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THE RELIGIOUS FACTOR IN GLOBAL POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

V. M. Bokoch*

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the religious factor as one of the key elements in contemporary processes of global politics and international relations. The author emphasizes that under the conditions of globalization, religion is increasingly becoming an active subject of political interactions, influencing both the formation of foreign policy strategies of individual states and the dynamics of interstate conflicts and peacebuilding processes. Religious institutions and identities are examined in the context of their role in constructing political narratives, legitimizing power, and mobilizing social groups. Particular attention is paid to the Ukrainian context, where the religious factor has acquired special significance in connection with political transformations and Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine. The article analyzes the establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine as an important element of state-building and its impact on strengthening national unity and identity. It also examines the practices of instrumentalizing religious themes in hybrid warfare and disinformation campaigns against Ukraine. The study is based on an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating analytical tools from religious studies, political science, and international relations theory. It is particularly emphasized that the religious factor can both contribute to the consolidation of the international community and serve as a source of escalating contradictions, which requires a thorough analysis of the specifics of religious worldviews and the models of their interaction in the global environment. In conclusion, the article substantiates the thesis that the religious component must be taken into account in Ukraine's strategic foreign policy planning, while adhering to the principles of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue. The successful integration of the religious factor into international politics will contribute to the strengthening of state sovereignty, the expansion of international support, and the affirmation of Ukraine as a full-fledged subject of global politics.

Keywords: religious policy, Russian-Ukrainian war, church, state, Ukraine, church-state relations, international relations, globalization.

* Вікторія Бокоч / Viktoriya Bokoch, доктор політичних наук, професор, професор кафедри міжнародної політики (Ужгородський національний університет м. Ужгород, Україна)
viktoriya.bokochh@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-0636-2032

РЕЛІГІЙНИЙ ФАКТОР У ГЛОБАЛЬНІЙ ПОЛІТИЦІ ТА МІЖНАРОДНИХ ВІДНОСИНАХ

В. М. Бокоч

У статті здійснено комплексний аналіз релігійного чинника як одного з визначальних елементів сучасних процесів глобальної політики та міжнародних відносин. Автор акцентує увагу на тому, що в умовах глобалізації релігія дедалі частіше перетворюється на активного суб'єкта політичних взаємодій, впливаючи як на формування зовнішньополітичних стратегій окремих держав, так і на динаміку міждержавних конфліктів та процеси миротворення. Релігійні інституції та ідентичності розглядаються у контексті їхньої ролі у конструюванні політичних наративів, легітимації влади та мобілізації суспільних груп. Особливу увагу присвячено українському контексту, де релігійний фактор набув особливої ваги у зв'язку з політичними трансформаціями та російсько-українською війною. Проаналізовано становлення Православної Церкви України як важливого елементу державотворення, її вплив на укріплення національної єдності та ідентичності. Розглянуто практики інструменталізації релігійної тематики у гібридних війнах і дезінформаційних кампаніях проти України. Стаття спирається на міждисциплінарний підхід, залучаючи аналітичний інструментарій релігієзнавства, політології та теорії міжнародних відносин. Окремо підкреслюється, що релігійний фактор може як сприяти консолідації міжнародного співтовариства, так і слугувати джерелом ескалації протиріч, що потребує ретельного аналізу специфіки релігійних світоглядів та моделей їхньої взаємодії в глобальному середовищі. У підсумку обґрунтовано тезу про необхідність врахування релігійної компоненти у стратегічному плануванні зовнішньої політики України, одночасно дотримуючись принципів релігійної свободи та міжконфесійного діалогу. Успішна інтеграція релігійного фактора в міжнародну політику сприятиме зміцненню державного суверенітету, розширенню міжнародної підтримки та утвердженню України як повноправного суб'єкта глобальної політики.

Ключові слова: *релігійна політика, російсько-українська війна, церква, держава, Україна, державно-церковні відносини, міжнародні відносини, глобалізація.*

Formulation of the problem. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, became not only a factor of military threat but also a catalyst for profound changes in the sphere of state-confessional relations. The religious space of Ukraine, due to its historically close interaction with the church structures of the aggressor country, found itself at the center of the struggle for national identity, spiritual sovereignty, and constitutional order. In this context, the study of transformational processes in the interaction between the state and religious organizations during wartime, as well as the identification of forms and means of spiritual resistance to the aggressor, gains particular significance.

