

Outline

Russia began its assault on all faiths, except those affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church, soon after its invasion of Crimea. While denying control over its proxy Donbas 'republics', the targets of attack there were the same. Since its full-scale invasion, Russia has clamped down on religious diversity and independence in any part of Ukraine which came under occupation. Freedom House's 2025 assessment of Russian-occupied Ukraine was lower than North Korea and significantly lower than in Russia.

The mounting repression is linked with Russia's attempt to eradicate all that is part of Ukrainian identity on occupied territory. The Russian Orthodox Church actively supports 'Russian world' ideology and the war against Ukraine, with all other churches viewed with hostility as 'spying' for Ukraine or 'Western agents'. Crimean Tatars, who strongly identify with Ukraine, have been disproportionately targeted, especially those involved in the human rights movement and / or whose Muslim communities distance themselves from the Russian-collaborating Directorate of Muslims of Crimea.

One of the methods first used in occupied Crimea was the requirement that all religious communities re-register under Russian legislation. Many religious communities did not want to register as 'Russian' and the Russian requirements were onerous and difficult to fulfil. It was also easy for the Russian authorities to refuse to register a community, as they did in 2019 when Archbishop Klyment was finally forced to apply to re-register an Orthodox Church of Ukraine [OCU] parish. OCU was not the only target. In 2015 Pastor Anatoliy Kaluzhny reported that not one Protestant community had received full registration. Restrictions were also imposed upon clergy unwilling to take Russian citizenship, and FSB surveillance and threats were common. The absurd administrative charge of 'unlawful missionary activity' is also regularly applied, and not only in the case of leaders of unregistered communities. Several Imams have, over recent years, been fined on this charge for leading Friday prayers in their own mosque.

Seizure of property, illegal breaking of lease agreements, etc. have been widely used on all occupied territory to strip religious communities of their places of worship, and in the case of the Crimean Diocese of OCCU to drive the church out of its main Cathedral and Diocese centre in Simferopol.

Flawed 'extremism' and 'terrorism' legislation are increasingly used as a cover for religious persecution, particularly against Crimean Jehovah's Witnesses, which Jarrod discussed, and Crimean Muslims. The latter cases are especially shocking given the huge sentences passed without any recognizable crime and on the basis of evidently fabricated 'evidence'. The persecution is based on a 2003 secretive Russian supreme court ruling declaring Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is a peaceful Muslim organization that is legal in Ukraine, 'terrorist'. That ruling, as well as 'secret witnesses' and fake experts, are used to justify sentences of up to 20 years. Since 2017, Russia has been using such 'Hizb ut-Tahrir trials' against Crimean Solidarity civic journalists and activists, with well over a hundred political prisoners currently imprisoned.

While Russia made little effort to conceal its role in the enforced disappearances of many Crimean Tatars, it initially left the seizure of some Ukrainian Orthodox places of worship and early abductions to the paramilitary organizations it had used in 2014 to seize control. At a time when peaceful protests of any sort had already become inconceivable in occupied Crimea, believers from almost all faiths gathered each day, under a Ukrainian flag, in the centre of occupied Donetsk to pray for peace and unity. This Prayer Marathon continued for 158 days, until it became simply too dangerous, with 16 of the participants having been taken prisoner at some point, subjected to mock executions and, in some cases, to savage torture.

Since 2022, Russia has abducted huge numbers of civilians and tortured some to death. One of its victims was OCU priest, Father Stepan Podolchak who was probably seized and tortured to death because he refused to transfer his parish's affiliation to the Russian Orthodox Church. Other Orthodox clergy have come under pressure to do the same, with it likely that Father Kostiantyn Maksymov from occupied Zaporizhzhia oblast was sentenced to 14 years on 'spying charges' because of his opposition to the forced merger of the Berdiansk Diocese into the Russian Orthodox Church. In some cases, Protestant pastors and others have been released fairly quickly, however two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests were held for almost two years, with Russian propaganda media treating them as 'terrorists.'

