

Ukraine: The Religious Dimension of the Conflict

While religious issues are not the primary drivers of the conflict in and around Ukraine, religion has played a significant role in it. Not only have religious rhetoric and traditions become part of an increasing polarization in Ukrainian society, centuries-old orthodox institutions have also been deeply changed through the conflict.

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Eastern Ukraine's Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, together known as the Donbas, have been an active war zone since 2014 with over 13,000 killed and 1.6 million Ukrainians displaced. The conflict sparked when former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich was ousted after rejecting an Association Agreement with the EU that triggered fierce protests. The power vacuum in Kyiv was followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea and unrest in eastern Ukraine, ultimately leading Russian-backed separatist forces to take control of much of the Donbas. Since 2014, Ukraine has not had full control over its border. Different types of ceasefires have been put in place, none have held. Political settlements have largely failed to materialize. Recently, Kyiv and Moscow took some steps to withdraw troops from various locations across the Line of Contact.

Amidst this complex political conflict, a historically-rooted religious claim to independence on the part of an Ukrainian orthodox church from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) resurfaced. In January 2019, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople – *primus inter pares* (First among Equals) among Orthodox leaders – granted the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) independence (autocephaly). Calls for autocephaly predate the conflict in the Donbas. However, the declaration of auto-



Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, signs the declaration (tomos) of autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine on January 5, 2019. *Murad Sezer / Reuters*

cephaly was interpreted through the lens of the wider political conflict in and around Ukraine and heightened tensions. The creation and recognition of a national orthodox church threw global Orthodoxy into turmoil and generated heated responses from political stakeholders in Ukraine, Russia, and around the globe.

The tensions between Orthodoxy in Ukraine and beyond have accelerated and

intensified religious dynamics in the wider political conflict: Russia sees Ukraine in need of protection from Western meddling and emphasizes a shared culture, faith tradition, and history in support of this narrative. In contrast, Ukrainian policymakers call for territorial sovereignty with a distinct Ukrainian identity, detached from Russia. They frame an autocephalous national church as an indicator of such independence. Religious organizations have

taken sides and called for support of either the Ukrainian army or Russian-backed separatist fighting units in Donbas. Church affiliation has become more polarized and divided the society along orthodox jurisdictions, shrinking space for peacebuilding efforts by religious actors. The topic of religion has become intertwined with the conflict in and around Ukraine, making it necessary to take it into consideration when contributing to further conflict resolution.

The Desire for Autocephaly

Since the 1990s, three orthodox churches have claimed the status of the national

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church of Ukraine, and there have been continuous appeals for an autocephalous orthodox church in Ukraine which would be self-governing and not subject to outside authority. The “Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate” (UOC-MP), which is a constituent part of the ROC, is numerically the largest church in Ukraine with over 12,000 parishes. In 1992, Patriarch Filaret broke away from the establishment to form the “Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyiv Patriarchate” (UOC-KP) as Ukraine’s “true” national church. Under his leadership, the UOC-KP soon encompassed around 4,700 communities and enjoyed broad support in Ukraine. Filaret was particularly popular among Ukrainian nationalists, who considered him a national hero. The “Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church” (UAOC) was founded in the 1920s and reestablished in the 1990s, likewise as an attempt to become a Ukrainian autocephalous church. With about 1,200 parishes, it was the smallest of the three.

Compared to other states in Europe, Ukrainians rank above average in terms of religious worship and daily prayer. Religion is an integral part of personal and social life. A typical Ukrainian churchgoer would have been unlikely to notice great differences between the liturgy of the three orthodox churches, the service was almost identical. However, the conflict has sharpened distinctions. As other Orthodox Churches considered the UOC-KP and the UAOC schismatic and non-canonical (not viewed as legitimate), their sacraments and other *rites de passage* were not acknowl-

edged. For example, a representative of the UOC-MP denied a father the burial of his one-year old because the child had been baptized in the UOC-KP. For a large number of Ukrainians, belonging to either of the two non-canonical churches, salvation recognized by global Orthodoxy was thus officially only possible through the UOC-MP – a church associated with Russia, with which Ukraine is currently at conflict.

