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Mapping the Religious Landscape of Ukraine

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RELIGION

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report maps Ukraine's religious landscape in order to explore the role of religion and religious organizations in perpetuating, and potentially mitigating, societal tensions in conflict. Most of the study was prepared before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, but the findings remain relevant. This research was supported by the United States Institute of Peace and by the Culture and Religion in Mediation program, a joint initiative of the Center for Security Studies at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

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Cover photo: A priest inspects damage inside Transfiguration Cathedral, which was heavily damaged in Russian missile attacks, in Odesa, Ukraine, on July 24, 2023. (Photo by Emile Ducek/New York Times)

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Summary



Conflict dynamics in Ukraine are deeply rooted, highly nuanced, and complex. The conflict in eastern Ukraine that began in 2014, and its escalation into a war encompassing all of Ukraine's territory following Russia's February 2022 invasion, are the result of the intersection of numerous forces both geopolitical and ideological—many of which are not explicitly religious. Nevertheless, religion and religious actors have an important effect on Ukrainian society at large, the evolution of conflict dynamics, and prospects for future peacebuilding.

Despite its clear relevance, international policymakers, humanitarian actors, and peacebuilders have rarely engaged with religion as a key factor in understanding the conflict in Ukraine, its possible evolution, or opportunities for peace. The conflict in Ukraine is multilayered, and religion permeates every level. Better recognition of the nuanced role religious actors play in shaping societal and political narratives will provide much-needed insight into the causes and perpetuation of conflict and help to identify possible entry points for integrating religious actors into peacebuilding efforts.

At the same time, international nongovernmental organizations and policymakers will need to strike a delicate balance when engaging with religious actors, as tensions within different religious communities—sometimes based on personal disagreements, sometimes on local political or even geopolitical considerations—threaten to undermine bridge-building initiatives. Moreover, focusing too closely on the biggest religious actors in Ukraine obscures the important work done by grassroots-level actors or by individual religious leaders in the name of peace. Future work with the religious sphere in Ukraine must find ways to incorporate smaller, sometimes low-profile initiatives connecting warring religious factions. Overall, the United States and other international partners must recognize that religious organizations and institutions will, in all likelihood, continue to play a prominent role in Ukraine's political, ideological, and humanitarian spheres.

Abbreviations



AJOCU	Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine
AMU	Association of Muslims of Ukraine
AUCCRO	All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations
FJCU	Federation of Jewish Communities of Ukraine
OCU	Orthodox Church of Ukraine (Православна церква України)
RAM ARC	Religious Administration of Muslims of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea
RAMU	Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine (Духовне управління мусульман України)
RAMU “Ummah”	Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine “Ummah”
ROC	Russian Orthodox Church
UGCC	Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (Українська Греко-Католицька Церква)
UOC	Ukrainian Orthodox Church
UOC-KP	Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kyiv Patriarchate (Українська Православна церква-Київський патріархат)
UOC-MP	Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Moscow Patriarchate (Українська Православна церква)
UOGCC	Ukrainian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church
UJCU	United Jewish Community of Ukraine

Key Concepts and Terms



Autocephaly. The status of an Orthodox Church that has the independence to appoint a new head on its own through a synod; this independence requires the approval of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the recognition of the other canonical Orthodox Churches. If the status is recognized by both, the church is considered a canonical autocephalous church.

Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Any of 14 Orthodox Churches that enjoy autocephaly within the global Orthodox communion. If the church has declared itself autocephalous but this status is not recognized by the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the other canonical Orthodox Churches, it is considered a noncanonical autocephalous church. In some cases, such as that of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (Православна церква України), the status of autocephaly is accepted by some but not all other canonical churches.

Autonomous Orthodox Church. An Orthodox Church that is internally free to govern its own affairs, but whose head is still appointed by and answerable to its “mother church.” An example is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (Українська Православна церква, UOC-MP): it became autonomous in 1990 but was still overseen by the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, its mother church. Since May 2022, when the UOC-MP announced a break with Moscow, its status has been unclear.

Peacebuilding. A process aimed at resolving conflict in a nonviolent manner by transforming it and providing structural, cultural, and political changes at the personal, group, national, and international levels to achieve a state of positive peace.

Religious actor. Representative of a religious organization or faith-based organization, such as a minister or an active believer, who is trying to advance the goals of the primary organization. The term can also encompass the religious organizations, institutions, or structures themselves.

Religious peacebuilding. Action in the field of peacebuilding made by actors, initiatives, or organizations with religious background or motivation. It also can refer to the study of religion's role in the development of peace.

Social service, social ministry. Actions and activities in support of social initiatives and projects by religious organizations or faith-based organizations.



A crucifix marked with bullet holes stands at an abandoned Ukrainian Army checkpoint on the outskirts of Bohdanivka, northeast of Kyiv on May 18, 2022. (Photo by Ivor Prickett/New York Times)

Introduction

Many clergy members in war-torn Ukraine find themselves today in an existential gray zone. If their town or village happens to be on the front lines of active combat or already under occupation, they often face a stark dilemma: what is more important—their families or their parishioners? Should they save their families by taking them away (and risk being viewed as traitors) or remain behind in order to provide the spiritual and pastoral care that is needed now more than ever? If occupying authorities pressure them to support the delivery of services—for example, by distributing food supplies—clergy must decide whether to cooperate or to refuse out of patriotism even when their people are starving. They must also ponder what these decisions will mean for them later, when their cities are finally liberated. More fundamentally, they must consider what it means,

in the middle of a war, to be a person of the cloth who also wants to remain a citizen of an independent and fully sovereign Ukraine.

In recent years, fractures in the religious community of Ukraine—and their exploitation for political gain—have become incredibly powerful influences over Ukrainian identity and nationality. Religion and religious actors have been important influences on the occupation of Crimea and on hybrid warfare issues in eastern Ukraine since 2014; since Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion, they have influenced social dynamics within the country as a whole. Nonetheless, international policymakers' understanding of the religious dimension of the conflict remains largely superficial; religion is often considered a minor concern compared to international

geopolitical and strategic brokering. This is a mistake. As this report demonstrates, analyzing and understanding the nuanced connections between religion and society are crucial to understanding the conflict and choosing effective, feasible peacemaking and peacebuilding interventions.

Ukraine has struggled to develop its own robust sense of national identity since the fall of the Soviet Union, and events within Ukraine since 2014 have served to further polarize and exacerbate divisions. In a surprise, last-minute move, President Viktor Yanukovich canceled an agreement with the European Union (EU) in late 2013. This sparked a massive protest against Yanukovich's corruption and pro-Russian policies, which spread to all major cities in the country and eventually led to Yanukovich's removal. This was followed by Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, ostensibly to protect Russian-speaking populations from this wave of anti-Russian sentiment. Separatist tensions flared in eastern Ukraine and, with military and political support from the Russian state, grew into a full-fledged armed conflict that has lasted to the present day. Claiming the need to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO and to cleanse the country of "Nazism," Russia launched a full military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

These conflict events have coincided with and been reinforced by religious divisions in society. This report focuses on religion in Ukraine and specifically seeks to illuminate issues surrounding the country's various structures and formations of Orthodox Christianity, the question of autocephaly and its politicization, and religion's intersection with broader conflict drivers. It also aims to provide key examples of how Ukrainian religious actors of all faiths are contributing to conflict prevention and the possible advancement of peace—and how they may do so in the future.

While the peacebuilding field now recognizes the importance of engaging with religious ideas, practices, actors, and institutions for managing violent conflict

and building peace, a great deal of uncertainty remains about how to do so strategically and sensitively. Peacebuilding practitioners and diplomats are often unsure how to tailor their trainings and engagement to fully tap into the influence of religious actors in peacebuilding. They may also be anxious about navigating what can seem a complex, dynamic, and confusing religious landscape. Because of these uncertainties, many fail to engage the religious sector, or they do so less strategically than they might or in ways that have unintended negative consequences.

The mapping carried out in this report thus aims to clarify the role of religion in Ukraine through a research methodology developed by the authors to examine the role of religion within the context of the conflict. It is also designed to help outside actors understand the religious actors and networks that influence the situation so they can identify more effective areas of engagement for national and international stakeholders (including those from the United States and European Union).

This study has three primary objectives:

- To analyze the relationship between religion and various dimensions and levels of conflict in Ukraine
- To map and analyze the role of religious actors and institutions in the conflict and the extent to which religious entities are involved in existing peace processes and peacebuilding efforts
- To collect lessons learned and recommendations from peacebuilders, religious actors, and institutions to inform the possible design and implementation of future programming that engages with the religious sector in Ukraine

The target audience of this report is policymakers, practitioners, and funders involved in designing or supporting peacebuilding programming in Ukraine. This

includes the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the US government, European governments, and international as well as national nongovernmental peacebuilding organizations.

METHODOLOGY

USIP has been working at the intersection of religion, violence, and peace for over 25 years. Drawing from its experience and expertise in integrating religious actors into peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts, USIP has developed a methodological framework for conducting a mapping of the religious sector's contribution to peace and conflict. This mapping framework was combined with the Peacebuilding Analysis Guide of the Center for Security Studies to guide the design of this research project.

This project also incorporated another methodological approach known as Research in Action.¹ The basic principle is to connect and partner with various actors who, directly or indirectly, shape the social or professional practice of a specific field. The research is thus conducted *with*, not *on* or *for*, this community. Integration of theory and practice is a major aspect of this approach, so incorporating the Research in Action methodology helps to validate the research findings and increase their utility in practical peacebuilding work across multiple levels.

Work on this project fell into two phases. The initial phase consisted of rigorous background desk research, a thorough literature review, and extensive consultations with a diverse range of stakeholders; a

qualitative content analysis of media and documents provided by religious organizations was carried out by the Peaceful Change Initiative. The second phase consisted of on-the-ground, in-depth interviews based on a set of questions refined during the initial phase. Peaceful Change Initiative also conducted focus groups with local religious and nonreligious community members in selected communities across Ukraine's various regions (oblasts), engaged in participant observation to gain insight into the narratives related to the conflict, and interviewed key participants from religious organizations connected to conflict dynamics. The focus of the analysis was twofold: it sought to identify the processes, techniques, and methods by which religion and religious actors place strain on communities and sow deeper divisions within Ukrainian society, but also to determine the various ways they constrain violence, restore relationships, protect populations, and mediate disputes.

LIMITATIONS

The vast majority of data on which this report is based was generated prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The obvious difficulties and dangers associated with conducting research during wartime conditions have made it challenging to update the data or gather additional data, although the report does consider significant events since February 2022 that bear on religion and religious actors' relationship with the war. As the situation in Ukraine is extremely fluid, with even near-term prospects uncertain, this report is necessarily circumspect in some of its conclusions, particularly with respect to future peacebuilding scenarios.

Understanding the Conflict



The religious issues discussed in this report are set against the backdrop of a conflict that simultaneously exacerbates existing cleavages, unifies disparate groups, and has already significantly affected aspects of the social and political reality of Ukraine. To understand the role of religious actors in Ukraine—both as factors in the conflict and as potential agents of peacebuilding—it is critical to first explain the conflict and then locate them within it.

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. In the first five months of war, an estimated 12,272 civilian casualties were reported by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.² According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, as of June 2023, nearly 6.5 million Ukrainians had fled the country to escape violence, and some 5 million had become internally displaced.³ This situation has the potential to become the worst humanitarian crisis in Europe in decades.⁴ It is unclear how the conflict will escalate and what its full ramifications will be. Yet the path that led to this violence is clearer, and the historical legacies that brought Ukraine to this point are important to recognize.

Ukraine has been in armed conflict with Russia since 2014, when in response to the ousting of the pro-Russian Ukrainian president Yanukovich, Russia annexed Crimea and began providing military support to separatist groups in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. While at first glance this series of actions seems straightforward, seeing the annexation of Crimea as a simple act of retribution masks the complex dynamics at play. The conflict Ukraine was fighting from 2014 to 2022 was multilayered and engaged a vast number of

national and international actors for a variety of geopolitical reasons. To properly analyze the role of religion and its relevant actors, the layers of conflict must be teased out and laid bare.

First, and most acutely, there was a military struggle between the government of Ukraine and separatist groups—aided and augmented by Russian forces—over territories in eastern Ukraine. A vulnerable media landscape and widespread corruption created conditions in which misinformation flourished, heightening existing political and ideological differences between neighbors whose relationships were already strained due to the violence.

