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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ukraine

Read a Section: Ukraine

[Russia-Occupied Territories of Ukraine](#)

Following its illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia purported to annex four additional oblasts (regions): Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhya – actions condemned in 2022 by UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions ES-11/1 and ES-11/4. The U.S. government does not recognize these purported annexations and considers all these regions a part of Ukraine. The U.S. government also does not recognize the purported 2014 annexation of the country’s eastern Donbas Region and the Crimean Peninsula. UNGA Resolution 68/262 (2014) states the referendum on annexation held in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol holds no validity and cannot form the basis for any alteration of their status. Since 2014, Russia has occupied Crimea, and Russia-led proxy forces have controlled parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts.

Religious freedom developments in Russia-occupied territories are detailed in the section “[Russia-Occupied Territories of Ukraine](#).”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution protects freedom of religion and provides for “the separation of church and religious organizations from the state.” By law, the objective of domestic religious policy is to foster the creation of a tolerant society and provide for freedom of conscience and worship. The law does not provide for alternative service during military mobilization and martial law.

Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to report unpunished assaults by private individuals on their followers, and they called on the government to ensure effective investigation of hate crimes committed against their members and places of worship. Jehovah’s Witnesses also continued to call on the government to exempt conscientious objectors from military service during mobilization and martial law. Authorities arrested and prosecuted some Jehovah’s Witnesses and Protestant conscientious objectors for draft refusal, although in most cases, courts suspended sentences. Some Jewish leaders and human rights activists continued to state concerns regarding what they considered impunity for hate crimes, including acts of antisemitism. On October 19, parliament approved the first reading of a draft law that would authorize government agencies to investigate and address instances of individual religious entities’ subordination to governing centers located “in a state carrying out armed aggression” against the country, although the legislation would not prohibit religious practices. According to the government and some religious leaders, the draft law was tailored to meet the country’s legitimate national security concerns and to counteract Russia’s intelligence and disinformation campaigns while maintaining due process and religious freedom. Some leaders of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), however, termed the draft law a “ban” on the UOC, which in 2022 stated it had severed ties with the Moscow Patriarchate. According to a Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) report, the government opened 70 criminal investigations involving UOC clergy as of November; courts convicted 19 of these UOC clerics and stripped them of their citizenship. The government also banned 177 Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) clerics, including the ban since 2014 on ROC Patriarch Kirill from entering the country. In March, the government issued an eviction notice to the UOC monastic congregation at the state-run National Kyiv Pechersk Lavra museum. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made several public statements against antisemitism, participated in Jewish cultural events, and condemned Russia’s attacks on Jewish sites. President Zelenskyy and other government officials condemned Russian President

Vladimir Putin's attempts to paint Ukraine as antisemitic as one of many false justifications for Russia's unprovoked invasion of the country. In April, President Zelenskyy, Ukrainian Muslim soldiers, leaders of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, and Muslim clerics took part in a Ramadan iftar. President Zelenskyy stated that government participation in the iftar for the first time marked a new tradition.

According to numerous sources, Russia's military forces committed widespread religious freedom abuses in both occupied and Ukrainian government-controlled areas, such as shelling religious institutions and cultural heritage sites and detaining clergy. A nongovernmental organization (NGO) identified 532 burial sites or places of worship damaged or destroyed between February 24, 2022, and April 30, 2023. Another NGO reported Russia's occupying authorities had destroyed, damaged, or looted at least 630 religious buildings, institutions, and sacred sites. An October SBU report documented attempts by Russia's intelligence services to recruit Ukrainian teenagers in Radomyshl, Dnipro, Lviv, and Vinnytsya to perpetrate antisemitic acts.

The ROC and the UOC continued to label the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) a "schismatic" group and to urge other Orthodox churches not to recognize it. UOC and OCU representatives continued to contest some parish registrations and affiliations. According to the Razumkov Center, a nongovernmental public policy think tank, OCU affiliation grew to 42.2 percent of the population during the year, compared with 36.4 percent in 2022, while UOC membership declined to 5.6 percent from 6.5 percent in 2022. The UOC again reported violent threats and attacks on some of its congregations and buildings, accusing the OCU of seizing churches belonging to the UOC. The OCU said that parishioners, rather than the OCU, had initiated the transfers of affiliation within the provisions of the law. Both OCU leaders and some UOC bishops continued to voice opposition to ROC Patriarch Kirill's support of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The UOC continued to assert its independence from the Moscow Patriarchate, although the OCU spokesman, the government, and civil society groups continued to state that the UOC remained subordinate to the ROC. The independent National Minorities Rights Monitoring Group documented no violent acts of antisemitism during the year, compared with one in 2022. There were reports of vandalism of Christian monuments, Holocaust memorials, synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, and Jehovah's Witnesses' kingdom halls. In September, an estimated 32,000 pilgrims visited the country during the annual Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage to the grave of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov.

In February, President Biden met with OCU leadership during his visit to St. Michael's Monastery in Kyiv and discussed pressures the OCU faced in Russia-occupied territories. U.S. embassy officials, including the Ambassador, engaged with officials of the Office of the President, State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience (DESS), ministry officials, members of parliament, and municipal governments to discuss the importance of fair and transparent treatment of religious groups, preservation of religious heritage sites, support for religious minority communities, and combating antisemitism. Embassy officials continued to urge government and religious leaders to practice tolerance, restraint, and mutual understanding to ensure respect for all individuals' religious freedom and preferences. Embassy officials also continued to encourage religious groups to resolve property disputes peacefully and through dialogue with government officials.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 34.8 million (midyear 2023). According to UN and Ukrainian State Statistical Services estimates, the country's prewar population was approximately 43.5 million. The International Organization for Migration estimates 7.8 million individuals fled following Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion, while an estimated one million have since returned. According to a November national survey conducted by the Razumkov Center, 60.8 percent of respondents identify as Christian Orthodox, compared with 62.7 percent in 2022; 11 percent Greek Catholic, including the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) and

members of the Mukachevo Greek Catholic Eparchy subordinated directly to the Holy See, compared with 10.2 percent in 2022; 1.4 percent Protestant, compared with 3.7 percent in 2022; and 1.2 percent Roman Catholic, compared with 1.9 percent in 2022. According to the survey, 11.3 percent of respondents identify as Christian unaffiliated with any church, and 13.4 percent say they do not belong to any religious group. Pagans (following traditional pre-Christian polytheistic beliefs, including animism), Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, followers of other religions, and individuals choosing not to disclose their beliefs constitute the remainder of the respondents.

According to the same survey, the 60.8 percent of respondents who identify as Orthodox Christians divide their affiliation as follows: 42.2 percent OCU (compared with 36.4 percent in 2022); 5.6 percent UOC (compared with 6.5 percent in 2022); 12.6 percent unaffiliated Orthodox believers, (compared with 19 percent in 2022); and 0.4 percent undecided (compared with 0.8 percent in 2022).

According to government statistics, followers of the UGCC reside primarily in the western oblasts of Lviv, Ternopil, and Ivano-Frankivsk. Most Roman Catholic Church (RCC) congregations are in Lviv, Khmelnytsky, Zhytomyr, Vinnytsya, Zakarpattia, and Ternopil Oblasts, in the western part of the country. Greek Catholics from the Mukachevo Eparchy live in Zakarpattia Oblast.

According to the government's estimate, most OCU congregations (formed in 2018 by the merger of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate, Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, and part of the UOC) are in the central and western parts of the country, except for Zakarpattia Oblast. Most UOC congregations are in the Donetsk, Luhansk, and Odesa Oblasts; the remainder are located primarily in the central and western parts of the country, excluding Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, and Ternopil Oblasts.

The Evangelical Baptist Union of Ukraine is the largest Protestant community. Other Christian groups include Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Reformed, Methodists, Presbyterians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ).

