

UN and Orthodox Prelates Condemn Zelensky's Moves to Evict Monks, Seize Churches in Ukraine

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In a standoff of thousands of Orthodox believers against the regime at the revered Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Porphyry called Zelensky's crackdown 'a faithful repetition of the Soviet persecution of the Church.'

The United Nations has sounded an alarm against the Volodymyr Zelensky government for targeting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) with unjustified discrimination, and Orthodox prelates around the world have strongly concurred.

The UOC which was, until May of last year, subordinate to the Patriarchate of Moscow, is not to be confused with the newer, nationalist Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) which was formally constituted in December 2018 and January 2019.

Upon the initiation of Russia's "special military operation" into Ukraine on February 24 of last year, despite their spiritual association with the invaders, Primate of the UOC, Metropolitan Onufriy, [voiced](#) "special love and support" for the Ukrainian armed forces, and called on Russian President Putin "to immediately stop the fratricidal war" (all translations from [Google](#)).

Later in May, in a protest against Russia's invasion, a council of the UOC formally [declared](#) its "full independence" from the Patriarchate of Moscow, while in those same months, hundreds of UOC priests signed an open letter calling for Moscow's Patriarch Kirill to face a religious tribunal over his support for the invasion.

Yet, as LifeSiteNews [covered](#) in December, due to its former links to the Patriarchate of Moscow, churches, monasteries, and convents of the UOC have been subject to military raids by the Security Service of Ukraine, also known as the SBU. Reports indicated that by December 5, the SBU had searched 350 buildings of the UOC and investigated the loyalties of 850 individuals.

Now, a March 24 [report](#) from the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has confirmed the "SBU conducted searches (some of which it referred to as 'security measures') in several monasteries, offices, education facilities and other property of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) in Kyiv, Rivne, Zhytomyr, Ivano-Frankivsk, Chernivtsi, Dnipropetrovsk, Khmelnytskyi, Cherkasy, Volyn, Kherson, Ternopil, Poltava and Zakarpattia regions."

"SBU officers questioned several [UOC] clergymen with the use of a polygraph" resulting in "three notices of suspicion" issued to UOC clergy including two which violate "the equality of citizens based on race, nationality, religious belief, disability or other grounds," and the third with multiple charges including "denial of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine."

In addition, the SBU's "security measures" have relegated at least two suspects to "round-the-clock house arrest."

"OHCHR is concerned that the State's activities targeting the UOC could be discriminatory. OHCHR also recalls the need to ensure that all those facing criminal charges enjoy the full spectrum of applicable fair trial rights," the report reads.

The OHCHR also addresses draft laws registered in Ukraine's parliament which ban "the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as the operations of religious organizations that are organizationally or canonically linked to it and prohibits them from renting state or private property in Ukraine." These proposals also seek to ban "the use of the term 'Orthodox' in names of religious organizations not related to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine."

Protesting the "vague legal terminology and the absence of sufficient justification" for such legal measures, the OHCHR judges they unnecessarily infringe upon "the freedom to manifest one's religion" violating the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In response to the report, Oleh Nikolenko, spokesman of Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [stated](#), "Ukraine is a democratic state, in which freedom of religion is guaranteed. At the same time, freedom is not the same as the right to be engaged in activities that undermine national security."

"We call on OHCHR to refrain from unbalanced political assessments and base its reports on facts," he said.

Understanding the historical difference between the UOC and OCU

The bitter schism between the UOC and OCU have their origins in the ethnic and political divisions between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples.

Since 1686, the Patriarch of Moscow had recognized authority to ordain the metropolitan archbishop of Kiev. However, two nationalistic Orthodox Churches in Ukraine came into existence in the twentieth century in response to the 1917 dissolution of the Russian Empire, and the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union. Both of these churches were unrecognized by other Eastern Orthodox Churches and considered "schismatic" while simultaneously competing with the Russian Orthodox UOC.

According to reports, in 2014 the OCU churches provided support for the U.S.-facilitated

color revolution and [coup d'état](#) of the democratically elected President in Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, who was perceived as an ally of Russia. In response, the Russian Federation accepted the rejoining of Crimea to its centuries-old motherland, when the peninsula held a lopsided referendum and [celebrated](#) the historical event.

As tensions and violence between the government in Kiev and Russian-speaking regions in the east of the country were ongoing in 2018, the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople issued a type of recognition to the previously unrecognized churches in Ukraine, causing a broader schism between itself and the Patriarchate of Moscow who went on to forbid the participation of UOC clergy and laity in the worship and sacraments of OCU churches.

In a March 28, 2023 [statement](#) denouncing the Zelensky regime's "pressures, violence and persecutions" of the UOC, Primate of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Porphyry, stated that the UOC is "the only canonical and legal Orthodox Church in Ukraine," being "recognized by all Orthodox Churches in the world" while the OCU, "recognized by only four," is a mere "non-canonical schismatic structure" which "can become a Church only through repentance and canonical procedure, never by the stroke of someone's pen."

UOC provides material support for Ukrainian army, yet govt 'chose to attack the church'

In a similar statement of support for the UOC, Archbishop Michael of Prague [lamented](#) that the "Ukrainian authorities are going to crucify the Church of Christ" in their nation and yet "all this happens despite the fact that the UOC has publicly distanced itself from the Moscow Patriarchate, offers prayers for the victory of the Ukrainian army and supports the soldiers materially."

Articles on the UOC website appear to document significant amounts of material charity provided to varieties of entities including Ukrainian armed forces engaging in conflict with the Russian army. A March 28 [report](#) with ample photographs demonstrates how copious food products, medicines and medical devices have been provided by UOC clergy and faithful to military personnel, internally displaced persons and regional hospitals.

