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BRIEF OBSERVATIONS OF THE GENERAL TRAJECTORY OF WESTERN MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

The article attempts to analyze the general trajectory of Western media coverage of the religious environment in Ukraine. Recently, the religious situation in Ukraine has become one of the strategic issues of national security, since it is relevant and important in the light of not only the religious, but also the political context of Ukraine. The study examines the journalistic activity of Western publications about the religious transformations of Ukraine from 2019 to 2023. This encompasses the intensity of the rapid confessional changes in Ukraine, the style of the journalistic text under study, the intensity of their media representation, and the peculiarities of Western publishing. As sources of information, data on open Internet resources, as well as publications in the Western press and blogs are used. The key representations of the Ukrainian religious situation in the American and European mass media are analyzed, and a media context is found in which a specific interpretation of religious issues is proposed, taking into account intense transformational components. The influence of the work of several popular Western media, in particular, the Pulitzer Center, ContactUkraine, ukrainetrek.com, U.S. Department of State, United States Institute of Peace, and others, regarding the Ukrainian religious and political environment is considered. Special attention is drawn to the state reaction to the aggressive influences of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), in particular, and is referred to by the modern press under the stamp "Moscow Patriarchate" (MP) and is recognized as the pro-Russian and at the same time the largest religious community represented on Ukrainian lands. A political and socio-religious analysis of the processes that took place in Ukraine during the specified period is compiled. The relevance of the research topic is due not only to the widespread public interest and involvement in the waves of confessional shifts, but also to the revealed political instability of church life. This was presented by Western media for the European and American target audiences and was not associated with the UOC-MP and today's religious trends. Therefore, we consider it peculiar that the reflection by journalists of Western publications forced the Ukrainian state apparatus to have influences on a hostile religious institution. Accordingly, consideration of the content of foreign publications is important for the further development of the image of the modern world religious discourse.

Keywords: religion in Ukraine, Western media about religion in Ukraine, religious information, interfaith conflict, UOC-MP, OCU.

Formulation of the Problem

The stated problem of covering the religious situation in the media is defined and confirmed by the fact that in recent years the religious tension in Ukraine has become one of the strategic issues of national security, actively covered both in domestic media and in Western media. The study of the current topic is relevant and important in the light of not only the religious, but also the political context of Ukraine. Major events related to the religious situation in Ukraine include an internal confessional dispute between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) (Kyiv Patriarchate). As a result of this conflict, which began back in 2014, the Ukrainian OCU was recognized as autocephalous and received support from many Western countries. The religious situation in Ukraine is also being actively discussed in the context of its influence on the country's political situation. These religious communities and their leaders play a special role in shaping public opinion and have a great influence on political decisions. In addition, much attention is paid to such issues as religious freedom, tolerance, religious extremism, and the role of religion in wars and conflicts in Ukraine. The article allows one to learn about various aspects of religious life in the country through the eyes of Western publishers. It also broadens the understanding of the social and political situation and contributes to a deeper understanding of the many social and political processes taking place in Ukraine.

Analysis of Recent Publications

Ukrainian researchers from different angles approach the study of the problems of coverage of Ukraine in foreign mass media. For example, O. Samorukova, considering the reflection of the processes of democratization in Ukraine in foreign media, draws attention to the general interest of the latter in various processes in “the external appearance of the country on the pages of the world press, which, in turn, is an important condition for the success of political, social and economic reforms.”¹ In her next study, the author draws attention to manipulative technologies in the coverage of the situation in Ukraine by foreign media. According to her, “in general, most of the pro-Russian media, covering the situation in Ukraine,

¹ О. Саморукова , “Відображення процесів демократизації в Україні в зарубіжних ЗМІ,” *Наукові праці Національної бібліотеки України імені В. І. Вернадського*, no. 41 (2015): 100–111. [O. Samorukova, "Representation of democratization processes in Ukraine in foreign mass media," Scientific works of the National Library of Ukraine named after V. I. Vernadskyi]

report on real news or events, however, with the help of an emotional style and appropriate “experts,” distort them.”² This clearly demonstrates the different trajectories of coverage of Ukraine in the Western media. At the same time, N. Onishchuk and L. Tatarinova focus on the review of Ukrainian and foreign media materials on the Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine and note that “most of the mass media of the leading countries of the world, including Ukraine, direct their efforts to demonstrate the destructive position Russia takes on our country's accession to NATO, by covering aspects of preparation for possible aggression.”³

