



**Kyriaki Topidi**

(Head of Cluster on Culture and Diversity/Senior Researcher,  
European Centre for Minority Issues - Flensburg, Germany)

**Religious minority identities under pressure in Ukraine:  
between the war and europeanization\*<sup>1</sup>**

*Le identità delle minoranze religiose sotto pressione in Ucraina:  
tra la guerra e l'europeizzazione\**

**ABSTRACT:** In light of Russia's recent invasions in 2014 and again in 2022, the present contribution discusses how religious minorities have perceived their Ukrainian-ness and what have been the implications of this war on religious minority identity protection in Ukraine. The analysis will first provide an overview of the recent changes in the legal and policy frameworks concerning religious minorities in Ukraine. At a second level, it will argue that religious minority groups have adopted diverse techniques of resilience, adaptation, and survival to respond to the double challenge of aggression from Russia but also from within Ukraine. Processes of othering and the elasticity of the space for individual groups to adopt (and maintain) multiple identities will be stressed as structural features in protecting minority identity in its cultural dimensions within the current circumstances. Finally, the analysis will engage with the effects of the war in Ukraine in relation to religious minority identity protection

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against the background and role of the Europeanization track of the country connected to the prospect of EU membership.

**ABSTRACT:** Alla luce delle recenti invasioni russe del 2014 e del 2022, il presente contributo analizza come le minoranze religiose abbiano percepito la propria identità ucraina e quali siano state le implicazioni di questa guerra sulla protezione dell'identità delle minoranze religiose in Ucraina. L'analisi fornirà innanzitutto una panoramica dei recenti cambiamenti nel quadro giuridico e politico relativo alle minoranze religiose in Ucraina. In secondo luogo, sosterrà che i gruppi religiosi minoritari hanno adottato diverse tecniche di resilienza, adattamento e sopravvivenza per rispondere alla doppia sfida dell'aggressione da parte della Russia e dall'interno all'Ucraina. I processi di alterizzazione e l'elasticità dello spazio che consente ai singoli gruppi di adottare (e mantenere) identità multiple saranno sottolineati come caratteristiche strutturali nella protezione dell'identità minoritaria nelle sue dimensioni culturali nelle circostanze attuali. Infine, l'analisi si concentrerà sugli effetti della guerra in Ucraina in relazione alla protezione dell'identità delle minoranze religiose, alla luce del contesto e del ruolo del percorso di europeizzazione del Paese, connesso alla prospettiva di adesione all'UE.

**KEYWORDS:** religious minorities, Ukraine, enlargement, sovereignty, war, hybridization

**SUMMARY:** 1. Introduction - 2. A general overview of minority protection in Ukraine post-1991 - 3. The implications of the 2022 war on religious minority identity in Ukraine - 4. The prospect of EU accession and its impact on religious minorities in Ukraine- 5. Concluding remarks.

## 1 - Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was confronted with an expansive project of *Ukrainization* replete with challenges linked to the diverse ethno-cultural make-up of the country. The Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 and its implications from an identity perspective (among other radical shifts in geopolitical terms) highlight the challenges connected with becoming a majority, after a long period of being a minority and vice versa. Due to the features of the system of governance during the Soviet period and although contemporary Ukrainians are clearly the majority in their country in numerical terms, they retain an ambiguous self-perception as a minority, in terms of



fundamental cultural identification both linguistically and culturally, including in religious terms.<sup>2</sup> The country's incomplete transition to fully fledged statehood in diversity governance terms has been additionally complicated by a minoritized cultural self-identification of the majority also due, in part, to the absence of political responsibility assumed towards ethno-cultural minorities living on Ukrainian territory by successive governments post-1991. Religion, especially that of a minority group, has been treated in the early years of Ukraine's independence as a ground for rejection or discrimination. The Crimean Tatars, for instance, when returning to their lands after independence, were confronted with experiences of rejection and suspicion.<sup>3</sup>

In parallel, for a long period, post-1991 the undermining of Ukrainian statehood from the Russian state has been unfolding and evolving. It has been built on the dissemination of polarizing and manipulated historical narratives. Two main broad directions have been pursued in this endeavour: the instrumentalized use of controversies around World War II, used also in the latest war in 2022, against Ukraine but also nostalgia for Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> These endeavours have been arguably successful in setting the scene for the polarization of communities within Ukraine in part also due to a certain 'deficit' in Ukrainian national dignity.<sup>5</sup> As importantly, it has been additionally hypothesized that such polarization efforts mostly appear to be driven by elites and remain disconnected from the complexity of social dynamics among groups on the ground.

