

# The Nation-State Policies and New Challenges for the Orthodox Church in Ukraine

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## *Abstract*

After the Ukrainian Parliament adopted Law 3894-IX in August 2024—legislation that effectively paves the way for banning the legal operation of structural units of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC)—it became evident that the Ukrainian authorities are pursuing the removal of the UOC from the country's religious landscape. This article examines the key factors leading to the adoption of this law, with particular attention to the developments following the Maidan Revolution of 2014. Aligning with broader nation-state policies, Ukrainian authorities increasingly sought to marginalize the UOC, perceiving it as a 'non-patriotic' institution incompatible with the vision of a sovereign national church. These efforts intensified after the UOC declined to participate in the Poroshenko-led initiative to create a 'united' and 'independent' Orthodox Church, which culminated in the establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in December 2018. Nonetheless, it was the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 that became the most decisive catalyst for state actions against the UOC—despite the Church's clear and consistent support for Ukraine and its Armed Forces. The ensuing developments have only deepened the fractures within Ukraine's Orthodox community, exacerbating inter-Orthodox divisions and complicating prospects for religious reconciliation in the country.

**Keywords:** Ukrainian Orthodox Church; Russia-Ukraine war; nation-state policies.

## **Introduction**

On 20 August 2024, the Ukrainian Parliament (*Verkhovna Rada*) adopted Law No. 3894-IX,<sup>1</sup> which created the legal conditions for banning the structural units of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC).<sup>2</sup> As the largest religious denomination

<sup>1</sup> The full text of this Law can be found here (in Ukrainian): <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3894-20#Text>

<sup>2</sup> As of 1 January 2024, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) had 10,586 parishes, compared to 8,075 parishes in the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), according to data from the DESS—the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience (<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1vcq1ulAaH8jEOY6HcJyq0GTmDo3SEW6F/edit?gid=1651907408#gid=1651907408>). In terms of clergy, as of 2022 the UOC had 9,111 priests (including monastics), while the OCU had 3,842 (<https://dess.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Zvit-pro-merezhu-relihiynykh-orhanizatsiy-Form1-2022.xlsx>). Unfortunately, DESS has not published updated figures on the number of priests since 2022. Notably, even in



in Ukraine, the UOC has played a central role in the country's spiritual, cultural, and social life for decades. The adoption of this law marks a significant shift in Ukraine's religious policy and reflects broader changes in the relationship between the state, religion, and national identity in the post-Euromaidan period.

This development did not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it represents the culmination of a series of political and legislative measures pursued by Ukrainian authorities following the 2014 Euromaidan revolution. In the years that followed, state support for the transfer of UOC parishes to other Orthodox jurisdictions, the promotion of the newly formed Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), and attempts to compel the UOC to alter its official name all signalled growing efforts to reduce the Church's public presence and institutional legitimacy. These measures were further intensified after the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war in 2022, when the UOC's perceived historical ties to the Moscow Patriarchate became a focal point of controversy and political scrutiny, despite its formal declaration of independence from Moscow.

The war significantly accelerated the authorities' efforts to marginalize the UOC. Amid heightened nationalist sentiment and concerns about internal security, the Church was increasingly portrayed as a potential conduit of Russian influence, leading to growing societal distrust and political pressure. Accusations of collaborationism, local bans on UOC activity,<sup>3</sup> and the confiscation of church property created a hostile environment that ultimately culminated in national legislative action.

This article examines the principal factors that contributed to the decision of the Ukrainian authorities to adopt Law No. 3894-IX in August 2024, thereby enabling the legal proscription of the structural units of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. It traces the evolution of the UOC's institutional status and shifting public perceptions of the Church over the past decade, beginning in the aftermath of the 2014 Euromaidan revolution. The analysis situates these developments within the broader transformation of Ukraine's nation-building paradigm, marked by the ascendancy of nation-state policies that emphasize cultural and ideological homogeneity over pluralism. These policies have progressively supplanted state-nation frameworks that were more accommodating of religious, linguistic, and regional diversity.

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the 2022 report, the agency chose not to provide separate statistics on monks and nuns, as it had done in earlier years. This omission appears deliberate and may have been intended to obscure the very low number of monastics in the OCU. The number of monks and nuns has long been regarded as a key indicator of a church's spiritual vitality and institutional maturity, as monastic communities traditionally serve as centres of theological education, ascetic discipline, and the continuity of religious tradition. By withholding such data, DESS may have sought to avoid drawing attention to the OCU's comparatively weak monastic presence, which would stand in sharp contrast to the much larger and more established monastic network of the UOC.

<sup>3</sup> In certain regions of Ukraine all parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have been shut down. Clergy have been compelled to hold services clandestinely in private residences, evoking parallels with the suppression of religion during Stalin era.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative, multi-source approach that combines discourse analysis of legislative texts and governmental communications, analysis of Ukrainian media narratives, and a review of sociological survey data concerning public attitudes toward religious institutions. The article's principal contribution lies in demonstrating how the 2024 proscription of the UOC represents not merely a legal or "security" measure (as often claimed by proponents of the legislation), but a pivotal moment in the redefinition of Ukrainian national identity. By linking the Church's marginalization to the consolidation of a post-Maidan civic nationalism that increasingly privileges a singular cultural-ideological vision, this article advances scholarly understanding of how statecraft and religion interact under conditions of war and geopolitical realignment. In doing so, it offers a framework for analysing similar church-state realignments in other post-imperial or conflict-affected societies.

### Nation-state policies and the Ukrainian Orthodoxy

Religion is an important element of national identity<sup>4</sup> and, moreover, religious affiliation is "one of the main sources shaping people's identities." Religious identities can be politicized in order to mobilize support for political and religious purposes, and they can also be securitized.<sup>5</sup> The securitization of religion has become an increasingly salient issue in Central and Eastern Europe, reflecting the complex interplay between religious institutions, state authorities, and broader societal anxieties. In the post-communist context, religious identities and institutions have often been mobilized in political discourse, with governments and non-state actors framing certain religious groups or practices as potential threats to national security or political stability. This process of securitization is particularly pronounced in states grappling with ethno-religious diversity, historical legacies of inter-confessional conflict, and ongoing debates over the role of religion in public life. Some scholars (e.g. Máté-Tóth, Povedák, Triandafyllidou, Yelenskyi, and others) have noted that such framing not only influences policy and law enforcement strategies but also reshapes public perceptions of religious communities, potentially exacerbating social divisions and legitimizing restrictive or exceptional measures.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Sergei Mudrov, *Christian Churches in European Integration* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Alam Saleh and Hendrik Kraetzschmar, "Politicized Identities, Securitized Politics: Sunni-Shi'a Politics in Egypt," *Middle East Journal* 69, no. 4 (2015): 559.

<sup>6</sup> András Máté-Tóth and Kinga Povedák, *Religion as Securitization in Central and Eastern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2025); Anna Triandafyllidou, "Religion and Nationalism Revisited: Insights from Southeastern and Central Eastern Europe," *Ethnicities* 24, no. 2 (2023): 203–218; Viktor Yelenskyi, "'Then What Are We Fighting For': Securitizing Religion in the Ukrainian–Russian Conflict," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 41, no. 6 (2021), art. 2.



