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Christian Communities During Russia's War Against Ukraine: Perception of the Churches' Aid Involvement Through the Eyes of Poles from Lviv—A Pilot Study

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to present the perceptions of Poles from Lviv regarding the aid involvement of Christian churches during Russia's war against Ukraine. Christian churches appear privileged and effective sites of aid delivery in the narratives of respondents. However, this does not mean that they have a monopoly on aid activities. The foundation that underpins these activities is particularly evident in the categories highlighted in this article: the role of clergy in local communities (leaders), personal knowledge of society, church infrastructure, and the churches' experience gained during the USSR's persecution of religion. The assistance identified by respondents boils down to material and emotional support, experiencing religious practices, and involvement in direct activity on the war front. The research was based on individual in-depth interviews (IDIs), conducted in December 2023.

Keywords: Poles; Lviv; Russia's war against Ukraine; humanitarian efforts; relief efforts; Christian Churches



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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to present the perception and experiences of Poles from Lviv regarding the aid involvement of Christian churches during Russia's war against Ukraine as of December 2023, when the research material was collected. By 'Christian churches', we mean the Orthodox Churches (both the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate), the Catholic churches (the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Catholic Church), and Protestant communities. The article analyses not only how the activities of Christian churches are perceived, but also the everyday experiences of ordinary people in their interactions with churches. This survey, however, is a pilot study. It is intended to inspire and guide future research in the problem area addressed.

Although Russia's aggression against Ukraine does not have clear religious reasons, nor was it justified as such by Putin, it has taken on a religious context from the outset. This is primarily due to the unequivocal support of the war by the Moscow Patriarchate led by Patriarch Kirill (Krawchuk 2022) and the ambiguous attitude of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which, on the one hand, condemned the war (Metropolitan Onufriy 2022) and, on the other, did not explicitly dissociate itself from Kirill's pro-war and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. The attitude of the Roman Catholic Church, in particular the Vatican, towards the war also appears ambiguous (Németh 2024, pp. 250–51). In the name of dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church, the Vatican has avoided condemning Russia's actions, and opposition to the war is formulated in such a language as not to explicitly mention its perpetrators. This caused the Catholic Church to

avoid dialogue for a long time with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which unequivocally condemns Russian aggression. As José Casanova bitterly observes, ‘It is hard to understand how the Pope, Vatican diplomats, and the many Catholic orders involved for years in ecumenical dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church [...] thought that they could serve as peacemakers in the war on Ukraine without being willing to even talk to the hierarchy of the largest Christian Church in Ukraine, representing the majority of the Ukrainian Orthodox population’ (Casanova 2024, p. 21). According to Casanova, ‘Pope Francis’s prophetic voice is much needed and is to be lauded. When it comes to Russia and China, by contrast, Pope Francis sounds not only much less prophetic but extremely diplomatic, cautious and careful not to antagonize the powers that be, almost in admiration of the traditional geopolitically realistic Vatican Ostpolitik. The contrast between the two papal voices, the prophetic one on most global issues and the cautious diplomatic one on Russia and the war on Ukraine could hardly be more jarring’ (Casanova 2024, p. 29).

The political involvement of the churches—especially the Orthodox and Catholic churches—is an important element in interpreting the religious dimension of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. The activity of Christian churches during Russia’s war against Ukraine has been the subject of studies focusing on different issues and from different points of view (Benedikter 2023a, 2023b). In particular, the political involvement of the Moscow Patriarchate (Horsfjord 2024; Składanowski and Smuniewski 2023; Składanowski 2023), the reactions of the Orthodox churches (Solarz and Korniichuk 2023; Smytsnyuk 2023), and the reaction of the Vatican and Pope Francis (McLarren 2024; Németh 2023) are often described. Psychological issues are also examined (Kostruba and Fishchuk 2023), including the need for religious and spiritual counseling among war refugees from Ukraine (Wyrostkiewicz et al. 2022), violence against religious representatives, and the destruction of church infrastructure (Ziuzina et al. 2023, pp. 413–25), as well as the Orthodox unity of the Ukrainian people (Fylypovych 2023). Additionally, transformations in the activity of Christian religious communities (Ziuzina et al. 2023, pp. 425–27), are described, including the contribution of Christian churches in identifying issues and measures to tackle them (McLarren 2023).

