

UKRAINIAN POLICY TOWARDS THE UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN 2023: FROM DISCRIMINATION TO REPRESSIONS

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UKRAINIAN POLICY TOWARDS THE UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN 2023: FROM DISCRIMINATION TO REPRESSIONS

The text before you was developed by the independent information and consulting company *Religion Today* and represents the fifth annual analytical report prepared by our experts. The first and the second issues, *Crisis of modern Orthodox Christianity and Orthodox Church of Ukraine in the Global and Regional Context*, represented an analytical digest of actions leading to legalizing the ecclesiastical schism in Ukraine and the role they played in global politics. The third annual report, *Islamic society in 2021 Russia: Structural changes and internal conflicts*, dissected the Islamic ummah of the Russian Federation. The fourth annual report, *Churches of the Moscow Patriarchate in the Baltic states in times of the political crisis of 2022*, discussed the difficult situation in ROC communities in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

The subject of this annual report is "Ukrainian policy towards the UOC in 2023: From discrimination to repressions" and it consists of three parts. **In the first part**, traditionally, we offer our readers a list of the events of the past year, so that everyone can draw his or her own conclusions on this topic. **The second part** offers a detailed analytical article by religious scholar Anastasia Koskelo "Dynamics of development of the religious and political situation in Ukraine, political and ideological struggle around the position of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – the main trends of 2023." **The third part** of the annual report contains two interviews with experts: Vakhtang Kipshidze, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Orthodox Church Department for the Church's Relations with Society and Mass Media, and Roman Lunkin, Doctor of Political Sciences, Head of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

31 DECEMBER 2022

It was the last day when the authorities allowed the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) to hold a service in the upper part of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra.

Metropolitan Pavel (Lebed), vicar of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra: *"We have always been and are always allowed to pray at the tomb of St. Nicholas by Muslims. Catholics allow us to pray at the tomb of the holy apostles, at the relics of St. Nicholas. But our people, who fancy themselves the navel of the earth, are driving us from our shrines on our land."*

1 JANUARY

At the initiative of the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, the directorate of the Kiev-Pechersk historical and cultural reserve unilaterally terminated the lease agreements of the Holy Dormition Cathedral and the Refectory Church of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra with the UOC. As a result, the monks were denied access to these churches.

19 JANUARY

Draft law 8371 on prohibiting the activity in Ukraine of religious organizations with their governing center in Russia was submitted to the Verkhovna Rada. It provides for amendments to the laws of Ukraine "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" and "On State Registration of Legal Entities, Physical Entrepreneurs and Public Formations."

The draft law was initiated by the head of the Cabinet of Ministers, Denys Shmyhal. The draft law is designed as an addition to Art. 5 “Separation of Church (religious organizations) from the State” of the Law of Ukraine “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations”:

“The activity of religious organizations affiliated with the centers of influence of a religious organization (associations), the governing center (administration) of which is located outside of Ukraine in a state that commits armed aggression against Ukraine, is not allowed.”

The statement refers to three subjects:

A religious organization, the activity of which is not allowed. These are parishes, monasteries, etc.

A center of influence of a religious organization (association). This may be a diocesan administration, but most likely the Kiev Metropolis of the UOC itself.

A governing center (administration) located outside of Ukraine in the state that is committing armed aggression against Ukraine. This is the Moscow Patriarchate.

20 JANUARY

Romanian public and political organizations called on Romanian-speaking parishes of the UOC to join the Romanian Patriarchate.

“We are appealing to all Romanian Orthodox Christians in Ukraine – laity, clergy and hierarchs – to initiate internal consultations in local Romanian Orthodox communities in Ukraine to determine the best way to withdraw from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, withdraw from the Russian Patriarchate in Moscow and return to direct submission to the Romanian Orthodox Mother Church – the Romanian Patriarchate.”

1 FEBRUARY

The State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience published the results of its own expert examination and con-

cluded that the UOC was part of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and directly subordinate to it.

The final conclusions of the expert examination are summarized as follows: *“The adoption of the new edition of the Statute on the Administration of the UOC (dated 27.05.2022) and the resolution of the UOC Council (meaning the so-called “Feofaniia Council”, the UOC council taken place in Feofaniia on 27.05.2022 – Religion Today) did not lead to the severing of the church-canonical connection of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with the Russian Orthodox Church. The status of the UOC as a structural subdivision of the ROC, exercising certain rights of autonomy, but not forming an autocephalous Church, remains unchanged.*

The UOC in relation to the ROC has an ecclesiastical-canonical relationship of a part with the whole. The relations between the UOC and the ROC are not the relations of one independent (autocephalous) church with another independent autocephalous church. The UOC also does not have the status of an autonomous Church, which would be recognized by other churches, and, therefore, from the point of view of ecclesiology and canon law is a structural subdivision of the ROC, which has separate rights of an independent entity without its own canonical subjectivity.

The current activity or inactivity of the highest authorities of the UOC testifies to the fact that the UOC continues to be in a relationship of subordination to the ROC. It does not act as an independent (autocephalous) Church and does not proclaim its own independence (autocephaly). No documents or actions testifying to the transformation of the UOC into an independent religious organization in relation to the ROC were found by the members of the Expert Group.”

3 MARCH

The committee of the “Kiev-Pechersk Lavra” historical and cultural reserve started revision of the property of Kiev-Pechersk monastery.

10 MARCH

The Ministry of Culture of Ukraine published a document which informed that the monks of the UOC were obliged to leave the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra by March 29, 2023.

20 MARCH

The Holy Synod of the UOC took place. The Primate of the UOC and members of the Holy Synod came to the President's Office to meet with Vladimir Zelensky. Despite three hours of waiting, the president of Ukraine did not come out to the UOC hierarchs. The members of the Synod left Zelensky their written appeal:

"For a long time our Church has been subjected to illegal re-registration of communities, raiding of temples and discreditation in the media with the dissemination of a large number of groundless accusations. These accusations do not correspond to reality, but serve as a prerequisite for discrimination of the rights of Ukrainian citizens on religious grounds and talk about banning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. ... There are nine draft laws registered in the Verkhovynaya Rada of Ukraine which, contrary to the principle of equality of religious organizations, are aimed at making it impossible for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to operate. ... Most of these draft laws have received negative conclusions from the Scientific-Expert Department of the Verkhovynaya Rada of Ukraine and contain a large number of comments and reservations regarding the violations of such constitutional rights of citizens as freedom of conscience and religion. <...> But the difficult situation in the religious sphere has critically worsened after it became known that the state authorities intend to evict our monastic community from the territory of the Holy Dormition Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, which the monks have literally raised from the ruins for thirty-five years."

24 MARCH

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report on freedom of religion in Ukraine for the period from August 1, 2022 to January 31, 2023, stating discrimination against the UOC:

"The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is concerned that the State's activities targeting the UOC could be discriminatory. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also recalls the need to ensure that all those facing criminal charges enjoy the full spectrum of applicable fair trial rights."

28 MARCH

In Ivano-Frankovsk, representatives of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) with the help of local authorities seized the last UOC church in the region. As Ruslan Marcinkiv, the mayor of Ivano-Frankovsk, stated: *"This is a great event for us. Ivano-Frankovsk region is the first one that is completely without the Moscow Patriarchate today."*

28 MARCH

The Synod of the OCU appealed to the Ukrainian authorities with a request to transfer the objects on the territory of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra to the jurisdiction of the OCU.

29 MARCH

The monks of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra had not left the monastery despite the order of the Ministry of Culture. A month-long confrontation between the monks of the Lavra and the UOC believers, on the one hand, and representatives of the executive branch of the Ukrainian government and protesting activists, on the other hand, began.

29 MARCH

The Primate of the OCU, Metropolitan Epifany Dumenko, appointed Archimandrite Avraamy Lotysh, a resident of the Holy Dormition Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, to *“fulfill the duties of the vicar”* of the Lavra. On the same day, the Primate of the UOC, Metropolitan Onufry (Berezovsky), banned Archimandrite Avraamy from priestly serving *“for falling into schism and gross violation of the oath of a clergyman”* without the right to receive communion.

30 MARCH

Metropolitan Pavel (Lebed), the vicar of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, recorded a video message addressed to Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky on the situation in the monastery:

“Mr. President! I’m telling you and your entire pack that our tears will not fall to the ground, but on your head. Do you think that after taking power on our backs, you can treat us like that? God will not forgive you or your family! Because today you’ve thrown 220 brethren out on the street. Because you could not accept Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev with the Synod. You could not stop the Minister of Culture, who is possessed by rabies, anger and hatred – so he does everything with your permission. Woe to you. Have fear!”

1 APRIL

In the morning, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) searched the vicar of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, Metropolitan Pavel’s home and charged him with two articles of the Criminal Code: 161 (inciting inter-religious hatred) and 436 (justifying armed aggression). In the evening of the same day, the Shevchenkivsky Court of Kiev chose a measure of restraint for Metropolitan Pavel in the form of 24 hour house arrest for 60 days with the wearing of an electronic bracelet. Right in the

courtroom the bishop was put an electronic bracelet on his leg. Addressing the Primates of the Local Churches, Metropolitan Pavel said: *"This is how unwanted people are dealt with in our country."*

3 APRIL

The Verkhovna Rada registered a draft resolution on depriving the UOC of the right to use the Pochaev Lavra.

4 APRIL

Metropolitan Rastislav, the head of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia, spoke in support of the believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church:

"This persecution, which has been going on for several decades and aims to replace the canonical Church with schismatic structures, has intensified considerably after the start of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and in recent days has taken on the character of an attempted liquidation. The current Golgotha of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – the persecution of its clergy and the humiliation of believers – will not be forgotten by God or by history."

4 APRIL

The former head of the US State Department, Michael Pompeo, arrived in Kiev on a visit. Mike Pompeo met with the head of the OCU, Metropolitan Epifany Dumenko. From the hands of Metropolitan Epifany, the former head of the State Department received the highest award of the OCU – the "Cross of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine", while the participants of the American delegation were awarded medals "Cross of Freedom."

4 APRIL

The Khmelntsky Regional Council banned the activity of the UOC on the territory of this region.

