



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# ISSUE UPDATE: RUSSIA'S RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS IN UKRAINE

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### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

*By Dylan Schexnaydre, Researcher*

### Overview

For nearly ten years, the Russian Federation—through its military and proxy forces—has committed gross religious freedom violations in Ukraine. In February 2014, Russian forces *seized* the Crimean Peninsula and a month later illegally annexed it. In April 2014, fighting between Russian-backed separatists and the Ukrainian army began in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region. That same month, pro-Russian activists unlawfully declared their independence from Ukraine and proclaimed the unrecognized "Luhansk People's Republic" (LPR) and "Donetsk People's Republic" (DPR), which together *comprised* a third of the Donbas region.

In the years following, Russian-installed authorities in Crimea and Donbas imposed repressive Russian laws that severely curtailed religious freedom and targeted religious minorities. Officials banned religious literature and prohibited certain forms of religious activities and speech. They also outlawed entire religious groups either by depriving them of legal registration or declaring them "extremist" or "terrorist," despite the fact they had peacefully and legally practiced their religion in Ukraine for years.

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, its military has dismantled religious life and stifled religious diversity throughout other parts of Ukraine. On the frontlines of the war, Russian artillery and military forces frequently damaged and destroyed religious buildings and other sites and killed or injured those sheltering or worshiping in these places. In areas under Russian control, de-facto authorities have abducted and tortured religious leaders and enforced the same repressive Russian legal mechanisms that were instituted in Crimea and Donbas. Furthermore, official Russian state discourse justifying and supporting the war has frequently resorted to rhetoric demonizing Jews, distorting the Holocaust, denigrating "non-traditional" religious groups and the LGBTQI+ community, and characterizing Russia's unprovoked war of aggression in Ukraine as justified based on religion.

This issue update highlights Russia's religious freedom violations across Ukraine in the wake of its unprovoked 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

## Religious Demography

According to a national survey conducted by the Razumkov Centre in 2022, the majority of Ukraine's population *identifies* as Orthodox Christian, with the main two branches being the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the historically Moscow Patriarchate-linked Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). Additional Christian groups found in Ukraine include Ukrainian Greek Catholics, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, and Jehovah's Witnesses among several others. Non-Christian religious groups, who constitute a smaller portion of the population, include Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Falun Gong practitioners, Baha'is, and members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). While the distribution of religious affiliation in Crimea specifically is unclear, out of the estimated 2,353,000 people living on the peninsula in 2014, 300,000—or roughly 13% of the population—was *reported* to be Crimean Tatar, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group.

## Religious Freedom Violations in Russian Occupied Crimea

Since the occupation, Russian de-facto authorities have enforced Russia's religiously repressive legal system that punishes independent religious activities and targets disfavored religious groups. All religious groups in newly Russian-occupied territories had to re-register in accordance with Russian-imposed requirements. Authorities *denied* legal registration to several religious organizations and coerced others to recognize their legitimacy to gain registration. When the deadline for re-registration in Crimea passed in January 2016, only about 400 religious organizations had *gained* Russian legal status as opposed to the 1,546 recognized in Crimea under Ukrainian law prior to occupation. As of September 2022, Russian authorities in Crimea have registered more than 900 religious communities.

Upon registration, religious communities must adhere to Russian law which prohibits certain forms of religious activities and speech. Courts in occupied Crimea have fined several religious communities and members for illegal missionary activities, which include preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and even answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites. In May 2022, a Crimean Tatar Muslim was *fined* \$250 (20,000 Russian rubles) for leading prayer at a mosque without being a registered member of the community, and in August, a court in Yalta *fined* a Roman Catholic priest \$374 (30,000 Russian rubles) for failing to put his parish's full legal name on material posted on social media.

Russia's extremism law grants courts broad autonomy to determine whether literature or groups are "extremist," therefore subjecting them to various legal sanctions including literature bans, liquidation, financial blacklisting, or imprisonment of members who engage in the organization's activities. The law fails to clearly define "extremism," and the use of or advocacy for violence is not a *prerequisite* to be declared extremist, paving the way for authorities to prosecute virtually any activity or speech they consider problematic.

Since the Russian Supreme Court declared Jehovah's Witnesses extremist in 2017, Crimean Jehovah's Witnesses have faced unjust prosecution for their peaceful religious activities. In December 2022, a court in Armyansk *sentenced* two Jehovah's Witnesses to six years in prison for discussing the Bible over Zoom among other peaceful religious activities. In February 2023, the Yalta City Court *sentenced* three Jehovah's Witnesses to between six and six-and-a-half years in prison and another Jehovah's Witness to three years' suspended imprisonment for their religious beliefs. As of March, Russian de-facto courts in occupied Crimea have *sentenced* 12 Jehovah's Witnesses to imprisonment and two to suspended imprisonment, with five still under investigation.

