



Permanent Mission of Ukraine
to the International Organizations in Vienna

PC.DEL/211/19

1 March 2019

ENGLISH only

**Statement of the Delegation of Ukraine
on Russia's attack on the freedom of religion and belief in the temporarily
occupied territories of Ukraine**

As delivered by Ambassador Ihor Prokopchuk,
Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the International Organizations in Vienna,
to the 1218th meeting of the Permanent Council,
28 February 2019

Mr. Chairperson,

The delegation of Ukraine repeatedly responded in earlier meetings of the Permanent Council to Russian allegations concerning freedom of religion and belief in Ukraine. Such allegations and often accusations produced in large volumes by the Russian Federation are unfounded. Ukraine remains the biggest target of Russian state-driven campaign of disinformation and propaganda. This is part of the ongoing Russian hybrid aggression against Ukraine. For decades the Russian church and Moscow have aimed at deepening divisions in the Ukrainian society, in particular by dividing the Ukrainian Christian orthodox people into “correct”, i.e. “canonical” and belonging to the Russian Church, and “incorrect”, i.e. so called “non-canonical” and belonging to other Churches. As we all know, none of the OSCE commitments on freedom of religion or belief contain the notions of so called canonical and non-canonical churches, but these notions are used in Russia and by Russia to suppress the freedoms which the Russian authorities had undertaken to observe.

Finally the Russian strategy of driving division in Ukraine in the religious sphere has failed when the Ukrainian nation succeeded in its at least 100 years quest for establishment of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. As I informed the Permanent Council, this status was granted to the Ukrainian people by the Mother Church – the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in January of this year. This historic accomplishment was preceded by intensive consultative process and the unification congress of three branches of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy in December 2018. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine has been entered number 15 in the diptychs of autocephalous national Churches of the world-wide Christian Orthodoxy. The Russian Orthodox Church belongs to the younger churches and ranks 5th in the diptychs.

As for the exercise of freedom of religion and belief in Ukraine, including the situation for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, this freedom is under severe attack in territories of Ukraine illegally occupied by the Russian Federation – the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, city of Sevastopol and parts of Donbas.

Last December the Ukrainian delegation brought it to the attention of the Permanent Council that the Russian occupation authorities in Luhansk reportedly denied so-called “registration” to all Baptist, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist, and other Protestant churches. The aim was to effectively ban all activities by these religious groups, and now their members can face even illegal detention for gathering to pray in private homes.

At the Permanent Council two weeks ago the Ukrainian delegation informed, that in Simferopol, in the illegally occupied Crimea, the Russian occupants ordered the Cathedral of Ukrainian Orthodox Church to leave the premises by 1 March 2019. This order of the occupation administration aims at terminating the presence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the peninsula and the religious life of its remaining eight parishes.

Today we emphasise that such repressive measures are carried by the Russian occupation authorities throughout the occupied territories of Ukraine. It became known that in the occupied parts of the Donetsk region the religious communities have been demanded to register according to the so called new “laws” issued by the illegal entities of the Russian occupation administration.

These is real risk that from 2 March 2019, 36 churches and premises, including the diocesan House of Mercy, belonging to the communities of Ukrainian Orthodox Church in temporarily occupied parts of Donetsk region, may be “confiscated” and their priests will be expelled from these territories.

Given this extremely worrisome situation, the Metropolitan of Kyiv and all Ukraine Epiphanius, Head of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine, appealed to the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the guarantors of the Minsk Process, the European Union and to all democratic countries, international and interdenominational institutions to take urgent measures to prevent such catastrophic development, devised by the Russian authorities. The Russian Federation continues to generate new falsehoods and unfounded accusations to divert attention from the gross violations it continues to commit in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.

We note that until now the SMM has not informed about the mentioned illegitimate demands of the Russian occupation authorities in Crimea and Donbas. We request the SMM to immediately follow up on this information and keep it under constant monitoring. We also request the Slovak OSCE Chairmanship to duly react to these latest developments of violation of OSCE principles and commitments.

We urge Russia to put an end to the repressive policies of its occupation administrations in Crimea and parts of Donbas and abide by OSCE commitments regarding the freedom of religion or belief. We also urge Russia, as the occupying power, to abide by the applicable norms of international humanitarian law.

Mr. Chairperson,

The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted the law which enables the religious communities to change their affiliation and strengthens the religious freedom of the believers. Whereas in the initial draft a simple majority was required for approving the

decision, the legislators introduced a requirement of two thirds of the community vote required for the changed affiliation. Moreover, the law protects the interests of those believers who wish to stay within the Russian Orthodox Church. This church will continue to have the same rights and commitments as other religious denominations in my country. At the same time, a legislative provision was introduced which required religious organizations with governing body in the aggressor state or occupying power, as determined by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, to show this link in their names. There are six such religious organizations in Ukraine. There is no limitation of their operation in Ukraine.

In Ukraine, where church is separated from the state, the government is not interfering and will not interfere in the affairs of the religious organizations, but will promote fulfillment of freedom of religion and belief as is the case in other democratic OSCE states. We also reiterate that we will not allow the interference in Ukraine's religious life of the neighboring State which continues its aggression, has incorporated the national Russian Orthodox Church into its governmental establishment and uses it as a hybrid warfare instrument against Ukraine. We recall in this regard, in particular, that on 12 October 2018 the President of Russia convened the national security council to discuss, according to official Kremlin's information, "the situation for the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine after the decision of the synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to proceed to granting autocephaly to the Church of Ukraine". When Kremlin speaks about the "Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine" and when the Russian delegation in the OSCE speaks about the "Ukrainian Orthodox Church" – they speak about the same religious organization.

Thank you, Mr.Chairperson.