6 APRIL

In Lvov, using an excavator, local authorities demolished the last UOC church in the city. The mayor of the city, Andrey Sadovoy, said: "Thanks to everyone who joined in and without provocation helped to close the history of the Moscow Patriarchate in our city during these two days."

10 APRIL

Bishop of Ivano-Frankovsk Nikita (Storozhuk) was beaten. The police who arrived at the scene did not detain the attacker and refused to check him for alcohol or drug intoxication.

11 APRIL

The deputies of the Volyn regional council unanimously adopted a decision to ban the activities of the UOC in the region. They also recommended local self-government bodies to terminate lease agreements for the lands on which the UOC churches were located.

12 APRIL

The district court of the town of Cherkassy chose for Metropolitan of Cherkassy and Kanevsk Feodosy (Snigiryov) a measure of restraint in the form of 24 hour house arrest.

"The first and heavier (charge – Religion Today) is that I allegedly gave orders to publish materials of extremist nature on the official website of the Cherkassy diocese. But I never gave such orders and never had any

intention to do so. This statement is completely false and in no way corresponds to reality. And the prosecution does not and in principle cannot have any facts, any evidence to claim otherwise. The charges against me under this article of the Criminal Code of Ukraine are completely fabricated from start to finish."

11 MAY

The court in the town of Kropivnitskiy sentenced Metropolitan of Vasilkovsky Iosaf (Guben) and the secretary of the diocese, Archpriest Roman Kondratyuk, to three years' imprisonment with a two-year probation period and deprivation of the right to hold leading positions in religious organizations for a year. The bishop and the priest were accused of inciting religious hatred.

15 MAY

The Kiev District Administrative Court overturned a ruling issued in April 2019 to suspend the authorities' actions taken to rename the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The court ruled that the UOC had not broken ties with the ROC and was part of it, which could be grounds for banning the UOC if such a decision was upheld by higher courts. Also, the UOC should be renamed the "Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine" (ROCU).

22 MAY

Metropolitan of Banchensk Longin (Zhar) was summoned for questioning to the Chernovitsky police department. There the bishop received a notification of suspicion which said that a criminal case had been opened against him under Article 161 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine – for inciting interreligious hatred.

1 JUNE

Deputies of the Zakarpattia region council banned the UOC on the territory of the region.

1 JUNE

The SBU charged Metropolitan Vissarion (Stretovych) of Ovruch with incitement of interreligious hatred.

26 JUNE

The State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience published the demands that the Ukrainian authorities had put forward to the leadership of the UOC. In order to avoid a ban, the UOC must *"publish an official document of the church authority or person(s) authorized to speak on behalf of the UOC on the withdrawal of the UOC with all its dioceses, synodal institutions, benefices, monasteries, theological educational institutions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, parishes and missions from the ROC."* In addition, the authorities require UOC bishops and clerics who are members of the ROC episcopate, its Synod, synodal institutions, and the Inter-Council Presence commissions to submit an application to withdraw from them and to make these documents public. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is also obliged to officially notify the Local Orthodox Churches of its withdrawal from the ROC.

27 JUNE

The UN Human Rights Office expressed concern over the upsurge in violence and hate rhetoric against the UOC:

"Government officials, bloggers, and opinion leaders have used discriminatory and inciting rhetoric and openly called for violence against the clergy and supporters of the UOC. During the reporting

period, the government and law enforcement agencies were unable to effectively respond to incidents related to 'hate speech.' Additionally, several regional councils have banned the operation of the UOC."

28 JUNE

Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky submitted to the Verkhovnaya Rada a bill to set the date of Christmas celebration on December 25 in order to *"reject the Russian legacy of imposing Christmas on January 7."*

10 JULY

In Bila Tserkva the priests of the OCU seized the Transfiguration Cathedral of the UOC.

14 JULY

The Solomensky district court of Kiev satisfied the prosecutors' petition to change the measure of restraint for Metropolitan Pavel, the vicar of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, from 24 hour house arrest to detention in custody with the possibility of bail in the amount of 33 million hryvnias (over \$900,000).

26 JULY

The representative of the UOC, Bishop Gedeon (Kharon), was not allowed to speak at a UN Security Council meeting on the situation with the persecution of the church in Ukraine at the initiative of the United Kingdom. As Bishop Gedeon stated: *"The fact that I was not allowed to speak at the UN meeting is blatant lawlessness – first of all, on the part of the United Nations itself, because it has its own laws, which were violated today by the British presiding officer, who decided to deprive me of my speech. It was a total lawlessness, a violation of the UN Charter itself. Apparently, they have fear – fear of the truth."*

7 AUGUST

The final session of the Vinnytsia city court on the case of Metropolitan Ionafan (Yeletskykh), the ruling bishop of the Tulchyn diocese of the UOC, was held. Metropolitan Ionafan was sentenced to five years of imprisonment with confiscation of property. Until the sentence comes into force, the bishop will be under house arrest.

7 AUGUST

Metropolitan Pavel (Lebed), vicar of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, was released from custody on bail.

9 AUGUST

The Commercial Court of the city of Kiev recognized as legal the termination of the contract of free-of-charge use concluded between the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra and the national reserve of the same name. The monastery was forbidden to prevent the museum from using the property of Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, including control over the monastery premises.

11 AUGUST

The directorate of the museum-reserve banned entry for all visitors to the territory of the Lower Lavra, except for priests, monks and monastery workers.

18 AUGUST

The Ministry of Culture of Ukraine banned students and teachers of the Kiev Theological Academy and Seminary from staying on the territory of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra.

6 SEPTEMBER

The SBU and the National Police submitted to the court the cases of Metropolitan Vissarion (Stretovych) of Ovruch, the secretary of the diocese and the pastor of the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin, accused of inciting ethnic and religious discord.

12 SEPTEMBER

The directorate of the museum-reserve sealed the buildings of the Kiev Theological Academy and Seminary located on the territory of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra.

4 OCTOBER

The SBU's Telegram channel published a report on the criminal prosecution of more than 60 representatives of the UOC:

"Since [2022 – Religion Today], the SBU has exposed more than 60 representatives of the UOC MP, 14 of whom are metropolitans, for collaborating with the occupants. ... To date, 26 defendants have been suspected and 19 have been sentenced."

5 OCTOBER

Draft law 10126 on the liquidation of religious organizations whose "authorized persons" committed crimes "against the foundations of Ukraine's national security" was submitted to the Verkhovnya Rada. The document suggests that religious organizations can be liquidated by court if their representatives are convicted under articles of the Criminal Code of Ukraine on "war propaganda", "incitement of interreligious discord", "terrorism", "planning, preparation, unleashing and waging aggressive war", "violation of laws and customs of war", "genocide" and "mercenarism."

6 OCTOBER

The SBU brought new charges against Metropolitan Feodosy (Snigiryov) of Cherkassy and Kanev, who had been under house arrest since April 12, 2023, under the case of distributing extremist materials.

19 OCTOBER

The Verkhovnaya Rada voted for the adoption in the first reading of draft law 8371 on banning the activity in Ukraine of religious organizations with their governing center in an aggressor state (the so-called "the law on banning the UOC").

20 OCTOBER

The head of the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience of Ukraine, Viktor Yelensky, commenting on the adoption by the Verkhovnaya Rada in the first reading of the bill on the de facto ban of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, said:

"I and Ukraine are proud that we have a very high level of freedom of conscience, a very high level. And Ukraine has always been a refuge for those people who were seeking religious freedom. And we are very proud of that, just as we are proud of the fact that we have never banned anyone."

26 OCTOBER

The Commercial Court of the Chernihiv Region upheld the position of the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture in its efforts to evict the UOC nuns from the Yeletsky monastery.

2 NOVEMBER

The Sosnovsky District Court of the town of Cherkassy extended Metropolitan of Cherkassy and Kanevsk Feodosy (Snigiryov) house arrest with wearing an electronic bracelet for another two months.

2 NOVEMBER

The Sixth Administrative Court of Appeal ruled to dismiss the appeals of the Metropolis of the UOC, as well as hundreds of monasteries and diocesan offices, and upheld the decision of the Kiev District Administrative Court of 15.05.2023, which stated the legality of the Ministry of Culture's actions to forcibly rename diocesan structures, monasteries and communities of the UOC to the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

17 NOVEMBER

UN Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights Ilze Brands Kehris, speaking at a Security Council meeting, said that the Kiev law enforcement agencies had failed to properly investigate the cases of violence and threats against representatives of the UOC recorded in the UN: *"In February 2022, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights documented 10 cases of physical violence and 60 cases of threats of violence between parishioners of various religious societies. The response of Ukrainian law enforcement officials to this was inadequate and they failed to adequately investigate the incidents and take action to protect members of the UOC. ... In at least 26 cases against members of the UOC, we have had concerns about the legal proceedings, for example, the lack of access to a lawyer during searches."*

26 NOVEMBER

A group of deputies of the Verkhovna Rada wrote an appeal to Parliament Speaker Ruslan Stefanchuk with a request to send the text of the bill 8371 adopted in the first reading to the Venice Commission for expert examination in order to find out whether this bill complies with constitutional and international law, European standards and values.

DYNAMICS OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL SITUATION IN UKRAINE, POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE AROUND THE POSITION OF THE UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH – THE MAIN TRENDS OF 2023

1

THE UKRAINIAN STATE TAKING UP THE POLICY OF DESTRUCTION OF THE UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

By the end of 2022, the religious policy of the Ukrainian state was in a state of stagnation. The transformation of the OCU into a “national religious monopolist” did not take place. The main competitor – the UOC – could not be destroyed in a conditionally “democratic” way, i.e. through the forced transfer of communities from the UOC to the OCU “one by one.” This became a factor in the radicalization of the Kiev regime’s actions. Instead of “poaching” clerics and laity from the “wrong” Church to the “right” Church, Ukrainian officials moved to the practice of purposeful destruction of the UOC.

The repressive policy of the Ukrainian state towards the UOC, as in previous years, is presented as “legitimate actions.” The novelty of 2023 was the involvement of experts in religious studies to justify this policy. The main agencies from which experts are involved are the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience (SEFC) and the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine. The main task of all “expert examinations” was to confirm the links between the UOC and the ROC, as well as between the UOC and the Russian state (which, in turn, is a form of legalization of repressive measures against clerics and laity).

