

RELIGION AND THE RUSSIA–UKRAINE WAR: A PRIMER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The war between Russia and Ukraine is not religious in origin, but religion figures prominently in several of its domestic and international dimensions, including identity formation, social cohesion, and international advocacy. For policymakers, understanding these dynamics is essential to assessing risks of social fragmentation, evaluating claims made in international forums, and anticipating how religious issues may surface in future diplomatic and negotiation processes.

OVERVIEW

The war between Russia and Ukraine is not religious in origin, but religion figures prominently in several of its domestic and international dimensions. Religious dynamics shape not only wartime narratives and mobilization, but also state–church–society relations within Ukraine and the external positioning of both Ukraine and Russia.

Within Ukraine, religion intersects with national and civic identity in ways that are both stabilizing and contentious. Patriotism has become a key marker of civic belonging across most religious communities, contributing to social consolidation during wartime. At the same time, the heightened salience of religious identity creates risks of political instrumentalization and social polarization.

The most sensitive domestic religious issue concerns the ongoing conflict within Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Tensions between the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) have intensified since Russia’s full-scale invasion. Public stigmatization of the UOC—by representatives

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of the OCU, political actors, and segments of wider society—has contributed to declining trust in religious institutions and, in some cases, to broader concerns about social cohesion.¹ This trend reflects a wider desire to secure Ukrainian society from Russian influence—especially through soft power mechanisms such as religion and culture. At the same time further marginalization of the

UOC risks alienating parts of the population, particularly internally displaced persons from eastern and southern regions where the UOC has traditionally been dominant. Furthermore, terminating the official registration of UOC parishes—a real possibility—may diminish the state’s ability to exercise oversight and accountability if these churches are simply driven underground.

Investigations into collaboration by individual UOC clergy with Russian or pro-Russian forces have heightened public scrutiny.² However, the uneven pace and outcomes of legal proceedings have also generated concerns about accountability and public confidence in the justice system.

Religious organizations continue to play an outsized role in humanitarian assistance, evacuation, refugee support, and spiritual and psychosocial care.³ These activities have contributed to social resilience during the war, but they also highlight structural constraints, including limited state capacity in social policy and the financial strain placed on religious institutions operating under wartime conditions.

Religion likewise has significant external implications. Russia has sought to instrumentalize intra-Ukrainian religious tensions in its international messaging, portraying Ukrainian government actions toward the UOC as violations of religious freedom. These claims have been advanced not only through media and diplomatic channels but also as part of Russia’s stated positions in discussions about potential negotiations. At the same time, divisions within Ukrainian Orthodoxy have increasingly spilled over into European countries hosting Ukrainian refugees, reshaping religious landscapes and occasionally serving as vectors for pro-Russian narratives.

Despite these tensions, Ukrainian religious actors—coordinated in part through the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations⁴—have played an active role in international advocacy, particularly in Europe and North America. Understanding the religious dimensions of the war is therefore essential for policymakers seeking to assess both Ukraine’s internal dynamics and Russia’s broader informational and diplomatic strategies.

RELIGION IN UKRAINE: ESSENTIAL BACKGROUND

Ukraine is a predominantly Orthodox Christian country, but it is also religiously pluralistic. Orthodox Christians constitute the largest religious grouping, followed by Catholics (primarily the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church), Protestants, Muslims, and Jews. Religion has played a central role in Ukrainian history and remains highly visible in public life.

Orthodox Christianity is closely intertwined with questions of national identity. Public opinion surveys consistently show that many Ukrainians view Orthodoxy as an important marker of cultural belonging, even among those who are not regular churchgoers. Churches have played visible roles during key political moments, including the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Euromaidan protests (2013–2014), reinforcing their prominence as social and moral actors.

Ukraine’s legal framework guarantees freedom of religion and formally separates church and state. In practice, however, religious affairs are highly politicized, particularly with respect to Orthodoxy. Competing visions of religious authority, national sovereignty, and historical continuity are deeply embedded in debates over church affiliation and legitimacy.

Interfaith coordination in Ukraine is facilitated by the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO), which brings together major Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim representatives. AUCCRO has served as an important platform for joint statements, humanitarian coordination, and international advocacy, particularly since the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022.

