

CHRISTINA DIETL, KHRYSTYNA FOSTYAK,
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WAR IN UKRAINE

THEOLOGICAL, ETHICAL AND HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

Aschendorff Verlag

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 7
Christina Dietl, Khrystyna Fostyak, Thomas Schulte-Umberg, Olha Uhryn and Noreen van Elk (Eds.)
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25100-3

A Logical Experiment in Politics: Second Scholasticism in Creating Russian Imperialism 13
Volodymyr Shelukhin
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25101-0

The Tools of Modern Russian Colonization: The Case of the Bakhchysarai Khan's Palace 30
Elmira Ablialimova-Chyihoz
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25102-7

Central and Eastern Europe in the Age of the First World War: Revolution, Counter-Revolution, Containment 44
Dmytro Bondarenko
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25103-4

The Idea of a Federation of Poland and Ukraine in the Light of the Correspondence of the Greek Catholic Priest Prelate Tyt Voinarovsky with the Polish Diplomat Jan Stanisław Łoś 58
Paulina Byzdra-Kusz
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25104-1

The Gender Aspect of Political Rhetoric and its Origins: The Case of Ukraine 71
Mariana Myrosh
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25105-8

New Icons of War: Religious Motifs in Ukrainian Digital Popular Art During the Russo-Ukrainian War 89
Alina Mozolevska
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25106-5

Religion as a Key Front of Russian Aggression Against Ukraine 110
Maksym Vasin
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25107-2

Muslims in the Struggle for the Ukrainian Cause and Statehood 128
Andrii Zhyvachivskyi
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25108-9

Certain Aspects of Church-State Dynamics: Legal Naming Issues within Ukrainian Orthodoxy in the Context of the Russian-Ukrainian War 148
Mechyslav Yanauer
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25109-6

Patriarch Bartholomew's Position Towards the War Against Ukraine 164
Patrice Hrimle
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25110-2

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the Russo-Ukrainian War 175
Kateryna Budz
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25111-9

Europeans Lost in Translation 189
Roman Sigov
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25112-6

Friends or Foes? Religious Organizations and European Institutions in the Face of Russia's War on Ukraine 200
Iuliia Korniichuk
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25113-3

Punish Russian War Crimes Already Now! 213
Oleksandra Matviichuk
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25118-8

List of Contributors 216
List of Editors 219

War in Ukraine
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-25107-2

Religion as a Key Front of Russian Aggression Against Ukraine

Maksym Vasin

The Russian aggression against Ukraine, which has been going on for more than ten years, actively includes the religious front. Fully controlled by the Kremlin, Russian religious centers and their leaders have de facto been transformed into political or governmental structures. They are involved in spreading Kremlin propaganda that fuels hatred of the Ukrainian nation and incites Russian citizens to continue this unjust war. Many Russian religious leaders can be considered accomplices in numerous war crimes committed by the Russian army in Ukraine. In response, the Ukrainian parliament passed law No. 3894-IX. The law seeks to ban the activities of Russian religious centers in Ukraine because they have become part of Putin's dictatorial regime. This paper elaborates on the religious dimension of the Russian invasion of Ukraine from different perspectives. The author analyses the recent events in Ukraine and Russia by examining the changes in religious life in the historical and political contexts of both countries.

1. Introduction

In February 2014, Russia began its military aggression against Ukraine, with the justification of an alleged need to protect the Russian-speaking residents and Orthodox believers of the Donbas, the eastern regions of Ukraine, as well as the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea.[1] Russian authorities have been spreading propaganda for many years about the threat posed by nationalists (so-called

1 Cf. Kathy Lally/Will Englund, Putin Says He Reserves Right to Protect Russians in Ukraine (4 March 2014). URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/putin-reserves-the-right-to-use-force-in-ukraine/2014/03/04/92d4ca70-a389-11e3-a5fa-55f0c77bf39c_story.html. All internet links in this article were last accessed on 5 April 2024.

"Banderites") from the western regions of Ukraine, who allegedly want to seize Orthodox churches and ban the use of the Russian language. By imposing these false narratives not only in Ukraine and Russia, but also internationally, Russia aimed to (1) intimidate residents of the eastern regions of Ukraine bordering Russia to fuel alleged separatist sentiment, (2) divide Ukrainian society from within to facilitate the future military invasion and occupation of Ukraine, (3) prepare Russian society for war against Ukraine using hate speech towards Ukrainians as a nation, and (4) prepare the international community for Russian intervention and the seizure of all, or at least part, of Ukraine.

The Kremlin decided to switch to a hard power policy toward Ukraine after the escape of Viktor Yanukovych, a pro-Russian former Ukrainian president, as a result of the massive Ukrainian protests in 2013 to 2014, called the Revolution of Dignity, against forced cooperation with Russia and in favor of European integration. Russian President Vladimir Putin has never given up his dream of restoring an authoritarian Russian empire similar to the Soviet Union and based on the ideology of the "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World). The subjugation of Ukraine and the subsequent Russian infiltration of the Ukrainian government is a crucial step for Putin's imperial ambitions. For this reason, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, seeking to occupy the capital city quickly (and, eventually, most of Ukraine), overthrow the government of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and install a Russian leadership in Kyiv.[2]

The failure of the Kremlin's initial plan to capture Kyiv in three days thanks to the uncompromising resistance of the Ukrainians impelled Russia toward a strategy of protracted war. This strategy is rooted in the use of terror against the civilian population of Ukraine, especially in the newly controlled territories seized by the Russian military during the full-scale invasion.[3] The religious factor plays a significant role in the Russian military strategy, because the Kremlin uses religion on multiple dimensions to increase the success of its war against Ukraine.

