12 The Ukrainian Orthodox Church's Online Media After the 2022 Invasion: A Strained Attempt to Hold a Middle Ground[1]

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To understand how Russia's war against Ukraine affects the functioning of the Orthodox Churches within Ukraine it is necessary to look to Orthodox online media. A study of the online media of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) is particularly enlightening due to the internal issues and identity crisis that the UOC faces as it attempts to maintain its own position in a country where the state has grown rather hostile to it due to real and perceived connections with the Russian government. Much of the UOC's media since the war began and especially since May 2022, advances the argument that the UOC is caught between Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) on one side and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian government on the other. It works to portray itself as an organization that is dedicated to the Ukrainian war effort, but at the same time is looking to maintain its religious freedom and advance what it views as a canonical Orthodox position. This puts the UOC into a difficult and increasingly untenable situation. The online media of the UOC attempts to distinguish itself from the ROC and make plain its disagreements with Patriarch Kirill. At the same time, the UOC also stresses its differences with the autocephalous OCU and Ecumenical Patriarchate. To accomplish this, it often takes a more muted, less confrontational approach in its media offerings than what it did prior to Russia's full-scale invasion (Lassin 2025).

The most significant changes in how UOC online media presents its messages stem from the UOC's council of May 2022. At this event, the UOC released statutes that declared the "full autonomy and independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church" from the ROC (Sobor Ukrains'koi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi 2022). This announcement led to many questions as to what asserting that independence meant since the definition of what constitutes ecclesiastical independence rather than

1 This research focuses on the online media of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). The UOC is formally part of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), but since the 2022 invasion, it has declared independence from the ROC. The UOC is also separate from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which was created in 2018 and is not recognized by the ROC or UOC.

autonomy or autocephaly remains rather murky. While the full details of these decisions are still being debated and worked out, we do see how they are impacting media narratives that emerge from sources affiliated with the UOC. In this chapter, I will address how specific outlets associated with the UOC aim to walk this narrow path and the difficulties and doubts that they encounter in this work. I chart the changes in the tone and content of UOC-allied online has made since Russia's 2022 invasion. I then move into an exploration of how these online media develop a discourse of the UOC as an oppressed group by highlighting the concerns of Western scholars who have issues with the potential infringements on religious liberty from the Ukrainian government. I then conclude with a section discussing the theoretical ramifications of how these empirical observations relate to changes in Ukraine's religious landscape since the war and the role of media in these changes.

The Union of Orthodox Journalists: Polemics toward the OCU and the ROC

Perhaps the most prominent UOC-affiliated online outlet is the "Union of Orthodox Journalists". The UOJ was launched in the wake of the Euromaidan protests by Viktor Vishnevetskii, a Ukrainian billionaire with strong ties to the Moscow Patriarchate (K sozdaniiu 'Soiuza pravoslavnykh zhurnalistov' 2016). Its main functions have been, prior to 2019 denigrating the idea of an autocephalous Ukrainian Church and after the granting of the Tomos, criticizing the actions of the OCU and its supporters. It also documents and comments on what its editorial staff sees as actions against the Orthodox faith and Orthodox believers in Ukraine usually at the hands of those who support the OCU and the Ukrainian government. The site often publishes strident commentary against the OCU, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and the governments of Ukraine, as well as Western countries.

The UOJ provides an emblematic example of how online media affiliated with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is attempting to strike a balance between disavowing Patriarch Kirill and his support for the war while at the same time asserting that the creation of the autocephalous OCU was non-canonical and should be opposed. Two articles published just a few days apart in late October and early November 2022 demonstrate this process and the difficulties the UOC faces in trying to distinguish its position in the Ukrainian media space.

The UOJ's homepage displayed two articles written by the same author, Kirill Aleksandrov, "Roundtable Against the UOC: Do they want to return to the Poroshenko times?" and "ROC, the State, and War: What would Metropolitan Kirill say to Patriarch Kirill?" These two articles offer a glimpse into this divided sentiment. The first highlights a roundtable discussion between Bishop Evstratii (Zoria) of the OCU, politician Rostislav Pavlenko, who is described as "one of the 'fathers' of the Tomos," religious studies scholar Oleksandr Sagan, and political analyst Sergei

