

# THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS OF UKRAINE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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## Abstract

In Ukraine, over the years of independence, a diverse religious environment has formed based on the legislatively guaranteed right to freedom of conscience and religion and the principle of religious pluralism. This environment consists not only of individual religious organizations but also of interfaith institutions, which play a significant role in Ukraine's development and contribute to resolving important societal issues. Their existence is compelling evidence of churches' strengthened position, the growing social role of religion, and the increased activity of religious organizations within Ukrainian society. Interfaith councils, which engage in a broad range of interests and activities, have facilitated connections between religious organizations and the government, drawing the attention of state structures and the public to pressing social and religious-church issues. In Ukraine's multi-confessional society, characterized by a high level of religious adherence, the state system can function effectively through active interaction and cooperation between government bodies and civil society institutions, which include religious organizations and interfaith associations. Interfaith associations, especially the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, have provided significant support to state bodies in developing religious-church life and protecting the interests of believers from various confessions. Closely interacting with state authorities, this council has become an influential civil society institution that responds promptly to events and challenges within Ukraine. Its activities are directed towards harmonization of church relations, the development of religious life based on principles of tolerance and mutual respect, the reduction of interfaith tensions within Ukrainian society, and the realization of Ukraine's European civilizational choice.

**Keywords:** religion, religious organizations, interfaith association, religious pluralism, state-church relations, tolerance, interfaith relations.

## Introduction

The proclamation of Ukraine's independence in 1991 led to significant changes in state-church and interfaith relations. The building of the Ukrainian state was accompanied by the introduction of democratic principles into the religious-church sphere. These principles granted Ukrainian

citizens rights and freedoms they did not have under the Soviet totalitarian regime. The formation and functioning of a democratic system became one of the conditions for securing the fundamental human right to freedom of conscience and religion. Inheriting from the Soviet Union a nearly devastated religious sphere, the independent Ukrainian state managed to normalize state-church relations on fundamentally new grounds and lay the foundations for its own religious policy.

Democratic transformations in Ukrainian society led to an active revival of religious life. This revival manifested itself in the increase in the number of believers and the expansion of religious networks, the confessional diversity of the religious environment, growing public interest in religion and trust in the church, the rising authority of clergy members, the church's increased influence on socio-political processes, and the expansion of social service and charitable activities, among others. Religious organizations, gradually transforming into authoritative and influential social institutions, gained the ability to impact the course of events and processes, the views and beliefs of various elites, the behavior of the broader population, and the preferences of believers.

Religious organizations gradually established contacts and relationships with state institutions and their leaders, participated in political events and actions, and responded to events occurring in Ukraine. They sought to strengthen their positions, increase public trust, build their structures, and expand their religious networks. Religious organizations aimed to influence the formation and implementation of a religious policy within the Ukrainian state that would allow for the integration of religious principles, values, and ideals into public life.

## **The Main Material and Results**

With Ukraine's proclamation of independence, the state faced the task of establishing relations with religious organizations and addressing interchurch conflicts that affected large parts of its territory. The first step in creating a new model of state-church relations, interfaith understanding, and reconciliation was holding the All-Ukrainian Interfaith Forum on November 19-20, 1991, in Kyiv. Representatives of 13 religious associations attended, including Orthodox, Catholics, Greek Catholics, Protestants of various denominations, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Muslims, Jews, and Karaites.

Forum participants worked together to develop mechanisms for building state-church and interfaith relations within the new socio-political conditions. A proposal was developed to guarantee every citizen the right to freely practice their religion, for state authorities not to interfere

in the internal life of religious organizations, to support religious organizations with access to worship facilities, and to avoid hostility and violence in resolving disputes between religious organizations. The forum participants issued appeals to the *Verkhovna Rada* of Ukraine and to Ukrainian believers.<sup>1</sup> The movement toward developing state-church relations and interfaith reconciliation in Ukraine soon began to take on organizational forms, resulting in the creation of various interfaith institutions.

The first interfaith association in Ukraine, renewed in 1991, was the Ukrainian Bible Society, which included 17 collective members. Its primary purpose was the translation and dissemination of the Bible and biblical books in various languages for the public. Today, the Ukrainian Bible Society is a member of the international association, United Bible Societies, which comprises 141 societies operating in 200 countries.

Also among the first interfaith institutions was the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO), established in 1996, initiated by President Leonid Kuchma. Today, it includes 19 members, including leaders from Orthodox churches, Greek Catholic churches, Roman Catholic churches, Protestant churches, Islam, and Judaism. From its inception, the AUCCRO united denominations that represented 90-95% of Ukraine's believers.<sup>2</sup>

As defined in the AUCCRO's charter, its purpose is to unite the efforts of churches and religious organizations of various denominations for Ukraine's national and spiritual revival, coordinate interchurch dialogue in Ukraine and abroad, participate in drafting legislative and other regulatory acts on state-church relations, and conduct collective charitable activities.<sup>3</sup> Patriarch Filaret, one of its members, summarizes it as: "Ukrainian denominations united in the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations to promote religious freedom and build a democratic society."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Звернення учасників Всеукраїнського міжрелігійного форуму до Верховної Ради України. [Address of the participants of the All-Ukrainian Interreligious Forum to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine]. *Православний вісник*, 1992, № 2, 2.

<sup>2</sup> П. Калашник. Всеукраїнська рада церков і релігійних організацій, її місце і роль в розвитку державно-церковних відносин. [The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, its place and role in the development of state-church relations]. *Актуальні проблеми державно-церковних відносин в Україні*, 2001, 187–194.

