

Independence of the Church in Ukraine: Russia's War in Ukraine

On May 27, 2022, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine -- the Moscow Patriarchate, opened a council (*Sobor*) to discuss the situation in the country created by Russia's military aggression on Ukraine. On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine, hoping to capture the country, change its government and make Ukraine into a satellite state. The Patriarchate of Moscow has supported the war, while its subordinate Ukrainian church, which numbers around 12,000 parishes, has strongly condemned the Russian invasion. At the May 27 the council of the Church in Ukraine (the Moscow Patriarchate) the delegates decided to completely separate from Moscow and establish administrative independence. In its concluding document, the council listed 9 points, of which numbers 4 and 6 deal with the question of independence.¹ The newly independent Ukrainian church does not intend to break communion with Russia. This was confirmed on the first Sunday after the council. During the Divine Liturgy on May 29, 2022, Metropolitan Onufriy mentioned Patriarch Kirill of Russia among all the other church heads of the worldwide Orthodoxy. Only the ruling bishops of the autocephalous churches commemorate in the diptychs the ruling bishops of the other autocephalous churches. Metropolitan Onufriy no longer commemorated Kirill as his ruling bishop.²

In the days leading up to the Great Lent of 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. As the Great Lent started, the Russians started to bomb Mariupol, a city named after an icon of Theotokos, deliberately targeting

¹ “Постанова Собору Української Православної Церкви від 27 травня 2022 року,” Київська Митрополія, May 27 2022 <<https://mitropolia.kiev.ua/postanova-soboru-ukrayinskoyi-pravoslavnoyi-czerkvy-vid-27-travnja-2022-roku/>>

² “Шедевр церковной дипломатии,” РБК, May 29 2022 <<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/29/05/2022/62931bae9a7947448b3cdab4>>

civilian infrastructure, including a maternity ward and a historic theater building serving as a shelter for hundreds of civilians. Such violent acts caused by the Russian government in Ukraine initially did not produce any reaction from the Patriarchate of Moscow. A few weeks into the fratricidal war, the Patriarch of Moscow essentially justified the atrocities in Ukraine, implying that Russia had not attacked Ukraine and that Russia was not fighting a war with that country. On May 3, 2022, Russian news outlets reported that the Patriarch of Moscow declared in his Sunday sermon: "we [Russia] do not want to fight a war with anyone; Russia has never attacked anyone. it is astonishing that a great and powerful country [Russia] has never attacked anyone; she has only defended her borders."³

In contrast to his patriarch's position, the head of the Russian church in Ukraine, Metropolitan of Kyiv Onufriy, called the invasion a "disaster." Soon after Russia attacked Ukraine on February 24 2022 Metropolitan Onufriy declared: "unfortunately, Russia has launched military operations against Ukraine, and at this fateful time, I urge you not to panic, be courageous and show love for your Motherland and each other." He added: "In this tragic time, we express our special love and support to our soldiers who stand guard and protect and defend our land and our people. May God bless and keep them!" Metropolitan Onufriy called the Russian invasion a "war," an illegal act in Russia, and called on the Russian leadership to stop it: "Defending the sovereignty and integrity of Ukraine, we appeal to the President of Russia and ask to stop the fratricidal war immediately."⁴

Ukraine's other canonical church, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which was granted autocephaly in 2018 by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, also condemned the Russian invasion. On March 6, in his Forgiveness Sunday Sermon, Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Ukraine Epiphanius called on the faithful to pray for the victory of Ukraine. he said: "Not all of us can or are able to defend Ukraine

³ "Патриарх Кирилл: Россия никогда ни на кого не нападала," rg.ru, May 3 2022, <<https://rg.ru/2022/05/03/patriarh-kirill-rossiya-nikogda-ni-na-kogo-ne-napadala.html>>

