Zelensky government steps up persecution of Russian-affiliated Orthodox Church amid mounting military losses

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Amidst a deepening military and political crisis in the country, the right-wing government of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky moved last week to oust Orthodox monks attached to the Russian-affiliated Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) from their base at the 980-year-old Pechersk Lavra monastery complex in Kiev.

The UOC has had a long-standing affiliation with the Russian Orthodox Church but declared its independence from Moscow in May 2022, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church still includes UOC-affiliated clergy in its work, however.

Regarding the escalating prosecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Zelensky appealed to both Ukrainian nationalism and religious separatism in justifying the move, claiming that "One more step towards strengthening our spiritual independence was taken this week."

The move is a clear signal to ramp up religious and ethnic conflicts in the war-torn country. In an indication that this is just the beginning of a broader campaign, Zelensky stated, "We will continue this movement. We will not allow the terrorist state any opportunity to manipulate the spiritual life of our people, to destroy Ukrainian shrines—our Lavras—or to steal any valuables from them."

In 1991, only 39 percent of Ukrainians identified as Orthodox Christian. In the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and amid the widespread deindustrialization and poverty that followed, religious sentiments and obscurantism grew as did various rival sects of the Orthodox Church—all with their own separate geopolitical orientations. By 2015, a Pew Research Center study found that approximately 78 percent of Ukraine's adult population identified as Orthodox Christian.

Following the 2014 Western-backed coup of elected President Viktor Yanukovych, the right-wing nationalist government of Petro Poroshenko intervened strongly in the creation and promotion of a single Kiev-aligned Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in opposition to the Moscow-aligned Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Both antecedent separate Orthodox churches of the OCU had supported the 2014 Maidan coup and would become a central part of the NATO-aligned Poroshenko government's push to promote nationalism, militarism and anti-Russian sentiments.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine was formed in 2018, out of the two smaller rival but pro-Maidan Orthodox churches, both lay claim to representing all of Ukraine. In 2019, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine was granted independence or "autocephaly" from the Moscow-based Patriarch. The move by the Patriarch of Constantinople to formalize a split with the Russian church to which it had been tied since 1686 was strongly opposed by the Moscow Patriarchate led by Putin-ally Patriarch Kirill, who broke off relations with Constantinople in response.

Since the 2019 split from Moscow, the rivalry between the two separate churches over property, parishioners and religious sites continued. In this conflict, the Kiev-aligned OCU was granted the full backing of the right-wing Ukrainian government, of which it has become an integral part.

The February 2022 invasion of Russia marked a new stage in the religious war between the two churches with Kiev moving quickly to denounce the UOC as

"collaborators".

Later in October of last year, the Ukraine's Security Service (SBU), which maintains close ties to the Ukrainian far-right, began to regularly carry out raids in search of "anti-Ukrainian" materials at UOC churches, impose sanctions on its bishops and supporters, and open criminal cases against dozens of its clergymen.

The Pechersk Lavra monastery located in Kiev is viewed as one of the most important historical and religious sites within Ukraine and all of Eastern Europe. Until recently, the site was administered jointly by the National Kyiv-Pechersk Historic-Cultural Preserve and the Moscow-aligned UOC.

In January of this year, the Ukrainian government terminated the UOC's lease of the site and intervened to allow the government-backed OCU to celebrate a Christmas service at the site's Dormition Cathedral.

The announcement Friday gave the remaining UOC monks until March 29 to fully vacate the premises. Initial media reports following the eviction notice suggest that the UOC monks are refusing to leave and will likely be forcibly removed and arrested by the SBU after the deadline passes.

The Orthodox Church in both Russia and Ukraine has for centuries promoted obscurantism, nationalism and anti-Semitism with its own clergy members guilty of participating in some of the worst pogroms of the previous centuries.

However, there is clearly nothing progressive in Zelensky's crackdown on one religious organization while supporting its equally backward rival. It speaks to the reactionary character of the Zelensky regime that it has embraced Ukraine's "spiritual independence" in order to promote Ukrainian nationalism, anti-Russian chauvinism and ethnic conflict.

It is no accident that the Ukrainian government announced the eviction just as it made public plans to continue pouring troops into the "meat grinder" of Bakhmut, where Russian and Ukrainian soldiers have died in the thousands and Ukraine appears to be losing.

On Tuesday, in his evening video address, Zelensky said that Ukraine's top military command unanimously favors defending the sector of eastern Ukraine including Bakhmut to "destroy the occupiers to the maximum."

In a further indication of an intense political and military crisis, on the same day, Zelensky removed the governors of Luhansk, Odesa, and Khmelnytskyi provinces with no reason given for their sudden dismissals.

Regarding the ongoing mass death at Bakhmut, a Ukrainian soldier recently stated plainly to the *Kyiv Independent* that, "When they drive us to Bakhmut, I already know I'm being sent to death."

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