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## Repressive Policy of the Occupiers During Hybrid War Against Religious Communities of Ukraine, 2014-2022

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# **REPRESSIVE POLICY OF THE OCCUPIERS DURING THE DECLARED RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN HYBRID WAR AGAINST RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES OF UKRAINE 2014-2022**

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## **Abstract**

The article analyzes the repressive policy of the occupiers during the undeclared Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war against the religious communities of Ukraine in 2014–2022. It has been established that the “russian world” is a neo-imperial, geopolitical, ideological doctrine aimed at the theoretical substantiation and practical restoration of the “great historical Russia” within the borders of the Russian Empire at the peak of its power in 1914. By way of the “russian world,” an important “soft power” of the Kremlin, Russia first planned to capture the mental space of Ukraine and the brains of its citizens; then, if necessary, they would deploy troops and annex this territory to their state. The Russian Orthodox Church played an important role in Russia's neo-imperial plans, as it was an active embodiment of the “russian world” in the spiritual, political, cultural, and humanitarian spaces of Ukraine. Russia's undeclared war against Ukraine and Ukrainians, which began in 2014 and temporarily occupied a large part of Ukraine, was a real ordeal for the Ukrainian state and its citizens and a terrible tragedy for believers of all faiths. Examples of crimes against humanity committed by Russian terrorist forces on the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine

against religious communities are highlighted. The consequences of the criminal and aggressive policy of the Kremlin and the "russian world" introduced by the Russian terrorist forces and its impact on the situation of believers are shown. There are two tendencies that characterize the attitude of the Russian aggressors and their servants towards the believers of different denominations in Ukraine. During the first stage of the hybrid war (February 20, 2014 – February 23, 2022) the occupiers and their proxies on the temporarily occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine (parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions) and Crimea in accordance with the "russian world" doctrine favored the Ukrainian Orthodox Churches of the Moscow Patriarchate, because they rightly considered it their ally in the conquest of Ukraine. During the second phase of the full-scale aggression of Russian troops (February 24, 2022) and the collapse of the so-called Russian blitzkrieg, the occupiers became inhumane and began destroying religious buildings, killing clergy and believers regardless of religion.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, undeclared Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war, religious communities, Russian Federation, "russian world," Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

## Introduction

Liquidation in the late twentieth century of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (hereinafter – the USSR) gave a real opportunity to the former Soviet republics to get rid of the totalitarian legacy and embark on the path of democratic development. Initially, the leadership of the Russian Federation tried to democratize the country at least formally, but eventually abandoned these plans and began to actively promote and restore the neo-imperial discourse. The main supplier of these ideological changes in the early 21st century became the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin. This process has accelerated in Russia, especially after the Orange Revolution of 2004–2005.

Realizing that Ukraine could become a model and guide for both Russia and other post-Soviet republics on the path to democratization, Westernization, and liberalization, Putin began the process of developing and forming a new ideology that would help restore Russia's newest modernized superpower. The "russian world" became such an ideological doctrine, or an important component of it.<sup>1</sup>

The "Russian world" is not an ordinary cultural project. It was "*de jure*" created for the preservation and development of the Russian language and culture both in Russia itself and in the former Soviet republics and around the world. However, "*de facto*" it is a neo-imperial geopolitical

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<sup>1</sup>Ю. Фігурний, 'Русский мир' – важливий чинник агресії Російської Федерації супроти України й українців." *Українознавство*. ["Russian world" is an important factor in Russia's aggression against Ukraine and Ukrainians. *Ukrainian Studies*], (2016. № 3 (60)), p. 45.

ideological doctrine aimed at the theoretical substantiation and practical restoration of "great historical Russia," or the Russian Empire as it was at the peak of its power in 1914.<sup>2</sup>

With the election of Kirill (Gundyaev) as the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) on February 1, 2009, the ideas of the "russian world"<sup>3</sup> acquired a so-called "sacredness." In a speech by the head of the ROC at the Third Assembly of the "russian world" on November 3, 2009 it was emphasized:

The heart of the "russian world" today are Russia, Ukraine, Belarus. Venerable Lavrentiy Chernihivsky expressed this opinion in a well-known phrase: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus are holy Russia. This understanding of the "russian world" is embedded in the modern name of our Church. The church is called Russian not on ethnic grounds. This name indicates that the Russian Orthodox Church is fulfilling a pastoral mission among peoples who accept Russia's spiritual and cultural tradition as the basis of their national identity, or at least as an essential part of it.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Ukraine and Ukrainians were expected to comply with the "russian world" against their will, an ideological, chauvinistic, imperial, geopolitical concept that boded negatively for Ukraine. Namely: the initial "fraternal" cooperation, the gradual "soft" absorption, the complete assimilation and, as a result, aims at the final liquidation of Ukraine as a sovereign state and the Ukrainians as a nation and an original ethnic community.

### **Introduction of the Religious Doctrine of "russian world" in the Occupied Territories of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (Donetsk and Luhansk Regions) in 2014–2022**

In independent Ukraine, religious tolerance and freedom of conscience were placed at the level of state ideology. The Christian church of Ukraine, which is represented by various denominations, held joint prayers for the Motherland, thus proving its unity to the faithful. After the Orange Revolution of 2004, interfaith unity in Ukraine only strengthened. In May 2005, church leaders prayed for Ukraine on Independence Square, uniting Christians of traditional Ukrainian Churches, which created a wave of high spiritual uplift among the people. The prayer inspired the faithful of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (hereinafter UGCC), the Ukrainian Orthodox

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<sup>2</sup>Ю. Фігурний, "Доктрина 'русского мира' політична ідеологія агресії Росії проти України." *Українознавство*. [The doctrine of the "russian world" is the political ideology of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. *Ukrainian Studies*.]. (2021. №4), p. 75

<sup>3</sup> The spelling of Russian in low case letters is a way Ukrainians indicate their derision of the aggressor.

