

## Moving away from Moscow. Will the UOC choose the path of autocephaly from the ROC-MP?



*The head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovsky), at his residence in the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra. On the wall is a portrait of Moscow Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church. Kyiv, January 4, 2017 Photo: UNIAN*

**By Dr. Serhiy Shumylo\***

In recent days, the media has been talking a lot about the law passed by the Verkhovna Rada on the alleged “ban of the UOC.” In fact, if you read the law, it does not mention the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), but rather any religious organizations associated with the religious centers of the aggressor state of Russia. Therefore, it is incorrect to say that this law “bans the UOC”.

And when the UOC itself claims that the law is directed against them, does it mean that they are confirming their affiliation with the religious center of the aggressor state?

Official speakers of the UOC, commenting on the adopted law, constantly emphasize that the UOC is “completely independent” (“de facto autocephalous”), but for some reason they are most afraid of the entry into force of the law. They probably know what they are afraid of.

Because in fact, during the two and a half years of Russia's war against Ukraine, the UOC has not adopted a single document on its withdrawal from the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP), on which it has depended canonically and administratively all these years (since its very creation in 1990).

For all other local Orthodox Churches of the world, the UOC is not an independent church, but a canonical structural unit within the ROC MP. It is in this status that they recognize and accept representatives of the UOC for concelebration during foreign trips. And nowhere in its relations with other local Orthodox Churches does the UOC declare that it has nothing to do with the ROC MP. Such statements are made only to an internal audience within Ukraine, but not to the outside world.



*Consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine: destroyed church in honor of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Novoekonomichne village, Donetsk region*

As some UOC bishops explain in private conversations, if they finally leave the ROC-MP, they will lose their “canonicity” and recognition by other Orthodox Churches. In fact, they have become hostages to their own “canonical myth”, which they have been nurturing for over 30 years in their midst in confrontation with the UOC-KP (Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate) and the UAOC (Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church), and later the OCU (Orthodox Church of Ukraine), having raised a whole generation of believers and priests on the idea that there can be no “canonical church” in Ukraine outside of unity with the ROC-MP.

This seems to have become a kind of modern so-called “ecclesiology” of the UOC. In fact, even the new Statute of Governance of the UOC is based on this idea, which in its first paragraph refers to the 1990 letter of Moscow Patriarch Alexy Ridiger on the self-

governance of the UOC within the ROC MP, and which unambiguously states that the UOC maintains its unity with world Orthodoxy exclusively through the ROC MP.

It is this point that has become a stumbling block and the cause of claims to the UOC by many priests and believers of the UOC, as well as society, as well as the expert community (religious scholars) and the Ukrainian government. After all, in the context of Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine, which is blessed and inspired and supported by the Russian Orthodox Church in every possible way, the fact that one of the largest religious organizations in Ukraine maintains such a canonical connection with a religious center in the aggressor state makes it a hostage to anti-Ukrainian politics and an unwitting accomplice to its criminal activities.

It is clear that in times of war, any state will try to neutralize such influences from the aggressor state in the social, political, economic, cultural, and religious spheres. It cannot be otherwise. Because this is a war. And this is not just a matter of freedom of conscience, but of national security in times of war. This is a matter of saving the lives of millions of Ukrainian citizens who are being killed by Russian troops every day.

Especially when the aggressor state actively uses the religious factor and rhetoric in its anti-Ukrainian propaganda, justifying and even “sanctifying” the war against Ukraine.

Therefore, it is natural that the state in the context of war wants to receive from the UOC (which before the outbreak of full-scale war was a single entity with the ROC MP) not only in words but also in practice confirmation and guarantees that it is no longer in any way connected with the Moscow Patriarchate (MP).

To this end, in early 2023, the leadership of the State Service for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience sent a request to the governing bodies of the UOC to provide official documents confirming the UOC's withdrawal from the ROC-MP. Unfortunately, no such documents were provided. It was not because they do not exist.