Such dynamics indicate the favor, thanks to the media, of a foreign audience towards Ukraine, understanding and desiring to support its development. At the same time, S. Voronchuk notes that “the formation of the image of Ukraine by the media” plays an important role in the perception of our state by a foreign audience, in particular, the French.⁴ As for the work of foreign scientists, one should at least recall the work of J. Szostek, which examines the tools with which Russia, thanks to the media in Ukraine, spreads its own propaganda through the use of “soft power.”⁵ This indicates the interest of foreign authors in the problem of spreading Russian propaganda in Ukraine thanks to the mass media. L. Maschmeyer, A. Abrahams, P. Pomerantsev, and V. Yermolenko analyze the operations of influencing society through social media. Here we are talking about a hybrid war in the foreign and Ukrainian media field. However, in the aggregate of the reviewed bibliography, the issue of Western media coverage of the religious culture in Ukraine is not directly addressed. That is why the purpose of the study is to determine the features of the general trajectory of Western media coverage of the religious situation in Ukraine.

The Main Results of the Study

A preliminary analysis of sources involves a review of foreign news articles and Western media reports on the religious environment in Ukraine. Here, studies of the political

² О. Саморукова, “Маніпулятивні технології у висвітленні зарубіжними ЗМІ ситуації в Україні,” *праці Національної бібліотеки України імені В. І. Вернадського*, no. 48 (2017): 494–505. [O. Samorukova, “Manipulative technologies in the coverage of the situation in Ukraine by foreign mass media,” works of the National Library of Ukraine named after V. I. Vernadskyi]

³ М. Онищук and Л. Татарінова, “Україна-НАТО: підсумки 2021 року: огляд матеріалів українських і зарубіжних ЗМІ з питань євроатлантичної інтеграції України,” *Вісник Книжкової палати*, no. 1 (2022): 23–28. [M. Onyshchuk and L. Tatarinova, “Ukraine-NATO: results of 2021: review of Ukrainian and foreign media materials on the issues of Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine,” *Bulletin of the Book Chamber*]

⁴ С. Ворончук, “Образ України у ЗМІ Франції,” *Вісник Львівського університету. Серія Журналістика*, no. 46 (2019): 364–70. [S. Voronchuk, “Ukraine's image in French media,” *Bulletin of Lviv University. Journalism series*]

⁵ J. Szostek, “Russia and the News Media in Ukraine: A Case of ‘Soft Power’?,” *East European Politics and Societies*, no. 3 (2014): 463–86.

context and interests that may influence the coverage of the religious situation in Ukraine in Western media will be appropriate, such as analysis of links between Western media and political structures or organizations, comparison of coverage of the religious situation in Ukraine in Western and domestic media, and analysis of differences in the interpretation of events and presentation of facts in Western and other sources.

The Ukrainian authorities have chosen a geopolitical course towards European integration and an orientation towards joining NATO, which entails certain historical revisions. Such motivation serves the interests of the state and has a cultural effect. For this decision, Ukraine and its people suffer from the aggressive actions of Russian imperialism, which should force Kyiv to reconsider its choice in favor of Moscow. Since 2014, since the unilateral removal of the Crimean peninsula from the territorial borders of Ukraine, the Western press has been constantly saturating the world information space with facts of the Russian invasion and its recognition of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Donetsk and Lugansk regions which used to be integral parts of Ukraine.

Due to the active work of American and European publishing houses, Ukraine became known all over the world. The Western press is guided by powerful information technology resources that serve as a tool to influence world opinion. This information confrontation is unfolding in different directions, where political interests are lobbied in one way or another. One of these areas is the religious sphere, in particular, the role of the Moscow Patriarchate, as a sphere of potential Russian influence on Ukrainian society.

In the 2019 U.S. Department of International Religious Freedom Report, Ukraine is recognized as a multi-confessional country where the right to freedom of religion is constitutionally embedded. Ukraine is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which recognizes the right of citizens to believe at the international level. However, due to the aggressive rhetoric of the UOC-MP headed by Metropolitan Onuphry, the state is forced to restrict its activities, thereby nominally violating the constitutional rights of believers of the UOC-MP.⁶ Ukrainian citizens perceive the events of recent times quite sensitively, expressed as a negative public outcry. The state is forced to stand up for the interests of citizens from possible risks associated with the violation of fundamental human rights by religious organizations. The religious question has become one of the issues of national security and defense for Ukrainians.

⁶ “Report on International Religious Freedom: Ukraine,” U.S. Department of State, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/ukraine/>.

