

Information Politics of Ukraine in the Field of Freedom of Conscience in a Pandemic

Palinchak Mykola ^{1†}, Olga Dobrodum ^{2††}, Svitlana Khrypko ^{3†††}, Olga Gold ^{4††††},
Ivan Ostashchuk ^{5†††††}, Inna Vlasenko ^{6††††††} and Olena Lobanchuk ^{7†††††††},

s.khrypko@kubg.edu.ua

^{1†} Uzhhorod National University, Ukraine

^{2††} State University of Trade and Economics, Ukraine

^{3†††} ^{5†††††} ^{6††††††} Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University, Kyiv, Ukraine,

^{4††††} Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University,

^{7†††††††} National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, Kyiv, Ukraine

Summary

In today's era of digital technologies, the problem of religious communication in the cyberspace is being actualized, since the globality and accessibility of the WWW makes it one of the most effective and promising channels for transmitting various kinds of messages, including those of a religious nature. Today, religious organizations and movements pay the closest attention to the virtual media space, not only using it to attract new followers, but also for religious PR, image-making and branding, informing the world about themselves through news from the life of the organization and its followers. An equally important form of electronic communication in the online sphere is currently the interaction of various religious movements and religious cultures in general, or the dialogue of confessions in particular. Research in the digital space makes it possible to identify important trends in religious spheres based on the analysis of the flow of information on the Internet, to demonstrate the specifics of individual media outlets and the consequences of their activities for interreligious dialogue, to study the role of the Internet in changing religious beliefs, the possibility of changing religious identity, retrospective development of religious enlightenment at the turn of the century, to determine the vectors of possible interreligious interaction and discuss the role of digital technologies in the work of religious structures, to state the need to continue an active dialogue between representatives of religious movements, to hold expert seminars on interreligious dialogue on a regular basis, and to record the risks generated by the digital space. Thus, the coronavirus pandemic served as a background and context, a litmus test and a catalyst for accelerating and intensifying interreligious, interfaith dialogue and dialogue between religious organizations and society.

Keywords:

information politics, cyberspace, freedom of conscience, Ukraine, religious communication, coronavirus.

1. Introduction

In today's era of digital technologies, the problem of religious communication in WWW is being actualized, since the globality and accessibility of Internet makes it one of the most effective and promising channels for

transmitting various kinds of messages, including those of a religious nature. Today, religious organizations and movements pay the closest attention to the virtual media space, not only using it to attract new followers, but also for religious PR, image-making and branding, informing the world about themselves through news from the life of the organization and its followers. An equally important form of electronic communication on the World Wide Web is currently the interaction of various religious movements and religious cultures in general, or the dialogue of confessions in particular.

The rhythm of life of a modern person is obviously accelerating, largely due to the widespread introduction and spread of high-tech and new means of communication. On the other hand, religion and church traditionally act as a factor of ethnic self-identification, contribute to the preservation of national culture and historical memory – this is due to their absolute importance for the young Ukrainian state.

From the very moment of the appearance of the Global Web, interreligious dialogue on the world stage began to be carried out using the online space, but the role of the Internet is especially intensifying during the modern pandemic, when a multitude of interfaith sites are manifesting themselves and all forms of interreligious communication on the Internet are being actualized, which proves the importance of the designated topics [9].

2. Theoretical Background

Interreligious activities of international organizations organize and ensure ecumenical dialogue and religious freedom, Internet freedom and communication interaction. Conferences and congresses, symposia and round tables actualize the topic of interreligious dialogue in the era of global digitalization and pandemic in order to ensure security amid the growth of religious radicalism, search for ways to create a stable basis for the interaction of

confessions, reflect on the role of social networks in transforming public opinion regarding traditional and non-traditional religious movements, conceptualization of modern trends in the religious sphere, increasing the influence of digitalization on the religiosity of the population, deepening the perception of religious ideas and the multivariance of their interpretation, the formation of a tolerant and communicative space through an informal dialogue of religious associations, conceptualization of the main problems directly related to the implementation of dialogue in the ethno-confessional sphere.

The distinguishing characteristics of today are the progressive digitalization of society, intensive onlineization of many aspects of life. At present, we can state the progressing informatization of society: what was planned to be done over the next 30-40 years, happened in the last year. It is axiomatic that information technologies are now penetrating almost all spheres of human life.

In this regard, in our opinion, it is advisable to touch upon the socio-religious sphere of the functioning of society.

