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Ukrainian Church Autocephaly: The Redrawing of the Religious Borders and Political Identities in the Conflict between Ukraine and Russia

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Abstract

A rapid and sudden change of religious and political boundaries and identities in connection with the contestation of Ukrainian Orthodoxy by the Ecumenical Patriarchate has remodeled the church schism in Ukraine, but without resolving it. Global Orthodoxy is going to be split into mutually exclusive clusters with two major centers, Moscow and Istanbul. Against the background of the 2019 presidential campaign, this theopolitical conflict in Ukraine could trigger a bloody religious war with far-reaching consequences.

Autocephaly as “Another” Act of Independence of Ukraine

The dominant discourse in Ukraine is one of breaking away from “barbarian Russia” in a quest to join “the civilized West.” Ukraine’s orientalizing of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a “usurper” of Ukrainian Orthodoxy is taking place against the background of the struggle for One Local Orthodox Church in Ukraine, as theopolitical leverage in the 2019 presidential campaign. The famous “Babylon captivity” of Russian Orthodoxy by Western Christianity, pointed out by Georgii Florovskii back in 1937 (Florovskii 2009), is paralleled in post-2014 Ukraine by the idea of “Moscow’s captivity” (*московська неволя*) of Orthodoxy in this country (Poroshenko 2019a).

It began on April 9, 2018, when Ukraine President Petr Poroshenko had a meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul regarding Ukrainian church autocephaly, an event that would let Kiev definitively disengage from Moscow (Poroshenko 2018a), which “annexed” the Kiev Metropolitanate in 1686 (Thronos 2018). The reclamation appeal was swiftly approved by the Ukrainian Parliament and submitted to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. September 2018 brought stunning news for the Orthodox commonwealth. The Ecumenical Patriarchate sent two emissaries to Kiev with the purpose of preparing the ground for church independence. The fact that there were two bishops, and not one, led the leaders of the ROC to the suspicion that the Phanar wanted to re-ordain the schismatic clerics in Ukraine and make them canonical, because two bishops are entitled to ordain a third one (Hilarion 2018). On September 17, 2018, the emissaries met with President Poroshenko and confirmed the end phase of the coming autocephaly (Poroshenko 2018c). A week before, Poroshenko had a meeting with the United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Samuel Brownback, who extended U.S. support to Kiev for “the right to have the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church” (Poroshenko 2018b). In addition, on Sep-

tember 19, 2018, Patriarch Filaret of the Kiev Patriarchate visited the U.S. Department of State, where he discussed church autocephaly in connection with the national security of Ukraine (Filaret 2018a). Thereafter, the U.S. Department of State issued its official “respect” for autocephaly in Ukraine (Nauert 2018). A month later, this position morphed into “strong support” expressed by U.S. Secretary of State and former CIA Director, Michael Pompeo (Pompeo 2018).

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the Russian Federation Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov accused Washington of “direct public support” for the “provocations of Patriarch Bartholomew”, aimed at tearing Ukraine from Russia (Lavrov 2018). Ukrainians recognize that, without the active U.S. involvement to impede Russia, the issue of church independence in Ukraine would not have budged (Volkova 2018). President Putin, at his annual press conference on December 20, 2018, accused Washington of dictating its will to both Kiev and the Phanar; moreover, he accused the Phanar of the desire to generate cash flows from Ukraine (Putin 2018). The Ukrainian media have published a detailed list of Ukrainian Orthodox real estate assets that the Phanar is supposed to receive in exchange for autocephaly (see Kozub 2018a), ostensibly, as part of the agreement signed on November 3, 2018.

The ROC defined the initiative as “an intervention of one Local Church in the territory of the other” (Synod ROC 2018a, b) and broke the communion with the Phanar (Zaiavlenie 2018). The largest Orthodox community in Ukraine, *The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate* (UOC), previously recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the only canonical church in Ukraine, came up with a rigid resolution breaking the co-service with Ecumenical clerics (Synod UOC 2018). On October 12, 2018, a meeting of the Russian Federation Security Council took place at which its members, including the top-tier *siloviki*, discussed the theopolitical situation around Ukraine, and explicitly called the UOC of the Moscow Patriarchate

“the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine” (*ο Ρωσσοϋ πρσσωλσβσννϋϋ ϋερκκνν νσ Ϥκρσννε*) (Sovbez 2018), which automatically enhanced the position of the UOC’s opponents. The holding of such a meeting and the post-colonial terminology used, whether intentional or merely ill informed, demonstrates the importance the Kremlin attaches to the ROC as a conductor of its soft power.

Interestingly, the Ecumenical Patriarchate argues that it “protects the individuality and identity of the Ukrainian people” (“δνδ τνν πρσσωσνσν τνσ νδνπρσσωπνσσ κνν ταντϋτντνσ του Ουκρσνννκϋλσϋ”) (Bartholomew 2018a), which is a political argument. In this regard, ROC representatives do fear a radical change of religious and national identity in both Ukraine and Russia (Shchipkov 2018). Moreover, in his keynote address to the Ukrainian Parliament on September 20, 2018, President Poroshenko stressed that the expected Act of Ukrainian church independence would be *another* Declaration of Ukrainian independence. Ukrainian autocephaly implies “the fall of the Third Rome as the oldest conceptual request of Moscow for the world hegemony” (Poroshenko 2018d). On October 14, Poroshenko added fuel to the fire (translation mine): “The question of the Tomos and autocephaly goes far beyond church life. It is the question of our independence. It is the question of our Ukrainian national security. It is the question of our Ukrainian statehood. It is the question of the whole world’s geopolitics” (Poroshenko 2018f).