This work is part of the current in-depth research on Russia’s war against Ukraine, approaching the topic from the perspective of civilian observers who are also a national minority in Ukraine—Poles. As for Poles in Ukraine, there is no clear data on this population. The only census in Ukraine was conducted in 2001. According to this, 144,100 Poles lived in Ukraine at that time, which accounted for 0.3% of the total population (48,457,100) (Державний комітет статистики України 2001). However, it is assumed that this number has decreased significantly in recent years, which is related to low fertility rates, emigration, and the effects of the ongoing war (Bazhenova 2023; Subbotina 2014). According to the United Nations Population Fund, Ukraine’s population in 2024 is 37,900,000 (World Population Dashboard Ukraine 2024). Many Poles, mostly women and children, who lived primarily in western Ukraine (Zhytomyr Oblast, Khmelnytskyi Oblast, Lviv Oblast) left for Poland after Russia’s war against Ukraine began.

The uniqueness of the conducted research is due to at least three facts. First, the source material consists of unique statements recorded for the sake of the research, statements of specific individuals from Ukraine who, by virtue of their social activity, should be considered insightful observers of the reality around them. Second, it contributes to the development of research focusing on the functioning of religion in the contexts of humanitarian crises and aid activity focused on religious or religious–theologically inspired subjects. Third, the uniqueness of this research stems from its contribution to the development of security sciences, particularly in areas such as social/public security and supporting society in times of war.

2. Methodology

The article is based on the method of individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted from 7 to 11 December 2023, in Lviv, with the Polish population living there. The re-

spondents were chosen based on their experience and the impact they have on the local community. These included people associated with the following organizations or forms of activity: Polish People's Theater in Lviv, volunteers at cemeteries with Polish graves, the University of the Third Age, the tourist industry serving Poles, scouts, the Galician Courier, teachers from Polish schools, and Polish doctors. The survey was an anthropological study, with 15 participants, both women (8) and men (7). The small group of respondents cannot be considered a representative sample. However, their involvement in the life of the Polish community in Lviv means that their statements provide a reliable picture of the prevailing convictions among its members. Their statements did not differ dramatically from each other. The observed homogeneity of the group of respondents made it possible to decide not to disclose gender in the interview excerpts quoted below. In addition, the authors of the publication decided not to post the entirety of the conducted interviews in online repositories due to security issues related to the ongoing war in Ukraine. The interviewees were informed of this decision before the interviews began. Since the beginning of the research, the authors of the publication have been careful to ensure a high level of anonymization. For at least one reason, this approach should be considered an advantage in this study. A noticeable effect of the approach adopted was the increased freedom of expression of the interviewees, which to some extent reduced the desire to artificially show their best side, which in turn translated into a slightly lower level of distortion of the described reality in the eyes of the respondents. It is worth noting that the interviewees were not asked about their religion. The authors of the publication believe that such a question, in the face of the main topic of the research, could shut down the respondents from giving honest statements in line with their beliefs.

The collected material from the interviews was first subjected to codification (identifying and labeling—coding—key ideas, themes, and patterns found in the content of the interviews), second, categorization (grouping the codified data into broader categories that represent the main themes), third, analysis (interpreting and describing the categories found and their relevance to understanding the topic at hand; indicating how each theme connects to respondents' perspectives and experiences), and fourth, synthesis (summarizing the key findings from the analysis, indicating the most important themes, patterns, and trends in the statements). The main categories turned out to be: "aid potential of churches", "forms of aid", and "distance to aid involvement of churches". Within the first category, the following four subcategories emerged: "'priests-community leaders'", "knowledge of the public", "church infrastructure", and "experience from the USSR era". In contrast, the second category involves: "material and emotional support", "religious practices", and "frontline presence". In the third category, no subcategories were delineated. In accordance with Steinar Kvale's (2017, pp. 101–19) approach, the following methods were used to work with the study material: condensation of meaning, conversation analysis, and narrative analysis.

3. Aid Potential of Churches

When asked about the actions of Christian churches during Russia's war against Ukraine, all respondents invited to the survey pointed out that it is the churches that have a unique ability to help. This ability consists of various elements. Fourteen of the fifteen interviewees pointed to Christian clergymen, seeing them as individuals who stand out in society because they are equipped with the ability or capacity to organize various forms of assistance. They focused on describing clergymen as community leaders, knowledgeable about society, managers of infrastructure useful in providing aid, and holders of the experience gained by the churches during the persecution of religion under the USSR. It is significant that only one respondent said that he did not have detailed information about church activities, but presumed that non-liturgical activities take place in churches (IDI_2). However, the same respondent, answering the question "How, from his perspective, does he see the needs of Poles living in Ukraine during the war?" stated in his first sentences about the activities of the clergy and parishes: "My opinion is that

these last years have created a certain atmosphere of help. However, the Poles living here have oriented themselves primarily to material aid. On the other hand, when it comes to spiritual help, we receive it from the priests, from the parishes" (IDI_2).