<sup>3</sup> Положення про Всеукраїнську раду церков і релігійних організацій. [Regulations on the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations]. *ВРЦіРО*. <http://vrciro.org.ua/ua/documents/13-polozhennyapro-radu>.

<sup>4</sup> Всеукраїнська рада церков відзначила своє 20-ліття. [The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches celebrated its 20th anniversary]. *IPC*. [http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1758%3A1&catid=34%3Aua&Itemid=61&lang=u](http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1758%3A1&catid=34%3Aua&Itemid=61&lang=u)

A key focus of the AUCCRO has been the development of interchurch dialogue to achieve interfaith understanding and reconciliation, and to maintain interfaith peace. Through joint efforts between the AUCCRO and Ukrainian authorities, the level of interchurch conflict related to resolving organizational, personnel, property, financial, economic, legal, and other issues has significantly decreased. In the early 1990s, over a thousand Ukrainian towns were affected by interchurch conflict; by early 2003, this number had dropped to about 100, with no cases of open religious conflict involving force since 2002.

Since its inception, the AUCCRO has not ignored any socially significant events. Its members have collectively voiced the views of Ukraine's religious community on current socio-political issues, communicating them to the country's leadership. The AUCCRO has prioritized Ukraine's sovereignty, integrity, the establishment of social peace and harmony, and the building of relations with the international community based on equality and partnership. AUCCRO members have advocated for Ukraine's unity, condemned attempts to divide it along religious, national, or regional lines, and highlighted the nation's issues, such as poverty, ostentatious wealth, entrenched corruption, moral and spiritual crises, legal nihilism, and unjust judicial practices.<sup>5</sup>

The AUCCRO has put considerable effort into developing state-church relations based on partnership and expanding communication with authorities. A key method for achieving this has been systematic meetings between AUCCRO members and top Ukrainian officials, where both current and strategic issues of state-church relations and various socio-political problems were discussed.

To broaden communication between religious organizations and central executive bodies and to strengthen mutual trust, the AUCCRO has established relations and signed cooperation documents (agreements, memoranda, statements) with several ministries (information, foreign affairs, defense, internal affairs, culture, health, education and science, youth and sports, social policy, justice, regional development, construction, and housing services), other central executive bodies, and Ukrainian state authorities (the State Committee on Religious Affairs of Ukraine, the National Expert Commission on Public Morality, the State Penitentiary Service of Ukraine). Public

<sup>5</sup> Звернення Всеукраїнської ради церков і релігійних організацій з нагоди 20-річчя відновлення державної незалежності України. [Address of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the restoration of state independence of Ukraine]. ВПЦіПО. <http://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements/160-zvernennya-z-nagody-20-richchya-vidnovlennya-derzhavnoyi-nezalezhnosti-ukrayiny>

councils and working groups were also established for cooperation with churches and religious organizations.

During the events of the Maidan in 2013–2014, churches effectively sided with Ukrainian society, which had engaged in mass civil resistance actions. Statements supporting the actions of the government and President V. Yanukovich were voiced only by a few individual hierarchs. Overall, the churches firmly condemned the use of force against the peaceful Maidan. Monasteries and churches in Kyiv provided shelter, protection, and assistance to protesters. During violent clashes, clergy positioned themselves between the opposing sides, urging security forces not to follow unlawful orders and not to use weapons against civilians. The AUCCRO made every effort to facilitate dialogue between the authorities, the opposition, and the Maidan. Thanks to its efforts, negotiations were held between V. Yanukovich and opposition representatives, ultimately leading to the signing of an agreement on February 21, 2014, aimed at resolving the socio-political crisis in Ukraine. Thus, during the Maidan events, the churches demonstrated their role as powerful and unified institutions of civil society capable of protecting citizens' interests from government abuses.

In the context of the occupation and annexation of Crimea by Russian forces, the churches stood in defense of peace, Ukraine's territorial integrity, and sovereignty. On March 1, 2014, the Federation Council of Russia adopted a resolution granting the Russian president the right to use military forces on Ukrainian territory. By March 2, the AUCCRO had issued a statement urging the Russian authorities to refrain from military intervention and calling on the international community to do everything possible to preserve peace in Ukraine and protect its territorial integrity and sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> The AUCCRO devoted significant attention to legislative activities, including drafting and publicly discussing bills on issues critical to the state and society, particularly those related to religious life. On July 10, 2015, it published a draft of its proposed amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine, aimed at ensuring the right to freedom of conscience and religion, establishing partnership relations between the state and church, and promoting traditional spiritual and moral foundations and family values in Ukrainian society. The AAUCRO

<sup>6</sup> Заява Всеукраїнської ради Церков і релігійних організацій у зв'язку з рішенням Ради Федерації Федерального Зібрання Російської Федерації від 1 березня 2014 року. [Statement of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations in connection with the decision of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation dated March 1, 2014.]. *Офіційні документи Української Греко-Католицької Церкви*. <https://docs.ugcc.ua/1352/>

also expressed readiness for its representatives to participate in the work of the Constitutional Assembly.<sup>7</sup>

The AUCCRO supported government initiatives to improve the national healthcare system, implement medical reform in Ukraine, develop medical legislation, promote healthy lifestyles, and improve the physical health of the Ukrainian population. It condemned the spread of HIV/AIDS, alcoholism, and smoking in Ukrainian society and urged state authorities to restrict the advertising of alcohol and tobacco products and to ban their use in public places.<sup>8</sup> To prevent the trade in human organs, this council successfully lobbied the *Verkhovna Rada* of Ukraine to include a provision in the Law on Transplantation of Organs and Other Human Anatomical Materials, requiring donor consent for transplantation.

