

The logo for ZOiS, consisting of the letters 'ZOiS' in a bold, red, sans-serif font. The 'i' is lowercase and has a dot.

Zentrum für Osteuropa-
und internationale Studien
*Centre for East European
and International Studies*

Nr. 6/2024 · December 2024

ZOIS REPORT

WAR AND RELIGION
VIEWS FROM WITHIN UKRAINE'S
'RUSSIAN' CHURCH

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Summary

Russia's war against Ukraine has changed Ukraine's religious landscape. Due to its ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), once the biggest Christian denomination in the country, has faced declining membership, public scrutiny and restrictive government policies.

This report focuses on the perspectives of rank-and-file UOC members regarding public disapproval of their church. Based on qualitative interviews conducted with priests and parishioners in nine parishes in 2024, it provides insights into the mood within the UOC and its members' (un)willingness to change their religious practices and affiliation against the backdrop of growing anti-Russian sentiment in Ukrainian society. These are the main findings:

- Most interviewees attribute the current public disapproval of the UOC to the misrepresentation of their church in the media. However, a few acknowledge that the church also bears some blame, arguing that its leaders failed to effectively communicate their break with the Moscow Patriarchate in 2022 or condemn instances of collaborationism within the church. While many believe that the church leaders should improve their communications with society, most interviewees doubt that this will help to change public sentiment or alleviate state pressure on the church.

- With few exceptions, the interviewees are not in favour of changing the language of UOC religious services from Church Slavonic to Ukrainian. They explain their reluctance with reference to habit and theological considerations. At the same time, some concede that if Ukrainian society perceives Church Slavonic as Russian, it might be helpful to introduce elements of Ukrainian into the liturgy. However, only a few parishes have taken this step to date.
- Since February 2022, UOC members have been under pressure from society, the media, and the authorities to switch their affiliation to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), the church that now has the largest share of support in Ukraine. For most of my interviewees, re-affiliating with this ‘rival’ church is not an option. Yet several expressed a readiness to re-affiliate, provided the whole parish agree to do so. Only two priests were ready to change affiliation if it means protecting their parish and retaining a place of worship.
- Interviewees by and large echo internal UOC propaganda about the illegitimacy of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and describe the state policy towards their church as religious persecution. Yet many challenge these narratives, acknowledge the religious validity of the OCU, and deny that religious persecution is taking place in Ukraine. Even those who subscribe to anti-OCU narratives still say that many OCU priests and parishioners they know personally are good Christians.
- Roughly half of the interviewees admit that there are some pro-Russia people in their church. The concept ‘pro-Russia’ varies from interviewee to interviewee. For some, it includes those who believe that Russia and Ukraine should be united, that Ukraine is to blame for the war, or that the bonds between the UOC and the Russian Orthodox Church should be preserved. Others speak of people who are ‘indirectly pro-Russia’—those who think that Russian culture is superior, refuse to take sides in the ongoing war, or are critical of what they see as the anti-Christian agenda of Ukraine and the West.
- Nearly all of my interviewees are dismissive of politics as something they do not, under any circumstances, want their church to be involved in. For them, the term encompasses everything that has nothing to do with prayer, one’s relationship with God, and parish life. Their resistance to engaging in debates about the veneration of Russian saints in the UOC, autocephaly or language change is palpable in our conversations. Politics is thus a concept the interviewees use to justify their apolitical stance and discursively shield themselves from what they see as hostile and wrong.

Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine has triggered profound changes across Ukrainian society, and the field of religion is no exception. Ukraine's dominant religion is Orthodox Christianity, which first came to the country in the tenth century (► see [A Short History of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine](#) below). Today, Ukraine has two separate Orthodox Churches: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU).¹ Although both share the same dogmatic teaching, each church questions the religious validity of the other.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine emerged in 2018–19 from the pro-independence movements that had sought to break ties with Russia's religious leadership since the early twentieth century. By contrast, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a name to which many people add 'of the Moscow Patriarchate', has been distinguished by its subordination to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Once the largest Christian denomination in the country,² it now faces the prospect of gradual dissolution—parish by parish—due to what the Ukrainian government believes are links to Russia.

A Short History of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine

The history of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine is bound up with the nation's political and cultural development. Its origins can be traced back to the tenth century, when Prince Volodymyr of Kyiv introduced Orthodox Christianity to his dominion. For centuries to come, the church became a powerful institution that preserved a sense of local identity, especially after the Ukrainian lands were incorporated into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. When a short-lived Ukrainian state brought about by a rebellion against the Poles was absorbed by Russia in the late seventeenth century, the Ukrainian ecclesiastical authority known as the Metropolis of Kyiv was subordinated to the Bishop of Moscow. The church would thereafter prove instrumental in promoting Russian political and cultural domination.

The rise of the Ukrainian national movement in the twentieth century ignited pro-independence aspirations within the church, resulting in the proclamation of autocephaly—ecclesiastical independence—by some clerics in the early 1920s. However, the advent of the Soviet era brought that autocephaly to an abrupt end. Although openly hostile towards religion, the Soviets nevertheless supported the Russian Orthodox Church's claims on Ukraine in a bid to help them rule over its diverse population. No wonder that when the Soviet Union collapsed, many clerics in Ukraine decided to separate from Moscow, while many others opted to stay with the Russian Church. As a result, Ukraine now has two competing Orthodox Churches: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) historically subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) that emerged in 2018–19.