3.1. Clergy—Local Community Leaders

The clergy, in the statements of the respondents, appear as community leaders. In the face of war, the personal experience of faith and the presence of clergy are particularly important to them: "I am very encouraged by the attitude of the Church. We have a church, we have faith, the priests are with us" (IDI_13). For many, the opportunity to talk to clergymen is a source of comfort and hope: "The priest is a kind of model for us, some kind of support, especially since we know these priests" (IDI_15). The clergy, through their knowledge of their parishioners and direct contact with them, have a strong understanding of the community's needs: "Priests keep records of parishioners. They visit parishioners' homes, at least once a year or for certain occasions, say a first communion or wedding. Priests know a lot about families" (IDI_15). Many act as intermediaries, making it easier for help to reach those who need it most. The respondents also emphasize the role of clergy in building and strengthening community and a sense of unity among believers: "First of all, we have a very good relationship with the parish priest. We meet with him very often at various celebrations. We can talk freely with him" (IDI_1). The presence and involvement of clergy in the life of the community foster relationship-building and mutual support among its members. Clergy also play an educational role, passing on moral and spiritual values, which is especially important for younger generations: "I think the role of the clergy at the moment, especially in Ukraine, is very important. They are very much needed to pray with people in churches, in Orthodox churches, in houses of prayer. It's about the Word of God, the Word especially for children" (IDI_9).

The strength of Christianity is its transnationality. It is significant that, in Ukraine, in Roman Catholic churches where the liturgy was exclusively celebrated in Polish until a few years ago, more pastoral services are now conducted in Ukrainian: "This is the role of the Church, to preach the Gospel whether in Polish or Ukrainian. In the past, people used to say among acquaintances 'we're going to the Polish church.' Now it's rather disappearing. The church is no longer Polish but Roman Catholic" (IDI_7). This shift in pastoral service, particularly in the case of the Latin Church, towards those historically connected to Poland seems symptomatic. It demonstrates the genetic ability of Christianity to function within complex and even culturally and linguistically entangled societies. Christian clergymen with experience in ministry in the Church functioning in different countries are capable of becoming leaders who connect modern Ukrainians with Christians of other countries. Of course, this applies primarily to countries of Euro-Atlantic civilization.

To sum up, Christian clergymen play a complex role in the war relief process, affecting the life of the community both spiritually and materially. They are community leaders because, first, they know the people among whom they minister; second, in the face of wartime volatility and existential uncertainty, they are a stable part of the social fabric; and third, they contribute to maintaining social and spiritual cohesion. The self-disclosure of the clergy as community leaders can therefore be seen as an event that has the potential to mitigate the effects of war and contribute to a greater subjective sense of security.

3.2. Knowledge of Society

Being a community leader is associated by respondents with personal knowledge of people. Examples of statements on this topic include: "especially in small towns, the clergy know the people" (IDI_11) and "certainly the priest, first of all, knows the people" (IDI_8). To the question posed in the interview, "Do the clergy of Christian churches have a discernment of the social situation, do they know what is going on in society?", almost all interviewees unequivocally answered in the affirmative. One of them argued his position as follows: "Yes, because priests talk to people a lot" (IDI_12). This direct knowledge of the situation allows them to respond quickly and tailor assistance to individual needs.

Churches serve as important social and cultural centers, especially in smaller towns and villages. They are not just places of worship, but also centers of social life: “churches are centers of Polish culture” (IDI_7) and “church activities are most visible in the field. People know one another, they gather around the church. It is organized efficiently” (IDI_1). These observations underscore the importance of Christianity’s role in organizing community integration. The long-term presence of clergy at a single parish fosters the building of deep and lasting relationships, which is particularly evident in Greek Catholic and Orthodox communities, where clergy from these churches serve in a parish for a longer period of time (IDI_6). This stability is conducive to a better understanding of parishioners’ needs and to addressing them more effectively. The church provides a platform for organized aid and social action, which is especially important in times of crisis. An example is the “Family of Families” operating at St. Anthony’s Church in Lviv, which brings people together and organizes aid (IDI_1).