The transition to new methods of work occurred on the eve of the new year 2023. On December 1, 2022, Ukrainian President **Vladimir Zelensky** enacted a decision of the National Security and Defense Council, according to which the SEFC was to conduct a religious expert examination of the statute on the administration of the UOC within two months for the presence of a church-canonical connection with the Moscow Patriarchate. This was followed by a personnel reshuffle in the SEFC itself: the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine dismissed the head of the service, **Olena Bogdan**. Bogdan had a reputation as a law-abiding official, repeatedly spoke out about the need to maintain democratic freedoms in society and insisted on the equality of all confessions. A few days before her dismissal, she gave an interview in which she called the UOC “the largest religious organization in the country” and actually admitted that there were no legal grounds for banning the UOC.

As a result, on December 19, 2022, Olena Bogdan’s place was taken by the new head of the SEFC, **Viktor Elensky**, known for his nationalist views and critical attitude to the UOC as “Russian agents.” The results of the above-mentioned expert examination of the SEFC were issued already under the new head of the department and published on February 1, 2023. As a result, the SEFC experts confirmed that the UOC, despite the changes in its Statute made after the “The Feofaniia Council” in 2022, did not have full autonomy and continued to be part of the ROC. The SEFC examination itself has no legal force, but it became the starting point of the legislative process to ban the UOC in the Verkhovna Rada. The document is also constantly referred to as a justification for their activities by Ukrainian officials, SBU officers and the judiciary.

The examination gave rise to a fierce “war of lawyers” over the status of the UOC, which colored the entire year of 2023. In fact, legal work has become the only way for the UOC to limit repressions – simply by virtue of the fact that it allows to “play for time” and slow down some repressive processes. The legal department of the UOC called the expert examination biased and incompetent. The head of the department, **Archpriest Alexander Bakhov**, stated that it “is a certain interpretation by

experts in philosophy and history of their vision of the church-canonical relationship in the statute on the governance of the UOC," and that the text of the expert examination is drafted as if its authors *"were given instructions from Russia, and the subject of the study was the statute of the Russian Orthodox Church,"* not the statute of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (indeed, the main argument of the SEFC experts in favor of the thesis that the UOC is subordinate to Moscow is derived from the statute of the Russian Church). The lawyer of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, **Archpriest Nikita Chekman**, sent a lawsuit to the Kiev District Administrative Court, where numerous legal violations were pointed out during the examination. In particular, as Archpriest Nikita noted, the study was conducted by *"biased persons who repeatedly expressed a negative attitude towards the UOC."* Despite numerous court hearings, as of the end of November 2023, the examination was recognized as legal by the Kiev District Court (see the decision of May 19, 2023).

In parallel with the courts on "the examination", the courts on the old case of "renaming", i.e. on forcing the UOC by the state to remove the word "Ukrainian" from its name and to rename it "Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine", were resumed. Thus, the story with the forced renaming of the UOC is already 5 years old (and all this time the Kiev Metropolis of the UOC has been suing the Ukrainian state authorities, since the UOC itself has no legal entity). The basis of the case is the amendments to the law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" adopted by the Verkhovna Rada back in 2018. According to the amendments, religious organizations whose center is in Russia are obliged to report this in their official name. A month later, on January 25, 2019, the expert examination of the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture appeared (its results were approved by the order of the Ministry of Culture No 37 from 25.01.2019), according to which the UOC, on the basis of its Statute, was subject to the amendments. In April 2019, the UOC managed to win the court against the amendments, and the forced renaming was suspended. In fact, the issue was "frozen" for four years.

Nevertheless, in 2023, a new stage in the "renaming" case began, associated with general changes in the state religious policy. The prelude

to the new stage was the decision of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine on December 29, 2022 – that the amendments to the law on religious organizations made in 2018 were in line with the Constitution. As a result, the Ministry of Culture conducted a new “expert examination” and on May 15, 2023, the Kiev court overturned its own ruling on “suspension of actions.” Since then we have seen “ping-pong” between the Legal Department of the UOC and the Kiev Court. There have already been six courts of appeal.

The principal novelty of the current stage is the reasoning. This time the statute of the UOC as such is no longer considered by the court. The key thesis of the new expert examination and the new court – that the UOC has not severed its ties with the ROC and is part of it – is deduced from the statute of the ROC itself. In connection with this curiosity, a joke has been circulated among defenders of the UOC that the Ukrainian court “has thus confirmed the validity of Russian laws in Ukraine.” Despite the court’s recognition of the legitimacy of the expert examination, the UOC lawyers insist that the UOC congregations at this stage are not obliged to change their statutes and re-register, because the expert examination of the Ministry of Culture “does not carry legal consequences.”

2

ZELENSKY IGNORING THE UOC METROPOLITANS AS A SYMBOL OF THE AUTHORITIES’ PUBLIC DISDAIN FOR THE UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

The end of 2022 was marked by another escalation of the conflict between the leadership of the UOC and the Ukrainian authorities, related to the expulsion of Kiev-Pechersk monks from the so-called Upper Lavra. **Metropolitan Pavel (Lebed)**, the vicar of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, recorded a harsh video addressed to Zelensky in this regard. “*Mr. President! I’m telling you and your entire pack that our tears will not fall to the ground, but on your head. Do you think that after taking power*

on our backs, you can treat us like that? God will not forgive you or your family! Because today you've thrown 220 brethren out on the street. Because you could not accept Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev with the Synod. You could not stop the Minister of Culture, who is possessed by rabies, anger and hatred – so he does everything with your permission. Woe to you. Have fear!”, Pavel stated in his video published on the Lavra's YouTube channel.

From that moment, the era of public political correctness of the Ukrainian authorities towards the UOC hierarchy ended. On March 20, 2023, Zelensky defiantly refused to meet with **Metropolitan Onufry (Berezovsky)**, the UOC's Primate, and members of the UOC Synod. The members of the Synod stood outside the Presidential Office in Kiev for several hours, wanting to discuss the fate of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra with the president, but were never admitted. The Primate of the UOC assured that he was ready to wait for a personal meeting with the president on the street until the evening, but the Office staff said that Zelensky had “no plans” to meet with the hierarchs. The unwillingness of the Kiev authorities to have any dialog with the hierarchy of the UOC and the president's disrespect for Metropolitan Onufry was thus clearly demonstrated.

3

SABOTAGE OF BILLS AIMED AT BANNING THE UOC IN THE VERKHOVNAYA RADA AS A FORM OF CONFRONTATION OF UKRAINIAN PARLIAMENTARIANS WITH THE REPRESSIVE RELIGIOUS POLICY OF THEIR OWN STATE, AND THE “SPAM WAR”

The main force opposing the repressive policy of the Ukrainian state towards the UOC in 2023 was the Ukrainian parliament. During the year, 11 bills aimed at banning the UOC, of varying degrees of radicalism, were submitted to the Verkhovnaya Rada for a vote. All of them were introduced

by the executive branch or radical nationalist factions. As of the end of November 2023, only one of them – No 8371, which is pro-governmental and also earned the reputation of “the softest” – passed the first reading (October 19, 2023). At that, 267 deputies voted in favor, and 34 (i.e., almost 9%) voted against it.

The obvious outcome of 2023 is that the majority of Ukrainian parliamentarians clearly do not want to engage in the fight against the Church. “Patriotic” Ukrainian media are outraged: in their opinion, the deputies are almost blackmailing the authorities with the Church issue, refusing, in case of increased repression of the UOC, to vote “correctly” on other strategic articles. *“As the mono-majority leadership explains, there are simply not enough votes in the Verkhovna Rada to resolve the issue with the Moscow Patriarchate. And the root of the problem is inside the pro-government faction, where there is a critical number of “God-fearing” deputies who, for various reasons, do not want to support even a ‘humble’ scenario of the Cabinet of Ministers. Moreover, they are now also blackmailing by not voting for “the IMF bills” to continue get macro-financial aid (for example, they threaten not to support the second reading of the renewal of e-declaration), if the problem of the Moscow Patriarchate is solved with the help of other factions,”* the Glavkom reports.

The head of Humanitarian and Information Policy Committee of the Verkhovna Rada, **Nikita Poturaev**, admitted in an interview with journalists that Ukrainian parliamentarians are under strong external pressure on the church issue: *“I am not convinced that the votes are so critically lacking, and I believe that it would be possible to put it on the agenda and vote. On the other hand, I realize that if it does not get enough votes, it will not be very good for our state and public interests. Because then certain people will realize that we lack the political ability to address this issue at all.”*

Against the backdrop of the inability (or rather, unwillingness) of the parliamentarians to “solve the issue”, the head of the SEFC **Victor Yelensky** in mid-2023 again spoke about alternative methods of dealing with the

UOC, including the so-called "The second Feofaniia Council." That is, about some new "council" of the UOC that would proclaim the "final and irrevocable" separation of the UOC from the ROC. Instead of a legislative ban, Yelensky suggested that the authorities take the path of an "intra-church revolution," in other words, an "explosion of the UOC from within." *"They [the UOC – Religion Today] want to convene a Local Church Council regarding further relations with Moscow. Such an appeal has already been signed by 380 people, including two bishops, which has never happened before,"* Yelensky said in an interview with the Glavkom.

