

# Silenced Dissent in the Russian Orthodox Church

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*The official support of Russia's war against Ukraine by the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church has silenced most of the voices of existing dissent. However, before February 2022, there were different reactions from the church to various waves of protest. While the church leadership spoke of a "crisis of the young generation", individual clergy members showed understanding for the outrage over the state repressions and the lack of prospects perceived by the youth. Under the current circumstances, there is little room for anti-war action by Orthodox clergy and laity, but some are seizing the opportunities left to them.<sup>1</sup>*

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Russia's war against Ukraine since 24 February 2022 is fully supported by the Moscow Patriarchate and legitimized as a war against evil forces who want to destroy the unity of the "canonical territory" of the Russian Orthodox Church. This rhetoric is not entirely new. Since the beginning of its "rebirth" in 1988, the Moscow Patriarchate has cultivated a national conservative and apocalyptic discourse: Orthodoxy and the Russian army together are stopping the Antichrist – at least on the territory of "Holy Rus".<sup>2</sup> Equally not entirely new is the fact that there has always been a diversity of voices within the Russian Orthodox Church, which – until recently – the patriarchy has found difficult to contain. At the end of February, up to 300 clergy members and lay people of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia, as well as in Belarus, have immediately called for reconciliation and to end the war.<sup>3</sup> They did so right before Russia's parliament passed the law from March 4<sup>th</sup>, imposing a jail term of up to 15 years for "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces and its operations and spreading "fake" news about these issues. In February 2023, the editorial board of the Russian Orthodox website *Blagodatnyj ogon* (Holy Fire) has called on the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church to strip clergy of their rank who have openly opposed the Russian war on Ukraine a year ago.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, we outline how the Russian Orthodox Church deals with dissent in general and provide an overview of dissent among priests and lay people within the ROC since the mass protests against the arrest of the Russian opposition politician Alexey Navalny in February 2021. Since then, there has been no doubt the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church unconditionally supports the existing power structures – and indeed not only in Russia, but also in Belarus,<sup>5</sup>

while the majority of the clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, including its head Metropolitan Onufry (Berezovskiy), immediately condemned and compared the Russian invasion to Cain killing his brother Abel.<sup>6</sup>

It has been difficult to gather information about war protest in Russia ever since,<sup>7</sup> let alone within the Russian Orthodox Church. Not one Russian Orthodox bishop has raised his voice against the war, and the question: “Why have you forgotten the truth of God?” posed by Sergey Chapnin, the former editor of the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, fired in 2015 and living in exile now,<sup>8</sup> has remained unanswered so far.<sup>9</sup>

### **Regime critique with appeals to Christian principles**

Since the poison attack in August 2020, Alexey Navalny’s treatment in the Berlin Charité clinic, his return to Russia in January and sentencing in February 2021, Navalny has been sitting in a Russian prison camp. He immeasurably irritated the regime not only with his return, but also with his film documentation on the construction of a luxurious palace for President Putin on the Black Sea coast. Navalny has been well known for years for his exposure of corruption scandals among the governing elites. Nevertheless, he is not an uncontroversial opposition politician, especially because his statement that Crimea belongs to Ukraine represents only a recent policy shift.<sup>10</sup>

In a written interview for the *New York Times* in late August 2021 regarding his condition of detention, Navalny spoke of psychological violence. He reports he is constantly provoked so that he can then be accused of outrages. Therefore,

*I just decided this would become an excellent Christian practice. We continually talk about loving thine enemy, but really, just try to understand and forgive people you literally couldn’t stand at all just a little while ago. But I’m trying.<sup>11</sup>*

