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630 places of worship destroyed or damaged by the war

Russia continues to torture priests and destroy Ukrainian churches – IRF released new report in [English](#) and in [Ukrainian](#)



[IRF](#) (29.03.2024) - During the full-scale invasion, Russian troops damaged or wholly destroyed at least 630 churches, prayer houses, and other religious facilities in Ukraine.

The Institute for Religious Freedom published this new data in the report **“The Impact of the Russian Invasion on Faith-Based Communities in Ukraine.”** The IRF research contains the results of monitoring and surveys on the situation of Ukrainian religious communities in the territories occupied by Russia.

- The report in English: <https://bit.ly/2024-IRF-Report-Ukraine-en>
- The summary of the report in English: <https://bit.ly/2024-IRF-Summary-Ukraine-en>
- The report in Ukrainian: <https://bit.ly/2024-IRF-Report-Ukraine-ua>

In addition, IRF recorded seventeen interviews with religious leaders of various denominations about Russian war crimes in Ukraine. These video testimonies are available for watching on YouTube with English subtitles: <https://bit.ly/2022-IRF-video-testimonies>

Oleksandr Zaiets, Board Chairman of the Institute for Religious Freedom, project manager

The Kremlin uses religion, particularly Russian religious centers, as a tool of war against Ukraine. In addition to propagating hatred of Ukrainians, the Russian authorities in the occupied territories of Ukraine often practice arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, torture, and even murder of Ukrainian religious leaders. Those priests, pastors, imams, etc., who did not agree to collaborate and refused to submit to Russian religious centers are subject to repression.

The IRF report states that most damage was inflicted by Russian missiles, kamikaze drones, and artillery, including targeted attacks on civilian objects. In addition, some places of worship have been deliberately looted by the Russian military, closed, or converted by the occupying authorities into administrative buildings.

Most churches, prayer houses, synagogues, and mosques were destroyed in Donetsk region (at least 146), Luhansk region (at least 83), and Kherson region (at least 78). The destruction in Kyiv region, where Russian troops attempted to capture the capital of Ukraine in February-March 2022, was also enormous (73). Due to the ongoing hostilities, the number of destroyed buildings is increasing in Kharkiv region (at least 62),

Zaporizhia region (at least 51), and Mykolaiv region (at least 41).

On a confessional basis, Orthodox churches suffered most damage from the Russian aggression – at least 246 in total. Of these, the churches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate) suffered the most – at least 187. Also, 59 churches of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine were destroyed or damaged.

The scale of destruction and looting of evangelical churches is also extensive – at least 206 in total. Among them, the Pentecostal (94), Baptist (60), and Seventh-day Adventist Church (27) prayer houses suffered the most.

Dr. Maksym Vasin, Executive Director of the Institute for Religious Freedom, author of the report, Ph.D. in Law

It is most likely that if Russia retains control over the occupied territories of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions throughout 2024 and beyond, Ukrainian churches and religious communities in these regions will face the same fate as believers in the parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions occupied since 2014. The Russian occupying authorities will continue to fight any manifestations of dissent, opposition, and Ukrainian identity, particularly religious identity, by enforcing repressive Russian legislation.

Hiding behind slogans of protecting Russian speakers, "denazification," and "desatanization" of Ukraine, the Kremlin has actually been implementing the ideology of the "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World). As interpreted by Russian propagandists, this ideology comprises the physical destruction of the Ukrainian people as a nation (genocide), the elimination of Ukrainian cultural heritage, the overthrow of the Ukrainian government, and the disappearance of the Ukrainian state.

