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WHEN GOD BECOMES THE WEAPON

Persecution based on religious beliefs in the armed conflict
in Eastern Ukraine

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Center for Civil Liberties (CCL) was established in May 2007 to promote human rights and the values of democracy and solidarity in Ukraine and Eurasia. The NGO is based in Kyiv, Ukraine. Last year, the Center for Civil Liberties began documenting human rights violations during the EuroMaidan events and subsequently in Crimea and Donbas. CCL conducts this work by deploying mobile groups to different parts of the liberated areas in Donbas to gather and verify information on human rights abuses.

International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) is a non-profit organization based in Brussels. Founded in April 2008, its mandate is to support local civil society groups in their work to eradicate violations of human rights and help their concerns and efforts be heard at the international level. Currently, the IPHR team is investigating war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine by interviewing victims of violence, inspecting sites of conflict and collecting evidence. The goal is to collect enough substantial evidence to fight against impunity for those committing human rights abuses and to help victims seek just satisfaction through legal proceedings at national and international levels.

Together, CCL and IPHR field teams have gathered numerous testimonies, evidence and proof of various crimes against humanity and war crimes that took place in eastern Ukraine during 2014-2015. Abductions, torture and other ill treatment, indiscriminate shelling and persecution for expressing individual views are among the atrocities that currently take place in the conflict zone. Analysis of these crimes has revealed the systemic and widespread character of persecution based on religious beliefs. Moreover, careful examination of many cases has shown that religion is one of the key motivations and justifications for criminal activity by the illegal paramilitary groups in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.

The methodology used in preparing this report includes: witness and victim testimony, interviews with clergy from the region and church authorities, interviews with experts and specialists on religion, desk research, as well as an analysis of available audio and video material.

This report outlines the major crimes committed on the grounds of religious discrimination and demonstrates how religion has been invoked within the rhetoric of persecution employed by illegal combatant groups. We hope to attract the attention of international stakeholders to these grave crimes so that a common strategy can be implemented to put a stop to them.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the occupation of Crimea by the Russian army in March 2014, the Russian-backed paramilitary groups seized control of several cities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and proclaimed the territories as the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). The Ukrainian government responded by launching an Anti-terrorist Operation in the region, sending National Guard troops and volunteer battalions to liberate the territories. With Russian military, financial and political support, the pro-Russian paramilitary groups held their positions and this military conflict remains unresolved.

Prior to the conflict, the religious make-up of Ukraine could be described as diverse, with a relatively religious population and freedom to practice one's faith of choice. In May of 2014 the so-called DPR declared the Orthodoxy of Moscow Patriarchy as the main religion of the region. This has led to attacks on churches, cases of abduction, torture and other ill treatment as well as the murder of clergy members and the prohibition of religious practice other than that of the Orthodoxy of Moscow Patriarchy in the region. Unlawful armed groups, under the banners of the Russian Orthodox Army and the Cossack Army, openly manifest their adherence to orthodoxy and have begun a "crusade" across the Donbas region. Evidence has come to light that several priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate have, to varying degree, supported these unlawful paramilitary groups in their campaign against representatives of Protestant, Evangelical and Catholic Churches and Orthodox believers who do not recognize the Moscow Patriarchy.

3. THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF UKRAINE

Ukraine's religious landscape is generally characterized as diverse with many religious believers and a high level of religious tolerance. Out of the estimated 45.5 million inhabitants¹, 67% declare themselves to be believers and almost three-quarters feel that every religion should be respected.² For the majority of Ukrainians, religion is an internal spiritual matter, and is therefore valued as an important part of the traditional and cultural context, rather than an institutionalized faith.

At the beginning of 2014, about 35 thousand registered religious organizations operated in Ukraine, along with an additional 1,653 unregistered organizations.³ The State Committee for National and Religious Affairs affirms that the Ukrainian religious network is made up of 55 denominations.⁴ Undoubtedly, the vast majority of these denominations are Christian. According to recent studies carried out by the Razumkov Center, an independent public think tank, 71% of believers identified themselves as Christian Orthodox. According to the same poll, about a quarter of people who declared themselves to be Orthodox identify with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP); less than 1.5% adhere to Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), while 41% declare themselves as "Simply Orthodox". The three Orthodox churches are identical in their doctrine. The difference between them lies in their political views, with UOC-MP taking a pro-Russian stance, while

¹ State Statistics Service of Ukraine, data as of January 1, 2013

² Razumkov Center, April 2013

³ 2014 Report of State Committee of Ukraine on Nationalities, Migrations and Religion Affairs accessible at <http://risu.org.ua/ua/index/resourses/statistics/ukr2014/55893/>

⁴ 2013 Report of State Committee of Ukraine on Nationalities, Migrations and Religion Affairs accessible at <http://mincult.kmu.gov.ua/mincult/uk/publish/article/327651;jsessionid=C576ABCB3D48CB82182949A7237D6CDE>

the UOC-KP and the UAOC are pro-Ukrainian in persuasion.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) is the largest non-Orthodox church, claiming an estimated 5.7% of believers, while the Roman Catholic Church congregation is estimated to attract 1.4% of worshippers.⁵

Independent research agencies estimate the Muslim population at 500,000, with the large ethnic group of the Crimean Tatars accounting for the majority of this.⁶ There are an estimated 103,600 Jews in the country, but some local Jewish leaders estimate the number of persons of Jewish heritage to be as high as 370,000.⁷

The Protestant community is represented by the biggest range of religious organizations and this branch of Christianity has been actively growing in terms of its institutionalized network - about a quarter of all registered religious organizations belong to the Protestant denomination.⁸ Many Protestant churches operate in the east of Ukraine.