Authorities in Crimea have targeted the OCU since it gained autocephaly in 2019, including *arresting* its archbishop and *ordering* the demolition of one of its churches. Most recently in May, Russian authorities *seized* the OCU Cathedral of Saints Volodymyr and Olha in Simferopol and transferred it to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Crimean Tatars, who fiercely oppose Russia's purported annexation of Crimea, have faced some of the harshest repression. Russian officials have dismantled Crimean Tatar institutions, subjected the community and its allies to harassment and intimidation, and arrested dozens of Crimean Tatar activists, journalists, and other civil society actors on the basis of their religious identity, religious activity, or alleged affiliation with *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* (HT), which is legal in Ukraine but banned in Russia. Since the Russian Supreme Court declared HT a terrorist organization in 2003, Muslims in Russia accused of belonging to HT have faced unsubstantiated terrorism and other charges related to their religious affiliation or activities, despite no evidence the defendants participated in, called for, or planned violence.

In February 2022, Federal Security Service (FSB) officers *searched* the homes of four Crimean Tatar activists and detained them for alleged HT activities, which included organizing and participating in meetings and discussing

religion and politics. The Southern Military District Court subsequently sentenced [Marlen Mustafayev](#) to 17 years' imprisonment in November, [Ametkhan Abdulvapov](#) to ten years and six months' imprisonment in March, [Ernest Seytosmanov](#) to 18 years' imprisonment in May, and [Ansar Osmanov](#) to 20 years' imprisonment in June.

Over the course of 2022 and early 2023, the Southern District Military Court sentenced a group of 20 Crimean Tatar activists who were arrested together in 2019 to prison terms ranging from 12 to 19 years for alleged HT affiliation. At the time of their arrests, authorities reportedly [planted](#) and subsequently "found" HT materials during searches of their homes. Those sentenced include [Remzi Bakirov](#), [Riza Izetov](#), [Farkhod Bazarov](#), [Raim Ayyazov](#), [Shaban Umerov](#), [Tofik Abdulgazyev](#), [Vladlen Abdulkadyrov](#), [Izzet Abdullayev](#), [Medzhit Abdurakhmanov](#), [Bilyal Adilov](#), [Enver Ametov](#), [Ruslan Suleimanov](#), [Yashar Muyedinov](#), [Rustem Sheikhaliev](#), [Osman Arifmemetov](#), [Alim Karimov](#), [Servet Gazyev](#), [Erfan Osmanov](#), [Seiran Murtaza](#), and [Dzhemil Gafarov](#).

In January, the Southern Military District Court sentenced Crimean Tatar cleric and activist [Raif Fevziyev](#) to 17 years in prison, and in May, the court sentenced [Dzhebbbar Bekirov](#) to 17 years in prison and [Zavur Abdullayev](#), [Rustem Murasov](#), and [Rustem Tairov](#) to 12 years in prison each. All five had been arrested in August 2021 and accused of being involved in HT. Prosecutors used recordings of the defendants discussing religious issues as evidence during trial, with at least one of the recordings dating back to December 2015.

In May, the Southern Military District Court sentenced [Oleksandr Sizikov](#), who is legally blind, to 17 years in prison and [Seiran Khairedinov](#) and [Alim Sufianov](#) to 12 years in prison each for alleged HT activities, which included possessing religious literature and discussing religion and politics. Authorities had originally detained the three in July 2020. Sizikov remains under house arrest pending his appeal.

Imprisoned Crimean Tatars [reported](#) medical neglect, being served food violating their religious dietary requirements, Qur'an confiscations, and inhumane living conditions, including rat-infested cells and a lack of access to beds, clean water, and sanitary toilet facilities. In February, Dzhemil Gafarov [died](#) in prison after experiencing chest pain, difficulty breathing, and severe headaches. Prison authorities rejected his January request to transfer to a hospital and had allegedly denied him medical care repeatedly over the years, despite his preexisting health conditions. In April, authorities took

into custody [Amet Suleymanov](#) to begin serving his sentence, despite his serious heart issues. Authorities had placed Suleymanov under house arrest in March 2020 after accusing him of HT membership, and in October 2021, the Southern Military District Court sentenced him to 12 years in prison.