In some cases, the securitizing discourse “simultaneously ties the state to ethnicity/nationhood and ethnicity/nationhood to religion.”<sup>7</sup> Consequently, a group that feels its identity is under threat may resort to various means, including force, to defend it. Further complexities may arise from the imposition of certain identity parameters (such as religious affiliation, language, or interpretations of history) that are not accepted by particular segments of society.<sup>8</sup> This is consistent with the theoretical model of nation-state policies developed by Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, who argue that such policies presuppose “various forms of social pressure and coercion” aimed at assimilating populations into a nation-state identity and preventing “the emergence of alternative cultural identities,” or eroding them where they exist. This approach stands in contrast to “state-nation” policies, which seek to respect and protect “multiple but complementary sociocultural identities.”<sup>9</sup>

Our theoretical proposition is that state-nation policies did not acquire sufficient support among the Ukrainian ruling elites. On the contrary, through the dominance of nation-state policies, successive Ukrainian governments reinforced nationalist identity, while the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was depicted as alien. This contributed to the alienation of a substantial portion of the Ukrainian population—mainly those who did not support nationalist ideas as the building blocks of a new (or revised) national identity. These developments revealed the potential transformation of growing identity tensions into long-lasting and deep ethno-national and ethno-religious divides. In this respect, one may draw a typological parallel with Stuart Croft’s depiction of the “Muslim other” in the United Kingdom, subdivided into (1) a minority “radical” other and (2) a majority “mainstream” other, with the former rejected and the latter accepted.<sup>10</sup> In the Ukrainian case, the clergy and faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church were portrayed as “aliens” (a radical other) who had to be marginalized and eventually replaced by a more “patriotic” Church acceptable to the ruling political elites and their domestic and foreign policies, which were shaped by a nationalist agenda. Denys Shestopalets argues that Ukraine witnessed the emergence of a form of “religious nationalism,” driven in part by religious organizations—most notably the Kyiv Patriarchate—that positioned themselves in opposition to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.<sup>11</sup> The ideological foundations of this nationalism are articulated in the work of several scholars (e.g. Pavlo Artymyshyn, Oksana

<sup>7</sup> Rebekah Tromble, “Securitising Islam, Securitising Ethnicity: The Discourse of Uzbek Radicalism in Kyrgyzstan,” *East European Politics* 30, no. 4 (2014): 529.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Cram, “Identity and European Integration: Diversity as a Source of Integration,” *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 1 (2009): 109–128.

<sup>9</sup> Alfred Stepan, Juan J. Linz, and Yogendra Yadav, “The Rise of ‘State-Nations,’” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (2010): 53.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Croft, *Securitizing Islam: Identity and the Search for Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Denys Shestopalets, “Church and State in Ukraine after the Euromaidan: President Poroshenko’s Discourse on Religion, 2014–2018,” *Politics and Religion* 13, no. 1 (2020): 150–179.

Lytvynchuk, Lena Surzhko-Harned, and others), who contend that the UOC functioned as a vehicle for disseminating narratives perceived as detrimental to Ukrainian national identity, territorial integrity, historical memory, and, more broadly, to the recognition of Ukraine as a sovereign state.<sup>12</sup>

The split in Ukrainian Orthodoxy, which later enabled the authorities to provide preferential support to particular jurisdictions, occurred before Ukraine became an independent state in 1991. In 1990, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) obtained official registration, while some parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate (MP) chose to join the UAOC. In some cases, MP church buildings were taken by force. In October 1990, at the request of the bishops of the Ukrainian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), the ROC Bishops' Council abolished the Exarchate and granted the Ukrainian Orthodox Church a higher status, with independence in its governance, including the right to elect its own head. According to the Patriarchal Gramota issued by Patriarch Alexiy II to Metropolitan Filaret of Kyiv and All Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was granted "independence and self-governance in its administration."<sup>13</sup> This autonomy included the right to elect its primate without the involvement of the Moscow Patriarchate, to appoint its episcopate independently of Moscow, and to exercise financial self-sufficiency.

In May 1992, the Bishops' Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church exercised this authority by electing a new primate, Metropolitan Vladimir (Sabodan). At the same time, Metropolitan Filaret (Denisenko), who had been dismissed from his position, chose to unite with the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church in order to establish a new ecclesiastical structure known as the Kyiv Patriarchate (KP). However, this "union" proved short-lived: by 1993, the UAOC had withdrawn from the KP and resumed its activity as a separate and independent Church body.<sup>14</sup> From 1993 onward, three major Orthodox jurisdictions coexisted in Ukraine:

<sup>12</sup> Pavlo Artymyshyn, "The Activity of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate as Part of the Russian 'Soft Power' Strategy in Ukraine: From Hybridity to War," *Scientific Yearbook: History of Religions in Ukraine* 1, no. 34 (2024): 221–238; Lena Surzhko-Harned, "Russian World and Ukrainian Autocephaly: Religious Narratives in Anti-Colonial Nationalism of Ukraine," *Religions* 13, no. 4 (2022): 349; Oksana Lytvynchuk, Andrii Shevchuk, and Zoriana Hrytsyshena, "Hybrid War: The Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Ukrainian Media," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 45, no. 6 (2025): 21–44.

<sup>13</sup> Московская Патриархия, "Грамота Алексия II, Божию милостию Патриарха Московского и всея Руси, митрополиту Киевскому и всея Украины Филарету" [Patriarchal Gramota of Alexiy II, by the mercy of God, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, to Metropolitan Filaret of Kyiv and All Ukraine], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://old.mospat.ru/archive/page/sobors/1990-2/540.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Valentin Sprinchak, "История церковных юрисдикций на Украине" [The History of Church Jurisdictions in Ukraine], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://tass.ru/info/5665207>.



1. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC; sometimes referred to as UOC-MP), recognized by all other Orthodox Churches as the only canonical Church in Ukraine.
2. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), not recognized by world Orthodoxy.
3. The Kyiv Patriarchate (KP), likewise unrecognized internationally but fully supported by the Ukrainian state.

The schism within Ukrainian Orthodoxy, amplified by political support from the authorities in Kyiv for the KP and the UAOC, laid the groundwork for the gradual erosion of inter-Orthodox relations. In the context of Ukraine's evolving national identity and sovereignty, this governmental backing contributed to portraying the UOC as "non-patriotic" and "Moscow-controlled." By contrast, the KP and the UAOC were increasingly depicted as "patriotic," "nationally oriented," and "independent," in line with the state's efforts to assert political autonomy and cultural distinctiveness. This ideological framing not only deepened ecclesiastical divisions but also intertwined religious affiliation with notions of national loyalty, thereby further complicating inter-Orthodox relations and shaping public perceptions of religious institutions in Ukraine.<sup>15</sup>

### **An Autocephalic Movement and the Ukrainian Orthodoxy**

Since the early years of Ukrainian independence, state authorities have generally exhibited a favourable attitude toward the idea of ecclesiastical autocephaly, although the degree and form of such support have varied across different administrations. The first President of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk (1991–1994), played a pivotal role in the early fragmentation of Ukrainian Orthodoxy. In 1992, he openly supported Metropolitan Filaret (Denisenko), who proclaimed the establishment of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC KP), a body that remained unrecognized by the canonical Orthodox Churches worldwide. In 1993, Kravchuk dispatched his deputy prime minister, Zhilinskyi, to Istanbul to engage in dialogue with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos regarding the possibility of the KP's recognition. At that time, however, Bartholomeos maintained that any resolution of the Ukrainian ecclesiastical issue could only be achieved through cooperation with the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>16</sup>

Under the subsequent presidency of Leonid Kuchma (1994–2004), state policy on church affairs adopted a comparatively balanced and pragmatic approach, though a gradual shift toward favouring autocephaly became evident

<sup>15</sup> Konstantin Skorkin, "The New Church Politics of Ukraine," accessed October 10, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2018/12/the-new-church-politics-of-ukraine>.

<sup>16</sup> Andrei Vlasov, "От Кравчука до Порошенка: первому проекту ЕПЦ уже 25 лет" [From Kravchuk to Poroshenko: the first Single Local Church project is already 25 years old], accessed October 10, 2025, <http://spzh.news/ru/istorija-i-kulytrua/53699-ot-kravchuka-do-poroshenko-pervomu-projektu-jepc-uzhe-25-let>.

over time. According to Yelenskyi (2018), Kuchma's changing attitude was driven partly by personal and symbolic considerations rather than purely political calculation.<sup>17</sup> Reportedly, the president expressed dissatisfaction during an official visit to Jerusalem, where he observed that his counterparts from Russia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia were each accompanied by the primates of their respective national Churches, while Ukraine lacked such a representative. Toward the end of his presidency, Kuchma is said to have regretted his inability to secure autocephalous status for the Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

The idea of autocephaly reached a new level of political prioritization under President Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010), for whom it became closely associated with a broader nation-building agenda. Seeking to strengthen ties with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Yushchenko extended an official invitation to Patriarch Bartholomeos to attend the 1020th anniversary celebrations of the Baptism of Rus' in Kyiv in 2008. During the Patriarch's visit, Yushchenko personally requested the granting of autocephaly for the Ukrainian Church; however, Bartholomeos's response remained non-committal. Some reports suggest that the Patriarch was willing to recognize the non-canonical Ukrainian Churches as part of his jurisdiction by reinstating the historical Kyiv Metropolia under Constantinople's supervision. This proposal was rejected by Filaret, who sought full ecclesiastical independence rather than subordination.<sup>18</sup> Thus, by 2008, the Ecumenical Patriarchate demonstrated a reluctance to intervene directly in Ukrainian ecclesiastical affairs—a position that would shift markedly a decade later.