The collected statements, in which the theme of familiarity with the community on the part of the clergy recurs, testify to the fact that it is the clergy—seen as a social group—which has the potential to help in times of war. Their familiarity with local communities can become, and often does (as will be further described in this text), a network of assistance. Churches and parishes are not only places of prayer but also spaces for building social relationships. They thus become centers of local life. This fact makes it possible to effectively identify both the spiritual and material needs of the population and then address them.

3.3. Church Infrastructure

Respondents point out the importance of the church network, which is seen as a reliable channel for aid: “the church network is a good network for distributing aid because people trust them” (IDI_11) and “the Church is held in high regard and people trust the church. The Church as an institution receives aid funds to give them. This aid is distributed fairly” (IDI_6). This trust means that churches can distribute aid quickly to those in need. Churches use their infrastructure to respond effectively to humanitarian needs. They have places that can be used to store and distribute aid, as well as means of transportation to transport it. As one interviewee points out: “The church has infrastructure that can be used, for example, to distribute, to move people around, to stay there overnight” (IDI_12). This infrastructure becomes a key resource in the rapid delivery of aid. In this context, it is worth referring to the close relationship between clergy and laity. Parishes, especially in smaller towns, play a central role in identifying and supporting those in need: “The parish brings together, I think, the most people” (IDI_14). Churches offer direct support to refugees, using available space to accommodate them. This willingness to take direct action demonstrates the key role of churches in the humanitarian crisis: “The church has given the clergy house for use. Everything is occupied by refugees from the East” (IDI_8) and “The monastery also has refugees” (IDI_12). Providing shelter is as important as material aid. The assistance provided by the churches is not always widely publicized, but it should be made clear that, in the perception of laypeople, it is significant. Respondents emphasize that churches engage in a variety of forms of support, adapting their activities to changing needs: “I think this assistance is there, only it is not publicized” (IDI_11) and “the church has always helped with food, clothing” (IDI_12). Versatility and flexibility in relief efforts are key during the volatility of the events of the ongoing war.

A network of parishes and Christian communities, public trust, infrastructure, and deep knowledge of local communities make it possible to deliver aid effectively and quickly. These efforts include not only the distribution of material goods but also the provision of shelter for refugees and comprehensive support tailored to current needs. The churches, with their resources and commitment, play a key role in mitigating the conflict and supporting those most affected by the crisis.

3.4. Experience Under the USSR

The persecution of religion in Ukraine during the era of dependence on the USSR contributed to a unique experience for Christian churches. They developed the ability to function in a place and time marked by physical and psychological violence. The memory of communist persecution is very much alive. Respondents return to images perpetuated within them or passed down in family stories: “our religiosity was forbidden, after all, throughout the communist regime” (IDI_13). Vivid images from years ago are the strength of this memory. One interviewee recalls: “when I was a child they told us at school, you are pioneers, you are not allowed to go to church. They made us Soviet pioneers” (IDI_1). The same respondent recalls another image: “Christmas at our house... We lived on the main street. My father always put up a Christmas tree by the window and it was visible from the street. After the twenty-fourth of December, the Christmas tree was lit every day. And everyone walking down that street to school could see that Christmas tree. That’s why my Russian teacher—and she was Jewish—would come and beg: ‘please, don’t turn on the Christmas tree now, as the children go to school, so that, so that..., please don’t turn it on’” (IDI_1). Someone else remembered from their childhood that their mother would then take them to the cemetery to light candles, “which was not allowed” (IDI_10).

The current period of Russia’s war against Ukraine brings back memories of communist persecution of the Church among the interviewees. They emphasize that the experience gained during that period enabled the churches to develop resilience and the ability to spiritually and emotionally support those who need help in difficult times. One of them shares a reflection: “There is meaning in this suffering. My mother says, listen, now an ordinance has gone out in the churches to sing supplications on your knees after every mass. It’s now like in Soviet times. Back then, we hid in the houses, and sang supplications quietly on our knees” (IDI_13). This statement accentuates the continuity of experience, linking current difficulties to the historical context of Soviet bans. Contemporary challenges allude to the memory of secret religious practices during the USSR era. The Church, understood as a community of believers, being a space for prayer—individual, family, as well as public—reveals itself as a diachronic community, persisting despite various adversities. Churches have developed the ability to adapt in extremely unfavorable circumstances.

