

FAITH UNDER FIRE

Navigating Religious Freedom Amidst the War in Ukraine

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1. Introduction

The comprehensive report “Faith Under Fire: Navigating Religious Freedom Amidst the War in Ukraine” highlights a dire situation that demands immediate global attention and action.

Amidst an urgent and deeply troubling backdrop, this research examines the plight of religious communities in territories of Ukraine occupied by Russia since February 2022. It reveals a shocking reality where religious communities and affiliated structures are systematically targeted, seized, and destroyed while religious freedoms are severely restricted, all exacerbated by the ongoing brutal war.

This study meticulously documents Russian aggression, providing hard-hitting evidence of the devastation wrought over the past 20 months. It underscores the alarming scale of oppression and destruction, with at least 660 religious structures harmed, including Ukrainian Orthodox churches and 206 evangelical houses of prayer. Deliberate looting and repurposing of religious sites by Russian forces for military use have intensified the damage.

This report also exposes the harsh humanitarian crisis resulting from the full-scale Russian invasion, describing war-torn regions with scarce basic necessities and systematic targeting of civilian infrastructure. The report underscores the significant violation of international humanitarian law through missile and drone strikes on vital infrastructure, constituting war crimes.

Yet, it also highlights the remarkable resilience of religious communities in the face of adversity, demonstrating their unity and deep connections as they provide essential humanitarian assistance.

The research draws attention to the obstacles faced by these communities as Russian occupation authorities suppress opposition and manifestations of Ukrainian identity with arrests, interrogations, deportations, and restrictions on church services.

It’s essential to note that the principal author, Rev. Mykhailo Brytsyn, himself was arrested during a worship service in front of his congregation in Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia region, and after long interrogations, deported. His church was shut down, and the church building was seized and repurposed for the use of the Russian army.

In summary, this collective work from Mission Eurasia and the Institute for Religious Freedom of Ukraine serves as a powerful call for international action to address religious freedom challenges, war crimes, and humanitarian crises in Ukraine’s occupied territories. It provides comprehensive recommendations, urging global leaders to hold Russia accountable, protect the rights of religious minorities, and provide essential support. It showcases the resilience of Ukrainian religious communities and underscores the urgent need to restore justice, freedom, and hope in this conflict-ridden region.



Sergey N. Rakhuba
President of Mission Eurasia

2. About Mission Eurasia

Mission Eurasia is an educational charity organization registered in the USA as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. The immutable objective of Mission Eurasia is two-fold:

- 1) Provide effective assistance to religious organizations and communities in overcoming the repercussions of the communist era while responding to modern challenges in post-Soviet countries from the position of a Christian worldview;
- 2) Work toward the realization of new opportunities in the spiritual, social, and educational spheres.

The organization was founded in 1991, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, by evangelical leaders, Peter and Anita Deyneka. At first, it operated under the name Peter Deyneka Russian Ministries. Today, under the leadership of Sergey Rakhuba, Mission Eurasia and its branches can be found in 14 Eurasian countries as well as Israel. The main objectives of the mission are training, equipping, and mobilizing the Next Generation of Christian leaders to transform their nations for Christ through strategic and holistic ministry.

In 2014, Mission Eurasia formed the Religious Freedom Initiative to monitor the status of religious freedom, coordinate the actions of Mission Eurasia teams in different countries, and develop recommendations for their ministry.¹

In 2022, with the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Mission Eurasia directed its efforts toward alleviating the resulting humanitarian crisis and meeting the critical needs of the residents of frontline regions and internally displaced persons. In tandem with this, Mission Eurasia continues to monitor and analyze the status of religious freedom in the Ukrainian territories temporarily occupied by Russia, with the goal of responding to the persecution of religious minorities, and providing them with timely assistance.

As of today, the main directions of the Religious Freedom Initiative's work in the regions of activity of Mission Eurasia are the following:

- ▶ Monitoring the religious freedom situation, collecting data on violations of the rights of believers and religious communities, and carrying out analytical activity.
- ▶ Assisting church ministers in occupied and liberated territories heavily impacted by military action.
- ▶ Protecting the interests of religious communities and church ministers at the international and national levels.
- ▶ Fostering the spiritual and psychological rehabilitation of church ministers.
- ▶ Providing help and advice to religious communities that suffered from military action aimed at revitalizing their activities, dealing with management adjustments, and retrieving lost or confiscated documents.
- ▶ Supporting domestic and international dialogue with the participation of government officials and religious figures to ensure religious freedom, and favorable conditions for religious activity of all denominations.

¹ Reports and other work of the Religious Freedom Initiative can be found on the Mission Eurasia website: <https://missioneurasia.org/articles/>

3. Research methodology

In 2022-2023, Mission Eurasia's Religious Freedom Initiative researched the status of religious freedom and the conditions in which religious life struggles on in Ukrainian territories occupied by Russian forces. Special attention was paid to the Pryazovia area – southern regions of Ukraine along the coast of the Sea of Azov, which Russia seized during the full-scale invasion of 2022. It is a part of the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Donetsk regions.

The following data collection methods were used in conducting the research:

(1) In-person interviews. Mission Eurasia's Religious Freedom Initiative conducted over 30 in-person interviews with leaders of Ukrainian religious associations and clergy based in specific communities, the activities of which cover the territories of the Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions. The church ministers who were interviewed represented a variety of religious denominations: the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Roman-Catholic Church and the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, several protestant church denominations – various associations of Baptists, Pentecostals, evangelical Christians, Charismatic churches, Mennonites, etc. Among these ministers were the leaders of national and local religious associations (bishops), as well as clergy, pastors, deacons, and those responsible for ministry in the occupied territories. Of the interviewed ministers, 80% have directly conducted ministry in Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia.

(2) Phone calls and other means of remote communication. Mission Eurasia's Religious Freedom Initiative has maintained ongoing communications with ministers of various denominations that remain in Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia with the goal of receiving testimonies from the scene, along with verifications of information from open sources. Various secure communication channels are used for these communications.

(3) Open-source data collection. In the absence of access to regions heavily impacted by active hostilities, some information about the conditions prevailing religious communities of various denominations in Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia was collected from open sources. The Initiative also analyzed statements and monitored reports and statistical data collected from other human rights organizations and international institutions.

Ensuring the safety of religious communities and persons who provided testimonies. Because this report highlights the status of religious communities in the territories of Ukraine occupied by Russian troops, any potential repercussions from presenting the data collected during the research were considered when compiling it. To ensure the safety of religious communities in the occupied territories and of the persons who gave testimony, some quotes are presented anonymously. Some places in which events occurred, names of religious communities, and other details were deliberately removed from the testimonies.

4. Historical context

4.1. The rise of religious freedom and pluralism in independent Ukraine

With the restoration of national independence in 1991, a period marking the rapid development of religious communities of various denominations, primarily of the Christian faith, began in Ukraine. Church membership grew along with the numbers of registered religious communities all over the country. Despite the opposition of former communist functionaries, the new democratic government elected to move toward European integration and has abandoned the prohibition policy in the religious sphere. The law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,” which was passed under the Soviet Union, stopped being a meaningless declaration and became an effective mechanism for the legal regulation of church-state relations in Ukraine.

Thanks to this, religious communities enjoyed freedom of activity as legal entities who no longer had to notify the government about their establishment. Religious communities started registering spiritual centers, missions, spiritual educational institutions, charities, youth and children organizations. Street evangelization and Christian summer camps for children and youth became widespread. The movement of church rehabilitation and socialization centers for people with various addictions gained momentum. Churches received the right to use the media, and started freely spreading the Gospel through radio, television, the press, and the Internet.

With time, the role of religious communities in Ukrainian social life grew. According to sociology data, for many years, the Church was the most trusted social institution by the Ukrainian population.² Christians of various denominations openly practiced their spiritual life, and engaged in public and political processes in the state. A circle of professional Christian associations formed. The Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations – an interfaith non-government organization that represents the interests of around 95% of believing citizens of Ukraine emerged as one of the most influential social unions.³

Freedom of religion began flourishing thanks to religious pluralism and the absence of a state church. In Ukraine, no church had precedence over other denominations in the number of believers throughout the country. Despite its historical dominance, Orthodoxy in Ukraine remains divided and is represented by churches of different jurisdictions – the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate. Catholicism in Ukraine also has its peculiarities, as besides the Roman-Catholic Church, the Greek-Catholic Church of Ukraine is significantly prevalent in Western regions. At the same time, evangelical churches of various denominations (Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, Charismatic Christians, etc.) together form almost a third of all active religious communities in the country.

