

# RUSSIA'S PERSECUTION OF UKRAINIAN CHRISTIANS

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## HEARING BEFORE THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS SECOND SESSION

JULY 24, 2024

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COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND  
COOPERATION IN EUROPE,  
U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION,  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

*Wednesday, July 24, 2024.*

The hearing was held from 10:12 a.m. to 11:37 a.m., Room 210, Cannon House Office Building, Representative Joe Wilson [R-SC], Chairman, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

**Committee Members Present:** Representative Joe Wilson [R-SC], Chairman; Senator Roger Wicker [R-MS], Ranking Member; Representative Marc Veasey [D-TX]; Representative Robert B. Aderholt [R-AL].

**Other Members Present:** Representative Andy Harris [R-MD]; Representative Wiley Nickel [D-NC]; Representative Mariannette Miller-Meeks [R-IA]; Representative Jim Costa [D-CA].

**Witnesses:** Steven E. Moore, Founder, Ukraine Freedom Project; Mark Sergeev, Ukrainian pastor; Catherine Wanner, Professor, Pennsylvania State University.

### OPENING STATEMENT OF JOE WILSON, CHAIRMAN, U.S. HOUSE, FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

Chairman WILSON: [Sounds gavel.] Ladies and gentlemen, good morning, friends of Ukraine and friends of Christians in Ukraine. The Commission will come to order. Good morning to all of you who have joined us today.

Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge our members. Congressman Marc Veasey of Texas is here. We also has an honorary member of Congress, and that is Chaplain Margaret Kibben. She is here, the chaplain of the House. Therefore, Chaplain, thank you. Please come up front, Mademoiselle. Therefore, we are so fortunate to have Chaplain Kibben to be here.

The Helsinki Commission has long seen freedom of religion or belief as a priority. Ukraine is a living example. Ukrainians of all backgrounds and creeds are bravely working together for the existence of their country and defense of their homeland, and ultimately the defense of freedom and democracy worldwide. What we sadly can see, is war criminal Putin is murderously attempting to recreate the failed Soviet empire to benefit the oligarchs, oppressing the Russians first and then invading liberated republics. I just left breakfast for the Central Asian republics with the ambassador from Kazakhstan, and it can be identified that when—if he is going

to recreate the Soviet Union, that includes the Central Asian republics too. It does not stop at Ukraine. It does not stop in Georgia, but it does not stop in Moldova. We know that it continues. Therefore, all of us need to be working together for peace and stability, and peace through strength.

Religious freedom is respected and protected. It is one of the core values Ukraine fights for. Meanwhile, it is illegal in Russia to evangelize, as expressing religion that is not connected to the state is a threat to the façade that war criminal Putin depends on to stay in power. Christians in Ukraine, particularly Evangelical Christians, have—we will learn more about today been the target of horrific torture and abuse by the Putin forces. Evangelicals are seen by the Kremlin as being pro-American and are specifically sought out for kidnapping and torture. Ukraine, some of which has been occupied for decades since the 2014 invasion, which should not be forgotten. Ten thousand or more Ukrainians were killed in 2014, and sadly the world thought this would pass. No, it does not; it continues. It is not safe for Christians. We will learn today because of war criminal Putin and his murderers and rapists that things are not safe. It is not safe for anyone who refuses to submit to the demands of the occupiers. Those who serve a higher power present a real challenge for the war criminal Putin, both in Russia and in occupied Ukraine, as he and the delusional enablers worship the failed Soviet empire.

I look forward to hearing about this from our witnesses, in addition to more about the Ukrainian religious landscape and how the United States can support our Ukrainian friends living under Putin's occupation. Their words will speak for themselves. Their testimonies are graphic and incredibly disturbing.

We are very grateful we have been joined by Dr. Andy Harris from Maryland, and so we appreciate his service.

We have, first, Dr. Catherine Wanner, who is a professor of history, anthropology, and religious studies at Penn State.

Additionally, we have—speaking of his experiences and church leadership in occupied Ukraine Mark Sergeev—[changes pronunciation]—Sergeev. Sergeev, hear, hear. I should know because I am really grateful that the church I go to, First Presbyterian Church, has been associated with the pastor's church and with Micah Rea in particular. We appreciate that the pastors actually visited South Carolina, and we always welcome—as Chaplain Kibben knows, we welcome chaplains to South Carolina.

Finally, we have the former congressional chief of staff of Peter Roskam—Peter, a superhero of all things from Illinois—and is now the founder of the Ukraine Freedom Project, Steven E. Moore.

With this, I will turn to any of the commissioners, particularly Marc Veasey, for any opening remarks.

#### **STATEMENT OF MARC A. VEASEY, U.S. HOUSE, FROM TEXAS**

Representative VEASEY: Mr. Chairman, thank you very much, and great to be here today. I want to appreciate—want to give my appreciation to the panelists—our guests for being here today to come in, answer some questions, and talk with us about the issues around religion that are happening right now in Ukraine.

I think particularly having this discussion that we are doing today with the visit that we are having from Prime Minister Netanyahu, so much of the conflict in that region goes back to the 19th century, much of it based on religion and lots of other sort of, you know, myths and stereotypes and tropes that people have of one another. Trying to figure out how you can live peacefully and at the same time deal with all of these issues, I think, is very timely, that we are having it today.

Therefore, I want to thank each and every one of you for being here, and I want to thank the Chairman for putting this together. I think this is going to be an interesting discussion and a lot to learn, and hopefully we will have more to share with the American public about what is happening in Ukraine around this topic of Ukrainian Christians as the day progresses. Therefore, I appreciate you.

Mr. Chairman?

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Congressman Veasey. I really appreciate Congressman Veasey shows bipartisanship of us working together.

Additionally, we have Wiley Nickel. Congressman Nickel's with us today, and he dressed up in a khaki suit, so—[LAUGHTER]—some people really make us look good. [LAUGHTER.]

We will begin with Dr. Catherine Wanner.

**TESTIMONY OF CATHERINE WANNER, PROFESSOR,  
PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY**

Ms. WANNER: [Off mic.] Thank you for the invitation to be here. I am honored to testify at this hearing.

There are more Evangelicals in Ukraine than there—[comes on mic]—are in any other country in Europe. They include Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, as well as other Protestants.

Many factors have contributed to this concentration of Protestant believers in Ukraine, but surely the emergence of tolerance, religious diversity, and religious pluralism as governing principles are key among them. This has created a vibrant religious marketplace in which a plethora of religious groups compete for members, and in which religious symbolism and practice are broadly accepted in public institutions and in public space.

When Ukrainian territories fell under Russian occupation in 2014, the persecution of minority religious communities followed. Evangelicals were especially targeted. I will discuss why Evangelicals incur the wrath of Russian ruling authorities and specifically what the consequences have been.

The repression of Evangelicals in the occupied territories of Ukraine has been so fierce because the established religious pluralism that allowed Protestant communities to thrive in Ukraine clashes with the imposition of the Russian world ideology that comes with Russian rule. The Russian world posits that eastern Slavs are part of a single spiritual and historical civilizational space that includes Russians, Ukrainians, Belarussians, and sometimes even Moldova and Kazakhstan. Increasingly, it really brings in anyone who recognizes the importance of traditional values and the Russian Orthodox Church as their protector.

However, the key point is that there is no place for Protestants in the Russian world. They are apostates to their faith and traitors to their nation precisely because they have abandoned Orthodoxy. The Russian world ideology justifies the repression of religious minorities and privileges Russian Orthodoxy as a state-protected guardian of these traditional values, public morality, and social and political order.

The second reason Evangelicals have been targeted is that Baptists and Evangelical Christians have long been demonized —because of the negative associations that Protestantism carries with the United States. Clergy and active believers are subject to charges of being foreign agents or American spies.

The 2012 foreign agent law has been repeatedly used in Russia and now in the occupied territories to crack down on civil society organizations, to silence dissent, and to jail even potential members of opposition. This law is used to restrict religious freedom, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly. It targets religious leaders, members of NGOs, human rights activists, and independent journalists, among others, by mandating complicated and often contradictory reporting and registration requirements. Noncompliance results in fines, jails, or closure of the organization.

As a result, occupation by Russian forces slips easily and quickly into religious repression, especially of Evangelicals, because the Russian state implements entirely different policies toward non-Russian Orthodox Church-affiliated religious communities than the Ukrainian state does. The repressive treatment Evangelicals received in the USSR, and to a degree continue to experience in Russia, is even more brutal and violent in the Russian-controlled occupied territories of Ukraine.

Therefore, let us consider the consequences. Viewed as apostates to their native Orthodox faith, traitors to their nation, and foreign agents who undermine anti-Western Orthodox conservatism, Evangelicals have been subject to searches, abductions, interrogations, unlawful detainment, and torture. They have had their property confiscated, their families threatened, and been subject to physical violence. Pastors are pressured to reaffiliate to religious organizations in Russia. Since 2022, over 40 clergy have faced reprisals and five have been killed. Residents of eight Ukrainian regions under occupation report religious persecution and other violations of religious freedom. In Zaporizhzhia, there are at least 47 cases; Kherson, 20; Lugansk, 13; Donetsk, 11; and the list goes on.

Russian Federal Law 114—also known as the Yarovaya law—passed in 2016, is too broad to leave Evangelicals vulnerable to charges of extremism or illegal missionary activities. As a result, many Evangelicals were forced to flee the occupied territories. By December 2023, not even two years into the war, over 630 churches and religious buildings had been destroyed or damaged. One-third, or at least 206, were Protestant. In occupied Donetsk, there were at least 146 documented cases of damaged or destroyed religious buildings; in Lugansk, at least 83; Kherson, 78; and in Zaporizhzhia, at least 51. Other religious buildings were looted and converted to arsenals, police headquarters, and United Russia offices.



Only a few Protestant churches are open in the occupied Donetsk region. There are parts of Lugansk and Zaporizhzhia regions where not a single Protestant church remains opened. We will hear more about Melitopol, a city in southern Ukraine, that at one point had more Protestant prayer houses than Orthodox churches prior to 2022, and today not a single Protestant church remains.

There is little to suggest that such repressive measures against Evangelicals will cease. In fact, the reverse is likely. As harsh as restrictions are on Evangelical communities in Russia proper, they are far worse in occupied Ukraine. Whereas previously most Evangelicals espoused an Anabaptist pacifism and performed alternative military service, now, having declared this a just war, many Evangelicals serve in the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Previous networks of cooperation and association of all kinds—missionary, humanitarian, and educational—that united Russian and Ukrainian Evangelicals in common endeavors have been shattered as a result of this war. This is true for nearly all religious associations and networks, regardless of confession, that linked Russian and Ukrainian co-believers.

In sum, the occupation of Ukrainian territories has ushered in religious repression of Evangelicals because the Russian state has distinct policies for non-Russian Orthodox Church religious communities. This is a longstanding practice and is unlikely to change under the current Russian leadership. The goal of democratizing Ukraine and its allies is to ensure that religious freedom, tolerance, and pluralism are not additional casualties of this war. Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, must be held accountable for their numerous war crimes in Ukraine so that they will be deterred from further attempts to use religion to inspire violence and to justify repression of religious minorities as they are doing in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

Thank you.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Dr. Wanner. Both Congressman Veasey and I were so impressed to find out the level of—the number of Evangelical churches in Ukraine. That is not widely known. Therefore, this—the American people need to know this.

