

**Security Council**

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**Letter dated 30 May 2023 from the Permanent Representative of
the Russian Federation addressed to the Secretary-General and
the President of the Security Council**

I have the honour to transmit herewith the Chair's summary of the Arria-formula meeting of the Security Council members held on 12 May 2023 on the topic "Situation with Freedom of Religion and Belief in Ukraine: Persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church" (see annex).

I would appreciate your kind assistance in having the present letter and its annex issued as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Vassily **Nebenzia**



Annex to the letter dated 30 May 2023 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council

Summary of the open Arria-formula meeting of the UN Security Council Members held on 12 May under the title “Situation with Freedom of Religion and Belief in Ukraine: Persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church”

Introduction

On 12 May the Russian Federation hosted an Arria-formula meeting with the view to provide Members of the Security Council and all other interested UN Member States with information on the situation of freedom of religion and belief in Ukraine and persecution against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (the UOC), discrimination of the UOC communities and parishioners, seizure of the UOC buildings and arrests of the clergy.

The meeting was held in Conference Room 11.

The meeting was chaired by **H.E. Mr. Vassily Nebenzia**, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the UN and attended by all Security Council Members, other UN Member States and representatives of the UN bodies and agencies. The concept note was released prior to the meeting.

The briefers were **Ms. Meera Terada**, Director of NGO “Foundation to Battle Injustice”; **Bishop Gedeon** of the UOC and **Mr. Ivan Melnikov**, Vice-Chair of the Russian Office of the International Committee for Protection of Human Rights.

In his introductory remarks, **H.E. Mr. Vassily Nebenzia** explained the urgency of the topic. He underlined that the canonical UOC – a traditional church with centuries-long history and millions of worshippers – was on the verge of being banned by law. Its main sacred sites, such as the Kiev Cave Lavra, were at risk of being expropriated, clergy and parishioners were living in constant fear of being persecuted by the Ukrainian security services. The video reel illustrating what is going on with the freedom of religion and belief in Ukraine was displayed.¹

Ambassador Nebenzia recalled the Russia-initiated Security Council meeting of 17 January 2023 on the situation of the UOC,² where Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Patriarchate of Moscow, described the tragic situation of the UOC in Ukraine.

Ambassador Nebenzia reminded that in 2014 new authorities in Kiev that had come to power as a result of a bloody *coup d'état* with the active support of Nazi groups decided to replace the canonical Orthodox Christianity with an artificial new church (the Orthodox Church of Ukraine) and to disband the UOC. However, such a plan was not easy to fulfil in a country where the majority of believers belonged to the UOC. Kiev authorities started to exert pressure on the clergy of the UOC in order to force them to transfer to this new schismatic church. In order to accomplish that, and also to expropriate Orthodox monasteries and temples, the same nationalist groups were used. Seizures of UOC temples and forceful, illegal disbanding of religious communities were presented as so-called “voluntary transfers” to the new church. Such “transfers” were carried out through mass clashes and beatings of clergy

¹ These and other materials demonstrated or referred to during the meeting can be accessed via the following link: https://disk.yandex.ru/d/oqJ_erapx0Wrhg.

² S/PV.9245.

and parishioners. After a new religious commune was officially “reregistered”, a church was usually seized by force, sometimes by armed people. In 2022 and in January-February 2023, approximately 300 raider seizures of UOC communes took place. It became a widespread practice for local authorities to terminate land lease contracts for land lots where temples and other real estate of the UOC were located.

Ambassador Nebenzia informed the audience that starting from October 2022, Kiev’s authorities had been conducting mass searches (without any legitimate grounds) in UOC churches and monasteries throughout Ukraine. The Security services of Ukraine had conducted more than 100 searches in temples, monasteries, and administrative buildings of UOC episcopates across the country. Criminal cases were initiated against the clergy without any legal ground. Old newspapers and magazines, as well as religious and history books from personal libraries served as evidence. Almost 250 clergy members of the UOC were banned from entering Ukraine. The total of 61 criminal cases were opened against UOC clergy. In February 2023, a Ukrainian court sentenced a UOC priest to seven years in prison on charges of cooperation with Russia. This priest was detained by the Ukrainian special services in Ukraine-controlled Krasnolimansky district of the Donetsk People’s Republic.