The All Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO) represents more than 90 percent of all religious groups in the country, including the OCU, UOC, UGCC, RCC, All-Ukraine Baptist Union, Ukrainian Church of Evangelical Pentecostal Christians, Ukrainian Union Conference, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church, Ukrainian Lutheran Church, Ukrainian Evangelical Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Ukrainian Diocese, Union of Jewish Religious Organizations of Ukraine, Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine, Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ukraine, Ukrainian Bible Society, and the Trans-Carpathian Reformed Church. The council rotates its chairmanship.

According to the government, Islam is the country's second largest religion after Christianity. Sunni Muslims constitute a majority of the Muslim population. Muslim leaders, government agencies and independent think tanks estimate the Muslim population at 500,000-600,000, while before February 2022, some Muslim leaders estimated two million. According to government figures, 300,000 Muslims are Crimean Tatars.

The Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities (VAAD) states there are approximately 300,000 persons of Jewish ancestry in the country. According to VAAD, prior to Russia's aggression in eastern Ukraine in 2014, approximately 30,000 Jews lived in the Donbas region (Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts). Jewish groups estimate between 10,000 and 15,000 Jewish residents were living in Crimea before Russia's purported annexation in 2014.

There are also small numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, practitioners of Falun Gong, Baha'is, and adherents of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including worship. By law, the government may restrict this right only in the “interests of protecting public order [or] the health and morality of the population or protecting the rights and freedoms of other persons.” The constitution provides for the “separation of church and religious organizations from the state” and stipulates, “No religion shall be recognized by the state as mandatory.”

The criminal code determines punishment, in the form of a fine or imprisonment, for “willful actions inciting ethnic, racial, or religious enmity and hatred, humiliation of national honor and dignity, or the insult of citizens’ feelings with respect to their religious convictions and also any direct or indirect restriction of rights, or granting direct or indirect privileges to citizens based on race, color of skin, political, religious and other convictions, disability, sex, ethnic and social origin, property status, place of residence, [or] linguistic or other characteristics.” The criminal code codifies the commission of an offense “based on racial, ethnic or religious enmity and hostility” as aggravating circumstances.

By law, the objective of religious policy is to “restore full-fledged dialogue between representatives of various social, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups to foster the creation of a tolerant society and provide for freedom of conscience and worship.” The law on the condemnation of the Communist and Nazi regimes establishes punishment for public denial of the criminal nature of those regimes, dissemination of information aimed at justifying their criminal nature, and the production or dissemination and public use of products containing their symbols.

The law requires the government to investigate crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes committed by the Communist and Nazi regimes and to identify and preserve mass graves of their victims, research and publish information about repression, mass and individual murder, deaths, deportation, torture, use of forced labor and other forms of mass physical terror, and persecution based on “ethnic, national, religious, political, class, social, and other factors.” The law also requires the government to raise public awareness of Communist and Nazi-era crimes and to support NGOs conducting research and education in that area.

A 2021 law defines antisemitism and reaffirms punishment for crimes motivated by antisemitism. The law also reaffirms punishment for making false or stereotypical statements about persons of Jewish origin, producing or disseminating materials containing antisemitic statements or content, and denying the facts of the persecution and mass killing of Jews during the Holocaust. Individuals violating the law are subject to civil, administrative, and criminal liability. Victims may also receive compensation for “material and moral damages.” A bill the parliament adopted in 2022, but that has yet to be signed into law, would increase penalties for incitement to antisemitic acts, with prison sentences of five to eight years.

Religious organizations include religious congregations, administrations and centers, theological schools, monasteries, religious brotherhoods, missions, and associations consisting of those religious organizations. Religious associations are represented by their centers (administrations). To register and obtain legal-entity status, an organization must register either with the DESS or with regional government authorities, depending upon the nature of the organization. Religious centers, administrations, monasteries, brotherhoods, missions, and schools register with the DESS.

Congregations register with oblast as well as Kyiv and Sevastopol City authorities in their locations. While these congregations may form the constituent units of a nationwide religious organization, the nationwide organization does not register on a national basis and may not obtain recognition as a legal entity. The constituent units instead register individually and obtain legal-entity status.

The law directs regional governments' religious affairs departments to handle dual registration. The law also specifies reregistration requirements for organizations that wish to change their affiliation, particularly UOC parishes seeking to join the OCU. The law requires a quorum, as defined by each congregation and usually comprising two-thirds or three-fourths of a religious organization's members, to decide on a change of affiliation. The law also requires a vote by two-thirds of those present to authorize such a decision. The law bans any transfer of an organization's property until the affiliation change is finalized.

To be eligible for registration, a religious congregation must have at least 10 adult members and submit to the registration authorities its statute (charter), certified copies of the resolution that created it and was adopted by founding members, and a document confirming its right to own or use premises.

Registered religious organizations, which include individual religious congregations, administrative offices, theological schools, monasteries, religious brotherhoods and sisterhoods, missions, and religious associations, must register with tax authorities to acquire nonprofit status, which many do for banking purposes.

Without legal-entity status, a religious organization may not own property, conduct banking activities, be eligible for utility bill discounts, join civic or advisory boards of government agencies, or establish periodicals, nongovernmental pension funds, officially accredited schools, publishing, agricultural and other companies, or companies manufacturing religious items. Religious organizations without legal-entity status may meet and worship and may also publish and distribute religious materials. In accordance with the stipulation against national registration, however, only a registered constituent unit of a nationwide religious association may own property or conduct business activities, either for itself or on behalf of the nationwide association. The law grants property tax exemptions to religious organizations and considers them nonprofit organizations.

The law requires commanders of military units to allow their subordinates to participate in religious services but bans the creation of religious organizations in military institutions and military units. The law prohibits UOC priests from serving as chaplains on bases or in conflict zones.

A law on military chaplaincy defines selection criteria for clergy to become chaplains, their status in the chain of command, and their rights and duties in the Armed Forces, National Guard, State Border Guard Service, and other military formations. The legislation institutionalizes military chaplaincy according to NATO principles, gives chaplains the status of full-fledged service members, and provides for the same type of financial and social security support for them as for other service members. The law protects the confidentiality of confession to a military chaplain and provides for the creation of interfaith councils on military chaplaincy as advisory bodies at the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Internal Affairs.

According to the constitution, organizers must notify local authorities in advance of any type of planned public gathering, and authorities may challenge the legality of the event. According to a 2016 Constitutional Court decision, religious organizations need only inform local authorities of their intention to hold a public gathering and need not apply for permission or notify authorities within a specific period in advance of the event.

Government regulations on identity documents, including passports, allow religious head coverings in photographs.

The law allows religious organizations to establish theological schools to train clergy and other religious workers as well as to seek state accreditation through the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance for their curriculum. The law states theological schools shall function based on their own statutes.

Government agencies authorized to monitor religious organizations include the Prosecutor General, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and all other "central bodies of the executive government."

Only registered religious organizations may seek restitution of communal property confiscated by the former Communist regime. Religious organizations must apply to regional authorities for property restitution. The law states authorities should complete their consideration of a restitution claim within a month. While a law on freedom of conscience and religious organizations allows such organizations to use state-owned property free of charge, a law on the rental of state-owned and communal property prohibits any transfer of such property for free use. During the year, religious community leaders expressed support for efforts by the parliament to amend the latter law in line with the law on freedom of conscience and religious organizations.

The law prohibits religious instruction as part of the mandatory public school curriculum and states public school training “shall be free from interference by political parties, civic, and religious organizations.” Public schools include “ethics of faith” or similar faith-related courses as optional parts of the curriculum. The law provides that Christian, Islamic, and Jewish-focused curriculums may offer ethics of faith courses in public schools.

The law provides for antidiscrimination screening of draft legislation and government regulations, including for discrimination based on religion. The law requires the legal department of each respective agency responsible for verifying draft legislation to conduct screening in accordance with instructions developed by the Cabinet of Ministers to ensure the draft legislation does not contain discriminatory language and to require changes if it does. Religious organizations may participate in screening draft legislation at the invitation of the respective agency.