Second, the 2014 violence needs to be understood in the context of broader internal sociopolitical tensions within Ukraine dating back to the end of the Cold War. The ousting of President Yanukovich, the annexation of Crimea, and the conflict in eastern Ukraine also ignited a simmering identity crisis across Ukraine. Many Ukrainians before February 2022 felt a strong kinship with Russia and wanted their countries to remain close. Since Ukraine became independent following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukrainian governments have oscillated between pro-Russian and pro-EU stances as they try to navigate close historical relationships while building a modern, independent Ukraine. Thus, Ukraine's relationship with both Russia and the EU, and the future of Ukraine itself, have become points of contention across all levels of society.

Third, the 2014 conflict in Ukraine also came at a time of rising geopolitical tensions between the United States, the European Union, and Russia, and can be regarded in many respects as the initiation of a proxy



A priest leads a service at an Orthodox Church in Kryvyi Rih, Ukraine, on October 23, 2022. From a Russian perspective, Kyiv is often regarded as the birthplace of both the Russian nation and the Russian Orthodox Church. (Photo by Finbarr O'Reilly/New York Times)

war. Russia has long resisted the expansion of NATO into eastern Europe, considering this a threat to its security, but had been establishing deeper connections with the EU through a variety of economic partnerships. Resisting Western domination of the international system while also raising Russia's profile through economic integration became a difficult, but important, strategic balancing act. Ukraine, standing directly between Russia and Europe and increasingly leaning toward Europe, could easily have been considered a battleground that, at least ideologically, Russia was losing—particularly following the 2013–14 Euromaidan protests.

Fourth and finally, following Russia's full military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and despite Moscow's efforts to gloss the encroachment as a "special military operation," the two countries have been embroiled in an interstate war.

UKRAINE, THE "RUSSIAN WORLD," AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF EUROPE

A critical element underpinning all the facets of this conflict is the shared cultural, religious, and historical connections between Russia and Ukraine. Despite recognition of Ukraine's independence in 1991, Russia and President Vladimir Putin in particular have never understood Ukraine as a "foreign" state, but rather see it as a key part of the Russian civilization and sphere of influence in greater Eurasia. From a Russian perspective, Kyiv is often regarded as the birthplace of both the Russian nation and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). In a speech delivered on February 23, 2022, Putin asserted:

Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space. . . . Since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians.⁵

Putin has attempted—whether out of genuine religious conviction or pure political opportunism—to capitalize on shared connections between former Soviet peoples in order to argue for unifying Russian Orthodox adherents once again. Any nationalist Ukrainian sentiment, then, is a threat.

Putin's beliefs about the shared nature of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples are not a recent development. Shortly after Putin rose to power, he began deploying the term "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World) in speeches, usually appealing to "compatriots" abroad.⁶ At its core, the Russkiy Mir concept is an attempt to establish a Russian civilization that extends beyond the current borders of the Russian state. Former Soviet and other culturally proximate territories that share linguistic, spiritual, and historical ties are all part of this greater "Russian World."

In many cases, invoking Russkiy Mir blurs the separation of church and state. In describing the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Putin focused almost entirely on the cultural and religious significance of the region: "Crimea, the ancient Korsun or Chersonesus, and Sevastopol have invaluable civilisational and even sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the followers of Islam and Judaism."⁷

The Russian Orthodox Church is a critical part of the Russkiy Mir model, both conceptually and practically. Russian Orthodoxy is a major social and political force throughout Eastern Europe, as majorities in many former Soviet nations and satellite states—including Ukraine's neighbors Belarus, Moldova, and Romania—identify as followers of the faith.⁸ The ROC helps to maintain Putin's claims regarding the importance of Russkiy Mir and the need to defend ethnic Russia, in part because of the overlap between Russkiy Mir and the theological conception of the Holy Rus. The Holy Rus is an imagined jurisdiction encompassing Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, and it also represents the Russian Orthodox conception of the Kingdom of Heaven. The geographical and religious similarities between Russkiy Mir and the Holy Rus have allowed the Russian state and the ROC to work in concert, each

promulgating ideas of a "shared moral order" throughout former Soviet countries in order to build widespread support for the Russian state and its policies.

In this context, it is clear that Putin has attempted—whether out of genuine religious conviction or pure political opportunism—to capitalize on shared connections between former Soviet peoples in order to argue for unifying Russian Orthodox adherents once again. Any nationalist Ukrainian sentiment, then, is a threat to Russia's ideological machinations. Moreover, Ukraine's location in a highly strategic position between Russia and NATO member states cannot be ignored. Russia may consider it strategically important to solidify and expand its influence in that buffer zone. Certainly such a calculation seemed to play into the decision to annex Crimea; controlling Crimea ensures long-term access to the Black Sea, a critical shipping route, through the Sevastopol naval base. To improve Russia's position geopolitically while simultaneously strengthening the Russkiy Mir narrative, Russia is conducting a sort of hybrid war—combining disinformation, cyber warfare, electronic warfare, corruption, arms sales, the expansion of the ROC, and now direct invasion—to exploit fissures and unresolved conflict in Europe and to bring Ukraine into its "rightful" place as part of the Russkiy Mir.

The interests of the European Union and NATO, meanwhile, stand in direct contrast to those of Russia. Many countries in Europe had economic ties to both Ukraine and Russia, and they desire peace on the continent. Germany and France, for example, were key brokers in early peace deals to stop the conflict in eastern Ukraine. NATO has placed a greater focus on security, trying to maintain its task of providing stability and deterrence in the face of an aggressive Russia. However, NATO has thus far stopped short of directly engaging in the hostilities in support of Ukraine, wishing to avoid further escalation of the conflict.

THE CONFLICT: HYBRID WARFARE AND FULL-SCALE WAR, 2014–2022

The confluence of interests at play in Ukraine—manifest in the effort of both institutions and individuals to define Ukraine’s place in a changing global system—contributed to the escalation of conflict in 2013. Even though the Ukrainian Parliament overwhelmingly supported an agreement of association and free trade with the EU, President Yanukovich made a sudden decision to suspend the agreement under apparent pressure from Moscow. A wave of uprisings broke out in response, rapidly spreading across Ukraine in what would later be known as the Euromaidan or simply the Maidan. Subsequent months saw the removal of President Yanukovich, quickly followed by Russia’s annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in 2014.

Russia framed the military intervention as an effort to protect the Russian-speaking population of Crimea and its port access to the Black Sea against the post-Yanukovich government, which Russia accused of gaining power through a coup d’état. Consistent with the Russkiy Mir worldview, the annexation of Crimea was painted as the legitimate return of a region illegally transferred to Ukraine by the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Russia also blamed Ukrainian nationalists and the West for fueling the crisis in Ukraine by encouraging talks about membership in NATO and the EU. In addition, it claimed that Ukraine and the West were directly attacking Russian-speaking communities in eastern Ukraine, so that Russia was forced to respond. The

West, conversely, saw the annexation of Crimea as an unfounded aggressive action and criticized Russia for disregarding international law and the rules-based international order. The United States and other countries, along with the European Union, quickly imposed sanctions on Russia for its aggression—a step they would repeat after the 2022 invasion.

Shortly after the annexation of Crimea, Russia began unofficially backing pro-Russian separatist groups in the Donbas region, leading to the eruption of war in eastern Ukraine in 2015. The Ukrainian government became engaged in a consistent, low-level conflict with separatist forces throughout the Donbas region. Despite a questionable referendum on independence in the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk, little progress was achieved in finding a peaceful solution to the conflict. Fighting continued consistently until Russian troops invaded Ukraine in February 2022, some of them entering through the separatist areas. Prior to the 2022 invasion, the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine had forcibly displaced more than 2 million Ukrainians; by August 2022, six months after Russia’s full invasion, this figure had ballooned to almost 8 million.⁹

While the war in Ukraine today is not being fought primarily for religious reasons, it is clear that a religious dimension is both present and potentially very powerful. To better understand this religious dimension and the potential roles of religious actors, a deeper dive into the nature of religion in Ukraine—including the various fractures it exhibits—is required.

The Religious Landscape of Ukraine

Religion, and specifically Orthodoxy, has played a crucial role in Ukrainian life and history. Modern-day Kyiv is the birthplace of Slavic Orthodoxy; in the 10th century, King Volodymyr I of Kyivan Rus', an early Slavic state centered in Kyiv, adopted Christianity and required the baptism of his people. Though repressed under the Soviet Union, religion (and specifically Orthodoxy) immediately reestablished itself as a fundamental part of Ukrainian public life and national identity following the collapse of the USSR. A 2016 survey by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center survey revealed approximately half of Ukrainians agreed that Orthodox religious leaders have influence over national politics, and churches have played a large and visible role in recent popular revolutions and mass protests. In both the Orange Revolution of 2004 (mass protests following accusations of fraud in the presidential election) and the Euromaidan in 2013 and 2014 church leaders stood in solidarity with pro-democratic social forces, in some cases physically inserting themselves between protestors and the police.¹⁰

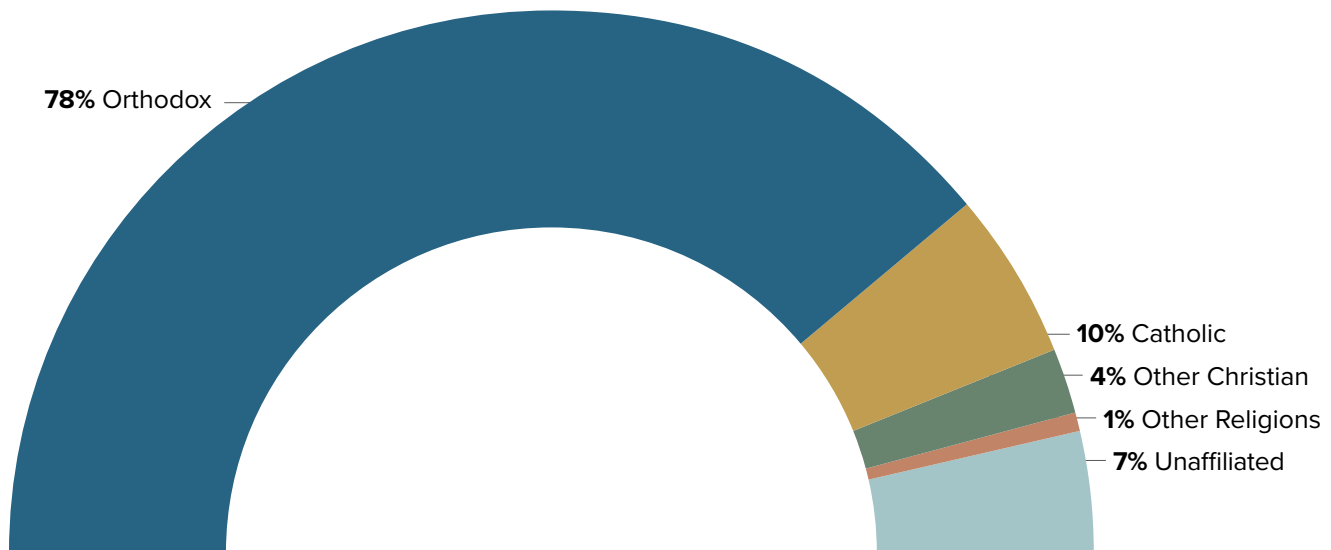
UKRAINE'S RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Ukraine is home to the third-largest Orthodox population in the world, following Russia and Greece, and the share of population identifying as Orthodox is higher in Ukraine than in Russia. Orthodoxy in Ukraine, however, is not a monolith. Perhaps the most important religious dynamic at play across the country is the fragmentation of the Orthodox Church into two (or more) competing factions: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Moscow Patriarchate (Українська Православна церква, UOC-MP) and the Orthodox

Church of Ukraine (Православна церква України, OCU). A July 2021 study reported that more than 70 percent of Ukrainian respondents identified as Orthodox, with 25 percent belonging to the UOC-MP, 58 percent to the OCU, and 12 percent simply identifying as “Orthodox” without specifying a particular branch.¹¹ An earlier study had indicated that, among those who identify as Orthodox in Ukraine, roughly 38.4 percent consider themselves to believe in Orthodox Christianity in general and are not associated with any particular denomination or faction.¹²

Orthodox Christianity is an important social and political force throughout Eastern Europe, particularly since the fall of the Soviet Union. The majority populations of countries like Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, and Romania identify as Orthodox Christians.¹³ However, despite its importance across the region, Orthodoxy is not widely practiced. Only 12 percent of Orthodox Ukrainians report attending church weekly, and this mirrors trends in other parts of Eastern Europe, where religious behavior such as daily prayer and worship attendance is reportedly low compared to the number of followers.¹⁴ Research on Ukraine conducted by the Razumkov Center suggests even lower levels of church attendance—around 10 percent in 2021—as well as declining levels of perceived moral authority among and trust in religious leaders.¹⁵ Data from July 2022 show a rapid year-on-year reduction in the number of people self-identifying as UOC-MP followers (from 18 percent to 4 percent). Such figures should be regarded with extreme caution, however, given the complexities of gathering reliable

Figure 1. Religious Demographics in Ukraine



Source: Pew Research Center, “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe,” May 10, 2017, www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe; and “Dynamics of Religious Self-Identification of the Population of Ukraine: Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted on July 6–20, 2022,” Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, August 5, 2022, <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1129>.

data under wartime conditions (including extremely limited access to populations in occupied territories or close to areas of active fighting).¹⁶ This apparent contradiction—in which people identify as Orthodox but do not engage in Orthodox practice—may be linked to a perception that identifying as part of the religious majority is an important part of national belonging. Given the Soviet Union’s repressive measures against religion, and the resurgence of nationalist identities in former states following the USSR’s collapse, this is an important dynamic to consider. It also suggests valuable nuances about what it means to belong, practice, and behave in the religious sphere.