Because of this competition in the religious environment, the principle established by the law of equality of all religions, faiths, and religious organizations was cemented in Ukrainian society.⁴ The absence of a single dominant church in Ukraine precluded the

2 <https://www.helsinki.org.ua/svoboda-dumky-sovisti-ta-relihiji-prava-relihijnyh-hromad-m-vasin/>

3 <https://vrciro.ua/en/council/info>

4 Article 5 of the Law of Ukraine “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations”:
<https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/987-12>

merging of state and church. And even though certain political powers attempted to garner the support of some religious circles and use it in electoral struggles, such attempts were not as effective.

4.2. Ideological basis of the Russian aggression against Ukraine

Since the restoration of state independence, a national identity has come to the fore in Ukrainian society, including in Christian communities, an identity that the Soviet regime had sought for decades to uproot. The historical roots of Kyivan Rus, the cradle of Eastern European Christianity, are now celebrated, highlighting Ukraine's millennium-long historical heritage, including the struggle for Ukrainian statehood for centuries. Now, Ukrainian culture and language are a source of national pride like never before.

Ukrainian society sees itself as a part of the European community, where democratic values, human rights, freedom of religion, and human dignity are honored. The desire of the people of Ukraine for the rule of law and true justice, as well as their aversion to corruption, were the impetuses behind both the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity of 2013-2014.

Mass public protests in support of the European integration of Ukraine and against corruption and attempts at establishing an authoritarian regime further brought the worldview and value differences between Ukrainian and Russian societies to light, including in the religious sphere. At a time when Ukrainian churches supported their people's fight for democracy and state independence, Russian state propaganda distorted these events, portraying them as a "coup d'état," "nationalistic uprising," or "civil war."

As time passed, the Kremlin, fearing similar protests against corruption and the government's arbitrary use of power in Russia itself, started to incite hostility against Ukrainians, and against the Western world as a whole. Just as they did in the days of the Soviet Union, the government used propaganda to brainwash its citizens, intimidating them with supposed danger from Ukraine, the USA, and NATO. This was all aimed at buttressing the power of the Kremlin within the country. Moreover, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that Ukraine as a state was a fiction and an artificial construct and that the Ukrainian nation as a whole didn't even exist as such, stressing the superiority of the Russian nation, language, and culture.⁵

The Kremlin's chauvinistic rhetoric produced a joyful reaction in Russian society to Russia's armed invasion of the Eastern regions of Ukraine and occupation of Crimea in 2014. Russian religious figures also supported the armed aggression, welcomed the annexation of the Crimean peninsula, and largely justified the war against Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church and most other churches and religious organizations in Russia forfeited their mission to serve as the salt and light for society, and subjugated themselves to the state apparatus.

At the same time, Ukrainian religious figures and most religious communities in Donetsk and Luhansk Regions controlled by Russia suffered brutal persecution. The only exception was the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate, which enjoyed immunity as it supported the Russian-controlled separatists. Russian occupation authorities perceived the faithful of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, and evangelical churches of various denominations as enemy agents, and as spies from Ukrainian or American intelligence services, sectarians, and renegades of the Orthodox

5 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> [Warning! This publication is Russian propaganda.]

faith of the Moscow Patriarchate. Threats, illegal arrests, kidnappings, torture, and arbitrary prison sentences were widespread. The Russian occupation authorities used these repressive methods to fight dissenting opinions, displays of Ukrainian identity, and any other form of opposition, including in the religious environment.⁶

With the full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022, the level of hatred towards Ukrainians in Russian society reached a horrifying level. Most Russians supported Putin's calls to overthrow the Ukrainian government, destroy Ukrainian statehood, and conquer and strip Ukrainians of their national identity.⁷ For the most part, Russian religious figures of various denominations have served as mouthpieces for the Kremlin propaganda machine, with no regard for the numerous casualties in the civilian population of Ukraine, the millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, the targeted missile strikes on civilian infrastructure, and the massive humanitarian crisis triggered by the Russian invasion.

Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, Head of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, noted that the religious-political ideology *Ruskiy Mir* (Russian World) is no different from the ideology of the Islamic State. The only exception is that in the ideology of ISIS, the instrumentalization of Islam as a religion took place to justify their goals, while in the case of Russian World, Christianity has been instrumentalized. Firstly, it permits the Russian Orthodox Church to sanction violence from a religious perspective. Secondly, it portrays the West as an enemy and gives face to a collective antagonist comprising the Western world and Western culture, which now symbolizes all possible and impossible sins. In this way, a mutational shift from the religious to the political dimension occurs. Thirdly, these mutations promote a horrific suicidal ethos, as they promise unconditional life after death to those who stand under these banners. In fact, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow stated that all sin will be forgiven to anyone who dies in the war in Ukraine. Of course, forgiving sin in such a way is antithetical to any Christian church.⁸

6 Read more in the 2018 report of the Institute for Religious Freedom "Religious Freedom at Gunpoint: Russian Terror in the Occupied Territories of Eastern Ukraine": <https://irf.in.ua/p/28>

7 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-strong-is-russian-public-support-for-the-invasion-of-ukraine/>

8 <https://ugcc.ua/data/pytannya-vidpirnosti-ideologiy-russkogo-mira-tse-pytannya-maybutnogo-tserkvy-hrystovoy-v-suchasnomu-sviti-glava-ugkts-2361/>

5. The wide-scale destruction of religious structures in Ukraine resulting from the Russian aggression

According to updated data from the Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom, over the past 20 months of the full-scale invasion, Russian forces have totally destroyed or damaged at least 660 religious structures in Ukraine. Most of this was the result of Russian missiles, suicide drones, and artillery strikes, including targeted shellings of civilian infrastructure. In addition, some religious structures were deliberately looted by Russian soldiers, closed, or repurposed into administrative buildings by occupation authorities. The practice of seizing religious structures by Russian forces for their use as military bases or to conceal firing positions leads to even more destruction of religious facilities in Ukraine due to the hostilities.⁹

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS AND SACRED PLACES

damaged by shelling or looting because of Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine



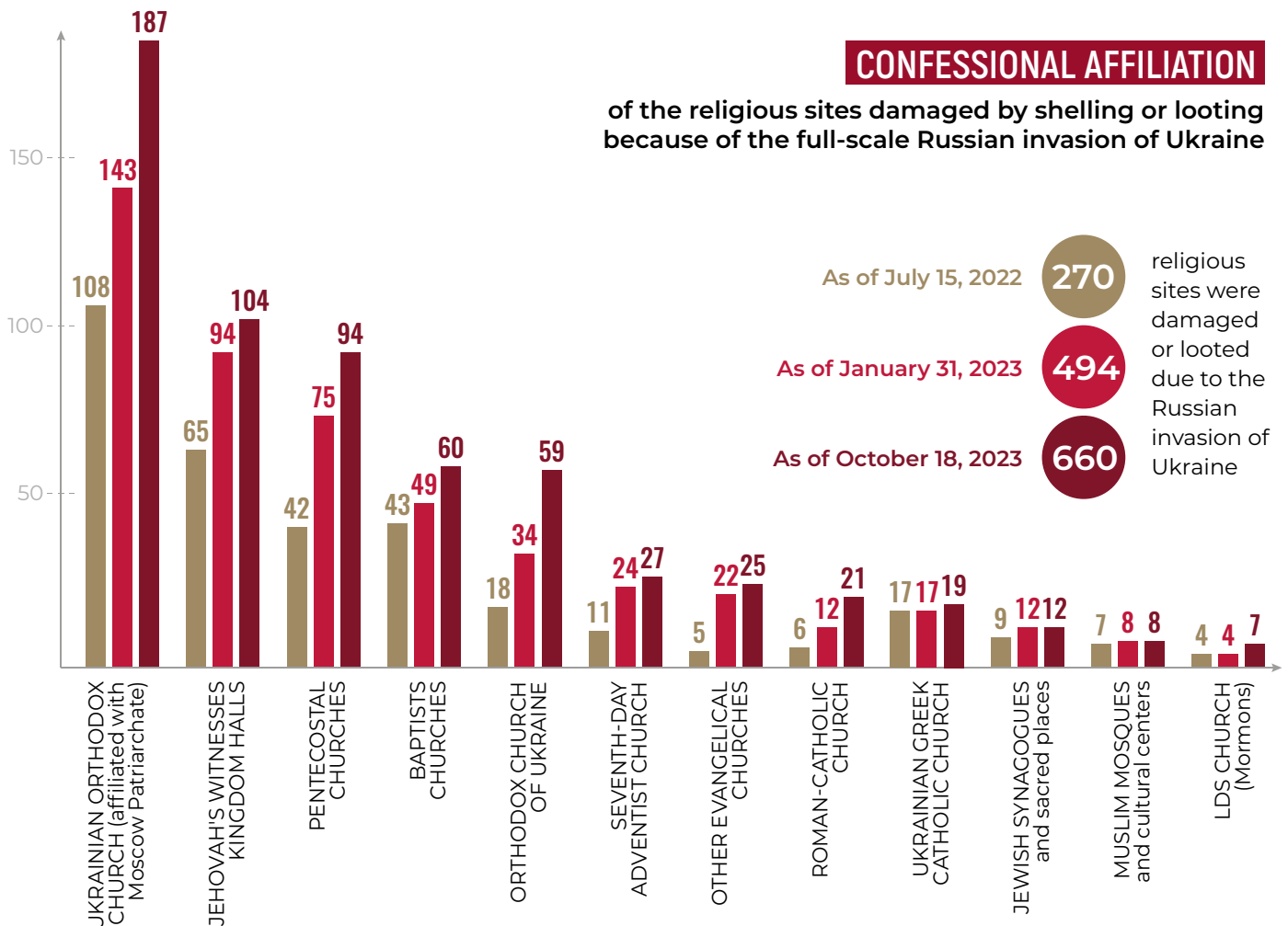
The largest number of churches, prayer houses, synagogues, and mosques were destroyed in the Donetsk (at least 153), Kherson (at least 89), and Luhansk (at least 84) regions. Significant destruction also took place in the Kyiv region (73) in February-March of 2022, when the Russian military attempted to seize control over the capital of Ukraine. Due to the ongoing military action, the numbers of destroyed structures continues to rise in the Kharkiv (at least 62), Zaporizhzhia (at least 64), and Mykolaiv (at least 41) regions. In addition, Russia continues to shell civilian infrastructure in almost all regions of Ukraine. They employ missiles and suicide drones in these attacks, thereby damaging religious structures even in the distant Western regions of Ukraine.