Zdioruk that took place on October 31, 2022, in Kyiv organized by the Ukrainian Foreign Policy Research Institute (Aleksandrov 2022a). The roundtable centered on the role of the Moscow Patriarchate in the war against Ukraine and its influence and control over the UOC. The article on the UOJ, unsurprisingly finds the discussion objectionable. The author writes that he put the words "round table" in quotation marks in the subheading and throughout the article because he felt it did not rise to the proper definition of a round table where "supporters of various points of view are invited to discuss the matters at hand in a respectful manner" (Aleksandrov 2022a). Instead, the author makes the point that everyone involved was of the same opinion regarding the ROC and the UOC. He also notes that the UOJ attempted to participate in the event but were turned away for what was called the "political bias" of the UOJ (Ibid.).

Included at the beginning of the article as well is a screenshot from the roundtable of an illustration depicting Patriarch Kirill as an octopus whose tentacles are wrapped tightly around a cathedral that represents the UOC. The image of an ominous octopus gripping something that it is alleged to be threatening or controlling is not a new trope in political cartooning. It has been used in a variety of contexts to comment on a Russian threat (Hashimoto 2017: 42). The grip of the octopus-patriarch is meant to be reminiscent of these political cartoons and to elicit the idea of the ROC as an imperialist institution, seizing what it wants in a bestial grip. The history of such an image connects how this round table views the ROC and UOC and prominent examples of propaganda. In placing this illustration in the article, the author offers a visual encapsulation of what he views as the event's wholesale discrediting of the UOC and its predetermined biases against it. Curiously, the fact that it is the face of Patriarch Kirill squeezing the church could also be read as supporting the UOC's desire for greater independence from the ROC. While this is not explicitly stated, the image's inclusion here aids in making the argument that the UOC is working to break free from the clutches of the ROC and Patriarch Kirill. UOC online media must work to demonstrate distance from the ROC and this image can also be read as portraying the UOC as a victim of the ROC's actions, despite what its creator may have intended.

Throughout the article, the participants are referred to as "experts" again written in quotation marks as a means of discrediting them and their opinions. The author decries the expertise of the participants by noting their ignorance of the structure of the UOC and their misunderstandings of Orthodox theology. He opposes the idea that the whole of the UOC should be held responsible as collaborators with the Russian government, and the notion that the UOC is in schism from all other Orthodox churches. In reciting these perceived mistakes, the author develops the narrative that the UOC is being maligned and treated unfairly. Moreover, his criticism of what he frames as false expertise builds the case against opponents of the UOC that they

do not understand the actual details of the situation and thus cannot appreciate the nuance and distinctions that are critical elements to it.

The fact that this round table occurred without the participation of the UOC and that the UOC was only able to respond in media friendly to its cause demonstrates the great difficulty that it has in presenting its position in Ukrainian public discourse. Any justifications that the UOC provides do little to break through this perception. The author mentions for example that the Ukrainian war dead are commemorated daily in the churches of the UOC and that UOC parishes organize humanitarian aid to Ukrainian soldiers and civilians. However, this is not enough in the eyes of the participants of the round table to make up for the fact that the UOC does not recognize the autocephaly of the OCU and as well as its association with the ROC.

While the first article speaks to the difficulties that the UOC has within Ukraine, the other article addresses the grievances that members of the UOC have with Patriarch Kirill's actions concerning the war in Ukraine. The article provides a thorough reading of then-Metropolitan Kirill's writings related to the question of war and his involvement with drafting the important document, the "Social Bases of the Russian Orthodox Church", which has guided the ROC's social policies and positions in the twenty-first century. The article starts with a detailed listing of the facts surrounding the war, most importantly that it was started by Russia, that it is taking place on Ukraine's territory, that the war was entirely unprovoked, and that the civilian population of Ukraine is suffering immensely because of this war. This litany works to ensure that any reader understands that the UOJ does not agree with the Russian justifications for the war at all. Moreover, the UOJ works to demonstrate the independence of the UOC, using Kirill's previous statements and positions concerning war and violence. This strategy tries to salvage some positive elements of the UOC's affiliation with the ROC through an acknowledgment that the ROC's leader has previously expressed such opinions. Moreover, the use of Kirill's previous statements and positions denounces the patriarch as betraying his previous views and positions, making the argument that the current policies of the ROC are aberrations from the past views and that the UOC's previous relationship with the ROC does not require condemnation. The ability to use these previous statements and actions also speaks to the internal debates and issues within the UOC. While most in the UOC oppose Russia's actions and support Ukraine in the war, this does not mean that they support every action the Ukrainian government has taken. Those in the UOC still adamantly oppose the OCU's declaration of autocephaly and believe it to be outside the norms and regulations of the Orthodox faith. Because the war continues and the UOC now faces legal threats from the Ukrainian government, there is a noticeable shift in the tone and tenor of the UOC's media strategies. The desire to strike a balance that can simultaneously show the UOC's support for Ukraine in the war effort and advocate for the religious freedom of the UOC and denounce the ac-