Recommendations

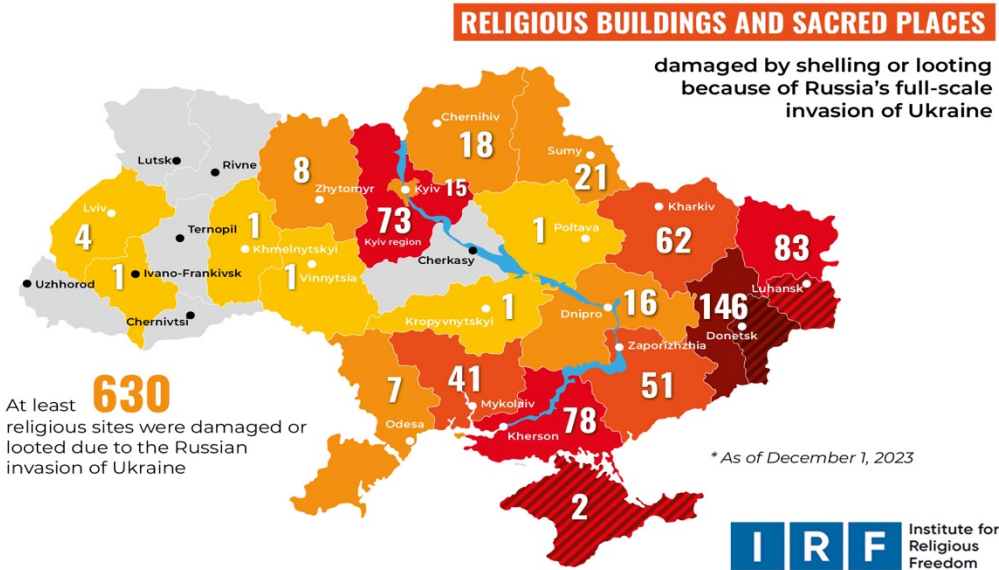
The Institute for Religious Freedom formulated several recommendations in the report. Among them are the following:

- 1. To publicly condemn the Russian World ideology and the position of the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, as well as other Russian religious associations and leaders who participate in the Russian aggression and justify it or promote hatred and genocide of the people of Ukraine.
- 2. To strongly and proactively support Ukraine’s efforts to investigate Russian war crimes and prosecute all war criminals.
- 3. To introduce personal sanctions against Russian officials, religious leaders, media workers, and other individuals responsible for justifying or carrying out repressions against Ukrainian religious leaders and faith-based communities on the Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia.
- 4. To designate the Russian Federation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, considering the constant attacks on the civilian population and critical infrastructure of Ukraine, deliberate exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis, nuclear blackmail, the use of torture, inhuman treatment of prisoners of war, and arbitrarily imprisoned civilians, particularly religious figures.

Footnote

The Institute for Religious Freedom has prepared a report, “The Impact of the Russian Invasion on Faith-Based Communities in Ukraine,” as part of [the Locked Faith project](#) with the support of the peacebuilding organization PAX (Netherlands) in cooperation with Mission Eurasia (USA), the Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine) and representatives of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations.

This is the fourth report on Russian war crimes against religious communities prepared with the assistance of the Institute for Religious Freedom since the beginning of Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine. Before that, in September 2022, the IRF published the report [“Russian Attacks on Religious Freedom in Ukraine.”](#) In 2018, the report [“Religious Freedom at Gunpoint: Russian Terror in the Occupied Territories of Eastern Ukraine”](#) was published. In 2015, with the participation of the IRF, a coalition of human rights organizations published the report [“When God Becomes the Weapon.”](#)
Infographics: IRF Ukraine / irf.in.ua



Ukraine is now 'Holy War,' Russian Church declares

By [Brendan Cole](#)

[Newsweek](#) (28.03.2024) - The Russian Orthodox Church has approved a document that deems President Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine a "Holy War."

The declaration came during a congress of the World Russian People's Council in which religious, political and cultural figures in the country met at the site of Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, a focal point for the Orthodox faith in Russia.

The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, also heads the council and is an ally of Putin. He has been criticized for providing a religious justification for the war and [failing to unequivocally condemn](#) the killing of people in Ukraine.

In February 2022, Patriarch Kirill said that Ukraine and Belarus were part of "Russian lands" and called the Ukrainians who were defending themselves against Russian aggression as "forces of evil," pitching the war as a battle for the future of Christianity.

