

TRANSATLANTIC POLICY NETWORK ON RELIGION AND DIPLOMACY POLICY BRIEF #2

UKRAINIAN RELIGIOUS ACTORS AND ORGANIZATIONS AFTER RUSSIA'S INVASION: THE STRUGGLE FOR PEACE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Co-authored by two Ukrainian scholar-practitioners, this policy report analyzes Ukraine's religious context, the range of responses to the Russian invasion from across the spectrum of religious groups in the country, and the obstacles to and opportunities for Ukrainian religious contributions to peacebuilding. The report concludes with recommendations for how governments and civil society organizations in the international community can engage with Ukrainian religious and non-religious actors to foster a constructive response to the war.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Facilitate programs and activities that can foster cooperative relations and reduce competitive dynamics (or “zero sum” attitudes) between religious organizations engaged in public and community life. Ukrainian mediators and facilitators have already produced guidelines that can inform such work.
- Encourage social media and communications platforms to devote additional attention and resources to the specific risks of escalation and violence associated with hate speech in Ukraine in the present climate.
- Create mechanisms that will permit religious and secular organizations responding to various needs in Ukraine to better coordinate and leverage each other's respective comparative advantages and unique capacities vis-à-vis humanitarian relief, documentation of conflict events and war crimes, and assistance for refugees and internally displaced populations. Similarly, it will be important to enhance communication and coordination between international actors engaged with Ukraine.



This brief is a product of the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy, a forum of diplomats from North America and Europe working at the intersection of religion and foreign policy.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and not of the Berkley Center, Georgetown University, or any TPNRD-participating government.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has sparked a crisis and transformation in Ukrainian society, including within its religious communities. Religion, and specifically Orthodox Christianity, has played a critical role throughout Ukrainian history. Now, it can also play a special role in conflict transformation and peacebuilding.¹ Success in this respect depends on numerous factors such as theological preparation, even-handedness, open communication channels, and a wide network of connections. These requirements, combined with the pro-Putin stand of many religious organizations in Russia, significantly complicate the potential for religious peacebuilders to encourage a revision of foundational assumptions on the part of some parties to the conflict.

One of the characteristics of the religious landscape in Ukraine that we have observed as dialogue and peacebuilding practitioners is a reactionary model of behavior among religious leaders. Senior clergy often prefer to wait for occasions to react to sociopolitical events instead of proactively generating their own strategies. This reticence to act is at least partially grounded in clerics' fear of losing their hard (e.g., land, buildings, money) and soft resources (e.g., political status, social connections, public support). This posture hinders the positive potential of religious communities and widens the gap between the expectations that civil society has for religious figures and the concrete actions of those figures.

In this report, we will summarize some of the key responses to the war from Ukraine's main religious groups and then offer some suggestions for policymakers and practitioners to consider in light of emerging challenges and opportunities.

RELIGIOUS REACTIONS TO RUSSIA'S INVASION

Religious Context

Ukraine's religious demographics and dynamics and religion-state relations have been shaped by regional particularities and the shifting borders of the nation. Whereas the east of Ukraine was under the influence (and part of) the Russian Empire, the west fell to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the south to the Ottoman caliphate. Thus, Ukraine was positioned on the border between the Catholic/Protestant and the Orthodox worlds, as well as on the border between the Muslim and Christian civilizations. We must take these regional and historical peculiarities into consideration when analyzing interreligious relations and religious conflicts in contemporary Ukraine.

More than 100 faith communities are active in Ukraine today. Together, they encompass a wide array of legal entities, including 32,719 religious organizations, 92 religious centers, and 299 religious administrations.² Christianity, represented primarily by Orthodox churches of different jurisdictions and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), remains the predominant faith. It is closely linked with national identity and Ukrainian state formation. Ukraine is also home to many Protestant denominations as well as the religious traditions of indigenous people (especially Crimean Tatars) and national minorities (Jews, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, and Volga Tatars).