The US Institute for Peace in the work “The Role of Religion in the War of Russia against Ukraine” without exaggeration writes about the struggle for the spiritual independence of Ukraine, which has deep roots in the religious history of the country. The American press in Ukraine nevertheless demonstrates an impartial attitude towards the religious situation. At the same time, Ukraine is defined by American journalists as a "religious battlefield" where the fate of the Orthodox Church in the country will be decided. The battle is not only for the form of organization and subordination of the UOC-MP, but also for leadership for world Orthodoxy between Moscow and Constantinople. The resource testifies that "the invasion of the Russians weakens the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate" in Ukraine, supporting this statement by a number of facts. Despite the certain relationship of the Church of the Moscow Patriarchate to the metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church Onufry openly condemned the actions of Vladimir Putin and accused him of the sin of fratricide, “a repetition of the sin of Cain, who killed his own brother out of envy.”⁷ For this reason alone, this source is significant for Ukrainian-American relations, because even today it demonstrates a high American and European expertise of the religious situation.

American and European media resources cover religious conflicts in Ukraine, usually from the point of view of religious freedom and respect for human rights. They cover various aspects of such conflicts, including the struggle between different religious groups, violation of the rights of minorities, the inadmissibility of violence and discrimination on religious grounds, and provision of information on the measures taken by the Ukrainian authorities to address these problems.⁸ However, specific approaches and emphases may differ depending on the political and ideological views of specific media. American media resources usually cover religious conflicts in the context of the struggle for power and influence between different political forces.

Ukraine is a state of law in which the constitutional provisions on religious tolerance and freedom apply to all citizens, including the UOC-MP. According to Article 35 of the Constitution of Ukraine, "every person has the right to freedom of thought and speech, freedom of conscience and religious confession." The constitution also guarantees "the right of every citizen to choose and change his or her religion or belief, and the freedom not to profess a

⁷ Aidan Houston and Peter Mandaville, “The Role of Religion in Russia’s War on Ukraine,” United States Institute of Peace, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/role-religion-russias-war-ukraine>.

⁸ Madeleine Long, “Keeping Faith: The Intersection of Religion and National Identity in Ukraine. Pulitzer Center,” Pulitzer Center, December 6, 2022, <https://pulitzercenter.org/projects/keeping-faith-intersection-religion-and-national-identity-ukraine>.; “People, Religion, Festivals, Traditions in Ukraine,” ContactUkraine, n.d., <https://www.contactukraine.com/about/people-religion-festivals-in-ukraine>.; “Religion in Ukraine. Welcome to Ukraine,” UkraineTrek.com, n.d., <https://ukrainetrek.com/about-ukraine-culture/ukrainian-religions>.

religion."⁹ These constitutional foundations apply to all religious communities and their followers in Ukraine, including the UOC-MP. However, now we are witnessing sanctioned measures: searches of representatives of the clergy of the UOC-MP, blockade of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, boycott of services, etc., provided for in Article 64, the content of which provides for certain restrictions in the conditions of martial law Article 35 is not listed.

Western experts drew attention to the problem of the contradiction between freedom of religious belief and the work of the MP church against the country of the aggressor, which lies in the fact that individual religious communities and their representatives can use their religion to support or justify the aggressive actions of the enemy. This provokes conflicts and contradictions in society, and also creates contradictions to the fundamental principles of freedom and justice. In addition, the use by the church of its influence and resources for political purposes can lead to a violation of the principle of separation of church and state, as well as to infringement of the rights of other religious groups. In such situations, the government must balance between respect for freedom of religion and the prevention of abuse by the church in domestic and foreign policy. Accordingly, the state takes forced steps to ensure national defense.

It is possible to determine the specific justification or reason for the attention of the Ukrainian special services to the UOC-MP by analyzing specific events and the political context. However, there are several general arguments that can explain such actions:

1. State security. Ukrainian authorities may view the Orthodox Church, especially the Moscow Patriarchate, as a threat to national security. With tensions with Russia following the annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, the government wants to limit the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate, seeing it as a potential tool of Russian aggression.

2. National identity. The definition of Ukraine as an independent conciliar state is of priority importance for the Ukrainian state. The creation of an autocephalous or independent Orthodox Church under Ukraine can be considered by the authorities as a way to strengthen national identity and consolidate the people.

3. Political background. Determining the future of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has political significance. The authorities may deliberately influence this process in order to maximize their influence or control over this religious structure.

