

The background of the cover features a stylized, abstract representation of the Ukrainian national flag. It consists of a blue upper half and a yellow lower half, separated by a thick, black, irregular diagonal line that suggests a torn or draped fabric. The colors are rendered with some texture and blending, giving it a painterly or digital-art feel.

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THOMAS SCHULTE-UMBERG, OLHA UHRYN,
NOREEN VAN ELK (EDS.)

WAR IN UKRAINE

THEOLOGICAL, ETHICAL
AND HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

Christina Dietl – Khrystyna Fostyak – Thomas Schulte-Umberg –
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Friends or Foes? Religious Organizations and European Institutions in the Face of Russia's War on Ukraine

Iuliia Korniiichuk

The paper explores the challenges posed by Russia's war against Ukraine to the relations between European institutions and religious organizations. In recent decades, with the resurgence of religion in the public sphere, European institutions have become a platform for dialogue with religious entities, including Orthodox churches, on various non-religious issues. Russia's war in Ukraine has strained this cooperation. While the EU unequivocally condemned the invasion and supported Ukraine, many Orthodox Churches struggled to clearly name and condemn the aggression or, like the Moscow Patriarchate, openly supported the war. This article investigates the EU institutions' responses to the involvement of the Moscow Patriarchate in the war and the challenges these responses pose.

1. Introduction

From the outset in 2014, the Russo-Ukrainian war remained largely localized as a regional conflict until February 2022, when it escalated to global significance with a full-scale invasion. The reverberations of this conflict were felt across the globe, impacting a myriad of unexpected actors. Among these, the active participation of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) stands out as a noteworthy development, though not entirely unforeseen. Despite the fact that prior to the full-scale invasion nearly every third parish of the ROC was located in Ukraine¹, the Church vociferously and unequivocally endorsed the aggres-

1 The Moscow Patriarchate had approximately 39,000 parishes, 12,500 of which were in Ukraine. Cf. Patriarchia.ru, The Internal Life and External Activities of the Russian Orthodox Church from 2009 to 2019 [In Russian] (29 January 2019). URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5359105.html> [accessed: 28 October 2023].

sive military campaign against Ukraine. This endorsement was not confined to public prayers by the Russian Patriarch for the “swift victory” of the aggressor state², or to statements of absolution for the deceased occupiers³. It extended to practical measures, such as the wide-scale collection of “aid” for the Russian occupying forces in Ukraine⁴, and the participation in the unlawful transfer of Ukrainian children to Russian territory⁵ – acts now under scrutiny by the International Criminal Court as potential war crimes and a manifestation of genocide against Ukrainians.

This article attempts to outline the impact of the ROC’s active involvement in the war against Ukraine, on the perception of this church within the European Union (EU), and on its further interaction with EU institutions. In this conflict, the EU unequivocally denounced the aggression and identified Russia as the aggressor, while the ROC, by contrast, lent its support to Russia’s actions, which it had previously laid an ideological groundwork for. This dynamic is further complicated by the fact that at the start of the conflict, the ROC was conspicuously visible and active within open forums for religious organizations in the EU, particularly among Orthodox Churches⁶. This is noteworthy

