

THE IMPACT OF

THE RUSSIAN INVASION

on faith-based communities in Ukraine



УДК 2-6(477-074)"2022/2023"=111
V30

V30 Vasin, Maksym. (2024) **The impact of the Russian invasion on faith-based communities in Ukraine** Kyiv: Institute for Religious Freedom.

The report presents updated data on churches, prayer houses, and other religious buildings affected by the full-scale Russian invasion and recent Russian war crimes against religious figures and communities of Ukraine, documented by IRF specialists. With the help of QR codes and hyperlinks, readers can access video recordings of testimonies of war crimes, genocide of Ukrainians, and crimes against humanity.

This report is the result of the activity the Institute for Religious Freedom (Kyiv, Ukraine) has been conducting since 2014, monitoring the religious situation in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia following its armed incursion. This study covers the period from July 15, 2022, to December 1, 2023.

The Institute for Religious Freedom prepared this report as a part of the Locked Faith project with the support of peacebuilding organization PAX (Netherlands) in cooperation with Mission Eurasia (USA), the Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine), and representatives of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations.

УДК 2-6(477-074)"2022/2023"=111



Author:

Dr. Maksym Vasin, Executive Director, Institute for Religious Freedom (Ukraine),
Ph.D. in Law (Juris Doctor)

Project Manager:

Oleksandr Zaiets, Chairman of the Board, Institute for Religious Freedom

Monitoring and data analysis:

Anastasia Zaiets, Master of Sociology, Institute for Religious Freedom

IRF contacts

P.O. Box 471-V, Kyiv, Ukraine 01001

E-mail: info@irf.in.ua

Phone: +38 099 176 3360

Website: irf.in.ua

© **Institute for Religious Freedom (Ukraine), 2024**

The responsibility for the information and views presented in this publication rests entirely with the authors and does not represent the official position of PAX or other IRF partners.

ISBN 978-966-8359-75-0

© **O. V. Pugach, 2024**

CONTENT

1. About IRF. Methodology of research	4
2. Background: 2014-2021	5
3. Destruction of Ukraine’s religious infrastructure as a result of Russia’s full-scale invasion	6
4. Intensification of Russian repressions against religious communities in the occupied territories of Ukraine.....	12
5. The ideological basis and genocidal nature of Russia’s aggression and the role of the Orthodox Church	20
6. Conclusion	23
7. Recommendations for response	23
Video testimonies of Russian war crimes against religious leaders and faith-based communities in Ukraine	24

LIST OF ACRONYMS

- DPR – self-proclaimed “Donetsk People’s Republic”
- IRF – Institute for Religious Freedom
- LPR – self-proclaimed “Luhansk People’s Republic”
- PAX – the largest peacebuilding organization in the Netherlands
- ROC – Russian Orthodox Church
- SBU – Security Service of Ukraine
- SEFC – State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience
- UOC-MP – Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate
- FSB – Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (former KGB)

1. ABOUT IRF. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

The Institute for Religious Freedom (IRF) is a human rights NGO, founded in 2001 in Kyiv, Ukraine. Our goal is to protect and promote religious freedom and other related human rights, facilitate inter-faith dialogue and church-state cooperation, strengthen democratic foundations and civil society in Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2014, the Institute for Religious Freedom has been monitoring violations of freedom of speech, conscience, religion, and other human rights in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea. In 2015, with IRF's assistance, human rights activists published the first report, *When God Becomes the Weapon. Persecution based on religious beliefs in the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine*¹. In 2018, IRF published its report *Religious Freedom at Gunpoint. Russian Terror in the Occupied Territories of Eastern Ukraine*².

In 2021, the Institute for Religious Freedom launched the project Locked Faith ([Locked-Faith.org](https://lockedfaith.org)), aimed at stopping religious persecution in Russian-controlled Ukrainian territories by holding the Russian leadership and other perpetrators accountable under international justice. In its 2022 report, *Russian Attacks on Religious Freedom in Ukraine*, IRF presented numerous facts and video evidence of Russian war crimes against religious figures and communities, as well as an analysis of the state of religious freedom in the Ukrainian Crimean peninsula, occupied by Russia since 2014³.

The purpose of the current publication is to provide an update on the impact of Russia's ongoing full-scale aggression, which began on February 24, 2022, on Ukraine's religious communities. The report provides data on the extent of destruction of Ukraine's religious infrastructure as a result of the Russian invasion as per December 1, 2023. To verify the data on destroyed and damaged religious buildings and sacred places, IRF conducted a written and oral survey of leaders and representatives of the vast majority of Ukrainian churches and religious associations of various denominations. Among them are Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant churches, Jewish and Muslim religious associations, and other religious and ethnic minorities.

1 <https://lockedfaith.org/en/p/12>

2 <https://lockedfaith.org/en/p/11>

3 <https://irf.in.ua/p/96>

2. BACKGROUND: 2014-2021

Since the first months of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2014, faith-based communities of various denominations have experienced in full the brutality and ruthlessness of Russia's repressive policies in the occupied territories of Crimea and the Donbas region. Russian troops and Russian-backed separatists have targeted religious leaders and individual believers of most faiths, with the exception of the Orthodox parishes affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate. Representatives of religious minorities have been arbitrarily arrested, threatened, beaten, illegally imprisoned, tortured, and in some cases deliberately killed. This is described in detail and with specific examples in previous reports released by the Institute for Religious Freedom and its partners.

The repressive policy in the self-proclaimed "people's republics" (the parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions controlled by Russia) was aimed at strengthening the Russian regime and stifling resistance. The occupying authorities eradicated dissent and all manifestations of Ukrainian identity, brutally persecuted pro-Ukrainian movements and any form of opposition, and introduced full control over the civilian population, striving to create a situation similar to that in Russia itself.

One of the tools used to repress Ukrainian religious communities in the Donbas region has been the introduction of Russian religious and anti-extremism legislation, which was copied in its entirety. Believers have faced demands from the occupying authorities for mandatory re-registration, acceptance of Russian citizenship, submission of lists of members of their religious communities, etc.

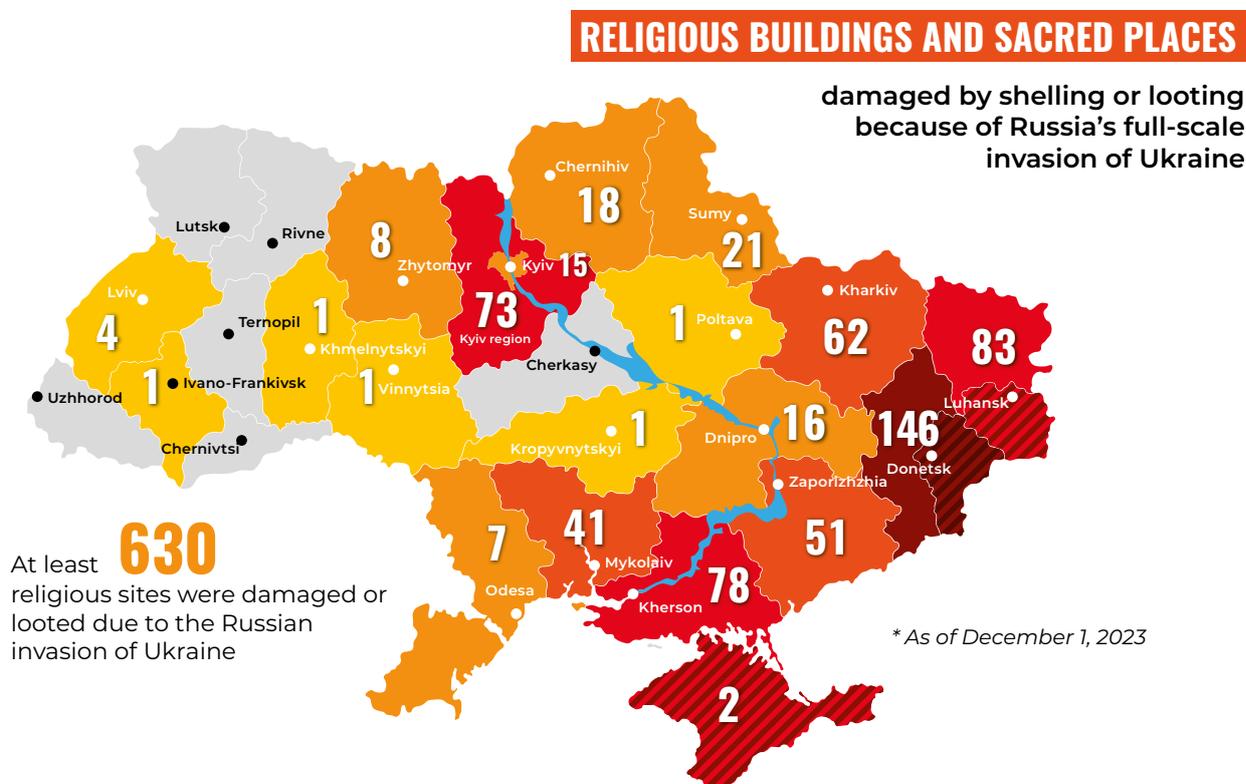
However, even fulfillment of all the stated requirements did not guarantee re-registration under Russian law. After all, the real goal of the occupying authorities was to encourage religious communities and their leaders to collaborate and support the Russian regime. Disloyal religious leaders and denominations were persecuted through arbitrary accusations of spying for Ukrainian or Western intelligence services, of sectarianism, extremism, or illegal missionary activities.