*Vladimir Putin remotely participates in the World Russian People's Council, listening to a speech by ROC Patriarch Kirill (Vladimir Gundyayev), who proclaims the "holy war against the West". Sochi, November 28, 2023*

### **Act on the autocephaly of the UOC: what could it be like?**

Realizing the challenges and threats faced by the UOC due to the lack of such documents, at the request of like-minded priests and believers of the UOC, in December 2022, I prepared an open Appeal to the Primate and Synod of the UOC (better known as "10 Questions to the Synod of the UOC") with a request to adopt such an official document on the UOC's secession from the ROC MP.

In addition, at the request of my friends from the UOC, I then developed a draft of a possible Act on the UOC's secession from the ROC and the proclamation of its autocephaly. This draft was submitted for discussion both to some UOC bishops and directly to Metropolitan Onufriy. Unfortunately, the idea of proclaiming such an Act, like many other proposals, remained unrealized.

**Based on the decision of the Feofaniia Council of the UOC of May 2022, this draft Act proposed to prescribe the following specific points (published for the first time):**

1. In accordance with the decisions of the May Council in Feofaniia, the UOC is a fully independent and self-governing (autocephalous) Church and is no longer administratively, canonically or in any other way connected to the Moscow Patriarchate.
2. The UOC has administratively and canonically withdrawn from the ROC MP, therefore, the decisions of the Patriarch, Synod and Councils of the ROC MP are not relevant and not valid for the UOC.

3. The Primate and other hierarchs of the UOC are no longer members of the Synod, Bishops' and Local Councils, the Interconciliar Representation and any other ecclesiastical canonical bodies, commissions and departments of the ROC-MP.
4. The "Statute of the ROC", in particular its Section X, is not valid for the UOC. The UOC, as a fully independent and self-governing Church, is governed exclusively by the Statute on the Governance of the UOC.
5. The UOC restores the Eucharistic communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Patriarchate of Alexandria, the Orthodox Churches of Cyprus and Greece and considers the decisions to break the Eucharistic communion with them, previously imposed under the influence of Moscow, to be invalid.
6. In its relations with other Local Orthodox Churches, the UOC is independent of the policies and guidelines of the Moscow Patriarchate and other churches and religious centers and independently conducts its external church activities.
7. The Holy Synod of the UOC condemns the statements of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow on the support and justification of Russia's war against Ukraine, as well as the fundamentalist ideology of the "Russian world" propagated by him, which by all indications is heretical and unorthodox.
8. The Holy Synod of the UOC once again declares its unequivocal support for the territorial integrity and state independence of Ukraine, condemns the war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine, attempts to occupy and annex Ukrainian territories (as well as the dioceses of the UOC in the occupied territories), and condemns the facts of collaboration, and fully blesses its flock in defense of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of our Motherland - the state of Ukraine.

This could be the Act of Secession of the UOC from the ROC-MP that we proposed.

It would seem that it would be easier to adopt such a document and thereby remove all questions from society and the state. But neither this nor any other document was adopted by the UOC.



*Archbishop Clement of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate against the background of a portrait of Metropolitan Onufriy*

### **UOC does not hear requests from its priests**

Instead, for the third year in a row, the UOC leadership has stubbornly spent a lot of time, effort, energy and money on various appeals, articles and interpretations that have nothing concrete to prove their position. The UOC has found the will and resources to challenge the actions of the Ukrainian state using influential international platforms (which sometimes looks like playing along with the aggressor country in times of war), but it has not found the opportunity (or desire?) to demonstrate its new “independent from the MP” status to other Local Churches.

It seems that some hierarchs, hearing the above-mentioned demands not only from the government and society, but also from their own faithful and clergy, refuse to adopt such a document on principle, deliberately driving the UOC into a dead end.

If the Synod of the UOC were to adopt an official act to implement the decisions of the Feofaniia Council of the UOC that the UOC completely withdraws from the ROC MP, the recently adopted law could in no way apply to the UOC. After all, as the initiators of the bill have repeatedly explained, this is exactly what it is aimed at - to encourage the leadership of the UOC to adopt official and unambiguous documents on the complete withdrawal from the ROC MP and the termination of canonical ties with it, and not to “ban the UOC.”

