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Discouraged Yet Praying for a Peaceful Future: Protestants in Separatist Eastern Ukraine

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Many individuals were interviewed for this article in recent months, but in order to protect their safety—as well as that of those around them—no names have been included.

Since war with Russia began in 2014, there has been a huge flow of people out of the occupied parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk [Russian: Lugansk] regions in eastern Ukraine. These territories also have seen a dramatic decrease in the number of Protestant Evangelicals, both churches and individual believers. In the occupied part of Luhansk region, the number of churches in the Evangelical Christian-Baptist Union has dropped from 50 to 22. The number of members in those churches has fallen from 2,500 to 1,200, with a continued fall expected. Lacking exact statistics for the occupied Donetsk

church had its building confiscated by the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic in August 2014. The church now appears to have left Donetsk completely and relocated to Kyiv.²

Included in these numbers is the loss of large numbers of pastors, church leaders, and preachers. Those in congregations left behind often have joined together under one or more of the remaining leaders. Many young people—including young families—have left the occupied regions as well, meaning that there is little hope for the next generation of Evangelical pastors and ministers. Those pastors and active ministers who remain



(Left to right) Sheltering underground in Donetsk, 2015 (OLIVER CARROLL); Directions to a shelter (red) over “I love you” graffiti (blue), Donetsk, 2016 (VARVARA PAKHOMENKO); Old people’s home in Artemovsk supported by Way of Light humanitarian organization (Source: www.svetlyput.ru)

region, one pastor suggested that large Baptist churches of 800-1,000 are now 100-150 people, while smaller churches that were formerly 200 strong now have just 30 people.

Similarly, the Ukrainian Pentecostal Church has estimated that the number of its churches in occupied Ukraine (also including Crimea) has decreased by 20 percent, and the number of individual believers by more than 60 percent.¹ In Donetsk city, the large and influential Word of Life Charismatic

feel a heavy burden, both spiritually and physically, to minister to their congregations and to the many people in tremendous need.

The outflow of people continues to this day, as some Evangelical churches have been reduced to “two to three older people, generally women.” The drop in the number of Evangelical believers is therefore significant, and is felt throughout the separatist areas in eastern Ukraine.

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Church re-registration

The registration documents that were issued to religious organizations by the independent Ukrainian authorities prior to March 2014 are no longer valid, and all Protestant Evangelical churches have been asked to re-register with the authorities of the breakaway Donetsk People's Republic or Luhansk People's Republic. In the latter case—despite working with lawyers and preparing many documents—no Evangelical church has been able to register successfully over the past seven years. As one minister lamented, “We try to obey their laws, but up to this point, nothing we have tried has worked to receive registration. In point of fact, we have become illegal.”

Also in Luhansk, police often come to Evangelical church buildings—none of which are registered—and very respectfully ask believers not to break the law by meeting there. Instead, the people are encouraged to meet in private homes and apartments. The police themselves explain that they are just following orders from above.

Maksym Vasin, director of the Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom, believes that the authorities of the Luhansk People's Republic have more sinister intentions by forcing Evangelical churches to go through re-registration. He “suspects that the information gathered about Evangelical communities and their members may be used for further persecution.”³

October 2021 is the final deadline for Evangelical churches to re-register in the Luhansk People's Republic. If a church is not re-registered by then, all of the church's property—including the building—will be considered “ownerless” and nationalized.

everyone has arrived, out of fear that someone might come and force them to stop worship. Much depends upon relations with—and the attitude of—local officials.

There has been less government pressure on churches in the separatist Donetsk People's Republic over the past two to three years. Yet the rules Evangelical churches must follow there are still stricter by far than in independent Ukraine.

Soviet-style persecution

When fighting began in 2014, soldiers acted very aggressively towards Evangelical churches and believers. They declared that only the Russian Orthodox Church belonged, and that no other religion had the right to exist in the occupied territories. Some church buildings were taken at that time, but—after many difficulties—these buildings were often returned. However, the Evangelical Donetsk Christian University was taken for use as a barracks for rebel soldiers and has never been returned. Active persecution of believers took place, involving threats to life and health, as well as cases of torture and murder.⁴ Many Evangelical believers in Donetsk city lived—and still live—in fear of soldiers.

During the first two years of the war, police often visited Sunday church services and issued fines for illegal activity. Many Evangelical believers stopped coming to church services since they could not pay such large fines.

Thus, although many Evangelical churches are still meeting regularly, freedoms that were protected until March 2014 may now be taken away. Some church ministers have been prevented from entering the Donetsk People's Republic without explanation, for example. Other ministers were forced to move out of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, or fined



Before the war: June 2013 graduates of Donetsk Christian University; December 2013 gathering at Donetsk Christian University (Source: DONETSK CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY)

In the breakaway Donetsk People's Republic, by contrast, many churches have been able to re-register with the new authorities successfully, and these churches are allowed to meet freely. Yet there are still a number of churches in the region that have not been able to re-register. These unregistered churches may be considered “extremist organizations,” and they have faced direct government opposition in recent years.

There have been cases in which typically unregistered churches have had their gas, electricity, and water turned off by the local authorities. Many churches are only able to hold services by using a gas-run electric generator. Sometimes when services are held, the people decide to lock the door after

for holding services there. It is important to be careful about what is said over the telephone, on the Internet—including on social media, and even in face-to-face conversations. It is especially important to avoid talking about protest or politics if you wish to avoid an invitation to the prosecutor's office!

There are limits on ministries, evangelism, and preaching the Gospel outside the walls of a church. To speak openly of one's faith in Christ at work, for example, is not allowed. Children's ministry is forbidden. Christian literature cannot be distributed.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are already forbidden by law in the Luhansk People's Republic (as they are in Russia), and

it looks as if Evangelical churches may be forbidden in the same way soon. However, this may prove to be an academic distinction. As one Evangelical minister comments, “from a legal standpoint we have the right to be registered and to conduct services, but in real life, it’s not possible.”

On 26 July 2018 the state security ministry of the Luhansk People’s Republic declared the Evangelical Christian-Baptist Union an “extremist organization” and forbade it from further operation on its territory. Although this declaration does not carry legal weight—legally, only a judge can make such a decision—all Evangelical Christian-Baptist Union pastors in the occupied Luhansk region feel the threat of being guilty of working with an “extremist organization.”

One minister described the overall atmosphere as the “return of the spirit of the Soviet period. This can be seen and felt everywhere—in advertisements, songs, news, etc. Since the war started, a curfew has been imposed at night as well.”

Outside support

Beginning in 2014, ministers from Russian Evangelical churches visited the occupied territory with material help from their congregations. Specifically, believers from the Evangelical Christian-Baptist Union of Rostov-on-Don region greatly

Roman Lunkin, head of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow:

“The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has undoubtedly divided the two countries and this has also affected the Protestant world. The number of contacts between churches has drastically reduced, and it has become much more difficult even to cross the border between the two states. Initially, the events of 2014 also produced a political schism: Many pastors and believers in Russia felt patriotic and supported Putin’s policy towards Ukraine. For Ukrainians, this meant that their fellow believers were supporting aggression and war. The majority of Russian pastors did not express an opinion, as they understood that any viewpoint would strike a nerve. The silence by pastors in Russia was also condemned in Ukraine as tacit support for Putin, although this was far from always the case.

“At the present time the acute phase of the conflict between pastors is over. Everyone has become used to confrontation between politicians. Moreover, it has become evident neither side is ideal, and pastors in Ukraine have in part behaved aggressively towards Russians. The tragic situation in Donbass [southeastern Ukraine] has become a field of co-operation between churches in Ukraine and Russia, both publicly and informally. One way or another, Orthodox, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Adventists have helped the local residents survive the difficult conditions of the armed conflict. They have transported—and continue to transport—humanitarian aid into the region. While some Ukrainians condemn the work of Russian churches in Donbass as indirect aid to the separatists, others approve of it.”

aided many churches in the occupied regions, including by offering food to those in need. Pastors, ministers, and groups of believers all visited. In addition, there was much aid from Russian individuals and volunteers.

This support made a great difference. Unfortunately, with the coming of COVID-19 and the consequent quarantines that have been imposed, no one from the Russian churches has been able to come and offer further aid to Evangelical churches in the occupied territories for quite some time.

