



## **His Holiness Patriarch Kirill sends letters to heads of Normandy Four states, Primate of Local Orthodox Churches, Pope Francis, UN Secretary-General and WCC General Secretary concerning anti-church bills due to be adopted by Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine**

On 18 May 2017, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine is to vote on the bills Nos. 4128 and 4511.

The bill No. 4128 'On Amendments to the Law of Ukraine on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations' (concerning the change of subordination of religious organizations) proposes to introduce into the religious legislation a vague notion of 'a person's belonging to a religious community' on the basis of some 'self-identification.' Those who 'belong to a religious community,' whoever may claim this title, are to be granted a right to change the statute of a community by simple majority vote. The new bill in fact proposes to legalize the practice of fictitious 'referendums' with participation of all the inhabitants of a settlement (and possibly that of visitors as well) who claim to belong to this religious community.

The bill No. 4511 'On the Special Status of Religious Organizations Whose Governing Centers Are Located in the State Recognized by the Verkhovna Rada as Aggressor-State,' proposes to impose on all the communities whose centers of canonical subordination are located in Russia (that is, primarily, the communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church) a certain 'special status' involving the essential deprivation of rights. In addition to the coercive re-registration of all the communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which will inevitably provoke new seizure of churches and clashes between the faithful of different confessions, the bill will give to the government of a secular state the greatest possible powers for controlling the internal life of religious communities, such as approving the appointment of leaders of communities, allowing or disallowing visits by religious leaders from other countries, as well as forcibly liquidating religious communities on a wide range of grounds.

The bills contradict the Ukrainian Constitution and the legislative norms in force. Among those who have come out against their adoption are the Verkhovna Rada Chief Directorate of Scientists and Experts, the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Corruption Prevention and Counteraction, and the Verkhovna Rada Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Valeriya Lutkovska. Finally, the acute criticism of the bills has been levelled by several Ukrainian confessions including the Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Jews.

In view of the expected adoption of these bills, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia

sent letters to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and other Normandy Four participants – Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, as well as to the Primates of the Local Orthodox Churches, Pope Francis, UN Secretary-General António Guterres, and General Secretary of the World Council of Churches Olav Fykse Tveit.

As the messages state, these bills, if adopted, will legalize a discriminatory legal practice unheard of in today's Europe with regard to the majority of the Orthodox population in Ukraine. So restrictive a religious legislation did not function in Ukraine even under the communist regime, while in the rest of Europe something similar existed only during the Nazi rule in Germany.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is the largest confession in Ukraine, present in all the regions of the country and having a colossal peacemaking potential, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill notes. The attempts to draw it into political confrontation are inadmissible and may lead to irreversible consequences. The messages emphasize that the adoption of the bills Nos. 4128 and 4511 'will threaten the constitutional rights of millions of Ukrainian believers, generate a wave of violence and new capture of churches and aggravate the civic conflict in Ukraine by moving it to the religious domain.' As a result, it will make the Minsk Agreement ever more difficult to implement, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill believes.

'For the last two years, the far-right radical elements in Ukraine have forcibly seized over 40 churches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church,' His Holiness continues, 'The pretext for such captures was furnished by the so-called 'referendum' of the people of a settlement who make the decision to 'move' the community. The opinion of the actual founders and members of a community as a legal entity is not considered in such cases.'

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill sent letters to the heads of the Normandy Four states, as well as to the Primates of the Local Orthodox Churches, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, the UN Secretary-General and the WCC General Secretary, calling upon them to exert every effort to prevent the adoption of the discriminatory bills Nos. 4128 and 4511, which 'threatens to become a glaring example of the violation of human right to religious freedom.'

*DECR Communication Service*

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