It is also important to note the role the Church plays in conveying a sense of identity and belonging, especially for those who feel foreign or isolated. This includes refugees arriving in Lviv from eastern Ukraine. Often, these are people who had no personal experience of religion before arriving in the west of the country, where they can find refuge in facilities provided by the Church. For them, this is a completely new experience for many reasons: “these are people from an area where there was neither a church nor an Orthodox church. They have no experience, none, zero. It is precisely with such people, already adults, that it is very difficult to do anything at all. (...) It’s hard, hard to attract them to the Church” (IDI_12). Churches are using their experience from the Soviet era to build a sense of community among people experiencing isolation and fear. Statements show that it is the churches that can play a key role in integrating these people into local society. Thanks to their experiences during the USSR period, when religious practices took place in secret, these communities have developed the ability to create close bonds among those experiencing isolation and fear. One respondent confessed that, after Ukraine regained its independence, “in the church here we found ourselves” (IDI_13). In these words, one can see a reference to Christianity, which has played a role in the history of Ukraine in preserving and concealing individual and community identity. The quoted statement refers to religious practices in churches and to communal prayers, which contemporaries mentioned are understood to be acts that were not only religious practices at the time.

The churches have developed a unique set of adaptive skills during the era of persecution by the USSR and have acquired knowledge and skills that are proving extremely valuable in the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine. Refugees from eastern Ukraine, hitherto unfamiliar with religious practices, arriving in areas like Lviv, where Ukrainian identity is less influenced by Russia and where Christianity is alive, can not only reassert

their Ukrainian identity but also reformulate their perception of the role of Christianity in a future independent Ukraine. That independence already demands that Ukrainians be clear about their civilizational affiliation: “Now, by the way, everyone has an idea of what Russia is? Well, unless they are on that side of civilization” (IDI_12).

4. Forms of Assistance

Fifteen interviewees participating in the survey indicated some form of assistance offered by Christian churches. The primary form of assistance appeared to be material and emotional support (14 respondents). However, during the war, spiritual support (10 respondents), usually related to religious practices and liturgy offered in churches, also turns out to be no less desirable. Only three of the respondents indicated direct involvement of the clergy on the war front.

4.1. Material and Emotional Support

Material and emotional support is another form of assistance from Christian churches mentioned by the respondents. In times of crisis, many people have sought comfort and support from their faith: “The Church has always been in the middle of events. As far as I can remember, people in moments of breakdown or difficult life situations, especially religious believers, have always headed there and asked for help” (IDI_4). Churches and clergy were present to help everyone, regardless of their financial situation, as highlighted by the words: “This is normal. Help, and not only help is for poor people. For example, in every church they give lunches to the poor. The Albertine Brothers and the Albertine Sisters are the ones who give lunches to the poor in the morning and evening” (IDI_9), and: “Clergymen are very familiar with specific situations of people’s needs. I too was a volunteer at the station from the first days of the war for more than six months. I saw all the organizations that were there: church and non-church. However, there were more of these church organizations, which helped people fleeing from eastern Ukraine, coming by trains to Lviv” (IDI_9). Many churches organized food distribution, as one respondent describes: “The Church helped, because at our place, for example, there are nuns in the Church of St. Mary Magdalene. I don’t know how they got there, but they distributed to people in need. The church gave a lot” (IDI_3). Such activities were not limited to individual establishments but were part of a broader initiative, as evidenced by activities at the train station: “There were volunteers at the train station every day from our cathedral and they distributed lunches, sandwiches, tea, coffee. It was like this almost the entire first year of the war, every day” (IDI_9). Clergymen also engage in relief efforts outside their own locality by providing food and other necessities to those in need: “The priest from my parish this year traveled to the town of Dovhenke and took food there to people who have nothing” (IDI_12).