The evangelical churches (Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, etc.), as well as the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church particularly suffered from Russian repression. In addition, the occupying authorities declared faithful of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses to be "enemies of the people" and "extremists." This made it impossible for these religious minorities to carry out any activities in the territories under Russia's control, and their property was unlawfully confiscated. On the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, occupied by Russia since 2014, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses and pro-Ukrainian Crimean Tatar Muslim communities have also been subjected to targeted repression. Numerous members of both religious communities were sentenced to long prison terms on trumped-up extremism charges.

3. DESTRUCTION OF UKRAINE’S RELIGIOUS INFRASTRUCTURE AS A RESULT OF RUSSIA’S FULL-SCALE INVASION

Previously, the Russian Federation tried to disguise its direct military intervention in the Donbas region from the international community. However, since February 24, 2022, President Vladimir Putin’s desire to completely conquer Ukraine and destroy Ukrainian statehood, identity, culture, history, language, and religious pluralism are out in the open. Hiding behind slogans of protecting Russian speakers, “denazification,” and “desatanization” of Ukraine, the Kremlin has actually been implementing the ideology of the “Russkiy Mir” (Russian World). As interpreted by Russian propagandists, this ideology comprises the physical destruction of the Ukrainian people as a nation (genocide), the elimination of Ukrainian cultural heritage, the overthrow of the Ukrainian government, and the disappearance of the Ukrainian state. Putin’s imperial ambitions implicate restoring Moscow’s control over all post-Soviet states. He desires to reborn the Soviet Union, known as the “evil empire.”

During the first 21 months of the full-scale invasion, Russian troops have damaged or wholly destroyed at least 630 religious facilities in Ukraine. Most damage was inflicted by Russian missiles, kamikaze drones, and artillery, including targeted attacks on civilian objects. In addition, some places of worship have been deliberately looted by the Russian military, closed, or converted by the occupying authorities into administrative buildings.



The Institute for Religious Freedom also has documented numerous cases of seizure of places of worship by the Russian military, which used them as military bases or as cover for their firing positions. This tactic of the Russian army has resulted in an increase in destruction of religious sites in Ukraine.

For example, on March 10, 2022, the Russian military seized a building complex belonging to the Tavriski Christian Institute (TCI) near Kherson. It was subsequently used as a military base with headquarters, barracks, a hospital, crematorium, and ammunition depot until approximately November 10–11, 2022. These religious buildings were exploited by the Russian army for military purposes until the Armed Forces of Ukraine liberated the right-bank part of the Kherson region. According to the testimonies provided by TCI employees, in this period the Russian military looted everything of value that was possible to remove.



VALENTYN SYNIY

Rector of the Tavriski Christian Institute
(Kherson region)

“They burned down part of the library and took some of the books to a landfill. Part of the library was possibly taken to Russia, as the destroyed books we saw in the landfill did not account for all of the library’s contents. The Russian military also removed all equipment from the institute: sports equipment, technical tools, and computers.

Neighbors said that there was a crematorium at our base where dead Russians were burned. There was a hospital and some kind of military headquarters. The Russian military was quartered on most of the premises. After the liberation of Kherson, Russian troops moved to the left bank [of the Dnipro river, ed.] and frequently shelled the TCI buildings. As a result of the Russian invasion, four buildings of the institute were destroyed: three were destroyed during the Russian occupation, and another (the dining room) by Russian mortar fire after the liberation of Kherson by the Ukrainian army. To date, of the five buildings of our institute, one survived. Four are completely destroyed or have suffered irreparable damage.”



Watch Valentyn Syniy's
video testimony:
<https://youtu.be/IXVCxOG57b0>

Houses of prayer received special attention from the Russian military. Large worship halls usually had basements and were sufficiently reliable for concealment, both in terms of structural strength and due to their status of religious structure. That is why the Russian army often purposefully searched for such buildings, intending to use them for military purposes.



OLEKSANDR BABIYCHUK

Bishop of the Ukrainian Pentecostal Church
in Kherson region,
Secretary General of the Ukrainian Bible Society

“Russian soldiers examined almost every church building in Kherson and asked what the walls were made of, weird things like that. They seized some religious buildings: occupied the Pentecostal building of the “Church of the