The law allows alternative nonmilitary service for conscientious objectors. It also allows government officials to deny a conscript’s application for alternative service due to missing the application deadline. The law does not exempt the clergy from military mobilization. It does not grant exemption from military reserve service during the “special period” (i.e., while hostilities with Russia’s forces continue), even for conscientious objectors. A 1999 Cabinet of Ministers resolution lists 10 religious groups whose system of beliefs “does not permit the use of weapons.” The document stipulates only the men affiliated with those 10 groups are eligible for the alternative service: Reformist Adventists; Seventh-day Adventists; Evangelical Christians; Evangelical Christians-Baptists; the Slavic Church of the Holy Ghost (“The Penitents”); Jehovah’s Witnesses; Charismatic Christian Churches and associated churches under their registered statutes; Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith – Pentecostals and associated churches under their registered statutes; Christians of Evangelical Faith; and the Society for Krishna Consciousness.

The Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights (“ombudsperson”) is constitutionally required to release an annual report to parliament containing a section on religious freedom.

The law restricts the activities of foreign-based religious groups and defines the permissible activities of noncitizen clergy, preachers, teachers, and other representatives of foreign-based religious groups. By law, foreign religious workers may “preach, administer religious ordinances, or practice other canonical activities,” but they may do so only for the registered religious organization that invited them and with the approval of the government body that registered the statute of the organization. Missionary activity is included under permissible activities.

The law on freedom of conscience and religious organizations requires religious organizations with a “governing center” in a country designated by law as a state that “committed military aggression against Ukraine and temporarily occupied Ukraine’s territory” to use the full title of the foreign religious organization within its name.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Since 2015, the government has exercised the right of derogation (the right to suspend) from its obligations under the ICCPR regarding the portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts under the control of Russia-led forces, including the ICCPR provisions pertaining to religious freedom. Since the introduction of martial law on February 24, 2022, following Russia’s full-scale invasion, the government has exercised the right of derogation from obligations under various articles of the

ICCPR, but Article 18, which protects freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, remains fully in force.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

Jehovah's Witnesses reported the government allowed them to practice their faith freely, but they continued to call on the government to exempt conscientious objectors from military service during mobilization and martial law. Additionally, they called for thorough investigations and prosecutions of religiously motivated hate crimes committed against Jehovah's Witnesses and their places of worship where war conditions did not hinder the government's ability to do so.

On October 12, the government filed its *Updated Action Plan* with the Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) concerning implementation of the 2020 decisions in cases concerning hate crimes against members and involving properties of Jehovah's Witnesses, including the Zagubnya and Tabachkova v. Ukraine and Migoryanu and Others v. Ukraine cases. The document stated that in February 2022, the Training Center of the Prosecutors of Ukraine "held a training course for prosecutors entitled "Procedural Guidance in Criminal Proceedings regarding Criminal Offenses Committed on the Basis of Intolerance," where issues of combating hate crimes, racial, national or religious intolerance were considered."

The Gyl and Barsuk v. Ukraine case, which includes 2016 allegations of religious intolerance against Jehovah's Witnesses, remained pending with the ECHR through year's end.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, since June, military enlistment officials transported 60 Jehovah's Witnesses to enlistment centers against their will. Of these, officials detained more than 30 for more than one night. In a small number of cases, Jehovah's Witnesses reported individuals were forcibly enlisted despite expressing their conscientious objection to military service.

On June 12, enlistment officials reportedly detained Natan K. in Vyzhnytsia, Chernivtsi Oblast. They took him to a local enlistment office and conscripted him into a military unit on June 15, even though he had identified himself as a conscientious objector.

On July 11, enlistment officials reportedly detained Petro D. in Ternopil and took him to enlistment office and conscripted him even though he had identified himself as a conscientious objector. After a July 19 court hearing, he did not return to the enlistment center, which resulted in his being absent without leave, an offense incurring a sentence of up to 10 years' imprisonment.

At year's end, there were five conscientious objector cases pending before trial courts and two cases before appellate courts. One case was dismissed because of the prosecutor's refusal to proceed. Jehovah's Witnesses said that despite the war, no member of their congregation asserting conscientious objection status had been sentenced following conviction.

Some Jewish leaders and human rights activists continued to state concerns regarding what they considered impunity for hate crimes, including acts of antisemitism, and regarding the government's long delays in completing investigations of these crimes. Some Jewish leaders said law enforcement authorities at times charged those committing antisemitic acts, if apprehended, with hooliganism or vandalism instead of a hate crime in what they assessed was an attempt to downplay the criminal behavior. Human rights and religious activists continued to express concern over the lack of proper punishment for hate crimes and stated that police and prosecutors at times avoided using the charge since it was difficult to prove.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

During the year, DESS took steps to promote dialogue between the OCU and UOC. On February 16, DESS Head Viktor Yelensky participated in a roundtable entitled, “Church, Society, and State. Dialogue for Unity and Victory,” with a group of UOC-MP and OCU priests as well as lay activists. Participants adopted a joint statement calling on members of both churches to “make every effort to overcome the barriers that undermine the main goal of our union – eucharistic communion between both churches.”

On May 11, the Supreme Court upheld the Kropyvnytskyy City military enlistment office’s refusal to defer conscription of Jehovah’s Witness’ minister Yaroslav N. to alternative civilian service. The court found the law mandating the refusal discriminatory, saying that although the plaintiff did not have a theology degree and he was not a professional minister, as were clergy of other religious denominations, he still was eligible for deferment. The Supreme Court also ruled in the case that the Law on Military Service and Military Duty contained a discriminatory provision which states that members of the clergy, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, are ineligible for conscription deferment from active military duty if their respective religious organizations do not require clerics to hold a theological degree. The Supreme Court ordered the Kirovohrad District Administrative Court to reconsider the case. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, on August 15, despite the reasoning of the Supreme Court, a lower administrative court partially satisfied the plaintiff’s claim, stating he qualified for an exemption from alternative civilian service as a religious minister.

On February 15, the Defense Ministry told the international religious freedom NGO Forum 18 that “alternative civilian service does not exist in wartime and that such individuals [refusing to serve] are dealt with through the courts.” Legal experts also assessed that the law does not provide for alternative nonmilitary service during martial law and mobilization. Human rights groups raised concerns about a lack of options for alternative service for conscientious objectors.

Forum 18 reported that in November, Seventh-day Adventist Dmytro Zelinsky was serving his three-year prison term for refusing mobilization on grounds of conscience. In August, the Ternopil Appeals Court acceded to a prosecutor’s request to overturn Zelinsky’s June acquittal. According to media reports, he had failed to provide the court with compelling evidence of membership in the Seventh-day Adventists. According to Forum 18, Zelinsky intended to appeal his case to the Supreme Court.

On May 25, the Supreme Court partially upheld an appeal by conscientious objector Vitaliy Alekseyenko. He had contested the Ivano-Frankivsk Appellate Court’s January 16 rejection of his appeal of his 2022 guilty verdict and one-year prison sentence. The Supreme Court on appeal remanded the case for rehearing at the trial-level court. The Supreme Court opinion held that lower courts failed to examine the defendant’s “intention and motivation” in his request for alternative service. Although not a member of a particular religious community, Alekseyenko told enlistment officers his religious beliefs did not permit him to bear arms. The officers reportedly replied that the law permits alternative civilian service opportunities only for members of the 10 faiths enumerated in the Cabinet of Ministers resolution on alternative service. The case continued through year’s end.

In April, Forum 18 reported that an Ivano-Frankivsk Appellate Court upheld a February 3 Ivano-Frankivsk City Court decision to issue Hennadiy Tomniuk, a Protestant Christian, a three-year suspended sentence following Tomniuk’s refusal of military mobilization on grounds of conscience and request of alternative civilian service. The prosecutor had requested Tomniuk serve the duration of his sentence in prison.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, on March 20, the Tyachiv District Court, Zakarpattia Oblast, acquitted Jehovah’s Witness Viktor S., who sought alternative civilian rather than military service. The prosecutor appealed the verdict, with a hearing reportedly scheduled for January 2024.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, on April 5, police initiated criminal proceedings on draft evasion charges against Vitaliy P. in Chuhuyiv, Kharkiv Oblast. On April 13, the police initiated criminal proceedings on similar charges against Viktor M. in Chortkiv, Ternopil Oblast. On June 14 and July 25, police initiated criminal proceedings on draft evasion charges against Serhii T. and

Ibrahim S., respectively, in Boryspil, Kyiv Oblast. Courts were scheduled to hear the four cases in 2024.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

In 2022, a presidential decree mandated direct subordination of DESS, previously operating as part of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, to the Cabinet of Ministers. The decree also tasked DESS with ensuring “a religious expert examination of the Statute on the Administration of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church for the presence of a church-canonical connection with the Moscow Patriarchate, and if necessary, to take the measures provided for by the law.”

