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RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORY OF DONETSK REGION

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the analysis of dynamics of the religious situation and its impact on the population of the temporarily occupied territory of the Donetsk region in the period from 2014 to 2024. When analyzing the religious situation in the occupied territory, it should be borne in mind that after the beginning of the armed conflict in the Donetsk region, the territory under the control of anti-Ukrainian forces has been constantly changing. The study of the peculiarities of religious processes in the Donetsk region in the light of occupation reveals not only aspects of politics and socio-cultural dynamics, but also outlines the importance of religion in maintaining religious identity and perception of society in the context of conflict and tense socio-political ties. The study confirms that as a result of military aggression, a significant number of religious organizations that functioned in the Donetsk region before the war began have become de facto “hostages” in the temporarily occupied

territory, where the Ukrainian government is unable to exercise its constitutional powers. The researchers state that from the first days of their stay in power in the occupied territory of Donetsk region, pro-Russian leaders declared their desire to fight for the establishment of the “Russian world” and the establishment of Russian ideological ideals in society, imposing their own social and spiritual values on the Ukrainian people.

Keywords: occupied territories, religious situation, multidenominationality, religious oppression, repression, religious identity, socio-cultural realities.

Introduction

The religious situation in the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine in the period after 2014, and especially with the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has changed significantly compared to the pre-war period. Russia has included in its Constitution a provision on the accession to the Russian Federation of the Ukrainian Crimea and four regions of the southeast: Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, even though none of these regions are totally under Russian control. An assimilation policy aimed at destroying Ukrainian identity is being implemented in the temporarily occupied territories. The Russian occupation has caused significant changes in the daily practices of confessions, disrupting the normal routine of religious life. Correspondents from the occupied territories report on the priority position of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the open persecution of some other confessions. Religious studies indicate the complexity of the situation, emphasizing the importance of studying the real interaction between religious communities and the occupation authorities, as well as their influence on the dynamics of religious life. In addition, the study of religious processes in this territory in the context of the influences of occupation reflects not only political and socio-cultural aspects but also determines the role of religion in maintaining identity and perception of society in the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Background

With the start of Russia’s full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, a new period began in the study of the strategy of the occupation authorities regarding religious denominations, when old ideological and political clichés disappeared and a new array of materials is introduced into scientific circulation. These issues are the focus of attention for

Kyiv religious scholars such as V. Yelenskyi,¹ O. Sagan,² L. Filipovych,³ V. Tytarenko,⁴ A. Kyrydon,⁵ and S. Kahamlyk.⁶ Their works are written on the basis of rich sources and statistical material that was not actively used and had not previously been introduced into scientific circulation.

A fairly powerful center of religious scholars, concentrated around the Donetsk National Technical University (DonNTU), to which the Faculty of Philosophy and Religious Studies of the Donetsk State University of Informatics and Artificial Intelligence (DonSUIAI) was attached, functioned in Donetsk before the war. Associate Professor I. Kozlovskyi monitored the dynamics of religious communities,⁷ who was court-martialed (!) by the Donetsk People's Republic (hereinafter referred to as DPR) on fake charges. After several years of imprisonment, he was managed to be exchanged for Russian prisoners of war, and he left for Kyiv. He took an active part in scientific and public life until the last days of his life. Donetsk religious scholars, who also left for the territory controlled by Ukraine, collect information about the state of religious communities from the places. The publications of I. Lukovenko, S. Heraskov, A. Fesenko, S. Ismahilov, R. Khalikov, and others reveal the essence of the anti-Ukrainian policy of the occupation authorities in the Donetsk region, methods of its pursuing, and consequences.

¹ V. Yelenskyi (2025). "The Symbol of Our Kinship" versus the "Insignia of Our Enslavement": Struggle for church's (in) dependence amid the Russian-Ukrainian War. *Religion as Securitization in Central and Eastern Europe*, 92-113; V. Yelenskyi (2024). At the crossroads of faith and war: navigating religious freedom in Ukraine. *The churches and the war*, 303-312.

² O. Sagan, V. Bondarenko, M. Yanauer (2024). Orthodoxy in Ukraine: Modern Institutional and Educational Issues. Publishing House "Baltija Publishing".