The AUCCRO unanimously and strongly opposed the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) by the *Verkhovna Rada* of Ukraine. Members felt that it distorted the understanding of gender equality as equality of rights between men and women, contained threats to public morality and family values, and impacted the upbringing of the younger generation. In an appeal to Ukraine's highest state bodies, the AUCCRO proposed that, instead of ratifying the convention, the country should develop its own domestic legislation on countering domestic violence and establish a state body focused on family and child support.<sup>9</sup> A survey conducted by the Rating Sociological Group in 2020 showed that the AUCCRO's stance on marriage and family issues aligned with the views of a significant portion of the Ukrainian population, who held conservative-traditional views on family structure and relationships.

Another important area of the AUCCRO's work has been strengthening the material foundation of religious organizations, including improving conditions for their activities, providing religious communities with worship buildings, introducing a moratorium on their privatization, reducing utility tariffs, improving taxation for their activities, exempting worship buildings from

<sup>7</sup> Пропозиції Всеукраїнської Ради Церков і релігійних організацій щодо змін до Конституції України. [Proposals of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations regarding changes to the Constitution of Ukraine]. *ВРЦіПО*. <http://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements/437-uccro-proposals-for-constitution-of-ukraine>

<sup>8</sup> Звернення Всеукраїнської Ради Церков і релігійних організацій щодо морально-етичного змісту рекламної продукції в Україні. [Address of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations regarding the moral and ethical content of advertising products in Ukraine]. *ВРЦіПО*. <http://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements/18-zvernennya-vrciro-shchodo-moralno-etychnogo-zmistu-reklamnoyi-produkciyi-v-ukrayini>

<sup>9</sup> Рада Церков закликає депутатів не ратифікувати Стамбульську Конвенцію. [The Council of Churches urges the deputies not to ratify the Istanbul Convention]. *ВРЦіПО*. <http://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements/499-uccro-against-ratification-of-istambul-convention>

property tax, waiving fees for reserving land plots for worship buildings, and granting religious organizations non-profit status. In line with Ukraine's obligations to the Council of Europe, AUCCRO members recommended that the state leadership take a comprehensive approach to the issue of returning worship buildings and other property to religious organizations.

Over the years, the AUCCRO has become one of the largest and most influential civil society institutions in Ukraine, playing a vital role in resolving significant issues related to state-church relations. It has also become a key factor in Ukraine's socio-political life. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the AUCCRO appealed to Ukrainians to follow the orders of the Ukrainian state and military authorities, and expressed strong support for the Armed Forces of Ukraine and all defenders who stood up to protect Ukraine from the aggressor.<sup>10</sup>

During a meeting of the AUCCRO on April 6, 2022, Ukrainian religious leaders unanimously adopted a statement regarding the facts of genocide against the Ukrainian people committed by Russian forces in the Kyiv region. In addition, during the meeting, heads and representatives of Ukrainian denominations exchanged views on legislative proposals aimed at banning the activities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP). Some members of the AUCCRO believe that the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on Ukraine is as dangerous as other forms of Russian aggression. As a result, the AUCCRO decided to address the Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine with a request to initiate a public discussion of draft laws No. 7204 and No. 7213, involving the leaders of relevant committees, representatives of different parliamentary factions, and the public. This approach, in the opinion of the AUCCRO, will help find a balanced solution to protect Ukrainian believers from the harmful influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, which justifies the war to destroy the Ukrainian people and effectively acts in the interests of the Russian invaders, while preserving religious freedom in Ukraine.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Звернення Всеукраїнської Ради Церков і релігійних організацій у зв'язку з військовою агресією Росії проти України. [Address of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations in connection with Russia's military aggression against Ukraine]. *БПЦіПО*. <https://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements/uccro-address-regarding-russian-military-aggression-against-ukraine>

<sup>11</sup> Рада Церков закликає визнати факт геноциду Українського народу російською армією. [The Council of Churches calls to recognize the fact of the genocide of the Ukrainian people by the Russian army]. *БПЦіПО*. <https://vrciro.org.ua/ua/events/uccro-calls-for-recognition-of-the-fact-of-genocide-of-ukrainian-people-by-russian-army>

On August 16, 2024, the members of the AUCCRO held a meeting with President of Ukraine, V. Zelensky, during which they discussed the protection of religious freedom and Ukraine's spiritual independence, the protection of constitutional order and public safety, human rights, and fundamental freedoms in the context of abuse by the aggressor country. As a result of the meeting, the AUCCRO emphasized that it categorically condemns the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has become an accomplice in the bloody crimes of Russian invaders against humanity and openly advocates the destruction of Ukrainian statehood, culture, identity, and the Ukrainian people themselves. The AUCCRO supported the legislative initiative to ban the activities of religious organizations connected with the Russian Orthodox Church and condemned the actions of the UOC MP, declaring that it had become an accomplice in the bloody crimes of Russian invaders against humanity. The statement also emphasized that the main threat to religious freedom in Ukraine is Russian aggression, which has resulted in the occupation forces killing dozens of clergy and destroying hundreds of churches.<sup>12</sup>