The proclamation of such acts is a common procedure in universal Orthodoxy for constituting one's own status. In the practice of the Church, when gaining autocephaly, Acts of various forms were adopted. There were those that proclaimed their new status, and those that granted the status of autocephaly. For example, the respective Acts proclaimed the autocephaly of the Polish and Czechoslovakian Churches. The

main thing is that the Act clearly formulates and defines the specific status of the Church, to which there would be no claims from the authorities and society.

Without such an official document, all the talk in the UOC about “full independence and self-sufficiency” is talk that has been going on for over 30 years.

The representatives of the UOC, denying the need to grant it full autocephaly, have repeatedly stated long before 2022 that it already “has de facto true autocephaly” (meaning the status of administrative self-government in the system of the ROC MP). Therefore, such statements after the outbreak of a large-scale war were not something new, which is why they did not gain credibility. After all, they were not true.

As for the amendments to the UOC Statute in May 2022, this in itself only fixes a certain state. The “cleansing” of “inconvenient” phrases in the Statute during the war about the connection with the church structure in the aggressor state is not yet a confirmation of the absence of such a connection.

The very status of the UOC outside the ROC-MP has not been proclaimed or enshrined. This is the reason for all the complaints. They tried to say “a,” but never said “b.”

From the very first days of the full-scale war, a group of priests and believers of the UOC, to which I belonged, initiated a series of appeals to Metropolitan Onufriy calling for a break with the MP.

Unexpectedly, this grew into a whole spontaneous church movement, which resulted in the convening of the UOC Council in May 2022. However, its half-hearted results and decisions, which were deliberately written to satisfy both the pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian wings and to be interpreted by anyone, depending on the further course of full-scale hostilities (some bishops waited for a long time to see whether the Russian occupation forces would be able to gain a foothold in the Ukrainian territories), quickly led to disappointment and new questions.

Procedurally, at the May Council in Feofaniia, the relevant Act on the UOC's withdrawal from the ROC MP was to be adopted first, and only then, with reference to it, the Council was to approve the Statute. This is, of course, if the UOC wanted to gain a truly independent status... This is what many of us hoped for. But this did not happen.



*An inscription in the Pochaiv Lavra, which is managed by the UOC-MP*

### **The appeal was signed by more than 300 priests**

Despite this organizational and procedural “hole”, if one wants to, one can always find ways to remedy the situation. Even if the Act of the Council was not adopted, the Act of the Synod as the governing body of the UOC in the interconciliar period could have been adopted later, which would have enshrined the decisions of the Feofaniia Council.

This would be an official Synodal document that would have canonical and legal significance. But the UOC does not have such a document.

Any other letters or comments, whether from Metropolitan Onufriy to the State Service for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience, or from Metropolitan Meletiy or Metropolitan Clement, or any of the other bishops of the UOC, without a corresponding decision from the supreme governing body of the UOC, are not official documents on behalf of the entire Church. They do not express the official position of the fullness of the UOC, and they can always be interpreted as a private opinion that has no legal consequences.

That is why, in order to help the hierarchy remedy this situation, an Appeal of the clergy and believers of the UOC with ten questions to the Synod was prepared and published in early January 2023.



Now we can openly say who was its author. At the request of some fathers from the UOC, I prepared this text in December 2022, when it was not yet clear to everyone how radically the attitude of society and the state towards the UOC's relations with the ROC MP was changing.

This appeal was signed by more than 300 priests and more than 1,000 UOC believers. It seemed to provide good ground to use it as a kind of “road map” based on the opinion of the clergy and faithful and to make appropriate decisions (including the Act of Secession from the ROC MP) that would prevent the impending crisis.

It was a sincere attempt to help the hierarchy of the UOC to find a way out of the impending crisis, because we were concerned about the fate of the Church and were not indifferent.

If the Synod had responded adequately to our Appeal, today there would not be the problem in which the UOC finds itself.

From the beginning of the Russian army's invasion of Ukraine, it was clear that in the face of Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine and the ROC MP's support for this terrible war, church life could no longer remain “as it was before.” It is clear that the Moscow Patriarchate can no longer exist in Ukraine in any form, even in a hidden way. And this is not about faith and freedom of conscience.