Canon Law and the Redrawing of Borders

The formal pretext of the controversy regarding Ukraine is the recent claim by the Phanar that Moscow annexed the Kiev Metropolitanate in 1686, whereas it had been only conceded on certain conditions (Thronos 2018: 11). The cause of the disagreement is the Act of 1686, issued by Constantinople for Moscow (see Chentsova 2017). The ROC rejects Istanbul’s interpretation (Synod ROC 2018c). The publisher of the original Act concludes that it remains *unclear* whether the concession was granted temporarily (Chentsova 2017: 97). It is another question if more than three hundred years of *de facto* uncontested control by Moscow have created a sufficient *de jure* basis to repudiate the annexation claims (Kommentarii 2018: 24–25, Zaiavlenie 2018, Irinej 2019b). The Act of 1686 was composed vaguely enough for various stakeholders to construe it in their own way. The argument of the Phanar in this regard is that “the authority, which issued a decree, has absolute priority in interpreting it” (“ν νρρν, ν νπσνν νξνδωσν ννν Πρσξνν νρρν νπϋλντον πρσσωρσνδντντν ννσ τνν νρμνννννν τνσ”) (Thronos 2018: 16). Such a claim sounds preposterous, since it clashes with the modern approach that a reading of a text is in itself an independent interpretation.

That notwithstanding, the Phanar, on October 11, 2018, revoked “the legal binding of the Synodal Letter of the year 1686” (Announcement 2018), and lifted the excommunication from the self-proclaimed Patriarch Filaret of the Kiev Patriarchate and his colleague Makarii from *The Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephalous Church*, and reinstated them “to their hierarchical or priestly rank” (Announcement 2018). Thereafter, the Kiev Patriarchate swiftly adopted a norm about the official title of their leader in compliance with the Ecumenical ruling: from now on, in correspondence with the other churches, Filaret can be referred to as “Archbishop” and not as “Patriarch” (Zasidannia 2018).

On December 15, 2018, a Council of the two previously unrecognized Orthodox communities, with President Poroshenko and Ecumenical clerics presiding, founded a new church organization called *The Orthodox Church of Ukraine* (OCU) (*Πρσσωλσβννν ϋερκκνν Ϥκρσννν*). The elected Primate Epiphanii, 39 years old, was given the title not “Patriarch” but, merely, “Metropolitan of Kiev and All Ukraine.” A rumor has been circulating among UOC bishops that Epiphanii is either a son or a grandson of the actual leader of the new organization, Patriarch Filaret of the Kiev Patriarchate (Sofronii 2018). It has long been speculated that, despite being a monk, Filaret might have illegitimate children. If true, this reason explains why the ambitious Filaret stepped aside for the sake of electing a young and poorly known candidate: if the latter indeed is his kin, it means that Filaret maintains control as *pater familias*. In addition, on January 8, 2019, Filaret was accorded the highest state award, *Hero of Ukraine* (Poroshenko 2019b), as a likely “kickback” for setting aside his personal ambitions.

The seriousness of the struggle for church power at the Council was emphasized by another candidate from the Kiev Patriarchate, Metropolitan Mikhail, belonging to a rival group of influence, who accused Filaret of blackmail (Mikhail 2018). The next day after the Council, the 89-year-old Filaret explicitly stated at the Sunday liturgy that he is going to govern the new organization together with Epiphanii, who would represent it in external relations (Filaret 2018b). This statement confirms the assumption that Epiphanii is a docile protégé of Filaret. Given that, at the Council, there were only *two* bishops from the UOC, Metropolitan Simeon of Vinnitsa and a vicar Metropolitan Oleksandr, the event appears to be a reincarnation of the “Church of Filaret.”

It is widely believed that Simeon and Oleksandr nominally represented the UOC at the Council. However, Patriarch Bartholomew had received them into the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate already on December 14 (Drabyenko 2018, Simeon 2018). This fact

implies that, *de jure*, there were no UOC bishops at the Council whatsoever. It is no surprise, therefore, that even the most outspoken pro-autocephaly bishop within the UOC of the Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Sofronii of Cherkassy, who does not recognize Patriarch Kirill (!), is not ready to accept Filaret in any capacity and calls the new situation a “feudal takeover” (*васальне захоплення*) by Constantinople (Sofronii 2018). The OCU’s subordination to the Phanar, including the parishes outside Ukraine, is indeed stipulated in the Act of Autocephaly solemnly signed by Patriarch Bartholomew on January 5, 2019 (see Tomos 2019, Burega 2019). On December 17, 2018, the UOC passed a resolution condemning the Council in Kiev as a “gathering of schismatics” (*об’єднання розкольників*) and excommunicated the two Metropolitans (Zvernennia 2018). Instead of Simeon, a new ruling bishop was ordained. The UOC, headed by Metropolitan Onufrii, maintains its position as the only canonical church in Ukraine.

Law, Outlaw, and Above the Law

On December 20, 2018, the Ukrainian Parliament hastened to pass *Amendments to the Law of Ukraine “On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations”* (Zakon 2018), requiring the UOC to change its official name to something like *The ROC in Ukraine*. Within the UOC, each parish is normally a legal entity in its own right; and if it refuses to comply with the above law or is incapable of doing so technically, the state regulatory authority will outlaw it and exclude it from the state register of nonprofit organizations (Yurash 2018). Another legal loophole is to terminate the existing leasing agreements between the state and the UOC for the latter’s use of various state facilities. As a result, these entities will face enormous difficulties in carrying out their regular (economic) activities, and their communities will be pressured to alter their jurisdiction in order to survive.

