

PROSPECTS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR UKRAINE'S EUROPEAN INTEGRATION FOR RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS

Tselkovsky G. A., Vasylenko V. S., Skladan A. A.

INTRODUCTION

European integration in public discourse is becoming ambivalent. On the one hand, politicians and officials present it as a technical process – the implementation of a package of regulatory and legal norms, which will automatically lead to Ukraine’s accession to the EU. On the other hand, a whole palette of perceptions of European integration has been formed, ranging from the cultural slogan “to become Europeans” to the religious narrative about European integration as a historical mission of the Ukrainian nation, “a return to the historical highway from which the Muscovite horde knocked down Ukraine.” In religious discourse, European integration is often contrasted with the biblical image of the Babylonian division of languages and peoples. Historical parallels are usually drawn with empires (such as the Persian and Roman empires) and the modern project of the “Russian World,” which claims to restore the unity of humanity under the auspices of a sacred language or religion. Such imperial models – assimilating or hierarchical – by definition could not be. The new integration formation – the Soviet Union, which had a dual nature – was a federation of equal peoples and the dominance of Russians in shaping a new community, the Soviet people, which claimed justice. In fact, this ambivalence became one of the primary factors in the collapse of this quasi-empire.

The European Union has set an ambitious goal – “to be united, but not one”, preserving diversity. Identity, culture, and religion within the framework of a united Europe become both a private matter of the individual and a common heritage of Europe, ensuring prosperity, peace, and justice for all peoples. Thus, European integration for Ukraine is not only a technical implementation of the *acquis communautaire*, but also a civilizational choice that has a spiritual dimension.

The analytical approach of this article considers the problem in two dimensions: first, what benefits do religious organisations in Ukraine derive from European integration; second, what can they contribute to the European integration process.

The methodological basis of the study is the provisions of Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, which institutionalises an open,

transparent and regular dialogue between the EU institutions and churches¹. This norm, on the one hand, guarantees respect for the autonomous status of religious organisations in the Member States, and on the other hand, obliges the EU to maintain a permanent dialogue with them. In practical terms, this means establishing formalised channels of communication among the European Commission, the European Parliament, and church representatives.

In the theoretical dimension, the typology of models of "state-church" interaction in the European context, proposed by the Romanian researcher Lucian, was used. Leusztian ². He identifies several formats of church representation in Brussels: diplomatic missions to the EU (for example, the mission of the Holy See), official confessional representations to institutions, inter-confessional offices (such as the Commission of the EU Episcopal Conferences – COMECE, or the Conference of European Churches – CEC), and religious organisations of a social orientation. This typology outlines possible trajectories of the institutional presence of Ukrainian churches in the European space.

A crucial theoretical basis is also the evolution of the status of the religious factor in the founding treaties of the EU. While the 1957 Treaty of Rome completely ignored the spiritual sphere, the Lisbon Treaty, through its preamble, has already explicitly recognised the “cultural, religious and humanistic heritage of Europe” as a source of universal values of the EU³. This suggests a growing awareness among European elites of the role of religious communities in shaping European identity and policies.

To understand the practical aspects of churches' involvement in European integration, the experience of neighbouring countries, in particular Romania, is essential. After joining the European Union, the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) demonstrated a complex and multi-level dynamics of adaptation to the European normative and value space. At the official level, the church hierarchy actively supported the country's integration into the EU, establishing a permanent representation at the European institutions in Brussels and participating in the dialogue structure provided for in Article 17 of the TFEU. At the same time, sociological and political-religious studies reveal the presence of noticeable resistance among the clergy and parish communities, who find certain aspects of European policies – particularly in

¹ Perchoc P. Religion and the EU's external policies. In-Depth Analysis. European Parliamentary Research Service. December 2017. PE 614.612. doi:10.2861/518909

² Leustean, Lucian N. "Representing religion in the European Union: a typology of actors." *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, Vol. 12 No. 3 (2011): 295-315. DOI:10.1080/21567689.2011.596415

³ Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Article 17 TFEU.

URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/tfeu_2016/art_17/oj

the fields of human rights, gender equality, and secular social norms – to be controversial. This tension between the official pro-European line and more conservative public expectations has created a specific trajectory of BOR adaptation, combining the desire for an institutional presence in the EU with the need to preserve traditional identity and legitimacy among believers⁴. At the same time, the church is actively involved in implementing social projects with the support of the EU, which demonstrates the possibility of productive cooperation while preserving its doctrinal principles. For example, with the support of the EU, a program was launched in Romania to enhance the capacity of the Orthodox Church to provide social services. This initiative was co-financed by the Romanian government and the European Union. Within the framework of this program, more than 1,200 priests and almost 1,000 catechists were trained to work with young people in the fields of HIV/AIDS prevention and domestic violence, which helped the church become a key partner in social services⁵. Such experience suggests that European integration presents new opportunities for churches to serve society.