In February 2021 some Russian Pentecostal churches were able finally to send aid, for the first time in over a year. Way of Light—a Russian humanitarian foundation—has continued to provide support to Evangelical churches in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions since March 2015.⁵

Some aid has come from Evangelical Christians on the Ukrainian side of the conflict as well. Ukrainian brothers and sisters have also distributed food and other needed products. However, this help became more difficult to provide once official passes were required to cross through checkpoints at the front lines of the conflict, since humanitarian aid to the occupied territories is forbidden by the Ukrainian authorities.

Evangelical churches in the occupied parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions now have little connection with churches in independent Ukraine, and their connection with Russian churches has ended as well, since Russians cannot visit due to COVID restrictions. Evangelicals in the separatist areas still have the ability to leave through Russia and to travel into independent Ukraine from there, however.

Day-to-day challenges

Most people with possibilities to leave the separatist areas have already done so. Those who have stayed include people with government-paid positions in education, hospitals, and so on, as well as retirees dependent upon government pensions.

There is almost no work available except for fighting as a soldier for the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. The factories are closed, and many businesses also do not function. Those that are still working tend to offer low salaries, and many people are not paid on time. Both the war and sanctions by Ukraine are depressing the economy, and it is difficult to buy or sell wares. A passport from either the Donetsk or Luhansk People’s Republics is required in order to work at a company in the occupied territories, and many people do not want to give up their Ukrainian passport in order to get one.

Many who are eligible for a government pension try to receive it from both the Ukrainian and rebel authorities—that makes it more possible to live. There is no insurance of any kind, not even for cars. In case of an accident, one has to figure out what to do on one’s own. No one has the right to speak up against the government in order to make a complaint.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a significant problem in the occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, just as in the rest of the world. However, it is very difficult to get tested for the virus, and medicines are generally in short supply and

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Eastern Ukraine *(continued from page 3)*

very expensive. Some vaccinations from Russia have been made available. Pandemic restrictions mean that it is now extremely difficult to travel regularly into and out of the occupied regions. This has cut people off from family, friends, and business opportunities. It is easy to believe that occupied Donetsk and Luhansk are cut off and forgotten by the outside world.

All these economic and social problems are hurting local Evangelical churches as well. Not only has it become difficult for them to receive and pass on humanitarian aid, there are also very few people left with resources to help support the church and those in need. Since many church members are older, economic and health problems are felt especially keenly. Being cut off from churches in Ukraine and Russia also hurts the Evangelical church spiritually and socially.

Discouragement in ministry

Over the past seven years, both the enthusiasm for and the results from ministry have waned in separatist eastern Ukraine. Especially in the early years, there were many serious and immediate humanitarian needs. People had no work and needed food, for example, while hospitals needed various kinds of help, from medicine to food. Although there were rules against it, Evangelical churches were able to help many of those in need. As a result, many people became interested in the Gospel and started attending churches.

Now, people are afraid to share the Gospel, and so Evangelical churches have stopped growing. Most social ministry of Evangelicals to meet humanitarian needs came to an end around 2016. The small amount of social ministry that does continue sees very little spiritual fruit. As one minister put it, “The Apostle Peter preached and 5,000 repented. Today, 5,000 preach and only one repents.” Everyone in ministry seems discouraged, both by the laws against it and by the diminishing results. Consequently, ever fewer people are actively involved in ministry outside of their church buildings. A few baptisms do continue, however.

Before the war, there used to be more local cooperation and relationships between different Evangelical denominations. Those connections are now gone: the Baptists meet together as one denominational group, while the Pentecostals meet separately.

The sadness and discouragement that ministers in the occupied territories are feeling are palpable. Yet many of these ministers carry on, remembering God’s faithfulness under similar circumstances in Soviet times.

Prayers requested

Above all, everyone prays for peace. Evangelicals in separatist eastern Ukraine would love to see all the checkpoints removed and freedom of religion restored. All of the restrictions on people’s lives have been added artificially, and could be removed easily if the authorities chose.

Another area for prayer is the restoration of connections between Evangelicals in the occupied regions and churches in independent Ukraine and Russia. The support that churches

Pastor Vladimir Rybant of Word of Life Pentecostal Church in Belgorod, a southern Russian city located 25 miles from the Ukrainian border:

“In the wake of Maidan [the 2013-14 pro-democracy demonstrations in central Kyiv which led to the collapse of President Yanukovich’s pro-Putin regime and the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia], relations between pastors [in the two countries] changed, of course. Initially there were heated arguments on Facebook, but then everyone calmed down and agreed to disagree. More recently the borders have been closed due to coronavirus, and contacts with Ukraine have virtually ceased. There were contacts and meetings prior to that, but pastors tried to avoid controversial issues. The problem is that most Russian pastors support our government’s policy towards Ukraine and condemn Maidan. There are only a few pastors with democratic convictions who condemn hostile actions against Ukraine. I am among them, so I have no problems communicating with our Ukrainian brethren.”

there were able to provide before the pandemic was significant, and it is needed again. It is a positive sign that some Russian Pentecostal believers were able to resume aid in early 2021.

Ministers and pastors in the occupied territories especially need prayers for wisdom and strength as they face significant physical and spiritual burdens in supporting their congregations and helping those in need. Furthermore, there is a great need for prayer for the next generation in Donetsk and Luhansk. Who will lead churches, share the Gospel, and minister to people’s needs in the years to come? ♦

Notes:

¹ [In Ukrainian] Anatolii Yakobchuk, “V okupovanomu Krymu ta Donbasi pohrishuiet’sia stanovishche viruiuchikh,” *Slovo pro Slovo*, 2 July 2021, <https://slovoproslovo.info/v-okupovanomu-krymu-ta-donbasi-pohrshuetsya-stanovysche-viruyuchykh/>.

² “Representatives of the DNR (Donetsk National Republic) took the building of the ‘Word of Life’ church in Donetsk,” 14 August 2014, <http://wolua.org/en/church-life/predstaviteli-dnr-zabrali-zdanie-tserkvi-slovo-zhizni-v-donetske.html>; [In Ukrainian] “Bohosluzhinnia v m. Kyievi prokhodiat’ za adresoiu,” <http://wolua.org/ua/announcements/meeting-in-kiev.html>.

³ Halya Coynash, “Russian controlled ‘Luhansk republic’ bans all Protestant churches,” *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, 17 October 2018, <https://khp.org/en/1539727352>.

⁴ Yakobchuk, op. cit.

⁵ [In Russian] “Prodolzhaem pomoshch’ nuzhdaiushchimsia na Donbasse! Itogi proekta #Dobropensia,” 30 December 2020, <https://www.cef.ru/infoblock/greetings/letter/article/1470175>. Way of Light’s website may be found at: www.svetlyput.ru/.

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Examples of ongoing assistance provided by Way of Light humanitarian organization: Bethesda Soup Kitchen in Luhansk city and a medicine delivery to a wheelchair user in Alchevsk. (Source: www.svetlyput.ru)

“I saw everything change before my eyes”: An Interview with Irina Sibagatova

Sloviansk [Russian: Slaviansk], a city with more than 100,000 residents, lies in the part of Donetsk Region currently under Ukrainian government control. However, the front line of the ongoing military conflict is only 50 miles away. Visiting the city in late 2018, the editor of the East-West Church Report was shown a center for displaced people set up by a large local Pentecostal congregation, Good News Church. [For an interview with Pastor Petr Dudnik about how this church fared during several months in 2014 when Sloviansk was controlled by separatist forces, see the East-West Church Report, vol. 27, no. 2 (2019), 6-11.]

At Good News’ Center for Displaced People, its director Dmitry Nazarenko—another of the church’s pastors—described how the building had previously housed the church’s rehabilitation center for people with drug and/or alcohol addictions. When fighting reached Sloviansk, those in the building were evacuated. Once the congregation was able to resume its previous activity, its members renovated the building as a refuge for up to 70 displaced people and reopened it in January 2015.

One such person displaced by the conflict, Irina Sibagatova is now administrator of the Center. An Evangelical originally from Makiivka [Russian: Makeyevka], a town near Donetsk city, she briefly described to the editor her experience fleeing hostilities. The original conversation took place in Russian.

How did you come to be here?