tions that the Ukrainian government has taken against it help to explain the media strategies that the UOC pursues online.

The article concludes with a rather interesting detail. The author provides an excerpt from an email that he claims to have received from an Orthodox Christian in Russia. It reads:

> I have encountered a difficult situation. Our patriarch justifies the war and calls to kill Ukrainians. But at services we commemorate his name, as well as that of our bishop, who supported all these ideas and even traveled to occupied Donetsk and Luhansk. My priest-confessor also supports all these atrocities. What should I do? My moral and ethical guidelines do not agree with these positions. Because of this, I don't want to go to church. Is it necessary to go to liturgy performed by clergy who justify murders? (Aleksandrov 2022b).

The powerful language here unambiguously disavows the current actions of the Moscow Patriarchate. Interestingly, the article does not offer answers to the reader's questions. To do so, to tell a reader whether to attend liturgies presided over by these clergy, would perhaps be a step too far given its role and affiliations with the UOC. To tell someone not to attend church could implicate the UOJ in promoting sin and disobedience. But the author does use this example to make clear that there is a growing issue within the ROC that must be addressed lest it could lead to much greater divisions and conflicts. Using the words of this Russian Orthodox Christian to demonstrate the spiritual anguish that the Patriarch's actions are inflicting on believers not only in Ukraine but in Russia too are meant to appeal to Russian Orthodox Christians to garner sympathy and support for the plight of their co-religionists in Ukraine.

It is important to note thought, that even as the UOC works to distinguish itself from the ROC, there are still areas that are deemed too fraught for the UOC and its allied media to address. The above article is one such example. In the days after its publication, it was suddenly removed from the UOJ's website with the site visitor encountering an error message when they try to access it. The only way to find this article now is through the Internet Archive. The removal of the article demonstrates the limitations that these media outlets work under as they attempt to remain within the good graces of their church hierarchy while also advocating on its behalf in public fora.

Vitrazhi: From Bombastic Clickbait to Placid Biblical Lessons

Another UOC-affiliated resource that sheds light on the changes to the UOC's online messaging is the YouTube channel *Vitrazhi* (https://www.youtube.com/@vitrazhi.o

fficial) (Russian for stained-glass windows). *Vitrazhi* was founded by Denis Lapin, an activist and appears to be sponsored at least in part by the UOC. Before the 2022 invasion, the videos on Church-related topics that take complex theological and ecclesiastical issues and make them more digestible for a wide audience. These videos have a high production value and are informative and can be entertaining, making them a perfect vehicle to reach audiences that are not as familiar with Church history and issues or not as well-versed in theological and ecclesiological issues. To reach wider audiences and keep their attention, his videos often were on topics that appeared rather salacious, and he would present them with a rather confrontational tone. In addition, the thumbnail previews of the videos and the images that he would use throughout them were often rather controversial, provocative, and worked to capitalize on meme formats that are common throughout the internet. Thumbnails are a central element in attracting viewership to online videos and are of particular importance on YouTube where the glut of material makes for a highly competitive environment (Koller/Grabner 2022).