3. Destruction of Ukraine's religious infrastructure as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion

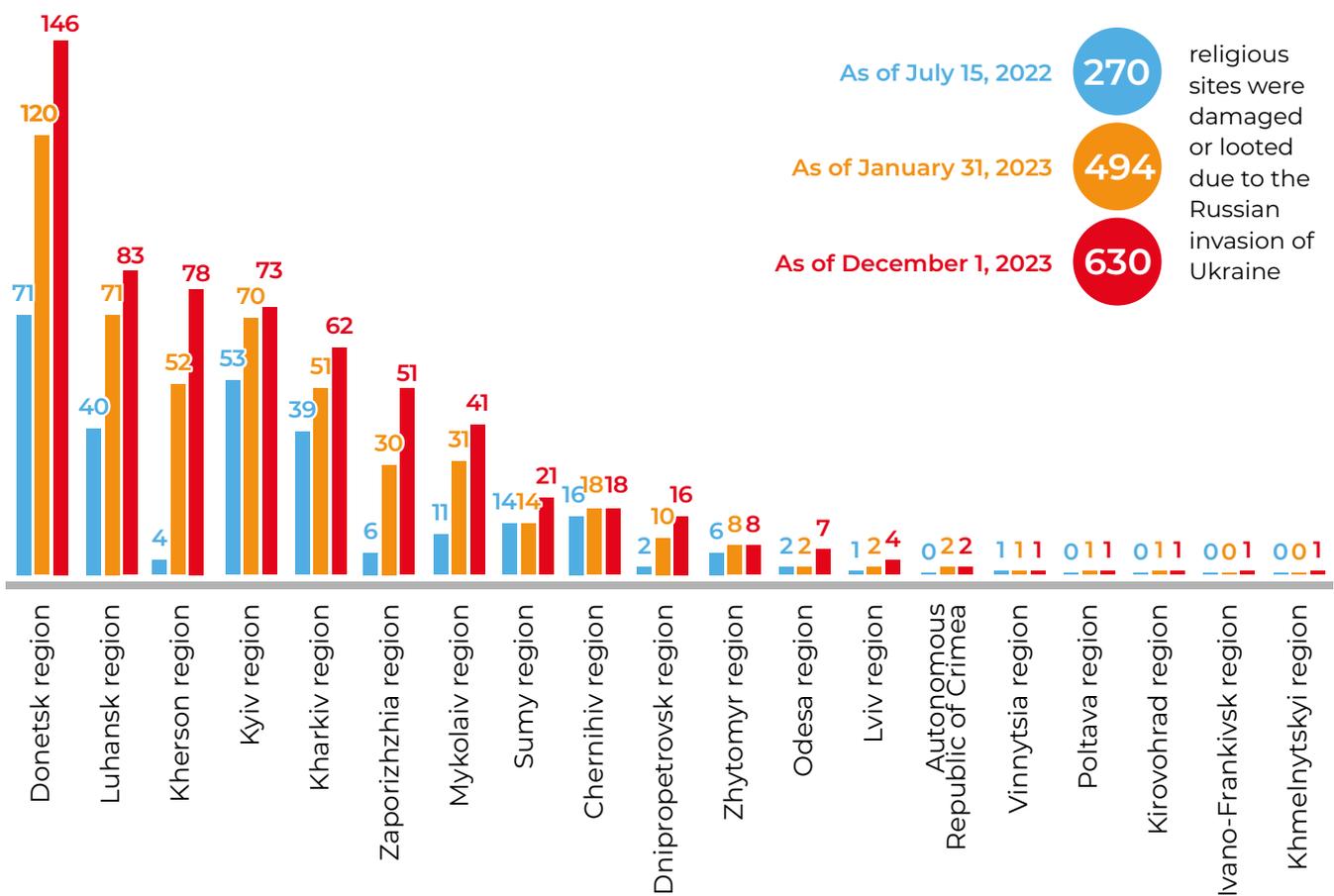


Watch Bishop Oleksandr Babychuk's video testimony:
<https://youtu.be/ryLcinUN0E4>

Nativity of Christ” in Nova Kakhovka, church premises in the villages of Rozdolne and Hornostaivka, as well as in other places in Kherson region. Prayer houses were turned into barracks for the Russian military. Of course, they used all church property and prohibited believers from conducting services there. The seized church buildings became restricted zones, impossible even to approach, let alone conduct any religious activity there.”

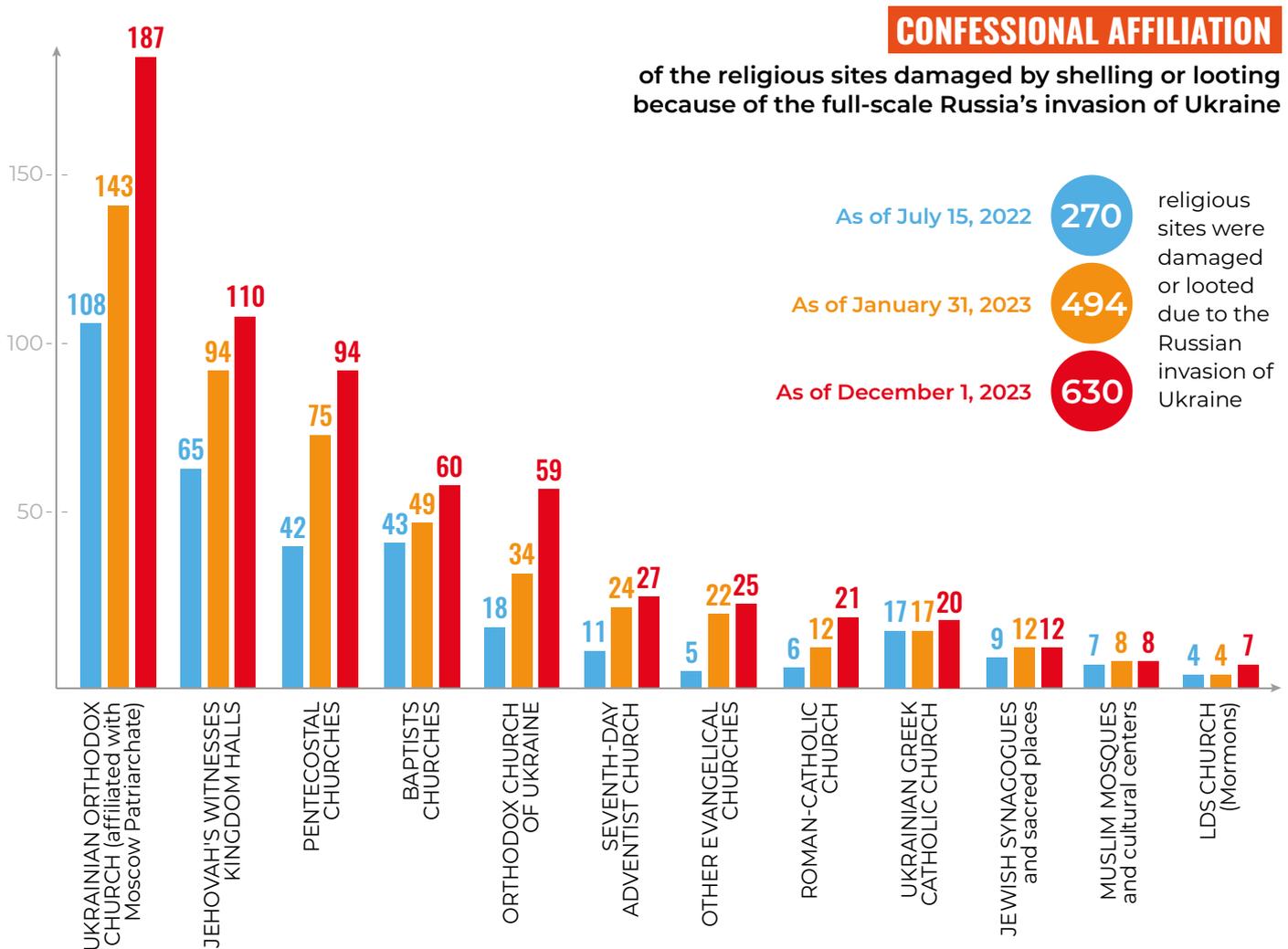
RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS AND SACRED PLACES

damaged by shelling or looting because of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine



Most churches, prayer houses, synagogues, and mosques were destroyed in Donetsk region (at least 146), Luhansk region (at least 83), and Kherson region (at least 78). The destruction in Kyiv region, where Russian troops attempted to capture the capital of Ukraine in February-March 2022, was also enormous (73). Due to the ongoing hostilities, the number of destroyed buildings is increasing in Kharkiv region (at least 62), Zaporizhzhia region (at least 51), and Mykolaiv region (at least 41).

In 2023, the scale of destruction of religious buildings in the southern regions of Ukraine increased significantly compared to 2022. Besides, several churches were flooded as a result of the June 6 blasting of the Kakhovka hydroelectric dam by Russian troops⁴, which is a separate war crime and potentially an act of ecocide. In addition, Russia continues to fire missiles and kamikaze drones at civilian infrastructure in almost all regions of Ukraine, affecting religious sites even in the far-western regions of the country.



On a confessional basis, Orthodox churches suffered most damage from the Russian aggression – at least 246 in total. Of these, the churches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate) suffered the most – at least 187. Also, 59 churches of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine were destroyed.

The scale of destruction and looting of evangelical churches is also extensive – at least 206 in total. Among them, the Pentecostal (94), Baptist (60), and Seventh-day Adventist Church (27) prayer houses suffered the most.

⁴ <https://news.church.ua/2023/06/07/u-xersonskij-jeparxiji-rozpovili-pro-postrazhdali-vnaslidok-pidrivu-dambi-xrami/>

Thus, in the city of Melitopol in the Zaporizhzhia region, occupied on February 24, 2022, the first day of the full-scale invasion, the Russian military purposefully seized church buildings in order to loot them and stop the activities of Ukrainian churches, primarily evangelical (Protestant) denominations. According to Pastor Mykhailo Brytsyn, the occupying authorities of Melitopol have now closed at least 11 churches, depriving believers of the opportunity to collectively profess their faith, perform social services, and provide humanitarian assistance to those in need. Under surveillance and risking personal persecution, believers are now forced to gather for worship at their own homes.