We left after the war began in 2014. To begin with we thought our situation might be like Slaviansk, which was occupied [by separatists] for two months but then liberated. So at first we stayed where we were. But the children were due to go back to school on 1st September, and there was still shooting and bombing in August. I brought them away so they could go to school. We left still expecting to return home in a few months—but it went on and on and on, so we stayed here. I will not return for the time being—there are no prospects there, as it [the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic] is not recognized, and it is not safe. But it is safe here.

Volunteers helped us. First we were taken to Kurakovka [Ukrainian: Kurakhivka] and then volunteers from Dobropole [Ukrainian: Dobropillia] met us and took us by car to Sviatogorsk [Ukrainian: Sviatohirsk], where Good News had a camp for refugees. We stayed there for five days.

One of the volunteers there was Sergei Kosyak, a pastor from Donetsk who had been held captive [by the separatists]. After he was freed, he opened up a camp for displaced people at *Beriozka*, a children’s summer camp near Lyman [another settlement in Donetsk Region under Ukrainian government

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**Irina Sibagatova and
Pastor Dmitry Nazarenko
(G.FAGAN)**

Sibatova Interview *(continued from page 5)*

control]. There were 70 of us there—mostly mothers with children. We stayed there in the woods for three months. Then this center for displaced people opened up here, and we were invited to come to help organize it. We began to receive people who had been evacuated from Debaltseve and Donetsk city.

Apart from shelter, what kind of needs did you have when you left?

When we lived in the woods it was complicated, as everyone only had their summer things—people left thinking it would be just for a couple of months. We did receive medicine, and doctors visited us—mostly volunteers took care of us, not the state. We left in August and the [Ukrainian] state only started to register displaced people and issue support payments in October. We parents sent our children to school and didn't know what to do next. As the situation dragged on, we began to understand that we needed to find work. Now, those in Ukraine [i.e. people who have fled the separatist-controlled areas] mostly live like locals.

Before the war, how did you relate to the fact that you are a citizen of Ukraine?

I just lived without thinking about it before the war. Then I saw everything change before my eyes. At first they turned off the Ukrainian TV channels. Then they introduced [separatist] militia channels. They began to broadcast many Soviet films from the Second World War and patriotic Soviet war songs like, “Arise, great country! Arise for a fight to the death!” [Russian: “*Vstavai strana ogromnoe!*”] [Editor's note: Accompanied by this song, a short montage of Second World War and recent footage produced by the Ministry of Information of the Donetsk People's Republic may be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63sAVcf2klc>.] They put up banners in the streets saying, “We will defend this land from the fascists.” This was clearly propaganda—everyone had been living in Ukraine and no one had ever seen these “fascists” face to face. But this information had a very powerful effect upon people's consciousness.



Separatist barricade in Kramatorsk, approximately 10 miles south of Sloviansk, in April-May 2014. The bright red slogan reads, “FASCISM SHALL NOT PASS!” (OLIVER CARROLL)



Good News' Center for Displaced People, Sloviansk (G. FAGAN)

Does that depend upon a person's age?

No, it depends upon whether you watch the TV or not. It affects even people with higher education. Once I had come here to Sloviansk, a neighbor—a schoolteacher—telephoned me: “Ira, is it really true that everything is okay where you are? Is it really safe?” I said, “Don't be silly, it is ordinary Ukraine here, just as it used to be in Makiivka. There aren't any fascists.”

Why do you think you resisted this propaganda when you encountered it?

I just couldn't watch it. Perhaps because I was also reading the Bible. Then you draw parallels; you understand the technology of how it is all done.

Do you mean that you were in the habit of comparing things?

Of thinking critically, probably. I am not sure, because I knew one very educated woman there, an Orthodox believer, who believed everything—that there were fascists here. Some people take it in, and it shapes their worldview.

Some local people there support the [separatist] authorities. Others have not left because they have homes and jobs there, or because their mother is sick, for example. Also, it is frightening to move to a place you do not know. Not everyone is in enough despair to enter a void.

What happened to your congregation near Donetsk?

Divisions began due to the war. We had some people who even went to demonstrations calling upon people to join the [separatist] militia. Several people wrote regular reports to the MGB [separatist secret police, analogous to the Soviet KGB] about everything going on inside the church. The situation became very complicated. You didn't know who was on whose side. When it all began, our pastor was arrested and told to leave if he wanted to live. He and his family were able to leave, but he cannot travel back there now.

Does your former church have its own building?

Yes. It functions; people meet; it passed re-registration. In Donetsk Region the situation for churches is not like it is in Luhansk. There, it is like walking through a minefield.

But the question is, will this last or not? Everything there is unstable and unclear. On the outside everything looks the same, but inside it feels as if you are under a kind of dome. When you are there, you breathe in, brace yourself, and await the moment you leave. When you come out, you breathe a sigh of relief. ♦

Separatist-Controlled Eastern Ukraine and Religious Freedom: A Primer

GERALDINE FAGAN

In the areas of Ukraine under separatist control since early 2014, religious minorities face harsh restrictions. To the south, the Crimean peninsula falls directly under Russian jurisdiction, and thus the strict requirements of the so-called Yarovaya legislation of 2016, which punishes the unauthorized sharing of religious ideas.¹ In March 2021, for example, Crimean Baptists were fined for keeping books and brochures in their church that were not marked with the name of their religious organization. This literature was destroyed.²

Yet believers in Crimea have one—at least theoretical—advantage over those in the breakaway parts of eastern Ukraine, Maksym Vasin of the Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom tells the *East-West Church Report*: “Russia *de facto* controls these territories, but has not taken any legal responsibility for them. In Crimea, Russia took on this responsibility—if illegally—and believers can appeal to the European Court of Human Rights or the United Nations. But in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine, no one is responsible for human rights.”³

Indeed, over the past seven years the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk [Russian: Lugansk] People’s Republics in eastern Ukraine have adopted their own legislation on religious activity. Initially, this overtly privileged Orthodox Christianity of the Moscow Patriarchate. This faith, the 2014 Constitution of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) declared, was “primary and prevailing,” repeating legal terminology from the late Russian Empire, when apostasy from Orthodoxy was treated as a criminal offense.⁴ In its early days, the DPR also boasted a Russian Orthodox Army, with its own cross-emblazoned banner and rap anthem.⁵ Yet even in the Army’s promotional material, its soldiers professed almost no religious dogma.⁶ The more Sovietized eastern parts of Ukraine are characterized, after all, by a large discrepancy between declared allegiance to, and involvement in, the Orthodox Church. In polling prior to the 2014 conflict, 72 percent in Ukraine’s five easternmost regions (including Donetsk and Luhansk) described themselves as Orthodox, whereas only 17 percent said they attended worship weekly. This is half the rate of church attendance polled in the seven westernmost regions of Ukraine.⁷

Religion laws

The focus of subsequent separatist legislation on religion has shifted away from explicit preference for the Moscow Patriarchate. Both the current constitutions of the DPR and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) claim that religious associations are “separate from the state and equal before the law,” and that no faith may become the state religion or compulsory.⁸ In practice, however, this pledge is undermined by the unrecognized entities’ own laws on freedom of conscience and religious associations.

Adopted in June 2016, the DPR’s law contains echoes of Russian legislation. Congregations registered



Guests at the funeral of Luhansk separatist commander Aleksei Mozgovoi, Alchevsk, May 2015 (OLIVER CARROLL)

with the authorities and so holding full legal personality status are termed “religious organizations.” As an alternative to registration, communities are permitted a limited existence conducting religious rites and teaching their current followers, but such “religious groups” must still notify officials of their activity.⁹ According to the same law, congregations wishing to retain full legal status as “religious organizations” had to re-register by 1 March 2019 or else were banned.¹⁰ Unlike

Russian legislation, the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese was recognized separately, and a special process created for its legalization.¹¹

Adopted in February 2018, the LPR’s religion law is significantly more restrictive. Thirty members—rather than the DPR’s ten—are required to form a local religious organization, and there is no provision for an informal religious group: all must register with the authorities.¹² Not only does the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese have its own, separate recognition procedure, but only Orthodox communities affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate are permitted to register.¹³ The re-registration deadline was extended by two months to 15 October 2018, following which any congregations failing to have passed were “considered to have ceased their activity.”¹⁴

Re-registration outcomes

Details of precisely which religious communities have successfully re-registered have not been made public.

