interrogation. In October the same happened to pastor of the congregation of the

Church of Seventh Day Adventists Serhiy Litovchenko who was held captive for 20 days in by the DNR militants in Horlivka.

On October 14, the capture by separatists of assistant pastor of the Church "Good News" Serhiy Saykov and his 14-year-old son Daniel in Krasnodon Luhansk region was reported. They were released after 4 days of brutal interrogation on suspicion of spying for Ukrainian army. After that, the family was forced to leave Luhansk region for western Ukraine.

These facts attest targeted religious persecution in the separatist-controlled territory in eastern Ukraine. These unbearable conditions for religious practice endanger the lives and health of many priests and believers.

Religious oppression is exerted in the Crimean peninsula occupied by Russia

According to official statistics of the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, in early 2014 in Crimea, there were 2083 religious organizations, which in 1409 had the status of legal entities and 674 enjoyed the right of religious activity without state registration. In the city of Sevastopol there are 137 more registered religious organizations.

Under various pretexts, such as combating extremism, the occupation authorities of Crimea persecute people belonging to the pro-Ukrainian religious organizations. The Russian legislation on the activities of religious organizations and combating extremism was the basis for searching the believers and religious communities to ban religious literature, to require re-registration of all religious communities. Russian authorities are trying in different ways to subjugate Ukrainian religious communities of Crimea to Russian religious centers.

Perhaps the most egregious case occurred on March 15, 2014, when the Greek Catholic priest Mykola Kvysh was illegally arrested by the Crimean authorities directly in the parish of the church of the Assumption in Sevastopol during communication with parishioners. This was accompanied by a deliberate desecration of the temple and shrines, further illegal actions towards the priest, violence, searches of private apartments, interrogation for 8 hours with elements of torture.

Mykola Kvysh endured death threats because of his denominational affiliation and communication and in connection with Ukrainian language that he was forbidden to use during the interrogation. The priest faced the prospect of being sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment under the law on false charges of extremism. For these reasons, on March 16, he was forced to leave Crimea.

Because of this kind of threat and the increasingly spreading atmosphere of hatred to pro-Ukrainian religious communities, all priests of the UGCC in March had to take their families to safety outside the Crimea. Similar challenges faced the priests of the Roman Catholic Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Kyiv Patriarchate, and others.

Soon Archbishop Klyment of the Crimean Diocese of the Kyiv Patriarchate reported the violation by the authorities of Crimea of prior written guarantees of religious freedom. It was a promise of immunity to the Kyiv Patriarchate parishes in Crimea, granted by notorious terrorist Girkin (Strelkov), who had been in charge of the security sector on the peninsula before the seizure of Slovyansk.

In particular, on April 13, the temple of the Intercession of the Mother of God church in the village of Perevalne was actually withdrawn from the Kyiv Patriarchate. Since April 21, the Russian military, who took guard of the training unit of the Naval Forces of Ukraine in Sevastopol, banned access to the temple of the Holy Martyr Clement of Rome and its rector and parishioners.

In addition, the Crimean authorities adopted a ruling to raise an incredible level of rent for the UOC-KP for the use of the Cathedral of St. Volodymyr and Princess Olga in Simferopol.

Similarly, Muslims in Crimea, most of whom are representatives of the Crimean Tatar people complained about religious oppression. Mustafa Dzemilev reported the violation of the right to privacy of Muslims in the performance of religious rites and visiting mosques, as FSB officers visited the mosque and were unlawfully collecting data, looking for possible extremists. The Muslim religious leaders complained that in the Crimea an information war against the Crimean Tatars began, and the situation in the area of information regarding the Crimean Muslims is being escalated.

As a result, on June 13, in the village of Luhove, Simferopol region of Crimea, unknown persons set on fire the Chukurcha-Jami mosque and drew a Nazi swastika near it.

On June 24, in the village of Kolchuhino, Simferopol region a Russian unit of Berkut special forces broke into the building of madrassas of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Crimea (SDMC), when there were 13 students and two teachers. They seized several computers and arrested deputy director of the madrassas Ayder Osmanov. According to the press secretary of the SDMC, a search was conducted by the Russian Center for combating extremism, and all the previous days a fierce information training for the search of "extremists."

There are more recent cases of religious intolerance towards Muslims of Crimea. In the evening of November 12, attackers knocked the window and entered the mosque in the village of Sonyachne, Sudak district. They dragged some wood into the room and tried to make fire on the ground floor of the mosque.