³ Л. Филипович, А. Колодний (2024). Вплив російсько-української війни на трансформації релігійного життя України. *Буковинський богословський вісник* [L. Filipovich, A. Kolodnyi. The impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the transformation of religious life in Ukraine. *Bukovinian Theological Bulletin*]. Issue 3. 87-95.

⁴ В. Докаш, В. Тітаренко (2024) Російська війна в Україні як каталізатор трансформаційних процесів українського харизматизму (у фокусі церкви «Нове покоління»). *Буковинський богословський вісник*. [V. Dokash, V. Titarenko. The Russian war in Ukraine as a catalyst for the transformation processes of Ukrainian charismatism (in focus is the New Generation Church). *Bukovinian Theological Bulletin*]. Issue 2. 13-20.

⁵ А. Курыдон, S. Troyan (2022). The Russian-Ukrainian war (2014-2022): Basic preconditions and causes. *Balkan social science review*. Issue 20. 157-179.

⁶ С. Кагамлик (2024). Ідеологічна агресія Московського патріархату як складова російсько-української війни: шляхи та форми протидії. *Ukrainoznavstvo*. [S. Kahamlyk. Ideological Aggression of the Moscow Patriarchate as a Component of the Russian-Ukrainian War: Ways and Forms of Countermeasures. *Ukrainian Studies*]. Issue 4. 66-76. [https://doi.org/10.17721/2413-7065.4\(93\).2024.318189](https://doi.org/10.17721/2413-7065.4(93).2024.318189).

⁷ І. Козловський (2018). Християнські церкви Донеччини (у контексті російської військової агресії). *Narodna tvorchist ta etnolohiia*. [I. Kozlovskyi. Christian Churches of Donetsk Region (in the Context of Russian Military Aggression). *Folk Art and Ethnology*]. Issue 4. 52-59.

Purpose of the Study.

The purpose of the article is to systematically analyze the dynamics of the religious situation and its impact on the population of the temporarily occupied territory of the Donetsk region during the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The Main Stages of the Evolution of Relations between Authorities and Religious Organizations in the Temporarily Occupied Territories of the Donetsk Region.

The current religious situation in the Donetsk region as a whole, including the territories temporarily occupied by Russia, is determined by the confessional realities that formed even before the beginning of full-scale Russian aggression. It should be noted that the Ukrainian Donetsk region is a border region with a dominance of local "Donetsk" identity and a tendency towards Soviet-Russian narratives, a relatively low (compared to the general Ukrainian realities) level of religiosity. Obviously, this state of things was influenced by many years of atheistic, or rather anti-church propaganda, which was disseminated till the last years of the USSR existence.

In addition to that, on the eve of the war, the Donetsk region was distinguished among other regions of Ukraine by its confessional diversity. As of January 1, 2013, there were 37,000 recognized religious organizations in Ukraine, representing 55 movements. Almost all religious institutions had a clear structure, territorial branching, a media network, and used methods of real and potential influence on society inherent only to them. The most numerous religious associations were the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) – 12,485 communities, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) – 4,536 communities, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) – 3,734 communities.⁸