In the constitutional and legal context, Ukraine declares itself to be a secular state. The freedom to profess or not to profess any religion and to carry out religious activity is guaranteed by Article 35 of the Constitution (June 28, 1996).⁹ Non-discrimination based on religion is guaranteed by Article 24: “No privileges or limitations on the basis of race, skin color, political, religious, or other convictions, sex, ethnic or social origin, property status, place of residence, or linguistic or other traits, are permitted”. The Law of Ukraine on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations was also passed in April 23, 1991 and grants religious organizations legal status with the right to acquire property, to stand before the court and to hold public worship. In 2006 this law underwent a detailed review by the Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief of the OSCE, which found that although some provisions were vague or unclear, the draft law met the requirements of international instruments and best practice concerning freedom of religion or belief.¹⁰

4. MILITARY CONFLICT IN THE EAST OF UKRAINE

Following the occupation of the Crimean peninsula by Russian military forces in March 2014, pro-Russian separatists along with large numbers of armed Russian nationals seized power over most of the territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and declared them as the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR). Prior to the escalation of conflict, Russian media had actively promoted the idea of separatism in southeastern Ukraine, alleging the prohibition of the Russian language, culture and Moscow Orthodoxy and thus inciting public outrage in Russia and in the southeastern regions of Ukraine where many Russians live.

In their turn, the Ukrainian government, local media and, to a large extent, their Western

⁵ Razumkov Center, April 2013

⁶ The Ukrainian Science Magazine accessible at: <http://social-science.com.ua/article/84>

⁷ Ukraine 2013 International Religious Freedom Report, US Department of State, accessible at: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2013/eur/222279.htm#>

⁸ In this report the Protestant denomination includes the following Christian groups: Evangelists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Calvinists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)

⁹ “Everyone has the right to freedom of personal philosophy and religion. This right includes the freedom to profess or not to profess any religion, to perform alone or collectively and without constraint religious rites and ceremonial rituals, and to conduct religious activity.” Article 35 of the Ukrainian Constitution, 28 June 1996

¹⁰ Andrew Sorokowski, Contemporary Ukraine on the Cultural Map of Europe, p.76

counterparts attributed the rise of violence in Donbas mostly to direct military intervention by Russia. They stressed that the rebellion in Donbas was started and led by armed Russian military units and Russian military intelligence agents from the beginning of the conflict in the spring of 2014. In the process of documenting war crimes in the region since October 2014, the IPHR and CCL mission teams have gathered numerous witness testimonies which support this claim. Mounting video footage available online also points to the fact that Russian nationals are taking part in combat and in several cases hold commanding or coordinating posts in the conflict.

5. THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF THE CONFLICT

In March 2014, the heads of the largest churches and religious organizations in Ukraine, with the exception of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, released a joint statement denouncing the allegations of Russian media: “In our country there is no harassment on the basis of language, nationality or religion. Therefore, we testify that all attempts of Russian propaganda to represent the events in Ukraine as a ‘fascist revolution’ and ‘the victory of extremists’ are completely untrue”.

Shortly afterwards, the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (UCCRO) also released an official statement after the request by Russian President Vladimir Putin to send troops to Ukraine was formally approved by the Russian Parliament: “Bringing of foreign military forces to Ukraine is a threat not only for our country but for the peace and tranquility on the European continent as a whole.” The Council also underlined that it recognized the current government of Ukraine as legitimate.¹¹

The Moscow Patriarchate of Ukrainian Orthodox Church has generally avoided taking sides, denouncing aggression by both parties and calling for peace.



Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (UCCRO) deliver a joint statement on the military conflict in the east of Ukraine, July 2014

¹¹ The All Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, full text in Ukrainian: <http://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements/380-council-of-churches-statement-on-decision-of-russian-military-invasion>

On May 16, 2014, representatives of the so-called Donetsk Peoples Republic (DPR) released the text of its own “constitution”. Section 9 of the document specifies: “The leading and dominant faith is the Orthodox faith ... as professed by the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). The historical heritage and role of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) are recognized and respected, including as a main pillar of the Russian World doctrine ”.¹²

The idea of a “Russian World”, which Vladimir Putin has often referred to as the basis of his policies in Ukraine, calls for the unity of people across the historical territory of ancient Rus, and for the preservation of the common values of Russian language, religion, spirituality and way of life. This concept has been strongly promoted by the Moscow Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The Patriarch has included former Soviet republics such as Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova when describing the concept. At the opening of the third annual Assembly of the Russian World in November of 2009 he stated, “It is necessary to clearly understand what the Russian World means today. I think that if we consider the Russian Federation with its present boundaries, then we have sinned against the historical truth and artificially cut off millions of people who are aware of their role in the fate of the Russian World and consider its creation their main deed. At the center of the Russian World are Russia, Ukraine and Belarus...”¹³

In August 2014, Patriarch Kirill wrote an open letter addressed to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the most senior cleric of the Orthodox faith, in which he called the war in Donbas a religious war.

In his letter, the Moscow Patriarch accused representatives of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and Protestant leaders of propagating hatred toward the Orthodox Church, taking over Orthodox shrines and attempting to eradicate orthodoxy from Ukrainian territory ever since autumn of 2013. He also accused the “uniates” and the “schismatics” [UGCC and Protestants] of taking up arms against the Orthodox clergy in the course of combat events in the east of Ukraine.

Initially published by the Department of Public Church Relations of ROC and circulated by the popular Russian portal “Orthodoxy and the World”, the letter was later removed from the Church’s official press center site.¹⁴

The heads of UGCC and the UOC-KP have denounced accusations by the Moscow Patriarch as unfounded and lacking any substantial proof. The head of the UOC-KP also denied claims that the war in Donbas is a religious war, instead calling it a war between Russia and Ukraine that has an “occupational character”.¹⁵

Following a period of relative silence since the summer of 2014, at the Supreme Church Council of the ROC on February 17, 2015, ROC Patriarch Kirill declared the military conflict

¹² Information portal of DPR, full text in Russian available at: <http://dnrespublika.info/o-республике/konstituciya-doneckoj-narodnoj-respubliki/>

¹³ Full text of the speech available on the official website of Moscow Patriarchate: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/928446.html>

¹⁴ Pravmir.ru, screenshot accessible at: http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache%3Ar_hsGnj8FwJ%3Awww.pravmir.ru%2Fpatriarh-kirill-obratilsya-k-predstoyatelyam-pravoslavnyih-tserkvey-s-prosboj-vozvyisit-golos-v-zashhitu-pravoslavnyih-na-vostoke-ukrainyi%2F+&cd=1&hl=ru&ct=clnk&gl=ru

¹⁵ Religion in Ukraine portal: http://www.religion.in.ua/news/ukrainian_news/26750-ugkc-i-upc-kp-nazvali-nepravdoj-zayavlenie-patriarxa-kirilla-o-situacii-na-Donbase.html

in Ukraine to be a civil war.¹⁶ The Patriarch reiterated that from the beginning of military action the ROC has not taken sides and has fully supported all peacemaking initiatives.

