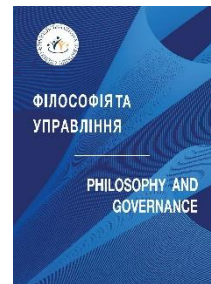




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Transformation of the religious landscape of Ukraine under the war conditions: Internal and interreligious challenges

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Research Article Received: 3 December 2024 Revised: 10 January 2025 Accepted: 13 January 2025 Published online: 23 January 2025 Copyright © 2024 by author  <i>This is an open access journal and all published articles are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)</i> DOI: 10.70651/3041-248X/2025.1.05	The article examines changes in the religious landscape of Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014 and, especially, in the context of a full-scale invasion from 2022. The annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and later Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, significantly influenced the configuration of the Ukrainian religious map. For the first time during the years of state independence and the establishment of freedom of conscience and religion, a significant decrease in the number of religious organizations and a reduction in the geography of their distribution were recorded. The situation in the religious sphere in the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories, where the collaborating authorities impose the Russian model of state-church relations and prohibit the activities of many religious communities, is separately analyzed. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to outline the current religious situation in Ukraine through the prism of changes that have occurred and are occurring in the context of the war. The study used such methods as comparative analysis, statistical review, and observation. The results of the study showed that the war accelerated the identification processes in Ukrainian society, accelerated state-confessional relations in the country, however, the principles of freedom of conscience and religion are generally observed. At the same time, after the Russian invasion, many religious communities lost their places of worship either as a result of destruction due to bombing or due to appropriation by the new “authorities” in temporarily occupied territories. Mass migration of Ukrainian citizens from dangerous regions also caused the cessation of the activities of a significant number of communities. The conclusions established that the main tension today in the religious sphere of Ukraine is related to the ambiguous position of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the reaction of its leadership to Russian aggression. At the same time, a difficult situation remains for religious communities of all directions – due to the security situation, destruction, migration of a significant number of believers, and in the occupied territories there are frequent cases of cessation of activities due to a ban, or underground activities.



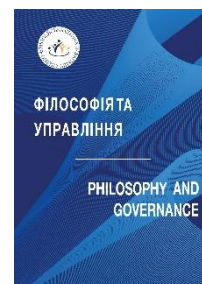
KEYWORDS

religion, war, occupation, state-church relations, freedom of conscience, freedom of religion or belief.



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Трансформації релігійного простору України в умовах війни: внутрішні та міжрелігійні виклики

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У статті досліджено зміни релігійного ландшафту України від початку російсько-української війни 2014 року й, особливо, в умовах повномасштабного вторгнення з 2022 року. Анексія Криму та окупація частин Донецької та Луганської областей, а згодом і Запорізької та Херсонської, суттєво вплинули на конфігурацію української релігійної карти. Вперше за роки державної незалежності й утвердження свободи совісті й віросповідання було зафіксовано істотне зменшення кількості релігійних організацій та скорочення географії їх поширення. Окремо проаналізовано ситуацію в релігійній сфері на тимчасово окупованих українських територіях, де колаборантські органи влади насаджують російську модель державно-церковних відносин та забороняють діяльність багатьох релігійних громад. Відтак, метою дослідження є окреслити сучасну релігійну ситуацію в Україні крізь призму змін (внутрішньорелігійних та міжрелігійних), що відбулись й відбуваються в умовах війни в середовищі як домінуючих в Україні релігій, так і міноритарних релігій. У дослідженні використано такі методи як порівняльний аналіз, статистичний огляд, спостереження. Результати дослідження показали, що війна прискорила ідентифікаційні процеси в українському суспільстві, скорелювала державно-конфесійні відносини в країні, проте, принципів свободи совісті та віросповідання в цілому дотримано. Водночас, після російського вторгнення багато релігійних громад втратили свої культові приміщення або в результаті знищення через бомбардування, або через привласнення новою «владою» на тимчасово окупованих територіях. Масова міграція українських громадян із небезпечних регіонів також стала причиною припинення діяльності значної кількості громад. У висновках встановлено, що основна напруга на сьогодні в релігійній сфері України – щодо неоднозначної позиції Української православної церкви та реакції її керівництва на російську агресію. Водночас, зберігається складна ситуація для релігійних громад усіх напрямків – через безпекову ситуацію, руйнування, міграцію значної кількості вірян, а на окупованих територіях непоодинокі випадки припинення діяльності через заборону, або ж діяльність в підпіллі.



КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

релігія, війна, окупація, державно-церковні відносини, свобода совісті, свобода віросповідання.

