

Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations as a Voice for Justice and Humanity during the Russian Invasion

MAKSYM VASIN*

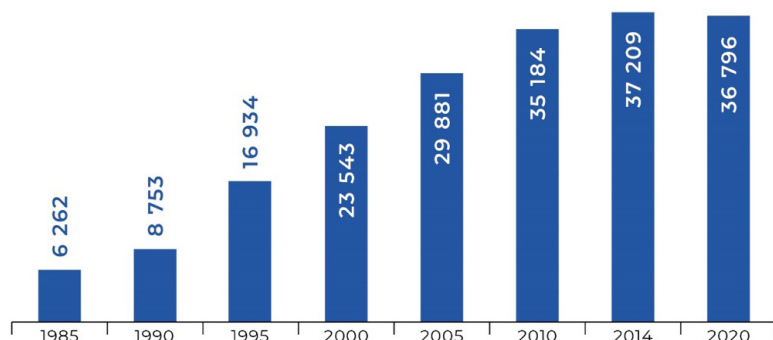
The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has prompted a critical examination of the church's role as a social institution during times of war. During such circumstances, national and global religious leaders are typically expected to spearhead peacebuilding initiatives focused on saving civilians, protecting critical infrastructure, and mitigating the potential for widespread destruction and humanitarian crises. In this case, however, the Kremlin has actively used the Russian Orthodox Church as well as an array of religious figures to justify Russian aggression and legitimize actions that amount to genocide against the Ukrainian people. In contrast, the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations has assumed the role of a moral guide during the war by condemning, with remarkably unity, Russian war crimes and the destructive ideology of Russkiy mir (the Russian world), and instead advocating for a humane approach and proposing peacebuilding initiatives. This paper details the scope and character of the Council's activities carried out in wartime, providing numerous illustrative examples.

Keywords: *Ukraine, Interfaith Dialogue, Interfaith Cooperation, Peacebuilding, Russian Aggression, Russian-Ukrainian War, International Relations*

Introduction

Ukrainian independence in 1991 ushered in an era of genuine religious freedom in place of the repressive policies of the Soviet era. These democratic transformations facilitated a rapid expansion of the country's religious communities and networks. In the 30 years since gaining independence, the number of religious organizations in Ukraine has surged, multiplying at least fourfold. As of 2020, there were approximately 37,000 religious organizations, compared to 8,700 in 1990.

* Dr. Maksym Vasin, Ph.D. in Law, Executive Director at Institute for Religious Freedom (Ukraine); Researcher at LYNC, and Religious Freedom Expert at Mission Eurasia (United States), mv@irf.in.ua.



(Data from the Razumkov Center and the Ukrainian state body for religious affairs¹)

While the numbers are remarkable, they may not even capture the true scope of the country's religious diversity, as Ukrainian legislation provides religious communities with the freedom to operate and extensive rights to practice and propagate their faith, all without the necessity of state registration. Furthermore, these communities are not obligated to notify state authorities of their formation or location.²

While Russia, beginning in 1997, was restricting the freedoms of religious organizations and gradually bringing all religious activity under state control, religious pluralism was flourishing in Ukraine, and the legal principle of equality of all religious organizations and faiths before the law was being strengthened.³ Newly-formed religious minorities were entitled to the same rights by law as well-established historical churches. These included non-profit status, exemption from land and real estate taxes, as well as reduced prices for utilities such as electricity and heating. Although religious minorities have likely encountered some difficulties at

¹ Razumkov Center, "Tserkovno-relihiyna sytuatsiya i derzhavno-konfesiyni vidnosyny v Ukraini" ["Church-religious situation and state-denominational relations in Ukraine"], *National Security and Defence*, no. 1–2 (2011): 4; State Service of Ukraine on Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience, "Zvit pro merezhu relihiynykh orhanizatsiy [Report on the network of religious organizations]," <https://dess.gov.ua/religion/>, accessed June 20, 2023. The data for 2020 doesn't include the number of religious organizations in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, which has been under Russian occupation since 2014, and doesn't accurately reflect the state of the religious network in the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

² Parliament of Ukraine, "Zakon Ukrainy pro svobodu sovisti ta relihiyni orhanizatsiyi" ["Law of Ukraine on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations"], Article 8, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/987-12>, accessed June 20, 2023.

³ *Ibidem*, Article 5.

the local level, overarching state religious policy has contributed to the further development of religious pluralism in Ukraine. The government has abandoned legislative initiatives intended to limit religious freedom in favour of increased state control, like those introduced in Russia. No Orthodox jurisdiction in Ukraine has yet succeeded in establishing itself as a state church or obtaining a state-linked monopoly, a favorable contrast to the close relationship between the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate.⁴

The Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (UCCRO), founded in late 1996 and comprising thirteen religious associations, has made an important contribution to preserving religious freedom.⁵ The Council currently includes sixteen religious associations as well as an interchurch organization. These include the country's two major Orthodox churches (the Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate, and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which gained autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2019), the Greek Catholic Church, the Roman Catholic Church, eight associations of evangelical churches encompassing various denominations (Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, Lutherans, and other minority churches), the Armenian Apostolic Church, a Jewish union, and two Muslim religious administrations. Thus, the Council currently represents over 95% of the religious network in Ukraine.⁶

The activities of UCCRO have not always been as dynamic and effective as they are today. Initially operating under the State Committee on Religious Affairs of Ukraine, it was tasked with managing agenda and organizational matters. Following the success of the Orange Revolution at the end of 2004, democratic transformations took place not only within government but across society as a whole. In 2005, a government representative resigned from the Council, leading to the organization of a permanent Secretariat to handle organizational matters. This Secretariat

⁴ Tymofii Brik and José Casanova, "Thirty Years of Religious Pluralism in Ukraine," in *From "the Ukraine" to Ukraine: A Contemporary History, 1991–2021*, eds. Matthew Rojansky, Georgiy Kasianov and Mykhailo Minakov (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2021), 249–82.

⁵ Maksym Vasin, ed., *Vseukrayinska Rada Tserkov i relihiynykh orhanizatsiy. Zbirnyk dokumentiv 1996–2021 [Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations. Collection of documents 1996–2021]* (Kyiv: Media Svit, 2021), 22.

⁶ Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations [*Hereafter used with the abbreviation UCCRO*], "25 years of interdenominational cooperation for the benefit of Ukraine," <https://vrciro.ua/en/council/info>, accessed June 20, 2023.

was composed of representatives from religious associations that were members of the Council.

Autonomy and independence from the government have been pivotal factors driving the activities of UCCRO. Over the years, it has evolved into an influential civil society actor in the country and gained increasingly visibility in the international arena. In Ukraine, the Council holds regular meetings with the President, the Parliament's Chairman, the Prime Minister, the leaders of ministries and parliamentary factions, and representatives of the judiciary. In 2019, the Council received state registration as a non-governmental organization without legal entity status, which was a response to criticism from secular activists about the participation of religious leaders in discussions of legislative initiatives and socio-political issues.

Internationally, on behalf of the Council, Ukrainian religious leaders often meet with leaders and government officials of various countries (such as the European Union, Israel, the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, etc.), global religious leaders (including Pope John Paul II, Pope Francis, the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches, etc.), and representatives of intergovernmental and international organizations.⁷

A unique feature of UCCRO is decision-making by consensus. This approach gives greater weight to the statements and decisions of the Council by taking into account the position of religious minorities and not only that of the country's large and well-established churches. The Council's regulations explicitly uphold the principles of "respect for the internal guidelines and traditions of all religious organizations officially operating in Ukraine."⁸ Furthermore, "the Council does not interfere in the internal affairs of religious and public organizations,"⁹ a commitment allowing the interfaith institution to remain operational even in cases of internal disagreements within a prevent the Council from serving as a mediator in resolving misunderstandings between different denominations, especially the current tension between the Orthodox Church of Ukraine which gained autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church which is canonically affiliated with

⁷ Vasin, ed., *Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations. A guide to 25 years of achievements* (Kyiv: Maxi Production, 2021), 4–5.