With that in mind, this hearing is so important we have been joined by Mariannette Miller-Meeks, the congresswoman from Iowa. Then I am very grateful to Congressman Jim Costa—again, bipartisan—from California and Congressman Robert Aderholt from Alabama. Therefore, again, it is bipartisan love and appreciation of the people of Ukraine.

With that, we now proceed to Pastor Mark Sergeev of the New Generation Church, which is associated with the Baptist Church.

#### **TESTIMONY OF MARK SERGEEV, UKRAINIAN PASTOR**

Mr. SERGEEV: It is a great honor for me to speak at the Helsinki Commission. The work of the Commission is well-known in Ukraine. I am grateful for the work of Commission does to help Ukraine fight for freedom.

Last week, I was at the frontline in Chasiv Yar. My role is a chaplain and I work for soldiers. The battles are horrible. The men and women fighting for Ukraine need spiritual guidance and emo-

tional care, and I am proud to guide and help them and pray sometimes in difficult situations.

Every Ukrainian soldier at the front is very thankful for American weapons. They fire Javelins all day and fall asleep to the sound of HIMARS firing on the Russian positions, and the soldiers sleep well. I want to say that the same Iran drones that attack Kyiv every night, attack Israel the same. However, American technologies keep us both in safety.

My journey from Ukraine front to speak today started four generations ago. I am a fifth generation Evangelical Christian. My grand grandfather was killed by Stalin because he was a Christian. My grandparents and my parents were always Evangelical Christians. They have been persecuted, and they were hiding their faith because they are afraid for their lives.

I was born in Ukraine, in Melitopol city. It is in the Azov Sea. We call it the gates to Crimea. I was born in a free country. My father was a senior pastor of Melitopol Christian Church. It was the largest church in the area, and some American visitors often compare us like Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church from Houston. We have a big stage, a big worship team, and we minister to 1,500 people every Sunday. We have 400 kids who attended Sunday school. We were a spiritual home to hundreds of Ukrainian families. Before the war started in Ukraine, we had this kind of dream. It is close to the American dream, to live a great life. However, Putin does not respond by peaceful means.

In February 2022, Russian tanks got inside of my city. They are rolling inside of the city. I watched this from the windows of my church. Two weeks later, somebody knocked on the door in my house, wake me up, and that was the soldiers of Russian Rosgvardia. Maybe you heard about it somewhere in the news. They take me outside and put me on the ground. I was only in my underwear at that moment. They woke up my oldest son, he is nine years old at that moment, with an AK-47 gun in the face.

You know, Russians are making a weapon of religion, and they are trying to make my father use the role of spiritual leader for a community to praise their invasions of our city. They told to my father: You have 72 hours to record a video in front of the church building that this is already Russian territory and Putin is our president, and just relax and wait. Then they gave a couple of hours to give a list of every businessman who supports the Evangelical churches. You know, they love money and always do this. They told him that every day if you waited, they would just cut off the fingers on your hand.

It is God's miracle that they did not come back with their knives, but they took off—they took the building. We have this big, long, 40-foot-long cross in the front of the building. They cut off this cross and put the Russian flag right now. Therefore, now this big auditorium that was used before for praising God and worshiping God, now they are using like a concert hall for Russian military concerts and celebrating Russian holidays. I am lucky to escape. I am here right now and still alive—a miracle that I am here alive, because I have been in crazy moments. I saw so many civilian—killing people, dead people. My kids saw everything. If you ask me how it looked like the picture, kind of very old movie about the Sec-

ond World War, if Private Ryan—the picture looked like the same. Finally, we get out of it. It is a miracle.

However, before the war started, in Melitopol—it is not a big city, but we have 40 Evangelical churches in Melitopol. Today, there are no more—not any kind of churches anymore. Therefore, the only churches left are those who are loyal to Moscow rather than God. My parents lived through the Soviet Union. They say conditions today in Russian-occupied Ukraine are worse for believers than they were in Soviet times. I encourage the Commission to go to [RussiaTorturesChristians.org](http://RussiaTorturesChristians.org), where you can see videos from my church how they looked like before the war, and security cameras show Russians breaking into our churches in the dead of the night, and Russian TV footage of Melitopol Christian church being used for Russian patriarch ceremonies.

I will close with the story of my friend Lena. She is a part of my church. She is a small group leader. Two months ago, Russian soldiers came into her house and took her because, you know, when they shut down every church in Melitopol, Christians go under the ground to worship God, and they get together in small groups. Now she is in prison in Donetsk because she is just a Christian leader because she just believed in God. Two months ago, yes, they take—they take her. Now they give her seven years because she is a Christian and she believe in God.

Last night I fortunately had a conversation with one American Christian leader, and he told me that he is concerned about the Ukrainian government persecuting Christians. Fortunately, I was able to have him understand the truth, that he was hearing the Russian propaganda. The real truth is that Russia is torturing, oppressing, and sometimes murdering Ukrainian Christians in my city and across occupied Ukraine, simply for being Christian. I am only one voice, and the voices against mine are powerful. However, I am grateful to the Commission for giving me a voice, and power, and helping Americans and the whole world know the truth of Russia's terrible oppression of Ukrainian believers. Thank you very much, and may God bless you all. May God bless America.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you so much, Pastor Sergeev. We just appreciate—again, we appreciate your visit to South Carolina and just, indeed, Micah is such a champion for you. Indeed, again, the significance of this hearing. I am very grateful that we have been joined by Senator Roger Wicker of Mississippi. The good news is that as the House members run off to vote, we have got somebody who is very capable to keep the hearing going. Therefore, with this, he is appreciated for so many different reasons, all right?

Therefore, I want to now recognize Steven Moore.

#### **TESTIMONY OF STEVEN E. MOORE, FOUNDER, UKRAINE FREEDOM PROJECT**

Mr. MOORE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for the honor of testifying before this Commission today. As you so graciously mentioned, I was once a chief of staff to a member of leadership here in the House of Representatives.

Chairman WILSON: Hey, say it. Peter Roskam.

Mr. MOORE: Yes, Peter Roskam.

Chairman WILSON: A dear friend.

Mr. MOORE: Anyone know Peter Roskam? [LAUGHTER.]

Chairman WILSON: Hey, a friend of Senator Wicker here.

Mr. MOORE: Yes. Therefore, he—and he still has a lot of friends here in the House of Representatives. Therefore, I was honored to be his chief of staff for seven years, and so as much time as I have spent in Congress, this is my first time on this side of the dais, in this position right here. Therefore, it is particularly an honor for me to do this. As a former staffer, I want to compliment the knowledge and professionalism of the staff of the Helsinki Commission. The work of the Helsinki Commission is quite respected in Ukraine, and it is largely because of the personal relationships the staff has developed with people over there. Therefore, they have been great to work with.

Therefore, five days after Russia's full-scale invasion, I went to Ukraine to try to help my Ukrainian friends get to safety and provide humanitarian goods. I created the Ukraine Freedom Project and used that as a vehicle to bring supplies to Kyiv when that city was surrounded on three sides by Russians. We got food to Kharkiv while it was under siege. I was one of the first wave of people at Okhmatdyt Children's Hospital earlier this month when it was bombed.

In my two and a half years living in Ukraine at war, I have seen and heard many things that nobody should. Even so, it is only a fraction of what the Ukrainians are going through. Some of the most horrific stories I have heard are from Ukrainian Christians who have been tortured by Russians. Russians occupying Ukrainian territory seek to systematically crush faith. Millions of Christians in occupied Ukraine are worshiping underground, as my colleague Mark Sergeev said, in fear of torture and prison for their beliefs. Protestants make up less than 4 percent of Ukraine's population, but Protestants have borne the brunt of the Russian abuse.

To fully understand why, I want to tell you about the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is not a church as we would think of one, but it is a working arm of the Kremlin. Patriarch Kirill, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, recently declared a holy war on Ukraine and the West. He promised that Russians who die fighting in Ukraine will have all their sins washed away. He stopped short of offering 72 virgins, but the strategy of creating martyrs is much the same as ISIS. Russians see Protestants as Believers in American religion and think that they must be agents of America, like Russian Orthodox priests, are agents of the Kremlin.

I first became aware of Russia's torture of Christians in Ukraine in 2022, when Viktor Cherniavskyi told me of his torture. Viktor was a pastor in Luhansk and had been evacuating people from occupied areas. One day, Viktor was leaving with a group of people that included a pregnant woman and a newborn infant, the Russians pulled him over and took him to the basement. Now, going to the basement is a euphemism for torture, and they kept Viktor in the basement for 25 days, including one day when he was tortured with an electrical Taser like you would use for self-defense. A Russian Orthodox priest stood over him and tried to cast demons out of him for being an Evangelical Christian.

Viktor's story is far from unique. Only days into the occupation of his city, the Russian [FSB] Federal Security Service came for

Oleksandr Salfetnikov, pastor of the Light of the Gospel Baptist Church. The Russians beat him with rubber batons for three days, trying to make him confess to being an agent of the [CIA] Central Intelligence Agency. When they released him, he had to be wheeled out. His assistant pastor did not survive his torture. We have collected—as Mark mentioned—we collected many similar testimonies on our website, [RussiaTorturesChristians.org](http://RussiaTorturesChristians.org). However, unfortunately, most Ukrainian Christians cannot speak out.

One Ukrainian believer who escaped to Poland told us that after he went public with his torture, a Russian FSB agent in the still-occupied hometown called him and told him what his teenage niece was wearing to school that day. This is the level of oppression. This is the level of detail the Russians go into to keep Christians oppressed in Ukraine. Therefore, while Russians are trying to overtly destroy Christianity in Ukraine, in America Russia's work to cover it up and spread false narratives to mislead Christians is active and ongoing.

Right here on Capitol Hill, Russian money is behind the effort to persuade members of Congress that the Ukrainian government is persecuting Christians. The Commission's excellent work on this subject in 2023 helped the world understand why this is Russian-inspired nonsense. However, let me review. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, for decades the branch of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, is home to thousands of clergies who have spent their lives reporting to Patriarch Kirill in Moscow. About a hundred of these clergy are either in prison or on trial for espionage-related offenses. However, this is just scratching the surface. We polled Ukrainians. Our polling shows that hundreds of thousands of people have left the Ukrainian Orthodox Church because they heard their local clergy say things against Ukraine or saw them do things to help the Russian war effort.

Therefore, this national security threat is widespread. Yet, a Russian-Ukrainian oligarch who is currently a deacon in the Russian Orthodox Church is paying a team of international lawyers and lobbyists, American lobbyists, hundreds of thousands of dollars to spread this false narrative inside Congress and cover up for Russian war crimes against Ukrainian Christians. Prominent members of the media, and even some members of Congress, continue to tell Americans that the Ukrainian government persecutes Christians.

To understand the extent to which Russian propaganda has penetrated American media, the Ukraine Freedom Project polled Republican primary voters on their attitudes toward Russia. A quarter of Republican primary voters agreed with the statement, that Russia is a country that promotes and encourages traditional family values. Now, this is Russia, the country that tortures Christians. Russia is the country that uses rape as a weapon of war. Again, this is Russia the country that brags about kidnapping hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian Christians, and they promote traditional family values.