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Religious Freedom *(continued from page 7)*

The DPR's Culture Ministry—which handles the registration process—has stated only that during 2019 it accepted 61 religious organizations' applications while rejecting 31, and lodged 39 religious groups' notifications of existence while rejecting 28. At the same time, it accepted 254 annual notifications of continuing activity from entities of the Moscow Patriarchate.¹⁵ In a similar report for 2020, the Ministry noted that it had received 28 applications for registration from religious organizations and/or religious groups' notifications of existence, but did not specify the outcomes.¹⁶

In the LPR, re-registration lies within the purview of the Department for the Affairs of Religious Organizations and Spirituality within the Ministry for Culture, Sport, and Youth. In December 2019 the Ministry claimed that 188 of 195 registered religious organizations belonged to the Moscow Patriarchate, with the remainder being Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Old Believer.¹⁷ Yet the structure of the Ministry's website allows only for Orthodox, Muslim, and Jewish organizations, which are also the only ones in schedules of routine inspections spanning a year from September 2020.¹⁸

Numerous congregations have certainly lost legal status. Just six weeks before the LPR's adoption of the 2018 law, its chief religious affairs official announced that there were 346 religious organizations on the territory belonging to 11 different faiths and/or denominations, including approximately 197 Orthodox churches.¹⁹ Six months later, the Expert Commission for Conducting State Religious Expertise attached to the LPR's Ministry for Culture, Sport, and Youth announced that it had considered 230 religious organization applications, of which 173 were successful.²⁰



Maksym Vasin of the Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom (G. FAGAN)

John's Gospel "extremist"

Following the established Russian model, both self-proclaimed republics have also banned items of religious literature deemed "extremist." The DPR's list includes six books by Pastor Aleksei Ledyayev of the Latvia-based New Generation Charismatic Church, three texts published by a local Muslim organization, and 11 Jehovah's Witness texts, as well as the Jehovah's Witness website.²¹ In September 2018 the DPR also banned the Jehovah's Witnesses' organization as "extremist."²²

The LPR's list of banned "extremist" literature similarly contains six Jehovah's Witness titles. It also features two items identified as circulated by the Ukrainian Evangelical Christian-Baptist Union: the magazine *Evangel'skaia Niva* [Russian: *Gospel Field*] and *Hitler's Cross: The Revealing Story of How the Cross of Christ Was Used as a Symbol of the Nazi Agenda* by U.S. Protestant pastor Erwin Lutzer.

A short video posted in July 2018 on the website of the LPR's Ministry of State Security [Russian acronym MGB, analogous to the KGB] shows the raid on a Baptist Union congregation in Luhansk city that uncovered these two items. In the video, worship by approximately 20 adults is halted by a man wearing a balaclava, who demands documents and to know on what basis the meeting is being held. "On the basis of faith in Jesus Christ," the visibly shaken young pastor replies.²³

The LPR's list of "extremist" literature also contains 12 titles published by the local branch of the International Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptist Churches. The IUECBC broke with the main Evangelical Christian-Baptist Union in the 1960s over how to respond to new Soviet restrictions and continues to refuse onerous registration requirements. Remarkably, their 12 banned titles include hymnbooks and a 2015 edition of St. John's Gospel, even though this is the same 19th-century Synodal Russian translation made and used by the Russian Orthodox Church.²⁴

In July 2021 a local court in the LPR ruled "extremist" another four titles circulated by the IUECBC: *Cursed to Be?* by German Christian publicist Wolfgang Böhne; *Jesus Our Destiny*

by Wilhelm Busch, a German Lutheran pastor in the anti-fascist Confessing Church movement in Nazi Germany; *Born to Die* by U.S. evangelist Billy Graham; and *The Door is Open* by 19th-century English Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon.²⁵

Repression in practice

These legal limitations are not just on paper. "From our monitoring, it seems that believers now suffer from religious persecution much more than in Soviet times," notes Maksym Vasin of the Institute for Religious Freedom.

"There are many closures of places of worship, arrests—even murders." Indeed, during the few months in 2014 when separatist forces gained control of the city of Sloviansk [Russian: Slaviansk], now again in independent Ukraine, four Pentecostals were captured by separatist militia and killed when they tried to escape.²⁶ In similar circumstances in 2014, Anatoly Anishchenko, a Pentecostal pastor from Krasny Luch [Ukrainian name: Khrustalnyi] in the LPR, was nearly executed on two occasions.²⁷

More recently and routinely, minority congregations are prevented from worshipping publicly. In the self-proclaimed DPR, for example, houses of worship seized by the authorities since late 2016 have included two Orthodox churches under the Kyiv Patriarchate in Donetsk city,²⁸ two Baptist churches in Makeyevka [Ukrainian: Makiivka] and Novoazovsk, and a Seventh-day Adventist church in Gorlovka [Ukrainian: Horlivka].²⁹ Religious leaders may also be fined for leading unauthorized worship, as when the pastor of Ark of the Covenant Pentecostal Church in Makeyevka was fined

the equivalent of approximately \$50 in December 2019, a significant sum in the region.³⁰

In the self-proclaimed LPR, the MGB security police are particularly powerful, according to Petr Dudnik, a Pentecostal pastor in Sloviansk. He described to the *East-West Church Report* their August 2018 raid on Grace Church of God, a sister congregation in Alchevsk: “Armed men in balaclavas entered and searched the property” before detaining Pastors Viktor Koval and Timofei Biryukov until evening.³¹

With no Protestant communities proving able to retain legal status in the LPR, the Seventh-day Adventists decided to halt public worship following the re-registration deadline. According to *Forum 18*, Baptist Union congregations were similarly forced to halt public worship in March 2019.³² *Forum 18* also reports that Luhansk’s Roman Catholic priest, Fr. Grzegorz Rapa, had to leave the region in February 2020 and has not been permitted to return; Mass was last celebrated

there by a Greek Catholic priest in April 2020. Local clergy of the newly formed Orthodox Church of Ukraine have likewise been barred.³³

In the LPR, minority religious leaders may also be fined for leading unauthorized worship. Among multiple instances documented by *Forum 18*, Vladimir Devyanin, leader of an Evangelical Christian-Baptist Union congregation in the town of Kirovsk [Ukrainian name: Holubivka], was fined the equivalent of approximately \$100 in summer 2019.³⁴ In 2019 Vladimir Rytikov, an IUECBC Baptist pastor who spent several years in jail for his faith during the Soviet period, had items of his property seized after he refused to pay earlier fines totaling approximately \$110 for leading his unregistered congregation in Krasnodon [Ukrainian name: Sorokyne].³⁵

During several hours’ detention by the MGB in January 2020, Pastor Rytikov was verbally threatened with prosecution for his “extremist activity.” The warning referred to his circulation of “extremist” literature, given that items distributed by the IUECBC were proclaimed “extremist” by the LPR authorities in November 2019.³⁶

Baptist pastor Vitaly Sorokun anticipated such an escalation when the author met him in October 2018 in the city of Kharkiv [Russian: Kharkov] in independent Ukraine. The LPR and DPR authorities “are trying to do in an extreme way what Russia is doing slowly,” he suggested. “Russia’s Supreme Court already ruled that the Jehovah’s Witnesses are ‘extremist.’ Theologically, I do not agree with them—but they cannot practice. So basically you have to think, ‘Who is going to be next?’ And you pretty much know.”³⁷ ♦



Jehovah’s Witness stall in Kharkiv, independent Ukraine, October 2018 (G. FAGAN)

Notes:

¹ See Lauren B. Homer, “Making Sense of the Anti-Missionary Provisions of Russia’s 2016 Anti-Terrorism Legislation,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2017), 1-7.

² [In Russian] “Tserkov’ EkhB Evpatorii ostrafovana za ‘nezakonnoe’ missionerstvo,” *Sova*, 18 March 2021, <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/intervention/2021/03/d43878/>.

³ Interview with the author, Kyiv, 10 October 2018.

⁴ [In Russian] “Konstitutsiia Donetskoi narodnoi respubliki 14 maia 2014 goda,” Preamble and Articles 9.2, 21, <http://dnr-news.com/konstituciya-doneckoy-narodnoy-respubliki.html> (as accessed on 24 May 2014). The text purporting to be the 14 May 2014 Constitution on the latest DPR website differs significantly, <http://dnrsovet.su/zakonodatelnaya-deyatelnost/konstitutsiya/>. The original text may be found at <http://worldconstitutions.ru/?p=1094>.