Russia does not brook any religious diversity and is determined to crush Ukrainian identity on any territory it occupies, with the situation likely only to worsen unless the territory is liberated.

Recommendations

- 1 Separately analyse and address the situation in Russia and in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine.
- 2 Unwaveringly and repeatedly draw attention to the demands of international law with respect to all occupied territory.
- 3 Promote sanctions (economic and / or travel restrictions) against those directly involved in persecution of Crimean Muslims (and others where information is available)
- 4 Help highlight Russia's methods of terror and repression on occupied territory

In more detail

The need for separate analysis of the situation in Russia and in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine. This is both because the level of repression, brutality and lawlessness on occupied Ukrainian territory is so much greater than in Russia, and because of the specific motives behind much of the repression. Most of the Hizb ut-Tahrir trials in occupied Crimea and persecution of lawyers representing them target members of the Crimean Tatar human rights movement, with Crimean Tatars having suffered disproportionately under Russian occupation because of their pro-Ukrainian position. The harassment and persecution of churches not affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church is often driven by, or at least justified on the

grounds that, these churches are viewed as pro-Ukrainian—and, in the case of Protestant churches, 'Western'

Unwavering attention to the demands of international law with respect to all occupied territory

With Russia claiming that the territory in question is 'Russian' and flagrantly disregarding international law, it can seem repetitive and redundant to keep pointing this out. Not repeating it simply plays in Russia's hands. Any application of Russian legislation on occupied territory is in violation of the Geneva Convention, and any so-called courts and sentences must be viewed as illegitimate. Although this was, in principle, always the case, the fact of such fundamental breach of international law was less often noted when 'only' talking about occupied Crimea. Russia has seized almost a fifth of Ukrainian territory, and is claiming that four entire oblasts, besides Crimea, have, supposedly, 'become Russian', with this including territory not under its control. That matters, and Russia must not be allowed to wear down international resistance.

Sanctions

Sanctions are needed at government level against those FSB officers, prosecutors and judges (generally from the Southern District Military Court in Rostov) directly involved in fabricated Hizb ut-Tahrir 'terrorism trials' against Crimean Tatar and other Crimean Muslims. Many of these individuals are also involved in illegal 'trials' of Ukrainian prisoners of war or civilians abducted from other occupied territory. It is especially important that judges are aware that they will be held personally liable, and at least face restrictions if they try to travel abroad, for their direct role in sentencing innocent men to long terms of imprisonment. Russia has already caused the death of one Crimean Tatar political prisoner, Dzhemil Gafarov, imprisoned on 'Hizb ut-Tahrir charges', is directly placing the life of Amet Suleimanov in danger, while also having a grave impact on the state of health of many ideas, including men who are well over 60. Those involved in refusing medical treatment, ignoring clear medical grounds for a person's release, etc, should also face targeted sanctions.

Publicity

Help with international publicity and awareness raising is urgently needed. Since 2017, Russia's methods of terror and religious persecution, through fake Hizb ut-Tahrir charges, have been almost openly aimed at crushing Crimean Solidarity, a Crimean Tatar human rights movement which ensured that information was received internationally about Russia's crimes and repression. It was probably thanks to Crimean Solidarity journalist Remzi Bekirov and two human rights lawyers that the international community learned of the detention on 3 March 2019 of Archbishop Klyment, Head of the Crimean Diocese of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. It may well have been that international attention which prompted the Russians to back down and release him. Remzi Bekirov was arrested just over three weeks later, in the worst Russian offensive to date against Crimean Tatar civic journalists and activists. He is now serving a 19-year sentence.

The situation in more recently occupied parts of Ukraine is, in many ways, even more dire. Virtually nothing is known of the charges used by an occupation 'court' to sentence Kostiantyn Maksymov, a priest of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to 14 years, nor of the charges or even the date of the 22-year sentence, against Berdiansk pastor and volunteer Viktor Bondarenko.

All such methods of terror and repression are aimed at creating an information blockade, behind which, like the Iron Curtain in Soviet times, religious and other persecution will only escalate.