<sup>4</sup>"Выступление Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на торжественном открытии III Ассамблеи Русского мира." [Speech by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the grand opening of the III Assembly of the Russian World] (2009. November 3). <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/928446.html>

Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (hereinafter the UOC-KP), the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (hereinafter the UOC-MP) and the Roman Catholic Church to gather for common prayers on the 13th of each month (on weekdays at 7 pm and on weekends at 1 pm). Similar prayer meetings also took place in Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lutsk, Kharkiv, Stryi, the village of Kryvorivnya and the village of Krasnik (Verkhovyna district); Kosovo, Mobile, village Shepit (Kosiv district); Kharkiv, Chervonohrad, Hanover (Germany), Toronto (Canada), and Philadelphia (USA).

The slogan of such meetings was:

East and West in unity under the Protection of the Blessed Virgin. Praying together for the strengthening of unity and love, we open our hearts to fraternal communication and cooperation that will contribute to the visible unity of our Churches<sup>5</sup> – it was said in a message to the faithful from all representatives of traditional Ukrainian Churches.

Not only the Orthodox clergy but also the leadership of Protestant churches and other faiths took part in the joint prayer for Ukraine. Every year on January 22 at 6 pm, an ecumenical prayer service for Ukraine is held in Kyiv. The organizers believed that this day, thanks to common prayer, would also become a holiday of Ukrainian spiritual unity.

Prayer for peace and tranquility in Ukraine has become an important part of the spiritual life of every believer in Ukraine. Every prayer meeting of the Protestant and Orthodox churches in all regions begins with a prayer for Ukraine and the spiritual union of the Christian churches.

Religious communities of Christians of traditional Ukrainian Churches, as well as Protestant and other directions, are widely represented in Ukraine. For example, the Protestant movement unites about 4,712 religious communities. At the end of 2014, there were more than 700 Protestant organizations in Donetsk region, 40.9% of the total, of which more than 12% were charismatic churches and more than 10% Baptists.<sup>6</sup>

Protestant churches have governing structures, including republican spiritual centers, which operate on the basis of statutory registers. In churches, the material base of religious activity is strengthened through religious and moral education and missionary work; close ties with the fraternal churches of other states are maintained. Religious literature, medicine, clothing, and food

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<sup>5</sup>“Спільна молитва за єдність Церков в Україні.” [A common prayer for the unity of the Churches in Ukraine]. <http://askoldova-mohyla.org/uk/item>, 2102.

<sup>6</sup>Николай Карпицкий, “Свобода від совісті. Сепаратисти розв’язали релігійний терор.” [Freedom from conscience. The separatists unleashed religious terror]. <http://tyzhden.ua/Society/139345> 26 червня, 2015.

are regularly imported from abroad and distributed to hospitals, orphanages, the elderly, and vulnerable populations.<sup>7</sup>

In order to completely subjugate the spiritual space of Ukraine, and later the Ukrainian statehood, the Kremlin purposefully began to use its own soft power, the so-called "russian world." It was with this imperial revanchist goal that Vladimir Putin used the ROC, the Russian language and culture, and the common historical past, etc., in the Russian peace attack on Ukraine and Ukrainians. The implementation of the main tasks of the "russian world" was planned for both the near and long term, as Vladimir Putin hoped that the puppet presidency of Viktor Yanukovich (February 25, 2010 – February 22, 2014) would last a very long time, similar to the rule in Belarus by A. Lukashenko.

However, the Ukrainian national revolution of the early 21st century negated all of Kremlin's plans. Therefore, Vladimir Putin was forced to use, in addition to the "soft power" of the "russian world," "hard power"—to capture Crimea and start a war in Donbass. Thus, in February 2014, the undeclared Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war began, which has continued up to this day. With the beginning of the invasion of Russian troops into the territory of Ukraine, the Kremlin began to implement the religious doctrine of the "russian world" in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine (Donetsk and Luhansk regions) and in the Crimea.

The Russian leadership believes that only the comprehensive use of all means will allow them to defeat Ukraine and Ukrainians and finally solve the so-called Ukrainian question, by the destruction of the Ukrainian state, Ukrainian political nation, and the original Ukrainian culture (ethnic, classical, and modern). A characteristic feature of the hybrid war was the brutality of the Russian occupiers and their proxies (servants-terrorists) of the so-called self-proclaimed and unrecognized "Donetsk People's Republic" (hereafter "DPR") and "Luhansk People's Republics" (hereafter "LPR").

For Ukraine and its people, the events of 2014 were a turning point in their lives and worldview. The occupation of a part of Donbass and of Crimea by Russian terrorist groups has become a real tragedy for many believers in Ukrainian churches. After capturing Ukrainian territories, Russian terrorist forces declared that they recognized only one religious organization

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<sup>7</sup>"Молитва за Україну." [Prayer for Ukraine]. <http://novazorya.if.ua/19012012/435-2012-01-18-15-21-18>.

as legitimate, namely the Russian Orthodox Church and its integral part, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Only this church had the full right to worship in the occupied territories. All other denominations, which are widely represented in the Donbass, began to be considered "unreliable" for supporters of the "russian world" and its patrons and ideologues from the ROC. It should be noted that, before the war in 2014, all religious denominations officially registered in Ukraine, which coexisted and developed peacefully, were represented in Donbass. But the ideology of the "russian world," the essence of which is "gathering Russian lands" in the separatists' interpretation became similar to Islamic radicalism, so its supporters quickly declared that there would be no religious tolerance in the occupied territories and legitimized severe persecution of so-called "infidels."

