

THE IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION ON FAITH-BASED COMMUNITIES IN UKRAINE

Summary of the 2023 IRF research

Background 2014-2021

Since the first months of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2014, faith-based communities of various denominations have fully experienced the brutality and ruthlessness of Russia's repressive policy in the occupied territories of Crimea and the Donbas region. Russian troops and Russian-backed separatists have targeted religious leaders and individual believers of most faiths, except the Orthodox parishes affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate. Representatives of religious minorities were arbitrarily arrested, threatened, beaten, illegally imprisoned, tortured, and some were deliberately killed.

The repressive policy in the self-proclaimed "people's republics," in those parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions controlled by Russia, was aimed at strengthening the Russian regime and preventing resistance. The occupying authorities have eradicated dissent and all manifestations of Ukrainian identity, brutally persecuted pro-Ukrainian movements and any form of opposition, and introduced full control over the civilian population, similar to the situation in Russia itself.

One of the tools to repress Ukrainian religious communities in the Donbas region was the introduction of Russian legislation, which was entirely copied. Believers have faced demands from the occupying authorities for mandatory re-registration, acceptance of Russian citizenship, submission of lists of members of religious communities, etc.

However, even fulfillment of all these requirements did not guarantee re-registration under Russian law. After all, the real goal of the occupation authorities was to encourage religious communities and their leaders to collaborate and support the Russian regime. Disloyal religious leaders and denominations were persecuted through arbitrary accusations of spying for Ukrainian or Western intelligence services, sectarianism, extremism, or illegal missionary activities.

The evangelical churches (Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, etc.), as well as the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, suffered particularly from Russian repression. In addition, the occupying authorities have declared the faithful of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses to be "enemies of the people" and "extremists." Religious communities on the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, occupied by Russia since 2014, have also been subjected to targeted repression. In particular, many representatives of Muslim communities of pro-Ukrainian Crimean Tatars and Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to long prison terms on trumped-up extremism charges.

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS AND SACRED PLACES

damaged by shelling or looting because of Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine



Full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine

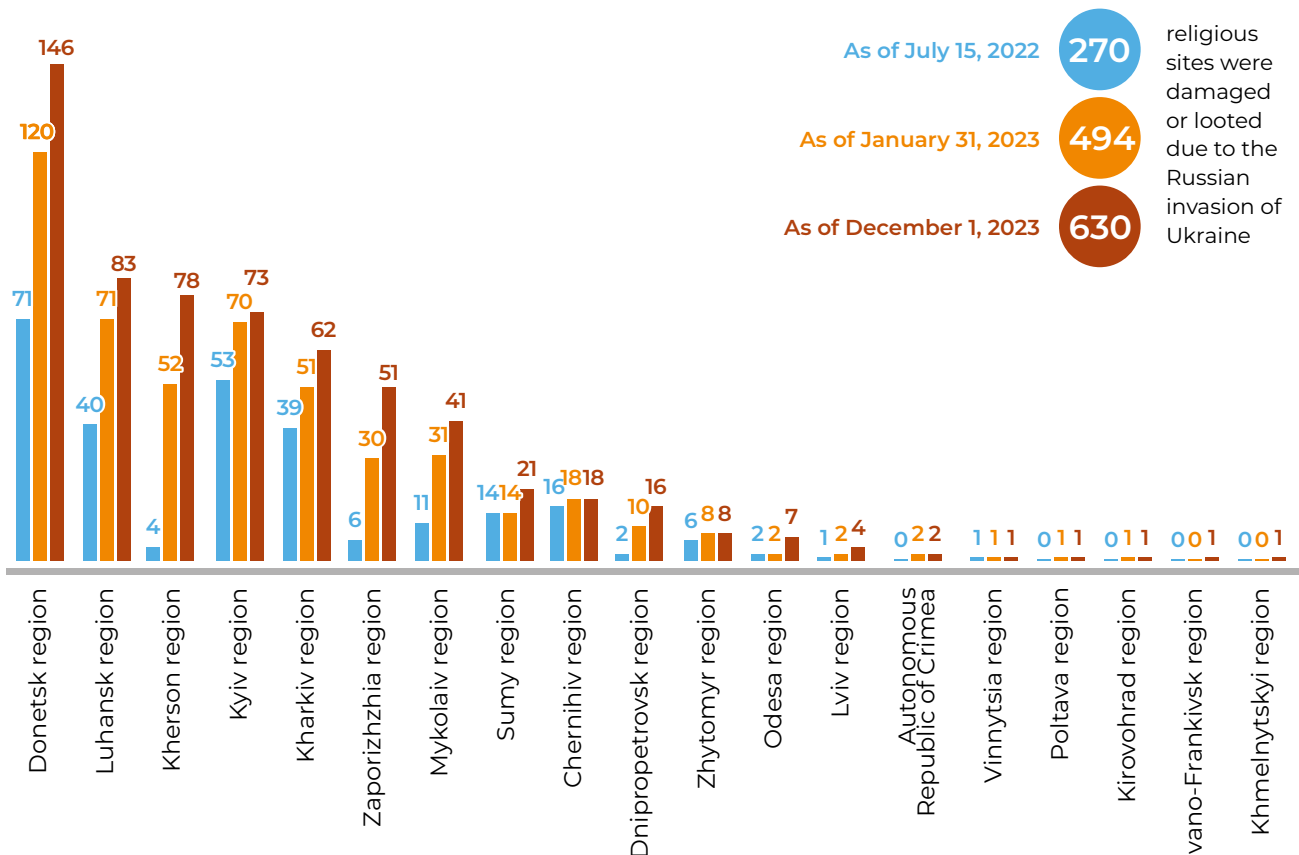
Previously, the Kremlin tried to disguise its direct military intervention in the events in the Donbas region from the international community. However, since February 24, 2022, President Vladimir Putin's desire to completely conquer Ukraine and destroy Ukrainian statehood, national identity, culture, history, language, and religious pluralism became apparent. Hiding behind the slogans of protecting the Russian language, "denazification," and "desatanization" of Ukraine, the Kremlin was actually implementing the ideology of the "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World). As interpreted by Russian propagandists, this ideology meant the physical destruction (genocide) of the Ukrainian people as a nation, the elimination of any mention of their cultural heritage, the overthrow of the Ukrainian government, and the disappearance of the Ukrainian state. For the sake of Putin's imperial ambitions, Russian soldiers continue to die on Ukrainian land.

During the 21 months of the full-scale invasion, Russian troops have wholly destroyed or damaged at least 630 religious facilities in Ukraine. Most were damaged by Russian missiles, kamikaze drones, and artillery, including targeted attacks on civilian objects. In addition, some places of worship have been deliberately looted by the Russian military, closed, or converted by the occupation authorities into administrative buildings.

The Institute for Religious Freedom has also documented numerous cases of seizure of places of worship by the Russian military, which used them as military bases or as cover for their firing positions. This tactic of the Russian army resulted in an increase of destruction of religious sites in Ukraine.

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS AND SACRED PLACES

damaged by shelling or looting because of Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine

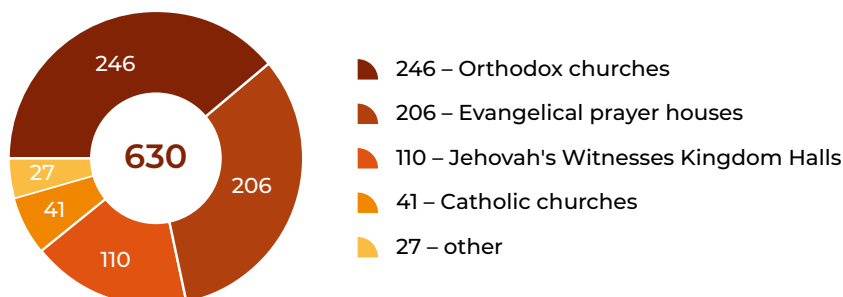


Most churches, prayer houses, synagogues, and mosques were destroyed in Donetsk region (at least 146), Luhansk region (at least 83), and Kherson region (at least 78). The destruction in Kyiv region was also enormous (73) when Russian troops attempted to capture the capital of Ukraine in February-March 2022. Due to the ongoing hostilities, the number of destroyed buildings is increasing in Kharkiv region (at least 62), Zaporizhzhia region (at least 51), and Mykolaiv region (at least 41).

