

# Wicker: Russia 'one of worst violators' of religious freedom

WASHINGTON, D.C. (Baptist Press and local reports) – Roger Wicker, Mississippi's senior U.S. Senator and a Mississippi Baptist, on March 15 condemned Russia's campaign to wipe out religious faiths in its ongoing war on Ukraine.



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“Allowing these actions to go unchallenged would give this dictator a green light to escalate his repression,” Wicker said in pre-recorded remarks to participants in a March 15 virtual hearing of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

“The Kremlin’s renewed all-out assault on Ukraine reveals Putin’s goals. He wants to go back to the old Soviet empire by any means necessary. He has framed the war in religious terms and set his own people against Ukraine...,” Wicker said.

“Despite the Kremlin’s claims, it is Russia’s forces who have kidnapped, tortured, and killed religious leaders and destroyed places of worship,” he said.

Wicker, a Republican, is the ranking member of the U.S. Senate’s Armed Service Committee. He is a member of First Church, Tupelo, where he has served as deacon chairman and Sunday School teacher.

Russia, an officially atheist country, has amplified its persecution of Christians, Muslims, and Jews in its war on Ukraine, destroyed churches, and murdered, tortured, and imprisoned many pastors and advocates.

Russia has murdered at least 26 religious leaders, tortured others, imprisoned many, and heavily damaged or destroyed at least 500 churches and other religious places of worship, said panelist Dmytro Vovk, an expert on religious freedom with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

The Russian Orthodox Church has suffered persecution while widely cooperating with and supporting Russia in the war, Vovk said. He described about a third of church buildings that have been decimated as Russian Orthodox congregations.

The Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine is comprised of thousands of congregations that describe themselves as independent of Russia.

Before the war, Ukraine and Russia operated with polar opposite religious landscapes. While Ukraine's religious freedom protections are among the most liberal in the region, "Russia has managed to create a very restrictive religious framework with one religion, the Russian Orthodox Church, being strongly endorsed and mainly just religious minorities being severely discriminated against and oppressed," Vovk said.

Rachel Denber, deputy director for the Europe and Central Asia Division of Human Rights Watch, reported to the panel, "At home, the Kremlin has been trying to decimate what had been a robust and civil society and laid to waste key fundamental freedoms.

"The muzzling of Russian citizens did not emerge in a vacuum, but it is the result of a decade of step-by-step repression that started in 2012 and that accelerated in critical moments – in 2014 when Russia's war against Ukraine actually started [with the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine], in 2018, and in 2020 this repression at home escalated.. and then of course with the full-scale invasion in 2022.

"Russian public life is unrecognizable as compared to even 18 months ago when authoritarian autocracy was already deeply entrenched," she said.

Russia's homeland repression has forced many to flee, including foreign media outlets and public rights groups. About 74 foreign groups have been blacklisted as undesirable through Russian law, and included are about a third of the American donor groups and think tanks including the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute.

Panelist Pinchas Goldschmidt, chief rabbi and president of the Conference of European Rabbis and exiled chief rabbi of Moscow, has urged the Jewish community to flee Russia. At least 11 rabbis have been expelled from Russia, leaving synagogues and communities without leaders, Goldschmidt said, and about 30% of Jewish population of Russia has fled.

Putin's government is increasingly authoritarian and nearly totalitarian, Goldschmidt said, describing the climate as more and more dangerous.

Dennis Christensen, a Jehovah's Witness leader who was imprisoned six years in Russia for his faith, said the country makes a mockery of justice. When it was widely reported that he was paroled in 2019, he said, he remained imprisoned for the remainder of his term.

Russia's penal system works on "breaking a person down," he said. "You were no longer a human being. You were a prisoner."

Hundreds of Tatar Muslims have been imprisoned since Russia gained control of Crimea in 2014, according to the written testimony of a Crimean Tatar activist who was unable to attend the hearing.

About 96 Tartars remained imprisoned, many have been tortured, and one has died in incarceration, according to the written testimony.

If Russia wins its war against Ukraine, it will continue to erode religious liberty in Ukraine and establish there the near authoritarian control Putin demands in Russia, panelists warned.



Ray

Mike Ray, director of Missions Mobilization at the Mississippi Baptist Convention

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“The situation in Ukraine continues to be tense, seeing great destruction, loss of life, and seemingly no moves toward a resolution,” he said. “Since I lived in the country half my adult life, I obviously have great sympathy for, and grief along with, the people of Ukraine who are suffering much because of this invasion, destruction, and tremendous disruption of their lives.

“I think of the city of Bakhmut, formerly known as Artyomovsk, that has endured months of siege and where literally thousands on both sides of the conflict have died in recent months. As I see this tragedy unfold day after day and the body counts [are] rising, I am reminded that each of these who die are created in the ‘Imago Dei,’ or the image of God.

“Each one was created by a God who wants them to know Him and have a relationship with Him and died to make that possible. Most of those dying, both Ukrainian and Russian, are dying outside of that relationship and therefore passing into an eternity without Him.

“Pray both sides would hear the Gospel by any means possible, even during this time, so they might come to know the One who created them and offers grace and mercy through our Lord Jesus Christ,” Ray said.