This paper aims to explore the different dimensions in which Russia uses religion to achieve its geopolitical and military goals. Using specific examples

2 Cf. Paul Kirby, Has Putin's War Failed and What Does Russia Want from Ukraine? (23 February 2023). URL: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56720589.

3 Cf. Hanna Arhirova/Vasilisa Stepanenko/Lori Hinnant, Thousands of Ukraine Civilians are Being Held in Russian Prisons. Russia Plans to Build Many More (12 July 2023). URL: https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-russia-prisons-civilians-torture-detainees-88b4abf2efbf383272eed9378be13c72.

of Russian religious policy, this paper proposes several conclusions and recommendations for the international community's response to Russian aggression against Ukraine.

2. Using Religion to Justify Russian Aggression Against Ukraine

Until 2014, Russia's soft power policy toward Ukraine relied on a narrative of "brotherly nations," and the promotion of Russia's political agenda and vision of history, culture, religion, cinema, and pop music. In addition to distorting the history of Kyivan Rus in favor of Moscow, Russian propagandists spread chauvinistic ideas of the "Russkiy Mir" concept, the boundaries of which extend far beyond the borders of the Russian Federation to where the Russian-speaking population remains.[4] This ideology, in addition to Russia's geopolitical dominance in the post-Soviet era, includes the alleged canonical claims of the Russian Orthodox Church to the territory of Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries. Moscow made great efforts to prevent the emergence of a united national autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine and fostered a society of intolerance against other Orthodox jurisdictions in Ukraine that are independent from the Moscow Patriarchate.[5]

The victory of the Revolution of Dignity in February 2014 meant the failure of the Kremlin's strategy of gradual Russification of Ukraine with the assistance of former President Viktor Yanukovych and other pro-Russian politicians and political parties in the Ukrainian parliament and government. The Russian leadership took advantage of the transit of power in Ukraine to annex the Crimean Peninsula and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions through military intervention. At the same time, Russia justified its aggression against Ukraine to the international community with the alleged *coup d'état* in Kyiv and the victory of radical nationalists, fascists, terrorists, etc.[6] Russian propaganda has frightened both Russian society and the international community with a "neo-Nazi" regime in Kyiv and the oppression of the Russian-speaking

4 Cf. Alexander Meienberger, The Concept of the "Russkiy Mir": History of the Concept and Ukraine, in: Euxeinos 13, 35 (2023) 15–29, 20–21.

5 Cf. USIP, Russia's War on Ukraine Roils the Orthodox Church (11 December 2018). URL: https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/12/russias-war-ukraine-roils-orthodox-church.

6 Cf. Luke Harding, Kiev's Protesters: Ukraine Uprising Was No Neo-Nazi Power-Grab (13 March 2014). URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/13/ukraine-uprising-fascist-coup-grassroots-movement.

population and Orthodox churches of the Moscow Patriarchate in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine.[7]

Under the totalitarian control of the Kremlin, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has gradually engaged in more aggressive efforts to justify the Russian invasion and utilizes the religious factor to weaken Ukraine's resistance. For example, in August 2014, the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, wrote an open letter to His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew I, the Primate of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, in which he called the war in the eastern regions of Ukraine "a religious war." He accused representatives of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and Protestant leaders of preaching hatred against the Orthodox Church, calling for the seizure of Orthodox shrines, and the eradication of Orthodoxy, starting with the mass protests in Kyiv in 2013 against the Yanukovych regime. He also accused Uniates and schismatics (Ukrainian Greek Catholics and Protestants) of direct aggression against the clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church canonically connected to the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) during the fighting in the eastern regions of Ukraine.[8]

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow addressed letters to the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) about the alleged violations of the rights of the UOC-MP clergy and faithful. He reported damage to some UOC-MP churches and the deaths of several UOC-MP clergy, calling them victims of the "armed internal Ukrainian conflict."[9] At the same time, the Patriarch of Moscow did not mention that the priests and churches of the UOC-MP suffered from the shelling

7 E. g. Viktor Saulkin, Остановит ли Россия карателей? Фашисты бомбят города Новороссии [Will Russia Stop the Punishers? Fascists Bomb Cities in Novorossiya] (11 June 2014). URL: https://pravfond.ru/press-tsentr/stati/ostanovit_li_rossiya_karateley_fashisty_bombyat_goroda_novorossii_601/.

8 Cf. Mospat.ru, Святейший Патриарх Кирилл призвал Предстоятелей Поместных Церквей возвысить голос в защиту православных христиан востока Украины [His Holiness Patriarch Kirill Called on the Primates of the Local Churches to Raise Their Voices in Defense of Orthodox Christians in Eastern Ukraine]. URL: mospat.ru/ru/news/51174/.