⁵ [In Russian] “Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Armiia DNR,” *YouTube*, 30 May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQdsGoUDmdA>; “Donetskoe opolchenie Russkaia Pravoslavnaia,” *YouTube*, 25 June 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9L7sUqm9n8>

⁶ [In Russian] “Fil’m o Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Armii,” *YouTube*, 3 June 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtjQIysnzwc>.

⁷ Razumkov Center, *National Security and Defence*, nos. 1-2 (2011) 16, 20. The data were compiled in 2010.

⁸ Article 9 in both constitutions. [In Russian] <https://minjust-dnr.ru/konstitutsiya-donetskoj-narodnoj-respubliki/> (DPR); <https://glava-lnr.info/dokumenty/konstituciya> (LPR).

⁹ [In Russian] “O svobode veroispovedaniia i religioznykh ob”edineniiakh,” 24 June 2016, Articles 7, Parts 2 and 7: <https://dnrsovet.su/zakonodatelnaya-deyatelnost/prinyaty/zakony/zakon-donetskoj-narodnoj-respubliki-o-svobode-veroispovedaniya-i-religioznyh-obedineniyah/>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Article 32, Parts 5 and 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Article 31.

¹² [In Russian] “O svobode sovesti i o ob”edineniiakh,” 2 February 2018, Article 6, Part 2: <https://nslnr.su/zakonodatelstvo/normativno-pravovaya-baza/5741/>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Article 34, Part 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Article 33, Part 1.

¹⁵ [In Russian] “Otchet o rabote Ministerstva kul’tury Donetskoi Narodnoi Respubliki v 2019 godu,” <http://www.mincult.govdnr.ru/otchet-o-rabote-ministerstva-kulturny-doneckoy-narodnoy-respubliki-v-2019-godu>.

(continued on page 10)

Religious Freedom *(continued from page 9)*

¹⁶ [In Russian] “Otchet o rabote Ministerstva kul'tury Donetskoi Narodnoi Respubliki v 2020 godu,” <http://www.mincult.govdnr.ru/otchet-o-rabote-ministerstva-kul'tury-doneckoy-narodnoy-respubliki-v-2020-godu>.

¹⁷ Felix Corley, “DONBAS: Luhansk: No gas, electricity, water for unregistered communities,” *Forum 18*, 5 February 2020, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2540.

¹⁸ [In Russian] <https://www.mklmr.ru/religiya/>; <https://www.mklmr.ru/plany-proverok.html>.

In November 2020 Ukrainian parliamentarian Viktor Yelensky noted that the DPR authorities had reversed their hostile stance towards the Jewish community due to outside pressure. See “Humanitarian situation in non-government controlled areas of Eastern Ukraine,” *YouTube*, 26 November 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NU-K945o2LE> at 1.07.00, also Yelensky's comments on the general religious freedom situation at 31.00-42.00.

¹⁹ [In Russian] “Vlasti LNR rasskazali o deistvuiushchikh religioznykh organizatsiiakh v respublike,” *RIA Novosti*, 20 December 2017, <https://ria.ru/religion/20171220/1511338260.html>.

²⁰ [In Russian] “Ekspertnaia komissiiia vydala zakliucheniia o priznanii religioznymi 173 organizatsiiam,” 26 June 2018, <https://mklmr.ru/religiya/novosti-religiya/2580-ekspertnaya-komissiya-vydala-zaklyucheniya-o-priznanii-religioznymi-173-organizatsiyam.html>.

²¹ [In Russian] <https://dnmu.ru/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Список-экстрем-материалов.pdf>. On 16 September it was reported that a court in Russia had ruled extremist Pastor Ledyayev's *New World Order*: “Sud priznal knigu piatidesiatnicheskogo pastora Alekseia Lediaeva ekstremistskoi,” *Sova*, 16 September 2021, <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/extremism/counter-extremism/2021/09/d44919/>.

²² [In Russian] <https://dnronline.ru/perechen-zapreshhennyx-obshhestvennyx-i-religioznyx-obedinenij-inyx-organizacij/>; Felix Corley, “DONBAS: Donetsk: Places of worship seized, sealed,” *Forum 18*, 12 October 2018, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2422.

²³ [In Russian] <http://mgblnr.org/media/c300a2c3-98eb-4a7d-b302-ebf89b06bf26>.

²⁴ [In Russian] <https://mu-lnr.ru/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/СПИСОК-ЕКСТРЕМАТИЗМА-МАТЕРИАЛОВ-19.02.20.pdf>.

²⁵ [In Russian] “Sud priznal rasprostraniavshiesia baptistami izdaniia ekstremistskimi – Genprokuratura,” *Luganskii Informatsionnyi*



Donetsk skyline, 2016 (VARVARA PAKHOMENKO)

Tsentr, 20 July 2021, <https://lug-info.com/news/sud-priznal-rasprostranyavshiesya-baptistami-izdaniya-ekstremistskimi-genprokuratura>; Felix Corley, “DONBAS: Luhansk: More Christian texts ‘extremist,’ Catholic priests banned,” *Forum 18*, 28 July 2021, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2675.

²⁶ For a detailed account of these events, see the author's interview with Pastor Petr Dudnik, *East-West Church Report*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2019), 6-11.

²⁷ [In Russian] “Svidetel'stvo Onishchenko Anatoliia g. Krasnyi Luch,” *YouTube*, 22 December 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8Ke_hqSToY.

²⁸ Felix Corley, “DONBAS: Donetsk: Raid, fine for unregistered worship meetings,” *Forum 18*, 10 February 2020, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2542.

²⁹ Corley, 12 October 2018, op. cit.

³⁰ Corley, 10 February 2020, op. cit.

³¹ Pastor Petr Dudnik interview, op. cit.

³² “DONBAS: Luhansk: Re-registration denials, raids, religious communities closed,” *Forum 18*, 23 October 2018, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425; Felix Corley, “DONBAS: Luhansk: Baptist Union Churches forced to halt public worship,” *Forum 18*, 15 March 2019, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462.

³³ Corley, 28 July 2021, op. cit.; Felix Corley, “DONBAS: Luhansk: Worship bans, clergy bans, punishments,” *Forum 18*, 23 October 2019, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516. For the author's October 2018 interview with Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, at the time apostolic nuncio in Ukraine and able to make infrequent visits to the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR, see *East-West Church Report*, vol. 27, no.2 (2019), 12-16.

³⁴ Corley, 23 October 2019, op. cit.

³⁵ Felix Corley, “DONBAS: Luhansk: Community work, fines, property seizure,” *Forum 18*, 16 October 2019, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2514.

³⁶ [In Russian] “OTDEL ZASTUPNICHESTVA MSTs EkhB SOOBSHCHENIE No. 2, 03 fevralia 2020 g.,” 4 February 2020, <http://iucecb.com/news/20200204-0921>; Felix Corley, “DONBAS: Luhansk: Soviet-era prisoner of conscience to be jailed again?” *Forum 18*, 4 February 2020, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2539.

³⁷ For the author's complete interview with Pastor Vitaly Sorokun, see *East-West Church Report*, vol. 27, no.1 (2019), 9-11.

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“Christianity was always distinguished by the fact that we were not of this world”:

Two Local Pastors Discuss Politics and the Church in Ukraine

In Ukraine, Protestant thinking on politics and government has undergone a radical shift. The East-West Church Report here features highlights of a recent discussion between two local Pentecostal pastors on this topic. It offers deep insight into how this shift marks a departure from Soviet-era Protestant attitudes towards the same issue, and how this new thinking feeds into broader pro-democracy initiatives in Ukraine. (The editor finds a similar phenomenon in neighboring Belarus, which will be explored in future issues of the Report.)

Sergei Demidovich serves with Good News Church in Sloviansk [Russian: Slaviansk], a small city in the portion of Donetsk Region now under Ukrainian government control. For several months in 2014—the initial phase of the ongoing conflict—separatist forces took control of Good News’ church building. For seven hours during this period, they blindfolded and held captive Bishop Aleksei Demidovich, Pastor Sergei’s brother. (For a detailed account of these events, see the East-West Church Report, vol. 27, no. 2 [2019], 6-11.)