Shortly after Bill 8371 passed its first reading, Yelensky again criticized what was happening – due to his agency's overload of legal work. *"The authors of all those bills that were filed, in my opinion, didn't really think about what would happen when they were passed,"* Yelensky said. According to Yelensky, the situation with numerous lawsuits against him and his agency over the new bills is an attempt to "knock him off his stride": *"We are already in the courts, because against the state service, against me personally, lawsuits have been filed in the interests of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra monastery, the UOC MP. And it is an understandable situation when they want to knock out those who are responsible for this area of work"*

By the end of November 2023, as the head of the SEFC had anticipated, the progress of the bill 8371 was in fact halted by the "war of spam" on the part of the Verkhovnaya Rada deputies. Back in October, the head of the committee, **Nikita Poturaev**, claimed that he was "ready for spam": *"If there will be spam, it may be, I assume there will be spam – how much of it can there be? I don't know. A thousand amendments, two thousand amendments – nothing. The committee will sit down (for work – Religion Today) – our committee is absolutely in this sense patriotic and pro-Ukrainian. The Committee will sit down and work as long as necessary. They will not succeed and from the Committee, I can say that we will do everything to make it ready for consideration in the Verkhovnaya Rada by the end of this year."* In any case, according to the deputy head of Humanitarian and Information Policy Committee of the Verkhovnaya

Rada *Yevgeniya Kravchuk*, in November 2023, “people’s deputies submitted 1200 amendments, among which actually 2/3 have signs of spam.”

4

CONTRAST BETWEEN THE INTERNAL AND FOREIGN RELIGIOUS POLICIES OF THE KIEV REGIME

Inside Ukraine, the Kiev authorities continue to intensify their assault on the religious freedom of citizens who associate themselves with the UOC. The number of cases of direct confrontations between law enforcers and believers, forced “transfers” of communities from the UOC to the OCU, arrests of clergy and convictions in courts are on the rise. The cases of arrested UOC bishops – Metropolitan Pavel (Lebed) of Vyshgorod and Chernobyl, Metropolitan Ionafan (Yeletskykh) of Tulchyn and Bratslav, Metropolitan Feodosy (Snigiryov) of Cherkassy and Kanev, Metropolitan Ioasaf (Guben) of Vasylkivsk, Archbishop Iov (Smakouz) of Shumsk, Metropolitan Longin (Zhar) of Banchensk. Mass beating of believers and priests took place during the forceful seizure of the Monastery of the Nativity of the Virgin in Cherkassy. The end of November 2023 was marked by the SBU searches in Pochaev Lavra and the storming of the Kremenets Theological School (female students, including minors, were forcibly evicted from the college). Also throughout the year, there were clashes between believers and law enforcers near the walls of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, some of which buildings were transferred to the OCU in 2022.

At the same time, for 2023, the Ukrainian leadership has formed a policy of “double standards” in terms of relations with confessions. The UOC is subjected to the greatest repression, while all other religious organizations, on the contrary, are encouraged by the state and used in Europe and the United States to demonstrate “Ukrainian religious freedoms.” This practice resembles that which existed in the 1960s-80s in the USSR in relation to the ROC – when individual representatives of the Church were taken abroad in order to create

a “favorable image” of the Soviet Union as a state where believers do not tolerate any oppression.

In the case of the Kiev regime, the main objective of such activities is to persuade the U.S. Congress to allocate more funds for military aid to Ukraine. The main instrument of such activity in Ukraine has been *the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations* (AUCCRO). In October 2023, representatives of the AUCCRO traveled to the United States to attend a conference at the United States Institute of Peace. The event was co-organized by the Washington-based think tank Atlantic Council and the charitable organization “Razom for Ukraine.” During the meeting, all leaders made statements about the unprecedented level of religious freedom in Ukraine. *“Our goal is to present in person the diversity of religious freedoms in Ukraine and the deep understanding and cooperation between different churches and denominations,”* said, among others, OCU representative **Eustraty Zorya**. – *Within Ukraine, we really feel the freedom of religion.”* **Yaakov Dov Bleich**, chief rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine, in turn, said, *“Our message that we brought here: first of all, look at us. This is a real council of churches and religious organizations, unlike what some of our neighbors have. People are here because they want to represent somebody and the government did not choose them by deciding who should be the representative.”*

When asked about their attitude toward Bill 8371 and the possible ban of the UOC, all guests from Ukraine stated that the law would not be a restriction on religious freedom, and that the UOC has direct ties to the Kremlin and is controlled by the Russian state. *“The Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine is controlled by government institutions with religious names, but in reality it is part of the Russian government,”* said Eustraty Zorya.

One of the goals of the event was to try to change the minds of the evangelical community in the United States, which has repeatedly shown sympathy for the UOC in 2023. Former Ukrainian Finance Minister **Natalia Yaresko**, who attended the meeting, said that American evangelicals *“need to hear from the evangelical community in Ukraine about the atrocities – murders and tortures – against evangelical*

pastors in occupied Donetsk. They need to hear about the lack of freedoms from you, your community,” Yaresko said, “What more can the evangelical community in Ukraine do to help the evangelical community in the U.S. understand that the Russian Orthodox Church today is not an example and no alliance should be sought with it!”

5

INTRODUCTION OF THE TOPIC OF PERSECUTION OF THE UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH TO THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL AGENDA OF THE USA

The processes taking place in the religious-political sphere of Ukraine are strongly tied to the internal political struggle in the United States. So far, the connection has been largely secondary and inertial. The Ukrainian church issue itself was of little concern to Americans; most media supported the OCU, established under the Trump administration, as a “patriotic” church and condemned the UOC as “agents of the Kremlin” and carriers of the “heresy of the Russian world.” The novelty of 2023 is that it was the persecution of the UOC that became a topic of intra-American political discussion.

The participation of major media makers – journalist Tucker Carlson and the owner of the X social network, Elon Musk – played a decisive role. **Tucker Carlson** first spoke out about the persecution of believers in Ukraine on December 10, 2022 on Fox news. *“Zelensky’s secret police raided monasteries across Ukraine, and even a women’s monastery, and arrested dozens of priests completely without evidence and in clear violation of the Ukrainian Constitution, which now means nothing,”* he said. Carlson emphasized that no one in the Biden administration condemned these actions: *“They said nothing. Not a single word. Instead, they continue to insist on sending Zelensky more tax dollars.”*

On March 15, 2023, Fox news aired an entire report about it when they tried to evict the monks from the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra. *“It is amazing*

to see today's situation when they (the authorities) kick monks out of a monastery that has existed since the 11th century and in whose caves saints are buried. Such behavior is not befitting of liberal democracies. Therefore, one is tempted to think: there are those who considered Zelensky a special hero, who welcomed him, who assured that this man should be supported in every possible way. But at the same time Christians question some of his actions, which we now turn a blind eye to and are completely silent about. The actions that Zelensky has taken can in many ways be called nothing less than persecution of the faithful of the Church. So why are we silent?", Carlson stated at that time.

Finally, on October 26, 2023, while speaking with attorney Bob Amsterdam on Network X, Carlson condemned the so-called law banning the UOC (Bill 8371): "Shouldn't we be concerned that the Ukrainian government, which we are all apparently in favor of, is banning a Christian denomination? Where is Russell Moore, editor of Christianity Today? Where is Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, a supposed Christian? I mean, they're supporting this. What is this?" "The Ukrainian government has now banned an entire Christian denomination, and virtually no one in the United States has said anything about it," Carlson said.

Elon Musk, in his turn, posted the video of Carlson on his own page in X with a short comment: "Priests are being put in jail?." Just one sentence by Musk did more to spread the word about the situation of the UOC than the previous efforts of all journalists and human rights activists. The number of views of the Carlson video passed 100 million people.

The topic of persecution of the UOC and, in general, the restriction of religious freedoms in Ukraine has firmly entered the discourse of politicians of the Republican Party. In particular, these topics were voiced during the debates of participants in the Republican primaries in Miami. Criticizing President Biden and his government, Republican **Vivek Ramaswamy** said that Ukraine is actually unworthy of U.S. support because it is not a "model of democracy" and is trying to ban the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. "The Parliament did this just last week with the support of our dollars!", Ramaswamy said.

The American press has joined the protest against the ban of the UOC. Thus, The Hill published an article by **William Burke-White**, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Carey Law School, in which he comments on draft law 8371: *"This law will not only deprive millions of Ukrainians of their freedom of religion but will also undermine the main pillar of Ukraine's defense against Russian aggression – being on the right side of the law,"* Burke-White said.

Against the background of the discussions on Bill 8371, American lawyers Robert Amsterdam and William Burke-White became the main speakers on the issue of persecution of the UOC in the United States. Moreover, **Robert Amsterdam** personally joined the work to defend the UOC from unlawful persecution and stated that his task is to get Bill 8371 withdrawn. *"As I have said, you know, countless times, the religious ban is inexcusable, illegal, contrary to international law and the interests of Ukraine. And, what saddens me most as someone who supports Ukraine is that this government has proposed a law to the Rada that is so contrary to the law and international practice! The Ukrainian government must return to the rule of law,"* he said in an interview with Voice of America (the organization is recognized as a foreign agent in Russia).

6

SPEECHES OF AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN RELIGION EXPERTS CONDEMNING THE PERSECUTION OF THE UOC

It should be noted that leading American experts on religion in Ukraine even before 2023 spoke out against radical measures of the Kiev regime and against the ban of the UOC in particular. Despite the fact that most of them are hostile to the Russian Federation and the Russian Orthodox Church, they consider the law banning any Church unacceptable.

