



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on December 20, 2023

UN Slams Ukraine's Crackdown on Largest Christian Church

On December 19, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk warned that Kyiv's push to outlaw the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) would breach freedom of religion.

Türk gave his remarks during a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, addressing the Kyiv government's persecution of the UOC in the context of the crisis between Ukraine and Russia.

"I note also my concerns regarding freedom of religion and belief in Ukraine, given continuing action by the authorities against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church," Türk declared during the meeting, alluding to a proposed law that would enable Kyiv to ban any religious organization suspected of having connections to Russia.

"These proposed restrictions to the right of freedom of religion do not appear to comply with international human rights law," Türk added.

A bill that would ban the UOC, the largest Christian church in the country, could be passed in early 2024, said Ruslan Stefanchuk, the speaker of Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada. While the bill is still being amended in committee, it is scheduled to be implemented early next year, he stated.

When questioned about the legislation during a TV appearance on Rada TV, Stefanchuk replied that "the committee must make the necessary decisions, carry out consultations, and accept it as a proposal in the second reading." "I hope that this issue might be settled by the beginning of next year," he highlighted.

The legislation, which had been prepared on the order of Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky, passed its first reading in the Ukrainian parliament in October. The bill would allow authorities to ban the UOC if an expert review panel confirms its ties with Russia. It obtained the support of 267 out of 450 members of parliament.

The UOC, which has millions of followers across Ukraine, condemned the legislation, saying that it goes against the Ukrainian Constitution and violates religious freedom.

In turn, the Kyiv government denounced the UOC for having ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. Zelensky also alleged that several UOC clergy were functioning as "spies" for Russia, even though the UOC officially broke ties with Moscow in March 2022.

Based on reports by Tass news agency, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) has launched 65 criminal



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cases against UOC priests; 17 clerics have faced sanctions, and 19 of them were deprived of their Ukrainian citizenship.

Furthermore, Ukraine's Interior Ministry has put Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, on its list of wanted criminals. The said list singled out the patriarch by his secular name and lambasted him as "an individual hiding from the bodies of pre-trial investigation," alleging him to be guilty of breaching Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

To make matters even more complicated, the SBU in November this year designated Kirill as a suspect in a criminal case linked to his alleged active support of Moscow's military operation against the Kyiv regime.

In a statement, the SBU claimed that, together with the Prosecutor General's Office, it had obtained evidence against the religious leader and condemned him for "promoting the armed aggression of the Russian Federation and denying the war crimes."

The SBU alleged that Kirill "is a member of the inner circle of Russia's top military and political leadership," elaborating that he uses Orthodox communities both at home and in Ukraine "to spread propaganda."

According to the SBU, the primate could face three criminal charges in total, such as encroachment on Ukraine's territorial integrity, "justification" and "glorification" of Russia's actions in the conflict, and "planning, preparation, initiation, and waging an aggressive war."

The head of Russia's Investigative Committee, Alexander Bastrykin, responded that a criminal case had been opened following Ukraine's declaration and that measures will be taken to identify the Ukrainian special service officials who were attempting to prosecute the head of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Patriarch Kirill has repeatedly urged his parishioners to back the participants of Russia's military operation against Ukraine, who were "sacrificing their lives to protect our Orthodox people in the Donbass."

Additionally, the patriarch has urged religious leaders and international groups to step in to curtail the Kyiv regime's "mass violations of religious rights of the followers of the UOC." The actions of Ukrainian authorities were "on par with the most sinister God-fighting regimes of the past," the religious leader maintained.

Regarding the news of Kirill's being put on the Ukrainian wanted list, Russian church spokesman Vladimir Legoida castigated Kyiv's move as "predictable and absurd." The Ukrainian authorities are responsible for "lawlessness and attempting to intimidate parishioners," he penned in a Telegram post.

Earlier this year, Zelensky also evicted the UOC's clergy from the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, a monastery almost 1,000 years old. The monks were told they could stay if they switched allegiances to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), a rival organization set up by the Ukrainian government in 2018. The emergence of the OCU, considered non-canonical by the Russian Orthodox Church, prompted years of religious tensions in the country.

Since then, half a dozen regions of Ukraine have criminalized the UOC, seizing its properties and handing them over to the OCU. Relics from the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra were looted with the excuse of saving them during the conflict.

When the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) condemned Kyiv's actions as discriminatory, Kyiv retorted by slamming the UNHRC for making "unbalanced political assessments," insisting that its



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crackdown on the UOC was justified on the pretext of national security.

The UNHRC's Türk also urged the Kyiv regime to construct a society where all communities would be included and the rights of all minorities protected, "including the right to use every language spoken in Ukraine."

A proposed ban on the Russian language by the Kyiv government in Kyiv after the February 2014 U.S.-backed coup was among the reasons for Crimea's decision to rejoin Russia and the regions of Donetsk and Lugansk to declare themselves independent people's republics.



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