To navigate the continuous fluctuations in connection with the protection of Ukrainian ethno-cultural diversity, throughout a turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century, the development of resilience sourced also from religious minorities to overcome trauma is a constant trend though one still

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<sup>2</sup> L. DENYSENKO, *Majority as a Minority*, in V. Yermolenko (Ed.), *Ukraine Histories and Stories*, Kyiv, Internews Ukraine/Ukraine World, 2019, <https://ukraineworld.org/en/articles/books/essays-intellectuals>, p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> L. DENYSENKO, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>4</sup> ARENA TEAM, *From 'Memory Wars' to a Common Future: Overcoming Polarisation in Ukraine*, London School of Economics, 2020, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/iga/assets/documents/Arena-LSE-From-Memory-Wars-to-a-Common-Future-Overcoming-Polarisation-in-Ukraine.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Y. PETROVSKY-SHTEM, *People of the Cossack Stock: Ethnic Minorities and the War Against Ukraine*, Webinar at the Davis Center of Russian and Eurasian Studies, March 8, 2023, <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/events/people-cossack-stock-ethnic-minorities-and-war-against-ukraine>.



insufficiently documented in the Ukrainian context. Resilience appears to be a unifying value across the diverse ethno-cultural groups in the country: adaptability, determination, and ingenuity in the face of disruptions seem to unite Ukrainians in their diversity.<sup>6</sup> Victimhood at the hands of oppressive powers, survival and a yearning for security also emerge as unifying values.<sup>7</sup> In Donbas, for example, the historical trajectory of events shows that prior to 1991, the Soviet lingua franca had erased almost any notion of Ukrainian linguistic identity. Post-1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by economic collapse, the demolition of a way of life and the development of mafia wars, which alienated the eastern parts of Ukraine. So “Eastern and Western Ukraine stared each other in the face for the first time in 1991, even if still mainly from a distance”.<sup>8</sup> This awkward encounter has been conditioned by distorted images of the “Other.” Experiences of “shame” in the 1990s due to economic hardship among Ukrainians have functioned as aggravating factors towards identity building but also as disruptions thereof. In the absence of inclusive identity discourses, civic rights (and values) appeared to offer a more tenable path to state-building. In a sense, Ukrainian resilience, including post-2022, can be construed as part and parcel of an irreversible nation-building process that has been disrupted by Russia on numerous occasions. In the midst of this complex matrix, and in light of Russia’s recent invasions in 2014 and again in 2022, the present contribution discusses how religious minorities have perceived their Ukrainian-ness and what have been the implications of this war on religious minority identity protection in Ukraine.

The analysis will first provide an overview of the recent changes in the legal and policy frameworks concerning religious minorities in Ukraine. These changes will showcase a lowering of minority protection standards at national level justified by the ongoing war. They also seem to pose anew the question of the leverage that EU membership prospects will carry for Ukraine towards the improvement of minority protection standards.

At a second level, the contribution will argue that religious minority groups have adopted diverse techniques of resilience,

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<sup>6</sup>ARENA TEAM, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>7</sup>ARENA TEAM, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Y. ABIBOK, ‘Russian Minority in Donbas’ and the History of the Majority, IWM post: European Boundaries and Divides, <https://www.iwm.at/sites/default/files/inline-files/IWMpost129mitUkraineBeilage.pdf>, 2022, 129, p. 9.



adaptation, and survival to respond to the double challenge of aggression from Russia but also of regression of minority protection standards from within Ukraine. Processes of othering and the elasticity of the space for individual groups to adopt (and maintain) multiple identities will be stressed as structural features in protecting minority identity in its cultural dimensions within the current circumstances.

Finally, the analysis will engage with the effects of the war in Ukraine in relation to religious minority identity protection against the background and role of the Europeanization track of the country connected to the prospect of EU membership.

## **2 - A general overview of minority protection in Ukraine post-1991**

Ukraine resists straight-line models of identity development as religious minorities traditionally have shown solidarity towards each other (for example between Muslims and Jews). Particularly for minority groups, such identity building is premised on a shared history of victimhood, as already mentioned.<sup>9</sup> The degree to which the willingness among diverse religious groups to assist each other functions as an indication of what it means to be Ukrainian becomes worthy of further scientific analysis. In this sense, the weaponization of minority rights by Putin's Russia to justify invasion and war, should not be considered the sole focus of analysis on the effects of war on religious minority rights and protection regimes in the country. Instead, the present analysis is built on the premise that, in spite of the counter reactions of elevated threat perceptions and the rise of nationalism among both minority and majority populations in the region, the war in Ukraine constitutes a brutal reminder of the significant challenges in ethno-cultural minority protection standards and policies in our continent. It also creates the space and even the need for a deeper understanding of the hybridization of minority ethno-cultural identity traits in contemporary Ukraine, especially under conditions of crisis.