9 ROC, Предстоятель Русской Православной Церкви обратился в ООН, Совет Европы и ОБСЕ с письмом о фактах притеснения Украинской Православной Церкви в условиях вооруженного конфликта на юго-востоке Украины [The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church Addressed the UN, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE with a Letter About the Facts of Oppression of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the Conditions of the Armed Conflict in the South-East of Ukraine] (19 August 2014). URL: patriarchia.ru/db/text/3706179.html. Own translation.

of residential areas and civilian infrastructure, which the Russian military and Russian-backed separatists intentionally executed since 2014.[10] Later, on February 17, 2015, at a meeting of the ROC Supreme Church Council, he called the Russian intervention in the eastern regions of Ukraine a "civil war," continuing to promote the Russian propaganda narrative of the alleged separatist roots of the military conflict and trying to hide the Kremlin's involvement in the fighting in the Donbas region.[11] In May 2022, the European Commission proposed adding Patriarch Kirill to the list of individuals under sanctions as a supporter of the Putin regime. The European Union External Action Service described him as "one of the most prominent supporters of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine."[12]

The Kremlin and the ROC made joint efforts to prevent the unification of Ukrainian Orthodoxy into one church and the proclamation of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). Eventually, after a unification council was held in Kyiv on December 15, 2018, and the OCU received the Tomos (Decree) of Autocephaly from Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I on January 6, 2019, "the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church proclaimed the impossibility of continuing in Eucharistic communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate."[13] This ROC decision also suggested a deterioration of relations within Ukrainian Orthodoxy, because the UOC-MP, with its ties to the Moscow Patriarchate, also had to follow this ban and avoid communication and attempts to reach an understanding with the OCU. As an example, the leadership of the UOC-MP immediately dismissed Metropolitan Anthony (Fialko) of Khmelnytsky and Starokostiantyniv as soon as he condemned the

10 Cf. Matthew Mpoke Bigg, Russia Adopts 'Scorched Earth' Tactics in Bakhmut, a Ukrainian Commander Says (10 April 2023). URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/10/world/europe/russia-bakhmut-scorched-earth-ukraine.html.

11 ROC, Святейший Патриарх Кирилл: "Сегодня нет более важного вопроса, чем мир на Украинской земле" [His Holiness Patriarch Kirill: "Today There is No More Important Issue Than Peace on the Ukrainian Land"] (17 February 2015). URL: patriarchia.ru/db/text/3996574.html. Own translation.

12 O'beara Fearghas, Russia's War on Ukraine: The Kremlin's Use of Religion as a Foreign Policy Instrument (19 May 2022). URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA(2022)729430.

13 ROC, Священный Синод Русской Православной Церкви признал невозможным дальнейшее пребывание в евхаристическом общении с Константинопольским Патриархатом [The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church Proclaimed the Impossibility of Continuing in Eucharistic Communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate] (15 October 2018). URL: patriarchia.ru/db/text/5283737.html. Own translation.

incident of beating a Ukrainian defender in the UOC-MP church in Khmelnytsky and expressed his readiness to join the OCU.[14]

Subsequently, the UOC-MP hierarchs, as well as Russian propaganda in general, persistently tried to discredit the OCU and its Tomos of Autocephaly, frightening the UOC-MP faithful and priests with statements about the "non-canonicity" of the OCU, its non-recognition by world Orthodoxy, its dependence on the Ecumenical Patriarchate, etc. It was beneficial for the Kremlin to maintain tensions in Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Russian propaganda attempted to convince the Western world that the voluntary transfers of a number of UOC-MP parishes to the canonical subordination of the pro-Ukrainian OCU were "raider attacks" and religious persecution by the Ukrainian government.

On the eve of the full-scale invasion, on February 21, 2022, announcing his recognition of the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Luhansk People's Republic," President Putin spoke of the need to protect the interests of the ROC in Ukraine, warning that the Ukrainian authorities "cynically turned the tragedy of the church split into an instrument of state policy."[15] This is a typical example of Russian propaganda, which usually falsely accuses the Ukrainian government of doing what the Kremlin is actually doing.

Following the example of the Russian president, Patriarch Kirill called the war "metaphysical" on March 6, 2022, speaking of the fight for holiness and against the propaganda of sin.[16] Patriarch Kirill implied support for Putin's position of the moral degradation of the West through the spread of gender ideology and the legalization of same-sex partnerships, against which Russia is fighting.[17] Since then, the Patriarch of Moscow's public speeches have often included elements of military rhetoric that align with the Kremlin's official

14 Cf. Dmytro Huliychuk, Побиття військового у храмі: Онуфрій звільнив хмельницького митрополита УПЦ МП, який захотів перейти до ПЦУ [Beating a Soldier in a Church: Onufriy Dismisses Khmelnytsky Metropolitan of UOC-MP Who Wanted to Join OCU] (3 April 2023). URL: https://tsn.ua/ukrayina/pobittya-viyskovogo-u-hrami-onufriy-zvilniv-hmelnickogo-mitropolita-upc-mp-yakih-zahotiv-pereyti-do-pcu-2299984.html.

15 Ksenia Luchenko, Russia's Attempt to Weaponize Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine (16 January 2023). URL: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/01/14/russias-attempt-to-weaponize-orthodox-christianity-in-the-war-in-ukraine-a79928.

16 ROC, Патриаршая проповедь в Неделю сыропустную после Литургии в Храме Христа Спасителя [Patriarchal Sermon on Holy Week After the Liturgy in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior] (6 March 2022). URL: patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html Own translation.