⁸ Vasin, *Vseukrayinska Rada Tserkov 1 [Ukrainian Council of Churches]*, 24.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). However, the Council avoids assuming the role of mediator in interfaith relations. What's more, it refrains from assessing and intervening in schisms and internal conflicts within a specific church or religious association, and explicitly states that it does not aim at ecumenism.

For example, despite the proven instances of abuse, collaboration, and high treason by certain bishops and priests of UOC-MP,¹⁰ this Church maintains its status as a full member of the Council, participating in its activities on an equal basis with other member organizations. However, there were several instances in 2023 when representatives of UOC-MP did not participate in Council events. For example, on October 23, the Ukrainian government prevented a church representative from participating in the Council meeting with the Prime Minister of Ukraine, Denys Shmyhal.¹¹ Conversely, there are times when UOC-MP, of its own accord abstains from engaging in the interfaith activities of the Council. In these cases, the church sends ordinary priests or representatives without any clerical rank to high-level meetings instead of the customary figure of Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovsky) or another bishop. A similar situation arose regarding the Council delegation's trip to the United States in Autumn 2023.¹²

UCCRO has become one of the most influential institutions of civil society in Ukraine due both to its active involvement in the social and political life of the country as well as its sustained advocacy for strengthening church-state relations. This growth has been facilitated, in part, by the volunteer-based expert and organizational support extended to the Council's members its Secretariat by the Kyiv-based Institute for Religious

¹⁰ Ukrainian News, "SSU Finds Millions of Cash and Identified Russian Citizens During Searches of Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and Other Churches," <https://ukranews.com/en/news/896990-ssu-finds-millions-of-cash-and-identified-russian-citizens-during-searches-of-kyiv-pechersk-lavra>, accessed June 20, 2023.

¹¹ Dep. for External Church Relations of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, "Statement of the DECR of the UOC on preventing the participation of representatives of the UOC in AUCCRO for a meeting with the Prime Minister of Ukraine," <https://vzcz.church.ua/2023/10/24/statement-of-the-decr-of-the-uoc-on-preventing-the-participation-of-representatives-of-the-uoc-in-auccro-for-a-meeting-with-the-prime-minister-of-ukraine/?lang=en>, accessed November 15, 2023.

¹² Peter Smith, "On a US tour, Ukrainian faith leaders plead for continued support against the Russian invasion," <https://apnews.com/article/faith-leaders-delegation-ukraine-support-01af17d0824ec75aa82a6e6562a783da>, accessed November 15, 2023.

Freedom.¹³ Over the past two decades, the Council has drawn attention to the issue of fair democratic elections and the rule of law and justice by advocating for effective judicial system reform and by combatting the preconditions for corruption. A separate area of the Council's activities is the protection of family values, including the promotion of marriage, responsible parenthood, and a culture of orphan adoption. These efforts have created more favorable conditions for preventing pregnancy termination, combating domestic violence, and opposition to the concept of gender self-identification.¹⁴

Since 2014, the Council has paid particular attention to countering Russian aggression and propaganda based on the notion of *Russkiy mir* (the Russian world) which has sought to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty, cultural heritage, freedom of religion, and religious pluralism.¹⁵ This paper will examine how the Council responded to the outset of Russian aggression in 2014 and the reaction of Ukrainian religious leaders when the Kremlin decided to escalate the ongoing armed conflict through a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Faced with continuous Russian missile attacks and tactics aimed at terrorizing the civilian population, the Council's activities have been geared towards preventing massive civilian casualties, preserving critical infrastructure, and averting large-scale humanitarian disasters. The paper provides a comprehensive overview and analysis of the interfaith dimension of the resistance to Russian aggression. It also includes a comparative analysis of the position of Russian religious leaders and interreligious institutions, assessing their ability to speak out against aggressive war and defend the sanctity of human life.

Initial responses to Russian aggression against Ukraine

Russia first invaded Ukraine in February 2014, seizing an opportunity presented by the weakened state of Ukrainian authorities following the successful Revolution of Dignity and the subsequent escape of pro-Russian

¹³ Institute for Religious Freedom, "Our goals and projects," <https://irf.in.ua/i/1>, accessed June 20, 2023.

¹⁴ Vasin, *Vseukrayinska Rada Tserkov [Ukrainian Council of Churches]*, 50–391.

¹⁵ Vasin, Dmytro Koval, Igor A. Kozlovskyy and Anastasia Zaiets, *Russian attacks on religious freedom in Ukraine. Research, analytics, recommendations* (Kyiv: Institute for Religious Freedom, 2022), 32–4.

former president, Viktor Yanukovych.¹⁶ With the Parliament's Chairman assuming the role of acting president, Ukraine was able to break free from corrupt and totalitarian rule and resume its democratic and constitutional course towards European integration.¹⁷ During this socio-political crisis, UCCRO "expressed its support for the legitimate state authorities of Ukraine and called on them to ensure the full restoration of the constitutional order and the establishment of political, economic and other fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens as soon as possible."¹⁸ At the same time, religious leaders condemned any manifestations of separatism fomented by Russia in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine. They called for the preservation of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders, asserting, "The territorial integrity of Ukraine, whose independence was granted to us by God, is a value of our people. Therefore, we have no right to allow Ukraine's division, because it is a sin before God and future generations of our people."¹⁹

Ukrainian society faced an additional challenge with Russian provocations and attempts to sow discord representatives of different national minorities and denominations. Russian propaganda sought to justify its armed aggression by claiming to protect Orthodox believers of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine from alleged harassment.²⁰ In response to this threat, UCCRO called on all religious communities and government authorities to exert every effort in preserving religious peace in Ukraine:

In no case should confrontation on religious grounds be allowed. Our large Ukrainian family must be united in diversity. In a free state, everyone has the right to express their religious beliefs freely and not to interfere with the free expression of other views. The state should be

¹⁶ Lucy Minicozzi, "Russia's annexation of Crimea," <https://kyivindependent.com/russias-annexation-of-crimea/>, accessed June 20, 2023.

¹⁷ Natalia Zinets and Alessandra Prentice, "Ukraine sets European course after ouster of Yanukovich," <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine/ukraine-sets-european-course-after-ouster-of-yanukovich-idUKBREA1G0OU20140223>, accessed June 20, 2023.

¹⁸ Vasin, *Vseukrayinska Rada Tserkov [Ukrainian Council of Churches]*, 181.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Alexandra Novitchkova, Mariia Tomak, Svitlana Valko and Victoria Cooper, *When God becomes the weapon. Persecution based on religious beliefs in the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine* (Kyiv: Center for Civil Liberties, 2015), 5.

the guarantor of religious freedom, and we are ready to help the state to realize this important constitutional function.²¹

Despite the efforts of Ukrainian religious leaders aimed at de-escalating the armed conflict, on March 1, 2014, the parliament of the Russian Federation, upon the proposal of President Putin, gave formal consent to the use of Russian troops in Ukraine. By that point, the occupation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea was already underway. Immediately, UCCRO issued a statement signed by the then chairman, Metropolitan Onufriy, acting head of UOC-MP, condemning the Russian invasion and the war launched by the Kremlin:

The deployment of military forces from another state onto the territory of Ukraine is a threat not only to our country but also to peace and tranquillity on the European continent as a whole. We call on the Russian authorities to refrain from military and other interference in Ukraine's internal affairs that is not sanctioned by international law and bilateral agreements. The Russian authorities must recognize their responsibility before God and humanity for the potentially irreparable consequences of a military conflict on Ukrainian soil.²²

Instead, throughout 2014, the Kremlin continued to implement its plan to annex the peninsula of Crimea and weaken Ukraine through the military occupation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, where self-proclaimed "people's republics" were established. On the one hand, the Russian authorities used militant groups (whom they called the Russian Orthodox Army) to occupy the eastern regions of Ukraine, targeting religious leaders of various denominations for their pro-Ukrainian position and condemnation of the war. These forces kidnapped, arbitrarily imprisoned, tortured and killed evangelical pastors and priests from churches not affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate, and also seized houses of worship and seminaries to repurpose as military bases.²³ Simultaneously, Russian propaganda persistently sought to convince the international community, including at various high-level international events, of the alleged brutal persecution of priests and believers by the new Kyiv authorities within the Moscow Patriarchate.²⁴ In response to this, UCCRO

²¹ Vasin, *Vseukrayinska Rada Tserkov [Ukrainian Council of Churches]*, 182.

