

Ukrainian parliament passes law banning Ukrainian Orthodox Church

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Ukraine's parliament moved forward on Tuesday with long-standing plans to ban the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). A lopsided 265 votes to 29 were cast in favor of a bill that will shut down religious groups supposedly linked to Moscow.

President Volodymyr Zelensky is expected to quickly sign the bill into law. In language commonly used by the fascist right, he praised the vote as a means to strengthen the “spiritual independence” of the country.

Under the law, each individual Orthodox parish accused of ties to Moscow will be given nine months to leave the UOC and join another Orthodox church such as the government-backed Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) or risk being banned in Ukrainian courts.

As Ukrainian-Canadian political science Professor Ivan Katchanovski noted on X, despite government persecution, the UOC still owns the largest number of parishes with 9,107 compared to 5,194 among other Orthodox churches. A complete ban on the UOC would entail a potentially huge transfer of buildings and property to the government-favored OCU.

The move comes as Ukraine continues its NATO-backed adventurist invasion of Russia's Kursk region, while Ukrainian troops keep losing territory in the Donbass to Russia. The situation for Ukrainian forces in the region has been described as “catastrophic” by military analyst Julian Repke in the German tabloid *Bild*.

On Monday, Ukrainian authorities ordered the evacuation of the eastern city of Pokrovsk in Donetsk, which was previously home to over 65,000 residents. About 53,000 people, including approximately 4,000 children, now remain in the city with Ukrainian authorities warning that Russia will likely take both Pokrovsk and its surrounding villages within the next two weeks.

According to Strana.ua, three companies of a battalion of the Ukrainian National Guard, including their commanders, refused to execute the orders of the military high command because of a “huge personnel shortage.” Ukrainian troops are outnumbered by Russian troops by a ratio of one to three. Ukrainian soldiers are reportedly also deserting in large numbers, in what are growing indications of the unfolding disintegration of the Ukrainian armed forces.

This is not the first time that the Ukrainian government has escalated its attack on democratic rights and efforts to whip up ethnic tensions amid a severe military crisis. In March of last year, Zelensky announced the impending eviction of UOC monks from the 980-year-old Pechersk Lavra monastery complex, a well known historical and religious site in Kiev, just as the Ukrainian government made public plans to continue pouring its troops into the “meat grinder” of Bakhmut where Russian and Ukrainian soldiers died in the tens of thousands.

At the time, Zelensky indicated that the eviction was just the start of a broader campaign to whip up religious and ethnic xenophobia stating, “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.”

While the UOC has had a long-standing affiliation with the Russian Orthodox Church, it 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.

In 1991, only 39 percent of Ukrainians identified as Orthodox Christian. As a result of the disorientation caused by decades of Stalinism and the devastating

socio-economic consequences of capitalist restoration, in the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, religious sentiments and obscurantism grew. Various rival branches of the Orthodox Church emerged, each with their own geopolitical orientation and political allegiances. 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 in Kiev, 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 sentiment.

The government-backed Orthodox Church of Ukraine was formed in 2018, out of these two smaller rival pro-Maidan Orthodox churches. In 2019, the OCU was granted independence or "autocephaly" from the Moscow-based Patriarchate under Patriarch Kirill, a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Since the 2019 split from Moscow, the two separate churches have been engaged in an embittered rivalry over property, parishioners and religious sites. In this conflict, the Kiev-aligned OCU has received the full backing of the right-wing Ukrainian government, of which it has become an integral part. The invasion by Russia in February 2022, marked a new stage in the religious and political war between the two churches with Kiev moving quickly to denounce the UOC as "collaborators."

In October of 2022, Ukraine's Security Service (SBU), which maintains close ties to the 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.

For centuries, the Orthodox Church in both Russia and Ukraine has promoted obscurantism, nationalism and anti-Semitism. Its clergy members have been guilty of participating in some of the worst anti-Jewish pogroms of the past, and continue to maintain close

relations with the far-right in both countries.

However, there is clearly nothing progressive in Zelensky's crackdown on one religious organization while supporting its equally reactionary rival. It is part of the systematic efforts to place far-right Ukrainian nationalism and anti-Russian chauvinism at the center of the ideology and politics of the Ukrainian state.

The Ukrainian far-right has endorsed the government's escalating attacks on the Church, while egging Zelensky on to take even more drastic measures.

The Chief of Staff of the neo-Nazi Azov brigade Bohdan Krotevuxh wrote on X, "According to the UOC, this is not yet a ban, it is only the first step. So continue to fight the Russian FSB agent network—the UOC."

Meanwhile social media accounts of the neo-fascist Right Sector organization complained that "It took almost a year for the Verkhovna Rada to pass a law in the second reading prohibiting the activities of religious organizations associated with the Russian Federation. But here, too, the law is not without tolerance. According to the law, the UOC is given nine months to sever ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. As if ten years of war were not enough."

These same fascist forces have also praised Zelensky's high-risk invasion of Russia's Kursk region which they have labeled "historically Ukrainian." The Ukrainian far-right has long laid claims to the Kursk region and several other Russian regions which it seeks to integrate into a "Greater Ukraine".



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