



Bishop Irinej of Bačka: In Ukraine, the authorities feel they have the right to declare the Ukrainian Orthodox Church an enemy



DECR Communication Service, 09.05.2023. In [an interview](#) from April 2023, given to the host of the television programme *Relativizacija Ljiljana Smailovic*, a hierarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Bishop Irinej of Bačka, touched in particular on the persecution suffered by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the role of state authorities in this persecution and the schismatic structure "OCU", which was created several years ago. The following is a translation of an excerpt from the interview.

- How closely are you following what is happening in Ukraine now? For example, the abbot of the Lavra was arrested...

- Unfortunately, I have been following this for a long time, for many years. And especially now I am following all the tragic and, I would say, shameful events that are taking place there these days.

I am aware that there is no such thing as guilt lying entirely on one side and not in the slightest degree on the other, as is usually imagined. The blame is always shared between all the parties involved in a process. But when the imbalance is enormous, as it is now, it causes particular sadness and grief in people's souls and, I confess, also in mine.

Namely, whatever the problems between Ukraine and Russia or, to take a broader view, between the collective West and Russia, when Ukraine is just the territory of this conflict and war - no matter what, no one has the moral right to involve the Church, and not just the Church, but any religious community whatsoever.

We know how many examples there are now and have always been of wars between Muslim countries. Who can say that Islam in those countries is to blame for their wars? They even violate the principles of Islam when they fight to settle their differences and mutual claims by wars, and not by other means. Or when countries belonging to, say, the world of Western Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant, are at war with one another - they, too, sometimes happen to be at odds with one another ...

It has never before occurred to anyone to attempt to divide the Church or to make decisions about its fate, organisation and structure on the grounds that its confession is held by the majority of the population of each of the countries which are parties to the armed conflict. This is, in fact, what is unfortunately happening in Ukraine, where the authorities have seen themselves entitled to declare the Church, in addition to Russia, their enemy, and more precisely the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which has an autonomous status and is almost completely independent of the Moscow Patriarchate, with which, at the same time, it is in a normal state of communion and unity, as with all the other Churches, including our Serbian Orthodox Church.

At the same time, the Ukrainian authorities support a schismatic, totally illegitimate and non-existent "church" by imposing it on the population of the country and trying to turn it, as I recently said, into a state church and a kind of inquisitorial structure, which carries out trials, arrests and generally behaves in a way that is completely unbecoming of the Church. The Church cannot resort to any kind of violence, cannot take churches and monasteries by force, cannot insult people or arrest clergy.

It is unacceptable to arrest the vicar of a monastery and the abbot of some 250 monks, that is, one of the largest monastic fraternities in the world in general, whose only fault is that he is not willing to speak in the language of hatred. There is not a single monastery or spiritual centre which preaches war and which does not advocate peace, dialogue and compassionate love for all those who suffer, whatever they may be. We cannot, like some politicians, say: "We are for this side - say the Ukrainian side - and for us there is no sacrifice, no suffering, no moaning on the other side". Nor can we say the opposite. But we believe that justice in this war is - entirely or almost entirely - on Russia's side, because Russia did not seek the war; the war was desired and imposed by the West. This opinion, as far as I can see, is the prevailing one in the Orthodox world. It is, dare I say, my most sincere opinion.

But can we, on the basis of such a view, say: "Well, let the Ukrainians suffer: what they sought, they got"? First of all, they did not seek it themselves, but it was decided for them, on their behalf. As it is [sometimes] the case with us. We know how many times in our old and new history, in different centres, decisions were

made on our behalf and we, not the people who actually made the decisions, had to deal with the consequences.

This is how I understand the situation as a whole and I consider the aforementioned attitude towards the Church to be absolutely unacceptable. It is an attack on the very heart of Russian Orthodoxy in the broadest sense of the word, which we can feel with particular clarity from our own history. Ukraine is still a new term, and as a construction it is new from every point of view: as a national identity it is a very young phenomenon, and as a state it had never existed before Lenin. The real founder of Ukraine is Lenin. Nothing can be done. It is impossible to change it.

It is the same with us. Before Tito there was no Montenegrin nation and no corresponding state; our poet Bečković said of this: "I am older than Montenegro". We can draw many parallels between the fate that befell us after the dissolution of Yugoslavia or its - whatever word we want to use for it - collapse, and the fate of our great mighty brethren in the east after the dissolution or the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this particular historical and value context, I would say that if anyone can, if anyone should understand the tragedy that is happening now, it is us. Because we went through all this ourselves, albeit on a somewhat smaller scale and in a slightly different way.

- President Zelensky said that priests who are found in their homes or churches with materials that challenge the existence of Ukraine or indicate that they maintain contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church will now be prosecuted, all of which will be treated as grounds for criminal proceedings.

- I know all this and so do you. But how is it possible? After all, first of all, the vast majority of believers in Ukraine are Ukrainians, not Russians, and did not come there from nowhere, but have lived there since long ago. It was there that both the first Russian state and the Russian Church as a separately organised structure were created. What Kosovo and Metohija and the shrines we have there are to us, Kiev is to the whole Russian world.

