



Problem of violation of the rights of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's faithful raised at OSCE meeting

On 1-2 April 2019, in Vienna, Austria, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe held the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Upholding the Principles of Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, Including in the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Among the topics raised at the meeting was the situation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

With the blessing of His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine, Bishop Viktor of Baryshevka, head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's Representation to the European and International Organizations, pointed out some concrete facts of the infringement of the rights of believers and religious communities of the canonical Church.

As Bishop Viktor of Baryshevka noted, following the adoption by the Verkhovna Rada of the law on forcible renaming of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a question arises whether the Ukrainian authorities' actions conform to Ukraine's responsibilities for the defence of human rights. According to the Ukrainian hierarch, this law also contains a discriminatory norm prohibiting the canonical Church from appointing chaplains for rendering spiritual help to servicemen. In its recent report the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights mentioned such restriction of the rights of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's faithful serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, noting that this decision contradicts Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In his address Bishop Viktor also pointed out that the systematic unlawful pressure was been exerted on clerics of the canonical Church with the view of forcing them to move to another jurisdiction. For instance, indicative of this are criminal proceedings brought against Archpriest Viktor Zemlyanoy, a human rights activist and cleric of the Rovno diocese, who was given a notice of suspicion. He is being oppressed for defending the Ukrainian believers' legal right to the freedom of religion.

As the archpastor emphasized, the facts of violation of the rights of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's faithful have already produced international reaction. For instance, at the end of 2018 the UN Special Rapporteurs sent a respective inquiry to the government of Ukraine; and the facts of human rights infringement in religious sphere were mentioned in the report prepared by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Among those who spoke at the meeting was also Mr. Vakhtang Kipshidze, vice-chairman of the

Moscow Patriarchate's Synodal Department for Church's Relations with Society and Mass Media. Speaking about the situation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, he compared Japan and Ukraine, pointing out that in both countries there are self-governing Churches and territorial disputes with Russia, and emphasizing that as for the authorities' attitude to the faithful, these countries are completely different.

"I would like to remind all those present that the Russian Orthodox Church bears relation not only to Russia and Moscow, but to many other countries and cities as well," Mr. Kipshidze said, "For example, in Japan there is the Japanese Orthodox Church with rights of autonomy within the Moscow Patriarchate, just like the Church in Ukraine. Besides, both Japan and Ukraine have a territorial dispute with Russia, but I have never heard that the Japanese Emperor was somehow trying to blame the Japanese Orthodox Church for that. Therefore, it is obvious that the problem is not in the status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, but in the Ukrainian authorities."

Mr. Kipshidze also mentioned gross and mass violations of the rights of the faithful in Ukraine, noting that any attempts of the state to engage in unification of a divided religious community by giving preference to these or those religious leaders constitute, according to the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, a violation of religious freedom.

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