During the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich (2010–2014), support for autocephaly effectively disappeared from the official political agenda. Yanukovich's administration maintained closer relations with the Moscow Patriarchate, aligning religious policy with a broader political and economic rapprochement with Russia. However, this orientation changed dramatically following Yanukovich's ouster in 2014 and the subsequent election of a new, post-Maidan Parliament and President. The Verkhovna Rada, elected amid a surge of national mobilization and anti-Russian sentiment, reaffirmed its unified and explicit support for the pursuit of autocephaly.

<sup>17</sup> Viktor Yelenskyi, "Українським дипломатам і спецслужбам слідует беречь Вселенського Патріарха" [Ukrainian diplomats and intelligence services should protect the Ecumenical Patriarch], accessed October 10, 2025, [https://censor.net.ua/resonance/3062278/viktor\\_elen-skiyi\\_ukrainskim\\_diplomatam\\_i\\_spetsslujbam\\_sleduet\\_berech\\_vselenskogo\\_patriarha\\_poskolku](https://censor.net.ua/resonance/3062278/viktor_elen-skiyi_ukrainskim_diplomatam_i_spetsslujbam_sleduet_berech_vselenskogo_patriarha_poskolku).

<sup>18</sup> Sergei Mudrov, "The Confrontation, Intimidation and New Divisions? A Controversial Path to the Creation of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, no. 54 (2019): 62–78; Sergei Mudrov, "The Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church: A New Dividing Line for Ukraine?" *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 27, nos. 2–3 (2019): 271–277.



## Euromaidan as a Turning Point

The ousting of President Yanukovich, elected in 2010, and the success of the Maidan protests in February 2014 marked a turning point in Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy. During these events, the KP and the UAOC, together with the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, expressed clear support for the protesters through both public declarations and concrete actions. According to Zhou, the KP actively participated in the Revolution of Dignity. For instance, St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery provided logistical support to the protesters and medical assistance to the injured. Zhou argues that this involvement reflected the KP's position, characterized by "a Ukrainian nationalist, anti-Russian, and pro-Western stance," which was later "inherited by the OCU."<sup>19</sup>

For the UOC, the situation was more delicate, as its faithful were divided between those who supported the protests and those who opposed the change of power and the rise of nationalist sentiments. Following the victory of the Maidan movement, the post-Maidan authorities created a less favorable environment for the UOC's development than had existed prior to 2014. These policies increasingly reflected the ideological views of Ukraine's post-Maidan elites, particularly their aspiration to establish a "fully independent" and internationally recognized Orthodox Church. In pursuit of this goal, the central authorities in Kyiv launched a campaign to create what they framed as a "truly national" Church—often disregarding the perspectives of religious organizations, which stressed the importance of adhering to ecclesiastical rather than political procedures in Church affairs.

In 2016, the Ukrainian Parliament formally appealed to the Ecumenical Patriarch, requesting the convening of an "All-Ukrainian Unification Council to resolve all contentious issues and to unify Ukrainian Orthodoxy," along with the issuance of a Tomos of Autocephaly for the Orthodox Church in Ukraine.<sup>20</sup> This initiative signalled a growing readiness on the part of secular authorities to intervene in Church matters, despite lacking the necessary ecclesiastical competence. A series of negotiations involving Ukrainian government officials, representatives of the UAOC, the Kyiv Patriarchate, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate followed in 2016–2017. However, these discussions largely took place behind closed doors, with minimal transparency or public disclosure.

Nearly two years later, in April 2018, President Petro Poroshenko (elected in 2014) sent a formal two-page letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch, again requesting the issuance of a Tomos of Autocephaly for the Orthodox Church in Ukraine. Speaking in his capacity as head of state representing all citizens, including those

<sup>19</sup> You Zhou, "Eastern Orthodox Churches and Nation-State Building in Eurasia: A Case Study Based on Fieldwork in Ukraine and Belarus," in *Risks, Resilience and Interdependency*, ed. G. Yang, J. Zhang, X. Xiong, and L. Liu (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 151–178.

<sup>20</sup> Верховна Рада України, "Постанова № 1422-VIII" [Resolution of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine No. 1422-VIII], accessed October 10, 2025, <http://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1422-19>.

of the Orthodox faith, Poroshenko referred to Bartholomeos as “the only person in the world” with the authority to resolve such ecclesiastical matters. His appeal emphasized the principles of individual freedom, citizens’ rights, and national sovereignty. Poroshenko argued that the Tomos would further enhance religious freedom, promote inter-confessional peace, and strengthen the civil liberties of Ukrainian citizens. Additionally, he stated that the granting of autocephaly would complete the consolidation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and independence “in the spiritual dimension.”<sup>21</sup>

The President’s request received swift political support. On 18 April 2018, a parliamentary resolution in support of Poroshenko’s appeal was registered; the very next day, it was added to the legislative agenda and passed with a strong majority: 268 Members of Parliament voted in favor, and only 36 opposed. Nearly all parliamentary factions supported the pro-autocephaly motion, with opposition primarily coming from the “Opposition Bloc.” In the explanatory note to this resolution, MPs pointed to what they regarded as the political role of the Moscow Patriarchate, stating that it “more and more often has the nature of propaganda for the annexation of Crimea and support for the armed invasion of Russia in the east of our state.”<sup>22</sup> The parliamentarians also noted growing public support for autocephaly, as indicated “in a recent sociological poll.”<sup>23</sup> The declared objective of the resolution was predominantly political: to hasten “the change of status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and to establish its independence from the aggressor state.”<sup>24</sup>

The actions taken by the President and Parliament in April underscored a significant consensus among post-Maidan political elites in their pursuit of autocephaly for the Orthodox Church. To reinforce the religious legitimacy of this political alliance, the President’s request included the signatures of bishops

<sup>21</sup> Petro Poroshenko, “Звернення” [Appeal], accessed October 10, 2025, <http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc34?id=&pf3511=63879&pf35401=453073>.

<sup>22</sup> Armed conflict has been ongoing in eastern Ukraine since 2014, involving pro-Russian separatist forces in the Donbas region and the Ukrainian army, which has also received support from nationalist paramilitary units. From the outset, the authorities in Kyiv have maintained that the insurgents in Donbas are backed by Russia.

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, according to the “Rating” sociological service, the proportion of respondents who were “fully positive” about autocephaly increased by 10 percentage points, rising from 21% in May 2017 to 31% in May 2018. At the same time, polarization intensified: the share of those who were “fully negative” nearly doubled, from 9% to 17%. It is important to note that these surveys excluded residents of Crimea and of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions not controlled by Kyiv. Significant regional differences in attitudes toward autocephaly were evident: 35% of respondents in western Ukraine viewed the creation of a unified local Orthodox Church “fully positively,” compared with only 5% in the east (see <https://www.religion.in.ua/news/vazhlivo/37134-sociologi-ukrayinci-vse-bilshe-sxilyayutsya-do-stvorenniya-pomisnoyi-cerkvi.html>).

<sup>24</sup> Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy, “Проект Постанови № 2410-VIII” [Draft Resolution No. 2410-VIII], accessed October 10, 2025, [http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4\\_1?pf3511=63879](http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=63879).



from the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.<sup>25</sup> In principle, the 2018 autocephalic movement could have reflected a state-nation policy—provided it had secured the support of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. However, the absence of such support fundamentally altered the nature of the process.