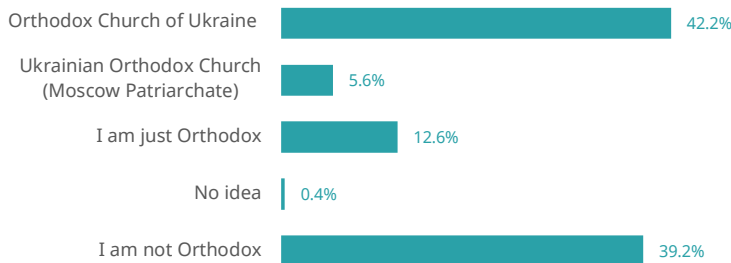
1 On the history of this split in Ukrainian Orthodoxy, see Nicolas Denysenko, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine. A Century of Separation* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018).

2 Shortly before the Revolution of Dignity (2013–14) and the annexation of Crimea (2014), 20 per cent of Ukrainians claimed to belong to the UOC, while approximately 19 per cent claimed to belong to the OCU predecessors: the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Autocephalous Church. See: https://razumkov.org.ua/upload/Przh_Religion_2013.pdf.

Since 2019, the number of OCU parishes has gradually been approaching that of the UOC.³ But there is a huge discrepancy in the numbers of people who claim to belong to each Church—42.2 per cent of Ukrainians feel affiliated with the OCU compared to just 5.6 per cent with the UOC, according to the latest research. ► **FIGURE 1** The UOC has seen an almost three-fold drop in affiliation since the Russian invasion began in 2022, and different surveys suggest that this is due to people’s distrust in what they see as a ‘Russian’ church.⁴

The UOC relations with the Moscow Patriarchate are complicated. In 1990, the UOC gained autonomy in managing its internal affairs but remained subordinated to Moscow in matters of external relations and religious practice. In 2022, the UOC proclaimed its independence from the Moscow Patriarchate.⁵ However, the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience—the governmental agency responsible for religious affairs in Ukraine—called that move into doubt in 2023, arguing that to become genuinely independent, the church would have had to proclaim autocephaly—the status of ecclesiastic self-governance (► see **Autocephaly in the Orthodox Church**, p. 6)—something the UOC never actually did.⁶

FIGURE 1
Which Orthodox Church do you identify with?



Source: ‘Religiosity, Trust in the Church, Confessional Affiliation and Inter-church Relations in Ukrainian Society (November, 2023)’, Razumkov Centre, 28 December 2023, <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/research-areas/surveys/religiosity-trust-in-the-church-confessional-affiliation-and-inter-church-relations-in-ukrainian-society-november-2023>.

3 According to the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience, on 1 January 2024 the UOC had 10,586 parishes, while the OCU had 8,075. See: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1vcq1ulAaH8jEOY6Hcjyq0GTmDo3SEW6F/edit?gid=39530429#gid=39530429>.

4 See the findings of surveys by the Razumkov Centre (<https://razumkov.org.ua/images/2023/12/19/2023-Religiya-F.pdf>) and the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (<https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1129&page=5> and <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1404&page=1>).

5 Anatolii Babynskyi, ‘UOC-MP Asserts ‘Full’ Independence at Surprise Solemn Sobor’, The Pillar, 28 May 2022, <https://www.pillaratholic.com/p/uoc-mp-asserts-full-independence>.

6 ‘Vysnovok relihiieznavchoi ekspertyzy Statutu pro upravlinnia Ukrainskoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvy na naiavnist tserkovno-kanonichnoho zviazku z Moskovskym patriarkhatom’, 27 January 2023, <https://dcss.gov.ua/vysnovok-relihiieznavchoi-ekspertyzy-statutu-pro-upravlinnia-ukrainskoi-pravoslavnoi-tserkvy>.

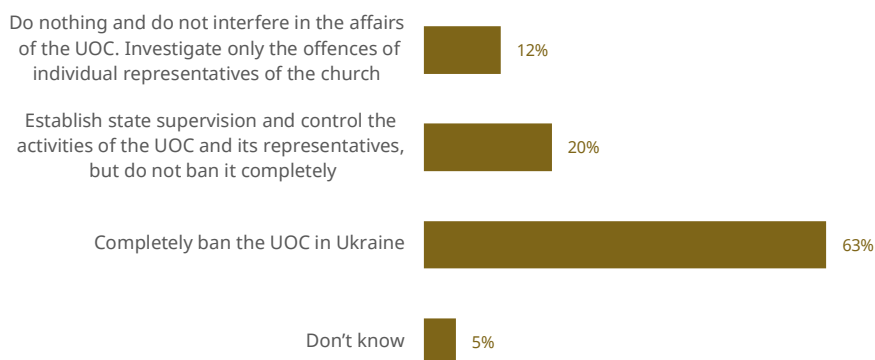
Autocephaly in the Orthodox Church

The Orthodox Church is not a centralised institution ruled by one religious leader; rather, it is a fellowship of several territorial churches united by doctrine and mutual recognition. Some territorial churches correspond to nation states, while others are relics of different empires in terms of their territorial claims (e.g. the Russian Orthodox Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church, or the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople). When a territorial Orthodox church has the status of autocephaly that effectively means

that this church has complete independence from other territorial churches in all matters related to its self-government, rituals, celebrations, and so on. There is no consensus among the clergy on how to achieve autocephaly, on what grounds it can be requested, and who should recognise a given church as autocephalous. Each case of autocephaly is unique, but since the nineteenth century the view that a nation state requires its own autocephalous church has become widespread among some Orthodox clergy.