The main challenges that arose due to the Covid pandemic were responding to believers' needs, work for all regardless of their beliefs, attending to the needs of the media, promotion of internal communication and supporting transversal diocesan projects [5]. Not all states managed to cope with these challenges effectively. The consideration of the process of digitalization can be helpful for further improvement of the state policy.

Current issues of interregional dialogue are also discussed in a series of virtual forums "Theology during epochal changes: fears and hopes" of the Toronto School of Theology, an ecumenical consortium affiliated to the University of Toronto and moderated by Professor Abraham Khan. Thanks to the online format, Ukrainian religious studies researchers Olga Dobrodum, Olga Gold and Eduard Martinuk regularly took part in web forums: "Rootedness and community: Challenges and Threats to our Collective life", "Anthropogenesis Evil: The destructiveness of what humanity generates in the world (and the goodness it generates)", "Responding Theologically to Populism", "Posthuman and Transhuman as Theological Challenges", "Eco-anxiety as a Theological Challenge", "The Anthropocene debates: Theological challenges and opportunities", "Epochal Shifts: Implication for theological reflections and praxis", "Epochal Transitions and Civilizational Crisis: Indigenous Insights, Inspirations, and Challenges" etc.

3. Specifics of Digitalization of Church Life in Ukraine During the Covid pandemic

The issues of religion and faith have become even more relevant during the pandemic, when anxiety, fear of death and search for the divine protection [6]. The Covid-

19 pandemic changed both the perception of religion and the way how religious services are performed.

According to the quarantine regulations, there is a regulation of the number of believers in religious buildings. In general, Christianity has adopted preventive measures against a pandemic in the diversity of its confessions – in particular, the Roman Catholic Church has succeeded here due to its long history of social service to society.

In Ukraine, radio, television and digital channels of church services of various Christian denominations are broadcast, almost all church events are carried out online. In this context, it is difficult not to note and pay attention to the significant intensification of church life due to its digitalization and, accordingly, its entry to a new level, a transition to a new quality, as well as an expressive intensification of the life of religious events. In the pandemic period, religious leaders have clearly become less mobile. In general, it can be noted that at present, politics, religion and IT are more often in the same associative and semantic series.

Describing the modern media situation in Ukraine, it should be noted that it is characterized by a diverse palette, an impressive spectrum and a kaleidoscopic nature of resources, each of which has its own history, specific audience, and the degree of accessibility on the Internet. Monitoring of religious news channels and sites of religious organizations, sites of religious and theological studies helps to clarify the religious picture of the world and the specific features of the religious socialization of Ukrainian citizens in the 21st century.

For the last thirty years, Ukrainian religious studies have been paying great attention to researching issues related to the problems of state-church relations, legal support for freedom of conscience, trends in globalization and Americanization of religion, and communication aspects of culture and religion. The pandemic served as a background and context, a litmus test and a catalyst to accelerate and intensify interfaith dialogue. In this pandemic situation, interreligious festivals and various offline social and religious life are axiomatically absent, since almost all religious activity, except for charitable activities, has moved to the Internet.

The characteristic feature of the offline discourse of the period under study is that it is often conducted in parallel or even counter version with respect to the online one: there is a digitalization and convergence of almost all media. The possibilities of introducing virtual reality into the sphere of religious studies are obvious, revealing the need for analytical research in this area. The philosophical and conceptual understanding of the virtualization of religious life and its display in the cultural sphere indicates that both religion and culture are embodied in cyberspace, the online segment is increasingly influencing the religious and cultural reality offline, due to which philosophy, like many

other humanities and social sciences, is acquiring in addition to the offline and online dimension.

From the very moment of the appearance of the Global Web, interreligious dialogue on the world stage began to be carried out using the online space, but especially the role of the Internet is intensifying during the modern pandemic, when a multitude of interfaith sites are manifesting and all forms of interreligious communication on the Internet are being actualized, which proves the importance of the designated topics. Interreligious activities of international organizations organize and ensure ecumenical dialogue and religious freedom, Internet freedom and communication interaction. The issues of both external and subjective religiosities also arises [3].

Conferences and congresses, symposia and round tables actualize the topic of interreligious dialogue in the era of global digitalization and pandemic in order to ensure security amid the growth of religious radicalism, search for ways to create a stable basis for the interaction of confessions, reflect on the role of social networks in transforming public opinion regarding traditional and non-traditional religious movements, conceptualization of modern trends in the religious sphere, increasing the influence of digitalization on the religiosity of the population, deepening the perception of religious ideas and the multivariance of their interpretation, the formation of a tolerant and communicative space through an informal dialogue of religious associations, conceptualization of the main problems directly related to the implementation of dialogue in the ethno-confessional sphere.