One example, for a video titled, "How Patriarch Bartholomew congratulated Biden. The transoceanic games of the Fanarites", underscores how Lapin used YouTube thumbnails and titles to create a sensationalist product meant to grab the attention of Orthodox Christians online (Vitrazhi 2020). The main focus of the image shows Patriarch Bartholomew crowning President Joe Biden with a bishop's crown. This image communicates the idea of Biden both receiving religious approval for his actions but also of Biden taking and exercising religious power as a bishop. This aims to portray the Ecumenical Patriarch as ceding his authority to the American president. This image is also situated within a discourse that the ROC advances that the United States is using Orthodoxy as a tool to further its own political agenda. Biden, bending his head to receive the crown, is shown wearing a mask with a rainbow pride flag superimposed over it. The mask is a powerful visual reminder of the height of the COVID pandemic and reminds viewers of the restrictions of that period. This detail is meant to stoke anti-pandemic restriction sentiments that have been popular among many Orthodox believers. Placing the pride flag over the mask emphasizes the political priorities and the agenda that are associated with the United States. The fact that it is over Biden's mouth elicits the idea that everything he says is done through the filter of advocating for LGBTQ+ rights. Such a depiction is designed to strike fear into the hearts of Orthodox believers and make them wary that the actions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its Western partners are all done to undermine the traditional values espoused by the Orthodox Church. This is part of a longstanding theme in Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox media that views the West as a place of decadence and debauchery that is best encapsulated in its support for LGBTQ+ issues around the world. It is very common to see Europe referred to as "Gayropa" in Russian media and Patriarch Kirill even explicitly mentioned the holding of Gay Pride parades as a reason why

Russia needed to invade Ukraine. Moreover, the fact that this is on Biden's face also injects some explicitly homophobic connotations against the American president. Meanwhile, the background of the image is the US Capitol overlayed in red to give the impression of threat and violence. Taken all together, this single image communicates a powerful message to accuse the Ecumenical Patriarchate of nefarious actions and to denigrate the United States and the West.

The title too requires some unpacking. Referring to the officials and supporters of the Ecumenical Patriarchate as Fanarites is a common trope seen on UOC media. This tactic refers to the neighborhood in Istanbul, the Fanar, where the Ecumenical Patriarchate is headquartered. This is done to remark on the small size of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in relation to the Russian Orthodox Church and to diminish its standing in the global Orthodox Church. Moreover, calling them Fanarites makes them sound like they are members of a small sect, with a name that is reminiscent of those that are used to denote heretical groups.

The insinuation that the Ecumenical Patriarchate is engaging in "transoceanic games" injects another element of intrigue into the video. This phrase evokes the idea that they are schemers and operating to manipulate global politics, interfering in different countries. This is a common trope also seen from the UOJ where there have been attempts, especially prior to the invasion, to implicate the Ecumenical Patriarchate in engaging in political machinations and having undue influence over the United States (Lassin 2025: forthcoming). The conspiratorial style present in these videos contributed a great deal to their appeal, promising to "reveal" information that was being obscured or hidden from the wider public.

However, since May 2022, Lapin's presence in the videos of *Vitrazhi* has been much more limited. He has appeared in only a handful of the videos since that time, his last appearance in a video on the channel was October 2023. The videos that the channel now posts are almost exclusively limited to short exegeses on daily Gospel readings hosted by Metropolitan Antonii (Pakanich). The much more sedate tone and content of these videos demonstrates a shift in the UOC's media strategy and less of a desire and willingness to be confrontational with supporters of the OCU in their online media. The sheer volume of these types of videos also helps to effectively bury the older, more bombastic ones. Unless a viewer decides to search starting from the oldest videos, they will have to do a great deal of scrolling before reaching the most confrontational videos that Lapin created. The result is that the entire tenor of the channel has shifted. No longer does it function as an engine of polemic and strife, working as a multimedia tool to refute the legitimacy of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the concept of Ukrainian autocephaly. Instead, it now acts as a place for spiritual nourishment for Ukrainian Orthodox Church believers, helping to steel them in a difficult time. The shift is in line with the changes seen above on the UOJ's site. In both examples, there is a clear change from a more confrontational approach

to one that is more defensive and aims to protect the community and its position in a hostile environment.

The Western Scholarly Community as a Rhetorical Resource for UOC Media

The UOC is not only focused on its own media outlets, it also understands the importance of reaching out and communicating its message and positions to wider audiences. A blog post by Bishop Sylvester (Stoychev) of Bilhorod, the head of the Kyiv Theological Academy, published on the website *Public Orthodoxy (https://publicorthodoxy.org)*, presents a useful example to understand how the UOC attempts to engage these audiences. In the post, Sylvester discusses the outcomes and reactions to the UOC's declaration of its independence from the ROC. The fact that he was posting on *Public Orthodoxy* is itself rather surprising. The blog is well known among scholars who work on topics related to Orthodoxy. Moreover, due to its affiliation with the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University, it could be construed as advocating a progressive stance on theological and ecclesiological issues. Bishop Sylvester surely understands these connotations and clearly wants to address this audience specifically, to help clarify the position of the UOC and perhaps to elicit some support from those who might have been antagonistic toward it in the past due to its affiliations with the ROC.