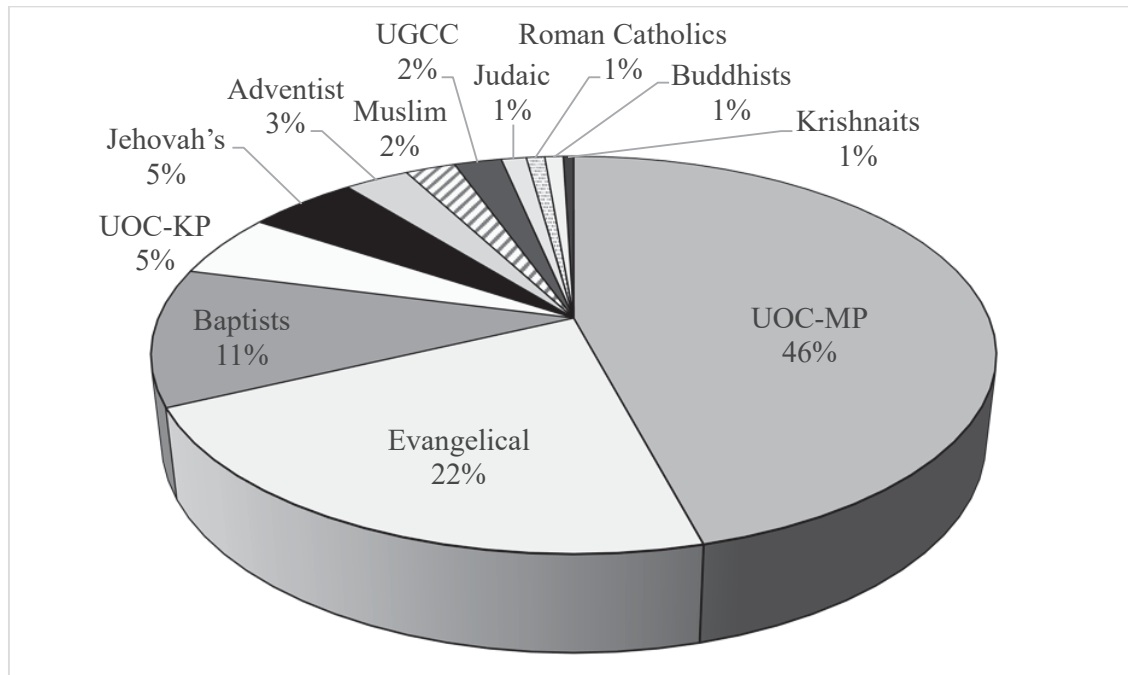
Official statistics of the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine (01.01.2014) showed that in the Donetsk region there were 1,797 religious communities and associations, of which 762 were UOC-MP, 366 were churches of Evangelical Christians, 186 were churches of Christian Baptists, 86 were parishes of UOC-KP, 83 were Jehovah's Witnesses, 49 were Adventist

⁸ Релігія і влада в Україні: проблема взаємовідносин. Інформаційні матеріали (2020, 18 грудня). *Центр Разумкова*. [Religion and power in Ukraine: problems of relations. Information materials. *The Razumkov Centre*]. <http://www.razumkov.org.ua> [in Ukrainian].

churches, 38 were Muslim communities, 36 were UGCC, 19 were Judaic communities, 14 were Roman Catholics, 14 were Buddhists, and 8 were Hare Krishna organizations (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1.

**Official statistics of the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine,
religious communities and associations, %
(01.01.2014)⁹**



Despite the soothing tone of government reports and positive quantitative characteristics of the ethnocultural and religious life of the regions, the regional religious policy of the Ukrainian state made a rather contradictory impression. These contradictions were especially noticeable in the regions that were the first to stand in the way of the “Russian world” Crimea and Donbas. Russia actively created new and used existing religious organizations to promote separatist sentiments and campaign for accession to Russia. Some clergymen were involved in subversive operations by the special services.

⁹ С. Гераськов, А. Фесенко (2020). Релігійна безпека на тимчасово окупованих територіях: стратегії та рішення для країн Східного партнерства: аналітична доповідь [S. Heraskov, A. Fesenko, Religious Security in the Temporarily Occupied Territories: Strategies and Solutions for the Eastern Partnership Countries: Analytical Report] 40.

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia inspired the proclamation of two puppet “people’s republics” in Eastern Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR and LPR). As a result, the territory of the Donetsk region was divided into parts controlled and uncontrolled by Ukraine. In the uncontrolled territory, the separatists imposed significant restrictions on exercising their constitutional powers by the Ukrainian authorities, in particular regarding the guarantee of the right to freedom of conscience in these territories. Influential religious organizations in the Donetsk region are becoming instruments for promoting the ideas of the “Russian world,” since the religious factor played a role in the events of the so-called “Russian spring” in 2014.

It has to be conceded that Russia did not immediately start persecuting non-Orthodox confessions in the occupied territory, maintaining tolerance for a certain time and “turning a blind eye” to the loyalty of religious communities to Ukraine. It is sufficient to say that in 2014, a daily interconfessional marathon, “Prayer for Ukraine,” took place in the center of Donetsk.