4. Legislative Policy Towards the Digitalization of Religion

It should be noted that in Ukraine, excluding the illegally annexed Crimea and the temporarily occupied territories of Donbass, an appropriate level of freedom of religion is ensured. This does not mean that there are no problems in the religious sphere, but despite this, the country has a fairly high level of religious freedom. Unfortunately, significant violations of the right to freedom of conscience are recorded in the occupied territories of Crimea and Donbass. These issues are on the agenda of Ukrainian churches and religious organizations, which are doing everything possible to help believers in these occupied regions, and call for appropriate action at the international level (OSCE, Council of Europe, EU, etc.). Of course, Ukrainian religious organizations take part in the dialogue not only in their own country and Ukrainian Internet, but also in various international forums, including in solving problems related to the pandemic.

There are various technologies and channels for the implementation of interreligious dialogue, which include: participation in joint events (event communications),

official written communication (letters, condolences, congratulations, etc.), conducting divine services and prayers. Separately, it should be noted the potential of the Internet as a channel contributing to the construction of horizontal connections between representatives of different religions, which practically do not touch each other in everyday life.

In general, it can be noted that at present, politics and religion, biological and information technologies often reside in the same semantic and associative series. Thus, the Orthodox have been adapting to the coronavirus quarantine [9]. Also in the temple, it is necessary to keep the distance between people. Church hierarchs make detours and flights over Russian cities with icons, and individual priests transfer services to the Internet, increase precautions during services in the church – for example, disinfect icons that believers apply to, and a liar for communion. Remote divine services are also carried out – in online broadcasts, and the broadcasts of the services often gain hundreds of thousands of views. Memorial notes are submitted online. Absentee funeral services for the dead are also being introduced. In some situations, confession is carried out by phone or Skype, metropolitans and bishops made rounds of the cross or overflights over cities with especially revered icons.

In the world Christianity, some of the cases of the use of digital technologies is often denied. There is a confusion because of the notion “virtual church”. Some confusing area is also the use of digital Bibles [2]. In states where infomatization and digitalization are still in the process of implementation, such contradictions may become even sharpen, and Covid-19 pandemic did not make them blurred. The majority of contacts of Ukrainian priests-hierarchs at any level – from the international level to regional level – take place in the format of videoconferences. The most massive church in Ukraine, the UOC, in canonical unity with the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), initially denied the reality of the epidemic until its hierarchy itself fell ill [4]. This reaction is sometimes associated with Russia’s hybrid warfare [1].

Representatives of religious organizations have different attitudes towards the pandemic; they can be roughly divided into Covid dissidents, Covid conspiracy theorists, Covid apologists, and Covid indifferent. Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, Hindus, Buddhists and other religions and confessions in Ukraine can also be considered in this aspect. At the same time, it is interesting how each of them relates to the transition to online, for example, the Hasidim are quite negatively against the digitalization of religious life, as well as against pandemic precautions [7].

For the most part, believers reacted to the pandemic normally. Thus, traditionally, more than seven million Orthodox Christians in Ukraine visit the church on Easter, but in 2020, according to various estimates, only 120-160 thousand Orthodox Christians attended the church.

According to official testimony, nothing extraordinary happened on Easter 2021; traditionally, the broadcast was made from all the temples, from where the technology allowed. The information policy of covering Easter festivities was that state channels broadcast the services of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), and the Inter channel broadcast the UOC-MP. On the eve of Easter holidays, all the media and the Internet urged believers of all denominations, regardless of jurisdiction, to adhere to sanitary rules during a pandemic. This mainly concerns the observance of a sanitary distance of one and a half meters and the wearing of masks. After the Easter holidays, filming, photographs and media broadcasting of evidence of comfort that the adherents of the OCU and the UGCC more adhered to the recommended norms and rules, while the UOC-MP was ignored. However, by and for the testimony by online media, blogs and forums, rules and regulations were ignored almost everywhere except the central temple of the UGCC in Kyiv.

The question of how justified and legitimate are mass demonstrations, protests, the fight for human rights in all countries in the context of the fight against Covid-19, what role and which religious organizations play there is also relevant. So, if we recall the phenomenon of the Maidan, then almost all churches in Ukraine reacted positively to this political event. The question arises, what role is now played by religious organizations in the fight against the pandemic. The political problem is related to vaccination – the problem of attitudes towards the vaccine Johnson and Johnson, including abortive residues [12].