In broad terms, minority protection policy within Ukraine has been largely in fluctuation after independence in 1991. It has been mostly tied to the interests of the ruling parties. At the societal level, social alienation between ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians has been more

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<sup>9</sup> ARENA, cit., p.69.



limited when compared for example to small ethnic groups such as the Crimean Tatars, though the current war may suggest otherwise.<sup>10</sup>

The current Ukrainian legislative framework is dominated by linguistic and religious minority issues that often become intertwined as securitized elements of group identity.<sup>11</sup> Predictably, following the annexation of Crimea and the launch of the war in Donbas in 2014, Ukraine's policy towards its ethno-cultural minorities has been characterized by the increased politicization of the issues surrounding diversity domestically. Adopted law and policies have also lacked coherence in the development of protection standards. Legal and institutional frameworks, along with formal and informal channels between the state and groups concerned were mainly developed along a false dichotomy: minority policies treated support and loyalty to the state and support to minority cultural features as mutually exclusive goals.<sup>12</sup>

As of 2014, under President Poroshenko, the axes of minority policy oscillated between state-building and nation-building. Initially, the government embraced minority groups, most characteristically Hungarians in West Ukraine, the Crimean Tatars through the establishment of a Plenipotentiary for Crimean Tatars or the Roma.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the post of a Plenipotentiary on Issues of Ethnic Policy and a

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<sup>10</sup> **A. TERZIAN**, *Minority Rights in Ukraine After the Maidan Revolution: Change or Continuity?*, in *Open Political Science*, 5, 1-12, 2022, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> The 1991 Ukrainian Constitution in Article 10 proclaims Ukrainian as the only state language, while guaranteeing the "free development, use and protection of Russian and other languages of national minorities." In July 2012, the protected use of 18 minority languages within regions with at least 10% of minority languages speakers was legally introduced. This meant that Russian was spoken in 13 out of 27 regions in Ukraine. This legal development was interpreted as part of a russification project and in fact even criticized as a disincentive in the learning and use of Ukrainian. The 2012 Language Law was intended to be abolished in 2014. The plan for the abolition was perceived by Russia as an "aggressive gesture" (See **K. HENRARD**, *Options for a Peace Settlement for Ukraine: Option Paper XIX - Minority and Language Right*, in *Opinio Juris*, April 18, 2023, <https://opiniojuris.org/2023/04/18/options-for-a-peace-settlement-for-Ukraine-option-paper-xix-minority-and-language-rights/>), and was inter alia used to justify the annexation of Crimea. For more on this point see **K. TOPIDI**, *Ethno-cultural Minority Identities at War in Ukraine and beyond*, cit., pp. 1-19.

<sup>12</sup> **K. HAERTEL**, *National Minorities in the Post-Revolutionary Era: Is the Ukrainian Government Capable of Inclusive Politics?*, in *Security and Human Rights*, 32, 121-138, 2022, p. 124.

<sup>13</sup> **K. HAERTEL**, op. cit., p.126.





Council of Inter-Ethnic Accord were inaugurated.<sup>14</sup> The latter structures were nevertheless short-lived insofar as the vision of the role of minority groups within Ukraine was ultimately constrained to cultural and educational issues exclusively.

Following the election of Zelenskyi in 2019, institutional efforts were made to mitigate the impact of anti-minority legislation: a new agency was created as the designated body on ethnic affairs tasked with the mission to relativize the balance between majority and minority interests in the country, including on the basis of religious belief. The State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of Conscience (DESS), an autonomous body, represented an institutional effort to formalize the dialogue between the State and minority groups.<sup>15</sup>

Still, the political space relevant to identity matters, including in religious terms has been entirely claimed by elites who have utilized and mobilized both language as well as religion as soft powers to legitimate violence. On the ground, however, the situation has been more nuanced: sociological polling suggests that Ukrainian identity is not defined by whether individuals speak Ukrainian or Russian.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the east-west divide in Ukraine, while in existence, can become heavily diversified on a regional basis.<sup>17</sup> Rather, divisions among groups are mostly observed along urban-rural lines, including on the issue of tolerance of minorities.<sup>18</sup> In any case, civic forms of identity built around a commitment to Ukrainian society appear to constitute the preferred form of identity construction for minority and majority groups in Ukraine.

### 3 - The implications of the 2022 war on religious minority identity in Ukraine: nation-building vs minority protection

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<sup>14</sup> K. HAERTEL, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>15</sup> Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, Decree on the Establishment of the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of Conscience, 12 June 2019.

<sup>16</sup> ARENA TEAM, op. cit., pp. 23-24.

<sup>17</sup> HARVARD MAPA, Digital Atlas of Ukraine, Ukrainian Research Institute, 2018, <https://huri.harvard.edu/mapa>. In 1994, Bremmer had already showed the regional differentiation in terms of political and cultural preferences of ethnic Russians in Ukraine. See I. BREMMER, *The Politics of Ethnicity: Russians in New Ukraine*, in *Europe-Asia Studies*, 1994, 46, 2, pp. 261-283, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668139408412161>.

<sup>18</sup> ARENA TEAM, op. cit., p. 29.