- 2 Cf. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Patriarch Kirill Bestows National Guard of Russia with an Icon That Will “Accelerate Victory” in Ukraine [In Russian] (13 March 2022). URL: <http://www.ng.ru/news/734198.html> [accessed: 28 October 2023].
- 3 Cf. AP NEWS, Moscow Patriarch: Russian War Dead Have Their Sins Forgiven (27 September 2022). URL: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-religion-moscow-0d2382ff296b7e253cd30c6bbadeed1d> [accessed: 28 October 2023].
- 4 Cf. TASS, Patriarch Kirill Urged the ROC to Mobilize the Faithful to Collect Aid for the Participants of the SWO [Special Military Operation] [In Russian] (20 January 2023). URL: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/16851337> [accessed: 28 October 2023].
- 5 Cf. Yanina Kornienko, *Deport Thy Neighbor: How the Russian Orthodox Church Together with the Security Forces Forcibly Relocate Ukrainians to Russia* (28 April 2022). URL: <https://www.slidstvo.info/english-stories/deport-thy-neighbor-how-the-russian-orthodox-church-together-with-the-security-forces-forcibly-relocate-ukrainians-to-russia/> [accessed: 28 October 2023].
- 6 The study of religion in the EU is most often represented by research on church-state relations in the member states. Among the works focusing specifically on the interaction of religious organizations with EU institutions, the contributions of François Foret (e.g., *Religion and Politics in the European Union: The Secular Canopy*, New York 2015) and Lucian Leustean (e.g., *The Ecumenical Movement and the Making of the European Community*, Oxford 2014; *Representing Religion in the European Union: Does God Matter?*, Routledge 2013) are particularly noteworthy. On the role and politics of the Orthodox churches in the EU, see e.g.: Lucian Leustean, *The Politics of Orthodox Churches in the European Union*, in: *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 18/2–3 (2018) 146–157 [DOI: 10.1080/1474225X.2018.1504598]; Effie Fokas, *Eastern Orthodoxy and Europe*, in: Grace Davie/Lucian Leustean (eds.), *The Oxford*

considering the anti-Western rhetoric espoused by the Russian government and the ROC itself.

This article draws from various sources, including missives sent by the Russian Patriarch to EU institutions addressing diverse facets of the conflict, and excerpts of these missives that are publicly available. It also encompasses accessible databases and documents from pivotal EU institutions, such as the European Parliament and the European Commission. These resources include relevant resolutions, appeals by civil society organizations and parliamentary inquiries on the religious situation in Ukraine starting from the beginning of the Russian invasion, and other areas of intersection between the war and religion.

This article is structured in three parts. The initial section delves into the representation of religious entities within European institutions, with a specific emphasis on Orthodox churches. The subsequent section delineates the nuances of the ROC's portrayal of the Russo-Ukrainian war in its interactions with European institutions, as well as the response of the European Parliament and European Commission to the church's active endorsement of Russian aggression. Finally, the last segment analyses the challenges that religious organizations now face when collaborating with EU institutions due to the war.

2. Religion and the Representation of Orthodox Churches in EU Institutions

The EU's policy towards religion and its collaboration with religious organizations is a dynamic and multifaceted issue. On the one hand, the principle of non-interference by EU institutions in religious matters is deeply ingrained in public discourse. This stance, often characterized as “the godlessness of the West” in Russian political rhetoric, firmly asserts that religious issues are the exclusive domain of individual member states. Any deviation from this status quo triggers a significant wave of criticism, exemplified by the debate surrounding the mere mention of Christian heritage in the draft European Constitution.

Handbook of Religion and Europe, Oxford 2021, 480–496; Effie Fokas, ‘Eastern’ Orthodoxy and ‘Western’ Secularization in Contemporary Europe (with Special Reference to the Case of Greece), in: *Religion, State and Society* 40/3–4 (2012) 395–414 [DOI: 10.1080/09637494.2012.754269]; Sorin Selaru, Representing the Orthodox Churches to the European Union, in: *Ortodoksia* 54 (2015) 54–80. URL: <https://journal.fi/ortodoksia/article/view/129926/78573> [accessed: 27 March 2024].

On the other hand, the EU has undergone a notable shift in its approach towards religious organizations and religion. While the ideals of religious unity played a substantial role in the formation of a cohesive European community⁷, the imperative for systematic collaboration with religious organizations emerged with the Draft Constitution for Europe in 2004. This principle was then echoed, almost verbatim, in the Lisbon Treaty (2007), which amended the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community.

Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty, a pivotal provision pertaining to religious matters, outlines three key principles: firstly, it underscores the importance of respecting national traditions regarding state-church relations within EU member states. Secondly, it acknowledges the equal standing of religious and non-religious organizations at the EU level. Thirdly, it mandates that the EU engages in an “open, transparent and regular dialogue with churches and other organizations”⁸ that represent civil society. Religious organizations operate within EU institutions exclusively in this capacity of, and on behalf of, civil society. In adopting this stance towards religious organizations, the EU neither pioneered nor deviated from established norms. Numerous international organizations, from the UN to the Council of Europe, regard the voice of religious organizations as an integral part of the broader civil society.