Two video reels were shown demonstrating the seizure of a UOC church in Boyarka (the Kiev region of Ukraine) and attempt to detain a UOC priest in Chernovtsy.³

The Russian Permanent Representative reminded that in December 2022, Mr. Zelensky by decrees approved decisions of the National Security Council of Ukraine on “sanctions” against 14 hierarchs of the UOC – citizens of Ukraine, which led to actual deprivation of their property on the territory of Ukraine and infringement of their personal rights. By a direct decree of Mr. Zelensky, twelve bishops of the UOC were deprived of Ukrainian citizenship, which can result in their deportation. In a number of Western regions of Ukraine, a campaign was gaining momentum to prohibit the UOC at the regional level. From March 2022 to February 2023, 81 decisions to ban the activities of the UOC organizations were adopted in Ukraine by local authorities.

Ambassador Nebenzia further stated that several draft laws were submitted to the Ukrainian parliament that provided for banning the UOC and expropriating its property. He called on the audience to speak out and make their position known that such laws were unacceptable and must not be adopted.

The Russian Permanent Representative emphasized that the decision of the Kiev authorities to expropriate churches of the Kiev Cave Lavra from the UOC and transfer them to the schismatic Orthodox Church of Ukraine became a symbol of the crackdown on canonical Orthodox Church in Ukraine. However, the tragedy was not covered by global media, and the High Commissioner for Human Rights turned a blind eye to it. Western Members of the Security Council were trying to present this situation as disinformation and in this regard Ambassador Nebenzia recommended reading the publicly available decision of the Kiev Court on this matter.

Ambassador Nebenzia stated that since March 2023, monks of the Kiev Cave Lavra were under threat of expulsion. Both monks and parishioners tried to prevent the forceful seizure of the Kiev Cave Lavra by peaceful means, but the Kiev police responded with beatings and detentions of protesters. On 1 April, the Ukrainian Security Service placed Archimandrite Pavel, rector of the Kiev Cave Lavra, under house arrest.

³ These and other materials demonstrated or referred to during the meeting can be accessed via the following link: https://disk.yandex.ru/d/oqJ_erapx0Wrhg.

The Russian Permanent Representative stressed that the UOC had never asked Russia to convene the meeting and had not authorized Russia to speak on its behalf at the United Nations. The aim of the Arria-formula meeting was to draw attention to this flagrant infringement on freedom of religion and belief. He underlined that millions of Orthodox Christians in Ukraine were subjected to discrimination and called on all UN Member States and Observers, the Secretary-General and international human rights watchdogs to prevent the disaster.

Two video reels depicting comments by a parishioner of the Kiev Cave Lavra and an address by its monks – were shown.⁴

Statements by the briefers

Ms. Meera Terada, Director of the NGO “Foundation to Battle Injustice” noted that the scale of persecution against representatives and believers of the UOC in Ukraine reached an unprecedented scale. She pointed out that the persecution of clergy had begun long before the special military operation. Churches and monasteries were looted and destroyed, and priests had been beaten and tortured, kept in inhuman conditions and forced to speak out against the UOC. Since November last year, the Secret Service of Ukraine had been conducting searches in churches and other shrines, priests were accused of provocations, they had been wrongfully charged and imprisoned. In January 2023, the Ukrainian prosecutor’s office opened a criminal case against Metropolitan Pavel Lebed, rector of the Kiev Cave Lavra. He was accused of inciting religious hatred because of his statements that Ukrainian authorities were “persecuting the Church.” In March 2023, the Ministry of culture of Ukraine unilaterally terminated the lease agreement for the Kiev Cave Lavra and demanded that monks of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church leave the monastery or join the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Bishop Gedeon of the UOC stated that the Orthodox Church in Ukraine was being destroyed by all available means in violation of the constitution and applicable laws. Ukrainian law enforcement agencies humiliated not only parishioners and ministers of churches, but also desecrated holy places. He witnessed vandalism in temples of the UOC by his own eyes. Bishop Gedeon underlined that if international community did not interfere, the problem “will reach unprecedented proportions”.

