

UKRAINE 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

In February 2014 Russian military forces occupied Crimea. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 68/262, adopted on March 27, 2014, and entitled “Territorial Integrity of Ukraine,” states the Autonomous Republic of Crimea remains internationally recognized as within Ukraine’s international borders. The U.S. government does not recognize the attempted annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and considers Crimea still to be a part of Ukraine.

UKRAINE

Executive Summary

The constitution protects freedom of religion and provides for the separation of church and state. According to the law, the objective of domestic religious policy is to foster the creation of a tolerant society and provide for freedom of conscience and worship. In September the Constitutional Court struck down a provision of the law requiring religious organizations to apply to local government authorities at least 10 days in advance for permission to hold religious services and ceremonies in public spaces. The court’s ruling stated the organizers of such gatherings must only inform local authorities in advance of the gathering. The government pursued several court cases involving assaults and detentions of religious figures in previous years. The parliament lifted the immunity of one its members to enable his prosecution for the illegal detention of a Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) religious official in 2013 by the government of former President Viktor Yanukovich. The parliament’s human rights ombudsman intervened to reverse a local government’s ban on non-Orthodox religions, and courts in several localities overturned fines given to Jehovah’s Witnesses for displaying their literature in public places. The president and other members of the government appealed to the ecumenical patriarch to help overcome the division of the country’s Orthodox Christians, for which the government blamed Russian interference. The UOC-MP said the government’s appeal represented “meddling” in the country’s religious affairs and criticized what it said was the government’s failure to address discrimination against the UOC-MP by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) and local governments sympathetic to the UOC-KP. Several court decisions upheld the transfer in Ternopil Oblast of a UOC-MP parish and church building to the UOC-KP. Religious leaders continued to call on the government to simplify the registration procedures for religious groups and to establish a transparent legal process to address restitution claims. In various regions of the country religious groups reported continued discriminatory

treatment by local authorities in allocating land for religious buildings to groups in the minority in their region.

Russian-backed separatists continued to control parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. Authorities in the “Donetsk People’s Republic” (“DPR”) detained and imprisoned members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses as well as other religious leaders. Following passage of a law banning “sects,” “DPR” representatives seized many Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Kingdom Halls as well as a Seventh-day Adventist church. Russian-backed separatists also continued to occupy religious buildings of minority religious groups and use them as military facilities.

There were reports of physical assaults on members of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church (UGCC) and Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as one attack on a Jewish journalist. Although there were threats of violence directed against the UOC-MP, the UOC-MP pilgrimage march from the Donetsk oblast to Kyiv celebrating St. Volodymyr’s Feast Day was peaceful, despite some acts of harassment. The UOC-KP pilgrimage march for St. Volodymyr’s Day, the UGCC pilgrimage to the Zarvanytsa Icon, and Jewish community pilgrimages to Uman and other Jewish burial sites, were all peaceful. UOC-MP leaders stated the UOC-KP continued its efforts to seize churches belonging to the UOC-MP; the UOC-KP said it was parishioners and not the UOC-KP who had initiated the transfers of affiliation. The Jewish community remained concerned about the continued existence of Lviv’s Krakivskiy Market on the grounds of an ancient Jewish cemetery. There were reports of acts of vandalism at Holocaust memorials, synagogues and Jewish cemeteries, as well as at Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Kingdom Halls along with a few reports of attacks on UOC-MP, UOC-KP and UGCC churches.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers continued to discuss the protection of religious heritage sites, the problems posed by manifestations of anti-Semitism, and issues related to the division within the Orthodox Church in meetings with the presidential administration and other branches of the government. The embassy also continued to monitor developments in Lviv in the dispute related to the location of parts of the Krakivskiy Market on the former site of the city’s Old Jewish Cemetery, and to encourage all parties involved in the dispute to seek a peaceful solution. Embassy officers met with minority religious groups and with internally displaced Muslims from Crimea to discuss their concerns. The Ambassador and embassy officers continued to urge the leaders of major religious groups to seek peaceful resolution of disputes over religious property.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 44.2 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the March national survey conducted by the Razumkov Center, an independent public policy think tank, 65.4 percent of respondents self-identify as Christian Orthodox, 6.5 percent as Greek Catholic, 1.9 percent as Protestant, 1.1 percent as Muslim, 1 percent as Roman Catholic, and 0.2 percent as Jewish. Another 7.1 percent self-identify as “simply a Christian” and 16.3 percent say they do not belong to any religious group.

The same survey breaks down the Christian Orthodox affiliations as 25 percent with the UOC-KP, 15 percent with the UOC-MP, 21.2 percent with neither Orthodox Church but as “just an Orthodox believer,” 1.8 percent with the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), 0.4 percent with other Orthodox churches, and 2 percent as undecided.

According to the January 1 report by the Ministry of Culture, the UOC-KP has congregations in all oblasts (regions) of the country, but has a bigger number of followers in the western and central regions. The UOC-MP has congregations throughout the country. Most of the UAOC’s congregations are in the western part of the country.

The UGCC, the largest non-Orthodox church with an estimated four million members, is primarily followed in the western oblasts of Lviv, Lutsk, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Ternopil. The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) has an estimated one million members. Most of its congregations are in Lviv, Khmelnytsky, Zhytomyr, Vinnytsya and Zakarpattia Oblasts.

The Evangelical Baptist Union of Ukraine is the largest Protestant community. Other Christian groups include Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Calvinists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Government agencies and independent think tanks estimate the Muslim population at 500,000. Some Muslim leaders put the number at two million. According to government figures, the majority are Crimean Tatars, numbering an estimated 300,000.

According to the most recent government census data from 2001, there are an estimated 103,600 Jews in the country; however, some local Jewish leaders

estimate the number of persons of Jewish heritage to be as high as 370,000. There are also Buddhists, practitioners of Falun Gong, and adherents of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship. By law the government may restrict this right only in the “interests of protecting public order, the health and morality of the population, or protecting the rights and freedoms of other persons.” The constitution provides for the separation of church and state and stipulates “no religion shall be recognized by the state as mandatory.”

According to the law, the objective of religious policy is to “restore full-fledged dialogue between representatives of various social, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups to foster the creation of a tolerant society and provide for freedom of conscience and worship.”

The law requires a religious institution seeking to receive official status as a legal entity to register both as a religious organization and as a nonprofit organization. To obtain official religious status an organization must register either with the Ministry of Culture, which is the government agency responsible for religious affairs, or with regional government authorities. The Ministry of Culture is responsible for the registration of religious centers, administrations, monasteries, religious brotherhoods, missions and religious schools. Religious congregations and groups register with regional authorities. Nationwide religious organizations may not be registered or recognized as legal entities on a national basis, but each individual group which is part of a nationwide religious organization must register in the locality where the group operates. To be eligible for registration, a religious group must have at least 10 adult members and must submit its statute to the registration authorities. To obtain status as a nonprofit organization, a religious group must register with the Ministry of Justice, which is responsible for maintaining the government’s register of legal entities. This register lists all entities with this status, including religious ones. The law does not specify which of the two registration procedures must be undertaken first.