According to Church representatives,

The intensification of religious oppression in Donbas is connected with the spread of the ideology of the self-proclaimed "DPR" and "LPR", which excludes freedom of religion, proclaiming the only possible doctrine of the Moscow concept of "russian world" led by the ROC.<sup>8</sup>

According to the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience, the occupation of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014 had critical consequences for religious freedom and religious diversity. According to official figures, at least 2,220 religious organizations representing at least 43 denominations operated on the Crimean Peninsula prior to the occupation. Instead, as of the end of 2020, the Russian Federation reports 907 religious organizations representing about 20 denominations. Thus, both the number of religious organizations and the number of denominations they represent have more than halved. The functioning of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Crimea has become almost impossible. At the beginning of 2014, the Crimean eparchy of the PCU consisted of 45 parishes, which were cared for by 14 clergies. At the beginning of 2022, the diocese had seven parishes and four priests.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>М. Васін, "Представники Церков заявили про посилення релігійних утисків на Донбасі." [Representatives of the Churches stated that religious persecution in Donbass was intensifying].

[http://viruyu.at.ua/files/viruyu/2014\\_11\\_viruyu.pdf](http://viruyu.at.ua/files/viruyu/2014_11_viruyu.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>"Релігійна свобода в умовах агресії рф проти України: експерти про досвід 2014-2022 років." [Religious freedom in the conditions of Russian aggression against Ukraine: experts on the experience of 2014-2022].

<https://dess.gov.ua/roundtable-18-march-2022/>

In Mykola Karpitsky's study *Freedom without conscience*, the ideology of the "russian world" is shown in the most aggressive interpretation of the separatists, which was enshrined in the "constitution of the DPR" on May 14, 2014. Its preamble states that the Supreme Council adopts a "constitution," professing the Orthodox faith of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) and recognizing it as the basis of the "russian world." Thus, under the guise of Orthodoxy, the separatists proposed a special doctrine that is the basis of the "Russian world," not only for all other Orthodox churches, but for all Christianity. In the ninth part of the "DPR constitution," this doctrine is declared dominant: in the DPR, the leading faith is the Orthodox faith, professed by the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. The historical experience and role of Orthodoxy and the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) are recognized and respected, among other things, as system-forming pillars of the "russian world." With this article, the separatists also opposed themselves to the majority of believers in Donbass, which is characterized by religious diversity. The number of registered Protestant communities there before the Russian-Ukrainian war was slightly higher than in the Moscow Patriarchate. Under these conditions, religious conflicts arose inevitably.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, with the beginning of the Russian aggression, the religious situation in eastern Ukraine and Crimea is radically changing in favor of the UOC-MP. This position on freedom of conscience and religion showed that difficult times had come for believers who did not belong to the UOC-MP, especially the Protestant churches, the UOC-KP, and other faiths. The aggressive policy of the "russian world" affected primarily those religious communities that took a pro-Ukrainian position. In the minds of the leaders of the Russian terrorist groups and their separatist supporters, all Protestants were considered American supporters and dependents, so they were the first to be robbed: houses of worship, churches and personal property were confiscated. This forced many believers and their families to leave their homes and move to peaceful areas. At the same time, many representatives of Protestant communities decided to stay on the occupied territories, hoping that their apolitical nature would help in relations with the new government in Donbass. In addition, believers, who usually had large families (three or more children), a home, a household,

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<sup>10</sup>Николай Карпицкий, "Свобода від совісті. Сепаратисти розв'язали релігійний терор." [Freedom without conscience. The separatists unleashed religious terror]. <http://tyzhden.ua/Society/139345> 26 червня, 2015.



or a business found it very difficult to move quickly to other regions that had not been affected by the war yet.

However, those who remained on the occupied territories were the first to be persecuted by the separatists. The latter did not like their confessional affiliation, so they wanted to turn the "lost sheep" onto the path of "true faith" of the UOC-MP. According to the press center of the civil movement "All together!", published in March 2015, the results of the monitoring of religious persecution on the occupied territories of Donbass involved

the fact of the murder of seven priests has been established. According to the All-Union Council of Evangelical Churches of Evangelical Baptists, as of September 2014, seven churches had been taken from them and three had been destroyed. The relatively "tolerant" attitude towards Baptists was manifested in the fact that in the city of Anthracite, separatists twice seized the building of the Baptist church *House of Prayer for All Nations*, but then returned it. In May 2014, separatists seized church buildings in Horlivka and Snizhne, and in Donetsk, the *Evening Light* Rehabilitation Center, holding 29 people captive, several of whom were beaten. In June 2014, churches in Torez, Shakhtarsk, Druzhkivka, two churches in Horlivka, and in Donetsk the rehabilitation center *Rock of Salvation* and the entire complex of *Donetsk Christian University* were seized. In August 2014 churches in Donetsk, Olenivka, Horlivka, and in September 2014 in Donetsk and Rovenky. The seizure of churches was often accompanied by the arrest of pastors.”<sup>11</sup>

Internet resources at the time were flooded with reports of the persecution of believers of various denominations. According to *Dialog*, in 2015, terrorists began openly inciting residents of Donetsk-occupied illegal armed groups against Greek Catholics, Baptists, and other Protestants. The so-called "authorities" of the self-proclaimed "DPR" drove people to rallies, at one of which near the Shakhtar Baptist church people stood with placards taunting the faithful as sectarians and demanding that they leave the "republic.”<sup>12</sup> The occupation policy in eastern Ukraine has affected the lives of many ordinary believers. The war forced thousands of believers to flee their homes. The fate of the Kotenko family, who still live in the village of Nychyporivka, Yahotyn district, Kyiv region, is significant. According to the head of the family, Hryhoriy Mikhailevich Kotenko, the father of eleven children, four of whom live in the United States, they were forced to leave their home and farm due to the threat of an attack by Russian terrorist forces of Mariupol. G.Kotenko calls the main reason for the resettlement the persecution of Protestant believers on