A 2022 National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) resolution ordered the drafting of legislation “making it impossible” for religious organizations affiliated with centers of influence in the Russian Federation to operate in Ukraine. The resolution also required that the bill meet Ukraine’s international religious freedom obligations. The legislation remained pending at year’s end.

On January 24, following the NSDC resolution, President Zelenskyy issued an order imposing additional sanctions against 10 senior UOC clergy members for activities such as collaborating with occupying authorities and publicly supporting Russia’s aggression. Existing sanctions imposed in 2022 remained in place. Although the official name of the UOC is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and many UOC members emphasized the UOC had separated from the ROC, some media outlets and members of the public often continued to informally refer to it as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (or UOC-MP) or ROC in Ukraine. A government-commissioned panel of seven experts determined in 2022 that the UOC remained connected and subordinate to the ROC, despite church representative statements that it had separated from the ROC.

In January, the UOC described the expert panel’s findings as “unlawful and biased,” stating that four panel members had earlier expressed support for banning the UOC. DESS rejected the accusation, countering that a UOC representative had refused to participate in the panel’s work while concurrently demanding the replacement of the four experts. The UOC contested the panel’s determination, and on August 25, the Kyiv District Administrative Court commenced judicial proceedings to consider the case, which remained pending at year’s end.

On October 19, parliament passed in the first reading a draft law that would give government agencies legal authority to investigate and address instances of individual religious entities’ subordination to governing centers located “in a state carrying out armed aggression” against Ukraine. The Cabinet of Ministers drafted the bill in line with the 2022 presidential decree. Any government findings and recommendations would be subject to judicial review, and only courts could approve enforcement actions, including entity dissolution. The government and most religious officials said the draft law was tailored to meet legitimate national security concerns and counteract Russian intelligence and disinformation campaigns while maintaining due process and religious freedom. Some observers stated that the draft law did not provide for a ban of any religion or religious practice and instead focused on individual religious entities. The Rada (parliament) also declared in its January 19 *“Conclusion by the Rada Humanitarian and Information Policy Committee”* that “certain religious organizations in Canonical subordination to the Russian Orthodox Church are preserved in Ukraine.”

Some UOC leaders, however, termed the draft law a “ban” on the UOC, which stated it had severed ties with the Moscow Patriarchate in 2022, with some international media reporting on these statements. In response to the bill passing its first reading, UOC spokesman Metropolitan Klyment described the bill as “a truly scandalous draft law containing many provocative provisions that contradict the constitution. It does not apply to the UOC. It applies overall to the religious organizations affiliated with Russia. According to all our statutes our church is not one of them.” In an October 23 statement, the UOC, a founding member of the AUCCRO, described as “discriminatory” and “unacceptable” the government’s decision “for the first time in Ukraine’s

history” not to invite a full-fledged member to the Prime Minister’s meeting with the AUCCRO. The Cabinet of Ministers reportedly did not explain the reason for rejecting UOC participation in the October 19 event. In January, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of Kyiv-Halych, head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, warned the government against outlawing Orthodox communities linked to Moscow. On December 19, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk expressed his concern that the restrictions proposed in the draft law would infringe on freedom of religion and international human rights law. Some experts on religion stated that the government already had sufficient legal basis under existing laws to address religion-related security issues and there was no need to pass additional legislation.

According to media sources, the Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Volyn, Rivne, Khmelnytsky, Chernivtsi, and Zakarpattia oblast councils, as well as several municipal councils, passed unenforceable, symbolic bans on the operation of the UOC in their respective regions, citing national security reasons. Oblast councils in Lviv, Zhytomyr, Vinnytsya, and Ternopil adopted similar “bans” in 2022. In an April 6 interview with Deutsche Welle, DESS Head Viktor Yelenskyy described the local governments’ decisions as unlawful. In June, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission (HRMMU) stated that such bans exceeded the authority of these governmental bodies. The HRMMU said that “[m]any local councils also sought to terminate municipal property rental agreements with the UOC” and expressed concern that “the cumulative impact of government actions targeting the UOC could be discriminatory.”

Pursuant to the 2022 presidential decree authorizing government agencies to investigate and address instances of any religious entity that is subordinate to a group (or governing center) located “in a state carrying out armed aggression” against the country, the SBU continued to conduct searches of numerous UOC religious sites. The SBU reported finding significant evidence of collaboration with Russia and other illegal activities. On February 23, the SBU released details of its “in-depth check” of more than 350 UOC buildings and 850 individuals.

According to October 4 and November 4 SBU reports on its activities during the year, the government initiated 70 criminal investigations involving UOC clergy, including 20 cases of collaboration with Russia, aiding and abetting Russia or treason; 18 hate speech investigations; and several cases involving allegations of illicit firearms sale and child pornography distribution. On November 27, the national media outlet *Detector.media* website quoted the SBU as stating that in 2022-23, the SBU had exposed more than 2,000 individuals across all sectors of society. Out of the 70 SBU investigations that followed, courts convicted 19 UOC clerics and stripped them of their citizenship and served 26 with “notices of suspicion” (notification that an individual is a suspect). The government exchanged two of the convicted and imprisoned priests for Ukrainian prisoners of war held by Russia’s forces. The 19 convicted UOC clerics reportedly held Russian passports and spread pro-Russia narratives about the war. Based on SBU findings, the government also banned 177 ROC clerics from entering the country, including the continued ban in place since 2014 on ROC Patriarch Kirill.

In a November 4 statement, the SBU announced that, in partnership with the Prosecutor General’s Office, it had gathered evidence showing Moscow Patriarch Kirill publicly supported Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine. Authorities charged Kirill with the offense of “encroachment on the territorial integrity and inviolability of Ukraine” and “waging a war of aggression.” The MOI placed Kirill on its list of wanted persons.

On August 7, the Vinnytsya City Court sentenced UOC Metropolitan Ionafan of Tulchyn and Bratslav to five years each for “actions aimed at violent change or toppling of the government,” infringing upon Ukraine’s territorial integrity, violating “citizen equality” on the basis of religious affiliation, justifying Russia’s armed aggression, and glorifying participation in said aggression. Ionafan reportedly distributed leaflets calling for among other things moving Ukraine’s border, and he posted articles on an ROC website supporting Russia’s forces and their actions against civilians. The metropolitan had pleaded not guilty to all charges. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) report, “[t]his case involved numerous violations of fair trial principles, including the public dissemination of photographs taken during the search of

the defendant's residence, the defendant's lack of access to legal counsel during the search, and the use of pressure to induce a confession and agreement to involvement in a prisoner exchange."

On May 11, the Leninsky District Court in Kropyvnytsky found Metropolitan Joasaph, former head of the UOC Kirovohrad Diocese, and diocesan secretary Roman Kondratyuk guilty of violating "citizen equality" based on religious belief. On the metropolitan's instruction issued in 2021, Kondratyuk reportedly distributed materials containing religious hate speech. Both individuals pleaded guilty and received a three-year suspended sentence and two years' probation. The court also banned them from holding management positions in religious organizations for one year.

The UOC continued to state that the OCU was stealing its property. Specifically, the OCU stated the UOC had challenged in court the reregistration of parishes from the UOC to the OCU. The OCU also stated the UOC had manipulated votes on parish affiliation by disqualifying pro-OCU participants. On July 27, the OCU Local Council, a top governing body within the OCU, thanked the government for protecting religious life from Russia's aggression. It also called on the government to adopt "legislation that will ban Russian centers from interfering in religious life of Ukraine."

