

# Faith Under Russian Terror

Analysis of the Religious Situation in Ukraine

Analytical Report and Recommendations



Mission Eurasia  
Religious Freedom Initiative

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The Mission Eurasia report *Faith Under Russian Terror* provides a comprehensive view of religious life in Ukraine amidst ongoing airstrikes and the repressive policies implemented by Russia in the eastern and southern regions it has occupied since the full-scale invasion. This study is based on documented facts and testimonies from nearly 70 eyewitnesses, shedding light on Russian war crimes and the genocide of the Ukrainian people. The report also includes expert analysis of Russia's aggression against Ukraine through a religious lens, along with recommendations for the international community's response. This publication continues the research initiated by Mission Eurasia, previously presented in the report *Faith Under Fire* in November 2023.

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# 1. FOREWORD

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the armed forces of the Russian Federation has continued into its third year, accompanied by the genocide of the local population and the destruction of symbols and expressions of Ukrainian identity. This is the largest military conflict on European soil since World War II, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people in Ukraine, including both military personnel and civilians. Moreover, Russian aggression has displaced approximately 7 million people within Ukraine, while another 7 million Ukrainians have been forced to flee abroad, seeking refuge from Russian terror.

The war in Ukraine is catastrophic not only because of the loss of lives and the destruction of critical civilian infrastructure. It has also created a massive demographic crisis, destroyed historical cultural monuments and religious values, and caused irreparable environmental damage. It will take decades to clear the mines from frontline territories.

Russian forces in Ukraine target not only military facilities but also energy and transportation infrastructure. The so-called “special military operation,” declared by Russian dictator Vladimir Putin, aims to obliterate Ukraine’s statehood and its people as a nation and ethnicity, in alignment with the chauvinistic ideology of the “Russian World.” As a result, Ukrainian churches, mosques, and synagogues have been targeted, while clergy and devout believers have faced persecution. Statements and actions by Russian officials in the occupied territories of Ukraine clearly demonstrate their intent to eradicate religious freedom in favor of a monopoly by the Russian Orthodox Church.

In His teachings, Jesus Christ said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Today, more than ever, the dramatic deterioration of the religious situation in the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine requires truthful and comprehensive coverage. The Mission Eurasia report *Faith Under Russian Terror* sheds light on the realities of religious life in Ukraine, which remain hidden for many due to the swirl of distorted news, accusations from unscrupulous lobbyists, and outright false statements from pro-Russian politicians and propagandists.

Our previous report, *Faith Under Fire*<sup>1</sup>, documented the state of religious freedom in the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine from February 2022 to mid-2023. Continuing our efforts to document Russian war crimes, this new study provides an overview and analysis of the religious situation in Ukraine from mid-2023 to the end of 2024.

We continue to present the facts of the resilience of Ukrainian churches and religious communities under relentless Russian terror, and we call on the international community to take decisive action to counter Russian aggression and help the people of Ukraine overcome its devastating consequences.

**Mykhailo Brytsyn**

*Director of the Religious Freedom Initiative of Mission Eurasia*

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<sup>1</sup> Brytsyn, M., Vasin, M. *Faith Under Fire: Navigating Religious Freedom Amidst the War in Ukraine*. Franklin, Tennessee, USA: Mission Eurasia, 2023. – 28 pages. Available at <https://bit.ly/2023-ME-report-on-Ukraine-ENG>



## 2. ABOUT MISSION EURASIA

**Mission Eurasia is an educational and charitable organization registered in the United States with 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. It was established in 1991, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, by evangelical pioneers Peter and Anita Deyneka. Today, under the leadership of Sergey Rakhuba, Mission Eurasia and its affiliates operate in 15 countries, equipping, training, and mobilizing the next generation of Christian leaders to transform their nations for Christ through holistic ministry.**

Throughout these years, the ministry has been dedicated to supporting faith-based communities and the wider public in overcoming the lingering effects of the communist era, responding to current challenges, and fostering new opportunities for holistic development—spiritually, socially, and educationally.

In 2014, Mission Eurasia established the Religious Freedom Initiative to monitor the state of religious freedom, coordinate the efforts of Mission Eurasia teams across various countries, and develop recommendations to guide their ministries.<sup>2</sup>

In 2022, following the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Mission Eurasia redirected its efforts to address the humanitarian crisis and meet the critical needs of residents in frontline regions and internally displaced persons. Additionally, it has consistently studied the state of religious freedom in Ukrainian territories temporarily occupied by Russia, ensuring timely responses to the persecution of religious minorities and providing them with essential support.

### **The main directions of the Religious Freedom Initiative's work in the regions where Mission Eurasia operates include:**

- Monitoring religious developments and conducting analytical research;
- Assisting church leaders in both occupied and liberated territories of Ukraine;
- Representing and advocating for the interests of faith-based communities and church leaders;
- Providing spiritual and psychological rehabilitation for church leaders;
- Offering advisory assistance to faith-based communities in restoring their activities, governance structures, and documents lost or confiscated by Russian authorities;
- Maintaining internal Ukrainian and international dialogue on protecting religious freedom during Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

<sup>2</sup> Reports and information about other activities of the Religious Freedom Initiative can be found on the Mission Eurasia website: <https://missioneurasia.org/religious-freedom/>.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To monitor the state of religious freedom in Ukraine and prepare the report *Faith Under Russian Terror*, Mission Eurasia researchers conducted approximately 50 in-person interviews between August 2023 and December 2024. Additionally, 20 more interviews focused on the issue of “brainwashing” of school children in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, including the imposition of the “Ruscism” (combination of “Russian” and “fascism”) ideology on children and the restriction of their right to religious education. Conclusions on this topic are presented in a separate section of this report.

The interviews involved representatives of all Christian denominations in Ukraine: Orthodox Christians, Greek and Roman Catholics, and Protestants from various traditions (including Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Mennonites, and others). Mission Eurasia researchers interviewed leaders and clergy from national and regional religious associations (churches and dioceses), including bishops, priests, pastors, deacons, and individuals heading up various church ministries.

Mission Eurasia representatives maintain ongoing communication with those who continue their spiritual care and outreach ministry in the Russian-occupied areas of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions. To ensure the safety of interviewees, their families, and fellow believers who remain in the occupied territories of Ukraine, some sources are presented anonymously. Also, certain quotations, the names of towns, faith-based communities, and other details have been intentionally omitted.



## List of Abbreviations

DESS – State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience

ECB – Evangelical Christians-Baptists

OCU – Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which received autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarch in 2019

RCC – Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine

ROC – Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)

UGCC – Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church

UOC – Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is in canonical connection with the Moscow Patriarchate

FSB – Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (formerly the KGB)

CEF – Christians of the Evangelical Faith (Pentecostals)

## 4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

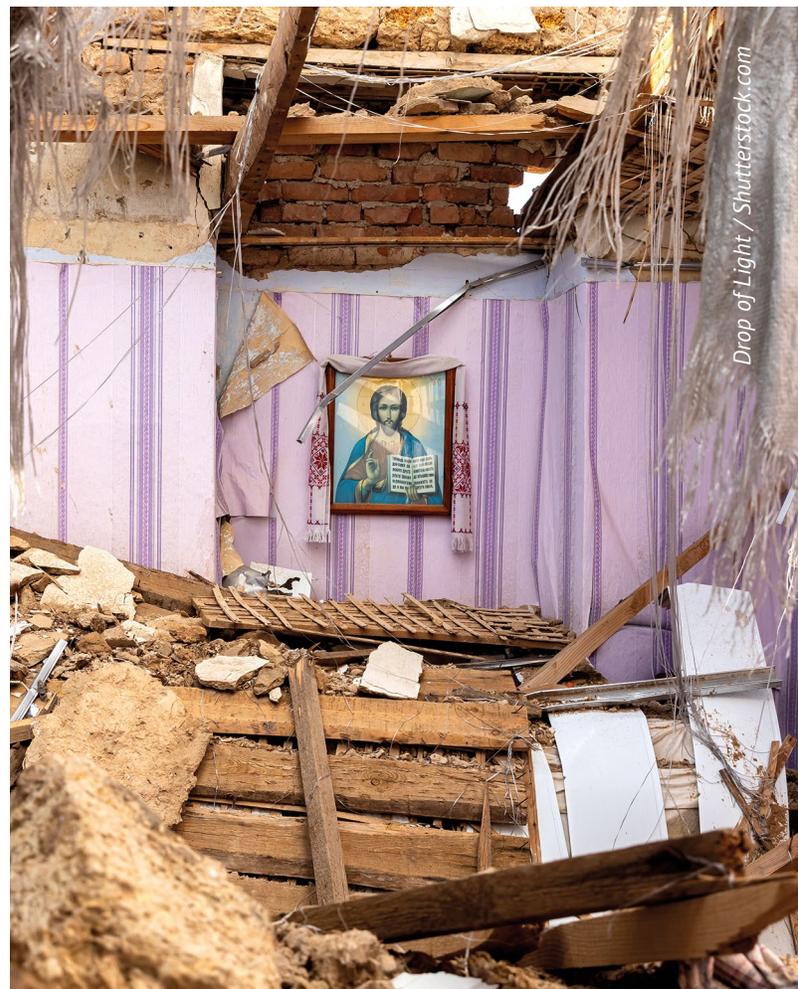
**Even during the Soviet era, Ukraine stood apart from other Soviet republics due to the significant number of faith-based communities. Despite the Communist Party’s totalitarian regime striving to restrict church activities and control their spiritual life, Ukrainian believers demonstrated unwavering commitment to their convictions and courageously defended them.**

With Ukraine’s restoration of state independence in 1991, faith communities gained new opportunities for growth. The democratic Ukrainian government abandoned restrictions on the activities of faith-based communities, leading to a rapid expansion. Within the first five years, the number of faith-based communities nearly doubled, reaching almost 20,000 by 1995. Over the next two decades, this number quadrupled, growing to 35,100 by 2020.<sup>3</sup>

Spiritual centers, ministries, theological education institutions, and children’s and youth organizations were granted state registration. Churches also developed rehabilitation centers, which help individuals overcome drug, alcohol, gambling, and other addictions through biblical principles. During this period, Christian and other religious media emerged, spreading teachings and spiritual-educational content via radio, television, and the internet. Each year, the influence of churches and faith-based communities on society grows. Ukrainian law grants these communities *“the right to participate in public life and to use mass media on equal terms with other non-governmental organizations.”*<sup>4</sup>

Over the past 30 years, Ukrainian Christians, through their understanding of historical roots and cultural traditions, have played a key role in shaping modern national identity. The unique coexistence of several Orthodox churches (OCU and UOC), two Catholic churches (RCC and UGCC), and various Protestant denominations (Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, Lutherans, Mennonites, etc.) has prevented any single

Christian denomination from dominating the others. While certain political forces have sought the support of specific religious groups to gain power, such efforts have been far less effective in Ukraine compared to the relationship between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church.



- 3 Maksym Vasin, Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations as a Voice for Justice and Humanity during the Russian Invasion. *The War in Ukraine and the Religious Communities*. Review of Ecumenical Studies, vol. 15, issue 3 (December 2023): 429-458, 430. Available at <https://sciendo.com/article/10.2478/ress-2023-0028>.
- 4 Article 5 of the Law of Ukraine “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations.” Available at <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/987-12>.

The growth of Ukrainian Christianity did not go unnoticed by the Russian Orthodox Church. From the early years of Ukraine's independence, the Moscow Patriarchate consistently sought to maintain its influence over Ukrainian territory. The election of Kirill (Gundyaev) as Patriarch of Moscow in 2009 marked an intensification of both political and religious pressure by Russia on Ukraine. This period saw the aggressive promotion of the chauvinistic ideology of the "Russian World," with its imperialist concepts of "Holy Rus" and the "brotherhood of three nations." Through these and other propaganda narratives, Russia has sought to justify its military aggression against Ukraine and its de facto control over Belarus.

The events of the 2013–2014 Revolution of Dignity further deepened the divide in values between Ukraine's and Russia's religious communities. Ukrainian churches supported the public protests on Kyiv's Independence Square (Maidan) and in other cities as a fight against corruption and government tyranny and in favor of democracy and European integration. In contrast, Russian religious organizations echoed the Kremlin's position, framing these events as an attempted coup. Russia's subsequent occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014 was accompanied by brutal persecution of Ukrainian churches and faith-based communities, which Russian authorities perceived as threats to their regime (with the exception of UOC parishes that maintained unity with the Moscow Patriarchate).

In the Russian-controlled territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, around 70% of Protestant churches in the area found themselves facing severe repression by both Russian military forces and the occupation authorities. During the first two years (2014–2015), the oppression of Ukrainian churches was largely driven by local pro-Russian collaborators and representatives of the Orthodox Church aligned with the Moscow Patriarchate. Pro-Russian Orthodox priests in eastern and southern Ukraine had long exhibited hostility toward religious minorities, particularly



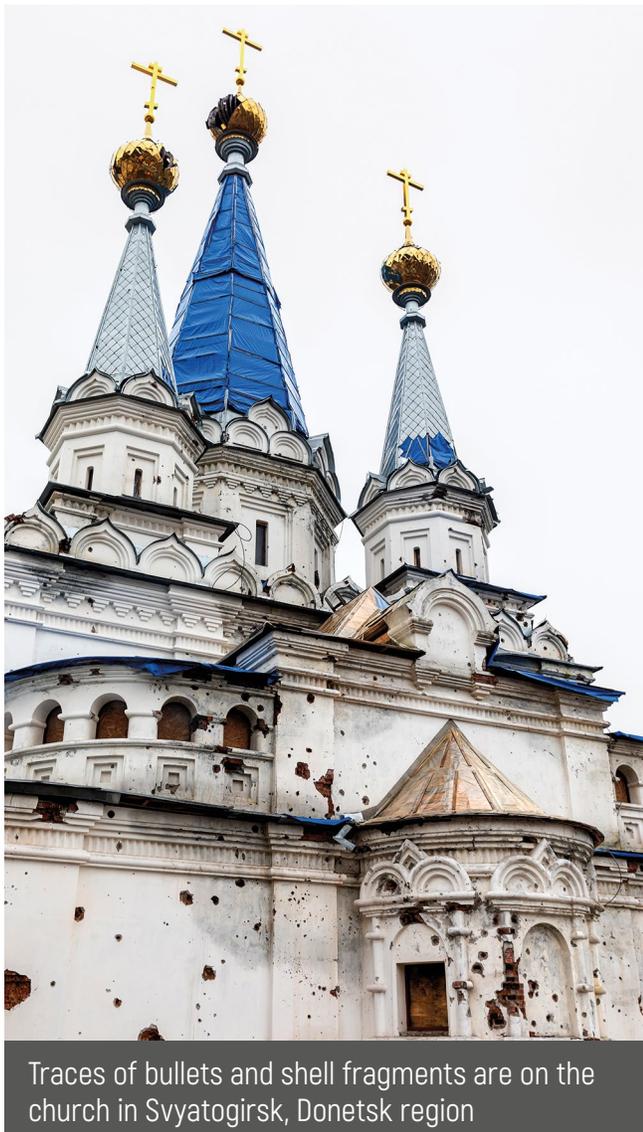
A woman with two kids crosses the border to leave Ukraine after Russia's invasion

Protestants, due to their active evangelism and social initiatives. These priests often sought to eliminate competition by leveraging the support of local authorities. Another significant point of contention for pro-Russian forces was the humanitarian aid efforts carried out by Ukrainian churches of various denominations. These churches worked tirelessly to deliver and distribute aid from fellow believers in Ukrainian government-controlled territories to the locals, who were pushed to the brink of survival by Russia's invasion.