FIGURE 2

In your opinion, what policy should the Ukrainian authorities adopt regarding the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)?



Source: 'What Should be the Government's Policy and Trust in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)', Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 7 May 2024, <https://kiiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1404&page=1>.

In recent years, the UOC has been in the national news for numerous scandals related to collaborationism or the promotion of pro-Russia narratives.⁷ A survey of public opinion in spring 2024 found that an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians did not trust the UOC and supported the idea of all-out ban of this denomination. ► **FIGURE 2** The government has also recently passed legislation making it possible to disband UOC parishes and structures should links to Russia be found.⁸

7 See the most recent media monitoring of UOC representation: Instytut masovoi informatsii, 'Vid komplimentiv do "vyhnannia bisiv": mediina traiektoriia UPTs Moskovskoho patriarkhatu', 18 April 2023, <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/vid-komplimentiv-do-vygnannya-bisiv-medijna-trayektoriya-upts-moskovskogo-patriarkhatu-i52196>.

8 Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy, 'Proekt Zakonu pro vnesennia zmin do deiakykh zakoniv Ukrainy shcho do diialnosti v Ukraini relihiinykh orhanizatsii', <https://itd.rada.gov.ua/billInfo/Bills/Card/41219>.

This report concerns the UOC. It does not ask whether the accusations against the church are true or false, nor does it enter into the discussion over the nature of its current relations with the Moscow Patriarchate. Instead, it explores how rank-and-file church members—parish priests and their parishioners—explain the existing public disapproval of the UOC. The report analyses their discourse with a view to understanding the mindset of UOC members, what compels them to act, and what they are ready to change to alleviate public pressure.

Methodology

This report draws on twenty-seven in-depth semi-structured interviews with parish priests and parishioners from nine parishes across Ukraine. The parishes were mostly urban and small, with one parish located in a rural area. I recruited interviewees between January and October 2024 using a snowball sampling approach. In some cases, the parish priests recommended parishioners I could interview; in others, parishioners volunteered to be interviewed or I convinced them to do an interview without letting their priest know. In one parish, interviews with the parishioners were conducted by my assistant, who was an insider and thus more trustworthy in the eyes of the parish.

The ongoing war was a factor in people's readiness to express certain beliefs. Many of my interviewees mentioned people with what they believed were pro-Russia views, yet none of them acknowledged having such views themselves. None of the people my interviewees described as 'pro-Russia' agreed to be interviewed. As a result, the report could only analyse 'pro-Russia' views in the UOC based on secondary sources. The interviews were complemented by my observations in some of the parishes, and a dozen informal conversations with clerics and believers who for various reasons declined to give interviews.

Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine

Although more than sixty per cent of the population claim to be Orthodox, Ukraine is nevertheless a secular country, where religious authorities have very little influence on political decision-making and private life. As anthropologist Catherine Wanner shows, most Ukrainians who call themselves Orthodox are not religious in the sense of following the teachings of religious authorities, knowing church doctrine, or regularly attending church services.⁹ Some of them go to a specific cathedral at Easter to get holy water, but otherwise never set foot in church. Some hang icons of the Mother of God from their rear-view mirrors but do not know any prayers by heart. Some simply believe in God and are concerned about Russian influence on the Orthodox Church, but do not partake in religious rituals.

⁹ Catherine Wanner, *Everyday Religiosity and the Politics of Belonging in Ukraine* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2022).

Former president of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko with the head of the OCU Metropolitan Epiphaniy on the day the church was officially established in December 2018



Source: © The Presidential Administration of Ukraine

The establishment of the OCU in 2018–19 demonstrated that many Ukrainians—regardless of church attendance—want a church that is independent from Russia.¹⁰ Most people also support the ban on the UOC. This can be attributed to growing anti-Russian sentiment in Ukrainian society and the widespread perception that Orthodox Christianity is an important part of Ukrainian national identity.¹¹ There are other reasons why the OCU is more popular: Unlike the UOC, it is autocephalous, uses the Ukrainian language in services, and embodies the idea of redressing historical injustices inflicted in the context of Russian colonial domination.

For UOC clergy and their parishioners, it is highly problematic that people who are not members of the church can call themselves Orthodox and have a say in internal church business. They are generally unwilling to deal with the demands of people who they do not consider members of their church. Some of my interviewees—sometimes without admitting it—reframe their church as simply another religion that should be governed by its own rules without being accountable to society at large.