We can conditionally state the political and non-political nature of vaccination in whether or not it forces the state to be vaccinated. The Roman Catholic Church is faced with a dilemma here: Catholics are taught not to be afraid of vaccination, although not all Catholics are so unanimous. But vaccination is also political in nature: it is also carried out in non-democratic countries. In democratic countries, the people are partially opposed to vaccination: it is necessary to recognize the remote influence of abortion material on the vaccine, to which the Roman Catholic Church pays attention.

Also, there is some interest in limiting the activities of religious organizations during a pandemic, as well as the reaction to their activities on the part of the state. Some organizations fulfil the wishes and recommendations of the state and go online, while others show resistance. An important aspect in this regard is that in connection with the pandemic in some countries, districts, regions, religious organizations began to be treated like ordinary organizations (cinemas, museums, theatres, attractions, restaurants and bars), which can offend the feelings of believers. As a result of this trend, some religious organizations are turning into non-religious: in Argentina, a prayer house was turned into a pub [11], and in Ukraine a

bicycle company registered itself as a religious organization. Thus, a legal conflict between religious organizations can turn into a political one [10].

Any prescription for any act of the state in connection with anti-pandemic measures should take into account the special status of religious organizations (attractions, parks, cinemas, theatres, museums), however, this is often forgotten. It pushes religious organizations to go online. However, it should be noted here that public policy should facilitate the transition to online in a gentle, non-repressive manner. It is illegal to allow pubs to function, but not to allow religious organizations do so, because religion enjoys a special constitutional status, and an unresolved legal problem tends to turn into a political one. This is the special status of religious organizations in comparison with all other organizations operating on the territory of the state. The status of a religious organization is similar to that of a public organization, but they are not identical. It is permitted to carry out religious activities in Article 35 of the Constitution of Ukraine, according to which everyone has the right to freedom of world outlook and religion [8]. This right includes the freedom to profess any religion or not to profess any, to freely practice, individually or collectively, religious cults and ritual ceremonies, and to conduct religious activities.

Freedom of conscience in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in Ukrainian society is largely problematic and is largely ensured, in our opinion, thanks to information technology. In our state, there has not yet been a prosecution of criminal religious organizations for non-compliance with quarantine restrictions: during Easter in 2020, only 5 criminal cases were initiated, but then they were not brought to an end. At present, we can state the intensive informatization of the Ukrainian society and the multimediatisation of various aspects of its life: what was planned to be done over the next 30-40 years happened literally within the last year. It is axiomatic that high-tech is now penetrating almost all spheres of human life, especially church life, which we are now witnessing in the pandemic period [13].

The website of Ukrainian Council of Churches and International Organizations (<https://vrciro.org.ua>) indicates that since the start of quarantine on March 12, 2020, this organization has held a meeting on quarantine, publicized an appeal to the Ukrainian people for prevention of coronavirus and declared March 25th as Day of Prayer and Fasting for Ukraine. This organisation continues to operate in an online format, engaging in inter-confessional interaction between organizations under quarantine using online communication tools. This organisation convened meetings on measures to ensure freedom of expression under adaptive quarantine.

In the countries of the European Union, from the point of view of law and justice, there are several main categories of countries: declaring a lockdown, but in which

legislatively does not regulate the activities of churches and religious organizations, a lockdown, in which religious services are regulated depending on zoning (as in Ukraine) and lockdown, in which, however, the holding of church services and all public gatherings is prohibited.

For most religions in Ukraine, an alarming moment is the decrease in church communication in the offline space, due to which the importance of the church as a social institution decreases. Faith often implies by default physical contact between its bearers and adherents, it is assumed that it is church practice that justifies their lives – hence the absence or even minimisation of physical contact in church circles can be perceived as dramatic.

Interreligious relations between the pre-quarantine and quarantine eras show logical continuity without tangible positive qualitative dynamics. Almost all church activities of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations went to the Internet – its activity turned out to be quite organized, because, for example, thanks to it, it was possible to avoid mass gatherings on Easter. Generally speaking, interfaith consultations suggest a joint effort against the pandemic: various organizations, such as the Institute for Religious Freedom, have contributed to helping the victims of the pandemic. The pandemic has served as a way to raise the profile of global communications in an ongoing ecumenical dialogue among Christians about social service and Christian work. In the present period of the epidemic coronavirus carries out an increasing number of events on interreligious dialogue in the format of webinars and online forums.