²² *Ibidem*, 186.

²³ Novitchkova et al., *When God becomes the weapon*, 11–20.

²⁴ Pravoslavie.ru, "Moscow Patriarchate tells OSCE about persecutions of canonical Orthodox Church adherents in Ukraine," <https://pravoslavie.ru/80528.html>, accessed

issued a warning against attempts to incite interfaith hatred in Crimea and other regions of Ukraine under any pretext, and urged against involving churches and clergy in direct violent confrontation:

We appeal to the Ukrainian authorities, as well as to the current officials in Crimea, to do everything possible to prevent violent acts in interfaith relations. We also urge all our faithful and supporters not to succumb to provocations, not to participate in violent acts against adherents of other faiths, not to contribute to the incitement of interfaith hatred, and to respect the freedom of religion of every person.²⁵

Furthermore, the Council appealed to both Ukrainian and foreign media not to participate in the justification of foreign aggression, the incitement of hatred against Ukraine, and the violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Religious leaders drew the attention of the Ukrainian public and the international community to the problem of “information wars that are being waged both between countries and peoples, and within our country, when outright lies brutally replace the truth.”²⁶

Later that year, in July 2014, the Council condemned any religious persecution and discrimination against believers in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions by the Russian occupation authorities. It also denounced the seizure of church buildings and other religious premises and their use in the armed conflict, irrespective of the motives. At the same time, Ukrainian religious leaders persisted in their efforts to dissuade the Russian-backed separatists from further escalating the conflict. They called on “all those who illegally hold weapons to lay them down and stop the bloodshed.”²⁷

In the early months of the Russian aggression, Ukrainian religious leaders maintained hope of persuading their Russian counterparts that the war was unjust and groundless, defended by the Kremlin through implausible propaganda fostering separatism, exploiting national identity, and fomenting religious and linguistic hatred in Ukraine. UCCRO endorsed the initiative of the Norwegian Bible Society to hold an in-person meeting of Ukrainian and Russian religious leaders in Oslo. The goal was to establish an informal channel for communication between different denominations to foster understanding and reconciliation between the

June 20, 2023.

²⁵ Vasin, *Vseukrayinska Rada Tserkov* [Ukrainian Council of Churches], 188–89.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 192.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 190.

two peoples. This peacebuilding initiative was took place from September 9–11, 2014, and included several events with opportunities for informal communication and a public roundtable discussion. During these events, the Council's delegation testified to the high level of religious freedom in Ukraine and refuted accusations of harassment allegedly endured by the Russian-speaking population and believers of the Moscow Patriarchate. Ukrainian delegates also cited examples of the brutal persecution of Ukrainian priests and believers in the occupied territories, where Russian-backed militants attempted to establish an "Orthodox state" and implement the "Russian World" ideology by force, killing and torturing representatives of Ukrainian religious minorities.²⁸ As a illustration, Oleksandr Pavenko, the head pastor of the Transfiguration of the Lord Pentecostal Church, testified about the murder of his two adult sons and two other church ministers by Russian troops in Sloviansk, Donetsk region.²⁹

Despite the personal testimonies of Ukrainian delegates, Russian religious leaders remained unwilling to acknowledge the true causes of the war and refused to condemn the Kremlin's aggressive actions in the Donbas region and the occupation of the Crimea. The joint communiqué issued at the end of the Oslo meeting noted that the participants had "common and different points of view on the causes, events and consequences of the current crisis in some respects."³⁰ Nevertheless, the final document contained several important statements aimed at ensuring compliance with international humanitarian law during this armed conflict:

We urge each party to the conflict to avoid, under any circumstances, actions that degrade human dignity, to avoid the use of torture, to prevent abductions (including for ransom), and to counteract looting. As religious leaders, we especially draw attention to respecting the right to freedom of conscience in the conflict zone. Violent actions against the clergy and believers, churches and houses of worship

²⁸ Vasin and Anna Zaiets, *Religious Freedom at Gunpoint: Russian Terror in the Occupied Territories of Eastern Ukraine* (Kyiv: Institute for Religious Freedom, 2018), 5–13.

²⁹ RISU, "Militants in Donetsk region plagued to death two deacons and two laymen of the Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith," https://risu.ua/en/militants-in-donetsk-region-plagued-to-death-two-deacons-and-two-laymen-of-the-church-of-christians-of-evangelical-faith_n69765, accessed June 20, 2023.

³⁰ Vasin, *Vseukrayinska Rada Tserkov [Ukrainian Council of Churches]*, 194.

of any denominations operating in Donetsk and Luhansk regions are unacceptable.³¹

In certain areas of eastern Ukraine and Crimea, UCCRO continued to serve as a unified voice for religious communities in the years following the outset of the armed conflict. It drew attention to the humanitarian aspects of the ongoing war, encouraging Ukrainians to volunteer and provide assistance to those defending the country, residents of the eastern regions, and internally displaced persons. In particular, the Council supported the volunteer movement among Ukrainians and called on the government to facilitate closer cooperation between government agencies and volunteers in collecting and distributing humanitarian aid, declaring, “No one should be afraid of any competition, because good deeds are done not for glory or praise, but for the good of one’s neighbors.”³²

Beginning in 2014, Ukrainian religious leaders found themselves confronting the challenge of countering Russian propaganda, which was now being disseminated from the pulpit in Russia. Instead of “testifying to the truth and serving to achieve peace,” as proclaimed at the Oslo meeting,³³ Russian religious leaders became a mouthpiece for the Kremlin, justifying the atrocities of the Russian army, spreading narratives about an alleged “fratricidal civil war”, and fomenting religious hatred in Ukraine.³⁴ Patriarch Kirill of Moscow tried to absolve Russia of responsibility for the ongoing bloodshed and brutal religious persecution in the occupied Ukrainian territories.

Later, during Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church openly justified Russian aggression and the genocide of the Ukrainian people, calling the brutal actions of Russian soldiers in Ukraine “a feat.”³⁵ Moreover, Patriarch Kirill encour-

³¹ *Ibidem*, 194–95.

³² *Ibidem*, 196.

³³ *Ibidem*, 194.

³⁴ Russian Orthodox Church, “Obrashcheniye Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla k Predstoyatelyam Pomestnykh Pravoslavnykh Tserkvey v svyazi s situatsiyey na Ukraine” [“Address of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill to the Primates of the Local Orthodox Churches in connection with the situation in Ukraine”], <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3704024.html>, accessed June 20, 2023.

³⁵ Idem, “Slovo Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla v Nedelyu 4-yu Velikogo posta posle Liturgii v glavnom khrame Vooruzhennykh sil RF” [“Word of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill on the 4th week of Lent after the Liturgy in the main church of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation”], <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5914188.html>, accessed June 20, 2023.

aged Russian soldiers to continue the invasion, proclaiming in his Sunday sermon that their deaths in the line of duty were “a sacrifice that washes away all sins.”³⁶ This heretical view, equating the death of Russian invaders, murderers, and rapists of civilians with the sacrifice of Christ, aimed to construct the narrative of a holy war in the Russian information space and silence those who questioned the invasion. The ideology of the Russian World became (or has always been) a political instrument of the Kremlin employed as a means of aggression, with the Russian Orthodox Church publicly cooperating with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the military to a extent not seen with any other country of their “canonical territory.”³⁷

Interfaith councils exist in Russia as well, but they lack self-governance and are entirely dependent on the Kremlin. For example, the Council for Interaction with Religious Associations under the Russian Federation’s President is headed by the Russian President’s Chief of Staff. Its membership is approved by decrees of the Russian President and includes representatives of the Russian government in addition to religious leaders of various denominations.³⁸ Such council cannot serve as a moral authority for Russian society and is unlikely to have an independent opinion that contradicts the position of the current regime.

