

SECURITY CHALLENGES FOR UKRAINIAN ORTHODOXY DURING THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

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Abstract. The article looks at the rapid changes taking place in the Orthodox environment of Ukraine during the Russian-Ukrainian war, exploring the main challenges for Ukrainian Orthodoxy and the issue of the religious security of Ukraine. It discusses the Law “On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Sphere of Religious Organisations” adopted by the Ukrainian Parliament on August 20, 2024, and the tensions within Ukrainian Orthodoxy, notably from the perspective of the relations between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), and the position of the UOC towards the Russian Orthodox Church.

Keywords: Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), inter-Orthodox conflict, state-church relations, Russian-Ukrainian war, *Law On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Sphere of Religious Organisations*

Introduction

This article is not a theological exploration that proposes to delve into theological reflections on the challenges facing Orthodoxy. Firstly, because the author is not a theologian, therefore cannot provide a theological point of view properly speaking on theological problems. The author is limited by her experience as a secular researcher of religion, who certainly sees the possible challenges the Church faces, but views them from the perspective of an observer, not a participant immersed in the problem. Secondly, even being a member of the Orthodox Church, as a layperson, the author is not initiated into all the details

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Article history: Received 10.11.2024; Revised 01.11.2024; Accepted 11.11.2024.

Available online: 11.01.2025; Available print: 30.01.2025.

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of intra-clerical life, where the problems that require clarification and resolution are actually formulated. The layperson is aware of the problems not at the level of theory, the science of God, but at the everyday level, at the level of a user of the knowledge that theology provides. The general goal of the article is to look at the rapid changes taking place in the Orthodox environment of Ukraine, building on my previous reflections set out in an article published in this journal in 2023.² There, analysing the situation in Ukrainian Orthodoxy at that time, I have noted that the war only exacerbated the existing confrontations between the two churches – the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) [UOC MP] and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine [OCU]. Even then, it was clear that the intra-Orthodox conflict was rapidly polarizing society, marginalizing the UOC, which had lost its former dominant status in the state and the prevailing support of the Ukrainian people. Since the writing of that article (2022), but already after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, two years have passed, during which many new events have occurred, leading to new threats. These challenges require an analysis, which is offered in the form of an essay – a free presentation of the author’s observations of the development of the situation in Ukrainian Orthodoxy during 2023–2024.

The main challenges for Ukrainian Orthodoxy

The challenges that have arisen before Ukrainian Orthodoxy, and therefore before Orthodox theologians today, depend on (1) circumstances external to the Church and (2) the internal state of the Church itself.

(1) The external circumstances are related to the Russian-Ukrainian war, which is a defining factor of the current situation of the entire Ukrainian society. The war divided Ukraine and the whole world along the lines of defining their attitude to Putin’s military aggression against a sovereign state. There are political forces that

2 Liudmyla FYLYPOVYCH, “The Realities of Current Orthodox Life in Ukraine during the Russian-Ukrainian War”, *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Theologia Catholica Latina* 1 (2023) 7–25, DOI: 10.24193/theol.cath.latina.2023.LXVIII.1.01, also Анатолій Колодний, Людмила Филипович, “Свобода релігії в часі російсько-української війни”, in *Незалежність України: Права людини та національна безпека. Збірник матеріалів Третьої міжнародної науково-практичної конференції, Національний університет «Львівська політехніка»*, 28 квітня 2023 року, Львів, 2023, 35–39, <https://lpnu.ua/sites/default/files/2020/pages/483/zbirnik-13062023.pdf>.

condemned the politics of Kremlin, but there are also those who support Putin in his violent efforts to establish control over Ukraine. The war also affected the life of the Church, in particular, the state of Ukrainian Orthodoxy (and not only). The church environment, like the secular one, was faced with the need to answer a number of important questions: Is this a war? Is this a just war? Who is the victim and who is the perpetrator, on whose side should the Church be? Should the church condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine? How to fulfil its role as a peacemaker? What should Christians do in this situation? For the Orthodox Churches, the question was detailed as follows: do you defend your autonomous (autocephalous) status, and therefore, sever all ties with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), or do you defend your affiliation with the Moscow Patriarchate?

