

After Five Years, Russia's War with Ukraine Continues

Eastern Ukraine – In Russian occupied Crimea, prosecutions of religious believers have doubled and continue rising. Any believer not belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church such as Protestants, Jehovah Witnesses, or Muslims, are in danger.

This month is now five years since the unmarked “little green men” (Russian Special Forces) parachuted into Crimea and forcibly took over the government. At that time, nobody dreamed of a possible conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Since that time however, Russia has cemented its hold on Crimea, imposing their 2016 repressive law on religion. Now they blockade the Kerch Strait, holding 24 Ukrainian sailors prisoner in Moscow prisons. Unfortunately, as time passes, things are not getting better.



Russian FSB agents move in to arrest believers for meeting in homes, not approved buildings.

In April 2014, shortly after invading Crimea, Russian forces secretly moved into eastern Ukraine to initiate the incursion there. One million refugees fled out of the areas of Kramatorsk, Donetsk, Slavyansk, and Luhansk. Eventually the Russian forces were forced to retreat from Slavyansk and Kramatorsk, but maintained their hold on Donetsk and Luhansk. Border skirmishes are still reported daily but the media does not usually report on this ongoing conflict.



Russian troops lead Ukrainian sailors to prison.

UNHCR Paramedic Evgeniy – “They found my Bible”

A few weeks ago our UK director Peter Wooding visited with Evgeniy, along with other incredible believers who still serve in this troubled region. “When I met Evgeniy at the church, I was struck by his gentle and friendly nature. It seemed amazing to me that he had been imprisoned by the separatists on two different occasions, yet he seemed so modest,” Pete said.

“The first time I was captured was in May 2014, in Slavyansk. It was occupied during this time and we brought humanitarian aid and took ill people who couldn’t move themselves. The separatist forces took our cars and said we weren’t allowed to take away these ill people. So, they punished me by putting me in jail for 15 days, and then they found a Bible in my car. They said I was an American spy. ‘If you are a Christian or a spy it’s the same! It’s not possible to change people. You should be killed!’” they said.

“During my second time in prison, it was a miracle, but on the third day we somehow escaped. It was like the book of Acts when an angel opened the doors of the prison cell. We can



Sergei giving medical supplies to Evgeniy.

laugh now but it was very dangerous and very serious. It was a miracle. Today, I am grateful that God continues to use me in this ministry. And thank you for these medical supplies!" he said.

Ministry to Soldiers – Pastor Vadim

Vadim Vero is a pastor, serving at the Word of Life Church in Dobropilya, near Kramatorsk, a former occupied area. This tough-looking Greek/Ukrainian looks more like a boxer than a typical pastor. His infectious laugh and bear hug reveal his love for God and people.

"At the beginning of the war, God called us to minister to the military when they came to our town," explains Vadim. "It was a very difficult year for our army. They didn't even have uniforms or enough food. Our church collected money and even clothes and gave them to the soldiers."

Vadim continues, "Today, because we were there from the beginning, we continue to have a good relationship with some of the military. Many of them are open to the Gospel, but you need to be near them because the friendship helps them to open their hearts."



Pastor Vadim and Sergei minister regularly to soldiers at checkpoints and near the frontlines.

Sergey is a Missionary to Displaced Families

When Donetsk came under siege, Sergey fled with his wife and children. He joined pastor Vadim to minister to other displaced families like his.

"For people who live close to the front lines it is a very traumatizing situation," Sergey said. "They hear bombs and bullets and get displaced. Sadly however, most people in other parts of Ukraine don't notice the war anymore."

"Many displaced people, and soldiers as well, are inspired when they hear that we too were impacted by the war. We are from Donetsk. We fled, but we continue to live near the front lines and help people. We do not hate Russians living in Ukraine as refugees. Our attitude shows them God's love, and this is more important than the things we bring," Sergey said.



Zach, Pastor Vadim, Sergey, and Yuri stand next to the van Mercy Projects purchased for the ministry in East Ukraine.

A New Van to help Displaced Families and Prisoners

Since Sergey began taking vital aid to vulnerable families and the military on the front lines, he has relied on a battered old van to get him around. After spending countless hours driving through pot-holed roads however, the old van finally gave up the struggle.

"I can't believe this," Sergey said, when we handed the keys to him. "Mercy Projects always supports us," he said.

With a huge smile on his face he shared: "We are so blessed that Mercy Projects helps us share the gospel. We never dreamed we would receive a new van so quickly! Please thank everyone at Mercy Projects for supporting our work here to share the love of God. Every time you help us when we have a great need!"