Appeal made in Russian Council for Human Rights to international human rights organization to come out in defence of the faithful of Ukrainian Orthodox Church



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On March 13, members of the Standing Commission for International Cooperation in the Area of Human Rights under the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights appealed to international human rights and humanitarian organizations ‘to impede the lawlessness of the Ukrainian authorities and prevent the abolition of one of the Russian Orthodoxy’s major shrines, the oldest monastery of Rus’ - the Kiev Lavra of the Caves’.

The appeal was caused by the action of the National Preserve ‘Kievo-Pecherskaya Lavra’ when its leaders demanded of the monks of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that they should leave the Lavra until 29th of March 2023. The reason for this decision was reported to lie in alleged violations of the contract on the free use of the monastery complex. However, the preserve has failed to cite concrete instances of such violations in its public documents.

‘Through centuries the Kiev Lavra of the Caves has been not only a spiritual sanctuary for millions of the faithful but also a symbol of the unity of the three fraternal Orthodox peoples: Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians’, reads the appeal made by the Council for Human Rights. Russian human rights advocates recalled that the Kiev Monastery of the Caves was founded in the 11th century by monks Anthony and Theodosius who are ranked among the saints in the Russian Orthodox Church. Lying in rest in the territory of the complex are the relics of over 100 ascetics venerated in the Russian Church. Among them are the honourable remains of Ilya Muromets, the hero of the Russian epic, and monks Nestor the Chronicler, who is believed to be the author of the first Russian written chronicle ‘The Tale of Bygone Years’.

‘It is clear that the persecutions against the Lavra’s monks are only a part of the process for abolishing the largest religious organization in Ukraine - the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and for depriving millions of her parishioners of the opportunity to communicate with God in their own church’, the appeal stresses.

As is noted in the document, this process began in December 2022, when the National Security Defence Council (NSDC) of Ukraine charged the government of introducing to the Supreme Rada a bill ‘on the impossibility for religious organizations affiliated with influence centres in the Russian Federation to work in Ukraine’. In addition, the State Service for Ethno-politics and Freedom of Conscience was charged with carrying out a ‘religious research expertise’ of the Statute on the Administration of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with regard to the existence of ecclesio-canonical relations with the Moscow Patriarchate’, and as appropriate, ‘to use measures stipulated by law’.

The authors of the appeal point out that the Ukrainian authorities ‘observe with cynical indifference how local heads of various regions of the country have connived at the capture of churches’ of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by extremists and national-radical activists and locally put a ban on the work of her parishes. ‘And now they have come to the banishment of the UOC clergy and monks from their main shrine - the Kiev Monastery of the Caves, a monastery with an almost millennium-long history’, stressed the members of the HRC Standing Commission for International Cooperation in the Area of Human Rights.

They also recalled that His Holiness Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, appealed to general secretaries of the UN and the OSCE Antonio Guterres and Helga Maria Schmid, Pope Francis of Rome and other international organizations and religious leaders ‘to exert every effort to prevent the coercive closure of the monastery as it will lead to the violation of millions of the Ukrainian believers’ rights to the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Ukrainian Constitution, as well as such documents as the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration on the Elimination of All

Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, and many other acts of international importance'.

'We call upon all the international human rights organizations to come out in defence of the faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and to prevent the banishment of the faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Kiev Lavra of Caves', stressed the human rights advocates on their part, 'We hope that the spiritual leaders of various religious confessions will not disregard this kind of threat in Ukraine and will do all that is possible to ensure that the right of the UOC parishioners to free confession in their own monastery will remain inviolable'.

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