Thus, the majority of Ukrainian denominations have declared their position in support of the constitutional unity of Ukraine. The Moscow Patriarchate of the UOC remains understandably neutral in the light of the ostensibly nonpartisan stance of the governing Russian Orthodox Church.

6. RUSSIAN ARMED RADICAL GROUPS AND ORTHODOX DOGMATICS

Although the Russian Orthodox Church, like the Kremlin, has officially denied any role in stirring up or exacerbating the turmoil in Ukraine, evidence of close ties between the Moscow Patriarchate and the pro-Russian cause has accumulated since the pro-Russian combatants took over Ukrainian territories in the east in the spring of 2014.

Among the unlawful armed groups on the territories of the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR, two main Cossack battalions are using the canonical orthodoxy in their rhetoric. They fight under religious-themed banners, proclaim themselves to be defenders of Christianity and of the Russian World, terrorize religious communities, confiscate church property, and imprison and murder clergy. Open sources and witness testimony indicate that these armed groups also have local support from the clergy of UOC-MP and ROC.

In general, the Cossacks act as an ethno-cultural organization. The Russian Orthodox Church has a special Synodal Committee for the Cooperation with Cossacks¹⁷ and there is also a Council for Cossacks Affairs under the patronage of the President of the Russian Federation.¹⁸ The organization claims to defend orthodoxy and Russian World values, and its rhetoric has strong undertones of xenophobia and violence. As an example, Battle Gnomes, a paramilitary camp where young Cossacks are taught to use guns, was established in Crimea in 2010 under the patronage of the Synodic Committee of ROC.

The Cossacks also form a network of paramilitary groups along the southwestern border of Russia and Eastern Ukraine. For several decades, Cossacks have been involved in armed conflicts in the post-Soviet areas of Transdnistria, Abkhazia and Serbia. Nikolai Mitrokhin, one of the leading researchers on radical issues in the Russian Federation, ranks them as right-wing extremists made up of veterans of the “Slavic” wars of the first half of the 1990’s, as well as participants of the coup attempt in Moscow in October 1993 and their followers. The most notorious actions of the latter group include the grenade attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in 1995 and 1999, an assassination attempt on Anatoly Chubais, former Chief of Staff of the Russian president and now Chief Executive Officer of Russia’s Unified Energy Systems, and an explosion on a Grozny-Moscow train near Moscow in 2005.¹⁹

The direct involvement of the Cossack groups in the military conflict in eastern Ukraine has been widely known, if not promoted, since the very beginning of the conflict in April 2014. One of the most well-known media figures is Cossack Babaj, whose real name is Alexander Mozhajev. He came to Donbas from the Russian region of Kuban, which is situated close to

¹⁶ <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3996574.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.skvk.org>

¹⁸ <http://www.skvk.org/o-sovete>

¹⁹ http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_7324

the Ukrainian border and defines himself as a “famous defender of the Russian speaking population of Donbas and Crimea”.²⁰

6.1 The Most Glorious Legion of Don

The Most Glorious Legion of Don is a battalion in eastern Ukraine, made up of Cossack affiliates from the Rostov-on-Don region of the Russian Federation. In his “address and order” to the Cossack community, the battalion leader Nikolai Kozitsyn defined the armed conflict as “an occupation of Ukraine by the Poles, Romanians and Hungarians who exploit it for resources and aim to exterminate the local Slavic population”.²¹ The legion’s website encourages other Cossacks to join the ranks of the legion, “to stand up for our blood brothers” and declares one of its major goals as being to uphold Christian morals, and pledges complete support to the Russian Orthodox Church (although mutual respect for other religions is also stated).²² Natalya Goncharova, who in May of 2014 sought to establish contact with the unlawful military groups in the hope of finding her kidnapped husband, reported that the flag of the legion had an iconic portrayal of the face of Jesus and was set up at the entrance of the Prosecutor’s office in the city of Lysychansk. Testimony from victims who have been held hostage and tortured by Kozitsyn’s group and groups led by his former counterpart, Cossack leader Pavel Driomov, establishes that this unlawful military group is one of the most vicious currently operating in the eastern region of Ukraine.



Nikolai Kozitsyn, head of the Most Glorious Legion of Don (left). Insignia of the Russian Orthodox Army uniform (right)

6.2 The “Russian Orthodox Army”

The Russian Orthodox Army, one of the most active unlawful paramilitary groups, also propagates Orthodox motives. Their motto is “Warriors of the faith, brothers of the Great Russia, we will unite the whole Southeast”, and their flag depicts a Christian cross.²³ The unlawful paramilitary group was formed in February 2014 and proclaimed former Russian military officer Igor Girkin (Strelkov) as its leader. Countless cases of grave crimes (kidnappings, torture, ill-treatment and murder) were alleged to have occurred in their headquarters in the city of Sloviansk, which pro-Russian military groups occupied from April to June 2014.