Without legal entity status, a religious group may not own property, conduct banking activities, or publish materials. Per the stipulation against national registration, only the registered constituent units of a nationwide religious

organization may own property or conduct business activities, either for themselves or on behalf of the nationwide organization. The law grants property tax exemptions to religious organizations and considers them to be nonprofit organizations.

The law requires commanders of military units to allow their subordinates to participate in religious services but bans the creation of religious organizations in military institutions and military units. The Ministry of Defense defines selection criteria for clerics to become chaplains, the status of chaplains in the chain of command, and their rights and duties in the armed forces, the National Guard and the State Border Guard Service.

The law gives prison chaplains access to both pretrial detainees and sentenced inmates. It also protects the confidentiality of confession heard by prison chaplains, prohibits the use of information received during confession as evidence in legal proceedings, and does not allow the interrogation of clerics, interpreters, or other persons about matters associated with the confidentiality of confession.

According to the constitution, organizers must notify local authorities in advance of any type of planned public gathering and authorities have the option to challenge the legality of the planned event. In September the Constitutional Court struck down a provision of the law requiring religious organizations to apply to local government authorities at least 10 days in advance for permission to hold religious services and ceremonies in public spaces. The court's ruling stated the notification provision in the constitution regarding public assembly means religious groups need to inform authorities of their intention to hold public religious gatherings but need not seek permission to do so, and need not observe the 10 day timeframe.

The law allows religious groups to establish theological schools to train clergy and other religious workers, and to seek state accreditation for their curriculum. The law states theological schools shall function on the basis of their own statutes, which are registered by the Ministry of Culture.

Government agencies authorized to monitor religious organizations include the Prosecutor General, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and all other "central bodies of the executive government."

Only registered religious groups may seek restitution of communal property confiscated by the Communist regime. Religious groups must apply to regional

authorities for property restitution. The law states consideration of a restitution claim should be completed within a month.

The law prohibits the teaching of religion as part of the mandatory public school curriculum and states public school training “shall be free from interference by political parties, civic and religious organizations.” Public schools include ethics of faith or similar faith-related courses as optional parts of the curriculum.

The law provides for antidiscrimination screening of draft legislation and government regulations, including on the basis of religion. The law specifies the screening will be conducted in accordance with instructions developed by the Cabinet of Ministers, with the legal department of each respective agency responsible for verifying the draft legislation does not contain discriminatory language and requiring changes if it does. Religious groups may participate in the screening of draft legislation at the invitation of the respective agency.

The law allows alternative nonmilitary service for conscientious objectors. The law does not exempt the clergy from military mobilization.

The Office of the Parliamentary Human Rights Ombudsman is constitutionally required to release an annual report to parliament with a section on religious freedom.

The law restricts the activities of foreign-based religious groups and defines the permissible activities of noncitizen clergy, preachers, teachers, and other representatives of foreign-based religious organizations. Under the law, foreign religious workers are permitted to “preach, administer religious ordinances, or practice other canonical activities,” but they may do so only for the religious organization that had invited them and with the approval of the government body that registered the statute of the organization. Missionary activity is included under permissible activities.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Since 2015, the government has exercised the right of derogation from its obligations under the ICCPR with regard to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions under the control of foreign forces, including the ICCPR provisions pertaining to religious freedom.

Government Practices

The government pursued several court cases involving past attacks and detentions of religious figures and reversed more recent actions taken against minority religious groups by local officials. A district court in Chernivtsi Oblast convicted a UOC-MP priest for a 2014 assault of a Jehovah's Witness. The parliament lifted the immunity of one its members to enable his prosecution for the illegal detention of a UOC-MP religious official in 2013 by the Yanukovich government. The parliament's human rights ombudsman intervened to reverse a local government's ban on non-Orthodox religions, and courts in several localities overturned fines given to Jehovah's Witnesses for displaying their literature in public places. The government appealed to the Ecumenical Patriarch to help overcome the division of the country's Orthodox Christians, for which it blamed Russian interference. The UOC-MP said the government's appeal represented "meddling" in the country's religious affairs and criticized what it said was the government's failure to address discrimination against the UOC-MP by the UOC-KP and local governments sympathetic to the UOC-KP. Several court decisions upheld the transfer in Ternopil Oblast of a UOC-MP parish and church building to the UOC-KP. Religious leaders continued to call on the government to simplify the registration procedures for religious groups and to establish a transparent legal process to address restitution claims. In different regions of the country, the UOC-KP, UOC-MP, UGCC and RCC, as well as other religious groups, reported continued discriminatory treatment by local authorities in allocating land for religious buildings for groups in the minority in the region.

On March 15, the Putyla District Court in Chernivtsi Oblast convicted a UOC-MP priest for physically assaulting a Jehovah's Witness, who had come to the priest's home in April 2014, and ordered the priest to pay a fine of 1,700 hryvnia (\$63) and compensation to the victim in the total amount of 4,232 hryvnia (\$160).

On December 8, the parliament upheld the prosecutor general's request to lift parliamentary immunity of its member Vadym Novynsky in order to prosecute Novynsky for his suspected involvement in the 2013 detention of Metropolitan Oleksandr, the personal secretary of then-UOC-MP leader Metropolitan Volodymyr. The detention reportedly was part of an effort involving then President Yanukovich, Novynsky, and several high-level officials of the Yanukovich government to remove Metropolitan Volodymyr from his leadership position because he did not support church involvement in politics.

On June 16, the parliament appealed to ecumenical patriarch to grant recognition to a united Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The UOC-KP and UAOC supported the appeal. The UOC-MP described the document as a sign of the government's

“meddling” in religious affairs, saying without political interference the country’s Orthodox Christians “would have found ways to unite long ago.”

On July 28, President Poroshenko called on the ecumenical patriarch to help overcome a “painful” division of the country’s Orthodox Christians. On November 19, the Patriarch met with the speaker of the parliament to discuss the appeal, but action on it remained pending as of the end of the year.

In his September 6 annual address to the parliament, President Poroshenko said the government would not “watch indifferently” as Russia interfered in the country’s church affairs and attempted to “use the feelings” of a part of the country’s Orthodox believers “in its own interests.” He cited unspecified polling data indicating a further increase in the number of Orthodox Christians who supported a united and independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church. He stated an independent church would not lead to limitations of religious freedom and said every citizen had and would have “the right to believe in God as he or she chooses, and to go to his/her church.”