17 Cf. Vladimir Putin, Presidential Address to Federal Assembly (21 February 2023). URL: en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565.

position. For example, on March 13, 2022, he presented the sacred icon to the commander of the Russian National Guard, who said that the icon would inspire the Russian military to new successes in the so-called "special military operation" in Ukraine.[18] Moreover, on September 25, 2022, Patriarch Kirill made a presumably heretical statement during his Sunday sermon and encouraged Russian soldiers to continue the war against Ukraine, claiming that their death in the line of military duty is a "sacrifice that washes away all sins."[19]

Similarly, other Russian religious leaders have been involved in publicly justifying and supporting aggression against Ukraine. On March 29, 2022, the State Duma of the Russian Federation held a roundtable meeting with religious leaders, during which Salah Mezhiyev, the Supreme Mufti of the Chechen Republic (which is a subject of the Russian Federation), said:

> "All the muftis of Russia should say one thing. There [in Ukraine], Nazis, fascists, Satanists, and LGBT communities … have gathered under American and European flags. … This is a fight against the globalization of Satanism. This is a war between good and evil. This is the Jihad. Muslims who fall in this battle will be shahid. … We feel hatred towards these shaitans[20] [in Ukraine]. There should be only one attitude toward them – they need to be beheaded".[21]

Bishop Sergey Ryakhovsky, head of the Russian United Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, attended this state event and proposed adopting the final

18 Cf. M24.ru, Глава Росгвардии принял из рук патриарха Кирилла Августовскую икону Божией Матери [The Head of the Russian Federal Guard Received the August Icon of the Mother of God from the Hands of Patriarch Kirill] (13 March 2022). URL: https://www.m24.ru/amp/videos/obshchestvo/13032022/440022.

19 SOTA, Патриарх Кирилл на традиционной воскресной проповеди заявил, что смерть на войне с Украиной "смывает все грехи" и фактически сравнил мобилизованных с Иисусом Христом [Patriarch Kirill Said at His Traditional Sunday Sermon That Death in the War with Ukraine "Washes Away All Sins" and Actually Compared the Mobilized to Jesus Christ] (25 September 2022), 00:32–01:14. URL: t.me/sotaproject/46913. Own translation.

20 A "shaitan" (or "shaytan") is an evil spirit in Islam, inciting humans and jinn to sin by whispering in their hearts. Shaitans are imagined to be ugly and grotesque creatures created from hellfire. Taken from Islamic literary sources, the term "shaitan" may be translated as "demons," "satans," or "devils."

21 Duma.gov.ru, Круглый стол на тему: "Мировые традиционные религии против идеологии нацизма и фашизма в XXI веке" [Roundtable on the Theme: "World Traditional Religions Against the Ideology of Nazism and Fascism in the XXI Century"] (29 March 2022), 1:54.50–1:57.16. URL: http://duma.gov.ru/multimedia/video/events/71233/. Own translation.

resolution of the roundtable participants in support of the so-called "military special operation in Ukraine."[22] He has repeatedly expressed support for the Russian president's policy and personally participated in the Kremlin's celebrations dedicated to the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea[23] and the occupied territories of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions of Ukraine.[24] At the same time, the website of the association of churches he headed regurgitated Kremlin propaganda, with many publications of Putin's statements, greeting letters, and interviews.[25]

Moreover, Sergey Ryakhovsky introduced the tradition of singing the Russian national anthem before the start of events of the Pentecostal Union of Churches, which he leads, encouraging participants of religious events to sing the words: "Russia is our sacred state, … Glory, the country! We are proud of you!" These lyrics are combined with the music of the anthem of the Soviet Union, which for decades executed Evangelical believers as enemies of the state.[26] Despite the ongoing Russian aggression and the statement of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations recognizing the genocide of Ukrainians committed by the Russian military since the beginning of the full-scale invasion,[27] Russian Pentecostals continued to glorify the state of Russia before the start of their solemn worship services in 2022 and 2023.[28]

22 Ibidem.

23 Cf. Sevastopol Life, Речь Путина о воссоединении Крыма с Россией [Putin's Speech on Crimea's Reunification with Russia] (18 March 2014). URL: youtu.be/2VbV-27EGt4.

24 Cf. Kremlin.ru, Подписание договоров о принятии ДНР, ЛНР, Запорожской и Херсонской областей в состав России [Signing of Treaties on Accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions to Russia] (30 September 2022). URL: kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465.

25 Cf. Cef.ru, Владимир Путин: "Мы все живём в мире, который основан на библейских ценностях" [Vladimir Putin: "We All Live in a World That Is Based on Biblical Values"] (28 June 2019). URL: https://www.cef.ru/infoblock/media-digest/newsitem/article/1510736.

26 For more see: Oksana Beznosova, The Ukrainian Evangelicals under Pressure from the NKVD, 1928–1939, in: Andrej Kotljarchuk/Olle Sundström (eds.), Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin's Soviet Union. New Dimensions of Research, Huddinge 2017, 175–198.

27 Cf. UCCRO, Appeal to the World Council of Churches on Russian Terroristic Attacks on Ukrainian Civilians (20 October 2022). URL: https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/appeal-to-world-council-of-churches-on-russian-terrorist-attacks.

28 Cf. AMJ Blog, Собор РОСХВЕ 2022 [The Council of ROSKHVE 2022] (18 October 2022). URL: youtu.be/0OQme9HlhFA.

3. Exploitation of the Split in Ukrainian Orthodoxy by the Kremlin to Discredit the Government of Ukraine

In 2014, when Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and invaded the eastern regions of Ukraine, the UOC-MP did not support the anti-terrorist operation of the Ukrainian government aimed at liberating the Donetsk and Luhansk regions from Russian military presence. The church leadership took a position "above the conflict," stating that it does not support any side of the armed conflict. The UOC-MP Primate, Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovsky), echoed the words of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, saying that "this war is a civil war" because "a brother is on one side, another brother is on the other side," and it is necessary to "forgive each other and stop killing each other."[29] However, he did not condemn the Russian military invasion of Crimea and the subsequent occupation of the Ukrainian peninsula. Nor did the UOC-MP Primate mention the growing Russian military presence in the Donbas region of Ukraine, which has fueled alleged separatist sentiments and allowed for a protracted war on these territories.