The churches also tried to respond to specific needs, such as the provision of medicine and basic supplies, as highlighted by the quote: “people always headed there and asked for help, and that help was always given to them. Usually in the form of food parcels and medicine” (IDI_4). Support was also given to medical facilities that had fallen on hard times due to the war. Churches were actively involved in helping hospitals, as illustrated by the following statement: “At our psychiatric hospital, the Greek Catholic Church helps a lot, as much as possible. There was also a Christian organization about which I can speak very positively. As soon as the war broke out, they immediately arrived at our hospital. And our hospital was immediately left with nothing, absolutely—no funding. We have a deluge of patients and we were without food, zero. And they got very involved, they provided help to us, to our kitchens. Well, it was so nice that they thought of us” (IDI_5). In addition, people from church religious groups regularly visit patients, offering not only material support but also emotional support: “People from churches still regularly visit our patients. They bring gifts of various kinds, fruits, sweets, during holidays. For our patients, someone’s attention and these material things offered to them are the fulfillment of their dreams” (IDI_5). Some respondents gave specific names of clergymen involved in

material assistance, such as: “I have to mention Father Jan Nikiel, because he has made an effort and continues to make an effort for these poor people. The Church helps a lot” (IDI_9). A summary of many of the interviewees’ statements can be the words of one of the respondents: “I always knew that I could find help in the church” (IDI_13).

A content analysis of the interviews conducted using the IDI method indicates the involvement of churches, clergy, and lay believers in helping victims of war relating to Ukrainian society. These activities included not only material and food support but also care for medical facilities and their patients, enriched with an emotional aspect. In the face of hardship, the churches and their representatives became key points of support, not limited to providing the basic necessities of life. They were also active in strategic locations such as the train station, coordinating the distribution of aid there. This all-encompassing involvement underscores how dedicated the churches and associated people were to helping those in need, responding to a wide range of social and individual needs during the war.

4.2. Religious Practices

From a theological point of view, religious practices, including liturgy, are an important part of how churches function. This issue is no less important in the thinking of the respondents, one of them stating directly, “We, at every Mass in the Lviv Cathedral, pray for peace in Ukraine. Every Mass ends with a prayer to help Ukraine. And it’s the same everywhere, they pray everywhere, in every church, in Orthodox churches, wherever there’s a prayer house, there’s a church, Protestants do the same, everyone” (IDI_9). This may indicate the universality of the phenomenon and the unification of different faiths in prayer for the country, showing religion as a force that unites society in pursuit of a common goal—peace. Another statement confirms the understanding and importance of the churches’ mission: “Churches support their parishioners. We belong to the Roman Catholic Church, this mass is celebrated for the soldiers, for peace in Ukraine, every time, at every mass this is emphasized. There is an additional prayer, there are various vigils, adorations for this intention” (IDI_6). The same respondent emphasizes the role of the church as a place of support in personal tragedies of individuals: “A man went to the army, he went missing. People in such a situation gather at the church, and the church supports them morally. And when it comes to prayer, support, well, this help is felt” (IDI_6). This statement reveals the interviewee’s thinking of the parish community as a place of prayer and, at the same time, solace and hope. The respondent seems to view spiritual and psychological help together.

Religious practices offered by churches of different denominations in Lviv in the face of war play an important role in the process of coping with stress and trauma. Prayer and participation in liturgies, as mentioned in the statements (IDI_9, IDI_6), can serve as tools for reducing tension and stress, offering the faithful a sense of peace, hope, and strength to endure difficult moments. People seek meaning in the face of suffering and difficult experiences, and religious practices can help construct that meaning, offering a perspective that helps reduce the psychological burden of war experiences. Participating in shared religious practices, such as prayers for the country or masses for soldiers (cf. IDI_6), also fosters a sense of belonging to a community. Close, supportive relationships are key to a sense of security and emotional stability. Shared, systematic religious practices and rituals not only strengthen interpersonal ties but also help individuals and society by bringing order to an everyday life that appears uncertain and chaotic. One statement (cf. IDI_6), referring to moral and prayer support in the face of personal tragedies, emphasizes the role of religion in offering comfort and hope. Religious practices can be seen as a space for the expression of feelings and emotions related to trauma. Prayer and participation in religious rituals can serve as mechanisms for emotional release, allowing the faithful to process and express pain in a safe, supportive environment. In addition, the spiritual search for meaning and hope in difficult situations plays an important role in adapting to life after traumatic experiences. In this way, religion and its practices become an important

element in supporting the process of psychological and emotional recovery of individuals and society after wartime experiences.