The UOC-MP expressed concern over a draft bill sponsored by a group of parliament members who claimed the Russian government might be using the UOC-MP to spread anti-Ukrainian propaganda and destabilize the country. According to the draft, all existing and newly created UOC-MP congregations needed to sign an agreement with the government pledging to respect the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as respect the rights of other religious organizations operating in the country, while the government would undertake to guarantee UOC-MP rights and freedom to worship. The draft law would not allow the UOC-MP to appoint bishops or promote clerics to senior positions without prior approval by the central government. The draft bill was still under consideration at year’s end.

On June 2, the Lviv Appellate Administrative Court upheld the 2015 order by the Ternopil Oblast State Administration chairman to reregister the Kolosova UOC-MP parish as part of UOC-KP. The UOC-MP stated the court ruling endorsed the unlawful deregistration of its parish.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses praised action by the parliament’s human rights ombudsman resulting in the reversal of the 2015 ban by the Osytniazhka Village Council in Kirovohrad Oblast on “any religious organization, except for a local Orthodox congregation.” The Ombudsman’s intervention also reportedly led to the

retraction of the 2015 decision by the Otyniya Village Council, Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast, to prohibit religious organizations from renting “government buildings.”

Religious leaders and human rights activists continued to advocate for the government to simplify religious registration procedures and to adopt legislation to turn the Ministry of Defense rules on military chaplaincy into law. They also continued to encourage the government to adopt the Concept of Church-State Relations, which would shape cooperation between the government and religious groups by expanding on the clauses in the constitution addressing religion.

On July 15, the Ministry of Education formed a commission for the recognition of academic degrees awarded by theological schools and on September 21 the Commission made its first decision to recognize such degrees.

On November 16, the Zolotonosha City and District Court in Cherkasy Oblast overturned the decision by the administrative commission of the Zolotonosha District Executive Committee to impose a fine on Jehovah’s Witness Yuriy Hynda for using a mobile literature display rack while preaching in a public place. On September 23, the Desnyansky District Court in Chernihiv revoked the decision by the administrative commission of the Desniansky District Executive Committee fining Jehovah’s Witness Larysa Rudniuk for the same offense.

On February 23, the Civic Council for Cooperation with Religious Organizations, an advisory body designed to facilitate MFA interaction with religious communities, issued a statement saying “at times, conflicts emerged at local levels either due to the jurisdictional affiliation of congregations or property ownership rights.” The Council reported there were instances of interference by local governments in the activity of religious congregations, but these were not the result of “intentional government policy.”

In Ivano-Frankivsk, Kirovohrad, Mykolayiv, Odesa, Ternopil Oblasts and the City of Kyiv, smaller religious groups reported continued discriminatory treatment by local authorities in allocating land for buildings. In the central and southern regions, Roman Catholics, UOC-KP members, UGCC members, and Muslims continued to report similar instances of discrimination. UGCC representatives stated local authorities in Sumy and Odesa remained unwilling to allocate land for UGCC churches. UOC-MP representatives continued to report the refusal of local authorities in the Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk regions to allocate land for UOC-MP churches. Roman Catholics reported the government continued to refuse to facilitate the restitution of Odesa’s Roman Catholic seminary building, which had

been confiscated by the Soviet regime. According to Mormon representatives, the city government in Kyiv remained unable to reinstate a lease on land to build a house of worship.

According to the UOC-MP, because local authorities delayed the allocation of land for construction of a UOC-MP church in Borova, Kyiv Oblast, the UOC-MP began to convert a building, donated by its parishioner Magdalyna Bukhalska, into a church. After local government officials reportedly accused Bukhalska of supporting a “separatist Church,” a number of individuals led by a local representative of the Svoboda Party, on September 9, destroyed the walls and roof of the unfinished church. They stated they had acted to express their opposition to the UOC-MP’s presence in the village. In September staff members of a school in Borova held a meeting to condemn a colleague who was a local UOC-MP parishioner for supporting construction of the UOC-MP church, citing Russia’s aggression against the country as their reason.

On March 10, the Ternopil Oblast Economic Court supported the Ternopil Oblast Administration’s petition to revoke the 2006 decision by the Kolosova village council on the transfer of church ownership from the government to the UOC-MP parish, returning the church to the government. On June 2, the Lviv Appellate Economic Court upheld the ruling. On June 10, several dozen members of the Right Sector movement arrived in Kolosova to “enforce” the court ruling. As police reportedly stood by, the Right Sector prevented UOC-MP parishioners from approaching the building while UOC-KP representatives broke the lock on the front door. According to the UOC-MP, later in the day Viktor Kotyk, lay leader of the UOC-KP congregation, verbally and physically assaulted UOC-MP follower Yakiv Ramsky. The victim was hospitalized with damaged ribs and multiple bruises.

The UOC-MP appealed the appellate court’s decision to the High Economic Court of Ukraine, while accusing the Ternopil Oblast authorities of allowing the UOC-KP to take over the church before the UOC-MP could make its appeal. As of year’s end, the High Court had not issued a verdict on the UOC-MP appeal.

According to the UOC-MP, the Kolosova Village Council was also “creating hurdles” for the allocation of land to the UOC-MP parish for construction of a new church.

The Kovel City and District Court, Volyn Oblast, continued examination of a new petition filed by the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union

(UCSJ) in 2015 against the 2007 decision by the Kovel District State Administration to allow the construction of a private industrial facility on the grounds of a Jewish cemetery near Toykut Village, Volyn Oblast. According to the UCSJ, the facility continued to function on the cemetery grounds.

All major religious organizations renewed their appeal to the government to establish a transparent legal process to address restitution claims. Most organizations continued to report problems and delays in the restitution process to reclaim property seized by the Communist regime; they said the consideration of claims frequently took longer than the month prescribed by law. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim groups continued to report the restitution process was complicated by intercommunity competition for particular properties, current use of some properties by state institutions, the designation of some properties as historic landmarks, local governments disputing jurisdictional boundaries, and previous transfers of some properties to private ownership. They said local officials continued to take sides in property restitution disputes, such as the case of the Lviv city government's denial of RCC requests for restitution of several properties which had been turned over to the UGCC.

The RCC continued to urge authorities to return former Church properties in the western part of the country and elsewhere. RCC leaders reported the government continued to refuse to facilitate the restitution of Odesa's Roman Catholic seminary building, which had been confiscated by the Soviet regime.

On February 23, the Odesa Oblast Council returned the city's historic synagogue to the Jewish community. Jewish community leaders continued to report property restitution difficulties with the Ternopil and Kyiv municipal governments.

Muslim community leaders continued to express concern over unresolved restitution claims involving historic religious buildings in Mykolayiv.

The All Ukrainian Council of Churches (AUCCRO), an independent interfaith board representing more than 90 percent of the country's religious organizations, renewed its appeal to parliament to impose a moratorium on the privatization of previously confiscated religious buildings. Despite government promises to address the issue, the government had taken no action as of the end of the year.

The Jewish community continued to express concern over the failure of local government authorities to protect historical religious properties.

