



## **Report on International Religious Freedom of U.S. Department of State analyzed in the Russian Orthodox Church**

In August 2017, the U.S. Department of State issued the 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom. Its text was analyzed in detail by the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, and after that the DECR chairman, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, sent a message to Mr. Rex Tillerson, U.S. Secretary of State.

As Metropolitan Hilarion notes, the Report contains a number of claims based on unobjective information. For instance, it mentions the situation around the building of a church in Torfyanka Park in Moscow, presenting it from the point of view of those who are against the construction. Nothing is said in the document on the conciliatory position of the Russian Church, the DECR chairman emphasizes.

Metropolitan Hilarion also expressed his disagreement with the report's criticism of the Church's participation in the system of distributing state funds. "Church organizations are involved in this programme on a general basis in conditions of free competition. The receipt of funding cannot but bear witness to the effectiveness of Church structures in realizing social and educational projects supported by the state," the archpastor wrote. He also pointed out that the recipients of state funding were not only the Russian Orthodox Church, but also Muslim organizations and Protestant communities.

The Report notes the significant number of violations of rights of believers who belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is the Report's strong side, Metropolitan Hilarion notes. At the same time, he adds, many facts have gone unnoticed, while some of them are presented inaccurately or on the basis of unverifiable data, for instance, the statistics on the religious demographics of Ukraine.

Besides, the Report mentions the discriminatory bill no. 4511; however, there is no mention of other anti-Church legislative initiatives considered by the Supreme Rada of Ukraine.

As an example of the state's interference in the church life, the Report mentions the appeal by deputies of the Supreme Rada to Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople to grant autocephalous status to a "unified Ukrainian Orthodox Church." "At the same time, the Report does not reflect the numerous instances of public utterances of notable Ukrainian state officials with unfounded political accusations aimed at the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, as well as the fact of the illegal blocking by the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture of the registration procedure for dozens of communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox

Church,” the DECR chairman adds.

The Report notes the instances of the violent seizure of church buildings belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, of arsons, vandalism, assaults on the faithful, as well as of the facts of preventing the seized churches’ communities from finding a new place for worship. However, Metropolitan Hilarion points out, the Report only mentions few such facts.

“The Russian Orthodox Church, as no other major religious community in the world, understands only too well what the violation of religious rights and freedoms means. This year we recall the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of persecution of the faithful in our country, unprecedented in world history,” the DECR chairman notes. “This terrible experience... compels us to labour so that in the future no discrimination should ever occur against people whose lives are guided by religious principles,” he adds.

“It is precisely for this reason that the Russian Orthodox Church defends the right of Christians, especially in those countries where they comprise a religious minority, to confess their faith freely, to live peacefully on the land of their forefathers,” the DECR chairman writes in his letter, expressing willingness to promote cooperation in this sphere with all people, organizations and countries. Thus, for instance, an appeal to the world community to exert every effort to fight extremism, terrorism and Christianophobia was made at the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians, recently held in Washington and attended by a delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church.

“As our Church has repeatedly stated, we are prepared to develop further our relationship in the cause of defending the rights and freedoms of persecuted Christians with the diplomatic representation of the United States of America in Russia, with the American public and religious organizations,” Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk wrote in conclusion of his letter.

*DECR Communication Service*

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