In spite of his change of jurisdiction on December 14, the excommunicated Metropolitan Simeon of Vinnitsa, on December 17, issued a post-factum certificate from the legal entity called *Religious Organization “Administration of the Vinnitsa Diocese of the UOC”* giving the legal entity *Religious Community of the Saint-Transfiguration Cathedral of Vinnitsa of the Vinnitsa Diocese of the UOC*, which is controlled by Simeon, its assets (see Skvortsov 2019). Furthermore, Simeon sued the UOC asking the City Court of Vinnitsa to reinstate him in his “job” (see Sprava 2018). Interestingly, this action violates the applicable canon law (!), forbidding clerics to appeal to secular courts in ecclesial matters on pain of removal: *In civili [iudicio] vero perdat quod evicit, si locum suum obtinere voluerit* (Conc. Carth.: xv). The case thus makes it possible for the secular state to appoint

bishops for the church and creates a legal precedent for stripping the UOC of real estate in favor of the OCU.

On the other hand, the legal landscape of Ukraine over the last few years is characterized by frequent attacks on dissidents by state-controlled neo-Nazi paramilitary organizations, such as the notorious “S14,” who stand above the law, and who are euphemistically called “radicals” by the mass media, in order not to insult them and become a victim of their pogroms (see Kozub 2018b). Western embassies in Ukraine pay little attention to these street fighters. For the sitting government, however, they are a convenient tool for solving various problems, which otherwise would be difficult to solve, because nobody is held responsible for their actions. This situation cannot last forever, yet the fear of possible “radical” pogroms against the UOC after the Council and the adoption of the law are grounded in reality, because appeals to “hunt down” (*полювання*) UOC priests have already been voiced (Yarosh 2018). Even the Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, Arsen Avakov, who is considered to be among the officials who provide cover for the “radicals,” sees a danger that the situation in the country will deteriorate after the creation of the new church (Avakov 2018). That considered, the UOC is facing direct and indirect state persecution.

Byzance après Byzance

On October 25, 2018, Patriarch Bartholomew spoke of “injustice” regarding Ukraine, because it has no church autocephaly (Bartholomew 2018b). The Greek term used for “injustice” was *αδικία*. Given that Patriarch Bartholomew today embodies what is left of Byzantium, *αδικία* traces back to Byzantine law and, through it, Roman law. In particular, the latter states: *Iuris prudentia est divinarum atque humanarum rerum notitia, iusti atque iniusti scientia* (Dig. I.1.10.2). Byzantine law renders this classical Roman invective into Greek as follows: “*Σοφία δὲ νόμου τὸ εἰδέναι τὰ δεῖα καὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπινα πράγματα, καὶ τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὸ ἀδίκον*” (Bas. II.1.11), reducing the three Latin notions (*prudentia*, *notitia*, and *scientia*) down to two Greek terms (*σοφία* and *τὸ εἰδέναι*); and namely, failing to use the profound Aristotelian *τὸ ἐπιστάσθαι* in the third instance. The Byzantines were thus bereft of the need for “scientific,” inward knowledge of what is just and unjust and left with the formalist, outward kind of knowing (cf. *εἶδος*).

Patriarch Bartholomew, representing *Byzance après Byzance*, demonstrates this outward approach to the situation in Ukraine when he issued the decrees for the previously mentioned UOC bishops or when he spoke about the 45–50 million residents therein (Bartholomew 2018b). In reality, this number is around 30 million, and not all of them are Orthodox: as of November

2018, the official population in Ukraine was 42 million people (<http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua/>); of which between 10 and 12 million (!) normally do not reside in the country (Reva 2018). Besides, while saying “all the others do have a right to autocephaly” (“όλοι οι άλλοι να έχουν δικαίωμα εις την αυτοκεφαλία”), Bartholomew, for example, would not mention the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America under the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Do the U.S. residents not have the right to autocephaly? Is it not *αδικία* either? The Phanar approaches Ukraine nominally, which has resulted in the “abolition” of its 300-year history.

Patriarch Kirill, speaking on December 26, 2018, referred to Great Britain’s hypothetical revocation of American or Indian independence as an example of the absurdity of such an anti-historical approach (Kirill 2018c). The point is, however, that the United States and India would effectively withstand a possible abolition act issued by London, whereas, after 2014, the Kremlin and the ROC, Putin and Kirill, have become impotent with regard to the Ukrainian case. Their fortune, unfortunately for them, is to contemplate the *Realpolitik* developments from afar and to rend the air with their helpless, although not incorrect, commentaries (cf. Kirill 2018d). The Russian Federation had taken Crimea but lost Ukraine, the UOC remaining as the umbilical cord between the two nations. This connection is being cut, and one cannot help thinking about a certain collective “revenge” on Russia for 2014.

The Post-Colonial “Swap”: 1204 ↔ 2014

Although Orthodoxy is usually considered to represent “the East” in comparison to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism (“the West”), the latter “has functioned as an absolute marker of difference from what is considered to be the essence of Orthodoxy, and, thus, ironically, has become a constitutive of the modern Orthodox self” (Demacopoulos/Papanikolaou 2013: 2). Scholars see historical roots of this anti-Westernism in the estrangement between the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire. However, even the Great Schism of 1054 was not perceived by its contemporaries as permanent. The radical change came in 1204 with the pogrom and colonization of Constantinople by the Western crusaders. Today,

in return, Orthodox anti-Easternism is taking shape, in Ukraine (vs. the ROC) and in Russia (vs. the Ecumenical Patriarchate). I interpret the incorporation of Crimea by the Russian Federation after 2014 in light of the reversed 1204-model, in which East and West swap roles: Ukraine is now “the civilized West” that is unexpectedly under attack by “the barbarian East,” and which has changed the relations of the two forever. Ukraine, with its “initiatives of reclamation” (Demacopoulos 2017: 482), stands under a big post-colonial sign, which includes the need to give up Russian “colonial” culture of which Russian Orthodoxy is part and parcel, believing that “the issue of autocephaly for the Ukrainian state is a chance for the decolonization for Ukraine” (Hovorun 2018) and the “second” Declaration of Independence.

