
Why Ukraine Is So Resilient, and Why It Must Win – the Religious Freedom Factor

John Moroz Smith

Humanitarian and Election Observer

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During the first summer after Ukraine declared independence, as I stood among the cobblestone streets of central Lviv, I sensed a door swinging open on history's small hinges. Lviv has become world famous this season as the main hub for war refugees fleeing west to NATO countries, and Western aid flowing east to the front. But when Russians last occupied Lviv, the city served for a half-century as the hub of the largest underground Christian church in history. Near city hall, I had stumbled upon a quaint museum in a converted church, which was eagerly overhauling its dark exhibits. Happy to welcome a foreign visitor, the director handed me his business card. The print read: "State Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism," but in pen, he had crossed out "and Atheism." A new state, a new mission for the museum, and a new chapter in that history had just begun.

Is that chapter about to end? The stakes of Russia's war on Ukraine are higher than any military conflict in the last half century. While observers have elaborated on multiple reasons for such significance, one receiving too little attention is freedom of religion. I believe religious freedom partly explains both why Ukraine's defenders have resisted so well thus far, and why the West must support them until victory is won.

Ukraine: the "Borderland" of Religious Freedom

The word Ukraine means "borderland," a fitting name at the fault lines of several empires and major religions. Across the span of my entire adult life, in a dozen different roles, I have been an eyewitness to Ukraine's arduous transformation on the frontier of religious freedom.

Ukraine has proved itself the world's best hope that a large nation of the Soviet Union can transform from repression to freedom, especially religious freedom. That hope can only survive through Ukrainian victory. The regimes in Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan have all strangled dissent and liberalization attempts in recent years. Russia's invasion of Ukraine threatens to undo all of Ukraine's progress towards the reinforcing freedoms of a modern society. It puts at stake the right of a sovereign nation to choose religious freedom for itself.

Russian occupation would obliterate Ukraine's religious freedom, by design. We already know that because of vivid proof from the territory Russia has controlled since its 2014 invasion of Crimea and

Donbas: religious organizations have been destroyed or driven out, clergy murdered or imprisoned, and religious buildings desecrated or damaged. Since February's invasion, abundant evidence has emerged that Russian forces are repeating this devastation on a larger scale in the new territory it occupies. Invading Russian forces have even damaged buildings in Ukraine affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church, which Russia claims to be invading to protect.

Religious Freedom Fosters Resiliency

Religious freedom is not only a major reason for Ukraine to defend itself. It has also shaped Ukraine into a society resilient enough to resist the largest attack in Europe since the Second World War. I have observed three ways in which religious liberty and pluralism have contributed to Ukraine's resilience in this war.

A New, Higher Purpose

First, building a nation based on law and freedom, including religious freedom and tolerance for religious pluralism, has imbued Ukrainians with a higher moral purpose for which they have proved willing to die. Ukraine has engaged in a difficult rebuilding and reorienting of its nation since declaring independence from the collapsing Soviet Union in 1991. Its first post-Soviet generation has now come of age, and chosen to build a different society, founded on Western values, including religious freedom. They are the founding generation of the largest democracy in a thousand years of Slavic history. They head into battle – strapping on antitank weapons and sniper rifles – offering their lives so their nation can realize that higher purpose.

Ukraine has been turning its historical political weakness into the modern societal strength of religious pluralism. Over the last eight centuries, Ukraine's conquerors included Orthodox Tsars from Russia, Roman Catholics from Poland, Muslim Turks and Tartars from Crimea, and Mongols from the East. Though never arriving as a conquering party, Jews have even deeper roots in Ukraine. Unlike Russia, no religious group has gained dominance. While most Ukrainians are Christian, they are subdivided into new and traditional denominations. Even the largest group – Orthodox Christians – divide into four different branches in Ukraine.

That serial influence of other religions in Ukraine, and a modern openness to them, explains why religious life is so vibrant there, much more than in Russia, and the gap is widening. In the 1990s, I witnessed the initial floodgates open to religious interests in both countries. But the available social space in Russia and Ukraine diverged sharply after Putin's rise. His regime co-opted the Russian Orthodox Church for state exploitation and silenced unwelcome words, persons, and organizations, depriving Russians of accurate information and a meaningful public witness in vital areas of life, including matters of religion.

