

The Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra as a source of new senses of Ukrainian state-building (analysis of mediatised discursive practices in the wartime)

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The article analyses the case of filming a Christmas culinary video programme in the Refectory Chamber of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra² and the reaction of Ukrainian society to this event. The Orthodox Church in Ukraine is quite conservative in its traditions and rules of behaviour in religious buildings. The very place where the video programme was filmed caused a significant public resonance. The article analyses the immediate news reports of the leading Ukrainian media and the more prolonged echo of this event in public conversations of Ukrainian church ministers, philosophers, theologians, and historians. The approach of critical discourse analysis, the theory of argumentation, and the case study method are used. Ukrainian public intellectuals and Orthodox clergy see the thousand-year history of the Lavra as a source of new meanings and a great potential for state-building and development of Ukraine.

Keywords: *Orthodoxy in Ukraine, Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, Russia's war against Ukraine, information warfare, mediatised discourses*

1. Introduction

A full-scale war is a time of great changes in the conceptual sphere of society. Issues related to sacred meanings and religious traditions are extremely sensitive. The information struggle during Russia's war against Ukraine also covered the sphere of religion. Defending one's own, national Christian tradition and protecting

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² The Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra (the Kyiv-Caves Lavra) is an Orthodox monastery complex founded in 1051 as a cave monastery. It is an outstanding historical and cultural sight, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Some important historical facts about the Lavra are presented later in this article in subsection 3.2. The Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra (historical information).

one's shrines is an important component of the information confrontation. How is this dimension of the war reflected in Ukrainian mediated public discourses?

In December 2024, an event occurred that caused a significant resonance in the Ukrainian society. A culinary video programme dedicated to traditional Ukrainian Christmas dishes was filmed in one of the premises of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, which has an almost thousand-year history. The Orthodox Church in Ukraine is quite conservative in terms of observing rites, rituals, and rules of conduct in religious buildings. Therefore, such an innovation caused a heated debate in the mediated public space.

It is important to examine the social, political, and historical contexts of the analysed case, as well as the reaction of the Ukrainian society to this event. We will analyse the operational news reports of the leading Ukrainian media, as well as the echoes of the event, i.e. the opinions of clergymen, philosophers, theologians, and historians presented in their public speeches.

2. Research design

The research material is based on:

- operational news reports of leading Ukrainian media outlets recognised as being of the highest quality (included in the so-called "Whitelist" as of December 2024 (<https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/bilyj-spysok-imi-za-drughe-pivrichchya-2024-roku-uvishly-13-media-i64640>),
- a more prolonged echo of the event: the opinions of clergy, philosophers, theologians, historians, expressed in their public speeches, conversations, meetings on public educational platforms (offline and in the digital environment).

The purpose of the study is to identify, through critical discourse analysis, the diversity of assessments of the event, the arguments of the discussion participants, and to trace the process of expressing new productive ideas in these discussions, which can be used to base the further development of public discursive practices aimed at a deeper understanding of the concept of sacrality and the conceptual role of sacred places (shrines) in the development of Ukrainian statehood.

The research methodology applies the critical discourse analysis approach (Van Dijk 2001), which allows us to reveal the nature of relations of social power and dominance that are implemented in the mediated discourse, as well as the mechanisms of influence on public opinion.

The study is based on the systematic theory of argumentation, with the main emphasis on the pragma-dialectical approach (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004). The specificity of the media communication environment involves considering the types of argument identified by D. Walton, which are commonly employed in the mass media, as well as pragmatic frameworks (models of goal-directed conversation) in which arguments are used (Walton 2007).

The research uses the case study method. The analysed event belongs to the type of cases that represent a certain deviation from the established norm. Such special cases of deviation, or extreme cases, can provide more information than representative ones and are therefore of particular value for theoretical research (Seawright 2016). Case studies, as well as qualitative research, in general, allow for a deeper understanding of the essence of a phenomenon to identify its strategic structure (e.g., to record how certain interaction effects affect choices, processes, and outcomes) (Widner et al. 2022).