Research in the digital space makes it possible to identify important trends in religious spheres based on the analysis of the flow of information on the Internet, to demonstrate the specifics of individual media outlets and the consequences of their activities for interreligious dialogue, to study the role of the Internet in changing religious beliefs, the possibility of changing religious identity, retrospective development of religious enlightenment at the turn of the century, to determine the vectors of possible interreligious interaction and discuss the role of digital technologies in the work of religious structures, to state the need to continue an active dialogue between representatives of religious movements, to hold expert seminars on interreligious dialogue on a regular basis, and to record the risks generated by the digital space.

It can be assumed that it is necessary to monitor cyberspace to prevent interreligious and interfaith confrontations and conflicts, since religious, cultural and other phenomena at the present stage often have a cyber-component. The digitalization of religious and cultural life, in comparison with the functioning of print media, can further contribute to the provision of civil, religious and cultural freedoms, the process of democratization of the media, fundamental changes in the protection of human

rights, the onset of Internet democracy, elections and referendums using the global web, etc.

Religiological analysis of online reality can be applied, in our opinion, to other diverse manifestations of contemporary philosophical, cultural and religious process. The discourse of virtual reality is characterized by the convergence of humanitarian and social knowledge: philosophy, cultural studies, religious studies, political science, sociology, psychology, linguistics, and information science, which allows them to be used to their mutual advantage. Just as proponents of the theories of “information society” appear technophobic oriented, ordinary users perceive cyberspace in rather ambivalent connotations – from optimistic to pessimistic, from deifying to demonizing, and the Internet is likened to an instrument of angels and demons, divine and infernal powers, heaven and hell. The religious Internet is developing more and more intensively: a computer language is being constructed, the phenomenon of flash mobs is spreading, and the World Wide Web is perceived as a prototype and model of the noosphere.

At the same time, the virtualization of religious life requires the development of adequate research tools, the availability of academic discourse and the expert segment of the development of the Global Web, provided that the principles of synergy, multiparadigmacy in the socio-humanitarian sciences, interdisciplinary research in general and Internet communities in particular are implemented. Cultural studies and philosophy of religion are saturated with media, be it written text or image, audio or video including documentary cinema, electronic sources, online artefacts. Networked cultural studies / virtual reality religious studies are becoming sub-disciplines of philosophical science, the growing role of media structures and media determines the development of mobile global geo-positioning and the communication management of state power. A period of direct inclusion of the information society in the general context of philosophical research is coming. One of the relevant aspects of this research is culture and religion in virtual space.

5. Conclusions

Today, the Internet is a promising communication medium for establishing an effective dialogue not only between representatives of certain religious trends, but also entire religious cultures that have developed in different historical conditions and in different territories. This environment has a number of characteristics that favour free and open communication even between representatives of opposing and competing religious movements and the achievement of consensus.

At the same time, interreligious dialogue within the boundaries of the electronic space of computer networks

potentially contains a number of communicative problems requiring resolution and an increased likelihood of conflicts. Therefore, the achievement of complete mutual understanding in it is impossible without the acceptance of the dogmas of religious pluralism and mutual tolerance, as well as recognition of the value and cultural differences of all participants in the dialogue.

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1. Palinchak Mykola

Doctor of Political Sciences, Professor of the Uzhhorod National University
Dean of the Faculty of International Economic Relations
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9990-5314>

2. Olga Dobrodum

Doctor of Philosophical Sciences, Professor of the Department of Journalism and Advertising of the State University of Trade and Economics
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7651-4946>

3. Svitlana Khrypko received the B.E., M. E., and Cand. of Philosophy degrees. She has been an associate professor at Department of Philosophy, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University since 2018. Her research interests include axiology, culturological studies, ethnic studies, philosophy of education.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9426-4549>

4. Olga Gold

PhD(Philosophical Sciences), Doctoral student, Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University,
Researcher at the Mediterranean Centre for Sociology, Political Science and History Mesopolhis, Aix-Marseille University, Aix en Provence, France
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1689-227X>

5. Ivan Ostashchuk

Ph.D., Doctor of Philosophical Sciences, the Head of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Borys Grinchenko Kyiv

University since 2022. His research interests include semiology, sacred symbols, hermeneutic analysis.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6115-0884>

6. Inna Vlasenko

PhD in Psychology

Associate Professor of Psychology of Personality and Social Practices Department, Borys Grinchenko Kyiv

University. Areas of scientific interests: conflict studies, intra- and interpersonal conflict resolution, psychological well-being of individual, practices of effective communication.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2562-3637>

7. Olena Lobanchuk

PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Ethics and Esthetics, Faculty of History and Philosophy, National Pedagogical Dragomanov University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1466-0398>