Orthodox Christianity, though majoritarian is not de facto monolithic, with the fragmentation of the Orthodox Church into at least two major fractions - the Ukrainian Orthodox Church historically affiliated to the Moscow Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.<sup>19</sup> The total percentage of the population identifying as Orthodox following the Church of Ukraine at the time of the beginning of the war was around 60% with 13.3% aligning with the Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>20</sup> Other minority religious groups constitute a diverse landscape and include the Catholic Community (Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church) counting 11% of the total population as believers, Muslim groups, especially the Crimean Tatars, amounting to 0.9% of the population, Jewish groups making approximately 0.2% of the population and Protestant groups conservatively estimated to 1.5% of the population.

As far as religious minorities are concerned, the pattern describing their perception and treatment by majority religious groups is similarly inconsistent: despite the diversity of groups present on Ukrainian territory,<sup>21</sup> non-Orthodox religious groups are often victims of negative attitudes.<sup>22</sup> Even prior to the war, religion has been constructed in securitized terms, mainly as an instrument of Russian cultural

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<sup>19</sup> There is in fact a third category of believers within Orthodoxy that self-identify as “just Orthodox” which was the largest group pre-2019 within the Orthodox religious group denoting a political statement against a polarized choice. The size of the group in question rose to 30.3% according to data of the 2019 national survey conducted by the Razumkov Center. This group is likely to collapse after 2022 (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/ukraine/>). The collapse is due to the war pushing the declared allegiance of its members to either the Ukrainian Orthodox Church or to the Orthodox Church within Ukraine affiliated to the Moscow Patriarchate.

<sup>20</sup> T. KALENYCHENKO and D. BRYLOV, *Whoever Saves One Life Saves the World Entire*: Ukrainian Religious Denominations during the War - English version, in *Bulletin de l'Observatoire international du religieux* 37, 2022, <https://obsreligion.cnrs.fr/bulletin/whoever-saves-one-life-saves-the-world-entire-ukrainian-religious-denominations-during-the-war-english-version/>.

<sup>21</sup> According to the 2020 US Department of State figures, 62.3% are identifying as Christian Orthodox, 9.6% as Greek Catholic, 8.9% as Christian, 15.2% as not belonging to any religion, 1.5% as Protestant, 1.2% as Roman Catholic, 0.1% as Jewish, and 0.5% as Muslim (See US DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ukraine, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2051579.html>).

<sup>22</sup> A. TERZYAN, op. cit., p. 4.





influence with some exceptions.<sup>23</sup> Following the Russian aggression, however, the role of religion - including within a domestic minority context - has been more closely aligned to the construction of national identity. The challenge still remains to decouple nationalism from patriotism for both the aggressor state, Russia, but as importantly for the Ukrainians.

Remarkably, however, interfaith initiatives have quickly developed in times of emergency and threat. Since the beginning of the 2022 war, the *All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations*, a non-governmental body representing almost 95% of religious communities in the country, has played an active role in coordinating and implementing humanitarian work efforts. It has also committed itself to awareness efforts in national and international contexts.<sup>24</sup> This particular religious actor, along with the individual majority and minority faith organizations, took upon themselves a significant part of the social burden provoked by the war, fulfilling a consolidating mission within Ukrainian society. The salience of their efforts and presence is particularly relevant within the broader debate on the use of religion as an instrument of a hybrid war where one religious actor (i.e. the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate) is perceived as aligned with the Russian aggressor.<sup>25</sup>

With respect to limitations to the exercise of religious freedom, the *Law on the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Field of Activities of*

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<sup>23</sup> See for example the adoption of the Law on the Prevention and Counteraction on Anti-Semitism in Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2021) that prohibits anti-Semitism and that may be in fact linked to the 2020 European Court of Human Rights Decisions in 2020 concerning the ineffective investigation of hate crimes targeting religious minority groups in Ukraine ([https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-205798%22\]](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-205798%22]) ; [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-205797%22\]](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-205797%22]) ). See also the adoption of the 2021 Law on Indigenous Peoples that recognizes Crimean Tatars, Karaites and Krymchaks as indigenous peoples of Ukraine against assimilation, deprivation of cultural values, eviction or forced relocation along with their cultural, educational, linguistic and information rights.

<sup>24</sup> See **UNITED STATES INSTITUTE FOR PEACE (USIP)**, *Faith Under Fire in Russia's War on Ukraine: Perspectives from Ukrainian Religious Leaders* - Webinar, available under <https://www.usip.org/events/faith-under-fire-russias-war-ukraine>, October 30, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> **M. BRYTSYN** and **M. VASIN**, *Faith Under Russian Terror: Analysis of the Religious Situation in Ukraine*, in *Mission Eurasia*, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2025-ME-report-on-Ukraine-ENG> ; **A. HOUSTON** and **P. MANDAVILLE**, *The Role of Religion in Russia's War on Ukraine*, *United States Institute of Peace*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/role-religion-russias-war-ukraine>.