Despite the predominance of Orthodox Christians in Ukraine, there are a number of notable religious minorities throughout the nation (see figure 1), many of whom are engaged in public and civic life to a degree that belies their relatively small size. Legally, the government of Ukraine recognizes all registered churches and religious groups within its borders, creating a highly pluralistic religious landscape.

The largest Catholic community in Ukraine (and the second-largest religious community overall) is the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (Українська Греко-Католицька Церква, UGCC), which as of 2019 numbered roughly 7 percent of the population. There is also a small Roman Catholic community at 1.3 percent of the population.¹⁷ UGCC followers are located primarily in the country’s western regions. Ukraine also hosts a variety of other religious communities, though considerably fewer than many other European states. The Crimean Tatars are a Muslim ethnic group indigenous to the Crimean Peninsula. They were systematically deported under the Soviet Union but have nonetheless maintained the largest Muslim population in Ukraine. Together with Volga-Ural Tatars and small numbers of Caucasian and Central Asian immigrants, Muslims make up about 0.9 percent of the population, according to the most recent census.

Ukraine was a flourishing center of medieval Judaism, home to several key Jewish sites and the birthplace of major Jewish theologians. Prominent synagogues became central features of the cities of Kyiv and Dnipro.

Widespread pogroms under the Russian Empire, Soviet persecution, and the Holocaust all contributed to the near annihilation of the Jewish population by the mid- to late 20th century. The Jewish community has since experienced regrowth: current estimates indicate a Jewish population in Ukraine of between 56,000 and 140,000, or approximately 0.2 percent of the population.¹⁸

Protestantism began to spread in Ukraine during the second half of the 16th century, but with a particularly significant increase in numbers following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Numerous congregations of every major Protestant tradition exist in contemporary Ukraine. Protestants have more than 10,000 church groups, making them second only to the Orthodox among organized communities. A 2019 study found that 1 percent of the population identified as Protestant, and the share had grown to 2 percent by 2022.¹⁹ Importantly, recent events may be resulting in significant growth for Protestant churches, paralleled by a more prominent presence and political position in the public sphere. Early reports indicate that, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis, audiences were very receptive to Protestants' message of putting aside political differences to work toward the betterment of Ukraine; the result was an influx of Protestant converts. It remains to be seen whether this phenomenon will continue in light of the outbreak of war.

Finally, Ukraine also has visible populations of non-Protestant Christians, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and adherents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

When considering the role of religion in Ukraine, many surveys and research projects organize their data according to oblast.²⁰ It is common to connect geography with citizens' attitudes toward Russia (for example, more adults in eastern than western Ukraine look to Russia as the protector of ethnic Russians²¹), so it seems natural to consider the predominant religion in each geographical area in the effort to understand how these attitudes are created and reinforced. However, conceptualizing and reporting on religious groups in Ukraine by oblast might

not be the most effective approach, as geographical lines may obscure the true boundaries of religious communities. Differences in lifestyle and perspective among eastern and western communities are heavily linked to each parish's position, structure, and ideology, but more on-the-ground research is required to understand the full spectrum of religious leanings and sympathies across the country. Furthermore, it is deeply important to consider each oblast as religiously diverse, even if one tradition dominates; initiatives, personal stories, and opinions from points of view that differ from the majority can prove particularly illuminating as peacebuilding opportunities are considered moving forward.

MAJOR RELIGIOUS ACTORS IN UKRAINE

As the discussion above makes clear, Ukraine is a religiously pluralistic country that, while primarily Orthodox, has a significant diversity of belief within its borders.

Citizens hold varying opinions about each branch of Orthodoxy and about religion and its role in society more broadly. Yet there are also clear divisions in society that tend to correspond to religious beliefs; for example, a 2016 Pew Research Center survey of a number of former Soviet nations found pro-Soviet views among many individuals who identified as Eastern Orthodox—a family of 14 mostly nationalized churches representing the Byzantine legacy and constituting the second-largest global Christian communion after Roman Catholicism. High percentages of Eastern Orthodox followers in Serbia, Belarus, and Moldova agreed with the statement, “A strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West”; 22 percent of Ukrainian respondents agreed with that same statement.²² Religious institutions in Ukraine potentially hold significant influence over their congregations and the national discourse more broadly, and thus it is critical to properly understand their goals, interrelationships, and beliefs. That said, it would also be erroneous to assume a generalized or causal relationship between professed Orthodox faith and pro-Russian political sentiment. The social reality of lived religious experience in Ukraine, as elsewhere in the world, is complex and frequently counterintuitive.

Religious institutions in Ukraine potentially hold significant influence over their congregations and the national discourse more broadly, and thus it is critical to properly understand their goals, interrelationships, and beliefs. . . . The social reality of lived religious experience in Ukraine, as elsewhere in the world, is complex and frequently counterintuitive.

The remainder of this section provides an in-depth overview of the religious institutions and actors present in Ukraine. After an account of Orthodox Christianity, it describes specific denominations, movements, and institutions. Given each institution's position within Ukrainian society and its potential to influence perception of the conflict, it is important to understand the biggest actors in the Ukrainian religious sphere.

THE STRUCTURE AND POLITICS OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY IN UKRAINE

Eastern Orthodoxy is highly influential in Ukraine, and its role should not be understated. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2016 nearly 78 percent of Ukraine's population identified as Orthodox.²³

Eastern Orthodoxy is a communion of self-governing (or *autocephalous*) churches that recognize one another as canonical—that is, as consistent with the ecclesiastical regulations governing the Eastern Orthodox Church. There are 14 fully recognized autocephalous churches, though additional churches also claim autocephaly with only partial or no recognition from the others. Depending on the seniority of the autocephalous church and the historical context in which it was established, each church is headed by either a patriarch, an archbishop, or a metropolitan. Despite their different titles, these figures officially enjoy equal authority and power, even if the reality of their political influence within the global Orthodox communion varies from church to church.

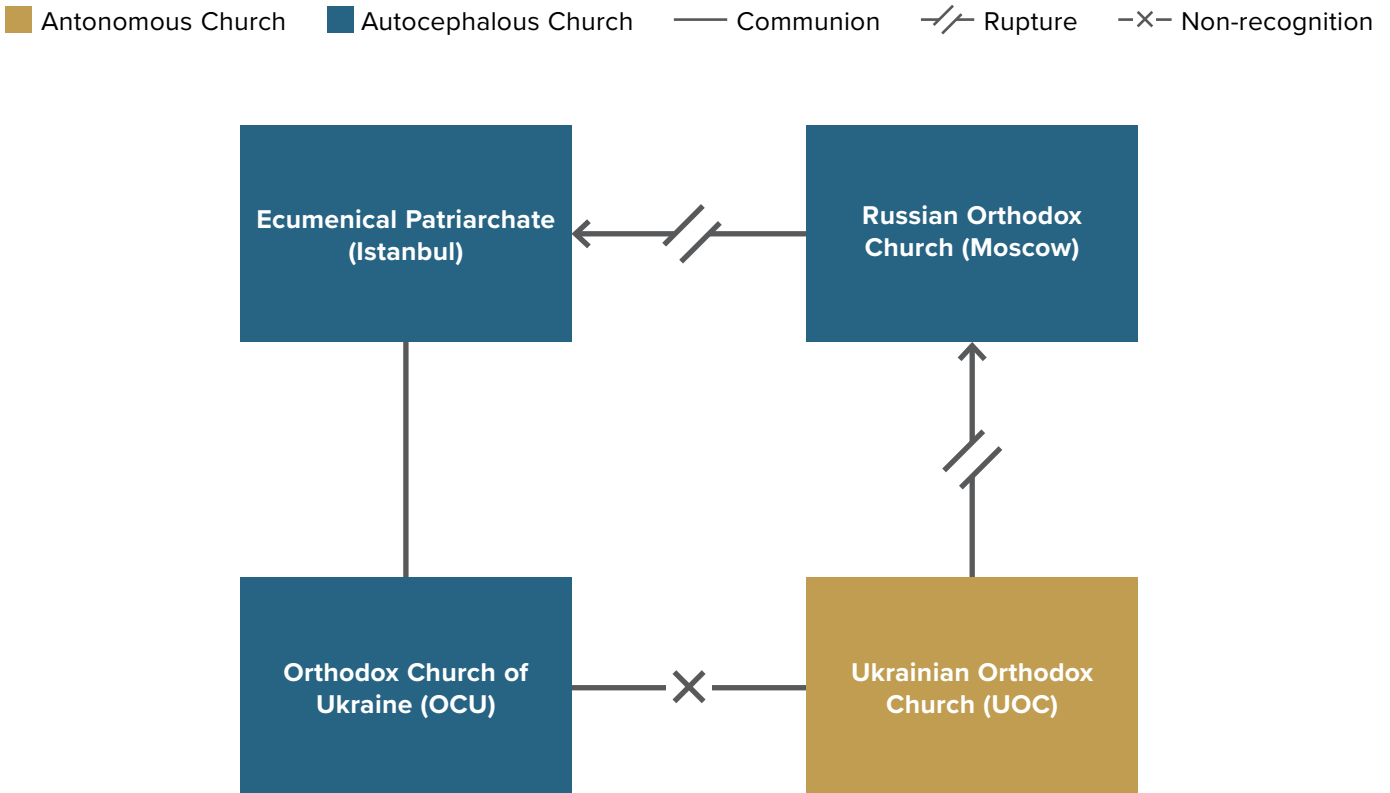
Many autocephalous churches, including the Russian Orthodox Church, oversee and provide limited guidance to a subset of *autonomous* churches. The ROC, for example, is the ultimate authority heading the Belarusian Orthodox Church and the Latvian

Orthodox Church, among others. These autonomous churches maintain varying levels of dependence on their mother church, usually defined through a decree known as a *tomos*.

Although every autocephalous church is equal in authority, power, and governance, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople holds a special place of honor based on its status as the historical source of many of the now-autocephalous churches and its location in the former capital of the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire. The Patriarchate of Constantinople is considered *primus inter pares*, or first among equals, and oversees the governance of certain trans-church issues.

The Orthodox Church's operations in Ukraine are particularly complicated at the moment (see figure 2). Although historically an autonomous (if fractured) church under the authority of the ROC, factions within the church pursued autocephaly after World War I and then again following the end of the Cold War. Most recently, a highly politicized 2018 movement advocating autocephalous status for the Orthodox Church in Ukraine culminated in the Ecumenical Patriarch's decision to grant the *tomos* establishing the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine. This move was fiercely contested by the ROC and the contingents of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that wished to remain with the Moscow Patriarchate, leading to a breakdown in relations between the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the ROC as well as within the UOC-MP community in Ukraine. The unique and uncertain position of the UOC-MP, seemingly in limbo between Ukraine and Russia, has created many fault lines across Ukrainian society that both reflect and potentially exacerbate existing geopolitical and local conflict points.

Figure 2. Ukraine and Global Orthodoxy



Note: While the Orthodox Church of Ukraine was granted autocephaly by Istanbul in 2019, its status is not universally recognized within the global family of canonical Orthodox churches. The Ukrainian government rejects the UOC’s claim to have broken ties with Moscow.