In his post, Bishop Sylvester notes that the opponents of the UOC reacted with the idea that the UOC was "only *claiming* that it has separated from Moscow" (italics in the original) (Stoychev 2022). He goes on to note that while these criticisms were largely based on what he sees as prejudices against the ROC and the UOC. Mentioning these prejudices is similar language to that seen in the UOJ's article concerning the round table discussed above. These comments are another example of the UOC's desire to add more context and nuance to the situation in Ukraine. He does note though, that there is one question that these critics do raise that is important to clarify, namely the current canonical status of the UOC, that is its standing with the ROC and with the other churches of the global Eastern Orthodox Church.

He reiterates that there was no declaration of autocephaly on the part of the UOC. This is of key importance due to the UOC's adamant opposition to the Ecumenical Patriarchate's decision to grant autocephaly to the OCU. He concedes that it is a difficult issue that he does not believe will be resolved soon. In his estimation this situation can only be solved at the level of a pan-Orthodox council. Further in the post, Bishop Sylvester goes on to speak against:

> Patriarch Bartholomew's unilateral attempt to solve this question essentially ended up a failure, as the question was not only not solved, but became even more tangled. The Council of May 27 means to me an important declaration and

> point of departure for the future. It is commendable that the UOC restrained itself from so reckless a step as unilaterally declaring autocephaly. That would have been a step into nowhere (Stoychev 2022).

Bishop Sylvester uses this moment to assert the correctness of the UOC's decisions and actions in this delicate matter, ones that he sees as based in the canons of the Church and exhibiting the virtues of prudence. In doing so, he offers criticism of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its role in the ecclesiastical debates within Ukraine, echoing the prevailing line from the ROC and UOC that the Ecumenical Patriarchate should not be meddling in Ukrainian affairs.

I find that Bishop Sylvester's response results in more ambiguity. If the UOC has not declared autocephaly and thinks that doing so would be a mistake, but at the same time is now independent of the Moscow Patriarchate and no longer is commemorating Patriarch Kirill in its liturgies, then where does that leave the UOC? Simply noting that the situation is complex does not provide a satisfactory answer to the status of the UOC today and its place within the global Eastern Orthodox Church. However, what it does do is demonstrate to an audience of people used to parsing the complexities of ecclesial history and the difficulties of this question. This appears to be the main goal of writing this post.

I argue that Bishop Sylvester intended for the post to demonstrate an openness to dialogue and a willingness to engage with audiences he knows have not agreed with the positions of the UOC in the past. Moreover, it appears that he is looking to perhaps find some allies outside of Ukraine for the actions of the UOC. By going to a forum like *Public Orthodoxy*, Bishop Sylvester displays an understanding of the central role that media plays in how the disputes within Ukrainian Orthodoxy are framed and received. He knows that it is essential for the UOC to be able to state its case and convince people through the media both in Ukraine and abroad. Engaging with academic audiences, while perhaps not thought of as the most influential audience, is of great importance within this situation. The niche nature of the conflict within a larger conflict and the complexities of the underlying issues often necessitates a focused effort that directly addresses this audience.

This appeal to academics can be seen in several different areas across Ukrainian Orthodox online media. One event where it has been seen most prominently is how the UOC spoke out against the Ukrainian security service's criminal investigation into the deputy head of the UOC's Department of External Church Relations, Fr. Mykola Danilevich. Danilevich has been a prominent public defender of the UOC and advocate for its rights. The Ukrainian security service has stated that he "justified the Russian war against Ukraine and incited religious hatred" (Radio Svoboda 2024). Danilevich's case has become a *cause celebre* that has been useful for the UOC to gain more attention for its current situation. The UOJ, for instance, published an article publicizing the support that Fr. Mykola received from well-known scholars

of Orthodoxy, Thomas Bremer and Regina Elsner (Redaktsiia SPZh 2024). The UOJ gains a great deal in pointing to these figures who are not Orthodox themselves and not directly part of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and nonetheless have come forward to vouch for Fr. Mykola and to defend the UOC from what it views as the aggression and repression of the Ukrainian government.