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>П. Порошенко, "На окупованих територіях Донбасу переслідують мусульман, юдеїв, протестантів і вірних КП І УГКЦ." [Muslims, Jews, Protestants and believers of the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church are persecuted in the occupied territories of Donbas]. <http://islam.in.ua/ua/novyny-u-krayini/na-okupovanyh-terytoriyah-donbasu-peresliduyut-musulman-yudeyiv-protestantiv-i>.

religious grounds. He understood that if they stayed and their homeland was captured by the occupiers, his family could be repressed as "American servants," so he decided to leave his home early. Although it is difficult for his family now, as he has to rebuild his life from scratch in his new place, Hryhoriy Mykhailovych does not complain. In their prayers to God, his family asks for return of peace and tranquility to Ukraine. At the initiative of G. Kotenko and the presbyter of the Yahotyn Church of the ECB, Vitaliy Petrovich Ponomarenko, believers repeatedly raised funds for the purchase of food for both Ukrainian soldiers and their brothers in faith who remained in the occupied territories and suffered from food shortages.<sup>13</sup>

Russian terrorist groups and their separatist mercenaries not only persecuted Ukrainian citizens on religious grounds, but also committed crimes against humanity. They robbed, tortured, and killed civilians only because the latter simply did not belong to the UOC-MP. The first news of the killing of believers for their religious beliefs came shortly after terrorists seized Slovyansk in 2014. Thus, according to the head of the All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians, Mykhailo Panochko, two deacons of this church in Slovyansk died at the hands of separatists, as well as two sons of Oleksandr Pavenko, the pastor of the church. On June 8, 2014, after a service, the so-called "DPR militias" stormed the Transfiguration Church on Pentecost and announced the arrest of Deacons Volodymyr Velychko and Viktor Bradarsky, as well as two adult sons of the senior pastor, Reuben and Albert Pavenko (apparently their goal was also to capture Alexander Pavenko himself, who, fortunately, was no longer in the room at that time - he managed to leave the city with his younger children). The terrorists accused the Christians of a crime against the DPR, namely, support for the Ukrainian army. The separatists also seized four cars belonging to the abductees. Later, it became known that they were taken to the city fire department, the basement of which was converted to hold the detainees. As it turned out, the church ministers were tortured and killed the next day, June 9 (according to one of the deputy prosecutors Slovyansk, who managed to escape from the captivity of the DPR, he heard the cries of the tortured brothers during their interrogation).<sup>14</sup> For more than a month, terrorists hid the murder from relatives who were looking forward to the release of the prisoners. Volodymyr Velychko had his wife and eight

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<sup>13</sup>Записано Оксаною Висовень 10 жовтня 2016 р. від Григорія Котенка, 1959 р. н., який мешкає в селі Ничипорівка, Яготинського району Київської області. [Recorded by Oksana Vysoven on October 10, 2016, from Hryhoriy Kotenko, born in 1959, who lives in the village of Nychyporivka, Yahotyn district, Kyiv region].

<sup>14</sup>"Вбивство п'ятидесятників у Слов'янську." [Murder of Pentecostals in Slovyansk].  
<https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

children at home, and Viktor Bradarsky had a family of three. One of the Pavenko brothers was still single, the other had a wife.<sup>15</sup>

On July 7, 2014, when Slovyansk came under the full control of the Ukrainian military, the Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, Arsen Avakov and his Deputy Vasyl Paskal arrived in the city. According to Natalia Bradarska, she turned to them for help in finding the missing. On July 14, Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to the minister, said that Arsen Avakov had instructed him to report the exhumation of bodies with traces of torture in a mass grave. Among the 14 bodies found, Pavenko's brothers and V. Bradarsky were identified by the remains of their clothes; V. Velychko's very burnt body was identified later, after genetic examination. On July 20, after the identification procedure was completed, the bodies of the victims were reburied at the place of their discovery behind the children's hospital, in a wasteland.<sup>16</sup>

This terrible event had a wide media resonance both in Ukraine and abroad. The civilized world has learned about the misanthropic and intolerant freedom of conscience and religion in the face of the ideology of the "russian world" and its bearers in the occupied territories of Donbass. Russian terrorists and their separatist supporters have tried to cover up religious torture and killings of civilians in Slovyansk. In order to erase the traces of the brutal torture of innocent Christians, the militants decided to stage the events and shift the blame to the Ukrainian army, as if the believers themselves went to Mount Karachun and were shot at by them on the way. In fact, according to one church member, after questioning and torture at 3 a.m. on June 9, the four detainees were ordered to get in a car and leave the town toward Mount Karachun. The detainees were accompanied by two cars with separatists. At around 4 am on June 9, a car with detainees opened fire. Volodymyr Velychko was killed in the passenger seat, others were shot near the car, which was then set on fire.<sup>17</sup>

This murder is cited in the media as one of the main examples of the persecution of religious minorities by Russian terrorist forces in the occupied territories of Donbass. The *Ukrainian Wikipedia* contains information about the reaction of the world and Ukrainian media and human rights organizations to religious discrimination and the murder of members of the

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<sup>15</sup>“На Донбасі посилюються релігійні утиски.” [Religious persecution is intensifying in Donbas]. <http://ecb-doluna.at.ua/news/2014-12-22-71>