Thus, sociologist of religion and professor emeritus at Georgetown University, **Jose Casanova**, was initially one of the first academic

experts to call on the UOC to “renounce” its ties to Moscow and the ROC: *“If the UOC (MP) wants to be respected, they should clearly state that everything Kirill says is anathema, unchristian and heresy.”* At the same time, Casanova clearly spoke out against the very idea of banning the UOC: *“I would strongly advise against choosing the path of simply closing this church – this is exactly what the Orthodox Church of Russia and Stalin did to the Greek Catholics and the Autocephalous Orthodox Church after World War II. At the same time, those churches that want to operate in Ukraine must accept all the laws and rules of cohabitation for the security of the state in the context of war and must show themselves very clearly, patriots of Ukraine, not Russia.”*

Katherine Wanner, professor of history and anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania during a panel discussion at Georgetown University’s Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Berkeley on January 30, 2023 also said that *“it is natural for Ukrainian authorities to want to use every possible strategy to win the war, including by suppressing Russia-affiliated religions, but at the same time, containment may be a stronger choice in the long run. It is very tempting for Ukraine’s leaders to react politically for short-term gain and try to turn all potential forms of soft power into weapons to try for strengthening Ukrainian sovereignty,”* Wanner said, *“However, it has never been more important than now to make decisions strategically, not necessarily reactively.”*

The criticism of the German Catholic theologian, professor emeritus of the University of Münster, **Jacob Bremer**, also caused a great resonance. Bremer subjected to a detailed analysis the text of the religious expert examination regarding the statute of the UOC, drawn up in January 2023 in the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience of Ukraine (SEFC). The authors of the expert examination claimed that the UOC is still affiliated with structures in the Russian Federation. Bremer, in turn, called the experts’ conclusions biased. *“Epistemologically it is impossible to prove that something does not exist – you can only prove that there is something. If I stated that I was not German, no one could prove it,”* Bremer stated. According to Bremer, the conclusions of the expert

examination are explained solely by the fact that *“there is a political intention to ban the UOC or at least significantly reduce its importance.”*

In general, by the end of 2023, a circle of experts, human rights activists, and politicians in the United States have begun to emerge who insist that the Zelensky regime should reconsider its policy toward the UOC. The opinion of this group is most clearly expressed by the well-known American lawyer **Bob Amsterdam**. The participation of Amsterdam and his supporters in the defense of the UOC, however, should not be taken as a sign of success for the ROC or the Russian Federation. Amsterdam defended Khodorkovsky in the Yukos case, supported Ilya Ponomaryov (recognized as a foreign agent in the Russian Federation). His support for the UOC is primarily an attempt to deprive Moscow of its monopoly in the defense of religious freedom in Ukraine. The main reason why Amsterdam and his supporters insist on restoring the UOC to its legal rights is that as a result of the actions of the Ukrainian government, the UOC is gradually taking the catacomb path. Which, by analogy with the times of the USSR, only complicates the control of believers by the authorities. *“Again,”* Amsterdam argues, *“we can’t determine the exact numbers right now, but it is believed that there are about 10,000 [clergy]. In essence, what has emerged is a catacomb Church whose number of believers cannot be counted, and it is reminiscent of the Soviet times.”*

7

DISCUSSION OF THE TOPIC OF PERSECUTION OF THE UOC AT UNSC MEETINGS AS A FACT OF SUCCESS OF RUSSIAN CHURCH DIPLOMACY

The year 2023 was marked by a definite change in the rhetoric of the ROC leadership toward international human rights platforms. Whereas in previous years Russian church officials had a generally skeptical and sometimes condemnatory tone towards international human rights, now, against the backdrop of increased persecution of the UOC, the leadership

of the Moscow Patriarchate has once again begun to perceive this tool as effective. The main focus was on working with the UN Security Council.

On January 17, 2023, **Metropolitan Anthony (Sevryuk)**, chairman of the department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate (DECR), addressed the UN Security Council meeting convened at the initiative of the Russian Federation and devoted to the situation of the UOC. *"I would like to draw the attention of the Council to the unlawful actions of the state authorities of Ukraine against the largest confession of this country, to the numerous violations of the rights of believers guaranteed by the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights <...> and many other acts guaranteeing the human right to freedom of religion,"* Metropolitan Anthony said. He told the audience about systematic violations of legislation on freedom of conscience in Ukraine, about bills aimed at destroying the UOC, about mass searches conducted by Ukrainian security services in churches, monasteries and diocesan offices of the UOC.

This speech by Metropolitan Anthony, however, was virtually ignored by the international community and had no practical consequences. Soon after the meeting, another round of repression against the clergy and believers of the UOC began in Ukraine. Two days later, on January 19, the already mentioned bill 8371, aimed at banning the UOC, was introduced to the Verkhovna Rada. On January 24, another "sanction list" of the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) was published, which included 21 representatives of the ROC, including Metropolitan Anthony (Sevryuk) himself and the leadership of the main synodal departments. And on February 1, the results of the SEFC examination were made public, confirming the connection between the UOC and the ROC (see above).

Nevertheless, it was after Metropolitan Anthony's speech that a discussion about the real situation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the state of religious freedoms in Ukraine began in the UN structures. Already on March 24, the report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk on freedom of religion in Ukraine was published. The report cautiously pointed out that the actions of the Ukrainian authorities with regard to the UOC *"may be of a discriminatory nature."* And on

June 27, the UN Office for Human Rights also published its report, which noted an upsurge in violence and “hate speech” against representatives of the UOC. It also noted the inaction of the Ukrainian authorities, which *“failed to effectively counteract”* these incidents.

This trend caused active opposition from NATO countries and their allies. In particular, on July 26, during the regular meeting of the UN Security Council on the situation of the UOC, Bishop **Gedeon (Kharon)** of the UOC was not allowed to speak at the initiative of the UK, which was presiding in the Council at that time. According to Bishop Gedeon, in his report he intended to voice concrete facts that testify to the intensification of persecution of the canonical Church in Ukraine, its clergy and believers. *“Not to let a person say a word is first of all to sign their helplessness, in fact they are afraid,”* he told reporters.

Despite this, in November 2023, the topic of persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church resurfaced in the UN Security Council, which can be considered a strategic victory for Russian church diplomacy. On November 17, at the regular meeting of the Council, convened at the initiative of the Russian Federation and devoted to the Ukrainian church issue, the UN Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights **Ilze Brands Kehris** spoke. She cited the cases of violence and threats against UOC representatives recorded by the OHCHR and noted that *“the response of Ukrainian law enforcers to this was inadequate, they failed to properly investigate the incidents and take action to protect UOC members.”* *“In at least 26 cases against UOC representatives, we had concerns about the legal proceedings, for example, in connection with the lack of access to a lawyer for the accused during searches,”* Ilse Brands Keris pointed out. She also said that the Ukrainian authorities should reconsider the text of the bill 8371 on banning the UOC, which was adopted in the first reading.

At the same meeting, a press briefing was held by **Vakhtang Kipshidze**, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Orthodox Church Department for the Church’s Relations with Society and Mass Media. Kipshidze’s main thesis voiced at the briefing – *“the country’s authorities are pursuing the goal*

of complete destruction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church” – was not disputed by any of the speakers of the session. Kipshidze’s words that “the first step to restoring peace in Ukraine is to stop the persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church”, – following the UN website, the world mass media spread it.

8

A NEW STAGE OF THE INFORMATION WAR AGAINST THE ROC BY EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN “THINK TANKS” RELATED TO THE PERSECUTION OF THE UOC – “DIGITAL ETHICAL HYSTERIA” INVOLVING FORMER EMPLOYEES OF THE MOSCOW PATRIARCHATE

In 2023, Western think tanks dealing with the Ukrainian topic actively used the method of “digital ethical hysteria” in covering the issue of persecution of the UOC. In order to disorient world public opinion and distract it from the real facts of violence and discrimination against members of the Ukrainian Church, the think tanks’ employees spent the whole year transforming the topic of persecution. The main culprit of the persecution was not the Ukrainian state, but the Russian state and the ROC as “its integral part.” The main thesis of the information campaign was that the ROC, by refusing to recognize the separation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from itself, “provokes persecution” itself, and by its human rights activities on international platforms it simply throws the Ukrainian brothers a “hospital pass.”

Former employees of the Moscow Patriarchate who are in exile, as well as clerics of foreign dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church, who have the status of “persecuted” and “persecuted for their beliefs” by their church leadership in the Western press, were actively involved in the “ethical hysteria” campaign. Leaders of the campaign were **Archimandrite Kirill Govorun** (clergyman of the Moscow diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, banned from ministry on September 25, 2023), **Sergei Chapnin**

(former editor of the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, currently editor of Public Orthodoxy and a member of The Orthodox Christian Studies Center of Fordham University (USA)), and *Natalia Vasilevich* (theologian-emigrant from Belarus, coordinator of the group “Khrystsiyanskaya viziya”). Their emotional statements on blogs and in the media, filled with hatred of the Russian church leadership, are designed to show the “scale of guilt” of the Moscow Patriarchate in the events in Ukraine and to convince the audience that there is no persecution of the UOC.

Thus, according to Govorun, *talking about persecution is conspiracy: “after this meeting [on January 17 at the UN Security Council – Religion Today], talking about persecution is like spreading conspiracy theories. That is, a person in his right mind would not do it. As the Albanian representative in the UN noted, Russia used to convene the Security Council about biolaboratories, but now it is about persecution.”* However, Govorun believes that *“Russia’s initiative [to discuss the issue of persecution of the UOC in the UN Security Council – Religion Today] gave a pretext to voice the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the war, as well as the destruction of churches and cultural monuments by Russian troops.”*

According to Govorun, the forced transfer of communities from the UOC to the OCU is also a fiction, and in fact the religion policy of the Ukrainian state is very democratic: *“People and religious communities in Ukraine have been given the opportunity to choose which of the two jurisdictions to belong to: the autocephalous or the Moscow Patriarchate. [...] The fact that the congregations and the hierarchical structures serving them have changed places and now the latter must serve the former is perceived by the UOC MP episcopate as some kind of catastrophe, which they call persecution. In reality, it is about normalization of relations between communities/believers and the hierarchy serving them. Now no Ukrainian jurisdiction can claim to own the congregations as its own property. The communities themselves choose which hierarchy will serve them.”*

According to Chapnin, by raising the topic of persecution of the UOC in public, Patriarch Kirill cynically sacrifices the hierarchy of the UOC: *“Kirill’s words ‘we know how difficult it is today to be members of the*

Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate' are a very insidious blow to Metropolitan Onufry, Archbishop Sylvester (Stoychev) and all those who for a year have been trying to convince us that the UOC is no longer part of the Russian Orthodox Church."

According to Vasilevich, talks of persecution of the UOC is just an instrument of influence of Russian church diplomacy: "The ROC can finally get on its hobby horse about 'persecution of canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine'. Every new church forcibly transferred from the UOC to the OCU is another argument in the piggy bank, 'my precious.'" Persecution of the UOC representatives, according to Vasilevich, the world community should connect not with the policy of the Kiev regime, but with the will of the people of Ukraine: "Now we should consider the conflict around the UOC as an emotional breakdown of the Ukrainian society. Broad layers of Ukrainian society have come to hate the UOC due to a number of factors."

