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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ukraine — Crimea

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Executive Summary

In February 2014, armed forces of the Russian Federation seized and occupied Crimea. In March 2014, Russia claimed that Crimea had become part of the Russian Federation. The UN General Assembly’s Resolution 68/262 of March 27, 2014, entitled “Territorial Integrity of Ukraine,” and Resolution 75/192 of December 28, 2020, entitled “Situation of Human Rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol (Ukraine),” declared continued international recognition of Crimea as part of Ukraine. The U.S. government recognizes Crimea is part of Ukraine; it does not and will not recognize the purported annexation of Crimea. Russian occupation authorities continue to impose the laws of the Russian Federation in the territory of Crimea.

According to the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, one of the country’s oldest human rights groups, following Russia’s occupation of Crimea, many religious communities were essentially driven out of the peninsula through registration requirements under newly imposed Russian laws. Only the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) was exempt from these registration requirements. The Russian government reported there were 907 religious communities registered in Crimea, including in Sevastopol, compared with 891 in 2019, representing a drop of more than 1,000 since the occupation began in 2014, the last year for which Ukrainian government figures were available. Religious activists, human rights groups, and media reports said Russian authorities in occupied Crimea continued to persecute and intimidate minority religious congregations, including Muslim Crimean Tatars, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) members and clergy. At year’s end, two Jehovah’s Witnesses were serving prison sentences for their faith. According to the NGO Crimea SOS, as of October, 69 Crimean residents remained in prison in connection with their alleged involvement with the Muslim political organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is banned in Russia but legal in Ukraine. Russian occupation authorities continued to subject Muslim Crimean Tatars to imprisonment and detention, especially if authorities suspected the individuals of involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir. In September, Russia’s Southern Area Military Court sentenced seven Crimean Muslim Tatar prisoners arrested in 2017 and 2018 to a maximum-security penal colony. All were initially arrested for their suspected involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir in Bakhchisarai. According to the international religious freedom NGO Forum 18, Russia continued to prosecute individuals for some types of worship, including imams leading prayers in their own mosques, as “illegal missionary activity.” Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) leaders said they continued to have difficulty staffing their parishes because of the policies of occupation authorities and that they continued to be required to operate under the umbrella of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). Crimean Tatars reported police continued to be slow to investigate attacks on Islamic religious properties or refused to investigate them at all. The OCU reported continued seizures of its churches. According to the OCU, Russian occupation authorities continued to pressure the OCU Crimean diocese in an effort to force it to leave Crimea. Religious and human rights groups continued to report Russian media efforts to create suspicion and fear among certain religious groups, especially targeting Crimean Tatar Muslims, whom media repeatedly accused of having links to Islamist groups designated by Russia as terrorist groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir. Russian media also portrayed Jehovah’s Witnesses as “extremists.”

According to the *Krym Realii* news website, on the eve of the 76th anniversary of the Soviet authorities’ forced deportation of the Crimean Tatar people from Crimea, unidentified vandals destroyed several tombstones in an Islamic cemetery in Vladyslavivka Village, Nyzhnyohirsk Region. Local police reportedly refused to investigate the incident, attributing it to a family dispute. In April, on the eve of Ramadan, unidentified vandals threw rotten eggs at a mosque in Cheremysivka Village.

The U.S. government condemned the continued intimidation of Christian and Muslim religious groups by Russian occupation authorities in Crimea and called international attention to religious abuses committed by Russian forces through public statements by the Secretary of State and other senior officials as well as messaging on social media. In a February press statement, the Secretary stated, “Russian occupation authorities continue their assault on human rights and fundamental freedoms. Russian occupation authorities severely limit religious freedom, target religious believers with bogus terrorism charges, and seized the Orthodox Church of Ukraine cathedral in Simferopol. The United States calls on Russia to free all Ukrainians it has wrongfully imprisoned in retaliation for their peaceful

dissent and to end Russian abuses of fundamental freedoms in Crimea.” U.S. government officials remained unable to visit the peninsula following its occupation by the Russian Federation. Embassy officials, however, continued to meet in other parts of Ukraine with Crimean Muslim, Orthodox, and Protestant leaders to discuss their concerns over actions taken against their congregations by the occupation authorities and to demonstrate continued U.S. support for their right to practice their religious beliefs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The Crimean Peninsula consists of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC) and the city of Sevastopol. According to State Statistics Service of Ukraine 2014 estimates (the most recent), the total population of the peninsula is 2,353,000. There are no recent independent surveys with data on the religious affiliation of the population, but media outlets estimate the number of Crimean Tatars, who are overwhelmingly Muslim, is 300,000, or 13 percent of the population.