*Religious Organizations* reflects the securitized dimension of religion as part of a hybrid war and was adopted by the Verkhovna Rada on the 20<sup>th</sup> August 2024, entering into force on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2024. It prohibits religious organizations that are “affiliated with centers of influence in the Russian Federation” and is precisely testimony to the hybrid nature of the ongoing war. Along the same lines, sanctions against senior clergy of the Moscow-controlled Ukrainian Orthodox Church were imposed for collaboration with Russia.<sup>26</sup> From a Ukrainian perspective, the law is a response to the instrumentalization of religion justifying Russian entitlement to land and identities. Russian claims of the same nature could have worrying implications beyond the Ukrainian case, for Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia in Georgia or Belarus.

Accounts related to the treatment of religious minority group members within occupied territories of Ukraine are alarming, feeding into the polarizing narratives around religious minority faiths in Ukraine. Their members have become victims of raids during worship services, of campaigns of intimidation and of actual violence targeting buildings, objects (such as destruction of Christian literature) The targeted minority faiths include Protestant and Baptist communities. Terrorism allegations are also framing Crimean Tatars who have opposed Russian occupation, often accused of alleged membership to the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir. Imprisoned Muslims have reported among others torture, medical neglect or prayer bans. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church has been likewise banned in Zaporizhzhia. In simpler and more explicit terms, the restrictions to the exercise of religious freedoms in Russia have been spreading within Ukraine through occupation.<sup>27</sup>

In this sense, the impact of the Russian aggression has, on the one hand, been legitimately perceived as an existential threat to religious minority groups that still have a recollection of the suppression of minority faiths pre-1991. The threat is further magnified by virtue of the current regime applicable in Russian occupied territories of Ukraine in relation to religious freedoms. Russia’s aggression has precisely re-

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<sup>26</sup> US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> See K. TOPIDI, *Religious Belief as an Existential Threat: How Russia Victimizes Religious Minorities in Russia and in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine*, in *Canopy Forum*, November 2, 2024, <https://canopyforum.org/2024/11/02/religious-belief-as-an-existential-threat-how-russia-victimizes-religious-minorities-in-russia-and-in-the-occupied-territories-of-ukraine/>.



emphasized the hostile to religious minorities environment prevailing in Crimea and other occupied territories of Ukraine against a number of Muslim groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir considered a terrorist organization under Russian law (though not under Ukrainian law), Jehovah's Witnesses, banned since 2017, along with Falun Gong or the Tablighi Jamaat.<sup>28</sup> Violence, including torture against religious leaders and destruction of religious sites is already documented in various locations within Ukraine in connection with the ongoing war.<sup>29</sup> This parameter may also explain the hypervigilance of these communities towards the instrumentalization of religion in the present war.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, and in tight connection with the perceived threat of Russia's aggression against religious freedom, one also notes the fragmentation that the war has provoked within the segment of the Orthodox Church that is attached to the Moscow Patriarchate. The internal schism has been triggered by ordinary priests adopting a pro-Ukrainian position, in contrast to higher ranking bishops that have abstained from taking an explicit position or even adopted a pro-Moscow stance.<sup>31</sup>

With Orthodoxy being used by Russia to legitimate violence in Ukraine, religious minority identity has acquired distinct features as a result of the 2022 war: first, the war has reordered religious affiliation and altered the language that members of these groups prefer to use.<sup>32</sup> Second, minority religiosity has been elevated to a political resource characterized by its uncontroversial features, its pervasiveness and its interconfessional reach.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, the war has also highlighted the existing gaps in religious minority protection which in fact predate the war, particularly vis-à-vis religious minority groups such as the

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<sup>28</sup> US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> RELIGION ON FIRE: *Documenting Russia's War Crimes Against Religious Communities in Ukraine*, <https://www.mar.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Religion-on-Fire-report-2023-ENG.pdf>, states that 350 sacred sites have been destroyed across the spectre of all major faiths in the country.

<sup>30</sup> RELIGION ON FIRE, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> T. KALENYCHENKO and D. BRYLOV, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> E. MURATOVA and N. ZASANSKA (eds.), *Ukraine's Minorities at War: Cultural Identity and Resilience*, Routledge, London, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> C. WANNER, *Religion and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine - Zenovia Sochor Parry Memorial Lecture in Ukrainian Studies*, Ukrainian Research Institute / Harvard University, November 2, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAISMr0KAw8>.