The thesis that repression is the desire of Ukrainian civil society is also developed by the portal Public Orthodoxy. "*We have a conflict between the UOC and Ukrainian civil society, to which the state mostly reacts spontaneously, trying to take into account the mood of society and assessing the level of threat to national security. That is, in Ukraine there is no conflict between the church and non-believers, the church and the secular and nationalist state,*" claims one of the portal's authors, Professor Gennady Khristokin of the Kiev Aviation (!) Institute.

9

"DEMOSCOWIZATION"/ "DERUSSIFICATION" AS A FORM OF MANIFESTATION OF "CANCEL CULTURE" IN UKRAINIAN ORTHODOXY

The Ukrainization (also known as derussification) of Orthodoxy is part of a worldwide trend towards "nationalization of religion", especially noticeable in countries under political dictatorship. The process of "Ukrainization of Orthodoxy" in Ukraine is in many ways similar to the process

of “Chinazation of religion” in China during the last years. In the first case, they talk about a break with the communist past, and in the second case – on the contrary, about the incorporation of religion into the communist ideology. But in practice everything turns out to be the same: filtering of the clergy, “political” renaming, redesigning of religious buildings in the “national style.” As an ideological tool, this is one of the ways to “wash out” nationalistically and patriotically-minded clergy and believers from the UOC.

The term “demoscowization” (i.e., “parting with Moscow”) has also gained currency among Ukrainian clerics. *“When all over Ukraine they are getting rid of the Russian heritage, it is also time for the Church to start the process of ‘de-moscowization’ of its consciousness,”* **Archpriest Vladimir Melnychuk** states on his Facebook page. From the theses of the “demoscowization”:

- The UOC serves not in Church Slavonic, but in *“Russian-Ukrainian mix of the Church Slavonic language”*;
- *“Having services with Ukrainian pronunciation is the only chance to preserve Church Slavonic worship in our Church”*;
- *“The modern use of Church Slavonic language with Russian pronunciation according to Russian books is not a desire to preserve tradition, but ordinary Russophilism, Moscowcentricity, younger brother complex, brought up for centuries.”*

Melnichuk got himself “demoscowized” both ecclesiastically and legally – being a priest of the Moscow Patriarchate in Italy, he transferred to the Patriarchate of Constantinople in April 2022. Accordingly, this is not a discussion within the ROC or the UOC, but rather some recommendations for Ukrainian Orthodoxy from the “civilized world.” Nevertheless, they are quite popular in Ukrainian church circles. And here there is a clear “divergence of paths” for “the demoscowized” inside

and outside of Ukraine. Foreign Ukrainians are more likely to go to the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which actively positions itself as “extra-national” and “supranational.” Internal Ukrainians – on the contrary, to the nationalist OCU.

The OCU is actively discussing such questions as whether a Ukrainian can go to the church of Xenia of St. Petersburg, and whether a believer should be “renamed” if he was baptized in honor of a Russian saint as a child. “Russian” elements in the decoration of the temples of the OCU – are universally destroyed. According to **Father Georgy Kovalenko**, rector of the Open Orthodox University of St. Sophia the Wisdom, *“the religious communities that transfer to the OCU are faced with the fact that Russian imperial symbols remain in the interiors of churches. That is why the process of decommunization, in his opinion, should concern both the internal appearance of churches and the names of churches,”* the Ukrainian State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience reported. The policy of “demoscowization” is also supported at the national level – for example, on June 28, 2023, President Zelensky signed a decree to move the national celebration of Christmas from January 7 to December 25 (i.e., to differ from Russia in this respect).

10

ATTEMPTS OF RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN THE OCU AND THE UOC – FORCED FROM OUTSIDE AND SPONTANEOUS

From the very foundation of the OCU – since 2018 – the Ukrainian authorities and their Western advisors have insisted on the need for, if not direct unification, then at least “rapprochement” and “a dialog” between the OCU and the UOC. Nevertheless, the whole logic of events was against this. First of all, because of the strong politicization of the church issue in Ukraine: because of the deliberate positioning of the

OCU as the only “patriotic” Church by state propaganda, and the UOC as a “fifth column.” Aggressive nationalist rhetoric on the part of the OCU and raiding of churches throughout the country have also been an obstacle to any dialog between the two church structures all this time. However, as negativity toward the OCU accumulated in the public consciousness and as the topic of persecution of the UOC became part of the political agenda of the United States, the position of the OCU began to weaken noticeably. Against this background, personal contacts between the hierarchs of both church structures became more frequent.

The ecclesiastical and political situation in Ukraine resembles the situation in Soviet Russia a century ago, when there was one canonical Church (“Tikhonov’s”) and one “patriotic” Church (the Renovationist schism), and it was this division artificially created by the authorities that made conditions for the Soviet regime to eradicate the Church as such. Realization of this fact by representatives of both jurisdictions in Ukraine is the main motive for rapprochement (in a sense, it can be formulated in the words of Bulat Okudzhava’s song – “let’s hold hands, friends, so that we do not disappear alone”). The most discussed scenario is the same as in 1923–25s in Russia. That is, we are not talking about any regular “united council”, but about the return of “evaders” from the OCU to the canonical UOC through repentance.

The “cordial” meeting between Metropolitan Pavel (Lebed) of the UOC and Metropolitan Aleksander (Drabinko) of the OCU, which came into the public eye, had a symbolic significance. The meeting between Metropolitans Pavel and Aleksander is a natural result of the church-political deadlock in which Ukraine finds itself, as confirmed by Metropolitan Pavel’s subsequent “explanations.” The conservative part of the UOC accused Metropolitan Pavel of “betrayal”; experts began to assume that the bishop was thus saving himself from a new criminal case and even wanted to symbolically join the “autocephalist party.” Nevertheless, Metropolitan Pavel made it clear that it is not about any “unification” of the UOC and the OCU, but simply that Metropolitan Aleksander should

“return to the bosom of the Mother Church.” According to Metropolitan Pavel, technically this is quite possible, since Metropolitan Aleksander has not been disowned.

To what extent Metropolitan Pavel’s proposal will be realized in the case of Drabinko personally, and whether such a practice will become a mass practice for the hierarchs of the OCU is one of the key questions of Ukrainian ecclesiastical life for 2024.

SUMMARY

Compared to the previous year 2022, the church-political situation in Ukraine in 2023 has become even more acute. At the same time, the strategies of key actors have changed:

- The Kiev regime’s position on religion has become noticeably radicalized. From the attempt to forcibly “nationalize” the parishes of the UOC and unite them with the OCU, the Ukrainian authorities have moved to direct forceful attacks on the canonical Church and have set a course for the total destruction of the UOC. The Ukrainian Verkhovnyaya Rada is actively resisting this repressive policy;

- In the international arena, the Russian Federation and the Russian Orthodox Church played a leading role in protecting the rights of believers in Ukraine throughout 2023. The situation in Ukraine prompted the ROC to reconsider its policy of recent years with regard to the international human rights movement, first of all, to participate more actively in the work of the UN Security Council;

- These successes of the ROC have been criticized by Ukraine’s Western partners. One of the tasks of Western politicians for 2024 seems to be to deprive the ROC and the Russian Federation of the monopoly to protect the rights of the UOC. In addition, more and more politicians, experts and human rights activists in the West are encouraging

the Zelensky regime to abandon its repressive policy towards the UOC, as the latter drives the Church into “catacombs” and thus only makes it more difficult to control the believers;

- The further fate of Orthodoxy in Ukraine will depend both on the situation at the front and on the balance of forces in the information war;

- Religious figures of the UOC and OCU do not have much room for any maneuver, their role is that of hostages of the geopolitical situation. Nevertheless, the church-political direction that can “save face” to the greatest extent and maintain a balance between political conjuncture and corporate interests will have the greatest prospects in 2024. The return of some hierarchs of the OCU to the canonical UOC is one of the possible trends of the future 2024.

**“PROTECTION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
SHOULD NOT BE POLITICIZED” –
VAKHTANG KIPSHIDZE**

On November 17, 2023, *Vakhtang Kipshidze*, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Orthodox Church Department for the Church’s Relations with Society and Mass Media, spoke remotely at the UN Security Council meeting on the situation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In an interview with Religions Today, he shared his impressions of the meeting and expressed his views on the current state of religious freedom in Ukraine and on the policy of the Ukrainian authorities toward the UOC.

– On November 17, you spoke at the UN Security Council on the protection of the rights of believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. What are your impressions of this event? Do you think you were heard?

– As you know, this was not the first time that a representative of the Russian Orthodox Church has addressed the UN Security Council on this issue. Before me, Metropolitan Anthony (Sevryuk) of Volokolamsk and writer Jan Ilyich Taksyur, who was released from imprisonment in Ukraine, had already addressed the UN Security Council on this topic. The Russian Federation, using its rights as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, regularly initiates such meetings. The Chinese presidency of the United Nations Security Council gives us this opportunity, and this is wonderful.

However, the atmosphere at these meetings is not an easy one. All representatives of the countries of the so-called “West” remain completely deaf not only to the concerns of the Russian Federation about the persecution of the UOC, but also to the living testimonies of real people who suffered for their faith in Ukraine, such as Jan Taksyur and Bishop Gedeon

(Kharon), who was simply prevented from speaking at the UN Security Council in July of this year at the initiative of Great Britain. Accounts of religious persecution in Ukraine do not arouse any interest among Western representatives. With a stubbornness worthy of better use, they continue to repeat that Ukraine is a democratic state where there are no problems with respect for the rights of believers, and that Russia is to blame for everything.

They do not want to consider any objective data or documents at all. Although it is not only the reports of the Russian Federation and the ROC – all these facts are set out in the reports of the UN Human Rights Secretariat. That is, these are official UN documents. This is not the position of an interested party, which, no doubt, we are, as members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are our fellow believers. This is the voice of the UN. But it turns out that none of them are interested in this either.

Speaking about my personal impressions, I have spoken at many international venues and, of course, I know firsthand what double standards are. But here specifically, double standards as a phenomenon have reached an absolutely unbelievable level. It is a prohibitive level of cynicism, at which the concept of religious freedom completely loses its objective meaning. For Western countries, it is just a screen that can be used to realize their own state interests.

