



Russian aggression against Ukraine threatens religious liberty

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Ukraine is under siege, and if history is any indicator, should Russia prove victorious, freedom of religion will also be under siege.

Russia's attack on Ukraine continues. Ukrainian resistance so far has been fierce, but Russian forces retain a huge advantage in firepower. A victory by Moscow would mean installation of a puppet government in Kyiv, with harsh repression to follow.

Politically Russia was unfree even before the war. However, fear of popular protest led Russian president Vladimir Putin to intensify greatly restrictions on any opposition. Although Ukrainian democracy has been troubled, earning only a "partly free" rating from Freedom House, Kyiv remains well ahead of Moscow in that regard.

Religious liberty in Ukraine would only degrade under Russian control. Putin turned religion into a handmaiden of aggressive nationalism, making the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) a veritable political partner. Patriarch Kirill has given full religious blessing to the regime's foreign policy agenda.

For instance, *The Wall Street Journal* reported last month (behind a paywall) a Kirill-led think tank, the World Russian People's Council, declared: "If the actions of our president to recognize [the Donbass statelets] relate to the political, military sovereignty of Russia—that is, we are trying to stop the advancement of NATO, missiles on our borders—then the moral problems associated with the protection of traditional values are aligned, and they are no less important than political and military aspects." Indeed, the ongoing fight, declared Kirill, will determine "where humanity will end up, on which side of God the Savior."

If victorious, Putin would likely turn religious affairs in occupied territories over to Kirill, which would mean replicating Russia's regulatory system. Unfortunately, Moscow has targeted minority faiths and used religious restrictions against political opponents. Overall, it has created the most hostile religious environment of any majority-Christian country (whose government nominally welcomes religion, in contrast to, say, Cuba's communist regime).

For instance, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reported this about Russia: "In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Russia deteriorated. The government continued to target 'nontraditional' religious minorities with fines, detentions, and criminal charges. Russian legislation criminalizes 'extremism' without adequately defining the term, enabling the state to prosecute a vast range of nonviolent religious activity. In 2020, the state

brought 188 criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses, who were banned as an extremist group in 2017."

The extraordinary hostility shown JW's is baffling. The small sect poses no threat to the regime. Apparently, its insularity, commitment to proselytism, and refusal to sacralize state authority—JW's made U.S. constitutional history by refusing to say the Pledge of Allegiance—turned it into target. Four years ago even Putin expressed puzzlement at his government's crackdown. He allowed that he did not "quite understand why they are persecuted." But nothing changed.

Labels as Muzzles

Extremism is a legal charge often flung at Muslims, too. In its report on religious liberty, the State Department found that "authorities continued to investigate, detain, imprison, torture, and/or physically abuse persons or seize their property because of their religious faith, including members of groups the government classified as extremist and banned, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, and followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi." Others deemed extremist or otherwise undesirable include Scientologists and Falun Gong practitioners.

The law, noted the commission, "sets strict registration requirements and empowers state officials to impede and monitor religious groups' activities. It also broadly defines and prohibits 'missionary activities,' including preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites."

Anti-terrorism restrictions were used to shut down Baptist, evangelical, and Pentecostal educational institutions. "Experts also noted the government and ROC often viewed these institutions as sources of foreign influence," explained the State Department. "ROC educational and missionary institutions, by contrast, were not subjected to similar scrutiny by government authorities."

Noteworthy was the use of religious persecution for political purposes in Chechnya. According to USCIRF: "In the North Caucasus, security forces acted with impunity, arresting or kidnapping persons suspected of even tangential links to Islamist militancy as well as for secular political opposition. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov oversaw or condoned egregious abuses based on his religious views."

Shockingly, Russia ranked third globally on the number of blasphemy cases filed, following only Pakistan and Iran. In another echo of Islamist regimes, indigenous non-Abrahamic faiths are especially vulnerable in Russia. Reported USCIRF: "Desecration of indigenous religious sites has increased in recent years, leading to the establishment of a monitoring group in 2020. Although Russia has many indigenous religions, they are not given the privileged status of 'traditional religions' like Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Buddhism."

In 2014, Moscow annexed Crimea and backed local separatists in the Donbass, a traditional Russian-speaking area in Ukraine's east. The new authorities cracked down on religious

dissenters. Peaceful believers were tarred with charges of extremism, and the ROC was favored over its Orthodox competitors, as well as other denominations and faiths.

“The occupation authorities continued to enforce Russia’s repressive laws and policies on religion, which has resulted in the prosecution of peaceful religious activity and bans on groups that were legal in Crimea under Ukrainian law,” noted the USCIRF. “At least 16 Crimean Muslims were sentenced to prison on made-up charges of extremism and terrorism, primarily based on religious discussions that prosecutors linked to the now-banned group Hizb ut-Tahrir. In the spring, the Russian government began to transfer ownership of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) Cathedral of St. Vladimir and Olga to the state; it is the most important property of the UOC in Crimea and its congregation has already been evicted.”

The State Department painted a similarly grim picture: “Many religious communities were essentially driven out of the peninsula through registration requirements under newly imposed Russian laws. ... Russian authorities in occupied Crimea continued to persecute and intimidate minority religious congregations, including Muslim Crimean Tatars, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) members and clergy. ... Russia continued to prosecute individuals for some types of worship, including imams leading prayers in their own mosques, as ‘illegal missionary activity.’ ... According to the OCU, Russian occupation authorities continued to pressure the OCU Crimean diocese in an effort to force it to leave Crimea. Religious and human rights groups continued to report Russian media efforts to create suspicion and fear among certain religious groups, especially targeting Crimean Tatar Muslims.”

Similar is the situation in the portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (DPR and LPR, respectively) controlled by Russian-backed separatists. Faiths persecuted in Russia, most notably JW’s, the Muslim congregation Hizb ut-Tahir, and disfavored Orthodox churches, were restricted in Donbas. Baptists, Pentecostals, and Seventh-day Adventists were barred from registering, and thus from operating.

The State Department detailed the persecution: “Russia-backed ‘authorities’ in the ‘DPR’ and ‘LPR’ continued to implement ‘laws’ requiring all religious organizations except the UOC-MP to undergo ‘state religious expert evaluations’ and reregister with them. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), a majority of religious groups recognized under Ukrainian law continued to be unable to reregister because of stringent legal requirements under Russian law preventing or discouraging reregistration of many religious communities. ... All but one mosque remained closed in Russia-controlled Donetsk. Russia-led forces continued to use religious buildings of minority religious groups as military facilities.”

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a travesty at many levels. A Ukrainian defeat would allow Moscow to impose an increasingly oppressive political system on the Ukrainian people, almost certainly stripping Ukrainians of the right to freely worship God according to conscience.

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