

Delegation of the Russian Federation

**STATEMENT BY MR. DMITRY BALAKIN,  
DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN  
FEDERATION, AT THE 1218th MEETING OF THE  
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

28 February 2019

**On violations by the Ukrainian Government of religious rights and  
persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Ukraine**

Mr. Chairperson,

The situation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), and of its clergy and faithful, has worsened notably in recent months. There is but one reason for this, namely the pressure exerted on the UOC by the Ukrainian leadership, which is implementing its own agenda – an agenda that is in many respects politically motivated – to put in place in Ukraine a new ecclesiastical structure with an openly nationalist slant. This involves flouting in a flagrant manner Ukraine’s commitments under international law, including its OSCE commitments, and also the tenets of its national legislation, according to which the State should refrain from interfering in the life of duly registered religious communities, should ensure that all citizens have the right to freedom of religion, and should avoid giving preferential treatment to any one religious grouping.

Yet, the Ukrainian authorities, soon after proclaiming the establishment of the so-called Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), set their sights on creating a legal framework for effectively eliminating the largest Orthodox community in the country – a community that numbers over 12,000 parishes, all of which are united by the fact of their belonging to the UOC, which is a canonical church in the sense that it is recognized by universal Orthodoxy and by all the Orthodox churches. These authorities have divided Ukrainians into “ours” and “theirs”, thereby setting the stage for future religious conflict. A large-scale campaign to discredit the UOC is under way in the country. Deliberate acts are being committed which can only be described as persecution.

The Ukrainian authorities are trying to place their discriminatory actions on a legal footing. On 20 December 2018, the Ukrainian Parliament (*Verkhovna Rada*) adopted amendments to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations that, in reality, imply subjecting the life of religious communities to a political discourse imposed by the authorities. Under these amendments, religious associations that, in the view of the Ukrainian authorities, have their leadership structures in the “aggressor State” are obliged to change their name and undergo official re-registration. They must otherwise reckon with

being denied registration as legal entities and even with being forcibly renamed if so prescribed by the Government agencies. Practically no attempt is made to conceal the fact that the amended law is directed mainly against the UOC.

On 17 January 2019, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted further amendments to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, in this case paving the way for the redistribution of religious communities' property. Was the redistribution of church property a relevant issue at all before the State started interfering in ecclesiastical matters? By no means. Yet, the preparatory stage of this process is now already under way: within the regional authorities' administrative structure, commissions are being set up for the "inventorying" of church property. (As a recent example of such a commission we may cite the one that took up its work just over a week ago within the administration of Rivne region.) Tellingly, the authorities have tasked these commissions with making an inventory only of the property belonging to places of worship and parishes of the UOC. At the end of last year, as instructed by the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, an inventory began to be made of the property within the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves, which is the most sacred site in Ukrainian Orthodoxy. I should add that the residence of the primate of the UOC, the Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Ukraine, is located on this monastery's grounds.

Following President Petro Poroshenko's blatantly political "tour" of the country to exhibit the *tomos* (decree of autocephaly granted to the OCU by the Patriarch of Constantinople), there has begun a new wave of appropriations of churches. The first such wave, if I may refresh your memory, took place in 2014–2016, when more than 40 parishes were taken away from UOC congregations.

As a rule, the same pattern can be observed in each case. At a meeting, usually attended by representatives of the local authorities, a decision is taken on "transferring" the parish, whereupon aggressively minded individuals, many of whom are not even members of the local congregation, forcibly take over the church building. Such assaults occurred literally the other day in the villages of Zolochivka (Rivne region), Zadubrivka (Chernihiv region) and Ustivitsa (Poltava region).

Slightly earlier in the year, on 13 January, supporters of the new ecclesiastical structure, backed by nationalists from the Svoboda party, appropriated several places of worship belonging to the UOC: St. Michael's Church in the village of Krasnovolya (Volyn region), the Church of the Great Martyr Demetrius of Thessaloniki in the village of Puzhaykovo (Odessa region), and St. Nicholas's Church in the village of Vorsivka (Zhytomyr region). On 16 January, members of the radical organization "C14" were involved in the appropriation of the Church of the Holy Ascension in the village of Olenivka (Chernihiv region). That same day, St. Michael's Church in the village of Shandrovets (Lviv region) was taken over in the presence of the local authorities and the police. On 18 January, the Annunciation Church (UOC) in the village of Pokhivka (Ivano-Frankivsk region) was appropriated. On 26 January, St. Nicholas's Church (UOC) in the village of Nichohivka (Volyn region) was taken over in an operation in which the head of the village council, F. Svitach, was involved. That same day, some radicals who were passing through decided – with the backing of the deputy head of the Chernihiv district council, V. Polishchuk – to take over the Church of the Intercession of the Holy Virgin (UOC). On 15 February, an attempt was made to set fire to the Church of the Holy Ascension (UOC) in Kryvyi Rih; the following day, there was a similar arson attack on the Church of St. John the Theologian in Zaporizhia. Around the same time, some radicals – acting all the time in the presence of