Ukraine's religious infrastructure has suffered very direct and specific effects in the current conflict. The State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience reports that at least 183 spiritual sites have been severely damaged by Russian forces in at least six regions of Ukraine: Chernihiv, Donetsk, Kharkiv, Kyiv, Luhansk, and Zhytomyr. Most of these sites are Orthodox churches. In parallel, several Ukrainian religious scholars involved in the Workshop for Academic

Study of Religion started a new documentary project called “Religion on Fire”³ that catalogs and reports cases of damage to religious sites as well as the imprisonment or killing of clergy. As of this writing, reports suggest damage to at least 190 sacred sites.

The war has also created dangerous conditions for religious leaders. The spokesperson for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Metropolitan Yevstratiy Zorya, reports that at least three priests have been killed by Russians.⁴ The Institute for Religious Freedom reports that clergy from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) and Protestant denominations have been persecuted, imprisoned, or killed.⁵ These dire circumstances have sparked new theological reflection.⁶ That is, Ukrainian theologians are increasingly developing a “theology of war” and a “theology of peace” rather than debating whether or not a given war is just.

Religious Responses

Almost all religious organizations in Ukraine have taken a strong pro-Ukrainian stand since the beginning of the conflict. Religious leaders of all faiths have built new personal connections with government leaders, established humanitarian corridors for evacuation, accommodated refugees, and coordinated systematic assistance (providing shelter, food, medicine, and counseling) to victims of the war.⁷

The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO) continues to function and to influence Ukrainian life. The AUCCRO’s consensus-based decision-making does not allow for quick and timely reactions to social trends, but it does offer a way to integrate positions of the majority of the influential religious organizations of Ukraine and spread their united messages. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, the AUCCRO has kept in touch with the Office of the President and the government. It has become a vehicle for various humanitarian initiatives and

for condemnations of Russia’s aggression.⁸ Additionally, the leaders of religious organizations have both independently and jointly appealed to Russian President Vladimir Putin. They have also appealed to world leaders for support and assistance. The Institute for Religious Freedom, an NGO connected to the AUCCRO, made a proposal to protect freedom of conscience and religion under the conditions of war, issuing a general appeal that was supported by more than 70 different organizations.⁹

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate presently receives a lot of attention—and rejection¹⁰—from Ukrainian society. Today the UOC MP has found itself in perhaps the most serious crisis in its entire existence. We are seeing an internal schism in the church itself, as many UOC MP priests have taken a pro-Ukrainian position and refuse to commemorate Moscow Patriarch Cyril in their liturgies.¹¹ Several UOC MP dioceses have called for autocephaly from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC),¹² anathema for Patriarch Cyril, and dialogue with the OCU.¹³ Nearly 150 UOC MP parishes have left to join the OCU officially and numbers are growing¹⁴ (according to the OCU, there are more than 400 transitions¹⁵). UOC MP bishops initially took a wait-and-see attitude, and some are openly pro-Moscow. Although Metropolitan Onufriy, the head of UOC MP, labeled the invasion a Russian war against Ukraine,¹⁶ during the first three months of active hostilities the UOC MP Synod railed against what it sees as the persecution of its church and the “destructive ideology of the OCU.” The position of the UOC MP changed significantly on May 27 at a church council convened by Metropolitan Onufriy that gathered not only bishops but also local priests and believers from different regions of Ukraine. The council’s published resolution¹⁷ called for full independence from the Russian Orthodox Church as well as for the decentralization of regional eparchies and possible dialogue with the OCU. These changes have not yet been formally reflected

in church regulations and there is no clear reaction from Moscow, so significant new developments on this front could yet arise. The tenor of the council's statement, expressed in the form of an ultimatum, suggests a difficult road ahead for intra-Orthodox dialogue and possibilities for UOC MP-OCU unification.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine's (OCU) reaction to the war has been completely different. The OCU has openly called for UOC MP priests to move with their parishes to the OCU¹⁸ and has issued an official statement denouncing Patriarch Cyril as a "propagandist of the ideology of the fascist regime."¹⁹ As a new and growing ecclesiastical structure, the OCU has many tasks to fulfill, such as developing regional and international links and educating new priests. The combative language of several OCU priests does not help to engage new parishes and even scares away potential partners. The OCU has an enormous opportunity to take the position of the canonical pro-Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which requires them to have balanced communication, transparent conditions for the integration of the newly-arrived clergy, structured management, and internal unity of clergy. In late March, Metropolitan Epiphany mentioned several ways to help UOC MP members join the OCU.²⁰