According to information provided by the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture in 2014 (the most recent year available), the UOC-MP remains the largest Christian denomination. Smaller Christian denominations include the OCU, the RCC, UGCC, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, along with Protestant groups, including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Lutherans. Adherents of the UOC-MP, Protestants, and Muslims are the largest religious groups in Sevastopol.

There are several Jewish congregations, mostly in Sevastopol and Simferopol. Jewish groups estimate between 10,000 and 15,000 Jewish residents lived in Crimea before the 2014 Russian occupation; no updates have been available since the occupation began. The 2001 census, the most recent, records 671 Karaites.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Pursuant to international recognition of the continued inclusion of the ARC within Ukraine’s international borders, Crimea continues to be officially subject to the constitution and laws of Ukraine. In the aftermath of Russia’s occupation, however, Russian occupation authorities continue their implementation of the laws of the Russian Federation in the territory. The Muslim group Hizb ut-Tahrir is considered a terrorist organization under the law of the Russian Federation, but not under Ukrainian law. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, Russian occupation authorities continued to ban Jehovah’s Witnesses in Crimea under a 2017 ruling by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation.

According to occupation authorities, fines for individuals conducting illegal missionary activity range from 5,000 to 50,000 rubles (\$67 to \$670); the fine for legal entities is 100,000 to one million rubles (\$1,300 to \$13,400).

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

In December, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution urging Russia to end its “temporary occupation” of Crimea. In his February speech at the UN General Assembly plenary meeting, then-Foreign Affairs Minister of Ukraine Vadym Prystaiko told the UN delegates of the continued large-scale abuses of human rights and fundamental freedoms by Russian occupiers, spotlighting discrimination against Ukrainians of various ethnic and religious minority groups, including Crimean Tatars, Muslims, and members of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

According to the Ukrainian human rights organization Crimean Human Rights Group (CHRG), which has offices in Kyiv, 109 individuals were unlawfully incarcerated or imprisoned due to politically or religiously motivated persecution in Crimea during the year, compared with 89 in 2019.

Human rights groups said occupation authorities continued to impede the rights of Crimean Tatars following the 2016 designation of the Mejlis, recognized under Ukrainian law as the democratically elected representative council of Crimean Tatars, as an “extremist organization.” Detentions and forced psychiatric examinations of Crimean Tatar Muslim prisoners continued throughout the year. According to Crimea SOS, as of October, 69 Crimean residents remained in prison in connection with their alleged involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir. Occupation authorities placed three additional Crimean residents under supervision and two more under house arrest. Russian authorities often accused Muslims of involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir. In June, OHCHR reported Russian occupation authorities had detained 63 citizens of Ukraine for alleged involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir activities, 20 of whom had been convicted, including seven individuals who were sentenced in 2019 to prison terms ranging from seven to 19 years.

On September 21, Russian occupation authorities released Tatar blogger Nariman Memedeminov after he had served nearly one year of his sentence. Occupation authorities had detained Memedeminov on terrorist charges in 2018, citing his involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir. Russia’s North Caucasus Military Court in Rostov-on-Don had sentenced him to two and a half years in prison in October 2019. Human rights activists linked the original verdict to his reporting on the human rights situation in Crimea.

In September, Russia’s Southern Area Military Court sentenced seven Crimean Muslim Tatar prisoners arrested in 2017 and 2018 to a maximum-security penal colony. Marlen Asanov received 19 years, Memet Belialov 18 years, Timur Ibragimov 17 years, Seyran Saliyev 16 years, Server Mustafayev 14 years, and Server Zakiryayev and Edem Smailov both 13 years. The judge found Ernes Ametov not guilty and released him. All were initially arrested for their suspected involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir in Bakhchisarai.