Already in one of his speeches in court Navalny had described himself as a devout person, who acts according to the principle: “*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.*” (Mt 5,6).<sup>12</sup> Appeals to Christian motives are not unusual among members of the Russian opposition – this already occurred in 2012 during the scandalous “Punk Prayer” by the group *Pussy Riot* in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, during which the Mother of God was made aware that the Patriarch does not believe in God, but rather in Putin.<sup>13</sup> Since then, the Russian Orthodox Church has been intensifying the state promoted conservative discourse on “traditional values”,<sup>14</sup> whereby members of the opposition like to question the Church’s interpretative authority with regard to Christian principles: for example, during his widely acclaimed final statement in court the student and blogger Yegor Zhukov, who was sentenced to three years of probation due to his critique of the manipulations of the Moscow municipal Duma elections in 2019, appealed to the Christian values of love, trust, compassion, humanism, mutual aid

and care for one another on which a strong society must be based.<sup>15</sup>

Zhukov's and Navalny's statements stand in a long tradition of regime and church critics. For example, a letter from the publicist Vissarion Belinsky from 1847 to the freshly converted Nikolai Gogol is famous in Russian cultural history:

*[The] Orthodox Church [...] has always served as a bulwark of the knout and servant of despotism. But why have you mixed Christ up in this? What have you found in common between Him and any Church, much less the Orthodox Church? He was the first to bring people the teaching of freedom, equality, and brotherhood and sealed and affirmed the truth of his teachings with his martyrdom. And this teaching was man's salvation only until it became organized in the Church and raised Orthodoxy as its basic principle.<sup>16</sup>*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky was sentenced to death in 1849 for publicly reading this provocative text and only pardoned shortly before the execution order.

### **“Crisis of the young generation”**

The increasingly repressive character of the current Russian regime could be observed in 2021: besides the treatment of Navalny, the brutal treatment and arrests of peaceful protesters, the massive obstruction of the participation of oppositional candidates and the obvious manipulations during the Duma elections as well as the inclusion of independent media and media professionals into the notorious register of “foreign agents” spoke volumes. In October 2021, the latter had 47 entries, thus nearly three times as many as in April. During the protests at the beginning of 2021, 11,000 people were arrested and currently 186 have been prosecuted regarding the “palace case” (eight in a penal colony, eight imprisoned in a detention center, while the others were released with various restrictions on their freedom or fines or have left the country, and 34 are missing). Besides the release of Navalny and other political prisoners, fair and honest elections as well as social injustices were among the main concerns of the mainly young protesters in early 2021 – according to surveys, approximately 24% were between 18 and 25 years old, 42% between 25 and 35 years old and 15% between 36 and 46 years old.<sup>17</sup>

Metropolitan Ilarion (Alfeyev), head of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate until June 2022,<sup>18</sup> indeed acknowledged the existence of social problems and corruption. However, in his view this was still by far no reason to “call on young people to take to the streets”. According to him, children and youth are “deliberately not being introduced into politics, rather into a political confrontation” and this is an “absolutely impermissible violation of the civic legal order”. Concerning the “political seduction of the youth”, lamented by Patriarch Kirill, there was therefore also no lack of sarcastic comments regarding the alleged entirely unpolitical “military-patriotic” education at Sunday schools.

It is no coincidence that Metropolitan Ilarion labeled critics of this synodal

department as “church Navalnys”.<sup>19</sup> By focusing on the inadmissible politicization of the youth, Ilarion followed the line of interpretation which Patriarch Kirill set out: he interpreted the protests as a “crisis of the young generation”, which he believes is literally going crazy under the tremendous influence of the media and internet and losing its entire orientation in life. To fend off their “destructive influences”, above all parents should teach children the “right thoughts and convictions”. The latter are represented by the members of the “Special Purposes Mobile Unit” (russ. OMON), said the deputy director of the Synodal Department for Church’s Relations with Society and Mass Media, the political scientist Alexander Shchipkov: they are the “best part of the Russian youth”, who sacrifices its health to “protect us.”.<sup>20</sup> To date tens of thousands of young soldiers have already laid down their lives for their fatherland – a sacrifice for which Patriarch Kirill also promises them immediate absolution (no doubt also for whatever war crimes they may have committed).<sup>21</sup>

Back in 2021, regime critics took notice of an interview with arch priest Maxim Kozlov, a member of the Supreme Church Council of the Russian Orthodox Church. According to him, the main problem was neither “a certain mister [Navalny] for whose freedom people were demonstrating nor the palace”, which was purportedly built for President Putin, rather the absence of a “clear positive project” for the country:

*I can very well imagine myself in the situation of a young person, who is 16, 18 or 20 years old and thinks: “Well, are things going to always remain the same until 2036? Not this way, not that way? Always the same faces in the Duma, the same eternal faces in the Duma, who have been party leaders since the 1990s, soon old men, whom we have known since 1991, 1993, and is there really no one else in Russia, who would be able to express the desires of the people?” The perception that this is the case, but that there is no other possibility unfortunately leads, among other things, to such events as those we experienced last Saturday [23 January 2021].<sup>22</sup>*

Besides the allusions to the late Soviet stagnation with its old-aged party secretaries, this statement could also be interpreted as critique of the conservative constitutional reform of 2020, which allows for two presidential re-elections and thus the presidency of Vladimir Putin until 2036. Kozlov additionally emphasized that contemporary parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church must be open for people of every political persuasion, both for protest participants as well as for OMON policemen. In his opinion, the obviously “non-monolithic, less solidarity-oriented” Russian society must learn to live peacefully with different socio-political views, because the attempt to create a mono-ideological society already led to totalitarianism once. However, after the start of the Russian war against Ukraine, Kozlov seems to be “in line” with the monolithic war ideology of the Russian regime, since in June 2022, in addition to his former duties, he was appointed director of the *Aspirantura/Doktorantura* of the Moscow Patriarchate. On 9 May 2022, when

Russia celebrates its victory in World War II, Kozlov said that believers should not only pray for those who “laid down their lives so that fascism could be defeated” but also “for those killed in other armed conflicts”.<sup>23</sup>

In 2021, the greatest hopes of the critics of the church leadership within the church still lied in lively discussions about social and youth issues at the local level: Sergey Chapnin called on the local priests to honestly address the problems of youths and to “spare them from official rhetoric of the church”, whose talk of “traditional values” and critique of social networks and the consumption society among youths draws anything from skepticism to Homeric laughter: “The youth is not dumb.” The church indeed attempted to set up youth services throughout the church, but with its blatant support for the state repressions and not the slightest understanding for the concerns of the protesters the church hierarchy – both in Russia as well as Belarus – is committing a great mistake, Chapnin said.<sup>24</sup>

The priest Georgiy Edelshteyn, known for his commitment to the rights and freedoms of believers in the 1970s and a member of the Moscow Helsinki Group (ordered to shut down in January 2023<sup>25</sup>) argued similarly regarding the dubious legal proceedings against Navalny:

*One should not regard me and millions of my fellow citizens as idiots [...] Why was the entire center of Moscow closed off? [...] Why were tens of thousands of police moving around Moscow? [...] Was it really because some Alexey Navalny did not show up for registration five or six times?*

Millions of people in Russia could only conclude from this that courts and the state prosecutor can never be trusted.<sup>26</sup> For the sake of recollection: Navalny was sentenced to two and a half years in a prison camp, because he could not regularly show up for his registration during his treatment in Germany – a violation of the conditions of probation from an equally politically motivated trial in 2013. In March 2022, Navalny has been given nine more years in a “strict regime penal colony”.<sup>27</sup>

### **Former debates within the church**

In the run-up to the Duma elections in September 2021, Metropolitan Ilarion emphasized that the Russian Orthodox Church does not become directly involved in political campaigns. However, the church supports all political forces which promote a stable government, civic, interconfessional and international peace.<sup>28</sup> Doubts whether the ruling governmental elite really served these objectives were already in place back then, and when Ilarion received the order of Alexander Nevsky on 2 February 2022 from President Putin, he mentioned that “*in recent years we [the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate] have felt more and more like a kind of defense department, because we have to defend the sacred boundaries of our Church.*”<sup>29</sup>

For at least a decade, within the Russian Orthodox Church the political

determination for change and participation has been stifled with reference to the revolution of 1917 promoted by “foreign agents”. As for its rejection of youth protests, the church leadership draws on the “Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church” from 2000, because calls for political changes are undesired: “*The Church does not believe it possible for her to become an initiator of any change in the form of government.*” (III.7).<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, until the beginning of 2022 the indeed very lively debates in the church environment have only been suppressed in individual cases. The expert on religion Roman Lunkin even claimed back then that “Patriarch Kirill’s silence opens the field for the political self-determination of the clergy.” He observed an awakening political interest among a new generation of young clergymen and members of the community, who wanted to shape their own future.<sup>31</sup> They also appealed to the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church: the unprecedented “*If the authority forces Orthodox believers to apostatise from Christ and His Church and to commit sinful and spiritually harmful actions, the Church should refuse to obey the state (III.5)*” attracted quite a bit of attention. However, the reference to the following passage was much more frequent:

*Among the traditional areas of the social efforts of the Orthodox Church is intercession with the government for the needs of the people, the rights and concerns of individual citizens or social groups. This intercession is a duty of the Church, realised through verbal or written interventions by appropriate church bodies with the governmental bodies of various branches and levels. (III.8.)*

For example, in 2019 an open letter drew a strong response as nearly 200 clergy members advocated for indicted and sentenced participants during the protests against manipulations of the local Moscow elections. However, the Moscow Patriarchate condemned the letter as a “political declaration”, although it was not being followed up by sanctions. In December 2020 over 2000 Russian Orthodox Christians signed an additional open “letter to the Christians in Belarus”, who took part in the protests against Lukashenka’s electoral manipulations.<sup>32</sup> Even during the protests in early 2021, debates on the issue were carried out in the Christian social networks, during which clergymen mostly did not side with Navalny, rather against state violence and the destruction of civic freedoms in the country. A certain degree of self-censorship and the fear of discipline may have contributed to the fact that this time there was no comparable joint action of the clergy in Russia to support the protesters. Instead, it was individual priests who expressed critique and felt stiff headwinds. For example, the priest Andrei Vinarskiy was sentenced to 20 days in prison due to his participation in a demonstration in favor of Navalny in Khabarovsk in January. After serving his sentence, the church leadership banned him from celebrating masses despite a petition for his return from his community. The ban is not supposed to be lifted until he repents. However, Vinarskiy refused to do so. On 2 July he was detained again while protesting at the Khabarovsk court

building against the trial against the previous coordinator of the local Navalny regional network. Vinarskiy, who has been a priest in the Birobidzhan Eparchy for over 20 years, was already well known for his support of the arrested ex-governor of the Khabarovsk region, Sergey Furgal, and was detained several times during the demonstrations in autumn 2020.<sup>33</sup> Vinarskiy continues his support for Furgal to this day. Every evening he holds an individual protest in Khabarovsk for about half an hour which he streams on *YouTube*.<sup>34</sup>

### **Missing theological language**

All in all, quite a few church representatives and believers held the opinion that one does not have to be a Navalny fan to be outraged over the circumstances of his arrest and the treatment of the protesters. An example for the comparatively openly conducted debate in 2021 was the case of Alexey Uminskiy, a priest in a church parish in Moscow, who is highly regarded due to numerous publications and media appearances and one of the few priests who openly sympathizes with the opposition. In April 2021 he appealed in a video for “Christian mercy” towards the imprisoned Alexey Navalny, who entered a hunger strike to obtain an examination by an independent medical officer. In the video, Uminskiy expressed his hope that the attention given to Navalny’s fate would compel the authorities to solve the problem of the poor medical supply situation in prisons.<sup>35</sup> Two days after the release of the video, Sergey Karnaukhov, a lecturer in political science at Moscow University and previous employee of the Interior Ministry, severely attacked Uminskiy in a television show entitled “Who is dragging the church into politics and turning criminals into martyrs?” aired by the television station *Spas* of the Russian Orthodox Church: Karnaukhov claimed that Uminskiy is a criminal and should be arrested, before he “drives our church into the abyss”. He accused him of “extremism” and demanded that priests be more systematically disciplined. Otherwise, the Russian Orthodox Church will greatly suffer soon from many clergymen who become the main actors operating “not only against the church, but also against the constitutional structure of Russia”.