<sup>16</sup>“Вбивство п'ятидесятників у Слов'янську.” [Murder of Pentecostals in Slovyansk]. <https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

Slavic Pentecostal Church. BBC correspondent Svitlana Dorosh called this murder the most high-profile crime against religious ministers committed during the war in eastern Ukraine. The USA Department of State's Office of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor has included the incident in its list of examples of persecution of Protestants on territory beyond Ukrainian control.<sup>18</sup>

The killing of Pentecostals for religious beliefs is reflected in a joint report by the International Partnership for Human Rights (Brussels), the human rights organization of the Center for Civil Liberties (Kyiv) and the publications of Russian philosopher Mykola Karpitsky, who lives in Ukraine. After the "Charlie Hebdo" terrorist attack, when the slogan "*Je suis Charlie*" (French "I am Charlie") spread widely on the Internet, Ukrainian blogger and public figure Denis Kazansky published the post "We are all Protestants from Slovyansk," proposing this as a variant of the slogan of solidarity. The material was distributed by a number of media and bloggers.<sup>19</sup>

In the following years, freedom of conscience and religion became even more restricted on the occupied territories, especially in cases where the community did not express openly its support for the occupying power. Thus,

in 2017, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation recognized the religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist organization." At the end of January 2022, 5 persons belonging to Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned in Crimea. Another 9 are restricted in their movement: 7 are under house arrest, 2 are under a restraining order. Jehovah's Witnesses operate freely and peacefully in Ukraine and many other parts of the world, and there is no good reason to consider them an extremist organization.<sup>20</sup>

The State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience testifies that there are constant reports from Crimea about the impossibility of preaching in mosques: the text must be coordinated centrally. Under the pretext of fighting against extremism, there were numerous arrests of Muslims, almost all Crimean Tatars. The *Mejlis* of the Crimean Tatar people, which operates freely and peacefully in Ukraine, was banned as an "extremist organization." It is obvious that the repressions are caused by the resistance to the occupation by the Crimean Tatar activists. Human rights activists emphasize that a number of persecutions by the Russian occupation

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Релігійна свобода в умовах агресії рф проти України: експерти про досвід 2014-2022 років." [Religious freedom in the conditions of Russian aggression against Ukraine: experts on the experience of 2014-2022]. <https://dess.gov.ua/roundtable-18-march-2022/>

authorities can be qualified as crimes against humanity within the meaning of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, since 2014, on the temporarily occupied territories of eastern Ukraine and Crimea, the occupiers and their separatist mercenaries have created a repressive system against the freedom of conscience and religion, believers who adhere to any worldview that differs from the ideology of the “russian world.” The functioning of religious communities that did not openly declare their support for the occupying power became impossible.

### **A New Stage of the Revanchist Neo-Imperial Policy of the Russian Federation Towards Ukraine and Its Influence on Religious Communities**

In the context of the revanchist neo-imperial policy of the Russian Federation towards Ukraine and the undeclared Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war, especially after February 24, 2022, when the full-scale invasion of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation began. The existence of Ukrainian statehood and the survival of Ukrainians as a unique ethnic community and political nation are under the threat.

We have traced two tendencies that characterize the attitude of the Russian aggressors and their constituents towards believers of different denominations in Ukraine. During the first phase of the hybrid war (February 20, 2014 – February 23, 2022) the occupiers and their proxies in the temporarily occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine (parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions) and Crimea, according to the doctrine of the “russian world,” were sympathetic to the UOC-MP, because they considered it rightly their ally in the conquest of Ukraine. During the second stage of the full-scale aggression of Russian troops (from February 24, 2022) and the collapse of the so-called Russian *blitzkrieg*, the occupiers became enraged, losing their humanity and following the orders of Putin and his criminal team, began to destroy religious buildings, torture and kill the clergy and the faithful, regardless of their religious affiliation. This unjustified cruelty showed the cruel nature of Russian imperialism and outraged the much of the world.

If, in 2014 and early 2015, active hostilities took place only in eastern Ukraine (Donetsk and Luhansk regions), then from the end of February 2022, the war became a reality for all citizens of Ukraine. Official speakers of the Russian Armed Forces claim that Russian servicemen will destroy (demilitarize) only military infrastructure. However, the reality turned out to be worse.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

Everything from the homes of ordinary Ukrainians to sacred buildings came under fire from Russian pilots, artillerymen, rocket launchers, tankers, and so on.

According to the Civil Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience, as of mid-March 2022, damage to buildings of spiritual significance was recorded in at least seven regions of Ukraine: Kyiv, Donetsk, Zhytomyr, Zaporizhia, Luhansk, Kharkiv and Chernihiv. The vast majority of them are Orthodox churches, as well as three religious buildings of Protestant communities, three Jewish, one Roman Catholic, and one Muslim. Cases of murder and abduction of priests by the occupation forces were recorded, as presented in the appeal of *Euromaidan SOS* and the Round Table on Religious Freedom in Ukraine regarding the attack on religious freedom during Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine.