1. Introduction

Ukraine was among the leading countries in Europe in terms of religious organizations' freedom and freedom of conscience. However, since the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, Ukraine's religious landscape has undergone notable changes. The annexation of Crimea, the occupation of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and later Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, reshaped the country's religious map. The previously stable religious network statistics required continuous updates due to the temporary occupation of these territories. For the first time since Ukraine's independence and the establishment of freedom of conscience, a significant decline in the number of religious organizations and their geographical distribution was recorded. This primarily impacted Islamic organizations, the majority of which were Crimean Muslim communities. Orthodox religious life in Ukraine also experienced profound transformations.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, resulted in severe losses among Ukrainian believers, the destruction of religious buildings, mass migration, and the devastation of key religious centers that played a crucial role in Ukraine's spiritual life. The war accelerated identity processes within Ukrainian society and reshaped state-church relations. Across most regions of Ukraine, the state and religious organizations strengthened their partnerships, developed new forms of cooperation, and collectively worked to uphold religious pluralism and freedom of religion.

2. Literature Review

The analysis of scientific works devoted to processes in the religious sphere during the war demonstrates the relevance and importance of this issue both among scientists and among society. Thus, a systematic scientific description of the above processes takes place in the works of famous Ukrainian religious scholars A. Kolodnyi and L. Fylypovych [6; 7], O. Sagan [9], D. Bryliov [1], which reveal various aspects of the impact of the war on religious life in Ukraine, the difficulties in ensuring religious pluralism in war conditions, confessional transformations in Ukraine in the context of georeligious processes.

An extremely important component in studying the topic of changes in the religious space of Ukraine during war conditions is the use of qualitative sociological data and appropriate analytics. For many years, such data and qualitative analytics based on them have been provided by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine [2, 3], the Razumkov Center [4], and official data of the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience [5] are also used.

Given the public resonance of many processes in the religious sphere, the impact of the war on the functioning of religious communities is also being studied by journalists [10]. Despite the wide range of mentioned studies, these processes remain insufficiently studied comprehensively (in the context of studying both internal and interreligious factors of transformational processes). In particular, there is a lack of analysis not only among the dominant religious systems in Ukraine, but also among minority religions.

3. Problem Statement

The purpose of this article is a scientific study of the contemporary religious situation in Ukraine through the lens of changes that have taken place and are taking place during the war both among dominant religions in Ukraine and among minority religions. Such changes are considered in the context of both intra-religious and inter-religious factors, which are simultaneously influenced by processes related to the war.

4. Methods and Materials

The study is based on a comprehensive review of scientific works and sociological reports that relate to the current religious situation and intra-religious processes in Ukraine. Statistical data by regions of Ukraine were obtained from official state sources, such as reports of the State Service of Ukraine on Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience, as well as from data of sociological services of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine and the Razumkov Center. The

analysis of statistical data allowed us to track changes in the religious landscape of Ukraine in dynamics, and the survey of respondents allowed us to outline the attitude of the population to certain religious processes in the context of current challenges, in particular the war.

One of the important research methods was comparative analysis, which was used in studying the situation with the activities of communities of different religious directions both in the territory controlled by the Ukrainian authorities and in the temporarily occupied territories. Also, journalistic materials and investigations, data from government agencies were used to study the situation in the occupied territories.

The author's own observations, interviews with representatives of religious communities, and content analysis of electronic resources and social networks of various religious organizations allowed us to identify intra-religious processes that take place in war conditions.

5. Results and Discussion

Today on the religious map of Ukraine we have the following situation among main religious actors:

1. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) emerged relatively recently on Ukraine's religious map. Its establishment followed the 2018 unification council, which consolidated three branches of Ukrainian Orthodoxy – the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), and part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). The granting of the Tomos of Autocephaly by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2019 significantly altered the configuration of Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine. Today, the OCU enjoys the strongest support from the Ukrainian state.

2. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (UOC-MP) remains the largest Orthodox community in Ukraine in terms of numbers. Its current leader, Metropolitan Onufriy Berezovskyi, has taken a markedly different stance from his predecessor, lacking a clear pro-Ukrainian orientation. He refused to recognize the Holodomor as a genocide of the Ukrainian people, instead describing it as divine punishment. For an extended period, Onufriy refrained from acknowledging Russia as an aggressor and instead called for an abstract notion of peace, thereby equating Ukrainian soldiers with separatists and Russian invaders. Furthermore, he characterized manifestations of Ukrainian national identity, including language, as sinful. His antagonistic stance towards the OCU and his broader views on interfaith relations have contributed to tensions within the Orthodox Christian community in Ukraine.