Another interfaith institution, the Interreligious Council of Russia, has the status of a non-governmental organization and brings together representatives of traditional religions for cooperation. Despite certain similarities with UCCRO, such as formal self-governance and the presence of its own secretariat, the Interreligious Council of Russia also serves as a proxy of the Kremlin, creating the illusion of religious freedom and religious pluralism. This is primarily because the head of this council is Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, who demonstrates absolute loyalty

³⁶ SOTA, “Patriarkh Kirill na traditsionnoy voskresnoy propovedi zayavil, chto smert na voyne s Ukrainoy smyvayet vse grekhi i fakticheski sravniv mobilizovannykh s Iisusom Khristom” [“Patriarch Kyrill in his traditional Sunday sermon said that death in the war with Ukraine washes away all sins and actually compared the mobilized to Jesus Christ”], <https://t.me/sotaproject/46913>, accessed June 20, 2023.

³⁷ Pavlo Smytsnyuk, “The War in Ukraine as a Challenge for Religious Communities: Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Prospects for Peacemaking,” *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Theologia Catholica Latina*, no. 1 (January–June 2023), 26–70, 32.

³⁸ The President of Russia website, “Sovety pri Prezidente” [“Councils under the President”], <http://kremlin.ru/structure/councils#institution-17>, accessed November 15, 2023.

to and dependence on the Russian regime. Moreover, in a meeting held by President Putin with religious leaders in the Kremlin on October 25, 2023, he thanked the representatives of the Interreligious Council of Russia for their support of the Russian Armed Forces, their support of all those who “are fighting for Russia as part of a special military operation,” and for their propagandist work.³⁹

Given that Russia has total state control over all religious activities, it is impossible for the aforementioned interfaith institutions and religious leaders to voice opposition to the war, condemn Russian aggression, speak out against the Kremlin’s imperial ambitions, and denounce the genocide of Ukrainian civilians. The question of what position to take regarding the war has presented a challenge for various churches and religious groups in Russia, Ukraine, and other countries, leading to disagreements and a breakdown in ecclesial communication.⁴⁰ This applies not only to Orthodox parishes in Ukraine and the Russian Orthodox Church, but also between the Ukrainian and Russian Protestant churches, Jewish and Muslim religious associations, and other denominations. The Russian invasion has prompted many Ukrainian religious communities to recognize the need to sever ties with Russian religious centres and their members influenced by Russian propaganda.

In January 2023, the Ukrainian government submitted draft Law # 8371 to prevent the influence of Russian religious centers on Ukrainian religious life, expecting UOC-MP to definitively sever its ties to the Moscow Patriarchate.⁴¹ The draft law also aims to counteract the further spreading of the Russian narrative which alleges that “canonical Orthodoxy” is subject to persecution in Ukraine, a notion serving as a religiously motivated justification for the war alongside generally anti-Western bellicose rhetoric.⁴²

³⁹ Interreligious Council of Russia, “Vstrecha Prezidenta Rossii V.V. Putina s predstavitelami religioznykh obyedineniy” [“Meeting of Russian President V.V. Putin with representatives of religious associations”], http://interreligious.ru/news/news-council/news-council_678.html, accessed November 15, 2023.

⁴⁰ Liudmyla Fylypovych, “The Realities of Current Orthodox Life in Ukraine during the Russian-Ukrainian War,” *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Theologia Catholica Latina*, no. 1 (January–June 2023): 7–25, 8.

⁴¹ UCCRO, “Not a single church is banned in Ukraine, unlike the Russian-occupied territories – UCCRO delegation stated,” <https://vrciro.ua/en/news/2023-uccro-visit-to-washington>, accessed November 15, 2023.

⁴² Thomas Mark Németh, “Russlands Krieg gegen die Ukraine – eine Herausforderung für die Orthodoxie,” in *“Nicht Konkurrenten, sondern Brüder...” Auf dem Weg zu ei-*

The intensification of active hostilities and the consequent mobilization of the civilian population of Ukraine has brought attention to the issue of freedom of conscience and created the need for a theologically justified defense of the homeland. With its statements about an “internecine fratricidal war,” Russian propaganda aimed to weaken the resistance of the Ukrainian people and persuade them to accept the occupation. In response, Ukrainian religious leaders felt a responsibility to dispel doubts among their followers and the wider society by emphasizing that defending the country from an unjust and unreasonable invasion is the duty of every citizen, regardless of their religion:

We recognize the right of individuals and the state to defend themselves against aggression, against those who have illegally taken up arms and plotted evil, sowing death, grief, and tears on the Ukrainian land of Donbas. Therefore, we call on believers, according to their religious beliefs and capabilities, to participate in the defense of the Motherland. For a common victory, some may join the army; others may support the army as chaplains, volunteers, in hospitals, and help the families of military personnel, injured civilians in Donbas, and internally displaced persons.⁴³

This statement took into account that the doctrine of some denominations prohibits the use of weapons, and thus encouraged believers to contribute to the resistance to the Russian invasion in any way they considered permissible. Today, the Council continues to make efforts to secure believers’ rights to alternative (non-military) service, even under martial law, advocating for these changes with the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine.

The Council’s influential voice persists in Ukrainian society, directing attention to complex social issues and humanitarian challenges associated with the ongoing war. Religious leaders have repeatedly called on Ukrainian politicians and state leaders to put aside their differences and “join forces to defend the homeland, to fight the main internal evil - corruption, to carry out the necessary economic and political reforms for the benefit of the entire Ukrainian people.”⁴⁴ Before the full-scale invasion, when much of Ukraine lived in peace, the Council highlighted the plight

nem neuen Miteinander von orthodoxer und katholischer Kirche, ed. Dietmar Schon (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet Verlag 2023), 11–31.

⁴³ Vasin, *Vseukrayinska Rada Tserkov [Ukrainian Council of Churches]*, 197.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

of fellow citizens living in war zones and suffering from Russian aggression: “There are still unacceptable human rights violations, hostage-taking and torture, religiously motivated persecution, and the harassment of religious minorities in eastern Ukraine, which must finally stop and be reflected in the reports of the OSCE Special Monitoring mission.”⁴⁵

In 2016, the Council held an offsite meeting in Kramatorsk, Donetsk region, reaching out to those in occupied territories as well as those in the “gray zone,” who had endured the occupation and liberation. The Council expressed its readiness to serve them and help “heal the wounds caused by this war.” Responding to Russian religious leaders’ engagement in war propaganda, the Council stated that “religion should not be used as a tool for artificially inciting hatred and escalating the conflict, but should be a source of peace, understanding, and love.”⁴⁶

Efforts to release prisoners of war and political prisoners

Since 2014, a primary focus of interfaith humanitarian activity in Ukraine has been the release of prisoners of war and political detainees held by the Russian military and occupation authorities as hostages, often in inhumane conditions in violation of international humanitarian law.⁴⁷ Much of UCCRO’s international activities have been dedicated to this cause. The Council has sought support from world religious leaders and interfaith organizations, both abroad and in Russia, for years. Ukrainian religious leaders have even personally appealed to President Putin, urging humane treatment and mercy for prisoners of war, including arbitrarily detained Ukrainian priests and civic activists. In 2016, in its appeals to the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches and the Interreligious Council of Russia, the Council underscored the immorality of torturing prisoners of war and hostages and using them as leverage against the Ukrainian authorities:

Humans must not turn into beasts that play with a captured victim for fun, choking him almost to death and then letting him go for a short time to prolong his torment. The torture of hostages and prisoners,

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 201–02.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 202.