UOC-MP representatives continued to complain about what they said was the central government's inadequate response to continuing discrimination and intolerance toward its members by UOC-KP representatives and high-ranking UOC-KP supporters in some local governments.

In July more than 20 Ukrainian Jewish groups published a statement condemning as a form of Holocaust denial the government's honoring of leaders of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). According to press reports, international scholars also objected. In July the Kyiv City Council named a street after Stepan Bandera, former OUN leader.

On September 29, the government commemorated the 75th anniversary of the 1941 Babyn Yar massacre of 33,000 Jews with a ceremony at which it made a pledge of one million dollars to enhance the existing memorial site with landscaped alleys paying tribute to Jewish victims and non-Jewish Ukrainians who saved Jews.

On April 25, the MFA appointed a new Special Representative for Prevention and Combatting Anti-Semitism, Racism and Xenophobia.

In an April 23 meeting with the AUCCRO President Poroshenko reiterated the government's commitment to protecting religious freedom.

On August 26, the president issued a decree to commemorate the upcoming 500th anniversary of the Reformation, stating Protestant churches and organizations had made a "significant contribution" to the development of religious, cultural life and charitable activity, and had played a "historic role" in strengthening the country as an independent nation. He stated the government would support and organize educational, academic and other events related to the 2017 anniversary.

On February 23, the Civic Council under the MFA issued a statement calling on the international community to take "effective measures to protect fundamental rights and freedoms of believers in the temporarily occupied areas of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol, and in certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts uncontrolled by the Ukrainian government, and also to counter attempts to use religion to fuel hatred and escalate the conflict." The council also stated the "massive violations" of the rights of believers and the disruption of activity of religious organizations, which occurred in Crimea following its occupation by the Russian troops, posed a "serious problem."

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Russian-backed separatists in Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts detained and imprisoned members of the Jehovah's Witnesses as well as other religious leaders. Although local authorities returned two previously seized Kingdom Halls to the Jehovah's Witnesses during the first half of the year, following passage of a law banning "sects" in June, "DPR" authorities threatened Jehovah's Witnesses with arrest and seized several more Kingdom Halls. "DPR" representatives also seized a church of the Seventh-day Adventists and staged a demonstration against "sects" outside a UGCC church. Russian-backed separatists continued to use numerous places of worship they had previously seized as military facilities.

According to the UGCC, on July 7, masked attackers verbally and physically attacked UGCC priest Vitaliy Kester at his home in separatist-controlled Kostyantynivka, Donetsk Oblast. Kester stated the incident might have been retaliation for his chaplaincy's support for government troops fighting against Russian-backed separatists.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, on January 17, three masked gunmen burst into the Kingdom Hall on Volkov Street in Horlivka, Donetsk Oblast. They detained congregation members Pavlo Dmitriev, Oleksandr Stadnyk, and Serhiy Rakita. Other Jehovah's Witnesses (approximately 30 people) were ordered to leave. The gunmen searched the Kingdom Hall and confiscated all its religious literature, claiming it was "extremist." Families of the detainees received no information about the three men until the next day. The men were held at temporary detention facilities in Donetsk and Makiyivka until their release on February 16.

In January the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group reported Russian-backed forces in Donetsk had imprisoned a number of local residents, including the president of the Center for Religious Studies and International Spiritual Relations, Ihor Kozlovskiy. Relatives reported the separatists took Kozlovskiy from his home, leaving his bedridden son unattended until the next day. The separatists searched Kozlovskiy's apartment and removed computer equipment, documents, and antiques. The separatists reportedly accused him of supporting religious minorities, of "espionage," and of manufacturing explosive devices. He remained in detention at year's end.

In February the separatist authorities returned a previously seized Kingdom Hall in Donetsk to the Jehovah's Witnesses. In June a local Jehovah's Witnesses

community regained control of its Kingdom Hall in Dokuchayivsk and religious services resumed there.

Following the adoption by the “DPR” of a law banning the creation of “sects” on June 24, the Jehovah’s Witnesses reported “DPR” representatives arrested a number of Jehovah’s Witnesses ministers while seizing their Kingdom Halls. On July 22, five gunmen entered the Kingdom Hall on Vitchyzniana Street in Horlivka during a religious service and ordered all 60 attendees to leave the building. The gunmen claimed the Jehovah’s Witnesses were participating in religious services of a banned religion. They arrested Oleksandr Ignatov, the minister of the congregation, and took him to the local “Unit for Combatting Organized Crime,” where “DPR” representatives interrogated him and informed him they had seized the Kingdom Hall. Ignatov was released late at night the same day. The gunmen reportedly vandalized the Kingdom Hall, stealing roof tiles and iron fencing, while “DPR police” refused to intervene.

On July 25, “DPR” gunmen arrested Volodymyr Popkov, the minister serving a congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Horlivka. They stated the newly adopted “DPR” law banned the religion of Jehovah’s Witnesses and they were seizing the Kingdom Hall on Simferopolska Street. They took Popkov to a local “Unit for Combatting Organized Crime,” where he was reportedly subjected to intense interrogation and threatened with death unless he stopped his religious activity. He was not released until the following day; on the same day the Kingdom Hall was looted by gunmen.

Aside from banning the creation of “sects,” the “Law on the Freedom of Worship and Religious Associations,” adopted by the “DPR People’s Council on June 24, required all religious groups to register with “DPR authorities.” The law gave the “DPR” extensive powers to deny a registration request.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, on June 24, a representative of the “ministry of state security of the DPR” prohibited Jehovah’s Witnesses in Dokuchayivsk, Donetsk Oblast, from “discussing religious topics with people” outside of their Kingdom Hall. He reportedly threatened any believers who defied the ban with 30-day arrest.

As of the end of the year, the Jehovah’s Witnesses reported nine of their Kingdom Halls had been seized both in the “DPR” and “LPR”, including in Horlivka, Donetsk, Telmanove, Yenakiyev Brianka, and Perevalsk.

According to the Church of the Seventh-day Adventists, on November 16, a group of “DPR” representatives seized an Adventist church building in Horlivka, claiming its congregation had failed to share church ownership documents with the municipal “authorities.”

On September 27, at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the executive director of the Institute for Religious Freedom, a Kyiv-based NGO, reported numerous places of worship in the “DPR” and “LPR” remained under control of the Russian-backed separatists, and often were used as military facilities. He cited as examples a complex of buildings of the Donetsk Christian University, a building of the Word of Life Bible Institute in Donetsk, and several places of worship of the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. He stated there was religious persecution in separatist-controlled areas of the Donbas region as a “consequence of the Russian aggression.”

According to the Russian-backed separatist-controlled Luhansk Information Center website, on March 11, the so-called Luhansk People’s Republic (“LPR”) head Ihor Plotnitsky instructed the “LPR’s State Committee for Religious Affairs,” its “State Security Ministry,” and its “Interior Ministry” to monitor religious groups closely. Plotnitsky reportedly said “sects” might pose a threat, but not all “nontraditional” religious organizations were “sects”, without specifying further what he meant.