After continued persuasion by Patriarch Filaret and other stakeholders, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople granted Ukraine an autocephalous orthodox church, the OCU, in January 2019. The creation of a new church effectively merged the UOC-KP and the UAOC. Today, the OCU’s total number of parishes amounts to roughly 7,000. Several parishes are still in the process of transition. So far, the new church has received little recognition internationally and within global Orthodoxy.

Politics and Religion: Entangled

The establishment of an autocephalous national church would not have been realized without political support. Former president Petro Poroshenko was the leading political advocate for the OCU’s efforts to become independent from the Russian Orthodox Church. In April 2018, Poroshenko began appealing for the church’s autocephaly to Bartholomew I., *primus inter pares* in global Orthodoxy. A majority of lawmakers in parliament supported his appeal. In the 2019 elections, Poroshenko campaigned under the slogan “Language! Army! Faith!”, combining Ukraine’s linguistic identity, ending the war in the Donbas, and ensuring an independent Orthodox church. The struggle for an autocephalous church was accentuated as a dimension of Ukraine’s wider struggle for assertion of its independence from Russian influence.

In this regard, the Ukrainian state considered the UOC-MP a source of Russian influence and refused to cooperate with it. A bill was introduced in parliament that tried to denounce the UOC-MP as an ally of Moscow. Another aimed at simplifying the transfer of parishes to the anticipated new national church. Poroshenko’s political efforts resulted in ecclesial affiliations becoming a marker of identity and political support for actors in the conflict in Donbas: support of the OCU meant allegiance with Ukrainian interests on the one hand, UOC-MP affiliation implied alignment

with the separatist forces and Russia on the other. Regardless of Poroshenko’s electoral defeat in 2019, this framing has had lasting implications on narratives around Ukrainian national identity, which continue to divide conflict parties in Donbas.

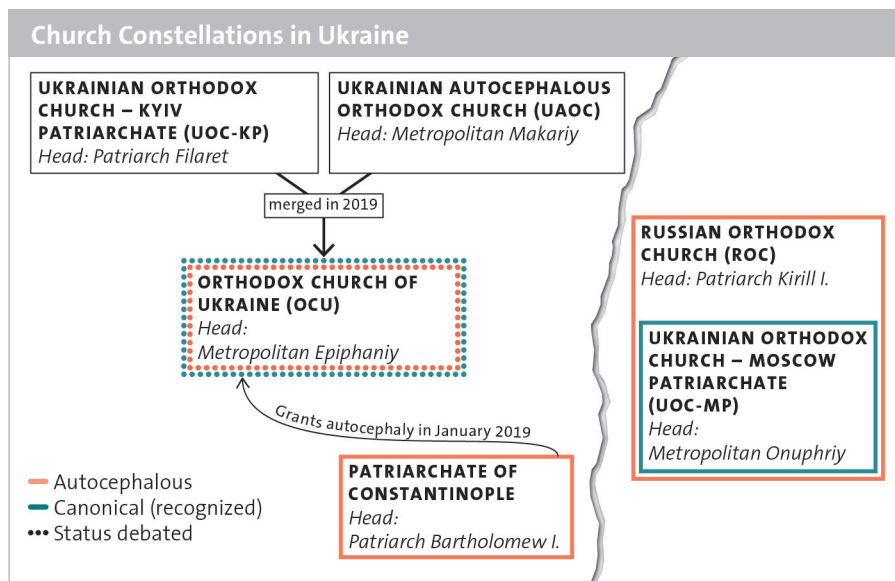
In the past, Ukrainian heads of state have had a favorable relationship with either the Kyiv or the Moscow branch of the Orthodox Church and have been involved in religious affairs. Under the new Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the church-state relation has taken a new turn. As the son of Jewish parents, Zelensky is not affiliated with a confession and considers religion a private matter. He reaffirmed this message when he met with representatives of Ukrainian churches and religious organizations in December 2019.

Russian Shift of Narratives

The Kremlin promotes the narrative of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World or Russian Peace), centering around a geopolitical and ideological unity of Eastern Slavs in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. While also emphasizing the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of Russia, the Kremlin highlights its protection mandate towards all Russians and Russian-speakers against Western interference and moral corruption. In this regard, the Kremlin has boosted its ties with the ROC and Russian Orthodox religion has become an integral part of the national aspirations to re-establish Russia’s influence. The 2015 Russian National Security Strategy lists the revival of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values as a strategic interest.