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) remains firmly pro-Ukrainian and works throughout the country via the network of Caritas Ukraine. Standing outside the intra-Orthodox debates, the UGCC has condemned what they described as the genocide of Ukrainian people in Mariupol as well as the ideology of the so-called "Russian world."²¹ In an official statement, UGCC Archbishop Svyatoslav Shevchuk called for prayer for Ukraine and the Ukrainian army and for taking care of people's hearts in times of war.²² However, the UGCC recently found itself at the center of a scandal over the Way of the Cross procession for Easter at the Vatican. A Ukrainian and a Russian woman from Italy were to carry the cross together, which would

be a sign of reconciliation.²³ Archbishop Svyatoslav condemned this idea, saying that "it was untimely, ambiguous and does not take into account the context of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine."²⁴ However, the only change made to the procession was not naming Ukrainian and Russian people brothers.²⁵ Ukrainian media declined to broadcast the procession.²⁶

While the official website of the Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine (RCC) has been quiet since November 2021, several RCC bishops in Ukraine have actively used social media to condemn the Russian invasion. They also did not support the pope's idea of a symbolic Way of the Cross at Easter to parallel the idea of future reconciliation and the sin of non-forgiveness.²⁷ During the past three months, the Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine has received substantial support (funding, information, hosting refugees) from the Polish Catholic Church.²⁸

On the other hand, divisions in the Ukrainian Protestant community intensified in 2014 when theologies of the Maidan revolution²⁹ and theologies of war were discussed. Recently, the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Russia shared an open statement in which they reported to Putin on their work and wished him long years of health and happiness.³⁰ Most Ukrainian evangelicals have taken an anti-Putin stand. The All-Ukrainian Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists has called its members to pray, coordinate help, and open their churches and centers for refugees.³¹ Other non-formal evangelical networks have coordinated their humanitarian interventions and have rescued more than 20,000 civilians from frontline and Russian-occupied territories.

Ukrainian Muslim leaders, despite internal conflicts, are united in condemning Russian aggression. The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine (SAMU) wrote an open letter calling for an end to the invasion and the killing.³² They also called on Russian Islamic leaders to stop supporting the Russian

state because of its injustice.³³ Additionally, a Ukrainian Jewish rabbi, Moshe Reuven Asman, denounced Russian aggression and Putin's stated goal of de-nazification as nonsense.³⁴

Overall, Ukrainian religious leaders who were uncertain about their public position in 2014 have been compelled by the Russian invasion to express their public views more forcefully. This dynamic is reshaping inter- and intra-religious relations and the public presence of religions in Ukraine. The silence or neutrality of some ministers and organizations leaves great doubts among believers and should be considered in future studies.

FAITH ENGAGEMENT WITH CONFLICT IN UKRAINE IS NOT NEW

Life under conditions of ongoing armed conflict since 2014 has created new demands for society in Ukraine, including among religious believers. For example, a year after the establishment of the OCU, a group of active believers and supporters of the church developed a unique document, *10 Theses for the OCU*,³⁵ that offers a blueprint for future church development. Unfortunately, although the document was discussed at the level of church leadership, it was not developed or advanced at the grassroots level because of the lack of understanding and motivation from different religious leaders, as well as competing priorities in their everyday work. Additionally, informal Orthodox meetings continue, such as a movement of various Christian denominations who gather to discuss values and concepts of mutual interest (justice, peace, grace, etc.). Furthermore, there was a small, low-profile group of parishioners who consciously attended services at an Eastern Christian church other than their own every Sunday to take part in the liturgy and receive communion, demonstrating commonality and unity despite the differences.

Along with these initiatives, representatives of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches

and Religious Organizations have continued the tradition of holding a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity at the beginning of each year, where members of different denominations come to worship alongside each other. Joint prayers for peace have also become commonplace, which can be observed both within the individual churches and collectively under the leadership of the Roman Catholic Community of St. Egidio.