The UOC continued to report instances of "unlawful" reregistration of parishes from the UOC to OCU by some local governments. The OCU denied these allegations.

Referring to the legal requirement that religious organizations with a "governing center" in a country designated by law as a state that "committed military aggression against Ukraine and temporarily occupied Ukraine's territory" the UOC stated it did not apply to its entities because of the church's declared independence from the ROC.

On November 2, the Sixth Appellate Administrative Court upheld the Kyiv District Administrative Court's May 15 ruling rejecting a 2019 appeal by the UOC-affiliated Kyiv Metropolitanate and the Pochayiv Lavra Monastery contesting the applicability of a 2018 law to the case. The court found the UOC failed to prove its nonaffiliation with the ROC. The ruling also applied to 267 UOC religious organizations that were third parties to the suit. On November 12, the UOC legal department stated that "neither court decisions nor laws of Ukraine" required the UOC to rename itself and expressed its intention to appeal the ruling.

On September 15-17, an estimated 32,000 pilgrims, overwhelmingly from abroad, visited the country during the annual Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage to the grave of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov in Uman, Cherkasy Oblast, despite government security warnings regarding Russia's invasion. On September 13, the Antidisinformation Center of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine highlighted allegations by Russian propaganda outlets that Ukraine planned to "commit a terrorist act" in Uman to disrupt the Jewish New Year celebration. The center described the allegation as Russia's attempt "to create an alibi for its future terrorist acts on the territory of Ukraine." According to news reports, law enforcement agencies implemented preventative antiterrorism measures.

The June 25 annual pilgrimage of hundreds of OCU members to a monastery in Manyava, Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast, occurred without incident, as did UGCC pilgrimages to a church in Stradch, Lviv Oblast; the Zarvanytsya icon of the Mother of God in Ternopil Oblast; and the Pohonya icon of the Mother of God in Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast that drew thousands of worshippers in June, July, and September, respectively.

On August 19-25, thousands of UOC members participated in the annual pilgrimage procession from Kamyanets-Podilsky, Khmelnytsky Oblast, to the Pochayiv Lavra Monastery, Ternopil Oblast, to celebrate the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God. The procession took place despite a ban introduced by the Khmelnytsky and Ternopil Oblast governments that reportedly sought to prevent violations of public order and Russia-orchestrated provocations.

According to the UOC, on August 18, police and SBU representatives prevented a bus carrying UOC pilgrims to Kamyanets-Podilsky from entering the city. Similarly, UOC representatives stated

that on August 19, law enforcement officials prevented a group of UOC pilgrims traveling by bus from Chernivtsi Oblast to Kamyanyets-Podilsky from entering Khmelnytsky Oblast. The officials warned the travelers would face “problems” if they continued their trip and attributed the travel prohibition to the local government’s decision to ban religious processions. In mid-August, police and SBU representatives in Vinnytsya Oblast reportedly threatened a small procession of UOC pilgrims walking from Brailiv to Pochayiv, saying they would encounter “big problems” if they did not stop their trip, forcing the pilgrims to return home.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported they continued in-person missionary activity. During the year, they documented 14 incidents in which government officials either prohibited or interfered with their evangelizing activity. They stated they did not file any criminal complaints with police, and most incidents involving officials were settled “amicably, through personal visits.”

On January 26, the administrative commission of Lviv’s Lychakivskyi District acknowledged municipal officers Vasyl Tymchyshyn and Marian Vovk improperly accused Jehovah’s Witnesses Rolan Stankevych and Marat Kupaiev of the administrative offense of setting up a mobile display of missionary materials at a public place in Lviv. The commission did not penalize the officers.

During the year, the RCC criticized the government for failing to finalize the transfer of St. Nicholas Cathedral in Kyiv from the state to an RCC congregation. The church said the facility required urgent repairs after decades of neglect and a 2021 fire, warning that the damage to this national cultural heritage building would “soon become irreversible.” During a meeting with parish members on November 6, the acting Minister of Culture and Information Policy attributed the delay to the lengthy legislative process. If adopted, the amendments would allow full transfer of the cathedral to the RCC at no cost.

On March 10, the state-run National Kyiv Pechersk Lavra museum served an eviction notice on the UOC monastic congregation requiring them to vacate the Pechersk Lavra Monastery by March 29. According to the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, the eviction notice was for noncompliance with heritage preservation regulations, such as making extensive illegal renovations. The eviction also applied to the UOC administration offices, theological academy, and seminary based on the Lavra compound. Prior to 2022, the UOC was the only church with a monastic congregation at the Pechersk Lavra Monastery, a UNESCO World Heritage site. In 2022, however, the government registered an OCU-affiliated monastic congregation at the monastery.

On March 11, then Minister of Culture and Information Policy Oleksandr Tkachenko stated the SBU and police officials were participating in the transfer of the monastery complex to the museum, a process overseen by an interagency commission. Tkachenko stated, “[N]o one is saying that monks will stop living at the Lavra after the commission finishes its work.” According to the media, several dozen UOC monks continued to live on the compound in one monastery building.

On March 29, President Zelenskyy called the beginning of UOC eviction from the Lavra a step toward “strengthening the spiritual independence of our nation and protecting our society from Moscow’s old and cynical manipulations of religion. Ukraine is a territory of the greatest religious freedom in our part of Europe. It has been so since 1991. That will always be so.” The eviction generated significant media attention and periodic public protests and demonstrations by supporters and opponents of the UOC at the location, including some of the monks.

On April 1, the SBU served a “notice of suspicion” on Lavra abbot Metropolitan Pavlo, charging him with incitement to enmity, religious discrimination, and the denial of Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine. Kyiv’s Shevchenkovsky District Court placed him under a two-month pretrial house arrest. According to officials, in public statements he “repeatedly offended the religious feelings of Ukrainians, disparaged the views of believers of other denominations, and sought to incite hostility toward them.” On July 14, the Solomyansky District Court in Kyiv ordered Pavlo’s transfer to a pretrial detention center. On August 7, authorities released him on bail, and his case remained pending in court as of year’s end.

On April 29, media outlets reported a group of lay UOC activists had protested the eviction from the Lavra, entered and damaged facilities, and clashed with police officers. Police arrested four protesters, whose trials on charges of “hooliganism” were pending at year’s end. On August 11, authorities closed the monastery to visitors, citing “systemic” UOC efforts to hinder government museum workers’ access to the Lavra buildings. Monastery visitors, however, were allowed limited entry to participate in religious services at the three Lavra churches near the monastery entrance. On September 9, the Economic Court of Kyiv rejected the UOC’s appeal of its eviction from the monastery.

On September 22, a Lavra museum director told national media outlet *Fakty ICTV* news that UOC monks and approximately 40 lay activists still occupied three buildings in the monastery despite being ordered to vacate the premises. He said, “[t]he monks who serve the Ukrainian sacred sites should keep doing that while unlawful activity of pro-Russian forces at the Lavra must be stopped.”

During the year, the government denied requests by UOC congregations in Chernihiv, Kamyanets-Podilsky, and Kremenets to allow use of state-owned historic church buildings. Authorities based their refusals on the 2022 NSDC decision on religious organizations affiliated with Russia-based “centers of influence,” noncompliance with heritage protection regulations, and legislation on the rental of state and communal property.

Small religious groups in Sumy and Mykolayiv Oblasts stated that local authorities continued to discriminate when allocating land for religious buildings. UGCC members, as well as Muslims, continued to report cases of discrimination, including regarding access to cemeteries. UGCC representatives said local authorities in Bila Tserkva were still unwilling to allocate land for a UGCC church at year’s end, a request originally made in 2008.

Kyiv’s Muslim community continued to report that the local government, which is responsible for allocating land for cemeteries, had not acted on the Muslim community’s 2017 request for additional free land in or near Kyiv for Islamic burials. The Muslim community said it considered this its legal right because by law, local authorities may designate cemetery land for the use by a specific religious group. Consequently, some Muslim families in Kyiv reportedly had to bury remains of relatives in other cities.