Source: “Ukraine: Religion, Peace and Conflict Country Profile,” United States Institute of Peace, www.usip.org/programs/religion-and-conflict-country-profiles/ukraine.

PROFILES OF MAJOR RELIGIOUS ACTORS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Following from the above discussion of religious demographics and key features of Ukraine’s religious landscape, this subsection provides brief analytic profiles of specific religious organizations and institutions. Although far from comprehensive, these profiles offer more detailed information on the religious actors most relevant to subsequent sections of the report, which address the intersection of religion, peace, and conflict in Ukraine.

Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU)

Православна церква України

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine was born in 2018 from the unification of different pro-independence Orthodox

jurisdictions in Ukraine, including the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kyiv Patriarchate (Українська Православна церква-Київський патріархат, УОС-КР), and parts of the UOC that chose to break away from the Moscow Patriarchate. The OCU is the entity officially recognized as autocephalous by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Importantly, the OCU enjoys only partial recognition within Orthodoxy, as the Russian Orthodox Church staunchly rejects the establishment and autocephaly of the OCU. While many of the other canonical Orthodox Churches have refrained from recognizing the OCU’s autocephalous status, several—including the Serbian

Orthodox Church and the Romanian Orthodox Church—have explicitly rejected it. Nevertheless, as of 2019, the OCU reported over 7,000 affiliated parishes and claimed approximately half of all Ukrainian Orthodox believers.²⁴ However, this figure is difficult to confirm; conflicts with both the UOC-KP (which withdrew from the OCU shortly after its formation) and the anti-autocephalous UOC-MP obscure the true number of followers.

The process of establishing itself as an autocephalous church has led to significant conflict between the OCU and the other Orthodox jurisdictions. The UOC-MP specifically opposed the creation of the OCU and autocephaly, and since 2019 has seen some bishops and parishes choose to join the OCU, heightening tensions. The OCU is also in open conflict with its former partner, the UOC-KP, over the governance of the autocephalous church. Furthermore, the granting of autocephaly proved a flashpoint in a larger schism of the Eastern Orthodox Church, as the ROC rejected the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople's granting of autocephaly, even going so far as to break ties with the Ecumenical Patriarchate over the matter. As of early 2023, among the 14 canonical Orthodox Churches worldwide, only the Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Church of Greece, the Patriarchate of Alexandria, and the Church of Cyprus recognize the OCU as autocephalous.

The OCU has openly called for UOC-MP priests to move with their parishes to the OCU, and it has issued an official statement denouncing Patriarch Kirill, the powerful primate of the ROC, as a “propagandist of the ideology of the fascist regime.”²⁵ As a new and growing ecclesiastical structure, the OCU has many tasks to fulfill, such as developing regional and international links and educating new priests. The aggressive language used by some OCU priests with regard to the UOC limits engagement with potential new parishes and risks scaring away would-be partners in civil society and local communities. The OCU has an enormous opportunity to establish itself as the preeminent canonical Orthodox Church that

is pro-Ukraine, but doing so would require it to strike a balanced tone in its communications, create transparent mechanisms for the integration of the newly arrived clergy, and set up management structures conducive to internal unity. There has been some modest progress in this regard; in late March 2022, for example, the OCU primate, Metropolitan Epifaniy, offered several ways to help UOC-MP members join the OCU.²⁶

The OCU is explicitly pro-Ukrainian, identifying the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine as a war with Russia and emphasizing the important role of the church in Ukraine in securing peace and independence. These views closely mirror the political position of the Kyiv Patriarchate, even though the latter is currently estranged from the OCU over church governance questions. The autocephalous church has taken over many of the Kyiv Patriarchate's social ministry and military chaplaincy efforts in eastern Ukraine after the merger of churches that formed the OCU and has established a strong social service arm known as Eleos-Ukraine.²⁷

Ukrainian Orthodox Church— Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP)

Українська Православна церква

The UOC-MP, in accordance with its charter, was until fairly recently referred to simply as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, as there was no other recognized Orthodox formation in Ukraine espousing a patriarchate other than Moscow. Although an autonomous church under the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church, the then Ukrainian Orthodox Church was crucial to the ROC because of its historical roots in Ukraine, and Kyiv in particular. Furthermore, roughly a third of all ROC parishes were located in Ukraine.²⁸ Prior to 2019, the then UOC was the largest religious body in Ukraine. The practice of appending “MP” when referring to the church is a recent development that reflects public and political pressure to make its connections to Moscow more explicit.

As different Orthodox jurisdictions in Ukraine merged together in order to secure autocephaly from the

[The Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate] has emphasized the need for peace and for opening a dialogue with Russia. . . . However, the UOC-MP is known to have deep connections to both the ROC [Russian Orthodox Church] and the Russian government, and Ukrainian media and society have criticized its pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian actions.

Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that opposed separating from the Russian Orthodox Church became known as the UOC-MP. The UOC-MP stands apart from almost every other Orthodox institution in Ukraine, and sometimes even in opposition to the official state position. For example, during the early phase of the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, church authorities refused to close some places of worship.²⁹ Leaders within the UOC-MP have been in conflict with other Orthodox jurisdictions seeking independence since the fall of the Soviet Union, and there is reportedly interpersonal conflict between the patriarchs of the various Orthodox jurisdictions as well.

Though figures vary, the UOC-MP appears to possess roughly 12,500 parishes across Ukraine, and in 2017 counted approximately 18 percent of Ukrainian citizens as members.³⁰ Since autocephaly, the UOC-MP has lost at least 500 parishes that changed allegiance to the new, independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The majority of these changes are village-level transfers in western oblasts, such as Khmelnytsky, L'viv, Rivne, Vinnytsia, and Zhytomyr.³¹ The UOC-MP is currently led by Patriarch Onufriy, who in turn answers to Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Prior to the escalation of conflict in 2022, the UOC-MP had officially been largely silent about its political position. In 2015, Patriarch Onufriy characterized the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine as a “civil war” in which two brothers from the same family could easily find themselves on opposing sides.³² Typically, the UOC-MP position has emphasized the need for peace and for opening a dialogue with Russia. The church was also involved in military chaplaincy in eastern Ukraine until 2021, when it was banned from serving in the Ukrainian

army and from undertaking reconciliation and humanitarian work in conflict zones.³³ However, the UOC-MP is known to have deep connections to both the ROC and the Russian government, and Ukrainian media and society have criticized its pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian actions.³⁴ There are also some signs that the UOC-MP may have had links to the Opposition Bloc, a short-lived pro-Russian political party in Ukraine that did not support the Euromaidan. The leader of the Opposition Bloc, Vadym Novynskyi, was well-known as a strong supporter of and investor in the UOC-MP.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 placed the UOC-MP in a difficult position. While there were early indications that a few UOC-MP–affiliated churches directly supported Russian action, the vast majority of UOC-MP members strongly condemned the invasion; several UOC-MP dioceses called for autocephaly from the ROC, anathema for Patriarch Kirill, and dialogue with the OCU.³⁵ This trend culminated in May 2022, when the General Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church issued a decision indicating its intention to break ties with the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church and reaffirming its autonomous status. The question of the church’s status and allegiance was revived in late 2022 following investigations of several UOC-MP–affiliated churches by Ukraine’s internal security service. Citing the discovery of pro-Russian propaganda in these facilities, the Ukrainian government announced sanctions against a number of UOC-MP clergy. As part of an effort to ensure the “spiritual independence” of Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that he would submit for parliamentary review a new law to ban religious organizations affiliated with centers of influence in Russia from operating in Ukraine. In the spring of 2023, the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture announced that the

UOC's lease of the Pechersk Lavra monastery complex in Kyiv, one of the holiest sites in global Orthodoxy, would not be renewed and that the UOC monks would need to vacate the premises.

Despite these growing tensions, at least some minimal contact continues between the rival Orthodox Churches in Ukraine. The UOC and OCU held two public meetings in St. Sophia, in July 2022 and February 2023, resulting in common statements issued on behalf of all participants.³⁶ Various informal meetings—mostly between local priests—have also occurred.

Ukrainian Orthodox Church— Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP)

Українська Православна церква-Київський патріархат

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kyiv Patriarchate is one of several Orthodox jurisdictions that has been present in Ukraine since the fall of the Soviet Union. It was formed in 1992 when, in the wake of the USSR's dissolution, a group of Ukrainian Orthodox leaders requested autocephaly from the Russian Orthodox Church. When this request was denied, the UOC-KP refused to remain under the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate and continued operations as an independent church, unrecognized by any other autocephalous church.

In 2018, at the request of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the UOC-KP merged with other factions of Ukrainian Orthodoxy that supported independence from the Russian Orthodox Church. This created the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which is now partially recognized as autocephalous within Eastern Orthodoxy.

However, the UOC-KP quickly left the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine again after the leader of the former UOC-KP, Patriarch Filaret, could not find sufficient common ground with the leader of the newly established OCU, Metropolitan Epifaniy, on a number of governance issues.³⁷ One area of disagreement was the name of

the church; Patriarch Filaret firmly argued that the new church should be known not as the OCU, but as the UOC. There are indications that Patriarch Filaret and Metropolitan Epifaniy have a personal conflict that could be affecting these larger institutional decisions.

Despite the UOC-KP's declaration of independence from the OCU, the UOC-KP is not recognized by the rest of Eastern Orthodoxy or by the Ukrainian state, and many bishops of the former UOC-KP did not support its revival.³⁸ Nevertheless, in January 2020, Patriarch Filaret withdrew his signature from the official act of dissolution of the UOC-KP originally signed in 2018 to allow for the creation of the OCU. This withdrawal effectively restored the UOC-KP as a separate but significantly diminished entity.

It is unclear what level of influence the UOC-KP enjoys as compared to the OCU, or whether the UOC-KP is widely recognized by its former parishes and Ukrainian society at large. However, prior to the creation of the autocephalous OCU, the UOC-KP was the Orthodox jurisdiction with the largest number of followers; in 2017, 44 percent of Orthodox Christians in Ukraine were part of the Kyiv Patriarchate, while only 18 percent belonged to the Moscow Patriarchate, despite the UOC-KP having far fewer parishes.³⁹ The 2014 annexation of Crimea decimated the UOC-KP presence in the peninsula, as 38 of the church's 46 parishes ceased to exist in the first year alone; but as of 2018 the UOC-KP still oversaw 5,319 parishes across the nation.⁴⁰

The UOC-KP has historically taken a clear and active position in favor of Ukrainian independence and against Russian aggression. Prior to autocephaly, the church saw itself as a fundamental part of a patriotic Orthodox Church for Ukraine, and consequently was heavily involved in the Euromaidan. The UOC-KP also had the most military chaplains working in eastern Ukraine, with a strong social ministry connected to military families, even though the bulk of their support was located in western Ukraine.⁴¹ However, most of the administration

of its social ministry was adopted by the OCU following the merger that created the new autocephalous church.

It remains to be seen what, if any, level of influence the UOC-KP will have over its constituents and Ukrainian society overall following its departure from the ascendant OCU.

Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)

The ROC is a powerful autocephalous church within Eastern Orthodoxy that has historically overseen a number of autonomous Orthodox Churches, including the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The ROC claims 150 million members worldwide, has strong links to the Russian state, and exerted and continues to exert extensive influence. Much of this influence is derived from historical and theological sources; the Holy Rus—the canonical jurisdiction overseen by the ROC—has ties to a medieval state encompassing Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian territory and has clear connections with the modern-day *Russkiy Mir*.⁴²

The current head of the ROC, Patriarch Kirill, is often considered a “soft power” ally of Russian president Vladimir Putin. Since 2014, ROC priests have been present in Ukraine as military chaplains for the Russian army in occupied territories and to support the occupying authorities in towns and cities under Russian control.

Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC)

Українська Греко-Католицька Церква

The UGCC is the third-largest church in Ukraine, following the OCU and the UOC-MP, with approximately 5.5 million adherents across roughly 3,400 communities. The UGCC is both the largest Catholic community in Ukraine and the largest Eastern Catholic Church, and it occupies a peculiar position between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. The UGCC is in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican, and is thus subordinate to the Pope. However, due to historical decisions allowing Eastern Catholic churches to maintain and preserve distinct

customs found in Eastern territories, the UGCC follows a number of Byzantine rites. This situation has resulted in strained relations with both the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church.