According to the CHRГ, in December, the “Supreme Court of the Republic of Crimea” extended into January 2021 the detention of Imam Bilyal Adilov, Erfan Osmanov, Seyran Murtaza, Server Gaziyeв, Mejit Abdurakhmanov, Tofik Abdulgaziyeв, Rustem Seitkhalilov, Akim Bekirov, Farkhat Bazarov, Seitveli Seitabdiyeв, Shaban Umerov, Riza Izetov, Jemil Gafarov, Alim Karimov, Yashar Muyedinov, Izet Abdulayeв, Asan Yanikov, Enver Ametov, Raim Aivazov, and Ruslan Suleimanov. Their cases were under judges’ consideration at year’s end. The group was arrested in March 2019 when armed representatives of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), Russian National Guard, and police searched 30 Crimean Tatar homes in Simferopol, Volodymyrivka, Strohanyvka, Kamyanka, Bile, Akropolis, and Alkavan, detaining 23 individuals for their alleged links to Hizb ut-Tahrir. During the searches, law enforcement representatives reportedly planted and “found” Hizb ut-Tahrir materials. The detainees’ lawyers were not allowed to be present during the searches.

On December 8, the “Supreme Court of the Republic of Crimea” extended the detention period to January 14, 2021 for Krymska Solidarnist (Crimean Solidarity) activist Remzi Bekirov. On December 10, the “Supreme Court of the Republic of Crimea” extended the detention period to January 14, 2021 for his fellow activists Osman Arifmetmetov and Vladlen Abdulkadyrov. The Kyivsky District Court in Simferopol had ordered the arrest of all three men in 2019 on charges related to “terrorism” for their suspected involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir following searches of their homes. Law enforcement officers reportedly beat Abdulkadyrov while he was in detention.

According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Russian occupation authorities continued to ban Jehovah’s Witnesses in Crimea under a 2017 ruling by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation. According to the OHCHR, all 22 congregations of Jehovah’s Witnesses registered in Crimea had lost their right to operate since the Russian Supreme Court’s 2017 ban on the religious group. As a result, Jehovah’s Witnesses who practice their faith risked retaliation by law enforcement. According to Forum 18, in 2019, a Russian court charged Jehovah’s Witnesses Sergei Filatov and Artyom Gerasimov with organizing an “extremist” organization following a raid by Russia’s FSB on eight homes of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Alupka and Yalta. The Russian FSB had arrested Filatov, a former head of the Jehovah’s Witnesses community in Dzhankoy, in 2018. On March 5, the Yalta City Court initially fined Gerasimov 400,00 rubles (\$5400); the Dzhankoy District Court sentenced Filatov to six years imprisonment on extremism-related charges. On May 26, Filatov lost his appeal. On June 4, the “Supreme Court of the Republic of Crimea” revoked Gerasimov’s fine and sentenced him to six years in prison, matching Filatov’s sentence. Forum 18 stated authorities transferred Filatov and Gerasimov to a prison in Russia during the summer and, as of September 30, had not allowed them to receive letters.

Forum 18 reported authorities transferred Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov to Russia in January and did not allow him to receive letters written in his native Tatar language.

According to the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, on May 26, armed FSB, Russian National Guard, and masked riot police raided four homes of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Kerch, arresting Artem Shabliy. Reportedly, Shabliy was accused of having “drawn others into the activities of an extremist organization” by discussing the Bible with them.

According to the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, on October 1, armed searches on nine Jehovah’s Witness homes in Sevastopol led to the arrests of four men: Yevhen Zhukov, Volodymyr Maladyka, Volodymyr Sakada, and Ihor Schmidt. All four remained imprisoned at year’s end. According to Forum 18, in November, Svetlana Sakada, the wife of one of the four detained, said her husband was not guilty of extremism-related charges. Forum 18 reported the four faced up to 10 years in prison if convicted on “extremism”-related charges, and that another Jehovah’s Witness, Viktor Stashevsky, was on trial on the same charges.