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/user/KazakBabaj/videos>

²¹ <http://vvd2003.narod.ru>

²² <http://vvd2003.narod.ru>

²³ <https://vk.com/rus.p.army>

6.3 UOC-MP Clergy Involvement in the Conflict

According to the testimony of the local people of Sviatohirsk, Donetsk region, the city's monastery, Lavra of the UOC-MP, provided its premises as living quarters for unlawful armed groups at the onset of the fighting. It was these groups that went on to storm and take over the administrative buildings in Sloviansk and Horlivka. According to the testimonies, it was here that Vyacheslav Ponomariov, later the self-proclaimed mayor of Sloviansk, and Igor Bezler, a.k.a. "Bes" (Demon), a former colonel of the Russian Armed Forces and prominent paramilitary leader, were deployed at the onset of the fighting.²⁴ The priests of the Lavra have denied the accusations.

Villa Maria, the UOC-MP cultural center in Sloviansk, is also accused of sheltering unlawful groups of combatants. According to witness Valery Stupko, an employee of the museum next to the cultural center, on April 12, 2014, heavily armed masked men emerged from the center and made their way through back alleys to Sloviansk's main police station. As the sequence of events would later show, these men seized the police station within minutes and thereby initiated a series of assaults on government buildings across the east of Ukraine.

Many priests in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions provide moral and spiritual support for the unlawful armed groups that have committed human rights abuses and violated the law in their persecution of Ukrainian authorities and citizens who express pro-Ukrainian opinions. Much photo and video material has been circulated on the internet portraying priests sanctifying flags, check-points, and fire-arms, and blessing the actions of the fighters against the "sinners", "schismatics" and "American agents".

Father Oleg of UOC-MP came to Sloviansk from Horlivka after the pro-Russian armed groups captured the city. He served at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit on Revolution Square after its previous chaplain fled from the occupied city. He also served as a chaplain for the battalion of Igor Strelkov (Girkin) – a Russian former intelligence officer who commanded the illegally formed forces in Sloviansk. Father Oleg has sanctified the battle flags and blessed the pro-Russian fighters before battle. After the liberation of Sloviansk by the Ukrainian authorities, some of the local people complained about the actions of the priests, but Father Oleg has since denied the accusations of supporting the illegal combatants, claiming that he has only prayed for peace.²⁵



Father Oleg (left) together with combatants of the Russian Orthodox Army. Chief of the Russian Orthodox Army Igor Girkin (right) with ROA and DPR banners

²⁴ <http://www.unian.net/politics/908218-boevikov-v-slavyanske-priyutuli-v-mestnom-pravoslavnom-tsentre-shtepa.html>

²⁵ http://censor.net.ua/video_news/294730/tam_nelyudi_eti_nochevali_eli_i_pili_a_prihojan_nastavlyali_na_put_dnr_jiteli_slavyanska_obvinyayut

Father Vitalii Veselyi, the protoiereus at the Church of the Resurrection of UOC-MP and the head of the Centre for Slavic Culture “Presentation”, has also played a significant role in the anti-Ukrainian movement in the Donetsk region and the occupation of Sloviansk. For years, Father Vitalii has promoted the idea that Ukraine does not exist as a legitimate state. He has faced accusations that he, too, welcomed the rebels onto property owned by his church in order to help them prepare their initial assault in Sloviansk. He denies the allegations, stating he only found out about the imminent arrival of the armed fighters at the Centre from someone who called it in to the church. He insists that he had asked them to leave the Villa Maria building, but they refused and he claims that he was powerless against the armed fighters.

According to Father Volodymyr Koskin, a priest from Mariupol who was taken hostage during the Sloviansk occupation, one of the Donbas UOC-MP priests oversaw a punitive unit in the basement of his church where a torture chamber was set-up. After this fact caused public outrage, the UOC-MP stated that the priest had been banned from the church long ago. However, there are photos, which prove he served in this temple up until at least one week prior to the statement.

Another hostage held captive at the rebel controlled Secret Service premises in Donetsk (cited anonymously for safety reasons) testified: “The Orthodox priests came from Novosibirsk and got drunk with Butcher [a fighter of the unlawful military group]. They came to preach their faith since we are not canonical Orthodox, not the “right” ones. These priests put on Cossack hats, and took up sabers, saying all are Cossacks. They told us that Orthodox people from Novosibirsk parish had come to save the Russian people, to struggle for the faith. They were really drunk, they started to swing their crosses, yelling for us to get down on our knees and repent. He hit Lekha [Oleksii] with the cross several times - hit his head until blood came and he broke his cross.”

The concept of the Russian World brotherhood, defense of Canonical Orthodoxy and strong anti-Western sentiment undermine the official neutrality of the high authorities of the Russian Orthodox Church and Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate. Over the past year, these rhetorical elements have combined to create a dangerous mix of radicalism, violence in the name of God, and general impunity in the face of the law, effectively masking Russia’s true political motives behind the military conflict.

7. PERSECUTION BASED ON RELIGION AND CONFISCATION OF CHURCH PROPERTY FOR MILITARY PURPOSES

7.1 The Inter-Faith Prayer Marathon, Donetsk

In March 2014, representatives of local churches united to form the Donetsk Council of Churches, comprised of some 60 churches of different denominations. As a local pastor from a Greek-Catholic Church recalls, the local clergy from the Moscow Patriarchate were also invited to join the organization, but declined the invitation saying that they didn’t have “permission from above”. The Council set up a daily Prayer Marathon in one of the main squares of the city—Constitution Square—with daily worship held for an hour in the evenings. At first, about 30 to 40 believers came to pray, but soon the worship attracted around one hundred people and the prayer hours began to be held during the day as well. A tent was set up to accommodate the worshipers and pastors from different churches were present to support those who came to pray. The prayers included pleas for peace, for an end to the violence in the region and for the protection of the unity of Ukraine. Therefore, the

gatherings, although religious in their nature, were pro-Ukrainian in sentiment. On several occasions local pro-Russian combatants vandalized the tent, threw national symbolic items into the nearby river, and threatened clergymen with violence. These attacks were accompanied by religiously motivated verbal slurs and statements that “uniates”, “schismatics” and “satanists” did not belong on Orthodox land. On May 23, about 15 gunmen from a local pro-Russian paramilitary group destroyed the prayer tent, took all the equipment and threatened to shoot anyone who came to pray there. Serhiy Kosiak, a local pastor from the Assembly of God Church and one of the organizers of the Prayer Marathon, sought discussions with the commander of the pro-Russian fighters immediately after the assault. He was detained and brutally beaten, allegedly for his pro-Ukrainian stance. The Prayer Marathon was allowed to take place, on the condition that there was no mention of Ukraine as a nation.