⁴⁷ Matilda Bogner, “More than 8 months into Russia’s armed attack on Ukraine and the ensuing escalation in hostilities the UN reports widespread abuse, torture of prisoners of war,” <https://ukraine.un.org/en/207332-more-8-months-russia%E2%80%99s-armed-attack-ukraine-and-ensuing-escalation-hostilities-un-reports>, accessed June 20, 2023.

horrific conditions of detention, and delays in the process of release are precisely the kind of atrocities that are often seen in some regions of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in eastern Ukraine, which have been engulfed in military conflict for more than two years. A world filled with pain and suffering needs acts of mercy.⁴⁸

This matter is addressed in the “Ukraine is Our Common Home,” Strategy for the Participation of Churches and Religious Organizations in Peacebuilding adopted in 2017 by the Council’s Commission on Social Service. The Strategy outlines peacekeeping measures and emphasizes collaborative actions across denominations to secure the release of hostages (prisoners of war) held by the Russian occupation authorities in Crimea and the eastern regions of Ukraine, as well as Ukrainians convicted in Russia on political charges.⁴⁹

In June 2018, all seventeen Council members personally signed an appeal to President Putin calling for the release of prisoners and hostages. This document contained a list of Ukrainian political prisoners held in Russia on trumped-up criminal charges and a list of prisoners of war awaiting exchange.⁵⁰ In December 2018, all Council members once again appealed to the President of Russia, requesting mercy for imprisoned Ukrainians. The plea was made as the Russian side had completely halted the process of exchanging prisoners of war throughout the year:

(...) we are talking about people who, according to numerous testimonies and findings of international organizations, endure harsh detention conditions, are subjected to torture, and have no access to medical care. Each day of their captivity causes serious damage to their health and profound distress upon their families and friends.⁵¹

These humanitarian appeals on the part of the Council were somewhat successful, as they strengthened the efforts of the Ukrainian government and international human rights organizations involved in organizing the exchange of prisoners of war and improving their detention conditions. Eventually, in 2019, the exchange of prisoners of war resumed, and a

⁴⁸ Vasin, *Vseukrayinska Rada Tserkov [Ukrainian Council of Churches]*, 199.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 330–40.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 204–05.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 206–07.

number of the Kremlin's political prisoners were released from Russian prisons.⁵²

On February 15, 2022, UCCRO issued an appeal to mercy, again raising the issue of releasing all detainees for humanitarian reasons. The primary objective of this initiative was to forestall Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and to de-escalate the existing armed conflict. In an appeal sent to both Presidents Putin and Zelenskyy, the Council called for "all possible diplomatic efforts to avert this grievous bloodshed on our land, which will leave an indelible mark for generations, and instead to strive for a lasting, just peace between our countries."⁵³ The day before Russia's extensive invasion, the Council explicitly condemned President Putin's intentions to initiate a major war. Ukrainian religious cautioned against the profound consequences for his soul due to this crime:

We authoritatively and unanimously testify that the Ukrainian people do not want war, and we consider it a common duty of believers to prevent it before it is too late. God's commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," establishes the absolute sanctity of human life and underscores God's severe retribution for those who commit murder. A war of aggression is a grave transgression against the Almighty.⁵⁴

Regrettably, the Kremlin's decision to attack Kyiv and all of Ukraine, with the aim of extinguishing Ukrainian statehood and sovereignty, remained unaffected by these efforts. Likewise, the Council's earlier plea for "the resumption of the process of diplomatic settlement of the military conflict" and the implementation of "previously reached agreements on the introduction of a ceasefire" proved unsuccessful.⁵⁵ On February 24, 2022, Ukrainian territory widespread rocket attacks across all regions, marking the intrusion of the war into every Ukrainian home.

⁵² Olga Stryzhova, "Prymarnyy obmin. Yak Ukrayina zabyrala svoiykh, i chym tysne Rosiya" ["Phantom exchange. How Ukraine took away its own, and what Russia is pressuring"], <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30995454.html>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁵³ UCCRO, "The Council of Churches calls on Russia and Ukraine to exchange all prisoners of war as a step towards de-escalation," <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-calls-on-russia-and-ukraine-to-release-all-captives>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁵⁴ Idem, "Ukrainian Council of Churches calls on President Putin to stop the war," <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-calls-on-president-putin-to-stop-the-war>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁵⁵ Vasin, *Vseukrayinska Rada Tserkov [Ukrainian Council of Churches]*, 209.

Challenges for Ukrainian religious communities after February 2022

The anticipated swift advance of Russian forces to Kyiv in a three-day march did not in fact materialize, as the invading army encountered fierce resistance from the entire population of Ukraine.⁵⁶ However, extensive and bloody confrontations unfolded along significant sections of the frontline in the country's north, east, and south, and Russia's massive rocket attacks on residential areas and critical civilian infrastructure across the country triggered massive humanitarian crises in many regions. The invasion has disrupted the peaceful lives of innumerable families, forcing them to relocate to safer areas in astounding numbers: six million Ukrainians have become internally displaced, and another 8 million Ukrainian refugees have found themselves abroad.⁵⁷ Disturbingly, occupation authorities arbitrarily deported several thousand Ukrainian families and about 16,000 Ukrainian children to Russia for forced assimilation.⁵⁸ The brutality of the Russian military against the civilian population, coupled with these actions, demonstrate the genocidal motives behind Russia's aggression against Ukraine.⁵⁹ These circumstances have served as the basis for an investigation at the International Criminal Court in The Hague and the issuing of an international arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin as well as the Russian Ombudsman for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, as war criminals.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Paul Sonne, Isabelle Khurshudyan, Serhiy Morgunov and Kostiantyn Khudov, "Battle for Kyiv: Ukrainian valor, Russian blunders combined to save the capital," <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/interactive/2022/kyiv-battle-ukraine-survival/>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁵⁷ USA for UNHCR, "Ukraine emergency," <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁵⁸ Peter Beaumont, "I was so scared: the Ukrainian children taken to Russia for financial gain," <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/29/i-was-so-scared-the-ukrainian-children-taken-to-russia-for-financial-gain>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁵⁹ The New Lines Institute and The Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, "An Independent Legal Analysis of the Russian Federations Breaches of the Genocide Convention in Ukraine and the Duty to Prevent (May 2022)," <https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/An-Independent-Legal-Analysis-of-the-Russian-Federations-Breaches-of-the-Genocide-Convention-in-Ukraine-and-the-Duty-to-Prevent-1-2.pdf>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁶⁰ International Criminal Court, "Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova," <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>, accessed June 20, 2023.

At the outset of the war, UCCRO appealed to the people to “remain calm, not to panic, and to follow the orders of the Ukrainian state and military authorities.” The Council also expressed its support for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, blessed them for the defense of the homeland, and called on the religious and political leaders of the world to “do everything possible to stop the aggressor’s attack on Ukraine.”⁶¹ The next three months were pivotal for the survival of the Ukrainian state and the nation as a whole, as the Kremlin aimed to seize the entire country and carry out the “denazification” of the Ukrainian people (a euphemism for large-scale destruction).⁶² Russia employed tactics involving the terrorization of the civilian population through persistent rocket attacks, the deliberate destruction of critical infrastructure, cultural heritage, and religious sites, and the mass murder of civilians solely based on their Ukrainian identity.⁶³

Amidst the immense challenges, a majority of Ukrainian religious leaders chose to stand alongside their people. On March 2, 2022, under the initiative of UCCRO, a prayer event for the protection and preservation of Ukraine was held at St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv.⁶⁴ This interfaith event, occurring in the heart of the Ukrainian capital despite incessant Russian missile attacks, aimed to spiritually fortify the Ukrainian resistance and prevent the destruction of this 1000-year-old shrine, which the Council had warned about the day before.⁶⁵ Through these trying times, Ukrainian religious leaders have consistently provided pastoral support to their followers, frequently appealing to the international community to refute Russian propaganda and to extend military and humanitarian aid essential for Ukraine’s survival. Moreover, many religious communities of different denominations have turned into humanitarian hubs, orchestrating the evacuation of civilians from high-risk conflict zones. They have received and distributed humanitarian aid from other regions

⁶¹ UCCRO, “Ukrainian Council of Churches calls on President Putin”.

⁶² Paul Kirby, “Has Putin’s war failed and what does Russia want from Ukraine?,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56720589>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁶³ Vasin et al., *Russian attacks*, 4–5.