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), on January 29, in Donetsk, members of the “Young Republic,” an organization associated with the “DPR” authorities” staged a demonstration near a UGCC church, carrying posters saying “No to sects in the ‘DPR!’” and “Greek-Catholic church conducts ‘anti-republican’ activities!” The demonstrators told OHCHR representatives they were speaking out against the Greek Catholic Church because it promoted the idea of a “united Ukraine.”

Russian-backed separatists also reportedly continued to participate in anti-Semitic acts.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of physical assaults on Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as one attack on a Jewish journalist. The UOC-MP pilgrimage march from the Donetsk Oblast to Kyiv celebrating St. Volodymyr’s Feast Day was mostly peaceful despite some acts of harassment. The UOC-KP pilgrimage march for St. Volodymyr’s

Day passed without incident, as did the UGCC pilgrimage to the Zarvanytsa Icon and Jewish community pilgrimages to Uman and other Jewish burial sites. UOC-MP leaders stated the UOC-KP continued its efforts to seize churches belonging to the UOC-MP; the UOC-KP said it was parishioners and not the UOC-KP who had initiated the transfers of affiliation. The Right Sector political movement continued to intervene at disputed religious properties on behalf of the UOC-KP. The Jewish community remained concerned about the continued existence of Lviv's Krakivskiy Market on the grounds of an ancient Jewish cemetery. There were numerous reports of vandalism at Holocaust memorials, synagogues, and Jewish cemeteries, as well as reports of vandalism directed against Jehovah's Witnesses' Kingdom Halls and a few reports of attacks on UOC-MP, UOC-KP and UGCC churches.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, on March 15, a man shouting "Jehovah's Witnesses are scum!" beat elderly missionaries Tamara Barsuk and Vira Gyl in Chuhuyiv, Kharkiv Oblast, until both lost consciousness. The attacker tore up their religious literature and scattered it on the street. Both women were hospitalized, and Gyl remained in the hospital for a month. Law enforcement authorities reportedly refused to treat the assault as a hate crime and instead investigated it as a "domestic quarrel." On October 11, the Chuhuyiv Town Court sentenced the attacker to two years in prison.

On July 8, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, a man shouting: "Go away dogs! We have our church," punched two female Jehovah's Witnesses in Kamianka, Sumy Oblast. One of the victims was diagnosed with a serious cranial injury. Law enforcement officials reportedly documented it as a "minor bodily injury," and refused the victims' request to classify the assault as a hate crime.

According to the National Minority Rights Monitoring Group (NMRMG), an NGO supported by the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress and the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities, one case of suspected anti-Semitic violence was recorded during the year, compared to one case of anti-Semitic violence in 2015, four such cases in 2014, and four in 2013.

On August 24, an unidentified young man attacked Israeli journalist Yitzhak Hildeshaimer in Kharkiv. The attacker struck the journalist from behind and reportedly performed a Nazi salute when Hildeshaimer turned around. The reporter cited his yarmulke as a likely reason for the attack.

On the night of December 21, unidentified individuals entered the synagogue near the grave of Rabbi Nachman, founder of the Breslov Hasidic movement, in Uman, Cherkasy Oblast, and subjected worshippers to anti-Semitic verbal abuse, then splashed red paint and sprayed noxious gas over the building. The vandals also left behind a pig's head with a swastika carved on it. Law enforcement authorities opened an investigation, and government officials, including the prime minister and prosecutor general, publicly condemned the attack. At year's end the investigation remained open. On December 31, unidentified individuals damaged a crucifix on a cross in Uman in what police said was an act of retaliation for the vandalism of the synagogue. Police detained and instituted a criminal investigation against two suspects for damaging the crucifix, while a third suspect remained at large.

The UOC-MP continued to express concern over a lack of progress in the police investigation of the killing of Roman Nikolayev, rector of UOC-MP St. Tetyana's parish in Kyiv, who was shot in 2015. As of the end of the year, no official link had been established between the killing and the victim's religion.

On July 27, the UOC-MP celebrated St. Volodymyr's Feast Day with pilgrimage processions to the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra Monastery, announced as the Procession of Peace, Love, and Prayer for Ukraine. Police reported 14,000 people participated in the final leg of the march, which began at UOC-MP monasteries in Donetsk and Ternopil Oblasts in early July. On July 19, Mykola Kokhanivsky, leader of the OUN Volunteer Movement, stated his group would prevent the procession from reaching the capital, saying the individuals participating in the march were "the Kremlin's outright collaborators." On July 20, the UOC-KP reiterated its condemnation of calls for violence against the UOC-MP procession, clergy, and members. On July 24, the head of the UGCC warned opponents of the march against attempts to hinder the procession. On July 26, supporters of the AutoMaidan group in Odessa prevented about five hundred UOC-MP members from boarding buses scheduled to take them to Kyiv for the procession. AutoMaidan activists reportedly threatened to burn the buses, forcing most drivers to cancel the trip. According to the UOC-MP press service, law enforcement officials were present at the scene but did nothing to stop the threats. Also on July 26, UOC-MP opponents threw eggs at the procession as it passed by Boryspil. Law enforcement personnel kept the attackers at a safe distance from the marchers and the UOC-MP praised law enforcement authorities for maintaining public security during the march. The procession arrived safely in Kyiv on July 27.

On July 28 the UOC-KP held its annual procession in Kyiv to mark St. Volodymyr's Feast Day. Police reported no incidents, and an estimated 15,000 individuals participated in the event.

According to the police, on July 16-17, thousands of individuals participated without incident in the UGCC annual national pilgrimage to the Zarvanytsya Icon of the Mother of God in Ternopil Oblast.

In September and October the annual Jewish New Year pilgrimages to the Uman burial site of Rabbi Nachman took place. Pilgrims attempted to block municipal workers from dismantling a bridge where they were staying temporarily during the pilgrimage, which led to clashes with police. According to the media, a record number of 40,000 pilgrims visited Uman during the year. Jewish pilgrims visited other burial sites of spiritual leaders in Belz, Medzhybizh, Berdychiv, and Hadyach, without report of significant incident.

According to the January 1 report by the Ministry of Culture, the UOC-MP had 12,334 congregations; the UOC-KP had 4,921 congregations; and the UAOC 1,188 congregations throughout the country. The report confirmed UOC-KP and UOC-MP estimates that less than a hundred UOC-MP congregations had transferred affiliation to the UOC-KP over the past few years.

According to statements made to the media by the UOC-MP, in several oblasts the UOC-KP continued to be "emboldened" by police inaction and support from radical groups, including the Right Sector political movement in its continuing efforts to seize UOC-MP church buildings. Some of the incidents reportedly occurred after local authorities had transferred parish jurisdictions from the UOC-MP to the UOC-KP against the will of some parishioners, according to the UOC-MP.

