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The Monastery of the Caves, also known as Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, one of the holiest sites of Eastern Orthodox Christians, is seen on March 23, 2023, in Kyiv, Ukraine. Ukraine's parliament overwhelmingly voted Thursday, Oct. 19, to advance legislation seen as effectively banning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church over its ties to Moscow, despite the church's insistence that it is fully independent and supportive of Ukraine's fight against Russian invaders. (AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky, File)

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Ukraine's parliament voted overwhelmingly Oct. 19 to advance legislation seen as effectively banning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church over its ties to Moscow, despite the church's insistence that it is fully independent and supportive of Ukraine's fight against Russian invaders.

The Verkhovna Rada, or parliament, voted 267-15 on the measure, which requires further voting before it gets finalized and reaches the desk of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The legislation would prohibit the activities of religious organizations "that are affiliated with the centers of influence of a religious organization, the management center of which is located outside of Ukraine in a state that carries out armed aggression against Ukraine."

That is seen as directly targeting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, one of two rival Orthodox bodies in the country, where a majority of citizens identify as Orthodox.

The UOC has historically been affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate. It declared its full independence from Moscow in May 2022, three months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and has repeatedly declared its loyalty and called on members to fight for Ukraine. Its leader, Metropolitan Onufry, said earlier this month that it's the "sacred duty" of every believer to defend Ukraine.

But many Ukrainians remain suspicious of the church and whether it has fully cut ties with Moscow Patriarch Kirill, who has strongly supported the war as a metaphysical battle against Western liberalism.

A government study earlier this year disputed the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's declaration of independence. The State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience said after examining the UOC's governing documents that the church remains a structural unit of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Many lawmakers burst into cheers Oct. 19 as the chairman of the Verkhovna Rada, Ruslan Stefanchuk, read out the tally of the vote. When Stefanchuk called for the voting, he urged the lawmakers to "have faith in the Lord God and love Ukraine."

Parliament member Inna Sovsun commented on Facebook afterward: "So far this is only a first reading, but still a historic decision. It is extremely important to me to put an end to the [Russian Orthodox Church] activities in Ukraine."

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Ukraine's security service, the SBU, reported earlier this month it has initiated 68 criminal proceedings against UOC representatives since the war began, bringing charges such as treason, collaboration, aiding and abetting an aggressor country, public incitement to religious hatred, sale of firearms and the distribution of child pornography. According to the SBU, Ukrainian citizenship was revoked for 19 UOC representatives who held Russian passports and spread pro-Kremlin propaganda about the war.

UOC leaders emphasized that the Rada vote was preliminary and called on representatives to revise the measure. The church legal department said it violates the right to freedom of religion established in the nation's constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights.

"It is certain that the adoption of this draft law will indicate that human rights and freedoms, for which our State also fights, are losing their meaning," the church legal department said in a statement.

A similarly named body, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, received recognition as an independent church in 2019 by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, but the UOC and Moscow have disputed his authority to confer that recognition.

The action comes amid an ongoing standoff at the historic Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, a sacred Orthodox site in Kyiv where the government has sought to evict representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The oldest parts of the large complex, known in English as the Monastery of the Caves, date back a thousand years.

Patriarch Kirill, at a gathering honoring Orthodox media, criticized Ukraine's stance on the church.

"The children of our church [have] become objects of oppression and even bullying for the fact that they are bearers of centuries-old Russian culture, which is inseparable from the heritage of Russian statehood," he said, according to the state-run news agency Tass. "The so-called abolition of Russian culture, this shameless slander and unpunished destruction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are ways to oppose and quarrel those who are related to the single spiritual and cultural heritage

created by the peoples of historical Rus."