We polled how—

Chairman WILSON: Give us that stat again?

Mr. MOORE: Sure. Twenty-five percent of Republican primary voters agree with the statement that Russia is a country that promotes and encourages traditional family values. We asked how

they got this information. Again, 25 percent of all Republican voters believe this narrative. Among those who get their news from Tucker Carlson, it is 38 percent. Among those who get their news from Joe Rogan, it is 47 percent. Perhaps the most indicative of the degree to which our adversaries are collaborating is that people who get their news from TikTok believe it at the rate of 35 percent.

Therefore, I want to thank the Commission for today's opportunity to highlight the stories of so many brave Ukrainians, people I have gotten to know, who have suffered for their faith and their country, and to highlight the work of my organization to help Ukrainians and tell their stories of torture at the hands of Russians.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Steven, and indeed, we are having votes now. Therefore, what we will be doing—I will do five minutes, and Rachel Bauman in our office is really a taskmaster. She is going to watch the five minutes. I cannot go beyond five minutes, Rachel. Then the House members will depart, vote, and come back. In the meantime, everybody will be the beneficiary, because Senator Roger Wicker will be in charge. [LAUGHTER.] With that—

**STATEMENT OF ROGER WICKER, U.S. SENATE, FROM  
MISSISSIPPI**

Senator WICKER: It is a great feeling.

Chairman WILSON: It is a good one, hey. However, please, five minutes, go.

Indeed, I want to thank each of you. Sadly, actually, Steven, when you say TikTok, this is confirmation that there is an axis of evil. Okay, the axis of evil is the Chinese Communist Party, war criminal Putin, and the regime in Tehran. People—and all Americans need to recognize this, and we are in a war and conflict we did not—we did not start or want. That is, it began February 24, 2022 with the invasion by war criminal Putin into Ukraine. It continued with the invasion by the puppets of Tehran on October 7 into Israel, and, sadly, it challenges, of course, the people—the Chinese Communist Party, Taiwan. Therefore, we need to recognize that.

Then I personally want to point out that, indeed, Pastor, your bravery. The church that I go to, First Presbyterian Church of Columbia, South Carolina, is the sponsor of Russian language ministries. It is Alex and Irina Ponomarev who have worked throughout the Slavic world to promote the love of Jesus, not politics, and indeed, our church sponsors programs for missions in Haiti, Guatemala, Wales, and Ukraine. We have worked closely with Russian Americans coming to our church and the love and affection that we have for the people of Russia.

Therefore, it is not political, and so it is just so insulting to think that American missionaries are political. It is not. It is a love of Jesus. That is what it is. With that in mind, and indeed, Steven, you have brought it up, and that is the Russian narrative, which is a nice term for propaganda. How can we counteract that? What messages can we have?

Mr. MOORE: Well, so we actually did—we have done extensive polling on this. Therefore, we took a poll in the immediate after-

math of the vote on April 20. What we found was that 22 percent of Republican primary voters had heard something about the Tucker Carlson narrative that Ukraine is persecuting Christians. However, the good news is that my organization, Ukraine Freedom Project, and many of our allies, we had a lot of allies doing this, we ran a campaign for most of the last year leading up to the vote telling Americans, particularly Republicans, particularly Republican Evangelicals, that Russia is torturing and murdering Ukrainian Christians for their faith.

Therefore, while 22 percent heard the Russian narrative, 34 percent heard our narrative. Therefore, it is a matter of getting good information to people about what is actually happening in Ukraine. You know, in the crazy times that we live in, we are fortunate to find out that the truth still works.

Chairman WILSON: Hey, the truth shall set you free. Pastor Sergeev, indeed, I was recently in Armenia, where it became so clear that war criminal Putin is trying to recreate the evil, failed Soviet Union. Therefore, that means every former Soviet republic is at risk. Whether it be Armenia, or we see immediately in Ukraine, we have already seen in Georgia, we see in Moldova, we have seen threats to Estonia, over and over again. Therefore, with the persecution of Christians today in the occupied areas, how does that relate to the Soviet persecution?

Mr. SERGEEV: Well, sir, I want to say one thing. Like I always have been months ago in the U.S. and sharing the stories, we have to understand that this war is not about territories, because Russia has the biggest territory. Some people I met, Americans, they say, hey, this is a fight for resources, and I am smiling because it is crazy. They have so many resources. I mean, this war is about—it is a spiritual war. They trying to rebuild an empire, and as Ronald Reagan said, that was an empire of evil, and this is true.

I see this in my parents generation. I see they are afraid because they know this. Like I said before, I have thi—the whole generation who fight for freedom just to be a Christian. We see this—what they are trying to do, and as I see right now, it is—they start to close in on the churches. Now they are going deeply because they take the buildings. They are going and clean up small groups. Patriarch Kirill has a big conversation with one mayor from the city—[inaudible]—in Ukraine. He said, if you will not kill them all—Protestant people—you will not win in the Zaporizhzhia area, and they make it publicly. Therefore, they are making a kind of Christian jihad, and this is the problem.

Chairman WILSON: Again. Thank you, each of you, for your courage. Now I am very happy to turn it over to Senator Roger Wicker from the great state of Mississippi.

Senator WICKER: Well, thank you. Thank you. Do, hurry back. [LAUGHTER.]

Mr. Veasey, do you have time to—we have time for you to ask your questions if you—I will go ahead and recognize you.

Representative VEASEY: Oh, thank you very much.

Dr. Wanner, I wanted to ask you about the persecution of Protestant Christians in occupied Ukraine. Can you compare that to how other religions may be treated there? I know that there are, you know, Mormons there, that there are Jehovah's Witnesses, that

there are other religions out there. How are those other religions being treated, in comparison?

Ms. WANNER: I think there is religious repression of all non-Russian Orthodox Church-affiliated religious communities. For example, in Ukraine, the second-biggest faith group is the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. They also are targeted for repression of their clergy, believers, and the like. The problem is, though, in the occupied territories there are very, very significant numbers of specifically Baptist and Pentecostal communities. Those faith groups have been especially targeted. They are targeted in Russia. They were targeted in the [USSR] Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. However, those Baptists and Evangelical Christian communities predominated in Ukraine during the Soviet period. Certainly, in the post-Soviet period, those Evangelical communities have continued to grow.

They are, what is more, extremely active in society—both politically in terms of social service provision, and social policy formation, and the like. Therefore, it is specifically, for a multitude of reasons, that Evangelicals—Baptists, Evangelical Christians, and Pentecostals—those religious communities and those religious leaders, have been especially targeted. They are seen as a threat to Orthodoxy. They are quite visible. They are quite effective. Since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion, these Protestant communities have been even more active in terms of providing humanitarian aid and serving not just their own communities but serving the nation more broadly. For these, and many other reasons, the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine feels particularly threatened. They have historically felt this way, because of the American connection with Protestants, with Protestant faith groups, but even more acutely today.

Representative VEASEY: Yes. Oh, wow. Mr. Sergeev, I wanted to ask you about the young people in Ukraine. I think that one of the missions that we went on in Birmingham, England a couple of years ago, there was—we stayed right across the street from a church there, and I went and talked to the pastor. He was telling me how church membership in England had been just dwindling everywhere, really. Of course, in order for churches to continue to grow and prosper, you have to have young people there who participate and feel comfortable and safe being in churches. I wanted to ask you, what impact has this had on young people in Ukraine? How do you think that they will view church and church attendance and being affiliated with churches in the future, should these persecutions continue to happen?

Mr. SERGEEV: Sir, I want to say one sure thing. In the last two years, as I said before, like, I am not only the youth pastor. I was a worship leader. We have a big YouTube channel of worship songs. Therefore, America was a big example for us for a long time. I mean, we sing the same songs. We translate them to Ukrainian language and even the Russian language. Therefore, in the last two years, me and my brother, we made 12 times a big worship school. Through this worship school, the young generation came. More than four and a half thousand people, musicians. They are still in Ukraine, still believing.



We kind of—from one place we have—yes, we are still fighting. We have a war. Every night, they are shooting the missiles, putting the drones. However, at that same moment, I see how many of the young generation, they are still believing and coming. We have so many open new churches right now, even in Ukraine. In the midst of the whole chaos, the young generation is still believing. I told today before to the doctor Wanner that just last year I just post one story on my Instagram. Fifteen seconds. Come together and just let us—get together on Maidan Square in the center of Kyiv and pray about our soldiers. Five hundred young adults came from one story.

We just gathered together. We would been there two hours and no kind of officer—a police officer—came and said, hey, go home. I mean, we have this big freedom in the midst of the war, and we just gathered together and prayed. It is not a problem for me to make any kind of Evangelical movement and put the stage in front of somewhere square and just worship God. Therefore, I see a future, you know. I am still believing that God has a calling for this nation. That is why we are still fighting. Thank you, sir.

Senator WICKER: Well, thank you very much, Representative Veasey. Perhaps members of the House will be able to return.

I can say that there are a number of senators who feel very strongly about this issue. We are getting ready for hearings, getting ready for markups, and there is an important joint meeting of the Congress today. Therefore, people will be coming in and out. I think at this point I will—I will take the liberty of making my opening statement. It may be then that members of the panel would like to respond to anything I might say. However, I do want to thank my colleagues in the House and our great staff on the Helsinki Commission for putting this together. I certainly appreciate the attendance today. This is a very large crowd. I see people identified as clergymen. Certainly, I am sure there are members of a variety of religious faiths.

It is interesting that today a number of us in the House and Senate will stand honoring the right of people of the Jewish faith to live and to have a homeland where for once in the history of several millennia they will be able to be safe. Therefore, I think the Helsinki Commission and this hearing stand for a larger principle, and that is our First Amendment right to freedom of religion as part of freedom of expression.

Our witnesses today remind us of a tragically overlooked victim of the dictator Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine, and that is the Ukrainian Evangelical community. Former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback has been a leading advocate on this issue. At this point, I would enter for the record a piece he wrote highlighting the mistreatment of those Christians. It is dated Friday, April 19, 2024. I hear no objection, so without objection, it will be admitted.

Under Russia's thumb, Evangelical leaders have been systematically persecuted for their faith. Some have been tortured or sent away. Some have been killed. Groups of Evangelical faithful have been forced to assemble in secret. They know their gatherings could be violently disrupted at any time, and that they could suffer physical harm without a moment's notice. In at least one instance, Rus-

sian soldiers swarmed the church as congregates were singing songs of worship.

I do appreciate, Mr. Sergeev, the fact that you like to sing the same hymns as we do. I am old-fashioned myself and like the traditional hymns. There is a bit of debate in my denomination about that. [LAUGHTER.] However, Russian soldiers have evicted members and turned Ukrainian churches into propaganda offices. In Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine, there is no accountability for these crimes. Vladimir Putin plays by his own rules. Inside Russia, he broadcasts the lie that Evangelicals are political tools of the United States. To the rest of the world, he falsely claims that Ukraine is actually the one persecuting believers. As witnesses have said just today, he is persuaded some vocal, visible voices in the United States, unbelievably, to make that assertion. It is almost inconceivable that that could be taking place.