Bishop Gedeon of the UOC informed the audience on his own experience of reprisals from the Ukrainian authorities: he was twice deprived of Ukrainian citizenship in violation of court decisions: first time under Mr. Poroshenko, and second time by a decree of Mr. Zelensky. Moreover, his personal data was transferred to Interpol and as a result he was arrested during a visit to Athens and placed in solitary confinement without any legal basis.

Mr. Ivan Melnikov, Vice-Chair of the Russian Office of the International Committee for Protection of Human Rights, described the oppression of the UOC clergy. He indicated that reprisals had reached unprecedented scale: many clergymen were detained and deprived of their liberty; large number of clerics were under arrest or in pre-trial detention, for instance the Abbot of the church in Zhitomir region had been arrested by representatives of the Ukrainian security services and had been held in jail for months under groundless accusations of espionage. He spoke about cases of detention and torture of UOC priests Yury Mironetz and Alexander Boyko. He also referred to the case of Archpriest Andrey Pavlenko, which was brought to the attention the OSCE and other international organizations by human rights defenders. Archpriest

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Andrey Pavlenko was brutally beaten for many hours by the Ukrainian security services and detained for 10 months.

In addition to that **Ambassador Nebenzia** informed that Archpriest Andrey Pavlenko was supposed to be one of the briefers at the meeting but for technical reasons this was not possible.

Statements by Security Council Members

The Representative of **Ecuador** reiterated that while underscoring the importance of freedom of religion, Ecuador was concerned about the exploitation of religion to fuel conflicts. She noted that Geneva conventions prohibited acts of hostility against religious sites that represent cultural and spiritual heritage of people. She also stated that military aggression against Ukraine had resulted in the destruction of more than 270 religious sites, of which at least 104 have been verified by UNESCO.

The representative of **China** stated that religious issues in a conflict situation was often complex, and if not handled properly could prove unhelpful to achieving a peaceful resolution. Mutual respect must be fostered, and a culture of peace should be supported. Since the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine, confrontation between cultures was deepening. Dialogue and negotiations were the only feasible path to resolving the crisis, he said, urging all parties to exercise restraint. The international community should focus on promoting dialogue, and any incitement to hatred must be rejected. He stated that his country would continue to embrace an objective and impartial position on the conflict in Ukraine and called for political settlement of the crisis.

The representative of **the United States** stated that his country was taking seriously any violations of human rights, including the freedom of religion or belief but called the meeting another attempt by the Russian Federation to invent justifications for war. She suggested that those present consider the damage caused by Russia on religious sites and places of worship in Ukraine. She also called attention to the situation with freedom of religion in Russia. She called for immediate cessation of war and withdrawal of Russian forces.

The representative of **Brazil** said freedom of religion was a fundamental human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in numerous multilateral instruments. Noting Brazil's own tolerance and diversity, he declared that religious differences must not be exploited to fuel intercommunal tensions. Brazil supported the efforts of religious leaders to facilitate dialogue between Moscow and Kiev, and encouraged the parties to heed the pleas of the majority of United Nations Member States in favour of a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

The representative of the **United Kingdom** condemned Moscow's campaign of persecution against communities in Ukraine and the Russian Federation based on their religion or belief. He further condemned the destruction of over 100 religious sites resulting from war in Ukraine, as verified by UNESCO. He called the meeting an attempt to distract from Russia's own actions. He asserted that invasion in Ukraine continued to be marked by grave violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law by Russian forces.