## Religious Freedom Violations in Russian Occupied Donbas

While Russian forces took over the entirety of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, Russian occupation authorities and proxy forces spanning Luhansk and Donetsk have managed to expand the territories under their control following the 2022 invasion.

Russian de-facto authorities in Luhansk have refused to register places of worship for Protestants, the OCU, and Jehovah's Witnesses. According to Forum 18, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) reporting on freedom of religion or belief in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, out of the 202 religious organizations [registered](#) in Russian-occupied Luhansk, 190 are Russian Orthodox, 12 Muslim, one Jewish, one ISKCON, one Old Believer, and one Roman Catholic. In July 2022, men in military uniform in Lysychansk, Luhansk, reportedly seized the city's largest Protestant church, cleared out all the belongings, and turned it into a military administration building. That same month, they seized another Protestant church and reportedly told church members that the military administration has banned Baptists, Pentecostals, and Seventh-day Adventists as "extremists."

In Donetsk, Russian soldiers have [searched](#) churches, seized equipment and church documents, and removed religious literature deemed "extremist." In May 2022, Russian soldiers reportedly [established](#) an administration center in a seized Catholic monastery in Mariupol. In June 2022, Russian military forces toured the Church of Petro Mohyla of the OCU and burned books in the church's yard. It was reported in February that Russian de-facto authorities in Mariupol had [banned](#) "all Protestant and non-Orthodox churches" as well as non-Orthodox holidays. In April, occupation authorities in Dobropillya reportedly [prohibited](#) an OCU priest from conducting religious services at his church until he transferred to the UOC.

Forum 18 reports that Russian authorities in Luhansk and Donetsk continued to [prevent](#) Roman Catholic priests from returning to the regions, leaving their parishes without any priests to perform religious rituals.

## Targeting Ukrainian Religious Leaders

Russia's war against Ukraine has produced a humanitarian and human rights catastrophe. The United Nations (UN) has [confirmed](#) that nearly 9,000 civilians had been killed in Ukraine, with another 15,000 wounded. More than 8 million people have fled Ukraine as refugees to neighboring European countries, with millions of others internally displaced. Russia has consistently bombed civilian targets, including hospitals, schools, apartments, shopping centers, and houses of worship. In [October](#) and [March](#), the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine—which the UN Human Rights Council [established](#) in March 2022 to investigate war crimes committed during the conflict—[concluded](#) that Russian forces committed war crimes in Ukraine, including summary executions, torture, and rape. In March 2023, the International Criminal Court [issued](#) a warrant for the arrest of President Vladimir Putin and another Russian official on war crimes charges related to the unlawful transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia.

Among these gross human rights violations and potential war crimes, Russian forces have damaged places of worship and targeted religious leaders because of their religious leadership roles. Russian military personnel have consistently threatened, exiled, detained, disappeared, tortured, and killed religious figures in order to [exert](#) control and influence over local populations. More than 30 religious figures, including pastors, priests, deacons, hieromonks, monks, nuns, and military chaplains, have reportedly been [killed](#) since the invasion. Religion on Fire, a Ukrainian project documenting the war's impacts on religious communities, [reported](#) at least 20 religious figures killed and another 15 kidnapped in the first six months of the war.

In March 2022, Russian soldiers in Kherson [abducted](#) OCU priest Sergey Chudinovich after he refused to allow Russian soldiers to distribute aid at his church. Russian forces [kept](#) him in a cold basement without proper clothing and beat, strangled, and attempted to rape him with a baton until he agreed to cooperate with them. In March 2022, Russian forces [detained](#) Crimean Tatar Imam Rustem Asanov at a checkpoint in the Kherson region. They kept him in a basement where they tightened the handcuffs on his hands to the point of physical pain,

suffocated him until he lost consciousness, and beat him. After releasing Asanov, Russian forces [raided](#) his mosque and confiscated religious materials they deemed “extremist.” In another incident, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine found that Russian soldiers in an unidentified region [stripped](#) a priest of his clothes, beat him, and ordered him to parade around naked in the streets of his village.

In September, armed men in military uniform [abducted](#) Baptist pastor [Leonid Ponomaryov](#) and his wife [Tatyana Ponomaryov](#) from their home in Mariupol. Previously, Russian officials had reportedly claimed that the two had been involved in “extremist activity,” and military personnel searched and closed Ponomaryov's church. A month later, the two were released. In November, Russian forces in Nova Kakhovka, Kherson, [abducted](#) Evangelical deacon Anatoliy Prokopchuk and his son Oleksandr Prokopchuk for unclear reasons. Days later, the two were found dead with signs of severe torture on their bodies in a forest near the city. In November, Russian forces in Berdyansk, Zaporizhzhia, [detained](#) Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests [Ivan Levitsky](#) and [Bohdan Geleta](#) and later claimed to have discovered explosives, weapons, and “extremist” materials at their church. The Ukrainian Catholic Archiepiscopal Exarchate of Donetsk has [refuted](#) these allegations. As of May, the priests' whereabouts [remain](#) unknown.