Only under the pressures of war and growing discontent among its faithful did the leadership of the UOC-MP cautiously begin moving toward genuine autonomy from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). On May 27, 2022, the UOC-MP's local council declared the church's independence from the ROC. However, the church remains in a state of uncertainty regarding its political and religious ties with the Kremlin. Notably, Metropolitan Onufriy later condemned the Russian invasion, stating on February 24, 2022:

"The war between [Russia and Ukraine] is a repetition of the sin of Cain, who killed his own brother out of envy. Such a war has no justification either from God or from people."

Nevertheless, numerous cases of collaboration between UOC-MP clergy and the occupation authorities have raised concerns regarding the church's unified stance on the war and its spiritual and ideological ties to Moscow. Pro-Moscow Orthodox structures continue to operate freely within Ukraine, organizing religious processions under Russian flags and displaying icons of Emperor Nicholas II. These actions propagate nostalgia for the Russian Empire, dismiss Ukrainian sovereignty, and undermine national symbols. Religious communities that support Ukraine's resistance against Russian aggression are often labeled as Nazi, fascist, or even Satanic [9].

3. The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) have demonstrated strong patriotic alignment with the OCU. The UGCC's position fully aligns with the pro-Ukrainian stance of the OCU. Meanwhile, the RCC in Ukraine has taken a more definitive position in condemning Russia's aggression, which contrasts with the Vatican's more ambiguous official stance. Despite its historical adherence to Vatican policy, the RCC in Ukraine now clearly distinguishes between the aggressor and the victim in the ongoing war, reflecting a more independent and context-sensitive approach.

As of January 1, 2024, despite losses in the east and south of Ukraine, the UGCC is growing quantitatively, having 3,681 organizations against 3,510 in 2021. According to the number of registered communities, Greek Catholics have 10% of the total religious network of Ukraine [5]. Followers of Greek Catholicism before the large-scale Russian invasion numbered 8.8%. Currently, as of December 2023, according to the results of the survey, i.e. self-declaration, the number of followers of Greek Catholicism has increased to 11% [4].

4. The stance of Protestant organizations in Ukraine regarding the country's pro-European trajectory remains somewhat ambiguous. While the majority of Protestant communities support Ukraine's independence and European integration, some maintain longstanding ties with Russian educational and leadership centers, disregarding the prevailing pro-Ukrainian orientation within the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations.

Many Protestant groups advocate for peace, though their prayers often focus on general reconciliation rather than explicitly seeking Ukraine's victory in the war. They express gratitude for the opportunity to live in unoccupied territories, pray for the safety of their fellow believers in Russian-controlled areas, yet some interpret the war as divine punishment for Ukraine's perceived spiritual failings, including a lack of faith and widespread indifference to Christ.

Among Protestant denominations, Adventists and Baptists were among the last to sever ties with Russian-led Euro-Asian structures, reflecting their historically Eurasian orientation. In contrast, a distinct pro-Ukrainian stance is most evident among Christians of the Evangelical Faith (Pentecostals) and the Ukrainian Lutheran Church. The CEF Church recently published a document explicitly condemning the actions of Russian Pentecostals, whose leader, Sergey Ryakhovsky, is known to be a personal adviser to Vladimir Putin and a supporter of Moscow's aggression.

This division within Ukrainian Protestantism highlights the broader geopolitical and ideological challenges facing religious organizations amid Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine.

Protestants are poorly represented in the Armed Forces due to the religious ban on using weapons. But some of them perform chaplaincy and volunteer functions. Protestants distinguished themselves in mass evacuation of the civilian population from the regions of hostilities, in the collection and distribution of humanitarian aid to the needy, reconstruction of destroyed housing, medical aid, etc.

Having lost their places of worship, humanitarian centers, educational institutions, believers and their leaders in the war, the Protestants, due to their network nature, quickly and dynamically got involved in the restoration of liberated settlements, the reconstruction of destroyed social objects, the revival of leadership skills, and the education of a new generation of pastors. Churches help displaced persons both in Ukraine and abroad, those who remained in temporarily occupied territories.

5. Muslims of Ukraine. A noticeable uncertainty about the current war is also observed in the organizational structures of Muslims of Ukraine. The Mufti of the Muslim Spiritual Assembly of Ukraine, Ahmed Tamim, does not clearly state his condemnation of Russian aggression.

With the help of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine in Crimea, a split was carried out in the Crimean Muslim Spiritual Assembly (Mufti Emirali Ablayev eventually became a servant of Moscow) and the Spiritual Center of Muslims of Crimea was formed, located in Yevpatoria, which, later proclaimed under the name of the Crimean Muftiate, is now seeking to join the Muslim Spiritual Assembly of the Russian Federation.