⁴ "Обращение Блаженнейшего Митрополита Киевского и всея Украины Онуфрия к верным и гражданам Украины," Київська Митрополія, February 24 2022, <<https://mitropolia.kiev.ua/ru/zvernennya-blazhennishogo-mytropolyta-kyuyivskogo-i-vsiyeyi-ukrayiny-onufriya-do-virnyh-ta-do-gromadyan-ukrayiny/>>

from the enemy with weapons in hand. But every Christian not only can but must pray. And our prayer at this time, the prayer for the Ukrainian army, for the state and our President, for those who suffer from the war, as well as the request for God's protection, victory, and peace -- is the contribution of every believer in the approaching victory."⁵

The other Orthodox Churches have joined the Ukrainian churches to condemn Russia's war. The Church of Georgia has condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a violation of the country's territorial integrity and, from February 27, has conducted a series of drives to collect humanitarian aid for Ukraine. In his Easter Epistle, Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II said: "the ongoing wars in the world are [a] cause of great heartache, especially the war in our neighborhood, which Russia has unleashed in Ukraine where appalling facts of grave cruelty are taking place."⁶ The Church in Romania condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, the very day Russia attacked Ukraine. The Romanian Patriarchate published a statement by Patriarch Daniel, in which he stated: "The Romanian Orthodox Church, like other important institutions in Romania and the European Union, has marked with the greatest concern the start of the war in Ukraine, a war started by Russia against a sovereign and independent state."⁷ Patriarch of Bulgaria expressed his sorrow at witnessing "the military actions of two fraternal peoples -- Russia and Ukraine," and called for an immediate end to "the bloodshed."⁸ In his sermon on the Forgiveness vespers, Patriarch of Serbia expressed fear that Russia's war in Ukraine would "bring

⁵ «Проповідь Блаженнішого Митрополита Київського і всієї України Епіфанія в сиропусну неділю», Православна Церква України, March 6 2022 <<https://www.pomisna.info/uk/sermon-post/propovid-blazhennijshogo-mytropolitya-kyuyivskogo-i-vsiyeyi-ukrayiny-epifaniya-v-syropusnu-nedilyu/>>

⁶ "The Easter Epistle of the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Archbishop of Mtskheta and Tbilisi And Metropolitan of Bitchvinta and Tskhum-Apkhazeti, Ilia II (2022)," The Patriarchate of Georgia, April 24 2022 <<https://patriarchate.ge/news/2960>>

⁷ "The Romanian patriarch also condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine," The European Times, May 27 2022 <<https://www.europeantimes.news/2022/02/the-romanian-patriarch-also-condemned-russias-aggression-against-ukraine/>>

⁸ "Patriarch of Bulgaria calls for an end to bloodshed and increased prayer," *Orthodox Christianity*, February 25 2022 <<https://orthochristian.com/144676.html>>

suffering and divisions both to the whole world, and to Europe." On March 6, Patriarch Porfirije said: "the war in Ukraine produces suffering and divisions, however, not only at this moment between our brothers, Russians and Ukrainians, but threatens to bring suffering and divisions both to the whole world, and to Europe, where we feel like a tragedy is imminent."⁹

The Orthodox Church in America has condemned Russia's war in Ukraine and offered special petitions to be added to the Sunday Liturgical prayers for Ukraine and its people. On February 27, Metropolitan Tikhon issued an encyclical in which he stated: "in light of the distressing developments in Ukraine affecting millions of innocent people in the region, I wholeheartedly urge you to pray for peace and the well-being of our brothers and sisters who are enduring this tragic moment." He further called on the Russian government to cease hostilities "and that President Putin put an end to the military operations. As Orthodox Christians, we condemn violence and aggression."¹⁰ The Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America followed up the statement by the Metropolitan with an additional declaration. In it Russia's war in Ukraine was once again condemned: "we, the bishops of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America, condemn the war which is causing death and devastation affecting millions of innocent people." The Holy Synod further stated: "Joining our voice to that of other Christian leaders, who also decry the invasion of Ukraine, we call on the Russian authorities to end the hostilities," and declared the American church's "solidarity with the suffering Orthodox Christian brethren of Ukraine."¹¹

Russia's war in Ukraine has been condemned in the strongest possible words by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Soon after the Russian invasion