The majority of UGCC followers can be found in western Ukraine, particularly around the city of L’viv; only small minorities exist elsewhere in the country. Several studies and surveys suggest that levels of religiosity are comparatively higher in the western region, meaning that while the UGCC constitutes a significantly smaller proportion of Ukraine’s Christian community, adherents are in some respects more active than Orthodox peers. The UGCC is explicitly political, with pro-Ukrainian and pro-European positions; official sources regularly comment on geopolitical events in Ukraine, provide commentary on elections and reforms, and encourage their believers to be politically active. The UGCC was banned by the Soviet authorities, and today it remains sharply opposed to pro-Russian positions and communist ideas. The UGCC has indicated it views the events of the 2013–14 Euromaidan revolution, and the subsequent military aggression by Russia, to be key moments in developing a Ukrainian national consciousness. The church also works to provide charitable assistance to victims of war in Ukraine, including through military chaplains working in conflict zones.

In 2009, a small number of UGCC bishops declared the founding of a new church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church (UOGCC). Though still recognizing the papacy as its guiding authority, the UOGCC sought to disassociate from pro-European and relatively liberal UGCC positions that it perceived as heresy.

Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine (RAMU)

The RAMU has been operating since 1992, uniting more than 130 communities and serving as the largest Muslim association in Ukraine. It caters primarily to Muslim diasporas from post-Soviet settings (such as Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus) currently living

in Ukraine. The RAMU has close ties to the transnational Sufi network Al-Ahbash, also known as the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects—a movement originally founded in Lebanon in the mid-20th century. A member of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO, described below) and an active participant in the interreligious work in Ukraine, RAMU is headed by Mufti Akhmed Tamim and defines itself as moderate and apolitical. Due to differences over religious ideology and rival claims to religious authenticity, it finds itself at odds with other Muslim organizations in Ukraine, notably the RAMU “Ummah” group.

Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine “Ummah” (RAMU “Ummah”)

The RAMU “Ummah” was established in 2008 and consists of about 30 communities. Led until spring 2022 by Said Ismagilov, its current acting mufti is Murat Suleimanov. RAMU “Ummah” has ideological, organizational, and financial ties to Muslim organizations in Europe with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood movement—in particular the Council of European Muslims (formerly known as the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe). A consistent rival of the similarly named but significantly larger RAMU “Ummah” has close connections to two other Ukrainian Muslim NGOs, the Congress of Ukrainian Muslims and Alraid—both headed by Seyran Arifov—as well as ties to other Muslim organizations around the world.

Religious Administration of Muslims of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (RAM ARC) and the Association of Muslims of Ukraine (AMU)

The RAM ARC was established in 2016 out of the pre-existing Crimean Tatars Association of Kyiv. Its goal is to consolidate all Crimean Tatar religious communities formed after the migration or exile of Crimean Tatars to areas of Ukraine controlled by the Kyiv authorities.

Headed by Mufti Ayder Rustemov, RAM ARC is closely connected with the Crimean Tatar Salafi communities

and the Association of Muslims of Ukraine (AMU). AMU was founded in 2014 in Kyiv by refugees from Crimea and initially led by Suleiman (Elimdar) Hayrullayev, graduate of an Islamic university in Saudi Arabia and chairman of the Ulema Council of the RAM ARC. The AMU serves as a hub for the Salafi movement in Ukraine and caters in particular to new converts.

Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine (AJOCU)

AJOCU is an official member of the AUCCRO (described below). It is a nongovernmental public organization created on January 14, 1991, to unify Jewish organizations of Ukraine and support the Ukrainian Jewish community. Headed by Chief Rabbi Yaakov Dov Bleich and in some respects the standard bearer of Ukrainian Judaism, AJOCU nonetheless competes with other Jewish groups for influence within the community.

Federation of Jewish Communities of Ukraine (FJCU)

FJCU describes itself as an all-Ukrainian Jewish charitable organization that unites more than 163 communities. It works in close cooperation with the Ministry of Education of Israel, the Embassy of the State of Israel in Ukraine, and some of the largest international Jewish organizations. FJCU focuses on the development and implementation of humanitarian projects and charitable programs to support the Jewish population, restore Jewish traditions, and promote Jewish culture. It is led by its chairman, Rabbi Meir Stambler.

United Jewish Community of Ukraine (UJCU)

The UJCU is an all-Ukrainian Jewish public organization. Its president is the oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, who is also a major funder of Chabad, a global Hasidic outreach movement with roots in Ukraine. The UJCU board chairman is Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetsky, the rabbi of Dnipro and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts. Michael Tkach is UJCU’s CEO. The organization includes 140 Jewish organizations and communities from all over Ukraine.

Reform Judaism

Reform Judaism in Ukraine is represented mainly by the Religious Association of Progressive Judaism of Ukraine, which is led by Rabbi Oleksandr Dukhovnyi, the chief rabbi of Kyiv and Ukraine. The Reform movement in Ukraine keeps a particularly low public profile and generally refrains from public engagement and participation in cooperative initiatives.

Major Protestant Actors

Protestant Christians in Ukraine are represented by different denominations and groups, as well as thousands of small churches in all regions of the country. There are several organizations coordinating Protestant churches, including the Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Evangelical Alliance; Protestants are also active in the AUCCRO (described below) and the Ukrainian Bible Society.

Divisions in the Ukrainian Protestant community intensified in 2014, when competing theological understandings of the Euromaidan revolution—and the subsequent armed conflict in the east—emerged as sources of debate and discussion.⁴³ While most Ukrainian evangelicals have taken an anti-Putin stand, the Union of Evangelical Christians–Baptists in Russia shared an open statement in which they reported to Putin on

their work and wished him long years of health and happiness.⁴⁴ The All-Ukrainian Council of Evangelical Christians–Baptists has called on its members to pray for refugees, coordinate help for them, and open their churches and centers to them.⁴⁵ Other informal evangelical networks have coordinated their humanitarian interventions and rescued more than 20,000 civilians from frontline and Russian-occupied territories.

All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO)

One of the largest nongovernmental organizations in Ukraine, the AUCCRO was first established in 1996 under Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma. This interreligious advisory body brings together religious organizations to develop a common vision and position on sociopolitical events. Covering roughly 95 percent of religious communities in Ukraine, including the UOC-MP, the AUCCRO lobbies for religious interests before various political leaders in Ukraine. It holds regular meetings with the Ukrainian president and prime minister as well as the World Council of Churches. The AUCCRO also works closely with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and Science, and it has partnered with the Ministry of Defense since 2009 to operate the Council for Pastoral Care, an important point of intersection between religious actors, the state, and the military.

Religion and Conflict in Ukraine

Religion is not the primary factor driving the war in Ukraine, but it nevertheless influences the formation of war narratives, understandings and interpretations of conflict dynamics within communities, the course of political processes, and, in some cases, direct support for certain armed elements. Misunderstanding of and indifference to the role of religion in society can significantly exacerbate conflict dynamics, while understanding the peacebuilding potential of religious communities can shape interventions and create opportunities at different levels.

The dynamics of both the conflict and the religious landscape in Ukraine are complex, deep-seated, and critically important as the world looks toward the future of Ukraine in the wake of the 2022 invasion. Churches and religious associations have the capacity to make important contributions to stabilization efforts and the task of bridging divided communities.⁴⁶ The potential of religious actors in conflict spheres is huge, but there is an equal risk that religious rifts are used to further divide society and entrench conflict. Understanding the key intersections between religion and conflict in Ukraine is vital to make more effective peacebuilding choices and, with luck, support the end of hostilities.

This section summarizes four main ways religion and conflict intersect in Ukraine at levels ranging from the local community to the transnational. Specifically, it looks at the changing role of religious institutions in civil society; the impact on society of disputes within and across religious groups; the use of religious actors in service of political goals; and the geopolitical ramifications of autocephaly.

RELIGIOUS ACTORS AS LEADERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Following the 2014 Euromaidan protests and the ousting of President Yanukovich, religious actors—and particularly churches—in Ukraine became highly visible as peripheral conflict actors and were influential in shaping Ukrainian societal opinion. For many Ukrainians, the breakdown of political authority and general disorder created by the revolution and ensuing conflict gave additional weight to the authority of churches and traditional religious organizations that might previously have been disregarded.

Ukrainian churches became one of the key factors in mobilizing civil society between 2014 and 2022. Widespread appeals to nonviolence during the Maidan protests bolstered the legitimacy of the churches' moral authority in the eyes of many Ukrainians, which in turn gave them more influence over the social transformation that followed the revolution. The emergence of a clearly pro-Ukrainian interchurch consensus was particularly important in this regard, both in terms of shaping societal discourse and providing practical peacebuilding services through joint ministry in the conflict zone in eastern Ukraine. Arguably, the coalescence of churches in Ukraine provided a model of reconciliation and consolidation that could be replicated in other domains. Were Ukrainian civil society to follow this model and act in concert, for example, the impact of its programs and initiatives could be greatly strengthened.

Simultaneously, macro-level transformations were occurring that reshaped the role of churches in Ukrainian society. The scale of the new political reality that emerged from the Euromaidan, and the level of



Sergei Kosyak leads a service at the Christian Aid Center of the Transfiguration Church in Maryinka, Ukraine, on February 20, 2016. Protestant Christians in Ukraine are represented by different denominations and groups, as well as thousands of small churches in all regions of the country. (Photo by Brendan Hoffman/New York Times)

confusion surrounding it in the early days following the revolution, led many clergy and religious organizations to reevaluate their place in society and their approach to leading in turbulent times. In times of strife and division, a religious organization typically understands itself as adopting either a particularist or ecumenist approach. Churches that take a particularist approach prioritize institutional and congregational interests above all else. Churches that take an ecumenist approach see their role as providing answers to profound societal questions together with other religious groups.⁴⁷ The ecumenist approach is based on the idea that religion is a cultural resource that may benefit all religious groups, regardless of their specific beliefs.

The majority of Ukrainian churches adopted the ecumenist approach in response to the Maidan, leading to a

show of real unity following the protests and the resultant violence. It is important to note, however, that divisions between some churches were only deepened following the Maidan, notably between the Moscow Patriarchate and the various independence-minded Orthodox Churches. Critically, the politicization of religious communities following the revolution has strengthened the dichotomy of “friend or foe” among religious communities, which might take decades to undo even in peacetime. However, among like-minded religious organizations, shared values and a willingness to take political risks helped generate important informal networks of horizontal cooperation between religious leaders and activists.

After such strong initial shows of unity, ecumenical expressions began to decrease in the years following the revolution, hindering the emergence of

new religious social movements and connections between religious institutions and civil society. By the late 2010s, declarations of religious unity were limited to the statements and aspirations of individual church leaders. Moreover, the weakened state of Ukraine's central government in the years following the Euromaidan protests led to increasing interinstitutional conflict, including among religious institutions, which resulted in a loss of common purpose and a much more profound sense of division in the country. As religious institutions attempted to navigate their very public and influential role in the new Ukraine, they sought to define a new role for themselves and pursue what they termed "open ecumenism" for the good of Ukraine. Ultimately, however, churches returned to older patterns of behavior, once again competing with each other openly or behind the scenes.

A resurgence of interreligious infighting has led to a certain loss of both authority and influence for many Ukrainian churches. If this trend continues, churches risk further eroding societal trust and may ultimately become a weak link in Ukrainian civil society. Particularly given the new sociopolitical reality in Ukraine following Russia's invasion in February 2022, and given the intense politicization of religion that has resulted from the onset of full-scale war, it is unclear whether Ukrainian churches can continue to model unity and prioritize activities for the good of society over all other interests.

Religious actors' return to the public sphere following the 2013–14 Euromaidan protests demonstrates an important way new social relationships can be developed in times of great upheaval. The key takeaway from the Ukrainian context, however, is the need for balance. Each religious community's traditional spiritual function must be respected and maintained even as each practices public religion through ecumenism. Moreover, cooperation between the secular and religious domains also requires a systematic approach that allows society to fully benefit from the unique contributions of religious actors.

CONFLICT AND PEACEBUILDING ACROSS AND WITHIN RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Though not a direct driver of the conflict, fractures in the religious landscape in Ukraine both mirror existing geopolitical divides and reinforce them. Furthermore, the widespread political tensions between—and the factionalization within—different churches serve to further destabilize Ukrainian society and risk worsening conflict and undermining any peacebuilding effort.