⁶⁴ UCCRO, “A prayer for Ukraine held in St Sophia Cathedral, despite the shelling of Kyiv with Russian missiles,” <https://vrciro.ua/en/events/uccro-prayer-for-ukraine-and-against-russian-aggression>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁶⁵ Idem, “Emergency address on the possibility of an aerial attack on Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv,” <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-emergency-address>, accessed June 20, 2023.

and abroad, forming extensive volunteer networks. These communities have also served as shelters for internally displaced persons by providing warmth during the winter and functioning as bomb shelters.⁶⁶

In the early months of the war, the Council repeatedly appealed to the international community to “take urgent measures to organize humanitarian corridors for the evacuation of residents from the areas occupied by Russian troops and those where active hostilities are ongoing.”⁶⁷ These appeals served as a reliable source of information for the global community about Ukraine’s most pressing humanitarian crises. Consequently, they prompted a swifter response from Western democratic states, NATO, the United Nations, other international organizations, and many donors on whom the Ukrainian people’s and their state’s survival depended. On March 3, 2022, the Council appealed to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the regional office of the Red Cross, the European Parliament, and members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The urgent plea sought to create humanitarian corridors in Ukraine for the evacuation of children and women: “Many people, including women, children and people with disabilities, have found themselves in life-threatening conditions due to lack of water, food, safe shelter and are constantly threatened by artillery shelling or air strikes.”⁶⁸

The Council made a similar appeal on April 16, 2022, calling for the creation of a humanitarian corridor to evacuate the civilian population of Mariupol, Donetsk region, which was suffering from massive bombing by Russian aircraft and the destruction of all vital infrastructure: “there is no drinking or any other water, no food and medicine supply, no heating and electricity, no medical care for people with chronic diseases and thousands of wounded from constant bombardment and shelling.”⁶⁹ The Council expressed its readiness to “fully assist in the functioning of such

⁶⁶ Ivan Rusyn, “War and the Church in Ukraine: Part 1,” <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/prayer/war-and-the-church-in-ukraine>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁶⁷ UCCRO, “Council of Churches calls to create the humanitarian corridors in Ukraine for evacuation of women and children,” <https://vciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-calls-to-create-humanitarian-corridors-in-ukraine-for-evacuation>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ Idem, “UCCRO Statement on the necessity of humanitarian corridors for Mariupol,” <https://vciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-statement-on-humanitarian-corridors-for-mariupol>, accessed June 20, 2023.

humanitarian corridors for Mariupol to avoid any provocations in the process of delivering humanitarian aid and evacuating civilians.”⁷⁰ In this context, the Council explored the possibility of having priests accompany the evacuation convoys to mitigate the risk of shelling by the Russian military.⁷¹

The Council has previously drawn the world’s attention to the particular brutality exhibited by the Russian military against civilians, emphasizing Russia’s flagrant violation of international humanitarian law:

In fact, Russia is waging the war against the civilian population of Ukraine, as it is targeting residential areas, schools, kindergartens, maternity homes, hospitals, and critical infrastructure necessary for the life of the civilian population with ballistic missiles, including from the territory of Belarus, and aircraft, using prohibited cluster and vacuum munitions.⁷²

Ukrainian religious leaders have also consistently appealed to the United Nations Secretary-General and global leaders to protect Ukraine’s airspace from constant rocket attacks targeting residential areas, energy facilities, and other critical civilian infrastructure.⁷³ In the first three weeks of the full-scale invasion alone, Russian troops destroyed more than 200 schools, 30 hospitals, and 1,500 residential buildings, including apartment buildings, either wholly or partially.⁷⁴ Therefore, on March 13, 2022, the Council reaffirmed its plea to the democratic world to protect the people of Ukraine from recurrent bombing and missile attacks:

UCCRO reiterates its call on world leaders, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, European Union, and NATO member states to take urgent measures to introduce a no-fly zone over the territory of Ukraine or to provide the Ukrainian army with modern air

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ Beaumont, Luke Harding and Jon Henley, “Russia accused of shelling Mariupol evacuation route as civilians flee Sumy,” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/08/ukraine-war-civilians-sumy-irpin-refugees-russia>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁷² UCCRO, “Statement on the shelling by the Russian invaders of civilian objects in Ukraine,” <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-appeal-on-russian-air-attacks-on-civil-infrastructure-of-ukraine>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁷³ Idem, “Council of Churches insists on introducing a no-fly zone over Ukraine,” <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-calls-for-no-fly-zone-under-ukraine>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁷⁴ Idem, “UCCRO Appeal on introduction of a no-fly zone over Ukraine and the response to humanitarian disasters in select regions,” <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-appeal-to-introduce-no-fly-zone-over-ukraine>, accessed June 20, 2023.

defense equipment and fighter aircraft that will protect Ukrainian civilians from regular bombing and missile attacks by Russian invaders.⁷⁵

Like a voice echoing in the wilderness, Ukrainian religious leaders repeatedly called for the provision of missile defense equipment to the Ukrainian army and the establishment of humanitarian corridors for the evacuation of residents of Kyiv, Mariupol, Melitopol, Berdiansk, Kherson, and Kharkiv. At this critical juncture in the war, with the existence of the Ukrainian people and state hanging in balance, the Council's peacebuilding mission was to protect its people from destruction. Therefore the request to provide Ukraine with heavy weapons and fighter aircraft was supported by representatives of all Ukrainian denominations, transcending theological differences in attitudes toward military service:

Millions of civilians of different nationalities and religions living peacefully in Ukraine face a humanitarian catastrophe caused by Russia's military invasion. The situation is particularly complicated by the shelling of food warehouses and humanitarian aid convoys, as well as the Russian invaders' blockade of many Ukrainian cities. (...) Even in times of great upheaval, war, and dispute, we must not forget about humanity and mercy. Each of us must do everything possible to save human life and end this Ukraine-hating aggressive war launched by Russia as soon as possible.⁷⁶

Over time, the collective voice of religious communities, in tandem with diplomatic initiatives by the Ukrainian government, has influenced the position of Ukraine's allies. The Ukrainian Armed Forces now use modern air defence systems provided by the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, and other partnering nations in order to protect civilians and critical infrastructure.⁷⁷

As the fighting has persisted, the issue of the exchange of prisoners of war has become increasingly pressing, with the number of prisoners exceeding that of the previously eight years of war combined. The Council once again appealed to Russian religious leaders and ministers regarding

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ Idem, "UCCRO Appeal on the provision of air defense for Ukraine and humanitarian corridors for the rescue of civilians," <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-appeal-on-necessity-of-no-fly-zone-over-ukraine-and-humanitarian-corridors>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁷⁷ Alex Horton, Ruby Mellen, Samuel Granados and Artur Galocha, "These are the Western air defense systems protecting Ukraine," <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/19/ukraine-air-defense-systems-patriot/>, accessed June 20, 2023.

the exchange of prisoners between the two countries, endeavouring to appeal to their sense of mercy instead of spreading propaganda. At the same time, Ukrainian religious leaders articulated a fundamental truth that the Kremlin has been hiding from Russian citizens for many years: “Ukraine seeks to end the war and bloodshed, which will be possible as soon as Russian troops and the navy return to their permanent locations, and aviation and ballistic missiles stop destroying peaceful cities and villages in Ukraine.”⁷⁸ If Russian religious leaders could convey this truth to the peoples of the Russian Federation, it could avert hundreds of thousands of deaths and expedite the attainment of peace between the two nations.