A unique feature of the AUCCRO, as stipulated in its charter, is the requirement for all decisions to be made through consensus. This approach ensures that the AUCCRO's members have a unified stance on the issues they address, though it complicates the admission of new religious associations. Some religious groups in Ukraine, including certain Orthodox, Protestant, Muslim, and Jewish organizations, still have tense relations with each other, and several denominations (such as Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Islam, and Judaism) have multiple competing leadership centers. Under these conditions, achieving a consensus on admitting new members to the AUCCRO is challenging, as even one current member can block the entry of an entire religious association. The limitations of this membership mechanism have been highlighted by repeated unsuccessful attempts by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine "Ummah," Jewish community associations, and other religious groups to join the AUCCRO. Despite many religious associations wishing to participate in the AUCCRO's activities and work with the state on religious policy, they have been unable to gain membership, as the interfaith organization "has no intention of expanding its membership."<sup>13</sup> The established procedure for admitting new members to the

<sup>12</sup> Заява членів Всеукраїнської Ради Церков і релігійних організацій. [Statement by members of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations]. *ВРЦіРО*. <https://vrciro.org.ua/ua/news/statement-by-members-of-the-ukrainian-council-of-churches-and-religious-organizations>

<sup>13</sup> О. Саган. Всеукраїнська Рада релігійних об'єднань як складова громадянського суспільства України. [The All-Ukrainian Council of Religious Associations as a component of the civil society of Ukraine]. *ВРРО*.



AUCCRO not only puts the others at a disadvantage compared to its current members. Current members of the Council are in a privileged position compared to those who are not members, which does not align with the principles of equality of religions, beliefs, and religious organizations before the law, religious pluralism, and non-interference by one religious organization in the activities of another. Therefore, the admission of new members to the AUCCRO should be completely open to all religious associations wishing to join.

The complex admission mechanism has led to the formation of alternative interfaith associations in Ukraine with similar goals and objectives. One such organization is the Ukrainian Interchurch Council (UIC), established in May 2003. Its membership includes 21 religious associations, primarily Protestant organizations, as well as the Kharkiv-Poltava Diocese of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. The UIC's main objectives include promoting the state-building processes in Ukraine, drafting legislative initiatives to improve state-church relations, social protection, and charity; fostering interfaith dialogue; coordinating the activities of churches, religious associations, and missions; reviving, preserving, and implementing Christian values in Ukrainian society; engaging in spiritual and cultural-educational activities; and protecting and upholding the interests of Christian religious organizations.<sup>14</sup>

The UIC, like other religious organizations, responded sharply to the socio-political events in Ukraine from late 2013 to early 2014. It condemned separatism, supported the preservation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, peace, and stability, and called for an end to the incitement of discord between the Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking populations of Ukraine. The UIC also opposed the deployment of Russian military forces in Ukraine.<sup>15</sup> In its address to co-religionists in Russia and CIS countries, the UIC identified the true reasons behind the Ukrainian people's protests: rampant corruption, usurpation of power, judicial corruption, collusion between the authorities and criminal elements, and other forms of lawlessness and social injustice. It also debunked myths spread by Russian propaganda about ethnic, linguistic, political, and religious persecution, as well as alleged mass repression of Russians, Jews, and other minorities.

<http://vro.org.ua/about/6-vseukrajinska-rada-religijnikh-ob-ednan-yak-skladova-gromadyanskogo-suspilstva-ukrajini.html>

<sup>14</sup> Про УМР. [About UMR]. *УМР*. <https://umrada.org/aboutus/>

<sup>15</sup> Звернення Головуючого Української Міжцерковної Ради у зв'язку із сепаратистськими проявами та загрозою застосування збройних сил Російської Федерації в Україні. [Address of the Chairman of the Ukrainian Interchurch Council in connection with separatist manifestations and the threat of the use of the armed forces of the Russian Federation in Ukraine]. *УМР*. <http://umrada.org/02-03-2014-zvernennya-golovuyuchogo-ukrayinskoyi/>

The UIC declared its stance on the role of the church in the Ukrainian state and society. In a statement, it emphasized that the church always advocates for the country's spiritual and socio-economic development, peace and stability, legality and law and order, equality and justice, and respect for human rights and freedoms.<sup>16</sup>

The UIC condemned attempts to legalize soft drugs and advocated against their spread in Ukraine. Additionally, its members called for the preservation of family, moral, ethical, and spiritual-cultural values of the Ukrainian people as a foundation for a healthy society and a strong state, and supported the Ukraine Without Orphans Alliance. The UIC developed and proposed a strategy for Ukraine's society to overcome its spiritual and moral crisis and to develop spirituality and moral-ethical culture from 2015 to 2025. The UIC also addressed other current issues related to socio-political life, state-church, and interfaith relations in Ukraine, and issued several statements, appeals, and resolutions.

In December 2003, a declaration was signed to establish another interfaith institution—the Council of Representatives of Christian Churches of Ukraine (CRCCU). The establishment of the CRCCU was driven by the leaders of Christian churches in Ukraine recognizing the need for joint efforts to defend freedom of conscience and religion, as well as to align the positions of the Churches in the area of state-church relations. These processes were somewhat intensified by the joint efforts of the churches in 2002–2003 to prevent the adoption of the Law of Ukraine "On Amendments to the Law of Ukraine 'On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,'" which was proposed by the Cabinet of Ministers and contained a number of provisions unacceptable to the vast majority of denominations. It was at this time that certain shortcomings of the AUCCRO became apparent, particularly its dependence on the State Committee of Ukraine for Religious Affairs, as well as the need to establish closer contacts between Christian churches in Ukraine. As a result of these processes, on December 2, 2003, the Council of Representatives of Christian Churches in Ukraine was formed as a representative interfaith consultative advisory body. This council includes representatives from nine Christian denominations, including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Evangelical, and Lutheran churches. The primary mission of this organization is to promote Christianity and religious freedom

<sup>16</sup> Декларация Української Міжцерковної Ради. [Declaration of the Ukrainian Interchurch Council]. *UMP*. <http://umrada.org/deklaratsiya-umr/>

in Ukraine, to foster and deepen interfaith dialogue, to strengthen ties between Christian churches, and to combat lack of spirituality, immorality, and other negative social phenomena.<sup>17</sup>

This Council of Christian Churches discussed issues related to the development of legislation on freedom of conscience and religious organizations. In solidarity with the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, it sent an appeal to President Yanukovich, urging him to veto proposed amendments to the Law of Ukraine “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,” but the president did not respond.

