



Permanent Mission of Ukraine
to the International Organizations in
Vienna

**Statement by the Delegation of Ukraine
Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
“Upholding the Principles of Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, including
the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief”, Session 2
(Vienna, 2 April 2019)**

**Madam Moderator,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The OSCE commitments on freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief were first enshrined in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and further elaborated in many subsequent OSCE documents, including the 2010 Astana Commemorative Declaration, in which participating States recognized that “greater efforts must be made to promote freedom of religion or belief and to combat intolerance and discrimination”. They constitute a comprehensive framework for participating States to ensure the respect for and promotion of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Ukraine is fully committed to protecting and fostering the fundamental freedom of religion or belief, guaranteed by the Constitution of Ukraine, in compliance with the OSCE commitments and applicable international standards.

Ukraine is a multinational country, with over 130 nationalities of different religious backgrounds. The Government of Ukraine attaches great importance to the promotion of tolerance, mutual respect and understanding within the Ukrainian society. The overwhelming majority of religious communities in Ukraine describe harmonious inter-faith relations and conditions of non-discrimination allowing everyone to profess and practice, alone or in community with others, the religion or belief of his or her choice, as well as the right not to profess any religion.

The Government of Ukraine pays special attention to the cooperation with all the religious organizations of Ukraine and inter-confessional dialogue.

The representatives of the Ukrainian churches and religious organizations are participating in the activities of the Commission on religious organizations’ rights implementation under the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, civil councils of the Ministry of Education and Science Ukraine, Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, Ministry of Health Care of Ukraine and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.

All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, established in 1996, representing more than 90% of my country’s religious denominations, has become the basic

platform for inter-confessional dialogue. The President of Ukraine convenes meetings with the Council's Board members on the regular basis.

To assist in resolution of the problematic issues between the confessions, the Working group of current inter-church conflicts was established in 2014 under the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine. There is also Experts council on freedom of conscience and religious organizations' activities under the same ministry.

Distinguished participants,

Speaking about the allegations of Russia and its proxies concerning freedom of religion and belief in Ukraine we would like to stress that they are unfounded. This is part of the ongoing Russian hybrid aggression against Ukraine.

For decades the Russian church and Moscow have aimed at deepening divisions in the Ukrainian society, in particular by dividing the Ukrainian Christian orthodox people into "correct", i.e. "canonical" and belonging to the Russian Church, and "incorrect", i.e. so called "non-canonical" and belonging to other Churches. As we all know, none of the OSCE commitments on freedom of religion or belief contain the notions of so-called canonical and non-canonical churches, but these notions are used in Russia and by Russia to suppress the freedoms, which the Russian authorities had undertaken to observe.

Finally the Russian strategy of driving division in Ukraine in the religious sphere has failed when the Ukrainian nation succeeded in its at least 100 years quest for establishment of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. This status was granted to the Ukrainian people by the Mother Church – the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in January of this year. This historic accomplishment was preceded by intensive consultative process and the unification congress of three branches of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy in December 2018. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine has been entered number 15 in the diptychs of autocephalous national Churches of the world-wide Christian Orthodoxy. The Russian Orthodox Church belongs to the younger churches and ranks 5th in the diptychs.

The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted the law, which enables the religious communities to change their affiliation and strengthens the religious freedom of the believers. Whereas in the initial draft a simple majority was required for approving the decision, the legislators introduced a requirement of two thirds of the community vote required for the changed affiliation. Moreover, the law protects the interests of those believers who wish to stay within the Russian Orthodox Church. This church will continue to have the same rights and commitments as other religious denominations in my country. At the same time, a legislative provision was introduced which required religious organizations with governing body in the aggressor state or occupying power, as determined by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, to show this link in their names. There are six such religious organizations in Ukraine. There is no limitation of their operation in Ukraine.

Madam Moderator,

As for the exercise of freedom of religion and belief in Ukraine, including the situation for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, this freedom is under severe attack in territories of Ukraine illegally occupied by the Russian Federation – the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, city of Sevastopol and parts of Donbas.

Last December the Russian occupation authorities in Luhansk reportedly denied so-called "registration" to all Baptist, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist, and other Protestant churches. The aim was to effectively ban all activities by these religious groups, and now their members can face even illegal detention for gathering to pray in private homes.

We emphasize that such repressive measures are carried by the Russian occupation authorities throughout the occupied territories of Ukraine.

In Simferopol, in the illegally occupied Crimea, the Russian occupants ordered the Cathedral of Ukrainian Orthodox Church to leave the premises this month. This order of the occupation administration aims at terminating the presence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the peninsula and the religious life of its remaining eight parishes.

It became known that in the occupied parts of the Donetsk region the religious communities have been demanded to register according to the so called new “laws” issued by the illegal entities of the Russian occupation administration.

There is a real risk that, 36 churches and premises, including the diocesan House of Mercy, belonging to the communities of Ukrainian Orthodox Church in temporarily occupied parts of Donetsk region, may be “confiscated” and their priests will be expelled from these territories.

Given this extremely worrisome situation, the Metropolitan of Kyiv and all Ukraine Epiphanius, Head of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine, appealed to the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the guarantors of the Minsk Process, the European Union and to all democratic countries, international and interdenominational institutions to take urgent measures to prevent such catastrophic development, devised by the Russian authorities.

Therefore we

request *the Slovak OSCE Chairmanship* to duly react to the violations in the situations of foreign occupation of OSCE principles and commitments principles of tolerance and non-discrimination, including the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief: the occupied territories must not be left “grey zones”;

call upon *Russia* to put an end to the repressive policies of its occupation administrations in Crimea and parts of Donbas and abide by OSCE commitments regarding the freedom of religion or belief;

urge *Russia, as the occupying power*, to abide by the applicable norms of international humanitarian law in the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories of Autonomous Republic of Crimea, city of Sevastopol and certain areas of Donbas.

I thank you.