Jaroslav Lukasik is originally from Łuków in eastern Poland. In 1993 he moved to Belarus as a student of the Belarusian language and became active in the local Pentecostal community. Under pressure from the increasingly draconian regime of President Aleksandr Lukashenko, he was deported in 2007 and now lives in Kyiv, where he is involved in numerous Protestant outreach initiatives. (For details of these, see the East-West Church Report, vol. 27, no. 3 [2019], 1-4.)

The East-West Church Report has received permission from Jaroslav Lukasik to reproduce this dialogue in condensed form. The original discussion took place in Russian and was broadcast on 18 June 2020 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwFNHfRkCcc>.

Sergei Demidovich: Let’s start with the basics. What is politics?

Jaroslav Lukasik: The art of governing, which involves one of the most important concepts—power. As Christians who read the Bible, we know that power is God’s prerogative. From the first page to the last, God is revealed as someone who has power. And we humans are by nature oriented upon power; we



Sergei Demidovich
(Source: S. DEMIDOVICH/YOUTUBE)

are called to it. In the first book of Genesis—when God creates humans—we read: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Immediately after that, it says: “let them have dominion” [Genesis 1:26]. So, God has power, and He shares that power with humans. The likeness of God within human beings on earth is that we are created in order to have dominion. But God’s power rests upon truth and love—He is truth and love. And so, power, according to God’s design, is an instrument with which to realize truth and love. We see the same thing in the family: Why do parents have power over their children? Because they know truth, and they love them. The same applies to politics. Whom do we want to see in power? This may sound unrealistic to some people, but in fact what we all want is a professional, someone with a positive worldview who knows their country, loves it, and serves it. If other kinds of people seek to enter government or end up there, then we—the public, journalists—criticize them.

SD: There is that well-known phrase from the Bible: “There is no authority except that which God has established” [Romans 13:1]. Would you explain this?

It is often interpreted as not resisting—or juxtaposing ourselves against—those in power. We Protestants are noted for this. We often say: “All power comes from God, and we are not politicians.”

JL: All power indeed comes from God in the sense that God created the earth, and it is held in order.

SD: You mean, the principle of power means that there is no anarchy with God?

JL: Yes, including political power, which comes from God. This acquires even more significance in the light of the Fall. Evil entered the world through the human heart, which wanted to receive the dividends of love, so to speak, outside of truth. Human beings want power that is not based upon truth and love; they strive to win power by force. God therefore creates certain structures—the state is a divine institution—with which to contain this human tendency towards chaos.

SD: Isn’t it evil to desire power?

JL: Well, the First Letter to Timothy says: “If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work” [1 Timothy 3:1]. So to some extent we should strive for power when we realize that we know truth, providing that other people confirm this empirically, and when we love and when we have vision and knowledge about what needs to be done—not just desire for power for its own sake. If people act just for the sake of power, then that is pride.



Jaroslav Lukasik
(Source: S. DEMIDOVICH/YOUTUBE)

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Politics and the Church *(continued from page 11)*

SD: If a person is apolitical and not interested in this world, can we then say that this person either does not know truth or does not love, in terms of their country?

JL: You know, in ancient Greece there were people who were “apolitical”—who did not take part in the life of the *polis* or administration of the city, which was the state. They were called “idiots!” [Editor’s note: From Greek *idios*, meaning “private.”] That has a very different meaning now. (Laughs.) In fact, there is no such thing as being apolitical. People who say they are not interested in politics or only discuss it privately are still subject to someone else’s politics.

SD: Moreover, when someone says he is outside politics but understands the situation—understands that it is dangerous to adopt a particular position—that is political. He understands: “Ah, right now it is better not to be political.” In private conversations I have repeatedly heard our eastern brethren [i.e. fellow Protestants from Russia] saying: “We understand everything, but...”

However, we did not finish the question concerning politics in the Bible. People often agree that politics is present in the Old Testament, where God deals with the [Jewish] people. But in the New Testament we have: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” [Matthew 22:21].

You often hear people say that Jesus did not engage in politics. I once confronted Aleksandr Shevchenko about his [2015] book *The Church and Civil Society*. [Editor’s note: Originally from Ukraine, Shevchenko pastors a Russian-speaking congregation in Sacramento, California.] There he says—I’m trying to recall accurately—that the Church has the Bible whereas the state has the Constitution; that Church and state are parallel and do not meet. To me, this is nonsense.

We are not looking to attack anyone here. But are there not parts of the New Testament where we can see that we as Christians are responsible for society, and that we cannot absent ourselves? Does this idea that the Church is separate from the state come from the Bible?

JL: The Church is and should be separate from the state, but we need to understand what that particular terminology means...

SD: This is where I think we need to be clear. Very many Christians, after imbibing those types of books and sermons, say: “Politics is all dirt, we are outside it. We are waiting for Jesus and are engaged purely in the Gospel and people’s salvation.” But is there such a thing

as the “pure Gospel,” oblivious of the place where you live? Not responding, for example, to participation in legislation or other initiatives?

JL: Well, what is people’s salvation? Is it when people come forward in church and proclaim that Jesus is their Lord and Savior? Very well, a person has proclaimed this and turned their life around. But now they have to live an ordinary life with Jesus, that is, live in accordance with God’s commandments. That includes being a citizen who has been born again. I don’t understand how the Constitution supposedly is for the state, whereas we have the Bible. I have multiple identities. I am one person, but I am a father, son, husband, brother, and so on. Each of these presupposes different duties. I am simultaneously a citizen with civic duties.

God isn’t abstract. He isn’t nirvana, as might appear to some people. He created a concrete world with content, including power, love, truth, laws of gravity and thermodynamics. We are supposed to live in it in accordance with God’s truth, being the image and likeness of God, while realizing that it is all in a fallen state—that we live in a world where sin reigns. Until Christ comes for the second time, our task on earth as born-again people is to

acquire the kingdom of heaven, as one Orthodox saint said. [Editor’s note: St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) maintained: “The true aim of our Christian life consists in the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God.”] It is to be as close to truth as possible and to spread the principles of the kingdom of God. What we understand through faith—through reading the Bible, prayer, communing with God—we realize step by step, in our families, in our neighborhood, and in our state, wherever we have power and influence.

But to return to the Old and New Testaments—I think a person would have to be very naïve to say that there is no politics in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the narrative is about the state—how God forms a culture, a people. When it says that a king acted worthily in the eyes of the Lord, whereas another king acted unworthily and led Israel into error through his policies, God is evaluating certain political matters. The Old Testament says that spiritual matters depend upon politics. But what does the New Testament say? That politics depend upon spirituality. The clear message of the New Testament and the whole Christian tradition and history that flow from it is that political processes depend upon what truth and love is found in the hearts of concrete personalities.

SD: So politics is something a Christian should be engaged in?

JL: It is a very important sphere that influences our spiritual life. The laws and culture in a state have a very strong influence upon us. We must realize this and take an interest in forming the right political culture in our community.



Lenin statue graffitied in Ukrainian national colors, Donetsk Region, February 2015 (OLIVER CARROLL)

SD: Why does this fare so poorly in our country? There are a considerable number of Christians here. In earlier years there were more supportive members of the Verkhovna Rada [Ukrainian parliament], such as Pavlo Unguryan. There was a serious lobby for legislation in support of Christianity.

JL: I think the problem is that Evangelical Christians across the post-Soviet space still have a lack of vision for their countries. Here we are speaking primarily about Ukraine, which I would say is generally a little ahead in this regard. It is true that [Latvian-based New Generation Pastor Aleksei] Ledyayev talked about going into politics and the need for Christian government. [Editor's note: In 2002 Pastor Ledyayev called for a "new world order" in which Christians would strive for political power in order to oust evil forces otherwise dominant over it. In August 2021 the Russian authorities banned four Latvia- and Ukraine-based entities associated with his New Generation Church as "undesirable organizations" posing a threat to state security.]

But first, let's try to understand. Based upon what we have said so far, if you aspire to power then you are claiming to know some kind of truth about this country, to have a vision for it. Not just for a particular sphere, such as concern about a kind

of LGBT lobby—although that is an important topic. We need answers from the Lord. After analyzing the Bible, our history, and the events happening around us, we need to arrive at a vision: What kind of Ukraine does God want? What should it be like in the field of economics, for example? Private property and land: capitalism? How big should the government be in terms of how far it is able to interfere in the lives of ordinary people? There are many questions to which we need answers. I believe that Christians are called upon to devise our own model of patriotism in this way.