Conclusion

The rapid and sudden change of religious and political boundaries and identities in connection with the contestation of Ukrainian Orthodoxy by the Ecumenical Patriarchate draws striking parallels with the allegations about the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The image of Moscow is of a “barbarian usurper”, who breaks both international and canon law. However, the Phanar has remodeled the church schism in Ukraine, (which now has two Orthodox denominations instead of three), without resolving it. It could trigger a bloody religious war with far-reaching implications for the political standing of Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, and other countries (e.g., Georgia, Belarus, Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece). This theopolitical conflict is spreading around the globe since the Moscow Patriarchate, backed by the Russian authorities, decided to disregard the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s worldwide jurisdiction and establish its own parallel infrastructure (see Zhurnaly 2018: 105, 106). From now on, global Orthodoxy is going to be split into mutually exclusive clusters with two major centers, Moscow and Istanbul. The “Greek” churches and the Romanian Church can accept the actions of the Phanar, whereas some other churches will stay with Moscow (cf. Ecclesia 2019, Komunikat 2018; Sawa 2019; Irinej 2019a, b). The outcome of the struggle will depend on the array of invested resources, from political support to the self-mastery of the actors.

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See overleaf for References

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ANALYSIS

Orthodox Church of Ukraine: Challenges and Risks of a New Beginning

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Abstract

On January 6, 2019, in Istanbul the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I handed the Tomos of Autocephaly to the newly elected head of the newly established Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Epiphany. This historical event was the result of a long-lasting process to establish a national Ukrainian church independent from the Moscow Patriarchate. Nevertheless, political entanglements and power struggles within the church undermine the unifying purpose of the new church and promise a conflicted future for the religious situation in Ukraine.

Religious Plurality as a Chance

Historically, Ukraine is a religiously diverse country. Its borders and national affiliation have changed several times. Thus, religious confession is often linked to ethnic identity. Islam has deep roots with the Tatars on

the Crimean Peninsula and Judaism in the west of the country. Christianity entered the kingdom of Rus in 988, with the baptism of Prince Vladimir and the Orthodox Church went on to become the dominant religious community of the region. In the 17th century, some Orthodox

bishops in the western territory joined the Roman Catholic Church in a union. As the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), this is an important denomination today, especially in western Ukraine. Finally, numerous Protestant communities are represented in the country.

During the 20th century, further divisions of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in the territory of today's Ukraine took place. With the first independence of Ukraine in 1918, a Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) was created, but was subsequently forced into emigration. After the end of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's independence in 1991, the demands for an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church grew louder. As recently as 1988, the 1000th anniversary of the baptism of Rus' was a key event for the end of the atheistic oppression of the ROC, which at the same time underlined the spiritual unity of the orthodox believers in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. In 1992, after the refusal of autocephaly from Moscow, the then Metropolitan Filaret (Denisenko) founded the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) and since 1995 bears the title Patriarch. In world orthodoxy, this church, as well as the UAOC, has not been recognized on the territory of Ukraine. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which is in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate, has been the only canonically recognized church in Ukraine. According to the statutes of the ROC, it enjoys the status of "far-reaching autonomy," which means that it is independent from the Moscow Patriarchate in its administration, structure and personnel decisions, choosing its leader by itself.

In numbers, the UOC is the strongest denomination in Ukraine, counting about 12,000 churches. The UOC-KP has about 5000 communities, the UAOC about 1000. Since there is no reliable data on the number of their faithful via membership records, the corresponding official information varies and is subject to interpretation and manipulation. Recent surveys speak of a larger number of believers who identify with the Kyiv Patriarchate and a declining number of supporters of the UOC. However, a significant number of the population calls itself "simply orthodox". In fact, it must be assumed that for a long time many churchgoers did not consider the affiliation of their parish to one or the other ecclesiastical structure to be decisive, since there were no differences in their liturgy. However, the question of whether they belong to a canonical church or a church that is considered schismatic in world Orthodoxy is undoubtedly important to many believers. This lack of recognition for millions of faithful has been a painful situation for those affected for 25 years, and it was exactly this desire for recognition that moved the Ecumenical Patriarch to act in the direction of autocephaly.

Already the history of Ukraine shows how issues of church affiliation can gain significant political relevance. Since the end of the Soviet Union, political elites have repeatedly attempted to use the desire for a Moscow-independent Orthodox Church or—in times of pro-Russian sentiments—a special closeness to the Patriarchate of Moscow for political purposes. The events of 2013–14—the initially peaceful and later escalating pro-European protests on Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) in Kyiv, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia and the ongoing war in the east of Ukraine—have had a lasting impact on the self-identification of Ukrainians, including the orthodox believers. All Ukrainian religious communities demonstrated a remarkable moment of ecumenical agreement, by demanding the renunciation of violence on all sides of the conflict and declaring their solidarity with the right of self-determination for the Ukrainian population. During the protests, ecumenical prayer took place with the participation of all Orthodox churches, all denominations set up auxiliary points and offered pastoral care. Ukraine's historical religious plurality proved highly valuable in times of social protests, because no church or religion was perceived as "state religion" and all were free to stand with society, rather than the political elites.

2018—Catalyzing Church Independence

The religious pluralism in Ukraine created beneficial conditions for preventing the instrumentalization of one community as a state religion. Even the UOC with its close ties to the Moscow Patriarchate was eager to remain an independent voice within Ukrainian society and thus differed from its Russian mother-church. Nevertheless, the Maidan protests and the Russian aggression against Ukraine changed the perception of the churches by society and politicians. An outspoken loyalty to the Ukrainian state, its borders and its right to self-determination became a decisive criterion of society's acceptance of the churches. While the UOC-KP and the UAOC clearly sided with pro-European protests and strongly condemned Russia's military aggression, the UOC remained largely neutral. Her believers were and are on both sides of the conflict, so a clear condemnation of one side seemed impossible. However, on several occasions she advocated respect for national borders and signed the corresponding statements of the Ukrainian Council of Churches. At the same time, the Moscow Patriarchate never condemned Russian aggression, but constantly spoke of a "fratricidal war" within Ukraine. This neutrality or solidarity with the Russian government was perceived sensitively, by the faithful and politicians in Ukraine.