Another Muslim association – DUMU UMMA showed and shows a clear pro-Ukrainian orientation. The recent mufti of this association, Said Ismagilov, is currently serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

6. Jewish organizations of Ukraine in varying degrees, but in general, take a pro-Ukrainian position. Oleksandr Dukhovny, head of the Progressive Judaism Center, announced his anti-Moscow orientation. Moshe Asman, the chief rabbi of Ukraine, who heads the All-Ukrainian Congress of Jewish Hasidic Religious Communities, actively supports the Ukrainian side in the war.

7. Other minority religious communities mainly based on the ideas of universality, global human brotherhood, unity, non-politics and non-contextuality, and now in the situation of military aggression are forced to revise their neutral approaches, but they do it too slowly and uncertainly [7].

The main tension today in the religious sphere of Ukraine among the authorities and society is regarding the ambiguous position of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) and the reaction of its leadership to Russian aggression.

Both the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) have historically promoted the concept of Slavic unity, both institutionally and through individual clergy. Crucially, while the UOC-MP has been nominally “self-governing,” it has

traditionally remained under the jurisdiction of the ROC. The Tomos of the ROC formalized this subordination, ensuring that the UOC-MP adhered to the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate. Meanwhile, the Russian Orthodox Church itself has long been regarded as an unofficial extension of the Russian state.

In response to the ROC's endorsement of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine, the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) of Ukraine passed the Law "On Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Field of Religious Organizations" [11], which bans the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine and prohibits any affiliation between Ukrainian religious organizations and the ROC. The legislation was supported by 265 Members of Parliament.

The law is grounded in provisions of the Ukrainian Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights, which protect freedom of religion, conscience, and association while allowing for legal restrictions in cases concerning national security or the protection of citizens' rights and freedoms. The law explicitly states that it does not infringe upon the freedom of religion, religious beliefs, or the right to observe religious practices and rituals. However, it prohibits religious organizations affiliated with the aggressor state from operating in Ukraine, particularly those that directly or indirectly support Russia's war against Ukraine.

Effectively, the ROC has been banned as a foreign religious entity in Ukraine, along with any form of subordination, affiliation, or institutional ties to it. However, the dissolution of a Ukrainian religious organization connected to the ROC must follow a judicial process, ensuring compliance with both Ukraine's Constitution and European legal standards. This approach prevents unilateral state intervention and reinforces due process.

The law outlines a step-by-step procedure for enforcing the ban. The State Service of Ukraine on Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience or the Ministry of Justice must first submit documentation and a religious expert opinion verifying the affiliation of a Ukrainian religious organization with the ROC. The organization in question is then given an official order and a nine-month period to sever these ties. If the organization fails to comply, the case proceeds to court, where a final ruling is made regarding its legal status.

The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations has formally endorsed the legislative initiative, supporting the ban on ROC-affiliated religious organizations within Ukraine. The only objections at this stage come from Russian representatives and their affiliates.

1,502 religious communities have joined the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) from the UOC of the Moscow Patriarchate since 2018. Since 2018 – the creation of the OCU, subordination in canonical and organizational matters to the religious centers (management) of the OCU was changed in 2018 – two religious communities of the UOC MP; in 2019 – 319 communities; in 2020 – 30; in 2021 – 25; in 2022 – 496; in 2023 – 471; from the beginning of 2024 – 159 communities. At the same time, there is no information on the number of liquidated (non-active) religious organizations of the UOC MP [1].

According to the report on the network of religious organizations, as of January 1, 2024 (according to the data of regional state (military) administrations), there were 10,919 religious organizations of the UOC MP in Ukraine, of which 51 were religious centers/offices, including 10 586 communities (6,037 of them legal entities) and 214 monasteries (104 women's and 110 men's); 34 brotherhoods; 17 spiritual educational institutions (11 secondary and six higher). As for the OCU, as of January 1, 2024, there were 8,295 religious organizations operating in Ukraine, of which 56 were religious centers/administrations, which included 8,075 communities (3,400 of which were legal entities) and 87 monasteries; 16 fraternities; 26 spiritual educational institutions (13 secondary and 13 higher) [5].

In the occupied Ukrainian territories, the collaborating authorities imposes the Russian model of state-church relations, asserting the church monopoly of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), ignoring the religious needs of Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, representatives of new and non-traditional religions.

