



STATEMENT

**Religious persecution in Donbas region of eastern Ukraine
 as a consequence of the Russian aggression**

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Honorable Participants,

It has been 2.5 years that the fundamental human rights in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine have been violated. The Russian-backed separatists have systematically exploited the religious factor, trying to reinforce their imposed governance and eradicate any kind of dissent.

Instead of religious freedom and pluralism, which are inherent in the rest part of Ukraine, in the Donbas a religion is used as ground for persecution, torture and even the murder of priests and believers. Now among the captured is Prof. **Ihor Kozlovskiy**, a religious studies scholar, held for over 8 months, charged with the support of religious minorities.

Until now **numerous temples and places of worship remain under control of the Russian-backed separatists**, and often are used as military facilities. For example, a complex of buildings of the Donetsk Christian University, a building of the “Word of Life” Bible Institute on Tkachenko Street 100 in Donetsk, several places of worship of the Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses.

A year ago Mr. Zakharchenko, a head of Donetsk separatists, declared that he will “*actively fight against sects*”. After this a new wave of religious persecution was experienced by Evangelical Christians, Orthodox of the Kyiv Patriarchate, Greek-Catholics and other religious minorities.

As a consequence, in September of 2015 the separatists organized a rally in the city of Shakhtarsk, which confronted Baptist Christians in front of their house of worship, with the intent of banishing the all “sects” from the Donbas region. More currently, in 2016, a similar rally against “sects” was organized in front of the Greek-Catholic temple in Donetsk. Even children and school pupils were engaged to carry banners with political and hate speech slogans against religious minorities.

We recommend to participating states to expand the mandate of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, to include the investigation of the numerous incidents of religious persecution by Russian-backed militants in the Donbas. Also it is necessary to prepare a special report on situation with human rights in eastern Ukraine after such monitoring. And the issue of religious freedom should also become a part of negotiations in the Minsk and Normandy formats.

OSCE should defend the fundamental right for freedom of religion for those, who have suffered daily in eastern Ukraine because of the Russian aggression.

Thank you for your attention!