The situation changed in the middle of 2015, when the then leader of the DPR, O. Zakharchenko, stated that he recognized only four denominations – Orthodoxy (UOC-MP), (Roman) Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism. All other religious organizations were under suspicion and, in fact, under persecution. A year later, the pro-Russian authorities launched an offensive against Greek Catholics and Protestants as the least loyal to Russia denominations. They were proclaimed “sectarians,” and the local authorities organized rallies of ostensibly dissatisfied believers against them. Thus, at the end of January 2016, a rally was held near the UGCC temple in Donetsk, the organizers of which gave out posters with slogans: “No sects in the DPR,” “The Greek Catholic Church is a driver of anti-republican activity”, “DPR is a territory without sects.”¹⁰

Thus, the evolution of relations between the authorities of the self-proclaimed DPR and religious organizations in the temporarily occupied territories of the Donetsk region has gone through several stages:

the first – from spring 2014 to spring 2015,

the second – from summer 2015 to summer 2016,

¹⁰ В окупированном Донетке митинговали против «сект» ЦРУ (2019). *Новини Донбасу* [In occupied Donetsk rallied against CIA “sects”]. <https://novosti.dn.ua/news/248740-vokkupyrovannom-donecke-mytyngovaly-protyv-sekt-cru-vydeo-foto>.

the third – from summer 2016 to February 2022,

the fourth – from February 24, 2022 to today.

The first three stages were identified by I. Kozlovskiy,¹¹ the fourth is proposed by the authors of the article. The leading trend, on the basis of which the mentioned stages were identified, is in the constant and irreversible strengthening of control over religious life by the Russian authorities.

Orthodox Churches of the Donetsk Region

Among all the confessions present in the territory of the Donetsk region, the UOC-MP has been the most numerous since pre-war times. The UOC-MP was a church institution that was tightly integrated into the local power establishment and was used by the regional authorities of the Donetsk region as a tool for solving their own political goals and tasks. There was a symbiosis of church-government relations, especially during the governorship and presidency of V. Yanukovich. The church (at least some of its representatives) was and remains the promoter of Russian narratives being incorporated institutionally into the Russian church structure.

The UOC-MP acquired a privileged position in the occupied territory,¹² its structures were exempted from mandatory re-registration, and they were subjects only to so-called “legalization.” At the end of 2019, the occupation administration reported that 254 religious communities of the UOC-MP had been officially legalized (in 2018 – 247).¹³ If we compare these data with the total regional official Ukrainian statistics and assume that all (or at least most) communities were “legalized,” then 32% of the UOC-MP organizations (according to data as of January 1, 2019) of their total regional pre-war number remained in the uncontrolled

¹¹ І. Козловський (2019). *Порушення прав і свобод віруючих та релігійних організацій на окупованих територіях Донеччини (2014-2019 рр.)* [I. Kozlovskiy, *Violation of the rights and freedoms of believers and religious organizations in the occupied territories of Donetsk region (2014–2019)*]. 129–132.

¹² В. Бокоч, (2017). *Релігія в гібридній війні на Сході України*. [V. Bokoch *Religion in the Hybrid War in Eastern Ukraine*]. 27–31.

¹³ *Отчет о работе Министерства культуры Донецкой Народной Республики (2019)*. [Report on the work of the Ministry of Culture of the Donetsk People’s Republic]. <http://www.mincult.govdnr.ru/otchet-o-rabote-ministerstva-kultury-doneckoy-narodnoy-respubliki-v-2019-godu>.

territory. After the DPR was included in the Russian Constitution as a new subject of the federation, the UOC-MP in fact became a part of the ROC.

In contrast to the UOC-MP, nationally oriented Orthodox denominations (there were 23 of them on the eve of the war) became among the main targets for oppression and repression. The pro-Ukrainian position of these denominations and the pastoral care of believers in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other security structures and humanitarian service to war victims were perceived by the occupation authorities as a direct threat to the pro-Russian authorities.

With the beginning of military aggression in 2014, the administration of the Donetsk-Mariupol eparchy of the UOC-KP (the leading center) was moved to Mariupol. 36 communities of the church remained in the occupied territory. Most priests were forced to leave the occupied territory (either independently or were expelled by the occupation authorities with a prohibition on return). In September 2014, an informal “hunt” for the UOC-KP priests was declared in Donetsk and other occupied settlements, and the seizing of churches was in process. In particular, the separatists kidnapped two priests, beat them, calling them “Bandera priests,” took them out into the field, simulating a shooting, etc. After this incident, the Archbishop (since 2021 – Metropolitan) of Donetsk and Mariupol, Serhii (Horobtsov), recommended that all church servants leave the occupied regions. The head of the diocese himself also left Donetsk at the end of 2014. In 2015, militants from the Vostok brigade arrested and imprisoned priest Pavlo Minkov.

