



## **Ukrainian hierarchs and religious leaders comment on anti-church bills to be considered by Supreme Rada**

Bills No. 4128 and 4511 to be considered in the Supreme Rada on May 18, 2017, are viewed by representatives of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church and other religious leaders in Ukraine as well as secular experts as discriminatory and aimed against the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

In various dioceses of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, signatures are being collected under appeals to the Supreme Rada deputies to vote against the proposed bills.

Metropolitan Antony of Borispol and Brovary made comments explaining the discriminatory nature of the bills: 'These bills have provoked a strong response and assessment among many religious organizations in Ukraine. Indeed, if adopted, any confession in our country will be very easily deprived of any of its property'. He also pointed out that the bills contradict the legislative norms existing in Ukraine and, according to sociological surveys, have scarcely any considerable public support, whereas 52 signatures were collected against the bills for one day in the Odessa dioceses alone. "Ordinary people have clearly shown that they are against the 'anti-church', 'illegitimate' and 'anti-popular' laws. We hope that elected representatives of the people are aware of this and will not go against the will of their constituency".

Metropolitan Luka of Zaporozhe and Melitipol in his appeal to his flock said that these laws, if adopted, threaten to ruin church life and the age-long church administrative order. 'Bill 4128 proposes to define one's belonging to a religious community on the basis of one's 'self-identification'. In other words, anyone who once entered your church can claim to be its permanent parishioner. Together with the likes of him, they can without ceremony, on legal grounds drive you out of your church. Such actions represent a raid capture. Who of you will agree to being driven out of the church you have attended all your life?'

Bill 4511, in its turn, introduces a special status for Churches whose governing bodies are located in the country recognized by the Rada as 'aggressor-state'. As His Eminence Luka stressed, it 'gives a right not to the Supreme Church Authority but rather to representatives of civic authorities – often non-believers and ones who are hostile to our Church – to appoint clergy'. 'Are you ready to have your priest removed because some bureaucrat does not like him?' he asks the faithful.

Metropolitan Luka asked his flock to hold a fast from May 14 to 18 and assume the devotional feat of reading an agreed special prayer rule.

“Some ‘servants of the people’ by their actions seek to plunge not only our Church but also our Motherland Ukraine into the abyss of inter-confessional war. Unfortunately, we know from the history of countries in which such a war arose that it is much more terrible than a non-religious war’, the ruling bishop of the Zaporozhe diocese stated.

“Those who wish to implement these anti-church bills do not build and did not build churches and monasteries. Their task is to stir up enmity and hatred, to sow seeds of discord, pursuing man-hating policy according to linguistic, religious and cultural affiliation. But we always pray for our God-saved country, for her authorities and wish that the Lord may bring them to reason”, stressed Metropolitan Agafangel of Odessa and Izmail on May 14 in his homily after the Divine Liturgy at the Cathedral of the Dormition.

Addressing the congregation, the hierarch expressed the opinion that by such actions ‘the enemies of the Holy Church seek, in the spirit of past theomachist totalitarianism, to deprive the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, recognized by the Universal Orthodoxy, of her legitimate rights and freedoms by putting under full state control the life of the Church beginning from the appointment of metropolitans and bishops to interfering in the established life of every parish community’.

He stated that these bills grossly violate Article 35 of the Ukrainian Constitution and contradict all the laws on freedom of conscience and religion, thus trumping upon the fundamental European values, so much spoken about today, and will serve to destroy the civic and inter-confessional peace, accord and stability in Ukrainian society.

‘Therefore, I call upon all of you, first of all, to intensify your prayers for the defense of the Holy Church and for bringing the unreasonable to reason – those who intend to pursue their own momentary political ambitions against their own people – which may result in the people’s confrontation and, God forbid, the blood of brothers will be shed again. Clueless politicians should remember that the Orthodox would by all means defend their faith despite the forthcoming persecution and terrible trials, because God is with us’, the message states.

Over 52 thousand signatures were collected against these bills on May 14 in the Odessa Region alone.

The fact that the present actions of representatives of the state leadership reminds of the atheistic persecution to which the Soviet power subjected the Church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is stated by Archbishop Ioasaf of Kirovograd and Novomirgorod. ‘Little time has passed since the godless Soviet power with all its might turned against the Church of Christ in an attempt to destroy it and drown her in her own blood, the blood of new martyrs and confessors. It seemed that all this were in the past, that lessons were

learnt and conclusions were made... But no. Again, now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in an independent law-governed European state, in a situation of declared rights and freedoms and the equality of all before law, the enemy of the human race searches for ways and means to struggle with the Church. Some clueless deputies, who belong to certain confessions, who are hostile to our holy Church, bring in not only confusion and discord between Christians but also encroach upon what is held as the most sacred for our people – the Orthodox Church, in an attempt to enslave her by creating a ground for discord and bloody interreligious wars in the state’, the archbishop states in his appeal.