All major religious organizations continued to appeal to the government to establish and implement a transparent legal process for addressing property restitution claims. According to observers, the government made little progress on unresolved restitution issues during the year. Representatives of some organizations said they experienced continuing problems and delays reclaiming property seized by the former communist regime and said a review of claims often took far longer than the one-month period prescribed by law. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim groups stated several factors continued to complicate the restitution process, including Russia’s invasion, intercommunal competition for specific properties, current use of some properties by state institutions, designation of some properties as historic landmarks, local governments disputing jurisdictional boundaries, and previous transfers of some properties to private ownership.

Muslim community leaders again stated concern regarding the continuing lack of resolution of a restitution claim involving the site containing the ruins of an historic mosque in Mykolayiv, in the southern part of the country. According to Muslim leaders, the local government was reluctant to resolve the issue. Sources stated that Russia’s continuing attacks on the city and other wartime contingencies likely made progress on the issue difficult or even impossible.

Jewish community leaders continued to report the illegal construction of hotels for Jewish pilgrims in the vicinity of an historic Jewish cemetery and the grave of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov in Uman. Developers reportedly received favorable terms from local government officials issuing the building permits. As of year’s end, prosecutors in Uman commenced, but had not yet completed, an investigation into issuance of the permits. On February 15, the Supreme Court declined to hear a private developer’s appeal of a 2022 appellate court ruling upholding the Uman City Council’s order to demolish a high-rise building erected illegally in the protected heritage area. Jewish community representatives stated a part of the Jewish cemetery was damaged during the building’s

construction. Starting in July, municipal authorities reportedly connected this building and other illegal buildings to Uman's water supply network, ignoring Jewish community objections. The community stated its representatives were denied access to the construction site, and that the digging may have unearthed human remains.

According to the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union, the city of Lviv continued to take no action regarding a Jewish community request for an independent investigation of whether human remains had been unearthed during the 2022 construction of a private health clinic adjacent to Krakivsky Market on the grounds of a historic Jewish cemetery.

In January, media outlets reported the Mykulyntsi community council's continued failure to take measures to preserve an historic synagogue in Strusiv village, Ternopil Oblast, that was the subject of a pending lawsuit initiated by the oblast prosecutor's office. The local government said it had requested financial support from a Jewish charitable foundation, stating it lacked government resources for the project.

Jewish community representatives expressed cautious optimism regarding the Ternopil Oblast government's effort to return a prayer house confiscated during the Soviet era.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

On January 22, the National Day of Unity, President Zelenskyy highlighted what he described as the country's rich religious diversity, stating, "Our unity shines with gold-topped Lavra monasteries. Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, Pochaiv Lavra, and Sviatohirsk Lavra. Unity is St. Sophia Cathedral, St. George's Cathedral, the Big Khan Mosque of Bakhchysarai, and the synagogue in Dnipro."

In July, President Zelenskyy signed a law moving the official Christmas Day holiday to December 25 from the first week in January, when the ROC and some other Orthodox churches traditionally observe Christmas. The explanatory note attached to the law said its goal is to "abandon the Russian heritage," including that of "imposing the celebration of Christmas" on January 7. It cited Ukrainians' "relentless, successful struggle for their identity" and "the desire of all Ukrainians to live their lives with their own traditions, holidays," fueled by Russia's 17-month-old aggression against the country. On December 21, religious leaders, service members, civic activists, parliament members, government officials and foreign diplomats participated in a Christmas prayer breakfast hosted by the parliament.

In a June 28 address to parliament, President Zelenskyy stated, "[p]art of justice is the world's true attitude to our war for freedom and independence, as well as to other pages of our history that were distorted by one form of totalitarian evil or another. It is the duty of the Ukrainian state to honor the memory of all victims of the "Holodomor," the genocide of the Ukrainian people, as well as all victims of the deportation of the Crimean Tatar people and all victims of the Holocaust."

During his September 14 meeting with Jewish religious leaders, President Zelenskyy thanked the Jewish community for its support throughout Russia's invasion and efforts to educate global audiences about the consequences of Russia's aggression.

On September 29, President Zelenskyy honored the memory of the victims of the 1941 Holocaust massacre at Babyn Yar, stating, "It is very important to always remember history, not to forget. Because "Never again!" are not empty words."

On December 7, Zelenskyy participated in a Hanukkah menorah lighting ceremony in Kyiv, stating, "[t]he sacred Hanukkah lights, lit these days, remind us once again that light always prevails over evil."

On April 7, President Zelenskyy, Ukrainian Muslim soldiers, leaders of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, and Muslim clerics took part in a Ramadan iftar. Zelenskyy stated the event marked a

new tradition in celebrating an iftar with official government participation, remarking, “With this, we manifest that Ukraine values every person, values every community. Diversity backed by respect is part of the character of an independent Ukraine.”

On January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Rada Speaker Ruslan Stefanchuk described the Holocaust as a “tragedy that had and has no right to happen again, a crime against humanity that had to and must remind the world about the result of intense hatred by dictators and tyrants.”

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

The government continued to condemn incidents of vandalism against religious sites and arrest suspected perpetrators. Observers said that subsequent investigations and prosecutions continued to be generally inconclusive, although in some instances, the SBU arrested suspects of vandalism. For example, on April 3, the SBU detained an individual who reportedly painted antisemitic graffiti on a building in Uzhhorod in December 2022. The suspect also sent to a local Jewish community leader a “research paper” blaming Jews for instigating Russia’s military aggression and for “staging” the atrocities committed by Russia in Ukraine. Authorities charged him with incitement to enmity, religious, racial, or other discrimination, and denial of Russia’s armed aggression. His court case remained pending at year’s end.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported five incidents of vandalism committed against houses of worship during the year, compared with six in 2022. They said one incident “had explicit religious bias indicators.” On May 13, an unknown individual painted a swastika and wrote “Jehovists are Jew Slaves,” “Hitler the rescuer,” and “Sectarians” on the wall of the kingdom hall in Horishni Plavni, Poltava Oblast. Jehovah’s Witnesses filed a police report, but the perpetrator(s) were not identified by year’s end.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, media outlets sometimes published content they said misrepresented them. In some cases, a media outlet later issued retractions or clarifications.

From September 28 to October 9, several media outlets posted articles describing Jehovah’s Witnesses as “a sect” which has a particularly negative connotation in the country. The national media outlet Rbc.ua news website published an article, *Celebrities Who Were in Sects or Have Not Left Them Yet*, which included identifying Jehovah’s Witnesses as such. Telegrafua.com termed the Jehovah’s Witnesses a “sect” when publicizing a UN report that described religious persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses by Russia. Subsequently, golos.ua and focus.ua also republished the material. After receiving requests from the Jehovah’s Witnesses to correct the content as misinformation, telegrafua.com deleted its article and focus.ua deleted the word “sect.” Rbc.ua and golos.ua reportedly did not comply with the Jehovah Witnesses’ requests to publish a correction.

On July 26, state-funded radio station Kyiv24 News Radio aired a broadcast entitled *Religious ‘Pacifists’ of the Moscow Patriarchate, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Other Cults*. The host and the invited guest described Jehovah’s Witnesses as a “totalitarian sect ... banned in many countries of Europe ... worse than Moscow Patriarchate parishioners.” The incident was addressed 11 weeks later when, in response to a Jehovah’s Witnesses’s request, the radio station confirmed the deletion of the segment mentioning Jehovah’s Witnesses and edited the title of the program.

On March 5, Radio Maria, a radio station broadcasting in many oblasts of Ukraine, published a retraction of a December 2022 program entitled, *Jehovah’s Witnesses-Who Are They and What They Believe In*. The program had identified Jehovah’s Witnesses as “a sect” and “commercial cult,” which “boycotts” former members, has “a negative attitude towards state services,” and treats “all other organizations with strong aggression and confrontation.” The radio station published the retraction along with a letter of explanation written by Jehovah’s Witnesses.