Vladimir Putin lies because there is no honest reason for his assault on Ukraine. Only a cloud of falsehoods can obscure his crime and create the illusion that he is doing God's work. It reminds me of what we used to call, during the Soviet era, the big lie. Leaders tell a lie so fantastic and so vast that some people, gullible people, hearing that cannot imagine that anyone would tell such a tale if it were not the truth. That is the big lie. Mr. Putin has learned from some of the masters of the big lie that dominated the USSR during the time. Erasing Evangelical churches is part of Mr. Putin's goal to erase Ukraine as a nation.

Evangelical churches reflect the tradition of religious freedom in Ukraine. That spiritual legacy has flourished in the country since the fall of the Soviet Union, the kind of regime Russia hopes to reassert. That is what they are up to. It is Ukraine today. It is a couple of provinces in Georgia. It is attacking at the border of Armenia. There are too many places where Mr. Putin's Russia is involved to think that he is doing anything else. This kind of regime cannot allow religious freedom because free thinking presents a threat to a tyrant like Vladimir Putin. It exposes his lies to the detoxifying effects of the open air.

The United States and Ukraine prioritize freedom of religion. In Russia, Putin permits the practice of organized religion only if he deems it sufficiently loyal to his regime. Russian invaders require that Ukrainian Evangelicals swear loyalty to Putin before allowing them to practice their faith. This vile threat asks simply that Ukrainian Evangelicals violate their faith by placing a man above God. Vladimir Putin demands that believers foreswear their allegiance to Christ and place it in the hands of a murderous, godless tyrant.

I urge us all to be skeptical when we hear malicious lies that Russia is a haven for Christian civilization and traditional values. What a fantastic lie. In Russia and Russia-occupied Ukraine, there is no respect for the primacy of conscience, the freedom of the individual, and the dignity of human life. The occupiers defile churches, abduct and torture pastors—as we have heard today in testimony—and erase whole congregations. Russia has forced the once-vibrant Ukrainian Evangelical community underground.

To the Ukrainian Evangelicals risking their lives every day by expressing their beliefs, I have to say this: Keep the faith. Justice

will come for the Russian aggressor. I say that to members of all faiths, all religions, of whatever stripe. In Ukraine you have a right, no matter what your beliefs are, to express your faith. It is my fervent hope that the United States and other members of the OSCE will stand for justice for the Russian aggressor.

Now, at this point that concludes my formal statement. We have already entered into the record the article from April written by my former colleague, former Representative, and former Governor Brownback. Let me ask you, and I will start with Mr. Moore, in the third or fourth paragraph of Ambassador Brownback's article, he mentions the Russian Orthodox Church as you described it, Mr. Moore. However, I hope you will help us clear up a statement that I heard you make that seems to contradict what I understand Ambassador Brownback is saying.

He says, there is a now-independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine which is fully in support of freedom of religion and does not answer to Russia. Therefore, you would discuss that and tell us your understanding of the Russian Orthodox Church from Moscow, which is still present in parts of Ukraine, as opposed to and compared to the now-independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Mr. MOORE: Yes. I am happy to help out with that. Therefore, in 2019, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—not to be confused with the—see, so, sorry, yes. [LAUGHTER.] Which I was confused. However, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is the homegrown Ukrainian branch of orthodoxy that reports to the patriarch in Kyiv, where the—where the—[LAUGHS]—Ukrainian Orthodox Church is the branch that reports to Moscow. If you look at this over time, you know, at the beginning of the independent Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was attended by probably 70 percent of Ukrainians. Therefore, this is the one that reports to Moscow. As that church became increasingly more pro-Russian, then more and more Ukrainians left it.

You know, we have to poll those details this and shows—we asked people. You know, we did basically a customer service poll of former members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. We found out why they left. You know, a majority of them left simply because they felt that the church was too pro-Russian. As I mentioned in my testimony, about 8 percent left because they had seen the clergy do something to aid the Russian war effort or to say something against Ukraine.

Therefore, you know, the majority of Ukrainians are voting with their feet, so to speak. They are leaving the Russian-Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is loyal to Moscow, and they are joining the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which is the one that has a patriarch in Kyiv. Therefore, that is—does that—does that help with your question?

Senator WICKER: Well, let me see if I can rephrase this.

Mr. MOORE: Sure.

Senator WICKER: There is the Orthodox Church of Russia, with a patriarch in Moscow. There was a Ukrainian Orthodox Church with a patriarch in Kyiv who answered to the patriarch in Moscow. There was. Now, Dr. Wanner, would you like to take issue with that?

Ms. WANNER: It is a complicated situation.

Ms. WICKER: Well, it surely is. [LAUGHTER.] That is why it is taking me some time.

Ms. WANNER: I will try to—I will try to be very brief. There is the Russian Orthodox Church that has a patriarch in Moscow. For over 300 years, Ukrainian religious life was under the Moscow Patriarchate.

Senator WICKER: Such as it could be, under the USSR.

Ms. WANNER: Correct, such as it could be. However, the Russian Orthodox Church was the one church that was allowed to function in a somewhat unencumbered way in the USSR, unlike, for example, Evangelicals, who were heavily, heavily monitored and repressed in the Soviet Union. Having said that, the Russian Orthodox Church did exist throughout the Soviet period and continues to exist.

Therefore, the churches after Ukrainian independence, those Orthodox churches in Ukraine, became known as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate because they have institutional connections that bring them—they are under the patriarch in Moscow. This became—after almost three decades of an independent Ukrainian state, increasingly unacceptable in Ukraine, that they did not have their own Orthodox Church with their own patriarch. Of course, especially after 2014, when the war broke out, momentum for severing ties with Moscow mounted.

However, it was at this period, Steven's correct, in 2019 a separate, self-governing Orthodox Church of Ukraine was formed. However, that means in Ukraine there are two Orthodox churches, which is a highly unusual situation. One Orthodox Church has a leader, in Kyiv. The other Orthodox Church is not entirely independent. It is not entirely autonomous. It has a very amorphous and evolving relationship, but it still is formally connected with the Moscow Patriarchate.

Senator WICKER: However, can we both agree—can Mr. Moore and Dr. Wanner both agree that there is a now-independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine that does not answer to anyone in Moscow?

Ms. WANNER: Correct. That is correct. That is correct.

Senator WICKER: All right. Mr. Sergeev, would you like to comment on this before I move on to another topic?

Mr. SERGEEV: Well, I mean—

Senator WICKER: I am sure you cannot imagine why anyone would stay in the Orthodox Church and not join yours. That is their right, is not it?

Mr. SERGEEV: We have—before the war started in Melitopol, we have a big community of pastors. We have a great relationship with even the Moscow Orthodox church. However, as a chaplain, I can say a couple of weeks ago when I came back from the front line—I was in one area, one city, where there was one Moscow Orthodox temple. It is right now completely destroyed by Russians. However, our soldiers, Ukrainian soldiers, too one priest, Paul, from this temple. Russia exchanged this priest for 90 Ukrainian soldiers. Russia gave for one Orthodox priest and 90 Ukrainian soldiers who have been in prison. It tells us a story, of how many—

Senator WICKER: In a prisoner exchange?

Mr. SERGEEV: Yes.

Senator WICKER: Okay.

Mr. SERGEEV: They exchanged one for 90. Therefore, many agents of Russia work inside of Ukraine, and they look like Christians. They are making services and kind of work worshipping God. However, they are just working for Putin. This is—this is a fact. I am, like, a military chaplain, and I know these stories, how they look like. Therefore, this church for Ukraine, it is very dangerous, really, for our nation.

I understand, from one side we are—we are living in a democratic country, and we believe that everything is okay. Yes, we have to build our church and be free in our religious faith. However, as I see every church, and every pastor who runs away from occupation in Melitopol, they support Ukraine—Greek Catholics, Roman Catholics, Kyiv Orthodox Church. However, only one priest who let still there in occupation and works with Russia is from the Moscow Orthodox Church. Therefore, it is the facts that I just give you, and we are praying—[LAUGHS]—but yes.

Senator WICKER: Okay. Well, in the occupied territory, are the—are the churches that do not answer to Moscow, are they all underground or are some of them still able to operate in the open? How do underground churches meet and work? Do they have to move from place to place? Just describe that.

Mr. SERGEEV: There are not anymore, any kind of Evangelical churches in occupied territories.

Senator WICKER: Oh, really? Okay.

Mr. SERGEEV: Yes.

Senator WICKER: Not even underground?

Mr. SERGEEV: Like I said, for a couple of small groups. Even they come in sometimes in the houses and take them to prison. Therefore—

Mr. WICKER: Small prayer groups, things like that?

Mr. SERGEEV: Five, three people—

Senator WICKER: Right.

Mr. SERGEEV: I cannot say here publicly, because so many people it is dangerous for them. However, I am still in contact with these people, with the leaders. Sometimes they are not even—we just change the numbers. We speak secretly because it is dangerous for their life. However, we understand how many—I know how many people still—members from my church are still there in occupied territories and still getting together to pray. However, it is dangerous for their life, really.

Senator WICKER: Well, okay, now I assume in the areas of Ukraine that are not occupied by Russia, is there total religious freedom?

Mr. SERGEEV: A hundred percent.

Senator WICKER: Okay. I believe it is true that by some 70-plus percent in the last presidential election, the voters in Ukraine elected a Jew as their president. Is that correct?

Mr. SERGEEV: Well, he is not actually a Jew. [LAUGHS.] I mean, but—

Senator WICKER: Well, he says he is.

Mr. SERGEEV: He is Jewish, yes.

Senator WICKER: Okay.

Mr. SERGEEV: He is Jewish.

Mr. MOORE: I might add that the defense minister is Muslim.

Senator WICKER: There you go. All right. Therefore, do—is there any hint of a reason why any independent observer would say there is a problem with religious freedom in the non-occupied part? I mean, are the Russian Orthodox Churches discriminated against by the government or by the police, in the free part of Ukraine? Dr. Wanner, yes.

Ms. WANNER: There is a motion to discuss the status of what is called the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, the status of this religious group in Ukraine. That is because, you know, you very accurately depicted the attitude of the Russian state towards repressing dissent of any form. One of the things that Vladimir Putin has instrumentalized, even weaponized, is religion.

He has weaponized this, I would go beyond what was stated earlier, not just in the former republics turned independent countries of the former Soviet Union, but he is doing this around the world. That is to say, using the Russian Orthodox Church, if you will, almost as an arm of the Russian state—to pursue Russian foreign policy, and to enhance the geopolitical position of the Russian Federation, and to alter alliances in favor of the Russian state. Therefore, this is one of the reasons why the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which at least formally still has institutional connections to Moscow, has become an object of concern in Ukraine today.

Beyond that one issue, I think there is tremendous religious freedom in Ukraine. That is why Protestant communities were not only able to be created but to grow in Ukraine. Why, I would say, even before 2014 they, in fact, had Ukraine, if you will, as a base that served Eurasia. In other words, Protestant communities in Ukraine were very, very active in terms of humanitarian, educational, and missionizing endeavors. This, of course, is seen as a threat in Russia precisely because of the potential growth of Protestantism that that represents.

Given the negative associations of Protestantism—and specifically of the Baptist Church and Evangelical Christian and Pentecostal churches—then that makes a multiplication of potential American spies, if you will, to use their rhetoric, throughout wherever those particular faith communities should grow. Be they in Eurasia, be they on the African continent, be they in the occupied territories of Ukraine. That is why the position of the Russian Orthodox Church, by and large, has been to shut down those churches and shut down those kinds of missionary, educational, and humanitarian efforts.