(2) The second aspect regards the internal state of Ukrainian Orthodoxy. The war, which openly began in 2014 and which was de facto the consequence of Ukraine's leaving the USSR/Russia in 1991, led to the appearance on the religious map of Ukraine, instead of the Ukrainian Exarchate of the Moscow Patriarchate, of three Orthodox churches: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC KP), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC).

The unification council of the three branches of Ukrainian Orthodoxy (UAOC, UOC-KP and part of the UOC-MP) in 2018 and the receipt of the Tomos of autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2019 have changed the alignment of Orthodox forces not only in Ukraine, but also in the world. The hegemony of the UOC-MP in Ukraine and of the ROC in the world has been greatly shaken. In the process of recognizing the OCU, Ecumenical Orthodoxy has become even more polarized. Those churches that supported Constantinople have clearly been defined – the Patriarchate of Alexandria, the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, the Orthodox Church of Greece and de facto the Romanian Orthodox Church.

But there are also churches – the Jerusalem and Antioch Patriarchates, the Serbian and Polish Orthodox Church – which are clearly on the side of Moscow. The ROC cannot accept the fact that a large part of Orthodox Christians in Ukraine have moved away from its influence, that a new autocephalous church, the fifteenth, the Ukrainian Church, has appeared in the range of Orthodox churches. A paradoxical situation has developed in Ukraine. Those who were disregarded for 30 years and were considered schismatics, with whom no one wanted to deal in the religious world, completely ignoring any working relationships, have now acquired canonical status. And their counterpart – the UOC-MP – has lost this

canonical privilege, since its declared independence (not even autocephaly!) has not been recognised by anyone.

This new situation required a radical rethinking on the part of both the OCU and the UOC, in fact a new theology, which is designed to reflect the reaction of the church environment through the church intellectual elite to the changes taking place within the religious organisation and in society.

For one Church, this circumstance was perceived as the restoration of historical justice, as a natural legitimization (recognition) of the long-oppressed part of the Orthodox world – the supporters of the UOC-KP and the UAOC. The other Church – the UOC-MP still does not recognize the legitimacy of the Tomos, criticizes the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarch to grant autocephaly to the OCU, which allegedly contradicts the canons of Orthodoxy – as it is not a conciliar, but a personal patriarchal solution to the issue. The UOC still does not recognize the ordinations performed by the “schismatic” Patriarch Filaret (UOC-KP) and the “self-consecrated” Metropolitan Vasyl Lypkivsky (UAOC). This is one of the serious reasons for the clergy of the UOC in the issue of joining or uniting with the OCU and performing joint prayers, holding joint divine services, and remaining in Eucharistic unity.

In the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which has the largest number of parishes, significant changes occurred after the death of Metropolitan Volodymyr Sabodan (2014). Firstly, this concerned the clear position of the head of the church regarding its autocephaly and its withdrawal from the control of Moscow. The issue of autonomy was always recognised as untimely. Metropolitan Onufriy Berezovsky, unlike his predecessor, was not known for his support to pro-Ukrainian trends in the church. Moreover, he actually launched the processes of denationalization in this church.

Metropolitan Onufry did not agree with the assessment of the Holodomor as a genocide of the Ukrainian people, calling it God’s punishment of Ukrainians. Having headed the UOC MP, Onufry removed from the church government all pro-Ukrainian figures close to Volodymyr Sabodan, in particular Metropolitan Oleksandr Drabynko, and the church’s former press secretary, Archpriest Georgy Kovalenko. Other priests and hierarchs, concerned about their church careers, fell silent. For a long time, Onufry did not recognize Russia as an aggressor, called for some abstract peace, and therefore equated Ukrainian soldiers with separatists and Moscow invaders. The bishop presented manifestations of Ukrainian nationality, in particular linguistic, as a sin. With his position on interfaith relations in the

country, his hostile attitude towards the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Onufry contributed to the incitement of interfaith confrontations, in particular in the Orthodox segment of the country. Only under the pressure of the circumstances of the war and the condemnatory reaction of believers is the church leadership cautiously beginning to move towards a cautious separation from the Russian Orthodox Church. By the decision of the local council on May 27, 2022, the church declared its independence from the ROC, but the matter did not go beyond the declaration. The UOC is still in a state of uncertainty regarding the political and religious position towards Kremlin. It seems to be expecting the return of its former status, when it perceived itself as a subsidiary church of the Moscow Patriarchate, from which it never received recognition of its independence/autocephaly. The facts of cooperation of the UOC members with the occupation authorities raise the question of the unitary official position of the UOC on the war, of the spiritual and mental connection of the Orthodox with Moscow. According to many experts, if the UOC evades clear answers to the acute questions of its affiliation with the ROC, this church will appear in Ukraine as one of the most organized and structured communities with clear opposition to the establishment of Ukrainian independence. This church will be suspected of striving to return Ukraine to a new union community under the supremacy of Russia. In conditions of open military confrontation, such a position is perceived as anti-Ukrainian – anti-state and anti-people.