Jehovah's Witnesses and Jews.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the elasticity of religion as an identity marker is still present and tightly connected to the broader flexible religious cultural attributions that prevail in Ukraine for historical reasons. Thirdly, minority religious actors since the beginning of the war have shown initiative towards humanitarian and reconciliation efforts. These efforts have often exceeded their numerical strength (e.g. in the case of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church) crafting a position as national institutions serving all Ukrainians, including through their participation within transnational religious networks.<sup>35</sup>

More broadly, the diversification and hybridization of minority identity markers in political terms have characterized religious minorities, as well as very vividly linguistic ones.<sup>36</sup> Ethnic identity appears to be hybrid or at the very least situational whereby ethnic and cultural categories become adjusted and adjustable in connection with current war and beyond. For both the Russian speaking minorities but also other minority cultural groups such as the Crimean Tatars or the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, hybrid cultural identities seem to thrive defying clear group boundaries, although ethnic identities do not disappear.<sup>37</sup>

In part also due to the ongoing war, religious minority group identity formation in Ukraine does not appear to follow a linear evolution. Its development may be affected by the level of perceived threat it poses for the state as far as its legal and policy treatment is concerned. The existence and role of the kin state of a minority group and the type of claims raised are important elements to determine both the impact of the war on the group in question but also more broadly the reception of its claims and its recognition by the Ukrainian state. Indeed,

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<sup>34</sup> **US DEPARTMENT**, *Ukraine 2020 International Religious Freedom Report*. Article 161 of the Criminal Code is often singled out as conducive to mis-qualifying hate crimes against religious minorities, downgrading them to vandalism. Other outstanding issues concern property restitution claims of religious organizations, which were further complicated by the Russian invasion.

<sup>35</sup> See **N. ZASANSKA**, *Going beyond regional: the Greek Catholic Church as a communicator of dignity during the Russo-Ukrainian war*, in E. MURATOVA and N. ZASANSKA (eds.), *Ukraine's Minorities at War: Cultural Identity and Resilience*, Routledge, London, 2024, pp. 195-218.

<sup>36</sup> **K. TOPIDI**, *Ethno-cultural Minority Identities at War in Ukraine and beyond*, cit., pp. 1-19.

<sup>37</sup> **V. KULYK**, *What We Learned about Ethnonational Identities in Ukraine?* in *Nationalities Papers*, 51,5, 2023, p. 986.



while the Russian invasion has created the preconditions -as in 2014- for embracing the Ukrainian identity as a reaction to the Russian threat, individual hybrid identifications subsist. Notably, this means that religious minority group members do not shy away from their attachment to the Ukrainian state. Quite in the opposite, this attachment is combined with other parallel self-identification processes for the duration of the war.<sup>38</sup>

More specifically, since early 2022, a wide variety of religious groups showed a remarkably unanimous response in defence of Ukraine against the full-scale military attack of the Russian Federation. This development has been a powerful manifestation that a great diversity of cultural groups felt included in Ukraine and sufficiently integrated to mobilize their resource networks in defence of their home country and against the Russian invasion. Controversies and debates around religious minority issues are nevertheless likely to subsist on Ukraine's political agenda for a considerable time.

Collective memory and minorities' coping strategies as responses to the current war have additionally become visible based on the perspectives and lived experiences of ethno-cultural minorities in Ukraine..<sup>39</sup> For them, cultural identity reflecting collective memory is premised on "shared practices, attitudes, values and beliefs that are iterated and refined over time" and as "a story that people within a community tell and re-tell across generations that helps reinforce and sustain the ways in which cultural groups understand, negotiate, interact with and adapt to the worlds in which they live".<sup>40</sup> The interwoven links between national and religious identity have also become visible through narratives that present resistance as a fight for cultural identity survival. For example, the role of the collective memory of Crimean Tatars built around the first annexation and deportation of 1944 has been central to their coping strategies in occupied Crimea. The memory of the first annexation and deportation have been notably used for latent and open

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<sup>38</sup> V. KULYK, op. cit., p. 987.

<sup>39</sup> E. MURATOVA and N. ZASANSKA, op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> M. GROSSMAN et al., *Understanding Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism: A Standardised Research Measure*, Final Research Report, Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation/The Resilience Research Centre, Dalhousie University, Canada, 2017, p. 9.





resistance to the Russian regime, but also to justify cooperation with it in some instances in the current circumstances.<sup>41</sup>

Jewish communities in Ukraine have also formulated their public stance on the ongoing war and responded to Russian propaganda's allegations of "de-Nazification" of Ukraine in relation to their memory of the Holocaust. The public discourses of various Jewish communities in Ukraine related to the war have particularly shown how topics of discussion shifted from immediate situations and needs (evacuation, medical care for those in need) to more strategic planning for the future (e.g. rebuilding).<sup>42</sup>

Overall, despite their historical and present vulnerability, religious minority groups have therefore quickly responded to the shock of the war and exercised creatively dynamic forms of agency that cover both identity as well as more practical strategies for survival. Resilience, in this particular frame, can be defined as an evolving social process that connects minority cultural identity with both external and internal factors to the relevant groups. Faced with the adverse circumstances provoked by the Russian aggression, the responses that groups construct are largely shaped on the basis of their social, economic and political resources to mobilise.<sup>43</sup> The tension between cultural flexibility and continuity as a key feature of resilience and mobilization is a core theme encountered prominently within religious minority groups' agency in Ukraine post-2022. Again only indicatively, the analysis of the discourse and activity of Muslim organizations in Ukraine, in particular, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine "Umma" and the Congress of Muslims of Ukraine, in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine shows that their goal has been to promote Muslim agency in the public sphere, to contribute to the social mobilization of Ukrainian Muslims against aggression, and to counteract the pro-war discourses of Russian Muslim organizations.<sup>44</sup> The activities of these Muslim

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<sup>41</sup> E. MURATOVA, 'Collective memory, Islam, and coping strategies of Crimean Tatars in occupied Crimea', in E. MURATOVA and N. ZASANSKA (eds.), *Ukraine's Minorities at War: Cultural Identity and Resilience*, Routledge, London, 2024, pp. 77-97.