Right Sector representatives posted statements on its website saying they continued to visit sites disputed between the UOC-MP and UOC-KP to "facilitate" a change of jurisdiction at the request of the UOC-KP.

UOC-KP representatives continued to reject accusations about their involvement in the seizures of UOC-MP churches, saying parishioners using those church buildings had initiated legitimate transfers to UOC-KP jurisdiction. The UOC-KP continued to state it would act according to the law, and would accept into its jurisdiction any UOC-MP clergy and laity requesting UOC-KP affiliation.

According to the UOC-KP, on November 10 and 11, about a dozen young men yelled insults to members of a UOC-KP parish and construction workers building its church in Chornomorsk, Odesa Oblast. The attackers then used baseball bats to attack the walls of the congregation's current makeshift church. Parishioners stated the attack was an attempt to stop the construction of a permanent church building.

The Jewish community remained concerned about the continued existence of the Krakivsky Market in Lviv, located on the grounds of an ancient Jewish cemetery. According to the UCSJ, in October without consulting with the Jewish community, municipal authorities began digging at the site. Authorities said the digging was to restore a damaged cemetery fence. The city suspended the project when workers unearthed human remains, but the UCSJ expressed concern not all the remains were reburied.

The UCSJ and civic activists expressed concern over the Lviv city government's inability to stop construction of a high-rise building at the site of the World War II Jewish ghetto in Lviv. In November and December construction workers reportedly removed soil containing human remains from the site.

According to a January post on the website *Ukrinform*, the Russian Orthodox Church had established a staff within its Department of External Church Affairs in Moscow with the task of blackening the reputation of the UOC-KP and blocking the ecumenical patriarch from recognizing the canonicity of the UOC-KP.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, there were 21 incidents of vandalism, three of which were arson, against Kingdom Halls during the year, compared with 56 incidents of vandalism, including five arson attacks, in 2015.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, on May 17, unidentified individuals sprayed the walls of a Kingdom Hall in Lozova, Kharkiv Oblast, with graffiti, including a swastika. The police failed to identify the perpetrators.

On April 24 and April 30, unidentified individuals threw Molotov cocktails at the Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall on Pozharsky Street in Kyiv. Two fires were quickly extinguished. Both crimes remained unsolved at year's end.

The NMRMG identified 18 cases of anti-Semitic vandalism during the year, as compared to 22 in 2015 and 23 in 2014.

Several cases of anti-Semitic vandalism occurred in Kolomyia, Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast. On January 13, arsonists tried to set fire to the *ohel*, a structure covering the grave of Gillel Boruch Liechtenstein, the town's 19th century Chief Rabbi. The arson attempt failed, as the attackers were unable to ignite the flammable liquid they had planned to use. On August 18, vandals sprayed a swastika and anti-Semitic graffiti on the entrance to a local synagogue. On August 19, they caused damage to the Jewish cemetery. Law enforcement agencies identified three suspects who had desecrated a number of local Jewish sites in recent years and pressed charges. According to the local Jewish community, the Kolomyia City and District Court began to hear the case against the suspected perpetrators in August. The hearing continued at year's end.

The press and NGOs again this year reported vandalism to Holocaust memorials in Kyiv, Lviv, Nikopol, Mykolaiv, and Poltava Oblast. The investigations remained ongoing as of the end of the year.

On May 4, Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Day, a group of unidentified individuals burned an Israeli flag near the menorah monument in Babyn Yar. The Kyiv mayor condemned the act and urged law enforcement officials to conduct an investigation, which remained ongoing at year's end. Jewish community leaders called on the government to do more to improve security in the area and to investigate previous acts of vandalism against the memorial, including five such instances in 2015.

On July 24, unidentified individuals broke the door to the *ohel* of the grave of Rabbi Aryeh Leib in Shpola, Cherkasy Oblast, and threw a Molotov cocktail inside the structure. They attached another Molotov cocktail to the *ohel* door. The police investigation continued as of year's end.

On November 19, unidentified individuals defaced the front wall of the Central Synagogue in Chernivtsi with "Death to the Jews."

On November 28, unidentified attackers splashed paint on the Holocaust monument in Uzhgorod and left anti-Semitic leaflets at the site. According to media reports, an anonymous group of "national revolutionaries" claimed responsibility for the incident and published photos of the attack. The Transcarpathia Oblast Governor condemned the vandalism and called on law enforcement agencies to bring the offenders to justice. As of the end of the year, there was no further information about the case.

Donetsk oblast police reported unknown vandals threw Molotov cocktails into the UOC-KP Church of the Intercession of the Mother of God in Mariupol on November 6.

According to the UGCC, on August 29, unidentified individuals set fire to a newly built UGCC church in Ternopil. They also painted graffiti in the church basement. Police opened an investigation, which remained open at year's end.

On May 23, unknown individuals set fire to the Transfiguration Church of the UOC-MP in Kyiv. On April 24, an arson attack damaged the St. Agapitus UOC-MP Church in the capital. On January 5, unidentified individuals set fire to the UOC-MP Church of Saint Petro Mohyla in Kyiv. Police investigations into the attacks continued at year's end. The UOC-MP described these and other incidents as the result of a slander campaign reportedly conducted by some media outlets.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador, embassy officers, and other U.S. government officials continued to discuss concerns about the government's response to the division within the Orthodox Church, religious heritage preservation, and anti-Semitism in meetings with the presidential administration, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, members of parliament, political parties, and local officials. The Ambassador continued to raise the issue of communal property restitution in meetings and correspondence with government officials at both the national and local levels, urging government officials to take greater action to ensure the preservation of historic religious sites.

Embassy officials continued to meet with Muslim internally displaced persons from Crimea to discuss issues they faced, in particular their ability to practice their religion freely and the restitution of their religious property.

The Ambassador and embassy officers met with leaders of major Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious groups in Dnipro, Kyiv, Uman, and Lviv to discuss the concerns of these communities and urge peaceful resolution of religious disputes over property. In particular, the embassy encouraged religious groups involved in the dispute related to the location of parts of Lviv's Krakivskiy Market on the former site of the city's Old Jewish Cemetery to resolve the dispute peacefully.

The Secretary of Commerce led the U.S. delegation participating in a ceremony to commemorate the anniversary of the Babyn Yar massacre; she emphasized the

need for religious tolerance and respect in her discussions with officials and religious leaders. Embassy officers also continued their participation in annual ceremonies honoring Holocaust survivors and rescuers.

