

Russia violates religious freedom at home and in Ukraine

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Persecution of religious minorities with Russia has escalated since the invasion of Ukraine, where Russia's military has destroyed houses of worship and tortured religious leaders, according to two reports from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The commission released both "[Religious Freedom Conditions in the Russian Federation](#)" and "[Russia's Religious Freedom Violations in Ukraine](#)" July 5.

'Systematic harassment' of Russian religious minorities

"Since President Vladimir Putin launched his full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 23, 2022, Russian authorities have continued their systematic harassment and prosecution of religious minority communities within the Russian Federation, while simultaneously undertaking the largest crackdown on independent civil society in decades," the update on religious freedom within Russian stated.

Russian officials have accused religious minorities of extremism, terrorism and blasphemy—and labeled them as "undesirable organization"—to crack down on religious leaders who have not voiced support for Russian aggression toward Ukraine, the update noted.

"Authorities have intimidated religious leaders and pressured them to

remain silent about the war or to publicly support Russia, despite their own moral or religiously grounded opposition to the war,” the report stated.



Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow, on Jan. 7, 2021. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

A 1997 Russian law recognizes only Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism as “traditional” religions. Furthermore, Russia increasingly has granted special recognition and privileges to the Russian Orthodox Church.

“The Russian government views independent or ‘nontraditional’ religious groups as disloyal to the state and a threat to political stability,” the report stated.

Government officials have imposed steep fines on individuals and religious groups engaging in broadly defined “missionary activity” such as answering questions about their faith outside of designated religious sites, the commission reported.

Since the Russian Supreme Court declared Jehovah’s Witnesses as an extremist group six years ago, officials have subjected its members to 2,000 home searches and imprisoned 44 Jehovah’s Witnesses, the report noted.

Russia has accused Muslims of terrorism and sentenced more than 200

adherents of Islam to prison without presenting evidence they promoted violence.

The Russian government declared New Generation Evangelical Christian Church an “undesirable” group, and a pastor in April was sentenced to a year in prison after including symbols of the church in social media posts, the commission reported.

In March, a Russian district court sentenced an Evangelical pastor to 18 months in prison for allegedly “brainwashing” individuals in worship services.

The report also documents the denial of religious freedom and other civil liberties since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, imposing censorship and using vaguely worded laws to label dissidents as “foreign agents.”

“Russian authorities continue to engage in severe religious repression and have used its war in Ukraine to institute new or amend existing legal mechanisms to further suppress religious communities and decimate independent civil society,” the report concluded.

Russia guilty of ‘gross religious freedom violations’ in Ukraine

The commission’s report on Russian action in Ukraine noted the escalation and expansion of “gross religious freedom violations” that began with its 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donbas.



Participants at the 2022 Baptist World Alliance annual gathering in Birmingham, Ala., lay hands on Vernetta Mint Mint San of Myanmar and Igor Bandura of Ukraine to pray for their homelands. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, “its military has dismantled religious life and stifled religious diversity throughout other parts of Ukraine,” the commission reported.

“On the frontlines of the war, Russian artillery and military forces frequently damaged and destroyed religious buildings and other sites and killed or injured those sheltering or worshiping in these places,” the report stated.

“In areas under Russian control, de-facto authorities have abducted and tortured religious leaders and enforced the same repressive Russian legal mechanisms that were instituted in Crimea and Donbas.”

Religious groups in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine were compelled to register with the Russian government, and authorities denied legal registration to several faith groups, the report noted.

“Upon registration, religious communities must adhere to Russian law which prohibits certain forms of religious activities and speech,” the report stated.

‘A humanitarian and human rights catastrophe’

The commission report stated Russia’s invasion of Ukraine “produced a humanitarian and human rights catastrophe.” The report noted the United Nations confirmed about 9,000 civilian fatalities in Ukraine and another 15,000 wounded.



A man cleans debris of the destroyed house after recent Russian air strike in Chasiv Yar, Ukraine, Sunday, Nov. 27, 2022. Shelling by Russian forces struck several areas in eastern and southern Ukraine overnight as utility crews continued a scramble to restore power, water and heating following widespread strikes in recent weeks, officials said Sunday. (AP Photo/Andriy Andriyenko)

“Russia has consistently bombed civilian targets, including hospitals, schools, apartments, shopping centers, and houses of worship,” the report stated.

The U.N. Human Rights Council concluded Russia committed war crimes in Ukraine, including summary executions, torture and rape.

“Among these gross rights violations and potential war crimes, Russian forces have damaged places of worship and targeted religious leaders because of their religious leadership roles,” the commission reported.

At least 30 religious leaders—pastors and deacons, as well as priests, nuns and monks—have been killed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the report noted.

“Russian military personnel have consistently threatened, exiled, detained, disappeared, tortured, and killed religious figures in order to exert control and influence over local populations,” the report stated.

The commission reported armed military personnel abducted Baptist pastor Leonid Ponomaryov and his wife Tatyana from their home in Mariupol and held them several weeks.

“Religious figures, civilians, and aid workers have also been injured and killed as places of worship and other buildings became the target of various military campaigns and bombings,” the report continued.

The U.N. verified damage to at least 112 religious sites, while other groups have reported up to 500 religious buildings damaged or destroyed, the report noted.

‘Deteriorating religious freedom’

Randel Everett, founding president of the 21Wilberforce human rights organization, praised the commission for documenting religious freedom violations in Ukraine and Russia.



Randel Everett

“Religion has become another battleground in the Russia-Ukraine conflict” Everett said. “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has splintered Ukraine’s Orthodox Church, which has declared independence from the Russian Orthodox Church.

“The growing atrocities in Ukraine include the destruction of churches and religious sites, killing of worshipers and those seeking shelter in places of worship, and the abduction and torture of religious leaders. The latest USCIRF report provides valuable information for government officials, religious freedom advocates and the public on deteriorating religious freedom conditions in Russia and Ukraine.”

Every year since 2017, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended the U.S. Department of State designate Russia as a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in “systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.”

The State Department designated Russia as a Country of Particular Concern for the first time in 2021, and also designated it as a CPC last

year.

At its 2022 annual meeting in Birmingham, Ala., the Baptist World Alliance General Council [adopted a resolution](#) condemning the “unprovoked and unjustified” Russian invasion of Ukraine. The resolution voiced concern about “ongoing restrictions on religious freedom or belief occurring in Russian-held territories of Ukraine.”