⁹ Summary of the Institute for Religious Freedom's research as of October 18, 2023: <https://irf.in.ua/files/publications/2023.10-IRF-Ukraine-report-summary-ENG.pdf>

Our analysis of the denominational affiliation of these religious buildings indicates that most of the church buildings impacted by Russian aggression have been Orthodox—at least 246. Of these, church buildings belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate) suffered the most—at least 187. At the same time, 59 church buildings belonging to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine have been destroyed.

The scale of the destruction of evangelical prayer houses is vast, as at least 206 have been affected. Of them, the church buildings that suffered the most are affiliated with the Ukrainian Pentecostal Church at 94 buildings, the prayer houses of Evangelical Christians-Baptists at 60, and the Seventh-day Adventists at 27.

The Kingdom Halls of Jehovah’s Witnesses have been severely impacted, with the damage totaling 141 religious facilities, of which 10 were totally destroyed, 21 were severely damaged, and 78 suffered minor damage. Among these are 32 religious facilities that were seized by the Russian military or occupation authorities.



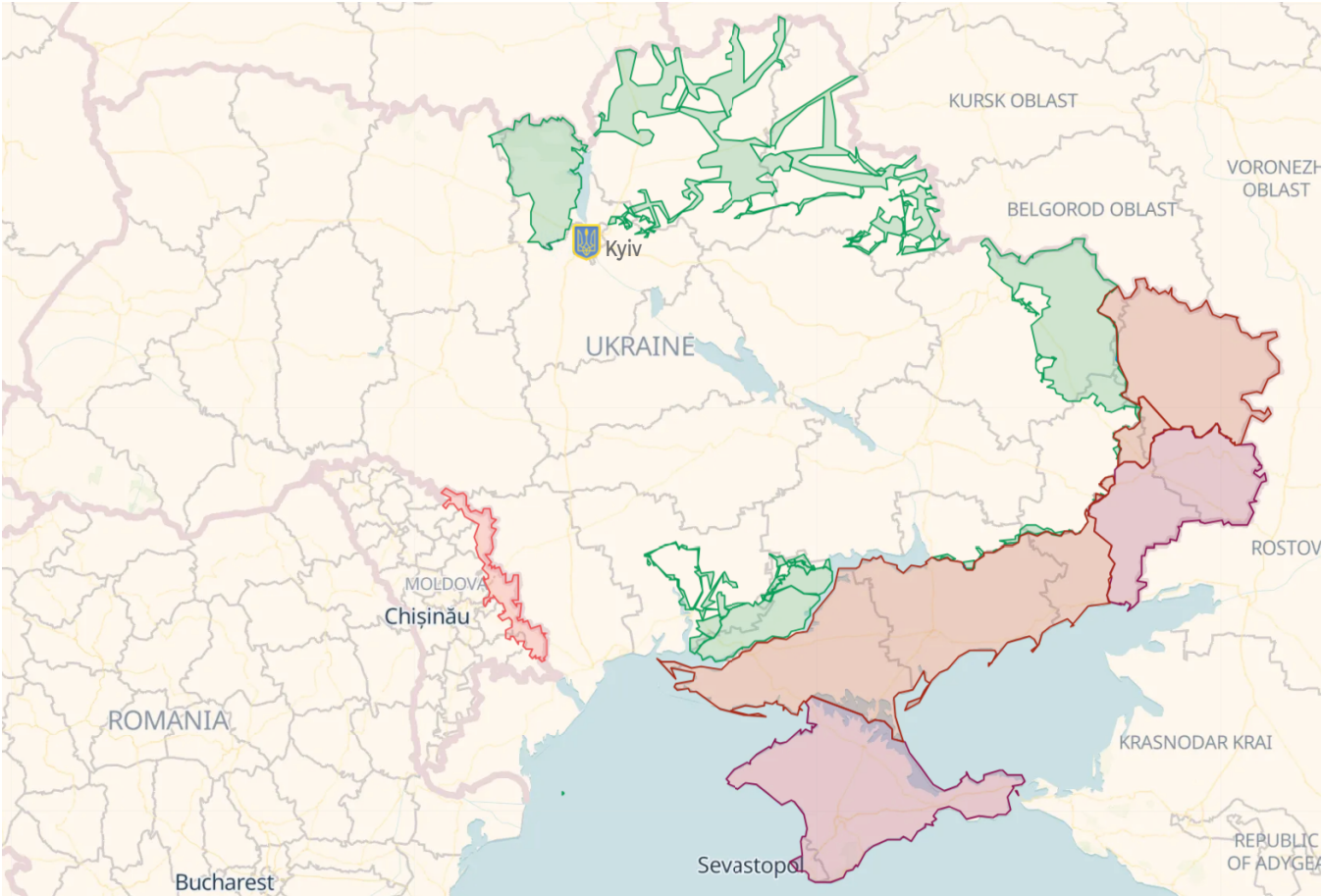
However, even this shocking data from the Institute for Religious Freedom is not complete, as the true scale of the destruction of the religious infrastructure and spiritual heritage of Ukraine is impossible to fully comprehend in the conditions of ongoing military action and systematic Russian air raids on all regions of the country. At the same time, new reports concerning Russian soldiers seizing or looting yet another church or prayer house appear almost every week.

6. Challenges facing the religious communities in the territories of Ukraine under occupation due to the full-scale Russian invasion

6.1. Humanitarian crisis in Ukraine caused by the war

From the first hours of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the life of religious communities was drastically changed, as was the life of every Ukrainian. Russian forces moved very quickly and simultaneously in different directions: from the North, East, and South. And while battles to protect the capital raged in the Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy regions, most of the Kherson region was occupied before noon of February 24, 2022.¹⁰

MAP OF MILITARY ACTION IN UKRAINE AS OF OCTOBER 20, 2023.¹¹



- territories occupied before February 24, 2023
- liberated territories
- territories occupied after February 24, 2023
- Russian-occupied territory of Moldova

¹⁰ Testimony of Imam Rustem Asanov for the Institute for Religious Freedom: <https://youtu.be/SPBeKYh9dM4>
¹¹ Current map of military action in Ukraine: <https://deepstatemap.live>

In the span of a few weeks, Russian forces advanced deep into Ukrainian territory. They took large swaths of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions under control, completely occupied the Luhansk region, and widened their control area in the Donetsk region. Battles continued in the Kyiv, Mykolaiv, Sumy, Chernihiv, and Kharkiv regions, which, on October 20, 2023, were liberated by the Armed Forces of Ukraine (with the exception of a few settlements near Kupyansk in the Kharkiv region).