The UOJ quotes extensively from their text in support of Danilevich. Most notable is their assertions that nothing in what Fr. Mykola has written could be construed as legitimating Russia's aggression. Even on one of perhaps the most controversial areas, Fr. Mykola's opposition to the seizure of UOC parishes, Bremer and Elsner come to Danilevich's defense noting that this has happened with some frequency since Russia's invasion. They argue that these events "threaten the necessary consolidation of Ukrainian society" (Bremer/Elsner 2024). This comment is particularly interesting because often when the UOJ or other UOC-affiliated outlets discuss parish seizure, it is often in the context of the opposing the OCU and those that support Ukrainian autocephaly. This has opened the UOC up to criticism that its stance against Ukrainian autocephaly is creating strife and conflict in Ukraine. However, in this case, Bremer and Elsner assert that the tumult that the seizure and transfer of parishes can bring in Ukraine is, in fact, the more divisive and disruptive act. Their view places the idea that an affordance of trust and tolerance to the UOC is essential for the overall tranquility of Ukrainian society. This framing looks to introduce subtlety and nuance into how people view the UOC. Across online media, the UOC is often portrayed as a sort of agent of Russia within Ukraine. What these comments offer is a view where it is the antagonism toward Ukrainian Orthodox believers who happen to follow the UOC that is a real threat to Ukraine, rather than having the UOC operate within Ukraine due to alleged connections with Moscow.

Additionally, they note that Fr. Mykola has been "responsible for the pastoral care of Ukrainian Orthodox refugees in Western Europe" as well as the creation of parishes for them in European countries. They note that these parishes are "an important spiritual and humanitarian anchor for many refugees" (Bremer/Elsner 2024). This is another comment that upends much of the discourse surrounding the UOC that is common in online media. Here, the UOC is seen as supporting the needs of Ukrainian refugees, responding as one would expect an organization that is supportive of Ukraine's efforts in the war to do. The establishment of these parishes could be seen by some as an attempt to extend Russian Orthodox influence in Western Europe. However, these comments work to blunt that concern and to help the UOC build its case as a patriotic organization that is supporting Ukrainians who have been displaced and affected by the war.

What publicizing Bremer and Elsner's text does is to show outsider perspectives that support the work and the actions of the UOC. Having this external validation is useful to help legitimate the UOC and defend it from the documented cases of collaboration with the Russian state. Overall, the case of Fr. Mykola encapsulates the

ways that UOC affiliated media has shifted its approach in how it engages online and the emphases and tone of their coverage. The combative style that was prevalent before the war is now replaced with a more defensive and cautious approach. In addition, there is a clear tendency to show the ways that the UOC is beneficial to Ukraine and how it has supporters in the West, both elements that help to differentiate it from the ROC and Russia as well as make a case for its indispensability for Ukrainian society.

#Dialog.TUT and the UOC's Attempts at Broader Appeal

Further engagement with the scholarly community online is seen in an online outlet from within the UOC with an ecumenical orientation: *#Dialog.TUT* (Ukrainian for 'Dialog Here', *https://www.dialogtut.online*). This was an initiative of Archbishop Iona (Cherepanov), one of the vicariate archbishops of Kyiv. Archbishop Iona has a longstanding interest in outreach, especially to youth. He has been the editor of a magazine and website aimed at teenagers, Otrok.ua. As the name of the project implies, *#Dialog.TUT's* goal is to bring people together for discussion, to address the issues that are dividing Ukrainian society, especially those within the Church. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was the impetus behind the project's creation, launching in April 2022.

Unlike other online Orthodox projects, there are not separate language editions depending on one's preferences. Rather, Russian and Ukrainian text is presented side-by-side in whichever language the author chose, or the articles are presented in both languages (and sometimes in English) to be maximally inclusive. This decision displays an understanding of the sensitivity over the questions of language within Ukraine today. It is a gesture toward coexistence and attempts to make claims that Ukrainian culture and identity is present within the UOC while at the same time making sure not to marginalize Russian speakers in Ukraine. Moreover, this decision is also an attempt to show some separation from the ROC and the Russian state which have been antagonistic toward the existence of Ukrainian identity.