Additionally, in its appeal to Ukrainian parliamentarians, this interchurch council supported a proposal to exempt religious organizations from land tax and raised the issue of restricting alcohol and tobacco advertising. The leaders of the religious associations in the Council of Representatives of Christian Churches of Ukraine also issued a joint address to the *Verkhovna Rada* of Ukraine and participants in parliamentary hearings on “Ukrainians Abroad: Current State and Prospects for Cooperation,” concerning the situation of Ukrainian labor migrants. Overall, the result of the CRCCU’s activities was the adoption of documents by the leaders of Christian Churches in Ukraine on matters of spirituality, public morality, and significant socio-political events in the country. These included, in particular, an Address to the Ukrainian people on the 70th anniversary of the Holodomor in Ukraine (1932-1933), an Address to lawmakers regarding proposals to introduce new methods of registering individuals in Ukraine, and an Address to the state and the Ukrainian people on the protection of human life.

The CRCCU held meetings with the heads of the Ministry of Education of Ukraine and the Ministry of Health of Ukraine, where issues of cooperation with these government bodies were discussed. Leaders of Christian denominations, in an open letter to the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine and other central executive authorities, expressed their concern about the spread of AIDS and HIV in Ukraine and initiated the development of a comprehensive educational program for their prevention among the population.<sup>18</sup>

On January 10, 2024, a meeting of the heads and authorized representatives of Christian churches in Ukraine took place, during which a Statement of the Christian Churches of Ukraine

<sup>17</sup> Народа представників християнських церков України. [Meeting of representatives of Christian churches of Ukraine]. *PICV*. [https://risu.org.ua/ua/index/reference/major\\_religions/~НарадаПХЦУ/33310](https://risu.org.ua/ua/index/reference/major_religions/~НарадаПХЦУ/33310)

<sup>18</sup> Відкритий лист глав християнських церков щодо методів профілактики поширення ВІЛ/СНІД серед населення. [An open letter from heads of Christian churches regarding methods of preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS among the population]. *IPC*. [http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=681%3A1&catid=50%3AZv&Itemid=78&lang=uk](http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=681%3A1&catid=50%3AZv&Itemid=78&lang=uk)

condemning the aggressive ideology of the “*russskiy mir*” was adopted. The meeting was held in the updated format of the Council of Representatives of Christian Churches of Ukraine, chaired by the senior bishop of the Ukrainian Church of Evangelical Christians, Anatoliy Kozachko.

The meeting was attended by the leaders and authorized representatives of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine, the All-Ukrainian Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, the Ukrainian Church of Seventh-Day Adventists, the Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church, the Ukrainian Evangelical Church, and the Ukrainian Lutheran Church.

In their statement, the church leaders supported the call of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations to international interfaith organizations regarding the issue of holding the Russian Orthodox Church morally and otherwise accountable. The Russian Orthodox Church has been actively supporting Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, fueling interethnic and interfaith hostility, and, through the promotion of the “*russskiy mir*” ideology, inciting the genocide of the Ukrainian people.<sup>19</sup>

In April 2006, the Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Ukraine (CEPCU) was established, comprising 12 associations, including Baptists, Adventists, Pentecostals, and Lutherans. The purpose of establishing the CEPCU was to unite the efforts of evangelical Protestant churches to protect the principles of freedom of conscience and religion, equal rights for religious organizations, and to promote Christian values and morality within Ukrainian society. In addition, the Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Ukraine calls to jointly defend the interests of the Ukrainian people in order to prevent restrictions on freedom of conscience and other basic human rights, which are protected not only by the Constitution of Ukraine, but also by international treaties, in particular by Articles 9 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>20</sup>

The founders of the CEPCU saw the need to initiate dialogue between churches to foster interfaith understanding and harmony in society, establish relationships, and coordinate actions in promoting evangelical truths, developing a common stance at interfaith, state, and international

<sup>19</sup> Звернення християнських церков України щодо засудження агресивної ідеології “русского міра”. [Appeal of the Christian churches of Ukraine regarding the condemnation of the aggressive ideology of the “Russian Peace”]. *Інститут релігійної свободи*. <https://www.irs.in.ua/p/176>

<sup>20</sup> РЄПЦУ закликає владу не допустити злочину проти гідності людини. [CEPCU calls on the authorities to prevent crimes against human dignity]. *РЄПЦУ*. <https://repcu.org/2019/11/27/appeal-about-0931/>

levels, and building partnerships with the government, its agencies, local self-government bodies, and public organizations in the sphere of Ukraine's spiritual revival.<sup>21</sup>

Demonstrating concern for the current socio-political issues in Ukraine, the CEPCU expressed its stance on politics in one of its statements. It emphasized that churches should not be involved in political activities, and that religious organizations and believers should not be used to achieve political goals.<sup>22</sup> In an address on the occasion of the *Verkhovna Rada* elections (October 2014), the CEPCU urged voters to support candidates who uphold Christian values, protect Ukraine's national interests, promote economic development, pass fair laws, and combat corruption. It also warned against any temptation to sell one's vote or falsify election results.

