

Russian religious persecution grows during war on Ukraine

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WASHINGTON (BP)—Russia has amplified its persecution of Christians, Muslims and Jews in its war on Ukraine, destroying churches and murdering, torturing and imprisoning many pastors and advocates, participants in a U.S. government hearing said March 15.



Leonid Regheta witnessed this war-damaged building in Irpin during a summer 2022 trip to Ukraine. (Photo courtesy of Leonid Regheta)

Panelists decried and called for punishment of Russia's war crimes explored in "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Religious Freedom," a virtual hearing hosted by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Russia murdered at least 26 religious leaders, tortured others and imprisoned many, and it heavily damaged or destroyed at least 500 churches and other religious places of worship, said panelist Dmytro Vovk,

an expert on religious freedom with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

The Russian Orthodox Church has suffered persecution while widely cooperating with and supporting Russia in the war, Vovk said. He described about a third of church buildings decimated as Russian Orthodox congregations. The Russian Orthodox Church is comprised of thousands of congregations in Ukraine that describe themselves as independent of Russia.

Before the war, Ukraine and Russia operated with polarly opposite religious landscapes. While Ukraine's religious freedom protections are among the most liberal in the region, "Russia has managed to create a very restrictive religious framework," Vovk said, "with one religion, the Russian Orthodox Church, being strongly endorsed and mainly just religious minorities being severely discriminated against and oppressed."

But the war has even increased religious persecution within Russia that was already rampant, panelist Rachel Denber of Human Rights Watch said, with efforts to annihilate civil society related to religious persecution.

"At home, the Kremlin has been trying to decimate what had been a robust and civil society and laid to waste key fundamental freedoms," said Denber, deputy director of the Human Rights Watch Europe and Central Asia Division.

"The muzzling of Russian citizens did not emerge in a vacuum, but it is the result of a decade of step-by-step repression that started in 2012 and that accelerated in critical moments—in 2014 when Russia's war against Ukraine actually started (the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine), in 2018 and in 2020 this repression at home escalated ... and then, of course, with the full-scale invasion in 2022.

“Russian public life is unrecognizable as compared to even 18 months ago, when authoritarian autocracy was already deeply entrenched.”

Repression forced many to flee Russia

Russia’s homeland repression has forced many to flee, including foreign media outlets and public rights groups. About 74 foreign groups have been blacklisted as undesirable through Russian law and about a third of the American donor groups and think tanks, including the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute.

Panelist Pinchas Goldschmidt, chief rabbi and president of the Conference of European Rabbis and exiled chief rabbi of Moscow, has urged the Jewish community to flee Russia.

At least 11 rabbis have been expelled from Russia, leaving synagogues and communities without leaders, and about 30 percent of the Jewish population of Russia has fled, Goldschmidt said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s government is increasingly authoritarian and nearly totalitarian, Goldschmidt said, describing the climate as more and more dangerous.

Dennis Christensen, a Jehovah’s Witness leader who was imprisoned six years for his faith in Russia, said the country makes a mockery of justice. When it was widely reported he was paroled in 2019, he said, he remained imprisoned for the remainder of his term.

Russia’s penal system works on “breaking a person down,” he said. “You were no longer a human being. You were a prisoner.”

Hundreds of Tatar Muslims have been imprisoned since Russia gained control of Crimea in 2014, according to the written testimony of a Crimean Tatar activist who was unable to attend the hearing. About 96 remained

imprisoned, many have been tortured, and one has died in incarceration, according to the written testimony.

Russian victory equals less religious freedom

If Russia wins its war against Ukraine, it will continue to erode religious liberty in Ukraine and establish there the near authoritarian control Putin demands in Russia, panelists said.

USCIRF members on the panel included Chair Nury Turkel; vice chair Abraham Cooper, Commissioners Sharon Kleinbaum, David Curry and Frederick Davie.

U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi called Russia one of the world's worst violators of religious freedom and said Russia wants to return to the previous empire of the USSR.

"Allowing these actions to go unchallenged would give this dictator a green light to escalate his repression," Wicker said in pre-recorded remarks. "The Kremlin's renewed all-out assault on Ukraine reveals Putin's goals. He wants to go back to the old Soviet empire by any means necessary.

"He has framed the war in religious terms," Wicker said of Putin, "and set his own people against Ukraine. ... Despite the Kremlin's claims, it is Russia's forces who have kidnapped, tortured and killed religious leaders and destroyed places of worship."