The first scholarly attempts to analyze the influence of the religious factor, particularly the Ukrainian aspect, on global political processes and international relations were undertaken by representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora, including I. Mirchuk, Yu. Boiko, and others. Among contemporary Ukrainian researchers,

special mention should be made of the works of A. Kryukov and V. Debenko, who convincingly demonstrate the interconnection between the "Russian World" doctrine and the expansionist policy of the Russian Federation. The connection identified in their studies between the political ambitions of the Russian state and the religious activity of the Russian Orthodox Church toward non-Orthodox believers has been further developed in the works of L. Melnyk, M. Samardak, V. Shevchenko, and other scholars. The issue of the influence of the "Russian World" doctrine on the process of forming Russian national identity has been studied by N. Ishchuk. The active promotion of the "Russian World" concept by the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine has stimulated increased scholarly interest in the problem of the relationship between this doctrine and the neo-imperial political course of modern Russia. This topic is addressed in the works of O. Horkusha, S. Zdioryk, N. Ishchuk, M. Kozlovets, A. Kolodny, P. Pavlenko, O. Sahan, L. Fylypovych, and

other researchers. Thus, the study of the "Russian World" doctrine as a specific religious factor in the context of global politics and international relations remains an important and relevant direction of modern Ukrainian religious studies.

Discussion and results. One of the defining stages in the development of the religious environment in Ukraine was the unification of Orthodox churches of the Kyivan tradition and the granting of the Tomos of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. This decision initiated the process of institutional formation of an independent model of Ukrainian Orthodoxy as a response to the long-term religious and ideological expansion of the Moscow Patriarchate.

As a result of complex political and religious transformations, two parallel Orthodox organizations were formed in Ukraine – the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which differ in their political orientations. The OCU aligns itself with pro-Ukrainian socio-political forces, while the UOC (in unity with the Moscow Patriarchate) gravitates toward pro-Russian narratives. At the same time, the UOC-MP essentially identifies itself with the position of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding the issue of autocephaly of Ukrainian Orthodoxy.

According to the conclusions of political analysts, the geopolitical activity of the Russian Orthodox Church led to the formation of two opposing Orthodox jurisdictions: global Orthodoxy, represented by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and the concept of the "Russian World", which is under the ideological influence of the Moscow Patriarchate [1]. Ukraine's process of European integration is taking place amid confrontation with the Russian state and church, as well as with pro-Russian political and church forces seeking to impose the alternative civilizational project of the "Russian World". According to Ukrainian scholars, the concept of the "Russian World" should be viewed as an ideological construct that combines the religious and political dimensions of

modern Russia under conditions of globalization [2: 124].

The central idea of the "Russian World", according to the interpretation of Patriarch Kirill, is the formation of a special civilizational space that unites the values, knowledge, and historical experience of the peoples of the former Kyivan Rus in order to ensure their dignified presence in the world community [3]. The core of this space, according to the ideologists' vision, should be Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, which in religious rhetoric are referred to as "Holy Rus". This idea is reflected in the official name of the Russian Orthodox Church – "Russian Orthodox Church". Patriarch Kirill emphasizes that the Russian Orthodox Church carries out a spiritual mission among peoples whose national identity is based on Russian cultural and spiritual traditions. This ensures its status as the largest multinational Orthodox community in the world and defines its aspiration for the further development of a multinational character [3].

According to Patriarch Kirill's statements, the Russian Orthodox Church does not deny the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states within their internationally recognized borders. He emphasizes that while each nation develops according to its own laws in its own state, these nations remain part of a single historical and spiritual people with a shared past, present, and future [4]. According to him, the existence of state borders between Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus harms the unity of the peoples of the "Russian World," but these borders are considered a temporary phenomenon, as the concept of "Holy Rus" encompasses a unified civilizational space, which also includes the territories of Moldova and Kazakhstan [5]. The shared historical roots of the peoples of Kievan Rus, in the patriarch's view, create the foundation for integration processes within this space.