The actions of religious leaders in Russian-occupied areas require detailed examination, as they may serve as a predictor of future developments should Russia's invasion of Ukraine succeed. Beyond the geopolitical and strategic advantages of controlling Crimea, the justifications for its annexation were framed in traditional religious rhetoric. Russian President Vladimir Putin invoked the shared spiritual heritage of the region to legitimize both the annexation and his support for pro-Russian separatists, particularly through the narrative of "Holy Rus." Following the annexation in March 2014, he stated:

"Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined

the overall basis of the culture, civilization, and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.” This spiritualized justification reinforces Putin’s broader ideological claim that Ukraine is not merely a neighboring state but an integral part of Russia’s historical and cultural sphere, effectively treating it as Russian territory or even property [6].

Within Russian-occupied territories, the Kremlin officially recognizes only select religious affiliations: Orthodoxy (Moscow Patriarchate), Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism. Religious minorities, particularly those perceived as sectarian, face systematic discrimination, interrogation, arrest, torture, intimidation, and property seizures. Victims of these repressive policies include minority Protestant groups, Mormons, Buddhists, Greek Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and evangelical Christians. Religious institutions that fail to register under Russian authorities risk bans, fines, or the confiscation of places of worship and other religious property [10].

These patterns of religious persecution in occupied territories highlight the broader authoritarian model of state-controlled religion in Russia, where religious loyalty aligns with political loyalty. This approach signals potential future repression should Russian forces expand their territorial control in Ukraine. After the Russian invasion, many communities lost their places of worship, meeting buildings and other religious activities, either as a result of destruction due to bombing or due to appropriation by the new “authorities” in the temporarily occupied territories for their administrative needs. The mass migration of Ukrainian citizens from dangerous regions caused the stopping of activities of the vast majority. Members of the communities had to leave their places of permanent residence, and at the same time their religious centers, move to other regions of Ukraine or abroad.

An extremely difficult situation for religious communities is in the occupied territories. Many religious communities under occupation were forced to either cease their existence or go underground. Many communities were left without property: churches and houses of worship were destroyed or the occupation authorities used them for their own needs. Most often, churches and houses of worship are converted into barracks, offices, or gyms.

For example, the activities of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are prohibited in the occupied territories. Their religious buildings are adapted to the needs of the occupying power. Russian propagandists have repeatedly reported on the closure and repurposing of the kingdom halls of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Ukraine after the banning of this organization following the example of Russia [8]. The occupying authorities of the Russian Federation also apply the practice of administrative punishments “for missionary activity” against any religious organizations.

Some denominations and religious movements that operate legally in Ukraine (as well as in most countries of the world) are considered extremist organizations in Russia (Jehovah’s Witnesses, Church of Scientology, Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars).

According to the Institute of Religious Freedom, repression against representatives of various faiths continues in all occupied territories. Not only the Orthodox, but also other religious organizations present there became “martyrs” for the faith. Another recent trend is the raiding of property of Protestant communities and “non-traditional” religious communities [10].

But in Ukraine, in general, it can be stated that the level of civic responsibility (identity) is growing strongly. And today, 73.5% of Ukrainians named civic identity as a priority, while slightly more than 4% named the priority of religion [3].

In the territories under the control of the Government of Ukraine, religious communities, which are free in their development, like many other public or volunteer organizations, have focused their activities, in addition to directly religious ones, on supporting the Armed Forces and war victims [2].

6. Conclusions

It has been established that in conditions of full-scale war, the main challenges in the religious sphere related to external factors are:

- some communities now have no place to hold gatherings, as their religious buildings have been destroyed as a result of shelling and bombing of settlements, or joint gatherings are simply dangerous due to the frequent threat of shelling;
- in the occupied territories, their activities are either prohibited or dangerous due to the occupation authorities’ failure to comply with the principles of religious freedom or direct persecution, seizure, arrests, etc.

The main internal challenge is that no accurate information about how many believers have left Ukraine and how many have already returned. According to author's surveys in religious communities, due to the war about 40% have become temporarily displaced, having left their homes and places of worship in search of safety, and more than 20% of communities are currently in regions occupied by Russian forces.

The main interreligious and social tension today is related to the ambiguous position of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the reaction of its leadership to Russian aggression, also the unwillingness of this Church to comply with the norms of the Law "On Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Field of Religious Organizations."

So, we may conclude that Ukraine has the following tasks in the religious field related to the war:

- to resolve the issue with the UOC of the Moscow Patriarchate, many of whose representatives continue to support the war and collaborate with the occupiers. After that, the question of unifying Ukrainian Orthodoxy will arise;
- to solve the security concerns of religious communities both during and after the war. Restore the ability to work for those communities that stopped operations during the war;
- to bring back a large number of believers from migration.

Ultimately, the role of religious organizations in establishing a lasting peace after the war will be crucial. But it will be possible only after we'll stop Russian aggression and resolve mentioned problems in the religious sphere that arose during the war.

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