Helsinki Commission Testimony

**Religious Persecution of Evangelicals in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine**

July 24, 2024

Thank you for the invitation to be here. I am honored to testify at today’s hearing and to speak in support of Ukraine’s efforts to defend the religious freedoms of all her people, and especially those in the occupied territories.

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

The repression of Protestants in the occupied territories of Ukraine has been so virulent 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 historic civilizational space that includes Russians, Ukrainians, Belarussians and sometimes even Moldova and Kazakhstan. 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 “traditional values,” public morality, and social and political order.

The second reason that Evangelicals have been targeted is that Baptists and Evangelical Christians have long been demonized because of the negative associations with the United States. The projected connections between Protestantism and the United States means that 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 jail even potential members of an 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. 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 even more brutal and violent in the Russian-controlled, occupied territories of Ukraine.

**Consequences of Repression Directed at Evangelicals in Occupied Ukraine**

Let’s consider the consequences. Viewed as apostates to their native Orthodox faith, traitors to their nation, and “foreign agents” who undermine anti-Western Orthodox conservativism, Evangelicals 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 in Kyiv to ones in Russia. Since 2022, 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 since 2022: 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). Russian Federal Law 114, the Yarovaya law passed in 2016, is so broad so as 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. At least 206 were Protestant. In occupied Donetsk, there were at least 146 documented cases of damaged or destroyed religious buildings; in Luhansk at least 83; in Kherson at least 78; and in Zaporizhzhia at least 51. Other religious buildings were looted and converted to profane uses, such as arsenals, police headquarters, and United Russia offices, a violation of international law that prohibits the use of religious buildings for military purposes. Russian authorities require churches to reregister, only to deny registration and force closure. Only a few Protestant churches are open in the occupied Donetsk region. There are parts of Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions where not a single Protestant church remains open. Melitopol, a city in southern Ukraine had more Protestant prayer houses than Orthodox churches prior to 2022. 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, and educational - that united Ukrainian and Russian Evangelicals in common endeavor have been shattered as a result of the war. This is true for nearly all religious associations and networks that linked Russian and Ukrainian cobelievers regardless of confession.

In sum, the occupation of Ukrainian territories by Russian-controlled forces has ushered in religious repression of Evangelicals because the Russian state has distinct policies for 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 for a democratizing Ukraine and for its allies is to ensure that religious freedom, tolerance for religious diversity, and religious pluralism are not additional causalities 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 as a means to repress and dominate others as they are doing in the occupied territories.

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