In Ukraine, in the eleventh year of the war, the propaganda of the “Russian world” continues, affirming the ideas of the “one and indivisible Holy Russia”, a common baptismal font, the all-Russianness of Prince Volodymyr the Baptiser, “the only truth of Russian Orthodoxy”, “the divine election of the Russian people and Putin”. The Cathedral of St. Sophia of Kyiv, the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and other holy places have been declared the property of the Russian people, who are called to liberate them from the Ukrainian fascists. The doctrine of “Moscow as the third Rome”, of Russia as the source of Orthodox civilization, of the Church Slavonic (i.e. Old Russian) language as a sacred language still live in the minds of many Orthodox Ukrainians – parishioners of the UOC.

Until recently, pro-Moscow-oriented Orthodox church structures operated in Ukraine, in particular the Union of Orthodox Journalists. On the initiative of these organisations in Ukraine during the war, although prohibited by law, mass events were held, including religious processions, sometimes with icons of Emperor Nicholas II and the imperial slogans “Orthodoxy-[Tsarist] Autocracy [Самодержавство]-Peoplehood”. They promote the Russian Empire and the

desire to return to it. They express contempt for Ukrainian state independence and Ukrainian symbols. The state does not always respond in a timely and adequate manner to such situations, uses soft power, refuses mass persecution, does not arrest pilgrims who go to the Pochaiv Lavra in religious processions. The state does not want the aggravation of state-confessional and inter-church relations as additional challenges, especially during martial law.

The ROC-oriented forces in the UOC oppose Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO, considering such demands from the Church a manifestation of "political Orthodoxy", from which it has been distancing itself since 2014. The slogan "we are outside politics", so popular in the UOC environment, is actually quite shrewd. Church leaders declare themselves outside politics, but outside Ukrainian politics, which is aimed at protecting Ukrainian independence. At the same time, with its uncertainty about the Kremlin's policy, its failure to condemn aggression, and its support for the occupation regime, this Church is drawn into politics, but on the side of Russia. The Church is involved in politics by dividing and promoting the views of the ROC on the Ukrainian war, criticizing the patriotic position of Ukrainian churches, falsifying their history, and accusing them of colluding with the Americans against the ROC.

Ukraine has to respond to such anti-Christian and anti-state propaganda. The struggle is currently limited to "verbal battles" in the form of appeals, statements, expert opinions, and laws. Finally, numerous calls from Ukrainian society to ban the activities of anti-Ukrainian organisations on the territory of war-torn Ukraine were implemented in the Law "On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Sphere of Religious Organisations" (Registration No. 3894-IX) adopted by the Parliament on August 20, 2024 (265 deputies voted in favour). Given that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is an ideological successor to the regime of the aggressor state and an accomplice in war crimes and crimes against humanity committed on behalf of the Russian Federation, its activities in Ukraine are prohibited.

According to this Law, religious organisations that are part of the ROC must leave it. The law clearly defines the procedure that the State Service of Ukraine on Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience (DESS) must ensure. The DESS must establish the facts of the community's affiliation with Russian structures. This has already been partially done as a result of a religious expert examination conducted in early 2023.³ Responding to a request from the UOC hierarchs regarding measures

3 Висновок релігієзнавчої експертизи Статуту про управління Української Православної Церкви на наявність церковно-канонічного зв'язку з Московським

they can take to avoid being considered part of the ROC, the DESS clarified in its letter of June 1, 2023:⁴

- the publication of an official document of the church authorities or a person (persons) authorised to speak on behalf of the UOC, on the withdrawal of the UOC, including all its dioceses, synodal institutions, deaneries, monasteries, church educational institutions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, parishes and missions, from the ROC;

- submission and publication of statements by the hierarchs and clergy of the UOC, who are part of the episcopate of the ROC, on the withdrawal from the Synod of the ROC, synodal institutions and Inter-Council Commissions;

- official notification of the Local Orthodox Churches of the world on the withdrawal of the UOC from the ROC.

