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PC.SHDM.NGO/3/19/Rev.1
2 April 2019

ENGLISH only

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April 1-2, 2019

Distributed at the request of Public Organization
“Public Advocacy”
Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
1-2 April 2019
Session 1

To:

OSCE
OSCE Member States
State of Ukraine
International Organisations

Honorable participants of the meeting, ladies and gentlemen,

In spite of the ordeals faced by the country, Ukraine and the Ukrainian people seek to embody the best European values in their lives. In conditions when the country is suffering from war and is being torn apart by confrontations, the Ukrainian government is faced with the challenge not to make a mistake, and we hope, politicians will preserve the values of religious freedom and human rights, which are already embedded in Ukrainian legislation.

Unfortunately, today I have to be vocal about the mistakes of the Ukrainian authorities. I draw your attention to the ongoing violations of the rights of believers and religious organizations of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Our churches are being unlawfully seized, our believers are beaten and thrown out of their churches, our bishops are being persecuted. I personally was labeled as an “enemy of Ukraine” and was included in the database of the notorious website called “Mirotvorets” (Peacemaker).

Unfortunately, all these actions are massive and occur with the support of state authorities, whose representatives not only reluctantly ignore the violations, but also actively contribute to the so-called “transitions” of our parishes to the other state-sponsored denomination – the Orthodox Church of Ukraine – which was established by Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew upon the initiative of the high-ranking state officials.

We inform you that since the beginning of 2019 alone, 62 churches have been illegally taken over. There have been about 137 cases of forged assemblies of village communities, organized with the direct support of government officials in order to create a semblance of legal transfers of our communities to another denomination. Today we cannot provide spiritual assistance to our believers who serve in the armed forces of Ukraine, since the state has forbidden us to designate our chaplains to security and law enforcement agencies. It is worthy to note that a recent report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, which was published on the eve of the election day in Ukraine, paid particular attention to the infringement of the rights of Ukrainian soldiers, indicating that such discriminatory decision of the state contradicts Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Recently, the Security Service of Ukraine has presented a suspicion of committing a criminal offense allegedly for inciting sectarian strife to human rights defender and priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Victor Zemlyanoy, while, in fact, he is engaged in defending and advocating the right of our believers to religious freedom. Other clergymen in Rivne Region of Ukraine are regularly and massively summoned for interrogations. In such a way, they are coerced to transfer to another denomination – the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

According to Archpriest Roman Klim, whose church in the village of Baranivka, Zhytomyr Region¹, was recently seized: “They threw out of the temple women, elderly people through the improvised “shame corridor”... What country are we living in? And at the same time there were the head of the administration, the police. It's very unnerving. At school, children are bullied. Young parishioners are threatened at work. The priest is blackmailed, too. This is the direct incitement of interfaith hostility. I am compelled to seek help from the whole world.”

In the same village, Oleg Kovalsky, a deputy from the Radical Party, in an attempt to storm the church kicked nun Dimitria, the mother of a deceased ATO soldier. According to the testimony of the victim: “There was a terrible mess in the church. After the service, at which we were present ... they began to drive us out, just throwing us out of the church ...”

Although the nun herself had been awarded the Order of the Mother of the ATO Fighter², the “patriots” — the supporters of the “new Ukrainian church” – continued insulting and beating her. When the crowd of activists assaulted priest Amphilochius, pulling his stick out of the hands and biting his fingers, the nun tried to protect her confessor: “What are you doing?! You are beating a schema monk”. In response, a deputy from Oleg Lyashko’s Radical Party, Oleg Kovalsky, one of the initiators of the attack, hit the mother of the deceased ATO hero in her shoulder and chest, then in the face. After that, Kovalsky knocked the nun Dimitria to the ground and kicked her.

“My son died in ATO. They called me a FSB agent... I was born in Ukraine, my passport testifies to this. My son died, FSB does not offer such evidence ... Lastly, I was awarded myself. I was awarded the Order of the Mother after my son... I have the right to... at least to have a word in my Ukraine, to pray in peace. Why did they call me names? Why have I been dishonored? Why did they tormented me? Why did they beat me?”

These testimonies make it possible to assess the events taking place in Ukraine today as threatening not only religious equality, but also peace in the country. The use of the religious factor to incite religious hatred is unacceptable and inhuman, it can lead to dire consequences for the next generations.

Back in October 2018, four United Nations Special Rapporteurs (the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief) sent a communication to the Government of Ukraine regarding the investigation of violation of the rights of believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Unfortunately, so far the government has not responded to the communication³. The above-mentioned report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights also contains unequivocal inferences about violations of the rights of believers of our denomination, as well as gives recommendations for their elimination by the Government of Ukraine and the international community.