On April 22, 2022, the Council issued a call urging “every Russian religious leader, regardless of confessional affiliation, to make public and non-public requests to the Russian authorities to organize the evacuation of civilians and wounded defenders of Mariupol from Azovstal.”⁷⁹ In the wake of over a month of the Russian blockade and the shelling of humanitarian corridors, about 5,000 city residents, including more than 200 children, had been killed.⁸⁰ In its appeal, the Council proposed a mechanism for exchanging Ukrainian defenders surrounded at the Azovstal plant for Russian prisoners of war and individuals convicted of treason. However, with no positive response received after two weeks, the Council reached out to world leaders, the United Nations, and other international organizations to “make even more efforts to evacuate the defenders of Mariupol who remain under siege at the Azovstal plant” and among whom “there are many wounded who need urgent medical care.”⁸¹ Fortunately, this humanitarian plea was eventually heeded, and

⁷⁸ UCCRO, “UCCRO Appeal regarding prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine as a manifestation of mercy,” <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-appeal-on-exchange-of-prisoners-between-russia-and-ukraine>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁷⁹ Idem “Appeal to Russian religious figures on the evacuation from Azovstal of civilians and wounded defenders of Mariupol,” <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-appealed-to-russian-religious-figures-to-evacuate-citezens-from-azovstal-plant>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁸⁰ Ukrinform, “Za chas vorozhoyi oblohy u Mariupoli zahynuly mayzhe 5 tysyach zhyteliv, sered nykh – blyzko 210 ditey” [“During the enemy siege in Mariupol, nearly 5,000 residents died, including about 210 children”], <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3442162-za-cas-vorozoi-oblogi-u-mariupoli-zaginuli-majze-5-tisac-ziteliv-sered-nih-blizko-210-ditej.html>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁸¹ UCCRO, “Appeal on the necessity of evacuating all people from Azovstal, including the defenders of Mariupol,” <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-appeal-on-evacuation-all-people-from-azovstal-plant-in-mariupol>, accessed June 20, 2023.

the evacuation from Azovstal was successfully carried out, followed by the exchange of Ukrainian defenders for Russian prisoners of war facilitated through international mediation.⁸²

On October 20, 2022, the Council issued yet another appeal for assistance in liberating prisoners of war, this time directed to the World Council of Churches. The appeal also drew attention to the Kremlin's new terrorist tactics aimed at destroying Ukraine's energy system on the brink of winter: "More than two hundred Iranian-made cruise missiles and kamikaze drones have hit peaceful Ukrainian cities and villages, which cannot be justified by military necessity."⁸³

In addition to their international efforts, religious leaders have also provided spiritual support for the people of Ukraine. Periodically, interfaith prayer events have been held at the initiative of the Council, sometimes involving foreign delegations. On the anniversary of the full-scale invasion, UCCRO announced a nationwide fast and prayer, "with round-the-clock prayer vigils, fasting and active works of mercy," describing these as "the supernatural weapon given by God to destroy great evil and the devil's plans."⁸⁴ Furthermore, military chaplaincy of various denominations with the participation of priests, pastors, rabbis, and imams, has developed over the past year. This development is a response to the need for pastoral care and psychological support among Ukraine's defenders who regularly endure intense combat against a larger enemy force. The religious activities of many churches extend beyond Ukraine's borders, as Ukrainian refugees have found solace in the pastoral care and support of fellow believers abroad.

⁸² TURAN, "Ankara offers to take the defenders of Azovstal to Turkey, guaranteeing that they will not return to the front," https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2022/5/free/politics_news/en/4849.htm, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁸³ UCCRO, "Appeal to the World Council of Churches on Russian terroristic attacks on Ukrainian civilians," <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/appeal-to-world-council-of-churches-on-russian-terrorist-attacks>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁸⁴ Idem, "Call for national fasting and prayer on February 24 for victory and peace in Ukraine," <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-call-for-national-fasting-and-prayer-in-ukraine-on-february-24>, accessed June 20, 2023.

International meetings aimed at countering Russian propaganda

In early April 2022, the last Russian troops left the territory of the Kyiv region, having faced defeat by the determined resistance of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the local population. This victory facilitated, to a certain extent, the revival of business activities in the capital and permitted the resumption of official international contacts on a personal level, despite Russia's continuing missile attacks across Ukraine.

On April 19, 2022, an online meeting of Ukrainian religious leaders with United Nations Under-Secretary-General Martin Griffiths took place. The outcome of this meeting was a call by United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres for the cessation of hostilities on the territory of Ukraine during a holiday period for many believers - Christian Easter, Jewish Passover, and Muslim Ramadan. This temporary pause also aimed to facilitate the evacuation of civilians. The Council supported this call and simultaneously "called on the United Nations leadership to take more decisive action to stop the war."⁸⁵

Soon after, on August 3, 2022, a delegation of the World Council of Churches, led by the current Secretary General, Rev. John Sauka, visited Kyiv. During this visit, Ukrainian religious leaders highlighted the severe consequences of Russian aggression for religious communities in various regions of the country, especially in the occupied territories. They underscored the Russian military's abduction and torture of clergy of various denominations, the shelling and destruction of religious buildings, and the murder of church volunteers and activists.⁸⁶ This meeting marked the beginning of further dialogue and interaction between Ukrainian religious communities and the World Council of Churches. Several weeks later, UCCRO delegation took part in the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, which was held from August 31 to September 8 in Karlsruhe, Germany. This international visit provided a unique opportunity to present the findings of the Institute for Religious Freedom's research on the scale of the destruction of religious infrastructure in

⁸⁵ UCCRO, "Ukrainian Council of Churches supports the UN chief's call for a truce on Easter days," <https://vrciro.ua/en/events/uccro-supports-un-call-for-truce-on-easter>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁸⁶ Idem, "UCCRO hosted in Kyiv a delegation from the World Council of Churches," <https://vrciro.ua/en/events/uccro-hosted-in-kyiv-delegation-of-world-council-of-churches>, accessed June 20, 2023.

Ukraine due to the Russian invasion, along with the testimonies of affected religious leaders.⁸⁷

The following year, on May 12, 2023, another delegation from the World Council of Churches delegation visited Ukraine, this time under the leadership of the new Secretary General, Rev. Dr. Jerry Pillay. The foreign religious leaders, together with representatives of UCCRO, prayed in the church in Bucha and witnessed firsthand the extensive destruction of residential areas and the mass graves of innocent civilians killed by the Russian military.⁸⁸ Bishop Vyacheslav Horpynchuk, Chairman of UCCRO, emphasized:

Terrorizing civilians, especially religious leaders, is a common tactic of intimidation and subjugation for the Russian occupation authorities. We hope that the voice of the World Council of Churches will also be heard across the world in defense of believers who suffer daily because of the presence of Russian occupiers on Ukrainian soil.⁸⁹

Answering questions from foreign guests about the state of religious communities, representatives of Ukrainian denominations underscored how,

In Ukraine, freedom of religion is respected, and there has been no religious persecution during the war. However, the situation of believers in Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia due to armed aggression remains extremely dangerous.⁹⁰

UCCRO also sought to personally convey to Pope Francis the evidence of the suffering endured by the people of Ukraine, and to deepen cooperation with the Vatican in its peacebuilding activity. This initiative received support from the Apostolic Nuncio to Ukraine, Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas, leading to the first official visit of the Council's delegation to the Vatican on January 24-26, 2023. Among the topics raised

⁸⁷ Vasin, Koval, Kozlovskyy and Zaiets, *Russian attacks on religious freedom in Ukraine. Research, analytics, recommendations* (Kyiv: Institute for Religious Freedom, 2022), 8–21.