As of October 2023, The Transparency Register documents the registration of 12,412 non-governmental organizations representing the interests of EU citizens in European institutions. Among these, 47 are organizations advocating for churches and religious entities⁹. The majority of these are associations and networks that unite relevant religious organizations across various EU nations. Notable examples include the inter-Christian Conference of European Churches, the Catholic Commission of the Bishops of the European Union (COMECE), and the European Jewish Congress.

7 Cf. Lucian Leustean, *The Ecumenical Movement and the Making of the European Community*, Oxford 2014.

8 European Union, Treaty of Lisbon Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community. Signed at Lisbon, 13 December 2007 (Notice No. 2007/C 306/01), in: *Official Journal of the European Union* 50 (2007) 1–230. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=OJ:C:2007:306:TOC> [accessed: 28 October 2023], Art. 17.

9 European Union, Transparency Register Annual Report 2023. URL: https://transparency-register.europa.eu/index_en [accessed: 28 October 2023].

The representation of Orthodox churches primarily occurs through the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Union¹⁰. Established in 2010, this committee brings together representatives from four EU countries with Orthodox majorities – Greece, Cyprus, Romania, and Bulgaria, along with representatives from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church. While the latter two are headquartered outside the EU, they maintain a significant number of parishes within the EU, justifying their participation on this basis¹¹. In addition to the committee, several Orthodox churches have established separate representations within Brussels institutions since the early 1990s¹². However, these do not possess the same official status as the organizations listed in the Transparency Register. Notably, the only Orthodox church with individual representation in this system is the Romanian Orthodox Church (Representation of the Romanian Orthodox Church to the European Institutions).

Despite the professed willingness to collaborate with all religious organizations and the asserted commitment to treating them equally, such collaboration varies for different Orthodox churches and their adherents. This discrepancy primarily arises from the complex interrelations between the churches themselves, impacting the nature of their engagement with European institutions.

10 As of the time of writing this paper, the organization had been delisted from the register, notwithstanding its longstanding presence therein.

11 The issue of spiritual care for the diaspora and the establishment of parishes beyond recognized church territories has emerged as a major point of contention in Orthodox church relations. In the early twentieth century, the Patriarch of Constantinople succeeded in rationalizing Constantinople's exclusive authority over diaspora communities, a right vehemently contested by Moscow. With the onset of Russia's aggressive invasion of Ukraine, certain Western European Orthodox parishes announced their transition from the Russian Orthodox Church to the jurisdiction of Constantinople. For more on the problem of the diaspora in Orthodoxy, see: Berit Thorbjørnsrud, "The Problem of the Orthodox Diaspora": The Orthodox Church between Nationalism, Transnationalism, and Universality, in: *Numen* 62/5–6 (2015) 568–595 [DOI: 10.1163/15685276-12341394]. On the parish transfers, see, e.g.: Pjotr Sauer, Russian Orthodox Church in Amsterdam Announces Split with Moscow, in: *The Guardian* (13 March 2022). URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/13/russian-orthodox-church-in-amsterdam-announces-split-with-moscow> [accessed: 27 March 2024].

12 For more on that see: Lucian Leustean, Representing Religion in the European Union. A Typology of Actors, in: *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 12/3 (2011) 295–315 [DOI: 10.1080/21567689.2011.596415].

In accordance with Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty¹³, the European Parliament hosts annual high-level meetings with religious leaders in order to maintain a dialogue with religious organizations. Over nearly a decade since Russia's war, only two of these meetings have addressed this issue, and both occurred only after the full-scale invasion (December 2022, January 2023; "The impact of the war in Ukraine on the European way of life"¹⁴). Despite the multi-million wave of Ukrainians seeking temporary protection in the EU, the one predominantly authorized to speak on their behalf at such gatherings is still the ROC – the church that provided the ideological basis for this war and actively supports it.

At present, the only interconfessional organization within this register, which now also represents Ukrainian Orthodox entities outside the Moscow Patriarchate, is the Conference of European Churches, of which the Orthodox Church of Ukraine became a member only in September 2023.