Some occupied cities, such as Mariupol, Maryinka, and Bakhmut in the Donetsk region and Severodonetsk, Popasna, and Rubizhne in the Luhansk region, suffered severe destruction and were almost completely wiped off the face of the earth. However, even the relatively intact cities of Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Enerhodar in the Zaporizhzhia region and Kakhovka in the Kherson region were left without water, electricity, or communications. Residents found themselves on the brink of survival not only because of constant, devastating shellings, but also due to the destruction of civilian infrastructure.

Moreover, Russia systematically uses terror tactics against all of Ukraine's civilian population, inflicting frequent massive missile and suicide drone strikes on its energy infrastructure, multi-apartment houses, food warehouses, humanitarian hubs, hospitals, and schools.¹² Such attacks on civilian infrastructure have no apparent military objective, and thus, under international humanitarian law they are war crimes.

Russia's blowing up of the Kakhovka Dam on June 6, 2023 caused a large-scale ecological catastrophe, and deepened the humanitarian crisis in the southern regions. Some 80 settlements ended up in the flood zone, most on the left bank of the Kherson region. There were human casualties: 32 dead and 39 missing civilians. As noted by the UN, 620 square kilometers of territory in four regions were flooded: Kherson, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Dnipropetrovsk. One hundred thousand residents of these regions suffered from the flooding. Communications were damaged, along with the fresh water supply, infrastructure, environment, irrigation to agricultural lands, religious structures, and cultural and historical monuments. Ukraine suffered damages totaling almost US \$14 billion.¹³

In the settlements heavily impacted by military action, the looting of stores and pharmacies has been commonplace. Banks and gas stations ceased operations. A widespread practice among Russian soldiers has been to loot the private residences of locals and ship the spoils (washing machines, other household appliances, tools, warm clothing, etc.) to their relatives in Russia.¹⁴ According to data from the Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom, Russian soldiers committed deliberate acts of vandalism and the looting of religious structures, for example, in the Catholic seminary in Vorzel, Kyiv region¹⁵ and the Tavriski Christian Institute in the Kherson region.¹⁶

6.2. Obstacles to the social ministry of churches

Churches in occupied territories were left to face Russian soldiers, who at first paid no attention to them because they did not consider them to be independent and influential participants in civil society, although this is actually the case in Ukraine. Together with the occupation authorities came devastation: a lack of food, basic necessities, medicine, and

12 <https://www.euronews.com/2023/06/01/terror-bombing-why-is-russia-targeting-civilians-in-ukraine>

13 <https://ukraine.un.org/en/249742-kakhovka-dam-destruction-inflicted-us14-billion-damage-and-loss-ukraine-government-ukraine>

14 <https://mediazona.by/article/2022/04/05/cdek>

15 Testimony of Fr. Ruslan Mykhalkiv for the Institute for Religious Freedom: <https://youtu.be/RpDJ59MW4Fo>

16 Testimony of Rector Valentyn Syniy for the Institute for Religious Freedom: <https://youtu.be/lXVCx0G57b0>

access to banking services. In response to the humanitarian crisis, churches provided locals with assistance in meeting their critical needs. This was possible due to the experience of self-organization, unity, and strong horizontal connections in the communities of various denominations.

The churches of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions already had experience in helping victims of war. At the beginning of the Russian aggression in 2014, Ukrainian churches encountered thousands of people fleeing from the eastern regions of Ukraine facing military action, and assisted them in procuring housing and in meeting basic everyday needs. Since then, powerful volunteer movements have arisen in religious communities, and widespread networks of partners and the faithful abroad have formed to provide essential humanitarian help.

In the first months of the full-scale invasion, the recently occupied cities in the Pryazovia area were able to receive humanitarian help from territories controlled by the Ukrainian government. Many Ukrainian churches of various denominations have displayed their solidarity, conducting active and large-scale activities to provide humanitarian assistance to the residents of occupied and frontline territories, as well as rendering aid to internally displaced persons. Food, baby food, clothing, medicine, household cleaning and hygiene products were the most requested, as people's survival was at stake.

In response to this need, most churches and religious organizations became humanitarian hubs and provided the spaces for a well-organized volunteer movement all over Ukraine. Religious communities received and processed requests from the residents of occupied territories, for whom they collected aid, both inside the country and from abroad, and sent it to settlements controlled by Russian forces. Churches were able to coordinate their activities, and served as centers of trust for locals, where they were able to contact their relatives, receive pensions from Ukrainian banks, and resolve other everyday issues.

Church volunteers also organized various evacuation channels for the civilian population from areas of military action and occupied regions of Ukraine, places where state and international rescue services did not dare to operate. Especially dangerous were evacuations from the nearly totally destroyed cities of Mariupol, Rubizhne, Severodonetsk, and the settlements of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.

As early as May-June of 2022, the humanitarian activities of churches started to annoy the Russian occupation administration, as they perceived them as a threat to their power. At first, Russian soldiers simply confiscated humanitarian aid at roadblocks. Soon, they instituted a total ban on humanitarian aid coming from territories controlled by the Ukrainian government. Occupation authorities wanted locals to receive aid exclusively from Russia and see Russian soldiers as "liberators," and this position was a constant refrain in Kremlin propaganda.

"Russian humanitarian aid was more propaganda than aid. In March-April [2022], Russian trucks came, and people were given small food packages. The Russian press was always around, and some older woman from the Brezhnev [Soviet] era would always appear to tell the cameras how grateful she was to Russia for the aid. It did not look like aid. It looked like they were training animals. First, they take everything away from the people, then they toss them a pittance and compel them to love, rejoice, and obey."¹⁷

As a result of restrictions on the humanitarian activity of Ukrainian churches, the civilian population of the occupied territories increasingly suffered from the humanitarian crisis caused by the Russian invasion. Life under Russian occupation was especially hard on families with little children. Survival was also a challenge for older people, people with disabilities, seriously ill and immobile people. Many people were saved only thanks to the help and sacrifices of religious figures and church volunteers.

“It is very hard to explain to a child that Russians brought flags but did not bring baby food. How can you tell this to a 10-month-old child with a very aggressive semolina allergy?”¹⁸

Despite this, Ukrainian churches were no longer able to actively help those in need as they did before, as the occupation authorities now perceived them as “enemy elements.” The evacuation of locals from occupied settlements to territories controlled by the Ukrainian government was also forbidden. The Russian military saw the population decrease in captured cities and villages as a threat, as it was an obvious indicator of the local people’s rejection of Russian authority.

6.3. The suppression of opposition to the Russian occupation and manifestations of Ukrainian identity

As the number of Russian soldiers in occupied Ukrainian territories increased, the resistance movement was growing stronger among the local population. In February-March 2022, public acts of defiance to the Russian authorities took place in many occupied cities. Thousands attended anti-Russian protests. This shocked both Russian soldiers and the international community, who did not expect such a strong show of resistance from Ukrainians. For many, it was especially surprising to see how strongly residents of the southern regions of Ukraine, where the Russian language prevailed in everyday life, opposed the idea of living under Russian rule. This resistance destroyed the myth put forth by Kremlin propaganda which justified aggression against Ukraine as necessary to protect the Russian-speaking population.

It became apparent that the residents of the occupied territories did not perceive Russian soldiers as liberators and, in fact, steadfastly resisted them. Moreover, Russian counterintelligence agencies were unable to find and suppress underground resistance cells. And so Russian propagandists began to accuse Ukrainian religious figures of organizing armed resistance. Priests and pastors were baselessly accused of cooperating with the Security Service of Ukraine, storing weapons, transporting explosives, or calling for an armed uprising against the occupation authorities.

Ekaterina Arkalova, a propagandist of the Spas TV channel, founded by the Russian Orthodox Church, told this to her viewers about her trip to Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia region:

“There are many different sects in the empire’s south. And they have stockpiles. Greek-Catholics, the Word of Life [church], Jehovah’s Witnesses, stockpiles of...ammunition, sectarian literature, all sort of things...in short, they’re sponsoring the Armed Forces of Ukraine ... and now fighting those sects, all of them simultaneously, all those protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses, is the main task of our counterintelligence in those territories.”¹⁹

¹⁸ In-person interview # 28

¹⁹ [https://ria-m.tv/news/310678/propaganda_urovnya_bog_s_boevyih_komarov_rashisty_i_pereklyuchilis_na_sektu_harizmatov_v_melitopole_\(video\).html](https://ria-m.tv/news/310678/propaganda_urovnya_bog_s_boevyih_komarov_rashisty_i_pereklyuchilis_na_sektu_harizmatov_v_melitopole_(video).html)

In addition to this slander, Russian occupation authorities blamed virtually all religious communities seen by them as “undesirable” of harboring “ties to the West,” and engaging in espionage, and other subversive activities “under the leadership of Western intelligence services.”²⁰ Kremlin propaganda’s portrayal of “Western civilization” as an enemy harkens back to the Cold War era. Back then, the Soviet Union opposed the “rotting West” and its “bourgeoisie ideology.” Now, Russia, with the blessing of the Russian Orthodox Church, is fighting imaginary “nationalists” and “satanists” in Ukraine, as well as the USA and NATO, who allegedly threaten the Russian nation.²¹ It is through this fear of constant external threats that Russian President Vladimir Putin has managed to retain his authoritarian rule in Russia ever since 2000.