Therefore, the methodology combines an analysis of EU legal norms, a comparison of institutional models of church representation, and an examination of the empirical experience of European integration of religious communities in Central and Eastern European countries.

1. Opportunities for European integration for religious organisations in Ukraine

Legal protection and recognised status. Integration into the European legal field provides Ukrainian religious organisations with a qualitatively new level of legal protection and institutional recognition. Article 17 of the TFEU not only confirms the autonomy of churches in the member states but also formalises their participation in EU consultative processes⁶. If the dialogue between the authorities and churches was previously mainly informal or situational in nature, it is now becoming systematic. European integration transforms the interaction between the “state-church” from ad hoc contacts to institutional cooperation.

⁴ Guglielmi, M. The Romanian Orthodox Church, the European Union and the Contention on Human Rights. *Religions* 2021, 12, 39. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010039>

⁵ New Grant Broadens Romanian Orthodox Church's Social Services. *International Orthodox Christian Charities / Orthodox Church in America*. 2009. URL: <https://www.oca.org/news/archived/new-grant-broadens-romanian-orthodox-churchs-social-services>

⁶ Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). Official Journal of the European Union. 2016.

URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/pbl_1/oj

Practical mechanisms for implementing this dialogue include regular high-level meetings between representatives of the European Commission and leaders of religious communities, thematic consultations in European Parliament committees, and working groups on ethical and social issues. Religious organisations are granted the right to submit their position papers, participate in parliamentary hearings, and influence the agenda on the problems affecting society. An illustrative example is the Commission of the EU Bishops' Conferences (COMECE), which regularly provides expert opinions on the initiatives of the European Commission. After Ukraine acquired candidate status, it became possible to include Ukrainian churches in such structures. By integrating into this system, Ukrainian churches will receive institutional channels of influence on European policy – especially on issues that directly concern Ukraine (peacekeeping initiatives, humanitarian programs, cultural heritage, etc.).

It is also worth considering the interfaith dimension of representation. The degree and format of involvement in European structures may vary among different faiths. For example:

The Orthodox Churches of Ukraine (OCU, UOC) could potentially establish permanent representations to the EU, analogous to other Local Churches, raise the issue of calendar reform in dialogue with European partners, and strengthen cooperation in resolving refugee issues and peacemaking efforts. The experience of the latest autocephaly of the OCU has already attracted attention in Europe as a contribution to freedom of conscience and counteraction to Kremlin influence.

The Roman and Greek Catholic Churches of Ukraine are already integrated into pan-European Catholic institutions through the Holy See. This allows them to convey the Ukrainian agenda at the highest level directly. They participate in programs, agreements, and networks operating within the European Catholic community.

Protestant churches, with their extensive ties to European and American co-religionists, can benefit from institutional platforms such as the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE). This allows them to make joint statements, share resources, and coordinate humanitarian efforts at the European level.

Thus, European integration actually institutionalises the presence of Ukrainian religious organisations in the European public space, providing them with a formal status of stakeholder in decision-making. For Ukrainian churches, this is a transition to a new level of legal protection and subjectivity.

Access to EU financial instruments. Joining the single European market opens up access to significant financial resources for religious organisations, including EU funds and grant programs. In particular, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)

provide funding for projects in the fields of community development, education, and social entrepreneurship, which can be implemented by religious organisations or in collaboration with them. The Creative Program Europe supports projects in the field of culture and creative industries. For churches, this presents an opportunity to receive grants for the preservation of sacred cultural heritage, digitisation of archives, and hosting cultural events at the European level.⁷ Interreg cross-border cooperation tools enable, together with partners from neighbouring EU countries, the development of tourist routes between monasteries, the organisation of youth exchanges, and conferences, among other activities.

In Central European countries, there are successful examples where, with EU funding, restored monasteries and temples have been transformed into cultural and educational centres with tourist infrastructure, while maintaining their original religious purpose. Provided that the project demonstrates a contribution to regional development, including job creation, tourist influx, and educational impact, the amount of grant support can reach several million euros. Thus, Ukrainian shrines and religious communities will have the opportunity to attract resources for their development, without relying solely on donations.

An auspicious direction is cross-border cooperation projects. For example, a joint initiative of Ukrainian and Polish churches to restore wooden churches in the Lemko region could qualify for funding under the Poland-Ukraine line⁸. Such projects not only improve the material base (restoration of churches, construction of shelters, and hostels for pilgrims) but also integrate Ukrainian churches into European cooperation networks, contributing to the establishment of lively contacts between clergy and believers from different countries.

