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The Ukrainian Orthodox Church in canonical unity with the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP)

Religious institution

All actors • Ukraine

Religious organization "[The Ukrainian Orthodox Church](#);" primate – Onufriy (Orest Berezovskyi), Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Ukraine.

Official position/functions regarding the conflict

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church in canonical unity with the Moscow Patriarchate (the Russian Orthodox Church) is still the largest religious organization in Ukraine; according to official records, it unites from 11.000 to 12.000 parishes (for the details read [here](#) and [here](#)). A part of its parishes is located on the territory of the Crimean Peninsula and in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that are not controlled by Ukraine; this enables the UOC (MP) to maintain contact with believers adhering to different political positions. The official position of this church remains publicly neutral; it has emphasized the importance of “peace” and the priority of remaining a “spiritual organization,” which stays “above the conflict.” Officially it “supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine” and is “out of politics;” [the statements of Metropolitan Onufriy are as neutral as possible \(even though in one of his earlier interviews he called the war “civil” and “fratricidal”\)](#).

In most cases, however, Onufriy's position proves to be ambiguous: sometimes one can clearly discern the "notes of protest" in it; for example, in 2015 he refused to stand up in the Ukrainian parliament during a minute of silence in memory of the fallen Ukrainian soldiers, which he [later explained by the "urgent need to end the war."](#) Such public rhetoric evokes regular criticism for the lack of understanding of the international nature of the conflict in it, the unwillingness of this church to take action, and the manifestations of separatism; for instance, many people in Ukraine wondered why Onufriy never sent a letter to Patriarch Kirill with a request to influence the end of the war in the east of the country. [At the same time, however, at the beginning of the conflict, especially in Crimea, the UOC \(MP\) representatives blessed the Ukrainian military "to defend our Motherland from the Russian military," referring to the defensive nature of the confrontation on the Ukrainian part.](#)

The rhetoric and the public discourse of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow has been quite influential in the UOC (MP). His initial mission was to build a spiritual and geopolitical concept of the "Russian World," a model of a sociocultural community above state borders that was to be based on the traditional Russian values of "Orthodox spirituality." In fact, it was the ROC that legitimized Ukraine's belonging to the core of the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation. [In 2014, Kirill himself stated that a "fratricidal civil war" was taking place in Ukraine and asked Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to "protect Orthodox Christians in eastern Ukraine, who, in an atmosphere of deepening violence coming from Greek Catholics and schismatics, live in daily fear for themselves and their loved ones."](#)

"Orthodox public organizations" became an important element of this rhetoric; they are directly or indirectly led by the ROC, and the pro-Russian wing of the UOC (MP) often cooperates with them. Some of these organizations operated in Ukraine within the framework of the "Policy of Compatriots," and some of their main curators were the deputies of the Ukrainian national parliament on behalf of the Party of Regions. Examples include the "Union of Orthodox Citizens of Ukraine," "United Fatherland" Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods of Ukraine, St. Alexander Nevsky Orthodox Brotherhood, and the "Orthodox Choice" All-Ukrainian Public Association.

[On the territories of Crimea](#) and in separate districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions (ORDLO), the UOC (MP) remains in touch with the local authorities since it does not fall under the ban as a "sectarian organization," continuing to operate officially. At the same time, in Ukraine, [some of this church's ministers received allegations of anti-Ukrainian activities](#), arms sales, and assistance to terrorist organizations (for the details read [here](#) and [here](#)). Few documents that testify to this stir up hate speech against the UOC (MP) and accusations of its "pro-Russian" position and cooperation with the "church of the occupier."

Interests in the conflict region

The main interest of this church in the conflict region is to preserve and increase its influence by way of expanding the network of its parishes and attracting new believers. It is important for its hierarchs to maintain contact with local authorities at different levels as this often leads to additional benefits and access to local resources – both in controlled and non-controlled territories.

Given the different political views and groups of influence within the UOC (MP), it is virtually impossible to single out one line of its development. The neutral and 'monastic' position of

Metropolitan Onufriy does not reflect the existing confrontation between the priests, who often depend on the position of the diocesan (regional) bishop. Previously, the pro-Russian wing of this church could find all kinds of resources and powerful support from representatives of the Party of Regions and later from the President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych; it would come in the form of allocating land, resolving legal issues, providing access to various institutions, etc. Upon the granting of the Tomos of Autocephaly, things have changed since a group of openly pro-Ukrainian priests left the UOC (MP) and moved to the OCU; however, different attitudes still persist within the UOC (MP).

In general, the UOC (MP) has been trying to maintain the position of social and political neutrality as much as possible, withdrawing itself from the public space “until better times.” On the one hand, hate speech and mass media harassment against it have influenced the moods of its believers; on the other hand, those external attacks have helped strengthen their social bonds in times of crisis.

Activity regarding the conflict

The UOC (MP) continues to carry on its active humanitarian mission in the zone of the contact line and in the regions of its presence, including in ORDLO. Sometimes this humanitarian assistance is associated with the propaganda of the “Russian World,” but such a case was officially recorded only once at the beginning of the conflict ([distribution of Russian textbooks](#) and sermons by UOC (MP) ministers). Other “Russian World” sermons and possible propaganda have not been properly documented or investigated.

[The Synodal Department for Chaplaincy continues to operate within the UOC \(MP\)](#). However, only few military chaplains continue to act – unofficially – [after the conflict in the Council of Chaplains under the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, which caused most of them to leave](#), as well as after the unofficial ban on their presence in the units of the National Guard, albeit with a [clarification that representatives of a church whose center is located in the aggressor country \(meaning the ROC\) may be refused access to a military unit](#).

The top leadership of this church takes part in the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, [supporting its overall strategy of peacebuilding](#), as well as its [appeals to Vladimir Putin for the release of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners](#), its [backing of the President’s peace initiatives in 2014](#), and its [statement on providing aid to protect the Ukrainian state](#), among other initiatives.

[One of the attempts to involve the UOC \(MP\) in active peacemaking was the statement by the Adviser to the Secretary of the NSDC Serhiy Sivokho on its potential role as a mediator](#) in the negotiations with ORDLO; however, this proposal drew public condemnation and did not translate into practical implementation.