As described earlier, the most important religious division in Ukraine is the fragmentation of Orthodox communities. Divisions between the UOC-MP and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, as well as the smaller schism between the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, affect the majority of Ukrainians and can increase political polarization and undermine religious authority in society. The primary fault lines concern autocephaly and its ramifications; as discussed earlier, the Kyiv Patriarchate and the OCU are in an ongoing dispute over the leadership of the autocephalous Ukrainian church, and the UOC-MP challenges Ukrainian autocephaly entirely. The OCU is also opposed to the UOC-MP's strong links to the Russian Orthodox Church, despite its claims to have broken with Patriarch Kirill. Although there are reasons for these divides at the institutional level, interpersonal conflicts between Orthodox leaders also play a role in shaping macro-level decisions.

Fracturing is also evident in non-Orthodox Christian communities in Ukraine. For example, some members of Ukraine's Catholic community have accused more conservative factions within their church of being funded and supported by the Russian government with the explicit intent of sowing division in western Ukraine. Moscow's full-scale invasion also deepened prior misunderstanding and mistrust between Protestant communities in Ukraine and Russia. Unlike Ukrainian evangelicals, Russian pastors either remained silent in public, spoke in support of Putin, or remained neutral through generic "We stand for peace"

statements—sometimes explicitly urging Ukrainian pastors to remain silent about the suffering and death around them. As one Protestant theologian put it, “I received numerous messages where I was asked not to write, to remain silent, which can be summed up very simply: Please, if you die, do it silently.”⁴⁸ At the organizational level, statements and appeals from the Russian Union of Christian Churches of the Evangelical Faith sought to avoid placing blame by calling for an end to “this fratricidal war, where the reasons are not important.”⁴⁹ Affiliates of this group were among the first to enter Mariupol after the Russian military took the city, and they publicly announced their new church there despite the objections of local Ukrainian Protestant leaders.⁵⁰

Religious minorities are not immune to the effects of religious infighting. The Muslim community of Ukraine has no single recognized leader, but perhaps the most important organization among Muslims outside Crimea is the Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine. This group emphasizes its religious functions over its political role, and accordingly is officially politically neutral despite generally supporting the Ukrainian government. However, RAMU has found itself persistently at odds with the rival RAMU “Ummah”; the groups have different approaches to Islamic theology and reject each other’s respective claims to represent Sunni Islam. These tensions stem in part from RAMU mufti Akhmed Tamim’s roots in Al-Ahbash, the transnational Sufi group of Lebanese origin viewed as heterodox by some contemporary Sunni groups. Conversely, through its broad array of international ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, RAMU “Ummah” claims to provide a more mainstream Sunni orientation. RAMU has also found itself at odds with Crimean Muslims, the country’s largest Muslim minority group, particularly following Russia’s annexation of Crimea. RAMU has tried to exert authority over Crimean Muslims now living in territories controlled by the Ukrainian government, while the latter have sought to assert their autonomy.

THE POLITICIZATION OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

The third intersection between religion and the conflict in Ukraine is the purposeful use of religious organizations, but particularly the various Orthodox Churches, as political tools. The conflict between Orthodox jurisdictions in Ukraine predated the political conflict, and it is hard to argue that the former caused the latter. However, the conflict between competing Orthodox structures overlaps significantly with the conflict in Ukraine, with dynamics and rhetoric echoing across conflict boundaries. In addition to the politicization of religion, whereby the religious sector becomes increasingly intertwined with key political debates and disputes in Ukraine, it is also possible to identify a parallel dynamic that might be termed the theologization of politics, whereby the narratives and symbols deployed in political discourse come increasingly to resemble the highly existential and often fatalistic vocabulary commonly associated with religion.

The following subsections detail how some of Ukraine’s religious bodies have been both willing and (sometimes) unwilling political participants in the ongoing conflict.

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Moscow Patriarchate

Both the ROC and the UOC-MP have outwardly promoted Slavic unity, both institutionally and at the level of the individual priest. Of vital importance is the fact that the UOC-MP traditionally answered to the ROC; while technically a “self-governing” church, the UOC-MP historically fell squarely under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church and was subject to its authority through the *tomos*. The Russian Orthodox Church, in turn, is widely understood by outsiders as an unofficial arm of the Russian state.

Often seen as essentially one and the same due to this relationship, both the ROC and the UOC-MP are

perceived as buttressing Putin’s effort to portray himself as the defender of Russian ethnicity and—through the *Russkiy Mir* concept—the historical ideals of a Greater Russia and Holy Rus. Both ideals stress Slavic unity based on historical, cultural, linguistic, and religious connections between former Soviet states, most importantly between Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. While the term “Holy Rus” is much older than the ROC’s Patriarch Kirill, it was Kirill who popularized the concept. He began using the term on his first visit to Ukraine in 2009, when he stated that the ROC is the church not only of the Russian Federation, but of all “historical Russia,” including Ukraine.⁵¹ Adopting the narrative of the Holy Rus was geopolitically strategic: “Holy Russia” was depicted as a decentered entity, but with strong religious and ideological ties to areas of geopolitical interest to the Russian state. In this narrative, Kyiv is painted as Russia’s cradle, a sacred city comparable to Jerusalem or Constantinople, and as a fortress of the Orthodox faith.

While Patriarch Kirill was thought to initially disapprove of the annexation of Crimea, he quickly adapted to the political reality in Russia. After 2014, his sermons and statements updated the narrative: the emphasis on the unity of Russia and Ukraine through the Holy Rus was gone, replaced by an account of a divinely sanctioned “Russian World” (*Russkiy Mir*) waging a war of liberation against the anti-Christian, hegemonic West. Preserving Russian civilization became paramount for Kirill, and conflicts between Russia and its former satellites were part of a “struggle for East European space.”⁵² Ukraine emerged as the front line of this ideological conflict, and political and military conflict with Russia morphed into a sort of religious war.⁵³ “Schismatics,” like the Kyiv Patriarchate and other independent Orthodox Churches, were said by ROC leaders to oppose the Moscow Patriarchate’s attempts to build an Orthodox civilization and were held to be ultimately responsible for the crises that followed. Patriarch Kirill even accused the churches seeking autocephaly of persecuting Orthodox Christians in Ukraine who still looked

to Moscow for their spiritual leadership, going so far as to say that the *tomos* granting autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine encouraged violence.⁵⁴ The narratives espoused by the ROC and, by extension, the UOC-MP were accompanied by specific and troubling moves such as possible cooperation with occupation authorities, distribution of Russian aid, and similar actions by both ROC and UOC-MP priests throughout conflict zones in eastern Ukraine.

The true role of the UOC-MP after Russia’s invasion in 2022 is yet to be revealed; the conflicting nature of the evidence seems to imply that individual priests are making their own decisions in their communities, as opposed to following a clear strategy from above. Notably, Metropolitan Onufriy of the UOC-MP immediately opposed the invasion; in remarks from February 24, 2022, he said, “The war between [Russia and Ukraine] is a repetition of the sin of Cain, who killed his own brother out of envy. Such a war has no justification either from God or from people.”⁵⁵ A highly significant development occurred on May 27, 2022, when the Council of the UOC-MP decided to break ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, amending its administrative charters to emphasize “the complete independence of the UOC.” While continuing to reject the legitimacy of autocephaly for the OCU, the UOC-MP leadership’s statement left open the possibility of dialogue with the OCU—something it had previously refused to even consider—and stipulated specific conditions under which such engagement could begin.⁵⁶

The ROC’s Patriarch Kirill also spoke out regarding the invasion, but again invoked the historical and ideological ties between the Russian and Ukrainian people: “I believe that this God-given community will help overcome the divisions and contradictions that have arisen that have led to the current conflict.”⁵⁷ Importantly, recent evidence indicates that there may be a disconnect between the ROC’s top-level leadership and its bishops in some parts of the country. Reports indicate that in March 2022, 200 Russian clergy members sent

a letter to Patriarch Kirill, asking him to “take a different view of the conflict” and asserting that “there is an eternal question at stake here and you have gotten it wrong.”⁵⁸ This appears to mirror a similar disconnect between what the ROC and the UOC-MP are preaching and what their congregants believe. A March 9, 2022, survey revealed that more than 50 percent of parishioners within the UOC-MP supported the termination of ties with the ROC following Russia’s invasion. Admittedly this represents only one survey conducted close to the beginning of the conflict; but if the rejection of the ROC becomes widespread, this shift could become a decisive factor in Ukrainian public affairs in the years to come.⁵⁹

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine

While lacking the same close ties to the state that the ROC has, the OCU nevertheless became a key part of Ukraine’s nationalist movement in the late 2010s. The independent Orthodox Churches, some of which had been working toward autocephaly for almost a century, were not doing so for political reasons, but their aspirations conveniently aligned with the Ukrainian president’s push for greater independence from Russia during an intense electoral race.

Former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko first announced his campaign to separate Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine from the Russian Orthodox Church in mid-April 2018.⁶⁰ The Verkhovna Rada (parliament) of Ukraine widely supported this move as well. In an effort to dilute Russian influence through the UOC-MP and to distinguish Ukraine as a sovereign state with its own constitution and institutions, Poroshenko openly pursued autocephaly—for example, while meeting with a representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in Kyiv in July 2018.⁶¹ Himself a deacon in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Poroshenko employed the slogan “Language, Army, Faith” during his reelection campaign in 2019, pushing a narrative of a unified Ukraine inherently different from Russia. He further took legal steps—ultimately unsuccessful—to

brand the UOC-MP as non-Ukrainian by pressuring it to reflect the name of its Russian mother church somewhere in its title. Other legal maneuvers aimed to simplify the process for parishes to switch Orthodox jurisdictions. While Poroshenko was not reelected, his loss should be read not as a rejection of his campaign but rather as a rejection of him personally and of his politics as a whole; Ukrainian society remains distinctly pro-Ukrainian. The strong political support for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church proved incredibly important, as the declaration of autocephaly would most likely not have been possible without such decisive support from political leadership.

The current president, Volodymyr Zelensky, has done little to tie religion into his political discourse. In his election campaign, he highlighted Ukraine’s diversity and multifaceted nature, and shortly before his inauguration, he released a video message calling for peace in Crimea and Donbas that featured a handful of leaders from various Ukrainian religious institutions to present an image of unity in diversity.⁶² Although Zelensky showed little interest in promoting a political narrative laden with religion at the beginning of his administration, references to religion and ensuring Ukraine’s “spiritual independence” entered his rhetoric in late 2022.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the OCU and the Ukrainian government continues to be somewhat symbiotic. The OCU, along with an increasingly fragmenting and anemic UOC-KP (most of whose former members have joined the OCU), holds pro-Ukraine, pro-government, and usually pro-EU positions. And while the UOC-KP is currently operating outside the OCU fold, it is worth recalling that it was heavily involved in the Euromaidan protests and offered its churches and monasteries in Kyiv to be “used by revolutionaries as hospitals, canteens, and dormitories.”⁶³ The Kyiv Patriarchate was also explicitly in support of the removal of former president Viktor Yanukovich.⁶⁴

Religion in Occupied Areas

The actions of religious leaders in contested areas also deserve specific analysis, as they can perhaps be viewed as a bellwether for what might happen in the future should Russia's invasion of Ukraine succeed.

Despite the obvious geopolitical and strategic benefits of controlling Crimea, justifications for the annexation of the peninsula were couched in traditional religious terms. Putin drew on the shared spiritual history of the region to justify the annexation and his support of pro-Russian separatists, particularly on the narrative of the Holy Rus. As he said following the annexation in March 2014:

Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization, and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.⁶⁵

This religious overlay has had implications for religious freedom in the occupied regions of eastern Ukraine. In 2015, the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic—part of the territory that the Kremlin subsequently claimed to have annexed to Russia in September 2022—defined the following religious affiliations as acceptable: Orthodoxy (Moscow Patriarchate), Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism. There is evidence of discrimination, interrogation, arrest, torture, intimidation, and property raids and seizures against so-called sectarian believers, including minority Protestants, Muslims, Mormons, Buddhists, Greek Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, and evangelical Christians. Other laws on freedom, conscience, and religious association adopted by the Donetsk People's Republic and the adjacent and similarly annexed Luhansk People's Republic required that "all religious communities in the region . . . re-register no later than March 1, 2019." Institutions that fail to register face bans, fines, or confiscation of places of worship and related religious property.⁶⁶

GEOPOLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF AUTOCEPHALY

The fourth intersection of religion and conflict in Ukraine concerns the geopolitical ramifications of autocephaly, both within the international system and within the Eastern Orthodox Church. As the balance of power shifts—both in the Orthodox-majority world and globally—new hierarchies have the potential to exacerbate existing tensions, reinforce conflicts in other domains, or become key avenues for the pursuit of peace.