Unfortunately, the Synod of the UOC has not provided answers to our 10 questions. The appeal of more than 300 priests and more than 1000 UOC believers was ignored. The idea of proclaiming the above-mentioned Act was not supported either. Moreover, when a delegation of signatory priests went to the residence of the Primate of the UOC, Metropolitan Onufriy, to meet with him and convey their pain and suggestions, he did not come out to them. They said that he was not feeling well... Instead, instead of a response, repression, mudslinging, and “bans” on the most active priests-signatories of the UOC and all those involved in the creation of the Appeal soon followed.

For many priests and believers of the UOC, these two and a half years have been a time of lost hopes and expectations.



*Moscow Patriarch Kirill (Gundyaev), left, and head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovsky) during Russia's war against Ukraine. Moscow, February 1, 2015*

### **Conviction of signatory priests and complete impunity for collaborator clergy**

The stubborn attempts of the church leadership to preserve the previous “status quo” in the UOC and its hidden canonical affiliation with the ROC MP look like deliberate suicide under the guise of fake “martyrdom.” This caused massive disappointment and an outflow of many believers from the UOC.

Apparently, it is more important for the UOC leadership to feel at least some external recognition (albeit as a canonical part of the ROC MP) from representatives of some other Local Churches (mostly pro-Russian) than to be recognized by their own society and state. However, the Church exists to serve its own people, not for external contacts and relations. These (external) benefits are enjoyed by a few in the UOC, while thousands of ordinary priests are left to their own devices and are forced to suffer because of the uncertain course of their own hierarchy.

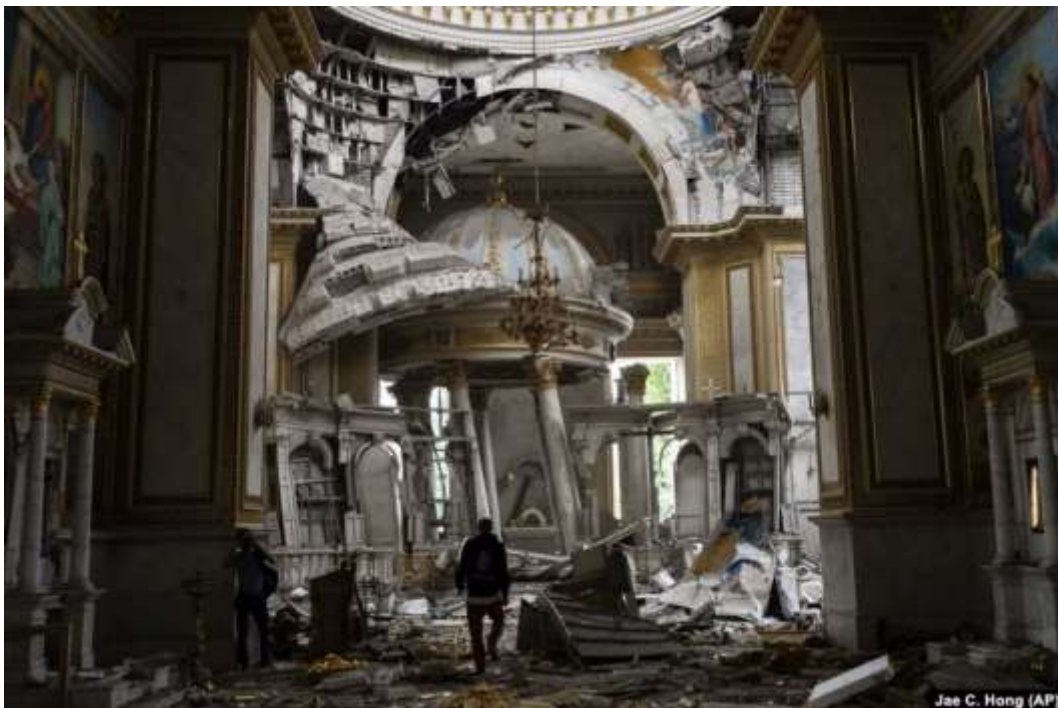
Does such an attitude toward their own flock meet the “canonical criteria” that they supposedly strive to adhere to? The eternal question that is primary is “man for the Sabbath, or the Sabbath for man”...