From the outset, the UOC refrained from endorsing the autocephalic initiative. Following the adoption of the parliamentary resolution, the UOC's press service characterized the appeals by state authorities to Patriarch Bartholomeos requesting autocephaly as an "abuse of authority" and "interference in Church affairs."<sup>26</sup> Only a handful of UOC priests publicly supported the move toward autocephaly, which is particularly significant given that the UOC was the Church with the largest number of Orthodox faithful in Ukraine. This created a unique and unprecedented situation in both Ukrainian and global Orthodoxy: minority Orthodox groups, heavily backed by state authorities, sought autocephaly, while the majority Church consistently opposed it. By contrast, the nineteenth-century movements that led to the establishment of the Romanian, Bulgarian, and Serbian autocephalous Churches did not experience such paradoxical divisions.<sup>27</sup> Those earlier autocephalies were achieved amid broad unity between clergy and laity—a stark contrast to the fragmented context of twenty-first-century Ukraine.

The granting of autocephaly by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which took place despite opposition from Ukraine's largest Orthodox Church, was viewed by some observers as an imposition from above and as evidence of a politically motivated process. However, this interpretation is not universally shared: some scholars and church figures regard the move as a legitimate step toward ecclesiastical independence and the resolution of a long-standing division within Ukrainian Orthodoxy.<sup>28</sup> Given the strong opposition from the UOC, the move toward autocephaly appeared to align more closely with nation-building policies of the state than with a state-nation approach that seeks to balance national identity with inclusive civic unity. Consequently, the UOC found itself on a path of trial for maintaining its nonconformist position.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ukrinform, "Порошенко принял от иерархов УПЦ КП и УАПЦ обращение к Варфоломею" [Poroshenko received from the hierarchs of the UOC-KP and UAOC an appeal to Bartholomeos], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-society/2444446-poroshenko-prinal-ot-ierarhov-upc-kp-i-uapc-obrasenie-k-varfolomeu.html>.

<sup>26</sup> *Strana.ua*, "Решили тесно общаться" ["They decided to communicate closely"], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://strana.ua/news/137287-kak-ponimat-otvet-varfolomeja-ukraine-po-avtokefalii->.

<sup>27</sup> Theodor Damian, "The Autocephaly of the Romanian Orthodox Church: 125 Years since Its Acknowledgement," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 31, no. 3 (2011): 36–40.

<sup>28</sup> Vladimir Kara-Murza, "Украинская автокефалия: кто против?" [Ukrainian Autocephaly: Who Is Against?], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29482330.html>.

<sup>29</sup> The November 2018 Bishops' Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church almost unanimously declined to take part in the autocephalous process and the "uniting Church council" actively promoted by President Poroshenko.

In fact, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church became the target of unprecedented intimidation campaigns soon after the Maidan forces came to power in 2014. While Ukrainian mass media have traditionally shown little sympathy toward the UOC,<sup>30</sup> the intensity of this antipathy has varied over time. The first notable surge of hostility against the UOC emerged in the early 1990s, during the formative years of the non-canonical Churches and the Greek Catholic Church as they established new structures in Ukraine. However, even in the 1990s—the beginning of the post-Soviet ordeal for the UOC—“there was no such amount of lies against the Church as we have observed now.”<sup>31</sup>

Since 2014, developments surrounding the Ukrainian Orthodox Church can be interpreted through the lens of what Stuart Croft conceptualizes as the construction of the “other,” or even the “radical other.”<sup>32</sup> Public discourse and media narratives increasingly portrayed the UOC as an entity fundamentally alien to the Ukrainian nation. Accusations directed at the Church grew progressively more severe, frequently employing rhetoric that bordered on, or constituted, hate speech. The UOC was often characterized as a “fifth column” within Ukraine—an institution allegedly acting contrary to the interests of the state and the Ukrainian people. While some scholars have argued that Ukrainian mass media reported on the UOC “without inciting enmity,”<sup>33</sup> empirical evidence suggests otherwise. A 2023 media monitoring study conducted by the Kyiv-based Institute of Mass Information found that over 82% of media reports about the UOC “carry a negative emotional colouring.”<sup>34</sup>

Beyond media attacks, pressure from state authorities also intensified. The first legislative acts aimed at obstructing the activities of the UOC were adopted between late 2018 and early 2019 (Laws No. 2662-VIII<sup>35</sup> and 2673-VIII,<sup>36</sup> related

<sup>30</sup> Archbishop Kliment Vecheria, head of the Information Department of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, interview by author, Kyiv, May 8, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Metropolitan Antonyi, “Агрессия сегодня действительно происходит. И её очень много. В нас с вами” [Aggression Is Indeed Taking Place Today, and There Is a Great Deal of It within Us], accessed October 10, 2025, <http://pravlife.org/content/mitropolit-antonyi-agressiya-segodnya-deystvitelno-proishodit-i-ee-ochen-mnogo-v-nas-s-vami>.

<sup>32</sup> Croft, *Securitizing Islam*.

<sup>33</sup> Nataliia Zhelihovska and Artur Gmyria, “Adherence to Journalistic Standards in Coverage of Religious Issues in Ukrainian and Italian Media,” *Current Issues of Mass Communication* 33 (2023): 60–70.

<sup>34</sup> Institute of Mass Information (IMI), “Понад 82% текстів про УПЦ МП мають негативне емоційне забарвлення – моніторинг ІМІ” [Over 82% of media reports about the UOC-MP carry a negative emotional colouring—IMI monitoring], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://imi.org.ua/news/ponad-82-tekstiv-pro-upts-mp-mayut-negatyvne-emotsijne-zabarvlennya-monitoring-imi-i52197>.

<sup>35</sup> Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, “Law No. 2662-VIII,” accessed October 10, 2025, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2662-19>.

<sup>36</sup> Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, “Law No. 2673-VIII,” accessed October 10, 2025, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2673-19>.



to the naming of religious organizations and jurisdictional transfers). Law No. 2662-VIII was contested in court, but in December 2022 the Constitutional Court of Ukraine ruled that it complies with the Constitution, thereby confirming its legality. The outbreak of the full-scale war in February 2022 precipitated profound transformations within Ukraine's religious landscape, creating new opportunities for actors advocating the marginalization or removal of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. These actors capitalized on the wartime context to advance their objectives, irrespective of the Church's official position on the Russia–Ukraine conflict.

### The UOC and the War

The Russia–Ukraine war has exerted a profound influence on the evolution of Ukrainian statehood and national identity. The conflict has accelerated a decisive shift away from Russian cultural, symbolic, and institutional influence, reinforcing processes of de-Russification across multiple spheres of public life.<sup>37</sup> National self-awareness has become increasingly pronounced, accompanied by a marked rise in negative perceptions of Russia and, to a lesser extent, Belarus.<sup>38</sup> Parallel to these developments, public support for the Ukrainian language has strengthened, reflecting its growing role as a core marker of national identity, while narratives of collective and historical memory have undergone a gradual but discernible transformation.<sup>39</sup> These broader identity-driven changes have coincided with a decline in public support for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which has frequently been accused—often without conclusive evidence—of engaging in “unpatriotic” activities.

However, claims portraying the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as “unpatriotic” must be critically reassessed in light of the Church's publicly articulated positions following the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war. From the outset of the conflict, the leadership of the UOC consistently condemned the military actions undertaken by the Russian state and explicitly affirmed its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. These statements, issued through official channels and public addresses, demonstrate that the Church has actively sought to distance itself from any association with the Russian invasion, challenging narratives that depict it as aligned with foreign interests. While perceptions of the

<sup>37</sup> Olga Marukhovska-Kartunova, Vitalii Turenko, Olena Zarutska, Liubov Spivak, and Renata Vynnychuk, “Analysis of Modern Socio-Cultural Processes in Ukraine and Their Impact on the National Identity and Resilience Growth of Ukrainians in the Conditions of War,” *Kurdish Studies* 12, no. 2 (2024): 2780–2790.

<sup>38</sup> Mykhailo Stepyko, “Transformations of Ukrainian Citizens' Identities in the Time of Russian Aggression,” *Strategic Panorama*, no. 2 (2023): 76–84.

<sup>39</sup> Liudmyla Krymets, Oleksandr Saienko, Oleh Nedvyha, Olesya Tserkovnyak-Horodets'ka, and Natalia Logvinenko, “The Formation of Ukrainian National Identity in the Context of Russian Aggression: A Philosophical and Psychological Analysis,” *International Journal on Culture, History, and Religion* 7, suppl. 1 (2025): 518–536.