At its core, the struggle over Ukrainian autocephaly represents a conflict between independence-seeking Ukrainian Orthodox Churches (and, from 2018, the Ukrainian political establishment), the Russian Orthodox Church (and by extension the Russian state), and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.⁶⁷

When the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, along with the synod, agreed to grant a *tomos* bestowing autocephaly on the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Russian Orthodox Church strongly opposed this decision. In September 2018, the synod of the Moscow Patriarchate stated its intention to break ties with the Ecumenical Patriarchate given Constantinople's support of the Ukrainian autocephalous movement.⁶⁸ This was a monumental act, and its full ramifications are likely to remain hidden for years, if not decades.

Though in many ways shocking, the ROC's split with Constantinople followed centuries of tensions between the two Orthodox Churches. The Russian Orthodox Church claims the most parishes and the most parishioners in global Orthodoxy, with over 150 million followers out of the roughly 260 million total Orthodox followers worldwide. The ROC has long felt it deserves corresponding recognition in terms of its standing within the Orthodox hierarchy. Moreover, as early as the fall of Constantinople in 1453, some Eastern Orthodox scholars argued for Moscow as the "Third Rome" and the seat of the Orthodox Church. But Constantinople

as direct heir to the Byzantine legacy has an interest in defending its position as first among equals within Orthodoxy, and it therefore rejects the Moscow Patriarchate's efforts to "upgrade" the ROC's status within the global Orthodox communion.

Constantinople had two main purposes in choosing to grant the Ukrainian church autocephaly. First, autocephaly was granted on the condition that the various independent Orthodox Churches in Ukraine unite under one banner, essentially ending decades-long schisms within Ukrainian Orthodoxy. This arrangement would be of clear benefit to the Eastern Orthodox Church, as it would bring many devout Ukrainians officially into a single Orthodox institution. Second, granting the OCU a *tomos* of autocephaly dealt a significant blow to the Russian Orthodox Church, undercutting its ability to challenge Constantinople. Approximately one-third of all ROC parishes are located in Ukraine, and if all the UOC-MP's parishes were transferred to the autocephalous OCU, the ROC would no longer control the most parishes in the Orthodox world. This has implications for both the ROC's prestige and its financial interests. The Ecumenical Patriarch may have expected that granting autocephaly would create a dramatic shift in religious influence and power, weakening Constantinople's biggest rival and diminishing the ROC's global influence.⁶⁹ However, this result has not been realized, as the dust has yet to settle from the ROC's historic decision to break from Constantinople entirely.

The wider world's response to autocephaly, and to the religious landscape in Ukraine more broadly, also feeds into existing geopolitical divisions. Notably, the US has provided significant political, economic, and military aid to Ukraine since 2014 and has openly declared support for Ukraine's autocephalous movement on the

grounds of religious freedom. The US Department of State agreed to support positive dialogue on religious freedom in Ukraine, and former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo even called Metropolitan Epifaniy to congratulate him on his election as the head of the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Some observers, however, particularly those sympathetic to Moscow, have viewed or portrayed this engagement as a strategic decision on the part of the US to endorse specific religious actors in Ukraine. Given the prominence of Russian misinformation and influence operations—Moscow-aligned media also reported Pompeo's actions as an example of direct US interference in Ukraine—perception matters greatly.⁷⁰

Notably, large Orthodox constituencies in North America and northern Europe were highly supportive of autocephaly for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. This may have been a factor in the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople's decision to issue the *tomos*, and moving forward these constituencies should be viewed as potentially influential actors in transnational Orthodox discourse and engagement.

Domestically within Ukraine, autocephaly has the potential to help usher in new calls for Ukrainian identity and unity. The idea of the *Russkiy Mir* and other religiously inspired unity narratives have largely failed to gain traction among Ukrainians after the annexation of Crimea, which strengthened sympathies for a unified Ukraine and a specific Ukrainian identity. With the intensification of the war since 2022, it is likely that calls for a distinct Ukrainian identity will continue and even intensify, and it would be a mistake for the international community to underestimate the role religious organizations and institutions already play—and will continue to play—in Ukraine's public sphere.

Religious Peacebuilding Efforts in Ukraine

Religious actors in Ukraine play a clear role in ongoing societal unrest and may contribute to the risk of internal polarization. However, they also represent unique means of bridging existing divides. For this reason, in addition to understanding the ways in which these actors may be detrimental, it is also important to explore how to support these actors in building peace and future reconciliation. This effort involves identifying existing opportunities that can be built upon, while finding ways to work under rapidly changing conditions as the conflict evolves. Religious actors should also be supported to participate in peacemaking and peacebuilding projects outside their own communities.

Importantly, a primary obstacle to greater support for religious peacebuilding efforts is the misconception by outside actors that religion is irrelevant to the conflict. Because religion and religious narratives are not considered primary drivers of the conflict, donors and the international community may choose to limit the amount of support provided to religious peacebuilding efforts.⁷¹ Certainly, prior to the Russian invasion in 2022, few decision-makers gave much consideration to the religious dimensions of the conflict.

INTERNATIONAL ELITE VIEWS OF RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING

Several key EU and Swiss policymakers were interviewed for this report to learn about their perceptions of the conflict and their operations within Ukraine. Every contacted individual highlighted that religion was not the primary issue in the conflict, and some assumed that the religious dimension in Ukraine was limited to the dispute over autocephaly within the Ukrainian

Orthodox Church. There was little awareness of religious actors and their role in peacebuilding outside of Orthodox jurisdictions.

Furthermore, interviewees often downplayed the role of religion and religious actors. Several individuals indicated that overemphasizing the role of religion in the region could “drag it further into the dispute” and only serve to complicate matters even more. Many interviewees said that analyses of religion in Ukraine were most relevant when Poroshenko incorporated autocephaly into his political positions, and that since Zelensky’s election, interest in discussing religious issues had decreased substantially. Because Zelensky has showed little interest in engaging with religious actors or in marrying Ukrainian unity to religious structures, many policymakers interviewed considered religion to be of secondary interest.

Policymakers evidently do not consider religious influences or rely on religious actors when making on-the-ground assessments. None of the interviewees could tell, for example, whether staff of major international efforts such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine were actively consulting religious representatives to gather information for their reports—but all assumed they were not. This preconception could represent a significant gap for European policymakers working on the conflict internationally.

That being said, a few individuals did take an interest in the subject and follow current developments. The Human Security Advisory at the Embassy of Switzerland in Kyiv,

for example, had no ongoing peacebuilding processes or projects with religious representatives, but remained in loose contact with religious actors in order to maintain a broad horizontal network. This was done in part to ensure access if a religious issue in Ukraine were ever to become a priority for European policymakers.

When questioned about the peacebuilding activities of religious actors and organizations, interviewees were unaware of many initiatives between religious institutions. Moreover, they were generally critical of religious institutions' engagement in conflict issues, fearing that their involvement in peacebuilding efforts could work against social cohesion and drive communities further apart. Nonetheless, several interviewees mentioned the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church as a potential bridge builder and a player that should be watched. The peacebuilding potential of top religious leaders, who are often associated with the political elite in Ukraine, was estimated to be less promising than that of grassroots religious representatives. However, some interviewees were aware of a number of religious figures acting individually on conflict-related issues.

TYPES OF RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING

The research conducted for this study found two main types of peacebuilding in Ukraine, which are here labeled “interparty peacebuilding” and “intraparty peacebuilding.”

Intraparty peacebuilding refers to internal peacebuilding practices, that is, those that focus on enhancing the social cohesion and well-being of one party to the conflict (in this case the government-controlled areas of Ukraine) and that assume there is no contact with the other conflict party or its representatives. It can take the form of humanitarian and social work, psychological support for victims of violence, gathering and sharing of information, or provision of educational programs—in short, any actions that prepare society for further development and serve to minimize the consequences of the experience of armed conflict. Ideally, intraparty

peacebuilding interventions should seek to improve social and economic frameworks, build institutions, ensure a high degree of security at various levels, and develop dialogue skills among different social groups with a focus on youth (empathic practices, discussion of complex issues, dialogue experience, problem solving through cooperation, etc.).

Interparty peacebuilding, on the other hand, refers to contact with representatives of the other conflict party aimed at achieving at least some minimal understanding of the other's position. For example, these efforts can involve dialogue projects with participants from different sides of the conflict (in this case, representatives of government-controlled territories, of non-government-controlled territories, and of Russia). In such initiatives, the emphasis is on developing empathy for the position of the other, which does not entail acceptance or consent. Initiatives can include minimal contact to resolve urgent issues (burial of victims, restoration of water or electricity, etc.), as well as so-called shuttle diplomacy, when officials cross the line of demarcation for humanitarian purposes. Some interparty peacebuilding initiatives have been spontaneous, such as the establishment of an underground hospital in the basement of one of the churches on the demarcation line, where soldiers from the Ukrainian Armed Forces and fighters from the Donetsk People's Republic received medical treatment at the same time.

From time to time, these two types of peacebuilding may intersect within an organization or project. Ideally they should be balanced, because in and of themselves, dialogical practices aimed at establishing contact between the parties—that is, interparty peacebuilding—will not prepare the infrastructure for safe reintegration or peaceful coexistence after the end of the active phase of the conflict. Thus there is the need to propose and work within a framework that recognizes the distinct orientation and modalities of each approach.



Metropolitan Epifaniy, primate of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, center, conducts a Palm Sunday service at the Pechersk Lavra monastery in Kyiv on Sunday, April 9, 2023. (Photo by Adam Pemble/AP)

It is also important to note that intraparty peacebuilding activities do not always focus on achieving predetermined peacebuilding outcomes, as participants' aspirations and strategic visions for the future may be undefined. Interparty peacebuilding initiatives, on the other hand, often require special training for organizers, coordinators, and facilitators, as well as special security arrangements for dialogue participants due to the intense political sensitivities that may accompany such convenings. If the broader society does not feel ready for possible reconciliation, such activities can be premature and may pose a major threat to participants. They also may be endangered if they are perceived to transgress the boundaries of their communities through a willingness to meet with the enemy (especially in a wartime environment characterized by specific discourses of patriotism). At the same time, such interparty peacebuilders do not generally integrate into social groups on the opposite

side of the conflict; thus they may remain intermediaries who have to seek psychological support elsewhere. Under such conditions and in the absence of a community of practitioners, these efforts carry enormous personal risks for peacebuilders, including psychological and occupational burnout, mental disorders, and threats to primary physical security and employment stability.

OVERVIEW OF RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING INITIATIVES

The discussion thus far makes clear the potential of religion to exacerbate conflict in Ukraine: religious organizations are used to further political aims (and political aims inform religious goals); the division of society along religious lines threatens to undermine initiatives building societal cohesion; and if left unchecked, religious issues could become important flash points in transnational geopolitical power struggles. These risks,

however, are counterbalanced by the important peacebuilding work religious organizations in Ukraine do on the ground. The involvement of religious organizations in conflict and peace dynamics must be analyzed with great nuance, as the landscape is not so simple that one religious community may be labeled peaceful and another belligerent.

Moreover, perhaps because of larger national- and international-level conversations, the on-the-ground role of religious organizations in Ukraine is easy to overlook. Between 2014 and early 2022, religious communities of all beliefs contributed significantly to social and peacebuilding initiatives—but they mainly did so in silence.

The discussion below aims to amplify the accomplishments of these communities by looking at a number of faith-based organizations that have implemented practical peacebuilding programs in Ukraine with a proven impact. It is critical to consider how the international community can best support these actors in future peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. To do this, it is necessary to understand what types of programs have found success and why, and to consider how these programs might be improved.

In addition to incorporating aspects of both the intra-party and interparty peacebuilding models discussed above, the peacebuilding initiatives outlined in this section can be categorized according to an adapted version of the peacebuilding pyramid framework developed by John Paul Lederach.⁷² According to Lederach, peacebuilding consists of three different levels of actors. Level 1 refers to actors in leadership positions at major institutions like the military, the government, or religious organizations and institutions. Their work is focused on high-level initiatives like negotiations and ceasefires, and typically is led by a highly visible figure. Level 2 refers to middle-range leaders who command respect in their sector; they include religious figures, academics, and NGOs, among others. Their typical approach to peacebuilding includes promoting conflict

resolution on the ground, running problem-solving workshops, and establishing commissions for peace. Level 3 refers to grassroots movements, including efforts by local leaders, community developers, local health officials, refugee camp leaders, lay religious members, and more.