Another article and video [published](#) the next day, show the Kyiv Diocese of the UOC providing humanitarian aid to three units of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the Bakhmut region.

Despite all of this, the UOC as a whole is suspected of collaborating with the Russian military, based on the convictions of a small number.

Archbishop Iona, the head of the youth department at the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra (Cave Monastery), explained to Politico, "Only a few priests have indeed collaborated. It is not right to apply collective guilt to a church. There were also collaborators among SBU and other organs. But the government chose to attack the church." He added that collaborators are active in every sphere, including government security forces.

"The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is not a 'warring party,' but a living and active Church of God," added Patriarch Porphyry. "Wars, just and unjust, are fought by states, not churches... The Church is always for peace."

'Priests of OCU' participate in successful violent takeover of UOC church, then pray at the altar

With the Zelensky regime involved in SBU raids against the UOC, and advancing legislation to ban the church, preventing it from renting property in Ukraine or using the word "Orthodox," they and the OCU are also methodically moving to dispossess these Orthodox Christians of operating in state-owned ecclesial buildings or other church properties as well.

An article on the UOC's website from Tuesday [displays](#) video footage of a raid upon the UOC cathedral church in the [Ivano-Frankivsk](#) Diocese. The video and report testify that while UOC faithful prayed, a crowd of around 200 appeared issuing threatening chants. Raiders from the OCU "broke into the shrine" used tear gas on priests and the faithful, "opened the central door and pushed the parishioners down the stairs."

Immediately following this violent capture of the church, dispossessing their fellow Christians, individuals the article identifies as "priests of the OCU," went in and "prayed at the altar."

According to the report, "the police did not intervene."

Thousands of faithful in standoff with Zelensky to prevent ousting of UOC from the revered Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra

However, despite the violence of this dispossession, the most serious case involves the Zelensky regime's move to oust over 200 UOC monks along with several hundred other professors and students of the 11th-century Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra (Monastery of the Caves) which is broadly revered as the center of Eastern Slavic Christianity, giving its name to the city in which it is located, Kyiv.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the communists turned the holy site into a state-owned museum which was transferred to the Ukrainian government after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Around that time partial jurisdiction was returned to the UOC including a lease with the government owners to use the main churches in 1988. Another agreement was made in 2013 for the free use of religious buildings and additional state-owned property which was apparently intended to be perpetual as it had no end date.

At the end of December, the government terminated the UOC's ability to worship in the "Upper Lavra" which includes the Holy Dormition Cathedral and another minor church. The government then allowed the nationalist OCU to worship in those spaces on several occasions.

And then, earlier this month, Zelensky issued a termination of the 2013 agreement and ordered the entire UOC community to fully evacuate the premises by March 29 including the caves themselves, the monks' cells, their theological seminary and academy in the "Lower Lavra."

The stated reason for the evacuations came about when a special government commission identified numerous violations of the free lease agreement by the UOC.

In response, the church is arguing the termination remains illegal and has [filed](#) a lawsuit seeking redress in the matter. Furthermore, the monks have committed to defying the order and remaining in their monastery home as long as it is physically possible.

Ukraine's Culture Minister Oleksandr Tkachenko, who issued the evacuation order, said the government would not use force against the monks if they "missed the deadline," according to Politico, and they were free to stay so long as they "transfer their allegiance" to the OCU.

As a result, there is currently a standoff at the Lavra involving [thousands](#) of faithful who have [arrived](#) to prevent the state from expelling the monks. As reported by OrthoChristianity, many are spending the night in the Lavra, waking to attend 6:30 a.m. Mass, and then returning to the outdoors to guard the monastery once again.

The outlet also reported on Thursday that the UOC faithful successfully [prevented](#) a state commission who arrived to "inspect" the properties from entering the churches out of a suspicion that they would seal the doors. Members of the commission responded stating that if this situation continues, they will be forced to utilize law enforcement.

Patriarch: Zelensky's discrimination 'a faithful repetition of the Soviet persecution of the Church'

In the meantime, the UOC has received significant levels of support from Orthodox [prelates](#) around the world.

"We demand an end to the systematic persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by the rulers of Kiev," [said](#) Archbishop Atallah Hanna from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Such rulers "implement Western agendas hostile to the Orthodox Church, its values, its message and its presence."

This persecution equates to "persecution of the entire Church, as there are threats to evict bishops, fathers, and monks from the Lavra monasteries in Kiev, which are the ancient historical monasteries associated with the Orthodox Church in Ukraine," he said.

"We do not recognize the legitimacy of any entity created in Ukraine to be a substitute for the legitimate Orthodox Church, and we call on the Christian world and the entire civilized world to work to stop this systematic persecution," the Archbishop emphasized.

Patriarch Porphyry [described](#) Zelensky's planned expulsion of the UOC bishops, monks, professors and students from the Lavra as "a faithful repetition of the Soviet persecution of the Church." He continued by characterizing these policies as a "state terror against the Church, as well as the grossest violation of its basic rights, religious freedom and freedom of conscience in general."

Back in the U.S., responding to the situation at the Kiev Caves Lavra, Primate of the Orthodox Church in America, Metropolitan Tikhon, [wrote](#) in a Tuesday statement, "[we] decry restrictions on the religious freedom of any group in Ukraine and especially denounce any generalized religious persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufriy."

"We once again assure Metropolitan Onufriy, his clergy, and the Ukrainian faithful, who are beset by troubles on all sides, that the Orthodox Church in America stands ready to support the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, both with our prayers and by any other means at our

disposal," he concluded.

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Featured image: Thousands of members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church gather at the Holy Dormition-Kiev Caves Lavra as Zelensky's regime gears up to seize the highly revered church (Source: Українська Православна Церква / YouTube via LSN)

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