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**STATEMENT BY
MR. ALEKSANDR VOLGAREV, DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF
THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE 1434th MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

20 July 2023

On gross violations by the Kyiv regime of the right to freedom of religion, belief and conscience, including politically motivated persecution of followers of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church

Mr. Chairperson,

We are compelled once again to draw attention to gross and systematic violations of the rights to freedom of religion, belief and conscience in Ukraine. Since the start of the year, the Kyiv regime has been conducting even more zealously its violent onslaught on the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). It has organized a wave of repression against UOC clergy and parishioners on the most extensive scale in the country's recent history.

In early 2023, the Ukrainian Government submitted draft law No. 8371 to the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament), which provides for a ban on the activity of religious organizations whose operating centre (governing body) is located in a State that, in the Kyiv regime's view, is engaged in armed aggression against that regime. Under this pretext the authorities in Kyiv have called into question the self-governance, autonomy and legal status of the canonical UOC. The draft law also provides for a considerable simplification of the legal procedure that the authorities must go through to prohibit the UOC from operating. That is, it lays down that henceforth it is not worshippers and members of the clergy but, rather, the Kyiv regime authorities who have the power to decide whether a church is to exist or not.

At the same time, the Zelenskyy regime has doubled down on forcing the UOC out of the pale of the law. Demands have begun to be made that the Church change its name. On 1 February, the so-called State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience published the findings of a religious expert examination of the UOC regulations. It is asserted that an ecclesiastical and canonical relationship exists with canonical Russian Orthodoxy, which may serve as a basis for outlawing the UOC.

A campaign is simultaneously under way at the regional level to ban the UOC. This campaign has been pursued with the greatest zeal in western Ukraine. Relevant decisions were taken in April and May this year in the Volyn, Ivano-Frankivsk, Zhytomyr, Lviv, Rivne, Chernivtsi and Khmelnytskyi regions.

The Kyiv regime has significantly stepped up its persecution of UOC clergy, who are now being accused of crimes against national security and public safety. According to a report by the Security Service of Ukraine published in early April this year, the Service has carried out more than 40 “comprehensive counter-intelligence measures” since 2022. Almost 250 UOC clerics have been banned from entering the country – they have thus turned out to be outcasts in their native land. Sixty-one criminal cases have been opened against clergymen, including 14 bishops, on charges of “treason” and “incitement to religious hatred”. Under various pretexts, 19 metropolitans have been stripped of Ukrainian citizenship. In February of this year, at the instance of the Kyiv regime, a court sentenced a UOC priest to seven years in prison on charges of “anti-Ukrainian activities”. He had been captured by the Kyiv security forces in an area of the Krasnyi Lyman district of the Donetsk People’s Republic that was temporarily controlled by the regime. A total of seven clergymen have been sentenced.

Efforts have also been stepped up to enable the implementation of the political, non-canonical and pseudo-religious structure known as the “Orthodox Church of Ukraine” (OCU), which is backed by the United States of America and Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople. I would remind you that it was created by the authorities in 2018 as a counterweight to the canonical UOC and that it rests not on religious but on political foundations. The Kyiv regime makes no secret of its intention to have parishes and property transferred to the OCU. According to data from the legal service of the canonical UOC, around 300 UOC churches have been seized over the past year and a half, of which 63 are now under the “jurisdiction” of the schismatics. The raids are often accompanied by threats and physical violence against priests and parishioners. We shall give a few examples.

On 22 January this year, adherents of the OCU, together with paramilitary “territorial defence” militants and representatives of the local authorities, seized an Assumption Church in the Kyiv region. Priests and parishioners were beaten up. On 22 April, OCU followers supported by militants took over a church and parish building belonging to a UOC congregation in the village of Trebukhiv in the Brovary district of the Kyiv region. The doors of the church were forced open and the worshippers endured physical blows during this seizure. One of the schismatics demonstratively burned a Bible and prayer books in the Russian language, referring to them as “trash”. On 29 April, the Metropolitan Onufriy officiated at a service in a church named after the Venerable Agapetus in the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves. When the service had finished, groups of radicals tried to lay into him. Subdeacons and worshippers managed to prevent the assault by flocking round their pastor and shielding him with their bodies. And these are just some of the most high-profile episodes.

Mr. Chairperson,

Persecution of the UOC has culminated in attempts to expel it from the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves, which back in December 2022 was legally “made over” to the schismatic OCU. The authorities tore up the rental agreement with the canonical church and since 1 January 2023 have been demanding that the monks vacate the premises, threatening to use force against them otherwise.