During 2019, 3 church buildings were seized from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). According to Archbishop Serhii, 3 priests, 2 deacons, and 3 nuns continued to serve in the temporarily uncontrolled territory, conducting services in about 20 parishes by rotation. A complicated and unclear situation has developed around the House of Mercy for the Aged (Boikivske village, former Telmanovo), which houses about 40 elderly people (there is evidence that it was planned to set up a hospital for the wounded there).

The occupation administration tried to force priests of the UOC-KP to re-register parishes on the territory of the self-proclaimed “republic.” However, as of early 2025, the authors are not aware of any official re-registration of the OCU communities. Since 2018, the church leadership has reported the inadmissibility and impossibility of fulfilling the requirements for re-registration under the occupation legislative documents (in particular, under the so-called Law of the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” “On Freedom of

Religion and on Religious Associations”)¹⁴. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2014, the UOC-KP has been considered exclusively “schismatics” and “nationalists.” Therefore, the UOC-KP communities (after December 2019 – the OCU) continued their activities in fact underground.

Non-Orthodox Christian Denominations

The differentiated approach to Christian denominations by the occupying authorities resulted in persecution of Greek Catholics and Protestants.

Thus, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, although not officially banned by the DPR government, had an aggressive policy pursued against it. The facts of the churches’ seizure were known as early as 2014, and the monastery of the nuns in Donetsk was taken. The priests who deliberately remained there continued to perform their ministry in shifts (within a month, replacing each other). According to Fr. Vasyl Panteliuk, there were contacts with Metropolitan Hilarion (Shukalo), who offered his assistance to the UGCC communities.¹⁵ Occasionally the UGCC became the object of organized actions by the occupying authorities and local activists.

At the end of 2019, the Holy Transfiguration Parish in Donetsk received official “registration” as the first UGCC community in the DPR. On the eve of the full-scale invasion, 11 UGCC communities were left in the territory uncontrolled by Ukraine. Three communities of them acted in Donetsk, one in Horlivka, and one in Khartsyzsk.

Protestant (in particular, Charismatic and Full-evangelical) churches turned out to be centers of resistance to the “Russian world” in the Donetsk region, believers and ministers of Protestant churches (for example, pastor of the Word of Life church O. Khomchenko, pastor of the Assembly of God church S. Kosiak) became co-founders of the above-mentioned Donetsk prayer service (Prayer Marathon “Prayer for Ukraine”).

¹⁴ Закон Донецкой Народной Республики «О свободе вероисповедания и о религиозных объединениях» (2016). [Law of the Donetsk People’s Republic “On Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations”]. <https://dnrsovet.su/zakonodatelnaya-deyatelnost/prinyatye/zakony/zakon-donetskoj-narodnoj-respubliki-o-svobode-veroispovedaniya-i-religioznyh-obedineniyah>

¹⁵ Греко-католики розповіли про підтримку від Української Православної Церкви в Донецьку (2019). *Україна сьогодні*. [Greek Catholics tell of support from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Donetsk]. <https://ukraine.segodnya.ua/ua/ukraine/greko-katoliki-rasskazali-o-podderzhke-otukrainskoy-pravoslavnoy-cerkvi-v-donecke-698139.html>.

Protestant churches, such as Evangelical Christian Baptists (hereinafter referred to as ECB), Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists (hereinafter referred to as SDA) were active in the occupied territories, albeit on a limited basis. The largest presence was recorded in ECB communities (as of the end of 2019, only 26 ECB communities were permitted to operate legally), three communities of Christians of the Evangelical Faith Pentecostal were legalized (two in Donetsk, one in Horlivka), and four churches of Seventh-day Adventists (two in Donetsk, one in Ilovaisk, and one in Horlivka). Among the re-registered communities is the central ECB church in the city of Donetsk, Gethsemane, well-known in the city churches of the ECB Bethel, House of the Gospel, Golgotha, communities in Horlivka, Torez, Makiivka, Yenakiievo, Ilovaisk, Shakhtarsk, Amvrosiivka, the central church of the SDA of Donetsk, etc. It should be noted that the fact of obtaining "registration" by individual communities did not guarantee there was no persecution of other communities of the same denominations. Thus, in particular, when some ECB communities were collecting documents for "registration," at the same time the Donetsk church of the ECB Light of the Gospel received a decision to nationalize its house of prayer (May 2019).