A special form of religious practice during the war involves participating in the funerals of victims. An analysis of the content of statements relating precisely to the role of funerals carried out by churches of different denominations in Lviv reveals the deep emotional and social dimensions of these ceremonies. These funerals are not only a form of farewell to deceased soldiers and civilians, not only a common experience of mourning, but are also events that unify society, build national morality, and strengthen the national community, in which citizens of different religions and faiths function. Funerals are an everyday experience in Lviv. The respondent speaks of these events in a very personal way: "I was very impressed by the fact that funerals are held in the garrison's Greek Catholic church for every deceased soldier who is from here or the family wanted him to be buried here. We have these funerals in the city almost every day. One experiences it all. When you're walking by and you see that they are carrying out coffins with soldiers, that there is a funeral, it's just every person . . ." (IDI_13). The statement recognizes the speaker's identified significance of the funeral ritual as a moment of communal experiencing and processing of the trauma of war, as well as the mission of religion in social life, the mission of churches as spaces where the community can gather and express their grief. The statement was interrupted at one point by the speaker after the words: "you see that they are carrying out coffins with soldiers, that there is a funeral, it's just every person . . .". The recollection of a particular situation blocked the speaker. They could not continue speaking. Only after a while did they continue: "*Ukrainka* escorts them on their last journey, and this is our everyday life. We experience this as one community . . . we stand and we pay this last tribute. This unites us with a common pain, and here it no longer matters what religion a soldier belongs to, what church". It should be noted that the respondent speaks of Ukraine using the diminutive form "*Ukrainka*". This is a peculiar form, in which one can recognize not only an emotional attitude to one's own nation and state, but also probably something more. "*Ukrainka*" is also a child, a little girl from Ukraine who should be protected from bad people, who is just growing and developing. She is a very young person with a future ahead of her, who now finds herself in a situation that a child should not have been in. If the interviewee says, "*Ukrainka* escorts them on their last journey", it probably means that in the act of this funeral he sees not so much a tragedy and an end, but rather the beginning of the future, which will be built no longer by *Ukrainka*, but by the "adult" Ukraine. In the next words of this statement, the interviewee points to the universality of the experience of mourning and solidarity across religious divides. This emphasizes the role of the Church as a place where people of different faiths can come together to experience mourning and feel unity in pain. The respondent's statement also echoes his personal experience of suffering and some kind of loss, even though it is not anyone from his family or acquaintances: "We see funerals of soldiers in the cathedral, funerals of local people who died from shells here in the city. A parishioner from the cathedral was killed by a shell. It was a big funeral, and one just experiences it. One sees that the church is next to the person suffering, and the church suffers too, because we are that church". In these words, the church appears not only as a religious institution, but as a living community that shares the pain and suffering of its members. If the respondent says, "A parishioner from the cathedral was killed by a bullet (. . .) and you just experience it", the statement emphasizes how the death of each member of the community is felt as a shared loss. From a theological point of view, a great ecclesial awareness of the speaker should be recognized in this statement. It is this consciousness of the faithful, regarding the Church understood as a living community because it experiences the pain of its individual members that seems to have the potential to strengthen the society that will emerge from Russia's current war against Ukraine. The current role of religion in building Ukraine's future national and political community can also be seen in this way.

4.3. Frontline Presence

A content analysis of IDI interviews reveals Christian clergy as active participants in direct aid in areas of armed struggle. Statements such as “Priests go to the front, help, support. They do what they can, maybe more than they can” (IDI_15) and “There are some priests who, for example, drive things to the front. They drive all the time and are involved in general. Such a clergyman can even do more than a civilian, so to speak” (IDI_4), as well as “The Church materially supports the soldiers themselves, the families of soldiers. Such assistance is widespread” (IDI_6), illustrate not only their involvement, but also their willingness to face the necessity of transcending their limitations in order to help. The clergy’s activities on the front lines of Russia’s war against Ukraine point to their role in bringing both material and spiritual support. By transcending traditional forms of parish activity, clergymen show great dedication, which is invaluable for the morale of soldiers. This presence of clergy among soldiers at the front and the comprehensive assistance of Christian churches to soldiers should become the subject of separate research.

5. Distance from Aid Involvement of Churches

Respondents’ distance from the churches’ aid involvement during the war is minuscule. In three cases, interviewees expressed disapproval of the attitudes or individual behavior of clergy. One respondent, speaking about a particular church community, stated: “there they treat the parishioners a bit like a lower species. There the clergyman is so exalted a bit, and everyone around him should serve him” (IDI_6). Another statement echoes criticism of some clergy behavior: “There are some priests who sort of seek comfort, as if they want to be in such an empty environment. Such a clergyman does only what he has to do, which comes directly from his function. And what is secular, he doesn’t do it anymore. I think there are some like that, too” (IDI_4). Another interviewee mentions, without hiding his critical judgment: “Not everyone is suitable for priesthood. I, for example, was at my granddaughter’s baptism in a certain church. What the priest was saying and doing there, well, it appalled me a lot, well, and I couldn’t accept it” (IDI_1).