Various Orthodox organizations and church representatives subsequently sided with Uminskiy, for example the well-known Arch Deacon Andrei Kurayev in his *LiveJournal* blog. The Orthodox internet portal *Pravmir* announced that it would suspend its cooperation with *Spas* until the management of the television station officially apologizes. Uminskiy calmed down the situation by claiming that those responsible for the television station apologized personally to him. The moderator of the concerned program, Roman Golovanov, then explained live during his show *Strim* that it was a mistake to broadcast Karnaukhov’s accusations and apologized to “everyone who was hurt”.<sup>36</sup>

It can therefore be concluded that in 2021 some diversity of media and social

networks existed within the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>37</sup> In his account of the Navalny protests, the Russian-Orthodox theologian Andrey Shishkov saw potential for development: according to him, the Orthodox Christians of Russia were still lacking a theological language with regard to political issues, which goes beyond commonplaces such as “the church is outside politics” and “To Caesar what is Caesar’s”. In his view, dedicated Orthodox political thought became stuck in the interwar period before WWII, when it gradually emerged under Russian émigrés in Paris as a response to political violence (in the USSR and in view of rising fascism in Germany), injustice and the inability of the church to morally characterize the political events: *“What we witness now are so far episodic, barely connected initiatives. They remind one of the attempts of a person who has lost the ability to speak and has to learn to speak again. The voice is still weak, and the words are often confused. There is still a long rehabilitation period ahead.”*<sup>38</sup>

Since 24 February 2022, even the weak voices seem to be mostly silenced. In the face of Russia’s war against Ukraine, the mentioned rehabilitation period is deferred for years and will be even more painful and difficult. But the thought by the mentioned Russian Orthodox intellectuals in exile of the interwar period could certainly be helpful to address these issues (e.g., Sergey Bulgakov, Nikolay Berdyaev, Simon Frank, Anton Kartashev, Maria Skobtsova). The Church historian Georgy Fedotov (1886–1951), for example, considered “national repentance” crucial for the future resurrection of Russia with its Orthodox Christian culture. Already in 1933, he feared, that if Russia, after a possible breakdown of the Soviet regime, was rebuilt with the hateful energy of Russian (Orthodox) nationalists, “an ecclesiastical, orthodoxized evil is far more frightening than outright [Soviet] anti-Christianity.”<sup>39</sup> Also, Fedotov pleaded for the liberation of Russia from its “imperial burden”.<sup>40</sup>

### **A “win-win” symphony?**

Regarding the political position of the church leadership, the Moscow Patriarchate has visibly moved closer to the government since the appointment of Patriarch Kirill in 2009. The Russian Orthodox Church is not a state church which receives tax money, but it is a central actor in the new conservative authoritarianism, for whom the “symphony” with the state pays off. The Main Cathedral of the Russian Military Forces, inaugurated in 2020 in Moscow, is symbolic of this. The other side of the coin is that the Russian Orthodox Church can hardly afford to criticize the current regime. The forms of cooperation with the state have rapidly increased in the past decade: a 2015 report on the allocation of presidential funds from the *Center for Economic and Political Reforms* determined even back then that the Russian Orthodox Church and related NGOs who support the government’s rhetoric are among the most significant recipients of subsidies.<sup>41</sup> The journalist Andrei Soldatov even claimed that the Russian Orthodox Church has

largely surrendered the freedom to act as an independent religious organization: in numerous “cooperation agreements” with all security agencies, “including the Interior Ministry, the *Rosgvardija* (Forces of the National Guard) and the law enforcement agencies (FSIN)”, the church is directly subordinating itself to military commanders.<sup>42</sup> Hence, in case Putin is voted out of office or the government is even overthrown, the church has much to lose, in particular regarding its budget. Therefore, already before the war against Ukraine the church leadership has lost the respect of many “liberals”, in particular urban intellectuals.<sup>43</sup> But moreover, it also lost the respect of the so-called “Orthodox fundamentalists”, which it was aiming to win over with its rhetoric on “traditional values”. Their influence has enormously increased during the pandemic. Numerous priests and believers ignored the protective measures which were imposed by the government and supported by the church leadership, while condemning the ordered closures of churches as part of a “liberal-secular conspiracy”, which was rather ironic in view of the church’s antiliberalism. Proof of the fundamentalists’ dubious success is the fact that monasteries became major infection sites.<sup>44</sup> Apparently, at least until the end of 2021, the “church shepherds” were unable to keep their disparate “flock of sheep” in check. The events of the year 2021 show that the stability of the political system in Russia was increasingly being purchased through repressions as well as media and electoral manipulations.