The UOC-MP leadership has failed to openly and unequivocally condemn the Russian aggression and the atrocities of the Russian military in Ukraine, to refute Russian propaganda about the alleged threats to religious freedom and the Russian language in Ukraine, or stand with the suffering people of Ukraine and support their liberation struggle. For example, on May 8, 2015, the UOC-MP Primate, Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovsky), and other bishops of this Church refused to stand up during a ceremony honoring the fallen Ukrainian soldiers who were posthumously awarded the title "Hero of Ukraine for courageous defense of the Motherland from Russian aggression" at the Ukrainian parliament.[30] Later, they explained their gesture as a call for an end to the war, implying the Ukrainian army was not defending its people but fighting against them. There have also been cases of individual clergymen of the UOC-MP refusing to hold memorial services for fallen Ukrainian soldiers,[31] whom

29 Union of Orthodox Journalists, Православная церковь в современной Украине [Orthodox Church in Modern Ukraine], Kyiv 2016, 7–8. Own translation.

30 Cf. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, УПЦ (МП): митрополит не встав під час вшанування Героїв України, бо "проти війни" [UOC (MP): Metropolitan Did Not Stand up During Honoring of Heroes of Ukraine Because He Is "Against War"] (9 May 2015). URL: radiosvoboda.org/a/news/27005934.html.

31 Cf. Ukrinform, Звернення учасників АТО щодо діяльності церков Московського Патріархату [Appeal of ATO Participants Regarding the Activities of the Churches of the Moscow Patriarchate] (22 January 2018). URL: https://www.ukrinform.ua/ru-

Russian propaganda did not recognize as defenders of their land, but instead called "punishers".

The position of the UOC-MP hierarchs and priests is entirely consistent with the narratives of Russian propaganda, which try to weaken the resistance of the Ukrainian people by promoting the fallacy of a "fratricidal civil war" which would allegedly end if the Ukrainian army ceased to kill its own civilians. However, the UOC-MP leadership ignored the Russian military intervention and did not make similar calls to the Russian army to vacate Ukrainian land and cease shelling civilians in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. With the help of such statements by Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovsky) and other UOC-MP bishops and clergy, the Kremlin misled the faithful of the UOC-MP, encouraging them to believe President Putin's words of the alleged absence of Russian troops in the eastern regions of Ukraine and the alleged free will of Russian-speaking residents of this area to join Russia. In reality, the situation was the opposite. Putin himself later admitted to this, confirming that Russian soldiers "stood behind Crimea's self-defence forces"[32] and invaded the eastern regions of Ukraine.[33] It is also evident that without direct Russian intervention, small separatist groups in eastern Ukraine could not have had the heavy military equipment and sophisticated air defense systems that were used to shoot down the passenger plane flight MH17 near Donetsk on July 17, 2014, killing 298 people. The District Court of The Hague declared in its ruling that the evidence it had examined in the case of the downing of flight MH17 clearly shows that the Kremlin had "overall control" of the forces of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic in 2014.[34] However, the UOC-MP leadership continued to remain "above the armed conflict," refusing to condemn Russia's direct aggression against Ukraine and break the ties with the ROC.

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32 Reuters.com, Putin Admits Russian Forces Were Deployed to Crimea (17 April 2014). URL: https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-putin-crimea-idUSL6N0N921H20140417/.

33 Cf. Shaun Walker, Putin Admits Russian Military Presence in Ukraine for First Time (17 December 2015). URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/17/vladimir-putin-admits-russian-military-presence-ukraine.

34 Marieke de Hoon, Dutch Court, in Life Sentences: Russia Had "Overall Control" of Forces in Eastern Ukraine Downing of Flight MH17 (19 December 2022). URL: justsecurity.org/84456/.

Law #3894-IX, which the Ukrainian government submitted to the parliament as draft law #8371 in January 2023,[35] received a significant response by the U. S. and European media. The law, adopted on 20 August 2024, seeks to prevent the spread of Russian propaganda through the use of Russian religious centers, which are a part of the military-political complex of Russia, attempting to destroy Ukraine as an independent state and eliminate Ukrainian sovereignty. As Metropolitan Yevstratiy (Zorya), a member of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organization delegation to the U. S., explains: "This is why the draft law proposed to the parliament of Ukraine is a way to protect our citizens from abuses of religious freedom, as Russia uses the churches and religious communities it controls as proxy war instruments."[36]