Ukraine’s pursuit of religious independence from the ROC meant the loss of potential Russian influence in Ukraine. Anticipating this, Russian political and religious stakeholders thus tried to avert a declaration of autocephaly. When visiting Ukraine in 2009, the ROC’s head, Patriarch Kirill, used the narrative of *Holy Rus* (Holy Russia) to imply that the ROC is the church of all “historical Russia”, including Ukraine. Therewith, he offered an alternative to autocephaly: “Holy Russia” as a decentered entity, with Kyiv as Russia’s cradle, as a sacred city and as a fortress of Orthodox faith. However, Russia’s actions in 2014 undermined his notions of “civilizational unity in faith, values and traditions”. The annexation of Crimea strengthened sentiments of Ukrainian identity and Ukrainian-ness.

In the aftermath of the events in 2014, the ROC’s leadership’s focus shifted from a



unity between Russia and Ukraine to a Russian World battling increasing de-Christianization in the West. The OCU is seen as undermining the ROC’s attempts to build an Orthodox civilization and to hinder unity across global Orthodoxy. Ukraine is framed as having come under Western – particularly US American – influence. According to remarks by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in 2018, awarding the OCU with autocephaly is a provocation orchestrated by Patriarch Bartholomew I. with direct support from Washington.

Religious Actors in the Conflict

Religious actors have responded to the conflict in Donbas in ways that have driven both conflict and peace. Mobilization along ecclesial (church affiliation) lines has previously existed, but has intensified with the OCU’s declaration of autocephaly in 2019. Ukraine witnessed waves of patriotic mobilization from 2014 onward, which churches and religious organizations in Kyiv and across both sides of the Line of Contact reinforced. For example, the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, encompassing many religious groups in Ukraine, urged Ukrainians of different religions and denominations to aid civilians in the Donbas and to defend their homeland against Russian-backed separatists, fueling the increasingly divisive discourse around religious identity.

These mobilization trends have gone hand in hand with hostile attacks and discriminatory practices along religious lines. Starting in 2014, nationalist Ukrainian volunteer

battalions and pro-Russian fighting units such as the self-proclaimed “Russian Orthodox Army” have assaulted members of other confessions. More recently, priests belonging to the UOC-MP have reported threats of physical violence and coercion aimed at forcing people to change their faith in government-controlled areas. Moreover, new registration procedures in the Donbas region enable the de-facto authorities to legally ban, fine, and confiscate anything related to the practice of an unregistered religious community, such as the OCU, Evangelicals, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) and the human rights office of the United Nations have expressed their concern at these developments.

Disputes over local-level transfers of parishes have increased as parishes are faced with the decision to vote upon with which “mother church” to affiliate. Religious leaders are understanding that a parish transfer could put themselves and their church at odds with Moscow- or Kyiv-aligned clergy. For ordinary church-goers, rumors circulating of church grabbing, as well as real take-overs add an additional element of pain and confusion to their daily lives.

Religion, however, has not only been a dividing force. On the contrary, many religious actors continue to push for peace. They have continuously taken on roles of activists, insider mediators, prison and mil-

itary chaplains, and humanitarian service providers at the front lines. During the protests on Kyiv’s Maidan in 2013 and 2014, protesters used religious spaces as a point of refuge and shelter. Orthodox priests have mediated between authorities and the opposition, encouraging dialogue. Religious leaders and priests have served their communities living in the midst of war on both sides of the Line of Contact in Donbas, continuing to hold prayers and providing basic humanitarian services.

However, it has become increasingly difficult for religious actors to engage in peacebuilding efforts and promote social cohesion. Stringent registration procedures and discriminatory practices by governing bodies and the de-facto authorities on either side of the conflict line inhibit work across jurisdictions. Some religious actors have thus started to shuttle between communities under the radar on an individual basis. Furthermore, services provided by religious groups and organizations are often framed as “secular services”, allowing an easy exchange of services across divides. The neutral categorization of these services is under

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threat, as polarization limits collaboration for these on-the-ground efforts that contribute to peace and stability. It remains vital to keep communication open across the line, as these religious organizations have the capacity to build human capital and support peacebuilding efforts.