WHY RELIGION MATTERS IN THE WAR

Religious rhetoric has become an important element of wartime discourse in both Russia and Ukraine. On the Russian side, political and religious leaders have increasingly framed the war in sacralized terms. President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly used religious language to delegitimize Ukraine’s leadership, while Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has advanced narratives depicting the war as a “holy struggle.” These narratives draw on concepts such as the “Russian World”⁵ and are reinforced through institutional mechanisms, including the expansion of military chaplaincy, the designation of “heavenly patrons” for military units, and the theological framing of Russia’s military campaign. Moreover, this concept is used as a basis for recognizing Ukrainian territory as canonical for the Russian Orthodox Church, which endangers Ukrainian Orthodoxy and blocks its movement towards full independence.⁶

In Ukraine, religious language is also present in public discourse, but it serves a different function. References by political leaders and popular culture to divine protection or religious symbolism are generally framed in terms of national survival, moral resistance, and appeals for a just peace rather than civilizational or confessional exclusivity.

Within religious communities themselves, the war has intensified tensions between global religious identities and national or ethno-confessional affiliations. This dynamic is particularly visible in traditions with transnational structures, such as Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism. In Ukraine, the war

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has accelerated processes of identity transformation, often pushing religious actors to clarify their positions on national sovereignty and political loyalty. In Russia, by contrast, religious identity has increasingly been fused with state-centered and ethnonational narratives, with less reference to global religious norms or institutions.⁷

Religious actors also possess social capacities that are difficult to replicate through secular initiatives alone. These include the ability to shape moral narratives, address existential and moral trauma, mobilize volunteers through dense local networks, and engage international partners through faith-based transnational ties. During wartime, these functions have taken on heightened significance.

ORTHODOXY, THE STATE, AND INTERNAL TENSIONS IN UKRAINE

The most consequential religious dynamic inside Ukraine concerns relations between the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The OCU was established in 2018 through the unification of several pro-independence Orthodox jurisdictions and was granted autocephaly by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2019. Those jurisdictions were the historical Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), established in the early 1920s following the Russian Revolution, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP, established in 1992 during the dissolution of the Soviet Union) under Patriarch Filaret (who died in March 2026).⁸ Both of these churches had previously declared autocephaly from Moscow but were not recognized as canonical by any other Orthodox church. This turn deepened the conflict between Constantinople and Moscow, where Ukraine plays an important role. The UOC, historically affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate, declared changes to its charter in 2022 that formally distanced it from administrative subordination to the Russian Orthodox Church, while maintaining canonical ties that remain contested.⁹

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, scrutiny of the UOC has intensified. Investigations by Ukrainian security services into alleged collaboration by individual clergy with Russian forces have led to criminal cases and convictions in a limited number of instances. These cases, combined with broader concerns about Russian influence, contributed to the adoption of legislation aimed at restricting the activities of religious organizations deemed to be affiliated with centers of influence in Russia. However, the UOC is internally heterogeneous and has groups with different political interests, including both pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian ones. Some of the UOC bishops also proclaim a need to restore communication with the Ecumenical Patriarch.

Supporters of these measures view them as necessary steps to protect national security during wartime and argue that they do not violate freedom of conscience. Critics, including some domestic and international observers, warn that broad or uneven application risks undermining religious freedom and exacerbating social divisions. Public stigmatization of the UOC has also raised concerns about the alienation of believers, particularly among populations already affected by displacement and conflict.¹⁰

In late 2024, Ukraine adopted legislation aimed at restricting the activities of religious organizations deemed to be institutionally affiliated with centers of influence located in the Russian Federation. Although the law is formally framed in terms of national security and constitutional order during wartime, it is widely understood—both domestically and internationally—as primarily targeting the Ukrainian

Orthodox Church. The legislation does not impose an automatic ban but establishes a legal mechanism through which state authorities may assess organizational ties, property use, and governance structures, potentially leading to suspension or termination of legal status. As of early 2026, implementation remains uneven and contested, with legal challenges pending and significant uncertainty regarding enforcement standards. The law has intensified debate within Ukraine over the balance between security imperatives and religious freedom, while also attracting close scrutiny from international observers concerned about precedent, proportionality, and due process.

These dynamics underscore the delicate balance Ukrainian authorities face between addressing legitimate security concerns and maintaining social cohesion in a highly religious and diverse society.

VIOLETIONS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND NEGOTIATION DYNAMICS

Religious freedom has become a contested issue not only within Ukraine but also in the international dimensions of the war.¹¹ In territories occupied by Russian forces, there is extensive documentation of persecution against religious communities perceived as disloyal to Russian authority. These include clergy and believers affiliated with the OCU, Ukrainian Greek Catholics, Protestants, and Muslim groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir. Houses of worship have been damaged or destroyed, religious leaders detained or expelled, and religious activity tightly controlled.