The fundamental causes in forming the "Russian World", according to Patriarch Kirill, are Orthodox faith, the Russian language, and Russian culture. Orthodoxy, which united the peoples of historical Rus through the Baptism in Kyiv [6: 241], became the foundation for

forming their national identity and shared spiritual values. The role of faith in daily life, especially after a long period of state atheism, has grown. The second component is Russian culture, which, according to the patriarch, is not limited by national borders, has a multi-ethnic character, and absorbs the historical experience of many peoples of Rus. The Russian language serves as an important means of communication and a carrier of the values of this cultural community.

The third essential foundation of the "Russian World," according to the patriarch, is a shared historical memory and a unified approach to socio-political development. This concept is based on the continuity of the traditions of Rus' statehood from Kievan Rus to the modern-day Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova. The peoples belonging to the "Russian World" historically built their societies on principles of loyalty to God, patriotism, love for humanity, justice, interethnic and interreligious harmony, a desire for education, hard work, and respect for elders [3].

At the present stage, Ukrainian society has become convinced of the dangerous nature of the "Russian World" concept and the threat of an ideology that, under the guise of defending the Russian language, Orthodox faith, and ethnic Russians, actually justifies military aggression, the occupation of Ukrainian territories, and violence based on nationality. In this context, the Russian Orthodox Church is increasingly seen as a civilizational institution aiming to extend its influence not only among the Russian people but beyond its borders.

After the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the armed conflict in Donbas, the Ukrainian government intensified measures to support national identity through the development of the Ukrainian language, culture, and the promotion of the establishment of an independent Orthodox Church, which aimed to counter the expansion of the "Russian World" ideology. However, these efforts faced resistance from supporters of this doctrine, who, using their official positions, tried to block Ukraine's Euro-

integration ambitions and keep it under Russia's political and religious influence.

Since the annexation of Crimea, information and propaganda activities aimed at promoting the ideas of the "Russian World" have significantly increased. The occupying administration organizes numerous events aimed at promoting the Russian language and culture, actively involving public organizations and clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in this process. Structures controlled by the Kremlin in annexed Crimea even initiated the establishment of the "Russian World" concept at the legislative level and ensured its state support.

Thus, the doctrine of the "Russian World" gives Orthodox Christianity a leading role, with the Russian Orthodox Church playing a key role in it. Today, the ROC shows a high level of politicization, transforming into an influential player in modern geopolitics. Ultimately, the goals of the Russian government and ecclesiastical leadership within this concept align: Russia's political dominance in the post-Soviet space and the international arena corresponds to the ROC's aspiration to achieve religious leadership in global Orthodoxy.

The process of integrating autocephalous Orthodoxy in Ukraine was accompanied by significant resistance from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which, despite official statements of independence, still maintains canonical dependence on the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) [7]. Transformational shifts in the religious sphere were often accompanied by resistance from individual officials at various levels of government, indicating political motivation in opposing the processes of religious decolonization.

Against the backdrop of the Russian Federation's military aggression against Ukraine, on December 1, 2022, the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine made a decision "On certain aspects of the activities of religious organizations in Ukraine and the application of personal special economic and other restrictive measures

(sanctions)" [8]. This decision introduced a range of measures aimed at strengthening national security in the field of religious relations.

A key component of this decision is the introduction of personal sanctions against individuals associated with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Among those on the sanctions list were, in particular, former Member of Parliament and deacon of the UOC Vadym Novynskyi, former abbot of Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra Metropolitan Pavel (Lebid), Metropolitan of Simferopol and Crimea of the ROC Lazar, Metropolitan of Izyum and Kupiansk of the UOC Elisei, and Bishop of Romny and Buryn of the UOC Joseph.

In January 2023, the National Security and Defense Council adopted changes to this decision, expanding the list of sanctions to a full package of 14 points with a validity period of five years. Both documents became legally binding by approval through the relevant decrees of the President of Ukraine.

In the framework of ensuring national security in the religious sphere, on March 3, 2022, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted the Law "On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on the Prohibition of the Production and Distribution of Information Products Aimed at Promoting the Actions of the Aggressor State" [9]. This legal act provides for the possibility of dissolving religious organizations if their activities, proven in court, pose a threat to national security or have an anti-state character.

In the conditions of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a number of legislative initiatives aimed at restricting or halting the activities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church were registered in the Verkhovna Rada. The issue of ensuring national security in the context of religious organizations connected to leadership centers in the aggressor state became a subject of discussion during the Committee hearings in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on May 30, 2022. As a result of the hearings, a number of key recommendations were formulated, including: the introduction of personal sanctions against representatives of the

Russian Orthodox Church, the creation of a Temporary Investigative Commission to investigate possible collaboration of religious figures during the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine, and strengthening control over the financial, economic, educational, and informational activities of religious organizations affiliated with the aggressor state [10]. Some of these initiatives are already in the process of implementation.