SD: I am listening to you, but all this does not speak to our form of Christianity. I have been a believer since childhood. What we were taught as children—when the government was Soviet—was: "We are not of this world." That was very clear. "This world and everything in it will perish. The Lord will take us to Himself and wipe away every tear." Those were the times. It was impossible to imagine anything different; that is, we never had any ideas about changing the world. We always held to the position—and this is where I think [Pastor] Aleksandr [Shevchenko] got his ideas from—that we need to drag people out of the world. Evil is out there, in the world, while salvation is here in the bosom of the Church. And what was salvation? A person must not sin in a personal sense. There was great emphasis upon us being the light of the world. What did that mean? It meant that we should not lie or steal like other people.

"I work at a factory where everyone steals things, but I don't; everyone swears, but I don't; everyone drinks, but I don't." Do you understand? Christianity was always distinguished by the fact that we were not of this world. We didn't stake any claims. We were barred from further education, after all.

With the collapse of Soviet power this Christianity entered a new era of freedom. Of course, we began to receive visitors—[foreign] evangelists, and we ourselves traveled. I studied in Germany; others went to America. We saw a different world. We have been trying hard, but it seems to me that in our core—especially those of us from the more classical Protestant traditions, not the newest Charismatic churches—we retain the earlier paradigm in our heads. So everything you are speaking about has nothing to do with us—it is as if we are still held captive by some kind of modesty or provincialism. We take responsibility for the territory of our churches, but we don't think about processes happening outside. How do we change this? The modern Charismatic movement went deep into politics, but the political machine—evil and corrupt—crushed many. It swallowed them.



Statue above Kyiv of St. Volodymyr [Russian: Vladimir] the Great, 10th-century ruler of Rus' who converted to Christianity and then baptized his people in the Dnieper River, shown here. (G. FAGAN)

JL: Believers living in the Soviet Union really were a light to the world. They were the salt of the earth if they didn't steal at work, swear, drink, or participate in sinful activities.

SD: "Believer" was a synonym for "honest" back in those days. I have a very vivid example. My brother [now Bishop Aleksei] worked as a train driver and, due to the fault of an assistant who was not at his post, his train hit a woman. She survived—she was thrown to one side—and an investigation followed. When the section manager arrived, everyone was shouting, insisting that the

assistant had been at his post. The section manager said: "Quiet! Demidovich, come here!" He wasn't interested in all the other people there—he knew who would tell him the truth. "Where was the assistant?" Aleksei just stood there—he was in danger of letting down the whole team, you understand? Then he mumbled something about the assistant being at his post.

That night he couldn't sleep a wink. He rushed to get on the first commuter train—it wasn't even his shift yet. He went straight into the section manager's office and said: "I can't live with this—I deceived you yesterday!" Now, you see, that section manager will have the motto "A Christian doesn't lie" in his head for the rest of his life. But today, Jaroslaw, this means almost nothing. I ran a café where believers worked, and they stole things. Other employers say the same.

(continued on page 14)

Politics and the Church *(continued from page 13)*

JL: The difference between our lives in the Soviet Union and today is an interesting topic. But let's focus on this theology of isolation, which has its roots in the theological tradition of Pietism. The Pietists were German Lutherans who, by their spirituality, separated themselves from the nominal state church, beginning in the late 17th century. Engaged in a search for God, they divided the world into spiritual and non-spiritual. Spiritual matters included prayer, attending church, and moral family life. Non-spiritual matters included everything to do with finance, education. Politics, above all, was regarded as a dirty business that should not be touched. Unfortunately, this tradition has spread to post-Soviet Protestantism—after all, there were many Germans who founded churches here in the 1920s, like [Gustav] Schmidt. [Editor's note: Born in 1891 in what is now the Ukrainian region of Zhytomyr, Schmidt co-founded a Pentecostal mission to Russia and Eastern Europe in 1927.] There were already Mennonites here, so this idea spread.

You can understand our church people in the Soviet period. Believing in God was already politics. But how many years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union? Thirty! We are living in a different time. The Soviet army was one thing, but our own Ukrainian army defending our borders is quite another. Friends, it is time that we started adjusting, or else we will lose this splendid historical opportunity that God has given us to spread

the Gospel, to carry out Christ's Great Commission. This has a cultural component, even a political component.

Yet while older churches often retain this Pietism, this isolationist theology, the situation is changing. We have seen this in Ukraine over the past few years, as with the program to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, which sought to form a political culture in which Christian values reverberate. [Editor's note: See the *East-West Church Report*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2019), 1-4.] But we are still a century behind. Today's Christianity has lost its cultural mandate, its mission of preaching the Gospel on the level of culture.

***SD:* What do you think might be done now in Ukraine? What should we be hearing from church leaders?**

JL: Well, if we do not fulfill Christ's Great Commission in the sphere of culture, then we are carrying out only part of what Christ told us to do. This is a very serious moment, and we must think carefully. First, we should not imagine that we should immediately enter politics. That would be even worse—there have been very many experiments when Christians entered politics, and they ended poorly. Second, our Christian political actions must be like the tip of an iceberg that rests upon our social and cultural activities—a whole host of Christian NGOs, missions, and charities creating their own model of patriotism with its own internal culture. Our political activity will be the culmination of all that. ♦

BOOK REVIEW

The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation

by Nicholas E. Denysenko

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HEATHER BAILEY

In the modern Orthodox world, local churches tend to coincide with national boundaries. Ukraine's quest for both ecclesial and political sovereignty has proven arduous, however. The country has twice—in 1917-18 and 1991—secured political independence from Russia. Yet it retains direct ties with the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), even as many Ukrainian Orthodox Christians allege that church to be a tool of Russian imperialism.

In his thorough and nuanced study, Nicholas Denysenko examines the century-long efforts to establish an autocephalous [independent] Ukrainian Orthodox Church that would be recognized as canonical [legitimate] by the global Orthodox community. These attempts have yet to succeed due to both disagreements within Ukrainian Orthodox clerical circles and the Moscow Patriarchate's insistence that Ukrainian autocephalist movements are linked with ethnophyletism [heretical subordination of the Orthodox faith to ethnic identity], even fascism.

Denysenko—a U.S.-based specialist in Orthodox liturgical theology and a deacon in the autocephalous Orthodox Church in America—here recounts the complex historical, theological, and political circumstances that have contributed

to the present fragmentation of Ukrainian Orthodoxy. His study provides essential context for understanding the ongoing ecclesial and political tensions between the Patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow, and between Ukraine and Russia. These disputes are not merely academic, but represent a pastoral crisis for all Ukrainian Orthodox clergy, confuse the laity, and potentially contribute to ongoing violence in Ukraine.

Denysenko's main thematic lens is Ukrainization. By the time of Bolshevik upheaval in 1917-18, Ukrainian Orthodox clerics wanted church reform, yet disagreed over the extent to which their church should be Ukrainized. The spectrum of this ranged from moderate measures—such as Ukrainian pronunciation of Church Slavonic or the use of Ukrainian in worship services—to more radical ideas about egalitarian, laity-centered church governance. For many, it meant the pursuit of Ukrainian autocephaly. The majority of bishops and priests wanted to pursue this canonically, but some prioritized it above all else, exposing the autocephalist movement to charges of ethnophyletism. Here, Denysenko convincingly demonstrates that the actions of a minority during a tumultuous era have obscured the fact that most Ukrainian churchmen desired only moderate Ukrainization and autocephaly via a canonical route.

Amidst the political turmoil of revolution, civil war, and Ukraine's incorporation into the U.S.S.R., a group of Ukrainizers established the first, short-lived Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) in 1921. This body—the first of three using the title—was unequivocally uncanonical, a characteristic that the Moscow Patriarchate's subsequent narratives applied to all later entities claiming to be the autocephalous church of Ukraine. Since all Ukrainian bishops who favored autocephaly wanted to attain it through a canonical process, none joined the 1921 UAOC. In disregard of the doctrine of apostolic succession, the new entity responded by using a novel rite based upon ecclesial egalitarianism to consecrate its first two bishops. This meant that their ordinations of subsequent clergy were also uncanonical. When the 1921 UAOC was liquidated by the Soviets in 1930, its uncanonical status accompanied a wave of Ukrainian Orthodox émigrés to North America.