Cultural integration and inter-church networks. The full participation of Ukrainian churches in pan-European religious organisations opens up opportunities for their representation at the continental level. There are long-standing pan-European structures for inter-church dialogue: the already mentioned Conference of European Churches (CEC), which unites Protestants, Orthodox, and Old Catholics, and the Council of Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE), which coordinates the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church. Active membership in these organisations will provide Ukrainian churches with platforms to articulate their position, exchange experiences, and take solidarity actions in response to social challenges.

⁷ 25. Русаков С. С. Європейська інтеграція як ціннісно-культурний виклик воєнного часу. Культурологічний альманах. 2025. № 2. С. 463–470. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31392/cult.alm.2025.2.56>

⁸ UNESCO. Wooden Church of the Carpathian Region in Poland and Ukraine. URL: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1424/>

Formal accession is only the first step. It is essential to continue getting involved in the work by sending representatives to specialised commissions and working groups. For example, the CEC has working groups on bioethics, ecology, education, and migration. Ukrainian delegates, by participating in the development of joint declarations on these issues, will have the opportunity to influence European opinion and policies. The voice of Ukrainian churches is already being heard at international forums on war, human rights, and humanitarian aid – integration will enhance its resonance.

Special mention should be made of ecumenical platforms. Documents like the Charta Oecumenica, adopted in 2001, outline the principles of cooperation between European churches of different traditions⁹. The accession of Ukrainian churches to similar charters or the signing of bilateral agreements on mutual recognition and co-operation (for example, the Porvoo Agreement of 1992 between the Anglican and Lutheran churches¹⁰) would be a symbol of deep involvement in the European spiritual space. This does not mean renouncing one's own identity, relatively, on the contrary, contributing one's gift to the common treasury of European Christianity.

Thus, European integration provides Ukrainian religious organisations with a “pass” into the pan-European church environment, where they can freely convey their values and beliefs, find like-minded people and partners in other countries, jointly defend moral principles, and respond to social problems.

2. Challenges of adapting to European norms

Despite the apparent benefits, integration into the EU legal framework poses several significant challenges for Ukrainian churches and religious organisations. European standards necessitate a review of some traditional approaches to church activities, particularly in terms of internal organisation and public communication.

Employment relations and non-discrimination. One of the most sensitive issues is the alignment of religious organisations' human resources policies with EU anti-discrimination law. Directive 2000/78/EC on employment equality prohibits discrimination, including on the grounds of religion, in the

⁹ Charter Oecumenica : Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe. 2001. Conference of European Churches (CEC) & Council of European Bishops ' Conferences (CCEE). URL: <https://ceceurope.org/storage/app/media/uploads/2015/07/ChartaOecumenica.pdf>

¹⁰ Porvoo Common Statement. Conversations between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches. Porvoo, Finland, 1992. URL: https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/102178/porvoo_common_statement.pdf

workplace¹¹. This challenges the traditional practice of churches requiring lay employees to belong to a particular denomination or adhere to the rules of church life. The Court of Justice of the EU in the Vera cases *Egenberger v. Evangelical Church of Germany (C-414/16)*¹² and *IR v. JQ (C-68/17)* established criteria for the admissibility of such requirements. The Court ruled that a requirement of church membership or compliance with its ethical standards must be objectively justified and proportionate to the nature of the position¹³. In other words, for clergy or theological teachers, religious loyalty may be considered a necessary occupational requirement. However, for administrative or technical staff in general church institutions, such a requirement must be individually justified and, in many cases, is inappropriate from a legal perspective.

This obliges Ukrainian churches to review established approaches to personnel selection. It is necessary to clearly define a list of positions where the requirements of religious affiliation or lifestyle are justified by the very nature of the work (for example, clergy, catechists, educators in religious educational institutions). For other categories, it is desirable to develop transparent criteria for hiring and firing that are based on professional qualities, rather than relying solely on informal recommendations from "their own". In other words, it will be necessary to gradually move from a patron-client model of personnel management to transparent procedures that will withstand the test of non-discrimination in court.