In subsequent years, the persecution of Ukrainian churches and faith-based communities intensified due to the direct involvement of Russian intelligence agencies, particularly the FSB, in consolidating Russian control over occupied Ukrainian territories. Among the methods used to target noncompliant religious communities were false accusations of anti-Russian or extremist activities and the planting of banned

literature during searches. One such incident involved a pastor in the Luhansk region, where fabricated evidence was used as grounds to accuse him of allegedly creating an extremist organization.

Another case also occurred in the Luhansk region, where evangelical Christians-Baptists (ECB) were targeted based on a forged letter purportedly from a religious center in Kyiv addressed to local believers. The letter urged them to “Hold on; you will be liberated soon!”



Drop of Light/ Shutterstock.com

Traces of bullets and shell fragments are on the church in Svyatogirsk, Donetsk region

Even a superficial analysis revealed this was a provocation by Russian authorities aimed at labeling the All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of ECB as extremist. As a result, the leadership of the so-called “Luhansk People’s Republic” arbitrarily banned the activities of this Ukrainian religious center without any legal proceedings and began persecuting Baptists without evidence, accusing them of extremism.

Between 2016 and 2018, the self-proclaimed authorities of the “DPR” and “LPR”<sup>5</sup> began implementing “laws” copied from Russia to legitimize their repressive policies against Ukrainian churches and other religious minorities. In 2018, all faith-based communities in these regions were required to undergo mandatory re-registration, which included severing ties with Ukrainian religious centers. However, even compliance with these demands did not guarantee the preservation of legal status or property rights, as the Russian authorities in Donetsk and Luhansk sought to strengthen the monopoly of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate by suppressing other religious communities. Ultimately, during all the years of Russian control in Luhansk, not a single Protestant church was re-registered, resulting in the loss of their legal status and property rights. In contrast, UOC parishes were granted a simplified legalization process under the newly implemented “laws.”<sup>6</sup>

Under the weight of repressive legislation and the arbitrary actions of Russian authorities, believers in the Russian-occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea continued to hold worship services and gather for prayer in homes, often at great personal risk. Reports from various towns and villages occasionally reached human rights organizations, detailing how Russian authorities discovered, raided, and banned worship services of unregistered churches and underground home prayer gatherings.

5 The “DPR” – “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “LPR” – “Luhansk People’s Republic” are quasi-state entities in parts of Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk regions, self-proclaimed by separatists in April 2014 with military support from Russia.

6 Vasin, M. Freedom of Religion Under Fire: Russian Terror in the Occupied Territories of Eastern Ukraine. Kyiv: Institute for Religious Freedom, 2018. – pp. 10, 15. Electronic access: <https://lockedfaith.org/files/2018.10-IRF-Report-on-Donbas-region-UKR.pdf>.



A Ukrainian family walks past a damaged building in Mariupol, Donetsk region

AFP/Getty Images

The persecution of Ukrainian faith-based communities was carried out by local pro-Russian authorities, the FSB, or units of the so-called Russian “Orthodox Cossacks,” often with the support of local clergy of the UOC.<sup>7</sup> Dozens of church leaders, as well as imams, rabbis, and active church members, faced repression for refusing to cooperate with Russian authorities in the occupied territories of Ukraine. Arbitrary arrests, imprisonment on fabricated charges of extremism, torture, and forced deportation to government-controlled Ukrainian territories were widespread in these areas. In many cases, Russian authorities prohibited deported Ukrainian religious leaders from returning home under threat of imprisonment.

Between 2014 and 2022, prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, approximately 100 church buildings and other religious facilities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were destroyed, seized, looted, or repurposed for non-religious uses by Russian forces or authorities controlled by Russia.

In January 2023, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) confirmed in its ruling that, as of May 11, 2014, it was Russia, not separatists, that exercised effective control over the territories of the self-proclaimed “DPR” and “LPR” in eastern Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in June 2024, the ECHR recognized the systematic violations of Ukrainian citizens’ rights by Russian authorities since the occupation of Crimea began in February 2014. The court emphasized that multiple rights guaranteed by the European Convention were violated in Crimea, including the right to life, the prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, the right to liberty and personal security, the right to a fair trial, freedom from punishment without law, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the prohibition of discrimination, among others.<sup>9</sup>

In light of this, Russia bears responsibility for egregious human rights violations and systematic persecution of religious minorities in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea over the past decade.

7 When God Becomes a Weapon: Persecution for Religious Beliefs During the Armed Conflict in Eastern Ukraine / Center for Civil Liberties, International Partnership for Human Rights. – Kyiv, 2015. – pp. 8–10. Electronic access: <https://bit.ly/2015-Report-on-Ukraine-UKR>.

8 <https://tinyurl.com/3nnpwup>

9 <https://www.rferl.org/a/european-rights-court-rules-russia-guilty-multiple-abuses-in-ukraine/33008390.html>.

## 5. THE GENOCIDAL NATURE OF RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE

Since 2014, Russia has concealed its military presence in eastern Ukraine, attempting to deceive the Western world with propaganda about separatist movements in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. However, on February 24, 2022, Russian dictator Vladimir Putin announced an open and full-scale armed invasion of Ukraine, declaring war against Ukraine's democratic system, civil liberties, and religious pluralism. The Kremlin's primary goal was to overthrow the Ukrainian government, establish military control over the entire country, and eradicate any symbols or signs of Ukrainian identity.

The imperial ambitions of Russia's leader are rooted in the chauvinistic ideology of the "Russian World," which denies Ukraine's existence as a sovereign state and the Ukrainian people as a distinct ethnic and national group. This ideology, supported by Russian society at large, underpins the aggression against Ukraine, fueled by years of inciting hatred against Ukrainians in the Russian media. This has led to numerous atrocities committed by Russian forces in Ukraine, including torture, rape, executions of local civilians, and persecution of religious leaders from various denominations.<sup>10</sup>

Russia has normalized violating international humanitarian law and committing war crimes, regularly targeting civilian infrastructure with cruise and ballistic missiles and explosive drones across almost all regions of Ukraine. Hospitals, maternity wards, schools, food warehouses, energy facilities, museums, libraries, and hundreds of religious buildings have often been the targets of Russian airstrikes. For nearly three years, the civilian population of Ukraine has endured daily terror, with critical energy infrastructure destroyed, leaving people without heat in the winter, air conditioning in the summer, or the ability to prepare and store food or access urgent medical care. Alongside the deliberate destruction of Ukraine's cultural

and religious heritage, these actions bear clear signs of genocide against the Ukrainian people and crimes against humanity.<sup>11</sup>



Ukrainian refugees on Lviv railway station waiting for train to escape from Russia's invasion to the European Union

<sup>10</sup> Vasin, M. The Impact of the Russian Invasion on Faith-Based Communities in Ukraine / Institute for Religious Freedom. – Kyiv: O. V. Puhach, 2024. – 28 pages. Available at <https://bit.ly/2024-IRF-Report-Ukraine-en>.

<sup>11</sup> Vasin, M., Koval, D., Kozlovskiy, I., Zaiets, A. Russian Attacks on Religious Freedom in Ukraine: Research, Analytics, Recommendations / Institute for Religious Freedom. – Kyiv: O. V. Puhach, 2022. – pp. 23–27. Available at <https://irf.in.ua/files/publications/2022.09-IRF-Ukraine-report-ENG.pdf>.

With the onset of open and full-scale aggression in February 2022, targeted religious persecution expanded into newly occupied territories, including parts of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions in southern Ukraine. Russia remains on the U.S. “Countries of Particular Concern” (CPC) list under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as it is the only country that not only suppresses religious freedom among its own citizens but has also “expanded its repressive policies to the territory of a neighboring state by means of military invasion.”<sup>12</sup>

The 2023 Mission Eurasia report *Faith Under Fire* documents the timeline of events related to Russia’s implementation of repressive religious policies against Ukrainian churches and faith-based communities. Beginning with threats, interrogations, and arbitrary arrests, the Russian occupation authorities have also extensively engaged in illegal imprisonment and convictions on fabricated charges of extremism, torture, and even murder. Alongside these actions, Russian forces have confiscated and looted church buildings, removed crosses, and

repurposed houses of worship for the needs of the occupation authorities. After seizing churches and other religious facilities, Russian security forces have raided home gatherings of believers, depriving them of any opportunity to worship together, support one another, and carry out outreach ministry for vulnerable local residents.<sup>13</sup>

Russian suppression of religious freedom occurs in both cities and small villages, targeting churches of all Christian denominations—Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant—as well as Muslim communities, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other religious minorities that refused to cooperate with the occupation authorities or subordinate themselves to Russian religious centers. For instance, Priest **Ihor Novosilsky** of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church endured arbitrary arrest, torture, and illegal imprisonment for 262 days. This occurred because he refused to comply with the demands of the Russian authorities in the Kherson region to renounce the Ukrainian language and subordinate himself to the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>14</sup>



Consequences of the Russian airstrike in Zaporizhzhia on January 8, 2025

Zaporizhzhia RSA

12 2018 Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom: <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2018USCIRFAR.pdf>.

13 Brytsyn, M., Vasin, M. *Faith Under Fire: Navigating Religious Freedom Amidst the War in Ukraine*. Franklin, Tennessee, USA: Mission Eurasia, 2023. – 28 pages. Available at <https://bit.ly/2023-ME-report-on-Ukraine-ENG>.

14 Testimony of Priest Ihor Novosilsky for the Institute of Religious Freedom: <https://youtu.be/2rxikO3J49Q>.



The goal of these persecutions against Ukrainian religious leaders and actively involved believers is to force them to collaborate in consolidating Russian control over newly occupied territories by identifying and eliminating disloyal locals, and eradicating any manifestation of dissent and signs of Ukrainian identity. For many victims of Russian repression, the best possible outcome is forced deportation from Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia or the ability to flee independently before facing retaliation from the occupation authorities.

This contrast becomes even more apparent when compared to other regions that are under Ukrainian government control, where religious freedom remains well protected. This allows churches of various denominations and

religious minorities to fully meet the spiritual needs of the believers and engage in large-scale social activities, including the receipt and distribution of humanitarian aid. According to the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, “there is freedom of religion in Ukraine under martial law, and various churches, using this freedom, carry out their spiritual and humanitarian work within Ukrainian society.”<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to the Russian aggression of 2014–2021, the full-scale invasion has left no region of Ukraine where civilians can feel safe. This also applies to faith communities and religious infrastructure, as Russian airstrikes have destroyed hundreds of churches, mosques, synagogues, and other religious structures, even in remote regions in western Ukraine.

According to the Institute for Religious Freedom, during 2022–2023, including the battles for Kyiv, at least 630 religious sites in Ukraine were completely destroyed, damaged, or looted. The majority of these were affected by Russian missile strikes—both cruise and ballistic—explosive drones, and artillery, including deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure. Furthermore, the Russian army’s practice of seizing religious buildings and using them as military bases or cover for firing positions has led to even greater destruction of churches and other religious sites in Ukraine as a result of combat operations.<sup>16</sup>

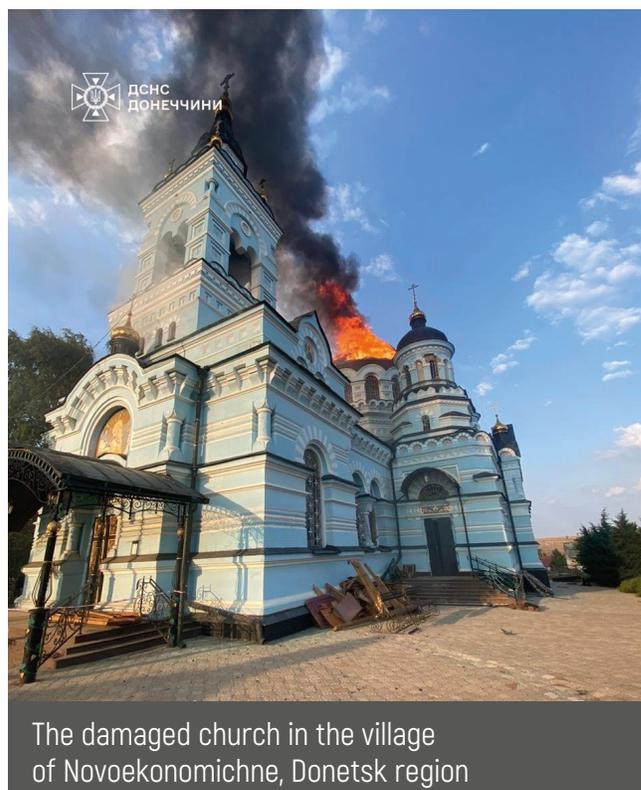
Throughout 2024, Russia intensified its airstrikes on civilian infrastructure across various regions of Ukraine and conducted ground offensives in the east. This led to an increase in the number of destroyed and damaged religious sites in Ukraine to at least 650.

During August and September alone, more than 10 churches and religious buildings were damaged as a result of Russian aggression. For example:

<sup>15</sup> <https://vrciro.ua/en/news/uccro-meeting-with-the-ctc-delegation>.

<sup>16</sup> Summary of the 2024 Institute for Religious Freedom report on Ukraine as of December 1, 2023: <https://irf.in.ua/files/publications/2024.01-IRF-Ukraine-report-summary-ENG.pdf>.