3. Social, political, and historical contexts of the analysed case

Ukraine is a multi-confessional country. The religious life of the country is represented by communities of Orthodox believers, Greek Catholics, Protestants of various denominations, Jews, and Muslims of Ukraine. The most common religion in Ukraine is Christianity. According to a nationwide survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in September–October 2024 (Grushetsky 2024), most Ukrainians (70%) considered themselves Orthodox, 7% identified themselves as members of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, 1% as members of the Roman Catholic Church, and 4% as Protestants and other Christian churches.

3.1. Information struggle in the sphere of religion during the war

Russia, in its war against Ukraine, seeks to destroy Ukrainian statehood and national identity. In this war, Russia also seeks to conquer Ukrainian Christian shrines, which have a thousand-year history. Counteracting the information aggression of the Russian Federation in the religious sphere requires, first, attention to one's own spiritual roots, to one's own religious traditions, and to protect the Ukrainian Church from hostile influences.

There are currently two Orthodox churches in Ukraine. **The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU)** was established on 15 December 2018 at the Unification Council

of Ukrainian Orthodox Churches; on 6 January 2019, it received the Tomos of autocephaly, i.e. it was recognised as a canonically full-fledged and self-governing church, part of the one Ecumenical Orthodox Church without the mediation of other local churches (i.e. without the governance of the Russian Orthodox Church). The Tomos of autocephaly was issued by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Constantinople.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). The pro-Russian activities of the UOC-MP have been documented in numerous criminal cases and decisions of Ukrainian courts. This religious organisation has acted as a conductor of the ideas of the “Russian world” and Russian propaganda, collaboration with the enemy and, in fact, justification of Russian armed aggression. The collaboration activities of the UOC-MP are aimed at destroying the Ukrainian society from within.

In August 2024, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted Law No. 3894-IX “On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Sphere of Activities of Religious Organisations.” The law makes it impossible for religious organisations to operate if they have their governing centres in the territory of the aggressor country. This law was supported by most Ukrainian citizens (Grushetsky 2024; <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/riven-religiinosti-dovira-do-tserkvy-konfesiinyi-rozpodil-ta-mizhtserkovni-vidnosyny-v-ukrainskomu-suspilstvi-zhovten-2024r>).

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) is not banned in Ukraine (as Russian propaganda claims). Only their cooperation with Russia as an aggressor country is prohibited. Church communities can refuse to be dependent on Moscow and continue to operate freely within the framework of Ukrainian legislation.

3.2. The Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra (historical information)

The Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra (the Kyiv-Caves Lavra) is one of the largest centres of Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine. It plays a prominent role in the history of Kyiv and the entire state. The monastery, founded in 1051, was a centre of spiritual formation, chronicling and development of the culture of Ancient Rus, book printing and preservation of cultural heritage, economic development and urban planning. Currently, the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, unites 144 buildings and is the largest museum complex in Ukraine.

The Lavra is a sacred place, a symbol of the preservation of the spiritual resilience of the Ukrainian people, despite all the tragic trials.

During Soviet times, the Lavra suffered terrible demolition: the destruction of the Orthodox clergy, the looting of historical relics and jewellery, the closure of the Lavra in 1920, the transformation of the monastery into a museum town, the propaganda of an atheistic worldview in the reserve, and the placement of secular facilities (communal apartments, dormitories, a court, post office, etc.) in its historic buildings. The Dormition Cathedral, the main church of the Lavra, was blown up after the Soviet troops retreated from Kyiv in 1941.

The photo shows the Dormition Cathedral, rebuilt in 1999–2000, during the period of Ukraine's independence (see Figure 1) and the Refectory Church of Saints Anthony and Theodosius of Pechersk (see Figure 2), which consists of two adjacent buildings: the church itself (further away, with a green dome) and the Refectory Chamber (closer to us). The Refectory Chamber historically served for ceremonial receptions, as well as for monks to eat together during special events. It was in the Refectory Chamber that the events of the case we are going to analyse unfolded.

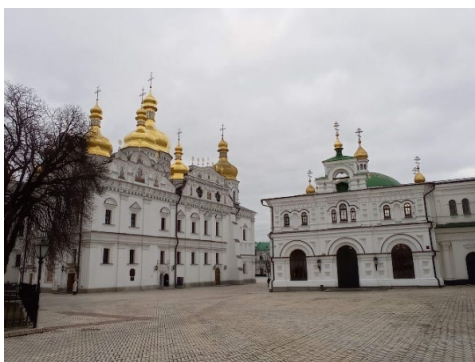


Figure 1. The Dormition Cathedral
(left in the photo)



Figure 2. The Refectory Church with the
Refectory Chamber

The interior of these two buildings (the Refectory church and the Refectory Chamber) is shown in Figures 3 and 4.