For the Ukraine case, a revised version of Lederach's peacebuilding pyramid schema is used, where the various levels are adapted to fit the specific context of religious—and particularly Christian—structures in Ukraine. Therefore, in the analysis below, Level 1 religious peacebuilding refers to religious actors (that is, both individual leaders and organizations) tied to official church institutions. Level 2 religious peacebuilding involves hromada (community) priests or small-scale local organizations whose activities do not represent official expressions of church policy but which facilitate low-profile, unofficial communication and dialogue between different groups.

It is important to note that there is a far wider array of religious activity in support of peace in Ukraine than can be included here; many individuals and groups do not have publicly visible projects but are nevertheless engaging in Level 3 peacebuilding—which in this framework would involve, for example, initiatives led by lay members of churches or religious institutions. A number of official initiatives at this level have been intentionally excluded from this report because their activities are not public knowledge, and any disclosure could endanger them and their workers. Ideally these organizations will be able to enter the public dialogue when it is safe for them to do so.

Key Level 1 Religious Peacebuilders

Caritas Ukraine. Caritas Internationalis, the umbrella organization for the national-level Caritas Ukraine, is a worldwide charity inspired by Catholic values and the Gospel. Pope Francis has called Caritas International “an essential part” of the Catholic Church. In Ukraine, Caritas is overseen by the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

The on-the-ground role of religious organizations in Ukraine is easy to overlook. Between 2014 and early 2022, religious communities of all beliefs contributed significantly to social and peacebuilding initiatives—but they mainly did so in silence. . . . It is critical to consider how the international community can best support these actors in future peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts.

Since April 2014, Caritas Ukraine has been heavily involved in the provision of humanitarian assistance to conflict-displaced and conflict-affected residents of eastern Ukraine, particularly the Donbas region and Crimea. Since 2016, the organization has also implemented peacebuilding projects in nine regions across Ukraine.⁷³ Many of these projects have been focused on rehabilitating victims and supporting friendly relationships between internally displaced persons, war veterans, and the local population. In addition, Caritas plays a significant role in promoting cooperation between different civil society groups in Ukraine, both by coordinating smaller Catholic-based humanitarian organizations across the nation and by connecting religious leaders, universities, schools, and social service providers in dialogue.

Eleos-Ukraine. *Eleos* means “mercy” or “compassion” in Greek, and Eleos-Ukraine is a network for cooperation between NGOs, religious communities, and the public sector that aims to promote democratic values and resolve social issues in Ukraine. Run by the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the organization is headed by Metropolitan Serhiy Horobtsov of the Donetsk-Mariupol Diocese, though it cooperates extensively with secular organizations.

Eleos-Ukraine provides assistance to many people throughout Ukraine and has a particular focus on conflict-affected individuals. It assists internally displaced persons and migrants; provides spiritual, psychological, and social support for demobilized members of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and their families; and promotes reconciliation of conflicts on national, social, and cultural grounds. Beginning after the Russian invasion in February 2022, Eleos-Ukraine began evacuating

individuals from the cities of Kyiv and Kharkiv to safer areas of the country.

Eleos-Ukraine also publicly supports the position of the OCU and is frequently seen partnering with Metropolitan Epifaniy in OCU projects. Notably, priests involved with Eleos-Ukraine publicly promote political narratives through initiatives like the Wall of Memory next to St. Michael’s Cathedral in Kyiv. This installation, showing the portraits of Ukrainian soldiers killed since 2014, has inspired many protests and public actions related to the conflict to take place in the square outside the church.

Eleos-Ukraine continues to operate in eight regions of Ukraine and has expressed the aim of becoming a leader on social issues in the country, emphasizing health care and post-conflict reconstruction through cultural projects and memory preservation initiatives.

Open Orthodoxy Network. The Open Orthodoxy Network is affiliated with a more flexible wing of the UOC-MP and more recently with certain segments of the OCU that had hoped to extend an ecumenical hand to the UOC-KP in the period leading up to the declaration of Ukrainian autocephaly. In August 2018, the organization hosted a dialogue titled “What the Orthodox Church of Ukraine Should Be Like.” In a statement issued on behalf of the dialogue participants, the Open Orthodoxy Network noted the need to eliminate “imperial, totalitarian and Soviet constructs” and to work “for peaceful coexistence, cooperation and co-ordination” of the Orthodox Churches.⁷⁴ The statement also called for the unity of Ukraine beyond the granting of the *tomos*. The dialogue was held in partnership with the Orthodox University of St. Sophia.

Level 1 interfaith peacebuilding. Since the beginning of the Maidan, the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations has issued numerous calls to end any and all violence in Ukraine. It is heavily involved in OSCE deliberative meetings in Vienna, where it argues for monitoring of persecution on religious grounds in eastern Ukraine. The AUCCRO also works to document facts of persecution, violence, and infringement of human rights in conflict zones. The organization created and published a peacebuilding strategy that recommends practical initiatives for peacebuilding for religious organizations. This strategic framework was developed in collaboration with many other humanitarian organizations in Ukraine, including Caritas Ukraine and Eleos-Ukraine.



There are a number of societal trends shaping religious peacebuilding in Ukraine, particularly since the Euromaidan. The scale of the need for social and political reform following the revolution, combined with the state's relative lack of capacity, led to a significant rise in the number of volunteers and the provision of social services. The conflict in eastern Ukraine also inspired the rapid development of a robust multi-faith military chaplaincy with strong connections to secular actors. The work in eastern Ukraine is perhaps one of the most successful efforts to coordinate Ukrainian religious and social movements since independence from the Soviet Union. According to scholars like sociologist of religion James Beckford, social movements that use religion as a “cultural resource” and in a liberal way (understood as open-minded, flexible, and prepared for change) could prove particularly powerful in

resolving the challenges of a globalized world.⁷⁵ Thus the emergence of these socioreligious movements could represent innovative and constructive solutions to the complex social problems Ukrainian society faces during this time of upheaval.

Level 2 Peacebuilding

The work being done by Level 2 peacebuilders in Ukraine is vast and important, but events on the ground necessitate that much of it stays hidden. In particular, prior to the Russian invasion, there was critical work being done by individual priests from the UOC-MP and the Roman Catholic Church in the Donbas region to support social ministry and peaceful negotiation. Other Orthodox and Catholic priests were also reportedly engaged in negotiations between Ukrainian regions and Moscow, and they played instrumental roles in connecting religious activists from both sides of the conflict. With the recent escalation of violence, these networks and individuals are likely continuing this work.

Given the ongoing conflict, this report cannot provide additional details about these individuals and their work. However, it is critical that their efforts not be overlooked. As Lederach theorizes, middle-range leaders play an important role in coordinating between high-level decision-makers and grassroots organizations. “Translating” peace—that is, making it understandable and possible across the various perspectives found at these different levels—depends at least in part on the work of these middle-range leaders. Consequently, when it is safe to do so and they are willing to share information, international actors and those pursuing peace in Ukraine should prioritize hearing their stories and learning from their approaches.

Observations and Recommendations



The Russian invasion in early 2022 has created a new reality for Ukraine; when this war ends, regardless of the outcome, the religious and sociopolitical landscape of the country is likely to look very different. The challenges facing external and internal governance and humanitarian actors may change as new priorities and new limits on organizations' capacities emerge. Religious leaders of all faiths represent an important source of continuity, and they have the potential to emerge as highly legitimate, highly influential actors in the post-conflict sphere. Given the outsize role in public life played by several of the minority religious communities, they could potentially end up as important brokers or mediators in religious peacebuilding efforts.

A number of lessons can be drawn from religious activity in Ukraine from 2014 to 2022 that may be useful in the future. These should be carefully considered by international actors looking to support peace processes in Ukraine.

First, the key set of religious actors working in the public sphere is not limited to large organizations. Such organizations typically have long histories that mirror many of the changes to everyday life Ukrainians have undergone since the 2014 revolution, and it is important to study them and partner with them. But it is also important to learn from smaller and less powerful actors. The stories and experiences of peacebuilders on the ground, particularly those with connections to religious organizations, can be highly informative in creating more tailored peacebuilding responses and leveraging the full potential of religious partnership.

Put another way, it is important to recognize that there are aspects of the intersection of religion, conflict, and peace in Ukraine other than the headline-grabbing politics of Ukrainian autocephaly and the UOC-MP's complex and controversial relationship with Moscow. Beyond the prominent Orthodox personalities and intrigues, there exists a universe of relevant and often underappreciated religious peacebuilders.

Second, there are two crucially interrelated types of religious peacebuilding in Ukraine: intraparty peacebuilding, which prioritizes social cohesion, resilience, and general well-being within the geographic and communal boundaries of a conflict party (such as government-controlled areas), and interparty peacebuilding, which involves various forms of contact, engagement, and exchange between the conflict parties. Religious peacebuilding initiatives may incorporate aspects of both approaches, which are mutually reinforcing, and success will often depend on being able to make progress on both fronts simultaneously.

Third, following the Euromaidan, Ukrainian society experienced a significant politicization of religion and a parallel theologization of politics. This shift was a specific tactic of Poroshenko, but also naturally evolved to encompass almost all public religious organizations that were either explicitly pro-Ukrainian or at least broadly neutral. Even non-Orthodox religious institutions have adopted explicitly political positions on certain public issues. For example, the Ukrainian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church (UOGCC, distinct from the UGCC), as well as Jewish and Muslim communities,

have supported the OCU's claim that the ROC is spreading disinformation in Ukraine.

Fourth, religious peacebuilding often takes the form of social service or social ministry that supports victims of the armed conflict in different ways. The various types of initiatives include supporting dialogue and negotiation between conflict parties—including efforts not publicly disclosed or recorded in research. Despite their covert status, these projects are playing an important role in building bridges and de-escalating tensions. Future research and analyses could seek to fill in gaps in this report's description of religious peacebuilding cases and work toward a better understanding of intervention stakeholders, objectives, and impact.

Fifth, religious peacebuilding is hampered by a lack of conceptual clarity. Among religious leaders there is no broadly shared understanding of or clarity about "peace" and "peacebuilding" as terms; in addition, competing definitions of the nature, scope, and origins of armed conflict in Ukraine abound. This situation creates a major challenge for religious peacebuilding in general because the absence of even a loose consensus about the nature of the conflict makes it difficult to approach peacebuilding via a shared language of theology.

Finally, it could be beneficial for religious actors in Ukraine to shift from their current reactive approach to conflict dynamics to a more proactive approach. Given that religious

leaders and organizations have extensive responsibilities and play complex roles within their communities, it is understandable that they do not always have the capacity to anticipate and address rising social tensions. However, given the unique positions they occupy and their capacity to take the pulse of their communities, religious leaders should be provided with the training and resources needed to proactively and effectively prevent and de-escalate conflicts in those communities.



It is important to note that this research began as a study of the peacebuilding potential of religious communities in the context of sociopolitical conflict and later military-political conflict in Ukraine. The situation today has evolved further; the low-intensity hybrid conflict in the east of the country has transformed into a full-scale international war between Russia and Ukraine. Under these trying circumstances, both the strengths and weaknesses of religious actors have been on full display, on the one hand confirming their ability to take highly effective humanitarian action, and on the other demonstrating their relative powerlessness in the face of the state, which has continued to instrumentalize religion for political purposes. Yet this difficult situation has served to confirm the importance of, and prospects for, religious diplomacy and peacebuilding in Ukraine, and has highlighted the need to establish a real and enduring dialogue between religious and state actors in service of the common good.

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PEACEWORKS

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The transformation of low-intensity hybrid conflict in the east of Ukraine into a full-scale international war following Russia's February 2022 invasion has confirmed the importance of, and prospects for, religious diplomacy and peacebuilding in Ukraine. Drawing on rigorous research, extensive consultations with a diverse range of stakeholders, observation, on-the-ground interviews, and focus groups with local religious and nonreligious community members across Ukraine, this report identifies the ways in which religion and religious actors place strain on communities and sow deeper divisions within Ukrainian society, and how they also constrain violence, restore relationships, protect populations, and mediate disputes. The report offers a number of lessons that should be carefully considered by international actors looking to support peace processes in Ukraine.

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