A similar fear was being spread by the Russian government in the occupied territories, labeling more and more religious communities or separate religious figures, volunteers, and public activists “enemies of the people.” In the Russian worldview, there is no place for religious minorities, especially from hostile Ukraine. Even Orthodox religious communities who attempted to retain their Ukrainian identity and canonical subordination to the spiritual center in Kyiv have been subjected to increasing pressure directed at forcing them to submit to the Russian Orthodox Church and spread the Russian World ideology.

“At first, they asked how our church differs from an Orthodox church. I said: we are Orthodox, just Ukrainian. When they realized there was nothing, they could use against us. They simply gave us an ultimatum: either you transfer to the Russian Orthodox Church, or repressions will follow.”²²

After witnessing Russian crimes, some priests from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate refused to mention Patriarch Kirill of Moscow in prayers and strived to maintain unity with their spiritual center in Kyiv. At least a few of the priests who had canonical links with the Moscow Patriarchate endured threats, attacks, illegal arrests, and torture for retaining their Ukrainian identity and for refusing to pray for “the victory of Russian arms.”²³

According to the Nobel laureate and head of the Centre for Civil Liberties **Oleksandra Matviichuk**, the Russian Federation views freedom of religion as a collective category:

“If a particular religious organization is loyal to the Russian government or enjoys its special favor, then believers of that community are allowed to use their right to religious freedom; but if it is not, they will be persecuted.”²⁴

Another issue that provoked the persecution of religious freedoms by the occupation authorities was the use of the Ukrainian language during church services. First, this concerned communities of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, which conduct their liturgy exclusively in Ukrainian. The Russian occupation administration demanded that protestant pastors also stop using Ukrainian during church services. Ukrainian-speaking religious figures suffered from increasingly frequent and violent persecution from the representatives of the Russian government.

20 Read more in the 2022 report of the Institute for Religious Freedom, “Russian Attacks on Religious Freedom in Ukraine”: <https://irf.in.ua/p/96>

21 <https://www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection/>

22 In-person interview # 34

23 [https://ria-m.tv/news/311500/v_melitopole_okkupanty_uje_nachali_iskat_vragov_sredi_svoih_pravoslavnyih_svyaschennikov_\(foto\).html](https://ria-m.tv/news/311500/v_melitopole_okkupanty_uje_nachali_iskat_vragov_sredi_svoih_pravoslavnyih_svyaschennikov_(foto).html)

24 <https://irs.in.ua/p/69>

The occupation administration also deemed religious literature written in Ukrainian or published abroad to be extremist, and banned its use. In addition to this, Russian soldiers deliberately destroyed Ukrainian spiritual literature in the libraries of spiritual educational facilities and the storage facilities of churches and missions. This took place, for example, on the premises of Mission Eurasia in Irpin, Kyiv region,²⁵ and in the Tavriski Christian Institute in the Kherson region.²⁶

As noted by **Taras Kremin**, Ombudsman for the Protection of the State Language, appointed by the Ukrainian government:

“The systematic implementation of linguicide policies in the occupied territories and in areas of military action by the occupiers is a criminal breach of the international humanitarian law and the laws of Ukraine and must be properly documented, investigated, and brought to trial. Instances of this must be identified and punished.”²⁷

In starting the full-scale invasion, the Kremlin rallied for the so-called “denazification” and “desatanization” of Ukraine, justifying its military aggression as necessary to protect the Russian-speaking population and the Orthodox Church. However, the occupation authorities have implemented violent xenophobic policies against the Ukrainian population, uprooted all displays of Ukrainian identity, and destroyed spiritual shrines and historical monuments all over Ukraine using systematic missile strikes in all regions of Ukraine.

6.4. The establishment of total control over religious activity

In early April of 2022, Russian forces left the Kyiv region for good – the Armed Forces of Ukraine rebuffed them after they failed to quickly capture the Ukrainian capital as planned. Soon, Russian formations were forced out of the Chernihiv and Sumy regions, as well as most of the Kharkiv region. It was evident that the Russian blitzkrieg in Ukraine had failed, and the war turned into a protracted armed conflict. At that time, Russian military police in the occupied territories started summoning local priests and pastors for so-called “get-to-know-you talks,” which were more like interrogations.

“They summon you, start asking questions. As soon as you begin to respond, they start relentlessly lecturing: ‘We know everything about you. You cannot hide anything. But do not be afraid to talk. We are here temporarily. Later, you will choose your regional government by yourself’”²⁸

In some religious communities, Russian intelligence operatives started visiting church services or sending observers, who were very noticeable among the rest of the faithful who usually frequented these churches. They were unfamiliar with the liturgy, did not have any acquaintances, and after talking with them it became immediately apparent that these observers were tasked with monitoring the churches’ activity.²⁹

Starting in the summer of 2022, such “get-to-know-you talks” became a common practice since, by then, the Russian military perceived any church activity as a challenge to their power in the Ukrainian territory under their control. Sometimes, these interrogations took place in church buildings, where Russian intelligence operatives and representatives of the

25 Testimony of Denis Gorenkov for the Institute for Religious Freedom: <https://youtu.be/CCgbwdlDqck>

26 Testimony of Valentyn Syniy for the Institute for Religious Freedom: <https://youtu.be/IXVCx0G57b0>

27 <https://nova-ombudsman.gov.ua/news/rosijska-politika-lingvocidu-na-okupovanih-teritoriyah-ukrayini-yak-sposib-demontazhu-konstitucijnogo-ladu-ukrayini-ta-element-genocidu-proti-ukrayinskogo-narodu>

28 In-person interview # 05

29 In-person interview # 07

occupation authorities usually showed up accompanied by armed soldiers. Other times, religious figures were summoned to military police departments for such “talks,” which added an element of psychological pressure and intimidation. The goal of these frequent interrogations was to monitor attitudes in local populations and induce religious figures to collaborate with the occupation authorities.

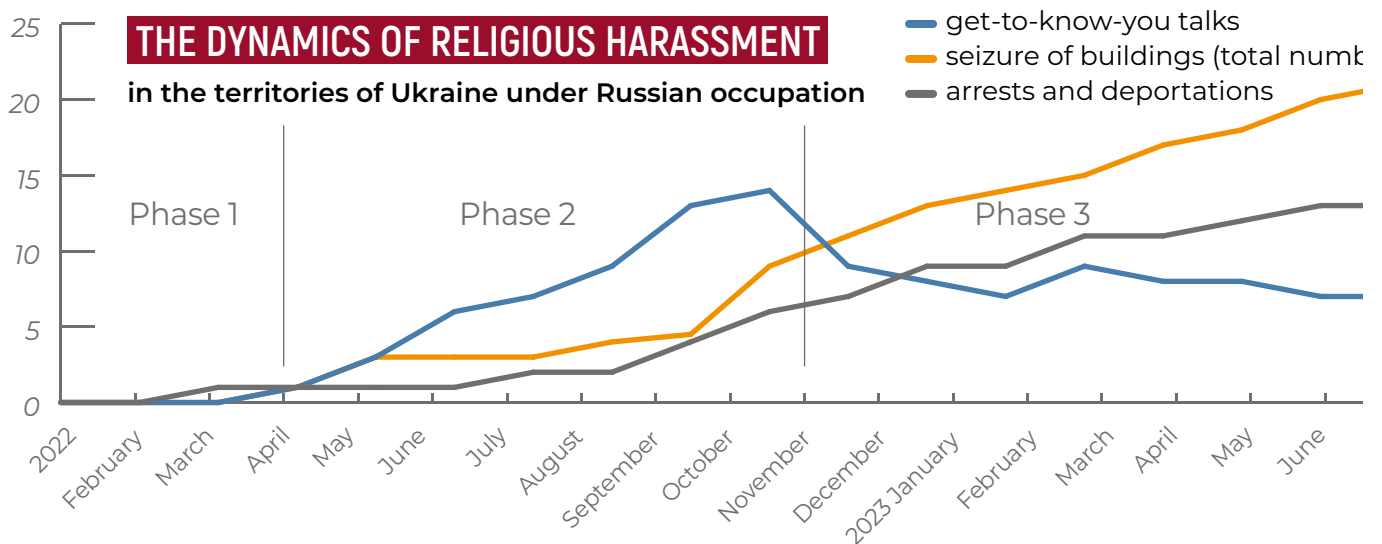
“At every ‘get-to-know-you talk,’ they first asked: ‘What kind of church are you? Who organized you? Who are you subordinate to? What is your structure?’ When they felt they’d ‘warmed you up’ enough, they’d ask, ‘How many of you are there? What are people’s attitudes? What do they think of the new government?’”³⁰