Figure 3. The Refectory church (inside)

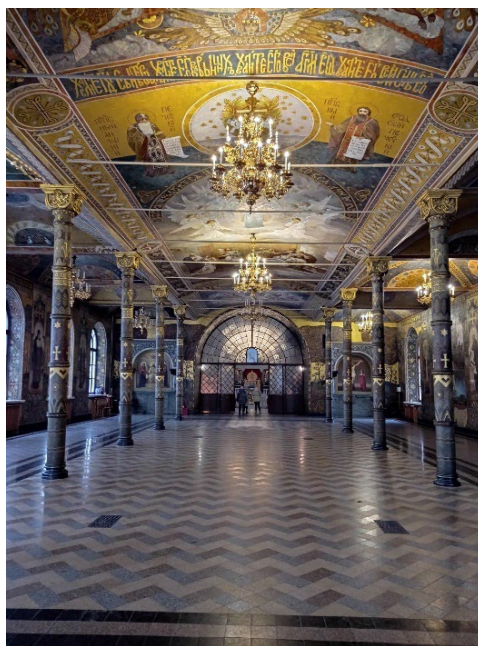


Figure 4. The Refectory Chamber (inside)

Since October 1990, in accordance with the lease agreement, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) has been housing its administrative bodies on the territory of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra. During that time, the pro-Russian UOC-MP was carrying out illegal construction and reconstruction of historical sights in the Lavra, conducting hostile collaborationist activities in favour of the Russian Federation, and spreading historical myths of Russian propaganda, violating the laws of Ukraine.

During Russia's full-scale armed aggression against Ukraine, in March 2023, the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra National Reserve terminated the agreement with the UOC-MP on the free use of religious buildings on the grounds of non-compliance with the lease agreement and violation of the terms of use of state property³.

³ Analysis of the destructive consequences of the UOC-MP's activities for Ukrainian society; generalisation of the factors that contributed to the decision to deprive the UOC-MP of the right to use the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra; description of the work of the Security Service of Ukraine and other law enforcement agencies to identify cassocked perpetrators in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are presented in the study (Synchak et al. 2023).

Since 2023, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which is a canonically autocephalous and self-governing church of Ukraine, has been regularly performing divine services in the temples of the Upper Lavra.

4. Case: filming a culinary video programme in the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and the public reaction

On December 13, 2024, a special Christmas episode dedicated to forgotten Ukrainian culinary traditions was released on Akim Galimov's YouTube channel "Real History". The guest of the programme was Yevhen Klopotenko, a chef and creative entrepreneur, public activist, who talked about 12 authentic national Christmas dishes (see Video 1). Filming of the festive culinary video programme took place on the territory of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, in the Refectory Chamber of the Refectory Church of Saints Anthony and Theodosius of Pechersk.



Figure 5. Filming the Christmas cooking video programme in the Lavra courtyard (screenshot from the Video 1)



Figure 6. Filming in the Refectory Chamber (screenshot from the Video 1)

The location of the video programme caused a heated debate in the public communications space. The public opinion on the location of the video programme was very different: on the one hand, it was perceived positively as bringing the church closer to people's real lives; on the other hand, the event was interpreted as contempt of sacredness of space, a devaluation of the Christian faith, and a distraction of attention from God.

After the outbreak of discussions in the public space, chef Yevhen Klopotenko and the programme's host Akim Galimov explained their position on

social media, apologised to those whose feelings may have been inadvertently offended, and stressed the role of the UOC-MP and the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as Russian propaganda, in fuelling the scandal.

Maksym Ostapenko, the General Director of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra National Reserve, in a post on the Reserve's official Facebook page assured that "the administration of the Reserve is always ready for an open dialogue and will continue to work to ensure that this sacred space remains a place of spiritual unity, preservation of historical heritage, and cultural enrichment" (<https://www.facebook.com/kplavra>, 16.12.2024).