The issue of church independence gained new momentum only in the years after the Maidan. While

the Russian aggression continued on and the Ukrainian society grew closer to defend its identity, the UOC and the ROC continued their rhetoric of fratricidal war and emphasized the “one soul—one people” of Russians and Ukrainians. In April 2018, Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko and the Ukrainian parliament asked the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to grant the status of autocephaly to the Ukrainian church. The reaction of the Ecumenical Patriarch was as fast as it was surprising. In September 2018, two delegates were sent to Ukraine to explore the situation, talk to all possible actors and prepare for the establishment of a united church. In October 2018, the Ecumenical Patriarch re-established the schismatic bishops and faithful from the UOC-KP and UAOC, thus enabling millions of faithful to feel recognized as part of one church once again. In December 2018, a council was organized to establish a new church structure. All orthodox bishops of Ukraine were invited to take part in this council, which was planned to become unifying. Yet, from 190 participants only two bishops (out of about 90) of the UOC took part, thus the unifying character of the council and of the new church failed. The council also elected a head for the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), 39-year old (Metropolitan) Epiphany (Dumenko), who received the Tomos of Autocephaly for the new church on January 6, 2019 in Istanbul. From now on, the OCU is one of the 15 recognized Orthodox churches across the world.

Ecclesiastical Crisis

From an ecclesiastical point of view, this process was far from consensual, hinting at a large number of theological and structural problems within Orthodoxy. There is no consensus about the procedure for establishing new independent churches, and the attempt to build such a consensus at the pan-orthodox council in Crete in 2016 failed. For around 300 years, the Moscow Patriarchate was perceived as the mother-church for all other churches of the historical “Holy Rus’”, particularly those in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Yet, Moscow has refused to grant autocephaly to the Ukrainian church, as well as to solve the problem of the painful situation for the faithful that have been outside the church for 25 years. The intervention of the Ecumenical Patriarch on the formerly recognized territory of Moscow, thus, has to be the subject of critical ecclesiastical discussion, although the pastoral responsibility taken up by this move seems highly valuable.

Moscow’s reaction to the activities of Bartholomew was harsh and points to the complex political entanglement of the church. Not least for the ROC, which has over the last decade established itself as a column of Russian domestic and foreign identity, by elaborating the concept of the Russian World (“*Russkii mir*”).

This narrative defines its roots in the idea of the “Holy Rus’”, founded through the baptism of Prince Vladimir on the territory of today’s Ukraine. While Ukrainian citizens started losing faith in the Russian church long before the autocephaly, there has not been a stampede of parishes to the new independent church (about 80 parishes out of 12,000 so far), the loss of this ideological pillar weighs more heavily for the ROC. From the point of view of the church’s concept of Holy Rus’, national borders have to be respected and the unity of the people is perceived as spiritual unity. The annexation of Crimea was a radical dismissal of this idea by the political leadership, yet the church saw no possibility to protest this military intervention. On the other hand, the Ecumenical Patriarch dismissed the consensus on the borders of church territory by intervening in Ukraine. Remarkably, until the granting of autocephaly to the Ukrainian church, no representative of the ROC or the UOC described the events in Crimea as an annexation, but in recent months this taboo has been lifted and several representatives, among them the speaker of the UOC, Metropolitan Kliment, described the annexation for what it is. On the whole, the position of the ROC seems determined by its powerlessness in the face of its own political entanglement.

After the ROC severed the communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate on the level of bishops and theological dialogue in September 2018, it prohibited the laity from receiving communion in churches of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. While observers falsely called this act a schism, the orthodox faithful blamed the Moscow Patriarchate for abusing the most sacred heart of Christian faith—the eucharist—for political aims. No other orthodox church followed Moscow in this measure, so it remained one-sided and did not cause a schism. At the same time, no other church has of yet welcomed the newly established church of Ukraine. This situation illustrates the deep crisis in which Orthodoxy finds itself in the 21st century. On the one hand, there is the notorious question of power and synodality within the church, which includes the problem of missing canonical laws and procedures, but also the lasting power struggle between the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. On the other hand, the question of autocephaly is closely linked to issues of national borders and thus naturally linked to politics. Although orthodox theologians have discussed this problematic linkage for decades, no consensus has been found either on questions of procedure, or on alternative ideas of structuring the church in modern times. The situation of two parallel church structures in one country, as we see now in Ukraine, is common for most of the orthodox parishes in non-orthodox countries in Western Europe and America. It is, never-

theless, an abnormality for Orthodoxy, which perceives itself as one in faith, uniting a broad diversity of expressions of faith. In Ukraine, the parallel existence of two churches most probably will last a long time depending on the dynamics of conversion from the UOC, as well as from the former UOC-KP and UAOC to the OCU. Currently, this process is moving quite slowly, which points to the awareness among the faithful and bishops of the political manipulations shaping the whole issue.