Unfortunately, the longer the war continues, the fewer hopes and illusions many priests and believers of the UOC have about the possibility of a constructive dialogue within their church. Those believers or priests who are not afraid to express their disagreement with the current state of affairs in their own church are often humiliated, branded as “traitors,” “renovationists” and “heretics.” They are made to understand in every possible way that with such views they are “strangers” and “unwanted” in the UOC. In fact, this is persecution, only internal.

Pressure is being exerted on pro-Ukrainian signatory priests, and the most active ones are being subjected to exemplary punishment (bans from priesthood). At the same time, there has not yet been a single case of the same “bans” being imposed on those priests who continue to commemorate Moscow Patriarch Kirill Gundayev in the churches of the UOC, or who have announced their withdrawal from the UOC and subordination directly to the Patriarch and Synod of the ROC MP (and these are entire dioceses with hundreds of parishes and priests in the occupied Crimea, the occupied territories of Donbas, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson. Similarly, not a single priest or bishop of the UOC who openly collaborated with and blessed the Russian occupation forces during the invasion of Ukraine was banned (although there are many such cases).

It is painful to observe how more and more in the UOC some bishops and priests are being taken over by a sectarian sense of their own “infallibility,” resentment of everyone around them and seeing them as “enemies,” a chronic unwillingness to hear truthful criticism or to look at themselves from the outside to understand why people leave the UOC and are so critical of them for their “canonical connection” with the ROC MP.

There are some adequate priests and bishops with whom you can really talk, but there are not so many of them, and in general there is a growing sense of a certain overarching tendency to marginalize and sectarianize the whole Ukrainian society and state. And, of course, some demonstrative hypocrisy. Although, is it reasonable to expect anything else from the Sergianist school of the MP?



*Damage caused by the Russian missile attack on the Transfiguration Cathedral in Odesa, July 23, 2023*

## **Is there still a chance to get rid of dependence on Moscow?**

Of course, it is never too late to correct mistakes. There is still a chance to get rid of the canonical dependence on the Russian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate.

At least, according to the adopted law, nine more months are allotted for this.

Will the leadership of the UOC, which continues to remain in canonical unity with the Moscow Patriarchate, take advantage of this chance? I would like to believe so. At least, the last meeting of the UOC leadership with the delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which took place in Kyiv on August 23, 2024, inspires some hope, albeit rather fragile.

Nevertheless, I want to believe that the UOC leadership will choose the path of dialogue rather than confrontation with its own society, which is suffering from the war unleashed by Russia and is supported and blessed by the ROC MP. There is no alternative to this. There must be a real path to full autocephaly from the ROC MP, a path of service to its own people without regard to what Moscow says about it.

So far, this chance remains. If the UOC hierarchs have the will and desire, it can be used to preserve both the church and the trust of the people.

This is what the latest initiatives of the Ukrainian authorities are aimed at. The next step is up to the leadership of the UOC, which will have relevant consequences for the entire Church. It is up to the leadership of the UOC to determine what they will be.

Instead of concluding, I would like to recall here once again our last year's Appeal with 10 questions to the Synod of the UOC, which is still relevant for the UOC, and the answer to which could become a lifeline in the future fate of the UOC.

But will it?

**P.S.** Of course, ideally, it would be right for the UOC to follow the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Tomos on the autocephaly of the Church in Ukraine and enter into dialogue with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). However, this is currently a major problem, as the bishops of the UOC-MP are not ready for dialogue and unity with the OCU for various reasons. Therefore, this article does not address this issue as a package with the other issues. It seems that, first of all, the UOC should take the first step - to make a complete break with the Moscow Patriarchate, because in the conditions of war for Ukraine it is no longer about religion and rules. The second step is for the UOC to restore Eucharistic unity with the Mother Church of Constantinople and with its motherly help to start a dialogue with the OCU. There is no other realistic option yet. Unfortunately, even this scenario has not yet been fully realized. And while

negotiations continue, it is difficult to say whether it can be implemented, as many objective and subjective factors are at stake here.

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