By making himself dependent on this government, the Moscow Patriarchate was increasingly lacking the flexibility to deal with the range of opinions among church members. The war seems to be helpful in this regard. There are priests and parishes that openly support the war, at least five have died so far by volunteering for the front line. Nevertheless, in December, Patriarch Kyrill requested that during the mobilization, clergy were granted a deferment from mobilization for the entire period of their priestly ministry.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, many priests follow the official call of a circular letter from 28 December 2022 regarding the organization of church aid to the families of the mobilized.<sup>46</sup> All in all, the Synodal Department for Charity says by 6 February 2023 it collected 311.7 million rubles (3.8 million Euro) to help refugees and victims in the conflict zone.<sup>47</sup> Church aid to the mobilized themselves, however, is organized on own initiatives. In any case, if a priest does not follow the call to organize church aid, he will certainly get into trouble. A priest who wanted to stay anonymous to the journal “Cherta” assumed, that the percentages of Russian Orthodox believers who support the war, pray for peace or are just indifferent, most likely correspond to the divisions within the Russian society as a whole.<sup>48</sup> According to the survey by the Levada Center from 12 December 2022, the question, “do you personally support the actions of the Russian military forces in Ukraine” was answered “definitely yes / yes” by 74% (42/32), “no / definitely no” by 20% (11/9), and “can’t say” by 7%. All in all, the support is stronger among the older age groups (75%), and the lowest (62%) among the youngest (18–24).<sup>49</sup> Hence, only about

20% of the Russian population don't support the war.

It is also reported, however, that many people, disgusted by Patriarch Kirill's war rhetoric, leave church, or convert to other religions (though there is no measurable system of "church membership").<sup>50</sup> However, it must be said that all "traditional" and the majority of "non-traditional" religious communities officially – actively or passively – support Russia's "special operation" against Ukraine. On 29 March 2022 they were all summoned to take part in a round table about "Worldwide traditional religions against the ideologies of Nazism and Fascism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century", organized by the Russian Duma, and were expected to support the "military special operation in the Ukraine" at the "humanitarian, spiritual front" within Russia.<sup>51</sup> We know of only three religious leaders, who refused to take part in this and left Russia rather immediately: Archbishop Dietrich Brauer of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia (ELKR),<sup>52</sup> Moscow's Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt,<sup>53</sup> and Telo Tulku Rinpoche, the former supreme lama of Russia's Republic of Kalmykia.<sup>54</sup> The open support of the "special operation" by Bishop Sergei Ryakhanovsky, head of the church union of Russian Evangelical (Pentecostal) Believers, has caused friction among Pentecostals in Russia. Other religious communities in Russia experience the same, and most of them choose a strategy of non-provocative silence that remind of late Soviet patterns of behavior.<sup>55</sup> In any case, this is not a real win-win situation for almost any religious organization, except apparently for the Moscow Patriarchate.

### **Prayer for peace or victory?**

The first priest who was fined because of "discreditation of the armed forces" was Ioann Burdin, who held a sermon about the commandment "You shalt not kill" on 6 March 2022 and prayed for peace in Ukraine in front of 10 people of his parish. He was denounced by one of them, sentenced to pay a fine and forced to retire and leave his church in the Kostroma Oblast in April 2022.<sup>56</sup> The above mentioned Georgiy Edelshteyn was also quick to condemn the war in a post on *LiveJournal* on 26 February.<sup>57</sup> To date the website *shaltnotkill.info* (in cooperation with Belarusian Christian Ecumenical group "Christian Vision") documents 12 cases of hierarchs (priests, deacons) and seven lay members of the Russian Orthodox Church who are persecuted for their anti-war stance in Russia (fines, termination of service).<sup>58</sup> Hieromonk Ioann (Kurmoyarov), who was already defrocked in 2021 for criticizing the militaristic design of the new church of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in Moscow, and has been incarcerated since June 2022 – his containment has been extended several times (currently until 28 May 28). He is accused of posting several videos about Russia's war against Ukraine on his YouTube channel, as well as posts on the VK social network calling for anti-war protests – and he pleaded guilty.<sup>59</sup> Lay people who are protesting against the

war with reference to religion, as to the commandment “Thou shalt not kill”, are prosecuted by state authorities.<sup>60</sup>