Politicization of Church Independence

Poroshenko defined the establishment of a united Ukrainian Orthodox church as one of the main goals for his election campaign with the slogan: “An independent church is a pledge of an independent Ukraine.” The independent church should finally cut off its spiritual connection with Moscow. Poroshenko was present in the Presidium of the Council of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) on December 15, 2018 in Kyiv, and subsequently introduced the new head of the church to the people. He also joined the delegation to Istanbul for the handover of the Tomos on January 6, 2019. His permanent presence at all of these events is of no particular importance from an ecclesiastical point of view, but it is of extraordinary symbolic significance, albeit in a quite negative sense, because it links the new church from the very beginning with an outspoken political agenda. Poroshenko’s speeches in Kyiv and Istanbul strongly indicate that his only substantive idea for the new church is to demarcate it from Russia, that is, the rejecting and demonizing of everything to do with Russia. No theological or ethical issue appears to be crucial, but simply “a church without Putin, without Russian poison, without prayers for the Russian army.” Right after the handover of the Tomos in Istanbul, Poroshenko started a so-called “Tomos Tour,” which was meant to be a part of his re-election campaign, presenting the new church as the main result of his first presidential term. As head of the new church, Metropolitan Epiphany accompanied the president on this tour, and various religious events were part of the program. Additionally, dozens of billboards show the president together with Metropolitan Epiphany presenting the “Tomos for Ukraine”. From the point of view of the constitutional separation of church and state in Ukraine, this mixture of politics and religion is highly questionable. It is clear that the new church appears in the agenda of Poroshenko exclusively as a socio-political instrument, and this will certainly be a harmful legacy for the new church.

Remarkably, the Ukrainian identity of millions of the UOC’s faithful is ignored by accusing the church as a whole of representing Russian interests and functioning as a political agent of Russia, paradoxically in the

same manner that the Moscow Patriarchate ignores it by calling them one people with the ROC. Undoubtedly, this treatment encourages skepticism among the faithful of the UOC with regard to the new church. In addition, this rhetoric undermines the idea of unity and will aggravate, rather than overcome the divisions within the Ukrainian population. Instead of strengthening an open and unprejudiced dialogue with all of the Ukrainian orthodox faithful, the political elites push legislation, which is clearly aimed to pressure the UOC. Notably, the new law about the renaming of religious organizations in accordance with their foreign affiliation “in an aggressor state”. In January 2019, the parliament adopted a law that aims to regulate the conversion of parishes from one church to another. This law concerns all parishes of former orthodox churches in Ukraine, which have to register as a parish of the OCU, if they want to join it. While this law is needed, in light of the fact that there have been several cases of violent occupations of church buildings and questionable takeovers of parishes during the last decades, the political framing of the law undermines possible positive opportunities. Poroshenko stated that he will defend the freedom of conscience for all who want to join the OCU, but of course it is his duty to defend the religious freedom of all faithful, including the UOC and the parishes which want to join the UOC. Other laws concerning, for example, the presence of religious representatives in schools and in the military will follow. There is, therefore, a need for a close monitoring by international organizations and human rights defenders, in order to support democratic development and equal rights for all religious organizations.

Crucial Challenges for Ukrainian Orthodoxy

Thanks to the politicization of the church issue, both orthodox churches in Ukraine face several crucial challenges. First, the politicization of the church is perceived critically in society, not least because it mirrors the political entanglement of the ROC from which they want to split away. Thus, the future of the OCU and its acceptance by society depends on whether it will continue to work for the interests of the political elite or credibly distance itself from them. Second, the intended unifying mission of the church is now only a hope for the future. Neither the unification council in December 2018, nor the Tomos received in January 2019 has launched a mass conversion of parishes and faithful from the UOC to the OCU. It remains unknown how many parishes will join the new church, and this is foremost a question of the rule of law to create a context in which it is safe and secure for both converts and those who chose

to keep their current affiliation. Currently, such a secure atmosphere is not guaranteed and is, in fact, being corrupted by the political framing of the process. Thus, and third, both churches face the challenge of building some kind of peaceful co-existence between them, in order to prevent a further split in Ukrainian society on religious grounds. Both churches have declared their interest in supporting the development of a peaceful and democratic Ukrainian society. Some practical steps will be needed to realize this intention. Theologians from both churches underline the special legacy of Ukrainian Orthodoxy that makes it different from the ROC—historically it developed an organic relationship with civil society, rather than with the state. This is also explicitly

the view for the vast majority of the UOC, even if some Ukrainian framings of the issue presume the opposite. The participation of the churches in the Maidan and their solidarity with the “revolution of dignity” underlined this legacy. It is—fourth—a challenge, as well as a huge opportunity for the churches to elaborate on this legacy, which is a common legacy for all churches in Ukraine. These four challenges for the churches in Ukraine, as well as the enforced intervention in church matters by Ukrainian and Russian politics and the escalating strategy of the Moscow Patriarchate, make it plain that the process of establishing an independent Orthodox church in Ukraine has only just begun.

About the Author

Regina Elsner is a theologian and, since September 2017, a researcher at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Berlin, where she investigates the dynamics of Russian Orthodox social ethics since the fall of the Soviet Union

Further Reading

- Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer. *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*. Palgrave Macmillan 2016.
- Nicholas Denysenko. *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine. A Century of Separation*. DeKalb: North Illinois University Press 2018.
- Thomas Bremer and Sophia Senyk. Can history solve the conflict about Ukrainian autocephaly? October 12, 2018, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2018/10/12/history-ukrainian-conflict/>.
- Maria Lipman and Sergey Chapnin. The Ukrainian Church’s Quest For Ecclesiastical Autonomy. September 27, 2018, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/node/9938>.

DOCUMENTATION

Announcement by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Decision to Grant Autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine

Announcement

Presided by His All-Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch, the Holy and Sacred Synod convened for its regular session from October 9 to 11, 2018, in order to examine and discuss items on its agenda.