Despite the widespread dissemination of distorted information about the ban of the UOC-MP, the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations stressed that "not a single church is banned in Ukraine, unlike the Russian-occupied territories."[37] The adopted law introduces a multi-stage legal procedure that is a pathway to the prohibition of activities of religious organizations that fail to adhere to the government directives to sever ties with religious centers in Russia, an aggressor state. It does not imply an immediate ban on the UOC-MP's activities, which is not even directly mentioned. Instead, the law allows this church and other religious associations in Ukraine to liberate themselves from the influence of the Russian intelligence services and stop being mouthpieces for Russian propaganda. The UOC-MP has nine months to demonstrate its independence from Moscow and preserve the legal entity status for its metropolis, eparchies, and parishes. After that grace period, the law will come into force fully, empowering the Ukrainian government to conduct examinations of the ties of religious organizations to Russian religious centers and issue directives. Moreover, the fate of each of them will be considered separately by the court. Even if the court bans some UOC-MP parishes, their members can continue to practice their faith freely and hold worship services without the status of a legal entity. Unlike Russia, Ukrainian legislation allows

35 Cf. Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, Проект Закону про внесення змін до деяких законів України щодо діяльності в Україні релігійних організацій [Draft Law on Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on the Activities of Religious Organizations in Ukraine]. No. 8371 of 19.01.2023. URL: itd.rada.gov.ua/billInfo/Bills/Card/41219.

36 UCCRO, Not a Single Church Is Banned in Ukraine, Unlike the Russian-Occupied Territories – UCCRO Delegation Stated (1 November 2023). URL: vrciro.ua/en/news/2023-uccro-visit-to-washington.

37 Ibidem.

unregistered religious communities to operate and retains a broad scope of religious freedom for their members regardless of denomination.

Although religious freedom, according to international law, includes the right of religious organizations to determine their organizational structure and choose canonical subordination,[38] the law should not be viewed purely theoretically. The context must be taken into account to accurately assess the scope and necessity of the Ukrainian government's interference in internal religious affairs. Russia systematically and purposefully uses religion as an instrument of global expansion and armed invasion to destroy Ukraine as a state and nation.[39] Therefore, Russian religious centers, primarily those of the ROC, cannot be considered as religious structures but as political or government structures. At the same time, the Constitution of Ukraine requires that "the church and religious organizations in Ukraine are separated from the state."[40] The Ukrainian government's interference to limit the activities of the ROC in Ukraine can be perceived as "necessary in a democratic society" and as corresponding to a "pressing social need,"[41] given the transformation of the Russian religious centers into a structural part of Putin's dictatorial regime.

At the same time, the UOC-MP leadership allows the Church to be used in the Kremlin's geopolitical games. Apart from the declaration that references to the connection with the ROC be removed from the statutory documents of the UOC-MP in May 2022, neither Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovsky) nor other UOC-MP hierarchs have demonstrated practical steps to break their obedience to Moscow.[42] For example, the UOC-MP leadership did not condemn or resist the seizure of the Simferopol and Crimean eparchy and the Berdiansk eparchy, which were arbitrarily seized by the ROC and "transferred to the direct canonical and administrative subordination of the Patriarch of Moscow" after the occupation of these Ukrainian territories by Russian troops.[43] The UOC-MP

38 Cf. European Court of Human Rights, Case of Svyato-Mykhaylivska Parafiya v. Ukraine, Article 112. URL: hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-81067.

39 Cf. Peter Mandaville, How Putin Turned Religion's 'Sharp Power' Against Ukraine (9 February 2022). URL: https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/02/how-putin-turned-religions-sharp-power-against-ukraine.

40 Constitution of Ukraine 1996 (rev. 2019), Article 35. URL: constituteproject.org/constitution/Ukraine_2019.

41 Cf. European Court of Human Rights, Case, Article 112.

42 Cf. Oleksandr Sagan, Development Trends of Religious Institutions in Ukraine Under the Conditions of Martial Law State, in: Social and Human Sciences. Polish-Ukrainian Scientific Journal 34 (2022). URL: nsg-2023.blogspot.com/2023/02/20230108.html.

43 Pavlo Smytsnyuk, The War in Ukraine as a Challenge for Religious Communities: Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Prospects for Peacemaking, in: Studia Universitatis Babeş-

representatives do not speak about this raider attack at international United Nations and OSCE events. Instead, together with Russian propagandists, they continue to criticize the Ukrainian government for the voluntary transfer of their parishes to the autocephalous OCU.

As another example, the UOC-MP leadership does not publicly condemn and punish its bishops and priests who committed high treason, were involved in collaboration with Russian troops or the occupation authorities, openly justified Russian aggression, etc., even when their guilt was proven in court.[44] Instead, the ROC and UOC-MP media resources present proven abuses and outright violations of the law by some of the UOC-MP hierarchs and priests as persecution of the Church by the Ukrainian authorities.[45]

Nevertheless, due to this ambiguous position of the UOC-MP leadership and most bishops, Russian propaganda managed to create a negative background image of Ukraine in Western media, especially in the United States. It concealed from the public numerous Russian war crimes against Ukrainian priests and faith-based communities in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.[46]

4. Deliberate Destruction of Ukraine's Spiritual and Cultural Heritage

At a time when both sides of the Atlantic are debating whether it is possible and necessary for the Ukrainian government to intervene in the religious sphere for reasons of national security, Russia continues to systematically destroy Ukraine's religious infrastructure and spiritual and cultural heritage. Russia's full-scale invasion is accompanied by targeted attacks on civilian infrastructure with missiles and attack drones, as well as heavy artillery fire during the ground

Bolyai. Theologia Catholica Latina 67 (1) (2023) 26–70, 38–39.

44 Cf. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, СБУ повідомляє про затримання ще одного священника УПЦ (МП) на Сумщині [SBU Reports Detention of Another UOC (MP) Priest in Sumy Region] (3 March 2023). URL: https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-sbu-zatrymannia-svyashchennyk-sumshchyna/32297903.html.