Ukraine does not require the UOC to betray the doctrine of the Orthodox Church, nor to change its liturgical practice, the language of worship or the transition to another liturgical calendar. The only requirement that the law insists on is withdrawal from the ROC, which is a party to the war against Ukraine.

In connection with the adoption of the Law, UOC believers have concerns: does the ban on the activities of the ROC automatically mean a ban on the activities of the UOC (MP)? The head of the DESS, Viktor Yelensky, has repeatedly explained that the Law clearly stipulates that the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church as a foreign religious organisation with a centre of administration in the aggressor state are prohibited in Ukraine. The procedure specified in the Law will apply to religious organisations belonging to the ROC. Thus, having received the order, they will have to leave the ROC. If a religious organisation refuses to comply with the order, the DESS will have the right to go to court. And the court, and only the court, as it should be in a democratic society, will decide to terminate the activities of a religious organisation.⁵

патріархатом [Conclusion of the Religious Expertise of the Statute on the Governance of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church on the Existence of Ecclesiastical and Canonical Relations with the Moscow Patriarchate]; <https://dess.gov.ua/vysnovok-relihiieznavchoi-ekspertyzy-statutu-pro-upravlinnia-ukrainskoi-pravoslavnoi-tserkvy/>.

4 Повідомлення щодо зустрічі ДЕСС та представників УПЦ МП [Announcement regarding the meeting of the DESS and representatives of the UOC-MP], 26 June 2023, <https://dess.gov.ua/povidomlennia-shchodo-zustrichi-dess-ta-predstavnykiv-upts-mp/>.

5 Віктор Єленський: російська православна церква — не просто натхненниця розв'язаної війни проти України, вона бере в ній участь, [Viktor Yelensky: the

Thus, the Law “On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Sphere of Religious Organisations”⁶ pursues, in the opinion of the authorities, a legitimate goal, namely preventing the subversive activities of the ROC in Ukraine.

The law does not provide for the banning of any existing church in Ukraine, but still does not allow the subordination of religious organisations in Ukraine to leading centres aimed at the destruction of Ukrainian statehood, culture and identity. It should be noted that such Ukrainian churches as the Old Believers and the True Orthodox Church have already severed ties with centres in the aggressor state.

Ukraine has always been proud of its achievements in the sphere of religious freedom. Moreover, it has never had any banned or closed churches. The Russian invasion, of which the ROC is an active accomplice, forced our country to defend itself from abuses and the use of religion as a weapon by the aggressor state.

The highly authoritative interfaith organisation of Ukraine, the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations (AUCCRO), which joins 90% of religious communities in Ukraine stated that no organisation, either secular or religious, with a leadership centre in the aggressor state can operate in Ukraine. On August 16, 2024, during a meeting with the President of Ukraine, members of the AUCCRO confirmed their position and supported the President’s course on the spiritual independence of the country. In addition, they emphasised that even in the conditions of the ongoing brutal war, religious freedom in Ukraine is respected and has never been violated. Such support from the majority of the religious communities is important for the state and confirms the correctness of state policy in the field of religions.⁷

Russian Orthodox Church is not just the inspirer of the war waged against Ukraine, it is participating in it], DESS (4 April 2024), <https://dess.gov.ua/viktor-yelenskyy-rosiyska-pravoslavna-tserkva-ne-prosto-natkhnennysia-rozv-iazanoi-viyny-proty-ukrainy-vonabere-v-niy-uchast/>; Голова Держслужби з етнополітики пояснив, як визначатимуть зв'язок церкви з РФ [The Head of the State Service for Ethnopolitics explained how the church’s connection with the Russian Federation will be determined], *Ukrinform* (22.08.2024), <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3897507-golova-derzsluzbi-z-etnopolitiki-poasniv-ak-viznacatimut-zvazok-cerkvi-z-rf.html>.

6 Про захист конституційного ладу у сфері діяльності релігійних організацій: Закон України від 20.08.2024 № 3894-IX, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3894-20#Text>.