The Holy Synod discussed in particular and at length the ecclesiastical matter of Ukraine, in the presence of His Excellency Archbishop Daniel of Pamphilon and His Grace Bishop Hilarion of Edmonton, Patriarchal Exarchs to Ukraine, and following extensive deliberations decreed:

- 1) To renew the decision already made that the Ecumenical Patriarchate proceed to the granting of Autocephaly to the Church of Ukraine.
- 2) To reestablish, at this moment, the Stavropegion of the Ecumenical Patriarch in Kyiv, one of its many Stavropegia in Ukraine that existed there always.
- 3) To accept and review the petitions of appeal of Filaret Denisenko, Makariy Maletych and their followers, who found themselves in schism not for dogmatic reasons, in accordance with the canonical prerogatives of the Patriarch of Constantinople to receive such petitions by hierarchs and other clergy from all of the Autocephalous Churches.

Thus, the above-mentioned have been canonically reinstated to their hierarchical or priestly rank, and their faithful have been restored to communion with the Church.

- 4) To revoke the legal binding of the Synodal Letter of the year 1686, issued for the circumstances of that time, which granted the right through oikonomia to the Patriarch of Moscow to ordain the Metropolitan of Kyiv, elected by the Clergy-Laity Assembly of his eparchy, who would commemorate the Ecumenical Patriarch as the First hierarch at any celebration, proclaiming and affirming his canonical dependence to the Mother Church of Constantinople.
- 5) To appeal to all sides involved that they avoid appropriation of Churches, Monasteries and other properties, as well as every other act of violence and retaliation, so that the peace and love of Christ may prevail.

At the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the 11th of October, 2018

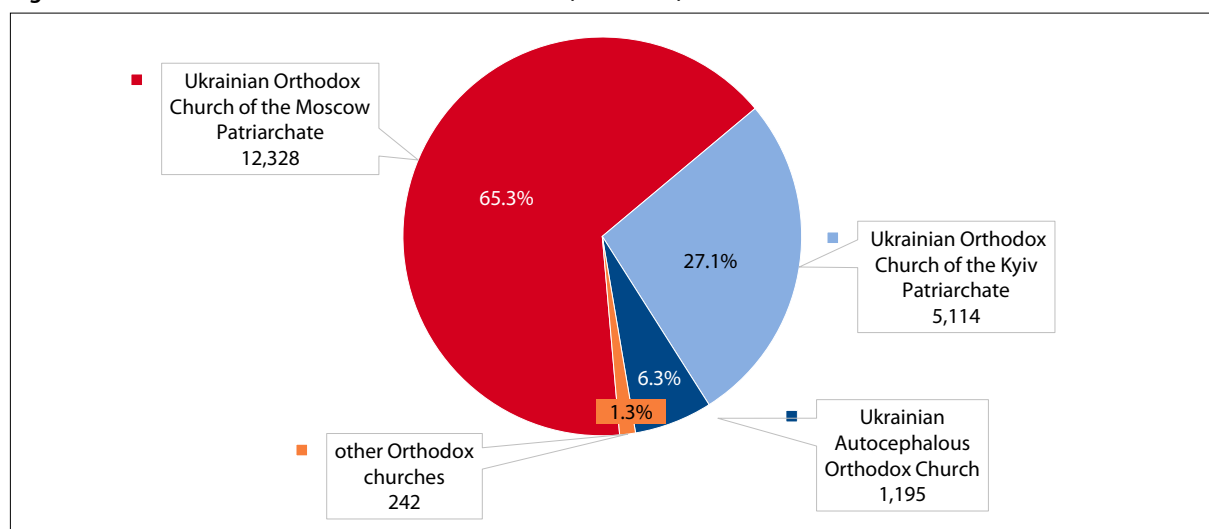
From the Chief Secretariat
of the Holy and Sacred Synod

Source: *website of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, 11 October 2018*, https://www.patriarchate.org/announcements/-/asset_publisher/MF6geT6kmaDE/content/communiq-1?_101_INSTANCE_MF6geT6kmaDE_languageId=en_US

STATISTICS

Number of Orthodox Parishes in Ukraine

Figure 1: Number of Orthodox Parishes in Ukraine (as of 2017)

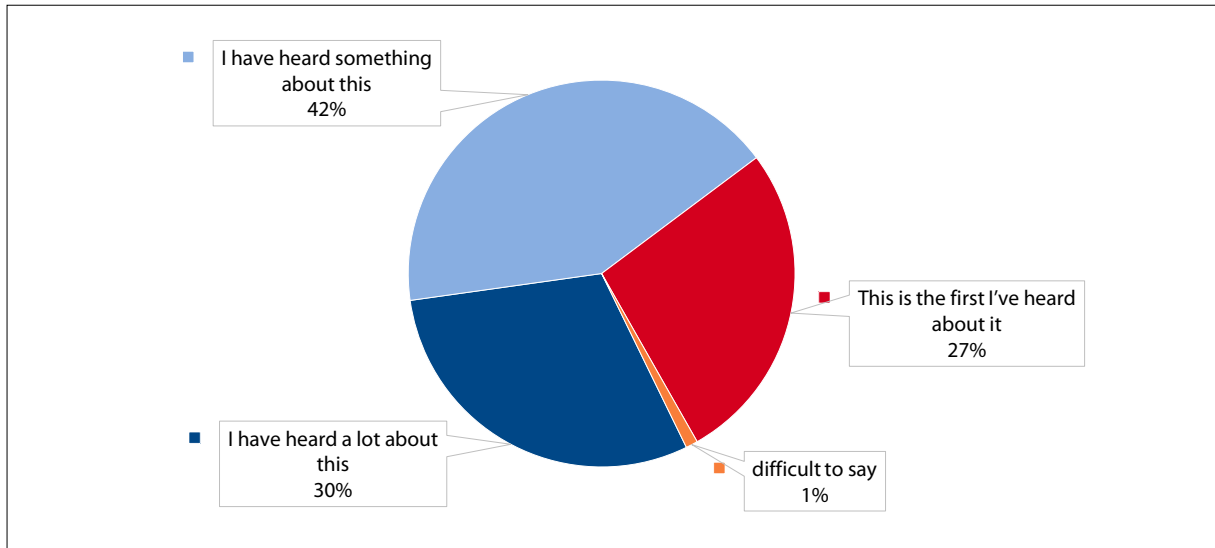


Total number of Orthodox parishes: 18,879

Source: Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, Decree no. 260 of 29 March 2017, http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1829%3A1&catid=51%3Astats&Itemid=79&lang=ru

