



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Religious Freedom

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

10:30 AM – 12:00 PM ET

Virtual

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nury Turkel, USCIRF Chair

Good morning and welcome to today's hearing on "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Religious Freedom," hosted by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom or USCIRF. This hearing will examine the religious dimensions of Russia's war and the impact of its discriminatory policies against a growing list of religious minorities in both Ukraine and Russia.

My name is Nury Turkel, and I am the Chair of USCIRF, an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government body created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or IRFA. USCIRF's mandate is to monitor religious

freedom abroad using international standards and to make policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this important hearing.

Since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his full-scale, unprovoked military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, thousands of civilians have been killed, millions have been displaced, and Ukrainians throughout the country have experienced gross human rights violations, including religious freedom violations. The Russian military has indiscriminately bombed churches, monasteries, kingdom halls, mosques, synagogues, cemeteries, and other religious sites, and Russian soldiers have abducted and tortured religious figures because of their leadership roles. In one case, Russian soldiers detained Crimean Tatar Imam Rustem Asanov in the region of Kherson after he organized peaceful protests against Russian occupation. They put a bag over his head and took him to a basement where they beat, strangled, and chastised him for setting the “wrong example” for his religious community.

It’s also important to note that Russia’s religious freedom violations in Ukraine are not new. In the parts of Ukraine occupied or controlled by Russian forces since 2014, we have seen Russia effectively export the religious freedom violations it has long committed within its own borders—including banning religious groups as “extremist,” issuing lengthy prison sentences for peaceful religious activities, and

prohibiting religious literature. In the nine years since Russia illegally seized Crimea, its de facto authorities have brutally targeted the peninsula's predominantly Muslim Crimean Tatar population. Numerous Crimean Tatars have received staggering prison sentences—in some cases nearly two decades—on dubious charges linked to their Muslim identity and principled opposition to Russia's occupation. Imprisoned Crimean Tatars have also faced severe medical neglect and inhumane living conditions in prison, with one activist Dzhemil Gafarov sadly dying in prison last month despite his well-known preexisting health conditions. At the same time, Russia has doubled down on the repression of its own citizens' religious freedom and other related human rights and fundamental freedoms through an array of legislation punishing and curtailing religious activities, expression, LGBTQI+ identity, and independent media, to name a few.

As I come to the end of my opening remarks, I would also just like to take a moment to remember and honor Jason Morton, USCIRF's Senior Policy Analyst who covered Russia and whose incredible work, expertise, and legacy significantly contributed to this hearing today.

It is now my pleasure to turn the floor over to USCIRF Vice Chair Abraham Cooper.