Among such spiritual initiatives are projects aimed at highlighting the presence of churches in public space. Among them are the active work of the Institute for Religious Freedom (particularly on domestic violence), Caritas Ukraine (UGCC), and Caritas SPES (RCC), along with public projects and the network of Orthodox NGOs Eleos-Ukraine (representing OCU). Together with them, since 2016, the Dialogue in Action³⁶ initiative has been working to develop a culture of dialogue and to combine the efforts of religious and secular representatives of local communities. Its activities include informal educational activities as well as facilitated dialogues, trainings, and coaching, which combine the efforts of religious and secular civic initiatives. Sometimes the topic of one of these projects may be an internal problem of the local community or a religious community, or it may be a general request to communicate with the outside world or local authorities. Experience shows that restorative practices are successfully integrated into possible joint projects and allow the development of theology of peace and hospitality from leading Ukrainian theologians. These initiatives and projects point to the possibility and prospect of dialogue and peacebuilding in the broadest sense with the involvement of religious representatives, but they require much more active involvement from the religious communities themselves.

TOWARD NEXT STEPS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In this section, we highlight several of the key factors of division and unification that will shape Ukrainian religious responses to the war:

- *High levels of competition*: an overall culture of competition where the main task “to survive” does not facilitate intra- and inter-religious cooperation;
- *Lack of communication and public presence*: a lack of understanding of why religious organizations should have a communications strategy and how it could help them grow;
- *Hate speech* in everyday communication, in public remarks, in social media, and in official religious documents;
- *Politicization of religious actors and organizations*: the mutual instrumentalization of religion by politicians and of politicians by religious leaders, a process in which political interests more often win, using religion as a tool to influence the electorate;
- *Silent responses to social concerns*: not responding to social issues does not help to resolve the problem, and many young people are leaving their faith communities because they cannot discuss their questions with spiritual leaders;
- *Reactional model for religious leaders*: as mentioned above, instead of taking proactive steps to build long-term strategies, Ukrainian religious organizations tend to be reactive.

Despite these systematic challenges and shortcomings, there are windows of opportunity, especially in terms of engaging the multireligious landscape of Ukraine. Thankfully, Ukraine has sufficient religious freedom and tolerance to enable such engagement. Let us explore some connectors

for the religious sphere that already exist to some extent but could be further developed:

- *Multireligious balance*: maintaining horizontal rather than hierarchical relations between different religious groups generates more opportunities for mutual initiatives and motivates cooperative action;
- *Local ministers are strong connectors with high social capital*: they are vital to their communities, as they can use faith and spirituality to unite representatives of different social groups, even those in conflict;
- *Demonstrative common action*: in the form of public speeches, actions, prayers, and charity;
- *Cooperation with secular leaders in social projects* that provides more connection and communication and opens the religious world;
- *Creation of moral codes* as the cultural resource for a social system that gives power and stability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Bearing in mind the various challenges and opportunities listed above, governments and civil society organizations in the international community may wish to consider some of the following actions and activities as means both for mitigating risks and for leveraging potentially productive openings:

1. In consultation with Ukrainian religious actors and civil society organizations, facilitate programs and activities that can foster cooperative relations and reduce competitive dynamics (or “zero sum” attitudes) between religious organizations engaged in public and community life. Ukrainian mediators and facilitators have already produced guidelines that can inform such work.³⁷

2. Encourage social media and communications platforms to devote additional attention and resources to the specific risks of escalation and violence associated with hate speech in Ukraine in the present climate.
3. Create mechanisms that will permit religious and secular organizations responding to various needs in Ukraine to better coordinate and leverage each other's respective comparative advantages and unique capacities vis-à-vis humanitarian relief, documentation of conflict events and war crimes, and assistance for refugees and internally displaced populations. Similarly, it will be important to enhance communication and coordination between international actors engaged with Ukraine.³⁸

The challenges of war bring many changes and some can be dramatic. However, the readiness of churches and religious organizations to respond to the dilemmas of society, to lead an active ministry, and to form new meanings that can strengthen national identity and form new theological visions of modernity remains an open question.

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The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University seeks a more just and peaceful world by building knowledge and advancing cooperation through research, teaching, and dialogue. Two premises guide the center's work: that a comprehensive examination of religion and norms is critical to address complex global challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

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