ACTIONS OF FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

According to religious and media sources, Russia's forces continued to commit numerous egregious human rights abuses, including attacks on religious institutions, in areas of the country controlled by the Ukrainian government and in areas temporarily controlled by Russia and later liberated by the Ukrainian military.

The research consortium Conflict Observatory identified 532 burial sites or places of worship damaged or destroyed by Russia's forces between February 24, 2022, and April 30, 2023, in both occupied and Ukrainian-controlled areas. The Kyiv-based NGO Institute for Religious Freedom (IRF) similarly found that as of December 1, Russia's forces had "destroyed, damaged, or looted" at least 630 religious buildings, theological institutions, and sacred sites. For example, on Easter Sunday night, April 16, a Russian missile strike destroyed the UOC St. Michael's Church in Komyshevukha, Zaporizhzhya Oblast. According to the Baptist Union, on May 21, Russia's forces shelled a Baptist church in Orikhove, Zaporizhzhya Oblast, causing irreparable damage to the building. They first hit the church during shelling on May 16. On June 13, Russian forces shelled the UOC Church of St. John the Forerunner in Bilozerkha, Kherson Oblast, killing priest Mykola Palahnyuk and wounding an elderly local resident. On July 23, a Russian missile struck the UOC Transfiguration Cathedral, Odesa's largest Orthodox church, injuring a guard, destroying the sanctuary, severely damaging the walls, and destroying part of the roof. On August 9, a Russian missile destroyed St. Peter and Paul Church in Zaporizhzhya. On October 6, Russian missile strike damaged a synagogue and rabbi's home in Kharkiv. On October 8, Russia's forces shelled the OCU Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God in Kherson during a religious service, injuring two parishioners and damaging the building.

According to *Euronews*, in April, Russian shelling damaged a landmark Orthodox church, St. Catherine's Cathedral, in the city of Kherson. Emergency authorities said four of its personnel were wounded in a second round of shelling as they worked to extinguish a fire at the cathedral.

On October 11, Russian shelling damaged the roof of the Assumption Cathedral of Svyatohirsk Lavra Monastery in the Ukrainian government-controlled part of Donetsk Oblast.

An October 25 SBU report documented attempts by Russia's intelligence services to remotely recruit Ukrainian teenagers in Radomyshl, Dnipro, Lviv, and Vinnytsya to perpetrate acts of antisemitism. The report stated that the intelligence services instructed the teenagers to paint antisemitic slurs on Holocaust memorials and detonate improvised explosive devices before sending back images of damaged sites. The intelligence services then planned to distribute the pictures to foreign media in an attempt to discredit Ukraine. The students reportedly were not paid, believing the recruiters were antisemitic activists, and did not know they were actually Russians. A young man reportedly painted antisemitic graffiti on several private houses in Radomyshl. The man said his handlers also tasked him with painting graffiti on a local memorial.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In May, the U.S.-based NGO Anti-Defamation League (ADL) issued the results of its survey of antisemitism in the country, based on data collected in November and December 2022. The survey asked approximately 1,000 respondents whether 11 stereotypical statements about Jews were "probably true." Based on responses, the ADL estimated 29 percent of individuals over 18 in the country agreed that six or more statements were "probably true," compared with 46 percent in 2019 and 32 percent in 2015. Among the statements were: "Jews are more loyal to Israel than to Ukraine" (38 percent); "Jews have too much power in international financial markets" (49 percent); "Jews still talk too much about what happened to them in the Holocaust" (43 percent); "Jews don't care about what happens to anyone but their own kind" (38 percent); "Jews have too much control over the global media" (32 percent); and "Jews are responsible for most of the world's wars" (13 percent).

According to numerous sources, Russia's invasion of the country continued to exacerbate preexisting tensions between the OCU and UOC. The ROC and the UOC continued to publicly describe the OCU as a "schismatic" group, even though the OCU was granted a *tomos* (decree) of Autocephaly by the Ecumenical Patriarch in 2019. The ROC continued to urge Orthodox churches around the world not to recognize the OCU.

Examples of tensions between the OCU and UOC included anti-UOC protests in March, widely covered by media outlets, during the eviction of the UOC from the Pechersk Lavra Monastery in Kyiv – the country's most famous monastery.

In September, the Ivano-Frankivsk Municipal Court found Roman H. (last name not disclosed) guilty of beating to death a local UOC supporter in March 2022 and sentenced him to nine years in prison. The victim was a vocal supporter of the activity of "churches of the Moscow Patriarchate."

In a March 13 interview with state-owned *Ukrinform* news agency, DESS Head Yelenskyy said, "[s]ince the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war, particularly after the large-scale invasion, there has been increased tension and indignation within society as a result of the position of the Moscow Patriarchate. Instances of [pro-Russia] collaboration by UOC-MP clerics and the quite lenient attitude of the top clergy toward the collaborators aroused passions immensely."

Following Russia's July missile strike on the Transfiguration Cathedral in Odesa, hundreds of UOC priests, and reportedly several bishops, signed an open letter to UOC leader Metropolitan Onufriy condemning the ROC's support of Russia's military aggression and calling on the UOC leader to pursue a full break from the ROC. The priests stated that "despite the (2022) conciliar decisions, everyone who wanted to continue commemorating Patriarch Kirill was doing so, and there were quite unambiguous statements about unity with the ROC." In February, Onufriy sent a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, asking him "to pay attention to the gross violation of the right to freedom of conscience and religion in Ukraine, which consists in the violation of the rights and discrimination of Orthodox Christians of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC)." The letter said that since the beginning of the invasion, the UOC had chosen the side of Ukraine, with its churches helping refugees, members of the church supporting the army, and some fighting on the front.

UOC representatives continued contesting parish reregistrations, stating that some local government officials breached the law by allowing individuals unaffiliated with the UOC to vote in meetings to change the affiliation of local parishes to the OCU. According to the UOC, some local authorities transferred parish affiliations against the will of parishioners. The UOC also said officials allowed OCU supporters to take possession of disputed facilities before the change of affiliation was officially registered.

OCU representatives accused the UOC of contesting legitimate changes of parish affiliation and reported that since 2019, the UOC had initiated more than 100 lawsuits against oblast government decisions to register UOC congregations that joined the OCU. The lawsuits remained unresolved through year's end.

In a May 1 interview reported on Kyiv-based *Gazeta.ua news*, OCU Metropolitan Epiphaniy estimated that more than 2,000 UOC parishes had become part of the OCU since its inception in 2018, including more than 1,000 parishes that had joined the OCU since February 2022.

Media reported numerous incidents of disruptions in UOC worship services by OCU supporters during the year. For example, UOC officials reported that on April 2, during a service at the UOC Cathedral of the Intercession of the Mother of God in Khmelnytsky, a man in a military uniform splashed water on a cleric and the Gospel book, pushing the cleric and tearing his vestments. Police detained the individual, who said he was outraged by the "presence of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine." A video of the incident on social media sparked a protest by more than 1,000 UOC opponents, seeking transfer of the cathedral to OCU affiliation. Similar protests and some altercations took place regarding churches in Cherkasy Oblast, Kyiv Oblast, Khmelnytsky Oblast, Ivano-Frankivsk, and other locations, resulting in injuries in some cases. Also in April, media outlets reported that SBU officials charged Pavlo Lebid, abbot of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra

monastery, with supporting Russia's war effort and placed him under house arrest. "I have never been on the side of aggression," he said. "I am against aggression. And now I am in Ukraine. This is my land." He remained under house arrest at year's end.

On January 4, the Kremenets District Court found Archbishop Job, rector of the UOC Pochayiv Theological Seminary, guilty of incitement to enmity and religious discrimination and ordered him to pay a fine of 8500 hryvnas (\$220), based on a plea bargain and admission of guilt.

On March 31, several dozen OCU and UOC clerics promoting rapprochement between the two churches issued a joint statement condemning violence against UOC parishioners in Ivano-Frankivsk, stating in part that "those actions not only contradict the Gospel but also cause irreparable damage to the international image of Ukrainian Orthodoxy and the nation in general. The modern Ukrainian Church cannot be guided by the slogan 'the end justifies the means,' but rather choose the model of open Orthodoxy."