"From a spiritual and moral point of view, the special military operation is a Holy War, in which Russia and its people, are defending the single spiritual space of Holy Russia," the document released on Wednesday said under the heading "special military operation," which is the official Kremlin term for the invasion.

It went on to claim that the war had the goal of "protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism."

Following the war, "the entire territory of modern Ukraine should enter the zone of Russia's exclusive influence," it said.

"The possibility of the existence of a Russophobic political regime hostile to Russia and its people on this territory, as well as a political regime controlled from an external center hostile to Russia, should be completely excluded," it added.

Orthodox church representatives globally, [such as the U.S.-based](#) Orthodox Public Affairs Committee (OPAC), have condemned the war. After the start of [Putin's](#) invasion on February 24, 2022, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) cut ties with the Russian Orthodox Church.

When contacted for comment the UOC referred *Newsweek* to its media statement in which it said it "dissociates herself from, categorically rejects, and condemns the ideas set out in this document."

"The assertion that the so-called 'special military operation' is a 'Holy War' contradicts the basic principles of Christian morality, especially in the light of the armed aggression with the use of violence.

"From the point of view of the Gospel, military actions cannot be justified as 'holy', nor can such assertions be made by people who call themselves clerics," the UOC statement added.

Willy Fautré, who heads the group Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), told *Newsweek* that Patriarch Kirill "might have been the only person who had the power to stop President Putin in his war on Ukraine and make history as a peacemaker."

But the patriarch's document shows he would go down in history "as an accomplice to war crimes and as the gravedigger of the Russian Orthodox Church."

Newsweek has contacted the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry for comment.

This month, the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Sviatoslav Shevchuk, [told Newsweek](#) that where Russia has arrived in Ukraine, "they exterminate all other religions besides the well-controlled and weaponized Russian Orthodox Church."

"For Russian occupiers, the weaponization of religion is something new, is a neologism," Shevchuk said. "It is why the Ukrainian government and Ukraine's religious society is forced to find different ways to protect ourselves from the weaponization of religion."

The church he heads has full communion with the Vatican and is the second largest in the Catholic faith after the Latin Church. He visited Washington, D.C., this month to describe to U.S. lawmakers, who are weighing the provision of further aid to Kyiv, the extent of destruction of religious buildings caused by the war.

The Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom said in February 2023 that the [Russian military](#) had destroyed, damaged or looted at least 494 religious buildings, with the figure estimated to be far higher today.

"That is also a challenge for my church, not to become militant," Shevchuk said, adding that the aim is "not to fall to the same temptation the Russian Orthodox Church fell into and become an instrument of hatred."

Update 03/30/24, 1 p.m. ET: This article has been updated with comment from Willy Fautré and a statement from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Pro-Russian cleric prosecuted on charges of treason

Statement published by the Chernivtsi Regional Prosecutor's Office

[Facebook](#) (22.03.2024) - Prosecutors of the Chernivtsi Regional Prosecutor's Office brought to court the indictment against the Archimandrite of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church UOC (MP), who before the liberation of Kherson was the rector of the Holy Dormition Cathedral of the Kherson Diocese, on the facts of treason and aiding the aggressor state (Part 2 of Art. 111, Part 1 of Art. 111-2 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine).

In addition, his property was seized within the framework of criminal proceedings. Among the said real estate objects is an apartment in the Pechersk district of Kyiv, a residential building in the Kherson region, as well as a vehicle.

According to the investigation, the Archimandrite provided ideological support to the Russian Federation during the occupation of Kherson region. In his sermons, he praised representatives of the occupation regime and personally started before the self-proclaimed authorities to transfer premises and property taken from Ukrainian citizens and private joint-stock companies to serve the cathedral.

In addition, on September 30, 2022, the clergyman joined the celebrations in the St. George's Hall of the Kremlin on the occasion of the so-called accession of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions of Ukraine to the Russian Federation, which showed his support for the illegal annexation of the territories of Ukraine.

A few days before the liberation of Kherson, the abbot fled to the temporarily occupied territory.

Since December 2022, he has been under sanctions by the NSDC (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine).