This attempt at demonstrating a full separation from the ROC and the actions of Russia is reinforced in the project's "About Us" (Pro nas) page (#Dialog.TUT 2022). This page is only available in Ukrainian, a move that clearly is used to label the project as one that is free from Russian interference. On this page, the project declares that it is independent and praises "how our Church, side-by-side with Ukraine, bears the burden of terrible war that has affected every family, every city, every home". This remark displays the desire for the UOC to declare its total separation from the ROC and to demonstrate its full support of the Ukrainian military and nation in the war.

This assertion of independence, however, is not always readily accepted. On the project's Facebook page, for example, there is a negative review of *#Dialog.TUT* from

a user named Sasha Antoniuk who writes, "independent [followed by four clown face emojis] (no) it's a DEPENDENT project from the ROC (KGB) in Ukraine" (Antoniuk May 18, 2023). This scathing attack invokes several issues that online projects associated with the UOC face in the current moment. Perhaps the most pertinent of these is the difficulty of convincing people of the UOC's independence as was seen above. The ROC, and by extension UOC's, deep connections with the Russian state allow for Antoniuk to launch his view of the link between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian state's security services including during the Soviet period.

The content on the pages of *#Dialog.TUT* reflects a similar approach to what is seen from the UOJ, advocating the independence of the UOC from Moscow. To take one example, an article posted on the site answers twelve of the most common "myths" about the creation of the OCU and the relationship between the UOC and the ROC. These myths are answered in the form of YouTube videos, roughly five minutes in length each, that provide succinct theological and ecclesiological answers to these questions to offer a counter-discourse to the notion that the UOC is merely a branch or pawn of the Moscow Patriarchate. These videos are pitched toward a Ukrainian and international audience. The presenter speaks in Ukrainian, and his words are accompanied by English subtitles. The tone of these videos is calm and logical, not histrionic or hyperbolic so as not to alienate viewers who might not ascribe to the UOC's assertions. These choices demonstrate an attempt to influence audiences who are more likely to have skepticism toward the UOC due to its associations with Russia. The videos stress the independence of the UOC and its ability to make decisions for itself. Moreover, the decision to make this a series of YouTube videos is an indication of an understanding of younger audiences' preferences in content consumption and online engagement.

#Dialog.TUT also demonstrates how the UOC employs online media to appeal to global audiences through articles in English. To further make its case for upholding religious freedom in Ukraine, these offerings often advocate for the rights of the UOC and other religious communities to operate without interference from the state. One post, from the American Protestant theologian and scholar of religion in Russia, John Burgess, offers a useful example of this trend. Burgess advocates that rather than adopting a national Church, Ukraine should follow a more pluralistic religious path. He argues that while Christian unity is still a laudable goal that Christians of all denominations should hope and strive for, the realities of the situation demand that the country should, at this moment, allow for the maximum degree of tolerance and openness to different groups (Burgess 2024). For most international, especially Western readers, a preference for religious pluralism is in keeping with Ukraine's democratic orientation and aspirations to be part of international organizations like the EU and NATO. The publication of this opinion piece presents an argument that disentangles the UOC from the ROC and the Russian state from an outside observer, lending it greater credibility. Moreover, because of its authorship,

there is no doubt that it is intended for international audiences and not just domestic ones. Much like the article of Archbishop Sylvester mentioned above and the comments of Bremer and Elsner that were republished by the UOJ, Burgess' article is an appeal to those outside of Ukraine and even outside of Orthodoxy to find support for the UOC amidst the challenges it faces from the Ukrainian government. This text speaks to the questions of religious freedom that the UOC and its affiliated media look to promote. The focus on religious freedom is a much more appealing argument to this audience than assertions of the UOC alone being canonical and questioning the legitimacy of the OCU.

Burgess' article is related to a series of posts that *#Dialog.TUT* published where they asked Western experts questions about religious freedom, human rights, and the ways that Ukrainian citizens can defend their rights against certain policies and decisions from the Ukrainian state (Redaktsiia proektu 'Dialog.TUT' 2024). Invoking the opinions of not only experts, but Western ones, works to appeal to the international audience and make the case that this is not just a question of domestic Ukrainian politics, but a moment for the global community to defend religious freedom. This reflects the more defensive and muted approach that UOC's online media has taken since Russia's invasion. There is much less of an emphasis on combating the OCU and the issues of autocephaly unless those directly infringe on the free religious practice of the UOC.