Over the past three weeks, representatives of the Kyiv regime have seized and sealed off six buildings in the monastery. There continue to be attempts to prevent the monks from accessing certain facilities on its premises.

All this is being accompanied by what amounts to looting of the holy sites of Russian Orthodoxy located there. According to available information, the Kyiv regime has reached agreements with certain international bodies and non-profit organizations on removing emblematic treasures from the Monastery of the Caves. The plan is to subsequently transfer them to museums in Italy, France, Germany and the Vatican. An inventory has been taken, transport arrangements have been made and funds earmarked to pay for the

removal of these treasures. By the way, the repression of the Kyiv regime has also affected another holy site, the monastery at Pochayiv in the Ternopil region – a less publicized but no less despicable example of the persecution of canonical Orthodoxy by the current authorities in Kyiv.

On a separate note, we should like to point out that on 26 June, as part of the attempts to destroy the UOC's independence, the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience, which we referred to earlier, demanded of UOC metropolitans and clerics that they issue what can only be described as political declarations about the severing of spiritual ties with canonical Russian Orthodoxy. The Service also demanded that ecclesiastical penalties be imposed on those members of the clergy who failed to do that. How can these actions, which must strike any right-minded person as absurd, be reconciled with, say, international obligations regarding non-interference in church affairs?

At the instance of the Security Service of Ukraine, the Vicegerent of the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves, the Metropolitan Pavel, has been under house arrest since April. He has been charged with incitement to religious hatred and what are referred to as “anti-Ukrainian activities”. On 14 July, the Solomianskyi District Court of Kyiv ordered that he be transferred from house arrest to detention. The judges provided for the possibility of his being released on bail, but set his bail at the deliberately exorbitant sum of 900,000 dollars. The Metropolitan Pavel said flat out that he simply does not have that kind of money. This man of the cloth now faces up to eight years' imprisonment. The Kyiv regime's judicial apparatus is not bothered by the fact that he is very ill and requires constant medical attention. Yet, in prison there is a very real threat to his life and health.

By way of contrast, here is another example of how the Kyiv regime's “justice” operates. Denys Varodi, a former child educator from the settlement of Chynadiiovo in the Zakarpattia region whom we mentioned at the previous Permanent Council meeting and who was trying to ferry an 11-month-old baby boy out of Ukraine to sell him for 25,000 dollars on the territory of an EU country, was released on bail earlier this week, with his bail set at 27,000 dollars. The bail was posted, so this person who was caught red-handed trafficking in human beings is now roaming free. Incidentally, one cannot fail to mention here that the position of OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings has now been vacant for four months.

Mr. Chairperson,

We regard the Kyiv authorities' actions as a targeted, politically motivated campaign to destroy canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine. The gross infringements of the rights of believers, the violation of religious freedoms, the outrages against the monks and holy sites of the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves – all this is at odds with a range of international obligations of Ukraine, including OSCE commitments. In the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 one of the ten guiding principles was pronounced to be “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief”. The CSCE Vienna Concluding Document (1989) lays down that participating States will “take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination against individuals or communities on the grounds of religion or belief”. In the CSCE Copenhagen Document of 1990 it is reaffirmed that “everyone will have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes ... freedom to manifest one's religion or belief, either alone or in community with others, in public or in private, through worship, teaching, practice and observance.” In its Decision No. 4/03, adopted in Maastricht in 2003, the Ministerial Council “affirms the importance of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief and condemns all discrimination and violence, including against any religious group or individual believer”.

The Kyiv regime's aforementioned violations of commitments have not elicited assessments from the relevant structures of our Organization. It is legitimate to ask why there is this silence on the part of the

Personal Representative of the Chairperson-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also Focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions, Ms. Regina Polak. These matters have a direct bearing on her mandate. Nor have we heard any reaction whatsoever from the relevant OSCE executive structures, above all the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. We would remind you that, in Decision No. 5 adopted by the OSCE Ministerial Council in Bucharest in 2001, the OSCE executive structures were called upon to “pay increased attention to manifestations of aggressive nationalism, racism, chauvinism [and] xenophobia ... to countering intolerance and discrimination on the ground of ... religious, political or other opinion”.

We urge them to finally respond to the Ukrainian authorities’ arbitrariness and outrages against the clergy and parishioners of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Thank you for your attention.