

# Ukrainian bill bans Russian-linked faith groups

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(RNS)—On Aug. 20, the Ukrainian Parliament passed a [long-anticipated bill](#) that will ban the activities of churches deemed to be affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church or supporting the Russian invasion.

The legislation, expected to be signed into law soon by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, explicitly bans religious institutions subordinate to leaders based in Russia.

Even some supporters of Ukraine see it as an overstep in the name of national security, a violation of religious freedom and a potential risk to continued foreign military aid.

The clear target of the law is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with its historical ties to Moscow.

The church declared itself independent of the Moscow Patriarchate three months after the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, but many still suspect at least some of the church leadership has loyalties to Russia.

“The government in Kyiv wants to see the conduits of Russian influence in Ukrainian society totally minimized,” said Andreja Bogdanovski, an author, scholar and analyst of Orthodox Christianity.

Ahead of the vote, [Zelenskyy said](#) the law would “guarantee that there will be no manipulation of the Ukrainian Church from Moscow.”

“This draft law must work and must add to Ukraine the unity of the cathedral, our real spiritual unity,” he added.

## Recent Ukrainian Church history

Historically, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has been the largest faith group in Ukraine. However, the country's Orthodox Christians found themselves split in 2019 when a newer religious body—the Orthodox Church of Ukraine—was recognized as canonical and fully independent of Moscow under the blessing of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The OCU, which now represents the majority of Orthodox Christians in Ukraine, formed in part from parishes resisting Russian control during Ukraine's independence movements at the beginning and end of the 20th century.

In the wake of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and support of separatist militias in the Donbas region, the OCU was bolstered by Ukrainian clergymen who felt that Ukrainian Orthodox Christians needed a religious body divorced from Moscow's Patriarch Kirill.



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

Kirill long has been a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin and has justified Russia's aggression in spiritual terms.

The law, once signed, would equip the Ukrainian government to set up a commission to investigate religious institutions across the country. The commission then would have nine months to provide a list of those deemed subordinate to Russian institutions.

Ukraine's largest organization of religious bodies, the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, which represents Christian, Jewish and Muslim groups, endorsed the draft law in an [Aug. 17 statement](#), praising the effort "to make it impossible for such organizations to operate in our country."

Those that sever their ties to Russia during that period will be allowed to continue to function.

What constitutes a tie and an appropriate level of separation have not yet been specified. These details are what in part delayed the legislation's approval for more than a year and a half after Zelenskyy first endorsed its draft.

Iryna Herashchenko, the first deputy chairwoman of the Ukrainian Parliament, hailed the bill's passing as a "historic vote."

Parliament "has passed a bill banning the aggressor country's branch in Ukraine. 265 MPs voted FOR! This is a matter of national security, not religion," she [announced on X](#).

## **Voices of dissent**

Despite the broad support inside Ukraine, the bill has been criticized by some Orthodox leaders, including those from populaces that support Ukraine against Russian aggression.

Bulgaria's newly elected Patriarch Daniil sent a letter of support to Metropolitan Onufriy, the primate of the UOC. The Bulgarian church does not recognize the OCU as canonical, but the church and government have expressed support for Ukraine in the war.

"You have resisted and continue, with God's help, to resist all attempts to create disunity, preserving the unity, integrity, and canonicity of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church," Patriarch Daniil wrote.

Onufriy also received letters of support from the heads of the Antiochian and Georgian Orthodox churches. Both jurisdictions have issued statements shy of condemning Patriarch Kirill's role in Russian aggression.

But the bill also has been blasted on religious freedom grounds by many observers and is expected to be challenged as Ukraine moves closer to joining the European Union.

"It's very hard diplomatically to reconcile this law with Ukraine's European ambitions," said Samuel Noble, a scholar of Orthodox Christianity at Aga Khan University in London.

"This is the kind of thing that will wind up being brought to Strasbourg, that is, the European Court of Human Rights."

"It's not normally the kind of thing that one does in a country aspiring to join the European Union. On the other hand, Ukraine is not in a normal situation," he added.

Smilen Markov, a Bulgarian scholar of Orthodox Christianity, put it more bluntly: "The Ukrainian state is violating religious freedom. It declares a religious community pro-Russian, which is legally problematic, divisive and ruinous."

Regina Elsner, the chair of Eastern churches and ecumenism at the

University of Muenster's Ecumenical Institute, [posted on Twitter](#) that the legislation's approval is "deeply disturbing."

"This law opens a door to serious violations of religious freedom and new fragmentation within Ukraine," she said. "The amendments of the last months did not improve anything. Hate and violence against UOC believers get public approval. Sad."

Since the outbreak of full-scale war, Ukraine has jailed more than 100 UOC priests over charges of espionage and anti-Ukrainian speech, including posting opinions on social media and speaking from the pulpit.

The Russian Orthodox Church in particular has sought to use such religious freedom concerns to garner sympathy for the UOC and cast doubt on Western aid to Ukraine, which has been crucial for the Ukrainian defense.

"The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is being subjected to reprisals for its refusal to join the organization of schismatics and self-ordained peoples, created as a political project aimed at destroying the common spiritual heritage of Russian and Ukrainian peoples," said Vladimir Lagoida, a spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church, on Telegram.

"There is no doubt that the persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church will sooner or later receive a fair assessment, just as the godless regimes of the past received it, destroying the human right to faith and to belong to their Church."

The UOC has ceased to commemorate Patriarch Kirill in prayers and has said it is not bound by the decisions of the Holy Synod of the Moscow Patriarchate.

"In Orthodox Church logic, that's effectively a declaration of independence," Noble said. "Even from the Russians' perspective, officially on paper, the UOC is autonomous in all things, except for Onufriy's seat on

the Synod of the Moscow Patriarchate, which he has more or less disowned.”

Still, many Ukrainians remain deeply suspicious of the UOC. In 2021, 18 percent of religious Ukrainians identified as members of the UOC, but months after Russia’s full-scale invasion, that dropped to just 4 percent, [according to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology](#).

The same poll found OCU membership increased from 34 percent to 54 percent. In addition, hundreds of Orthodox congregations have switched allegiance from the UOC to the OCU, according to church records, but few monks, traditionally seen as sources of authority in the church, have followed.

“Of course, it is true that the hierarchy of the UOC is partly pro-Russian,” Markov noted. “The allegations about ties with Moscow are often factually correct.

“However, these perpetrations are personal, and they should be proved case by case,” he added. “They cannot be blamed on a religious community of millions of Ukrainians.”