⁹ "Patriarch of Serbia on Ukraine: This war threatens to bring suffering and divisions both to the whole world, and to Europe," *Orthodox Times*, March 13 2022
<<https://orthodoxtimes.com/patriarch-of-serbia-on-ukraine-this-war-threatens-to-bring-suffering-and-divisions-both-to-the-whole-world-and-to-europe/>>

¹⁰ "Statement on war in Ukraine," Orthodox Church in America, February 27 2022
<<https://www.oca.org/holy-synod/statements/his-beatitude-metropolitan-tikhon/statement-on-war-in-ukraine>>

¹¹ "Statement on Ukraine," The Holy Synod of Bishops, Orthodox Church in America, March 26 2022 <<https://www.oca.org/holy-synod/statements/holy-synod/statement-on-ukraine>>

started, Patriarch of Constantinople called the aggression “beyond every sense of law and morality.” On February 27, Patriarch Bartholomew reiterated his “support to the Ukraine Orthodox Church, and to the whole Ukrainian nation, which has chosen to live free and determine its own destiny.”¹² Patriarch Bartholomew, who does not grant live television interviews, made an exception and spoke with CNN's Turkish service in early March. He emphasized that the Russian war in Ukraine threatened not only Ukraine's statehood and its people but also the whole world.¹³ Ecumenical Patriarch has continued to speak against the war in support of Ukraine. “It beggars the imagination the amount of havoc this horrible invasion has caused in Ukraine and all over the world,” said Patriarch Bartholomew on March 13 when visiting a university on his humanitarian visit to Poland, where most of Ukraine's refugees went after Russia launched a full-scale attack.¹⁴ In late March, he once again denounced the “atrocious invasion” of Ukraine.¹⁵ In his Easter Epistle, Ecumenical Patriarch once again affirmed his support for Ukraine. “We stand and suffer alongside the pious and courageous people of Ukraine that bear a heavy cross. We pray and strive for peace and justice as well as for all those who are deprived of these. It is unimaginable for us Christians to remain silent before the obliteration of human dignity,” Patriarch wrote.¹⁶

The decision made by the Church of Ukraine (the Moscow Patriarchate) on May 27 to secede from the Patriarchate of Moscow was informed by several crucial developments after Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine. The key among all the

¹² “Patriarch: Russian invasion ‘beyond every sense of law and morality,’” ekathimerini.com, February 27 2022 <<https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1178545/patriarch-russian-invasion-beyond-every-sense-of-law-and-morality/>>

¹³ “Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on CNN TÜRK: We are entering the new cold war era,” archons.org, March 4 2022 <<https://www.archons.org/-/cnn-turk>>

¹⁴ “Orthodox patriarch slams Russian invasion of Ukraine,” *Alarabiya News*, March 13 2022 <<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2022/03/29/Orthodox-patriarch-slams-Russian-invasion-of-Ukraine>>

¹⁵ “Orthodox patriarch denounces ‘atrocious invasion’ of Ukraine,” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 29 2022 <<https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/orthodox-patriarch-denounces-atrocious-invasion-ukraine>>

¹⁶ “We Stand by Ukraine” Patriarch Bartholomew Says in Easter Message,” *Greek Reporter*, April 21 2022 <<https://greekreporter.com/2022/04/21/patriarch-bartholomew-ukraine-easter/>>

factors has been Russia's most brutal conduct of war. Thousands of people lost their lives, more were injured, millions became refugees, and the war has destroyed almost half of Ukraine's economy. On top of that, the Russians have destroyed or damaged dozens of church buildings, heritage sites, museums, and libraries.¹⁷ The Moscow Patriarchate's support for the war has been even more devastating for the Ukrainians. While the atrocities were happening, the Moscow Patriarchate ignored all calls for help from its Metropolitan, bishops, and clergy in Ukraine. The near universal condemnation of Russia's attack on Ukraine by the other Orthodox churches has also encouraged the Ukrainians to seek independence from Russia. In sum, the May 27 council's decision communicates clearly that the Russian church has lost all moral standing in the sovereign Ukraine.

¹⁷ “Спасение культурного наследия Украины,” *Voice of America*, May 11 2022
<<https://www.golosameriki.com/a/saving-ukraine-culture/6565932.html>>