



Institute for
Religious Freedom

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INTRODUCTION

Institute for Religious Freedom (IRF) – is human rights NGO, the main goal of which is the assistance in the realization of freedom of religion or beliefs, other related human rights in Ukraine; also the collection, analysis and dissemination of information on the legislative policy and religious life in Ukraine.

The IRF was founded in 2001 in Kyiv (Ukraine), has non-profit status, is an independent NGO, and is not engaged by any political party and religious denomination.

The IRF has 15 years of professional experience on facilitating the interfaith dialogue and Church-State relations in Ukraine, monitoring religious freedom and violations of religious rights.

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SYSTEMATIC PERSECUTION OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN THE MILITARY CONFLICT AREA OF EASTERN UKRAINE

1. Continuation of Russian aggression against Ukraine, which includes political, military and information support of the separatists on certain territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Eastern Ukraine (Donbas area), is still accompanied by active use of the religious factor. The religious factor is an artificial ground for mobilizing pro-Russian forces and exacerbating the conflict. Almost all religious minorities, except Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) and some others, became a target for the illegal armed groups supported by Russia, which proclaimed their desire to eradicate any so called “sects” from Donbas area.
2. As a result, starting from March 2014, religiously motivated persecutions reached till now a terrifying scale and forms in the cities controlled by Russia-backed militants in Eastern Ukraine. These include taking hostages, torture, murders of religious activists and believers, as well as seizing places of worship and other facilities, and some of them were used by separatists as firing positions.
3. Till now dozens of temples and houses of worship have been seized by militants supported by Russia and sometimes used as military objects. For instance, the complex of buildings of Donetsk Christian University, the building of the “Word of Life” Bible Institute in Donetsk, and a number of religious buildings of Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses.

4. Incidents of religious persecution are also happening now. Pro-Russian authorities of Horlivka city in Donetsk region, which is outside of the control of Ukrainian government, confiscated the house of worship of the Seventh Day Adventists Church with all the property belonging to the religious community. In addition to seizing the building, the separatists also confiscated the Church's property in the house of worship, including household appliances, furniture, and the library. The pastor was only allowed to take his personal belongings.¹ During the past two years, different separatist groups in Horlivka have made several attempts to seize the Adventists' house of worship.
5. Earlier, in September 2014, when Horlivka was already controlled by the separatists, armed Russia-backed militants kidnapped Serhii Lytovchenko, an Adventist pastor, from the house of worship directly during Communion service. Then, kidnappers explained their actions by saying that *"it is an Orthodox land, and there is no place for different sects here."* The pastor was released only after 20 days.²
6. On 29 January 2016, "DPR" representatives organized a protest against so called "sects" next to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in Donetsk. Approximately 500 persons took part in the meeting; some of them had been delivered by buses. Protesters received banners with mottos *"No to sects in the DPR"*, *"The Greek Catholic Church is a pastor of anti-republican activities"*, *"Stop persecution of Orthodox Christians"*, *"Say NO to the faith that blesses the war in Donbas"*, *"Donbas is a sect-free territory"*. Participants of the protest included minors, schoolchildren who received posters with mottos aimed at inciting religious hatred.³
7. On the same day, the news broke out that Professor Ihor Kozlovskiy, President of the Center of Religion Studies and International Religious Relations and a Ukrainian scholar, was kidnapped in Donetsk by Russia-backed militants. He could not leave the city to avoid such persecution, because he had to take care of his severely ill son. Soon after, his relatives reported that representatives of so called the "Ministry of State Security of the DPR" conducted an arbitrary search in his apartment and accused him of subversive activities. Professor Kozlovskiy has remained a captive of the DPR more then 420 days now.⁴
8. In September 2015, Russia-backed separatists organized a meeting in Shakhtarsk city of Donetsk region against Baptists Church, next to their house of worship. They demanded that the "sect" members be expelled from Donbas. Protesters held banners with mottos aimed to incite hatred against Baptists and other religious minorities.

¹ RISU. (2016, December 06) In Horlivka, a Seventh Day Adventist church seized, all property confiscated. Retrieved from http://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/community/terrorism/65370/

² Institute for Religious Freedom. (2014, October 17) Pastor Sergiy Litovchenko was released from captivity of armed separatists in eastern Ukraine. Retrieved from

http://www.irf.in.ua/eng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=423:1&catid=34:ua&Itemid=61

³ Institute for Religious Freedom. (2016, February 01) Separatists in Donetsk resumed religious persecution (Video). Retrieved from

http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1646:1&catid=34:ua&Itemid=61

⁴ Ibid.

9. Earlier, in May 2015, Aleksandr Zakharchenko, the head of the self-proclaimed “DPR”, announced in Donetsk recognition of only four denominations – Orthodox Christian faith (only Moscow Patriarchate), Roman Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism. All other believers and religious minorities, including the Greek Catholic and Evangelical Christians were classified as “sect members.” This led to systematic and targeted religious persecution in the conflict zone in the Donetsk region, which is outside of Ukraine’s control.
10. The OHCHR monitoring mission in Ukraine reported that so called the “State Security Ministry” of the self-proclaimed “LPR” in December 2016 publicly called, that the Baptist community in Luhansk a “non-traditional religious organization” and accused the Church of “destructive activities.” These statements led to serious concerns among the Baptist community members who fear discrimination based on religion or belief.⁵
11. In Sverdlovsk city of Luhansk region, Russia-backed militants of the self-proclaimed “LPR” imprisoned Taras Sen, a pastor-missionary of the local Evangelical Christian Church of Pentecostals. He was accused of having ties with the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. It happened on 27 September 2015. Following an international response, the pastor was released within four days.⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

12. To take additional steps to monitor, document and prevent further persecution of religious minorities and religious hate crimes in the areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions outside of Ukraine’s control. In particular, to facilitate activities of the OHCHR Monitoring Mission in Ukraine and involve other international missions and non-governmental human rights organizations in the monitoring.
13. To prepare a specialized report on the rights of religious minorities in Eastern Ukraine based on the monitoring of the situation related to religion in the areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions outside of Ukraine’s control.
14. To include the issues of ensuring the freedom of conscience, religion and belief, as well as protection of the rights of religious minorities into the Minsk and Normandy formats considering the significant influence of Russia on the actions of the self-proclaimed authorities and illegal armed groups, and their dependence on Russian support.

⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2017) Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, 16 November 2016 to 15 February 2017 (Rep.) Retrieved from http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/UAReport17th_EN.pdf

⁶ Institute for Religious Freedom, Pro-Russian militants released Pentecostal pastor Taras Sen from captivity in Luhansk region. Retrieved from http://www.irf.in.ua/eng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=440:1&catid=34:ua&Itemid=61