7 ВРУ ухвалила Закон „Про захист конституційного ладу у сфері діяльності релігійних організацій” [The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopts Law “On Protection of Constitutional Order in the Field of Activities of Religious Organizations”], <https://carpathia.gov.ua/>

Sociological surveys confirm that the Ukrainian society also supports the policy of the government. Thus, according to a study by the Razumkov Center, most respondents stated that there is freedom of conscience in Ukraine. Also, almost 60% of the respondents consider the relations between believers of different faiths to be normal, and only 3% consider them to be conflictual.⁸ At the same time, as noted in the latest Pew Research Center report (published on 5 March 2024), Ukraine's performance on the government religious restrictions index is not only better than that of countries of the former Soviet Union, but also compared to six European democratic countries.⁹

The law does not prohibit the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. It only prevents religious organisations in Ukraine from being subordinated to the Russian Church, which has declared a "holy war" against Ukraine.

Even before the adoption of the Law, some local authorities, without waiting for instructions from Kyiv, regional and city state administrations suspended the activities of the Orthodox parishes of the UOC, deregistered them, did not approve the church charters of these communities, terminated lease agreements, and even turned off electricity, water, and gas. For example, the Ivano-Frankivsk Regional State Administration, after the flight to Moscow of the UOC local Bishop Seraphim, closed their church until the proper paperwork was completed, including renaming in accordance with the law preventing the subordination to the ROC. Everything is going to the point that there will be no UOC parish in Zakarpattia. The Lviv Regional State Administration did the same. In some respects, Ukrainian civil society is more resolute than the state, which keeps a balance and does not want confrontations.

news/verkhovna-rada-ukrainy-ukhvalyla-zakon-pro-zakhyst-konstytutsiinoho-ladu-u-sferi-diiialnosti-relihiinykh-orhanizatsii (16 October 2024).

8 Рівень релігійності, довіра до Церкви, конфесійний розподіл та міжцерковні відносини в українському суспільстві (листопад 2023р.) [Level of Religiosity, Trust in the Church, Confessional Distribution and Interchurch Relations in Ukrainian Society (November 2023)], <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/riven-reliiynosti-dovira-do-tserkvy-konfesiinyi-rozpodil-ta-mizhtserkovni-vidnosyny-v-ukrainskomu-suspilstvi-lystopad-2023r>.

9 For the Report on Government Restrictions on Religion: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/05/restrictions-methodology/#fn-69419-9>, with Appendix A: Government Restrictions Index (Ukraine is listed under moderate restrictions), and Appendix C: Religious restrictions index scores by region (GRI 4.1, lower than that of Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Greece, Romania).

Civil society in Ukraine wants to know why the bishops of the UOC MP did not stand up at the commemoration of heroes in the Ukrainian Parliament, why they did not condemn Moscow's aggression, why they did not sing a funeral service for the fallen soldier in the church, why they cooperate with the occupation authorities, why they flee from Ukraine to Russia, etc. It is public organisations that initiate various inter-church dialogues, call for an open conversation with the UOC, from which citizens, conscious patriots, want to hear answers to their "Why?". It is known that some consultations are being held, informal meetings are taking place between priests of the two jurisdictions, ways out of the crisis of Orthodoxy in Ukraine are being sought. But this is done not on the basis of a developed theology of inter-church relations in times of crisis/war, but intuitively, based on the practice of communication, on the basis of finding a way to overcome the crisis.

Life has prompted the birth of a new initiative from below – the establishment of the "Sophia Brotherhood"¹⁰ as a dialogue platform for communication between representatives of the UOC and the OCU. The emergence of the brotherhood is actually a grassroots initiative to restore church unity in Ukraine, it is the beginning of negotiations between the two branches of Orthodoxy at an unofficial level. The main goal of the Brotherhood is to consolidate the efforts and support the initiatives of Orthodox Christians aimed at developing dialogue. The members of the Brotherhood recognize as important the principles defined in the Declaration of Understanding,¹¹ which was published after the meeting in the St. Sophia Cathedral on July 5, 2022, as well as the provisions voiced in the Address of the dialogue participants dated February 20, 2023.¹²

The Brotherhood has determined the areas of its activity. In particular, its activity is aimed at reviving the principle of conciliarity in church life, intensifying the involvement of the Orthodox clergy and believers in processes related to the development of Ukrainian Orthodoxy. The Brotherhood plans to promote Christian education through the implementation of Orthodox missionary projects,

10 Sofia Brotherhood, <https://sofiyske-bratstvo.org/en/home/>.

11 "OCU and UOC MP Sign Declaration of Understanding", *RISU* (7.7.2022), https://risu.ua/en/ocu-and-uoc-mp-sign-declaration-of-understanding_n130717.