- On **August 7**, a prayer house of the UOC in the Yunakivka village of the **Sumy region** was damaged by Russian bombing. The powerful shock wave shattered windows and doors, damaged the roof and roofing materials, and even impacted the building's walls.<sup>17</sup>
- On **August 11**, a Russian missile destroyed the Church of St. Cyprian the Martyr and St. Justina the Martyr of the UGCC in the village of Antonivka, **Kherson region**. This was the second strike on the church. Earlier, on August 9, an explosive dropped by a drone caused a fire in the church. At that time, parishioners and local residents managed to extinguish the flames and save the holy site.<sup>18</sup>
- On **August 21**, targeted heavy artillery fire from the left bank of the **Kherson region**, occupied by Russian forces, destroyed the complex of buildings belonging to the Stavropegial Parish of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the OCU in the village of Antonivka, Kherson region. The parish priest's house, along with its contents, the library, the baptismal building, the staff house with its belongings, the garage, the parish storage facility, and the prosphora bakery all suffered damage. An 86-year-old parishioner who lived nearby was killed by the explosion of a shell.<sup>19</sup>
- On **August 25**, a Russian airstrike damaged a UOC temple in one of the villages of the Bezdrytska rural community in the **Sumy region**. The shock wave damaged the ceiling, roof, doors, and shattered the windows of the church. Thankfully, there were no casualties.<sup>20</sup>



The damaged church in the village of Novoeconomichne, Donetsk region

- On **August 26**, Russian forces shelled the 110-year-old Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the UOC in the village of Novoeconomichne, **Donetsk region**, for the fourth time. A drone carrying explosives caused a fire. Due to the danger of repeated shelling, rescuers were able to extinguish the fire only the following morning. The central dome and a smaller dome next to it were completely destroyed in the fire. Prior to this, the church had sustained significant damage on July 8 when Russian forces shelled the village using "Smerch" multiple rocket launcher systems.<sup>21</sup>
- On **September 2**, Russia targeted **Kyiv**, launching over a dozen cruise missiles and nearly 10 ballistic missiles. As a result of the airstrike, the Islamic Cultural Center of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims

17 <https://tinyurl.com/33x5rkju>

18 <https://ugcc.ua/data/na-hersonshchyni-rosiyany-zruynuvaly-hram-ugkts-5262/>

19 <https://uaorthodox.com/archives/6138>

20 <https://tinyurl.com/3wfj8tdf>

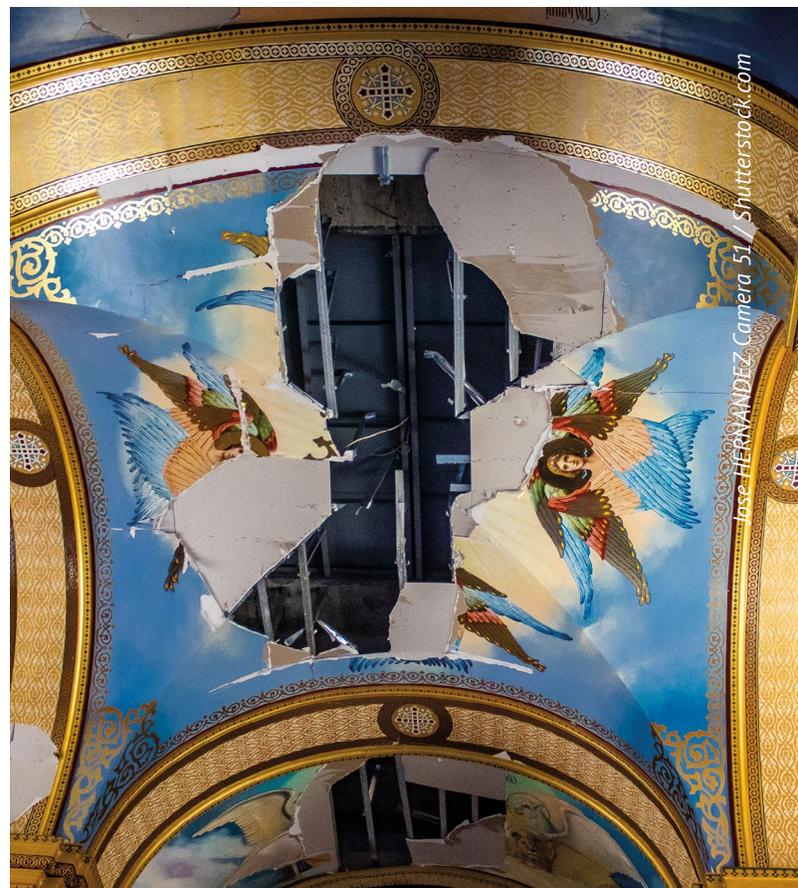
21 <https://tinyurl.com/22e9275x>

of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, including the mosque located within it, sustained damage. The shock wave shattered windows and doors, and the ceiling in one of the halls collapsed.<sup>22</sup>

- On **September 2**, a Russian strike damaged a church in the Novhorod-Siverskyi district of the **Chernihiv region**, causing a fire that spread to 38 households, including residential buildings and outbuildings.<sup>23</sup>
- On **September 4**, a Russian missile strike damaged the church of the UOC of the Holy Martyr Onuphrius in the city of Kryvyi Rih, **Dnipropetrovsk region**. The shock wave shattered windows and damaged parts of the iconostasis, frescoes, stained glass, and other elements of the church's interior and exterior decoration.<sup>24</sup>
- On **September 4**, Russia targeted the **Lviv region** with cruise missiles, aerobalistic missiles, and explosive drones. A total of 188 civilian buildings were damaged, including residential houses, five educational institutions, two creativity centers, two medical facilities, and two church structures—church of St. Yuriy the Victorious of the OCU and the Gothic-style Church of Saints Olga and Elizabeth of the UGCC.<sup>25</sup>
- On **September 12**, a Russian mortar strike on Nikopol in the **Dnipropetrovsk region** destroyed the historic UOC dedicated to the Icon of the Mother of God “The Sign,” built in 1912. The shell hit the church roof around 10 a.m. during the Divine Liturgy, sparking a fire. The church roof, dome, and interior decoration were completely destroyed.<sup>26</sup>

- On **September 22**, during a Russian attack with explosive-laden drones on the civilian population of the village of Sadove in the **Kherson region**, one of the projectiles struck the church of the UOC dedicated to St. Nicholas the Wonderworker. The incendiary payload caused a fire, which resulted in the church burning to the ground. Fortunately, no parishioners were injured.<sup>27</sup>

Religious structures, including architectural monuments, are being destroyed not only as a result of Russia's targeted or indiscriminate shelling of Ukraine's civilian infrastructure.



Russian missile devastated the UOC Transfiguration Cathedral in Odesa on July 23, 2023

22 <https://tinyurl.com/mw776txc>.

23 <https://tinyurl.com/55z3mmu6>.

24 [https://risu.ua/vibuhova-hvilya-vibila-vikna-u-hrami-upc-mp-v-krivomu-rozi\\_n150719](https://risu.ua/vibuhova-hvilya-vibila-vikna-u-hrami-upc-mp-v-krivomu-rozi_n150719).

25 <https://tinyurl.com/5das4kj8>.

26 <https://ukranews.com/en/news/1033979-1912-church-in-nikopol-destroyed-by-russian-shelling>.

27 <https://tinyurl.com/mry82cv8>.

The occupying Russian authorities also forcibly seize churches, prayer houses, and other properties from believers. At times, these repressive actions by Russian security forces against Ukrainian religious communities are initiated and supported by representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church.

For instance, on **April 28**, in the village of Oleksandrivka in the Skadovsk region of the **Kherson region**, during Holy Week before Easter, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) not only seized a church belonging to the UGCC but also committed sacrilege by “reconsecrating” it. The “consecration” ceremony of the captured church was performed by Sergey Samishchenko, a priest from the ROC’s Dzhankoi Diocese Department for Interaction with the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, along with Nikolay Kanyuka, the so-called dean of the Skadovsk Church District.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, the Russian Orthodox Church, in cooperation with the occupation authorities, continued to dismantle the parishes of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Crimea, which has been under Russian occupation since 2014. By 2023, only 11 of the original 45 OCU parishes remained in Crimea. However, during 2024, Russian authorities deprived the OCU of its remaining churches, leaving it without any properties for ownership or use.

On **August 30, in Yevpatoria**, Russian authorities demolished the Holy Cross Exaltation Church of the OCU by destroying the wooden church building with a wheeled bulldozer.<sup>29</sup> Later, on **October 4**, Russian authorities sealed the “Resurrection of Christ” Church of the OCU in the village of Biyuk-Onlar (Oktyabrskoe) in the **Kurman region** of Crimea.<sup>30</sup>



Kyiv, Ukraine - July 08, 2024: Thick smoke from fires rise over the downtown after a Russian missile attack

28 <https://tinyurl.com/25pz4uak>.

29 <https://investigator.org.ua/ua/news-2/novosti-krym/269595/>.

30 <https://suspilne.media/crimea/853563-okupanti-opecatali-se-odin-hram-krimskoi-eparhii-pcu-u-krimu/>.

# 6. RUSSIA'S REPRESSIVE RELIGIOUS POLICIES IN OCCUPIED UKRAINIAN TERRITORIES

## 6.1. Russian Repression Against Ukrainian Faith-Based Communities

During its full-scale invasion, Russia weaponized religion as a tool to wage war and achieve its military and geopolitical objectives. On one hand, the Russian Orthodox Church, led by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, along with other Russian religious leaders, publicly justified the so-called “special military operation,” encouraging Russian society to support the aggressive war and the de facto genocide of the Ukrainian people. On the other hand, in newly occupied territories in eastern and southern Ukraine, Russian authorities systematically terrorized Ukrainian faith-based communities of various denominations, pressuring them to collaborate or physically eradicating them in cases of noncompliance.

The head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Major Archbishop **Sviatoslav Shevchuk**, declared that all UGCC parishes in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories had been effectively eliminated following the church’s prohibition by Russian authorities at the end of 2022:

“In the occupied territories, our Church has been liquidated, including through so-called state decrees. For example, this happened in the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region.<sup>31</sup> Social service institutions of our Church, such as Caritas Ukraine or Catholic men’s communities like the Knights of Columbus, have also been banned there. Today, there is not a single Catholic priest—whether Greek Catholic or Roman Catholic—remaining in the occupied territories... Wherever Russia arrives, Stalinist times return, and clergy face repression.”<sup>32</sup>

The heads of Protestant denominations in Ukraine have reported that the number of their churches in Russian-controlled territories has decreased drastically over the past two years. By the end of 2022, **Russian occupation authorities announced a ban on the activities of the most active churches** and faith-based communities



The Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, destroyed by the Russian military

31 <https://tinyurl.com/yy4v7h7z>.

32 <https://tinyurl.com/3jr5ctb7>.

that engaged in outreach work and provided humanitarian aid to the local population.

**The heads of these banned churches and faith-based communities were also prohibited from conducting religious or public activities**, including registering new faith-based communities, carrying out missionary work, or participating in volunteer efforts. Many of these religious leaders, refusing to collaborate with Russian authorities, became victims of severe repression. They were subjected to arbitrary arrests, torture, and imprisonment under inhumane conditions. Some were forcibly deported from Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia,<sup>33</sup> while others chose to flee to avoid inevitable arrests and imprisonment on fabricated charges of extremism or espionage.<sup>34</sup>

By the summer of 2023, **Russian authorities had gradually banned all faith-based communities** in the occupied territories of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, with the exception of loyal parishes of the UOC that came under the direct authority of the ROC. In Berdyansk, Melitopol, and other places, Russian forces raided churches and the homes of church leaders, conducting searches without any legal basis. During these searches, they confiscated church documentation, keys, phones, computers, and other items. Worship services in church buildings were prohibited, and most church buildings remain closed to this day.

Russian authorities often declare closed churches as unclaimed property and **confiscate religious facilities for use by the occupation administration, repurposing them entirely**. Church leaders are not allowed to take out sound or other equipment, documents, or even personal belongings. Property belonging to faith-based communities in seized buildings is looted by Russian forces, officials, or looters, destroyed, or used improperly.

There have also been cases where **Russian authorities confiscated private buildings** used for home churches and gatherings of believers.<sup>35</sup>

*“It’s not just church buildings that have been seized. The homes of our priests have been taken as well. They’ve been given to newcomers needed by the Russian authorities. Also, homeless individuals have invaded the unattended church buildings. No one stops them from looting the churches.”<sup>36</sup>*

Clergy and members of faith-based communities who remain in Russian-occupied territories face **constant pressure to obtain Russian passports**. The occupation authorities demand that faith-based communities re-register under Russian law, threatening them with the loss of their legal status and property rights to church buildings and other assets. Russian officials often say, *“Register your church under Russian law, and then you’ll get your prayer house back.”<sup>37</sup>*

However, such re-registration is impossible without the leader and founding members of a faith-based community obtaining Russian citizenship. Furthermore, even religious leaders and other civilians who have been arbitrarily arrested, unlawfully imprisoned, or taken hostage are pressured to acquire Russian citizenship, effectively stripping them of the possibility to return to Ukraine through prisoner exchanges.

The repressive actions of Russian military and security forces, combined with relentless pressure from state-controlled media and propagandists, create an **atmosphere of hatred in the occupied territories toward Ukrainians who maintain their national identity or dissent against the Russian regime**. By suppressing

33 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 16.

34 Personal Interviews for Mission Eurasia, Nos. 9, 10, and 19.

35 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 24.

36 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 12.

37 Personal Interviews for Mission Eurasia, Nos. 20, 23, and others.

freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion and belief, the Russian occupation authorities instead foster sentiments of mutual distrust, suspicion, and fear among the local residents. Informants are encouraged to report one another to identify dissenters, opponents of the Russian invasion, potential spies, and saboteurs. However, the victims of such denunciations often include believers from non-Orthodox denominations, volunteers actively serving those in need, and residents exhibiting any expression of Ukrainian identity.

Similar to Soviet times, **Protestant Christians are a particular target for attacks by the Russian occupation authorities**, often becoming victims of threats, defamation, and denunciations.<sup>38</sup> They are vilified and stigmatized, insultingly labeled as “sectarians,” “Western spies,” “CIA agents,” “extremists,” and more.

“Russian soldiers came to the church and took the pastor in for questioning. They asked many questions about the congregation. In the end, they said that among them [the Russians], there is no such faith as Baptist. There are only Orthodox.”<sup>39</sup>

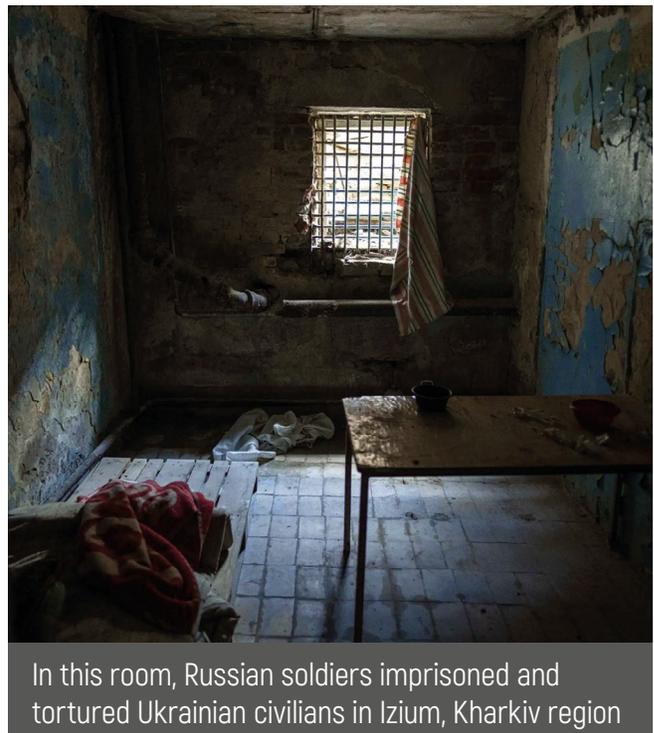
The so-called “desatanization” of Ukraine, declared by politicians close to the Kremlin,<sup>40</sup> is primarily directed against evangelical Christians—leaders and members of Protestant churches. **Victor**, who was arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned in a basement by Russian authorities for further torture, shared his testimony:

“During torture with electric shocks and beatings with baseball bats, Russian security forces brought in a priest from the Russian Orthodox Church. I was told that

he was there to exorcise demons from me because I am an evangelical Christian. While I was being tortured, the Russian Orthodox Church priest watched my suffering.”<sup>41</sup>

Professor **Peter Pomerantsev**, Senior Fellow of the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University, emphasized in his article for The Times:

“The Russian persecution of Protestants is pursued through intimidation, expropriation, enforced conversion, and even murder. What this persecution highlights is that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is more than just the latest iteration of the Kremlin’s centuries old attempt to crush Ukraine’s freedom. It is also part of the Kremlin’s larger war against America.”<sup>42</sup>



In this room, Russian soldiers imprisoned and tortured Ukrainian civilians in Iziom, Kharkiv region

AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka

38 <https://tinyurl.com/y2x3bh4y>.

