



## **Metropolitan Hilarion's comments on Ukrainian Supreme Rada's forthcoming consideration of anti-church bills**

An attempt to reformat the religious situation in Ukraine contrary to the opinion of a majority of the faithful – which is fraught with grave consequences for the civic peace in the country torn as it is by a confrontation – this is how Bills No. 4128 and No. 4511, expected to be voted on in the Supreme Rada on May 18, 2017, can be called. Both religious leaders and secular experts have described them as discriminatory towards the largest religious organization in Ukraine – the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with its more than 12 thousand parishes.

Bill No. 4128 provides for amendments to the Law On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations. The legislators are to adopt a provision on the belonging of a particular person to a religious organization on the basis of self-identification and to grant such persons a right to amend the statutes of a community through a simple majority vote.

What is there so bad about it, it would seem? But let us look at the situation as it has developed in Ukraine: at present, already over 40 churches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate have been captured in raids. The pattern of captures is usually the same: in a village church some people appear, who were not its parishioners before (these can be people of the same village or even visitors). They declare that they are the community of the church and have the right to it and decide to move the church to the jurisdiction of the schismatics. Even if such actions are illegal now and if a legal action is taken, the communities of the canonical Church win them, in case of the adoption of such a bill the law will turn out to be on the invaders' side.

The second bill to be considered by the Supreme Rada on May 18 introduces norms unthinkable in a country in which the freedom of conscience and confession is declared. Precisely for this reason, for instance, the Supreme Rada Commissioner for Human Rights Ms. V. Lutkovskaya stated that Bill No. 4511 contradicts the Ukrainian Constitution.

The bill 'On Religious Organizations Whose Administrative Center is Located in the Country Recognized by the Supreme Rada as Aggressor Country' proposes that a church organization with such status will be severely restricted in its rights. It will be obliged to conclude a special agreement with the Ukrainian State, to negotiate all the appointments to high and middle leading posts with the Ministry of Culture. Moreover, the state can simply liquidate it under this or that pretext.

The bill, if adopted, will be clearly aimed against one religious organization – the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, the only canonical Orthodox Church in that country, recognized by the world Orthodoxy. So, the matters concerning the election of bishops and appointment of rectors of churches will be decided not by the Supreme Church Authority but will depend on the arbitrariness of functionaries.

There was no such a large-scale and impudent interference in the Church's affairs as is provided by this bill even in the Soviet Union, in which non-interference of the state in the internal church life was declared at least formally. In today's civilized society there are no precedents of the adoption of such bills; they simply do not exist. Something similar could be seen, perhaps, only in the legislation of the fascist Germany.

The proposed discriminatory laws are aimed at deepening the schism in Ukrainian Orthodoxy and may provoke all kinds of clashes in society. That is why Bills No. 4128 and No. 4511 have provoked such a strong rejection by representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and other religious leaders in Ukraine, as well as human rights advocates and public leaders. Hundreds of thousands of signatures against the adoption of these laws have been collected for only a few days in various regions of the country.

The adoption of these bills 'threaten to become a glaring example of encroachment upon human rights, the freedom of religious confession', His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia stressed in his appeal on May 16 to Ukrainian President P. Poroshenko, the Normandy Four members – Russian President V. Putin, Federal Chancellor of Germany A. Merkel, French President E. Macron, as well as to Primate of the Local Orthodox Church, Pope Francis of Rome, UN Secretary-General A. Guterres and Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, O. Fykse Tveit.

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