UOC's political stance have been shaped by broader tensions within Ukrainian society and the ongoing contestation between competing Orthodox jurisdictions, the documented positions of its leadership indicate a clear engagement with national concerns rather than a rejection of Ukrainian statehood. Consequently, accusations portraying the UOC as inherently "unpatriotic," as well as claims noted by Irina Bogachevskaya that the head of the UOC, Metropolitan Onufriy, "in no way" articulated "his civic position" on the war, appear to lack a substantive evidentiary basis.<sup>40</sup>

On the very first day of Moscow's so-called "special military operation," 24 February 2022, Metropolitan Onufriy, head of the UOC, described the situation as a "tragedy," stating that "Russia began military operations against Ukraine." He clearly articulated the Church's position, emphasizing that the UOC had "consistently defended the integrity and sovereignty of our country." Metropolitan Onufriy further highlighted the spiritual and historical ties between Russians and Ukrainians, noting that both peoples emerged from "the same baptismal font in the Kyiv Dnieper," and thus that war between them amounted to the "sin of Cain's murder." In his address, the Primate of the UOC appealed directly to the President of Russia to end the war.<sup>41</sup>

In subsequent statements, Metropolitan Onufriy reinforced his anti-war stance. On 4 March, following a prayer service for peace in Ukraine, he reiterated that "Russian troops are fighting against Ukraine" and again called on President Putin to cease hostilities.<sup>42</sup> Six days later, he emphasized the urgent need to "provide real humanitarian corridors" for the evacuation of civilians.<sup>43</sup> On 8 May, in a direct appeal to Putin, he requested "to provide an opportunity for everyone

<sup>40</sup> Lilia Rzhetskaia, "Избирательность или закон: как Онуфрия лишили гражданства" [Selectivity or the Law: How Onufriy Was Stripped of His Citizenship], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/ru/izbiratelnost-ili-zakon-kak-mitropolita-onufria-lisili-grazhdanstva/a-73162475>.

<sup>41</sup> Church.ua, "ВІДЕО. Звернення Блаженнішого Митрополита Онуфрія до української пастви" [Video: Address of His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufriy to the Ukrainian Flock], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://news.church.ua/2022/02/24/video-zvernennya-blazhenishogo-mitropolita-onufriya-ukrajinskoji-pastvi/>.

<sup>42</sup> Pravoslavye.org.ua, "Слово Блаженнейшего Митрополита Онуфрия после молебна за установление мира в Украине (видео)" [The Word of His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufriy after the Prayer Service for the Establishment of Peace in Ukraine (video)], accessed October 10, 2025, <http://pravoslavye.org.ua/2022/03/%d1%81%d0%bb%d0%be%d0%b2%d0%be-%d0%b1%d0%bb%d0%b0%d0%b6%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%bd%d0%b5%d0%b9%d1%88%d0%b5%d0%b3%d0%be-%d0%bc%d0%b8%d1%82%d1%80%d0%be%d0%bf%d0%be%d0%bb%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b0-%d0%be%d0%bd%d1%83/>

<sup>43</sup> Pravoslavye.org.ua, "Блаженнейший Митрополит Онуфрий: Просим спасти всех людей, оказавшихся на линии огня" [His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufriy: We Ask to Save All People Who Found Themselves on the Line of Fire], accessed October 10, 2025, <http://pravoslavye.org.ua/2022/03/%d0%b1%d0%bb%d0%b0%d0%b6%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%bd%d0%b5%d0%b9%d1%88%d0%b8%d0%b9-%d0%bc%d0%b8%d1%82%d1%80%d0%be%d0%bf%d0%be%d0%bb%d0%b8%d1%82-%d0%be%d0%bd%d1%83%d1%84%d1%80%d0%b8%d0%b9-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be-2/>



who wishes to leave the city of Mariupol—both civilians and the military.”<sup>44</sup> The UOC’s consolidated position was formally expressed in the Synod’s statement of 12 May, affirming that “the Ukrainian Orthodox Church supports and will continue to support the defenders of Ukraine and provide charitable assistance to those in need.” The Synod called on all to “strengthen prayers for Ukraine and its authorities, for our military, and for the long-suffering people,” acknowledging that “our courageous soldiers stand in defense of the statehood of Ukraine” and urging everyone to “unite for the sake of victory.”<sup>45</sup>

Thus, it would be inaccurate to assert that the UOC adopted an “unpatriotic” or “treacherous” stance. This assessment is particularly significant in light of the treatment the Church received from Ukrainian state institutions after 2014, including within the Armed Forces. Despite its declared support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity and its assistance to the military, by 2022 the UOC had been effectively excluded from the system of military chaplaincy. Nearly all chaplaincy positions in the Armed Forces of Ukraine were occupied by representatives of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, and various Protestant denominations, with only a single chaplain affiliated with the UOC. In this context, the Church’s continued expression of loyalty and support toward the state and the armed forces may be interpreted as a substantial act of goodwill—a form of institutional trust extended by the UOC to both entities.

The Russian invasion was also used as a justification to intensify pressure on the UOC from official bodies, non-governmental organizations, media outlets, and other Orthodox jurisdictions. This pressure manifested in several ways. First, misinformation about the UOC became increasingly common in the media, portraying the Church in an extremely negative light within a country at war—often depicting it as a “traitorous” entity allegedly aiding the enemy. For example, UNIAN reported that a UOC church in the Kolomyia district (Ivano-Frankivsk region) possessed “food supplies for Russian invaders,” when in fact these supplies were intended for nuns residing on the church grounds.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Pravoslavyye.org.ua, “КИЕВ. Обращение Блаженнейшего Митрополита Онуфрия к Президенту Российской Федерации В. В. Путину в связи с ситуацией вокруг города Мариуполя” [Kyiv. Address of His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufriy to the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin in Connection with the Situation around the City of Mariupol], accessed October 10, 2025, <http://pravoslavyye.org.ua/2022/05/%d0%ba%d0%b8%d0%b5%d0%b2-%d0%be%d0%b1%d1%80%d0%b0%d1%89%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%b8%d0%b5-%d0%b1%d0%bb%d0%b0%d0%b6%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%bd%d0%b5%d0%b9-%d1%88%d0%b5%d0%b3%d0%be-%d0%bc%d0%b8%d1%82%d1%80%d0%be%d0%bf-2/>

<sup>45</sup> Pravoslavyye.org.ua, “Заявление Священного Синода Украинской Православной Церкви от 12 мая 2022 года” [Statement of the Holy Synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of May 12, 2022], accessed October 10, 2025, <http://pravoslavyye.org.ua/2022/05/%d0%b7%d0%b0%d1%8f%d0%b2%d0%bb%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%b8%d0%b5-%d1%81%d0%b2%d1%8f%d1%89%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%bd%d0%be%d0%b3%d0%be-%d1%81%d0%b8%d0%bd-%d0%be%d0%b4%d0%b0-%d1%83%d0%ba%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%b8%d0%bd%d1%81/>

<sup>46</sup> SPZh, “Информация о найденном пищевом складе в храме села Ценява — фейк” [Informa-

Second, representatives of other Orthodox jurisdictions—particularly the OCU—as well as other religious communities, such as the Greek Catholics, escalated their traditionally negative rhetoric toward the UOC, further reinforcing its image as the “radical other.” In its 16 May 2022 Synod statement, the OCU explicitly accused the UOC hierarchy of “conscious and persistent work” promoting the ideas of the “Russian world,” which it claimed contributed to the war reaching Ukrainian territory. Paradoxically, by placing responsibility for the war on the hierarchs of the only universally recognized Orthodox jurisdiction in Ukraine, the OCU’s Synod asserted that “there is no canonical alternative to the unification of the Orthodox Church” except “within the OCU.”<sup>47</sup>

The OCU’s October 2022 Synod statement further intensified this hostile rhetoric, alleging that “the structures of the Moscow Patriarchate” (i.e., the UOC) played a “significant role in the full-scale Russian aggression, justifying and encouraging it.”<sup>48</sup> These claims were not only unfounded but also exacerbated divisions within Ukrainian society, particularly along religious lines. As a result of the growing negative portrayal of the UOC, public sentiment toward the Church has increasingly turned hostile. By April 2024, approximately two-thirds of Ukrainians (63%), according to relevant sociological surveys, supported a complete ban on the UOC—an increase from 54% in 2022.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, affiliation with the UOC has declined: only 5.6% of Ukrainians identified as members of the UOC in 2023, compared to 13.6% in 2020,<sup>50</sup> 12% in 2017, and 17.4% in 2014.<sup>51</sup> It should be noted, however, that the methodology of these

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tion about a food warehouse found in the church of the village of Tsenyava is fake], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://spzh.news/ru/news/86846-informacija-o-najdenom-pishhevom-sklade-v-khrame-sela-cenyava-fejk>.