In 2023, the scale of destruction of religious buildings in the southern regions of Ukraine increased significantly compared to 2022. Besides, a number of churches were flooded as a result of the June 6 blasting of the Kakhovka hydroelectric dam by Russian troops, which is a separate war crime and potentially an act of ecocide. In addition, Russia continues to fire missiles and kamikaze drones at civilian infrastructure in almost all regions of Ukraine, affecting religious sites even in the remote western regions of the country.

GENERALIZED DATA ON THE DENOMINATIONS OF UKRAINE

that suffered the most from the destruction of religious sites



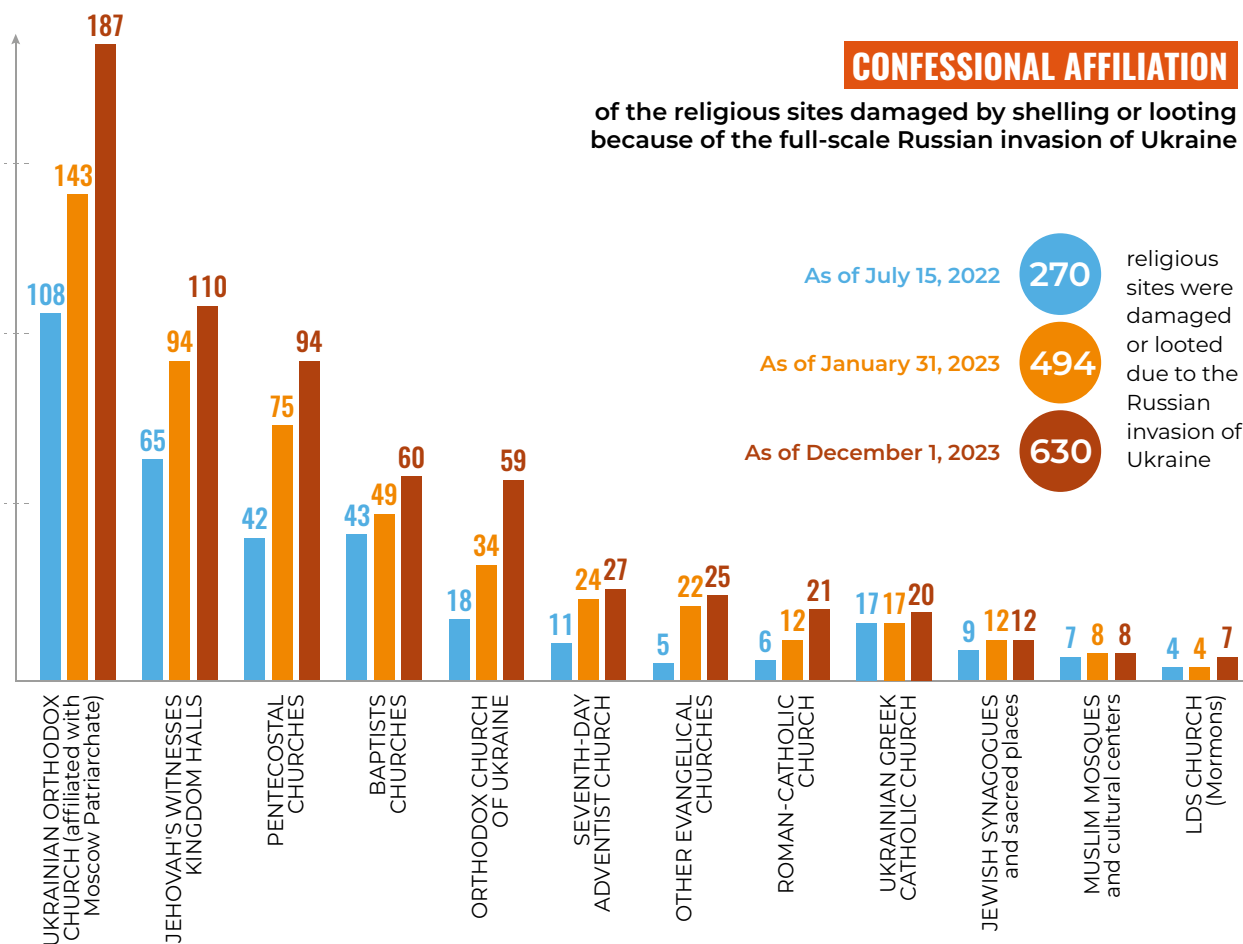
On a confessional basis, Orthodox churches suffered most damage from Russian aggression – at least 246 in total. Of these, the churches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate) suffered the most – at least 187. Also, 59 churches of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine were destroyed.