Given the factual absence of a classical management hierarchy in the occupied territories, every entity—the Russian military, Federal Security Service [FSB, formerly the KGB], intelligence, occupation authorities, a few collaborators from the local authorities, etc., attempted to assert their power in the region and induce cooperation. In some cases, religious figures were approached by new people posing as the new authorities in the region every week.³¹

“Conversations with FSB agents were always in the spirit of ‘carrot and stick.’ First came the threats: ‘You will not preserve neutrality. You must support our new government. You must persuade the people to vote for Russia at the referendum.’ Then came the sweet promises: ‘If we reach an understanding, you will be allowed to gather [for church services].’”³²

The Russian military demanded current activity plans from some churches: what events will be organized during the week, who will be responsible, and sermon notes for the upcoming service.³³ Russian soldiers could forbid a church service if they disliked or were bothered by a particular activity. For example, in one village, the church was banned from congregating because someone took down a Russian flag from the village council at night.³⁴

The relationship dynamics of the occupation authorities with religious organizations in one of the regions of Ukraine can be seen in the following diagram:



30 In-person interview # 28

31 Testimony of Imam Oleksandr Babyichuk for the Institute for Religious Freedom: <https://youtu.be/ryLcinUN0E4>

32 In-person interview # 08

33 In-person interview # 26

34 In-person interview # 17

On the diagram, several phases can be observed. The first phase (February-April 2022): At the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian soldiers ignored religious communities as participants in social life. The second phase (May-October 2022): The Russian government turned their attention to churches and religious communities and started “interrogatory conversations” with religious figures, threatening them if they refused to cooperate. The third phase (starting in November 2022): After failed “interrogatory conversations,” Russian occupation authorities started seizing church buildings.

Ukrainian churches remaining under the total control of the Russian occupation authorities continued activity as best they could in line with their mission. However, the Russian government started to see danger for themselves even in purely religious rituals. If, in the spring of 2022, priests and pastors in some cities and villages were able to organize joint interfaith prayers, in summer, joint prayer gatherings were forbidden, and the responsible ministers faced persecution and arrests.

“We told the Russians, ‘This is peaceful prayer. You are Russians. You are Orthodox. How can you fail to understand prayer? How can you forbid us to pray when we gather all denominations together here? You took so much away from us. At least allow us to gather for prayers.’ The Russians responded: ‘We understand that here you are used to praying like this, but now it is not allowed.’ So, for 130 days, our prayers were dispersed by soldiers. Then drunken provocateurs who tried to say we were troublemakers or communists suddenly appeared out of nowhere and demanded an end to ‘religious agitation.’ The military police already had our documents. They started to threaten our families. Then the arrests began.”³⁵

Another way of persecuting disobedient religious figures, widespread in Russia itself, is to level arbitrary accusations of “extremist activity.” Russian legislation, in particular, the so-called Yarovaya Law passed in 2016, makes it easy to fabricate a criminal case against any person with oppositional views, or to accuse any religious figure of “extremism” or “illegal missionary activities.”³⁶ Thus, Russian media reports of yet another denunciation of “extremists” from a religious environment should be viewed skeptically: not as a fact, but as a sign of repression.

“During the interrogation, I asked the [Russian] soldier something-I do not know who he is. He did not introduce himself. His face was covered with a mask. They addressed each other by callsigns. But by observing how other soldiers treated him, I understood he was in charge here. So, I asked him, ‘Why are you closing our church? You also have evangelical churches in Russia.’ To which he responded, ‘Those churches are temporary! There will only be the Orthodox Church! We are starting to sort things out here, and then we will sort them out back there!’”³⁷

Because of this widespread attitude, the Russian authorities started using increasingly harsh repressions against religious minorities, that is, against all non-Orthodox religious communities. The practice of arbitrary arrests and kidnappings of religious figures, holding them in basements in horrific conditions and inflicting violent torture on them, was widespread in the occupied territories.³⁸ The main objective of this inhumane treatment of clergy and pastors was to induce them to publicly support the Russian authorities in the occupied territories of Ukraine, and to collaborate with them to detect dissidents, saboteurs, and other members of the underground resistance.

35 In-person interview # 05

36 <https://missioneurasia.org/yarovaya-law-vs-religious-freedom/>

37 In-person interview # 28

38 Testimony of Fr. Sergiy Chudinovich for the Institute for Religious Freedom: <https://youtu.be/T5vaeQD43hw>

At the same time, occupation authorities incited hatred towards religious minorities in the media, labeling them enemies of the people, traitors, spies, dangerous sectarians, and extremists. Communities of Jehovah's Witnesses immediately found themselves outside of the law, as this religious organization is banned in Russia due to manufactured allegations of extremism. In some districts, the occupation authorities also labeled as extremist Evangelical Christians-Baptists, and Muslim Crimean Tatar communities which originated in Crimea.³⁹

6.5. The seizure of prayer houses and total ban on religious activity

Starting in the summer of 2022, Russian occupation authorities in Ukrainian territories that were occupied after the full-scale Russian invasion initiated open repression against religious minorities. Russian soldiers started to raid prayer houses, often during church services. During the raids, they conducted searches, made lists of the church members who were present, and collected their personal and biometric information, which they used for further surveillance.⁴⁰ After such raids, the faithful were forbidden from conducting any activity in their religious community's premises. In seized church buildings, occupation authorities sawed off crosses and used the premises to house their administrative institutions,⁴¹ or as bases for Russian soldiers,⁴² and offices of the Kremlin's political party, United Russia.⁴³

"We saw so much evil that Russians did in the occupied territories. But all the disgrace and abomination of their Russkiy Mir [Russian World] ideology was revealed when they opened the Ministry of Culture for the Zaporizhzhia Region in one of the church buildings. A Ministry of Culture in a stolen and looted church building! They sawed the cross off of this church. Before this, only satanists and communists sawed off our crosses."⁴⁴

Repressions occurred both in cities and in small villages. They were directed against churches of all denominations: parishes of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, churches of evangelical protestant denominations, and Catholic and Muslim communities. The only exceptions were the parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate, on the condition that their priests affirm their loyalty to the occupation authorities. Only a few communities among the religious minorities were allowed to continue gathering in their own prayer houses.

At the beginning of the wave of repressions, the closure of churches was justified by the alleged "extremist activity" of members of the religious community.⁴⁵ However, after September 2022, when the Armed Forces of Ukraine inflicted significant casualties on the Russian forces and liberated a large part of the Kharkiv region, the closure and seizure of church buildings and prayer houses became a common occurrence. In the fall-winter of 2022 and spring of 2023, almost all non-Orthodox churches in occupied territories were stripped of their right to hold church services.⁴⁶

39 Read more in the 2022 report of the Institute for Religious Freedom, "Russian Attacks on Religious Freedom in Ukraine": <https://irf.in.ua/p/96>

40 Testimony of Mykhailo Brytsyn for the Institute for Religious Freedom: <https://youtu.be/8tHPoF2POLI>

41 <https://novosti.dn.ua/ru/news/288203-dnr-otkryla-svoy-zags-v-dome-kotoryy-otobrala-u-baptystskoy-cerkvy>

42 [https://ria-m.tv/ua/news/296886/u_tsentri_melitopolya_okupanti_peretvorili_tserkvu_na_viyskovu_bazu_ta_nichlijku_\(video\).html](https://ria-m.tv/ua/news/296886/u_tsentri_melitopolya_okupanti_peretvorili_tserkvu_na_viyskovu_bazu_ta_nichlijku_(video).html)

43 https://risu.ua/rosijski-okupanti-prizupinili-diyalnist-spilnoti-menonitiv-v-molochansku_n133724