<sup>42</sup> A. MARCHENKO, *Public discourses connected to the Russian war in Ukraine: The representation of Jewish communities*, in E. MURATOVA and N. ZASANSKA (eds.), *Ukraine's Minorities at War: Cultural Identity and Resilience*, Routledge, London, 2024, pp. 98-114.

<sup>43</sup> M. GROSSMAN et al., op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> O. YAROSH, *Muslim organisations in Ukraine and the challenges of wartime: Moderation, mobilisations and resilience*, in E. MURATOVA and N. ZASANSKA (eds.),





institutions remain attached to the development of resilience of Muslim communities, assistance to the population of war-affected regions, and volunteer work for the Ukrainian army.

Similarly, the growing presence and role of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church (UGCC), a minority religious community in Ukraine, has strengthened its moral authority in Ukrainian society due to its specific communication style based on a 'culture of dignity.' Fostering individuals' sense of value and respect for others, the UGCC has emerged as a communicator of dignity that addresses and binds all people of Ukraine regardless of their religious self-identification. The 'culture of dignity' has also re-activated the church's historical model of resilience inherited from the Soviet past when the Greek Catholic Church was severely persecuted and repressed. More than that and due to numerous social activities during the war and increasing presence in social media, this Church seems to be losing its minority status and association with the Western Ukraine region, gaining more trust from Ukrainian society and power to promote its own ethos and conservative agenda.<sup>45</sup>

#### **4 - The prospect of EU accession and its impact on religious minorities in Ukraine**

The impact of the war on religious minorities in Ukraine is also tightly linked to the significant new geopolitical dimension connecting the ongoing war with Ukraine's Europeanization track. In June 2022, Ukraine was granted EU candidate status. Opening accession negotiations with the EU, Ukraine has committed itself to the fulfilment of the European acquis. Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union includes "the rights of persons belonging to minorities" as a common European value to be implemented in the legislation of aspiring member States to the European Union. Respect and protection for national minorities is thus one of the bedrock principles enshrined into the EU by virtue of Article 2 of the TEU. It not only speaks to core aspects of human

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*Ukraine's Minorities at War: Cultural Identity and Resilience*, Routledge, London, 2024, pp. 135-154.

<sup>45</sup> N. ZASANSKA, op. cit., pp. 195-218.



rights but also reflects essential tenets of democracy embodied in the principles of tolerance, equality and participation.

In times of populist rejection of core democratic principles in several European states and across the Atlantic, along with the external geopolitical confrontation with Russia, religious minority issues remain a core political issue within Ukraine, since they reflect challenges to both the maintenance of human rights standards as well as democracy. Within a broader wave of currently ten candidate countries towards EU accession,<sup>46</sup> the aspects of self-identification, education, and the use of minority languages as well as access to media, religious services and representation in the public administration have become essential reference points to assess the fulfillment of the conditions for accession to the Union.<sup>47</sup> Particularly for Ukraine, former EU Commissioner for Enlargement Varhelyi made the connection between EU membership and minorities explicit by stating that “when helping Ukraine, [we are] also helping the minorities”.

Among the groups of candidate states for EU accession, Ukraine nevertheless represents perhaps the most complex confluence of religious minority issues in the context of EU accession that is explicitly compounded by the unprecedented geopolitical dimensions of the conflict. Russia’s war of aggression has been fundamentally motivated by a carefully framed antagonism toward the West based on Moscow’s original claims of acting as a kin state to save Ukrainian Russian-speakers from persecution, spilling over to religious identity issues.<sup>48</sup> The war has never been however solely about minority issues although religious identity and affiliation became soon inherent elements of the conflict. Nonetheless, it is clear that any future resolution of the conflict will inevitably end up involving the (re-)examination of existing minority policies and conditions at some level within the frame of the prospect of EU membership.

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<sup>46</sup> The candidates are six in the Western Balkans as well as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

<sup>47</sup> **EUROPEAN COMMISSION**, *Commissioner Varhelyi’s keynote speech at the conference on Minority rights in the EU enlargement process organized by the European Parliament’s Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages*, European Commission, Brussels, 12 May 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Other kin-state relationships are also relevant for Ukraine, most famously the role of Hungary vis-à-vis the Transcarpathia area.