Tensions in Global Orthodoxy

These inter-Orthodox tensions along political lines have also had an impact on global Orthodoxy. The Russian Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople have had a strained relationship for centuries. The ROC claims to have the most parishes and demands corresponding recognition. It argues that all persons of Orthodox confession living in post-Soviet states (except for Georgia and Armenia which have their own autocephalous churches) should be ruled under the jurisdiction of the ROC. It connects Russian national aspirations with ecclesial affiliation and authority.

Both the head of the UOC-MP and the head of the ROC have thus condemned the

OCU's autocephaly. They are of the opinion that Bartholomew I. should have played the role of a peacebuilder or mediator between the different orthodox churches in Ukraine rather than causing a "schism". Their stand is inter alia of political and economic nature. The ROC is anxious about losing up to a third of its parishes, alongside treasured religious sites in Ukraine such as the monastery complex Kiev Pechersk Lavra, if all UOC-MP parishes and properties were to be transferred to the OCU. Further, the ROC fears a loss of parishes would affect its standing within global Orthodoxy. Constantinople's decision caused the ROC to cut ties with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople and effectively put any pan-Orthodox meetings involving Constantinople on ice, thereby decreasing chances of reconciliation.

Constantinople on the other hand, has an interest in defending its position as *primus inter pares* within global Orthodoxy. Constantinople historically granted independence to churches that had previously submitted to Constantinople's ecclesiastical rule. By granting autocephaly to the OCU, Constantinople took away ROC's authority over Ukrainian parishes. Constantinople is thus accused of acting outside its scope of duties and having set a dangerous precedent. The ROC and others fear it might not be long until other Churches claim their right to independence, such as the Latvian and Moldovan from the ROC, or the Montenegrin and North Macedonian from the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Having been granted autocephaly has placed the OCU at the center of competition between Moscow and Constantinople for prestige and spiritual authority. However, Ukraine's church currently finds itself

with little outside support. Out of the 14 recognized autocephalous churches within the Orthodox tradition, only the Greek Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate of Alexandria publicly recognize the OCU. Historically, however, newly autocephalous churches take time to integrate fully into the pan-Orthodox community.

Unclear Future

Autocephaly in 2019 added a complex religious dimension to the simmering war in Donbas, and it remains to be seen how it will fully unfold. Once again, two Orthodox churches exist within the same territory with ambitions to be the national church of Ukraine. The Kremlin and the ROC hold on to the UOC-MP. The Ukrainian government, meanwhile, is preoccupied with security, political, and economic matters related to the conflict in Donbas. It is thus unlikely to intervene politically on behalf of any *one* church. Overall, control over religious power will remain an issue of

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contention between Moscow and Kyiv as quarrels over ownership of significant religious property and parish transfers unfold and as the recognition of the OCU's independence on the part of the Orthodox community is likely to solidify.

While the call for autocephaly has been around at least since the 1990s, its declaration must be read within the modern-day conflict dynamics in Donbas. Poroshenko rhetorically intensified the nervousness around the UOC-MP's and the ROC's linkage to the Russian government, further

polarizing church belonging. In the eyes of the public, Zelensky's distance towards religious matters is seen as apathetic towards the OCU against the background of a historically close church-state relationship. As such, the loss of political support within Ukraine and the lack of support across other global autocephalous churches has weakened the new church. The OCU's leadership has done little to communicate these limitations or to manage believers' expectations. Hence, the public's excitement for the OCU has dampened and the church is increasingly seen as a primarily political project.

Recognizing that the conflict in and around Ukraine is not solely manifested through territorial disputes but is also reflected in issues of religious institutions, power, and shared identity represents an important step in gaining a more holistic understanding of the conflict and possibilities of its resolution. While disputes about ecclesial affiliation and power have not led to an escalation of the conflict in and around Ukraine yet, international policy makers are well advised to keep an eye on these dynamics with a view to preventing potential further politicization of the issue.

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