Value conflict and social consensus. The second set of challenges concerns the differences in values between traditional Christian teachings and the secularised society of Western Europe. Many ethical norms that have become widespread in EU countries contradict the official positions of most Ukrainian churches. These include, in particular, the following issues: legalisation of same-sex marriages and partnerships, gender equality in the LGBT+ aspect, liberalisation of legislation on abortion and reproductive technologies, secularisation of education, etc. While in most Western European countries there has been a significant shift in public opinion towards accepting these phenomena, the church hierarchies of Ukraine

¹¹ Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32000L0078>

¹² Butler G., Meling M. Horizontal Direct Effect of the Charter in EU Law : Ramifications for the European Economic Area. Vol. 3 No. 2 (2020): Nordic Journal of European Law Issue 2020(2) <https://doi.org/10.36969/njel.v3i2.22389>

¹³ Case C-68/17. *IR v JQ*. Judgment of the Court (Grand Chamber) of 11 September 2018. Reference for a preliminary ruling from the Bundesarbeitsgericht. Directive 2000/78/EC – equal treatment in employment – ethos of religious organizations – occupational requirements – dismissal due this second civil marriage. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A62017CJ0068>

(Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant) mostly take a conservative position, considering them unacceptable from the point of view of Christian ethics.

The conditions of European integration pose a dilemma for churches. On the one hand, they are called upon to bear witness to moral principles without adapting to the fashion of the time. On the other hand, too confrontational and judgmental rhetoric can lead to the isolation of churches from society, especially from young people, who are more tolerant of these phenomena. The example of Poland demonstrates that aggressive rhetoric against abortion or the LGBT community, supported at the state level, has caused mass protests and alienation of some believers from the church.¹⁴ In Ireland, in a 2018 referendum on abortion, the vast majority of citizens voted against the church's urgings¹⁵, legalising it – showing the limited influence of traditional religious arguments even in a country with a once strong Catholic tradition.

For Ukrainian churches, the lesson is the need to find a balanced strategy. They will have to learn to articulate their traditional values positively, through the prism of universal concepts such as love, mercy, dignity, support for families and vulnerable groups, rather than in the language of prohibitions and condemnation. For example, instead of simply condemning same-sex relationships, emphasise the beauty and significance of the traditional family, help young couples, and develop programs for responsible parenthood. Instead of fighting against abortion, create support networks for mothers and promote the value of life. In this way, it is possible to avoid using language that promotes hatred or discrimination, without compromising your beliefs.

Communication strategies in a secular society. The third challenge is adapting the language and style of public communication to the predominantly secular European environment. In the EU public space, appeals that exclusively cite the Bible or church authority may not always be heard or understood by the general public. To effectively influence public debate, religious figures will need to translate their ethical positions into the language of universal categories, such as human rights, human dignity, social justice, sustainable development, and inclusion. In fact, this is a requirement to speak to society in a language that is understandable not only to believers but also to secular people and those of other faiths.

For example, when speaking about environmental issues, instead of focusing only on the theological concept of "preserving God's creation", it is advisable to use the terminology of sustainable development and responsibility to future generations. When defending the traditional family,

¹⁴ Kulczycki A. "Between a Rock and a Hard Place : Abortion, Catholicism, the Populist Right and Public Health Threats in Poland." *Religions*, 2023, 14(10), 1271. DOI:10.3390/rel14101271

¹⁵ Turpin H. Factsheet : The Irish abortion referendum 2018. Religion Media Center. 24 May 2018. URL: <https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/factsheets/abortion-in-ireland-guide/>

discuss the social capital of the family, its demographic stability, and the well-being of children. Such rhetoric will find more resonance among European partners and in the media.

In addition, it is necessary to consider the high standards of discussion in the European environment, including the inadmissibility of hate speech, respect for diverse groups and minorities, and the etiquette of political correctness. The churches of Ukraine already have some experience in conducting correct dialogue (for example, the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations has developed a balanced tone of communication with the authorities and society). However, at the European level, the challenges are more subtle – it will be necessary, in essence, to become understandable “to outsiders” without losing its own identity.

Freedom of Speech and Religious Media in the European Information Space. An essential component of Ukraine's integration into the EU is the harmonisation of the information space – in particular, ensuring freedom of speech, pluralism and non-discrimination in the media. For religious media, especially Orthodox, this opens up new horizons for development, while requiring compliance with European standards of journalism.

The European Union considers media freedom and pluralism to be fundamental principles of a democratic society. Article 11 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights guarantees everyone the right to hold opinions freely and to receive information without interference from public authorities¹⁶. The EU has consistently stressed that independent media and diversity of opinion are prerequisites for free public debate. During the accession process, Ukraine will implement these principles, creating favourable conditions for the activities of religious media. As a result, they will be able to convey their messages more freely to their audiences, benefiting from the protection of freedom of expression.

