

Stumbling Lavra: Moscow Patriarchate vs. Ukraine

Tetiana Derkach, Religious Analyst, Co-founder of the Center for Religious Security and Cerkvarium online outlet

Olena Kifenko, translator

The most resonant news in Ukraine in the winter of 2023 was undoubtedly the vicissitudes surrounding the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). Its churches were searched by the Security Service of Ukraine, its bishops and priests were threatened with prison, the police prevented parishioners from holding services in churches, and church leaders and monks were evicted from Ukraine's main monastery, the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra. To those unfamiliar with the religious situation in Ukraine, this could seem like the beginning of a large-scale persecution by authorities of an unwanted church. However, a significant part of society supported these actions against the UOC-MP. What was the logic behind the Ukrainian authorities' actions and how legitimate are these actions in the religious field?

The origins of the conflict

For more than 30 years after the collapse of the USSR, the UOC-MP enjoyed a privileged position in Ukraine. It had the largest number of followers and access to the main Orthodox shrines, the Kyiv-Pechersk and Pochaiv Lavras. This gave the church an opportunity to influence numerous believers and authorities, as well as social and political processes in the country.

However, due to its openly pro-Russian activities, the moral authority of the UOC-MP began to decline. It was no longer perceived as a purely religious organization and was suspected of being a network of Russian agents. The Russian-Ukrainian war was the key moment determining the fate of this church as the independent state of Ukraine faced the problem of survival.

In 2022, the situation became critical, and the authorities urgently began investigating activities in favor of Russia among high-ranking officials, bureaucrats, and the UOC-MP. Although the UOC-MP leadership publicly condemned Russia's actions after the full-scale invasion, many church representatives justified the aggression and even cooperated with the Russian invaders. This raised questions about the legitimacy of the church management using the cultural monuments of the Kyiv-Pechersk and Pochaiv Lavras.

The importance of lavras for Ukraine

Lavras are Eastern rite Christian monasteries that have great spiritual and cultural significance. There are only 13 monasteries in the world with the lavra status, five of which are [located in Ukraine](#). All are state historical and architectural heritage sites. Three Orthodox monasteries, particularly Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra (in Kyiv, existing since 1051), Pochaiv Lavra (Ternopil Oblast, established in 1597), and Sviatohirsk Lavra (Donetsk Oblast, first mentioned in 1526), were in use by the UOC-MP.

Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra is of key importance to believers. It is now included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. Monks founded the shrine in the 11th century. A large number of ancient exhibits and church relics, which believers consider miraculous, are kept on site, and the relics of revered Orthodox saints rest in ancient caves. Therefore, the monastery's affiliation with the UOC-MP automatically gave this church a symbolically dominant status.

How the Moscow Patriarchate monopolized the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra

It is not surprising that the UOC-MP was administrating the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra. Because of Ukraine's colonial past as part of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, only the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was dominant. In 1990, shortly before Ukraine declared its independence, the Russians created an autonomous branch, the UOC-MP, which took over the right to use the shrine. In fact, the monastery became the headquarters of the UOC-MP leadership.

Gradually, the state transferred a growing number of monuments on the territory of the ancient monastery to the UOC-MP for free use. Most of the property was [acquired](#) between 1994 and 2013 when open supporters of the ROC, Presidents Leonid Kuchma and [Viktor Yanukovych](#), were in power. At that time, the UOC-MP was proud of its canonical affiliation with the ROC and the fact that the entire government and a significant number of officials were its parishioners.

After Euromaidan in 2013-2014, ties with Russia became toxic and officials stopped openly lobbying for the UOC-MP. However, this church retained great influence on the believers, and the state did not review the legality and expediency of its presence in the Lavra.

Religious procession or protest rallies?