⁸⁸ UCCRO, “Delehatysia Vsesvitnoyi Rady Tserkov vidvidala mistse masovykh pokhovan zhyteliv Buchi, zamordovanykh rosiyskymy okupantamy” [“The delegation of the World Council of Churches visited the mass graves of Bucha residents killed by the Russian occupiers”], <https://vrciro.ua/ua/news/delegatsiya-vsesvitnoi-radi-tserkov-vidvidala-mistse-masovikh-pokhovan-zhiteliv-buchi-zamordovanikh-rosiyskimi-okupantami>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁸⁹ Idem, “There is no persecution on religious grounds in Ukraine. Results of the meeting with the World Council of Churches,” <https://vrciro.ua/en/events/uccro-met-with-wcc-delegation-in-kyiv>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*.

with the Holy Father by the Ukrainian delegation was the repatriation of Ukrainian citizens deported by Russian occupation authorities, including children. The Council's delegation also discussed the possibility of the Vatican's assistance and mediation in the release and return of Ukrainian prisoners of war and political prisoners, providing civilian and military doctors, ensuring decent detention conditions, and upholding other rights in accordance with international humanitarian standards.⁹¹

Additionally, the Ukrainian delegation met with Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin and Secretary for Relations with States Archbishop Paul Gallagher. The delegation also held fruitful meetings with the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Kurt Koch, the Prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, Cardinal Miguel Ayuso, the Prefect of the Dicastery for Communication, Dr. Paolo Ruffini, and the Prefect of the Dicastery for the Oriental Catholic Churches, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti. During the conversation, Ukrainian religious leaders proposed to intensify the interaction of the Council with Vatican institutions in the relevant areas.⁹²

In June of 2023, the Pope's envoy, Archbishop of Bologna, and President of the Italian Bishops' Conference, Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, went to Kyiv on a special peacebuilding mission from the Vatican. During his meeting with representatives of the Council, discussions centred around the prospects for establishing a just peace in Ukraine and addressing the most urgent humanitarian challenges amid the ongoing war.⁹³

Ukrainian religious leaders also entered into fruitful dialogue with the Church of England. The spiritual head of this church, Archbishop Justin Portal Welby of Canterbury, visited Kyiv in late December 2022 to engage with religious leaders, government officials, and communities most impacted by Russian aggression. During a meeting with representatives of UCCRO, the Archbishop of Canterbury expressed the Church of England's solidarity with the Ukrainian people and a desire to learn more about how British believers could practically support those affected

⁹¹ Idem, "Communique on the results of the visit of the delegation of UCCRO to the Vatican," <https://vrciro.ua/en/events/uccro-visit-to-holy-see>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁹² *Ibidem*.

⁹³ UCCRO, "UCCRO representatives met with the Pope's envoy Cardinal Matteo Zuppi," <https://vrciro.ua/en/events/uccro-met-with-papal-envoy-cardinal-matteo-zuppi>, accessed June 20, 2023.

by the war, including refugees. Notably, this meeting began in a bomb shelter due to a Russian air attack on the Ukrainian capital.⁹⁴

Throughout 2023, an increasing number of foreign delegations visited Ukraine to witness firsthand the consequences of the Russian invasion and to hear testimonies from Ukrainian religious leaders about the challenges of war experienced by believers of different faiths in different regions. On February 21, representatives of the Council met in Kyiv with Margaret Kibben, Chaplain of the United States House of Representatives. During the meeting, Chaplain Kibben told Ukrainian religious leaders about the prayers of Congress members for Ukraine and the practical support provided by the American people to help Ukrainians repel Russian aggression.⁹⁵

In June 2023, UCCRO hosted a delegation from the Council on International Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark (People's Church) led by Rev. Dr. Niels Nymann Eriksen. Ukrainian religious leaders discussed areas of cooperation with the People's Church of Denmark to help the people of Ukraine during the war.⁹⁶

Immediately following this meeting, a delegation of religious leaders and experts from the Czech Republic arrived in Ukraine, led by Ambassador Robert Rehak, Vice President of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance and Special Envoy for Holocaust, Interfaith Dialogue and Freedom of Religion or Belief. The delegation also included the Secretary General of the Czech Ecumenical Council of Churches, Petr Jan Vinš. The international guests visited a local church in Bucha, where they prayed with Ukrainian religious leaders and viewed an exhibition about Russian troops' brutal massacre of civilians. During this visit, UCCRO issued a separate appeal to the international community

⁹⁴ Idem, "Dukhovnyy hlava Tserkvy Anhliyi zustrivsyia v Kyievi z Vseukrayinskoyu Radoyu Tserkov" ["Primate of the Church of England meets with the UCCRO in Kyiv"], <https://vrciro.ua/ua/events/dukhovniy-glava-tserkvi-anglii-zustrivsyia-v-kyievi-z-vseukrayinskoyu-radoyu-tserkov>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁹⁵ Idem, "Vseukrayinska Rada Tserkov zustrilasyia v Kyievi z kapelanom Konhresu SSHA" ["UCCRO meets in Kyiv with the chaplain of the US Congress"], <https://vrciro.ua/ua/events/uccro-meeting-with-chaplain-of-us-house-of-representatives>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁹⁶ Idem, "UCCRO informed Danish delegates of the consequences of Russian aggression in Ukraine," <https://vrciro.ua/en/events/vrtsiro-rozpovila-religijnim-diyacham-danii-pro-naslidki-rosiyskoi-agresii-dlya-ukraini>, accessed June 20, 2023.

regarding the genocide of Ukrainians in the Kyiv region.⁹⁷ The Czech delegation also visited the house of worship of the God's House Pentecostal Church, which a Russian attack helicopter had bombed a year earlier.⁹⁸

In addition to joint interfaith activities at the international level, the heads of Ukrainian churches and religious organizations have convened numerous meetings at the personal level, both within Ukraine and abroad. Participation in international events, such as the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington,⁹⁹ the Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in London,¹⁰⁰ and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe conference in Warsaw,¹⁰¹ have been an essential element of public diplomacy. These efforts have aimed to counter Russian propaganda about the causes and consequences of the war, and to enhance and expedite foreign aid needed to overcome the humanitarian crises in Ukraine brought about by Russia's war of aggression.

Conclusion

The unjust war waged by Russia against Ukraine, devoid of any legitimate grounds, along with the subsequent genocide of the Ukrainian people and large-scale destruction of civilian infrastructure and entire cities, has stirred emotions worldwide. On the one hand, Russian propaganda attempting to justify the war and the destruction of the Ukrainian nation has been amplified by religious leaders such as the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, the Presiding Bishop of the Russian United Union of Evangelical Christians, Sergei Ryakhovsky, the Supreme Mufti of the Chechen Republic, Salah Mezhiyev, and other religious leaders of the Russian Federation.¹⁰² On the other hand, members

⁹⁷ UCCRO, "Statement on genocide of the Ukrainian people, committed by Russian troops in the Kyiv region," <https://vrciro.ua/en/statements/uccro-statement-on-genocide-of-ukrainian-people-committed-by-russian-troops>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁹⁸ Idem, "Czech delegation visits Bucha and meets with the Ukrainian Council of Churches," <https://vrciro.ua/en/news/delegatsiya-z-chekhii-vidvidala-buchu-ta-zustrilasya-z-vseukrainskoyu-radoyu-tserkov>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁹⁹ Institute for Religious Freedom, "Almost 500 religious sites were destroyed in Ukraine as a result of Russian aggression," <https://irf.in.ua/p/105>, accessed June 20, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Idem, "IRF spoke about war crimes at the Ministerial conference in London," <https://irf.in.ua/p/94>, accessed June 20, 2023.

¹⁰¹ Idem, "OSCE diplomats received evidence of Russian crimes against religious communities of Ukraine," <https://irf.in.ua/p/97>, accessed June 20, 2023.

¹⁰² State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, "Kruglyy stol na temu: Mirovyte traditsionnyye religii protiv ideologii natsizma i fashizma v XXI veke"

of UCCRO, during Russian rocket fire together with their people, have consistently appealed to the democratic world to halt the aggressor, striving to be heard by the international community and to save as many lives as possible.

Amidst the ocean of propaganda distorting genocide as “denazification” and “desatanization,” labeling the destruction of entire cities as “liberation,” and describing the murder of thousands of Russian-speaking Ukrainians as “salvation,” a strong and clear voice in defense of justice and humanity has resonated in the name of suffering Ukrainians. Throughout the war, UCCRO has leveraged its moral authority and influence as a civil society actor to warn the international community against the catastrophic consequences of indulging Russian aggression. In an era of information wars, when evil is presented as good and vice versa, religious leaders bear a special responsibility to present society with the truth, shield war victims from the arbitrary cruelty of aggressors, and to help the wrongdoer recognize the error of his actions without assuming the role of the victim. Such peacebuilding activities have the potential to bring about a just and lasting peace, the triumph of good, and the condemnation of evil.

[“Roundtable: World Traditional Religions against the Ideology of Nazism and Fascism in the XXI Century”], <http://duma.gov.ru/multimedia/video/events/71233/>, accessed June 20, 2023.