At the same time, European norms also impose requirements on the content of the media. In particular, the EU has a zero-tolerance rule for hate speech and incitement to hatred. The European Audiovisual Media Services Directive directly obliges member states to ensure that media content does not contain incitement to hatred on grounds of religion or other grounds, and prohibits covert propaganda and information that degrades human dignity or promotes discrimination¹⁷. This means that any Ukrainian religious media –

¹⁶ Media freedom and pluralism. Shaping Europe's Digital Future. European Commission. URL: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/media-freedom>

¹⁷ Directive 2010/13/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 March 2010 on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Services directive). 2010.URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX%3A32010L0013>

whether TV channels, radio, printed publications, or news websites – intending to broadcast in the EU or cooperate with European partners must adhere to tolerance standards. Offensive statements against other faiths or groups, anti-Semitism, incitement to hatred against certain minorities, etc., are unacceptable. Thus, integration will encourage Ukraine's religious media to improve the culture of broadcasting and journalistic ethics.

A separate aspect is countering disinformation and propaganda under the guise of religious narratives. It is no secret that the Russian Orthodox Church and its related media (including in Ukraine) have long been relayers of Kremlin messages designed to undermine Ukraine's pro-European aspirations. Moscow, appealing to the "common Orthodox culture" and the myth of the "Russian world," used religion as a tool of information warfare to sow scepticism about NATO and the EU in Ukraine and other countries of Eastern Europe. An entire media ecosystem (TV channels, websites, Telegram channels) affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate has been created, which, under the guise of protecting "traditional values," spread Kremlin theses. Such a merger of the church, media, and state propaganda is one of the pillars of the Kremlin's hybrid aggression¹⁸.

Ukraine's European integration involves resolute counteraction to such influences. Several measures have been adopted at the EU level to protect information sovereignty. In particular, the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) came into force in 2025 – an innovative regulatory act that strengthens the independence of the media and introduces mechanisms to counter disinformation.¹⁹ The European Media Council was established within the framework of the EMFA, which, among other things, is authorised to coordinate the actions of national regulators to prevent foreign propaganda. Suppose media services originating from outside the EU pose a serious risk to public order and security. In that case, the Media Council can develop standard criteria and take measures to mitigate their adverse impact. This is an obvious response to situations where a third country (such as Russia) is trying to use Europe's media space for subversive purposes. By integrating into these mechanisms, Ukraine will be able to more effectively filter information flows, close hostile propaganda channels, and expose fake "Orthodox" media funded by the Kremlin.

¹⁸ Odarchenko K. How the Russian Orthodox Church Became a Weapon of Political Warfare. Foreign Policy Research Institute. 2025. URL: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/10/how-the-russian-orthodox-church-became-a-weapon-of-political-warfare/>

¹⁹ European Commission. «A new era for media regulation in Europe as the European Media Freedom Act's main obligations become applicable ». Press release, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CONNECT). 8 August 2025. URL: https://media-board.europa.eu/news-0/new-era-media-regulation-europe-european-media-freedom-acts-main-obligations-become-applicable-2025-08-08_en

In addition to prohibitive measures, the EU is committed to supporting high-quality journalism. The Creative Europe program and democracy-building funds provide funding for independent media projects, training for journalists, and initiatives aimed at increasing the media literacy of the population²⁰. Ukrainian religious media can apply for such grants to develop their editorial offices, for example, to launch a multimedia platform about Ukraine's historical and spiritual heritage in multiple languages, or to create a series of programs on interreligious dialogue in collaboration with European colleagues. This will contribute to their professional growth and integration into the European media market.

Studies of Orthodox media in Ukraine show that the information space has become a field of competition between different religious interpretations of the war. Analysis of official communications from the UOC (MP) and the OCU reveals the formation of two distinct value narratives – pacifist and conciliatory on the one hand, and patriotic and humanistic on the other. The UOC (MP) constructs a rhetoric of peace, forgiveness, and “supranational unity,” often sidestepping the issue of the aggressor's responsibility. At the same time, the OCU consistently emphasises justice, dignity, truth, and freedom as key spiritual guidelines for society²¹. This competition between the two approaches highlights the significant role the media space plays in shaping public morality during war. Also, it demonstrates the proximity of Ukrainian patriotic-Christian discourse to European humanistic values, particularly respect for human dignity, freedom, and justice. This experience suggests that, with the advancement of European integration, religious media can become a vital platform for strengthening democratic practices and promoting social resilience.

Thus, European integration will help Orthodox and other religious media in Ukraine reach a qualitatively new level. They will receive guarantees of freedom of activity and protection from censorship (no official or oligarch will be able to close down media that abides by the law arbitrarily). In return, they will have to adhere strictly to journalistic standards, avoid hate speech, verify facts, and transparently disclose their editorial policy. Ultimately, a society with a pluralistic media space will prevail – one that accommodates a religious voice, but one that is heard responsibly and with respect for human rights.