– *What are their state interests in relation to the religious situation in Ukraine?*

– The interest of the United States is to support the so-called OCU. They have created this structure and openly and bluntly support it, without observing the elementary norms of secularism, which American politicians constantly talk about respecting. That is why during his visit to Kiev, American President Joe Biden met only with the so-called “Metropolitan” Epifany, but not with Metropolitan Onufry. This is why the US authorities are not just turning a blind eye to the persecution of members of the UOC, but are also signaling to the Ukrainian

authorities which church is the right one. All other Western countries tacitly approve of this policy.

– How do you assess the voices in support of the UOC that are increasingly heard among politicians and human rights activists in the United States? The activities of lawyer Bob Amsterdam, in particular. There is an opinion that this is an attempt to deprive Russia of its monopoly on protecting the rights of the UOC.

– We do not deny anyone the opportunity to be sincere. Certainly, not all American politicians and human rights activists are “in cahoots” with President Biden. There are certainly public figures in the United States who recognize that Zelensky’s regime violates basic principles of religious freedom. Journalist Tucker Carlson, whose conversation with attorney Bob Amsterdam garnered millions of views, plays a huge role in this movement. These people are in opposition to the current U.S. administration. We are in no way in competition with them. The defense of religious freedom should not be politicized.

– To what extent does the ROC’s position on the UOC converge and diverge from Bob Amsterdam’s position? In particular, Amsterdam recently suggested that the Ukrainian government’s attempt to drive the UOC into the catacombs would turn against the government itself, because this would create “an underground Church that does not allow statistics to be kept.

– I believe that the defense of religious freedom should not be done in terms of “control” by the state. We should be thinking about protecting the rights of believers, not how to control the Church. Otherwise – it is difficult for me to judge. Contacts with American lawyers and human rights activists are very difficult now, primarily because of the situation with the United States. Any cooperation with Russian representatives is dangerous for Americans now, and they may be subjected to real repression

because of this. It is worth remembering at least the American journalist and human rights activist Jack Hanik, the creator of Fox news, who is now in prison.

– *Does the ROC maintain contacts with any Ukrainian human rights activists?*

– Ukrainian human rights activists are in even greater danger, and they are imprisoned for any contacts with representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church or the Russian Federation. Even people who simply spoke out against the church split, i.e., in favor of keeping the UOC within the Russian Orthodox Church, but were labeled “agents of the Russian Federation”, are imprisoned. Therefore, we are forced to avoid contacts with them in order not to expose them to additional risk. A simple call from Russia to a Ukrainian cleric or human rights activist can end in torture in the SBU.

– *What international platforms would you call today potentially effective in terms of protecting the rights of the UOC believers?*

– The system of international human rights organizations is in a state of protracted crisis. Many States now prevent the issuance of visas to foreign nationals intending to attend an international human rights event, which is a direct violation of international law. This calls into question the very legal nature of international cooperation. In our case, apart from the UN Security Council, there is still hope for the World Council of Churches and the OSCE. Although, perhaps, it will be impossible for us to get visas to Warsaw. With the Council of Europe, alas, everything is difficult: the absence of consideration of appeals of the UOC by the European Court of Human Rights, which has become extremely politicized and ignores the basic principles of protection of the rights of believers. There is still hope for bilateral contacts with various countries – for example, Hungary is not engaged in apologizing for everything that the Kiev regime is doing.

– There is an opinion, which is actively developed by the Western media, that the ROC by its defense only harms the believers and clerics of the ROC. That, speaking in defense of the UOC, representatives of the ROC seem to confirm the conclusions of the office of Viktor Yelensky that the UOC is part of the Moscow Patriarchate. Thus, the ROC only contributes to repressions against the UOC. What can we say to this?

– We advocate not only for members of our own Church. We speak out in support of Christians in various countries, including Western Europe, where many representatives of Christian communities are subjected to repression for defending, for example, the traditional view of the family. Religious freedom is a basic principle of international law, not part of the ROC's doctrine or part of any state ideology. The UOC itself in today's circumstances is unable to defend itself, as its leadership is actually held hostage by the Ukrainian authorities. And we understand perfectly well that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is not an instrument of Russian state policy or some kind of "pro-Russian force" in Ukraine, as it is called. The Ukrainian authorities' claims that the UOC are "agents of the Kremlin" are a cynical lie. The canonical Church of Ukraine has never fought the local authorities and has been a law-abiding organization. It has never taken part in any political conspiracies against the Ukrainian government, never participated in the activities of any political opposition. We defend them simply because we believe that the rights of believers should be respected everywhere.

– What is the logic of the Kiev regime's actions with regard to the UOC, in your opinion? Is there any rationality here?

– The Ukrainian authorities need the Church to turn into a political tool. It is for this purpose that they encourage the OCU. The OCU is an appendage of the current Ukrainian authorities, and the task of this structure is to destroy everything that reminds of the community of Russians and Ukrainians, of our common spiritual and cultural heritage. The Ukrainian

authorities have set themselves an absolutely infernal goal – to cleanse the Ukrainian religious space of our common centuries-old history. By and large, if this goal is achieved, it will mean the complete destruction of Orthodoxy in Ukraine. Because it is impossible to unambiguously separate Ukrainian from Russian.

– *But why would they want to destroy Orthodoxy in Ukraine? It's irrational.*

– I feel that the political activity of the Ukrainian authorities is becoming more and more God-fighting. God-fighting is irrational, you are right. In many ways, the actions of the Ukrainian authorities are similar to the actions of the Soviet government in the early years. It was also irrational activity.

– *But the Kiev regime has no openly god-fighting, anti-religious slogans.*

– Words are not as important. And actions are in many ways similar. Like the early Soviet regime, the Ukrainian government is trying to create a “new man.” This is a form of cultural self-destruction of the nation. The Soviet authorities purposefully supported the Renovationists because they were against Tikhon’s supporters – just as the current Ukrainian authorities support the OCU because it is against the UOC. Overall, this is an attempt to destroy the Church as such. Clearly, strengthening the OCU for Zelensky’s regime is not an end in itself. Just as the Bolsheviks viewed the Renovationists as an intermediate stage in the destruction of religion, the Zelensky regime looks at the OCU as a transitional stage to something else. This is just a tactical ploy. Perhaps there will be some other transitional links – uniatism, for example.

– *We often hear in the press and in conversations among believers that if the Russian Orthodox Church had granted autocephaly to the*

UOC in time, even before the invasion of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, there would not be such persecution of believers in Ukraine now. What do you think about it?

– The current Ukrainian authorities are determined in such a way that they do not care at all whether the Church is autocephalous or not. They want to destroy any connection of Ukrainians with Russia and Russian Orthodoxy. And the UOC in any case would be unable to help them in this, because it is necessary to commit an act of cultural self-destruction. Russian and Ukrainian Orthodoxy are united in terms of doctrine, history, liturgical traditions. In this sense, all attempts of the UOC to negotiate with the Ukrainian authorities have no prospects. The Ukrainian authorities do not want to subdue the UOC, but to destroy it as a historical entity.

Interviewed for Religion Today by Anastasia Koskello

**“THE PEOPLE OF UKRAINE HAVE SHOWN THAT
THEY ARE NOT READY TO CHANGE CHURCHES
LIKE THEIR SOCKS, JUST AT THE BEHEST
OF THE AUTHORITIES,” – ROMAN LUNKIN**

Religionist, sociologist of religion, head of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Doctor of Political Sciences *Roman Lunkin* answers the questions of Religion Today about the trends of 2023 in Ukrainian Orthodoxy.

– How do you assess the results of 2023 in church-state relations in Ukraine? What did it bring to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church?

– The year 2023, in general, with all the facts known to us, was quite favorable for the UOC. First of all, because the well-known bill 8371 “on the ban of the UOC” – it still hasn’t been adopted. No matter how hard the Ukrainian authorities tried, they could not radically change the situation. They did not succeed in merging the UOC with the OCU, nor in banning the UOC, nor in taking away the Pochaev Lavra from the UOC, nor in changing the leadership of the UOC.

– Can the change in the leadership of the SEFC on the eve of 2023 and the replacement of Olena Bogdan by Viktor Yelensky be seen as a symptom of a change in the policy of the Ukrainian authorities towards religion?

– The change in policy was obvious. Yelensky came for a very specific task – on the one hand, to weaken the UOC as much as possible, and, on the other hand, to present this to the West in a neat “democratic” package. His status as the former head of the Ukrainian branch of IARF

(International Association for Religious Freedom) seemed to give him confidence here. Inside the country, Yelensky acted mainly by “underhand methods”, organizing all sorts of non-public consultations, for example, between the UOC and the OCU, trying to find alleged “collaborators” among the clergy of the UOC. The purpose of this was to provoke an internal split in the UOC and thereby accelerate the merger of the remnants of the UOC with the OCU and the creation of the “unified Ukrainian Orthodox Church” desired by the Ukrainian authorities.

– *How “successful” was this mission of Yelensky’s?*

– From a formal standpoint, he achieved nothing at all. The UOC – as it stood, so it still stands. In fact, it is very difficult for us to judge to what extent he was able to influence the mood of the hierarchy of the UOC. Perhaps he was able to induce part of the episcopate to be at least more tolerant of the OCU. If this is so, it means one more step towards the UOC severing all ties with the Moscow Patriarchate.

– *The so-called “The second Feofaniia Council”, about which Yelensky repeatedly spoke – do you think he will be able to organize?*

– I think that under the current conditions – definitely not. This will only be possible if Metropolitan Onufry leaves.

– *What causes Yelensky’s policy to stall, who is giving him the most resistance?*

– First of all, it is a large part of Ukrainian society, which does not want to go along with the authorities in their fight against the Church. I have the impression that the Ukrainian people have not justified the hopes of their own authorities at all. The people turned out to be “not the same” as the representatives of the local academic elite, including Yelensky, had painted them to the Kiev authorities. First of all, the people

of Ukraine have shown that they are not ready to change Churches like their socks, simply at the behest of the authorities. Yelensky and his colleagues expected people to join the OCU *en masse*, but this did not happen. Yelensky underestimated that people care about their particular parish, their particular priest, and to a greater or lesser extent, their bishop. Community life in Ukraine is much more developed than in Russia. And general declarations that some Church is “more correct”, “more patriotic”, “more independent” do not have such an impact on the majority of believers. People do not agree to change the church simply for political reasons.