45 Cf. Petro Kralyuk, "Чорні дні" Московського патріархату. На що вказують події у Хмельницькому і арешт митрополита Павла? [The "Black Days" of the Moscow Patriarchate. What Do the Events in Khmelnytsky and the Arrest of Metropolitan Pavlo Indicate?] (3 April 2023). URL: https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/aresht-pavla-podiyi-khmelnytskyy-kryza-moskovskoho-patriarkhatu/32346936.html.

46 Cf. Maksym Vasin, The Impact of the Russian Invasion on Faith-Based Communities in Ukraine. Report by the Institute for Religious Freedom, Kyiv 2024, 24–25. URL: https://irf.in.ua/files/publications/2024.03-IRF-Ukraine-report-ENG-web.pdf.

offensive. In addition, some places of worship have been looted by the Russian military, closed, or converted by the occupation authorities into administrative buildings. There are numerous cases of the seizure of places of worship by the Russian military, which has used them as military bases or as cover for their firing positions. This tactic of the Russian army resulted in an increase of destruction of religious sites in Ukraine.[47]

According to the Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom, "during the 21 months of the full-scale invasion, Russian troops have wholly destroyed or damaged at least 630 religious facilities in Ukraine."[48] However, this number continues to grow every month. In 2023, the scale of destruction of religious buildings in the southern regions of Ukraine increased significantly compared to 2022. Many churches were flooded as a result of the June 6 blasting of the Kakhovka hydroelectric dam by Russian troops, which is a war crime and potentially an act of ecocide.[49] In addition, Russia continues to fire missiles and attack drones at civilian infrastructure in all regions of Ukraine, affecting religious sites even in the remote western regions of the country.

Orthodox churches suffered the most damage from Russian aggression – at least 246 are affected. Most of these are UOC-MP churches – at least 187. 59 OCU churches were destroyed. Protestant churches were also destroyed on a large scale, at least 206 in total. Among them, Pentecostal (94), Baptist (60), and Seventh-day Adventist Church (27) prayer houses suffered the most. The Halls of the Kingdom of Jehovah's Witnesses were also severly damaged: a total of 110 religious buildings, of which 12 were completely destroyed, 20 heavily damaged, and 78 slightly damaged. Furthermore, 32 Halls of the Kingdom were seized by the Russian military or occupation authorities.[50]

The data demonstrates that the Russian leadership is not concerned with religious freedom in Ukraine. President Putin's statements about his intention to protect Russian-speaking Orthodox believers were revealed as trick, because the UOC-MP churches suffered the most from the Russian invasion. Dmytro Koval highlights that the destruction of religious buildings in Ukraine by the Russian military is a potential fulfillment of the international law criterion for

47 Cf. Maksym Vasin et al., Russian Attacks on Religious Freedom in Ukraine: Research, Analytics, Recommendations. Report by Institute for Religious Freedom, Kyiv 2022, 8, 33. URL: https://irf.in.ua/files/publications/2022.09-IRF-Ukraine-report-ENG.pdf.

48 Vasin, Impact, 6.

49 Cf. Dan Sabbagh/Julian Borger, Thousands Flee Homes as Collapse of Dam Is Blamed on Russian Forces (6 June 2023). URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/06/ukraine-accuses-russia-of-blowing-up-nova-kakhovka-dam-near-kherson.

50 Cf. Vasin, Impact, 3.

the crime of genocide against the Ukrainian people: "Such attacks themselves are not autonomous manifestations of the crime of genocide, but they may indicate the existence of special genocidal intent."[51]

5. Implementation of Russian Repressive Policy in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine

In addition, the Russian occupation of certain territories of the Ukrainian southern and eastern regions is accompanied by the brutal persecution of Ukrainian local religious leaders and all faith-based communities of religious minorities. Moreover, even the UOC-MP priests are subjected to arbitrary arrests and torture if they maintain their Ukrainian identity and refuse to be directly subordinate to the ROC.[52]

According to the Institute for Religious Freedom report, Russian attacks on religious freedom in Ukraine have become crueler since February 24, 2022:

> "If previously priests on the occupied territories only received death threats, now religious leaders are tortured and killed – again, but on a scale far worse than in 2014. If previously Russian occupational authorities expelled Ukrainian believers from their churches and prayer houses, now Russia is destroying the spiritual heritage of Ukraine with missile attacks, shelling, and looting of religious buildings without justification by military necessity."[53]

The Kremlin uses religion as a tool to weaken the resistance of the population in the temporarily controlled territories of Ukraine. Russian intelligence services force local religious leaders to cooperate to strengthen the influence of occupation authorities, identify and persecute pro-Ukrainian activists, and prevent dissent and opposition to the Russian authorities.

According to the 2023 Mission Eurasia report, the xenophobic "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World) ideology has been forced on the occupied territories with extreme brutality:

51 Vasin et al., Attacks, 24.

52 Cf. Mykhailo Brytsyn/Maksym Vasin, Faith Under Fire: Navigating Religious Freedom Amidst the War in Ukraine. Report by Religious Freedom Initiative of Mission Eurasia, Franklin/TN 2023, 16.