Ukraine has actively highlighted these violations in international forums, including through submissions to bodies such as the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.¹² Ukrainian officials emphasize religious pluralism within government-controlled territory and frame wartime restrictions on specific institutions as security-driven rather than confessional in nature.

By elevating religious freedom to the level of a formal negotiating demand, Russia seeks to internationalize disputes within Ukrainian Orthodoxy and recast them as violations of universal norms rather than wartime security measures.

Alongside territorial and security demands, the Kremlin has increasingly incorporated claims¹³ about religious freedom into its public framing of a potential settlement to the war.¹⁴ Russian officials and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church have asserted that any negotiated outcome must include guarantees for the protection of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and an end to what Moscow characterizes as state-sponsored religious persecution in Ukraine.¹⁵ By elevating religious freedom to the level of a formal negotiating demand, Russia seeks to internationalize

disputes within Ukrainian Orthodoxy and recast them as violations of universal norms rather than wartime security measures.¹⁶ This framing serves both diplomatic and informational objectives, complicating international consensus and positioning Russia as a purported defender of religious rights, even as extensive documentation points to systematic repression of religious communities in Russian-occupied territories.

This strategy draws on the symbolic and institutional weight of Orthodoxy and exploits existing ambiguities surrounding church affiliation and religious authority. While these claims have found limited traction among Ukraine's core supporters, they continue to circulate in international and multilateral contexts, underscoring the need for nuanced understanding of religious dynamics in any discussion of negotiations or postwar arrangements.

KEY RELIGIOUS ACTORS AND ALIGNMENTS

Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU)

The OCU is recognized as autocephalous by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and a limited number of other Orthodox churches. It positions itself as the primary national Orthodox church and has taken a consistently pro-Ukrainian stance during the war. As of early 2025, it comprises more than 8,000 parishes and is led by Metropolitan Epifaniy.

Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC)

The UOC remains the largest religious organization in Ukraine by number of parishes. Although it formally distanced itself from administrative subordination to Moscow in 2022, debates continue over the depth and credibility of this separation. The UOC is led by Metropolitan Onufriy and remains a focal point of domestic and international controversy.

Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC)

The UGCC is the largest Eastern Catholic Church and maintains full communion with the Vatican while liturgically adhering to the Orthodox rite. It has a strong national identity and significant presence both in western Ukraine and in the diaspora.

Protestant Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Communities

Ukraine hosts a diverse Protestant landscape, coordinated through umbrella bodies such as the Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Ukraine. Muslim communities are represented by several religious administrations reflecting different ideological orientations, including Crimean Tatar institutions. Jewish life is organized through multiple federations and confederations with strong social and humanitarian profiles.

Most major religious organizations are members of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO), which serves to coordinate joint messaging and public advocacy on behalf of Ukrainian religious denominations and communities. Since 2022, the UOC's relations with AUCCRO have become strained—an effect exacerbated by AUCCRO's tendency within its international lobbying to support Ukrainian government actions against the UOC.

EXTERNAL RELIGIOUS ACTORS AND TRANSNATIONAL EFFECTS

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has played a central role in legitimizing Russia's war effort. Patriarch Kirill's alignment with the Kremlin has weakened the ROC's standing within global Orthodoxy and contributed to the erosion of its influence among Ukrainian clergy and believers.

Transnationally, religious divisions have followed Ukrainian refugee flows into Europe. While the OCU is restricted from establishing parishes outside Ukraine, the UOC has expanded its presence in several European countries. In some cases, these communities have become sites of contestation over Ukrainian identity and political allegiance, further extending the religious dimensions of the conflict beyond Ukraine's borders.

CONCLUSION

Religion remains a significant factor in the Russia–Ukraine war due to its influence on identity formation, social cohesion, and international advocacy. While the war is not religious in origin, religious institutions and narratives continue to shape both domestic dynamics within Ukraine and Russia’s external strategies. For policymakers, understanding these dynamics is essential to assessing risks of social fragmentation, evaluating claims made in international forums, and anticipating how religious issues may surface in future diplomatic and negotiation processes.

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Through research, teaching, and outreach, the Berkley Center seeks to build understanding and promote dialogue and cooperation around issues of religion, peace, and world affairs. Two premises guide the center's work: that religion is a critically important but poorly understood force in world affairs, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project represents a multiyear, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study the use of religion in foreign affairs. Through a global comparison of varying motivations, strategies, and practices associated with the deployment of religious soft power, project research aims to reveal patterns, trends, and outcomes that will enhance our understanding of religion's role in contemporary geopolitics.

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