MYKHAILO BRYTSYN

Presbyter of the “Grace” Church of Evangelical Christians of the city of Melitopol (Zaporizhzhia region), Director of the Religious Freedom Initiative at Mission Eurasia

“The Russian military seized several churches in Melitopol. The first to be seized was the building of the Melitopol Christian Church [pastor Viktor Sergeev]. It is a large complex. They seized it with an armored personnel carrier because they thought that there were armed “extremists” and “terrorists” there. That was nonsense. There was only one girl on front desk duty, that is all. Then they seized the building of the Word of Life Evangelical Church [pastor Dmitry Bodyu]. Russian soldiers arrived on a weekday, kicked out church security, put up their own, and turned the prayer house into a military base.

Our ‘Grace’ church was the third to be captured. Russian soldiers burst in during a worship service. They allowed nothing to be taken out. They simply expelled people while taking fingerprints, photos, IDs, addresses, and all personal information from the parishioners. It’s horrifying to think about what they can do with this information.

Now, some Russian police officers live in our church. The Russian occupying authorities designated one of the buildings of the captured and looted church as the “Ministry of Culture of Zaporizhzhia Region.” Crosses were cut from churches, including ours. Only Satanists used to do that. How can you say about Russians that “it is an army of an Orthodox country” if they are cutting down crosses?

In the fourth church that they seized, they looted, destroyed, and trashed everything. They came back in two or three weeks and banned believers from gathering there. Now, the Russian authorities have taken the Greek Catholic Church. Melitopol is not the only city where they are seizing church buildings. I know with certainty that they seized the “Word of Life” building in Berdyansk and prayer houses in several villages of the Zaporizhzhia region.”



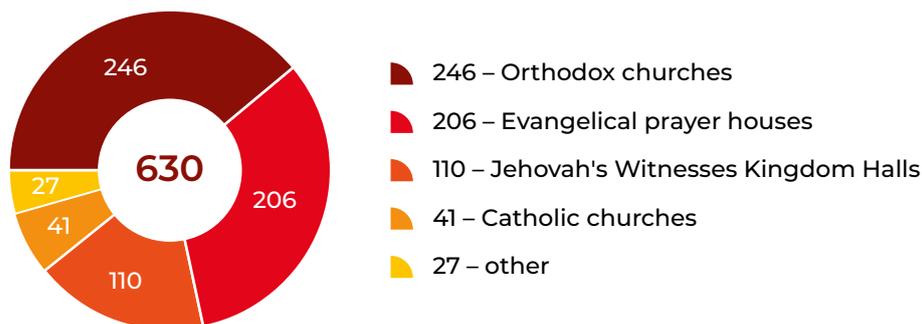
Watch Pastor Mykhailo Brytsyn's video testimony:

<https://youtu.be/8tHPoF2POLI>

The Halls of the Kingdom of Jehovah's Witnesses suffered considerable damage: a total of 110 religious buildings of which 12 completely destroyed, 20 heavily damaged, and 78 slightly damaged. Among them, 32 religious buildings were seized by the Russian military or occupying authorities.

GENERALIZED DATA ON THE DENOMINATIONS OF UKRAINE

that suffered the most from the destruction of religious sites



However, this updated data cannot be considered complete, as it is impossible to fully assess the true scale of destruction of the religious infrastructure and spiritual heritage of Ukraine in the conditions of ongoing military action and systematic Russian air raids on all regions of the country. Reports of another church or prayer house being seized or looted by the Russian military appear almost weekly. Due to the above, a more accurate assessment of the scale of the destruction of religious buildings and the damage caused to religious communities as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine will be possible after the end of hostilities and de-occupation of all Ukrainian territories.

4. INTENSIFICATION OF RUSSIAN REPRESSIONS AGAINST RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE

In the first months of the full-scale invasion, the Russian occupying authorities were trying to gain the support of the local population, and thus were in no rush to close churches and prayer houses. For some time, Ukrainian religious communities were able to conduct worship services (notably in Ukrainian), help victims of hostilities, distribute humanitarian assistance transferred from other regions of Ukraine and fellow believers abroad, alleviate everyday problems of their city's residents in the absence of food, medicines, gasoline for evacuation and access to bank accounts (including pension payments).

Simultaneously, the occupying authorities were encouraging Ukrainian religious figures of various denominations to issue public statements in support of the Russian-installed authorities and cooperate with Russian intelligence and security services, promising freedom of religion, continuity of worship, and religious activity as usual. However, they did not keep these promises. Underlying reason for this was not only the frequent change of leadership in various structures of the occupying administrations but also the hidden genocidal motives of the Russian aggression, the purpose of which was to destroy the Ukrainian state, nation, culture, history, and identity, including religious identity⁵.



OLEKSANDR BABIYCHUK

Bishop of the Ukrainian Pentecostal Church in Kherson region, Secretary General of the Ukrainian Bible Society

“Initially, the Russian occupying authorities painted a promising picture: there would be a possibility for worship and spiritual work... But the “teams” of the so-called authorities quickly changed. Others came and showed utterly different attitudes, and we quickly realized what was behind those promises and prospects. Open threats, blackmail, and accusations of strange things began. We were alleged to be American spies working under the guise of religious organizations.

The same thing happened with a branch of the Ukrainian Bible Society in Kherson, which has a warehouse and a building in the city center where worship services were held. For some time, it was possible to continue working, speaking with people, and distributing the Gospel, children's Bibles, and other spiritual literature. But the occupation authorities obviously did not like it, and someone sicced a special detachment of eight Russian soldiers on us. Right on Ukrainian Independence Day, on August 24, 2022, they raided our office. They broke the locked gate and side entrance and broke in.

⁵ Vasin M., Koval D., Kozlovskiy I. et al. Russian attacks on religious freedom in Ukraine. Research, analytics and recommendations / Institute for Religious Freedom. K.: 2022. – P. 15. URL: <https://irf.in.ua/files/publications/2022.09-IRF-Ukraine-report-UKR.pdf>

Russian soldiers behaved quite violently when seizing the building. All employees who were in the office were ordered to stay in place. We were told that some kind of partisan activity is being conducted there. The Russian soldiers began a full search of all office rooms and the warehouse. Eventually, they took the keys to the office and other buildings. The search itself was unimportant to them, as their true goal was to take away the keys and occupy the building. Since then, the occupation of our office has begun.



Watch Bishop
Oleksandr Babychuk's
video testimony:
<https://youtu.be/ryLcinUNOE4>

We felt and heard a lot of different threats and accusations of guerilla activities and undercover relations with foreign agencies. In reality, we did not engage in anything other than religious activities. Persecution from the Russian occupying authorities continued until the liberation of Kherson. For this whole time, they did not leave our building.”

From the first days of the invasion, Russian intelligence and security services summoned or forcibly brought in Ukrainian religious figures of various denominations for interrogation, attempting to coerce them to cooperate with the occupying authorities. Such interrogations were accompanied by personal threats and threats to family members, and often escalated to inhuman and degrading treatment and very violent torture. This mainly happened in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, large parts of which were rapidly occupied by the Russian military during February 24–26, 2022.

Russian occupying authorities sought not only to enlist the support of local opinion leaders, including religious figures, but also to use them to surveil the local population, denounce residents that were perceived as disloyal to them, and identify members of the partisan resistance movement and pro-Ukrainian activists for elimination. Those Ukrainian religious figures who could not be forced to cooperate and disagreed with the Russian occupation were compelled to leave their hometowns or villages to territories controlled by the Ukrainian government.