Public disapproval of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

Attitudes to the UOC in Ukraine have been generally negative since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and they worsened significantly after 2022. For UOC spokesmen, the pressure exerted by the state and society on the church is akin to religious persecution, and they point to many instances where the authorities have taken illegal actions against UOC parishes.¹²

Indeed, following the full-scale Russian invasion, many local authorities passed decrees prohibiting the ‘activities of the Moscow Patriarchate’ in their territories—a decision sometimes followed by a unilateral termination of lease agreements on municipally-owned property that UOC parishes used for worship. Despite their shaky legal foundations, the decrees mostly remain in force.

Most of the priests and parishioners interviewed for this report have not faced pressure from the local authorities. In two cases, however, the regional authorities (Oblast Council) passed decrees prohibiting the UOC. Their local counterparts (Town or Village Councils) subsequently terminated the leases on plots on which UOC temples were built. But, as the affected parishioners explained, these lease terminations have never been enforced.

The pressure UOC members face at the local level is often of a different nature. It is exerted by family members, colleagues, or acquaintances, who ask

10 Razumkov Centre, ‘Stavlennia hromadian Ukrainy do stvorennia pomisnoi avtokefal'noi pravoslavnoi tserkvy’, December 2018, https://razumkov.org.ua/images/sociology/2019_01_09/dynamic_avtocefalii.pdf.

11 Pew Research Center, ‘Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe’, 10 May 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

12 ‘V UPTs MP zaiavly pro “zakhoplennia” pivtory tysiachi parafii’, Religiina Pravda, 10 April 2024, <https://religionpravda.com.ua/?p=91804>.

them questions like ‘when will you stop going to that church?’. Parishioner A. recalls how in a train his fellow traveller learnt of his religious affiliation and spent the whole trip trying to persuade him to leave the church for good. And Father A. talks about a parishioner whose husband threatened her until she left the UOC for the OCU.

How do UOC members explain why society disapproves of their church? Their responses can roughly be divided into the following categories:

Links to Russia

The majority of my interviewees believe that their church broke all ties to the Russian Orthodox Church in 2022. Yet, in their view, society continues to associate them with Russia by inertia. Some of them concede that this is understandable, since for many years in the recent past the church was ‘proudly showing off its unity with Russia’, as one interviewee puts it.

Speaking of the period prior to 2022, not only do many interviewees acknowledge the subordination of their church to Moscow, but also condemn a specific atmosphere that then pervaded UOC temples. Described by them as ‘Russian spirit’ or ‘Little-Russianness’, there was a sense that everything Ukrainian was inferior to the Russian ‘original’. This made some interviewees not ‘feel at home’ (pochuvatysia chuzhymy) in their churches and even distrust church leaders. In the words of parishioner An., ‘You felt ashamed not to belong to the Great Empire, but to this local culture instead. [...] Sometimes you felt straight away that Orthodox culture meant Russian culture. It was as if we belonged to the church of some national minority.’

A few interviewees believe that the UOC is still linked to Russia. For them, the 2022 Church proclamation of independence was only a first step towards autocephaly. To back up their point, some of them mention how UOC priests still commemorate¹³ the Moscow Patriarch during the liturgy. And some, like parishioner L., demand clarity about the church’s current status: ‘They [UOC leaders] are saying “We are not the M[oscow] P[at]riarchate”, but who are we then?’

Pro-Russia views

For many interviewees, the pro-Russia sentiments of some UOC clergy and parishioners cast a shadow over their church. A. and B. described how a number of their fellow parishioners refuse to take sides in the ongoing war. They supposedly do not approve of statements condemning Russia or supporting Ukraine during religious services. A. recalled how some people left his parish after the priest called Russia an aggressor. In addition, many of those who stayed never kneel during the regular communal prayer for the Ukrainian victory, because they see the prayer as ‘political’.

‘You felt ashamed not to belong to the Great Empire, but to this local culture instead. [...] Sometimes you felt straight away that Orthodox culture meant Russian culture.’

Parishioner An.

‘They are saying “We are not the Moscow Patriarchate”, but who are we then?’

Parishioner L.

¹³ Commemoration is a ritual that an Orthodox community performs during the liturgy — the priest raises the chalice, faces the congregation and prays for — or commemorates — his bishop and his metropolitan and patriarch, thereby symbolically restating the union of his parish with the one legitimate and authentic church.

Father S. is convinced that a significant share of church members holds anti-Western views. They may acknowledge Russian aggression, but still believe the West is worse because of its 'anti-Christian' agenda. S. and many others also concede that there are people with openly pro-Russia views in the church. Yet, these people were unwilling to be interviewed for this study. In one parish I was approached by an elderly woman. She refused to give an interview, but recommended a reading list that would answer my 'every question'. The recommended texts were full of ideas about the godless West and claims that Ukrainians were in fact Russians.¹⁴

Misrepresentation by the media

Virtually everyone mentioned the media's portrayal of their church as a root of the problem. For some church members, it seemed as if the Ukrainian state had tasked the media to discredit the UOC. In 2022–23, the State Security Service launched investigations into several UOC clerics, and the government drafted a bill proposing a ban of religious organisations affiliated with Russia.¹⁵ All of this was extensively covered by the media. A couple of interviewees claimed that in this way the state was using the media to distract the nation from the dire situation on the battlefield. In the view of Father H., 'it is hard and expensive to build fortifications, but it's easier to do something about the church of the wrong patriarchate and take the political credit.'

