



Український Конгресовий Комітет Америки, Інк. UKRAINIAN CONGRESS COMMITTEE OF AMERICA, INC.

NATIONAL OFFICE

203 Second Ave., New York, NY 10003
Phone: (212) 228-6840/41
e-mail: ucca@ucca.org

WASHINGTON OFFICE

311 Massachusetts Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002
Phone: (202) 547-0018 · Fax: (202) 547-0019
www.ucca.org e-mail: unis@ucca.org

UCCA Supports Ukraine's Passage of Religious Institutions Law

On August 20, 2024, Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) passed a bill that bans religious organizations with direct ties to the aggressor state, russia. Ostensibly this bill aims to counter russian influence within Ukrainian religious institutions and outlaws the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the moscow patriarchate, which historically has been an arm of the kremlin within Ukraine. Under the guise of “russkiy mir [russian world],” russia has continually used the infrastructure of religious faith to advance its cynical and malicious aims in the territory of Ukraine. Despite the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's claims of severing ties with russia, evidence suggests ongoing connections.

The Ukrainian Congress Committee of America (UCCA), the representative organization of over 2 million Americans of Ukrainian descent, supports Ukraine’s passage of the religious organizations law as an initiative to combat a pervasive threat to its national security. A consistent tactic in russia’s full-scale war of aggression in Ukraine and globally has been a policy of deceiving its adversaries by falsely claiming abandonment of core principles of our societies. Some quickly take up this russian talking point to argue the actions of the Rada infringe on religious liberty in Ukraine. This narrative is false! Ukraine is a pluralistic, multi-religious society and the country has the unilateral right to restrict organizations that openly aid and abet an enemy that is invading its territory not just with missiles and tanks, but through political and societal manipulation. While russia-linked organizations are not tolerated, Ukraine remains a free society where people can practice their different faiths freely.

Last week, the Ukraine Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (UCCRO) issued a statement affirming that “religious rights and freedoms are respected in Ukraine, even amidst of brutal war...[citizens of Ukraine] have the opportunity to express their religious feelings and beliefs with dignity.” UCCRO went on to state that russian aggression is “the main threat to religious freedom in Ukraine. As a result of which, dozens of clergymen were killed by the occupiers and hundreds of churches and houses of worship were destroyed. The moscow patriarchate justifies pogroms and restrictions on religious freedom, torture and murders of priests and pastors, and cynically tramples on God’s instructions and basic norms of universal morality.”

Elected leaders in the United States understand this all too well. Commenting earlier this year on the persecution of Ukrainians in the russian temporarily-occupied territories, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Mike Johnson stated that “it’s a demonic thing in my view” how russia targets and tortures Ukrainians for their faith.

On commenting on the passage of the Ukrainian law, UCCA president Andrew Futey mentioned “the law in Ukraine is equivalent to recent initiatives in the United States which bans the use of social media outlets such as TikTok for its foreign ownership and potential threat to U.S. nation security interests.” In this context, Ukraine's actions are a necessary defense against a hostile force that exploits religious institutions for war, while still upholding the nation's commitment to religious freedom.

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