DMITRY BODYU

Pastor of the “Word of Life” Evangelical Church
in Melitopol (Zaporizhzhia region)

“When the war broke out in our city, we opened the doors of our church for people who fled from shelling: they could find food, warm up, and receive medical and practical assistance. The church served as a shelter for the residents of our city until March 19, when I was arrested. Russian soldiers came to my house at 6:30 in the morning, grabbed me, and dragged me to prison. I was persistently interrogated every day. I could not even imagine how much time I would have to spend in prison and what would happen to me next as I was threatened with death. However, eight days later, the Russian military released me because many people prayed for me, and my situation gained international attention.



Watch Pastor
Dmitry Bodyu's
video testimony:

<https://youtu.be/XhgLwc2mla0>

Despite this, Russian soldiers did not leave me alone. They came to my house almost daily to maintain pressure. They really wanted me to work for them. Therefore, I decided to evacuate from the occupied territory with my family. However, Russian authorities did not allow us to go directly to territory controlled by the Ukrainian government. They forced us to go to Russia through Crimea and return to Ukraine through Latvia and Poland, which took us seven days. It was a terrifying time, especially for the children who escaped with me. My children are adults now, but my grandson, who was only three years old, was with us."

Occupying authorities wanted to take advantage of the social influence of Ukrainian religious communities. However, they did not realize that in Ukraine, religious leaders and communities can act independently of state power, self-organize, and cooperate with representatives of other denominations. The Institute for Religious Freedom has documented numerous cases of torture where Ukrainian religious figures were arbitrarily imprisoned to expose their alleged links to Ukrainian or Western intelligence and security services. During brutal interrogations, Russian soldiers and intelligence agents could not believe that Ukrainian priests, pastors, imams, and rabbis conscientiously provided pastoral care to believers and were not agents of intelligence and security services, as is often the case in Russia.

Demonstratively, one of the forms of cruel and humiliating treatment was a demand to sing the national anthem of the Russian Federation. This is aggravated by the fact that Russians still perform their anthem to the tune of the anthem of the Soviet Union, known for its atheistic propaganda and repression against all believers. This abuse and numerous tortures were suffered by e.g. the Ukrainian chaplains whom Russians captured after an attempt to retrieve the bodies of Ukrainian sailors (at that time presumed dead) from Snake Island.



VASYL VYROZUB

Rector of the Odesa Holy Trinity Cathedral and
chaplain of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine

"In Russian captivity, we were constantly reproached for being chaplains of another denomination. That is, we are not chaplains of the Russian Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. And therefore, supposedly, "schismatics." Their attitude towards us was much worse. Whenever I said that I was a chaplain of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Russians said: "You are schismatic." Moreover, they immediately had a question: "In which SBU department do you work?". They never considered that I do not work for the SBU. They could not even comprehend it. If this is how they think, their priests must be cooperating with the FSB. After all, this was asked throughout the entire seventy-day captivity: "In which SBU department do you work?". And interrogations, interrogations, interrogations. I was beaten and threatened.

Interrogation with torture. That's what they learned to do in Russia, to break a person. In the morning, they forced us to sing the Russian anthem. Instead, we stood in prayer. We read The Lord's Prayer at that time. All the while, from the other side, Russian guards beat on the iron doors with batons. After one such "act of disobedience," I was thrown into a punishment cell.

The punishment cell is called "rubber". The room is two and a half by four meters (8.4 x 13 ft). It is a basement. It's cold: about 6 to 8 degrees Celsius (43 or 46 degrees Fahrenheit). They stripped me naked and threw me in. The room is not ventilated, and there is no toilet or water; just a room lined with rubber. I was in the cold for almost four days without food, water, or sleep. I heated one spot and stood on it, then stomped my feet. After 24 hours of standing in this way, my heels were already in pain, as if they had been beaten. Then I stood on my knees, trying to warm up. Whenever I fell asleep, I fell to the ground. The ground was cold, so I got up again. There was no toilet, and other prisoners were here before me. In a day, I was coughing up pus. And during all this, I was taken out for interrogations.

During the interrogations, two Russian soldiers stretched me with my head against the wall, each soldier pulling one of my legs, forcing me into a split, and twisting one of my arms. The third one stood behind them, hit my kidneys and head, and electrocuted me with a shocker. While twisting my arms and forcing me onto my knees, they shoved a needle under my nail and kept saying: "You will tell us, you will confess," and continued the torture. Russians learned how to torture. But they did not learn how to build and create. I lost over 15 kilograms (33 lbs) of weight in 70 days of captivity. So, you can imagine what they fed us."



Watch chaplain priest Vasyl Vyrozub's video testimony:

<https://youtu.be/hAW97dKedCs>

As they saw pro-Ukrainian religious communities as a threat, Russian intelligence and security services and occupying authorities transitioned to more brutal and targeted persecution from mid-summer 2022. Repressions included the seizure and closure of religious buildings, arbitrary arrests, and deportation of Ukrainian religious figures who refused to cooperate.



MYKHAILO BRYTSYN

Presbyter of the "Grace" Church of Evangelical Christians of the city of Melitopol (Zaporizhzhia region),
Director of the Religious Freedom Initiative at Mission Eurasia

"During a search in our church, Russian soldiers found Christian literature published in Germany back in the 1990s and used it to accuse us: "You are German spies. You are a cancerous tumor that we need to get rid of." We said, "Listen,



Watch pastor
Mykhailo Brytsyn's
video testimony:

<https://youtu.be/8tHPoF2POLI>

this is an ordinary Evangelical Baptist Church. There are many such churches all over Russia, Crimea, and Donbas." The response of the Russian soldiers struck us: "This is temporary. There will be one church. We will start by restoring order here and then in Russia as well." The Russians also searched my house and took all computers, tablets, hard drives, and all church documents that were there. They gave me two days: "How long do you need to leave? Is two days enough?"

Under Russian occupation, believers of evangelical churches (Pentecostals, Baptists, Adventists, Charismatics, etc.) have been particularly affected, not only by wide-scale looting and seizures of their prayer houses, but also as Russian soldiers repeatedly threaten the total physical destruction of all evangelical believers, calling them "American spies," "sectarians," and "enemies of the Russian Orthodox people." It seems that Russian soldiers and special agents have themselves been convinced by the Kremlin's propaganda about the "extremism" and "American roots" of all evangelical (Protestant) churches and see them as a threat to the "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World) ideology.



”



Watch Valentyn Syniy's
video testimony:
<https://youtu.be/IXVCx0G57b0>

VALENTYN SYNIY

Rector of the Tavriski Christian Institute
(Kherson region)

“Our employees who remained in Kherson during the occupation received a large number of threats from Russian soldiers. They called evangelical believers fascists, Banderites,⁶ and American spies... They said this was not a theological institute but a sect, so these premises should be taken from us.

One Russian officer told an employee of our institute, “Evangelical believers like you should be completely destroyed since you are sectarians and American spies. But simply shooting you will be too easy for you. You need to be buried alive.”

Ukrainian churches and religious organizations of all denominations have faced such repressions, with the exception of Orthodox communities affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate. Russian occupying authorities reacted with particular harshness to any manifestations of Ukrainian identity in the occupied territories and made significant efforts to eliminate them. Here even some priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church were repressed and tortured: those who, despite their canonical affiliation with the Moscow Patriarchate, preserved their Ukrainian identity and did not support the Russian occupation.

⁶ Banderites (Banderivtsi) is a colloquial term for members and supporters of the faction of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists led by Stepan Bandera. This term has been used pejoratively in Soviet propaganda and to denote the Ukrainian underground during and after the Second World War, as well as all Ukrainian nationalists and all those in Ukraine opposed to Soviet nationality policy. It continues to be used by radical anti-democratic pro-Russian forces in independent Ukraine to denote members of pro-Western democratic parties, especially hailing from Western Ukraine [source: Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine, 2001].