39 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 61.

40 [https://24tv.ua/desatanizatsiya-ukrayini-dlya-chogo-rosiyi-vigadali-novu-prichinu\\_n2185154](https://24tv.ua/desatanizatsiya-ukrayini-dlya-chogo-rosiyi-vigadali-novu-prichinu_n2185154).

41 <https://bit.ly/3PMIPTf>.

42 <https://time.com/6969273/russias-war-against-evangelicals>.

Jehovah's Witnesses continue to face serious challenges, as their religious organization is banned and labeled extremist in Russia. With the arrival of Russian authorities, Jehovah's Witnesses are among the first to face repression, as their legal status under Ukrainian law is disregarded. With their headquarters in New York, USA, members of this religious community are often stigmatized, branded as "extremists" by Russian authorities, and subjected to criminal prosecution for purely religious activities. This is particularly evident in Crimea, which has been under Russian occupation since 2014.<sup>43</sup>

**Russian soldiers conduct raids on places of worship during services**, justifying their actions as necessary for "document checks," "counter-terrorism measures," or "fighting extremism." These raids frequently occur during major religious holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and the Harvest Festival. Each time, armed Russian soldiers, their faces covered with balaclavas, abruptly interrupt worship services to check documents and conduct searches. This is not only a blatant violation of religious freedom and a mockery of Ukrainians' religious beliefs but also an act of intimidation aimed at suppressing dissent and resistance. This type of **psychological pressure is particularly distressing for women and children** present at the services. Additionally, Russian soldiers often insult and humiliate senior church leaders in front of the congregation, attempting to undermine their authority within the church community.

**"A few women gathered to pray. Russian soldiers stormed in and accused them of using a hymn book that was not marked as approved literature. They were forbidden from gathering in the future."<sup>44</sup>**



UNICEF/Tom Remp

There are documented cases where local collaborators, motivated by religious hatred, have disclosed the locations of home gatherings of believers to Russian security forces and reported on "unreliable citizens." Such denunciations often lead to **raids on home gatherings of believers, accompanied by searches and arrests**. Any expression of Ukrainian identity, Ukrainian-language literature, or even a prayer for peace in Ukraine can serve as grounds for arrest and criminal prosecution.<sup>45</sup>

For instance, **Olena**, a Sunday school teacher from a Protestant church in Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia region, was arrested for "praying for Ukraine" during a home gathering of believers. She was accused of "discrediting the Russian Federation's army" and, in August 2024, was sentenced to 4 ½ years of imprisonment with a suspended sentence.<sup>46</sup>

Ukrainian faith-based communities experienced heightened **pressure from the Russian occupation authorities in the lead-up to the Russian presidential elections** in the winter and spring of 2024. During this time, inspections became

43 <https://bit.ly/4gWCmzo>.

44 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 29.

45 Personal Interviews for Mission Eurasia, Nos. 11, 21, 20.

46 [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2924](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2924).

more frequent and particularly thorough. Russian soldiers, in conversations with church leaders and active believers, sought vulnerabilities for future blackmail and pressured them to cooperate with Russian security forces.

Representatives of Russian security services continue to conduct **interrogation-like conversations about believers' attitudes toward the occupation authorities**. They record sermons, photograph those attending services, ask provocative questions, and secretly record answers using audio devices. During raids, they confiscate phones, check social media posts, photographs, emails, and private messenger conversations.<sup>47</sup>

**Church gatherings have effectively become sites for so-called “filtering”**—a process aimed at identifying those who oppose the Russian occupation authorities or refuse to obtain Russian citizenship. In the homes of believers who have not received Russian passports, or in their phones, if compromising photos or messages are found, searches are conducted to locate Ukrainian literature, symbols, or any connections to Ukraine.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, those identified during filtering at worship services are denied residency permits.

**“Anyone found with a Ukrainian passport is told, ‘That’s it, you’re now on special lists. Don’t even bother applying for a residency permit. Choose—either take a Russian passport, or we’ll deport you.’”<sup>49</sup>**

Some instances of threats and arrests documented by Mission Eurasia<sup>50</sup> researchers remain hidden from the public due to private efforts aimed at securing the release of detained

religious leaders and believers. Despite this, Mission Eurasia, in partnership with the Institute for Religious Freedom, continues to monitor and document Russian war crimes against Ukrainian faith-based communities, striving to provide practical assistance to victims of Russian repression.

## **6.2. Coercion to Re-Register Faith-Based Communities Under Russian Law**

Under Ukrainian law, faith-based communities can operate without registration, enjoying broad rights for religious activities without the need for legal entity status. The requirements for state registration of new faith-based communities are also not burdensome, and the law allows for the creation of independent faith-based communities without mandatory affiliation with a particular religious organization.<sup>51</sup>

**The forced imposition of Russian law in the occupied territories of Ukraine has led to widespread violations of religious freedom for local residents.** Unregistered faith-based communities were declared illegal, while registered ones were compelled to undergo re-registration under Russian law under the threat of losing their legal status and property.

Since late 2023, occupation authorities have increased pressure on the leaders of all Ukrainian faith-based communities, demanding that they join Russian religious associations and submit to religious centers in the Russian Federation as part of the re-registration process. Leaders who refused or delayed their decision to re-register risked facing criminal charges for extremist activities.<sup>52</sup> Russian authorities in the occupied territories of Ukraine enforced

47 Personal Interviews for Mission Eurasia, Nos. 20, 21, 11, 14, and others.

48 Personal Interviews for Mission Eurasia, Nos. 17, 4, 69.

49 Personal Interviews for Mission Eurasia, Nos. 62, 69.

50 Personal Interviews for Mission Eurasia, Nos. 5, 10, 23.

51 Vasin, Maksym. *Your Right to Freedom of Religion: A Guide for Believers, Faith-Based Communities, and Government Officials*. – Kyiv: Media Svit, 2020. – pp. 8–9. Available at <https://bit.ly/PAX-Vasin-handbook>.

52 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 16.

compliance with Russian law through threats, fines, arrests, and the deportation of religious leaders who hesitated or ignored the re-registration process.<sup>53</sup>

**"Believers who remained under occupation began receiving visits from Russian Protestants. They offered assistance with re-registering churches and tried to persuade church leaders to be loyal and obedient to the occupation authorities."<sup>54</sup>**

Unregistered Baptist communities belonging to the International Union of Churches of ECB are facing particularly intense pressure. Refusal to register with the state is a core principle of this denomination, which seeks to avoid any government interference in its internal affairs. In Ukraine, relying on laws that allow religious communities to operate without registration, the IUC ECB has established a wide network of churches, including in regions now occupied by Russia. During the initial months of the full-scale invasion, Russian occupation authorities did not interfere with the activities of these Baptist churches. Believers continued to gather for worship in buildings registered to private individuals. However, in 2024, the occupation authorities intensified pressure on the leaders of IUC ECB churches, attempting to force them to abandon their principles and register their communities under Russian law.<sup>55</sup>

**Re-registration under Russian legislation does not guarantee the return of confiscated churches and other properties to believers.** The church buildings that were seized at the beginning of 2023 were designated as ownerless property. Consequently, local Russian authorities and military personnel have been using them at their discretion. Several



The aftermath of the fall of Russian missile debris in Kyiv on December 20, 2024

faith-based communities reported that even after re-registration, the occupying authorities failed to return their buildings, citing various pretexts despite earlier promises. One of the justifications given for refusal was: "You should have thought about this earlier!"<sup>56</sup>

The Russian occupying authorities demonstrated particular cynicism in one case involving a confiscated church building, which they repurposed and used for their own needs. When the faith-based community that owned the building re-registered under Russian legislation and wanted to return their property, Russian security forces simply set the church on fire. The fire completely destroyed the church building and its contents. Two days after the fire, a note appeared in the Russian Federation's property registry stating that the "building had been returned to the believers."<sup>57</sup> This exemplifies Russia's deliberate repressive policy aimed at depriving Ukrainian faith-based communities of their facilities and other assets essential for their spiritual and outreach work.

**Re-registering a faith-based community under Russian legislation does not even guarantee the ability to hold public worship services**

53 <https://tinyurl.com/3w3kspcx>.

54 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 30.

55 Personal Interviews for Mission Eurasia, Nos. 68, 64, 57, and also: <https://t.me/shaltnotkill/8919>.

56 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 20.

57 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 18 and Registry of Religious Organizations of the Russian Federation.

**openly.** Russian military personnel continue to raid worship services and believers' home gatherings despite re-registration. Believers are prohibited from gathering "in premises not designated for such purposes" and are threatened with fines imposed on community leaders.<sup>58</sup> Only a few rural faith-based communities are able to gather without registration in private homes, but only on the condition that they renounce expressions of Ukrainian identity.

"At first, the remaining members of our church were completely prohibited from gathering. Later, the Russian authorities said: 'Fine, you can gather, but you cannot pray for Ukraine, sing, pray, or speak in Ukrainian, and you cannot pray for those who have left Ukraine.'"<sup>59</sup>

**Submitting documents for re-registration does not guarantee the preservation of legal entity status.** The Russian occupying authorities frequently deny re-registration to religious communities that are banned in Russia, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, or to undesirable denominations. In such cases, the personal data of the founders of these religious communities is used to conduct further raids by Russian security forces on home gatherings of community members and to persecute believers actively involved in church life individually.

In most towns and villages, **no more than one Protestant church has been re-registered**, including in Tokmak, Yakymivka, Kamianka, Enerhodar, Pryshyb, Novobohdanivka, and Polohy in the Zaporizhzhia region. However, before the Russian invasion, each Christian denomination in these locations had its own local church, and sometimes even several. The current Russian repressions are reminiscent of Soviet-era practices, where the communist

regime first banned churches, deprived them of their buildings and experienced clergy, and then forced religious communities to re-register under new rules, complying with the demands of godless authorities.

Moreover, as in Soviet times, the occupying administrations **deliberately merge believers from different denominations into a single local church.** Believers from various religious communities are only permitted to gather in one building at the same time under the leadership of a single individual loyal to the Russian authorities. This allows Russian security services to infiltrate their agents, who are difficult for believers to identify among the many unfamiliar faces. Differences in doctrines and ritual practices become sources of discord within such communities, diminishing their social influence.

"People are terrified during worship services. It is forbidden to talk about the persecution of believers, the closure of churches, and similar issues. In conversations, people avoid expressing any opinions about Russian crimes. They are even afraid to discuss negative aspects of their own lives. Worship services are attended by people from different churches because all others have been closed. You never know who is who during the services."<sup>60</sup>

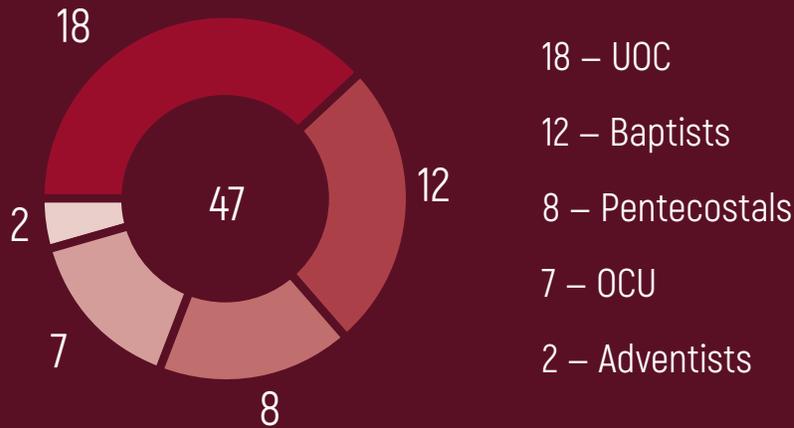
Data from the registry of religious organizations and personal interviews conducted by Mission Eurasia researchers indicate that a significant portion of re-registered religious communities are **small rural churches, most of which have been left without leaders.** Many Ukrainian clergy and pastors have been forcibly deported from Ukrainian territories controlled

58 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 22.

59 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 61.

60 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 62.

## Ukrainian Religious Leaders Killed as a Result of Russian Invasion



by Russian forces or have been compelled to leave independently due to threats and pressure to cooperate with the Russian occupying authorities.<sup>61</sup>

### 6.3. Russian Attacks on Religious Community Leaders in Occupied Ukrainian Territories

According to monitoring of open sources and personal interviews conducted by Mission Eurasia, as of December 2024, **at least 47 Ukrainian religious leaders have been killed** as a result of Russia's full-scale aggression. Among them, 18 belonged to the UOC, seven to the OCU, 12 to the Baptists, eight to the Pentecostals, and two to the Adventists.

The causes of death for Ukrainian religious leaders varied: torture by Russian military personnel, detention or imprisonment in inhumane conditions, targeted shootings of civilians by Russian soldiers, indiscriminate shelling of civilian infrastructure using artillery, missiles, or weapons of mass destruction, as well as explosive-laden drones deployed by Russia across all regions of Ukraine, among others.

This number is incomplete due to ongoing hostilities and the lack of access for human rights defenders into territories controlled by Russian forces, making it impossible to gather comprehensive data on all deaths resulting from torture and inhumane treatment in Russian prisons. Furthermore, the data collected by Mission Eurasia does not account for the deaths of clergy who were mobilized or voluntarily joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine or other military units, nor does it include proactive believers who served in churches and faith-based communities without being ordained clergy.

There are documented cases of **priests and pastors who were killed in 2022** as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine:

- On February 26, 2022, Russian soldiers stopped OCU priest **Maksym Kozachyna** at a checkpoint near the village of Ivankiv in the Kyiv region, pulled him from his car, and executed him by shooting, despite his clerical attire.<sup>62</sup>
- On March 5, 2022, Russian soldiers shot and killed **Oleksandr Kysliuk**, a professor at the Kyiv Orthodox Theological Academy of the OCU, in his own yard in the city of Irpin, Kyiv region.<sup>63</sup>

61 PBS News: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jh0ldyeiAiQ>.

62 <https://hromadske.ua/posts/rosijski-vijskovi-vbili-svyashennosluzhitelya-pcu-na-kiyivshini>.

