



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

August 2023

RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE: IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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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.

On March 15, 2023, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing on [*Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Religious Freedom*](#). The hearing identified Russia's religious freedom violations, analyzed the invasion's impact on religious freedom and other related human rights, and discussed recommendations for U.S. policy toward Russia.

USCIRF Chair [*Nury Turkel*](#) began the hearing by convening four witnesses who represented a variety of perspectives. One witness also submitted anonymous testimony to be read aloud by a third party due to safety concerns. Chair Turkel opened with descriptions of religious freedom violations committed by Russia in the context of its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, including the destruction of religious buildings and targeting of religious leaders. He also recounted religious freedom violations committed in Crimea following Russia's invasion and purported annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula in 2014.

USCIRF Vice Chair [*Abraham Cooper*](#) discussed Russian propaganda that has weaponized disinformation, antisemitism, and holocaust distortion to justify its military aggression against Ukraine. He also condemned Russian pro-war rhetoric calling for the "desatanization" of Ukraine, which specifically targets Ukraine's religious communities. USCIRF Commissioner [*Sharon Kleinbaum*](#) spoke about religious freedom violations in Russia itself, calling out several legal tools the Russian government has used to repress religion and imprison religious minorities. Commissioner Kleinbaum highlighted the Russian state's crackdown on independent civil society and human rights organizations working on freedom of religion or belief and discussed the Russian government's use of religious nationalism to target other vulnerable groups like the LGBTQI+ community.

U.S. Senator and Ranking Member of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (U.S. Helsinki Commission) [*Roger Wicker*](#) (R-MS) called for President Putin to be held accountable for the war in Ukraine as well as for Russia's religious freedom violations. He also called for the imposition of sanctions on Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church, who has been a vocal supporter of the war.

[Dmytro Vovk](#), Visiting Associate Professor at Cardozo School of Law and member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights’ (ODIHR) Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, discussed the situation of religious freedom in Ukraine following Russia’s 2022 invasion. He said that since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Russia has engaged in gross religious freedom violations in occupied territories including the murder, detention, and torture of religious figures and the destruction of religious buildings. Vovk also highlighted the Ukrainian government’s scrutiny of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), stressing the need for Ukraine to balance its legitimate national security interests with an individual’s right to religious freedom. Vovk emphasized that Russia remains the biggest challenge to religious freedom in Ukraine as Russia’s invasion, occupation, and human rights violations have eliminated Ukraine’s most pluralistic regions by forcing religious groups to flee these areas. Vovk recommended that the U.S. government:

- Continue to monitor the situation and produce an analytical report focused on religious freedom violations in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia;
- Initiate sanctions and travel bans against persons involved in violations of religious freedom in Russia and the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia, including the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill personally;
- Encourage the U.S. Congress to earmark funds to restore Ukraine’s cultural sites, including religious buildings of historical and cultural significance; and
- Facilitate legal support for the Ukrainian government to develop legislation dealing with national security issues in the religious domain.

[Rachel Denber](#), Deputy Director of the Europe and Central Asia Division at Human Rights Watch, focused on Russia’s domestic efforts to crush religious communities, human rights organizations, and independent civil society through draconian legal mechanisms. Denber argued Russia’s crackdown on civil society overlaps with its religious persecution through the use of extremism and terrorism laws, eradication of initiatives conducted by independent institutions, including religious groups, and its demonization of culture and ideas opposed to so-

called “traditional Russian values.” She also noted Russia’s targeting of protesters—both secular and religious—for their opposition to the war and government’s use of the “foreign agent” and “undesirable organization” designations to suppress human rights organizations, religious communities, and political opposition leaders. Denber called on the U.S. government to:

- Support independent Russian civil society and human rights activists by ensuring their projects are funded; expanding scholarships, fellowships, apprenticeships, and other opportunities in the United States; and ensuring civil society actors and activists can secure multiyear, multi-entry visas.

[Dennis Christensen](#), a former religious prisoner of conscience imprisoned in Russia, testified to his own experiences as a member of a persecuted religious community in Russia and as a prisoner. Christensen discussed the harassment of Jehovah’s Witnesses, the circumstances of his arrest, and the mistreatment he experienced while in jail. Christensen said, “I felt like the goal of the authorities was to torture and break me down, so I would cooperate with the investigator and plead guilty.” Christensen also recounted his sentencing and prison authorities’ efforts to keep him in prison, despite a court order changing his sentence. Christensen expressed concerns about the deteriorating situation for Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia as well as the health and well-being of his imprisoned friends, stressing that 370 Jehovah’s Witnesses have spent time in prison, with more than 120 still behind bars.

USCIRF Commissioner David Curry read testimony from a [Crimean Tatar activist](#) who would otherwise face retribution for participating in the hearing. The activist stressed that Russian de facto authorities introduced their own legislation in Crimea with the goal of subordinating independent religious organizations, establishing full control over them, and repressing those religious organizations and members who refuse to accept occupation. The activist said this was done through forcibly reregistering religious organizations and using anti-terrorism and anti-extremism legislation to prosecute activists and believers from religious organizations not recognized by Russian authorities, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami and Tablighi Jamaat. The activist added that all criminal cases against alleged members of such groups are



initiated on bogus pretexts and violate fair trial standards by using anonymous witnesses and allowing testimony obtained under duress. The activist recommended the U.S. government:

- Strengthen the system of sanctions against the Russian Federation, including considering the introduction of targeted sanctions against officials of the occupying authorities in Crimea responsible for the violation of religious freedom and persecution of social activists;
- Provide comprehensive support to political prisoners and their families, including material support to cover the costs of living, psychological aid, and rehabilitation for people who have already served their prison sentences; and
- Support independent activists, media professionals, and advocates working on behalf of human rights in occupied Crimea.

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, Chief Rabbi and President of the Conference of European Rabbis and exiled Chief Rabbi of Moscow, discussed his experience as a religious leader in Russia opposing the war, the struggles of the Jewish community, and state-perpetrated antisemitism. He argued that antisemitism and the targeting of the Jewish community in Russia is state sponsored, as exemplified by the state's distortion of the Holocaust, official accusations against Ukraine of "Nazism," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's comments about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Jewish heritage, and rhetoric targeting Chabad-Lubavitch communities. Goldschmidt also touched on state efforts to close the Jewish Agency and Jewish emigration from Russia. He concluded his testimony by saying, "We definitely can call the Jewish community of Russia today as a community in distress."

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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.