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## **UKRAINE: Ukraine's holiest site is battleground to erase Russian influence**

*Photo 1: Activists supporting the government's effort to expel monks from the Lavra demonstrate in April. PHOTO: ROMAN PILIPEY/GETTY IMAGES*



*Photo 2: Adherents of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, accused by Ukrainian officials of retaining ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, gather in front of the monastery. PHOTO: ROMAN PILIPEY/GETTY IMAGES*

# **UKRAINE: Ukraine's holiest site is battleground in campaign to erase Russian influence**

By Ian Lovett

Wall Street Journal (10.05.2023) – For years, Pavlo Lebid embodied the Russian Orthodox Church's power in Ukraine's capital.

One of the highest-ranking officials in the church's Ukrainian branch, with the title "Metropolitan," he rode around in luxury cars and was captured on video questioning the authority of police to ticket him. His portrait was painted onto a wall of a cathedral at the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves, Ukraine's holiest site, where he is abbot. Residents dubbed him "Pasha Mercedes."

Now, Metropolitan Pavlo is wearing an ankle bracelet, charged with supporting the Russian invasion and confined to house arrest while Ukrainian officials try to wrest control of the monastery, known locally as the Lavra, from him.

The crackdown at the Lavra is the boldest step Ukrainian officials have taken in their effort to rid the country of Russian influences.

Since Russia first covertly invaded Ukraine in 2014, Kyiv has passed laws promoting the use of Ukrainian, instead of Russian, in media and public life. Statues celebrating Russian writers and artists have been toppled.

But the Russian-aligned church, officially known as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, has been difficult to dislodge. Though the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, a Kyiv-based denomination with no ties to Russia, is now the

country's largest religious group, millions of Ukrainians still belong to Moscow Patriarchate churches.

Moscow Patriarchate officials are fighting efforts to evict them. They say they cut all remaining ties with Russia last May, after Patriarch Kirill, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, came out in support of the invasion, calling it a Holy War.

"We feel betrayed by our own government," said Archimandrite Mitrofan Bozhko, a priest at the Lavra. "If some people committed crimes, then deal with them personally. Don't ban the whole church. Our parishioners are on the front line fighting in this war."

Ukraine-aligned religious figures say that many members of the Russian branch of the church are loyal citizens trying to practice their traditional faith. But they accuse top leaders of playing into Moscow's expansionist ambitions.

"The Moscow Patriarchate uses the Lavra for spreading the ideology of the 'Russian world,' which is the basis for Russia's invasion," Archbishop Yevstratiy, a spokesman for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, said in an interview. "They use their influence in the Orthodox Church as a weapon of hybrid war."

Ukraine's security service, known as the SBU, says the Moscow Patriarchate remains a nest of spies and Russian sympathizers.

Since the full-scale invasion began last year, criminal charges have been filed against 61 Moscow Patriarchate priests. Seven have been convicted on charges that range from spreading Russian propaganda to spying on Ukrainian forces. A government investigation in January found no evidence that the denomination had formally cut ties to Russia or changed its governance structure, which has long recognized the Russian Orthodox patriarch as its top spiritual authority.

“This is about national security,” Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, said recently on Ukrainian television. The leaders of the Moscow Patriarchate, he said, “have always directly or indirectly supported Russian aggression against Ukraine.”

The Russian Orthodox Patriarchate has for centuries claimed religious jurisdiction over Ukraine. During the Soviet era, the Moscow Patriarchate was the only recognized church in the country. A new church, known as the Kyiv Patriarchate, sprouted following Ukraine’s independence in 1991.

That church was unrecognized by global Orthodoxy, and the Moscow Patriarchate remained predominant and retained control of many of the country’s holiest sites, including the Lavra.

The situation started to change after Russia seized Crimea in 2014 and secretly sent paramilitaries and then its regular army into eastern Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had placed the Russian Orthodox Church at the center of his efforts to rebuild Moscow’s influence in countries such as Ukraine that Moscow used to rule. The Russian invasion turned many Ukrainians against it.

Congregations across the country began decamping to the Kyiv Patriarchate, which has an almost identical liturgy but considers independence from Russia one of its core tenets. That process accelerated after Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who as 270th Archbishop to the Church of Constantinople is the foremost Orthodox leader, granted Ukraine its own church in 2019.

The Moscow Patriarchate, by contrast, continued to hold services in Russian and, until last May, blessed Patriarch Kirill during public worship. Its priests dismiss the Kyiv-based church, known formally as the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, as canonically illegitimate.

In Ukraine, the Kyiv-based church is winning out. Before the full-scale invasion began last year, 34% of Ukrainians identified as members of the Kyiv Patriarchate, while only 14% belonged to Moscow Patriarchate churches. Hundreds more churches have left the Moscow Patriarchate since then: A poll last summer found that only 4% of Ukrainians now identify as part of Moscow Patriarchate.

Though the Moscow Patriarchate has condemned the invasion, many Ukrainians question why the church didn't distance itself from Russia far sooner.

"This is the 10th year of war," said Yaryna Arieva, a 22-year-old resident of Kyiv. "All churches that work with Patriarch Kirill should be shut down."

Even as its numbers have dropped, the Moscow Patriarchate retains influence, especially in Ukraine's predominantly Russian-speaking regions. Last year the Kremlin put Moscow Patriarchate churches at the center of its propaganda campaign, claiming that Russian Orthodox believers in Ukraine were being suppressed.