63 [https://risu.ua/u-buchi-zagynuv-vikladach-kiyivskoyi-duhovnoyi-akademiyi-i-seminariyi-pcu\\_n127189](https://risu.ua/u-buchi-zagynuv-vikladach-kiyivskoyi-duhovnoyi-akademiyi-i-seminariyi-pcu_n127189).

- That same day, Russian soldiers shot and killed OCU priest **Rostyslav Dudarenko** at a checkpoint in his hometown of Yasnohorodka, in the Byshiv community of the Fastiv district, Kyiv region.<sup>64</sup>
- On March 6, 2022, Russian soldiers deliberately executed by shooting **Vitaliy Vynohradov**, dean of the Kyiv Slavic Evangelical Seminary, in Bucha, Kyiv region, along with hundreds of other brutally murdered local residents.<sup>65</sup>
- In Bucha, the body of **Ihor Horodetskyi**, a minister of the Association of Missionary Churches of Evangelical Christians of Ukraine, was found in a mass grave.<sup>66</sup>
- On September 1, 2022, during the shelling of the city of Balakliia in the Kharkiv region, **Andriy Klyauzer**, a pastor of the Ukrainian Church of the CEF, was killed while distributing food to local residents.<sup>67</sup>
- On November 22, 2022, in the city of Kakhovka in the Kherson region, Russian soldiers tortured to death **Anatoliy Prokopchuk**, a deacon of the Ukrainian Church of the CEF, along with his 19-year-old son Oleksandr. Shortly after their abduction, their bodies were found bearing signs of torture.<sup>68</sup>

Additionally, reports have emerged about the **deaths of the following church leaders during 2023–2024:**

- On June 13, 2023, as a result of shelling by Russian forces of the St. John the

Forerunner Church of the UOC in the village of Bilozerka in the Kherson region, Priest **Mykola Palahniuk**, the rector and dean of the Bilozerka district, was killed. He was distributing humanitarian aid on the church grounds to those affected by the flooding caused by the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydropower Plant when Russian artillery shelled the village from the left bank of the Dnipro River.<sup>69</sup>

- On August 13, 2023, in his home in the village of Stanislav in the Kherson region, **Mykola Tatiashvili**, pastor of the CEF *Church of God*, was killed. That day, the Russian army shelled settlements in the Kherson region, claiming the lives of at least seven people.<sup>70</sup>
- On January 22, 2024, during the Russian shelling of the Kurakhivka village in the Donetsk region, UOC priest **Mykola Fomin** was killed.<sup>71</sup>
- On February 15, 2024, in the Kalanchak village in the Kherson region, Russian soldiers tortured and shot OCU priest **Stepan Podolchuk**. Two days earlier, they had abducted him from his home barefoot, with a bag placed over his head.<sup>72</sup>
- On February 28, 2024, **Yuriy Klymko**, a chaplain and pastor of the CEF Church of Jesus Christ in the city of Kupiansk in the Kharkiv region, was killed. He died in his own church as a result of an explosion caused by a Russian FAB-500 bomb dropped on the city center.<sup>73</sup>

64 [https://lb.ua/society/2022/03/07/508410\\_blokpostu\\_nepodalik\\_fastova.html](https://lb.ua/society/2022/03/07/508410_blokpostu_nepodalik_fastova.html).

65 <https://tinyurl.com/hv5648w3>.

66 <https://vechirniy.kyiv.ua/news/95508/>.

67 <https://bit.ly/40JTF85>.

68 <https://vsirazom.ua/news/dyakon-iz-synom-zaznaly-zhahlyvyh-tortur>.

69 <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/stylar/pid-hersonom-rosiyani-vbili-svyashchenika-1686723605.html>.

70 <https://www.victims.memorial/people/mykola-tatishvili>.

71 <https://tinyurl.com/y4cnczh5>

72 <https://www.victims.memorial/people/stepan-podolchak>.

73 <https://tinyurl.com/tfmhwxnz>.

- On April 10, 2024, in the city of Chornomorsk in the Odesa region, **Vitaliy Taranenko**, a choir minister at the Resurrection Baptist Church (ECB), was killed during a Russian missile attack.

Every month, the list of clergy killed as a result of Russian shelling or torture grows. Additionally, dozens of priests, pastors, imams, and other religious leaders have been detained or abducted, arbitrarily arrested, subjected to interrogations involving abuse and torture, and starved in inhumane conditions in Russian prisons. Many of them were forcibly deported or compelled to leave Ukrainian territories occupied by Russian forces.

At the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, most church ministers remained in the occupied territories and continued their ministry. In the summer and fall of 2022, **the Russian occupying authorities attempted to coerce the leaders of the most proactive churches into cooperation.** When these attempts failed, Russian forces began closing churches and religious organizations that refused to cooperate or submit to Russian religious centers. Ministers of such churches and organizations were the first to face Russian repression, and at best, they were deported from Ukrainian territories under Russian control.

For example, following repeated interrogations and failed attempts to coerce UGCC priest **Oleksandr Bohomaz** into cooperation, Russian forces arrested and forcibly deported him from Melitopol in the Zaporizhzhia region on December 1, 2022. He was taken out of the city and dropped off near the gray zone at Vasylivka. At the final checkpoint, Russian forces took his fingerprints and pronounced a sentence of “expulsion from the Zaporizhzhia region.” The priest was forced to walk 30 kilometers to the positions of Ukrainian forces along a road under shellfire and scattered with mines. **Oleksandr Bohomaz** recalls his ministry experience under Russian occupation:

“When Russian security forces came to interrogate me for the sixth time, they pressured me to disclose the content of confessions, saying, ‘Many people come to you, but we are interested in their confessions.’ I made it clear to them that confession is a sacred mystery. But they didn’t care. These same Russian security forces gave Priest Leonid, who was still serving in the villages at the time, an ultimatum: either join the Moscow Patriarchate or get out of here.”<sup>74</sup>



Burial of the remains of 13 unidentified and two identified people who were killed in the Bucha district during the Russian occupation in 2022

Drop of Light / Shutterstock.com

74 <https://ukurier.gov.ua/uk/articles/svyashennik-ugkc-yakogo-deportovali-z-melitopolya/>.

The majority of Ukrainian religious leaders faced **repression not as a result of judicial processes but based on personal decisions made by Russian officials**. Even in cases where the occupying authorities attempted to create an illusion of legality and due process, investigative actions and court proceedings were conducted in blatant violation of international human rights agreements. Furthermore, Russian legislation on countering extremism and illegal missionary activity serves merely as a facade to conceal the genuinely repressive nature of Russia's religious policies, both within its own borders and in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

A striking example is the fabricated charges of extremism against two UGCC priests, **Ivan Levytskyi** and **Bohdan Heleta**, who were arbitrarily arrested on November 16, 2022, in the city of Berdyansk in the Zaporizhzhia region. Reports indicated that they were brutally tortured in a Russian prison to extract confessions to crimes they did not commit. On June 28, 2024, the priests were released from Russian captivity as part of a prisoner exchange.

“Ukrainian investigators have identified three Russians involved in the unlawful imprisonment of priests in Berdyansk. According to the investigation, in December 2022, Denys Shekhovets, head of the 3rd Investigative Department of the United Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, in collusion with Deputy Military Prosecutor Yevhen Svystunov and Garrison Military Prosecutor Oleksandr Korneyev, fabricated documents with false information. These documents falsely claimed that the priests were allegedly storing

ammunition and explosives and collaborating with Ukrainian intelligence services. Furthermore, Levytskyi and Heleta were unlawfully designated as prisoners of war. The priests were held captive for over a year and a half, during which they were repeatedly subjected to torture and abuse.”<sup>75</sup>

At least 47 Ukrainian religious leaders have been killed as a result of Russia's full-scale aggression.

**The Russian authorities and security forces blatantly violate international humanitarian law (IHL) regarding the protection of religious freedom** in occupied territories during armed conflict, as well as the humane treatment of prisoners or detainees. IHL further requires the inviolability of church property as private property and guarantees the rights of clergy:

“Medical and religious personnel who fall into the hands of the opposing party must not be considered prisoners of war. To carry out their vital humanitarian mission, medical and spiritual personnel require more than special respect and protection. Such personnel must be provided with all possible support necessary for their work under specific circumstances.”<sup>76</sup>

75 The indictments against Korneyev, Svystunov, and Shekhovets, published on the website of Ukraine's Prosecutor General's Office: <https://www.gp.gov.ua/ua/posts/povidomlennya-pro-pidozru-kornjevu-av-original-ta-pereklad>.

76 [https://www.icrc.org/ru/download/file/53471/4231\\_005\\_ihl\\_textbook\\_by\\_melzer\\_web.pdf](https://www.icrc.org/ru/download/file/53471/4231_005_ihl_textbook_by_melzer_web.pdf).

However, **in territories occupied by Russia, the status of a priest does not protect against threats, humiliation, abuse, and torture.** The Russian authorities resort to arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial imprisonment, and fabricated criminal charges based on false denunciations, confessions obtained under torture, or unfounded stereotypes unsupported by evidence.

According to Mission Eurasia data, as of summer 2024, only up to 25% of the leaders who headed religious communities before the full-scale invasion remain in charge of re-registered communities in territories occupied by Russia. Newly appointed leaders often lack theological education and, in some cases, experience in managing a religious community. Members of certain religious communities have expressed doubts about the personal qualities and sincerity of the religious beliefs of the new leaders approved by the Russian occupying authorities.

**“Russian officials told us that worship services would only be allowed if we registered under Russian law. But the pastor would not be the one who served before the war; it would be someone they approved.”<sup>77</sup>**

**Russian security forces distrust even UOC ministers loyal to them, demanding direct subordination to Moscow.** For example, in March 2024, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) completely replaced the leadership of the annexed Berdyansk diocese of the UOC for the second time. The previous Russian appointee, ROC Bishop Luka (Volchkov), was exiled to the Russian Far East. In his place, a Russian

bishop and priests close to him from Chuvashia were sent to the occupied territories of the Zaporizhzhia region.<sup>78</sup> Earlier, the ROC replaced Metropolitan Yefrem (Yarynko) of Berdyansk and Prymorsk, a UOC hierarch who refused to directly subordinate his parishes to Moscow.<sup>79</sup>

Moreover, the ROC did not even allow the loyal Metropolitan of Donetsk and Mariupol, Ilarion (Shukalo), to remain in his position.<sup>80</sup> In October 2024, the ROC Synod retired him and appointed a Russian metropolitan from Vladivostok in his place.<sup>81</sup>

Similarly, in July 2024, the ROC Synod retired two more UOC bishops in Crimea.<sup>82</sup> Prior to this, in October 2023, the ROC dismissed Metropolitan Lazar (Shvets) of Simferopol and Crimea, who had transitioned with his metropolis from the UOC to the ROC after the full-scale invasion. He was replaced by Russian Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov), known as “Putin’s spiritual advisor.”<sup>83</sup>

However, replacing Ukrainian religious leaders with fanatically loyal Russian Orthodox priests and Protestant pastors has not helped Russian security forces gain the favor of the local population in the occupied territories of Ukraine. Starting in 2024, Mission Eurasia began receiving reports of **attempts by Russian authorities to persuade Ukrainian religious leaders to return to the occupied territories** and resume leadership of their religious communities.

Individuals claiming to be “interested in restoring churches” contacted former church leaders, offering to return seized buildings (sometimes in exchange for bribes), promising easy transit through Russian territory and expedited re-registration of their religious communities.<sup>84</sup>

77 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 59.

78 <https://tinyurl.com/2f9ed42c>.

79 [https://lb.ua/society/2023/05/16/555595\\_rpts\\_pidporyadkuvala\\_sobi\\_berdyansku.html](https://lb.ua/society/2023/05/16/555595_rpts_pidporyadkuvala_sobi_berdyansku.html).

80 <https://t.me/shaltnotkill/8534>.

81 <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6167692.html>. [Caution! This publication is Russian propaganda.]

82 <https://df.news/2024/07/27/rpts-zniala-shche-odnoho-kolyshnoho-iepyskopa-upts-z-krymu/>.

83 <https://ua.krymr.com/a/krym-shevkunov-lazar-polityka-rpts/32645075.html>.

84 Personal Interviews for Mission Eurasia, Nos. 3, 13.



Vittorio Nicola Rangeloni / Shutterstock.com

In other cases, church leaders who had left the occupied territories were directly contacted by Russian security services and blackmailed with threats against family members still under occupation.<sup>85</sup> There is also evidence that phones and other communication devices used by church leaders have been subject to unauthorized interference by Russian security services.<sup>86</sup>

#### 6.4. Violations of Children’s Rights to Freedom of Religion

Russian war crimes against children are increasingly discussed on various international platforms. One of the most egregious crimes is the abduction of Ukrainian orphaned children from occupied territories and their forced deportation to Russia, followed by assimilation into Russian families or state-controlled orphanages. These actions bear clear signs of genocide against the Ukrainian people. For this reason, the International Criminal Court in The Hague issued arrest warrants for Russian dictator Vladimir Putin and Russian children’s ombudsman Maria Lvova-Belova, who are responsible for these war crimes.<sup>87</sup>

Before Russia’s full-scale invasion, most churches in Ukraine’s occupied territories had

well-developed ministries for children, including Sunday schools, clubs, summer and winter camps, and other religious education programs. Even small rural churches offered activities for children, organized holiday events, and held camps.

However, children in Russian-controlled territories are now deprived of these opportunities. **Sunday schools are no longer operational, as nearly all church buildings have been seized,** their property looted, Ukrainian-language children’s literature destroyed, and church leaders subjected to constant pressure through raids, interrogations, searches, inspections, and more.

Given these circumstances, believing parents who gather secretly for worship in homes no longer dare to bring their children for fear of endangering them. There have been documented cases where Russian security forces interrogated minors about their parents’ religious beliefs and their connections with territories under Ukrainian government control.

Russian authorities have imposed numerous bans and strict regulations in occupied Ukrainian territories, making it **impossible for churches to organize any form of ministry for children.** In addition, regular raids on worship services, during which armed Russian soldiers

85 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 23.

86 Personal Interviews for Mission Eurasia, Nos. 11, 21, 23.

87 <https://tinyurl.com/ms3mac3h>.

brutally check documents, humiliate church leaders, search premises, and confiscate church property, terrify children present at the gatherings, causing them psychological trauma.

**Access to children’s religious literature is severely restricted.** Inspections of believers’ gatherings include meticulous scrutiny of available literature. All materials used in churches must bear a “permitted” mark.<sup>88</sup> The use of literature without such approval results in fines for religious community leaders and threats of criminal prosecution.

**Literature in Ukrainian is banned.** Possession of such literature, whether secular or religious, puts local residents at risk of being accused of “extremist activity.”<sup>89</sup> During Ukraine’s independence, a significant amount of spiritual literature for children was published in Ukrainian, including Sunday school lessons, programs for children’s camps, and teaching materials church leaders, among others. Even small churches had their own Sunday schools and used these educational resources. With the arrival of Russian authorities, the use of Ukrainian-language literature was prohibited. Children’s religious literature in Ukrainian cannot obtain the required “permitted” mark.

