



Statement by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church concerning the bill adopted by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine with the aim of liquidating the Ukrainian Orthodox Church



DECR Communication Service, 22/08/2024

*On 22nd August 2024, members of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church held a remote meeting to approve **the text of the statement published below** (Minutes No. 102).*

On 20th August 2024, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine passed in the second reading the Bill “On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Sphere of Activity of Religious Organizations” that allows, through judicial proceedings, to ban activities of any religious community in the territory of Ukraine if it is “affiliated” with a religious organization in Russia. For the court to give such a ruling, conclusions of a “religious expertise” will suffice, which amid the ongoing witch hunt may and will be falsified.

Those who initiated and endorsed this bill in Ukraine – highest-ranking public officials, the Verkhovna Rada deputies, radical politicians and public figures, representatives of schismatic organisations and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church – do not conceal that the law directly targets the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, that it is aimed at liquidating it and all its communities or at forcibly transferring them to other religious organizations. Hundreds of monasteries, thousands of communities and millions of Orthodox Christians in Ukraine will find themselves outside the legal framework and lose their property and places of worship.

During 2014-2023, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church pointed out on many occasions that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church came under pressure which was undoubtedly part of the government anti-religious policy. The adoption of the law today indicates powerlessness of the regime that throughout its political existence has been systematically, step by step trying to weaken, split and destroy the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church repeatedly appealed to the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe organizations, as well as to the leaders of the world religious communities, bearing witness to the persecutions against believers in Ukraine. While the violations of the rights of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church members were acknowledged by many experts and human rights organizations in the West, it has not prevented the adoption of the bill which shatters the very idea of the freedom of conscience and fundamental human rights.

For many years, the policy of persecution against the Church has been carried out against a backdrop of the slanderous anti-church campaign in the Ukrainian mass media aimed at defaming the canonical Orthodoxy, as well as instigating and justifying mass seizures of churches called “voluntary transfers.” The seizures are orchestrated by the schism proponents and radical nationalists with support from the local authorities, security services and law enforcement bodies, and usually entail violence, including mass beatings of the clergy and the faithful. Attempts are being made, and some have succeeded, to seize the largest monasteries of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and forcibly evict their coenobites.

The Ukrainian security services continue to put outright pressure on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, its episcopate and clergy. Apart from threats and blackmail, the pressure has manifested itself in dozens of trumped-up criminal cases and unlawful verdicts on political grounds. Many archpastors and pastors of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have been arrested, taken into custody or received unjust sentences.

In a number of Ukrainian regions and localities, local authorities have imposed a downright “ban” on the activities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, forcibly closing its churches, hindering celebration of divine services and illegally confiscating plots of land with its monasteries and churches built on them.

Having failed in its attempts to weaken the canonical Church in Ukraine or undermine its unity, the local government has taken a step towards its outright ban.

In its scale and centralised nature, this measure can surpass all former historical repressions against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, including persecutions at the time of the Greek Catholic Union of Brest, and is commensurable to such sorrowful historical precedents as Nero's and Diocletian's persecutions in the Roman Empire, the so-called dechristianization of France during the 18th-century French Revolution, atheistic repressions in the Soviet Union and destruction of the Albanian Orthodox Church under Enver Hoxha's regime in the 1960s.

The adopted bill is incompatible with the rule of law principles; it is a political declaration aimed at legalizing the destruction of the religious community of the majority of the population. The law lays down criteria enabling to determine a group of people connected by their affiliation with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and carry out targeted political repressions against them.

It embitters us to note the negative role of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and the hierarchs who hold the same views. Through their unilateral and hasty actions inconsistent with the spirit of the sacred canons, they have only exacerbated the church schism in Ukraine, having failed to heal it. The leaders of the schismatics recognized by the Phanar have been particularly rampant in demanding the adoption of the law that practically bans the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. And Patriarch Bartholomew, who earlier publicly expressed approval for the criminal prosecution against and arrests of the UOC hierarchs and clergymen, now, like high priests Annas and Caiaphas, has openly supported the government's actions aimed at crucifying and destroying the canonical Church in Ukraine. Therefore, the Patriarch of Constantinople is personally responsible for orchestrating the persecutions against the faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

We firmly believe that *the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church of Christ* (Mt 16:18), just like in the past the most severe persecutions had failed to do so, and that the Orthodox Christians in Ukraine will confront these new ordeals with fortitude and steadfastness and *in all these things will be more than conquerors through Jesus who loved us* (Rom 8:37). We call upon the plenitude of the world Orthodoxy to pray ever more fervently for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church which is abiding in afflictions *on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus* (Rev 1:9).

We appeal to international human rights organizations to give an immediate and unbiased response to the flagrant oppression of the faithful in Ukraine.