3. Support for the War by the Russian Orthodox Church and its Reflection in Interaction with Key EU Institutions

Since the initial wave of Russian aggression (2014–2022), the Russian Orthodox Church has predominantly directed its efforts towards a group of political leaders, ranging from EU and UN bodies to the heads of state of the G7, the Normandy Four, and even the Pope. In these missives, the Patriarch frames the conflict initiated by Russia as an internal Ukrainian civil strife. It is noteworthy that the conflict is often depicted in religious terms – as a struggle of "uniates" and "schismatics" (terms employed by the Patriarch to refer to the adherents of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and other than UOC[MP] Ukrainian Orthodox churches) against "canonical Orthodoxy", with the latter denoting the Moscow Patriarchate itself¹⁵. The significance of these letters lies not only in

13 Cf. European Parliament, The European Parliament's Implementation of Article 17 TFEU [Treaty on the Functioning of the EU] (n.d.). URL: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/religious-and-non-confessional-dialogue/home/en-article17-the-ep-implementation.pdf> [accessed: 28 October 2023].

14 European Commission, JUST – Dialogue with Churches, Religious Associations or Communities and Philosophical and Non-Confessional Organisations (27 January 2023). URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/items/50189/en> [accessed: 28 October 2023].

15 Cf. Russian Orthodox Church, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill Addresses the U.N., the European Council, and the OSCE Concerning Facts of Persecution Against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Besieged Southeast Ukraine (18 August 2014). URL: <http://orthochristian.com/73060.html> [accessed: 28 October 2023].

their content and linguistic choices, but also in their timing, which frequently coincides with pivotal events on the front lines or in Ukrainian political affairs. For instance, the cited letter was published less than a week prior to Ukraine's Independence Day, during the Battle of Ilovaisk – one of the most tragic moments of the war for Ukrainians before the full-scale invasion.

Another form of this contentious information dissemination involved an endeavor to artificially amplify its own voice. In 2017, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC[MP]) established an autonomous representative office for European international organizations, aligning itself closely with Russian pro-government narratives. This role was also undertaken by certain non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A relevant instance is the appeal from the Belgian Foundation for the Protection of Civil and Political Rights (*Fondation pour la protection des droits civils et politiques*) to the European Parliament, addressing the purported suppression of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine. The organization emphatically underscored its Belgian origin and impartiality, beseeching the EP to address the oppression faced by the UOC[MP], substantiating its claims with a multitude of violations against the faithful of this church, as documented on its official website (see case materials:¹⁶). Simultaneously, the person representing the aforementioned Belgian NGO and signing the appeal turned out to be one of the speakers of the UOC[MP] and was later honored with an award by the church.

In a broader context, the aforementioned documents, along with numerous other appeals by the Moscow Patriarchate pertaining to the war during that period, exhibit several shared characteristics. Firstly, they conspicuously sidestep the overt act of external military aggression, commonly employing euphemisms like “these events”, “conflict”, “current situation”, and “civil conflict”, while refraining from acknowledging Russia's role. Secondly, they extend a distinct perspective on the content and scope of this phase of the war. The church's appeals exclusively allude to suspected violations of the rights of their own church beyond the confines of the war zone. In contrast to the majority of both Ukrainian and international religious and secular organizations, the Moscow Patriarchate consistently refrained from acknowledging gross human rights transgressions and the persecution of other religious entities on the oc-

16 Fondation pour la protection des droits civils et politiques, Request for Action in Relation to the Alleged Unlawful Seizures of Religious Institutions Belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) in 2014 and 2015 (7 June 2016). URL: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/courrier_officiel/arri/vee/2016/EP-PE_LTA\(2016\)006426_FULL_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/courrier_officiel/arri/vee/2016/EP-PE_LTA(2016)006426_FULL_EN.pdf) [accessed: 28 October 2023].

cupied territories, even when the declared purpose of such violations was to propagate “Russian Orthodoxy” as the “prevalent and paramount faith”¹⁷. This rhetoric diverged markedly from the official proclamations of European institutions, which acknowledged the acts of aggression and delineated a wide range of infractions supported by various sources of information¹⁸.