Greater Ramifications

This research into the UOC allows for a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the religious and media landscape in Ukraine since Russia's invasion. Many of the previous studies addressing religion in Ukraine, especially since the war, have focused mostly on the OCU. A major element of this research is tied to the relationship between the formation of the OCU and its relations with Ukrainian national identity (Shevchuk/Shevchuk/Khudoba 2022). However, as Lena Surzhko-Harned notes, prior to the invasion "the public appears to be committed more to secularism, pluralism, and freedom of consciousness, than religious nationalism" (Surzhko-Harned 2022: 2). This research presents new dimensions to this conversation showing how a religious organization attempts to appeal to a populace that values pluralism and contends with being seen as collaborating with an invader.

Ukraine has a long tradition of religious pluralism. The state of religious relations between the different Orthodox churches and the other religious groups can be seen as a competitive pluralism with these groups vying for adherents (Brik 2022: 20). This competition is largely over 43% of the population that does not identify with a denomination (Synchak/Balaklytskyi/Dudarets 2022: 50). Catherine Wanner has written about this group as the "just Orthodox", who are consciously deciding not

to side with a particular institution (Wanner 2022). This research on the UOC's online media demonstrates how the UOC attempts to appeal to this group. Convincing them to join the UOC formally might be too much to ask, but what the online content does work to do is elicit sympathy and concern for the UOC and religious freedom in Ukraine.

This research into the UOC's online media also expands previous work on the use of media framing by religious organizations in Ukraine. Oleksandr Levko has noted that the hierarchs of the OCU and the UGCC have readily identified Russia as a perpetrator and aggressor in the war, while Metropolitan Onufriy has scarcely mentioned Russia directly. Moreover, Onufriy's comments on the war in a way that obscures who is responsible for the violent actions (Levko 2023). Analysis of UOC online media demonstrates how this framing is extended and used to emphasize the OCU's victimization. Framing is a key element in how political events are understood and the UOC's online content reflects a larger narrative that it is looking to tell the Ukrainian people.

This narrative is not limited to appealing to Ukrainians though. I find that the UOC's focus on the opinions of Western scholars who have raised concerns about the Ukrainian government's potential curtailment of religious freedom is a tactic that aims to internationalize the issue to appeal to outside observers. The goal is to influence policy decisions from those in other countries who are worried about threats to pluralism and religious freedom in Ukraine. The difficulties that the UOC has had in appealing to Ukrainians and convincing them of its loyalty to the Ukrainian nation and its cause in the war necessitates using the affordances of contemporary technologies to find new potential allies and supporters. This research demonstrates that digital media presents one of the most powerful ways for beleaguered organizations to communicate a message that can appeal both to domestic and international audiences. To do this, they must be willing to find a language that resonates with these audiences, often meaning a mollification of previously used rhetoric.

Conclusions

In sum, the online media that the UOC produces demonstrates the precarious situation of the UOC in Ukraine today. The attempt to show a patriotic side and support its flock in a time of great violence and crisis motivates its need to distance itself from the Moscow Patriarchate. Another important strategy that the UOC employs is the publication of opinions from Western scholars and experts that support the positions of the UOC and help to disabuse the notion that the UOC's claims of independence from Moscow are merely pretense and to avoid scrutiny. At the same time, relations with the OCU remain strained at best and the majority of those in power within the UOC do not see the OCU's autocephaly as legitimate and would not wish

to repeat that path. What results, when we look at the UOC's online media is a need to justify itself to these different sides, none of which are generally favorable toward the UOC or convinced of its separation from Moscow. These media strategies show that the UOC is positioning itself for a future where it must be defensive and protective of its place in Ukrainian society. As the war continues, there will likely be even greater pressures placed on to the UOC to demonstrate loyalty to Ukraine and more skepticism towards its ambiguous relationship with the ROC. Likely, this will involve the UOC's online media moving even more toward defending its independence and its religious freedom. The results of this study show that recognizing the complexity and nuances of the relationships between and within religious organizations and traditions are essential to understanding the religious dimensions of the war in Ukraine. Resorting to binary thinking about these organizations and the larger religious conflict in the country elides any of these differences and makes for incomplete and biased analysis. Ultimately, the UOC is attempting to carve out a space for itself and communicate its position, however whether this approach will be convincing to Ukrainians and those abroad remains to be seen.

Disclaimer: The conclusions and opinions expressed in this research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government, Department of Defense, or The Air University.

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