For many years, the UOC was considered the largest religious organization in Ukraine by a number of registered communities. The church clergy's enormous influence over the flock has been used for political purposes, for example, in [presidential](#) and [parliamentary](#) elections or to prevent Ukraine from [joining NATO and the European Union](#). In 2011, activists of pro-Russian Orthodox organizations under the wing of the UOC-MP [called on](#) Ukraine's then President Viktor Yanukovych to prevent integration into "an alien and hostile Western civilizational and state structure, the European Union." Patriarch Kirill of the ROC gave a blessing to Yanukovych's presidency, whose work was "to strengthen the Russian World." In the same [appeal](#), the ROC demanded that Yanukovych grant their church a dominant status in Ukraine. In effect, the ROC was calling for a violation of the constitutional right to freedom of worldview and religion and legislation on freedom of conscience and religious organizations. "The church with more than 1,000 years of history, which formed the genotype of our people, to which the vast majority of them still belong, should not have the same rights and status as all other denominations, especially newly formed sects."

The UOC-MP's religious processions have always resembled political rallies. During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, UOC-MP believers held protests against vaccination and quarantine. A crowded religious procession was organized in the Lavras without observing sanitary requirements, forcing law enforcement to [open criminal cases](#). Several monks died in the [Kyiv-Pechersk](#) and [Pochaiv](#) Lavras. Subsequently, the shrines closed for quarantine.

There are many such cases. The UOC-MP has been constantly presenting itself as one of the most influential forces with a multi-million-dollar protest resource: an obedient flock. And it was thanks to the numerous UOC-MP supporters that the "Russian World" ideology spread across the country, giving Putin confidence that Ukrainians would support his aggression.

What the Security Service of Ukraine found

Under these circumstances, the Security Service was forced to act. There were legitimate reasons for this: [the long-term spread of the "Russian World" ideology](#), the use of [hate speech](#) against other religious organizations, and ultimately, support for Russian aggression against Ukraine. As a result of these investigations, [criminal proceedings were initiated](#) against 61 clergymen suspected of [collecting intelligence for the Russian Federal Security](#)

[Service](#), [adjusting enemy fire](#) (and this was [not an isolated case](#)), and promoting [pro-Russian propaganda](#) under religious cover. They were accused of violating the equality of citizens on religious grounds, calling for a change in the constitutional order, encroaching on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and justifying Russian aggression. In none of these cases are they accused of having the “wrong” religion.

How the UOC-MP lost its Lavra

The results of these investigations gave the state moral arguments to terminate the monastery use agreements with the UOC-MP. There are also legal grounds, such as misuse of property or lack of maintenance. The state’s claims against the UOC-MP have been accumulating for years and mainly concerned violations related to building management, storage of property and museum artifacts of religious use, and large-scale illegal construction. Museum workers have [repeatedly raised the alarm](#) that under the leadership of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra abbot, Metropolitan Pavlo, monks destroyed ancient buildings, barbarically drove piles for new construction, and even set up a vegetable garden above the caves, which caused flooding. Pavlo responded to all the claims with [curses and accusations of Satanism](#).

A journalistic [investigation in 2017](#) revealed that the monks had rebuilt many historic structures without permits and illegally erected new household and commercial buildings. In 2018, an inventory commissioned by the Ministry of Culture [found](#) 10 items missing. At the same time, [publications appeared](#) about commercial activities on the shrine’s territory. The last state audit began in 2022 and Metropolitan Pavlo tried to block it to hide the findings. The first inspections revealed dozens of [illegal buildings](#), and many of the facilities were in [poor condition](#). [Further](#), the monastery’s guards were using the ancient doors of the 18th-century shrine as a target for throwing knives.

Metropolitan Pavlo believes that the monastery is [the property of the church](#), not the state. Yet he is silent about his actions to [establish control](#), by force, over most of the sites of the ancient monastery: “We were simply taking them away.” It looked like squatting, but the state was forced to officially register the objects seized by the monks. Only now do the authorities have the political will to end this sad story.

Pavlo was eventually [suspected](#) of inciting inter-religious hatred and justifying Russia’s armed aggression. He was placed under house arrest. It is likely that additional charges may be brought related to the actual destruction of the monastery.

The UOC-MP fought fiercely for its dominance and numerous privileges, but the reality was clear. Despite all the church leaders’ threats, the Ukrainian authorities were forced to respond to the UOC-MP’s many years of destructive activity. This included saving shrines from destruction, protecting the country’s national security during the war, restoring the rule of law, and supporting the equal rights of believers of different religious faiths.