police officers – cut the locks off the doors of a church belonging to an UOC congregation in the village of Ozeryany (Volyn region) and took control of the building. Members of another UOC congregation stood in prayer around the Holy Assumption of the Virgin Mary Church in the village of Mykhalcha (Chernivtsi region) for over a week in order to defend it from supporters of the newly created ecclesiastical structure who were trying to take over the building. A UOC congregation was deprived of access to St. George’s Church (UOC) in the village of Kulchiny, in Kivertsi district, near Lutsk. On 16 February, also in the Volyn region, the UOC congregation of St. George’s Church in the village of Pisky had their church taken away from them by individuals who had already been involved in the appropriation of another church in the neighbouring village of Berestechko. On 22 February, two female parishioners were severely injured by radicals as they were cutting the locks off the doors of a church in the village of Zhidichin (Volyn region) and forcing their way into the building. This is by no means an exhaustive list – one could go on for quite a while yet and cite more examples.

Incidents of vandalism are on the rise. For example, in mid-December there were arson attacks on the Church of the Archangel Michael in the city of Bila Tserkva and the Church of the Holy Trinity in the city of Rzhyschiv, both in the Kyiv region. Violent disturbances were instigated in churches in the villages of Semenivka (in the Bilhorod-Dnistrovsky district of the Odessa region) and Vesele (in the Vesele district of the Zaporizhia region) on 26 December and 4 January, respectively. In Lviv, on 13 January, unidentified individuals daubed provocative graffiti on the front wall of St. Vladimir’s Church and also on the fence around St. George’s Cathedral. In Sumy, vandals using a similar style were at work: on 15 January, the wall around the Transfiguration Cathedral was covered with paint and defaced with graffiti of various kinds. This list, too, could be extended much further.

As already noted, the authorities are brutally and openly exerting pressure not just on the UOC’s parishioners but also on its clergy. A striking recent example of this is the detention, on 18 February, of Metropolitan Mitrofan of Horlivka and Sloviansk at a checkpoint of the Ukrainian armed forces. He was driven under police escort to the municipal police headquarters of Sloviansk “to have his identity checked”. As the Ukrainian authorities continue to oppress the UOC further, the more brazen and brutal this oppression becomes.

Parishioners and priests of the UOC are being openly threatened with physical violence. For example, that obnoxious nationalist Dmytro Yarosh, a member of the Ukrainian Parliament, is publicly inciting people to, in his own words, “hunt down the Muscovite priests”, adding that “it will be a delight to destroy them”. Such declarations elicit no reaction whatsoever from the Ukrainian authorities; nor do they come under legal scrutiny. And yet they could end up having the most serious consequences, not least the triggering of a religious war.

Representatives of the UOC have repeatedly drawn attention to the way in which pressure is being exerted on them by the State and by radical nationalists. For example, this issue was explicitly raised by Bishop Viktor (Kotsaba), Representative of the UOC to the European Organizations, in his address to the European community. In particular, he observed: “The places of worship of our Church, whose history stretches back over a thousand years, are being appropriated, believers are being beaten up, and UOC clergymen are being forced by government bureaucrats to transfer to the ‘new church’ that enjoys the backing of the President of Ukraine. The Ukrainian Security Service summons our priests for

questioning, while our bishops are allowed to travel abroad only after they have been subjected to preliminary interrogation and thorough vetting by the State intelligence services.” In practice, matters have already reached a point where clergymen who are citizens of Ukraine are being expelled from the country and stripped of their Ukrainian citizenship.

Esteemed Secretary General Thomas Greminger,

On 22 February, you stated that the OSCE was watching closely the situation with regard to the UOC and that it was aware of all the possible risks. We call upon the OSCE and its relevant institutions, as well as upon the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, to engage not just in monitoring as such but also to bring the full weight of their influence to bear on the authorities in Kyiv so as to prevent any further curtailment of the rights of Orthodox believers and any further violation by the Ukrainian Government of its OSCE commitments. It is equally crucial to put a stop to the appropriation of UOC churches and parishes in Ukraine, which is being carried out using criminal means, and to prevent any physical violence or threats against the UOC’s priests and parishioners. It is unacceptable that the Ukrainian authorities should be encouraging such phenomena.

Mr. Chairperson,

Not so long ago, in this very room, the Permanent Representative of Ukraine assured us that people’s freedom to choose which religious community or church they wish to belong to would be respected and even defended in his country. Alas, reality is showing us otherwise.

We demand that the Ukrainian authorities cease to persecute people on religious grounds. We call upon the OSCE’s relevant executive structures and upon the participating States to assess the Ukrainian Government’s unlawful actions in a principled manner.

Thank you for your attention.