Creating Civil Society on Foundations of Faith

Second, Ukraine has created civil-society organizations unprecedented for that region. To achieve its new national purpose, Ukrainians realized at the outset of their post-Soviet national project that they needed to create a vibrant civil society – a layer of societal networks, stronger than individual citizens and independent from the government. To accelerate its creation, Ukraine welcomed in

tens of thousands of experts and volunteers from the free world, thousands of whom represented various faith traditions. I was one of them, in the mid-1990s.

I observed how religious organizations, finally free to flourish in Ukraine, not only disseminated beliefs and ministered to the needy. They also became a cornerstone of a social reality that the Tsarist and Soviet systems never achieved: civil society. New religious organizations provided many Ukrainians with their first-ever experience in voluntary associations. They learned to trust, collaborate with, and even lead individuals outside their family, in a cause they chose. Ukrainians formed new connections that expanded and strengthened online, keeping pace with the emerging Internet and social media. This self-initiated engagement was a total break with Soviet infantilization in which the state chose all priorities and leaders, and controlled all life activities and outside information.

Ukraine’s “Orange” Revolution in 2004 revealed in microcosm the interim results of Ukraine’s nascent civil society, a preview of wartime resilience. As an election observer for the do-over election for president, I witnessed in action the civil society networks that religious organizations had helped to build. This Revolution’s driving force was massive, peaceful protest, in cities across the country, anchored by “tent cities” of protesters camping for months in public squares. In Kyiv, the crowds reached a million strong. How can a movement scale and sustain itself through sub-freezing temperatures and hostile government forces? How can it handle the logistics alone for such temporary “cities” – organizing food, water, heat, sanitation, and hygiene? Part of the answer is the role religious organizations played, both behind the scenes and literally center stage. At rallies, leaders of different faiths stood together, wearing their distinctive religious attire, night after night, leading the crowd in singing together, including a classic ecumenical hymn, “Prayer for Ukraine.”

News reports since Russia’s invasion have revealed these civil society networks back in action, sustaining the Ukrainian military and the nation’s overall resilience. Among them are religious organizations: accounting for their members, ministering to the distraught, caring for the wounded and the orphaned, aiding evacuees and refugees, feeding those who stay home, reuniting loved ones, sheltering those with destroyed homes, honoring and burying the dead, and comforting those who mourn.

From Enforced Isolation to Global Engagement

Third, religious freedom in Ukraine enabled its population to encounter foreigners and learn foreign languages – reversing the ignorance and distortions of the Iron Curtain’s intentional isolation. Most foreigners entering Ukraine for religious activities did not speak the language. For many of the thousands I met in Ukraine as a missionary, it was their first conversation with a native speaker of a foreign language. We taught free English courses. Then, English skills were poor and rare. Today, fluent Ukrainians are ubiquitous. So many Ukrainian leaders and citizens are pleading their case directly to the English-speaking world via foreign media and social media to communicate the facts, images, and stories of human harm and heroism.

As foreign religious workers have returned home from Ukraine, they often maintain communication and send resources to help the communities they learned to love. The web of international connections woven by robust religious activity in Ukraine has provided a framework for obtaining

humanitarian aid, sheltering refugees, and rallying political and military support from foreign governments.

Religious Organizations' Role in Post-War Rebuilding

Eventually, Putin will run out of bombs and bullets, and Ukrainians will need the free world's generosity to rebuild. Money, volunteers, and expertise can rebuild the homes, schools, churches, hospitals, and civilian infrastructure Russia has intentionally destroyed. Religious organizations will be central to that rebuilding. This time, Ukrainians will have natural allies and people of faith from around the globe to help them.

I foresee that rebuilding as the next great chapter in the history of religion in Ukraine, and perhaps for the next borderlands of religious freedom.

John Smith leads the law department of a global financial services company, after leading divisional law departments at a top aerospace and defense company. Smith is a leader in law, business, and national security with experience in private enterprise, the military, and all three branches of government. He works to strengthen American institutions that advance freedom, the rule of law, and human flourishing – at home and abroad.

In the last three decades, John has developed a rare, multi-dimensional expertise in Ukraine and Russia. Fluent in both languages, he has in-country experiences as a scholar, lawyer, soldier, missionary, election observer, interpreter, and humanitarian aid worker.



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Religious Freedom Institute
316 Pennsylvania Ave. SE | Suite 501
Washington, D.C. 20003
202.838.7734 | rfi.org