OHCHR reports consistently found that a pattern of criminalization of affiliation with or sympathy toward Muslim groups banned in the Russian Federation that continued to disproportionately affect Crimean Tatars. According to the report, these cases raised concerns about the right to a fair trial, as the detainees’ hearings often banned cameras, media, and family members from the courtroom. OHCHR reported that Russian courts in Crimea cited the “need to ensure the safety of the participants in the proceedings,” but that the defendants’ lawyers and family members said Russian occupation authorities excluded the public from court hearings to limit public awareness of trials, restrict public scrutiny, and exert additional pressure on the defendants.

On April 1, “prosecutors” reportedly charged Imam Yusuf Ashirov with conducting “illegal missionary activity” for leading Friday prayers at the Yukhary-Jami Mosque in Alushta. Ashirov denied the charges, explaining to the “deputy prosecutor” that he preached only to other mosque members and that he had “no desire to break the law.” Ashirov stated he suspected the charges against him stemmed from authorities’ attempts to transfer the mosque to the “state.” Similarly, in March, a court in Simferopol reportedly fined Imam Rasim Dervishev for “illegal missionary activity” for leading services. Dervishev’s lawyer stated, “It is absurd to require anyone to ask permission to conduct religious rituals,” and he argued that Dervishev had not spoken to anyone outside the mosque about his religious belief. Dervishev paid a fine of between 5,000 and 30,000 rubles (\$67 and \$400). Reportedly, in April, Imam Dilyaver Khalilov faced similar charges for leading services at a mosque in Zavetnoye. Occupation authorities withdrew charges against Khalilov after the COVID-19 pandemic struck. In August, authorities seized Khalilov’s mosque, stating it was not registered as a mosque but rather as a sports complex. The Muslim community had repaired the dilapidated building and registered it as a mosque with the Ukrainian authorities in 2000.

According to the CHRГ, in September, occupation authorities charged members of four churches (Catholic, Baptist, and two evangelical) with “illegal missionary activity.”

Forum 18 reported that occupation authorities brought 20 cases against individuals and religious communities for failing to use the full legal name of a registered religious community on websites or meeting places, compared with 11 such cases the previous year. Sixteen of the cases involved fines of 30,000 rubles (\$400, one month’s average local wage), while three defendants received a warning. The remaining case was under review at year’s end. On November 20, a member of one of the fined religious communities told Forum 18, “The prosecutor told us we would get a warning, but when the case came to court, it was a different prosecutor, who demanded that we be fined. We didn’t expect this turn of events.”

According to Krymska Solidarnist and Forum 18, local authorities continued a ban on the Tablighi Jamaat Muslim missionary movement in Crimea under a 2009 ruling by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation. The movement is legal in Ukraine. A Russian labor camp relocated Tablighi Jamaat Muslim Renat Suleimanov from the camp’s punishment cell to its “strict section.” The camp administration stated he was being punished for a conflict with another prisoner, but Suleimanov’s lawyer stated the accusation was fabricated as an excuse to punish his client. In January 2019, a Simferopol court had jailed Suleimanov for four years on “extremism”-related charges for meeting openly in mosques with three friends to discuss their faith.

The Ministry of Justice of Russia said 907 religious organizations were registered in Crimea, including 108 in Sevastopol, as of year’s end, compared with 891 and 105, respectively, in 2019. The number of religious organizations had dropped by more than 1,000 since the occupation began in 2014, the last year for which Ukrainian government figures were available. Registered religious organizations included the two largest – the Christian Orthodox UOC-MP and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea – as well as various Protestant, Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Greek Catholic communities, among other religious groups.

Human rights groups reported Russian occupation authorities continued to require imams at Crimean Tatar mosques to inform them each time they transferred from one mosque to another.

The RCC reported it continued to operate in the territory as a pastoral district directly under the authority of the Vatican. Polish and Ukrainian RCC priests were permitted to stay in the territory for only 90 days at a time and required to leave Crimea for 90 days before returning.

UGCC leaders said they continued to have difficulty staffing their parishes because of the policies of occupation authorities and continued to have to operate as a part of the pastoral district of the RCC.