53 Vasin et al., Attacks, 4.

> "Occupation administrations uprooted displays of Ukrainian identity with deep hatred, and fought any forms of opposition, striving to subjugate or stop the activities of religious minorities. It came to the physical extermination of priests, pastors, imams, and other religious figures, whom Russian soldiers arbitrarily arrested, kidnapped, and subjected to the most painful of tortures."[54]

This Russian violence was officially justified by manufactured allegations of supposed "extremist" or "illegal missionary" activities. Fabrication of criminal cases on these grounds against religious minorities is widespread in Russia after the adoption of legislative changes under the Yarovaya law.[55] Those priests, pastors, imams, or rabbis who could not be intimidated and induced to comply with Russian occupational administrations were forcefully deported from the Ukrainian territories temporarily controlled by Russia or imprisoned and tortured.[56]

6. Conclusions

Despite President Putin's accusations of moral degradation and disregard for family values against the West, the narrative of Russian propaganda should be viewed with a critical eye. In reality, the Kremlin and ROC leadership are far from Christian moral virtues, as evidenced by the widespread corruption, numerous war crimes in Ukraine, terror against civilians, and *de facto* genocide of the Ukrainian people. Similarly, the words of Vladimir Putin, Russian diplomats, and other propagandists regarding the alleged lack of religious freedom in Ukraine should not be trusted because, in reality, it is Russia that destroys churches and houses of worship in Ukraine, imprisons people and detains them in inhumane conditions and subjects Ukrainian priests, pastors, and imams to brutal torture, forcing them to justify Russian war crimes and cooperate with the occupation administration. On the contrary, "during the 30 years of independence, the Ukrainian state did not persecute anyone for

54 Brytsyn/Vasin, Faith, 25.

55 The Yarovaya law (in Russian: Закон Яровой), also Yarovaya package or Yarovaya-Ozerov package is a set of two Russian federal bills, #374-FZ and #375-FZ, passed in 2016. The bills amend previous counter-terrorism laws and separate laws that regulate additional counter-terror and public safety measures. The public names the law after the last name of one of its creators – MP Irina Yarovaya.

56 Cf. Brytsyn/Vasin, Faith, 22.

their faith, did not ban any religion without reason."[57] Even during wartime, when noticeable changes in the religious infrastructure occur, the Ukrainian government strives to ensure the right to the free practice of all religions.

The reason for Russia's aggression against Ukraine is not the Kremlin's desire to protect traditional family values or the religious freedom of Ukrainians. In reality, propaganda depicting the oppression of Russian-speaking residents and Orthodox believers, as well as criticism of the moral decline of the West and fear of NATO expansion, is an attempt to obscure the true intentions of the Russian leadership. First, Vladimir Putin and his clan-based system of governance seek to maintain unlimited authoritarian power inside the Russian Federation and the ability to embezzle and further gain profit through corrupt schemes. Putin successfully achieved this goal by intimidating Russian citizens with an external enemy and repressing dissidents and internal opposition, just as the Soviet Union did. Secondly, the Russian president aspires to revive the Russian empire, implementing the "Russkiy Mir" ideology and global dominance because he claims the collapse of the Soviet Union was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."[58] The Ukrainian people have resisted the geopolitical dream of Vladimir Putin by choosing the path of democracy, the rule of law, and European integration. Therefore, with the broad support of Russian society, Putin is prepared to wage a war that will eradicate the sovereignty of the Ukrainian nation state and the national identity of the Ukrainian people. This objective displays signs of genocide.

Religion is a key tool for achieving Russia's geopolitical goals[59] and a critical front on which the Kremlin has been waging an active, systematic, bloody, and cynical battle for decades. Russian diplomats and other propagandists have constantly tried to turn the Western world, especially Ukraine's allies, against the Ukrainian government, accusing Ukraine of targeted persecution of the UOC-MP. At the same time, the UOC-MP leadership allows Moscow to use this Church and the trust of Ukraine's Orthodox believers in its geopolitical battle, taking an uncertain position on Russian aggression and provoking discontent in Ukrainian society, primarily by inciting conflict in their parishes. It is beneficial for the Kremlin to widen the split in Ukrainian Orthodoxy in

57 Liudmyla Fylypovych, The Realities of Current Orthodox Life in Ukraine During the Russian-Ukrainian War, in: Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Theologia Catholica Latina 67 (1) (2023) 7–25, 10.

58 NBC News, Putin: Soviet Collapse a 'Genuine Tragedy' (25 April 2005). URL: nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057.

59 Cf. Fearghas, Russia's War.

order to use local provocations to discredit Ukraine's leadership and reduce military support from its allies.

Focusing on this issue helps the Russian leadership to divert the attention of the international community from the real threats to religious freedom in Ukraine, which are caused by the Russian military intervention. Russian authorities do not only completely control religious activity in Russia and force Russian religious leaders to justify the aggressive war, but also extend their repressive policy to the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. The Russian occupation administrations are forcing religious leaders to cooperate and cut ties with the religious centers in Kyiv in favor of subordination to Russian religious centers that are already under the control of Russian intelligence services. Moreover, Moscow loudly criticizes the Ukrainian government's democratic attempts to protect faith-based communities from the influence of Kremlin-controlled Russian religious centers, as provided by the recently adopted law #3894-IX. As a result of the law, the Kremlin can lose its last channel of influence on Ukrainian society, which is the UOC-MP, due to the *de facto* pro-Russian position of its Primate and most bishops.

The Russian leadership utilizes religion as a tool of warfare. By identifying, describing, and assessing the historic and political contexts in which this Russian strategy of warfare operates, this paper has revealed the reality of Russian propagandist rhetoric and the obscurement and distortion of the actual situation in Ukraine.