The Russian world is a term that everyone interprets in their own way, some in a positive sense, others in a negative one; but it is a fact that we are talking about a kind of organic whole that has divided over time into three branches that until relatively recently were not seen as completely separate and even less so as enemy nations and states. And I personally believe that the processes in Ukraine are not spontaneous but have been very skilfully unleashed.

- Who played a major role in this?

- The entire collective West: some more, some less. I would not like to go into this now, because it would take at least five hours to have a thorough conversation on the subject. However, I have reasons to think so, because since my youth I have been interested in issues of history related to the Russian Church. In my youth, living for ten years in Greece, I always did my narrow theological research until noon, and when I was tired - in the afternoon and evening - I studied literature in Russian, which was not then available there in

Russia, where its discussion was then a verbal offence, and reading it was persecuted, as it is now in Ukraine.

- A new law is being prepared in Ukraine, it has not yet been written.

- This law is a complete lawlessness. I remember incidents from my former life when I was the editor of *The Orthodox Missionary*, our popular youth magazine. At the border, at the entrance from Greece to us, then in Yugoslavia, various customs officials - semi-literate people, unfortunately - as soon as they noticed an icon or the sign of the cross on the cover, they tried to take it away to prevent the importation of these books. I used to carry both political books and books from the Serbian emigration with me: if they were taken away, they were taken away; if they passed, they passed. It was such a time. Literally all of us church people had to break the lawless regulations which forbade us to read what we wanted. And so, it used to happen, this customs officer, who, of course, could not read Greek, would ask: "What kind of books are these?" - I translated to him what kind of books they were, and he saw that they were all church theological books, and he made a list based on my testimony, and wanted to take all these books away from me. So I know from my own life experience what it means to have totalitarian regimes and the Church that is not free. They have no moral right to forbid anyone to read anything... Whoever wants to feel Russian, let him feel Russian, whoever wants to feel Ukrainian, let him feel Ukrainian.

I would like to add that from personal contacts I have surely noticed that everyone speaks Russian in Ukraine. Some people speak Ukrainian, of course, but they learned it only later. For example, President Zelensky's native language is Russian, but he learned Ukrainian later. Many friends from those lands, including Ukraine, have told me this.

- Have you ever been to Kiev, to the Lavra?

- I have been there more than once. The first time was back in the days of the Soviet Union, at the celebration of the 1000th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus'. Because, as far as I know, "Rus'" was the original name of the state while Kiev was the capital, and the other principalities - Moscow, Vladimir-Suzdal - were still in their infancy. The whole country was called "Rus'", hence the expression "Holy Rus'". The name "Russia" was introduced later by Peter the Great. I was there and, of course, there was no animosity and no problems, and we all treated one another kindly.

- Would you mind explaining what is unique about Lavra and the caves - what is actually being taken away there now?

- Imagine, say, that someone comes now to take the Peć Patriarchate away from us - it would be about the same. Here, in the Peć Patriarchate, are the relics of our saints, here is the historical centuries-old pulpit of our Church. And now someone will come and say: "It has nothing to do with you. You do not exist."

The Lavra is a great huge monastery, which is the historical seat of the Kiev metropolitans, a widely celebrated place of exploitation, prayer, fasting and virtuous life. What developed there was a special feat,

rare even on the scale of the whole Orthodox Church - the so-called hermitage. Secluded monks lived isolated in their cells on the territory of the monastery, spending all their life in fasting and prayer. God had glorified many of them by the fact that their bodies are not subject to decay. A delegation of our Church, headed by the late Patriarch Pavle, once visited the caves of the monastery and I myself had the opportunity to be part of that delegation. We, though we were younger then, were tired and not all of us went to the end, but Patriarch went through those catacombs from beginning to end and bowed down before every reliquary with relics of the holy ascetics of Kiev-Pechersk. There are hundreds of incorrupt bodies there. Of course, it is a very touching experience. You follow those underground corridors with only a candle in your hands; sometimes you can see some light from the lamps, which burn where the relics of saints rest. And you marvel at this real miracle. Of course, for those who do not believe, there is no miracle, but for those who do believe, a miracle is everything, even the most ordinary things.

Lavra is truly the centre of Eastern Slavic Orthodoxy, if we want to avoid the notion of Russianness, of the Russian world. It is no less of a shrine to the inhabitants of Ukraine themselves, as it is to all those who for centuries lived in that common state, when there was no idea of any separate Ukraine yet. From the point of view of history, "Ukraine" is the same as "Krajina", the linguistic equivalent of "border region".

In terms of purely profane morality, I would liken shooting oneself in the foot to striking a shrine - it cannot be justified on the basis of any earthly idea: whether just or unjust, ideologically correct or not.