On April 8, OCU and UOC supporters clashed during an ownership dispute regarding a UOC church in Lypovets village, Kyiv Oblast. An OCU member died during the altercation. Police said the individual suffered a heart attack, which the victim's daughter said was due to the altercation.

According to the OCU, on August 10, parishioners of the UOC Nativity of the Mother of God in Cherkasy unanimously elected to join the OCU, although the UOC stated this action was determined by nonmembers of the congregations. When the parishioners who had voted to join the OCU tried to enter the church on November 16, UOC members reportedly assaulted them, which the UOC denied. The UOC stated that dozens of OCU supporters entered the convent on November 20, attacking those recording or trying to stop them and injuring a priest and several parishioners, including two who required hospitalization. The OCU reportedly stated its members had acted in self-defense, and while local police said they tried to prevent violence, some UOC members criticized police for inaction.

On November 21, members of the OCU's prominent grassroots initiative "Ten Theses for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine" issued a statement saying, "the use of physical violence in the transfer of churches to the OCU is unacceptable," and "We call for an end to any attempts at forcible seizure of buildings and ask the leadership of the OCU to condemn them."

The OHCHR said it had "previously documented that law enforcement agencies did not take appropriate measures to prevent and react to violence related to conflicts involving the UOC, particularly related to incidents in March and April 2023."

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, on March 9, D.R. and O.H. were seeking to proselytize a woman in an apartment in Ternopil. She closed the door when she learned they were Jehovah's Witnesses. Later, the woman reportedly insulted the Jehovah's Witnesses as they tried to leave the apartment complex, allegedly threatening them with a gun. One of the Jehovah's Witnesses took the gun, called the police, and filed a police report. Police confiscated the gun.

On September 23, 2023, several Jehovah's Witnesses were proselytizing from house to house in Tukhol'ka village, Lviv Oblast. Local Greek Catholic priest Roman Kachala approached them, demanding they stop and leave the village. He reportedly threatened to slash the tires of their cars and to incite a mob.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, on March 23, OCU priest Roman Hryshchuk approached two Jehovah's Witnesses who were proselytizing using a portable literature rack in Hlyboka, Chernivtsi Oblast. He covertly filmed the conversation, supplemented it with personal comments and posted it on Facebook. Comments on the post reportedly included calls for the extermination of Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witness Stepan S. subsequently filed a police report. On October 18, the priest again approached Jehovah's Witnesses, one of whom was Stepan S., and later posted a second video on Facebook. Hryshchuk stated that Jehovah's Witnesses were "calling on Ukrainians to lay down arms and join their sect." On October 19, media outlets *Espresso* and *RISU* published the priest's comments accusing Jehovah's Witnesses of anti-Ukrainian activity. In response to

Jehovah's Witnesses requests for a retraction, *RISU* removed the article from its website, while *Espresso* reportedly did not respond to the request.

There were again reports of vandalism of Christian monuments, Holocaust memorials, synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, and Jehovah's Witnesses' kingdom halls.

The National Minorities Rights Monitoring Group reported no suspected cases of antisemitic violence during the year, compared with one case in 2022. The group recorded three cases of antisemitic vandalism during the year, compared with five incidents in 2022. The report statistics covered the period following the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel and Israel's response in Gaza.

On January 28, unidentified vandals splashed a Holocaust memorial in Dnipro with red paint and destroyed candle lamps near the memorial. A police investigation was in progress at year's end.

According to the Jewish community, the Ivano-Frankivsk City Court continued hearing a case against the individual who in March 2022 stabbed Igor Perelman, director of the city's Jewish community. The suspect remained out on bail pending trial through the end of the year.

On October 26, unidentified vandals splashed the walls and windows of a synagogue in Mykolayiv with red paint, according to the United Jewish Community of Ukraine. Law enforcement officials opened an investigation, which continued through year's end.

According to media outlets, in mid-December, an unknown individual desecrated a Hanukkah menorah on Kyiv's Independence Square. The video footage of the incident he posted online showed the vandal urinating on the menorah, calling it a "rake," and saying that "Jews will not inhabit" Ukraine. Authorities investigated the incident as a hate crime; the investigation continued through year's end.

In the evening of December 13, unidentified persons toppled a Hanukkah menorah on a square in central Kremenchuk, Poltava Oblast. Police detained a suspect who was reportedly drunk when he committed the offense. Law-enforcement officials charged him with petty hooliganism. The Jewish community called on the government to investigate the incident as an antisemitic act.

According to the RCC, on October 29, unidentified individuals damaged a crucifix and statue of Virgin Mary near the RCC Church of the Assumption in Kyiv. Parish representatives thanked local police for promptly opening an investigation, but police had not located the vandals by year's end.

According to the Lviv City government, on April 14, an attacker set fire to the entrance doors of the city's Greek Catholic Church of Nativity of the Mother of God. Lviv Mayor Andriy Sadovyy said pro-Russia elements might be behind the incident, describing it as "the final convulsions of the 'Russian world' in Lviv." On the same day, police detained a suspect who said he set the fire to stay warm.

During meetings with foreign officials and religious leaders, the interfaith organization AUCCRO sought to counter Russian propaganda narratives and raise international awareness of the plight of Ukrainians. AUCCRO continued to promote religious diversity and national unity in the face of Russia's aggression and to address issues such as support for war victims, military and medical chaplaincy, alternative nonmilitary service for conscientious objectors, and religious freedom in Russia-occupied territories. AUCCRO also called on the government to amend legislation to allow religious organizations to use state-owned property free of rental charges.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On February 20, President Biden and President Zelenskyy met with the OCU leadership during a visit to St. Michael's Monastery in Kyiv to discuss pressure the OCU faced in occupied territories.

U.S. embassy officials, including the Ambassador, engaged with officials in the Office of the President, ministry officials, members of parliament, and municipal governments to discuss the importance of fair and transparent treatment of religious groups, support for religious minorities, combating manifestations of antisemitism, and preservation of religious heritage sites, in particular historic Jewish cemeteries in Lviv and Uman. Embassy officials continued to urge government leaders to practice tolerance, restraint, and mutual understanding to ensure respect for the religious freedom and preferences of all individuals.

Embassy officials met with a wide range of religious leaders to urge tolerance, restraint, and mutual understanding. They continued to meet with internally displaced Christians, Muslims, and other religious groups to discuss their continuing inability to practice their religion freely in Russia-occupied territories. In February, the chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives visited Kyiv and Bucha and met with AUCCRO representatives and survivors of Russia's aggression. He received briefings on what AUCCRO representatives and survivors described as war crimes and religious persecution by Russian authorities and forces in temporarily occupied areas.

The embassy continued to engage with leaders of AUCCRO, which represents most religious groups in the country, to discuss the status of religious freedom in the country in general and religious persecution in the Russia-occupied territories in particular. Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, and Orthodox leaders acknowledged U.S. engagement on religious freedom and the attacks on churches in the temporarily occupied territories.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials participated in the anniversary commemorations of the 1941 Babyn Yar massacre and in other Holocaust commemoration events to honor the victims and the "Righteous Among Nations," underscoring the importance of preserving the memory of that tragedy and encouraging efforts to combat antisemitism.

The embassy continued to engage with Jewish religious leaders, organizations, and local authorities to discuss issues of antisemitism, promote Holocaust memorial efforts, and ensure the preservation of historic religious sites, including ancient Jewish cemeteries in Lviv and Uman. The Ambassador and other embassy officials participated in Holocaust commemorations, during which they encouraged efforts to combat antisemitism and preserve cultural heritage.

Embassy officials engaged with representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss their concerns, including the right to conscientious objection, mobilization under martial law, and how law enforcement authorities address religiously motivated hate.

The embassy continued to use social media to underscore U.S. government support for religious freedom, including the rights of religious minorities. It regularly highlighted religious holidays and responded to the systematic mistreatment of religious minorities in Russia-occupied areas.