After a stormy but short-lived public discussion of the event on social media in December 2024, the echo of this story in the public discourse of clergy, philosophers, theologians, and historians turned longer. It is worth considering these reactions separately: the immediate and the more prolonged in time.

5. Coverage of the case in leading Ukrainian media

Let's analyse how the event was covered by high-quality online media included in the so-called Whitelist, a list of transparent and responsible media compiled every six months by the media NGO Institute of Mass Information (IMI) based on systematic monitoring (<https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/bilyj-spysok-imi-za-drughe-pivrichchya-2024-roku-uvishly-13-media-i64640>). Out of thirteen editions of the Whitelist, the event was covered in six editions: Suspilne, Radio Liberty, Ukrayinska Pravda, Hromadske, Hromadske Radio, NV.

The following points were highlighted in the news stories of quality online media, mainly with respect to the balance of opinions:

- The essence of the event that caused heated discussions in society.
- The reaction of the management of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra Reserve to the information resonance in society.
- The assessment of the event by the clergy of the Catholic (RCC) and Orthodox (OCU) churches.
- The position of the UOC-MP and its actions (a lawsuit regarding "incitement of religious enmity and hatred, insulting the feelings of citizens in connection with their religious beliefs").
- Opinions of the participants in the filming (Yevhen Klopotenko and Akim Galimov).

For example, the Suspilne media outlet presents a negative assessment of the event by Vitaliy Kryvytskyi, a priest of the Kyiv-Zhytomyr Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine, and the opposite opinion of Heorhiy Kovalenko, a priest of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and rector of the Open Orthodox University of Saint Sophia the Wise, who supported the filming of the video programme; he believes that in condemning the choice of the filming location, the Ukrainian clergy “fell for Moscow’s IPSO” (Zablotska 2024).

Keeping a balance of opinions allows, to some extent, to restrain the “social power” (Van Dijk 2001) of media discourse over mass consciousness and to present the event as objectively as possible.

Radio Liberty presents not news materials, but publications in the “Point of View” section, which analysed opposing views on the event.

One of the articles was written by Serhiy Shumylo, PhD in History, Doctor of Theology, Director of the International Institute of Athos Heritage (Shumylo 2024). The author’s main arguments, identified based on Walton’s (2007, 275–322) concept, considering their role in the presentation of persuasive definitions in the mass media and the relating argumentation schemes, arguments by which he justifies his position, are as follows:

- 1) Decommunisation must be linked to a return to the true Christian faith.
- 2) A warning based on professional knowledge regarding the dangers of desacralisation of church space.
- 3) Opinions of prominent leaders of the past to support the theses expressed in the publication.
- 4) Positive examples from the traditions of other Christian churches, examples of respect for sacred sites.
- 5) Monasticism is a unique layer of Ukrainian history and culture that has been undeservedly forgotten and devalued and needs to be revived.
- 6) There is nothing wrong with recipe demonstrations or concerts of folk and classical music in themselves. The question is in the approaches to organising these events specifically in the temple complex.

Shumylo’s conclusion is that the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra is a sacred space for us, a unique Christian shrine of world significance, a kind of “Ukrainian Athos”. According to the author, there is indeed space for cooperation between the state and the church, for joint projects in the field of culture, education, and spirituality: “But cooperation with respect for religious feelings, monastic traditions and reverent perception of the temple space as a shrine. As it has been in our Ukrainian

tradition for centuries” (Shumylo 2024, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/kyyevo-pecherska-lavra-sakralnist/33244548.html>).

6. Echoes of the case: public discourses of clergymen, philosophers, theologians, and historians

In addition to this immediate reaction in the media, the longer-term reverberations of the case were important, namely in public speeches and discussions by church ministers, philosophers, theologians, and historians. The discourses unfolded in public mediated discussions of Ukrainian intellectuals on public educational platforms, offline and in the digital environment (educational and research projects Cowo.guru, Lyudina Dyvo Svit, and others), where dialogues took place about the role of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and the Christian faith in general in the history of the state and in determining the direction of further development of Ukraine.

Even before the filming of the culinary video programme in the Refectory Chamber, a public conversation “Searching for the Sacred Heart of Ukraine” was held on November 21, 2024, dedicated to discussing the role of the Lavra in the spiritual revival of Ukrainians. The meeting brought together leading philosophers, theologians, and spiritual leaders who proposed new approaches to understanding the Lavra in history and the present.

