

Ukraine Baptist says ban not a threat to religious freedom

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KYIV, Ukraine (BP)—A bill allowing Ukraine’s courts to outlaw Orthodox churches that maintain ties with Russia does not threaten religious freedom in Ukraine, a key Ukrainian Baptist leader asserted.

Rather, the law would provide a system for Ukraine’s government, as well as lay members of Orthodox churches, to learn whether any church leaders covertly are supporting Russia’s war efforts, said Igor Bandura, vice president of the All-Ukrainian Union of Associations of Evangelical Christian-Baptist.



Elijah Brown (left), general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, and Igor Bandura, vice president of the Baptist Union of Ukraine, stand behind a pulpit made from a missile shot down over Ukraine. (Photo from Twitter)

“It’s not a question of religious freedom, but it is a question of national

security, and here (on matters of national security) the state can react,” Bandura told Baptist Press. “We are not talking about the danger of religious persecution in Ukraine, because for us, religious freedom is very important.

“As Baptists, we still witness that Ukraine has religious freedom. We carefully are following (the proposed law’s) development.”

At issue is a bill that would allow Ukraine to forbid any religious organization that maintains its spiritual or administrative center in a country of aggression, in this case Russia. The bill passed Oct. 19 is the first of two required procedural votes in Ukraine’s lower house of parliament, and it is subject to a second draft, which must also pass Parliament and be signed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky before becoming law.

At that point, the state would have the authority to investigate churches, monasteries or seminaries on suspicion of supporting Russia’s war effort. Bandura said any action against a church or other religious organization would be subject to the courts and the appeal process culminating in Ukraine’s Supreme Court.

Brent Leatherwood, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, lays the blame on Russia for any attack on religious liberty in Ukraine the war has wrought.

“Under the Ukrainian constitution, citizens are guaranteed a right to freedom of religion. That should always be the standard, regardless of circumstances. Individuals have a right to order their lives according to their religious convictions,” Leatherwood said.

“Russia ending its attempt at conquest and respecting the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine would be a good way to ensure all Ukrainians have that freedom.”

Two Orthodox churches in Ukraine

The bill under consideration exists because Ukraine has two Orthodox churches—the Orthodox Church of Ukraine-Moscow Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The latter, historically affiliated with Constantinople, is autonomous.

Both are called the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, but importantly have different affiliations. Some Moscow Patriarchate churches do not include that designation in their names, Bandura said, making it difficult to distinguish them from autonomous Orthodox Church of Ukraine congregations.

“In their documents, and this is what they (Moscow Patriarchate churches) insist, they cut any relationship with Russia, and they are self-governing—which most Ukrainians don’t believe,” Bandura said.

Bandura cautioned Southern Baptists and other Americans not to believe “Russian propaganda” painting Ukraine as a persecutor of religious groups.

“We should be aware that Russia tries to use this to speak against Ukraine and to paint Ukraine and the Ukrainian president specifically to the United States as the enemies of religious freedom and initiators for religious persecution,” Bandura told Baptist Press.

“From our perspective, we say, ‘No, we have religious freedom for all churches and religious organizations, except this one, because they are playing this big game and still stay connected to Moscow, which is unacceptable to most Ukrainians, because Russia started the war against us, and their basic idea is to (commit) genocide (against) us as a nation.’”

Some priests from the Moscow Patriarchate openly supported Russia in the war, and some were arrested before fleeing to Russia.

“Since the beginning of the war, a group of priests from Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate was arrested for spreading their Russian propaganda,” Bandura said. “And later on, many of them were recognized as those who have Russian citizenship also.”



Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow, on Jan. 7, 2021. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

Leatherwood points specifically to Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church based in Moscow.

“Since this illegal and ghastly campaign of terror by Russia began, thousands of innocent lives have been lost and hundreds of religious sites have been destroyed by the Russian military,” Leatherwood lamented.

“As we have seen in the Ukrainian regions currently under Russian control, religious freedom has been largely extinguished, particularly for evangelicals in those areas. And these actions have been supported by Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is nothing short of morally reprehensible.”

Not all Moscow Patriarchate churches are believed to support Russia’s war efforts. There are more than 10,000 Moscow Patriarchate churches in

Ukraine, and some of their members are Ukrainian soldiers, Bandura said.

Moscow Patriarchate churches are included in the 25-year-old All Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, as are the autonomous Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the All-Ukrainian Baptist union, and Jewish, Muslim and other religious groups.

“We have a very open, sincere and trusted relationship. And all together, we have been dealing with this issue,” Bandura said of the diverse churches. Ukraine’s Parliament consulted the council about two years ago for the churches’ reaction to such a bill before it was submitted.

“Our position was very clear. We are standing against any religious persecution and any limitation in Ukraine,” Bandura said. “But in government, (it) would concern and include cases which are not religious freedom issues, but national security issues.”

The All-Ukrainian Union of Associations of Evangelical Christian-Baptist represents about 2,200 churches and is a member of the Baptist World Alliance, and Bandura is a member of the BWA General Council.