Every interviewee criticised the national and local media for one-sidedness. Two UOC members recounted how they had attempted in 2023 to arrange interviews between journalists and some clerics and were turned down. Yet mostly, the media were accused of mislabelling the UOC as the 'Russian Church in Ukraine' and misrepresenting the UOC's attitudes towards Ukraine. Many of them were convinced that the media are only interested in showing 'babushkas professing that there is no war with Russia'—to borrow a phrase from my interview with B.

Church communications problem

At the same time, many interviewees hold their church partially responsible for the ongoing media misrepresentations. In their view, church leaders failed to properly communicate the break with Moscow in 2022 and have been too slow to condemn collaborators among their clerics.¹⁶ Parishioners like T. demand that their leaders be unequivocal and quick, especially regarding collaborationism with Russia.

Some church members disagree. They say the problem lies in Ukrainian society's unwillingness to listen. Parishioner Il. dismissed the calls for UOC

'It is hard and expensive to build fortifications, but it's easier to do something about the church of the wrong patriarchate.'

Father H.

The head of the UOC Metropolitan Onufriy



Source: © Stolichnyj Blagovest

14 One of the texts is a book by the Russian Orthodox journalist Jurii Vorobevkii: *Ukraina. Fantom na russkom pole*, <https://coollib.net/b/623690-yuriy-yurevich-vorobevskiy-ukriana-fantom-na-russkom-pole/read>.

15 Andrei Fert, "'Sluzhba Bozhya Ukrainy". Kak i pochemu SBU izbavlyayetsya ot Ukrainy tserkvi Moskovskogo patriarkhata', *Open Democracy*, 16 December 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ru/sluzhba-bozhya-ukraini-fert/>.

16 The interviewees mentioned cases from the Kharkiv and Kherson Oblasts in 2022.

head Metropolitan Onufriy to face the media and set the record straight: 'He is a monk, and he is not obliged to have oratory skills. Besides, once you begin to explain yourself [to the public], you are automatically presumed guilty.'

Challenges of adaptation

The question 'Should the church change to avert public pressure?' prompts radically different responses. Psychologically speaking, many interviewees feel it would be wrong to change their religious practices due to external pressure, and believe that under such circumstances any changes would be insincere. The Ukrainian word for adaptation—*prystosuvannia*—has rather negative connotations, implying opportunistic self-masking rather than genuine change. Theologically speaking, as many interviewees highlight, the church is not to be changed, as the very idea contradicts the nature of this institution. As Father A. puts it, 'The Church is eternal because it doesn't adapt to party lines. Party lines change, but the church does not. This is how it's been for two thousand years.'

At the same time, the priests and parishioners I interviewed did contemplate concrete changes to solve specific problems. Even those who dismissed the idea of adaptation as such pointed out that their church should improve its communications with society or limit the bishops' authority. The interviewees nevertheless doubt that anything could change public attitudes towards their church. For many of them, the time when the church could have done something has long passed. As parishioner N. puts it, 'it doesn't matter what our parishes do [to support the Ukrainian Army], the people still do not accept us, they don't trust us.'

A few interviewees are convinced that the church should have done more and that changes can still help to improve its public standing. Here, they are motivated less by the desire to improve public opinion than by moral reasons. Parishioner A., for example, is quite vocal in calling on his parish rector and Metropolitan Onufriy to unequivocally support the Ukrainisation of church services, because for him it is the right thing to do.

Many interviewees emphasise that the changes should not drive people away from the church. For nearly all of the people who brought up this topic, fear of losing church members explains why the current UOC leadership appears so indecisive. For most priests and parishioners, this is the right strategy. Parishioner S., for instance, accepts that the UOC cannot proclaim autocephaly for the time being, because no one in the world would recognise it, and non-recognition would push many church members away. He praises Metropolitan Onufriy for understanding this and trying to preserve the church unity.

But parishioner A. is dispirited by the same strategy. He cites the example of his parish, which a significant share of people left after the rector called Russia an aggressor. In order to 'keep people in', the rector is now more cautious. A. is unhappy about that, as it precludes any possibility of change and makes the parish dependent on people with what he believes are pro-Russia views.

'The Church is eternal because it doesn't adapt to party lines. Party lines change, but the church does not.'

Father A.

'It doesn't matter what our parishes do, the people still do not accept us.'

Parishioner N.

‘We need to put some talking head on a TV to tell them about who we are, what we’ve done, that we’re not their enemies, that we are Ukrainians.’

Father A.

Improving communications

Despite their pronounced pessimism, many priests and parishioners believe that the UOC should improve its communications with Ukrainian society by engaging with the media at different levels and changing its own media too. But they remain unclear about what exactly the church should communicate.