The representative of **Mozambique** stated that Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guaranteed the freedom of religion, and attacks on this tenet were undermining peaceful coexistence among peoples and nations. He therefore urged political leaders and citizens to exercise restraint and abstain from weaponizing this highly sensitive issue. He reiterated his country's call for an

immediate cessation of hostilities in Ukraine and return to direct negotiation between the parties.

The representative of **Switzerland** expressed concern about the serious human rights violations committed in Ukraine during war and condemned Russian air strikes on civilian objects in Ukraine. He opposed the spread and dissemination of hate speech and any other form of religious-based discrimination. However, he did not consider that freedom of religion protected religious communities. He called on the Russian Federation to de-escalate the situation and withdraw its troops without delay.

The representative of **Malta** observed that the meeting was requested by the Russian Federation in an attempt to shift focus from its aggression in Ukraine. She condemned the dissemination of disinformation by Russia. She pointed out that missile strikes on Ukraine resulted in damage to religious sites and places of worship confirmed by UNESCO. She also condemned violation of human rights of various religious communities in the Russia's occupied territories of Ukraine.

The representative of **Albania** declared that freedom of religion and belief is an integral part of human rights standards. He noted that all problems in Ukraine were a result of the Russian invasion. He condemned the Russia's attempt to weaponize the religious issues.

The representative of **Japan** underscored the importance of freedom of religion and belief. He said the Russian Federation was using false rhetoric on religious issues and attempted to legitimize its own violations. He condemned Russian invasion in Ukraine. He also noted that the Security Council Members should make a decision about future webcasting of the Arria-formula meetings.

The representative of **France** said that the Russian Federation was again attempting to divert the Council's attention by exploiting issue of freedom of religion and belief. He described the meeting as an example of the Russian Federation's misinformation strategy and politicization of religious issues. He referred to the UNESCO report on the destruction of more than 100 religious buildings and sites during war in Ukraine.

The representative of **Ghana** expressed concern about the religious tensions in Ukraine and stated that those concerns should be regarded in the relevant UN bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council. She declared the Ghana's dedication to the freedom of religion and belief and called on the parties to exercise tolerance and show mutual respect for other faiths.

The representative of the **United Arab Emirates** voiced concern over the distressing recent events in Ukraine highlighting the need to ensure that different faith communities can live together peacefully. He stated that religious leaders and communities of faith can play an important role in building peace and providing comfort in times of war. He also noted that the religion must not be used as a tool for violence. He underscored the importance of protecting the sanctity of religious sites in times of conflict and expressed concern over distraction of the religious sites as a result of the conflict in Ukraine.

The representatives of **Gabon** highlighted the universality of the right to freedom of religion and belief. He expressed concern about violations of human right in the conflict in Ukraine, noting that clergy was also impacted by war in Ukraine. He called on the parties to the conflict to respect the provision of the main human rights treaties. He called for a diplomatic solution to the Ukrainian crisis and cessation of hostilities.

Closing remarks:

The Russian Permanent Representative expressed his gratitude to the briefers for the information about the precarious situation with freedom of religion in Ukraine. He also replied to the question of one delegation of who ruined people's peaceful life, stating that States had different points of reference on that matter and reminded that 8 years of the Kiev regime's crimes against people of Donbass were neglected by some UN Security Council Members. He underscored that the crackdown on the UOC did not start in February 2022. This was a campaign that the Kiev regime conducted since the *coup d'état* in Ukraine in 2014. Now it escalated to a full scale tragedy. He regretted that Western States did not want to see what was actually happening and what sort of persecution of the canonical Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine was taking place at the behest of the Kiev authorities with their full support and connivance.

Ambassador Nebenzia called on the Members of the Security Council, UN Member States and international human rights organizations to influence Kiev to prevent this tragedy and stop persecution of the UOC and millions of its worshippers.

Conclusion

The open Arria-formula meeting provided the Security Council Members, other UN Member States, Permanent Observers and non-governmental organizations with information on the violations of freedom of religion and belief in Ukraine and provided a platform for discussion.