IHOR NOVOSILSKIY

Rector of the Church of St. Olha of the village of Tokarivka, Bilozersk district (Kherson region)

“Throughout the entire period of Russian occupation, we were, are, and will be Ukrainians. But unfortunately, on August 29, 2022, Russian soldiers kidnapped me from the church grounds. They came to my house at 7:20 am, but I was no longer there. They took my wife by the neck and said, “Where is he?”, looking for me. Russian special forces found me on the territory of the church and grabbed me after hitting me in the head. They handcuffed me behind my back and put a bag over my head. That is how I was kidnapped. They threw me into a car, on the floor under the seats, like a dog. Russian soldiers sat down on those seats, putting their feet on me. They took me to an unknown destination.

In the cell, I learned I was in a temporary detention center in Kherson. There, Russian soldiers threatened me in many ways, for example: “We will cut off your finger!” These are the first words that I recall. I was asked if I prayed for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, what I talked about in sermons, and whether or not I helped Ukrainian soldiers. There were no specific allegations. But beatings began from the first day in the detention center. Russian guards demanded that everyone memorize the anthem of the Russian Federation during their first night. I did not, of course. So, on the fifth day, I found out what it feels like to be electrocuted with a shocker. I was beaten and broken for not learning the Russian anthem. I didn’t understand why I had to learn it. I told the guards: “I have a country whose anthem I know.”

None of the Russian soldiers ever introduced themselves or explained what was happening. Like the other people in the cell, I was simply kidnapped. No one in my family was told where I was or what happened to me. When Russian troops retreated from the right bank of the Dnipro River on October 29, 2022, we realized that we were being transported to the city of Hola Prystan’ on the left bank. We were there for ten days. We were then loaded into prisoner transport vehicles and taken to the city of Chaplynka, 15 kilometers from Crimea. Thirty people were left there, and the rest were taken further. We were placed in a basement, ten people in a cell.

The conditions were terrible. There was no flooring, water, or toilet in that basement. We were taken out of the basement for a 10-minute morning walk and 10 minutes in the evening. They brought porridge in a soldier’s thermos, which 60 people shared. I was responsible for handing out food in the cell. I split this porridge among the boys:

one and a half spoons in the morning and one and a half in the evening. We have been fed so terribly for a month. There was not a spoonful of food or a crumb of bread for the first five days. I developed a stomach ulcer, but FSB officers did not permit a hospital transfer. They answered me: "When you die, we will bury you." During my time in captivity, a guy with liver problems died in one of the cells. He was taken to a hospital, examined, brought back in an hour, and left in a cell without proper treatment. Five days later, he died.

In early 2023, Russian soldiers began to take most of the imprisoned Ukrainians to an unknown destination. Criminal cases were fabricated against everyone. Everyone was threatened with being shot. We lived in fear, not knowing what awaits us tomorrow. I was held captive for exactly 262 days, from August 29, 2022, to May 17, 2023, with two transfers.

Russian soldiers and FSB agents were most irritated when they heard: "I am Ukrainian. This is my land; I was born on it, and I will not leave it." They thought I was a nationalist when I spoke Ukrainian. On May 17, 2023, I was released without explanation. People who, as I understood it, were FSB representatives came in and asked: "Why were you detained?". As if they didn't know why. I no longer knew what answers to give them, so I said: "Probably for praying for the Armed Forces of Ukraine." ⁷



Watch priest
Ihor Novosilskiy's
video testimony:
<https://youtu.be/2rxikO3J49Q>

In the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions occupied by Russia back in 2014 (the self-proclaimed "DPR" and "LPR"), Russian religious legislation has been actively implemented over the past five years. In particular, the Russian laws on combating extremism and illegal missionary activity are being enforced as a formal pretense for repressions against Ukrainian religious minorities, i.e. all confessions with the exception of Orthodox communities affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate. This practice also takes place in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea. Following the illegal annexation of the DPR, LPR, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions by Russia in September 2022⁸ (de facto a recognition of the act of armed aggression against the Ukrainian state by the Russian political leadership), Russian legislation began to be implemented in the southern regions of Ukraine occupied by Russian forces as a result of the full-scale invasion.

From the end of 2023, occupying administrations in Russian-controlled territories of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions started to demand Ukrainian religious communities to re-register under the legislation of the Russian Federation. This involved encouraging religious figures and founders of religious communities to accept Russian citizenship and the subordination of religious communities to Russian religious centers. In this way, the Kremlin seeks to establish complete control over religious activities in the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories, as Russian religious centers cannot operate independently and are under the complete control of Russian security and intelligence services.

⁷ Evidence documented by the Institute for Religious Freedom in August 2023.

⁸ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465> (Warning! This publication is Russian propaganda.)



MYKHAILO BRYTSYN

Presbyter of the “Grace” Church of Evangelical Christians of the city of Melitopol (Zaporizhzhia region), Director of the Religious Freedom Initiative at Mission Eurasia

“The oppression of religious freedom continues to this day. Starting in the spring of 2023, Russian soldiers have taken away buildings, documents, and keys from almost all Protestant churches in the occupied territories of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions. Remaining church ministers are under constant pressure to obtain Russian passports, gather the necessary quota of parishioners with Russian passports, and register religious communities based on Russian legislation. They are blackmailed through the seizure of religious buildings. Russian occupying authorities say: “Register a religious community, then you will get your building back.” Some church ministers who did not agree to cooperate with the Russian authorities were banned from registering religious organizations in territories seized by Russian forces as a result of the full-scale invasion. However, even registering a religious community under Russian legislation does not guarantee the return of prayer houses to believers or the right to conduct worship services in them. Seized religious buildings are often given the status of non-proprietary real estate. This way, local authorities and Russian soldiers are now utilizing such church property at their discretion.”⁹

⁹ Testimony of Mykhailo Brytsyn, provided to the Institute for Religious Freedom in December 2023.

5. THE IDEOLOGICAL BASIS AND GENOCIDAL NATURE OF RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION AND THE ROLE OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine carries characteristics of genocide: both the Kremlin's rhetoric and the actions of the Russian military during the full-scale invasion clearly display an intent to destroy the Ukrainian people as bearer of state sovereignty, as a nation, and as an ethnic group. According to international humanitarian law, genocidal intent can be demonstrated by the fact that in addition to the physical destruction of the civilian population of Ukraine and the systematic attacks on the energy network and other critical civilian infrastructure, the Russian army deliberately destroys museums, libraries, books in Ukrainian, historical monuments, cultural property and religious buildings, which constitute the cultural heritage and symbols of the Ukrainian nation¹⁰.

At the basis of Russian war crimes and the crime of genocide of the Ukrainian people is the chauvinistic ideology of "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World), which de facto denies the right of the Ukrainian nation to self-determination, sovereign development, its own state, language, history, cultural identity and religious pluralism. Russian President Vladimir Putin, representatives of the Russian authorities, and Russian media have repeatedly stated that Ukrainians as a people "do not exist" and that the Ukrainian nation has been "artificially created." In 2021, Russian soldiers were obligated to study Putin's manipulative article On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians as part of their military-political training. In this propagandistic publication, Putin promotes the ideology that "Russians and Ukrainians are one people" and part of "a three-in-one Russian nation,"¹¹ writes about the creation of Ukraine at the expense of "historical territories" of Russia and distorts other historical events.¹²

In recent years, public calls to physically destroy Ukrainians were frequently voiced in Russia, both on television and the Internet. Russian soldiers in occupied parts of Ukraine embody these calls by killing residents with pro-Ukrainian views, exterminating the intellectual elite and committing mass crimes against the civilian population (torture, rape, murder, kidnapping, imprisonment, etc.). Russian occupying authorities are replacing the Ukrainian education system they illegally liquidated with one that aims to change the identity of Ukrainian children and youth. Russian missiles and artillery destroy historical and cultural monuments, especially those associated with Ukrainian identity, on an almost daily basis. Russian soldiers plunder and destroy Ukrainian museums, archives, theaters, libraries, churches, and prayer houses.

