

ON VIOLATION OF THE RIGHTS OF THE UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH COMMUNITIES IN UKRAINE

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

The international community has to pay careful attention to the processes currently taking place in Ukraine in view of the attitudes of state authorities to one of the biggest religious denominations in the country. We have to state with regret that in Ukraine, especially in its western part, the number of illegal seizures of the UOC churches keeps growing alongside with discrimination and violent behavior with regard to both particular faithful Orthodox and big religious centers.

The case in point is accepting by Ternopil regional council of the address to the Prime Minister of Ukraine which states that "... there have been actively created and galvanized fifth columns to serve the neighboring state. One of the spiritual sanctities of the Ukrainian nation – the Pochaev Lavolta (lavra) of the Dormition – is being purposefully turned into the hub of anti-Ukrainian and interfaith hostility. Under the guise of "canonicity" the UOC of Moscow Patriarchate tries to Russify Ukrainian citizens by abetting invaders". Unfortunately, such official position of the state body can be interpreted by the population of Ukraine as a signal to illegally seize the UOC sanctuaries with impunity and persecute its parishioners.

As early as summer 2015 there got intensified actions of radical organizations and other persons aimed at taking over the UOC property and disrupting the situation in Western Ukraine. At present more than 30 churches of our denomination have been subject to illegal seizure without any legitimate grounds. For instance, in Ptycha village of Rivne region there was illegally seized a church our religious community is entitled to. Despite all the relevant documents and the court decision which confirms ownership of our community of this building, we are unable to use it due to the prohibition of the local authorities to open the church. The authorities reason that in case the owner – our community – exercises their right to worship in the church, radically minded population and separate organizations will resort to mass rioting which the authorities will not be able to defend us from. This is also the case with other churches which are either illegally seized by raiders or closed and sealed by public authorities.

In Ternopil region, in the villages of Bashuky, Kulykiv, Kolosova, Katerynivka unprecedented events occurred when state authorities in the person of Governor S. Barna refused to abide by the court's decision that forbids eliminating our community. Owing to inappropriate unprofessional performance of the local authorities, over 15 people including youngsters and women were severely injured – fractured limbs, brain concussion – as a result of ungrounded use of ruby beats and tear-gas by the Internal Affairs Ministry unit – "Ternopil" battalion – against unarmed civilians who arrived at the church which had been seized before by the adherents of "Kyiv Patriarchate".

Regretfully, we observe that the power no longer takes a neutral stance because internal affairs agencies do not bother to investigate judicial cases upon the petitions we have continually submitted to state authorities since 2014. They haven't brought even an administrative action against at least a single person being involved in illegal seizures of the UOC churches although these persons are familiar to the authorities and details about those persons are forwarded to the law enforcement agencies. Assaulters of our churches normally wear camouflage uniform, balaclavas, and in some cases, they carry on cold guns and fire weapons.

Of no less importance is the fact that Ternopil state administration has probably urged to abolish the right of ownership of Kolosova village UOC community for the first time since the Communist atheist times wherefore they filed a lawsuit. The Governor of Ternopil region demands that the court should abolish the right of ownership of the church building but forgets about Ukraine's international commitments and obligations with regard to restitution – returning of the property, having been unlawfully appropriated under the Soviet rule, to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Consequently, for the first time ever the state makes an overt act opposite to restitution and urges to abolish the community's title to the church property instead of making the worship building over to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

The evidence testifies to the fact that there has been turned on the “green light” in Ukraine to suppress and humiliate the denomination recognized as “politically insecure”. Is it really so?

The problem is when religious strives are stirred up, when slogans and conceptual messages directed against our denomination get widely disseminated by mass media. For instance, the slogan was made available to the public via mass media that “each candle bought in a church of Moscow Patriarchate is a bullet fired at the back of the Ukrainian soldier”.

Such defamation alongside with impunity of the persons guilty of property seizure and other violations of rights of the UOC faithful only aggravates religion-based discrimination in Ukraine. To date, it is impossible to hold divine services in more than 30 UOC churches due to the fact they've been either occupied by representatives of “Kyiv Patriarchate” or the authorities have made a decision to terminate worship in these churches.

Religious communities have sent official addresses to the international authorities and structures that assumed the “watchdog” functions with regard to honoring human rights and freedoms. We cherish hope that the influence of the international community will help to halt the wave of religion-based infringements of human rights and freedoms. Besides, we are grateful to Mr. Mark Kirschbeim, OSCE representative in Ukraine, who expressed his concern about problems of the UOC churches seizure in Ternopil region having taken part in an interfaith dialogue on the matter highlighted. However, the presence of international observers didn't shoot the trouble, to make matters worse, the members of the OSCE mission while approaching Bashuky village of Kremenets district of Ternopil region were assaulted by the people who intended to prevent the foreign delegation from meeting with the community of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. A

statement on the above incident was submitted to the law enforcement bodies of Ukraine, but we received no feedback concerning the effective investigation.

We bindingly affirm that continued illegal seizures of the UOC churches, religion-based discrimination of the faithful may entail unpredictable implications and destabilization of the situation in Western Ukraine. Failure of the authorities to take actions has already brought about security threat which is likely to cause new conflicts. We call the Ukrainian authorities to halt the wave of illegal seizures of the UOC churches and take actions to bring the guilty to justice in order to put a stop to impunity and ensure defense of human rights in the country.

Video materials and reference papers on the topic highlighted in this speech are available on the site www.protiktor.com.

Thank you for your attention,

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