In one case, a respondent was skeptical about the churches’ involvement in psychological support: “The church is associated with religious life and not with health support. People who are non-believers, I don’t think they will be interested in psychological support in the church. They just won’t go there, because ‘I don’t go to church’” (IDI_5). At the same time, another interviewee had a different view on the issue of churches’ involvement in psychological help: “As far as psychological help is concerned, I think the church is surely the right place for helping those in need in such a situation” (IDI_4). This divergence of opinions shows that both the perception of the church’s role and its actual actions can vary significantly depending on individual experiences and expectations.

One respondent—not interested in church affairs on a daily basis—expressed uncertainty about the activity of church activities outside its traditional functions, as seen in the words: “I will say frankly that I don’t really know what they do. I mean, it’s hard for me to observe whether outside of the liturgy or something else. . . , but I suspect that they do some activity. I don’t have direct contact with it, so it’s hard for me to answer” (IDI_2). This statement reveals that its author has no knowledge of church activities, which, given that he is a socially engaged person, should be understood as a signal that the activities of churches are not widely recognized in society, their size is not dominant, and knowledge of this assistance is not widespread. The author of the statement is representative of that part of society that is not interested in the activities of religious entities and in understanding the activities of the Church in a broad social context.

The IDI interviews shed light on the ambiguous relationship between church activities and public perception. Undoubtedly, the ignorance of the clergy, their selfish attitudes, and, consequently, ineffective (or lack thereof) cooperation with the laity may be an impediment to the churches’ assistance. The statements analyzed in the study reveal a complex mosaic of expectations, perceptions, and realities of the churches’ actions during the war. On the one hand, the need for greater clarity and communication on the part of the churches regarding

their own relief efforts is apparent. On the other hand, there is a need to understand and appreciate the diversity of social needs and expectations, both among believers and non-believers, in order for aid to be effective and reach the widest possible range of those in need. The distancing of some respondents from church forms of aid clearly indicates that churches cannot be the only entities providing assistance to victims of war.

6. Conclusions

One of the statements made by a female respondent can be used to summarize the above analyses: “I am very encouraged by the attitude of the Church, regardless of what kind of Church it is” (IDI_13). The research shows that Christian churches play an irreplaceable role in supporting society during Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine. Their involvement, grounded in the strong foundations of faith and experienced repression under the USSR, demonstrates how contemporary relief efforts are built on these very foundations. Through the close relationship between clergy and faithful and the effective use of church infrastructure, churches are effectively meeting a wide range of needs—from material to spiritual. What is significant is how different churches are adapting their missions to the extremes of war, expanding the traditional framework of ministry to include spiritual, material, logistical, and even direct military and moral support on the front lines. Their actions reflect the universal values of aid and compassion, demonstrating that involvement in war relief transcends the boundaries of professions and social roles while also being a witness to faith. Although the Church plays a key role in relief efforts, the findings show that it is not and cannot be a monopolist in this field. All aid efforts on the part of the churches demonstrate the growing importance of diverse forms of community involvement in responding to the humanitarian crisis. The way the churches in Lviv are confronting the challenges is not only a testament to their unwavering faith and commitment but also indicates the potential for building stronger, more integrated communities in the face of war. Their actions are important elements in the broader mosaic of humanitarian aid and identity-building in post-war, independent Ukraine.

Limitations of This Study and Prospects for Further Research

As this is a pilot study aimed at highlighting a significant research field at the intersection of religious studies, political studies, and security studies within the context of Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine, it has certain limitations. We anticipate that further in-depth research, to be conducted by ourselves and other scholars, will clarify how the beliefs of the Polish minority in Lviv and its surrounding region, an area deeply intertwined with Polish history, are rooted in Polish national and religious traditions. In the light of Putin’s efforts to revive the ideological tenets of Russian and Soviet imperialism, it would also be valuable to explore further the Polish minority’s collective memory of the persecution of the Catholic Church during the Soviet period and its influence on their perception of contemporary Russian aggression. This would enable the beliefs held by the Polish minority in Lviv to be contextualised within the broader religious dimensions of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the religious context underpinning the conflict.

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