Religion is one of the tools that the Kremlin has been constantly using during the armed aggression against Ukraine ever since 2014 to spread the ideology of "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World).¹³ During the full-scale invasion, Russia actively exploits the schism in Ukrainian

10 Vasin M., Koval D., Kozlovskiy I. et al. Russian attacks on religious freedom in Ukraine. Research, analytics and recommendations / Institute for Religious Freedom. K.: 2022. – P. 25-26. URL: <https://irf.in.ua/files/publications/2022.09-IRF-Ukraine-report-UKR.pdf>

11 Besides Ukraine and the Russian Federation, the Republic of Belarus was presented as the third part of this conception.

12 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465> (Caution! This publication is Russian propaganda.)

13 Andrii Ivanets. Support of the aggressive and genocidal war of Russia against Ukraine by "traditional" religious organizations of the Russian Federation (from 24.02.2022 to February 2023). Kyiv: 2023. – P. 3-4. URL: <https://holodomormuseum.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Pidtrymka-tradytsijnymy-relihijnymy-orhanizatsiiamy-RF-ahresyvnoi-ta-henotsydney-vijny-Rosii-proty-Ukrainy-1.pdf>

Orthodoxy and provokes local conflicts in Orthodox communities to accuse the Ukrainian government of violating religious freedoms and weaken international support for Ukraine. The ambiguous position of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), regarding the Russian aggression serves Russia's interests, allowing it to successfully spread propaganda about the alleged oppression of religious freedoms in Ukraine in domestic and Western media. At the same time, the actual situation is the complete opposite: it is Russia that is carrying out brutal repressions against Ukrainian religious communities, primarily evangelical denominations, and physically destroying disloyal religious figures in the temporarily occupied territories. Ukraine, on the other hand, maintains democratic discussions during the legislative process and has a functioning justice system and international instruments for protecting human rights.

Despite the proclamation of the severance of formal ties with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in May 2022,¹⁴ the UOC-MP remains in canonical subordination to the Moscow Patriarchate and demonstrates its inability to criticize the decisions made in Moscow. For example, the UOC-MP leadership did not condemn or resist the seizure of the Simferopol and Crimea Diocese¹⁵ and the Berdyansk Diocese, which the Russian Orthodox Church arbitrarily "transferred to the direct canonical and administrative subordination of the Patriarch of Moscow" after the occupation of these Ukrainian territories by Russian troops.¹⁶ The governing bodies of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church also did not condemn the decision of the Holy Synod of the ROC to seize a part of the Kherson Diocese of the UOC-MP in December 2023¹⁷.

In addition, the UOC-MP does not dissociate itself from the propaganda of the ROC, which justifies the Russian aggression against Ukraine and attributes sacred meanings to it. For example, in September 2022, in his Sunday sermon, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow de facto encouraged Russian soldiers to commit further atrocities against Ukraine, proclaiming that their death on the battlefield is "a sacrifice that washes away all sins."¹⁸ This and other overtly heretical statements did not prompt the governing bodies of the UOC-MP to publicly condemn the pseudo-Christian militaristic theology of the Patriarch of Moscow and stop mentioning his name during services in their Orthodox communities in Ukraine.

In addition, the UOC-MP leadership does not publicly condemn its bishops and priests who committed treason or other crimes and whose guilt in, for example, collaborating with Russian troops and occupying authorities, openly justifying Russian aggression was proven in court. Instead, media resources of the ROC and UOC-MP depict proven abuses and outright violations of laws by certain hierarchs and priests as persecution of the Church by the Ukrainian authorities¹⁹. Russian propaganda similarly distorts information about the eviction of the UOC-MP from the premises of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra. In fact, the government of Ukraine terminated a lease agreement with the monastery of the UOC-MP after discovering numerous facts of law abuse and violations by hierarchs of the UOC-MP during their use of this state-owned historical and architectural monument²⁰.

The de facto pro-Russian position of the UOC-MP has led to growing resentment in Ukrainian society. As a result, hundreds of UOC-MP communities decided to change their canonical subordination and transfer from the Moscow Patriarchate to the Orthodox

14 <https://www.rferl.org/a/orthodox-church-kirill-war-russia/31872141.html>

15 <https://ua.krymr.com/a/krym-tserkva-perepidporiadkuvannia-moskovskomu-patriarkhatu/31890688.html>

16 https://lb.ua/society/2023/05/16/555595_rpts_pidporyadkuvala_sobi_berdyansku.html

17 <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6088380.html> (Caution! This publication is Russian propaganda.)

18 <https://t.me/sotaproject/46913>

19 <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/aresht-pavla-podiyi-khmelnytskyi-kryza-moskovskoho-patriarkhatu/32346936.html>

20 <https://vechirniy.kyiv.ua/news/80340/>

Church of Ukraine, which received autocephaly in January 2019. All the while, Russian diplomats and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church tirelessly accuse Kyiv of oppressing the UOC-MP at different international conferences, while trying to justify Russian military aggression. In the meantime, the UOC-MP leadership proved unable to openly and unquestionably condemn the Russian aggression, the occupation of Crimea and part of the eastern regions of Ukraine, and the atrocities of the Russian military in Ukraine during the full-scale invasion, to refute Russian propaganda statements concerning alleged threats to religious freedoms and the use of the Russian language in Ukraine, or unequivocally stand on the side of the suffering people of Ukraine and support their struggle for freedom.

Ukrainian authorities are forced to react to threats that arise from the Kremlin's use of Russian religious centers to justify its armed aggression, influence the consciousness of Orthodox citizens of Ukraine, and commit acts of sabotage involving Orthodox bishops and priests subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate. Government bill No.8371, submitted to the Ukrainian Parliament in January 2023, aims to minimize influence on the Ukrainian population through any Russian religious centers. The government proposes to oblige Ukrainian religious organizations subordinate to Russian religious centers to break these ties. If an organization refuses to comply with orders issued by the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience (SEFC) based on this law, it may be banned by court decision²¹. On October 19, 2023, the Parliament of Ukraine adopted bill No.8371 in the first reading, which means this law may still undergo significant changes during the second reading and finalization process.²²

The head of SEFC, **Viktor Yelenskyi**, substantiates the need for these changes by the fact that Russian religious centers, primarily the Moscow Patriarchate, cannot act independently and are under complete control of the Kremlin²³. Accordingly, this legislative initiative aims to encourage Ukrainian religious organizations to rid themselves voluntarily of the aggressor state's influence, allowing them to continue their religious activities in Ukraine. This choice also remains open for the UOC-MP: either take actual (not declarative) actions, break its ties with the ROC, or become a "victim" of the ban. Obviously, a ban on the UOC-MP would be in the Kremlin's favor, as it would allow to form an image of a martyr church and criticize Ukraine in the (Western) media with renewed vigor.

Russia's tactics of using the situation around the UOC-MP to reduce international support for Ukraine have already proven effective. At the end of 2023, the U.S. Congress was unable to decide on a new military support package. The decision was hampered by discussions about religious freedom in Ukraine, fueled by Russian propaganda²⁴. So far, the leadership of the UOC-MP has allowed Russia to use this Church in its geopolitical games. Compliance or non-compliance with orders of the SEFC to sever ties with the ROC, in the case of the adoption of bill No.8371, will become an obvious indicator of the true stance of the UOC-MP: it will show whether this church is really Ukrainian or remains a part of the Moscow-controlled ROC.