It was only after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the lack of public condemnation of aggression by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) that state authorities took decisive actions. Initially, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine did not extend the lease agreement with the UOC MP for the use of the Upper Lavra, allowing the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to conduct its first Christmas service in the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra since the restoration of independence.

In March 2023, the government of Ukraine initiated the termination of the lease agreement with the UOC MP for the use of the remaining buildings of the Lavra. For a month and a half, an inventory commission from the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine worked in the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, which, despite significant resistance from the UOC MP, conducted an inspection of all 79 objects.

Currently, the issue of freeing the Pochaiv Lavra from the management of the UOC MP is on the agenda. A resolution has been registered in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine calling on the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine to terminate the lease agreement with the UOC MP regarding this shrine. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Culture created a commission to verify the activities of the UOC MP at the Pochaiv Lavra. After the deoccupation of the territories, similar actions are planned for the Svyatohirsk Lavra.

Thus, the consolidated position of Ukrainian society regarding the rejection of pro-Russian activities of the UOC MP forces this church structure to make a choice: adapt its activities to the national

context or turn into a marginalized political-religious entity of a pro-Moscow character.

After the adoption of the Law "On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Sphere of Religious Organizations' Activities" by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on August 20, 2024 [11], the interfaith tension in the Ukrainian religious environment increased. This legal act prohibits the functioning of religious organizations in Ukraine that have direct or indirect connections with the Russian Federation. The main goal of the law is to ensure national security, protect the rights and freedoms of citizens, and establish a special regime for regulating the activities of foreign religious structures in Ukraine.

The law particularly emphasizes that its provisions should not be interpreted as restrictions on freedom of conscience or the right to freely practice and profess religion. At the same time, it legally prohibits the activities of foreign religious organizations registered in countries recognized as aggressors or occupying part of Ukraine's territory.

Since the Russian Orthodox Church acts as an ideological tool for the political regime of the aggressor state and is considered a subject involved in war crimes and crimes against humanity committed under the concept of the "Russian World", its activities on the territory of Ukraine are subject to legislative prohibition. Accordingly, the functioning of religious organizations affiliated with this church structure is also terminated.

The law grants the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience the authority to monitor the activities of religious organizations regarding their potential connections with the Russian Federation. In case such connections are found, the service is authorized to issue orders to eliminate the violations, and if not complied with, initiate legal procedures to cease the activities of the corresponding organization.

The High Commissioner for Human Rights of the UN Office criticized the law passed in Ukraine, which allows for the

dissolution of religious organizations affiliated with the Russian Federation, pointing out the insufficiency of the justification for its provisions. In its report, the Office argues that the proposed legislative changes impose excessive restrictions on freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, which contradicts international human rights law norms [12].

The authors of the document particularly emphasize the inadmissibility of restricting the right to freedom of religion solely on the grounds of national security. Specifically, it is noted that neither the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights nor the European Convention on Human Rights recognize national security as a legitimate basis for imposing such restrictions, unlike the provisions of the Ukrainian law. According to expert conclusions, the cessation of a religious organization's activity is a last resort, which must be based on compelling and proportional grounds, which, according to them, Ukraine has not provided [12].

The report also criticizes the provisions of the law that allow the dissolution of a religious organization due to the actions of individual members if they commit offenses that threaten state security or engage in spreading disinformation or propaganda. UN experts point out the risk of overly broad interpretation of such vague legal categories, which could jeopardize the freedom of religion and freedom of expression for entire religious communities. Special attention is given to the fact that the law allows state authorities to revoke the right to use religious property before a corresponding court decision comes into effect, which could lead to the restriction of access to religious buildings with historical and cultural significance.

In response to the comments of international experts, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine released a statement denying accusations of violating religious freedoms. According to the Ministry's position, the law does not prohibit any religious institutions operating on Ukrainian territory. Its

provisions, it is emphasized, are aimed exclusively at preventing the subordination of Ukrainian religious organizations to administrative centers located in the aggressor state or engaged in armed aggression against Ukraine, as well as religious organizations that support such aggressive actions [13].

