

The role of religion in democratic changes and formation of civil society in Ukraine

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As is known, Ukraine is a country located in Eastern Europe, between the European Union and the Russian Federation. Due to its geopolitical location our country has its own features, also when it comes to the issues of democratic development, formation of civil society and establishment of religious freedom. Therefore it is no accident that at this symposium we have a separate section concerning Ukraine together with other sections dedicated to Europe and Russia.

The present report is devoted to the role of religion in democratic changes and the formation of civil society in Ukraine.

In the beginning it should be noted that Ukraine has already passed a part of the way towards formation of democratic governance and independent institutes of a civil society. And until today religious institutions play in this process a special role. However, most of the way is ahead and therefore certain challenges still remain before the religious community.

Today the fact that Ukraine is a multi-confessional country is absolutely obvious. This is acknowledged by the current leadership of the state as well as by main political parties. Since 1991, when at the dawn of a young independent state there was proclaimed religious freedom, began the development of a network of churches and religious communities: some left clandestine activity, others were revived as such. Furthermore, there also appeared new religious movements on Ukrainian territory. As a result it led to the foundation of more than 36,500 religious organizations and 55 religious movements (according to official data, as of the beginning of 2012).

Such rapid development of the religious network put on the agenda a new question: how to maintain religious peace and tolerance between different denominations in such a multi-confessional country? Acute conflicts on religious grounds in the beginning of 1990s increased the desire of authorities and the largest church

organizations to create a platform for interdenominational dialogue and a search for amity. It became the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (UCCRO), the beginning of activity of which falls at 1996.

The UCCRO in its membership assembled the largest Christian Churches with representatives of three branches of split Orthodox Church, Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Protestant Church Associations as well as representatives of the Muslim and Jewish communities. Today, this advisory body represents over 90% of the religious network in Ukraine.

It should be noted that the activities of the Ukrainian Council of Churches began under the tutelage of the State Committee on Religious Affairs, but in 2005 this interdenominational council became fully self-governing and independent of the administrative influence of government.

It was preceded by the well-known events of the 2004 presidential election and widespread street protests of citizens for honesty and transparency in government activities, known as the "Orange Revolution". At that time the media reported on the extraordinary awakening of public consciousness, happening on the background of restoration of spiritual and moral values. Besides, it is a spiritual component and the role of leaders of major churches and religious groups in these public campaigns that was the reason of their absolute peaceful nature and absence of bloodshed in perhaps the greatest political crisis in the country's history.

After those days a new page in the modern history of Ukraine was characterized by the beginning of establishing a permanent dialogue between the government bodies and religious associations, based on partnership and the principle of non-interference of the Church and the State in the affairs of each other. It is noteworthy that the state-church dialogue has been developed, starting from the level of the President and head of government, reaching up to the level of local state administrations and municipal councils.

Besides the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations other interdenominational advisory institutions have also revived their activities. Among them there are the Council of Representatives of Christian Churches of Ukraine and the Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Ukraine.

At the same time the dialogue between state and religious organizations has led to the formation of public councils in a number of ministries in order to cooperate in the field of public health and education, improvement of the legislation base for activities of religious organizations, ensuring of the right of servicemen to freedom

of religion by introducing of the Capellan Service etc. A large role in this process was played by abovementioned interdenominational councils, which served as a place to harmonize positions of representatives of different denominations in the dialogue with the government.

The building of partnership between bodies of power and religious organizations allowed not only to solve some of the current problems of religious freedom, but also became an example for other non-governmental organizations in developing dialogue with the government and involving it in making administrative decisions. As a result, in November 2010, the Ukrainian government legislatively introduced a mechanism for public participation in the formulation and implementation of state policy, in particular through the creation of public councils in all ministries and other executive bodies.

Talking about the current situation in Ukraine, we can not avoid the fact that under the new political leadership the questions of democratic values, equality of religions, further development of state-church dialogue, strengthening freedom of speech and freedom of religion increasingly concerning the public and are often raised in the public debates.

In his annual address to the parliament the President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich said that religious organizations have become active agents of social life. According to him, the national model of state-church cooperation evolves in the direction from separation to partnership and national legislation facilitates creation of Ukraine as a European multi-confessional state.

At the same time, not all officials put into practice the principles enunciated by the President. There are almost no opportunities for permanent and constructive dialogue between religious organizations and the Government and Parliament, which more than once led to the emergence of legislative initiatives which in their content narrowed the scope of religious freedom and worsen conditions of the activity of religious organizations.

One example of this is a preliminary approval of a draft law # 10221 by the Parliament in June 2012, that changes the process of registration of religious organizations and provides for the granting of authority to the central and local bodies of power and public prosecutor's office to monitor compliance with the legislation on freedom of conscience, just as it was during the Soviet past.

Another example of the deterioration of legislation in the field of freedom of religion can be called a substantial complication of the procedure for obtaining visas and residence permits for foreigners who want to enter Ukraine for the preaching of religion and other religious activities. The practice of obtaining approvals for such activities by the authorities also became more complicated.

On the other hand, the preservation of such a dialogue with certain government agencies every time implies a balanced state policy in the sphere of religion, as well as in the interaction of government and religious organizations in solving social problems.

Summing up, it should be emphasized that in the multi-confessional society there is no alternative to the interdenominational and church-state dialogue. Its presence allows to form in society an atmosphere of religious harmony, prevent religious hatred and keep the peace, creating practical mechanisms to ensure the fundamental human right to freedom of religion.