44 In-person interview # 30

45 In-person interview # 04

46 In-person interview # 13, 21, 22.

"I can understand why the occupiers could not stand free Ukrainian churches in the occupied territory. Imagine the situation: a city with no political parties, no public organizations, no factories, or large businesses. Only churches are left. These are organized and decent people. People who know each other, share common values, and know what it is to collaborate with each other on various projects. They have resources and connections. All of this looked like a threat in the eyes of the occupation forces."⁴⁷

During our research, we analyzed the influence of Russian aggression on the three main denominations within a single Ukrainian region occupied by the Russian forces. Our findings revealed that, as of June 2023, only one out of 20 religious communities is active in the first denomination, none are left out of 16 communities in the second denomination, and four remain out of 48 communities in the third denomination.⁴⁸ At the same time, according to the data of Verstka, at least 109 instances of prayer houses ceasing activity, and limitations on the activities of ministers across at least five denominations were recorded in occupied Ukrainian territories.⁴⁹

"Throughout its history, our church went through many challenges in the now-defunct USSR [Soviet Union], especially during the Stalinist repressions. But God protected our church, and we continued church services. On Saturday, our church gathered for an evening service. Just then, Russian soldiers entered the prayer house and stated that they would set up a base in the church. With all our strength, we tried to persuade them that this was a church, a house of God, and they cannot do this. But none of our appeals would move them. Their commander said they had no other options, and would relocate to the church. Some soldiers said they were Orthodox, even though they honestly admitted that they were in a church for the first time in their lives. ... Sometime before, a prayer house of Evangelical Christians-Baptists was seized and looted in our village. And before that, a prayer house of Seventh-day Adventists and a building of Jehovah's Witnesses."⁵⁰

In addition to physically restricting the access of believers to their prayer houses, the occupation authorities confiscated the registration documents of the religious community, documents on the ownership of church buildings and lands, seals, accounting, and other documents. This made it impossible to conduct the activities of a legal entity. Cases of cancellations of state registration and demands to re-register the religious community in line with Russian legislation, which did not guarantee the preservation of the church's status as a legal entity also took place.⁵¹

In such conditions, conducting religious activities in Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia has become even more dangerous. Even congregating at home is risky, as after raids on church buildings, Russian intelligence services have used the personal data of church members that they collected for further surveillance, and to organize round-ups of believers in their own houses.⁵²

47 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wXzMmOdyBc>

48 In-person interviews ## 02, 16, 17.

49 <https://verstka.media/kak-rossiyskaya-armiya-presleduet-sviaschennosluzhiteley-i-razrushayet-hramy>

50 In-person interview # 32

51 Read more in the 2018 report of the Institute for Religious Freedom, "Religious Freedom at Gunpoint: Russian Terror in the Occupied Territories of Eastern Ukraine":
<https://irf.in.ua/p/28>

52 Testimony of Mykhailo Brytsyn for the Institute for Religious Freedom:
<https://youtu.be/8tHPoF2POLI>

6.6. Persecution and deportation of religious figures

When it turned out that after the seizure of church buildings or prayer houses, local religious leaders continued their pastoral activities underground, the Russian authorities started forcing them to leave the occupied territory. For example, in October 2022, a priest in the Orthodox Church of Ukraine was deported for not recognizing the falsified results of the so-called “referendum” for the accession of the Zaporizhzhia region to the Russian Federation.⁵³

“Here is what they wrote in his formal accusation: [He] justified ‘terrorism’ in his speeches and denied the results of the referendum for the reunification with the Russian Federation.”⁵⁴

The Russian authorities attempted to turn churches into a tool to achieve their political goals, starting with the reinforcement of their power in the occupied territories of Ukraine. The ministers of one church in the Zaporizhzhia region were told:

“We are closing your church because too few of your parishioners hold Russian passports.”⁵⁵

Numerous cases of violence against priests and pastors have been documented since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.⁵⁶ The results of our research show that arrests have even impacted non-Orthodox priests and pastors who did not necessarily have a firm pro-Ukrainian stance, or weren’t socially active. The occupation authority mostly arrested those religious figures, who, based on rumors or denunciations from local collaborators, were thought to have links with international organizations (including OSCE), religious centers in Kyiv, or Western countries (for example, the USA in the case of Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Adventists), local business, or with the armed resistance of the Ukrainian underground. For lack of evidence, most arrested priests and pastors were released after some time (a few days, weeks, or months), but were ordered to leave occupied territory under the threat of imprisonment or execution.

“When [Russian soldiers] came into the courtyard of our church, deep down in my soul, I knew that they were not there to just ‘talk.’ They searched the premises for hours. I felt that they were very angry, and understood that they would not leave me alone anytime soon. I asked them, ‘Are you going to beat me?’ They [Russian soldiers] took away documents on the ownership of the church building, put me into a bus, and we drove away. We stopped on the last [Russian] roadblock. They read me something along the lines of ‘unwanted individual,’ ‘hindering the activities of the social services,’ and ‘expelled from the territory of the Russian Federation.’ They told me to walk along the road. It was night. I did not know where the landmines were. They did not warn me that I was crossing the frontline. I was walking and praying that our guys [Ukrainian soldiers] not shoot me on accident.”⁵⁷

In April of 2023, the Institute for the Study of War reported that since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian authorities have killed or kidnapped at least 29 priests or religious leaders. These cases of repression on religious grounds are not isolated incidents. Rather, they are part of a targeted campaign for the systematic removal of “unwanted” religious organizations from occupied territories and for the promotion of the Moscow Patriarchate.⁵⁸

53 <https://zprz.city/news/view/u-zaporizkij-oblasti-rosiyani-vignali-z-domu-svyashhennika>

54 In-person interview # 09

55 In-person interview # 16

56 Read more in the 2015 report “When God Becomes the Weapon”: <https://lockedfaith.org/en/p/12>

57 In-person interview # 34

58 <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-9-2023>

In research on religious repressions conducted by Verstka, since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion, 43 instances of the targeted persecution of clergy have been recorded:

*“As a result [of Russian persecution], in 18 cases, ministers were forced to flee the city, go underground, or completely cease activity. In 12 cases, they were forcefully expelled. In eight, they were taken prisoner, and in five, killed.”*⁵⁹

Ministers were pressured through their families, children, and close ones. It is a known fact that Russians kidnapped a priest's son and held him in a prison cell for weeks to pressure his father regarding his religious activity.⁶⁰

When they could not gather enough evidence to charge priests and pastors, the occupation authorities organized open provocations. Weapons and compromising materials implicating them in terrorist activities were planted on church ministers.⁶¹ Russian authorities have used this kind of provocation since the occupation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014. For example, a supposed commendation from the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and literature with the alleged signatures of Ukrainian soldiers were planted on one pastor. Such falsified “evidence” has led to the arrest and violent torture of priests and their family members.

*“My friend's son was taken prisoner. They beat him and tortured him with electricity. Then they let him go. A part of his body was twisted. When the boy returned home, his father did not even recognize him. He thought that some homeless person was standing in the yard.”*⁶²

Most arrested ministers spent from several days to several months under arrest. For example, on September 21, 2022, in Mariupol, masked Russian soldiers kidnapped a Baptist pastor, **Leonid Ponomaryov**, and his wife, **Tetyana**, after they refused to allow their church to be used as the venue for the fake “referendum” for the accession of the Donetsk region to the Russian Federation. Russian occupation authorities stated that the couple was linked to “extremist activity” and searched the church. After that, they sealed the building to prevent future church services. The pastor and his wife were released a month later, after the conclusion of the falsified “referendum.”⁶³

It is also known that two priests from the Berdiansk parish of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, hieromonk **Ivan Levytskyi** and priest **Bohdan Geleta**, have been in Russian captivity for a year, since November 2022.⁶⁴ Additionally, on May 16, 2023, a minister of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, **Kostyantyn Maksimov**, disappeared in Russian-controlled territory. He departed from occupied Tokmak, a city in Zaporizhzhia Region, while on a volunteer humanitarian mission through occupied Crimea, where contact with him was lost. He is still missing.⁶⁵

Russian authorities are grossly violating the norms of international humanitarian law, which obliges parties to an armed conflict to provide humane treatment of a person in case of their capture or arrest. Moreover, international humanitarian law demands an even higher degree

59 <https://verstka.media/kak-rossiyskaya-armiya-presleduet-sviaschennosluzhiteley-i-razrushaet-hramy>

60 In-person interview # 07

61 <https://bit.ly/40ISB1L>

62 <https://bit.ly/3QIFg4Z>

63 <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/leonid-ponomaryov>

64 https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867

65 <https://ccl.org.ua/en/voices/kostyantyn-maksymov/>

of treatment than respect and protection for priests, as they must receive support for the unimpeded continuation of their pastoral activities and the performance of religious rites even under occupation.⁶⁶

Instead, there are frequent cases of torture endured by Ukrainian religious figures of various denominations in Russian captivity. They are threatened with execution,⁶⁷ humiliated,⁶⁸ denied access to food and access to a toilet, and their relatives are not told where the arrested are being held.⁶⁹ Among the most brutal examples of torture perpetrated by the Russian military against religious figures are mock executions, threats of rape, electrical torture, hours-long group beatings, etc.⁷⁰

“During interrogations, two Russian soldiers forced me into the splits position and stretched me. Two of them were wringing my arms and legs, holding my head to the wall. The third one was beating me from behind, on my kidneys and head, and with a stun gun. Then they forced me on my knees, wrung my arms, and put a needle under my nail, saying, ‘You will tell us everything. You will admit to everything,’ and continued the torture. Russians have mastered how to torture.”⁷¹

New evidence of the abuse, humiliation, and torture of priests, pastors, and other religious figures in Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia is constantly coming from various denominations. It can now be asserted that repressions of religious figures by the Russian occupation authorities are increasingly brutal and systemic. The danger for church ministers in occupied territories is growing.