In this regard, UNESCO World Heritage Director Lazar Elounda Assomo told *France Press* that Russian shelling in Ukraine in early April 2022 affected heritage sites in eight regions of the country. In total, at least 98 Ukrainian cultural and religious sites have been damaged or destroyed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> Earlier, the British representative to UNESCO Laura Davis said, “The latest confirmed UNESCO data on cultural sites in Ukraine, damaged or destroyed by Russia: 44 religious buildings...”<sup>23</sup>

For example, on March 6, 2022, during the bombing of the city of Izyum in the Kharkiv region by the Russian aggressor, the ECB prayer house was completely destroyed. The pastor of the *New Life Church*, Vyacheslav Voronin, wrote on his Facebook page: “The heart is broken. The morning of March 7. Consequences of yesterday's hit. Everyone who was in the temple is alive. Communications are destroyed. Phones are off. The shelling continues. Pray for the people of Izyum.”<sup>24</sup>

On March 13, 2022, the Russian Armed Forces fired on the campus of the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary in Pushcha Voditsa. The administrative and educational building, the canteen, utility rooms and movable property were damaged. One week later, on March 20, 2022, the Russian occupiers fired on the Irpin Bible School of the ECB. About 30 mortar

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<sup>22</sup>“Релігійна свобода в умовах агресії РФ проти України: експерти про досвід 2014-2022 років.” [Religious freedom in the conditions of Russian aggression against Ukraine: experts on the experience of 2014-2022]. <https://dess.gov.ua/roundtable-18-march-2022/>

<sup>23</sup>“98 культурних і релігійних об’єктів України пошкоджено чи зруйновано за часів війни. ЮНЕСКО.” [98 cultural and religious sites in Ukraine were damaged or destroyed during the war. UNESCO]. [https://risu.ua/98-kulturnih-i-religijnih-obyektiv-ukrayini-poshkodzheno-chi-zrujnovano-za-chas-vijni---yunesko\\_n128416](https://risu.ua/98-kulturnih-i-religijnih-obyektiv-ukrayini-poshkodzheno-chi-zrujnovano-za-chas-vijni---yunesko_n128416)

<sup>24</sup>“Російські орки зруйнували дім молитви баптистів в Ізюмі.” [Russian orcs destroyed the Baptist house of prayer in Izyum]. [https://risu.ua/orki-zrujnuvali-dim-molitvi-baptistiv-v-izyumi\\_n126955](https://risu.ua/orki-zrujnuvali-dim-molitvi-baptistiv-v-izyumi_n126955)

shells hit the seminary. On March 21, 2022, the shelling continued. Fortunately, no one was hurt. It is symbolic that the Irpin Bible Seminary was founded before the restoration of Ukraine's Independence; on February 15, 1991, 53 students began studying in the old building. 16 years later, a modern room with autonomous living units was built for the seminary. In the 2021/2022 academic year, 734 students studied here.<sup>25</sup>

On March 24, 2022, Russian invaders attacked the *Visor* Rehabilitation Center from the Church of the Savior, located in the village of Motyzhyn, Makarov District, Kyiv Region. According to the bishop of the Church of the Salvation, Yuri Babinets,

At about 12 o'clock the occupiers opened fire from the armored personnel carrier on the building of the rehabilitation center *Visor*. People who were in the room to save their lives were forced to jump from the second floor. The Russian occupiers broke into the rehabilitation center, fired on all the rooms and captured another servant. In addition, the occupiers opened fire from an armored personnel carrier on the building of the head of the rehabilitation center *Visor* Oleg Bondarenko. His further fate is unknown.<sup>26</sup>

On March 29, 2022, Russian servicemen fired on, destroyed, and burned the House of Prayer of the Protestant Christian Church of Bethany, located in the long-suffering city of Mariupol. Pastor Andreas Patz announced this atrocity of the Russian occupiers on his Facebook page. He wrote:

A beautiful building, unique in its plan. Of course, it was not the walls that were the main ones here, nor the beauty of the building, the most valuable thing here was what many of us experienced in those walls. And that's why it hurts so much. After all, this church is associated with the most precious, heartfelt and awe-inspiring experiences. There were communions, the most talented musicians praised the Lord, the choir sang and the voices of repentant sinners, there were weddings, baptisms, the Word of God was preached, there were always children, many children ... Christians LIVED and enjoyed life. And now the barbarians came, who have nothing sacred in this place, dear, for them it's just a brick stacked in the walls. And what difference does it make who and what is valuable here.<sup>27</sup>

On April 5, 2022, Russian servicemen burned thousands of Bibles in the city of Irpin and destroyed the building of the Protestant Christian mission "Eurasia" (Vyhovsky Street, 1). These

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<sup>25</sup>“Окупанти обстріляли, Ірпінську Біблійну Семінарію ЄХБ.” [The occupiers fired on the Irpin Bible Seminary of the ECB]. [https://risu.ua/okupanti-obstrilyali-irpinskiu-bibliynu-seminariyu\\_n127423](https://risu.ua/okupanti-obstrilyali-irpinskiu-bibliynu-seminariyu_n127423)

<sup>26</sup>“Окупанти на Київщині взяли в полон служителя церкви “Спасіння”.” [Occupiers in Kyiv Region Capture Servant of Savior Church]. [https://risu.ua/okupanti-na-kiyivshchini-vzyali-v-polon-sluzhitelya-cerkvi-spasinnya\\_n127631](https://risu.ua/okupanti-na-kiyivshchini-vzyali-v-polon-sluzhitelya-cerkvi-spasinnya_n127631)

<sup>27</sup>“У Маріуполі окупанти знищили будинок молитви церкви “Віфанія”.” [In Mariupol, the occupiers destroyed the house of prayer of the church "Bethany"]. [https://risu.ua/u-mariupoli-okupanti-znishchilibudinok-molitvi-cerkvi-vifaniya\\_n127780](https://risu.ua/u-mariupoli-okupanti-znishchilibudinok-molitvi-cerkvi-vifaniya_n127780)

atrocities were reported by the deputy commander of the company of the battalion of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, Protestant pastor Oleh Magdych: "The actions of the rashists are so senseless that when Ukrainians publish evidence of their atrocities, many have doubts that even for them it is too much, and therefore it is a planned fake."<sup>28</sup> But in fact it is a terrible reality. According to the pastor, it happened near the building of the Protestant Christian mission Eurasia, which was completely destroyed by the Russian occupiers. Next to it, in the courtyard of the mission, there was a minibus loaded with Bibles. The aggressors threw them out and burned them. The pastor is convinced that the occupiers committed these barbaric acts with a fanatical belief that Protestants are antichrists and Protestantism is not the ROC. And for Russian fanatics, anything other than the ROC is a sworn enemy.<sup>29</sup>