One bishop so far, Ioann (Popov) from Belgorod and Staryi Oskok, called for an end to bloodshed only once, under the impact of a missile attack on the Russian city of Belgorod at the beginning of July 2022.<sup>61</sup> According to an interview from February, his eparchy is supporting the Russian army and refugees. In addition, his eparchy has taken in 40 priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and their families who fled criminal prosecution in Ukraine.<sup>62</sup>

Other church co-workers just quit their official service voluntarily. One of those is Grigori Ohanov, the former chairman of the *Kerigma Association of Orthodox Youth Communities* of St. Petersburg, who openly claimed that “what Russia is doing now is going against Christ”:

*This may be a war against Satanists, only clearly Satanists are on the other side. A disgusting statement, and the church will have to repent for it for sure. I think it will be 50 years from now, I hope. There are no Western values, there are Christian values, which in the West are realised, expressed in human rights, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, and so on. Russia is a part of this European, Christian civilisation. A war against such Western values is a war against Christ, because Western values are based on the Gospel.*<sup>63</sup>

Another so-called “liberal” priest, who spoke about the sin “of calling the good bad and the bad good” in an interview with the journalist Katerina Gordeeva (now a “foreign agent” in exile) in October 2022,<sup>64</sup> is hieromonk Ioann (Guaita), priest of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow, who is already known for helping protesters during the protests in Moscow 2019.<sup>65</sup> No charges against him are known so far, while Reverend Andrey Kordochkin, Rector of the St Mary Magdalene parish in Madrid was dismissed in August 2022, because he compared Russia’s declared love for Ukraine to the kiss of Judas.<sup>66</sup>

According to the above-mentioned anonymous priest, the situation for any priest with an anti-war stance is most difficult, if he still wants

*to serve as a pastor, to be able to conduct worship services, to help people, both spiritually and materially. Then he is forced to weigh what will bring more benefit: his statements in the media, on camera, in his blog or the opportunity to bring people God’s word and explain day after day that war is evil, while the essence of Christianity is quite different – it is in love for God and people, and a Christian, if he is really a Christian, has no enemies. It is not an easy choice to make, but we have to make it.*<sup>67</sup>

In this spirit, a group of “Russian Christians of different confessions” published a common “Christmas declaration” against Russia’s war against Ukraine in December 2022. They chose to stay anonymous to be able to spread their message further as simple pastors, teachers, and laypeople in their professions. The call fellow Christians “not to ignore, to pray, to stand up against, to non-violently resist

mobilization, to get involved in humanitarian aid [for Ukrainian refugees].”<sup>68</sup>

One possibility to shape one’s own pastoral service is the choice of prayers during liturgy, as we know thanks to an investigation by Irina Pärt.<sup>69</sup> On several occasions – during the *Euromajdan* in Ukraine in February 2014, right after the Russian invasion in February 2022, and in September 2022, when military mobilization was underway – Patriarch Kirill launched new official prayers. The “Prayer for restoration of peace” from March 2022 was prescribed to all parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate and “*the message of the prayer is clear: Holy Rus’ is under threat, and our common heritage is now being attacked and needs to be defended.*” The new prayer from September then “explicitly calls for victory over the enemies of Holy Rus’” and prays for “the soldiers and all defenders of our homeland”. Pärt observed some flexibility in how these new prayers were received in different parishes. Many parishes did not replace the “Prayer for peace and overcoming internal strife” from 2014 by the prayer of March 2022 because it is perceived more neutral and focused on the suffering subject. Others just ignore the official prayers and use others, while many priests even provide additional patriotic prayers or “digital prayer space” for the relatives of the soldiers. However, not using the official prayers can have serious consequences as well. In February 2023, priest Ioann Koval’ was suspended because he changed one word in the officially prescribed liturgy in the following line: “Rise, O God, to the aid of Thy people, and grant us Thy mighty victory.” By replacing “victory” with “peace” he obviously committed the same crime as many Russian civil activists in their anti-war protests.

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## Endnotes

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