The CEPCU adopted an Appeal to its compatriots to fight corruption, calling it an “internal enemy,” a “deadly epidemic,” and a consequence of the lack of “healthy spiritual orientations” in the nation. The CEPCU urged Ukrainian Christians to pray for “the healing of the government and the people,” noting that “current and future generations of Ukrainians will highly appreciate political will and transparent actions in reforming the judiciary, permitting system (the set of regulated legal relations that arise between authorities, administrators, and business entities in connection with the issuance, re-registration, or termination of documents), local self-government, and other vital components of the state.”<sup>23</sup> In a Resolution dedicated to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the evangelical Protestant churches expressed their position on significant issues of religious-church and socio-political life, stating that a “spiritually reborn individual is the guarantee of a strong church, and a strong church is the guarantee of a healthy and successful state.”

The Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Ukraine strives to operate on an international level, expanding connections with foreign political, public, and religious leaders. This was evidenced by a visit of its delegation to Finland (October 2019), where they held meetings with the leadership of the Christian Democratic Party and the Evangelical Alliance of Finland.

<sup>21</sup> Декларація про утворення Ради Євангельських Протестантських Церков України. [Declaration on the formation of the Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Ukraine]. *РЄПЦУ*. <http://repcu.org/2011/11/04/391/#more-391>

<sup>22</sup> Заява Ради Євангельських Протестантських Церков України відносно неприпустимості втягування Церков у політичну діяльність. [Statement of the Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Ukraine regarding the inadmissibility of involvement of Churches in political activity]. *РЄПЦУ*. <http://repcu.org/2010/04/21/заява-ради-євангельських-протестант/#more-325>

<sup>23</sup> Звернення членів Ради Євангельських Протестантських Церков України про боротьбу з корупцією. [Address of members of the Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Ukraine on the fight against corruption]. *РЄПЦУ*. <http://repcu.org/category/звернення/>

In 2007-2008, the All-Ukrainian Council of Christian Churches (AUCCC) was formed, comprising leaders and representatives of the Spiritual Councils of regional Protestant associations. The All-Ukrainian Council of Christian Churches was created as a public platform designed to unite the existing spiritual, cultural, and intellectual potential of the evangelical churches of Ukraine for the formation of a common position and the implementation of Christian initiatives aimed at reforming Ukrainian society. It also seeks to review and further develop the social doctrine on the role of the Church in shaping social relations and the development of the state and society. The primary goal of this association is to promote a Christian worldview, coordinating both religious and secular activities of regional centers, and strengthening the spirituality and morality of Ukrainian society.<sup>24</sup>

In April 2009, the Council of Representatives of Spiritual Administrations and Centers of Muslims of Ukraine was established under the State Committee of Ukraine for Nationalities and Religions. Later, it was renamed the “All-Ukrainian Council of Spiritual Administrations and Centers of Muslims – Council of Muftis of Ukraine” (AUCSACM). Due to another reorganization in 2011 of the State Agency for Religious Affairs, this council continued its activities as an independent association. Unlike other councils, it was a mono-confessional entity. By the time the AUCSACM was established, four Muslim Spiritual Administrations and centers were functioning in Ukraine: the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine, the Spiritual Center of Muslims of Ukraine, and the Regional Administration of Independent Muslim Communities of Ukraine "Kyiv Muftiate." Outside these institutions, there were dozens of independent Muslim communities that were dissatisfied with the religious direction, ideological principles, spiritual leaders, and the conflictual relationships between the existing Spiritual Administrations. This is why the leaders of the independent Muslim communities formed a new Spiritual Administration through voluntary unification into a single centralized structure.

Among the main tasks of the AUCSACM is representing the interests of Muslim believers, ensuring their right to freedom of conscience and religion, and developing proposals for government structures on improving state-church relations and religious-church life in Ukraine. The All-Ukrainian Council of Spiritual Administrations and Centers of Muslims—the Council of

<sup>24</sup> В. Бокоч. Взаємозв'язок суспільно-політичних і релігійно-церковних трансформацій в Україні. [Interrelationship of socio-political and religious-church transformations in Ukraine]. Дис. ... доктора політичних наук за спеціальністю 23.00.02 – Політичні інститути та процеси. Одеса, 2014, 196.

Muftis of Ukraine—announced its complete openness to the participation of all Muslim organizations in Ukraine in its work.

The AUCSACM activities focus on forming a Muslim community in Ukraine, achieving understanding and mutual respect among Muslim organizations, advocating for the interests of Ukrainian Muslims both within the country and abroad; fostering cooperation among various spiritual administrations and centers, coordinating their activities, interacting with Ukrainian government bodies, and promoting mutual respect among representatives of other confessions. One of the AUCSACM’s activities is the distribution of quotas established by Saudi Arabia among spiritual administrations and centers to facilitate the annual pilgrimage (*Hajj*) of Ukrainian Muslims to the holy places of Islam. The AUCSACM actively supports the idea of translating the Quran into Ukrainian and promotes its implementation.<sup>25</sup>

In January 2017, another interfaith institution appeared in Ukraine – the All-Ukrainian Council of Religious Associations (AUCRA). It was founded by six religious communities: the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine “Ummah,” the Apostolic Orthodox Church in Ukraine, the National Spiritual Assembly of Bahá’ís of Ukraine, the Association of Sons and Daughters of Ukraine of Rukh Ruvira, the Religious Association of Progressive Judaism Communities of Ukraine, and the Center for Krishna Consciousness Communities. Among the founders of this interfaith association was the Ukrainian Association of Religious Studies, significantly enhancing its intellectual potential. The AUCRA’s creators believed that despite the existence and activities of various interfaith councils, “the potential of many religious associations in Ukraine remains unexplored or is used ineffectively.”<sup>26</sup> The AUCRA declared its goal as uniting the efforts of religious communities not involved in the interfaith movement in the national-spiritual revival of Ukraine; building interfaith relations based on tolerance, coordinating interfaith dialogue, participating in the development of legislative drafts on state-church relations and religious-church life; conducting collective charitable activities; and protecting religious freedoms in Ukraine.