During the second phase of the full-scale war against Ukraine, brutal Russian aggressors destroyed not only the religious buildings of the so-called "infidels," but also bombed the sacred shrines of the UOC-MP. Thus, during the fighting in eastern Ukraine, the RF Armed Forces fired deliberately and repeatedly at the shrine of the UOC-MP, the Svyatogorsk Lavra, namely the male monastery of the UOC-MP in Svyatogorsk. The first shelling was recorded in March 2022. The bombing damaged two rooms of the Svyatogorsk Lavra, which housed about a thousand people, including children. According to media reports, two monks and a nun from the Holy Dormition Svyatogorsk Lavra were killed in the shelling. Three more priests were wounded. Two monastic buildings were damaged.<sup>30</sup>

On June 1, the head of the Donetsk regional military administration, Pavlo Kyrylenko, announced that three civilians had been killed in the Svyatogorsk Lavra as a result of Russian attacks. On June 4, the Russian military fired again on the Svyatogorsk Lavra in the Donetsk region, where about 300 people were stationed at the time of the attack.<sup>31</sup> Minister of Culture and Information Policy Oleksandr Tkachenko stated:

Today, the Svyatogorsk Lavra in Donetsk region came under fire from the occupiers again. The All Saints Hermitage of the Svyatogorsk Lavra is on fire. The Donetsk eparchy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church confirmed that, in addition to the monastery brothers and

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<sup>28</sup>"В Ірпені окупанти спалили тисячі Біблій і знищили християнську місію." [In Irpen, the occupiers burned thousands of Bibles and destroyed the Christian mission]. <https://www.rbc.ua/ukr/stylar/irpene-okkupanty-sozhgli-tysyachi-biblii-1649616939.html>

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>"Війська РФ знову обстріляли Святогірську лавру, де перебували близько 300 людей." [Russian troops again fired on the Svyatogorsk Lavra, which housed about 300 people]. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-obstril-sviatohirskoi-lavry/31883364.html>

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.



sisters, there were about 300 refugees in the church, including people with disabilities, the elderly, and about 60 children, including infants. The minister did not specify whether there were any victims... So far, the Russian army has destroyed or damaged 133 religious buildings in Ukraine." <sup>32</sup>

Russians consider themselves very religious people, but during the undeclared Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war, they showed the world their true faces. The Russian occupation forces not only destroyed religious buildings ruthlessly, but also placed weapons in cult buildings and set up firing positions in the Ukrainian towns and villages they had temporarily occupied.

On this occasion, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine said on March 14, 2022: "Again, there have been numerous cases of the enemy using civilian infrastructure, including religious facilities, to equip firing positions, deploy weapons, and military equipment."<sup>33</sup> Despite the insidiousness, suddenness and scale of the Russian aggression, the Ukrainian Armed Forces stopped the next wave of occupiers and began their gradual expulsion from the territory of Ukraine.

Ukrainian civil society has also begun to actively oppose the aggressor on the humanitarian front. More than 70 public and religious organizations called on the international community to respond to the criminal actions against religious figures, communities of believers, and religious buildings that accompanied the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They published an "Appeal of *Euromaidan SOS* and the Round Table on Religious Freedom in Ukraine regarding the attack on religious freedom during Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine."<sup>34</sup> It emphasizes that the armed aggression of the Russian Armed Forces against Ukraine and Ukrainians, involves numerous violations of rights and freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Religious persecution reached even greater proportions during the large-scale armed invasion of the Russian Armed Forces into Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022 and continues to this day. Targeted shelling and destruction of churches, houses of worship, and other religious buildings, including architectural monuments, have been reported. During three weeks of active hostilities, servicemen of the Russian Armed Forces killed at least four Christian priests on the territory of Ukraine, and captured at least two more:. Thus, on March 9, 2022, in Mariupol,

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>"На захоплених територіях окупанти розміщують вогневі позиції у церквах – Генштаб ЗСУ." [In the occupied territories occupiers place firing positions in temples - the General Staff of the Armed Forces]. [https://risu.ua/na-zahoplenih-teritoriyah-okupanti-rozmishchuyut-vognevi-poziciyi-u-cerkvah--genshtab-zsu\\_n127141](https://risu.ua/na-zahoplenih-teritoriyah-okupanti-rozmishchuyut-vognevi-poziciyi-u-cerkvah--genshtab-zsu_n127141)

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

Donetsk region, the occupiers captured the pastor of the Protestant pastor Mykhailo Reznikov, and his brother Andriy Fomenko, who is raising 10 foster children.<sup>35</sup>

Summarizing all the above mentioned facts of the crimes of the Russian Federation against humanity *Euromaidan SOS*, participants of the Round Table on Religious Freedom in Ukraine and other public organizations, signed below, call:

1. International organizations and UN member states—to **appeal to the Russian Federation to end the war against Ukraine and the ongoing attack on religious freedom**, as well as to immediately release all citizens of Ukraine who are in prison for religious reasons in the occupied Crimea and other Ukrainian territories controlled by Russian troops.
2. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Churches in other countries that are in unity with the Moscow Patriarchate—to **sever relations with the Russian Orthodox Church** through its support of the groundless aggressive war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine.
3. The World Council of Churches—to **exclude the Russian Orthodox Church from its membership, to sever relations with it and to condemn the quasi-religious component of the ideology of the "russian world,"** as religion should serve peacebuilding and not be used to justify aggressive war against civilians, shelling schools and kindergartens, hospitals, maternity hospitals, and other important infrastructure.
4. Churches, religious organizations and interreligious institutions around the world call—**publicly on the Russian Federation to end the war against Ukraine and condemn the position of the Russian Orthodox Church** in support of the unfounded aggressive war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusions

Thus, analyzing the repressive policy of the occupiers during the undeclared Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war against the religious communities of Ukraine in 2014 – 2022, we came to the following conclusions:

1. It was found that the undeclared war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and Ukrainians, which began in February 2014 and continues up to this day, and its temporary occupation of a

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>“Громадські і релігійні організації закликали світ відреагувати на злочини Росії проти релігійних діячів, віруючих і культових споруд в Україні.” [Public and religious organizations called on the world to respond to Russia's crimes against religious figures, believers and religious buildings in Ukraine]. [https://risu.ua/gromadski-i-religijni-organizaciyi-zaklikali-svit-vidreaguvati-na-zlochiny-rosiyi-proti-religijnih-diyachiv--viruyuchih-i-kultovih-sporud-v-ukrayini\\_n127250](https://risu.ua/gromadski-i-religijni-organizaciyi-zaklikali-svit-vidreaguvati-na-zlochiny-rosiyi-proti-religijnih-diyachiv--viruyuchih-i-kultovih-sporud-v-ukrayini_n127250)

large part of Ukrainian territories, was a real test for the Ukrainian state and its citizens. It was also a terrible tragedy for believers of all religious communities in the occupied territories.

2. It is established that, in essence, "russian world" is a neo-imperial, geopolitical, ideological doctrine aimed at the theoretical substantiation and practical restoration of the "great historical Russia" within the borders of the Russian Empire at the peak of its power in 1914.

3. With the help of "russian world," an important "soft power" of the Kremlin, Russia planned first to capture the mental space of Ukraine and the minds of its citizens, and then, if necessary, with the help of the Armed Forces, to annex Ukrainian lands to the Russian Federation.

4. The ROC played an important role in Russia's neo-imperial plans, as it was an active provider of "russian world" in the spiritual, political, cultural, and humanitarian space of Ukraine.

5. Before the beginning of the undeclared Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war, Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk regions were an example of poly confessionalism and true religious tolerance. With the spread of the imperial, revanchist ideology of the "russian world" in 2014, the occupied territories became a place of severe trials: robbery, persecution, physical violence against members of religious communities by the official occupation authorities in Crimea and the so-called self-proclaimed republics "DPR" and "LPR," which only legally recognized the UOC-MP. The aggressive policy of the occupiers towards other believers led many believers of different denominations, who were very well-adapted to pre-war society, to flee their homes and move to peaceful Ukraine, where the state guaranteed them the freedoms of conscience and religion.

6. If, in 2014 and early 2015, active hostilities took place only in eastern Ukraine (Donetsk and Luhansk regions), then, from February 24, 2022, on, the war became a reality for all citizens of Ukraine. Officials of the Russian Armed Forces claimed that Russian servicemen would destroy (demilitarize) only military infrastructure. However, the realities turned out to be worse, when everything from the apartments of ordinary Ukrainians to sacred buildings came under fire from Russian pilots, artillerymen, rocket launchers, tankers, etc.

7. The main reason for the hatred of Russian terrorist groups in the temporarily occupied territories during the first phase of the hybrid war (February 20, 2014 – February 23, 2022) against religious communities not affiliated with the ROC has been identified. The occupiers recognized only one religious organization as legitimate, namely the ROC and its integral part, the UOC-MP; all other religious denominations are illegal and hostile and therefore had to be liquidated.

8. Examples of crimes against humanity committed by Russian terrorist forces (February 20, 2014 – February 23, 2022) against religious communities not affiliated with the ROC on the temporarily occupied territories are highlighted.

9. The consequences of the Kremlin's criminal aggressive policy and the "russian world" imposed by Russian terrorist forces in the occupied territories of Ukraine during the first phase of the hybrid war and its impact on the situation of religious communities not affiliated with the ROC are shown.

10. There are two trends that characterize the attitude of Russian aggressors and their servants towards believers of different denominations in Ukraine. During the first phase of the hybrid war (February 20, 2014-February 23, 2022) the occupiers and their proxies on the temporarily occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine (parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions) and Crimea were sympathetic to the UOC-MP according to the doctrine of the "russian world"; they identified it as their ally in the conquest of Ukraine. During the second phase of full-scale Russian aggression (February 24, 2022) and the failure of the so-called Russian blitzkrieg, the occupiers began destroying religious buildings by order of Putin and his team to assassinate inconvenient clergy and believers regardless of religion.

11. Despite the insidiousness, suddenness, and extent of Russian aggression, which began on February 24, 2022, the Armed Forces of Ukraine stopped the offensive of the occupiers and began their gradual expulsion from the territory of Ukraine. In turn, Ukrainian civil society has also begun to counter the aggressor on the humanitarian front. The religious communities of Ukraine participated actively in this struggle. By joint efforts, it is our conviction that the citizens of Ukraine will defeat the Russian Armed Forces, drive out the invaders, restore the unity and sovereignty of the Ukrainian state within its recognized borders, and restore peace, tranquility, comfort, and prosperity to every Ukrainian family.

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