

**U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)
Hearing**

Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia

September 16, 2020

AGW Opening Statement

Thank you, Chair Gayle Manchin, Vice Chairs Tony Perkins and Anurima Bhargava, as well as to the esteemed commissioners of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for inviting me to speak today. Today's hearing on religious freedom in Russia is critically important.

I'd like to remind the commission today that under binding laws of armed conflict, including the Geneva Conventions, Vladimir Putin is responsible not just for violations of religious freedom within it Russia's borders. Critically, Putin's Russia is also responsible for religious freedom violations in territory it occupies or otherwise controls.

Since 2014, Russia has been illegally occupying and controlling Crimea and parts of the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. It has achieved this using non-state armed groups and illegal entities created, supported, and commanded by the Kremlin. In these Ukrainian territories that Russia is illegally holding, it has also presided over egregious violations of religious freedom. This has included detention, imprisonment, torture, forced psychiatric hospitalizations, confiscation of property, and more.

This religious persecution has been persistent and well-documented. Russia has targeted the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Muslim Crimean Tatars.

That's why I have introduced H.R. 5408, the Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act. My bill would require the President to take into consideration Russia's violations of religious freedom within the territory of Ukraine that Russia occupies or controls, when determining whether to designate Russia as a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

We cannot be silent about the egregious violations of religious freedom in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine. I hope that this hearing will send a strong and clear message to Moscow: the United States will never cease standing side by side with the freedom-loving people of Russia and Ukraine against your tyranny and evil. We will never cease from calling attention to your crimes against humanity. The United States will hold you to account for your violations of religious freedoms, wherever they may be.

Thanks again to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for having me here today and for the important work you do. With that, I yield back the balance of my time.