12 Appeal of the Participants of the Interchurch Dialogue in St. Sophia of Kyiv to the Bishops, Clergy, and Faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, *Public Orthodoxy* (23 February 2023), <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2023/02/23/st-sophia-oco-uoc-appeal/>.

organizing cultural and educational events, developing educational and scientific programs, research, restoration and dissemination of the spiritual and cultural tradition, liturgical and musical, architectural and iconographic heritage of Ukrainian (Kyiv) and Ecumenical Orthodoxy, etc. The Brotherhood intends to create a unique information space regarding the defined goals of its activities, in particular, “exposing the true essence of the ideology of the ‘Russian world’, its anti-church and anti-Ukrainian orientation, and overcoming its negative impact on Ukrainian Orthodoxy.”¹³

In the Ukrainian expert and church environment, two opposing positions have developed regarding the brotherhood. Optimists, like the brothers themselves, believe that this initiative has a future, that it is able to overcome the existing hostility, distrust, resentment and confrontation between the two churches. It just takes time, the absence of interference from the state and radically minded members of society. That is, it is a completely church project. Pessimists see in this initiative an attempt to preserve the UOC as an autonomous structure without its entry and unification with the OCU. In general, society, which is now very focused on all kinds of unifying strategies, perceives this brotherhood as one of the possible ways of understanding between the two branches of Ukrainian Orthodoxy.

The real possibilities of inter-church understanding are evidenced by the mood within the UOC. An interesting project, supported by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), was implemented in 2024 by the young religious scholar Andrey Fert. Based on his interview, the Centre prepared a report, “War and Religion: Views from Inside the ‘Russian’ Church of Ukraine”.¹⁴ A cursory review of the survey results indicates the unpreparedness of the UOC faithful to constructively resolve the problem of the schism in Ukrainian Orthodoxy. The self-awareness of the vast majority of UOC faithful is filled with a large number of stereotypes that have been imposed on them for years. These people are mostly unable to think critically, do not want to change anything in their lives and in their understanding, are terribly conservative, because they are so eager to preserve themselves. The cause of all troubles, according to the interviewees, is not the

13 “викриття справжньої сутності ідеології «Русского мира», її антицерковної й антиукраїнської спрямованості та подолання її негативного впливу на українське Православ’я”, Sofia Brotherhood. <https://sofiyske-bratstvo.org/en/home/>.

14 Andriy FERT, “War and Religion. Views from within Ukraine’s ‘Russian’ Church”, *ZOiS Report 6* (2024), https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS_Reports/2024/ZOiS_Report_6_2024.pdf.

Church and its policies, but journalists, authorities, scientists, volunteers, other churches, who deliberately distort reality. The UOC faithful believe that they are under terrible pressure from the authorities that persecute them. Therefore, they must stand firm in their faith, because they are the last stronghold of Truth in this sinful civilization. The report concludes:

- Most respondents attribute the current public disapproval of the UOC to the misrepresentation of their church in the media. However, a few acknowledge that the church also bears some blame, arguing that its leaders failed to effectively communicate their break with the Moscow Patriarchate in 2022 or condemn instances of collaborationism within the church. While many believe that the church leaders should improve their communications with society, most respondents doubt that this will help to change public sentiment or alleviate state pressure on the church.

- With few exceptions, the respondents are not in favour of changing the language of UOC religious services from Church Slavonic to Ukrainian. They explain their reluctance with reference to habit and theological considerations. At the same time, some concede that if Ukrainian society perceives Church Slavonic as Russian, it might be helpful to introduce elements of Ukrainian into the liturgy. However, only a few parishes have taken this step to date.

- Since February 2022, UOC members have been under pressure from society, the media, and the authorities to switch their affiliation to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), the church that now has the largest share of support in Ukraine. For most of my interviewees, re-affiliating with this ‘rival’ church is not an option. Yet several expressed a readiness to re-affiliate, provided the whole parish agree to do so. Only two priests were ready to change affiliation if it means protecting their parish and retaining a place of worship.