“Our church had a large library of Christian literature—more than 4,000 copies. When the prayer house was seized, all the literature was destroyed. The Russians simply threw it into the backyard of the church and burned it. People living near the church told us about it.”<sup>90</sup>

**Children suffer the most harm in public schools,** which the occupying authorities have converted to align with Russian educational programs. A small number of local teachers who remained after the full-scale invasion generally know the believing children personally and treat

their religious beliefs with respect, considering Ukraine’s religious pluralism and the absence of a state religion. However, new teachers brought from Russia to fill staffing shortages in the education sector on the occupied territories often exhibit low moral standards, actively spread Russian propaganda, and incite hatred toward religious minorities and expressions of Ukrainian identity.

“The Ukrainian curriculum was better than the Russian one. But the greatest madness is teaching children that Stalin is a hero because he was a victor. And the Russian teachers swear a lot, even in front of the children. Our teachers never did that.”<sup>91</sup>

**The militaristic ideology infused with elements of Russian chauvinism being introduced in schools** on the occupied territories is deeply troubling. Ukrainian children are persistently—and sometimes forcibly—engaged in lessons and extracurricular camps centered on “patriotic education,” rooted in the chauvinistic ideology of the “Russian World.” During these brainwashing activities, children are immersed in an atmosphere of hatred toward non-Orthodox religious minorities and everything Ukrainian. Believing students from religious minorities face hostility toward their beliefs and practices, which they were once free to observe with others in their churches and Sunday schools before Russian occupation. Protestant and other non-Orthodox children, in particular, experience heightened oppression in schools, where Orthodox traditions are imposed alongside Russian religious fanaticism, which saturates these “patriotic education” programs.

The Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, **Dmytro Lubinets**, confirmed that Russian authorities are imposing propaganda on Ukrainian children in the occupied territories through their education system:

88 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 20.

89 <https://tinyurl.com/39bcd44a>.

90 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 28.

91 Personal Interview for Mission Eurasia, No. 34.



Sebastian Castelier / Shutterstock.com

“International humanitarian law strictly limits the authority of occupying powers to alter curricula and the language of instruction. Any form of militarization of children is also prohibited. Yet, as always, Russia violates every rule. Beyond the well-documented violations, the occupiers plan to introduce a new subject, ‘Fundamentals of Security and Homeland Defense,’ for 8th and 10th graders in the upcoming school year, while children in grades 1–4 will learn poems about the ‘Special Military Operation’<sup>92</sup> that glorify the occupiers. Essentially, this continues Russia’s tactics of erasing Ukrainian identity in children, re-educating them, and militarizing them. Russia has been carrying out similar actions since 2014. It is systematically preparing to turn Ukrainian

children into the next generation of soldiers for its army.”<sup>93</sup>

The presence of Russian military personnel, ROC clergy, and representatives of so-called Cossack paramilitary groups at school events **turns schools into hubs for promoting Russia’s ideology of hatred**. This has a particularly negative impact on children who were raised as upstanding Ukrainian citizens, with love for their people, guided by the principles of religious pluralism and Christian morality untainted by Russian imperialism. One of the most horrifying examples of the hatred incited by Russian media is a comment made by **Andrey Perla**, a political commentator on the Russian Orthodox TV channel Tsargrad, regarding the missile strike on the Ohmatdyt Children’s Hospital in Kyiv:

“The children’s hospital in Kyiv wasn’t a mistake. It’s time to admit this and stop being afraid... The ruthless law of war is

92 The “Special Military Operation” is the term used by Russian leadership to refer to the full-scale armed invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022.

93 <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=843824291182541&set=a.263825502515759>.

very simple: such enemies [Ukrainians] cannot be considered human. We must realize—plainly and terrifyingly—that there are no humans on the other side. Not a single one. Our [Russian] missiles do not kill humans. Not a single human. Over there [in Ukraine], there are no humans.”<sup>94</sup>

**The cynicism and psychological violence of Russian authorities in schools** reach such extremes that Ukrainian children are forced to write letters to Russian soldiers—those who are destroying their cities and terrorizing their loved ones. Children in occupied Ukrainian territories are taken on excursions to military training grounds where Russian soldiers train. Masked soldiers with covered faces conduct training sessions for children, teaching them to assemble weapons and the basics of military tactics. The militaristic spirit of these “educational programs” poses a particular challenge for children from Mennonite and Evangelical Christian families, who are raised on principles of pacifism and nonviolence.

Thus, in the occupied Ukrainian territories, the Kremlin is shaping a militarized generation of children poisoned by Russian propaganda, filled with hatred and violence toward everything Ukrainian—its history, culture, religious diversity—as well as toward families and friends who have moved to areas under Ukrainian government control. In the absence of free media and under brutal persecution for expressing Ukrainian identity, **within 3 to 5 years, some of today’s teenagers could be mobilized by Russian authorities to fight against their own Ukrainian people.** A similar tragedy has already occurred with residents of the Russian-occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, where at least 60,000 people, including students, were conscripted into the Russian army to participate in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>95</sup>



Kyiv, Ukraine - July 8, 2024: view of the destroyed Okhmatdyt Children's Hospital by Russian missiles

Eugene Vishnya / Shutterstock.com

94 <https://tinyurl.com/4x289muz>.

95 <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/donetsk-luhansk-mobilizatsiya-rosiya/32534205.html>.

# 7. THE ROLE OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH AND RELIGION IN GENERAL IN RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE<sup>96</sup>

Russia's invasion has posed numerous challenges for the Ukrainian government in the field of religion. The Kremlin has transformed religion from a force for peace into a tool for waging war and subjugating occupied territories. The use of the authority of religious leaders as a form of soft power complicates the Ukrainian government's efforts to address the threats posed by the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. Moreover, international obligations regarding religious freedom require the protection of this fundamental right, even in times of war and emergency.

## 7.1. Russia's Use of Religion as an Ideological and Propaganda Weapon in the War Against Ukraine

The Russian government and its security services (FSB) control religious centers and their leaders to support Putin's regime within Russia and its aggressive war against Ukraine. Russian religious leaders publicly justify armed aggression, distorting the moral compass of their followers, particularly Orthodox believers, who constitute the majority in both Russia and Ukraine.

The leading role in this is played by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who declared the war against Ukraine to be "sacred" and claimed that Moscow is defending the world from the "demonic West." This was stated in a document adopted on March 28, 2024, by participants of the Russian People's Council under the leadership of the head of the ROC.<sup>97</sup>

On April 17, 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution recognizing the Russian Orthodox Church as an instrument of Kremlin propaganda and noting the involvement of Russian Orthodox hierarchs in Russia's international crimes in Ukraine:

"Vladimir Putin's regime has committed to the neo-imperialistic ideology of Russkiy Mir (the "Russian world"), which the Kremlin has turned into a tool for promoting war. This ideology is being used to destroy the remnants of democracy, to militarise Russian society and to justify external aggression to expand the Russian Federation's borders to include all territories once under Russian domination, including Ukraine. The hierarchy of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, including Patriarch Kirill, has been championing the Russkiy Mir ideology, declaring the war against Ukraine and the "satanic" West as a "holy war of all Russians", urging Orthodox believers to sacrifice themselves for their country. The Assembly is appalled by such an abuse of religion and the distortion of the Christian Orthodox tradition by Vladimir Putin's regime and its proxies in

96 This chapter was prepared by Maksym Vasin, Ph.D., based on his presentation at the international conference "Governance of Religion in the Context of Socio-Political Transformations: Germany, Northern Ireland, the Baltic States, and Ukraine," held on December 14, 2024, at the University of Cambridge.

97 <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/c6pexzlw4w0o>.

the Moscow Patriarchate hierarchy. The Assembly condemns such rhetoric and emphasises that incitement to commit the crime of aggression, genocide and war crimes is a crime in itself. The Assembly calls on all States to treat Patriarch Kirill and the Russian Orthodox hierarchy as an ideological extension of Vladimir Putin's regime complicit in war crimes and crimes against humanity conducted in the name of the Russian Federation and the Russkiy Mir ideology."<sup>98</sup>

Earlier, during a Sunday sermon on September 25, 2022, Patriarch Kirill made an openly heretical statement, claiming that the death of Russian soldiers on the battlefield "washes away all sins," thereby ensuring the salvation of their souls. In this way, he encouraged Russian citizens to mobilize for the war against Ukraine, framing it as a war against "evil." Essentially, the Patriarch of Moscow introduced a new concept to Russian Orthodoxy, one closely resembling the Islamic concept of a shahid ("martyr"):

Russian religious centers serve as tools for promoting the ideology of the "Russian World" and erasing Ukrainian identity.

"The Church understands that if someone, driven by a sense of duty and the necessity to fulfill their oath, remains faithful to their calling and dies in the line of military duty, then they undoubtedly perform an act equivalent to sacrifice. They offer themselves as a sacrifice for others. And therefore, we believe that this sacrifice washes away all the sins a person has committed."<sup>99</sup>

Additionally, the Kremlin organizes public events involving Russian religious leaders from various denominations to justify the invasion of Ukraine and the atrocities committed by Russian forces. For instance, a roundtable discussion was held in the State Duma (the Russian Parliament) on March 29, 2022. In particular, the previously mentioned sermon by the Moscow Patriarch aligned with a statement by Chechnya's Mufti **Salah Mezhiev** during the same parliamentary discussion:

"All muftis of Russia must speak as one. There [in Ukraine], under American and European flags, are gathered Nazis, fascists, Satanists, and LGBT communities... This is a fight against the globalization of Satanism. It is a war between good and evil. This is jihad. Muslims who die in this battle will be shahids."<sup>100</sup>

The Russian authorities in the occupied territories of Ukraine **demand that Ukrainian churches and religious communities directly subordinate themselves to Russian religious centers.** Through these centers, Russian security services, particularly the FSB, can more easily control local communities both in Russia and in the occupied territories of Ukraine. They

98 <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33511/html>.

99 <https://tinyurl.com/y5wfstjm>.

100 <http://duma.gov.ru/multimedia/video/events/71233/> [Caution! This publication is Russian propaganda.]

use these communities to influence their members, spread propaganda, and bolster Putin's regime. Russian religious centers serve as tools for promoting the ideology of the "Russian World" and erasing Ukrainian identity not only in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia but also in local parishes under the Moscow Patriarchate across Ukraine. For the Kremlin, maintaining influence over the consciousness of Orthodox believers in Ukraine through the canonical and organizational ties of local parishes and dioceses of the UOC with the Russian Orthodox Church remains critically important. The spiritual connection is one of the last instruments of Moscow's colonial influence on Ukrainian society.

## 7.2. The Role of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church During Russian Aggression and Its Dependence on the Moscow Patriarchate

Despite the absence of direct ties to the Moscow Patriarchate in its name and statutory documents, **the UOC has mirrored the Kremlin's and the Russian Orthodox Church's stance on the situation in Ukraine since 2014.** Specifically:

- The UOC promoted Russian narratives about a "fratricidal conflict" and "civil war" in Ukraine,<sup>101</sup> which did not reflect reality given the direct involvement of Russian military forces in the occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.
- The head of the UOC, Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovsky), along with other bishops, refused to honor the fallen defenders of Ukraine during an official ceremony in parliament.<sup>102</sup> Some UOC priests also refused to conduct burial

rites for them.<sup>103</sup> This provocative stance by the church's hierarchs and clergy aided the Kremlin in destabilizing Ukrainian society, sowing division within the country, and weakening Ukraine's resistance to Russian aggression.

- The bishops of the UOC willingly cooperated with Russian occupation authorities in Crimea, as well as in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Meanwhile, the UOC leadership failed to address acts of treason, collaboration, pro-Russian activities, and calls for separatism by its bishops, justifying this inaction by claiming that their faithful were on both sides of the conflict.
- Some UOC bishops and priests provided assistance to Russian military forces and Russian-backed separatists, for which several were convicted in Ukraine as traitors.<sup>104</sup> However, the UOC leadership did not impose any disciplinary measures within the church against these hierarchs and clergy, further fueling outrage and distrust in Ukrainian society.

**The UOC leadership allows the Kremlin to exploit the church to discredit the Ukrainian government and weaken the resistance of the Ukrainian people.** Since 2014, the UOC has acted as a team player alongside Russian diplomats and representatives of the ROC, jointly claiming at international forums like the UN, OSCE, and Council of Europe that Orthodox believers in Ukraine were allegedly being persecuted. At the same time, the UOC made no statements to stop Russia's terror against Ukrainian religious minorities in territories occupied by Russia. The UOC's international advocacy efforts were directed solely against the Ukrainian government, benefiting the Kremlin, even though its own clergy occasionally suffered from Russian repression.

101 The Orthodox Church in Modern Ukraine / Union of Orthodox Journalists. – Kyiv, 2016. – pp. 7–8.

102 <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news/27005934.html>.

103 <https://www.depo.ua/rus/life/na-zhitomirshchine-svyashchennik-mp-otkazalsya-otpevat-soldata-02082014214200>.

104 [https://lb.ua/society/2022/12/07/538367\\_12\\_rokiv\\_uyvaznennya\\_zasudzheno.html](https://lb.ua/society/2022/12/07/538367_12_rokiv_uyvaznennya_zasudzheno.html).

Moreover, the UOC, together with the ROC, has systematically incited hostility against the UOC of the Kyiv Patriarchate, and since 2019, against the newly established Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which received a Tomos (decree) of autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarch. Such actions aligned with the Kremlin's goal of preventing the unification of Ukrainian Orthodoxy, as this would strip Russia of its ability to influence Ukrainian Orthodox believers and continue using the "martyr church" narrative regarding the UOC to undermine the Ukrainian government.

**Lauren Homer**, an expert on international religious freedom and president of the Law and Liberty Trust, emphasizes that the ROC and UOC have already lost the battle for the hearts and minds of Ukrainians:

**"If the UOC wants to remain as a Ukrainian religious organization it must cut all ties with Moscow, something it should have done long ago. It should stop being part of an evil worldwide propaganda campaign to discredit the Ukrainian government for forcing it to do so. Voters, elected officials, and media outlets in the West should reconsider any support for Russia's Russian World project and support religious freedom for Ukrainians, which cannot coexist with any influential religious organizations linked to Moscow."**<sup>105</sup>

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the UOC leadership has taken a cautious and, at times, ambiguous stance in its relationship with the ROC, maintaining certain administrative ties with the Moscow Patriarchate. Neither the UOC head nor its Synod has issued clear or public responses to the ROC's interference in the church's internal affairs. For

example, the UOC Synod did not object to the ROC Synod's decision to annex several UOC dioceses in Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia—specifically in Crimea, and the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions. The church also failed to issue an official response to the ROC Synod's decision to dismiss UOC bishops in several dioceses, including those in Crimea, Berdyansk, Donetsk, and Mariupol.