The Church is simply the Church; the Church is not at war, cannot be at war and certainly should not be at war. In this context there is a direct persecution of the Church which is no milder than it was during the worst years of the Soviet period when there were only two open church buildings in the whole of Ukraine in which services of God were celebrated: one in Kiev, and not in the city, but in the cemetery, and one in Odessa. Everything else was closed, destroyed, and desecrated. In the most holy part of the Altar, there was usually a café for the KGB, or something similar, and sometimes even worse, the details of which we will not go into now. But all this has been overcome, restored with great effort and sacrifice. And these people, who are now being persecuted, have revived it all and brought it to a marvellous condition. How neat it is! What lawns! What flower beds! - I have not seen such a thing in any of our monasteries, except perhaps in one of our women's convents.

- And when you said that the current changes in Ukraine were not spontaneous but introduced from the outside, under foreign influence, were you referring to the autocephaly of the "Orthodox Church of Ukraine" in 2018?

- Yes, of course, hers too.

- I would like to ask you another specific question. The European Union has set up an official website designed to combat Kremlin disinformation, which denies and calls conspiracy theory the notion that this autocephaly has anything to do with the West. But let's try to explain a couple of the facts at hand. As soon as the first news of the granting of autocephaly emerged, the first institution to send congratulations on the occasion was the American embassy in Kiev, and soon

afterwards CIA Deputy Director Jack Devine received a prestigious award from Filaret for his contribution to the fight for Ukrainian independence and autocephaly. And now the European Union website is claiming that these facts, on which the "conspiracy theory" is based, have nothing to do with each other.

- As for the "objectivity" and "truthfulness" of the various information centres in the West, including the European Union, we have the same experience. We do not need the Ukrainian experience, we have our own - for example, how aggression, or intervention, or the campaign they have conducted with us - whatever word they call it now - is presented in the West to this day.

But this is not the only issue. Unfortunately, our Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople has managed to get involved in the processes in Ukraine by ensuring his cooperation with them in the affairs surrounding this ill-fated illegitimate church. We will not now go into an explanation of motives and reasons. Meanwhile, I would note that it is not hidden from the public, that this whole affair is being organized not by people of the Church, but by representatives of the political world. The Patriarch received Poroshenko in Constantinople several times. Why should he discuss church matters with Poroshenko, who is not even now aware of what faith he belongs to, and who at different times managed to visit churches of all the denominations in Ukraine: both canonical and non-canonical, as well as Greek-Catholic, etc.

The second thing I would like to point out. High-ranking American and other Western functionaries kept making official statements - I have counted a dozen of them myself - in which they directly interfere in the internal life of the Church, which they have no right to do under any law, either their own or anyone else's, let alone any moral law.

And the same old Denisenko, now 95 years old but still in business, later withdrew from participation in the aforementioned [enterprise], again got his own grouping and no longer recognises what is now called the "Orthodox Church of Ukraine". So, no divisions have been healed. Everything remains as it was, and has become even worse. An even greater chasm of hatred has been created between brethren seduced by madness. And in that sense I would call an absolute lie, propaganda - call it what you like - that no one was involved from the outside, but it was all some spontaneous development on the ground.

- They write as if those facts have nothing to do with each other.

- Unfortunately, there is a very close connection between the two.

- About a year ago, the European Parliament passed a resolution accusing the Serbian Orthodox Church of spreading foreign state propaganda, i.e. propaganda of Russia as the defender of traditional family values. The European Parliament is not one of the most powerful institutions of the collective West, as you call it, but it seems to me that this resolution was just the tip of the iceberg, and the Serbian Orthodox Church was featured in all the CIA analyses that are not available to us now. Do you feel that you are an actor in this war of Churches and how do you view the accusations of spreading foreign state propaganda?

- We are not in the business of spreading anyone's propaganda, including even the propaganda of our own state, let alone a foreign one. Our position on the spectrum of issues at hand is solely ours, and if this fact is not to someone's liking, it is not our problem. For example, the fact of persecution and suffering of the canonical Church in Ukraine has been mentioned by us in some of our public speeches, by our Patriarch, by myself and by other bishops. A friend sent me a text from a news agency in German which says that the Serbian Church takes the same position on this issue as Moscow. So it is forbidden to agree with Moscow on anything? If that is their "democracy" - let them, but it is not binding for us.

You are considered to be the official speaker of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Tell us, what is its official position?

- Everything I have said is our position. It is not our practice to have two positions: private and official; our position is always the same. We advocate that neither the Church itself, nor its individual representatives interfere in political issues. And we have individuals trying to point out and interfere in matters of which we are not sufficiently aware or on which we have no right to influence. Not, of course, because the Church is not interested in anything. It is interested in life in general and the salvation of people, but we cannot do what politicians or the military can. We have our own value system which determines what we can and cannot do. There have been historical exceptions - in very difficult times - when some Church dignitary (I do not know if that is the right word) has had to take some kind of social responsibility because there was no one else. For example, in modern times, in the 20th century, Archbishop Makarius became the president of Cyprus at the will of the people. With us, for example, Negosh, by virtue of circumstances, was a secular ruler and, at the same time, Primate of the Church. In Montenegro, by virtue of exceptional historical circumstances, for about three centuries the Bishops were at the same time Princes of Montenegro. These were exceptions, but the phenomenon as a whole was totally alien to our ministry. And, of course, the moral values that we preach, as well as everything that we adhere to, certainly do not please the European Parliament or many others in the West.