<sup>47</sup> Pomisna.info, “Заява Священного Синоду Української Православної Церкви (Православної Церкви України)” [Statement of the Holy Synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Orthodox Church of Ukraine)], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.pomisna.info/uk/vsi-novyny/zayava-svyashhennogo-synodu-ukrayinskoyi-pravoslavnoyi-tserkvy-pravoslavnoyi-tserkvy-ukrayiny-3/>.

<sup>48</sup> Pomisna.info, “Заява Священного Синоду щодо проблемних питань державно-церковних відносин” [Statement of the Holy Synod on Problematic Issues of State–Church Relations], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.pomisna.info/uk/vsi-novyny/zayava-svyashhennogo-synodu-shhodo-problemnyh-pytan-derzhavno-tserkovnyh-vidnosyn/>.

<sup>49</sup> Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), “Якою має бути політика влади та довіра до Української Православної Церкви (Московського Патріархату)” [What Government Policy Should Be and the Level of Trust toward the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1404&page=1>.

<sup>50</sup> Razumkov Centre, “Ukrainian Society, State and Church in War: Church and Religious Situation in Ukraine 2023”, accessed October 10, 2025, <https://razumkov.org.ua/images/2024/02/12/2023-Religiya-ENGL.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> Razumkov Centre, “Церква, суспільство, держава у протистоянні викликам і загрозам сьогодення” [Church, Society, and State in Confronting Today’s Challenges and Threats], accessed October 10, 2025, [https://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2017\\_Religiya.pdf](https://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2017_Religiya.pdf).



surveys has been subject to criticism, and different sociological organizations have at times reported widely divergent figures regarding affiliation with specific Orthodox jurisdictions, including the UOC and the Kyiv Patriarchate.<sup>52</sup>

### The Final Step: Law 3894-IX

After February 2022, the threat of a complete ban on the UOC became a “sword of Damocles” hanging over the Church. A bill proposing such a ban was first submitted to the Verkhovna Rada in March 2022. However, its consideration was suspended after Rada Chairman Ruslan Stefanchuk stated that “during the war we have no right to adopt a single law that splits Ukrainian society,” while also emphasizing that “we will deal with everyone after the victory.” The bill’s authors justified the proposal by reiterating accusations of anti-Ukrainian activities against the UOC and by referring to what they described as a “vast reconnaissance and sabotage structure of the Russian Orthodox Church,” which allegedly “has worked and continues to work for Russian President Vladimir Putin.”<sup>53</sup> Allegations of such extensive “reconnaissance and sabotage activities” attributed to a religious institution are difficult to substantiate, although they clearly contribute to the broader narrative portraying the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as a potential threat to national security.<sup>54</sup>

The legislative process intensified in 2023: the draft law was resubmitted to Parliament in January and, by October 2023, it had passed its first reading (#8371). Crucially, in March 2024, the Parliamentary Committee introduced significant amendments. According to U.S. lawyer Robert Amsterdam, the revised version “seeks to weaponize the sanctity of religion against its own people.” Ultimately, the Ukrainian Parliament enacted this bill into law in August 2024, thereby paving the way for a total ban on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church within Kyiv-controlled territories.

It is important to note that the law does not explicitly prohibit the UOC by name; instead, it bans the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine and organizations that maintain ties with the ROC. However, the intended application of the law has been revealed through statements by its proponents, certain provisions in the text, and the actions and decisions of the authorities.

<sup>52</sup> Sergei Mudrov, “Православные церкви в Украине до и после Евромайдановской революции” [Orthodox Churches in Ukraine before and after the Euromaidan Revolution], *Zhurnal Belorusskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Sotsiologiya*, no. 2 (2020): 133–141.

<sup>53</sup> RISU.ua, “Стефанчук: Закон о запрете УПЦ МП следует принимать после победы” [Stefanchuk: The Law on the Prohibition of the UOC-MP Should Be Adopted after Victory], accessed October 10, 2025, [https://risu.ua/ru/stefanchuk-zakon-o-zaprete-upc-mp-sleduet-prinimat-posle-pobedy\\_n128658](https://risu.ua/ru/stefanchuk-zakon-o-zaprete-upc-mp-sleduet-prinimat-posle-pobedy_n128658).

<sup>54</sup> Even if there were instances in which individual UOC clergy provided information of potential value to Russia, such cases appear to have been isolated and limited in number. Indeed, incidents of treason have been documented more frequently within the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and the Armed Forces than within the UOC itself.

For example, Nikita Poturaev, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Humanitarian and Information Policy, asserted that the UOC “did not break its ties with Moscow” and “remained a part of the ROC.”<sup>55</sup> Such assessments, widely shared by supporters of the Law, appear to contradict the UOC’s institutional developments since 2022. In May 2022, the UOC Council—the highest governing body of the Church—formally severed all administrative ties with the Moscow Patriarchate and amended the UOC Statute accordingly. This decision was broadly supported by the clergy and faithful, and no subsequent actions have reversed it. Indeed, on the third anniversary of this Council in May 2025, Metropolitan Onufriy stated that the Council had “fundamentally changed the life of our Church,” affirming that since 27 May 2022 the UOC “is no longer part of the Moscow Patriarchate.” According to Metropolitan Onufriy, the Church now enjoys full independence: it “opens new dioceses, elects bishops and the primate without interference from other Local Churches, produces holy Chrism for its own needs, and establishes parishes abroad.”<sup>56</sup> It should be noted, however, that the canonical status of the UOC remains unsettled, as it has not been recognized by other Orthodox Churches as fully independent (or autocephalous).

The law also introduces a problematic mechanism for determining whether a religious organization maintains ties with the ROC by referencing documents of the Russian Church. This provision is clearly aimed at the UOC. Although the UOC removed all references in its Statute in 2022 that could be interpreted as reflecting ties to the ROC, such provisions remain in the ROC’s own Statute. The Moscow Patriarchate may consider the UOC a constituent part, but this does not mean that the UOC follows directives from Moscow.<sup>57</sup> By way of analogy, Russia considers the Ukrainian city of Kherson to be part of the Russian Federation and even depicts it as such on official maps; yet it would be unwarranted to conclude, on this basis alone, that the Kherson City Council acts under Moscow’s authority. Similarly, Law No. 3894-IX reflects the reasoning of the DESS “expert opinion,”<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Nikita Poturaev, “Никита Потураев: ‘Слуга народа’ присягала народу України, а не Московському патріархату” [Nikita Poturaev: “Servant of the People Swore Allegiance to the People of Ukraine, Not to the Moscow Patriarchate”], accessed October 10, 2025, [https://risu.ua/ru/stefanchuk-zakon-o-zaprete-upc-mp-sleduet-prinimat-posle-pobedy\\_n128658](https://risu.ua/ru/stefanchuk-zakon-o-zaprete-upc-mp-sleduet-prinimat-posle-pobedy_n128658).

<sup>56</sup> Ukrainian Orthodox Church, “Звернення Блаженнішого Митрополита Онуфрія з нагоди третьої річниці Собору УПЦ у Феофанії” [Address of His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufriy on the Occasion of the Third Anniversary of the UOC Council in Theophania], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://uoc-news.church/2025/05/20/zvernennya-blazhennishogo-mitropolita-onufriya-z-nagodi-tretoi-richnici-soboru-upc-u-feofaniji/>.

<sup>57</sup> Dmytro Vovk, quoted in Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, “the state prefers to rely more on what the ROC thinks about the UOC than on what the UOC thinks about itself,” accessed October 10, 2025, <https://khpg.org/en/1608814022>.

<sup>58</sup> The State Service of Ukraine on Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience (DESS) is a governmental body responsible for overseeing matters related to religion and religious freedom in Ukraine. In January 2023, DESS issued an expert opinion asserting that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) maintains “church-canonical connections” with the Moscow Patriarchate



which relies heavily on documents issued by the Russian Orthodox Church while ignoring the fact that the UOC has no control over the content or modification of those documents and that, following the UOC Council's decision, they have no authority over the Ukrainian Church.