Arguably, the first document that most distinctly underscored the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Russian information warfare was the European Parliament’s resolution on EU Strategic Communication to Counter Anti-EU Propaganda by Third Parties (2016)¹⁹. In the initial draft, the Orthodox Church was explicitly identified as one of the primary instruments for disseminating Russian disinformation, alongside entities such as “think tanks and special foundations (e. g., Russkiy Mir), special authorities (Rossotrudnichestvo), multilingual TV stations (e. g., RT), pseudo news agencies and multimedia services (e. g., Sputnik)” (Art. 8)²⁰.

The resolution elicited a wave of censure and indignation, primarily from the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches. Ultimately, in the final version of the document, the direct reference to the Orthodox Church was substituted with the broader term “cross-border social and religious groups” (Art. 8)²¹.

17 Own translation, in the original Russian version: “первенствующая и господствующая вера”. This is the language used in the self-proclaimed “Constitution” enacted by the occupying authorities of Donetsk. It was initially derived from the legislation of the Russian Empire. This document prominently endorsed the cause of Russian Orthodoxy. Subsequently, various versions of the document, even those purported to be the original, underwent revisions. The original text is cited from: Alexandr Soldatov, Not Blessed News: Why the Russian Orthodox Church does not Want to Recognize Its Ideological Followers in Donetsk Militiamen [In Russian], in: *Novaya gazeta* 122 (29 October 2014). URL: <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2014/10/29/61736-ne-blagaya-vest> [accessed: 28 October 2023].

18 While responses to the patriarch’s letters or other church appeals remain undisclosed to the public, a comparable contradiction emerges in the replies to parliamentary petitions from individual members of the European Parliament who put forth inquiries aligning with the patriarch’s stance. For instance, see: VP/HR – Attacks by Ukrainian Authorities on the Orthodox Church [P8_QE(2014)010367] (8 December 2014/18 February 2015). URL: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/questions/reponses_qe/2014/010367/P8_RE\(2014\)010367_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/questions/reponses_qe/2014/010367/P8_RE(2014)010367_EN.pdf) [accessed: 28 October 2023].

19 European Parliament, EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Anti-EU Propaganda by Third Parties [P8_TA(2016)0441 (2016/2030(INI))] (23 November 2016). URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0441_EN.pdf [accessed: 28 October 2023].

20 Ibidem.

21 Ibidem.

Notable is the disagreement among Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in assessing the required amendments, which is evident in the annals of the document's history. Among the more than two dozen proposed amendments to this specific section, several suggestions not so much concerned the removal of the reference to the Orthodox Church (although there were some instances), but rather the implication that it referred specifically to the Russian Orthodox Church as well as the account of the specific methods and tools used by the ROC to conduct these harmful activities²².

One of the pragmatic outcomes of this resolution was the establishment of the EU Strategic Communication Task Force, which was given the oversight to debunk any disinformation disseminated through the media. To date, the EUvsDisinfo project has scrutinized over 16,000 prevalent disinformation narratives, approximately 200 of which relate to Orthodoxy, mostly within the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war²³.

Finally, with the eruption of the full-scale invasion and the implementation of various EU sanctions packages against Russia (as of October 2023, the 12th iteration is under deliberation), the issue of the response to the active involvement of the Church arises. Despite the recommendation of the European Commission and the backing of certain member states, the EU was unable to arrive at an unanimous consensus regarding the inclusion of the Russian patriarch on its sanctions list. Subsequently, in its official journals, the Holy Synod, until this point reticent on the subject of sanctions against religious figures (with the exception of Ukrainian sanctions), extended special gratitude to Viktor Orbán for averting the imposition of sanctions against the patriarch²⁴.

The absence of unanimity among member states did not hinder specific states from imposing autonomous sanctions against the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. Consequently, in addition to Ukraine, the patriarch found himself listed in the sanctions lists of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia,

22 Cf. Anna Elżbieta Fotyga, Amendments (1 – 358). Draft Report [PE582.060v02-00]. EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Propaganda Against It by Third Parties (2016/2030(INI)). URL: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/commissions/afet/projet_avis/2016/583932/amendements/AFET_AM\(2016\)583932_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/commissions/afet/projet_avis/2016/583932/amendements/AFET_AM(2016)583932_EN.pdf) [accessed: 28 October 2023].