According to the OCU, Russian occupation authorities continued to place pressure on the OCU Crimean diocese in an effort to force it to leave Crimea. Only six of the 15 churches, identifying as OCU but required to reregister after the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) joined the unified OCU, were functioning in 2019-2020, compared with five in 2018 and eight in 2017. At year’s end, three of those were “on the verge of closure.” According to RFE/RL, Halya Coynash of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group stated the OCU was one of the few remaining symbols in Crimea of “Ukrainian identity,” making it a target for the local Russia-installed leaders. Describing Russia’s treatment of believers in Crimea, OCU Metropolitan Epiphaniy told RFE/RL, “This is reminiscent of the Stalin era of the U.S.S.R., when churches were destroyed.”

In March, Ukraine’s Cabinet of Ministers placed the Saints Volodymyr and Olha Cathedral, the only OCU church building in Simferopol and the location of the OCU diocesan administration, under state ownership in an attempt to draw international organizations’ support to help defend it from the occupiers. On July 23, Russian occupation authorities ordered Archbishop Klyment, elevated to Metropolitan on August 9, to demolish the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Yevpatoriya or face criminal prosecution. Klyment’s appeal of the order continued through year’s end.

According to Freedom House, the Russian FSB encouraged residents to inform on individuals who expressed opposition to the purported annexation, including support for Crimean Tatars, condemnation of the designation of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Hizb ut-Tahrir as extremist groups, or the oppression of the OCU.

Religious and human rights groups continued to report Russian media efforts to create suspicion and fear of certain religious groups, especially targeting Crimean Tatar Muslims, whom media repeatedly accused of having links to Islamist groups that were designated by Russia as terrorist groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir. Russian media also portrayed Jehovah’s Witnesses as “extremists.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to *Krym Realii*, on the eve of the 76th anniversary of the Soviet authorities’ forced deportation of the Crimean Tatar people from Crimea, unidentified vandals destroyed several tombstones in an Islamic cemetery in Vladyslavivka Village, Nyzhnyohirsk Region. Local police reportedly refused to investigate the incident, attributing it to a family dispute. According to the *Advet.org* news website, in April, on the eve of Ramadan, unidentified vandals threw rotten eggs at a mosque in Cheremysivka Village.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. government continued its efforts to focus international attention on the religious freedom-related abuses committed by Russia-led forces and occupation authorities in Crimea, especially on actions taken by those forces and authorities against Muslims and Christians, through public statements by the Secretary of State and other senior

officials, as well as messaging on social media. In a statement on February 26, the Secretary said, “Russian occupation authorities continue their assault on human rights and fundamental freedoms. Occupation authorities severely limit religious freedom, target religious believers with bogus terrorism charges, and seized the Orthodox Church of Ukraine cathedral in Simferopol. The United States calls on Russia to free all Ukrainians it has wrongfully imprisoned in retaliation for their peaceful dissent and to end Russian abuses of fundamental freedoms in Crimea.” U.S. government and embassy officials condemned the continuing intimidation of Crimean citizens. The Acting Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs participated in an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe side event on Crimea, stating, “Russian occupation authorities continue to harass, arrest, and prosecute activists, journalists, and members of civil society, simply for their expressing their opposition to the occupation or for being a member of an ethnic or religious minority group on the peninsula. They sustained a brutal campaign of repression against Crimean Tatars, ethnic Ukrainians, and members of other ethnic and religious minority groups in Crimea, raiding mosques, homes, and workplaces without justification or process and leaving these communities in a state of constant fear.”

Although embassy and other U.S. government officials remained unable to visit Crimea following the Russian occupation, embassy officials continued to meet in other parts of Ukraine with Muslim, Orthodox, and Protestant leaders from Crimea. The leaders discussed their concerns over actions taken against congregations by Russian occupation authorities and reassured the religious leaders of continued U.S. support for the right of all to practice their religious beliefs. In August, embassy officials met with Metropolitan Klyment and discussed pressures on his church in Crimea. Embassy officials told religious leaders the United States would continue to support religious freedom in Crimea and would press Russian occupation authorities to return confiscated property and release prisoners incarcerated for their religious or political beliefs.

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