– How appropriate here is the analogy with the times of the Renewal schism? Is it true that the UOC, by analogy with Tikhon’s Church, attracts people as a more traditional, conservative Church, while the OCU, like Renovatism, repels people with politicization and modernism?

– In part, that’s true. The OCU is repulsive because of its politicization and new style. Plus, there is a rumor actively spreading in Ukraine that the OCU will merge with the Uniate Greek Catholic Church in the future. This is, of course, from the category of fairy tales, but the appearance of such rumors is quite natural. Because the social and political views of the hierarchy of the OCU and the UGCC largely coincide. Although, in general, the OCU did not go as far in terms of reforming worship and church canons as the Renovatists did. Things like a married episcopate do not exist in the OCU. And their worship is practically the same as in the UOC.

– Can we say that in 2023 the position of the OCU has weakened, that its social base is melting away? The joke that the abbreviation “OCU” should be deciphered as “Empty churches in Ukraine”¹ – how well-founded is it?

¹ In Russian, “Pustye cerkvi Ukrainy” – by the first letters form an abbreviation used to name the Orthodox Church of Ukraine

– I think we cannot speak of “empty churches.” On the contrary, the OCU is becoming a rather stable church jurisdiction. The OCU has fewer parishes than the UOC, but there is still some growth there. And in the near future this “bipolar” structure in Ukrainian Orthodoxy is likely to continue. This is a more familiar situation for Ukraine than for Russia. People there have long been accustomed to the fact that there are different jurisdictions and do not see it as such a problem. Objectively, Ukrainian society is now not just politicized, but literally “electrified” by politics, so the OCU naturally has its own audience. The official data on the parishes of the OCU are most likely greatly exaggerated. But even if in reality the UOC has 12 thousand parishes, and the OCU has 3-4 thousand, it is still impossible to say that the OCU is a complete zero. And the OCU was not created out of nothing, but as a conglomerate of fragments of previously existing Orthodox jurisdictions, first of all, the Kiev Patriarchate and the UAOC. That is, it did not start from scratch. Even if the hierarchy of the OCU does not do anything good, and Epifany does not say anything clever, the OCU will not disappear overnight.

– The much-talked-about meeting between Metropolitan Pavel (Lebed) and Aleksander Drabinko has given cause for many commentators to claim that now the OCU clergy will run back to the UOC en masse. How likely is this scenario? After all, they deliberately “highlighted” this meeting. What did they want to say?

– Certainly they intentionally made the whole thing a media event, and that was some signal. But you have to understand the context. If Pavel (Lebed) was not in such a vulnerable situation now, if he was not under investigation – of course, he would not have met with Drabinko. Drabinko is not doing well either. On the one hand, he has an excellent reputation in front of the authorities, he is an absolute patriot of Ukraine, he is admitted to many offices, he has done a lot to establish relations with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. That is, he is a man of a very influential crowd. And it is in this capacity that he is important for Metropolitan Pavel.

This may correct his image as a person who is not “patriotic” enough, who is in quarrel with the authorities. On the other hand, in the church hierarchy itself, Drabinko has not reached the heights he may have wanted. In fact, he achieved nothing in the OCU. But he thought of himself as the successor of Metropolitan Vladimir (Sabodan) and the future head of all Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Perhaps, meeting with Pavel, he is thus establishing contacts with the UOC in order to take some prominent place in its hierarchy in the future. For example, to become the head of the UOC and prove to the Ukrainian authorities even more effective. That is, personally, Drabinko can easily return to the UOC. But there is no reason to believe that there will be a mass exodus of OCU members to the UOC.

– *What is the prospect of the UOC in case Drabinko returns to it?*

– It is likely that the UOC will be under even greater control of the authorities and will make some steps to finally break with Moscow. In fact, then the difference between the UOC and the OCU will be erased, and there will be a basis for their unification. That is, for what Zelensky dreams of. It would be very convenient for the Kiev authorities: two young metropolitans. Young Epifany at the head of the OCU and, so to speak, young Drabinko at the head of the UOC, although it is improbable. Apparently, the Ukrainian authorities believe that with these hierarchs the process of dialog will go faster. Because the dialog with Onufry obviously did not work out for the Ukrainian authorities. Onufry obviously does not want to compromise on many issues. Even that council in Feofaniia, which took place in 2022, was to some extent favorable to Moscow – because the provision on self-government of dioceses facilitated the transition of the UOC dioceses to the Russian Orthodox Church. And this is what the Kiev authorities blame Onufry for.

– *How do you assess the policy of the Moscow Patriarchate towards the UOC? Is the Russian Church aimed at preserving or absorbing the UOC? There is an opinion that the ROC, formally defending the UOC*

on various international platforms, in fact only aggravates the repression of Onufry's structure.

– If we observe from the outside, I would say that the ROC and Patriarch Kirill personally are clearly very careful about the UOC and Metropolitan Onufry. No harsh condemnation of Metropolitan Onufry's position, including the part when Onufry condemned the Russian authorities, has ever been voiced by the leadership of the ROC. There was no criticism of the UOC at all in the first six months after the beginning of the SMO. Then some resentment appeared in the patriarch's rhetoric that some parishes and dioceses of the UOC refused to pray for him. But the patriarch did not impose any sanctions, no harsh statement on this topic was made on his part. And the Patriarchate's reaction to "the Feofaniia Council" was rather restrained and positive.

– The Moscow Patriarchate has not yet expressed a clear assessment of "The Feofaniia Council." Will this assessment be voiced? And what can it be?

– Most likely, there will be no condemnation of this council. De facto, "The Feofaniia Council" was beneficial to the ROC, as it facilitated the incorporation of dioceses on the new territories of the Russian Federation into the ROC. I do not know whether the decisions of the council were directly or indirectly coordinated with Moscow, but they give the impression of being coordinated.

– Why is there such an inconsistency with the transfer of Ukrainian dioceses to the ROC? The Primorsk and Berdyansk dioceses have transferred, but the Luhansk and Donetsk dioceses have not yet. And the Crimean Metropolis has only recently transferred.

– This demonstrates that neither Church wants to quarrel and tear up relations. And the wording used in the transition of dioceses implies the

possibility of preserving their connection with the UOC. That is, these dioceses are not transferred to the ROC, but under the direct administrative subordination of Patriarch Kirill. Who heads both the ROC and the UOC as well. This does not mean that the ROC removes them from the UOC – such a subtlety.

– *Doesn't this mean that Patriarch Kirill is simply sabotaging the Kremlin's policy and, so to speak, "keeping his ear to the ground"? That he is afraid that everything will go back to normal...*

– Yes, the patriarch's position makes the Russian authorities somewhat displeased. Church policy does not quite coincide with state policy. Patriarch Kirill, of course, has a special position that is not identical to that of the Kremlin – and by doing so, according to some officials, it spoils the "big picture" for them. But this does not mean that the patriarch and the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church doubt that the new regions will gain a foothold in the Russian Federation. The reasons here are different. Simply in a situation when political boundaries are changing, the ROC leadership seeks to preserve relations in the church environment as much as possible, to preserve its positions. In this case, in order not to cause excessive indignation among the local Ukrainian clergy. If the patriarch said that all dioceses of the UOC on the new territories of should be transferred to the ROC by his decree – this would be perceived by the UOC clergy as a direct hostile action. They would simply not obey and would leave the Moscow Patriarchate. It is strategically important for the patriarch to have at least some staging ground in the UOC and at least some contacts with that part of Ukrainian Orthodoxy that does not want to radically break with Moscow and the Russian Orthodox tradition. In the current situation, it is better for the patriarch to have something than nothing in Ukraine.

– *And does Ukrainian Orthodoxy, different from Russian Orthodoxy, exist today as a cultural and religious phenomenon?*

– There is no doubt that Ukrainian Orthodoxy exists. Ukrainians have a more developed community life. The traditional rural Orthodox consciousness has been preserved there, which is uncharacteristic for Russian Orthodoxy in general, since the latter is largely urban today. There are some Ukrainian accents in worship, in the traditions of temple decoration. But this is not something separate from Russian Orthodoxy. Rather, it is just a special part of it. And we can consider it as one of the parts of South Russian Orthodoxy.

– *What can you say about the trend of “derussification” in Ukrainian Orthodoxy? Now there is much talk in Ukraine about removing Russian imperial symbols and icons of “Russian saints” from churches.... How far can this process go?*

– All this is not directly related to church life. Rather, it is part of the political circus that has been going on in Ukraine since 2014 with varying success. At rallies, politicians and even clergy can say absolutely outrageous things. The tone here was set by Filaret (Denisenko), who said during the Maidan days that “Satan rules in Russia,” and so on. But this is a momentary thing, all this will be forgotten rather quickly. Another thing is that in the future Ukrainian Orthodoxy may become not so much anti-Russian, but simply more Westernized. Perhaps it will become closer to the Canadian version of Ukrainian Orthodoxy within the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

– *The gradual withdrawal of Filaret (Denisenko), his virtual silence in the past year – how will they affect the religious and political situation in Ukraine?*

– I think that Epifany (Dumenko) was lucky in this respect, first of all. If Filaret had been in power, he would have provoked a split within the OCU, and he would have compromised the leadership of the OCU with some quarrels and squabbles. Filaret could write another letter to the UOC with a proposal to embrace and reunite, and Epifany would not be happy about it. Epifany and Filaret could now fight to the death in

Zelensky's office for the right to lead the united Church of Ukraine. But now Epifany is de facto alone, he is the non-alternative leader of the OCU. And in general, Ukraine's church life has become calmer for the first time in many years. There is no such charismatic turbo-engine in Ukrainian Orthodoxy now, and this is a very unusual situation for Ukrainians. In a sense, for the first time there is a tendency toward stability, which is broken only by the government's policy of discriminating against the UOC. On the one hand, the OCU has stabilized its position. On the other hand, the UOC is as steady as a rock.

Interviewed for *Religion Today* by Anastasia Koskello






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