The pre-trial investigation in this proceedings was carried out by investigators of [the Security Service of Ukraine in Chernivtsi region](#) with the operational support of the Office of the SBU of Ukraine in the Kherson region.

Is religious liberty 'under attack' in Ukraine?

No, but the country faces a dilemma in how to deal with an Orthodox church controlled by Russia.

Jillian Kay Melchior

[Wall Street Journal](#) (22.03.2024) - Opponents of U.S. aid to Ukraine claim the country persecutes Christians. *"When American leaders frame this as a war for democracy and human rights, it would be good if the recipient of the aid was a little bit more careful of human rights, including religious liberties,"* Sen. J.D. Vance (R., Ohio) says in an interview this week. Ukraine *"is doing some pretty bad stuff,"* he adds, citing *"news reports of priests being investigated, church assets being seized and priests being arrested."*

Ukrainians have *"invaded churches, they've arrested priests,"* according to Sen. Rand Paul (R., Ky.). Rep. Paul Gosar (R., Ariz.) says Kyiv has *"banned Ukraine's oldest and largest denomination, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church."* Tucker Carlson last year [said](#) President Volodymyr Zelensky *"banned a Christian faith in his country and arrested nuns and priests."* In a Republican presidential debate, Vivek Ramaswamy [said](#): *"Do you want to use U.S. taxpayer money to fund the banning of Christians? That is actually what's happening."*

Steven Moore, a former Capitol Hill staffer and now president of the Kyiv-based Ukraine Freedom Project, visited some 100 GOP congressional offices between September and January. About a third *"said they're concerned about Zelensky persecuting Ukrainian Christians,"* he says.

This narrative—the product of a public-relations and lobbying campaign—sounds bad. But it's false, and Americans in particular should appreciate Ukraine's dilemma. After Sept. 11, the U.S. sought to safeguard religious freedom while protecting itself from Islamic

terrorism. Ukraine seeks to uphold religious liberty while addressing Russia's power over the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which supports the Kremlin.

The story begins in the Soviet Union. After the 1917 revolution, Orthodox Christians went underground and proved resilient under persecution. Stalin concluded that if he couldn't extinguish Christianity, he would co-opt it instead. Beginning in 1943, he re-established the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church and reopened churches and seminaries—under state control. This official religious life "could be surveilled, regulated, taxed and, most critically, used to accomplish political goals," [writes](#) Kathryn David, a U.S. State Department historian.

After the Soviet collapse, evidence emerged of [extensive ties](#) between the Russian Orthodox Church and the KGB. Last year two Swiss publications [reported](#) that among the KGB agents in the church was Vladimir Gundyayev, known today as Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, head of the Russian Orthodox Church since 2009. (The church didn't respond to my query about the Swiss reports. Patriarch Kirill's nephew has [said](#) his uncle "was not an agent, although he was subjected to 'strict controls' by the KGB.")

[Canada](#), the [U.K.](#) and the [Czech Republic](#) imposed sanctions against Patriarch Kirill over his support for [Vladimir Putin's](#) war in Ukraine. Nina Shea of the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom says the Russian church's justification of the war is "comparable to jihad, holy war in Islam." The patriarch has [claimed](#) those who die during military duty have made a sacrifice that "washes away all the sins that a person has committed."

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church historically operated as a subordinate branch of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Institute for the Study of War [reports](#) the Ukrainian church "provided material support for Russia's initial invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014," and Russian soldiers used church buildings "as military storage depots, garrisons, field hospitals, and even fighting positions during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine."

The Ukrainian church [condemned](#) the 2022 invasion, appealed for negotiations, expressed disagreement with Patriarch Kirill and said it had made statutory changes testifying to its "complete autonomy and independence." But the Russian Orthodox Church website [lists](#) more than 100 members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as members of its episcopate. Many are also currently [listed](#) by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Robert Amsterdam, a lawyer representing the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, says it "severed all administrative ties from the ROC when the present conflict began," including "withdrawing their senior members and bishops from the synod of the ROC. The UOC cannot control what the ROC says or does on its websites, and obviously the Russians have their own separate agenda to misrepresent the independence of the Church." He also says the "canonical or spiritual connection" between the churches "is not the jurisdiction of politicians to alter."