Archimandrite Afanasiy Burdyukh, a Moscow Patriarchate priest in Kherson, said that Russian-installed officials approached him shortly after they seized the city in March 2022.

First they asked permission to distribute humanitarian aid at the church, then showed up with a film crew to document it. Next they told him to say that Kherson was historically a Russian city in his sermons. Ultimately, he said, officials pushed him to encourage parishioners to vote in favor of joining the Russian Federation in the sham referendum held in September.

"Convince them that Russia coming is a blessing," he recalls the men telling him. He added, "the Russians' idea was that the church was a source of information that people would accept without question. It was important to them to control

this source.”

Father Afanasiy said he never fulfilled these requests, but that many priests complied, including one from his church, Father Maksim Tarasenko.

“He would say, ‘We have the same past. We have the same motherland,’ ” Vitaly Stasiyk, a security guard at the church, said of Father Maksim, adding that he often referenced Kyivan Rus, a state founded in Kyiv more than a millennium ago that President Putin has invoked in his argument that Russia and Ukraine are historically the same country. Father Maksim didn’t respond to requests for comment.

When Russian forces pulled out of Kherson in November, Father Maksim fled across the river with them, as did many other Moscow Patriarchate priests. One Kherson priest was photographed at the Kremlin for a ceremony to commemorate the claimed annexation of four Ukrainian regions.

In the northeastern Kharkiv region, the rector of a Moscow Patriarchate church in Izyum has been accused of publicly blessing the Russian military convoy. Another priest, in the eastern Luhansk region, was convicted of high treason for sending information about Ukrainian military positions to the invading army; he is one of three priests who have been sent to Russia as part of a prisoner swap, according to Ukrainian military intelligence.

Ukraine is now trying to dismantle the Moscow Patriarchate.

Mr. Zelensky late last year ordered parliament to draft a law barring “religious organizations affiliated with centers of influence in the Russian Federation” from operating in Ukraine; a draft law has been introduced, but parliament hasn’t yet voted on the bill.

Last month, officials in the western city of Khmelnytskiy voted to evict the Moscow Patriarchate from their cathedral,

after a priest and parishioners were filmed beating a Ukrainian soldier. Nine regional legislatures later voted to ban the Moscow Patriarchate entirely.

Moscow Patriarchate officials say the bans amount to an illegal attack on their religious freedom and have sued to stop the evictions.

Metropolitan Clement of Nizhyn and Pryluky, a spokesman for the Moscow Patriarchate, conceded that some priests have aided the Russian occupation, but said this makes the church no different from any number of other Ukrainian institutions—including the SBU itself.

“In Kherson, lots of police went over to Russia. But no one talks about banning the police—only our church,” he said. “It’s political persecution. The goal is to take from one denomination and give to another that’s supported by the state.”

He added, “The government wants to divert attention from the large number of casualties at the front with this soap opera with monks.”

The Lavra case is becoming a defining test of Ukraine’s efforts to root out Russian influences.

Founded in the 11th century on cliffs overlooking the Dnipro River, the Lavra is considered the cradle of Slavic Orthodox Christianity. Orthodox believers have long come from across Eastern Europe to see the remains of saints buried in the Lavra’s catacombs.

Like most historic churches in Ukraine, the property is owned by the state, but the Moscow Patriarchate has held the lease since Soviet times.

The investigation into the Lavra began last fall, after a video filmed there showed parishioners singing a hymn

celebrating Russia's "awakening."

Metropolitan Pavlo is accused of spreading Russian ideology.

In a recording released by the SBU, he encouraged a woman to keep mentioning Patriarch Kirill during worship, which the denomination forbade last May, saying he'd do the same. On another tape, he says residents of Kherson were welcoming the Russian occupation. "There are already Russian flags everywhere and everything else," he said, "and the people are satisfied." A search of his home found a Russian coat of arms.

At a court appearance in April, Metropolitan Pavlo called the charges against him politically motivated.

From house arrest, he posted a video on YouTube calling on Moscow Patriarchate parishioners to fight to keep hold of their church buildings.

"Listen to no one. Keep your sanctuaries. Don't abandon them. And woe to those mothers of children who destroy temples," he said. "Church destroyers," he warned, will be punished for seven generations.

In Russia, the Moscow Patriarchate priests at the Lavra are a cause celebre. Patriarch Kirill denounced efforts to evict monks. The Russian foreign ministry called for Metropolitan Pavlo's release. "He is taking on the likeness of a martyr for the Orthodox faith," the ministry said in a statement.

Ukraine's government has already taken control of the Lavra's cathedral, after the Moscow church's lease expired at the end of last year. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine now holds services there.

Reclaiming the Lavra's monastery, where the Moscow Patriarch holds a long-term lease, has been tougher.

Ukraine's ministry of culture says the Moscow Patriarchate broke its lease by altering some of the Lavra's historic



buildings. The church challenged the ruling in court, and a judge dismissed the case. Metropolitan Pavlo repeatedly instructed the monks not to leave, and some 200 of them refuse to move out.

In recent weeks, parishioners have held vigil outside the Lavra to protest the monks' eviction. Counter protesters often stand a few feet away, demanding the Moscow Patriarchate leave.

"The Ukrainian government thinks the Lavra is state property," said Father Valery Kravets, a priest at the Lavra, during a recent protest. "But the Lavra wasn't built by the state. It was built by the parish and monks."

*Nikita Nikolaienko contributed to this article.*

#### [Further reading about FORB in Ukraine on HRWF website](#)

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