Religious figures, civilians, and aid workers have also been injured and killed as places of worship and other buildings became the target of various military campaigns and bombings. In March 2022, a tank [fired](#) on the office building of the Roman Catholic charity Caritas Internationalis in Mariupol, killing two of its employees and five others. In June 2022, Russian artillery [struck](#) the UOC Svyatohirsk Lavra monastery complex in the Donetsk region, killing two monks and a nun. That same month, Russian forces reportedly [destroyed](#) a mosque while assaulting Severodonetsk, Luhansk, killing 20 people seeking shelter in it. In July 2022, three aid workers from an ISKCON organization were reportedly [injured](#) after missiles hit the organization's building in Alchevsk, Luhansk. In January 2023, a Ukrainian Greek Catholic priest and nun were [wounded](#) by Russian artillery in Lipty, Kharkiv, while distributing aid in the region.

## Destruction of Ukrainian Religious Sites

Since the start of the invasion, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has [verified](#) damage to at least 112 religious sites. Religion on Fire [reported](#) at least 450 religious buildings—including chapels, churches, prayer houses, roadside crosses, kingdom halls, synagogues, mosques, memorials, monasteries, and religious educational institutions—were damaged or destroyed a year after the invasion, with the Ukrainian Institute for Religious Freedom [reporting](#) nearly 500 religious buildings and sites damaged or destroyed as of January 2023. Religious groups impacted by Russian attacks included the OCU, Protestants, Ukrainian Greek Catholics, Roman Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, Jews, Scientologists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the UOC, which has had the largest number of churches and religious sites damaged during the war, despite the Russian government [calling](#) for the UOC’s protection on the international stage.

Russian soldiers have commandeered religious buildings to use for military purposes and weaponized other revered spaces. Between March and November 2022 in Kherson, Russian soldiers [seized](#) the Protestant Tavriski Christian Institute, burned its library, and used its facilities as a military base and crematorium for Russian soldiers killed in combat. Russian soldiers pejoratively referred to employees of the institute as “sectarians” because of their Protestant religious beliefs and cited those beliefs as reasons to seize the institute. When the Ukrainian army pushed Russian forces out of the city, Russian artillery mostly destroyed the institute. Additionally, Ukrainian authorities in Kherson have expressed concerns that Russian soldiers [planted](#) mines at cemeteries and burial sites when they retreated. Religion on Fire has also documented Russian forces using UOC religious buildings and churches for military purposes, including military unit headquarters, ammunition warehouses, and sniper nests.

Human rights organizations and Ukrainian officials have also accused Russian forces of looting religious and cultural artifacts. In October, Russian soldiers reportedly [stole](#) the bone fragments of Prince Grigory Aleksandrovich Potemkin from St. Catherine’s Cathedral in Kherson. The prince had played a pivotal role in the Russian Empire’s 1783 annexation of Crimea and was the imperial founder of Kherson. Members of Mariupol’s exiled city council [claimed](#) that Russians had stolen 2,000 artifacts from the city’s museums, including a handwritten Torah scroll and a 200-year-old Bible.



*Before-and-after images of a Catholic church in Kyselivka, Mykolayiv, following Russian shelling in May 2022. Source: [Ukrainian Ministry of Defense](#).*



*Before-and-after images of a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in the Kyiv region following its destruction in March 2022.*



*The Orthodox All Saints Skete of the Sviatohirsk Lavra, Tetianivka, Donetsk, on fire following Russian shelling in June 2022. Source: [Holy Assumption Svyatogorsk Lavra](#).*



*Image of the Orthodox St. George's Skete of the Sviatohirsk Lavra, Dolyna, Donetsk, following Russian shelling in May 2022. Source: [Holy Assumption Svyatogorsk Lavra](#).*

### Russian Justifications for the War

Russian officials and pro-Kremlin war [propaganda](#) have justified the invasion of Ukraine with religious language, hateful speech, and distorted historical references at the expense of religious and other minority communities.

