A number of hierarchs of Local Orthodox Churches announced the creation of an international human rights association



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The international human rights association "The Church against xenophobia and religious discrimination" was established by a number of hierarchs and clergymen of Local Orthodox Churches together with the non-governmental organisations "Public Advocacy", "VSI Zmogaus teisiu apsauga" and "European institute for religion and law" which all have a consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

The corresponding agreement was signed on 19 December 2023, according to a press release issued by the Geneva Press Club.

The creation of a new human rights association was a response to violations of the rights of believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

The coordinating council of the new human rights association included: Metropolitan Theodosius of Cherkassy and Kanev (Ukrainian Orthodox Church); Metropolitan Jonathan of Tulchyn and Bratslav (Ukrainian Orthodox Church); Metropolitan Timothy of Bostra (Orthodox Church of Jerusalem); Archbishop Theodosius of Sebastia (Orthodox Church of Jerusalem); Metropolitan Mark of Berlin and Germany (Russian Orthodox Church Abroad); Metropolitan Gabriel of Lovech (Bulgarian Orthodox Church); Archpriest Demetrius Sidor, rector of the Holy Cross Cathedral in Uzhgorod (Ukrainian

Orthodox Church).

According to the press release, "religious leaders and human rights activists called on the Ukrainian authorities and President Zelensky to stop violations of the rights of the UOC believers and addressed the UN special mandate holders, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the UN Human Rights Council with statements about the facts of violations of the rights of this organization".

As is known, UN representatives have already repeatedly drawn attention to the critical situation and violations of the rights of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Thus, on the 24th of March 2023, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report on freedom of religion in Ukraine for the period fr om the 1st of August 2022 to the 31st of January 2023, wh ere one of the sections, which deals with freedom of religion, talks about discrimination against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In particular, it mentions legislative initiatives aimed at its prohibition, searches in monasteries and other church buildings, interrogation of clergymen, declaring them suspects, etc. The "Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, 1 August 2022 – 31 January 2023" mentions discrimination against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

In the report "Review of the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine" for the period from the 1st of February to the 30th of April 2023, the UN Office for Human Rights recorded an upsurge in the use of "hate speech" and violence against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, bans on its activities by a number of regional and local authorities, termination of lease agreements for churches, persecution of clergy. A concern was expressed that "the cumulative impact of government actions directed against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church may be discriminatory".

In addition, on the 17th of November 2023, the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights and Head, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Ilze Brands Kehris made critical comments on the adoption in the first reading of draft bill 8371 by the Verkhovna Rada .

According to the participants of the International Human Rights Association "The Church against Xenophobia and Religious Discrimination", the existing response remains insufficient.

In particular, they were particularly concerned about criminal cases against Metropolitan Theodosius of Cherkassy and Kanev, Metropolitan Jonathan of Tulchyn and Bratslav, Metropolitan Pavel of Vyshgorod and Chernobyl, Metropolitan Longin of Banchensk, and the use of such measures as detention and house arrest against them. At the same time, Metropolitan Jonathan has already been sentenced by the court of first instance to a heavy punishment - imprisonment for five years. "Having conducted a legal examination of the charges brought against these religious leaders, as well as the materials of criminal cases, we have come to the conclusion that those criminal cases and charges are not justified and testify to organised discrimination against the UOC. In essence, the listed criminal cases are an example of a persecution for freedom of speech and for the protection of believers of the UOC, as well as for the expression of religious beliefs based on church canons and doctrine," stressed the press release. It is noted that at the same time the state authorities refuse to prosecute the persons who publicly called to seize the churches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and commit other acts of violence against the believers of this organization, which "is a vivid evidence of double standards of justice and confirms the existence of a political order to deprive the rights of believers of the UOC, which has actually become a victim religious structure in Ukraine".

Touching upon the topic of the session of the court of appeal on the case of Metropolitan Jonathan of Tulchyn and Bratslav sentenced to imprisonment scheduled for 22 January 2024, members of the

human rights association "The Church against xenophobia and religious discrimination" stated that there is a high risk of a political order for an unfair conviction in this case. "In case this happens, in our opinion, the Ukrainian government will show its complete inability to fulfil its international obligations to respect human rights in the sphere of religion".

The human rights activists also keep in focus the ongoing consideration of the criminal case on charges against Metropolitan Theodosius of Cherkassy and Kanev for allegedly using by him the rhetoric of hostility towards representatives of another religious organizations. "IIt should be taken into account that on October 9, 2023, Metropolitan Theodosius spoke before the UNHRC during the discussions over the report of the UN High Commissioner on Ukraine during the 53rd session of the UN Human Rights Council. In his address, as the head of the Cherkassy and Kanev diocese of the UOC, he spoke about the mass seizure of churches in his diocese and other violations of human rights. Now the Ukrainian authorities are persistently demanding to change his measure of restraint from house arrest to detention, which, in our opinion, is persecution of a UN human rights activist for his legitimate international activities in protecting human rights," states the press release.

Another area of special attention is the situation with the bill No. 8371, adopted in the first reading, which provides for a complete ban and legal liquidation of all legal entities that are part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. According to human rights activists, "this law unprecedentedly violates the norms of international law and is an example of open discrimination against millions of UOC believers on religious grounds". If it gets adopted, the believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church will be completely deprived of their churches, land plots and prayer premises, as well as the opportunity to practice their faith in the communities they have created.

In addition, mass acts of violence against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are continuing in Ukraine: churches are seized by force, believers are beaten with the inaction and sometimes direct involvement of the police, the authorities take decisions to confiscate land plots from religious organisations and initiate lawsuits to take away churches from the UOC which had previously been given to it as restitution.

Human rights activists expressed hope for a caring reaction from representatives of the international community and the free press, who can provide "practical assistance in protecting human rights and reducing injustice and arbitrariness throughout the world."

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