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine stresses that the Russian Federation systematically instrumentalizes religion as a tool of hybrid warfare against Ukraine. In particular, the Russian Orthodox Church, under the control of the aggressor state, is used to legitimize violent actions against the Ukrainian people and to glorify individuals who commit crimes against humanity. In this context, the Ukrainian state sees it as its duty to protect citizens from the harmful influence of religious organizations that maintain symbiotic relations with the government structures of the Russian Federation and openly declare their intent to destroy Ukrainian statehood, national culture, and identity [14].

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasizes that the adoption of the law, which limits the activities of religious organizations affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church, is justified in a democratic society. This legislation provides for a democratic legal procedure, within which the final decision is made by the judiciary. At the same time, it is emphasized that the law is the least burdensome for believers, as it does not restrict freedom of religion, but only ensures their separation from the external influence of an enemy state.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs draws the attention of the United Nations to numerous violations by Russia of the right to freedom of religion, including the intentional killings of believers and clergy, the destruction of places of worship and shrines on Ukrainian territory, and the persecution of religious communities not affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church in the temporarily occupied territories. Therefore, the Ministry expresses hope that the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission will provide an

objective account of the situation concerning the right to freedom of conscience and religion in Ukraine, paying due attention to the crimes committed by Russia against Ukrainian believers, religious communities, and their property [15].

It is worth noting that the law itself does not contain a direct prohibition on the activities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. However, it introduces a legal mechanism that allows courts to sever the ties of religious institutions with church structures controlled by the aggressor state. Nonetheless, the new legislation has sparked a controversial response both within Ukrainian society and among the international community, primarily due to the lack of clear explanations regarding its practical implementation. This has become particularly relevant in the context of information-psychological operations and disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining Ukraine's international reputation and discrediting its policy on ensuring freedom of religion.

In this context, it would be advisable for the Ukrainian state to communicate more consistently and systematically with the international community regarding the substantive content, legal status, and strategic objectives of the new legislative act. Such communication would help highlight that the legislative initiatives are aimed exclusively at neutralizing the destructive influence of the aggressor state, without infringing on fundamental human rights to freedom of conscience and religion.

In the face of transformations in the socio-political reality in Ukraine, the need for a new format of interaction between civil society actors, state institutions, and religious organizations has become more urgent. This format should be based on the principles of openness, transparency, and participation, ensuring not only communication but also the consolidation of societal interests, formulation of common goals and tasks.

In this process, it is important to take into account a number of conceptual factors: the need to develop public policy based on the principles of the rule of law, respect for

human dignity, and non-discrimination; recognition of the potential of religious communities as institutions of civil society capable of collective self-organization; ensuring compliance with international standards of freedom of religion and belief; a systemic analysis of risks that may hinder the realization of these standards. The integration of these approaches into state-church and interfaith relations will contribute to achieving a stable dynamic equilibrium in society, increasing the predictability of political-religious processes, and effectively countering hybrid threats in the humanitarian sphere.

Conclusions. The analysis of the situation surrounding the legislative regulation of religious organizations in Ukraine amid Russia's armed aggression shows the complexity of balancing national security protection with ensuring fundamental human rights, including freedom of conscience and religion. The Ukrainian state, responding to the hybrid threats from the aggressor state, seeks to minimize the destructive influence of Russian-controlled religious structures that are used as tools of political and ideological influence. However, the adopted legislation has sparked debates within the international community

regarding its compliance with international human rights standards.

Ukraine's official position, particularly presented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, insists that the relevant legislative measures are not aimed at restricting citizens' freedom of religion, but at preventing external interference in the religious life of the state. Nonetheless, to mitigate the risk of negative international resonance, it is necessary to engage in more active and consistent communication regarding the content, legal grounds, and objectives of the reforms with international organizations and the human rights community.

In current conditions, achieving a stable political-religious balance requires a new approach to state-church and interfaith relations based on the principles of openness, the rule of law, respect for human dignity, and objective adherence to religious freedom standards. Considering the potential of religious communities as elements of civil society, as well as recognizing the possible risks to the realization of the right to freedom of religion, are key factors in forming Ukraine's resilient humanitarian policy capable of effectively countering contemporary hybrid challenges.

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