CRIMEA

Executive Summary

In February 2014, armed forces of the Russian Federation seized and occupied Crimea. In March 2014, Russia announced Crimea had become part of the Russian Federation. A UN General Assembly resolution declared continued international recognition of Crimea's inclusion within Ukraine's international borders. The U.S. government continues not to recognize the attempted annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and maintains Crimea continues to be part of Ukraine. Occupation forces continue their de facto implementation of the laws of the Russian Federation in the territory of Crimea. The occupation authorities subjected Muslim Crimean Tatars to abductions, forced psychiatric hospitalizations, imprisonment, and detentions, according to human rights and international organizations, especially if the authorities suspected the Tatars of involvement in the Muslim organization Hizb ut-Tahrir. While the Russian government reported 365 religious communities in Crimea had met the deadline for reregistration as officially recognized religious groups, over 1000 communities recognized under Ukrainian law had not done so, according to the OHCHR. Following the occupation authorities' designation of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis as an "extremist" organization, Mejlis representatives and other Crimean Tatar groups operating in the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government established an independent Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea (SAMC). The RCC, the UGCC and the UOC-KP reported the occupation authorities made it difficult for them to operate in the territory, including by seizing more than a third of the UOC-KP's churches.

Religious and human rights groups reported Russian media continued to engage in a campaign to create suspicion and fear among religious groups, especially targeting the Crimean Tatar community and the UOC-KP and the UGCC. Muslim religious properties reportedly were vandalized and Muslim leaders said police were slow to investigate.

The U.S. government continued to publicly condemn religious abuses committed by Russian occupation authorities in Crimea, particularly the intimidation of Christian and Muslim congregations through use of Russian Federation laws on

extremism. In issuing a statement on September 16 denying the legitimacy of the Russian Duma elections held in Crimea, the U.S. Department of State expressed specific concern about the status of the Crimean Tatar community. Officials from the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv remained unable to visit the peninsula following its occupation by the Russian Federation but continued to meet with Crimean Muslim and Christian leaders in other parts of the country to demonstrate 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 the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, the total population of the peninsula is 2,353,000. No recent independent survey provides data on the religious affiliation of the population, although there are an estimated 300,000 Crimean Tatars, who make up 13 percent of the population and are overwhelmingly Muslim. Adherents of the UOC-MP, Protestants, and Muslims are the largest religious groups in Sevastopol.

According to data collected by the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture in 2014 (the most recent year available), there are 2,083 religious organizations (a term including parishes, congregations, theological schools, monasteries, and other constituent parts of a church or religious group) in the ARC and 137 in Sevastopol. The numbers include organizations both with and without legal entity status. Muslims have the largest number of religious organizations in the ARC, most of which are affiliated with SAMC, Ukraine's largest Muslim group. The UOC-MP remains the largest Christian denomination. Smaller Christian denominations include the UOC-KP, the RCC, the UAOC, the UGCC, and the Jehovah's Witnesses, along with Protestant groups, including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists and Lutherans. There are several Jewish congregations, mostly in Sevastopol and Simferopol.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Pursuant to international recognition of the continued inclusion of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea 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 and attempted annexation, however, the occupation authorities continue their de facto implementation of the laws of the Russian Federation in the territory.

Government Practices

The occupation authorities subjected Muslim Crimean Tatars to abductions, forced psychiatric hospitalizations, imprisonment, and detentions, according to human rights and international organizations. In May a member of the Bakhchisaray Mejlis disappeared after he was kidnapped by uniformed men. The former deputy head of the Bakhchisaray office of the Mejlis was confined for several weeks in a psychiatric hospital, as were several other Muslims suspected of affiliation with Hizb ut-Tahrir, a Muslim organization banned in Russia. The authorities sentenced several Muslim Crimean Tatars to prison for alleged involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir activities and arrested approximately 35 more during the year. According to the Russian Ministry of Justice, 365 religious communities had met the deadline established by the occupation authorities for reregistration, while OCHCR reported over 1000 communities recognized under Ukrainian law had not done so. In March the occupation authorities designated the Crimean Tatar Mejlis as an “extremist” organization and banned Mejlis symbols. In response to what they said was Russian pressure on the Crimean SAMC, Mejlis representatives and other Crimean Tatar groups operating in the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government established an independent SAMC. Roman Catholic Church leaders reported continued difficulty in staffing their parishes because of the policies of the occupation. The UGCC reported it was only able to operate under the umbrella of the RCC. The UOC-KP reported the occupation authorities had seized more than a third of its churches and made it difficult for the UOC-KP to lease property. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On May 24, a group of uniformed men kidnapped Ervin Ibragimov, a member of the Bakhchisaray Mejlis and of the Coordinating Council of the World Congress of Crimean Tatars, after stopping his car on a road outside Bakhchisaray. Footage from a closed-circuit television camera showed the men forcing Ibragimov into a car and driving off. According to the Crimea Human Rights Group, the men wore uniforms of the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ traffic police. According to the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine on May 25, Ibragimov’s father went to the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in Simferopol to file a complaint and provide the television footage. The FSB officers reportedly refused to file the complaint and told him to send it by mail. Ibragimov had planned to travel to the town of Sudak on May 25 to attend the court hearing of a group of Crimean Tatars charged with holding an unauthorized gathering on May 18 to mark Crimean Tatar Deportation Remembrance Day. On June 1, Ibragimov’s employment record book

and passport were found near a bar in Bakhchisaray. Occupation authorities opened an investigation into the case, which remained open at year's end with no further information on Ibragimov's whereabouts.

From August to September, according to reports by the media and human rights NGOs, the former deputy head of the Bakhchisaray Mejlis, Ulmi Umerov, was confined to a psychiatric hospital by the occupation authorities following his detention in May.

On December 7, the Foreign Ministry of Ukraine condemned the forced psychiatric examination of Ukrainian citizens, including Vadym Siruk, Mislim Aliyev, Refat Alimov, and Arsen Dzhepparov, all of whom were detained by the occupation authorities on suspicion of involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir, a Muslim organization outlawed in Russia but legal in Ukraine. Siruk and Mislim Aliyev had been arrested in February.

According to media reports, in September the North Caucasus District Military Court sentenced Ruslan Zeytullayev to seven years in prison for his alleged role in organizing a Sevastopol-based group of Hizb ut-Tahrir followers. Ferat Sayfullayev, Rustem Vaitov, and Nuri Primov each received five-year prison terms for their alleged membership in the group. On December 27, Russia's Supreme Court reportedly overturned Zeytullayev's verdict and ordered re-examination of his case. The court upheld the prison sentences of Sayfullayev, Vaitov and Primov, who were originally arrested in 2015.

In a December 15 report, Amnesty International estimated at least 19 individuals were under arrest on charges of being members of Hizb ut-Tahrir. The occupation authorities charged the detainees with participation in a "terrorist" group. Amnesty International reported such charges "either appear manifestly unfounded or there are serious doubts regarding the probity of the respective charges, raising serious fair trial concerns." Civic activists stated any suspected member of the movement could potentially be charged with and convicted of terrorism. .