Protestant pastor Serhiy Kosiak after his “discussions” with pro-Russian fighters to allow for the Prayer Marathon to go ahead, May 2014

According to several pastors, the politics and general atmosphere in Donetsk changed considerably after Igor Strelkov, a Russian former intelligence officer who commanded the illegally formed forces in Sloviansk, fled to Donetsk in July 2014 and became “Defense Minister”. Several observers note that religion as a singular motive for assaults had previously been rather vague, whereas after the new regime was established in Donetsk, it became quite clear that anyone who was anything other than a follower of the Orthodox of Moscow Patriarchate was considered an enemy. Many pastors agree that before the arrival of Igor Strelkov they could find some sort of compromise with the local fighters because they knew so many personally. In the beginning of July, many more non-Slavs and Russian Cossacks started arriving in the city; the latter were especially suspicious of the prayer meetings, as they observe a particularly fanatical kind of Orthodoxy. Finally, in August 2014, the tent was forcibly dismantled by pro-Russian fighters and public worship was forbidden under the “unsanctioned meetings law”. Some 14 organizers of the Prayer Marathon have been captured at various points in time, and many were beaten and tortured in detention.²⁶

Aleksander Khomchenko, a pastor who was one of the organizers of the cross-denominational Prayer Marathon in Donetsk, was kidnapped on August 8, 2014, after leading a prayer on the city’s Constitution Square, and taken to the neighboring city of Makeevka. The fighters who detained him accused him of organizing unsanctioned meetings, helping the Ukrainian army and proselytizing a sect religion. Aleksander Khomchenko was told by his captors that, “There shall only be one religion on this land”. He spent four days in captivity and sustained excessive injuries from brutal beatings and torture by suffocation: “They hung me up on a rack and put a gas mask on my face. They would cover the opening at the tube’s

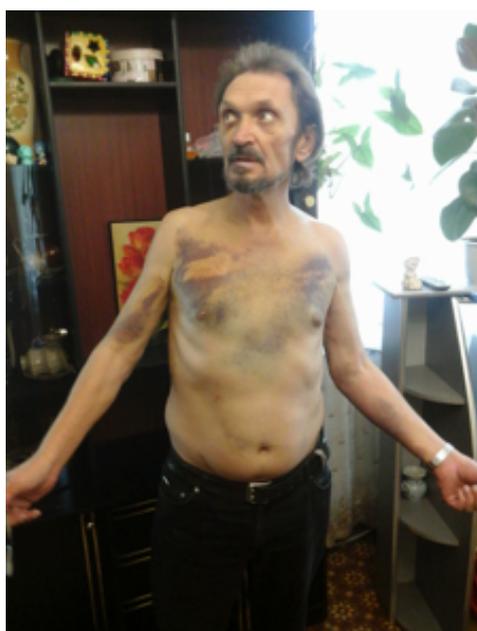
²⁶ Serhiy Kosiak, pastor at Assembly of God, Donetsk

end and block the airflow so I could not breathe. When I would almost lose consciousness, they would uncover the opening and cover it with a cloth soaked in ethanol. I would take a deep breath because I was nearly unconscious and feel a burning inside my chest. So I would start coughing and gasping for fresh air. That's when they would start beating me with batons on my chest and back. This continued over and over again." The pastor was also subjected to mock execution by firing squad, a torture method very popular among the pro-Russian fighters, according to numerous victims' testimonies.

As of March 2015, prayers in are held in secret, in the homes of the very few pastors and congregation members that have remained in occupied Donetsk.



Pro-Russian combatants break up the Prayer Marathon in Donetsk Constitution Square, May 2014



Alexander Khomchenko was subject to torture by means of suffocation, extensive beatings and mock execution by firing squad, August 2014, Donetsk

7.2 Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and Roman Catholic Church

Father Tykhon (Serhiy) Kulbaka, another organizer of the Prayer Marathon in Donetsk, was abducted by the pro-Russian combatants at gunpoint in a supermarket car park on Artema Street on July 4, 2014. The priest could not say where he was taken, as he lost consciousness due to ether given to him as he was kidnapped. He was then blindfolded for the remainder of his ten days in captivity. The priest was denied the medicine necessary to treat his diabetes, which resulted in serious health complications. He was also denied sufficient water and grave dehydration drove him to drink from the toilet. His ration of food for the day consisted only of bread, which the gunmen knew was deadly for a diabetic. As in the cases of several other priests, the fighters staged a mock execution by firing squad, which Father Tykhon recalls they treated as entertainment. He was taken outside three times, put up against the wall and told to say his last prayer. The gunmen shot into the air and the wall next to his ear, which caused a state of shock and subsequently led to a heart condition: “He [the pro-Russian fighter] pushed me and I hit the wall. He hit my head against the wall and ordered me to pray. I began to recite the Lord’s Prayer. Then came the sounds of the recharging of the gun and a series of automatic shots. My ear felt burnt from the hot air of the shots, and I understood that they are shooting right next to my head. I felt pieces of plaster from the wall falling on my head. It was really loud, almost deafening. I fainted. When I regained consciousness, I was lying on the wet ground outside. Everybody was laughing, I heard many voices, not just the two from outside my cell. They thought it was funny. Then they poured water on me, kicked me and ordered me to get up”.



Prior to his detention pastor Serhiy Kulbaka had received numerous threats by telephone.
His car was vandalized in June 2014, Donetsk

Father Tykhon was also subject to demagogical “conversations”, during which a man, well-versed in religion and bible studies, lectured him on the righteousness of the separatist cause, the truth of Orthodoxy and the heretical nature of all other religions: “If somebody came out to pray for the Soviet Union in the center of Berlin during the second world war, what do you think would happen to these people? And you pray for Ukraine in the very center of Novorossia! You are our enemy and what should be done with the enemy? The enemy must

be killed: all the uniates, schismatics and heretics”.