Senator WICKER: Let me ask you to expound on that. However, first of all, am I pronouncing your name correctly?

Ms. WANNER: You are. You are.

Senator WICKER: It is Wanner.

Ms. WANNER: Yes.

Senator WICKER: Okay. Well, then compare with us other former [USSR] Union of Soviet Socialist Republics countries. Then I think you mentioned Africa also. Are Protestant congregations in Ukraine currently, and have they been, sending missionaries to these other places, like the former USSR and Africa? How is it spread?

Ms. WANNER: To the extent that that is possible. Of course, that wavers over time and, of course, from country to country. However, yes.

Senator WICKER: However, where is—which former USSR countries are doing better in that regard? In allowing religious freedom and allowing other—

Ms. WANNER: If you want to count the Baltics, I mean, they are, of course, part of the [EU] European Union and so they then adopted EU legislation. However, of the other former republics turned independent countries of the former USSR, I would say there is none.

Senator WICKER: The ‘stans.

Ms. WANNER: They do not surpass Ukraine, in my view.

Senator WICKER: They do not have much to brag about.

Ms. WANNER: Because, for example, I mean, there are robust Muslim communities in Ukraine as well that are driven by immigrants from primarily Muslim countries of the former Soviet Union to Ukraine, as well as by a burgeoning Afghan community in Ukraine. Therefore, there are quite a few Muslims in Ukraine at this point. They too are quite vocal. They serve—they too serve as chaplains in the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Senator WICKER: Which one of you could give us some statistics about religious affiliation and membership in Ukraine? How many Baptists are there? How many new Ukrainian Orthodox are there? Does anybody have those statistics? Okay, Mr. Sergeev, and then we will come back to—

Mr. SERGEEV: A couple of phrases. We have the Baptist Union. This Baptist Union has more than 2,000 churches in Ukraine. Now it is the biggest Baptist Union in Europe if we count the people. We have a Pentecostal Union. We have more than 3,500 churches in Ukraine. Well, what percentage of the population would be in those two?

Senator WICKER: It is not a big one. It is not the United States. [LAUGHS.] I mean, I think it is kind of 3 percent.

Mr. MOORE: We have polled it. Therefore, Protestants are about 4 percent of the Ukrainian population. However, oddly enough, Baptists are the third-largest Christian denomination after—there is Orthodox, there is Greek Catholic at about 10 percent, and then Baptist is the next-biggest denomination. Among Orthodox, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that reports to Moscow is in that 4 percent range as well. Again, they have just—they are—

Senator WICKER: Okay. Down to 4 percent.

Mr. MOORE: Yes. Therefore, their parishioners have plummeted. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine has, I want to say, around 50 percent. I can get those numbers to the Commission. However, it is a very large percentage.

Senator WICKER: Well, listen. Mr. Chairman, I do believe my five minutes have expired. [LAUGHTER.] Let me just end with this. Here is why freedom has got to win out in the end. I want to quote from Ecclesiastes, third chapter, 11th verse: He has set eternity in the hearts of men, yet they cannot fathom the work that God has done from the beginning to the end. There is something in the human soul that makes most of us seek to understand eternity and spiritual things. When freedom allows that to flourish, humankind is

better, and what you are about, and what you are doing, is so important. I am so grateful to each of you for taking a stand, and for helping us understand it better on this side of the Atlantic. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you, acting chairman. We are really grateful the first string was here. Now the second string. Therefore, we now proceed to Congressman Wiley Nickel of North Carolina.

#### **STATEMENT OF WILEY NICKEL, U.S. HOUSE, FROM NORTH CAROLINA**

Representative NICKEL: Thank you so much. Good morning. Slava Ukraini [GLORY TO UKRAINE]. It is great to be with you. I just returned several weeks ago from a bipartisan, bicameral visit to Ukraine for about a week. We were joined by, Senator Wicker, and your colleague, Joni Ernst. Had a very important fact-finding mission. The issue of persecution of Evangelical Christians in Ukraine is an incredibly important topic, and I am really glad to be joined in a bipartisan way here to shed light on this because this is an issue that is not getting enough attention right now. Thank you to the U.S. Helsinki Commission of organizing today's hearing, and to our witnesses, again, for being with us.

Ukraine is a nation with a rich tradition of religious freedom. It is home to many Christian denominations. Unfortunately, under Russian occupation, these communities have faced severe repression and violence. When I traveled to Ukraine earlier this year, I heard about the atrocities firsthand, and had the opportunity to meet with Tamila Tasheva, the permanent representative of the president of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, and Dr. Viktor Yelensky, a Ukrainian scholar and politician. We discussed their efforts to prevent further human rights violations and to protect victims of the Russian occupation. I hope that today's hearing will shed further light on these atrocities and highlight the urgent need for Ukrainian victory to restore and protect religious freedom.

First question, Mr. Moore. Thank you so much for your leadership. It must be—it must be unusual to be on the opposite side of the hearings here today, but so far you seem to be doing very—

Mr. MOORE: Oh, thanks. Yes. Well, you guys make it easy. Thank you for that.

Representative NICKEL: You know, grateful for your work with the Ukraine Freedom Project. It is been crucial to documenting and exposing Russia's systematic oppression of Ukrainian Christians. Can you talk more about the specific challenges you have faced in bringing this information to the international community's attention?

Mr. MOORE: Sure. Well, there is getting the information to begin with, because the atrocities are all happening in the occupied areas. You know, oddly enough, the Russians are not welcoming me there. Therefore, getting that information is difficult, and then, because so many people, like Pastor Sergeev, have friends that are still in these occupied territories, there is a lot they cannot say. Therefore, the Russians are very good at oppressing people, finding



leverage on them, and making them do what they want. The Russians do not want this to get out. Therefore, that is a problem.

Then there is just generating interest among people—we started a campaign in earnest last September, almost a year ago now. You know, I wrote an op-ed, and I shopped it around to everyone I could possibly find, and no one wanted it. It took me weeks. Finally, a niche publication for Christian foreign policy called Providence Magazine—a great bunch of folks doing really good work—took my first op-ed, and from that, then generated a lot of other work. Ultimately, as more and more people got involved in this and more and more—and they—we were able to—you know, there was 100 articles about this between October and April. We were responsible for about 70 of them.

Therefore, generating that interest. Then also, finally, just working against the people who are—who are not constrained by the truth. The Russian propagandists are not constrained by the truth. You know, they have more money than we do, by a lot. You know, we—you know, if we get into the six figures in fundraising, it is a—you know, that is a good year for us. Meanwhile, the estimates of Russian propaganda spending worldwide is, like, \$2.4 billion. Therefore, there is a massive tide that we are swimming against. You know, and, again, as I mentioned to Chairman Wilson earlier, fortunately, the truth still works.

Representative NICKEL: Thanks so much.

Pastor Sergeev, can you describe the impact of the Russian occupation on your church community and how your congregation has been able to maintain their faith and resilience during such a truly difficult time?

Mr. SERGEEV: Excuse me, how they what?

Representative NICKEL: How they have been able to maintain their faith, the impact of Russian occupation on them?

Mr. SERGEEV: Well, look, 80 percent of our members ran away. We have so many—a couple of churches, small churches, in Germany right now getting together so many people at Ukrainian territory, free territory. However, we still have a kind of 200 in small groups. I said before, I cannot tell you how much, where. However, the good news is that so many Ukrainians got to Europe, and now we have hundreds of new churches open because they are free people, and they believe in God, and they just spread the gospel and opened up the new churches. I have been—this is my 24th country in the last two years for me. I have been to Israel twice. I met so many Ukrainians who work in Israel right now preaching the gospel and sharing the stories. They ran away from one war, and now they are in Israel got another war. There are some people from Ukraine the third time they are coming back to Europe from Israel because Hamas is shooting and, yes.

However, I think this is kind of new level of faith, I think, and we are just sharing the stories. I really still believe that God has a big calling for this nation. That is why I am here, sharing the story, and that is why I am coming back tomorrow to Ukraine—[LAUGHS]—because there are soldiers waiting for me to listen, to help. We have a big community of chaplains right now. It is kind of new web, and actually, I want to say a big thank you to every

American chaplain who comes to Ukraine and helps us, because you have a big experience.

The story of the American chaplain is 200 years old. We have only nine—the last nine years, like, we have this experience. We are waiting, and we are very thankful for support of chaplains who serve to Ukrainian nation and teach us how to do this whole thing and work with the —is that correct? And, in Ukraine how to help soldiers. Even yesterday, I saw the helicopter, and I am a little bit afraid because always when I see something in the sky, really inside of me I am preparing that if somebody has to shut down or going to come into some buildings. Yes, so this is our life right now.

Representative NICKEL: Thank you so much. My time has expired.

Mr. MOORE: If I could just add one thing, I would like to just—because it is timely, and it is something that Pastor Sergeev mentioned. You know, so the first place that Hamas went after October 7 was to Russia, to Moscow to see Putin. Putin has been periodically organizing summits between the Palestinian terror organizations, and Iran. He is doing this in Moscow. Therefore, as we listen today to Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech, and we listen to the protesters, I just want to make sure that everyone's aware of who Hamas' allies are, and who is Iran's allies. It is Russia. It is Moscow. It is Putin.

Representative NICKEL: Therefore, that is a great point, and just on the chaplain issue, you know, I was glad to see that the chaplain for the U.S. House of Representatives joined us earlier. I saw her here. However, thank you so much, Chair Wilson, for your leadership on this issue, bringing much-needed attention to this very important issue.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, Congressman. Again, you can see it is bipartisan—Democrat, Republican. Indeed, as we conclude, I appreciate, Steven, you bring up, hey, connecting the dots. There are good people who simply are not connecting the dots. The dots are perfectly clear. It is called Iranian drones being used by war criminal Putin to kill Ukrainians, okay? However, that is just one dot. I mean, there are dots everywhere. Hamas showing up in Moscow, Hamas showing up in Beijing. How could this be? Hamas really is a puppet of the regime in Tehran. Therefore, I just want to thank you all.

We have got to educate the American people because there are good people who are just not understanding that we are facing an axis of evil. That is the regime in Tehran. We have got war criminal Putin and the Chinese Communist Party. They are working together, collaborating together to invade democracies. Their goal is really—they are very eager to let us know in English—that is, death to Israel, death to America. Therefore, it is a foreign war today, but their plan is to bring it here. Therefore, I want to thank you.

Then we also need to get across that, indeed, what war criminal Putin is trying to do. The way he has misled the people of the Russian Federation is to recreate an empire. However, they need to know it is the failed Soviet empire for the benefit of oligarchs. It does not benefit the people of Russia. I have had wonderful visits. I had my business cards in Russian. I was so hoping—Chelyabinsk

is the sister city of my hometown, Will's hometown, of Columbia, South Carolina. I am very grateful to have visited Novosibirsk one time. Steven, there was a billboard in English that said, "Welcome to Novosibirsk: The Chicago of Siberia." I have had a University of South Carolina student who was from St. Petersburg as an intern in my office. I stayed with his family in St. Petersburg.