Members of the AUCRA view it as a platform for the broad involvement of all religious communities in the social and public life of the country. According to its Charter, not only religious

<sup>25</sup> Уперше в Україні створена рада, яка об’єднає мусульман країни. [For the first time in Ukraine, a council was created to unite the country's Muslims]. *Іслам в Україні*. <http://islam.in.ua/ua/novini-u-krayini/upershe-v-ukrayini-stvorena-rada-yaka-obiednaie-musulman-krayini>

<sup>26</sup> В. Бокоч. Взаємозв’язок суспільно-політичних і релігійно-церковних трансформацій в Україні. [Interrelationship of socio-political and religious-church transformations in Ukraine]. Дис. ... доктора політичних наук за спеціальністю 23.00.02 – Політичні інститути та процеси. Одеса, 2014, 197–198.

associations but also individual communities, as parts of other religious entities, can join its activities. As Sheikh Said Ismagilov, Mufti of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine “Ummah” emphasized, “The All-Ukrainian Council of Religious Associations demonstrates openness to other religious groups for the sake of a broad national dialogue.”<sup>27</sup>

Since 2001, Ukraine has seen the activities of a specialized interfaith organization, the Ukrainian Interfaith Christian Mission “Spiritual and Charitable Care in Places of Imprisonment,” which now includes 11 Christian religious organizations. The Christian Mission is part of the international Prison Ministry Association, which operates in 100 countries worldwide. Representatives of the Christian Mission in Ukraine have repeatedly appealed to the State Department of Penitentiary Affairs to conduct regular church meetings to improve the quality of ministry. They proposed the creation of a commission, which would include three representatives of the Mission, to study the aspects of religious ministry in places of detention. The uniqueness of this organization in Ukraine lies in the fact that it consists not of individuals, but of churches that carry out religious ministry in correctional facilities. The Mission closely cooperates with the State Penitentiary Service of Ukraine, provides chaplaincy services, ensures pastoral care for prisoners, and helps foster Christian values among the service's personnel. Although the Mission has a limited impact on socio-political life and state-church relations, it plays an important role in its field.<sup>28</sup>

Since the beginning of the armed aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and Russia's intervention, the Mission's churches have maintained unity and developed collaborative interactions in prison ministry, cooperating with state authorities and institutions. This has been manifested in spiritual and humanitarian support for the needs of prisoners and personnel, especially when, with the onset of the full-scale war in 2022, the supply system for Ukraine's penitentiary institutions was disrupted. Given the circumstances of the military actions and the inability to ensure the rights of prisoners in territories not controlled by the Ukrainian authorities, representatives of the Mission's churches called on the Ukrainian government to apply amnesty to those categories of prisoners for whom this is possible. For institutions in territories controlled by the Ukrainian authorities, they

<sup>27</sup> 20 березня в Укрінформ відбувся Круглий стіл, який закликає до міжрелігійного діалогу. [On March 20, Ukrinform hosted a round table calling for interreligious dialogue]. *BPPPO*. <http://vrrro.org.ua/round-table-opendoors.htm>

<sup>28</sup> Українська міжконфесійна християнська місія “Духовна та благодійна опіка в місцях позбавлення волі”. [Ukrainian Interdenominational Christian Mission “Spiritual and Charitable Care in Places of Imprisonment”]. *ЛІГАЗакон*. <https://ca.ligazakon.net/document/26169564/dossier>



proposed developing a mechanism for the release of convicted citizens through the institution of pardons and conditional early release.<sup>29</sup>

All interfaith councils share the aim of advocating not for specific confessions but for a broad dialogue on significant socio-political and religious-church issues in Ukraine. The activities of such associations in Ukraine yield positive results in addressing pressing issues in the relationship between state and religious organizations. At the same time, the existing interfaith and interdenominational associations represent the majority, but not the full spectrum, of active religious organizations in Ukraine. The consolidation of efforts within the religious community for the joint productive resolution of current issues in the relationships between the state and religious organizations, the protection of religious freedom, social activities, and so on, largely depends on the initiative and social responsibility of denominations, as well as the maturity of civil society in Ukraine.

However, there are certain differences among the councils in principles, directions, forms, and methods of activity, membership processes, and decision-making. Some interfaith organizations have distinct procedures for admitting new members. While the AUCCRO aims to limit its membership expansion, others, in contrast, declare openness and invite religious organizations to join. As a result, the interests of various confessions are unevenly represented in these councils. Moreover, some religious associations are members of multiple councils, while others do not belong to any. In the context of the multi-confessional nature of Ukrainian society, it is important for interdenominational councils to carry out their activities based on the principles of equality and equal rights, as well as a tolerant attitude towards the internal teachings, worship practices, and traditions of all religious organizations operating in Ukraine.