When President Vladimir Putin [announced](#) Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine, he made unfounded comparisons of Ukrainian government officials with far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis. President Putin furthermore said the so-called special military operation would aim to "demilitarize and denazify Ukraine" to stop what he falsely called a "genocide" against Russians and Russian-speaking citizens in the country. While there was no supporting evidence to back President Putin's claims, his repeated references to Nazis and World War II have [served](#) as a tactic to rally domestic support for the invasion by playing on Russian society's collective memory about the war and Russian suffering caused by Nazi Germany. Russian narratives about World War II have always been Russian-centric; however, these narratives have often omitted facts or distorted history related to the Nazis' systematic, genocidal campaign targeting Jews.

When employing denazification rhetoric, high-ranking Russian government officials and representatives have frequently engaged in blatant antisemitism and Holocaust distortion as they tried to delegitimize the Jewishness of [Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#), who is Jewish and lost family members in the Holocaust. When a journalist questioned Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov about the seeming contradictions of “denazifying” a country by removing its Jewish leader, Foreign Minister Lavrov [speculated](#) that Hitler “had Jewish blood, too” and added that “wise Jewish people say that the most ardent anti-Semites are usually Jews.” This statement coupled with denazification rhetoric perpetuated the antisemitic idea that Jews brought the Holocaust upon themselves. Additionally, in November the Russian Embassy in the United Kingdom [posted](#), in a now deleted Tweet, a meme that featured an antisemitic caricature of President Zelenskyy. Russian propagandists on state channels have also [referred](#) to Zelenskyy as the “Antichrist.” In addition to antisemitism targeting President Zelenskyy, Foreign Minister Lavrov [engaged](#) in Holocaust distortion most recently in January by invoking the Holocaust and Hitler to argue that Western countries were seeking to eradicate Russia and Russians just as “Hitler wanted a ‘final solution’ to the Jewish question.”

Denazification rhetoric moreover stood in stark contrast with Russian military actions impacting Ukrainian Jews and Holocaust memorials. In March 2022, a week after the outbreak of the war, Russian missiles [damaged](#) the grounds of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center in Kyiv which memorializes the site where 33,000 Jews were murdered by the Nazis in the span of two days in 1941. That same month, Russian artillery reportedly [damaged](#) a menorah at the Drobitsky Yar Holocaust memorial complex in Kharkhiv which memorializes a site where 15,000 Jews were killed. Relatedly, Russia’s offensive has led to the deaths of at least two Holocaust survivors: [Boris Romantschenko](#) and [Vanda Semyonovna Obiedkova](#).

In addition to denazification, Russian pro-war discourse has [depicted](#) the war as a fight against “satanism.” In some instances, “satanism” has appeared to refer to what the Russian state considers “non-traditional” religious groups, including a Jewish religious movement. In October, then Assistant Secretary of the Security Council

of Russia Alexei Pavlov [argued](#) for the “desatanization” of Ukraine, citing the degradation of traditional religious teachings and the flourishing of “neo-pagan cults.” Pavlov specifically singled out as cults the Protestant Word of Life Church, Church of Scientology, Church of Satan, and [Chabad Lubavitch](#), one of the largest Jewish religious groups in Russia and Ukraine. The concept of “desatanization” in such instances condones the targeting and elimination of Ukraine’s flourishing religious diversity and seeks to legitimize yet another historical antisemitic [trope](#).

Other high ranking Russian officials have depicted the invasion of Ukraine as a fight against “satanism.” Former president and deputy chairman of Russia’s Security Council Dmitry Medvedev [characterized](#) the war as a “sacred” battle, arguing that the purpose of the war was to “stop the supreme ruler of Hell, whatever name he uses—Satan, Lucifer or Iblis.” Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has [called](#) for a “jihad” across all of Ukraine and went on to [define](#) “satanism” as “openly acting against Russia.” President Putin has also [framed](#) the war as a battle against the “radical denial of moral, religious, and family values” by Western elites and cited the “overthrow of faith and traditional values” as resembling “‘religion in reverse’—pure Satanism.” Such sentiments have been shared and [amplified](#) by the Russian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Kirill, who has declared his vociferous [support](#) for the invasion as a fight against sin and foreign pressure to hold “gay parades.”

## Conclusion

Russia continues to be the most significant threat to religious freedom in Ukraine, contributing to USCIRF’s 2023 recommendation that the U.S. Department of State continue to designate the Russian Federation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). USCIRF has recommended Russia’s designation as a CPC every year since 2017. In 2021, the State Department for the first time designated Russia as a CPC and redesignated it as such in 2022 for its violations committed in Russia and Ukraine, including Crimea.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.