Therefore, just had such high hopes, for visits to Moscow. I led a delegation to place a wreath at the world's largest open cemetery, for the victims of the siege of Leningrad. Half a million people were buried in an open cemetery. It was—we put a wreath there in the shape of the United States and red, white, and blue flowers to show our love and affection for the people of Russia. While I was there, I found out that the success—Dr. Wanner would know, but I did not know—and that is that the success of Joseph Stalin in stopping Hitler at Leningrad was due to American lend-lease. All of the equipment that the Soviets used was equipment provided by the United States to our, at that time, Soviet allies. Therefore, over and over again we have a deep affection for the people of Russia, and we want the best.

A final point that really—I had the opportunity, gruesomely, to visit Bucha. Therefore, I was there. I met with a grandmother who told me about how she was just driving along with her 16-year-old grandson in the front seat, and the Russian soldier, without any provocation, without any warning, shot and killed her grandson in the front seat of the car. Then we visited with a family whose family members were taken out of their home there in Bucha. They took the family out, hands tied behind their back, shot them in the head, and buried them in a yard.

Then putting it in perspective for Americans, in visiting Bucha I could have been in any American subdivision, suburban area. The homes were very Americanized. In fact, something that we could all identify, two blocks from where the executions took place there is still a functioning drive-through McDonald's. We are not talking about some third world anywhere. Therefore, it is just so important that we support the people of Ukraine, support the people of Israel, support the people of Taiwan. That we maintain the borders of Ukraine, the borders of Israel, the borders of Taiwan, and the borders of the United States.

With that, we are adjourned. [Bangs gavel.] [APPLAUSE.]  
[Whereupon, at 11:37 a.m., the hearing ended.]

## Additional Submission for the Record

### OPENING STATEMENT OF BEN CARDIN

Thank you, Chairman Wilson, for organizing this hearing of the Helsinki Commission to examine how Russia's war in Ukraine has affected religious freedom there.

Religious persecution is not a new story in Ukraine. There is a history of repression against Jews, Orthodox priests, and other communities, often based on falsehoods and stereotypes. The Soviet State considered these religious communities a threat to their power. Russia has never fully divorced itself from this Soviet apparatus of repression. In fact, Putin continues this practice in occupied Ukraine, today.

As PBS has reported—

*"Since the occupation, evangelical congregations, Protestant churches, all the non-Russian Orthodox Christian faiths have been deemed undesirable and tens of thousands of believers have been forced to flee. Those who remain gather in secret in private homes for fear of angering the new regime."*

It is no surprise Putin sees Ukraine's freedoms as a threat to his regime. On a micro level, individual freedoms in Ukraine threaten loyalty to the Russian "authorities" operating on illegally occupied territory. On a macro level, as Ukraine chooses its own values and alliances—it is moving out of Moscow's orbit.

In an effort to enforce complete loyalty to Moscow, Putin wants to prevent people from having the freedom to worship as they choose. He uses the Russian Orthodox Church—controlled by the state—as a political litmus test.

The horrific treatment of Ukrainians by occupying authorities, which we will hear about today, reminds us that a "peace plan" from Russia that leaves Ukrainians trapped under occupation will not bring peace.

To defeat this cynicism, and to prevent Russia from further expanding its control across Ukraine, we and our allies must do everything possible to prevent Russian persecution of Christians in Ukraine and help Ukraine win on its own terms.

I am want to thank our witnesses' for sharing their experiences today.

### OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN JOE WILSON

The Commission will come to order. Good morning to all who have joined us today. Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge [other members present].

The Helsinki Commission has long seen freedom of religion or belief as a priority. Ukraine is a living example—Ukrainians of all backgrounds and creeds are bravely working together in defense of their homeland, and ultimately in defense of freedom and democracy. Religious freedom is respected and protected. It is one of the core values Ukraine fights for.

Meanwhile, it is illegal in Russia to evangelize, as expressing religion that is not connected to the State is a threat to the façade that war criminal Putin depends on to stay in power.

Christians in Ukraine, particularly evangelical Christians, as we will learn more about today, have been the target of horrific torture and abuse by Russian forces. Evangelicals are seen by the Kremlin as being "pro-American" and are specifically sought out for kidnapping and torture.

Ukraine, some of which have been occupied for a decade, is not safe for Christians, as we will learn today because of war criminal Putin and his thugs. It is not safe for anyone who refuses to submit to the demands of the occupiers. Those who serve a higher power present a real challenge for war criminal Putin, both in Russia and in occupied Ukraine, as he and his delusional enablers worship the failed Soviet Empire.

I look forward to hearing about this from our witnesses, in addition to more about Ukraine's religious landscape and how the United States can support our brave Ukrainian friends living under Russian occupation.

Their words will speak for themselves. The testimonies are graphic and incredibly disturbing. Those who support freedom support Ukraine.

- First, we will hear from Dr. Catherine Wanner, who is a professor of History, Anthropology, and Religious Studies at Penn State.
- Next, speaking about his experiences in church leadership in occupied Ukraine is Pastor Mark Sergeev [sir-GAY-ev].
- Finally, we have former congressional Chief of Staff now founder of the Ukraine Freedom Project, Steven E. Moore.
- With this, I will turn to [Commissioners present] for any opening remarks, after which we will hear from Dr. Wanner.

#### **OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR ROGER WICKER**

Thank you, Chairman Wilson, for organizing this hearing. Our witnesses today will remind us of a tragically overlooked victim of Putin's war on Ukraine: The Ukrainian Evangelical community. Former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback, has been a leading advocate on this issue. I would like to begin by entering into the record a piece he wrote highlighting the mistreatment of these Christians.

Under Russia's thumb, evangelical leaders have been systematically persecuted for their faith. Some have been tortured or sent away. Some have been killed.

Groups of evangelical faithful have been forced to assemble in secret. They know their gatherings could be violently disrupted and that they could suffer physical harm—without a moment's notice. In at least one instance, Russian soldiers swarmed a church as congregants were singing songs of worship. They evicted the members and turned the church into a propaganda office.

In Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine, there is no accountability for these crimes. Vladimir Putin plays by his own rules. Inside Russia, he broadcasts the lie that evangelicals are political tools of the United States. To the rest of the world, he falsely claims that Ukraine is actually the one persecuting believers.

Vladimir Putin lies because there is no honest reason for his assault on Ukraine. Only a cloud of falsehoods can obscure his crime and create the illusion that he is doing God's work.

Erasing evangelical churches is part and parcel of Vladimir Putin's goal to erase Ukraine as a Nation. Evangelical churches reflect the tradition of religious freedom in Ukraine. That spiritual legacy has flourished in the country since the fall of the Soviet Union—the kind of regime Russia hopes to reassert.

That kind of regime cannot allow religious freedom, because free thinking presents a threat to a tyrant like Putin. It exposes his lies to the detoxifying effects of the open air.

The United States and Ukraine prioritize the freedom of religion. In Russia, Putin permits the practice of organized religion only if he deems it sufficiently loyal to his regime. Russian invaders require that Ukrainian Evangelicals swear loyalty to Putin before allowing them to practice their faith. This vile threat asks simply that Ukrainian Evangelicals violate their faith by placing a man above God. Vladimir Putin demands that believers forswear their allegiance to Christ and place it in the hands of a murderous, godless tyrant.

I urge you to be skeptical when you hear the malicious lie that Russia is a haven for Christian civilization and traditional values. In Russia and Russian-occupied Ukraine, there is no respect for the primacy of conscience, the freedom of the individual, and the dignity of human life. The occupiers defile churches, abduct and torture pastors, and erase whole congregations. Russia has forced the once-vibrant Ukrainian Evangelical community underground. To the Ukrainian Evangelicals risking their lives every day by expressing their beliefs, I have this to say: Keep the faith. Justice will come for the Russian aggressor.

#### **RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION OF EVANGELICALS IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE**

##### **TESTIMONY OF CATHERINE WANNER PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES, PENN STATE UNIVERSITY**

There are more Evangelicals in Ukraine than in any other country in Europe. They include Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Pentecostals as well as other Protestant faith communities. Many factors have contributed to this concentration of Protestant believers in Ukraine but surely the emergence of tolerance of religious diversity and religious pluralism as governing principles in Ukraine are key among them. This has created a vibrant religious marketplace in which a plethora of religious groups compete for members and in which religious symbolism and practice are broadly accepted in public institutions and in public spaces. When Ukrainian territories first fell under Russian occupation in 2014, the persecution of minority

religious communities ensued. Evangelicals were especially targeted for repressive measures. What follows is why Protestants in particular incur the wrath of Russian ruling authorities and specifically what the consequences have been for Evangelical clergy and believers.

The repression of Protestants in the occupied territories of Ukraine, starting in 2014 and accelerating after the full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022, has been so virulent because the established religious pluralism and tolerance of religious minorities that allowed Protestant communities to grow and thrive in Ukraine clashes with the forced implementation of the Russian World ideology that comes with Russian rule. This is the first of two reasons. The Russian World posits that Eastern Slavs are part of a single spiritual and historic civilizational space that includes Russians, Ukrainians, Belarussians, and sometimes even Moldova and Kazakhstan as well. To be Ukrainian is to be Orthodox. There is no place for Protestants in the Russian World. They are apostates to their faith and traitors to their nation precisely because they have abandoned Orthodoxy. The Russian World ideology serves to justify the repression of religious minorities, especially Evangelicals, and to privilege Russian Orthodoxy as a state-protected guardian of “traditional values,” public morality, and social and political order.

The second reason is that Baptists and Evangelical Christians have long been demonized because of the negative associations with the United States that Protestantism carries. The projected connections between Protestantism and the United States mean that clergy and active believers are often subject to charges of being “foreign agents” or “American spies.” The 2012 Foreign Agent law has been repeatedly used in Russia, and now in the occupied territories as well, to crack down on independent civil society organizations, to silence dissent, and to jail even potential members of the opposition. This law is used to restrict religious freedoms, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly. It targets religious leaders, members of NGOs, human rights activists, and independent journalists by mandating complicated, and often contradictory, reporting and registration requirements. Non-compliance results in fines, jail, or closure of the organization.

As a result, the occupation of Ukrainian territories by Russian-controlled forces slips easily and quickly into religious repression, especially of Evangelicals, because the Russian state advocates entirely different policies toward non-Russian Orthodox Church-affiliated religious communities. The repressive treatment Evangelicals received in the USSR, and to a degree continue to experience in Russia, is significantly more brutal and violent in the Russian-controlled, occupied territories of Ukraine.

### HOW UKRAINE BECAME THE EURASIAN BIBLE BELT

Three empires intersected in Ukraine, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman, creating tremendous religious and cultural diversity in this borderland region. The German Tsarina Catherine II, looking to develop the rich agricultural lands of Ukraine, enticed German Baptists to relocate to Ukraine with the promises of land. They formed a basis from which Protestant communities would grow. The occupied territories were part of the Russian Empire, where peoples were categorized for governing purposes by religion. Baptists became known by the German word “Stundists,” to signify their strange habit of devoting an hour to Bible study and were shunned for their foreignness.

In the Soviet Union, the negative foreign connotations of Baptists and Evangelical Christians became closely associated with the United States. Ford, Rockefeller, and other titans of American industry were demonized as Protestants, who were called “sectarians” to signal their cult-like congregational life. Soviet anti-religious propaganda was laden with shrill accusations of zombified Protestant believers drinking the blood of children during their rituals as they acted as conduits for American interests to undermine Soviet power. Protestant communities were heavily monitored in Soviet Ukraine. Many communities went underground and led a clandestine existence. The resilience and even growth of Evangelical communities in Soviet Ukraine prompted some of the harshest repressive measures meted out to religious communities including Gulag imprisonment and internal exile to remote regions of the Soviet Union.

### RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN UKRAINE

When the USSR collapsed in 1991, many religious groups rerouted or established a base on Ukrainian soil. Three key factors made the religious landscape in Ukraine evolve in a significantly different way than it did in Russia. First, in Ukraine, religious pluralism emerged within Orthodoxy itself. Although the Orthodox organizational pattern is one church serving one people, and usually within one state, in the

1990s there were three Orthodox churches all claiming to serve Ukraine [Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate [[UOC-MP], Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate [UOC-KP], and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church [UAOC]]. There are currently two canonically recognized Orthodox churches serving Ukraine, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine [OCU] and the UOC-MP, as opposed to one for a single territory, which is highly unusual. This represents a break with the Orthodox ethno-territorial model of institutional organization.

Second, the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church [UGCC], an Eastern-rite Catholic church that recognizes the authority of the Pope, allows married priests and uses a Byzantine liturgy like the Orthodox, is also understood to be an authentically national church. Both Orthodoxy and Greek Catholicism are considered attributes of Ukrainian national culture and indigenous to Ukraine. However, no one jurisdiction of Orthodoxy or the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church enjoys a privileged political or popular position over other confessional groups.

Third, this inherent pluralism within Orthodoxy and multiple national churches means that legislative policies adopted in Ukraine after 1991 did not serve the interests of a single religious institution. No single church was assured state privileges and protections. Additionally, over time the Ukrainian state did not seek to, and was even not able to, control religious activity as civil society became more robust. As a result, a wide spectrum of religious groups either were founded or expanded in Ukraine. Evangelical communities, in particular, benefited from extensive American missionizing and the resources of their American counterparts and grew significantly. They began to shed many of the negative connotations that had been previously attached to evangelicals as a "dangerous sectarian cult" of foreign origin.

Although Evangelicals are currently no more than four percent of the population, their presence, impact, and influence in political life far outpaces what such numbers would suggest. A number of Evangelicals rose to political prominence. Oleksandr Turchynov, a Baptist, became Acting President of Ukraine during a critical turning point after the Maidan protests ended. Leonid Chernovetskyi, the mayor of Kyiv from 2006-2012, was an active participant in a Pentecostal church that had churches across Ukraine and at one time boasted a membership of 25,000, making it the largest evangelical church in Europe. Many humanitarian, educational, publishing, and missionary centers across a broad spectrum of faith groups established a base in Ukraine that served the broader Eurasian region, including Russia. In sum, multiple national churches that blocked the emergence of a single, state-protected church to dominate public and political life allowed freedom of religion and religious pluralism to become part of Ukraine's political culture. This is not the case in Russia and is no longer the case in the occupied territories.

#### **RUSSIAN RATIONALE FOR REPRESSING EVANGELICALS IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES SINCE 2014**

After 2014, Protestant communities in the Donbas were by far the most targeted group for repression, expulsion, and even torture. The city of Donetsk alone was home to a Christian University, Christian publishing centers, a seminary, humanitarian assistance programs, and other Baptist and Evangelical Christian initiatives that served all of Ukraine and the successor states of the former Soviet Union as well. Two reasons largely explain why Russian occupation yields persecution of all non-ROC religious communities and why particularly harsh treatment has been leveled at Evangelicals in the occupied territories of Ukraine since 2014.

The first reason for targeting Evangelicals is the long-standing charge of Baptists, Evangelical Christians, and other Protestants as "foreign agents," "American spies," or "dangerous sectarians." They are suspected of undermining Russian state power by introducing alleged Western liberalism and decadence into Russian society. In response to the perceived threat foreign ideas infiltrated by Evangelical communities pose and to stem this Western influence in the "near abroad," as the territories of the former Soviet Union are called, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill Gundyayev began to propagate the "Russian World" [*Russkii Mir*] ideology. The concept of a Russian World, founded on Russian Orthodoxy, the Russian language, and Russian culture, categorically denies the very possibility of an independent, autonomous Ukrainian nation and church. It is used by the Russian state and clerical officials to justify the reconstitution of the imperial vision of all Eastern Slavs under one church led by the Moscow patriarch and politically led by the president of the Russian Federation. Some separatist soldiers in eastern Ukraine politically loyal to Moscow initially called themselves an "Orthodox Army."

A goal of the Russian World is the promotion and institutionalization of anti-Western, Orthodox conservatism, which celebrates traditional values, especially as

they relate to gender and sex roles and identities. To do so, the ROC sponsors a variety of family, sport, and militarized youth programs. These are means by which church and state leaders work in concert to craft a militarized religious aesthetic and institutionalize certain ethical and moral practices that inform social and political life in Russia.

This vision of the Russian World was incorporated into the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic" [DPR]. Its 2014 constitution states that DNR recognizes "itself to be an integral part of the Russian World as well as Russian civilization confessing to the Orthodox faith [the Faith of Christian Orthodox Catholic Eastern Confession]." Asserting that the Orthodoxy of the Moscow Patriarchate is irreconcilable with all other religions, the leaders of DPR have heavily repressed non-Orthodox believers as apostates. By virtue of being born in the Donbas, one is Orthodox. Accepting another faith tradition is to betray one's nation and commit apostasy. Orthodoxy, as the antithesis to the West and the bulwark against a "Gayropa" agenda, has become part of the official political doctrine of Russia. Therefore, it was implemented in the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic, two territories annexed to Russia and now is imposed on the occupied territories under Russian rule.

Harassment goes beyond Protestants to include the Ukrainian Catholic Church [UCC] and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine [OCU] because of their so-called nationalist proclivities. Both churches have a national presence and claim to serve the Ukrainian people. Even the Ukrainian Orthodox Church [UOC-MP], which remains institutionally subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, has had some of its parishes and monasteries incorporated into dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church [ROC] in Crimea and the Luhansk region since 2014, and more recently in the occupied zones of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. Overall, the Russian Orthodox Church remains an enthusiastic supporter of Russia's "Special Military Operation," even though the war kills Orthodox believers and destroys in great number of Orthodox churches and monasteries that are institutionally linked to the Moscow Patriarchate, because it is a means to realize the Russian World. This ideology brings Russian speakers into the Orthodox fold and is a means of influencing other predominantly Orthodox countries and garnering their political allegiance.

### **CONSEQUENCES OF REPRESSION DIRECTED AT EVANGELICALS IN OCCUPIED UKRAINE**

Evangelicals in the occupied territories, as apostates to their native Orthodox faith, traitors to their nationality, and "foreign agents" of Western individualism and liberalism, have been subject to searches, abductions, interrogations, unlawful detainment, and torture. They have had their personal property confiscated, their families threatened, and have been subject to mock executions. Baptist and Pentecostal pastors have been pressured to transfer their affiliations from religious organizations based in Kyiv to ones based in Russia. Since the full-scale invasion, over forty clergy have faced reprisals and five have been killed. Residents of eight Ukrainian regions report religious persecution and other violations of religious freedom while under occupation: Zaporizhzhia [47 cases], Kherson [20 cases], Luhansk [13 cases], Donetsk [11 cases], Kyiv [9 cases], Kharkiv [5 cases], Chernihiv [3 cases] and Odesa [1 case]. As a result, many Evangelical clergy and believers were forced to flee or left out of fear. Russian Federal Law 114, the Yarovaya law passed in 2016, is so broadly construed so as to allow Evangelicals to be charged with extremism or "illegal missionary activities."

By December 2023, not even two years into the war, over 630 churches and religious buildings had been destroyed or damaged. At least 206 were Protestant. In occupied Donetsk, there were at least 146 documented cases; in Luhansk at least 83; in Kherson at least 78; and in Zaporizhzhia at least 51. Other religious buildings were looted and then converted to profane uses, such as arsenals, police headquarters, and United Russia offices, which, of course, is a violation of international law that prohibits the forcible use of religious buildings for military purposes. Russian occupation authorities require churches to reregister, only to deny registration and force closure. Only a few Protestant churches remain open in the occupied Donetsk region, and there are parts of Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions where not a single Protestant church remains open. Melitopol, a city in southern Ukraine, prior to 2022 had more Protestant prayer houses than Orthodox churches. Not a single Protestant church remains.

There is little to suggest that such repressive measures against Evangelical believers and their communities will cease. In fact, the reverse is likely. As harsh as restrictions are on Evangelical communities in Russia proper, they are measurably worse in occupied Ukraine. The war has inspired doctrinal change within Ukrainian



evangelical groups. Whereas previously most espoused an Anabaptist aversion to violence and performed alternative military service, now, having declared this a Just War of self-defense, many Evangelicals serve in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Previous networks of cooperation and associations of all kinds—missionary, humanitarian, educational, and the like—that united Ukrainian and Russian Evangelicals in common endeavors have been shattered as a result of the war. This is true for nearly all religious associations and networks that linked Russian and Ukrainian believers from a broad cross-section of confessions, with the exception of the UOC-MP, although the institutional connections linking this jurisdiction to the Moscow Patriarchate are evolving and changing too.

In sum, the occupation of Ukrainian territories by Russian-controlled forces has ushered in religious repression, especially of Evangelicals, because the Russian state advocates entirely different policies toward non-Russian Orthodox Church religious communities. This is a long-standing practice and is unlikely to change under the current leadership in Russia. The goal of democratizing Ukraine and its allies is to ensure that religious freedoms, tolerance for religious diversity, and religious pluralism are not additional casualties of this war. Russia and its President Vladimir Putin must be held accountable for their numerous war crimes in Ukraine so that they will be deterred from further attempts to use religion to inspire violence and to repress and dominate others as they are doing in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

#### **TESTIMONY OF MARK SERGEEV UKRAINIAN PASTOR AND WITNESS TO WAR CRIMES**

It is a great honor for me to speak to the Helsinki Commission. The work of the Commission is well known in Ukraine, and I am grateful for the work the Commission does on behalf of Ukrainians fighting for their freedom.

Last week I was on the frontline in Chasiv Yar in my role as a chaplain for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. These battles are horrible, and the men and women fighting for Ukraine need spiritual guidance and emotional care, I am proud to guide them and care for them.

Every Ukrainian soldier at the front is thankful for American weapons. They fire Javelins all day and fall asleep to the sound of HIMARS firing at Russian positions. The soldiers sleep well.

The same Iranian drones that the Russians use to attack Kyiv also attack Israel. And it is American technology that keeps us both safe.

My journey from the Ukrainian front to speak to you today began four generations ago. My great-grandparents were evangelical Christians who were killed by Stalin for being Christians. My grandparents and parents hid their faith from the Soviet authorities in fear for their lives.

I was born into a free Ukraine where we could worship as we please. I grew up in Melitopol, a small city on the Azov Sea known as the gates to Crimea. My father was the senior pastor at Melitopol Christian Church, the largest in our city. I was the youth pastor and worship leader. American visitors often compared us to Joel Osteen's Lakewood

Church in Houston. We ministered to 1500 people every week. Four hundred children attended Sunday school. We were the spiritual home to hundreds of Ukrainian families.