Some interviewees believe the UOC should emphasise its support for Ukraine and constantly remind society about the aid it provides to displaced persons and the army. To cite Father A., ‘We need to put some talking head on a TV to tell them about who we are, what we’ve done, that we’re not their enemies, that we are Ukrainians, and we love our nation, and pray for our army and victory.’

Other parishioners feel uncomfortable about publicising the aid the UOC has collected. As parishioner An. explains, when Caritas collects aid ‘it just collects it, but with the UOC it is always some sort of performance. It’s like we’re saying “look, others only talk, we put our money where our mouth is”, and it doesn’t feel right.’ Father O. sees no way out of this dilemma—not mentioning the church efforts is wrong, but mentioning them in order to prove the church’s patriotism is also wrong. His parish does not publicise the aid it provides to the army and he is convinced that the local community sees this even without a coordinated information campaign.

Most interviewees do not see a need for improving communications at the level of the parishes. On the question of how parishioners should react when locals ask them why they belong to the ‘Moscow church’, Fathers A. and S. mention that they instructed their parishioners on how to respond to such queries. When parishioner V. approached Father A., he told her ‘do not argue, do not try to prove a point, do not quarrel.’ S., on the other hand, organised Sunday after-service lectures/tea to educate his parishioners about church history and liturgy so they can answer outsiders’ questions.

Introducing the Ukrainian language to church services

While the other churches use modern Ukrainian, the UOC mostly holds religious services in an archaic language called Church Slavonic. Since the specific dialect of UOC Church Slavonic is influenced by Russian pronunciation, some outsiders believe the church prays in Russian.¹⁷ Several interviewees report encountering people with this view, which according to them stems from ignorance. Parishioner L. is among the few who argue that ‘our Church Slavonic is not pure, it resembles Russian ... it has always been closer to Russia.’

The interviewees are by and large against replacing Church Slavonic with Ukrainian, arguing that worship requires sacral language. As Father A. puts it: ‘One language to quarrel with neighbours, another one to talk to God.’

‘One language to quarrel with neighbours, another one to talk to God.’

Father A.

¹⁷ Church Slavonic has dialects called *izvod*. An *izvod* known as Russian or Synodal is commonly used in the ROC and the UOC. Another, called Ukrainian or Kyiv *izvod*, is used in several dioceses of the UOC. The two differ mainly in how they are pronounced.

For parishioner Il., Ukrainian cannot properly convey all the meanings hidden in Church Slavonic texts. For most critics of translation, the Church Slavonic prayers are like poetry, laden with specific cadences and a veneer of mystery that cannot possibly be translated. For parishioner P., the very idea of conceding to outsiders is wrong. In her view, the church should defend Church Slavonic, not abandon it because of rally cries.

Several interviewees explain that attempts to introduce Ukrainian even partially in their churches have led to tensions among the parishioners. In Father O.'s parish, many people left the church for good after the priest read from the New Testament in Ukrainian. He stopped short of introducing more Ukrainian elements, as, according to parishioner A., it became clear that 'people do not want that.' Another parish priest decided to hold practically all services in Ukrainian, and although only two people left because of that, most parishioners did not like the new service and were quick to voice their disapproval. Parishioner L. says she was virtually the only person in the whole parish to endorse Ukrainian. The parish eventually reverted to Church Slavonic.

In Father O.'s view, people associate the liturgy in Ukrainian with rival—and in their opinion illegitimate—churches, such as the OCU, and that is why they find it hard to accept the new language. Many interviewees agree that it is time to introduce some degree of Ukrainian, but they believe that the process should be gradual. Advocates of this approach suggest starting with delivering sermons or readings in Ukrainian and proceeding from there. Alternatively, they propose adopting the Ukrainian pronunciation of Church Slavonic. Half of the parishes studied in this report do readings and sermons in Ukrainian and do not intend to go further than that.

Veneration of problematic saints

Orthodox temples are usually full of icons of saints in front of which believers can pray. There are memory days dedicated to each saint in the church calendar. Yet, some saints are controversial in time of war. In the UOC, the last Russian emperor Nicolas II, the nineteenth-century Russian admiral Fyodor Ushakov, and the mediaeval prince of Novgorod Aleksandr Nevsky are venerated as saints. Many Ukrainians are appalled that churches have icons or memory days dedicated to Russian statesmen or military figures. The OCU revised its calendar in 2024 to remove these problematic saints,¹⁸ but the UOC never considered that option. For many, the fact that Russian saints are still venerated in UOC temples speaks to the pro-Russia attitudes of the church.

Several interviewees claim that the veneration of Nicolas and others was never a problem. Practically all of them explain that the icons of the emperor and Aleksandr Nevsky were not particularly popular and they almost never prayed to them. Many priests and parishioners are critical of the links made between these saints and Russia's war. Parishioner V. says they should

The icon of Nicolas II on a door at the Pokrovsky Nunnery in Kyiv that was removed in 2023



¹⁸ Orthodox Church of Ukraine, 'Dokumenty zasidannia Sviashchennoho Synodu 14 Iypnia 2024 r.', 15 July 2024, <https://www.pomisna.info/uk/document-post/dokumenty-zasidannya-svyashchennogo-synodu-14-lypnia-2024-r/>.