Victor Vonsovykh, a Catholic priest of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ parish in Horlivka was arrested and held captive for ten days by pro-Russian combatants. Upon release, he was threatened with execution should he ever return to Horlivka.²⁷

Polish Catholic priest Pavel Vitek, who took part in the “Prayer Marathon” event in Donetsk, was also abducted by the combatants. He spent a day in the infamous basement prison of the Security Service building controlled by armed DPR fighters.

In his address to the Aid to the Church in Need in September 2014, the Roman Catholic nuncio to Ukraine Archbishop Thomas Edward Gullickson stated: “At present, I have no news of Catholic priests or religious women either Greek or Latin serving in those parts of the war zone of Luhansk and Donetsk which are still under terrorist or Russian control; even the Exarch of Donetsk, Bishop Stefan Meniok, had to flee the fighting”.²⁸

7.3 Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate

According to Serhiy Gorobtsov, the Archbishop overseeing Kyiv Patriarchate parishes in the Donetsk and Mariupol regions, 30 of the 40 parishes on the currently occupied territory have stopped operating.²⁹ Most clergy and their families had to be evacuated from the region due to their names appearing on the “execution lists” of the DPR. Some of those who remain behind in the war zone organize clandestine gatherings for worship. There are also two separate reports of the destruction of church property.

In May 2014, a month after Sloviansk fell to the pro-Russian forces, a group of Russian Cossacks seized the property of the Ukrainian Orthodox church of the Kyiv Patriarchate on Karl Marx Street. The local head of the church, Archimandrite Savva, held a daily mass in Ukrainian and prayed for peace in his country. The combatants from the Orthodox Army called him a fake. The priest left the city after his name allegedly appeared on the “execution lists” and returned after the Ukrainian armed forces regained control over the city.³⁰

Alexander Shkumat, a priest from the Novoazovskiy district, has faced numerous threats for performing a funeral service for a family allegedly slain by pro-Russian fighters. The local church of the Kyiv Patriarchate was shot at, its windows were shattered, and the icons, literature and other ecclesiastical objects were burned in the churchyard. Father Alexander’s house was also ransacked and many personal belongings burnt.³¹

Two priests, Aleksander Shumin and Valeriy Lotorev, were abducted at gunpoint by combatants from the illegal paramilitary groups of DPR, taken beyond the city boundaries and brutally beaten for administering emergency medical aid to wounded Ukrainian soldiers.³²

Two other priests, Pavel Minkov and Yuriy Ivanov, were kidnapped, held in captivity and

²⁷ Institute of Religious Freedom, Kyiv, Ukraine:

http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1456%3A1&catid=34%3Aua&Itemid=61&lang=ru

²⁸ Zenit: <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/nuncio-to-ukraine-gives-overview-of-church-s-most-pressing-needs>

²⁹ Information valid at the time of interview with Serhiy Gorobtsov in February 2015

³⁰ Testimony given by Archimandrite Savva

³¹ Testimony given by Archbishop Serhiy Gorobtsov

³² Testimony given by Archbishop Serhiy Gorobtsov

subjected to forced labor at the camps of pro-Russian forces.³³

Valentin Serovetskiy, the chaplain of the Aydar volunteer battalion fighting alongside the Ukrainian regular armed forces, was detained at one of the so-called LPR checkpoints in July 2014 and held captive for nearly two months in Luhansk. During his captivity he was beaten, forced to dig trenches and mass graves and hold ad hoc funeral services for the dead. He sustained broken ribs and has contracted Hepatitis C.

7.4 Protestant and Evangelical Church

Murder of Four Evangelists, Slovianks

On June 8, 2014, after the festive Trinity Sunday service at the Transfiguration Church in Sloviansk, pro-Russian gunmen detained four members of the church: the pastor's adult sons Reuben Pavenko and Albert Pavenko and two of the church's deacons, Viktor Bradarsky and Vladimir Velichko. The men were taken to the former offices of the Security Service of Ukraine in Sloviansk, brutally beaten and killed.³⁴ Their bodies were found in a mass grave near a local hospital for children after the pro-Russian fighters had left the city and the Ukrainian armed forces took over.



Memorial service for the four slain Evangelists Vladimir Velichko, Viktor Bradarsky, Reuben Pavenko and Albert Pavenko. Slovyansk, June 2014

*The Kind News Church, Sloviansk*³⁵

The Kind News Church in Sloviansk came under attack by pro-Russian fighters numerous times. At the end of April 2014, gunmen stormed and searched the building, seeking proof that the church was supporting Praviy Sector – a Ukrainian volunteer battalion labeled as fascist by the Russian media. The clergy and the congregation were made to lay face down on the ground while gunmen searched the premises. The fighters soon discovered that the rooftop of the church allowed excellent visibility of the city and was an effective shooting

³³ Testimony given by Archbishop Serhiy Gorobtsov

³⁴ Interview of Col. Igor Rybalchenko, Sloviansk Police to Vice News: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBsEkF_GY0E

³⁵ Testimony of the Kind News Church pastor Petr Dudnyk and parishioner Yevhen Tkachov

position. On several occasions in late April and early May of 2014, gunmen from pro-Russian troops led by Igor Strelkov broke into the church at night and took positions on the roof, as evident from broken locks and windows leading to the rooftop. They finally took over completely and an Orthodox priest, who later appeared in videos shot by the so-called DPR forces, came to the church and declared that from that point on, the church shall be Orthodox. At first, about 10 to 15 fighters were stationed at the church. These were later joined by some 40 members of the Cossack Army and local thugs. Altogether around 100 combatants stayed at the church. On June 8, they brought artillery equipment NONA-C onto church territory and shelled Ukrainian forces' positions, all the while accompanied by the prayers and chanting of the Orthodox priest.³⁶

When the pro-Russian fighters retreated from Sloviansk, the Ukrainian army recovered three truckloads of weapons from the church.