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The UOC leadership has not made any official decisions addressing Moscow's interference in its internal affairs, as if agreeing with the ROC's actions to arbitrarily restructure and replace leadership within UOC dioceses in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine. Instead of a response from the UOC Synod, on October 31, 2024, approximately 30 bishops of the church reacted negatively to the dismissal of Metropolitan Ilarion (Shukalo) of Donetsk and Mariupol.<sup>106</sup> He was known for his pro-Russian views, collaboration with Russian occupation authorities, and a medal personally awarded to him by Putin.<sup>107</sup>

At the same time, the UOC Synod has neither dismissed its metropolitans and bishops who have placed themselves under the direct authority of the ROC nor punished those hierarchs who openly

105 <https://tinyurl.com/mr4d8t9r>.

106 <https://tinyurl.com/8ewkf3xu>.

107 [https://24tv.ua/tayemnitsi-donetskogo-mitropolita-ilariona-yak-prislugovuye-upts\\_n2398792](https://24tv.ua/tayemnitsi-donetskogo-mitropolita-ilariona-yak-prislugovuye-upts_n2398792).



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collaborated with Russian military forces or were convicted of treason. Instead, the UOC leadership quickly imposes disciplinary measures on bishops and priests who criticize the church's ties to the Moscow Patriarchate, express a desire to unite with the autocephalous OCU,<sup>108</sup> or restore communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

This inconsistent stance by the UOC and its double standards, which reveal an unwillingness to fully sever ties with Moscow, deepen the doubts of the government and Ukrainian society about the sincerity of the UOC's declaration of independence from Moscow, made at the Council in Feofaniya on May 27, 2022.<sup>109</sup>

### **7.3. Marginalization of the UOC in Ukrainian Society and the Growing Popularity of the Autocephalous OCU**

Since the start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the proportion of Ukrainians identifying as believers of the UOC has significantly decreased—from 13.3% in 2021 to 5.6% in 2023. Meanwhile, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which is autocephalous and independent of

Moscow, has nearly doubled its following during the same period—from 24.1% to 42.2%.<sup>110</sup> The unwillingness of Orthodox believers to associate themselves with the "Moscow" church may explain the growing number of local Orthodox communities transitioning from the UOC to the canonical jurisdiction of the OCU, occasionally accompanied by conflicts over church buildings and other property.

In response to criticism from the UOC, representatives of the OCU openly accuse it of maintaining ties with Moscow and reproach its leadership for refusing to engage in dialogue about uniting Ukrainian Orthodoxy. The negative image of the UOC as the "Moscow" church is also actively reinforced in Ukraine by national and local media, contributing to the marginalization of UOC clergy and local parishes within Ukrainian society. This mutually hostile rhetoric does not help in finding paths toward unity within Ukrainian Orthodoxy. However, hope for progress in this area comes from public initiatives such as the "Sophia Brotherhood"<sup>111</sup> and the "Open Orthodox University,"<sup>112</sup> which serve as effective platforms for reconciliation and dialogue between Orthodox traditions in Ukraine.

108 <https://tinyurl.com/jt4n224z>.

109 <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-61587932>.

110 Sociological research data from the Razumkov Center: <https://razumkov.org.ua/images/2023/12/19/2023-Religiya-F.pdf>.

111 <https://sofiyske-bratstvo.org/pro-bratstvo/>.

112 <https://ouu.org.ua/about/>.

The loss of trust in the UOC by a significant portion of Ukrainian society, along with numerous instances of treason by clergy acting in the interests of the Russian army, has at times prompted decisive actions by local authorities and activists. Local and regional councils have demanded that parliament adopt a law banning the ROC and its affiliated religious organizations in Ukraine.<sup>113</sup> According to data from the Razumkov Center, an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians (71%) fully or partially support banning the activities of religious organizations and associations whose governing center is located in Russia—a state that has carried out military aggression against Ukraine.<sup>114</sup>

#### 7.4. Ukraine's Response to Russia's Militarization of Religion and Its Use as a Tool of Aggressive War

For many years, discussions have continued in Ukraine about the need to limit Russia's influence on Ukrainian society through Russian religious centers, primarily the ROC, and its affiliated structures within the country. However, initial legislative initiatives in this area failed to achieve the practical outcomes the government expected, as they were not fully implemented.

On December 20, 2018, Ukraine's parliament passed **Law No. 2662-VIII on the renaming of religious organizations with governing centers in Russia.**<sup>115</sup> UOC structures were obligated to indicate their affiliation with the ROC in their names to enable Orthodox believers to make an informed choice regarding their denominational identity. However, the metropolitanate, dioceses, and local parishes of the UOC ignored this law, and the Ukrainian government lacked the political will and resources to enforce it through legal proceedings. As a result, this legislative initiative proved ineffective, although the law remains in force.



Sacred books, relics burned down as result of fire from rocket bombing

On January 17, 2019, Ukraine's parliament passed **Law No. 2673-VIII on changing the subordination of religious communities to a different religious center.**<sup>116</sup> On the one hand, this law facilitated the transition of local UOC parishes to the jurisdiction of the autocephalous OCU. On the other hand, the law failed to prevent local conflicts in cases where community members held differing views on changing their religious affiliation.

Pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, along with certain pro-Russian UOC hierarchs, were interested in provoking violent confrontations among Orthodox believers over church property. These local disputes provided Russian propaganda with opportunities to promote the narrative of "persecution of Orthodox believers" to discredit the Ukrainian government internationally. Moscow sought to portray the voluntary transitions of parishes from the UOC to the canonical jurisdiction of the OCU as "raids on churches," a narrative that, in most cases, did not reflect reality.

The most high-profile legislation was **Law No. 3894-IX, "On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Activities of Religious Organizations,"** adopted on August 20,

113 For example: <https://bit.ly/424l3am>; <https://bit.ly/41X76vU>; <https://bit.ly/4gHMHZl>; <https://bit.ly/4a6pEM5>; <https://bit.ly/4a9kXRF>.

114 <https://bit.ly/4gYebRH>.

115 <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2662-19>.

116 <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2673-19>.

2024.<sup>117</sup> It applies not only to the UOC but also to any other religious organizations with ties to Russian religious centers. These organizations have nine months to voluntarily sever such ties and demonstrate their independence from Russian influence through practical actions.

### **7.5. Key Provisions of the Law of Ukraine “On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Activities of Religious Organizations”**

Law No. 3894-IX bans the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine and prohibits the operation of Ukrainian religious organizations that maintain affiliation with Russian religious centers. Additionally, religious organizations affiliated with the ROC will lose the right to use state and communal property. The purpose of the law is to stop Russia’s interference in the internal affairs of Ukrainian churches and religious communities through Russian religious centers, which the Kremlin and Russian security services exploit as tools in their war against Ukraine.

To implement the law in practice, the government, represented by the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience (DESS), has been granted the authority to conduct investigations to determine whether Ukrainian religious organizations are affiliated with the ROC or any other Russian religious centers. Based on these investigations, the DESS has the power to issue orders to religious organizations, compelling them to sever such ties.

In May 2025, the law will come fully into force. From that point onward, the DESS will be able to file court petitions to enforce compliance with its orders if a religious organization refuses to act voluntarily. The law provides for a relatively swift judicial process, which may result in a court ruling to dissolve the religious organization as a legal entity. However, organizations can avoid court-ordered dissolution if, before the conclusion of the proceedings, they take

practical steps outlined in the DESS’s order to sever ties with Russian religious centers.

Given Russia’s full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian government has strong arguments to justify its legitimate aim of intervening in the religious sphere during martial law and amid an existential threat to Ukraine. However, debates continue regarding adherence to the principle of proportionality in determining how the Ukrainian government should respond to national or public security threats posed by the influence of Russian religious centers. Specifically, the law has several shortcomings that have raised concerns among international organizations and religious freedom experts.

First, one criterion for affiliation with a Russian religious center is the inclusion of provisions in its governing documents (e.g., statute) that link the Ukrainian religious organization to the center. The law does not include exceptions or caveats for this provision. As a result, questions remain about how the UOC’s governing bodies and local parishes can eliminate such ties to the ROC if they cannot amend the ROC’s statute. This provision of the law requires clarification from Ukraine’s government or, ideally, amendments to address this evident flaw.

Second, the law does not provide alternative measures for dealing with religious organizations that maintain ties with Russian religious centers, aside from prematurely terminating their right to use state property (rental agreements) and dissolving them as legal entities through the courts. Additional measures could include revoking non-profit status, imposing restrictions on income of foreign origin, or canceling reduced rates on natural gas, electricity, and heating that are designated for religious organizations in Ukraine. Such additional measures could encourage Ukrainian faith-based communities to expedite the severance of ties with Russian centers of influence, thereby avoiding the ultimate sanction of court-ordered dissolution.

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<sup>117</sup> <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3894-20>.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

**The escalating dynamics of Russian terror against Ukraine's civilian population point to genocidal motives behind Russia's aggression. Supported by Russian society, Vladimir Putin seeks not so much to conquer new territories—of which Russia already has plenty—but rather to destroy Ukraine as a state, nation, and ethnic identity. A successful, democratic, free, and independent Ukraine represents a condemnation of Putin's regime, which is built on corruption, a clan-based economy, unchecked power of the ruling party, and oppressive security forces.**

By creating horrific images of external enemies in the form of the “demonic West” and “Nazi-controlled Ukraine,” the Russian dictator and his inner circle are determined at all costs to maintain their corrupt power not only in Russia but across the former Soviet states. The Russian political elite, blinded by its desire to restore the Soviet Union and achieve global dominance, has fallen for its own propaganda and launched an “Orthodox jihad” (“holy war”) against fabricated enemies under false pretenses. Disregarding the lives of its own citizens, the Putin regime sends hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers into the flames of war, irrationally seeking to obliterate entire Ukrainian cities, kill tens of thousands of civilians, render millions of Ukrainian families homeless, and provoke the largest humanitarian crisis in Europe.

The Russian Orthodox Church and other religious leaders in Russia are active participants in this madness, instead of condemning the aggressive war, exposing Kremlin propaganda, and building bridges of reconciliation. Russian religious centers have become accomplices in Russia's numerous war crimes, acts of genocide, and crimes against humanity, spreading the chauvinistic ideology of the “Russian world,” inciting hatred toward Ukrainians within Russian society, and encouraging Russians to mobilize in support of continued aggression against Ukraine.

Under such circumstances, any freezing of the conflict and continued Russian control over Ukraine's eastern and southern regions, as well as Crimea, would have catastrophic

consequences for the local population. Russia's repressive policies not only deprive residents of the occupied territories of their fundamental rights and civil liberties but are also aimed at eradicating Ukrainian identity, destroying any signs of the occupied territories' connection to Ukraine, distorting historical facts and educational programs, and imposing the chauvinistic ideology of the “Russian World.” Hundreds of other Ukrainian churches and religious communities could disappear due to the targeted persecution carried out by the Russian regime. The militarization of society, especially children, and the dissemination of hatred toward anything non-Russian will undoubtedly fuel a new wave of Russian aggression against Ukraine in the near future, regardless of potential peace agreements or ceasefire arrangements.

In this context, the only guarantee for lasting peace and the prevention of future aggressive wars is holding Russia's leadership and all individuals responsible for Russian war crimes accountable. Such investigations and prosecutions may take place under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, the UN International Court of Justice for Russia's violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, national criminal courts in Ukraine and other countries, or through the establishment of a special tribunal to prosecute the Russian Federation for the crime of aggression against Ukraine.

## 9. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 01

Designate the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terrorism due to its ongoing attacks on Ukraine's civilian population and critical infrastructure, deliberate exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis, nuclear blackmail, use of torture, and inhumane treatment of prisoners of war and arbitrarily detained civilians, including religious leaders.

### 02

Impose additional economic sanctions on the Russian Federation and personal sanctions against Russian officials, religious leaders, collaborators, propagandists, and others responsible for the persecution of religious leaders and faith-based communities in occupied Ukrainian territories, as well as the destruction of religious sites. These sanctions should include restrictions on visa issuance and access to banking services for these individuals and their families.

### 03

Increase international pressure on the Russian Federation to end its policy of religious terror in occupied Ukrainian territories and to return all confiscated buildings and property to religious communities.

### 04

Unite global efforts, including those of world religious leaders, to secure the release of arbitrarily detained and politically persecuted religious leaders, believers, and other prisoners of conscience from Russian prisons. Facilitate agreements between Ukrainian and Russian parties for a prisoner exchange based on the "all for all" principle.

### 05

Support the development and implementation of rehabilitation programs for individuals subjected to torture, inhumane treatment, and abuse during Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Involve international organizations with expertise in best practices and extend these programs to the families of victims.

### 06

Continue documenting Russian war crimes against religious leaders and faith-based communities in Ukraine, including the destruction, damage, and looting of religious buildings and other material losses suffered by parishes.

## 07

Develop effective mechanisms for restoring documentation of faith-based communities lost due to hostilities or confiscated by occupying authorities, in order to reestablish their property rights.

## 08

Improve legal frameworks for recording damage and destruction of religious buildings and for mechanisms to compensate their restoration, including through reparations from the Russian Federation.

## 09

Critically assess statements by Russian propaganda media regarding alleged “persecution of Orthodox believers in Ukraine,” given the Kremlin’s use of religion as a tool to justify and intensify aggression against Ukraine, as well as the transformation of the Russian Orthodox Church and other Russian religious centers into propaganda platforms for war, hate speech, and the justification of genocide against Ukrainians.

## 10

Expand the provision of humanitarian, legal, psychological, and other assistance to the people of Ukraine through a network of churches and religious organizations that support local populations, internally displaced persons, and residents of frontline and occupied territories of Ukraine.