23 European External Action Service (EEAS), EUvsDisinfo. URL: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/> [accessed: 28 October 2023].

24 Cf. Russian Orthodox Church, Journals of the Holy Synod dated June 7, 2022 [In Russian] (7 June 2022). URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5934527.html> [accessed: 28 October 2023].

and the Czech Republic. Certain constraints, such as prohibitions on entry or television appearances, were imposed by the Baltic states²⁵.

Presently, the EU sanctions list mentions only two individuals whose ties to the ROC are directly stated in the document: the head of the church's Spas TV channel (annex 1, no. 1388) and an individual purportedly responsible for the ROC's links to the sanctioned nationalist motorcycle club Nightwolves MC (annex 1, no. 1206)²⁶. Additionally, at the end of 2023, two structures affiliated with the ROC were also sanctioned: the church TV channel Spas (annex, no. 328) and the church's private military company, "PMC Andreevsky Krest" (annex, no. 309), whose founder is explicitly identified as the ROC in the document²⁷.

4. Challenges for the Future

Despite the fact that the Russo-Ukrainian war is far from being a religious one, religion has both influenced it and undergone significant shifts as a result. In the first instance, it was the religious and political teaching of the "Russian world" that strengthened the ideological basis for the outbreak of the war. The phantom pains of church and state proved to be incredibly close and probably seemed worth taking serious risks to resolve them, despite the fact that both

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- 25 E.g., see: UK Sanctions List Publication (27 March 2024). URL: <https://docs.fcdo.gov.uk/docs/UK-Sanctions-List.html> [accessed: 27 March 2024] (Patriarch Kirill is listed under number 1467) or LATVIA: State TV Bans Orthodox Worship Services from Broadcast (7 September 2023). URL: <https://hrwf.eu/75604-2/> [accessed: 27 March 2024]. For more on the presence of clerics on sanctions lists related to Russia's war against Ukraine and the challenges associated with the imposition of such sanctions, see: Iuliia Korniiichuk, "This Did Not Happen Even During the Cold War": Religion and International Sanctions in the Russo-Ukrainian War, in: Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations. URL: <https://internationalrelations-publishing.org/articles/4-3> [preprint; accessed: 23 May 2024].
- 26 Cf. European Union, Council Regulation (EU) No 269/2014 of 17 March 2014 Concerning Restrictive Measures in Respect of Actions Undermining or Threatening the Territorial Integrity, Sovereignty and Independence of Ukraine (15 September 2023). URL: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2014/269/2023-04-26/eng> [accessed: 28 October 2023].
- 27 Cf. European Union, Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No 2023/2875 of 18 December 2023 Implementing Regulation (EU) No 269/2014 Concerning Restrictive Measures in Respect of Actions Undermining or Threatening the Territorial Integrity, Sovereignty and Independence of Ukraine (18 December 2023). URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:L_202302875 [accessed: 23 May 2024].

state and church at the time of the war had an outstanding influence in the international arena, which has been purposefully formed and maintained for the church for at least eight decades²⁸. This is what allowed the Russian Orthodox Church to have an exceptional position not only on interdenominational platforms, such as the World Council of Churches or the Conference of European Churches²⁹, but also on secular ones. Platforms within European institutions will not be an exception, as evidenced by such examples as the ROC's participation in the EU's Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches, despite the church's strong anti-Western stance domestically.

In the case of the reverse impact of war on religion, perhaps the biggest one was the autocephaly of the Orthodox community in Ukraine, which seemed absolutely unrealistic before the war began in 2014. The discourse surrounding Ukrainian autocephaly in the backdrop of the war, and the necessity to counteract the imperial narrative of the ROC, spurred discussions in various other countries. These discussions ranged from progress in the Macedonian religious issue to calls for the independence of Orthodox communities in the Baltic states³⁰.