- Interviewees by and large echo internal UOC propaganda about the illegitimacy of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and describe the state policy towards their church as religious persecution. Yet many challenge these narratives, acknowledge the religious validity of the OCU, and deny that religious persecution is taking place in Ukraine. Even those who subscribe to anti-OCU narratives still say that many OCU priests and parishioners they know personally are good Christians.

- Roughly half of the interviewees admit that there are some pro-Russia people in their church. The concept ‘pro-Russia’ varies from interviewee to interviewee. For some, it includes those who believe that Russia and Ukraine should be united,

that Ukraine is to blame for the war, or that the bonds between the UOC and the Russian Orthodox Church should be preserved. Others speak of people who are ‘indirectly pro-Russia’ – those who think that Russian culture is superior, refuse to take sides in the ongoing war, or are critical of what they see as the anti-Christian agenda of Ukraine and the West.

– Nearly all respondents are dismissive of politics as something they do not, under any circumstances, want their church to be involved in. For them, the term encompasses everything that has nothing to do with prayer, one’s relationship with God, and parish life. Their resistance to engaging in debates about the veneration of Russian saints in the UOC, autocephaly or language change is palpable in our conversations. Politics is thus a concept the interviewees use to justify their apolitical stance and discursively shield themselves from what they see as hostile and wrong.

In our opinion, it is unrealistic to overcome such uncertainty and even ambivalence of positions within the UOC in the near future. Therefore, the unification of the two branches of Ukrainian Orthodoxy is a matter of the future. Given the situation of the war, which, on the one hand, can accelerate the unifying intentions of the Orthodox, and on the other, hinder any movements towards each other, it is necessary to approach the matter moderately. Without violating religious freedoms and the right of every person to profess his/her chosen system of values, the state and society must take care of the consequences of the division of Orthodoxy in Ukraine, which is regarded by all experts as a factor of danger.

The country has already faced major security problems. The aggressor is destroying churches and houses of prayer, killing believers, Orthodox and other Christians and non-Christians, destroying the Ukrainian state itself, establishing a racist regime in the occupied territories, deporting Ukrainians to Russia, and forcibly denationalizing Ukrainian children. In addition to such obvious external threats that cannot be ignored when drawing up a security strategy, one cannot neglect internal dangers that Ukrainians often forget about, explaining the reasons for all their failures or problems to the outside world. And these internal factors, if not taken into account, can even play a decisive role in changing the security of life. The war devalued the very existence of a person, problematized the issue of one’s own identity, and led to an internal imbalance of the national organism. The vast majority of Ukrainians are in a state of uncertainty, poorly imagining life after the end of the war.

People are looking for support in faith in God, in hope for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Demand and trust in the Church have increased. But not all religious organisations have coped with the challenges of the war era.

Orthodox priests of the UOC have appealed to the Ecumenical Patriarch with a request to help in the self-determination of the UOC. Although they recognised the perniciousness of the Russian world, they do not know "...what canonical path we should take to unite all Orthodox in Ukraine into a single Local Church. We are trying to find a compromise, perhaps a transitional option, acceptable to all, since not all clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are currently ready to join the Orthodox Church of Ukraine... We turn to you for support and advice. We hope that with the help of Universal Orthodoxy we will be able to overcome conflicts in Ukrainian Orthodoxy."¹⁵

Another test for the UOC was the "Order of the World Russian People's Council", called the program document of the 21st century, dated 27 March 2024, which is addressed to the legislative and executive authorities of Russia.¹⁶ Without ever mentioning God, Christ, or the Gospel, the Order presented a strategy for the development of the country and the church. In this picture of the future, there is no place for either Ukraine, which is called the "lands of South-Western Rus", or for Ukrainians, who are presented as a sub-ethnic group of one – Russian – people. If Ukrainians do not accept the values of the "Russian world", which was created by Russia, the support and defender of this "spiritual and cultural-civilizational phenomenon", "the single spiritual space of Holy Russia", then they will be destroyed, the possibility of their existence "must be completely excluded".