Among the detained clergy and congregation members of the Church of Kind News were the heads of the Evangelical association Church of God, Bishop Oleksiy Demidovych and Gennadiy Lysenko. The latter was held captive and interrogated about the church governance structure while his hands and head taped with heavy-duty scotch tape. He was stabbed with a bayonet knife, beaten, and threatened with being shot in the head.



Snap shots from the video made available by the illegal pro-Russian combatants of NONA-C systems firing from the Kind News church property (left) and the prayers of Orthodox priests which accompanied this (right), Sloviansk, June 2014

Word of Life Church, Torez, Shakhtarsk, Donetsk

On June 19, the Torez premises of the Evangelical Church, Word of Life, were captured by gunmen bearing Cossack battalion insignia. The militants allegedly threatened the believers and the clergy with a firing squad and insisted that Evangelism is a sect religion.³⁷

The same church in Shakhtarsk was overrun by militants just two days later. Pastor Nikolai Kalinichenko was detained and warned that if he were to continue his religious activities he would be shot.³⁸

Witness testimony suggests that the churches in Shakhtarsk and Torez were used as pro-Russian deployment positions with barricades and weapons on church territory. On August 13, the Donetsk premises of the Word of Life Church were also taken over. VICE News correspondent Simon Ostrovsky traveled to Donetsk to attend secret Protestant church

³⁶ Video shot and made available by the pro-Russian combatants: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljFKNeuL6qQ>

³⁷ Serhiy Kosiak, pastor at Assembly of God

³⁸ Institute of Religious Freedom, Kyiv, Ukraine: http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1456%3A1&catid=34%3Aua&Itemid=61&lang=ru

services and spoke with fighters of the Donetsk People's Republic. One of the rebels interviewed outside the Word of Life Church in Donetsk declared that Baptism is a sect and that he personally has taken up arms to create an Orthodox state.³⁹

Donetsk Christian University, Donetsk

On July 8, 2014, the Donetsk Christian University complex was taken over by pro-Russian fighters. The acting Director of the University, Oleg Stein, was given an order from the "Ministry of Donetsk People's Republic" to vacate the property within two days, leaving all items except for personal belongings behind. The complex includes a kindergarten, middle school, university, administrative building, dormitory, family units for university employees, garages, storage rooms, tennis courts and much equipment. To this day, the complex is used as the military base for DPR with checkpoints, barricades, weapons and military vehicles, including tanks.

The Seventh Day Adventist Church, Debaltseve, Horlivka

The Seventh Day Adventist Church in Debaltseve was destroyed as a result of artillery fire during intense fighting between the DPR forces and the Ukrainian National Guard as they battled for control over the city at the end of July 2014. According to the official website of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Ukraine, pro-Russian fighters stationed themselves at an administrative building 50 meters away from the church and positioned MRLS (Grad) and other artillery weapons nearby.⁴⁰ The church was almost destroyed in the crossfire. The church's priest, Serhiy Kobzar, and his wife Tatiana who lived in the same building, hid from the shelling in the basement without electricity, food and with very little drinking water for two days.

On September 27, DPR combatants forced their way into the Seventh Day Adventist church during mass in Horlivka. They ordered a halt to the ceremony and told the congregation to leave. When some of the believers had the courage to question the combatants' authority, they were told to mind their own business and that "this is Orthodox land and there is no place for sects". The pastor, Serhiy Litovchenko, was taken to an unknown location.⁴¹ He was held captive by the DPR forces for 20 days.

Pentecostal Church, Donetsk

In August 2014, during a service at the Pentecostal church in Donetsk, pro-Russian gunmen ordered a halt to the service and forbade the congregation to come back to the church in the future. Around 60 people subsequently fled the region and found shelter in Mariupol, the frontline town under the control of the Ukrainian authorities. Ivan Pryadka, a Pentecostal pastor, provided the following account of events: "I was in Donetsk in August 2014 to conduct a service, there was a building which we rented in the center of the city. A jeep pulled up and 30 guys with assault rifles showed up. They introduced themselves and started interrogating us at the entrance to the building. They asked about our teachings and they said that we were wrong. I said that we only teach good things. At the end they said 'If you gather

³⁹ VICE News report Secret Protestant Churches in Donetsk: Ukraine's Religious War, March 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhEe2PSaEW0>

⁴⁰ Testimony of Serhiy Kobzar; the official website of Seventh Adventists in Ukraine: http://www.adventist.org.ua/news_vk_debaltsovo2014razrushen_mol_dom.html

⁴¹ The official website of Seventh Adventists Church in Ukraine: http://www.adventist.org.ua/news_vk_gorlovka2014_pohitili_advent_pastora.html

here again we will shoot you'. The gangs from the DPR have selected these buildings to house their soldiers in them". The pastor added that most prayer meetings in Donetsk are held in secret, because people have been threatened and many have been beaten.⁴²

Bethany Baptist Church, Donetsk

According to various open sources and testimony, the vast majority of Baptist churches have been appropriated by the pro-Russian battalions across the occupied territories of Luhansk and Donetsk. These buildings are often used as camps, as in the case of Bethany Baptist Church. As of March 2015, pro-Russian militants have been using the building as an infirmary for their sick combatants, as a place for exercise and rest and as a kitchen. In his report for VICE News, an American reporter was allowed inside the church building and was able to document the presence of illegal combatants occupying the church premises. In the auditorium, where the large congregation once prayed, the fighters had hung a punching bag and demonstrated their physical fitness in front of the camera.⁴³

Petrovsky Church of Christ, Donetsk

In October 2014, armed gunmen of the so-called DPR took over the premises of the Church of Christ in the Petrovsky district of occupied Donetsk. According to Leonid Kryzhanovsky, an elder of the church, about a dozen fighters from the pro-Russian Oplot battalion camped in the congregation hall. The commanding fighter of the battalion accused the leaders of the church and the congregation of collaborating with the Americans and stated that, "We only support the Orthodox Church and your Protestant churches shouldn't be here". Before moving out two weeks later, they painted a black skull and crossbones and the name of their battalion "Oplot" in large letters on the exterior wall.

