

Both Ukraine and Russia violate religious freedom

The Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe (FOREF) and Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), independent and nonpartisan human rights organizations, called on Ukraine and Russia to cease exploiting and repressing religious communities.

FOREF and HRWF (19.05.2017) - In Ukraine, Bills 4511 and 4128 proposed in the Ukrainian parliament (*Verkhovnaya Rada*) place Ukrainian Orthodox churches belonging to the Moscow Patriarchate in a special category as religious organizations "whose administrative centers are located in a state recognized ...as an aggressor state." Bill 4128 is aimed at promoting the transformation of such churches into members of the Kiev Patriarchate.

The legislation has been denounced as discriminatory by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, and also by Ukrainian politicians and civil society groups who understand that it constitutes a serious interference into religious affairs by the state, and violates fundamental human rights, freedom of religion principles and legal obligations of Ukraine.

In fact, ever since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and military subversion of sections of Eastern Ukraine, Orthodox congregations have been attacked, abused and manipulated by both pro-Russian agitators and Ukrainian groups that oppose them.

"Discriminating against followers of the Moscow Patriarchate is not justified by Russian aggression in Ukraine," according to Dr. Aaron Rhodes, president of FOREF. **"It violates human rights, and alienates citizens,"** he said.

The unfortunate Ukrainian legislation emerged shortly after the Russian Supreme Court issued a ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses, a decision that, if upheld, will make it a serious crime for 170,000 Russian citizens to practice their faith.

The decision has been praised by leading representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. According to Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Synodal Department for External Church Relations, "This is a sect, totalitarian and harmful...Their doctrine contains a lot of false teachings. They do not believe in Jesus Christ as the God and the Savior. They do not recognize the doctrine of the Trinity. Therefore, they cannot be called Christians."

"One cannot escape the irony of Russian Orthodox Church officials calling on Ukraine to respect freedom of religion while they support the legal destruction of a religious group with which they have doctrinal differences," said Willy Fautre, Executive Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.