It is no less important that in the European information field, Ukrainian religious media will be able to convey the truth about persecution and war,

²⁰ Media freedom and pluralism. Shaping Europe's Digital Future. European Commission. URL: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/media-freedom>

²¹ Skladan AA Orthodox Media and the War in Ukraine : Competing Religious Narratives of Peace and Justice. Cultural Almanac. 2025. No. 3. pp. 36–43. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31392/cult.alm.2025.3.5>

become part of the pan-European conversation about morality, faith and justice. And integration into the common digital market (roaming, platform accessibility) will enable their content to reach millions of viewers across Europe with ease. This is an opportunity to shed the label of “provinciality” and become full-fledged players on the European media scene.

3. The contribution of religious organisations of Ukraine to the process of European integration

As active participants in civil society, Ukrainian churches and religious organisations can bring their unique potential to the European integration process. Their experience, connections, and moral authority can serve as a "soft power" to advance Ukraine's interests and enrich the European community with spiritual meanings.

Religious diplomacy as a tool of "soft power". Ukrainian religious leaders have extensive transcontinental connections that can complement official state diplomacy. Through church channels, it is often easier to reach the hearts and minds of people in other countries, as they usually share common spiritual values. This is especially valuable against the backdrop of Russian aggression, where Ukraine is interested in conveying its truth to the broadest possible audience.

International inter-church cooperation has a long tradition in Europe. There are multilateral agreements between churches of different countries that build bridges of understanding. For example, the aforementioned Porvoo Agreement (1992) united the Anglican and Lutheran churches of Northern Europe based on mutual recognition and common ministry. The Leuenberg Agreement (1973, later known as the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe) united the Reformed and Lutheran communities. Charta Oecumenica declared the principles of cooperation between Christian churches in Europe. If Ukrainian churches, predominantly Orthodox and Greek Catholic, can join such initiatives or conclude bilateral agreements with EU churches, this will significantly increase their subjectivity in the European space. After all, then they will act not as supplicants, but as equal partners in pan-European Christianity.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, using the global network of Vatican diplomacy, has already proven its ability to raise Ukrainian issues at the highest levels. Protestant communities, thanks to their connections with European co-religionists and international charitable organisations (such as ADRA), have mobilised significant humanitarian resources for the victims of the war. This clearly demonstrates that the religious dimension of international relations is a powerful asset for Ukraine.

Thus, Ukrainian churches can become ambassadors of goodwill. They are able, through personal contacts with foreign religious leaders, joint prayer

actions, conferences, and statements, to convey the truth about the events in Ukraine, debunk the myths of Kremlin propaganda, and build understanding and support for Ukrainian aspirations in the European public.

Russian full-scale aggression caused mass forced migration of Ukrainians to EU countries. In these conditions, Ukrainian religious communities abroad – including Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Protestant parishes – have become centres of support and integration for our fellow citizens. Churches have taken on a significant role in social functions, helping people settle in a new place while maintaining their roots.

Volunteer hubs are being established at parishes, where humanitarian aid is collected, language courses are offered for newcomers, Sunday schools are run for the children of Ukrainian refugees, legal advice is provided on status and documentation, and psychological support is organised for those who have survived the trauma of war. For example, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic community in Munich has been actively involved in supporting refugees, particularly through pastoral initiatives and cooperation with charitable foundations²². Such activities contribute to the social integration of Ukrainians into European societies and the preservation of their national and cultural identity through the community.

European municipalities and governments generally have an upbeat assessment of the contribution of churches in working with refugees. Partnership agreements are often concluded at the local level between city authorities and religious communities to jointly implement social projects (for example, providing temporary housing, employment or care for people with disabilities). Such a state-church partnership in the social sphere is beneficial to all parties: the state, because it attracts additional resources and trust; the church, because it realises its mission of serving its neighbour and receives support; and people, because they receive a more humane and pastoral approach.

As a result, Ukrainian churches abroad become a kind of “islands of Ukraine” in Europe, carriers of Ukrainian spiritual culture. This gently, unobtrusively introduces Europeans to our traditions and values. In the long term, such communities can serve as a bridge for deeper mutual understanding between Ukraine and the EU, contributing to the unity of the European family of nations.

Actualisation of Europe's Christian heritage. Ukraine's European integration is occurring at a time when discussions about the role of religion in public life and identity are taking place in Europe itself. On the one hand,

²²22. Благодійники з Папського благодійного фонду відвідали парафію УГКЦ у Мюнхені. Матеріали. Українська Греко-Католицька Церква. 27 лютого 2023. URL: <https://ugcc.ua/data/blagodiynyky-z-papsjkoho-blahodijnogo-fondu-vidvidaly-parafiyu-uhkc-v-mjunheni-2261/>

the EU officially proclaims its commitment to the shared cultural, religious, and humanistic heritage of Europe²³. On the other hand, secularisation and a decline in church attendance are observed in many European countries. Ukrainian religious figures can contribute to the reactualization of Christian values, demonstrating their contemporary relevance.