The risks of activity for Protestant communities in uncontrolled territory, on the one hand, were based on the attitude of the occupation administration to the "religious danger" from the so-called "sects"; on the other hand, they were due to the patriotic, pro-Ukrainian position of Protestant communities in Ukrainian territory, who actively joined the volunteer movement and clearly expressed their position on condemning Russian aggression and supporting the integrity of Ukraine. The ideology of the "DPR" from the beginning of the war was that Protestant churches were "agents of foreign influence" and USA "spies."

The Protestant communities that decided to stay in the occupied territory were actually left without ties with their administrative structures in Ukraine. Pastors who were known for their pro-Ukrainian position were, at best, expelled beyond the borders of the so-called DPR, either were forced to move out (having received a ban on re-entry) or, at worst, they had been captured and tortured (for example, pastor of the Assembly of God Church S. Kosiak, pastor of the Word of Life Church O. Khomchenko, pastor of the SDA Church S. Lytovchenko, and others).

The most tragic events were the murder of deacons and believers of the Transfiguration of The Lord Pentecostal church in Sloviansk (the part of the Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church) in June 2014 and the murder of the pastor of the Renovation Church, S. Skorobohach,

in the city of Mariupol (June 2014). The latter tragically died during the liberation of Mariupol on June 14, 2014, after being wounded when militants fired on his car.

Protestant religious buildings were among the first seized houses of worship. Starting in 2014, the most famous were the seizure of the houses of worship of the churches Word of Life in Horlivka; the building of the Christian rehabilitation center Evening Light in Donetsk; the Evangelical Church Word of Life in Torez; the temple of the Word of Life Church in Shakhtarsk; the complex of buildings of the Donetsk Christian University; the seizure of all prayer houses of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint, and the subsequent repurposing of public institutions (for example, registry offices, the Republican Children's Center), etc. Only in a few cases were the houses returned to believers. Some Protestant denominations ceased their activities or turned to illegal activities. There are known cases when believers from communities that ceased their activities found a kind of refuge in communities of similar denominations.

Religious communities that have received registration in the occupied territory are actually under the supervision of the “special services”; their activities are monitored, and “preventive” educational conversations are held. Those communities that have not been re-registered tried to continue their activities, but they are subject to constant administrative pressure (religious services are banned, gatherings of believers are dispersed, fines are imposed on priests, etc.).