The destruction of evangelical churches is also extensive – at least 206 in total. Among them, the Pentecostal (94), Baptist (60), and Seventh-day Adventist Church (27) prayer houses suffered the most.

The Halls of the Kingdom of Jehovah’s Witnesses suffered considerable damage: a total of 110 religious buildings, including 12 completely destroyed, 20 heavily damaged, and 78 slightly damaged. Among them, 32 religious buildings were seized by the Russian military or occupation authorities.

CONFESSATIONAL AFFILIATION

of the religious sites damaged by shelling or looting because of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONSE

1. To condemn publicly the Russian World ideology and the position of the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, as well as other Russian religious associations and leaders who participate in Russian aggression and justify it, promote hatred and genocide of the people of Ukraine.
2. To create a Special Tribunal for the Punishment of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine.
3. To support the efforts of Ukraine to investigate Russian war crimes and to prosecute all war criminals.
4. To introduce personal sanctions against Russian officials, religious leaders, media workers, and other individuals responsible for justifying and (or) implementing repressions against Ukrainian religious leaders and faith-based communities on the Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia.
5. To designate the Russian Federation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism.

VIDEO TESTIMONIES OF RUSSIAN WAR CRIMES IN UKRAINE

Watch all video
testimonies:
[https://bit.ly/2022-IRF-
video-testimonies](https://bit.ly/2022-IRF-video-testimonies)



Priest Vasyl Vyrozub

«During 70 days of captivity, I lost over 15 kg (33 lb). Russians have learned to torture. But they had not learned to build and create.»

<https://youtu.be/hAW97dKedCs>



Pastor Dmitry Bodyu

«The Russian military seized our church building. I was imprisoned and told that I would soon be killed. For local evangelical believers under Russian occupation, a deadly threat remains.»

<https://youtu.be/XhgLwc2mla0>



Imam Rustem Asanov:

«Russians hate us. They have only one goal – the destruction of the Ukrainian nation as a whole. If they hear the Ukrainian language or see the Ukrainian flag, it tears them apart from the inside.»

<https://youtu.be/SPBeKYh9dM4>



Rabbi Moshe Azman:

“No one asked Russians to come in Ukraine to “denazify” someone, but they came and shot peaceful citizens of Russian-speaking cities of Kharkiv, Mariupol, and Kyiv region.”

<https://youtu.be/F5-Tsr20YkA>

About authors and methodology

The Institute for Religious Freedom (IRF) is a human rights NGO, founded in 2001 in Kyiv, Ukraine. Our goal is to protect and promote religious freedom and other related human rights, facilitate inter-faith dialogue and church-state cooperation, strengthen democratic foundations and civil society in Ukraine. For this research, IRF conducted a written questionnaire and an oral survey of representatives of most churches and religious associations in Ukraine, as well as recorded video testimonies and documented specific Russian war crimes against religious leaders and faith-based communities.

Author of the Summary: **Dr. Maksym Vasin** (IRF)
Copyeditor: **Jitske Hoogenboom** (PAX)

Project manager: **Oleksandr Zaiets** (IRF)
Designer: **Anna Bukovska**

The 2023 IRF
research was
supported by



Read the full
text of the
IRF's research