The growing number of interfaith associations and the expansion of their activities signal the development of the interfaith movement in Ukraine but also contribute to its fragmentation and weakening. This raises the question of the optimal number of interfaith councils and the coordination of their activities.

<sup>29</sup> Українська міжконфесійна християнська місія “Духовна та благодійна опіка в місцях позбавлення волі” оприлюднила спільну декларацію. [The Ukrainian interfaith Christian mission “Spiritual and charitable care in places of deprivation of liberty” published a joint declaration]. *Інформаційний ресурс Української Греко-католицької Церкви.*  
[https://archives.ugcc.ua/news/ukrainska\\_mizhkonfesiyna\\_hristiyanska\\_misiya\\_duhovna\\_ta\\_blagodiyna\\_opika\\_v\\_mistyah\\_pozbavlennya\\_voli\\_oprilyudnila\\_spilnu\\_deklaratsiyu\\_96989.html](https://archives.ugcc.ua/news/ukrainska_mizhkonfesiyna_hristiyanska_misiya_duhovna_ta_blagodiyna_opika_v_mistyah_pozbavlennya_voli_oprilyudnila_spilnu_deklaratsiyu_96989.html)

Leaders of some interfaith formations are gradually realizing the need for closer cooperation and uniting efforts to achieve socially significant goals. For example, representatives of the All-Ukrainian Council of Christian Churches (AUCCC), the Ukrainian Interchurch Council (UIC), and the Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Ukraine (CEPCU) held a joint meeting to discuss the place and role of religion and the church in forming and strengthening the spiritual foundations of Ukrainian society.

Additionally, at a meeting of leaders of Protestant religious movements and Ukrainian public figures, an initiative was announced to form a broad union of churches, religious, and public organizations into a unified civic movement called the “All-Ukrainian Sobor.” Its purpose was to support the country’s independence and unity and to address the challenges facing the Ukrainian state and society. The main task of this interfaith organization was to unite citizens around the idea of Christian development in Ukraine, affirm Christian values, and promote a healthy lifestyle. However, the increase in interfaith institutions is not seen as a promising trend. The future of the interfaith movement is not in further differentiation into specific parts or confessions, but in the integration of interfaith associations into a powerful organization representing the interests of the entire Ukrainian religious community, not just specific parts or confessions. In this context, it would be productive to bring to public discussion the creation of an interfaith association—the “All-Ukrainian Religious Council”—with participation from representatives of all religious communities in Ukraine, with free and equal access. Establishing such a council could unite and significantly strengthen the interfaith movement in Ukraine, reduce fragmentation, avoid duplicate efforts among councils, and foster deeper dialogue between the government and the church, facilitating the timely resolution of issues in state-church relations.

## **Conclusions**

The activities of interfaith associations fully align with the Law of Ukraine “On the Principles of Domestic and Foreign Policy,” which lists the restoration of a full-fledged dialogue between representatives of various religious confessions among the main principles of domestic policy in the humanitarian field. However, interdenominational tensions in the religious environment have increased following the adoption of the Law “On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Field of Religious Organizations” by the *Verkhovna Rada* of Ukraine on August 20, 2024, which

prohibits the activities of religious organizations linked to Russia on Ukrainian territory. The purpose of the law is to protect national and public security, human rights and freedoms, and to define the specificities of the activities of foreign religious organizations in Ukraine. The text of the document emphasizes that no provision of the law can be interpreted as restricting the freedom of religion or beliefs, or the right to observe religious practices and rituals.

The law stipulates that the activities of foreign religious organizations that are based in a country recognized as one that has committed or is committing armed aggression against Ukraine and temporarily occupies part of Ukraine's territory are prohibited. Given that the Russian Orthodox Church is ideologically linked to the aggressor state, complicit in war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the name of Russia, and the ideology of the "Russian world," its activities in Ukraine are banned.

The law provides that the activities of religious organizations affiliated with a foreign religious organization whose activities are prohibited in Ukraine must be terminated. The law mandates the Ukrainian State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience to examine religious organizations for any potential connections to Russia. If such connections are found, the service must initially issue a directive to rectify the violations, and if these connections persist, the service will seek a court order to terminate the organization's activities.

Therefore, the law does not explicitly ban the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP). It introduces legislative changes aimed at facilitating the court-based prohibition of Russian Church structures and establishes a mechanism for severing religious organizations' ties with Russia. However, the law has caused division within Ukrainian society and the international community, which has not received clear explanations regarding its implementation, especially given the ongoing disinformation campaign against Ukraine, particularly focusing on this law. The Ukrainian government should have better informed the international community and clarified the mechanisms aimed at countering the harmful Russian influence without undermining freedom of religion in the country.

Interfaith institutions have helped address issues such as establishing partnerships in state-church relations; improving Ukrainian legislation on religion and the church; enhancing the religious situation in Ukraine and achieving a high level of religious freedom; overcoming church conflicts, reducing interchurch tensions, and achieving interfaith peace and understanding; the national and cultural revival of Ukraine; protecting the spirituality and public morality of the

Ukrainian people; combating a lack of spirituality and immorality; strengthening the physical and moral health of the Ukrainian nation; promoting a healthy lifestyle; fostering interfaith cooperation in the social sphere; improving Ukraine's image on the international stage; supporting European integration; and countering Russian aggression against Ukraine. Since their establishment, interfaith associations have developed a broad interfaith dialogue aimed at achieving understanding and peace between different religions and have supported government bodies in addressing pressing issues in socio-political and religious-church life in Ukraine.

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