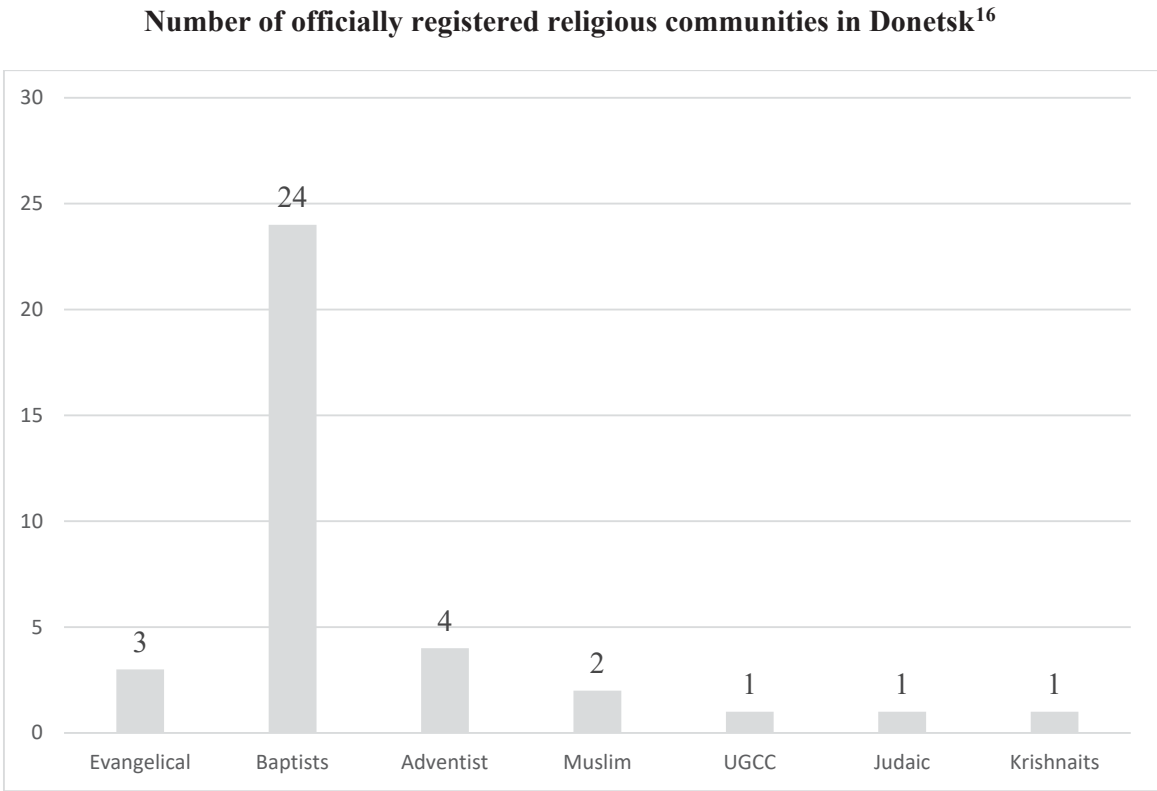
Non-Christian Denominations

Non-Christian Abrahamic religions (Judaism and Islam) also have a certain number of communities in the temporarily occupied territory.

Thus, Judaism is represented by one officially operating in Donetsk (among all religious communities in the city, it was the first to receive “official” re-registration) and several communities in other cities of the DPR. The Judaic community of Donetsk continues to work; the total number of believers has decreased approximately by 3-5 times. In 2014-2015, the number of believers was estimated at only 30% of the pre-war period. In absolute numbers, the pre-war number of Jews in Donetsk was estimated as 15-20 thousand, now it is 2-5 thousand. Shabbat services are attended by 80-100 people. The Chief Rabbi of Donbas, Itzhak Pinkhas Vyshetskyi, back in 2014, was forced to leave Donetsk and organized the displaced Donetsk-Kyiv community in Kyiv. The Donetsk community is headed by Rabbi Aryeh Schwartz. He

supports the position of the alliance with Russia, the community receives humanitarian aid from Russian Jewish organizations. A number of Jewish institutions function; in addition to the synagogue, the national Jewish school Ohr Menachem and the community center, a Jewish cemetery, the youth programs STARS and Ener Jew, and the educational project Kollel Torah are operating.

Fig. 2.



Islamic denominations are represented by several organizations. Since 2015, the activities of the so-called Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims Donbas Muftiate have been recorded. However, in July 2016, some printed materials of this organization in the DPR

¹⁶ Информация о религиозных организациях, сведения о государственной регистрации которых внесены в Реестр религиозных организаций (2019). [Information on religious organizations, information on the state registration of which is included in the Register of Religious Organizations]. https://minjust-dnr.ru/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Perechen_zaregistrirovannyh_reli.pdf.

were declared as extremist.¹⁷¹⁸ There are pages of the Donbas Muftiate on Facebook and VK, but the last updates are dated April 2016. The website of the muftiate, www.islam-donbass.ru, is not working.

Another organization is the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the DPR, headed by the so-called “Muftiate of the DPR” Rinat Aisin, who maintains close ties with Russian Muslims and receives humanitarian aid from them. Before the war, R. Aisin headed the All-Ukrainian Spiritual Administration of Muslims Unity with a center in the city of Makiivka, had contacts with the Supreme Mufti of the Central Muslim Council of Russia, T. Tajuddin, and was appointed the official representative of the administration in Ukraine. Since 2014, he has positioned himself as an “advisor on religious issues to the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the DPR.” In 2015, R. Aisin took a number of measures to establish himself as the head of the Muslim community in the occupied territories. He held a number of meetings in Russia, in particular with the Mufti of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Moscow and the Central Region of Russia, Albir Krganov. Moreover, officially R. Aisin did not represent the “muftiyate,” but the All-Ukrainian Spiritual Administration of Muslims Unity and signed documents on its behalf. Subsequently, R. Aisin contacted Muslim communities of other centers and administrations regarding their recognition of his authority as the “Mufti of the DPR.” R. Aisin may be trying to fill the “niche” of authority over the Muslim community in the DPR and replace the Islamic centers and administrations that existed before the war. After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, he has not been active.

