News



A woman holds a crucifix as others pray while blocking an entrance to a church compound in Kyiv, Ukraine, March 31 amid the Russian invasion. At the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington Oct. 30, a panel of Ukrainian religious leaders discussed their role in responding to Russia's invasion. (OSV News/Reuters/Valentyn Ogirenko)

Kate Scanlon

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If Russian President Vladimir Putin prevails in his invasion of Ukraine, religious freedom in the country would be curtailed, Ukrainian faith leaders said at a recent event at the United States Institute of Peace.

Ivan Rusyn, deputy senior bishop of the Ukrainian Evangelical Church, said that "this war is not about our land, this war is about the very existence of our freedom, identity, our culture. This is about people, about human life. There is no space for the Ukrainian identity under Russian dominion."

Yaakov Dov Bleich, who is the chief rabbi of Kyiv and Ukraine as well as founder and president of the Union of Jewish Religious Organizations of Ukraine, said, "Ukraine is representing and taking the heat for the democratic world."

"The only reason Russia is fighting us is because we're a democracy," he said. "The same way — excuse me for comparing — that Hamas is fighting Israel because it's a Jewish state, that they're fighting us as a democracy."

Russian propagandists sometimes claim that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is persecuting Christians. His government has taken steps to restrict Moscow-affiliated Orthodox churches under the influence of the Russian government as it seeks to fend off that country’s invasion, which the faith leaders at the event called a key distinction.

Meanwhile, data from the Ukrainian Institute for Religious Freedom shows that as of Feb. 1, 2023, at least 494 religious buildings, theological institutions and sacred places were wholly destroyed, damaged or looted by the Russian military since the full-scale invasion.

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In comments at the event, Metropolitan Archbishop Borys Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia noted that the multi-faith event had the same understanding of the threats members of each of their traditions face from Putin.

"All of our confessions understand that a Russian occupation will bring the limitation or elimination of our religious freedom," he said, noting as an example that "in 300 years, every time there's a Russian occupation the Ukrainian Catholic Church is rendered illegal starting with Catherine (the Great), in the 19th century, 20th century, 21st century."

"The challenge that Ukraine has is when there was a church that is 101% controlled by a government that is waging war against you," Bleich said, adding, "They didn't come and say, 'Oh, let's get rid of this church.'"

Gudziak told OSV News that "Catholic life is being extinguished" in Ukraine amid Russia's occupation.

"For Ukrainian Catholics, there is no choice," he said. "The resistance to this war is an act of survival."

Asked about what he would tell Americans skeptical of the U.S. providing aid to Ukraine, Archbishop Gudizak called it "a question of life and death," also noting that the U.S. and European economies are closely tied.

"The European economy will be crippled if Ukraine falls," he said. "The American economy is connected with European economic affairs. We unfortunately can't isolate ourselves."

The Oct. 30 event was hosted by USIP, a national, nonpartisan, independent institute founded by Congress and dedicated to conflict resolution.

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.