Finally, the Law makes judgments that exceed its competence by asserting that the ROC “supports the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine.”<sup>59</sup> Such a claim reflects either a misunderstanding of Orthodox ecclesiology or a deliberate attempt to mislead. The governing bodies of the Russian Orthodox Church—namely, the Bishops’ Council—have never officially expressed support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.<sup>60</sup> While Patriarch Kirill has publicly endorsed the war, it is important to note that his position within Orthodoxy is not analogous to that of the Pope in Catholicism: his opinions are not binding on the entire Church and cannot be equated with its official stance. Moreover, voices within the ROC have openly dissented. For example, Metropolitan Innokentiy of Vilnius (whose diocese in Lithuania belongs to the ROC) stated, “We strongly condemn Russia’s war against Ukraine.” In addition, around 300 ROC clergy signed a petition calling for an “immediate ceasefire,” warning senior officials that “no earthly power, no doctors, no guards will protect [them] from the Last Judgment.”<sup>61</sup>

Overall, it is therefore not surprising that the Law was negatively received by other Orthodox Churches and by a number of international human rights

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and remains “a structural unit of the Russian Orthodox Church.” This conclusion, however, was based primarily on an analysis of documents and statutes originating from Moscow rather than Kyiv (see <https://dess.gov.ua/vysnovok-relihiieznavchoi-ekspertyzy-statutu-pro-upravlinnia-ukrainskoi-pravoslavnoi-tserkvy/>). Importantly, the UOC has had no ability or authority to influence or amend these Russian documents or statutes since it formally severed its administrative ties with the Moscow Patriarchate at its Council in May 2022. Consequently, DESS’s reliance on Moscow-based documentation overlooks the significant structural and canonical changes undertaken by the UOC, which assert its ecclesiastical independence from the Russian Orthodox Church. This expert opinion therefore reflects a contested interpretation that does not fully take into account the current canonical reality and self-governance claimed by the UOC.

<sup>59</sup> This is quite similar to the statement of the DESS Chairman V.Yelenskyi, who claimed in October 2023 that the “The Moscow Patriarchate is a direct participant in the aggression against Ukraine” (<https://dess.gov.ua/moskovskyy-patriarkhat-ie-bezposerednim-uchasnykom-ah-resii-proty-ukrainy-holova-dess/>).

<sup>60</sup> Polls in Ukraine show that, as of November 2023, 64.8% of respondents believed that “the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow encourage and support Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.” Only 7.8% believed that the ROC does not have a clear position on the war. (<https://razumkov.org.ua/images/2024/02/12/2023-Religiya-ENGL.pdf>).

<sup>61</sup> “Обращение священнослужителей Русской Православной Церкви с призывом к примирению и прекращению войны” [Address by Clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church Calling for Reconciliation and an End to the War], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1yOGuXjdFQ1A3BQaEEQr744cwDzmSQ1qePaaBi4z6q3w/view-form>.

organizations.<sup>62</sup> Its politically motivated character and inherent biases indicate that, rather than safeguarding religious freedom and the rights of religious organizations, the Law lays the groundwork for deeper divisions within Ukrainian society, the persecution of its largest Church, and state favouritism toward the OCU.<sup>63</sup> This outcome corresponds to the broader context in which, as Denys Shestopalets observes, the agenda of the Kyiv Patriarchate “was de facto transformed into official state ideology.”<sup>64</sup> That agenda has promoted nationalist interpretations of Ukrainian history and religious development and has frequently portrayed the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as the “Moscow Church in Ukraine,” thereby also shaping Ukraine’s international image, as reflected in reactions to the adopted legislation.

### Perspectives from Churches and International Structures

Law No. 3894-IX specifically targeted the structural units of the largest Orthodox Church in Ukraine, paving the way for the banning of its parishes, monasteries, dioceses, and educational institutions. Given the scale and significance of the Church within Ukraine’s religious landscape, the enactment of this legislation inevitably attracted attention beyond national borders. The law’s implications for religious freedom and institutional autonomy rendered it a matter of concern for the wider Orthodox world. In addition, international organizations and human rights bodies monitoring the intersection of law, religion, and civil liberties were likely to interpret the legislation as having potential repercussions for Ukraine’s obligations under both domestic constitutional norms and international human rights frameworks.

The responses from various Orthodox Churches to the law were predominantly critical, highlighting its dangerous implications and potential consequences. The Russian Orthodox Church was the first to react at the level of its Holy Synod. In a statement issued on 22 August 2024, just two days after the law’s adoption, the ROC Synod condemned the legislation as undermining “the very concept of freedom of conscience and fundamental human rights.” It warned that the law could pave the way for severe persecution of the UOC, drawing historical parallels with some of the gravest episodes in Christian history: “the Roman Empire under Nero and Diocletian, the dechristianization of France during the eighteenth-century revolution, the atheist repressions of the Soviet Union, and the destruction of the Albanian Orthodox Church under Enver Hoxha in the 1960s.”<sup>65</sup> The following

<sup>62</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Ukraine: New Law Raises Religious Freedom Concerns,” October 30, 2024, accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/30/ukraine-new-law-raises-religious-freedom-concerns>.

<sup>63</sup> Dmytro Vovk, “Between National Security and Spiritual Liberation: Ukrainian State Policies toward the Ukrainian Orthodox Church,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 67, nos. 1–2 (2025): 13–30.

<sup>64</sup> Shestopalets, *Church and State in Ukraine*.

<sup>65</sup> Patriarchia.ru, “Заявление Священного Синода Русской Православной Церкви в связи с принятием Верховной Радой Украины законопроекта, направленного на ликвидацию



day, 23 August, Patriarch Porfirije of Serbia expressed solidarity with the UOC in a letter to Metropolitan Onufriy. Comparing the attempt to ban the UOC to the persecution of the Serbian Orthodox Church by the Ustasha regime in Croatia, he warned that outlawing the UOC would legitimize arrests and persecutions of clergy and faithful, as well as facilitate further confiscation of church property. Porfirije cautioned that Ukrainian society appeared to be regressing to an era reminiscent of the Roman Empire's persecution of the Church.<sup>66</sup>

On 24 August 2024, Patriarch John X of Antioch sent a letter to Metropolitan Onufriy condemning Law No. 3894-IX and expressing support for the UOC. He emphasized that the ban amounted to “a collective punishment inflicted upon millions of believers whose only ‘sin’ is remaining loyal to the Orthodox faith received from the saints according to the apostolic succession.”<sup>67</sup>

Voices from Albania and Bulgaria joined the chorus of criticism on 26 August. The Albanian Orthodox Church (AOC) condemned the persecution, imprisonment, and property confiscation faced by the UOC as brutal acts, made all the more troubling when carried out by the legislative body of a democratic state. The AOC called for “the repeal of this absurd law and for the restoration of peace and unity within Orthodoxy.” Meanwhile, Bulgarian Patriarch Daniil criticized the Ukrainian Parliament for banning Ukraine's only canonical Church, the UOC, asking rhetorically, “If the only canonical Church is banned, what will remain in Ukraine?” He also noted that eleven of the fifteen Orthodox Churches worldwide do not recognize the Orthodox Church of Ukraine as a legitimate member of the global Orthodox community.<sup>68</sup>

In early September, further criticism came from the Holy Land, Czechia, and Slovakia. On 3 September, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem described the new law as a “blanket punishment of countless faithful men and women,” asserting that it promotes “neither unity nor peace,” and urged the Ukrainian Parliament to “repeal this law for the sake of all believers in Ukraine.” On the same day, the Synod of the

Украинской Православной Церкви” [Statement of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Adoption by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine of a Bill Aimed at the Liquidation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6152918.html>.

<sup>66</sup> *Politika.rs*, “Podrška Srpske pravoslavne crkve kanonskoj crkvi u Ukrajini” [Support of the Serbian Orthodox Church for the Canonical Church in Ukraine], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/628604/podrska-srpske-pravoslavne-crkve-kanonskoj-crkvi-u-ukrajini>.