The quest for autocephaly next arose during the Second World War when Ukrainian churchmen anticipated Ukraine's liberation from Soviet rule. Once again, the bishops were all committed to canonical autocephaly. They turned to the Orthodox Church of Poland, whose own autocephalous status had been affirmed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1924. It was thus that the second UAOC was born in 1942, and—due to its Polish Orthodox connection—could claim legitimacy where the earlier UAOC could not. The 1942 UAOC was not a “direct descendant” of the 1921 UAOC, but the Moscow Patriarchate nevertheless depicted it as such (79). However, the founders of the 1942 UAOC broadly viewed the Nazis—whose short-lived control of Ukrainian territory had made their entity possible—as liberators. This allowed the Moscow Patriarchate to depict the Ukrainian autocephalist movement as inherently fascist following Ukraine's reincorporation into the U.S.S.R. in 1944 (89).

From 1945 to 1989, the Russian Orthodox Church was the only church in Ukraine following the Eastern Orthodox Rite that was allowed to operate legally. During this period, the Soviet state and the Moscow Patriarchate promoted a narrative portraying the U.S.S.R.'s military victory as a triumph that preserved the fundamental unity of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. The Moscow Patriarchate asserted its ecclesial hegemony by painting Ukrainian nationalism and autocephalist movements as “inspired by fascism” (89, 157); by reuniting the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church to Orthodoxy through a sham council in 1946; and by pressuring the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Poland to relinquish its autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarchate in return for autocephaly from the Moscow Patriarchate in 1948. When projecting its influence abroad, Moscow also “sought to replace” the Ecumenical Patriarch's authority as “first among equals,” Denysenko avers (159).

During the Cold War, Ukrainian Orthodox émigré communities in North America lacked unity. They also were deprived of legitimacy in global Orthodox opinion because of the uncanonical ordinations of many of their clergy.

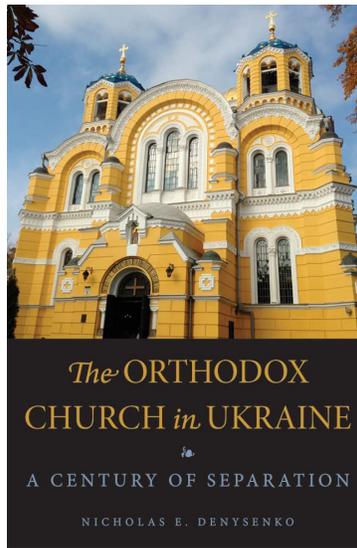
Church representatives sought a solution to this problem for decades, while rejecting the ecclesiology of the 1921 UAOC (103). Looking to the Ecumenical Patriarchate to resolve their legitimacy problems, they finally obtained canonical status when full Eucharistic communion was established between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada in 1990, and with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA in 1995.

During this decades-long process, the Ukrainian diaspora developed an anti-Bolshevik and anti-Moscow Patriarchate political theology that has contributed to Ukraine's post-Soviet identity crisis, and to the power struggle between the Ecumenical and Moscow Patriarchates. Building on the Ecumenical Patriarchate's affirmation of Polish Orthodox autocephaly in 1924, the émigrés argued that Moscow illegally annexed the metropolia of Kyiv from the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1686, and so was not the rightful mother Church of Kyiv. They therefore sought Ukraine's “ecclesial and political independence” from Russia and portrayed the Moscow Patriarchate as a usurper of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's authority, as well as a collaborator with the Soviet regime (106, 109).

Following the weakening and collapse of Soviet authority in Ukraine, three main Orthodox bodies emerged there by 1992, each claiming to be the rightful successor of the tenth-century Kyiv Metropolia and thus the local Orthodox Church of the newly independent nation. These were: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP); a new entity named the UAOC; and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyivan Patriarchate (UOC-KP). The UOC-MP remains the largest and regards itself as “the only canonical Church in Ukraine” (175). Established in 1989, the “third rebirth” of the UAOC declared itself a patriarchal church and elected a patriarch in 1990 (xiv). Then, once Ukraine had become politically independent in 1991, the Moscow Patriarchate's Metropolitan Filaret of Kyiv requested autocephaly from Moscow, supported by the vast majority of UOC-MP hierarchs.

Committed to the religious and cultural unity of Kyiv and Moscow, the Moscow Patriarchate was prepared to grant only a more limited autonomy to the church of Ukraine. Filaret came under fierce public criticism and was accused of leading the Ukrainian Orthodox Church into schism. In 1992 Ukrainian and Russian bishops loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate held a council in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv and deposed Filaret. Rejecting the legitimacy of this council, Filaret and some proponents of autocephaly in the UOC and UAOC then united to form the UOC-KP. The global Orthodox community regarded neither the UAOC nor the UOC-KP as canonical; in the latter case, this was because Filaret's 1992 deposition was accepted as legitimate. From 1995 onwards as the UOC-KP's Patriarch of Kyiv, Filaret sought to legitimize his church by obtaining Ukrainian autocephaly from

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the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The UOC-MP withdrew its request for autocephaly in 1996, and the Russian Orthodox Church formally anathematized Filaret the following year—a decision also accepted as legitimate “within global Orthodoxy” (183).

Amid the twists and turns of this feuding, Denysenko characterizes the rival political theologies involved as an obstacle to productive dialogue and unity, acknowledging that both Ukrainian nationalism and “Russian colonization of Ukraine” are problematic (207). Ukrainian Orthodox not affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate generally adopt a pro-Western orientation, whereas the Moscow Patriarchate favors a “Russian World” [Russian: *Russkii mir*] ideology that reasserts Moscow’s hegemony over newly-independent territories earlier firmly within its jurisdiction. For Denysenko, *Russkii mir* is a “civil religion” that has had particularly damaging consequences in Crimea and eastern Ukraine (208).

Since February 2014, when the security forces of President Yanukovich cracked down upon demonstrators favoring Ukraine’s association with the European Union, the Ukrainian autocephaly movement has become explicitly politicized. In June 2016 President Poroshenko—Yanukovich’s successor—and a now Western-oriented Ukrainian parliament petitioned the Ecumenical Patriarch to “pronounce” Moscow’s 1686 annexation of the Kyivan Metropolia “invalid” and to grant autocephaly (198). Their petition reiterated a claim made by many advocates of Ukrainian autocephaly over the previous hundred years—that autocephaly was necessary to end “Russian colonization of Ukraine” (198-99).

Denysenko laments the pattern of divisiveness that has left the country with no church whose claim to being “the Orthodox Church in Ukraine” is recognized by both the local population and the global Orthodox community (221). Appealing to Orthodox Christians to abandon fruitless



Intercession Orthodox Cathedral (Kyiv Patriarchate), Lviv, 2018 (G. FAGAN)

canonical controversies, he calls for a focus on overcoming divisions in Ukraine that negatively impact the laity, cause credibility problems for each jurisdiction, and detract from significant pastoral issues.

Since this book was published in 2018, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew responded affirmatively on autocephaly.* His 5 January 2019, *tomos* established an autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), with a Metropolia—rather than a Patriarchate—of Kyiv. While the *tomos* intended to unite the competing churches, factions of the UOC-KP

and UAOC refused to accept the new arrangement. Moreover, the Moscow Patriarchate has broken communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate over the move and continues to insist that the UOC-MP is the only canonical church in Ukraine. To date, Ukraine thus has an autocephalous church which a segment of the global Orthodox community accepts is canonical—but its internal religious divisions persist, and its conflict with Russia has deepened.

Impressive in scope, Denysenko’s study brings much-needed historical context and pastoral concern to a particularly thorny set of geopolitical and ecclesiological problems. ♦

* For subsequent commentary by Nicholas Denysenko, see “Filaret’s Final Act and the Future of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine,” *Public Orthodoxy*, 15 May 2019, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2019/05/15/filarets-future-of-orthodox-church-of-ukraine/>. For multiple perspectives on the situation by contemporary scholars, see *Canadian Slavonic Papers* vol. 62 (2020), nos. 3-4, 421-521.

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