# 10. PERSONAL STORIES OF CHURCH LEADERS

## Story of Illia and Kateryna Kuvshynov's Family from Berdyansk

**Illia Kuvshynov served as a pastor of one of the Protestant churches in Berdyansk, Zaporizhzhia Region. Together with his wife Kateryna, he is raising two children. Russian forces occupied their city on February 28, 2022—the third day of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Illia recalls the events of that winter, which dramatically changed their lives.**

*We lived in Berdyansk, by the Sea of Azov. I'm a pastor, and my wife and I served together at our church there.*

*On February 24th, 2022, we were awakened at 5 a.m. by the sound of explosions, and we realized the war had begun. By the third day, Russian forces had completely taken over our city. Half of our congregation left, but my wife and I chose to stay and continue serving the people for as long as we could.*

*Our city is not far from Mariupol. When the Russians were bombing the city with powerful bombs, we could hear the explosions, sometimes very close by. During the occupation, our church actively helped those fleeing from Mariupol. Many of them stayed in our church building. We cooked meals for them and delivered food to schools where other refugees had found shelter.*

*It was extremely cold. There was no gas or heating in the city for six months. One of the Christian brothers from our church went to Zaporizhzhia across the front line to bring back essential medicines and supplies because our city was blockaded. He also evacuated people from Berdyansk. He made over 50 such trips. Sometimes he came under fire.*

*One evening, six armed men broke into the churchyard. They lined me and another brother up against the wall and threatened to shoot us. They accused us of smuggling weapons through our church. We told them it wasn't true; we were only providing food and medicine to everyone.*

*After a few hours of shouting at us and making threats, they left. But the next day, Russian soldiers came to see me again. They detained our brother, a driver, as they knew he had been transporting a former Ukrainian soldier. They accused us of helping these people for several weeks. They threatened to shoot me in the legs and said they wouldn't release me. But after four hours of interrogating me, they eventually let me go. Thank God, the church wasn't shut down, and we continued worshipping.*

*Our brother, the driver, was held in captivity for 43 days and was severely tortured. But thank God, he was finally released and was able to return to his family.*

*Russian soldiers detained and interrogated me several times. But our story didn't end there. On March 8, 2024, at 2 a.m., about 15 soldiers violently broke into our apartment. They searched the entire place and accused us of hiding Ukrainian soldiers. They detained me and put me in jail. The next day, they placed a black bag over my head and took me to a basement for torture. They strapped me to a chair and beat me from all sides. They mocked my faith in God and accused me of every possible thing.*

*It was hard to believe that the Russian soldiers were sane since they told me, "We have liberated you." What kind of liberation was this? They've destroyed our cities, killed our people, including women and children. They abducted me in the middle of the night, tortured me – and this is called liberation?! We*

*can't even freely express our thoughts. Are we supposed to be grateful for such "freedom"? Are we to be happy with it? And if we aren't satisfied with this "freedom," you will just kill us?!*

*They then tied my hands with wires and shocked me with electricity, while laughing. This is the true "Russian world" they brought to our land.*

*During the interrogation process, I asked if I could take my family out of the city and leave Ukraine. In response, they began threatening to kill my family as well. Then they placed a grenade in my hand in order to leave my fingerprints on it, and told me that if I tried to escape, I would be framed and sentenced to 12-15 years. After that, I was thrown back into solitary confinement.*

*By then, many people were already praying for us. I vividly remember spending several hours praying in my prison cell and feeling the incredible presence of God. It was as if the prison walls had vanished and I was surrounded by thousands of people; I felt their prayers and God's embrace, and my heart was filled with peace. This was a deeply moving experience. I don't want to go through torture again, but I also long to experience the closeness of God in the same way I did when I was in solitary confinement.*

*The next day, Russian soldiers promised to release me if I gave them information about people supporting Ukraine and those who wanted our city to be Ukrainian again. They confiscated both Kateryna's and my Ukrainian passports, preventing us from leaving. For over three months, we were without any documents. The soldiers would come once or twice a week, usually at night, cursing me for not being helpful and refusing to provide the information they wanted. This made them very angry.*

*God protected our church, and I'm grateful I didn't reveal any information about our church members. At that time, we were forbidden from worshipping in our church building, so we started meeting in small groups in our homes.*

*Our friends began warning us that staying in the city any longer was very dangerous and urged us to leave. We learned about the situation in other occupied cities in the Zaporizhzhia region and realized that if I didn't agree to collaborate with the Russians, I would be sentenced or killed. But how could we leave without any documents?*

*We continued praying and fasting, not wanting to abandon our people, but we needed a clear direction from God. When I asked the Russians to return our passports, they were furious. But then a miracle happened! After several days of fasting and prayer, a Russian soldier came to me and gave back our passports! We couldn't believe it and knew this was an answer from God. We decided to leave right away.*

*As the fighting continued, we had to travel through Russian territory. On our way out of Berdyansk, I started receiving calls from the occupying authorities, telling me to go to the Russian military commandant's office. We were terrified that we wouldn't make it to the border in time to leave Russia or that we might be stopped from crossing. A little later, the commandant's office informed me that they would come for me on Monday. We traveled for two days straight, without resting, to reach the border and leave Russia before then. We prayed that the Russian security services wouldn't put us on a wanted list or arrest us along the way or at the border.*

*We crossed the border at night. A Russian female border guard, who was inspecting all our belongings, found a Bible and began questioning me sternly about what kind of book it was. I told her it was a Bible. She asked if I had read it. I said I had read the Bible more than 10 times. At that moment, her demeanor changed, and she said, "Oh, I can't even read it once! How could you? Is it true that reading the Bible changes your worldview?" I replied, "Yes, it does. This book will definitely change you." And I began to witness to her about Jesus!*

*It was a strange feeling: I was being pursued by the FSB and could be arrested at any moment, yet I was so happy to be able to share about Jesus at this Russian border! After that, an FSB officer checked us and allowed us to leave Russia, and also said it was a miracle that we passed all the checks in five hours. Normally, it takes at least 20 hours, and sometimes it even take several days. At that moment, we were convinced that God was guiding us.*

*After we had already crossed the Russian border, soldiers in our town came to the house of Kateryna's mother, looking for us. Thank God, our relatives were unharmed.*

*The church understood our decision to leave. They continue to meet as circumstances allow, and I support them remotely. We hold several Zoom meetings every week.*

*When Russians say on TV that they are welcomed in our cities, they are lying. Russian propaganda lies about everything. The Russians have only brought us pain, destruction, cruelty, and suffering.*

*But our God reigns. He permits us to endure evil, but He is ever with us. He sustains us. We trust that evil will be defeated. Our God is victorious! Please, pray for the safety of our church in Berdyansk.*

## Story of Yevhen and Olena's<sup>118</sup> Family from Southeastern Ukraine

**Yevhen and Olena were church leaders in a region of Ukraine occupied by Russian forces. They shared their testimony about the religious persecution they experienced at the hands of the Russian authorities.**

*Before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, our family lived in the southeastern part of Ukraine. We served in the Sunday school at our local evangelical church.*

*When our city was completely occupied by Russian soldiers, we decided to stay and continue serving God and the community. Our family has adopted children, which we knew would complicate our situation under occupation, as the Russian authorities were forcibly deporting Ukrainian orphans to Russia under the pretext of "protection." However, from the very first days of the invasion, Russian soldiers would tell us that this was only a temporary occupation and that they would go back to Russia soon.*

*The church continued its ministry, and we continued our work in the Sunday school. Moving around the city was dangerous due to the heavy Russian military presence. They looted shops, pharmacies, and gas stations. As it turned out, they did not have all of the necessary provisions for the invasion.*

*Residents of the city were arrested, especially those who opposed the occupation, spoke Ukrainian, or resisted the occupiers in any way. Many families managed to flee to the parts of Ukraine that remained under Ukrainian control. We assisted those who were evacuating to safer locations. Churches from around Ukraine sent us humanitarian aid, which we distributed to those in need. During the early months of the occupation, there was a severe shortage of food and medicine in the city, so our church and many others were very grateful for the assistance.*

*Russian soldiers began raiding churches. As a church maintenance director, Yevhen was responsible for taking care of the facilities, and had to guard the church day and night. When Russian soldiers came to the church building, they behaved very violently and humiliated those they found in the church. They considered Protestants to be sectarians and extremists who should not exist. But God protected our church. We heard about the arrests and killings of pastors in Russian-occupied territories, but we relied on God's mercy and continued our ministry.*

*During one Sunday morning service, armed Russian soldiers in full combat gear surrounded the church building. Their faces were covered, and their weapons were drawn. They blocked the church yard and broke into the church. The church ministers, including Yevhen, who were on duty in church to protect against looters, were surrounded by the soldiers. The soldiers forced these Christian brothers to display their Ukrainian patriotic tattoos. When they saw that these believers had no tattoos at all, they took them for interrogation.*

*The soldiers subjected the church ministers to physical and psychological abuse, constantly threatening torture, claiming that "because of churches like yours, children are being killed in Donbas." Searches were conducted in the church building, looking for "extremist literature" and weapons. Of course, nothing like that was found in the church. When they came across Ukrainian Christian literature, including Bibles, New Testaments, hymnals etc., they were furious. They threatened even women and children. They checked the documents of everyone who was at the church service. The raid lasted from morning until evening. By evening, Yevhen was one of the last to be released from the building. The Russian soldiers banned the church from gathering and announced that they were confiscating the building.*

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<sup>118</sup> The names have been changed to protect their safety.

*We started hearing that the Russians had begun seizing other churches in our area. The next day, we went to church to retrieve at least some of our belongings, but the soldiers did not allow us to take even personal items.*

*After the church building was confiscated, we started gathering in homes. Our church had established home groups, so this was not a new practice for us. With the onset of the occupation, when it became dangerous to move around the city, home group meetings became even more relevant.*

*We lived under occupation for several more months until the Russians began to raise objections to any form of ministry, any display of freedom, or any remnants of Ukrainian identity.*

*We were constantly pressured to obtain Russian passports and become Russian citizens. We heard that Russian military personnel were visiting worship services and other gatherings of believers in different cities, checking documents. They also came to our home gatherings. But we did not want to acquire Russian passports. There was an option to obtain a residence permit, and we took that opportunity. However, it turned out that such a permit provided no real benefit.*

*Our names (with other personal information) were labeled in the Russian intelligence database as “sec-tarians,” that is, “extremists.” During document checks, we were repeatedly called unreliable individuals. We were threatened with having our children taken away.*

*One night, Russian military personnel stormed our yard. They threw Yevhen to the ground and tied him up. They forced Olena to face the wall and twisted her arms behind her back. The children were at home and, despite our pleas for the soldiers not to frighten them in the middle of the night, an entire unit stormed our house with weapons and shields. The children were terrified when armed soldiers burst into their bedroom.*

*The entire house was turned upside down during the search. Last year, we were forced to sign documents stating that we were supposedly aware of the impossibility of remaining in our city. The decision to deport us was based on that document. The Russian soldiers wanted to expel us from the city immediately, but they needed to assemble a group for deportation. We then persuaded them to allow us to leave in our own vehicle.*

*Ultimately, we, along with our children, were deported. The military escorted us in a military vehicle the entire way. There were many checkpoints along the way, and the filtration procedures lasted several hours. In the end, we were given an expulsion order from Russian territory and a 30-year entry ban to Russia. We were forced to leave everything behind: our home, business, friends, ministry, and homeland. But we are grateful to God that our children were not taken from us and that our family was not separated.*

*In our new home and new country, we continue to believe that God will guide us on His path. We stay connected with our church community, which is now spread across different cities. We have found a ministry within the local Ukrainian church abroad where we serve God and wait for the day He allows us to return home.*



# 11. AFTERWORD

The *Faith Under Russian Terror* report illuminates the devastating realities of life under Russian occupation in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, offering invaluable firsthand accounts. In an era when misinformation runs rampant, this report stands as a beacon of truth, courageously exposing the genocide of Ukrainians and the systematic oppression of religious freedom carried out by Russian forces.

Putin's regime has weaponized disinformation and propaganda, leveraging its extensive global networks, well-funded lobbyists, and media influence to falsely portray Russia's war against Ukraine as a noble defense of "moral and Christian values." Recognizing the Western world's—and especially the United States'—deep commitment to religious freedom and human rights, they aim to manipulate global opinion by spreading false claims about a lack of religious freedom in Ukraine in order to undermine international military and humanitarian aid for Ukraine.

This report, however, reveals the stark reality of Russian terror in the occupied territories of Ukraine: a systematic assault on religious freedom targeting every faith group. Churches are closed; hundreds of sacred sites are destroyed, seized, looted or repurposed; church leaders are persecuted, tortured, and even killed; and entire faith-based communities are oppressed in a calculated effort to erase Ukraine's spiritual and cultural identity. This report underscores that, if Russia is not stopped and succeeds in its goal of overtaking Ukraine, this pattern of terror and repression would engulf the entire nation.

What makes this report extraordinary is its sources—it comes directly from those who experience and endure these atrocities daily. It is not just a study and record of facts but a powerful tool to counter the Kremlin's propaganda. This publication provides clear and irrefutable evidence of Russian war crimes, religious persecution, and acts of genocide against the Ukrainian people.

I am deeply grateful that Mission Eurasia has the opportunity to present this first-hand report of truth from the field. I am immensely proud of our partners on the ground, church leaders in Ukraine, and my colleagues whose expertise, dedication, and courage made this research possible. Their tireless efforts, often under immense personal risk, exemplify an unwavering commitment to truth and justice.

As you read these pages, I urge you to remember the lives behind the words—the individuals and communities who endure unimaginable hardships yet remain steadfast in their faith and identity. Let this report inspire you to stand with Ukraine in its fight for freedom, democracy, and sovereignty, to counter disinformation with truth, and to advocate for justice for the oppressed.

**Sergey Rakhuba**  
President  
Mission Eurasia



# Faith Under Russian Terror

## Analysis of the Religious Situation in Ukraine

Digital Publication



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To stay informed about religious freedom and human rights trends in the Eurasian region, or to collaborate with Mission Eurasia and support our strategic ministry initiatives, please contact us at [info@missioneurasia.org](mailto:info@missioneurasia.org) or visit our website at [MissionEurasia.org](http://MissionEurasia.org).

Russia seeks to create an image of a religious country that defends traditional values. This is not reality. Human rights activists have documented numerous violations in the occupied territories of Ukraine, including the imposition of fines for prayers in “unspecified places,” the transformation of houses of worship into military bases, the abduction of priests directly from the church yard, the burning of Bibles, the removal of crosses from evangelical churches, the coercion of priests to work with special services and violate the secrecy of confession, and more. Religious leaders and parishioners of various churches and denominations in the occupied territories of Ukraine have no mechanisms to stop this. Russia is negating freedom of religion, as such. This report covers these violations, based on the facts and evidence collected.

**Oleksandra Matviichuk**, recipient of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize,  
human rights lawyer,  
and head of the Center for Civil Liberties in Ukraine



This report has been issued by one of Ukraine’s most reputable centers for monitoring and analyzing religious freedom. This center has a long-standing reputation for its valuable insights, which are recognized by policy-makers and experts, both domestically and internationally. This particular report highlights the tragic and systemic violation of religious freedom by Russian forces in occupied territories. Currently, Russia stands as a major violator of freedom of conscience globally, while hypocritically accusing others, especially Ukraine, of the very actions it commits. Russian propaganda has skillfully manipulated the concept of religious freedom to ultimately infringe upon it, wherever possible. This report aims to deconstruct such propaganda and illuminate the truth of the situation on the ground.

Archimandrite **Cyril Hovorun**, professor of ecclesiology,  
international relations and ecumenism  
at Sankt Ignatios College, University College Stockholm,  
and director of the Huffington Ecumenical Institute  
at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles



This report is a stellar must-read about the many ways in which Russia is systematically persecuting Ukrainian Christians of all denominations in the occupied regions of Ukraine. It is full of information, analysis, and survivors’ stories. The persecution of Christians is outrageous, and other Christians around the world should be standing in solidarity with Ukrainian believers in their suffering.

**Lauren Homer**, attorney and religious freedom advocate  
since 1990 in Russia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet republics,  
president at Law and Liberty Trust in Washington, D.C.



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