Another group of pro-Russian fighters occupied the church premises in November 2014, and as of March 2015 the building is still being used as a military camp.⁴⁴ Since the occupation of the church building, about 100 members of the congregation have been meeting to pray in secret locations scattered across the city of Donetsk. When asked if he's afraid that the illegal militias will stop the church congregation from worshiping in private homes, Kryzhanovsky replied, "We're not afraid because the first Christians were also persecuted. And they weren't afraid to preach Jesus Christ."⁴⁵

⁴² VICE News report Secret Protestant Churches in Donetsk: Ukraine's Religious War, March 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhEe2PSaEW0>

⁴³ VICE News report Secret Protestant Churches in Donetsk: Ukraine's Religious War, March 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhEe2PSaEW0>

⁴⁴ Journalist Sabra Ayres was allowed to enter the building of the church and conducted interviews with the fighters and L. Kryzhanovsky in a report for Al Jazeera America. Full article along with some images of gunmen camp at the church is available at <http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2015/3/in-rebel-held-donetsk-religious-intolerance-grows.html>

⁴⁵ VICE News report Secret Protestant Churches in Donetsk: Ukraine's Religious War available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhEe2PSaEW0>



A rebel fighter carrying a live round through the Church of Christ, Donetsk, March 2015.
Photo: Francesca Volpi for Al Jazeera America

Other cases of confiscation of Protestant churches, detention and torture of clergy

On 15 June 2014 armed militants of the self-proclaimed DPR looted the premises of the New Generation Evangelical Church in Horlivka. They stole computer equipment and legal documents from the office.

On 17 June 2014 at approximately 3:00 am, about 30 combatants from the illegally formed pro-Russian battalion, “Vostok”, stormed the Evening Light Christian Rehabilitation Center in Donetsk and kidnapped 27 people. The hostages were accused of collaborating with Ukrainian volunteer battalions, but were later released.⁴⁶

On 26 June 2014 militants searched the premises of the Evangelical Church of Victors in Druzhivka, confiscated the office computer, documents and money and held pastor Pavlo Lisko and his wife captive for a week. They were accused of collaborating with the Americans and assisting those who want to leave the conflict zone.

There are other reports of violence against the clergy and congregation members of the Protestant faith that are currently pending verification by the IPHR mission team. Monitoring the crimes in the occupied territories is extremely difficult. Many victims and witnesses have family or congregation who live in the occupied territories, others frequently visit the conflict zone and out of fear for their safety and safety of those they care about, they refuse to testify about the crimes.

⁴⁶ Testimony of Serhiy Kosiak, Oleg Stein and ProChurchInfo website: <http://prochurch.info/index.php/news/more/29617>
The curator of the Rehabilitation Center could not be reached for testimony

8. CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this report shows that non-Orthodox religious believers living in the conflict-affected areas of Ukraine are being subjected to widespread and systematic attack by the rebel groups. While persecution on the grounds of religious belief is closely intertwined with persecution based on political affiliation, whereby non-Orthodox believers are associated with pro-Ukraine political persuasion and are targeted for this reason, this report primarily focuses on the persecution based on religious beliefs.

Persecution based on religious belief appears to be part of a well-coordinated policy and has a strong Orthodox connotation. Only the believers of Moscow Patriarchy Orthodoxy are free from persecution and are able to practice their religion freely. Moreover, the Orthodox religion is used as an ideological foundation of ‘state building’ by the rebel groups and anything that is non-Russian Orthodox is seen as alien. The essence of the project of the Donetsk People’s Republic is summarized in one paragraph, taken from the end of the preamble to their constitution: “...establishment of a sovereign independent state, based on the restoration of a unified cultural and civilizational space of Russian World, on the basis of its traditional religious, social, cultural and moral values, with the prospect of becoming a part of ‘Greater Russia’ as halo territories of the ‘Russian World’.”

Russian nationalism is indicated as the foundation of the new state. The phrase “Russian World”, for example, is found in the “constitution” several times. Some of the illustrative quotes include: “...feeling an integral part of the ‘Russian World’ as Russian civilization...thinking about the indivisibility of fate of the whole ‘Russian World’ and still willing to remain its partakers...remaining dedicated to ideals and values of the ‘Russian World’ and honouring the memory of their ancestors ...”

Article 9(2) of the constitution of the Donetsk People's Republic states that the “leading and dominant belief is the Orthodox faith (Christian Orthodox Catholic faith of Eastern Confession) professed by the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate).” Besides the special privileged status of the Russian Orthodox Church, any “unwanted” religions can be outlawed, and according to the Article 21 of the same document “... nothing in this Constitution limits the Donetsk People’s Republic’s right to protect the public from the activities of religious sects according to the law.”

The scale and magnitude of the attacks that the civilian population is subject to in the southeastern parts of Ukraine, is sufficient to qualify them as crimes against humanity as defined in international law. Monitors dispatched by CCL and IPHR were able to collect evidence which proves that non-Orthodox believers have been subject to murder, torture, forcible transfer, imprisonment and severe deprivation of liberty in violation of the fundamental rights set out in international law. Since the conflict began, dozens of places of worship have been seized and are currently under the control of paramilitary groups. The increasing frequency of physical attacks have forced believers to flee or to practice their religion in secret.

CCL and IPHR observers were not able to find proof of effective investigations being conducted in relation to the above mentioned crimes. As the evidence is mounting of the direct involvement of the Russian Federation in the ongoing conflict in southeastern Ukraine, Russia bears responsibility for preventing and investigating the crimes described in this report. Due to the political and practical obstacles that can hamper the effective investigation of such crimes, CCL and IPHR urge the Ukrainian authorities to formalize the process of instituting a declaration under Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute, which would confer jurisdiction to the International Criminal Court for the prosecution of crimes against humanity committed on Ukrainian territory. This will serve the interest of the victims affected by the conflict and will help put an end to rampant impunity in the region.