On February 11, police conducted searches at the homes of Crimean Tatars and arrested Emir-Usein Kuku, Enver Bekirov, for their suspected involvement with the Hizb ut-Tahrir group in Yalta. On December 6, Simferopol's Kyiv District Court reportedly granted a three month extension of their detention. The court also extended the detention of Teimur Abdullayev, Ayder Saledinov, Rustem Ismailov, Useir Ambullayev, and Emil Dzhemadenov, citing their participation in a Simferopol-based Hizb ut-Tahrir group.

The press reported the authorities in Bakhchysarai, on May 12, conducted searches and arrested Crimea Tatars Zevri Abseitov, Remzi Memetov, Rustem Abiltarov, and Enver Mamutov for their suspected affiliation with Hizb ut-Tahrir.

On October 12, Chairman of the Central Election Commission of the Kurultai (parliament) of the Crimean People Zair Smedlyayev was quoted in the press as reporting FSB forces had raided the homes of Crimean Tatars, some of whom had returned from the Hajj. The FSB detained Ayder Saledinov, together with Teymur Abdullayev, Uzair Abdullayev, Emil Dzhemadenov, and Rustem Ismailov, reportedly on suspicion of involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir. All remained in custody at year's end facing potential prison sentences of up to 10 years.

In February the OHCHR, based on information from the Ministry of Justice of Russia, reported 365 religious communities operating in Crimea had reregistered by the January 1 deadline set by the occupation law enforcement. Over 1,000 religious communities recognized under Ukrainian law had not reregistered. The OHCHR stated stringent legal requirements under Russian legislation had either prevented or discouraged reregistration of many religious communities. Many members of religious minorities, especially Crimean Tatars, Greek Catholics, and members of the UOC-KP, had reportedly refused Russian citizenship and were unable under occupation law to register a religious community.

The International Federation for Human Rights and the Ukrainian Helsinki Union for Human Rights condemned what they reported was the persecution of Crimean Tatar Muslims following the Russian authorities' March 3 designation of the Mejlis as an "extremist organization" and the subsequent ban on Mejlis symbols. According to other human rights groups, authorities had labeled the Mejlis as an extremist organization in order to restrict the rights of Crimean Tatars.

Mejlis leaders stated continued Russian pressure on the SAMC meant it no longer represented the views of its worshipers. On November 19, delegates representing the Mejlis and other Crimean Tatar organizations based in the Ukrainian government-controlled territory held the Congress of Crimean Tatar Religious Organizations in Kyiv, voting unanimously to create an independent SAMC. The congress elected Aider Rustemov as its leader.

Human rights groups reported imams at Crimean Tatar mosques, most of which remained unregistered, continued to have to inform occupation authorities each time they transferred from one mosque to another.

According to RCC representatives, the RCC continued to operate in the territory but as a diocese directly under the authority of the Vatican. The RCC continued to have difficulty in staffing parishes, as many of its priests were Polish or Ukrainian, and authorities continued to require them to register as foreign residents, which allowed the priests to stay in the territory for only 90 days at a time and then required them to stay out of Crimea for 90 days before returning. At the beginning of the year, seven RCC priests reportedly remained on the peninsula.

The UGCC reported it remained unable to operate as an independent church and could only operate as a pastoral district of the RCC.

The media quoted a report by Mufti Said Ismagilov, leader of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine, saying armed representatives of the occupation authorities had claimed to have found “extremist literature” at a mosque on Mokrousov Street in Simferopol during raids in January and September, but had actually brought the literature to the site in an attempt to fabricate a criminal case against local Muslims.

According to the OHCHR, the UOC-KP’s refusal to cooperate with the de facto Crimean authorities had led to the seizure and closure of its churches. According to the UOC-KP, only nine of the original 15 UOC-KP churches located in the region remained functioning at the end of the year.

In a February 9 interview with Chornomorska TV, Archbishop Klyment, head of the Crimean Diocese of the UOC-KP, said the Russian authorities had handed over part of the UOC-KP diocesan administration office in Simferopol to a private company, contrary to earlier promises to allow the UOC-KP to retain its presence in the region. He expressed concern the Russian authorities might ban the UOC-KP from the peninsula.

The UOC-KP leadership stated Russian occupation authorities continued to raise rents artificially and to prevent the Church from leasing property. After authorities repeatedly ignored a UOC-KP request to reduce the increased rent for the UOC-KP cathedral building in Simferopol, the occupation-run appellate court in Sevastopol, on June 14, reportedly sanctioned the eviction of the UOC-KP from the cathedral, and ordered the UOC-KP to pay a fine of 500,000 Russian rubles (\$8,100).

According to the All-Ukraine Union of Pentecostal Churches, on December 2, occupation authorities in Bakhchysarai warned the local Pentecostal congregation,

Voice of Hope, to stop using its church building located on Rakytzky Street, citing alleged violations of construction standards. The church building was located opposite a newly built office of a unit of the FSB. The authorities also demanded the congregation remove from the church's front entrance a banner with the Biblical quote "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious and human rights groups reported Russian media continued to engage in a campaign to create suspicion and fear among certain religious groups, especially targeting Crimean Tatar Muslims, who the media accused of being linked to radical Islamic groups engaged in terrorism. Russian media continued to depict the UOC-KP and UGCC as "fascists" for supporting the Ukrainian government and opposing the Russian occupation.

Crimean Tatars continued to report attacks on religious buildings and institutions. They reported police continued to refuse to investigate such crimes or were slow to do so.

According to the SAMC, on August 27, unidentified individuals threw three Molotov cocktails at a mosque in Pozharske Village, Simferopol District. The building sustained minor damage.

According to media reports, on October 13, a suspected arson attack destroyed several buildings of the UOC-MP monastery in Morozivka Village near Sevastopol. Before the attack unidentified individuals reportedly inscribed, "Down with Sabodan's heritage! Russian land for the Russians!" on a monastery gate, apparently a reference to the pro-Ukrainian views of the UOC-MP's late leader, Metropolitan Volodymyr Sabodan. According to UOC-MP Metropolitan Oleksandr, the monastery had remained subordinate to the UOC-MP in Ukraine following the Russian annexation, and monastery monks had received threats preceding the attack on this account.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government continued to call attention to religious abuses committed by Russian forces and occupation authorities in Crimea, especially against Christians and Muslims. U.S. government officials and embassy officers continued to condemn the intimidation of religious congregations, especially those of Christians and Muslim Crimean Tatars. In issuing a statement on September 16, denying the

legitimacy of the Russian Duma elections held in Crimea, the U.S. Department of State also expressed concern over the status of the Crimean Tatar community.

Embassy and U.S. government officials remained unable to visit Crimea following its occupation by the Russian Federation. Embassy officers continued to meet in other parts of Ukraine with Muslim and Christian leaders whose congregations were affected by the actions of the occupying authorities to discuss their concerns and reassure them of U.S. support for their right to practice their religious beliefs.