Ukrainian churches have a unique historical experience of preserving faith under brutal totalitarian regimes. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church operated underground for over 40 years (1946-1989), and even though it was the most persecuted religious community in the USSR, it managed to survive and be reborn. Orthodox and Protestant communities were repressed during the Soviet era, but they also preserved their traditions, often risking their freedom and lives. This experience of the steadfastness of faith in inhuman circumstances is a strong testimony to the secular world about the depth of spiritual foundations. European partners, who are currently preoccupied with the crisis of identity and the search for moral guidelines, can draw inspiration from the example of Ukrainians who preserved their dignity and humanity through religion, even under the pressure of Soviet atheism.

Additionally, Ukrainian churches can highlight the connection between Christianity and contemporary human rights and democracy. The concepts of human rights, the rule of law, and equality, on which the EU is primarily founded, evolved from the Christian understanding of human dignity as the image of God. Pope John Paul II once emphasised that Europe “breathes with two lungs” – Western and Eastern Christianity, meaning the unity of spiritual foundations.²⁴ Ukrainian religious leaders, by combining Eastern (Orthodox-Byzantine) and Western (Latin) traditions, can become a kind of bridge between Eastern and Western Europe in the spiritual dimension.

Experience of resilience in the face of crises. The last decade has been a period of severe trials for Ukraine – the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014, war, occupation of territories, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the full-scale invasion of 2022. In all these situations, religious organisations have shown a fantastic ability to mobilise and serve people. Churches became platforms for public dialogue during the Maidan, spiritually supporting soldiers and civilians in the war, organising a volunteer movement to aid the army and displaced people, and providing hospitals and hospices during the pandemic. This practical experience of solidarity is extremely valuable and may be of

²³ Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union. Official Journal of the European Union, C 326/13, 26 October 2012. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12012M%2FTXT>

²⁴ John Paul II. Ut. Unum Sint : On Commitment this Ecumenism. Encyclical Letter. Vatican City, 25 May 1995.

URL: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html

interest to other European countries facing new challenges – whether epidemics, migration crises, or social polarisation.

Ukrainian religious figures can share their experiences in crisis management: how to quickly deploy a network of volunteers, how to coordinate interfaith mutual assistance (after all, during the war, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church united all faiths in helping victims regardless of their faith), and how to speak to people who have experienced trauma in the language of hope and support. Such an exchange of experience will strengthen the resilience of the entire European civil society in the face of possible future crises.

4. Practical steps of state policy in the religious sphere

Understanding the aforementioned opportunities and challenges, the Ukrainian state, in collaboration with the religious community, has already begun implementing practical measures to achieve successful European integration in the field of freedom of conscience. In July 2025, the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience (DESS) held an all-Ukrainian seminar-meeting on the topic: “European integration processes and steps of the state. The path to the spiritual sovereignty of Ukraine”²⁵. It presented a comprehensive program for adapting religious organisations to European standards.

An inventory of national legislation related to freedom of conscience, religious organisations, non-discrimination, media, and other relevant areas is underway to ensure its compliance with EU law. The identified gaps and outdated norms have been included in the National Program for Adapting Ukrainian Legislation to EU Law. In particular, in the area of protecting the rights of religious minorities and religious organisations representing national minorities, the Cabinet of Ministers approved an Action Plan ²⁶developed in consultation with experts from the Council of Europe. This plan takes into account the results of the screening of Ukrainian legislation on human rights and non-discrimination.

European integration processes require improving mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating state policy in the field of freedom of conscience and interaction with religious organisations. The introduction of digital tools,

²⁵Державна служба України з етнополітики та свободи совісті. «Нарада ДЕСС–ОВА: “Євроінтеграційні процеси та кроки держави. Шлях до духовного суверенітету України”. День перший». 23 липня 2025. URL: <https://dess.gov.ua/narada-dess-ova-yevrointehratsiyni-protsesty-ta-kroky-derzhavy-shliakh-to-dukhovnoho-superenitetu-ukrainy-den-pershyy/>

²⁶Кабінет Міністрів України. Розпорядження № 475-р від 14 травня 2025 р. “Деякі питання забезпечення переговорного процесу про вступ України до Європейського Союзу за кластером І “Основи процесу вступу до ЄС””. Київ. URL: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/475-2025-%D1%80#Text>

such as the Accession Pulse platform²⁷, which is already used to track the implementation of government commitments under Cluster 1, demonstrates the potential for developing similar tools in the religious sphere. Such an approach would ensure transparency in policy implementation, facilitate the prompt identification of problems, and enhance feedback between the state and religious communities.