Some 22 Ukrainian Orthodox Church officials have been convicted of unlawful collaboration with Russians or other war-related crimes, according to Viktor Yelenskyi, Ukraine's top executive official on matters of religion and freedom of conscience. Priests have been convicted for [informing](#) Russia of Ukrainian positions and [otherwise spying](#) and for [disseminating propaganda](#) urging the government's overthrow. Mr. Yelenskyi estimates another 72 people connected with the church are subject to criminal proceedings or have been issued notice of suspicion. Mr. Amsterdam said "fewer than 1% of UOC members have been found to have issues."

Russia uses the church as “a channel of influence, as a kind of soft power,” and it controls senior Ukrainian Orthodox Church leaders through “blackmails, compromise, and they also bribe them,” says Cyril Hovorun, a former theological counselor to Patriarch Kirill who broke with him over his support for Mr. Putin and now lives in exile. (The Russian Orthodox Church didn’t respond to a request for comment.) Mr. Yelenskyi argues “the core problem is not in this handful of collaborators” but “the whole structure, which transmits Russian ideas and Russian narratives and is a channel of Russian influence. . . . It’s a threat to the national security of Ukraine to have ties to a body subordinated to Russia’s militaristic machine.”

Italy gives € 500,000 for the restoration of Odessa’s Orthodox Cathedral shelled by Russia

The church, heavily damaged by Russian shelling on July 23, 2023, is one of the beneficiaries of the projects of the Italian presidency of G7.

by Willy Fautré with Ievgeniia Gidulianova

[Bitter Winter](#) (16.02.2024) – Italy’s PM Giorgia Meloni is keeping her promise made as early as August 2023 to contribute financially to the emergency restoration of the Transfiguration Cathedral of Odessa heavily damaged by Russian shelling on 23 July 2023.

In early February 2024, an agreement was signed between Italy and UNESCO on the allocation of funds, according to the [Odessa City Council](#). The Italian government delegation was chaired by Davide La Cecilia, Special Envoy for the Reconstruction and Strengthening of Ukraine’s Resilience.

On the night of July 23, 2023, Russian troops carried out a [massive attack on the territory of Odessa and the region](#), firing 19 missiles of various types. The blow fell on the historical center of Odessa, included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. As a result of the attack, 25 architectural monuments were damaged, in particular the Transfiguration Cathedral. Half of the cathedral was left without a roof, the central piles and foundation were broken in the building, all windows were knocked out, stucco was knocked down. Rescuers and clergy managed to save some icons, including the Kasperovskaya Icon of the Mother of God, who is considered the patroness of Odessa. The Iberian Icon, installed for the 100th anniversary of Odessa, also survived.

On October 2, 2023, Ukraine and Italy signed an agreement to repair the Transfiguration Cathedral.

In November, heavy rains flooded the cathedral, and urgent conservation work of the roof was started by the Odessa Diocese.

Reconstruction to be based on a tripartite Memorandum and under a Supervisory Board

The mayor's office said that the plans are to sign a tripartite Memorandum of Cooperation on the Reconstruction of Odessa (Italy – Ukraine – UNESCO), as well as separately one between Italy and Ukraine, where the areas of cooperation will be marked.

To perform this restoration work, a Supervisory Board will be created, which will include all parties to the tripartite Memorandum, as well as strategic, technical and scientific committees. The latter, in particular, will include scientists from the Polytechnic Institute of Milan, the Milan Triennial Museum, and the National Museum of Modern Art and Architecture in Rome.