He called all to raise their voices in defense of the Church: ‘We will not be afraid as we have the example in the lives of the saints who openly and fearlessly confessed the name of God and stood firmly for the faith of their parents and the historical Church of our people’.

The ruling bishop of the diocese of Voznesensk came out with an appeal to the people’s representatives to stand against the anti-church laws to be adopted by the Supreme Rada. Bishop Alexiy of Voznesensk and Pervomaisk reminded the congregation at the St. Barbara church in Pervomaisk that ‘our representatives... wish to adopt laws whereby everything should belong to the state, that the authorities may appoint bishops and priests. Tomorrow strangers may come to our church and say that this church belongs to them’. The archpastor gave his blessing upon the collection of signatures under an appeal to Ukrainian people’s deputies until May 18 and called his flock to pray and hold a fast.

Speaking about the actions of those who initiated the bills, His Eminence Alexiy stressed, ‘They want to destroy the church structure so that the Church may be governed not by His Beatitude Metropolitan of Kiev, nor the Holy Synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, but bureaucrats. If they like a person, he will be the pastor, if not he will not be such’.

Bishop Nafanail of Volyn and Lutsk issued an appeal to the flock too, stating, ‘It is difficult to believe but today, in the democratic Ukrainian society, which aspires for the implementation of European values and freedoms, there are new persecutions against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – the legal successor of the old Metropolis of Kiev. The Ukrainian Supreme Rada, which should work for the benefit of the citizens regardless of their religious affiliation, tries to adopt laws which will work against the largest Ukrainian Church’. He also called upon the faithful, ‘through love, prayer and faith to rise against hatred’, to defend their constitutional rights and tell society ‘the truth about the fact that the Church is not a political institution but the Body of Christ’.

Bill No. 4128 met with a negative response of the Supreme Rada’s council of scientists and experts. Among those who are against it is a number of major religious organizations in Ukraine. Severe criticism against it was expressed earlier by representatives of other Christian confessions in the country.

Thus, already in 2016, Bishop Stanslav of the Roman Catholic diocese of Kharkov and Zaporozhe said this about Bill No. 4128: ‘... Everything has been done to help the Kiev Patriarchate to take possession of the Moscow Patriarchate parishes. A corruption scheme is being built to allow parishes move freely to the Kiev Patriarchate... It is not good; it is unfair! Right is the one who is stronger – it is not a Christian way. It is the same raiding!’

Concerning Bill No. 4511, he noted that ‘The Church is – of Christ; she is free; there should be no special statuses for her’. ‘Why should a cage with a special status be created for the Church? Who needs this law on a special status?! It is humiliation for the Church and, generally speaking, it speaks very badly of Ukraine. It does not testify to the democratic nature of the state and rationalism’, the Catholic prelate believes.

Igor Rudzik, secretary of the Ukrainian Lutheran Church, leveled strong criticism against the notion of ‘self-identification’ as to one’s affiliation to a community proposed by Bill No. 4128: ‘The bill proposes that the belonging of a person to a particular religious community should be established through self-identification with this religious community. But this contradicts our statute! Moreover it states that the self-identification is to be confirmed by one’s participation in the religious life of a community. But ‘religious life’ is also a very vague notion. Is it only one’s participation in divine service or one’s indispensable involvement in other spheres of the life of a community?’ He also noted that the decision on a change in the subordination of a religious community (the move of a community to a different religious organization) made by a simple majority is an interference in the internal affairs of a religious organization: ‘According to our internal laws, at least two thirds of the community members should be present at the meeting. For this reason, we view this bill as interference in our internal church affairs’.

Yevgeny Ziskind, executive secretary of the Association of Jewish Religious Organizations in Ukraine, and member of the presidium of the Jewish Confederation in Ukraine, joins the criticism of the bills: ‘Bill No. 4128 appeals to such a notion as ‘self-identification’, though no clear explanation is given at all to what is meant by it. For instance, in the Jewish tradition it is not enough for one to be only personally interested and determined. What is needed is also a number of rites and customs to be observed. The doors of our temples are always open and to each, but it does not mean at all that all those who come to a synagogue can be called members of our religious community, much less make decisions on its fate. So, this bill opens a way for raiding, capture of church facilities and lands only on the basis of the fact of ‘self-identification’.

The annual report of the Supreme Rada Commissioner for Human Rights states that Bill No. 4511 contradicts the Ukrainian Constitution, Ukraine’s international commitments and the religious legislation of the country.