Two Muslim communities have been registered by the Russian authorities in the occupied territory recently. The first is the central mosque Star of the Prophet in the village of Oktiabrskiyi, Kuibyshev district of Donetsk (its head is Rashid Bragin, its imam Rushan Tairov), which before the war was part of the Spiritual Center of Muslims of Ukraine (hereinafter – the SCMU). The second is the independent community As-Salam in the city of Makiivka (the head is Vahid Agishev, imam Mavletdin-khazrat Abushakhmanov). None of these communities had any relation to the organization headed by R. Aisin. In October 2014, June 2015, and June 2019, the building of the Star of the Prophet Mosque, located in the immediate vicinity of the Donetsk airport named after S. Prokofiev, was damaged as a result of combat activities. The SCMU (officially began its activities in 1995) is focused mainly on

¹⁷ Свобода віросповідання під прицілом. Російський терор на окупованих територіях Східної України (2018). [Freedom of religion in the crosshairs. Russian terror in the occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine], 22.

the Tatar population (Volga Tatars) of the region and has been active in the Donetsk region since pre-war times, having close ties with the local political elite.

In general, these communities have more or less free opportunity to conduct religious activities: they are loyal to the occupation authorities, carry out current religious activities, the community leadership participates in events held by the bodies for religious and nationalities affairs, and the DPR leadership congratulates Muslims on their holidays. There is reason to believe that the above-mentioned communities have generally fit into the current reality and demonstrate loyalty or even support for the established order in the temporarily occupied territory.

At the same time, the Al-Amal Mosque of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine “Umma” was closed in Donetsk in the summer of 2018.¹⁹ Before these events, the head of the community was I. Hamza. The imam and parishioners were accused of distributing extremist materials, having ties to the Muslim Brotherhood organization, and working for Ukrainian intelligence. The mosque was sealed, and the imam and several parishioners were taken for interrogation to the Ministry of State Security of the DPR, where they gave a written order not to leave the place of residence. Imams and community leaders in other occupied cities were summoned for interrogation. Further attempts to resume the mosque’s activities were unsuccessful. As of the end of 2024, the mosque was not active. Believers oriented towards Religious Administration of Ukrainian Muslims, headed by Sheikh A. Tamim, were also arrested and persecuted.

Conclusions

Based on the factual material of the study, we state that from the first days of their holding power in the temporarily occupied territory of the Donetsk region, pro-Russian leaders declared their desire to fight for the establishment of the “Russian world” and the Russian worldview ideals in society, imposing their own social and spiritual values on the Ukrainian people.

The situation that has developed in the religious environment of the Donetsk region is characterized by exceptional diversity and multi-confessionalism. As a result of hostilities and

¹⁹ Мечеть у Донецьку зачинено, категорично заборонено навіть заходити туди (2018, 18 листопада). [The mosque in Donetsk is closed, it is strictly forbidden to even enter it]. <https://religionpravda.com.ua/?p=59334>.

persecution by the occupying authorities, a significant part of religious organizations that operated in the territory of the Donetsk region before the war have become effectively “hostages” in the temporarily occupied territory, where the Ukrainian authorities are unable to exercise their constitutional powers.

Religious communities located in the uncontrolled territory of the Donetsk region face various challenges and restrictions, depending on their status and affiliation. The UOC-MP appeared to be almost the only denomination that did not suffer from the occupation authorities. In such conditions, the UOC-MP found itself in a privileged position due to its canonical subordination to the ROC and ideological harmony with the policy of the “eastern neighbor.”

The remaining denominations encountered serious resistance from the occupation administration. The UGCC and the OCU often face serious difficulties endangering the lives of both clergy and believers. Some religious associations do not have the opportunity to operate legally at all, especially Charismatic and Full-evangelical Protestant denominations. Other communities are forced to work underground because of the limitations imposed on them, even though they are authorized to operate lawfully. Judaic and some Islamic communities acting in the Donetsk region are also function in difficult conditions due to the lack of full-fledged opportunities for their worship activities.

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