21 <https://itd.rada.gov.ua/billInfo/Bills/Card/41219>

22 <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-65747898>

23 <https://www.dw.com/uk/superecka-navkolo-upc-mp-ci-mozlivij-cerkovnij-kompromis-u-lavri/a-65240490>

24 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/28/russia-attacks-ukraine-evangelicals/>

6. CONCLUSION

It is most likely that if Russia retains control over the occupied territories of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions throughout 2024 and beyond, Ukrainian churches and religious communities in these regions will face the same fate as believers in the parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions occupied since 2014. The Russian occupying authorities will continue to fight any manifestations of dissent, opposition, and Ukrainian identity, particularly religious identity, by enforcing repressive Russian legislation. Reference to Russian laws and mock justice will only be a smokescreen to hide a general lack of rule of law, widespread corruption, and arbitrariness of law enforcement agencies in all of the territory controlled by the Russian Federation from the international community. This makes that there is no chance for fair trial and protection of the right to freedom of religion in the Ukrainian territories under Russian control.

As a result, most members of Ukrainian religious communities will be forced to flee Russian repression, leaving their native cities and villages. This will trigger a new migration wave, leading to an increase both in the number of internally displaced persons and that of Ukrainian refugees in the countries of the European Union and on other continents.

This may be prevented by a more decisive response from the international community to the Russian Federation's crime of aggression against Ukraine, which is accompanied by numerous war crimes against Ukrainian religious figures and communities and shows clear genocidal traits. Such a response could include additional economic sanctions against the Russian Federation and personal sanctions against Russian leadership and direct perpetrators of Russian repressive policy in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.

Ukraine's partners and other democratic states should also facilitate the investigation by the International Criminal Court of any war crimes, crimes of genocide, and crimes against humanity committed on the territory of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and its armed forces. Additionally, countries should engage their national mechanisms in investigating Russian war crimes and bring all those responsible for their commission to justice.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONSE

- 1** To publicly condemn the Russian World ideology and the position of the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, as well as other Russian religious associations and leaders who participate in the Russian aggression and justify it or promote hatred and genocide of the people of Ukraine.
- 2** To strongly and proactively support Ukraine's efforts to investigate Russian war crimes and prosecute all war criminals.
- 3** To create a Special Tribunal for the Punishment of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine.
- 4** To introduce personal sanctions against Russian officials, religious leaders, media workers, and other individuals responsible for justifying or carrying out repressions against Ukrainian religious leaders and faith-based communities on the Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia.
- 5** To designate the Russian Federation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, considering the constant attacks on the civilian population and critical infrastructure of Ukraine, deliberate exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis, nuclear blackmail, the use of torture, inhuman treatment of prisoners of war and arbitrarily imprisoned civilians, particularly religious figures.

VIDEO TESTIMONIES OF RUSSIAN WAR CRIMES AGAINST RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND FAITH-BASED COMMUNITIES IN UKRAINE

The Institute for Religious Freedom recorded testimonies of religious leaders of various denominations who survived Russian captivity, abduction, arbitrary imprisonment, torture, or witnessed the deliberate destruction and looting of houses of worship by the Russian military. English subtitles accompany the videos.



Priest
Vasyl Vyrozub

"During 70 days of captivity, I lost over 15 kg (33 lb). Russians have learned to torture. But they had not learned to build and create."

<https://youtu.be/hAW97dKedCs>



Pastor
Mykhailo Brytsyn

"Russian occupational authorities confiscated all our church property in Melitopol. Later, the raids during home worship services occurred."

<https://youtu.be/8tHPoF2POLI>



Pastor Dmitry Bodyu

"The Russian military seized our church building. I was imprisoned and told that I would soon be killed. For local evangelical believers under Russian occupation, a deadly threat remains."

<https://youtu.be/XhgLwc2mla0>



Bishop
Oleksandr Babiychuk

"Arbitrary detaining of religious figures is a standard practice of the Russian military."

<https://youtu.be/ryLcinUNOE4>



Valentyn Syniy

"Russian servicemen threatened and claimed all Evangelical believers as American spies, sectarians, and enemies of the Russian Orthodox people."

<https://youtu.be/IXVCx0G57b0>



Anatoliy Falei

"Russian servicemen destroyed all at the Tavriski Christian Institute and stole everything, saying: It does not belong to you."

<https://youtu.be/Oslv5i5q7NI>



Priest
Ihor Novosilskiy

"Russian special forces found and grabbed me at the church after hitting me in the head. They handcuffed me and put a bag over my head. That is how I was kidnapped."

<https://youtu.be/2rxikO3J49Q>



Fr. Sergiy Chudinovich

"Russian military threatened me in every possible way. They put me on my knees, put my head on a chair, pressed me down with a knee, and said that they would rape me with the baton."

<https://youtu.be/T5vaeQD43hw>



Denis Gorenkov

"After Russian troops entered the Kyiv region, their headquarter was located in the building of our religious mission in Irpin. As result, our building was totally destroyed."

<https://youtu.be/CCgbwdIDqck>



Oleg Bondarenko

"Russian soldiers threw me into a sewage well, where I spent two days. Every day they mauled someone from the local population to death: they shot their legs and broke their hands."

<https://youtu.be/lzxRAO6rCuE>



**Pastor
Valentyn Zahreba**

"For many believers today, the issue of survival is becoming extremely important. Now both of our church buildings in Mariupol are destroyed."

https://youtu.be/cK_zpo7wBoA



Rabbi Moshe Azman

"No one asked Russians to come in Ukraine to "denazify" someone, but they came and shot peaceful citizens of Russian-speaking cities of Kharkiv, Mariupol, and Kyiv region."

<https://youtu.be/F5-Tsr20YkA>



Fr. Andrii Klyushev

"Russians wanted to get into our church. They broke down the doors to our bell tower, climbed it, then a Russian sniper climbed the fire escape to the roof of our church and use it as a firepoint."

<https://youtu.be/gEp3oZtGGyM>



Imam Rustem Asanov

"Russians hate us. They have only one goal – the destruction of the Ukrainian nation as a whole. If they hear the Ukrainian language or see the Ukrainian flag, it tears them apart from the inside."

<https://youtu.be/SPBeKYh9dM4>



Mufti Said Ismagilov

"Russia destroyed four Muslim religious buildings in Donbas. This happened as a result of heavy missile and artillery attacks by the Russian troops."

<https://youtu.be/txA-UAJH-I8>



Pastor Vyacheslav Keba

"When Russian soldiers came to our adaptation center, they started with shelling, then began to break everything, and finally stole many things."

<https://youtu.be/BhkNtHXoXvM>



Fr. Ruslan Mykhalkiv

"Russian soldiers shelled and robbed the Catholic seminary in the Kyiv region. They damaged many windows broke down doors, and burglarized the seminary."

<https://youtu.be/RpDJ59MW4Fo>



Watch all video testimonies:
<https://bit.ly/2022-IRF-video-testimonies>

The impact of the Russian invasion on faith-based communities in Ukraine

Copy-editor:

Cinta Depondt, PAX

Design:

Anna Bukovska, Fayno Development

Translation from Ukrainian:

Maksym Maliuta

Video production:

Sergiy Burlaka, Vitalii Kalinichenko, Davyd Padun

Cover photo:

Russian military on the background of the destroyed Church of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in the city of Volnovakha, Donetsk region
(Alexander Ermochenko/ Reuters)

Signed for printing from the original layout – 05.03.2024.

Format – 210*297 mm,

offset printing, matte chalk paper, 28 pages,

Mind. printing of arcs. – 2,5

Number of copies – 100 pcs.

Printed – FOP Pachkovska N. P.

Publisher – “Pugach O.V.”

Certificate of inclusion in the State Register
of the subject of publishing

ДК №1560, 05.11.2003.

E-mail: olgapugach@ukr.net



The Institute for Religious Freedom (IRF) is a human rights NGO, founded in 2001 in Kyiv, Ukraine. Our goal is to protect and promote religious freedom and other related human rights, facilitate inter-faith dialogue and church-state cooperation, strengthen democratic foundations and civil society in Ukraine.

IRF contacts

P.O. Box 471-V, Kyiv, Ukraine 01001

E-mail: info@irf.in.ua

Phone: +38 099 176 3360

Website: irf.in.ua

ISBN 978-966-8359-75-0