The requirement to re-registration of Ukrainian religious communities in Crimea under the laws of Russia Federation

A separate problem was the requirement of occupation authorities for mandatory re-registration of all religious organizations in Crimea in accordance with Russian legislation before 1 January 2015. Federal Law № 124-FZ as of 05.05.2014 provides a slightly modified procedure of re-registration of legal entities in Crimea, which contains many restrictive rules.

According to the certificate of the Ministry of Justice (which is not a legislative act), to set up a local religious organization in Crimea it is not required to provide documents confirming the existence of a religious group in a particular area for at least 15 years, as provided by federal law. However, the believers of Crimea are forced to comply with the other provisions of Federal Law № 125-FZ "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" dated 26.09.1997, which significantly restricts their freedom of religion unlike the laws of Ukraine.

As an example, religious organizations in Crimea have faced the following problems:

1. Re-registration of religious organizations in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is possible only under two conditions: 1) entry into a centralized religious organization of a relevant religious confession; or 2) state religious examination in the manner prescribed by order № 53 of the Ministry of Justice as of 18.02.2009 "On State Religious Expertise".
2. In accordance with the requirements of the Ministry of Justice, in reregistration of centralized and local religious organizations the original version of the current Statute of the religious organization registered in accordance with Ukrainian legislation shall be provided along with the a document confirming its registration

as a legal entity (for review, followed by a return to the applicant) . Such a requirement is not provided by the legislation of the Russian federation that gives reason to see this hidden risks for believers and religious communities.

3. In accordance with Federal Law № 125-FZ as of 09.26.1997, only the Russian citizens may establish a religious organization with legal entity status. Therefore, this requirement makes the believing Crimean residents adopt Russian citizenship, and in case of failure they are effectively being denied the right of association in a religious organization with capacity of a legal person.

Attention should be also paid to the emergence of threat to the preservation of property rights and access to places of worship and other buildings of religious communities in Crimea that have not been re-registered because: 1) they are not part to any existing centralized religious organization; 2) they have not passed the state religion expertise; 3) non-compliance of the new version of their Statutes with the requirements of Russian legislation; 4) to believers' refusal to adopt Russian citizenship.

Moreover, in contrast to Ukrainian law, which does not impose any conditions for religious communities without a legal entity status, Federal Law № 125-FZ as of 09.26.1997 requires the founders to be subject to a full procedure of establishing a religious community, even for the activities without a legal entity. Obviously, this requirement is correlated with the restriction of state registration of independent religious groups that have existed less than 15 years, and makes it prevents the activities of communities not being a part of a Russian religious center.

As a result, re-registration of religious organizations in Crimea mean that they can not continue to refer in their work on Ukrainian law, because under Federal Law № 124-FZ as of 05.05.2014, "their personal law is the right of the Russian Federation."

Another problem for the Crimean believers is to Russian policy towards foreigners. The Federal Migration Service of Russia has not extended the term of the residency for foreign nationals working in the Crimean religious communities. As an example, the Roman Catholic parish in Simferopol remained without its parson Fr Peter Rosohatsky who is a citizen of Poland and has worked in Crimea for 5 years. The Greek Catholics face similar problems, as they complained of forced rotation of priests due to the limitations in staying on the peninsula for a period not exceeding three months.

Conclusions

Since March 2014, religious persecution in the cities in eastern Ukraine controlled by Russian-backed separatists (a lesser part of Donetsk and Luhansk regions) acquired monstrous proportions and shapes - the murder and torture of religious leaders and the faithful, seizure of other religious buildings (churches, houses of worship, monasteries, rehabilitation centers, etc.) and their use by militants, including as fire-positions. Almost all Christian communities and religious leaders faced threat to their lives and health, with the exception of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) and some others.

At the same time, the military aggression of Russia in the Crimean peninsula, followed by annexation has led to complex legal issues related to the inability of the religious organizations registered under the laws of Ukraine to operate on the peninsula. The Russian government officially demanded reregistration of religious communities in Crimea in accordance with the Russian law and their entry into the Russian religious centers and subordination of all entities to the jurisdiction of Russian law.

These challenges to religious freedom that Ukrainian state faces, are beyond the internal political competence as they are related to aggressive military actions of militarist Russian state. Therefore only effective joint efforts of the whole international

community can help restore religious freedom in the occupied Crimea and Donbas, which sometimes is closely connected with the right to life.