Promising steps that logically follow from the general architecture of European integration reforms include updating the Law of Ukraine “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations” in accordance with EU standards on self-government of religious communities, financial transparency, non-discrimination and good governance. It seems advisable to establish a permanent advisory body on European integration of the spiritual sphere under the DESS, which would ensure the systematic participation of churches in policy development, its adaptation to EU law, and the assessment of the impact of new norms. Such a format would enable the integration of religious organisations – one of the most institutionally stable components of civil society – into the mechanisms of democratic participation, which is an integral part of the EU accession process. Training of personnel – both civil servants and representatives of religious organisations – capable of working effectively in the European legal and cultural space remains critically important.

CONCLUSIONS

European integration presents a new dimension of opportunities for religious organisations in Ukraine, while also posing demands for change. On the one hand, churches gain access to EU institutions, legal guarantees, and resources of a united Europe. They become part of a broad dialogue about the continent's future, have the opportunity to influence decisions regarding the moral guidelines of society, and receive support for their social and cultural initiatives. On the other hand, European standards test churches for maturity. It is necessary to bring internal orders up to the standards of transparency and non-discrimination, learn to communicate with the world in the universal language of values, and withstand the competition of ideas in a pluralistic environment.

Ukrainian religious organisations have something to offer Europe. They can become channels of popular diplomacy, spreading the truth about Ukraine and strengthening solidarity in Europe. They can help integrate hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, transforming them from

²⁷Державна служба України з етнополітики та свободи совісті. «Нарада ДЕСС–ОВА: “Євроінтеграційні процеси та кроки держави. Шлях до духовного суверенітету України”. День перший». 23 липня 2025. URL: <https://dessa.gov.ua/narada-dess-ova-yevrointehratsiyni-protsesty-ta-kroky-derzhavy-shliakh-to-dukhovnoho-superenitetu-ukrainy-den-pershyy/>

burdens to active participants in the life of their host countries. They bring a spiritual experience that confirms the inviolability of human dignity – an experience that is relevant for rethinking European identity. Their ability to self-organise in crises can serve as a model for their European colleagues.

At the same time, the success of Ukrainian churches in European integration depends on their readiness for transformation. A delicate balance is required between preserving their religious identity and embracing European norms and values. This balance is quite achievable; an example can be the churches of Central Europe, which managed to fit into the European space without losing their distinct identity. Moreover, they enriched this space with their contribution.

For Ukraine, European integration in the religious sphere is a path to spiritual sovereignty, when no external force (such as Russian influence) will be able to manipulate people's faith, and at the same time, a path to partnership in a large European family, where everyone is different but equal in dignity and rights. Religious organisations, relying on their mission to serve their neighbours, can become leaders in this historical process, giving it depth and humanity.

SUMMARY

The paper examines the transformation of the role of religious organisations in Ukraine in the context of the European integration process and the adaptation of national legislation to the norms of the European Union. European models of state-church interaction are analysed, and the possibilities of their institutional application in Ukrainian conditions are outlined. Particular attention is paid to the practice of protecting the rights of religious minorities, freedom of conscience, non-discrimination and compliance with human rights standards enshrined in EU law. It is demonstrated that European integration provides additional opportunities for Ukrainian churches to engage in public life, international representation, and social service. The importance of interfaith dialogue and the involvement of religious communities in the implementation of state policies related to minority rights and national security is highlighted. Examples of European experiences are highlighted, particularly in Romania, Poland, and Ireland, which demonstrate both the opportunities and challenges of interaction between the state and religious institutions in a democratic environment. It has been proven that the implementation of the EU *acquis* in the field of fundamental rights promotes transparency, accountability, and harmonisation of relations between the state and religious organisations. The study's results include the identification of key areas where Ukrainian churches can enhance their contribution to democratic reforms, as well as an outline of institutional steps to deepen their engagement with European structures.

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Information about the authors:

Tselkovsky Gennadii Anatoliiovych,

Candidate of Philosophical Sciences,
Associated Professor at the Department of Culturology,
Theology and Religious Studies
Mykhailo Dragomanov Ukrainian State University
9, Pyrohova Str, Kyiv, 01601, Ukraine

Vasylenko Victoria Stanislavivna,

Senior Lecturer at the Department of Culturology,
Theology and Religious Studies
Mykhailo Dragomanov Ukrainian State University
9, Pyrohova Str, Kyiv, 01601, Ukraine

Skladan Andrii Anatoliiovych,

Postgraduate Student at the Department of Theology
and Religious Studies
Mykhailo Dragomanov Ukrainian State University
9, Pyrohova Str, Kyiv, 01601, Ukraine