Depending on the precise outcome of the current war, Ukraine may be as a result called upon to address more extensive minority policy issues such as reintegration strategies for the Donbass and Crimea or even revamped regional autonomy arrangements in order to stabilize minority relations. EU accession will therefore take place not only against the backdrop of internal minority controversies (over past language and education legislation and more recently over religion), but also as a complex set of issues linked to Ukraine's national sovereignty, national identity and its geopolitical future.

The EU's room for maneuver on minority issues will be inevitably tainted by the securitization dimensions of identity, including in connection to religious identities, but also by Ukraine's traumas of war against a belligerent neighbouring kin state. The risk remains, however, that the EU's need to gain a geopolitical victory by fast-tracking Ukraine's accession may override significant or controversial minority issues.

Still, at the outset, it is worth stressing once more the increased civic attachment of Ukrainian citizens belonging to minority groups. This kind of attachment, including in response to Russian aggression, defies linguistic and to some extent cultural heritage, although this defiance is not a direct consequence of the 2022 war.<sup>49</sup> Further than that, ethnic minority groups in the country, including those of Russian ethnic origin, do not automatically assume a distinct and uniform ethnic identity characterized by a strong attachment to their respective kin states.<sup>50</sup> Against this backdrop, the prospect of EU membership for Ukraine raises the following points relevant for religious minority protection standards: First, the question of territorial integrity arises. Ukraine represents one of the candidate states for EU accession where parts of their territory are under the control of an invader (Russia). As the various scenarios that are likely to end the war between Russia and Ukraine remain open, EU membership and the broader Europeanization axis has grown in prominence within Ukraine as a quasi-existential factor including for the promotion of religious minority protection standards. Religious minority protection standards have been framed as a sustainable instrument of peace, especially in comparison with the weak standards of protection of

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<sup>49</sup> V. KULYK, op. cit., p. 975.

<sup>50</sup> V. KULYK, op. cit., p. 976.



religious minorities that apply in Ukrainian territories under Russian control.<sup>51</sup>

The second issue relates to the role of minority kin states. Under international human and minority rights law, the primary responsibility for minority protection has rested with the state where a given minority lives. Yet some states have been trying to leverage kin-minorities in the name of expanding the perceived reach of their nation. In the context of religious minorities, this role has been prominently played by Russia, expansively through the ideological vehicle of *Russkiy Mir*. The latter has been used as a constitutive element of a prominent political strategy to justify the 'protection' of the members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that is considered as subordinated to the Moscow patriarchate. *Russkiy Mir* forms, however, part and parcel of a nationalist-imperialist ideological construction. The same framework includes also the notions of Russian exceptionalism and 'special path' to justify political and military interventions in neighbouring states. The imperialist frame observed is characterized by regime continuity and great power status, threat perception, imperial attitudes, ability to coerce to legitimize Putin's political authority and a return to messianism. It also produces by extension imperialist uses of international law that aim to justify the invasion of Ukraine as a pro-minority measure. Ultimately, Russia's self-perception as a regional imperial power can be explained as a reaction to the decline of its political and economic influence.

In sum, the broader intention from the Russian side has been to create conditions of 'securitization' of Russian speaking minorities, including on the basis of religious identity, leading to minority communities being distrusted and overall ethnic tensions remaining high. Within such a vision of the role of Russia in the world today, the maintenance of a geopolitical sphere of its influence is essential and within it, Ukraine becomes salient for the maintenance of *Russkiy Mir* as a socio-cultural project with unambiguous power implications. It is against this backdrop, that the EU and the prospect of accession are considering ways for Ukraine to firmly detach itself from any Russian leverage and influence.

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<sup>51</sup> See for example D. VOVK, *Ukraine: Real threats but freedom of religion or belief concerns*, in *Forum* 18, August 21, 2024, [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2929](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2929).



## 5 - Concluding remarks

Russia's war against Ukraine, which began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas, and escalated into a full-scale attack in February 2022, has been demonstrably shown to be a challenge to the entire system of international relations that has developed since the end of World War II. At the same time, the internal Ukrainian societal and state reactions to the challenges of Russian aggression have affected religious minorities as well as other segments of society. The dramatic impact of the war on the lives of Ukrainians members has been also reflected in the ways that these communities self-identify. More specifically, the war has had a significant impact on the values and identity of Ukrainians, becoming a catalyst for the formation of the Ukrainian nation and horizontal ties, rethinking established social, gender, and other roles.

For religious minorities in particular, the war has intensified processes of 'othering' and the elasticity of the space for individual groups to adopt (and maintain) multiple identities. While state loyalty has been almost unambiguously present for these groups so far, the challenge for the future will be to allow such multiple identities to remain structural features towards the protection of minority identity in its cultural dimensions within extraordinary circumstances. The magnitude of such challenge is highlighted by the intensely securitized frame within which the presence and choices of religious minority groups are currently constructed and debated.