The UOC responded to such xenophobic, in fact genocidal calls from the ROC and Russia with a statement from the Department of External Church Relations, in which the church distanced itself, not sharing and condemning the ideas set forth in the Order. The church declared that it was building God's, not the "Russian world",

15 Священики УПЦ МП звернулися до Патріарха Варфоломія з проханням допомогти їм розірвати стосунки з РПЦ і Кирилом. <https://bukinfo.com.ua/religiya/svyashchenykurc-mp-zvernulysya-do-patriarha-varfolomiya-z-prohannyam-dopomogty-jim-rozirvaty-stosunky-z-rpc-i-kyrylom>

16 Наказ XXV Всемирного Русского Народного Собора «Настоящее і будущее русского мира». <https://forum.pravda.com.ua/index.php?topic=1140166.msg27853966#msg27853966>.

and was not forming “geopolitical and geospiritual structures”.¹⁷ The danger that is openly present in the policy of the ROC towards Ukraine threatens, first of all, the Orthodox “brothers”, who are slowly realizing these challenges, still believe in the brotherhood of the Russian people of the same faith. It is possible to ban the activities of such organisations that work for the interests of others, but will the ban change the orientation of their doctrinal concepts, practical activities, which undermine the independent existence of Ukrainian society? How to overcome the post-Soviet pro-imperial aspiration of such Ukrainians to join some historically dead unions, societies, communities, church organisations? Calls for a return to a single spiritual ecumenism of true – Russian – Orthodoxy are not just dangerous, but also criminal.

The activity of religious organisations that cherish only foreign values, neglecting their own, is dangerous. By forming a detachment from Ukrainian social life, a certain alienation of their believers from Ukrainian realities, such confessions devalue Ukrainian citizenship, historical memory, and a sense of being rooted in this land. But in conditions of war, there are more and more people who understand the value of Ukraine’s existence as a state that provides all, even anti-Ukrainian-minded citizens, with freedom of conscience and religion. Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Krishnas, and others who did not define themselves as Ukrainian-centric before the war, have stood up in defence of Ukrainian statehood.

Religious security of Ukraine is not only the presence of those confessional communities that defend its sovereignty, it is not only the possible deprivation of the right to activity of those who show their servility to the enemies of Ukraine. It is at the same time the active engagement of believers of these confessions in defending Ukrainian, it is the removal of their post-colonial consciousness.

Today, following the Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukraine is gaining a unique experience that makes us realize that security - national and individual – is unthinkable without the free exercise of faith by every citizen, provided that

17 “Заклики до знищення України та виправдання військової агресії неспівставні з євангельським вченням” – заява ВЗЦЗ УПЦ. <https://vzcz.church.ua/2024/03/28/zakliki-do-znishhennya-ukrajini-ta-vipravdannya-vijskovoji-agresiji-nespivstavni-z-jevangeliskim-vchennyam-zayava-vzcz-upc/>. In English: “Calls for the Destruction of Ukraine and the Justification of a Military Aggression are Inconsistent with the Gospel Teaching” – Statement from the UOC Department for External Church Relations” (28.03.2024), <https://vzcz.church.ua/2024/03/28/calls-for-the-destruction-of-ukraine-and-the-justification-of-a-military-aggression-are-inconsistent-with-the-gospel-teaching-statement-from-the-uoc-department-for-external-church-relations/?lang=en>.

religious communities function freely. Religion is becoming a significant element of the entire national security system, which will successfully protect Ukrainians under certain conditions. Among them, the most important are:

1) a worldview orientation towards building our own Ukrainian world, which should be understood as a society where Ukrainian values and Ukrainian visions prevail;

2) upholding the value of religious freedom and the plurality of religious life in Ukraine;

3) affirmation of the openness of religions existing in Ukraine, when a particular religious system is not closed in its tradition, but is open to interaction with other institutions of both the secular and religious worlds;

4) practicing a new format of communication between people and their communities, which is possible only through and in the form of dialogue: dialogue between church and state, church and society, between the churches;

5) assisting the state and its representatives in implementing a policy of equality towards religious organisations;

6) relying on the professionalism of experts and the responsibility of the media in objective coverage, scientific analysis and large-scale dissemination of information about the religious life of Ukraine.

Conclusions

The specific circumstances in which the Church finds itself require complex theological analysis. New or updated old concepts must be developed that would provide answers to the challenges of the day. And these are: the theology of war, the theology of just peace, the theology of dialogue (interreligious and interdenominational communication), and the theology of post-war revival.

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