Before the war, we all aspired to the Ukrainian dream which is not so different from the American dream. Every year our country got better as we threw off the corrupt Russian influences through peaceful means.

However, Putin does not respond by peaceful means.

On February 24, 2022, Russian tanks rolled into my city. I watched them from the window of our church.

Two weeks later the Russians came to my home.

Soldiers pulled me out of my house in my underwear and threw me face-first on the ground. My nine-year-old son woke up to a Russian AK-47 in his face.

Russians are making a weapon out of religion, and they tried to make my father use his role as a spiritual leader in our community to praise their invasion of our city. They told him he had 72 hours to record a video saying that now we are all Russians and part of Russia. They wanted him to give them a list of businesspeople in Melitopol who supported our church.

They told him that every day he waited, they would cut one of his fingers.

Through the fog of war and the miracle of God, they did not come back with their knives.

However, they took our church from us. A forty-foot cross clearly showed us to be a Protestant church. The Russians cut down the cross and replaced it with a Rus-

sian flag. Our massive auditorium, once used to praise God, is now used for Russian military concerts and to celebrate Russian holidays.

We were lucky to escape. Our journey to freedom involved a 35-mile drive through a dozen Russian checkpoints that took all day.

Before the war, we had 40 Evangelical churches in Melitopol. Today there are none. This is a common story across occupied Ukraine. The only churches left are those who are loyal to Moscow rather than God.

My parents lived through the Soviet Union. They say the conditions today in Russian-occupied Ukraine are worse for believers than they were in Soviet times.

I encourage the Commission to go to [RussiaTorturesChristians.org](http://RussiaTorturesChristians.org) where they can see video of our church before the war, security camera video of the Russians breaking into our church in the dead of night, and Russian TV footage of the Melitopol Christian Church being used for Russian patriotic ceremonies.

I will close with the story of my friend Lena. After the Russians shut down all the churches in our city, believers began to worship underground in small groups, much like the early Christian church.

Lena was a small group leader and a rock of stability in our shattered church community.

Two months ago, the Russian security services came to her home and arrested her for her faith, for tending to the spiritual needs of believers, for being an evangelical Christian.

Lena is still in a Russian prison in occupied Donetsk region.

Last night I was fortunate to have a conversation with an American Christian leader. He told me of his concerns about the Ukrainian government persecuting Christians.

Fortunately, I was able to help him understand the truth, that he was hearing Russian propaganda, and the real truth is that Russia is torturing, oppressing and sometimes murdering Ukrainian Christians in my city and across occupied Ukraine simply for being Christians.

I am only one voice, and the voices against mine are powerful. I am grateful to the Commission for giving my voice power and helping Americans and the world know the truth of Russia's horrible oppression of Ukrainian believers.

#### **TESTIMONY OF STEVEN MOORE FOUNDER, UKRAINIAN FREEDOM PROJECT**

Thank you for the honor of testifying before this Commission today. I once was chief of staff to a member of House leadership, but this is the first time I've been a witness. Therefore, I particularly appreciate the opportunity to be a part of your great work.

As a former staffer, I also want to compliment the knowledge and professionalism of the Commission staff. The work of the Helsinki Commission is respected in Ukraine, in part because of the personal relationships the staff have developed there.

Five days after Russia's full-scale invasion, I went to Ukraine to try to help Ukrainian friends get to safety and provide humanitarian goods. I created the Ukraine Freedom Project and brought medical supplies to Kyiv when that city was almost surrounded by Russians. We got food to Kharkiv while it was under siege. I was one of the first wave of people at Okhmatdyt Children's Hospital earlier this month.

In my two in half years living in Ukraine at war, I have seen and heard many things that nobody should. Even so, it is only a fraction of what Ukrainians are going through. Some of the most horrific stories I've heard are from Ukrainian Christians who have been tortured by Russians.

Russians occupying Ukrainian territory seek to systematically crush faith. Millions of Christians in occupied Ukraine are worshipping underground, in fear of torture and prison for their beliefs.

Protestants make up less than four percent of Ukraine's population, but Protestants have borne the worst of the Russian abuse.

To fully understand why, you must understand the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is not a church as we would think of one, but a working arm of the Kremlin. Patriarch Kirill, leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, recently declared a holy war on Ukraine and the West. He promised that Russians who die fighting in Ukraine will have all their sins washed away. He stopped short of offering 72 virgins, but the strategy of creating martyrs is much the same as ISIS.

Russians see Protestants as Believers in an American religion and think they must be agents of America, like Russian Orthodox priests, are agents of the Kremlin.

I first became aware of the Russian torturing of Ukrainian Christians in 2022, when Viktor Chernaiivsky told me of his torture. Viktor was a pastor in Luhansk and had been evacuating people from occupied areas. Viktor was leaving with a group that included a newborn infant and a pregnant woman when he was pulled over by Russians and “taken to the basement.”

“Taken to the basement” is a euphemism for torture.

Viktor spent 25 days in the basement, including one day when he was tortured with an electrical taser while a Russian Orthodox priest stood over him trying to cast demons out of him for being an evangelical Christian.

Viktor’s story is far from unique.

Only days into the occupation of his city, the Russian FSB came for Oleksandr Salfetnikov, pastor of the Light of the Gospel Baptist Church. The Russians beat him with rubber batons for three days, trying to make him confess to working for the CIA. When they released him, he had to be wheeled out. His assistant pastor did not survive his torture.

We have collected many similar testimonies on our website, [RussiaTorturesChristians.org](http://RussiaTorturesChristians.org).

However, most Ukrainian Christians cannot speak out. One Ukrainian believer who escaped to Poland told us that after he went public with his torture, a Russian FSB agent in his still-occupied hometown called him and told him what his teenage niece wore to school that day.

Russians are trying to overtly destroy Christianity in Ukraine. In America, Russia’s work to cover it up and spread false narratives to mislead Christians is active and ongoing.

Right here on Capitol Hill, Russian money is behind the effort to persuade members of Congress that the Ukrainian government is persecuting Christians.

The Commission’s excellent work on this subject in 2023 helped the world understand why this is Russian-inspired nonsense. Let me review.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, for decades the branch of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, is home to thousands of clergies who spent much of their lives reporting to Patriarch Kirill in Moscow. About 100 of these clergy are either in prison or on trial for espionage-related offenses. This is just scratching the surface of the national security threat. Ukraine Freedom Project polling of Ukrainians shows that hundreds of thousands of people have left the Ukrainian Orthodox Church because they heard their local clergy say things against Ukraine or saw them do things to help the Russian war effort.

Yet, a Russian-Ukrainian oligarch who is currently a deacon in the Russian Orthodox Church is paying a team of international lawyers and American lobbyists hundreds of thousands of dollars to spread this false narrative inside Congress and cover up for Russian crimes against Ukrainian Christians.

Prominent members of the media—and even some Members of Congress—continue to tell Americans that the Ukrainian government persecutes Christians.

To understand the extent to which Russian propaganda has penetrated American media, the Ukraine Freedom Project polled Republican primary voters on their attitudes toward Russia.

A quarter of Republican primary voters agreed with the statement Russia is a country that promotes and encourages traditional family values. Russia is the country that tortures Christians. Russia is the country that uses rape as a weapon of war. Russia, the country that brags about kidnapping hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian children, promotes traditional family values.

We polled how they got this information. Twenty five percent of all Republican voters believe this narrative. Among those who get their news from Tucker Carlson, Thirty eight percent believe Russia promotes traditional family values. Among those who get their news from Joe Rogan, it is forty seven percent. Perhaps most indicative of the degree to which our adversaries are collaborating, among TikTok users it is thirty five percent.

I thank this Commission for giving me today’s opportunity to highlight the stories of so many brave Ukrainians who have suffered for their faith and their country and to highlight the work of my organization to help Ukrainians and to tell their stories at the hands of the Russians.

## COMMENTARY

By Sam Brownback – Special to Higher Ground  
 Friday, April 19, 2024

**OPINION:**

If the United States hopes to correctly respond to Russian President Vladimir Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it is critical we understand the key role religion played in his motivations.

Ukraine is a battlefield in the War on Faith. A critical moment in years building up to this war was the creation of a separate Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2018, independent of the Russian Orthodox Church.

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The church split set the stage for Ukrainians of faith to chart their own course, separate from the direction of Moscow. With over 70% of the Ukrainian population identifying as Orthodox Christians, the institutional church has significant sway in the nation's public opinion.

After the split in 2018, roughly half of the parishes aligned with the newly independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine and half aligned with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which remained associated with Moscow until the war. After the invasion, they broke from the Moscow church as well.

The Orthodox Church is a major spiritual and culture-shaping institution with churches throughout the region. Putin has a direct and close relationship with Patriarch Kirill, leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, but he lacks any influence over the now-independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine. This, no doubt, was part of the calculus behind Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, sensing a need to strike while Russia still had residual influence. This too, will fade over time as Ukrainian national institutions replace those of "Mother Russia."

The creation of a new Orthodox Church in Kyiv also sent a powerful spiritual message that Ukraine was no longer under Russian spiritual direction, but truly independent. This was a major blow to Putin's worldview of a "Russian world" that included Ukraine.

To add to Putin's frustrations, Ukrainians made up 40% of the membership of the Russian Orthodox Church. Part of Putin's strategy to re-establish Russian influence across the former Soviet Union is to establish the Russian Orthodox Church as the leading church for Orthodoxy among the 16 autonomous Orthodox Churches. Putin is challenging the historical leadership role of the Greek Patriarch in Constantinople. The prospect of losing 40% of the membership of the Russian church is a significant blow to his ambition.

In an effort to bolster Russia's place in the minds of the Orthodox faithful, Putin casts himself as the defender of Christendom and traditional values, but Ukraine wants to be a part of the West where people determine their own way forward by searching for their own spirituality. Free people do not want to be dictated to by an authoritarian state. Freedom of belief is a bedrock principle for free people. It is an existential threat to a dictator.

Notably, Russia is a regular on the State Department's "Country of Particular Concern" list, which signifies they persecute religious people for their beliefs. Russian conduct in the Ukrainian war zone has been no exception to these practices with regular reports of the Russian military torturing pastors and closing churches, especially targeting evangelicals.

With an active war going on in Ukraine, there have been charges of spying directed at some priests who in the past had been associated with the Russian church. This has led to arrests and counter-charges against Ukrainian authorities of religious persecution. There is no religious freedom protection for aiding an invading army in their conquest of another country. These accusations will ultimately be resolved in a court, as they should be, but it is important to know that both branches of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine support the fight to defend their country.

The thought of a free society on his doorstep is terrifying to a dictator like Putin. Russia and Ukraine share a 1,400-mile-long border. Putin wants strategic depth between himself and the free world. Authoritarians want to dictate the way forward for society, not have to persuade or lead by example. Freedom threatens their power.

The United States and the entire freedom-loving world should support Ukraine in the fight for its independence from Putin's autocratic "Russian world." In the War on Faith, this is a major front as opposing sides battle over allowing people to freely decide how they want to live out their religious beliefs.

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*Sam Brownback is a former U.S. senator and governor of Kansas. He served as the United States Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom from 2018 to 2021 and chairs the National Council for Religious Freedom. He is also a Senior Fellow at Global Christian Relief.*

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