It should be wise for the Ukrainian side to include [Prof. Meshcheriakov](#) in the Supervisory Board as his name is closely connected with the history of the reconstruction of the Odessa Cathedral, which was completely destroyed during Stalin's time. Ph.D. Arch., Associate Professor, Meshcheriakov is a member of the Ukrainian Committee of ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), Chairman of the Odessa regional branch of the Architectural Chamber of the National Union of Architects of Ukraine, forensic expert of the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, Research Fellow on the British Academy's Researchers at Risk Programme, and Visiting Scholar at Trinity College, University of Cambridge. He is the author of two monographs and more than seventy scientific publications, articles, theses in the field of architecture and protection of cultural heritage.

Under Meshcheriakov's leadership, a group of architects in 1999 was the laureate of the national call for projects for the reconstruction of the Odessa Cathedral, which was rebuilt in 2000–2010 on the basis of his project. He was then awarded the State Prize of Ukraine in the field of architecture for the reconstruction of the Odessa Cathedral. He is also the author of a book on this topic.

The legal status of the Cathedral: complex and unclear

[The legal status of the Transfiguration Cathedral](#) is rather complex and unclear. Until May 2022, it was considered a church with a special status and rights of broad autonomy, affiliated to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church/Moscow Patriarchate (UOC/MP).

On 27 May 2022, the Council of the UOC/MP removed all references to such dependence from its statutes, stressing its financial autonomy and the absence of any external interference in the appointment of its clergy. It hereby dissociated itself from the Russian Orthodox Church and stopped commemorating Patriarch Kirill (of the Russian Orthodox Church) at the divine services because of his support to Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine. This distancing did however not lead to a schism from Moscow so that the UOC can keep its canonical status. In the meantime, the process of transfer of UOC parishes to the national Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), founded in December 2018 under President Poroshenko and recognized by Constantinople Patriarchate on 5 January 2019, has accelerated.

In this context, the comment of [Archdeacon Andriy Palchuk, a cleric of the Odessa Eparchy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church \(UOC\)](#) about the damage caused to the cathedral is worth mentioning: "The destruction is colossal. Half of the cathedral is left without a roof. The central pillars and the foundation are broken. All the windows and stucco were blown out. There was a fire, the part where icons and candles are sold in the church caught fire. After the end of the air raid, the emergency services arrived and extinguished everything."

On 23 July 2023, [Archbishop Victor of Artsyz](#) (UOC) appealed to Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church in a virulent way about the shelling of the cathedral. He accused him of supporting the war against Ukraine, a sovereign country, and personally blessing the Russian Armed Forces who are committing atrocities.

Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church kept silent about the heavy damage caused to the Orthodox Cathedral of Odessa by Russian shelling and has not proposed any financial or other assistance to its reconstruction.

Japan's assistance

Japan offered Ukraine financial assistance to restore cultural heritage, education and media through the UNESCO.

The signing ceremony was held on 7 February at the organization's headquarters in Paris. It was attended by Japan's representative to UNESCO Kano Takehiro, UNESCO Director General Audrey Azoulet, and Ambassador of Ukraine to France Vadym Omelchenko.

[Japanese](#) officials say that this year their country will allocate about 14.6 million US dollars to Ukraine, where hostilities are ongoing.

These funds will help preserve the world heritage in the historical center of Odessa, which was affected by Russian missile strikes.

On 24–25 February, a [symposium on Ukrainian culture](#) against the background of war will be held at Keio University in Tokyo and will be accessible online after [registration](#).

Last year, the Consul General of the Hellenic Republic in Odessa, Dimitrios Dohtsis, announced that Greece also intended to assist in the restoration of architectural monuments that were damaged [during the Russian missile attack](#), including the Cathedral, but as of early February nothing was made public about possible concrete initiatives.

No other EU country has promised to contribute to the restoration of the Cathedral.

Soon after the Russian shelling of Odessa, [EU High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell](#) called the night strike on the city another Russian war crime and tweeted: "Russia's relentless missile terror against UNESCO-protected Odessa is yet another war crime by the Kremlin, which has also destroyed the main Orthodox cathedral, a World Heritage Site. Russia has already damaged hundreds of cultural sites in an attempt to destroy Ukraine." No EU promise

was however made to contribute to the reconstruction of the destroyed parts of the Cathedral.
