



By: Iuliia Mendel, TA Kyiv

# Church or Kremlin's tool?



Ukraine may ban one of its branches of the Orthodox Church if it fails to sever ties with Russia. August 18 marked the final **deadline** for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, affiliated with Moscow, to address violations of the new law on freedom of conscience and religious organisations signed by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy last year.

Specifically, Metropolitan Onufriy, the head of the branch, was **required** to confirm the withdrawal from the Russian Orthodox Church, annul all provisions of the Russian Church's Statute, recall clergy, monks, and nuns from the church, and formally — either orally or in writing — declare the termination of ties with Russia.

In Ukraine, this church for years has been informally referred to with the suffix "MP," meaning Moscow Patriarchate.

Ukraine is to file a lawsuit to ban the church. The accusations, however, go far beyond religion.

The issue became especially urgent after the full-scale invasion, when Moscow Patriarch Kirill's council **declared** the war "holy," with Russian churches blessing soldiers and openly supporting aggression.

Some priests of this church have been charged with directing Russian strikes on Ukraine, misappropriating church property, and spreading Kremlin propaganda.

It's not clear how helpful the new law is in this regard, though, given that Ukrainian law enforcement already has the right to deal with such crimes regardless of the professional or religious affiliation of people committing them.

## A "ban on Christ"

Ukraine has its own independent Orthodox Church, which in 2019 received a Tomos granting autocephaly.

Before 2022, about 18% of Ukraine's population — around 8 million people — **attended** the

church linked to Moscow. Traditionally, they celebrate major religious holidays one to two weeks later than the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Religious organisations in Ukraine can voluntarily leave the Russian branch by submitting the necessary documents — thus avoiding the application of the ban.

Since 2019, more than 1,800 parishes have **switched** from the Moscow Patriarchate to other confessions. This process continues, and the state does not force believers to change their faith or rituals.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the "Moscow Patriarchate" insists it never **received** official notice about the investigation into its affiliation with Russia, nor about its results.

It also claims it was never sent the order defining the criteria for such affiliation. The church has described the state's actions as "manipulative and fictitious."

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The law has faced resistance not only from the clergy but also from many parishioners, who see it as a "ban on Christ" in Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly argued that this church cannot be outlawed. At the most recent talks in Alaska, reports **suggest** he again pressed the issue, trying to convince U.S. President Donald Trump that Ukraine is persecuting the church.

The church's existence in its current form is therefore of high importance to Moscow and may become one of the most difficult points in peace negotiations.

Russian propaganda has also thrown its weight behind the church. The internet is filled with alarming videos allegedly showing young men

harassing priests and seizing churches.

Some suggest this unrest is linked to the crackdown on the Moscow-affiliated church, though verifying the authenticity of such footage is often difficult.

## The future of Ukraine's orthodoxy

The struggle has extended to church property itself: in 2023–2024, commissions from the Ministry of Culture repeatedly inspected the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, Ukraine's most important monastery complex, creating a highly contentious media picture.

Ultimately, the state reclaimed ownership of the reserve that contains some of the country's most treasured religious monuments.



*The deeper challenge lies in removing all flags, restoring the church as a sacred space free from political control*

Since Christianity's arrival in Kyiv, the city's church remained under the Patriarch of Constantinople's authority until the late 17th century, when the Russian Empire annexed the metropolis.

In the 1990s, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church **sought** independence, but it **gained** formal recognition from other Orthodox churches only with the 2019 Tomos.

Some Ukrainian Orthodox Christians, however, remained under Moscow's ecclesiastical authority. Many question

whether Ukraine's current struggle will secure true independence for its Orthodox Church.

The roots of today's challenges trace back to the Soviet era, when churches were systematically **destroyed**, and clergy faced persecution, imprisonment, or execution.

The Soviet state, centred in Moscow, manipulated religion, transforming the church from a spiritual sanctuary into a tool of state control, propaganda, surveillance, and governance — a reality that persists in Russia today.

There are concerns that Kyiv might replace the pro-Russian model with a nationalist one, merely swapping one form of state influence for another.

But can true spiritual renewal be achieved by changing the flag over the church? The deeper challenge lies in removing all flags, restoring the church as a sacred space free from political control.