⁹ “Конституція України - Розділ II ,” Офіційне інтернет-представництво Президента України , n.d., <https://www.president.gov.ua/ua/documents/constitution/konstituciya-ukrayini-rozdil-ii>. ["Constitution of Ukraine - Section II," Official online representation of the President of Ukraine]

4. The answer to long-term problems. Possible actions of the state in relation to the Orthodox Church can be justified by long-term problems and conflicts related to religious relations in Ukraine, as well as the division between different versions of Orthodoxy (Moscow, Kiev, patriarchates, autocephalous, etc.).

However, it should be noted that the investigative activities of the state in relation to religious organizations will always cause social concern. These arguments can be seen as potential explanations, rather than a 100% justification for the actions of the Ukrainian state.

The Work of Western Publications

Western journalists, like any respectable information workers, strive for objective coverage of events and avoid bias when considering religious topics. They try to present different points of view and opinions, taking their time to state their own beliefs. There is a principle of separation of faith and politics; in Western journalism it is customary to separate religious issues and politics. Journalists try not to use religious topics for political purposes and not to promote a particular religion. Compliance with the norms of journalistic ethics, include respect for religions and feelings of people. Journalists avoid discrimination and try not to violate the rights of religious groups. Qualitatively presented research approach includes that Western journalists strive to conduct research, study the facts, and not just voice them, but analyze and provide reliable information about religious movements and events, rather than just “dryly” describe the actual state. Western publications are usually saturated with structural analytics.¹⁰

Note that the specifics of the work of a journalist may differ depending on a specific country and publication. The conflict between the Moscow and Kyiv Patriarchates is presented in the world media as a dispute about spiritual independence from Moscow. This conflict has political, historical, and cultural dimensions reflected in articles and news. The most significant seems to be attention to the religious component of any conflict, since conflicts of this level occur in many parts of the world, and the reader may not be informed about their nature and depth. Accordingly, the Western specialist is given the analytical task of working with the information received about the war, which he must professionally cope with.¹¹

¹⁰ Р. Кухарчук, “Релігійна тематика у вікні світських ЗМІ,” Детектор-медіа, 2009, <https://detector.media/withoutsection/article/44579/2009-03-25-religiyna-tematyka-u-vikni-svitskykh-zmi/>. [R. Kuharchuk, "Religious topics in the window of secular mass media," Detector-media]

¹¹ А. А. Бойко, “Характер висвітлення етнорелігійної проблематики у мас-медіа України,” Інститут журналістики, n.d., <http://journalib.univ.kiev.ua/index.php?act=article&article=1968>. [А. А. Boyko, "Character of coverage of ethno-religious issues in mass media of Ukraine," Institute of Journalism]; Ігор Скленар, “Специфіка роботи сучасного журналіста з релігійною інформацією,” РІСУ: Релігійно-інформаційна

The question of the future of the Orthodox religion in Ukraine after recent events is complex and controversial according to Western media. It should be noted that the tightening of the national identity of the Ukrainian people will likely lead to further consolidation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Perhaps this will lead to the strengthening of the UAOC and all religious institutions that contribute to national unification. However, we do not rule out that the situation with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church will continue to be controversial, since the continuation of the conflict between the UOC-MP and the OCU may lead to further division of Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Recent developments in Ukraine may stimulate the growth of informal religious movements and independent religious groups that may offer alternative forms of Orthodoxy or even reject it. Obviously, the future of the Orthodox religion in Ukraine will depend on the further development of the situation in the country, political processes, and social movements. The perception of national and religious identity in Ukraine will play a decisive role in shaping the future of the Orthodox religion in the country.

Conclusion

Western mass media consider the existing religious conflict mainly from the political and geopolitical perspectives. They explore the influence of religion on the domestic and foreign policy of Ukraine, as well as on relations with Russia and other countries. They also cover the intervention of other states, political forces, and organizations in this conflict. The Western media reflects the potential consequences of this conflict for the society, economy, and culture of Ukraine. They draw attention to the possibility of weakening national unity and the emergence of new strife in society. Foreign publications also explore the root causes of this conflict, including historical, social, and cultural factors. They draw attention to the role of the Orthodox Church in the formation of national identity and its interaction with political and social institutions. Foreign media also allow representatives of different sides of this conflict to join the interfaith dialogue. They conduct interviews with representatives of the Orthodox Church, politicians, experts and ordinary citizens of Ukraine in order to give the most complete picture of the situation. In general, the Western media are trying to cover the religious conflict in the Orthodox Church in Ukraine from all possible aspects in order to provide readers and viewers with objective information about this problem.

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