<sup>67</sup> *Orthodox Times*, “Patriarch of Antioch Expressed Solidarity with Metropolitan Onufriy,” accessed October 10, 2025, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/patriarch-of-antioch-expressed-solidarity-with-metropolitan-onufriy/>.

<sup>68</sup> BNR (Bulgarian National Radio), “Патриарх Даниил призова вярващите да се молят за укрепване на Украинската православна църква” [Patriarch Daniil Called on the Faithful to Pray for the Strengthening of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://bnr.bg/sofia/post/102037627/patriarh-daniil-otsluji-sveta-liturgia-v-pernik>.

Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia lamented that the Ukrainian Parliament had approved a bill aimed at banning the activity of the UOC. The Synod warned that this decision would intensify “persecution and oppression, hatred and defamation, aggression and attacks” against the UOC, including the confiscation of churches and monasteries and other repressive measures against clergy and faithful. The Synod expressed its full support for Metropolitan Onufriy.<sup>69</sup>

Overall, most Orthodox Churches responded negatively to this legislation, often condemning it in strong terms. The notable exception was the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which expressed support for Ukraine’s “spiritual independence.”<sup>70</sup> However, other Greek-influenced Churches that recognize the OCU—namely, the Church of Greece, the Church of Cyprus, and the Patriarchate of Alexandria—remained silent on the issue. As a result, the Ecumenical Patriarchate found itself relatively isolated, as even its closest allies opted for neutrality, while many other Orthodox Churches openly voiced concern about the law’s risks and its potentially divisive impact on Ukrainian religious life.

These concerns were echoed by United Nations experts, who expressed “serious concern at reports of ongoing persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) in Ukraine” and warned that neither military conflict nor national security considerations can serve as a legitimate justification for restricting freedom of religion. They further specified that references to “Russkiy Mir” or “pro-Russian affiliation,” as well as “accusations of extremism under vague anti-extremism provisions,” are not compatible with the “principle of legal certainty” when making decisions to dissolve religious organizations. According to the UN experts, “By equating religious affiliation with threats to national security, this law [3894-IX] establishes a framework for State control which is incompatible with international human rights standards.”<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Eparchiapo.sk, “Vyhlásenie Posvätej synody Pravoslávnej cirkvi v českých krajinách a na Slovensku k prijatiu zákona č. 8371 na Ukrajině” [Statement of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands and Slovakia on the Adoption of Law No. 8371 in Ukraine], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.eparchiapo.sk/sk/dokumenty/aktuality/spravodajstvo/vyhlasenie-posvatnej-synody-pravoslavnej-cirkvi-v-ceskych-krajinach-a-na-slovensku-k-prijatiu-zakona-c-8371-na-ukrajine>.

<sup>70</sup> Espresso.tv, “Варфоломій підтримав анонсовану Зеленським ініціативу про ‘духовну незалежність’ України — ОП” [Bartholomeos Supported Zelensky’s Announced Initiative on the “Spiritual Independence” of Ukraine—Office of the President], accessed October 10, 2025, <https://espresso.tv/kultura-varfolomiy-pidtrimav-anonovanu-zelenskim-initsiativu-pro-dukhovnu-nezalezhnist-ukraini-op>.

<sup>71</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Ukraine: UN Experts Warn of Persecution against Ukrainian Orthodox Church,” accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/10/ukraine-un-experts-warn-persecution-against-ukrainian-orthodox-church>.



## Conclusion

The trajectory of Kyiv's religious policies and Church–state relations since 2014 has been deeply intertwined with broader nation-building efforts aimed at forging a “truly independent” and internationally recognized Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This political–religious project reached a significant milestone with the establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in December 2018, which received recognition from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and three other Churches within the Greek Orthodox world. However, this recognition has remained limited, as the majority of the world's Orthodox Churches—eleven out of fifteen—continue to withhold official recognition. This selective acknowledgment underscores the complex ecclesiastical and geopolitical tensions that continue to shape Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine and beyond.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which historically maintained close ties with the Moscow Patriarchate while also enjoying a significant degree of autonomy, chose not to participate in the politically charged and state-supported process that led to the formation of the OCU. As a consequence, the UOC has faced mounting pressure aimed at marginalizing and ultimately eliminating its presence from Ukraine's religious landscape. The outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war in February 2022 intensified these dynamics considerably. Despite the UOC's support for Ukraine's sovereignty and its Armed Forces—a stance repeatedly emphasized by its leadership—the Church came under even greater scrutiny and pressure. The war created an environment in which accusations of disloyalty and collaboration with Russia were weaponized against the UOC, regardless of its actual positions. This atmosphere facilitated the passage of Law No. 3894-IX in August 2024, legislation that effectively paves the way for banning the activities of UOC parishes, monasteries, dioceses, and educational institutions as legal entities. The law has since served as a legal foundation for state-backed efforts to suppress the UOC. In late August 2025, the State Service on Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience (DESS) filed a legal action seeking the dissolution of the Kyiv Metropolia of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which, according to the DESS, shows indications of affiliation with the Moscow Patriarchate.

These restrictive measures have been accompanied by persistent negative coverage of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in a significant segment of Ukraine's media, as well as by coordinated actions undertaken by the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and certain radical nationalist groups. Such actors have forcibly taken control of UOC churches, including its largest cathedral in Cherkasy, which was violently seized in October 2024.<sup>72</sup> These incidents have not only provoked deep resentment among UOC faithful but have also further exacerbated tensions between Orthodox communities in Ukraine.

<sup>72</sup> “Archangel Michael Cathedral of UOC Seized in Cherkasy,” *SPZh.live*, accessed October 10, 2025, <https://spzh.live/en/news/82524-archangel-michael-cathedral-of-uoc-seized-in-cherkasy>.

The broader consequences of these developments for Ukraine's religious landscape are profound. Rather than fostering unity or reconciliation, the policies pursued by Kyiv have deepened existing divisions within the Orthodox Christian community, entrenching a schism that now appears more intractable than at any point in Ukraine's post-Soviet history. The politicization of religious institutions also carries wider implications for social cohesion and international standing. By aligning closely with nationalist agendas and permitting the instrumentalization of religious identities within geopolitical conflicts, the Ukrainian state risks undermining the credibility of its commitment to religious freedom and the rights of believers—principles enshrined in both its Constitution and its international obligations. This, in turn, may invite further scrutiny and criticism from human rights organizations, Orthodox Churches worldwide, and the broader international community. Overall, it is reasonable to conclude that the pursuit of nation-state policies in post-Maidan Ukraine has been detrimental to the country's religious development and inter-Orthodox relations.

### Rezumat

După ce Parlamentul Ucrainei a adoptat Legea nr. 3894-IX în august 2024 – o legislație care deschide efectiv calea pentru interzicerea funcționării legale a unităților structurale ale Bisericii Ortodoxe Ucrainene (BOU) – a devenit evident că autoritățile ucrainene urmăresc eliminarea BOU din peisajul religios al țării. Acest articol examinează principalii factori care au condus la adoptarea acestei legi, cu un accent deosebit pe evoluțiile survenite după Revoluția Maidan din 2014. În consonanță cu politici mai largi de tip *stat-națiune*, autoritățile ucrainene au urmărit tot mai mult marginalizarea BOU, percepută ca o instituție „nepatriotică” și incompatibilă cu viziunea unei Biserici naționale suverane. Aceste eforturi s-au intensificat după ce BOU a refuzat să participe la inițiativa condusă de Poroșenko de creare a unei Biserici Ortodoxe „unite” și „independente”, care a culminat cu înființarea Bisericii Ortodoxe a Ucrainei (BO-U) în decembrie 2018. Cu toate acestea, izbucnirea războiului ruso-ucrainean în 2022 a devenit cel mai decisiv catalizator al acțiunilor statului împotriva BOU, în pofida sprijinului clar și constant exprimat de Biserică pentru Ucraina și Forțele sale Armate. Evoluțiile ulterioare nu au făcut decât să adâncească fracturile din cadrul comunității ortodoxe din Ucraina, agravând diviziunile inter-ortodoxe și complicând perspectivele de reconciliere religioasă în țară.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Biserica Ortodoxă Ucraineană; războiul Rusia–Ucraina; politici de tip *stat-națiune*.

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