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**Presentstion on the panel “Instrumentalisation and
weaponisation of religion during the war”**

When we reflect on the topic of misuse of religion as a weapon in the current war, there is no doubt for me that the first examples of such abuse of religion can be found by the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, especially by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. In particular, at the end of November, within the framework of the World Russian People’s Council, he stated: “Such organizations (like this Council) should also be a weapon aimed at fighting against the destruction of our sovereignty, and in this regard, the Orthodox Church is the factor that mostly irritates the globalists”.

A few days later and in a different context, Patriarch Kirill formulated: “I am deeply convinced that a very important factor preserving our unity is the Russian Orthodox Church with its centers in Moscow, Kyiv and other historical centers of Holy Rus’.” This idea of unity across state borders has been traced in Kirill’s speeches for many years, even before his election to patriarch in 2009.

If we combine these two quotes from Patriarch Kirill, it turns out that he defends sovereignty and unity, which does not coincide with existing state borders and thus rejects the principles of international law. He promotes a certain “Holy Rus’,” an ideologeme designed to prove that Ukrainians are not an integral and independent nation. Instead, he believes that Ukrainians even without their consent are a part of the united Russian nation. The danger of this approach is that it denies Ukrainian statehood itself. In this case, the war may be waged not so much for territory but for the very existence of the Ukrainian statehood.

The saddest thing for Ukraine is that in order to promote this ideology, enormous sacrifices have already been made – hundreds of thousands are dead, maimed, wounded on both sides of the military confrontation. In addition, millions of Ukrainians were forced to flee their places of residence, many of them went abroad. Unfortunately, even today there is no end for this war, in which the present and future of the citizens of Ukraine is being destroyed.

If desired, we could talk much more about instrumentalisation of religion in the current warfare on the part of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. However, today we can hardly influence the Russian position. What we can really do is to think about the adequacy of Ukraine's response to this challenge.

In less than three years of war, the position of the Ukrainian state in the religious sphere has undergone significant changes. We can distinguish two stages of attitude towards the religious issue and specifically towards the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Until November 2022, the Ukrainian state tried to pursue a policy of reconciliation, trying to emphasize and strengthen the patriotic wing in the UOC.

[This policy was embodied by Olena Bogdan, who at that time headed the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience. The beginning of the active phase of the war became the impetus for radicalization of public sentiment in the sphere of interjurisdictional relations. This was especially actual in relation to the UOC, which despite declaration of its administrative independence from the Moscow Patriarchate in May 2022, retained its canonical connection with the center in Russia. Olena Bogdan sought to counter this radicalization of sentiment and maintain peace between the various faith groups of Ukraine].

December 1, 2022 became the date for the reversal of the state policy. On this day, the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine adopted the document "On some aspects of the activities of religious organizations in Ukraine". This was the reason for personal sanctions against a number of hierarchs of the UOC. In addition, in December the team responsible for the state religious policy was replaced – the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience was headed by Viktor Yelensky.

I suppose that since December 2022 we have witnessed the instrumentalisation of the topic of religion in Ukraine itself. It is unfair to claim that Viktor Yelensky is the key person who incited hostility towards the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. He himself is a well-known religious scholar who, even before his appointment to this position, was known in the field of defending freedom of conscience. However, it was under his leadership in the sphere of religion that over the past two years the Ukrainian state has gone as far as to actually ban the largest religious denomination in the country.

I am convinced that at this stage the interest in the information space to the religious topic was consciously supported by engaged parties. This can be assessed by the large amount of

negative information about the UOC and its concrete representatives before at the end of August the law “On protection of the constitutional order in the sphere of activities of religious organizations” was adopted. There is no doubt for me that over the course of two years, public opinion was deliberately *inflated* emotionally.

One of the key motives for criticism against the UOC inside Ukraine was formulated approximately as follows: if we cannot achieve real military victories at the frontline, then they can be replaced by victories over the internal enemy – the Orthodox Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate. It was important to control public opinion to maintain the belief that we are strong and defeating our enemy – if not at the frontline, then within the country.

Personally, I believe that the intensification of public sentiment in Ukraine was a form of instrumentalisation of the topic of religion. And this despite the fact that the central executive authorities of Ukraine acted rather as a factor restraining violence in the religious sphere, which was obvious at the regional level.

One of the indicators is the text of the adopted law, which, instead of simply declaring a ban on religious associations affiliated with the center in Russia, proposes a procedure for judicial ban on specific religious organizations. The law also gives 9 months before the possible start of trials against structural units (parishes and episcopal centres) of the UOC. Compared to other legislative initiatives of the political opposition, these are rather mild points.

Nevertheless, it is known that immediately after its adoption, this law was opposed by Pope Francis, the World Council of Churches, various human rights organizations, as well as individual theological experts participating in our meeting. It is known that the issue of religious restrictions in Ukraine was also one of the factors in the recent presidential elections in the United States.

In particular, the World Council of Churches was “deeply alarmed by the potential for unjustified collective punishment of an entire religious community and violation of the principles of freedom of religion or belief under a new law”. The American organization “Human Rights Watch” advised to turn to the Venice Commission, the advisory body of the Council of Europe on constitutional issues, and to the Bureau for Democratic Institutions

and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe with a request to provide an expert analysis of the law.

Now I would like to give an illustrative example that would clearly outline the problem of violence in the religious sphere. This is the physical capture of the cathedral in Cherkassy. It is believed to be the largest church building in Ukraine in size. This seizure took place according to a procedure worked out on the example of hundreds of UOC parish churches in rural areas.

The seizure itself took place on October 17, a month and a half after the aforementioned law came into effect, which actually bans the UOC as affiliated to the Moscow Patriarchate. This means that the adoption of the law did not influence or reduce violence during the transition of churches to the patriotic Orthodox Church of Ukraine. There was no condemnation of violence either from government bodies or from the leadership of the OCU. As in many previous cases, local authorities actively supported the transition of the cathedral.

Of course, there is a certain fault of the UOC in this incident. In particular, until recently, Metropolitan Theodosius of Cherkassy commemorated Patriarch Kirill at the liturgy, which irritated many observers. He was also critical of the OCU, questioning its canonical status. Even more, in terms of his personal identity, he has clearly pro-Russian beliefs.

However, the fact remains undeniable: nowadays we have violence in the religious sphere of Ukraine. The canonical connection of the UOC to the Moscow Patriarchate remains a reason for the forced transfer of its parishes. The central government authorities continue to provide different forms of support for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and do not react to the violent seizure of parish buildings.

What is especially sad is that physical violence is carried out despite the law adopted, which provide certain procedures for influencing religious organizations that “maintain contacts with the center in the aggressor state”. It means that in Ukraine, the principle of political expediency, and not the rule of law, still applies.