At this meeting (video 2), abbot Vasylii, who represented the Kyiv-Pechersk Monastery, focused on the fact that historically the Lavra played a city-forming role and generated new phenomena of social reality: “The Lavra becomes the source around which people begin to live, a new town begins to be built, new realities of culture, spiritual life, new ideas begin to be built” (Video 2, 57:45–1:01:03).

According to the philosopher and Orthodox theologian Oleksandr Filonenko, another discussant in video 2, the Lavra is currently undergoing processes of renewal, of “clearing the source”. It is now that the generative nature of the shrine can be fully revealed: the Lavra should “beat with an excess of novelty, innovation for the new Ukraine”. And in this, the state-building function of the Lavra should be paramount. “A new type of actor, a new formation of Ukrainianness should be born. The Lavra is the maternity hospital of the new Ukrainian subjectivity”. Now this is only emerging in the Lavra, but it is essentially determined by the very ontology of the shrine: the Lavra is “maintaining the connection between heaven and earth”, it is “a manifested vertical”. Here, in the Lavra, are the meanings for

which we fight, for which a new future is being born, says Oleksandr Filonenko (Video 2, 1:27:27–1:50:50).

A careful study of the historical experience of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra helps to discover meanings of contemporary events and gives new ideas for solving problems, for thinking and creativity.

In February 2025, a lecture by Vladislav Diatlov, a leading specialist at the Research Department of Historical and Archaeological Research, entitled “Lavra: Searching for a New Paradigm through the Analysis of Tradition” was held (see Video 3). Talking about the thousand-year history of the Lavra, the researcher says that we are now rediscovering the Lavra, looking for a new paradigm of vision. In the context of the current crisis events around the Lavra, the historian concludes, it is necessary to overcome stereotypes of outdated views and oppositions to “reconcile” the museum and the church, to honour the service of the clergy, people of science, culture, and museum workers, as it was throughout the Lavra’s history.

On 29 April 2025, a roundtable and three panel discussions were organised in Kyiv as part of the educational and analytical project “Modern Ukrainian Orthodoxy: Destroying Myths for the Reconciliation of the Orthodox in Ukraine and the Consolidation of Ukrainian Society” (implemented by the NGO “Sophia Brotherhood” with the support of the Renovabis Foundation). The roundtable was aimed at finding ways to overcome inter-jurisdictional prejudices in Ukrainian Orthodoxy and create a culture of dialogue between the OCU and the UOC. Among the invited speakers were representatives of the clergy, theologians, scholars, experts, and journalists (<https://sofiyske-bratstvo.org/vidbuvsya-kruglyj-stil-suchasne-ukrayinske-pravoslavya-rujnuvannya-mifiv-zarady-prymyrennya-pravoslavnyh-v-ukrayini>).

7. Conclusions

The unfolding of public discourses by clergy, academics, and culture actors regarding the role of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, sacred sites in general, and Christian traditions in the history, present, and future of Ukraine testifies the importance of finding new meanings, especially in the sphere of spirituality.

The revival of the Christian faith and church in Ukraine, starting in the 1990s, after the country gained independence, is taking place in difficult conditions. After seventy years of domination of the Soviet atheist ideology, and then thirty years of dominance of the church of the Moscow Patriarchate, today the spiritual and

intellectual elite of Ukraine faces the difficult task of clearing the origins of the Christian faith of the Ukrainian people, involving believers in the joint work of building the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, preserving and honouring Christian shrines as a great value for the entire people, as a national heritage. Special attention to shrines, their veneration will contribute to strengthening the symbolic foundation of the statehood.

As follows from public mediated dialogues of clergymen, philosophers, theologians, historians, the revival of sacred centres is necessary, in accordance with a well-thought-out state policy and strategy, for the development of the state, and the preservation of historical traditions and symbolic meanings of the Christian faith. It is important to find in these spiritual, transcendent meanings a source of new ideas for the development of Ukraine.

The systemic crisis in the world and large-scale transformations of the world order make it urgent to further discuss and study the problems of the humanitarian and confessional spheres, in accordance with the historical and cultural traditions of every country.

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