This resurgence of the intricate interplay between religion and politics, as well as religion and security, coincided with a shift in the discourse surrounding EU enlargement, which also appeared to be at an impasse until 24 February 2022. If the 2004 enlargement of the EU has often been dubbed the "great enlargement", the next one is likely to be referred to as the "Orthodox". Presently, six out of the nine EU candidate countries boast strong Orthodox majorities – North Macedonia (59 %), Montenegro (74 %), Serbia (86 %), Ukraine (77 %), Moldova (95 %), and Georgia (87 %)³¹. In Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Orthodox Christians constitute significant minorities, with a population of about 20 % and 30 % respectively. Turkey, while not home to a substantial

28 For more on the topic, see e.g.: William C. Fletcher, *Religion and Soviet Foreign Policy, 1945–1970*. London 1973; Alicja Curanović, *The Religious Factor in Russia's Foreign Policy: Keeping God on Our Side*. London – New York 2012.

29 The Russian Orthodox Church suspended its membership in this organization in the 2000s due to the denial of full membership to its subordinate autonomy.

30 Cf. Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, *The Orthodox Churches of the Moscow Patriarchate in the Baltic States' Attitude Towards the Russian Invasion of Ukraine*, in: *IES Commentaries* 711 (19 October 2022). URL: <https://ies.lublin.pl/en/comments/the-orthodox-churches-of-the-moscow-patriarchate-in-the-baltic-states-attitude-towards-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/> [accessed: 28 October 2023].

31 Pew Research Center, *Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century* (8 November 2017). URL: <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2017/12/06135709/Orthodoxy-II-FULL-REPORT-12-5.pdf> [accessed: 28 October 2023], 23.

Orthodox community, is home to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which holds a respected position as the first among equals in the Orthodox world.

In this context, Orthodox churches and inter-Orthodox disputes will become increasingly visible in the EU, and many more voices will begin to speak on behalf of the Orthodox Church on a much wider range of topics. This trend has already been demonstrated by the cases of appeals to the issue of identity, in particular religious identity, in discussions on the opening of EU membership negotiations. Currently, the most acute and striking example is the case of North Macedonia, where in addition to the issues of the name of the state, language and minority rights, some local Orthodox churches (in particular, the Bulgarian Church) have drawn the attention of their governments to the historical genesis of their church³². This makes practical conversations between Orthodox churches, including through non-religious platforms, even more important.

5. Conclusions

Russian aggression against Ukraine has become a test for both the international secular and religious community. During the last decade or two, the EU has consistently built relations with religious organizations, seeing the latter as representatives of civil society and potential partners in the promotion of democratic values. At the same time, the perception of the current war and the reaction to it have shown how different the interests and priorities of both parties can be.

In the last decade Russia has largely succeeded in weaponizing a number of tools and platforms that were developed as instruments for dialogue with civil

32 The Macedonian Orthodox Church or Archdiocese of Ohrid is the subject of a dispute between several Orthodox churches, namely the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Orthodox Churches of Bulgaria and Serbia (some concerns has the Church of Greece). The question of the origin of the church (which one is the “mother church”) is important for the formalization of autocephaly and the recognition of this autocephaly by other local churches. The status of the mother church informally adds weight and prestige to the church. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church uses Bulgaria’s status as an EU member state (which has voting rights and can block progress towards membership) to advance its position in this dispute. For more on the topic, see e.g.: Gjoko Gjorgjevski et al., *Macedonian Orthodox Church-Archbishopric of Ohrid and Its Arduous Road to Autocephaly*, in: *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42/6 (2022) 1–13 [DOI: 10.55221/2693-2148.2367]; Robert Hudson/Ivan Dodovski (eds.) *Macedonia’s Long Transition: From Independence to the Prespa Agreement and Beyond*, Cham 2023.

society. The active endorsement and support of Russia's war against Ukraine by the Russian Orthodox Church vividly exemplifies this phenomenon. It underscores the crucial role played by civil society, including religious institutions, as well as non-religious entities, in advocating for human rights as well as combating hate speech and disinformation. Despite some notable strides, such as efforts to combat disinformation or initiatives to impose sanctions on religious figures implicated in the conflict, the war has also exposed the limited capacity of both religious and non-religious institutions in effecting significant change in this regard.

Furthermore, the war has brought to the fore a series of challenges within the Orthodox community, which are poised to have broader political ramifications. Simultaneous shifts in the reevaluation of relationships within local Orthodox communities in specific nations and the potential accession of several Orthodox-majority countries to the EU indicate that the imperative of formulating a more comprehensive *modus operandi* will only grow in significance.