All the above testifies to the fact that today in Ukraine we have a full-scale religion-driven systematic conflict and confrontation between several communities of people. The state power continues to fuel this division, hoping to get a temporary political benefits, thus ignoring the illness of the society, the name of which is hatred and religious enmity.

The Parliament of Ukraine does not refrain from passing laws that baselessly mark the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as hostile to the society. For instance, the new Law No. 2662-VIII of December 20, 2018, requires that our religious organizations change their name. Thus, the state authorities oblige our religious communities to abandon their unique historical name and include in their Statutes information on our alleged affiliation with the aggressor state. Thus, the government, ignoring the norms of international law, seeks to provoke the population of the country against our denomination and to sow the seeds of animosity towards our believers.

It has become obvious that the state structures are openly lobbying the interests of the new religious structure – the the Orthodox Church of Ukraine – to the extent of the abuse of power and coercive illegal pressure on the Orthodox believers.

As a result of these obvious violence against the largest religious denomination of Ukraine, the Holy Synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church made a series of statements on the violation of the rights of Orthodox believers in its official decisions of March 14, 2017⁴, December 7, 2018⁵, September 25, 2018⁶.

¹ <https://spzh.news/ua/news/60914-nastojately-v-baranovke-vynuzhdeny-obratitysya-za-pomoshhyju-ko-vsemu-miru>

² <https://spzh.news/ru/news/60841-izbitaja-aktivistom-pcu-maty-geroja-ato-podala-zajavlenije-v-policiju>

³ <http://news.church.ua/2019/03/19/zayava-predstavnictva-upc-pri-jevropejskix-mizhnarodnix-organizacijax-shhodo-komunikaciji-specialnix-dopovidachiv-oon-stosovno-porushen-prav-viruyuchix-upc/>

⁴ <http://sinod.church.ua/2018/04/26/zhurnali-zasidannya-svyashhennogo-sinodu-ukrajinskoji-pravoslavnoji-cerkvi-vid-14-bereznja-2018-roku/>

On February 18, 2019, in the capacity of the head of the Representative Office of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to European International Organizations, I had to turn to officials of the UN, OSCE and other international organizations with a public video-address about religion-based violations in Ukraine, since the exacerbation of the situation will inevitably undermine religious peace in the country⁷.

In connection with the above, I urge the OSCE, diplomats and representatives of international organizations to use their full competence and authority to halt human rights violations in Ukraine.

Thank you very much for your attention!

Bishop Victor (Kotsaba)
Head of the Representative Office of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church
to European International Organisations

More details on the matter are available in our resource materials on the websites of the UN and OSCE:

Written statements submitted by the public organization “Public Advocacy”, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status Human Rights Council within the fortieth session, 25 February-22 March 2019:

1. *On violent seizures of religious buildings and forceful changes in the composition of the administrative bodies of the legal entities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.*
Link: <http://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/40/NGO/71>
2. *Signs of religion-based genocide preparation in Ukraine: Believers of the Ukrainian orthodox church as victims of the state power.*
Link: <http://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/40/NGO/69>
3. *On violations of the rights of believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by the actions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Constantinople and the responsibility of the Patriarch Bartholomew for massive violations of the human rights in Ukraine.*
Link: <http://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/40/NGO/72>
4. *On the International tendency to violations of the Right to freedom of religion in Ukraine, Montenegro and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.*
Link: <http://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/40/NGO/68>

Statement of Bishop Victor (Kotsaba), Head of Representative Office of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church at International Organizations at the OSCE Supplementary Meeting on Human Dimension, 22-23 June 2017, Vienna, Hofburg Session 1

Link: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/325191?download=true>

Statement By Head of the Representation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to European International Organizations, Bishop Victor (Kotsaba), at the OSCE Human Dimension Meeting on 11-22.09.2017 in Warsaw.

Link: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/341051?download=true>

⁵ <http://sinod.church.ua/2018/12/07/zhurnali-zasidannya-svyashhennogo-sinodu-ukrajinskoji-pravoslavnoji-cerkvi-vid-7-grudnya-2018-roku/>

⁶ <http://sinod.church.ua/2018/09/25/zhurnali-zasidannya-svyashhennogo-sinodu-ukrajinskoji-pravoslavnoji-cerkvi-vid-25-veresnya-2018-roku/>

⁷ <http://news.church.ua/2019/02/18/zvernennya-golovi-predstavnictva-upc-pri-jevropejskix-mizhnarodnix-organizacijax-do-oficijnix-osib-oon-obsje-jes-ta-inshix-krajn-u-zvyazku-z-faktami-masovix-porushen-prav-lyudini-v-ukrajini-ta-re>