‘These saints never preached about the war! [...] How can they be guilty for what Russia is doing today?’

Parishioner V.

be kept separate because ‘[these saints] never preached about the war! [...] How can they be guilty for what Russia is doing today?’ Others dismiss public attitudes towards Nicolas and others as inspired by the state policy of purging the public space of monuments to Russian figures, such as the poet Alexander Pushkin.¹⁹

Only a tiny fraction of interviewees agrees that displaying the icons of these saints in church is problematic. Parishioners S. and Sh. argue that it makes sense not to not publicly venerate Nicolas. While parishioners Il., An. and D. feel that the church should not bend to external pressure, they think that hiding or removing such icons is acceptable, not only because they are not essential to the faith, but also because they could push away potential converts.

Re-affiliation to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine

In 2019, Ukraine passed a law stipulating that a religious community can switch its affiliation to the OCU provided two-thirds of its members vote in favour of doing so.²⁰ This would seem to be an option for UOC parishioners and priests who want to avoid accusations of belonging to the ‘Russian church in Ukraine’. Yet since the Orthodox churches have no clear-cut membership, there is no consensus on who has the right to vote on this issue.²¹

UOC parishes that lease property from the state or municipality are arguably under greater pressure to re-affiliate. Under a new law, a religious organisation found to have links to Russia forfeits its right to rent state- or municipally-owned buildings. Should the authorities decide to expel a UOC parish from its building, they can offer a simple deal: To keep the building, the parish must switch to the OCU.²²

News of attempts by local authorities to terminate UOC lease agreements or push parishes to re-affiliate to the OCU have prompted some priests to seek legal advice. Several of the priests I interviewed said they had consulted lawyers on the matter of land leasing. But only Father S. made sure that the plot on which the parish building stood was re-registered as a parish property. In some cases, the parishes have no or incomplete documentation on their properties. Father H. recounts how the temple used by his parish was built at

19 In 2023, Ukraine passed a law which permits the demolition of monuments dedicated to Russian figures associated with colonialism. One of the consequences has been the mass demolition of monuments to Alexandr Pushkin. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/05/monuments-to-russia-national-poet-pushkin-under-threat-in-ukraine>.

20 ‘Poroshenko signs law on transfer of parishes to Orthodox Church of Ukraine’, UNIAN, 28 January 2019, <https://www.unian.info/politics/10425021-poroshenko-signs-law-on-transfer-of-parishes-to-orthodox-church-of-ukraine.html>.

21 UOC priests consider only regular attendants who partake in communion and rites to be church members. But for local state officials, every member of a local community is a parishioner.

22 This is essentially what happened in the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, the most important UOC monastery in downtown Kyiv, which rented its buildings from the state museum. In 2023, the museum together with the Ministry of Culture decided to terminate the lease and evict the monks. Yet, the OCU subsequently intervened to allow all the monks who agreed to join the OCU to remain in the Lavra buildings.

a time when the UOC had the full support of the authorities. All agreements pertaining to the building were oral, and officials allegedly told the priest: 'Don't you worry, someday soon we'll take care of the documents.' In other cases, the parishes had been lax about following legal procedures. As one priest with a senior position in a diocese criticised: 'First, our priests do not take care of documents, and then they cry about persecutions.'

Views of the OCU

According to the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience, roughly a thousand UOC parishes—approximately 8 per cent of a total number—have re-affiliated to the OCU since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022.²³ Official UOC websites, UOC-related media and many church influencers usually represent re-affiliation as a hostile takeover by the OCU with the help of state officials. According to this narrative, the OCU is interested in property, so it seeks to take as many places of worship as possible from the UOC, but since the parishioners mostly remain with the UOC, the buildings allegedly stand empty.²⁴

While it is nearly impossible to corroborate these claims, many interviewed UOC members echoed this narrative, accusing the OCU of seizing their church buildings with the help of the authorities. As parishioner V. puts it, 'If they [the OCU] ask the police to take over the temple, what sort of a church is that?' The OCU's perceived abuse of the re-affiliation procedure was raised in roughly half of my conversations and interviews with current UOC members and cited as a reason why they would not re-affiliate under any circumstances.

For many interviewees, the OCU is a 'political organisation' that is more interested in worldly affairs and state-building than in God. In the words of Father H., 'for the OCU, the adjective "Ukrainian" is more important than the noun "church".' By contrast, the UOC 'speaks of God', as parishioner D. puts it. Some UOC members, including fathers R. and H. are convinced that the OCU is short of parishioners, because people interested in 'secondary' issues usually do not go to church on a regular basis.

'For the OCU, the adjective "Ukrainian" is more important than the noun "church".'

Father H.

But there are also many UOC priests and parishioners who consider the OCU to be an equally true Church. Four of the priests I interviewed told their parishioners that the OCU was also legitimate and that if they wanted to re-affiliate they would go with them. One priest even went as far as holding a religious service together with an OCU priest, albeit in a private home for several like-minded parishioners and without letting his superiors know. Parishioners B. and P. think that focusing on the differences between the UOC and the OCU is counterproductive. Instead, they believe the two churches should join ranks against what they call 'gender ideology'. And parishioner Sh. says that while the UOC's internal propaganda made people doubt the OCU's religious authority, he never fell for it.