66 https://www.icrc.org/ru/download/file/53471/4231_005_ihl_textbook_by_melzer_web.pdf

67 In-person interview # 30

68 In-person interview # 33 messages

69 In-person interview # 05

70 Watch the testimony of Fr. Sergiy Chudinovich: <https://youtu.be/T5vaeQD43hw>, testimony of Oleg Bondarenko: <https://youtu.be/lzxRAO6rCuE> and testimony of Imam Rustem Asanov: <https://youtu.be/SPBeKYh9dM4>, recorded by the Institute for Religious Freedom.

71 Testimony of priest Vasyl Vyrozub for the Institute for Religious Freedom: <https://youtu.be/hAW97dKedCs>

7. Key findings

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched on February 24, 2022, has significantly worsened the situation of churches and other religious communities. Large-scale missile and suicide drone strikes on civilian infrastructure, which Russia carries out systematically to this day, have caused destruction and damage to hundreds of religious structures all over Ukraine. The situation of believers in the regions Russia occupied in the first weeks of the invasion, and which it still controls is especially difficult. Almost all religious communities are facing a repressive policy which the Kremlin enforces not only in Russia itself, but also in the territories of Ukraine under its control.

As a result of the full-scale invasion, the Russian forces were able to occupy most of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and also retain control of the Crimean peninsula, which they seized in 2014. In addition to this, the Russian occupation authority has now spread to a part of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. Along with the Russian soldiers, a humanitarian crisis has descended on the region. The religious communities of various denominations have tried to contend with this in the first months by serving as humanitarian hubs, where locals received critical assistance essential for survival.

At first, Russian soldiers did not anticipate the high level of self-organization, cooperation, and social activity demonstrated by Ukrainian religious communities. They, they came to see it as a threat to their power. Russian soldiers tried to fit into the propagandistic image of “liberators” and monopolize humanitarian aid delivery, which only worsened the humanitarian situation in the occupied regions. Church volunteers also assisted in evacuating the local population to territories controlled by the Ukrainian government. However, this activity was also soon banned, as the drop in population testified to the poor living and social conditions in the territories controlled by Russia.

Soon, occupation authorities fully understood the authority and social importance of religious communities, which, in Ukraine, functioned as independent subjects of a civil society. Local religious leaders were then subjected to attempts to force them to cooperate through talks and threats. Subsequently, the Russian military initiated public repressions of almost all religious communities, except for those Orthodox communities that fell under the control of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The xenophobic *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) ideology has been forced on the occupied territories with extreme brutality. Occupation administrations uprooted displays of Ukrainian identity with deep hatred, and fought any forms of opposition, striving to subjugate or stop the activities of religious minorities. It came to the physical extermination of priests, pastors, imams, and other religious figures, whom Russian soldiers arbitrarily arrested, kidnapped, and subjected to the most painful of tortures.

This violence was formally justified by manufactured allegations of supposed “extremist activities,” widespread in Russia itself after the adoption of legislative changes under the Yarovaya Law. Those priests who could not be intimidated and induced to cooperate were forcefully deported from the occupied territories by representatives of the Russian government.

The occupation authorities conduct raids of places where worshippers congregate, collect personal and biometric information, loot prayer houses, and turn them into administrative

institutions or military bases. In addition, non-Orthodox religious communities are banned from organizing public prayer gatherings and renting premises for their religious activities. The personal information collected from the members of “unwanted” religious communities is used to establish surveillance over them, and for future raids on their homes.

Religious activity in Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia has become very dangerous, even in private households. The persecution and repression of ministers are systemic in nature, and is trending upwards. Religious figures who still suffer persecution continue to be forced into cooperation with the occupation authorities, blackmailed through the confiscation of church buildings and threatened with violence against them and their family members. The frequency of documented cases of the use of methods of psychological and physical violence is growing.

Many unique historical buildings and other objects of Ukraine’s religious heritage are located in territories occupied by Russia. However, Russian occupation authorities cannot and do not want to preserve and protect Ukraine’s religious and historical heritage for future generations.

8. Recommendations

In order to respond to the arbitrary actions of the Russian authorities in the occupied territories of Ukraine, effective measures directed at ending the oppression of religious minorities, bringing guilty persons to justice, and providing assistance to religious communities in survival situations should be implemented. We recommend the following priority actions:

1. Strengthen the efforts of the international community to bring the leadership of the Russian Federation, representatives of occupation administrations, and direct executors to justice for the war crimes perpetrated against religious figures, and the systematic oppression of religious minorities on Ukrainian territories controlled by the Russian military.
2. Urge the governments of democratic countries to impose personal sanctions on the representatives of occupation authorities guilty of systematic persecution and war crimes perpetrated on a religious basis, as well as on Russian religious figures and journalists who are participating in the Russian aggression against Ukraine through their justifications of the war and their attempts to incite hatred towards Ukrainians and religious minorities.
3. Unite the efforts of the international community, including leaders of world religions, working toward the return of Ukrainian religious figures from Russian imprisonment, in particular the Greek-Catholic priests Ivan Levytskyi and Bohdan Geleta, Orthodox priest Kostyantyn Maksimov, and other prisoners of conscience.
4. Continue to document Russian war crimes in the religious sphere in a way that ensures the privacy and safety of those who agree to testify, as well as the safety of their families. This is especially relevant for religious figures from Russian-occupied territories, where, in some cases, the implementation of a state witness protection program is warranted.

5. Critically approach statements issued by Russian propagandist media on the supposed “persecution of Orthodox Christians in Ukraine,” keeping in mind the Kremlin’s use of religion as an instrument for the justification and reinforcement of aggression against Ukraine, as well as the transformation of the Russian Orthodox Church and other Russian religious associations into megaphones for the propaganda of war, hatred, and genocide against Ukrainians.
6. Continue and widen the humanitarian, legal, psychological, informational, and other support of churches, religious organizations, and missions in Ukraine that maintain communication with and assist believers and religious communities in territories occupied by the Russian military.
7. Support the development and implementation of a rehabilitation program for those who have endured torture, humiliation, and inhumane treatment while in Russian captivity. Help engage international organizations with best practices and experience in developing these programs. Extend these programs to the family members of victims.
8. Conduct advocacy activities aimed at the return of all buildings and property confiscated by the Russian occupation authorities to the religious communities of Ukraine. Provide methodological and other assistance to religious communities to help them calculate and document the material damage they’ve suffered.
9. Enhance the legal framework for recording the damage and destruction of religious buildings, as well as mechanisms for the reimbursement of the cost of restoring religious buildings, including through reparations from the Russian Federation.
10. Develop effective mechanisms for restoring the documentation of religious communities that was lost as a result of military action or seizures by representatives of the occupation authorities, with the aim of restoring the property rights of religious communities.
11. Expand the awareness of clergy and believers regarding their rights and freedoms, mechanisms for their protection, sources of legal information, and possible partnerships in protecting their human rights. Initiate educational programs on this topic at various levels for the church and secular environment.
12. Amplify international pressure on the Russian Federation, in particular from UNESCO, regarding the necessity of Russia’s compliance with the requirements for the preservation and protection of the historical, cultural, and religious heritage of Ukraine in the territories controlled by Russian troops. Such pressure must include measures for the return to Ukraine of all items of cultural value removed from the occupied territories, the reconstruction of destroyed objects of historical, cultural, and religious heritage, and compensation for the massive damage caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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