²³ 496 parishes in 2022 (<https://dessa.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Zvit-2022.pdf>) and 472 in 2023 (<https://dessa.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Zvit-2023.pdf>).

²⁴ This narrative came into being long before the 2022 invasion. See my analysis of it here: <https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2020/01/09/a-year-after-the-tomos-the-moscow-patriarchates-narratives-about-the-new-church-and-itself/>.

Reasons (not) to re-affiliate

Hardly any of the interviewees has actually re-affiliated. The priests cited their oath of loyalty to the UOC, and even parishioners who recognised the legitimacy of the OCU felt that the UOC was still their church. Others, like parishioner L., pointed out that while they would like to hear liturgy in Ukrainian, the closest OCU church was too far away.

Yet for most of the interviewees, the question of which church they are affiliated with is irrelevant. They seem attached to the place, the community of people, the priest and the spiritual fulfilment they get from their current church. As parishioner Sh. aptly summarised: 'The Parish comes first, then the question of UOC or OCU. [...] Having like-minded people around you is more important than the question of whether your church is led by Onufriy [UOC] or Epiphaniy [OCU].'

Only a few interviewees were ready to re-affiliate with the OCU to alleviate the pressure on their parish. Father O. was reluctant to re-affiliate, but said he would do it if it was the only way to save his place of worship and religious community. Others said they would only switch to the other church if the whole parish did so.

Father Y. and his parishioners H. and O. re-affiliated shortly after the full-scale invasion in 2022 for moral reasons: They could not remain in a church with people who supported the invasion. Father S. left the UOC a year after the invasion, because he wanted to be involved in humanitarian projects and his UOC affiliation proved problematic in that area of work. Father Ch. talked about a fellow priest who had joined a priest-initiated group promoting dialogue between the UOC and the OCU. But according to Ch., he did it not out of conviction, but because he was afraid of losing his temple to the OCU.

For the most part, however, my interviewees were against re-affiliation as a response to external pressure on the UOC. They framed it as a betrayal of their Church and cited many OCU violations as a reason not to join that church whatever the cost.

Conclusions

This report reveals a breadth of opinion within the UOC that challenges the prevailing perception of it in today's Ukraine as a thoroughly pro-Russian organisation. While by no means a representative sample, the rank-and-file UOC members I interviewed express a wide range of views on the war, Russia and the question of whether the church needs to change. Most of the interviewees hold the media responsible for negative attitudes towards their church, but some acknowledge that the church itself is partially to blame.

Implicit or direct criticism of the UOC leadership is evident in many responses, suggesting that its politics sometimes fails to resonate with ordinary church members. The top-down church propaganda against the OCU is not universally accepted by my interviewees. While most echo UOC narratives about the OCU and see their church as a victim of religious persecution, many question the claims of UOC leaders about the 'rival' church.

'Having like-minded people around you is more important than the question of whether your church is led by Onufriy or Epiphaniy.'

Parishioner Sh.

The report also shows that the general reluctance to use the Ukrainian language in religious services or re-affiliate with the OCU is not necessarily an indicator of pro-Russian attitudes. Among my interviewees, other factors play a stronger role here, including habit, theological considerations, and a strong sense of connection with their local parish community.

A significant number of interviewees are willing to introduce some Ukrainian-language elements, but virtually no one is ready to abandon Church Slavonic entirely. Most find the idea of switching to the OCU in order to appease church critics unacceptable. The few who expressed their readiness to do so said they would only switch together with the entire parish. Those UOC clerics who re-affiliated in 2022 did so on moral grounds. The report cites later cases where priests re-affiliated to the OCU for more pragmatic reasons: in order to retain their temples or remain active in humanitarian projects.

Confronted with war, public disapproval of the UOC, and internal church problems, many UOC members attempt to disengage themselves from complex discussions that they perceive as irrelevant to their daily lives as parishioners or clerics. The concept of politics looms prominently in all my interviews; everyone mentioned it in one way or another. For some, politics denoted everything that had nothing to do with God—i. e. debates about church structure, the veneration of saints, autocephaly, re-affiliation and so on. Others claimed that what the OCU and ROC were doing was politics, namely representing the church as an integral part of national identity, ideology and traditions. Thus politics in the mouths of my respondents always meant something bad or irrelevant. For them, the church should be beyond politics (*buty poza politykoiu*) and exorcise all politics-related things from its daily practices. Yet, the war politicises everything, so the conflict between religious communities striving to be apolitical and an increasingly politicised society is likely to continue.

Imprint

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Published by

© Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) gGmbH

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Citation

Fert, Andriy: 'War and Religion— Views from within Ukraine's 'Russian' Church', ZOiS Report 6/2024, (https://en.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS_Reports/2024/ZOiS_Report_6_2024.pdf)

ISSN 2627-7233

Editing

Anne Boden

Layout

Yuko Stier

Cover image

The All Saints Church in Kyiv Pechersk Lavra
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