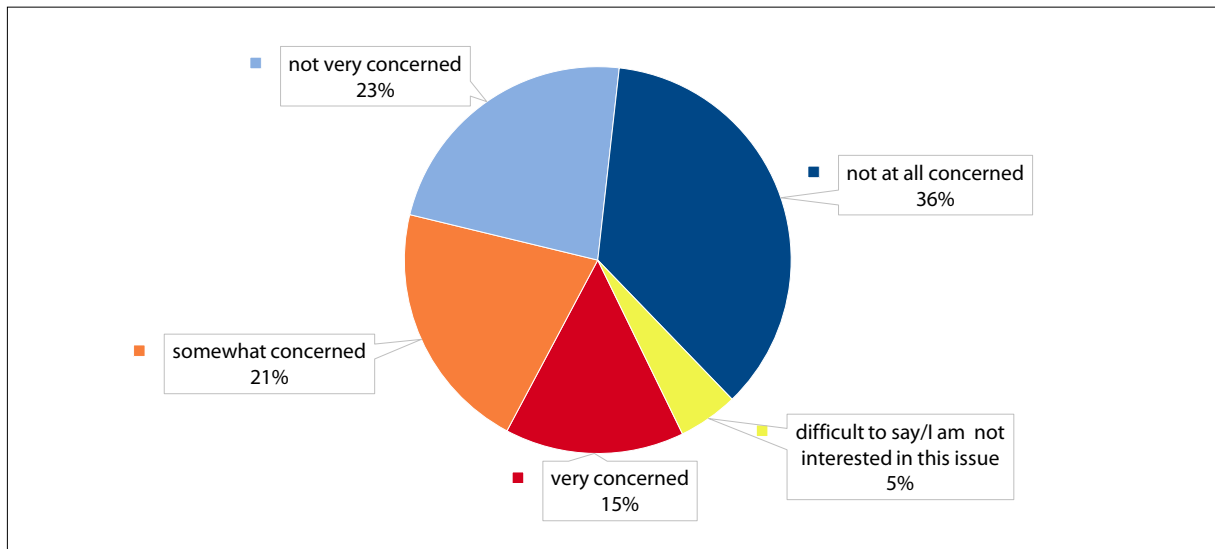
Church Schism: the Russian Perspective

Figure 1: Have You Heard about the Split of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine?



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center from 22 – 28 November 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/12/14/ukraine-s-orthodox-church/>, published 14 December 2018

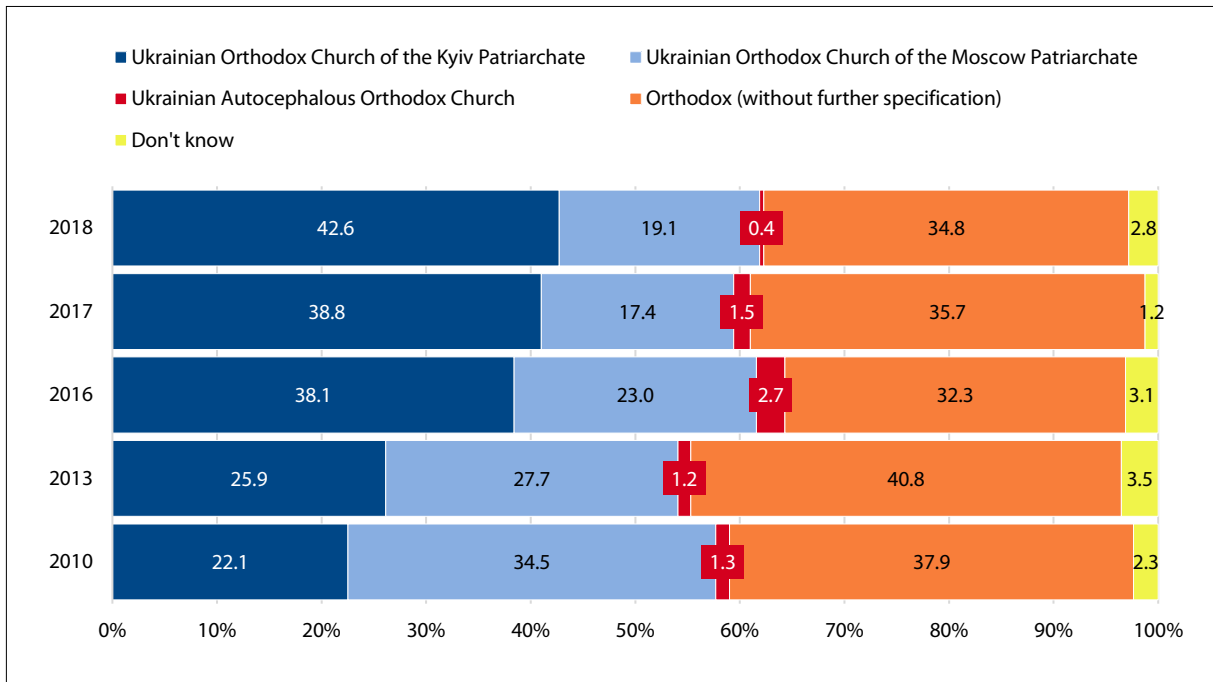
Figure 2: Are You Concerned about the Separation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Moscow Patriarchate (from the Russian Orthodox Church)?



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center from 22 – 28 November 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/12/14/ukraine-s-orthodox-church/>, published 14 December 2018

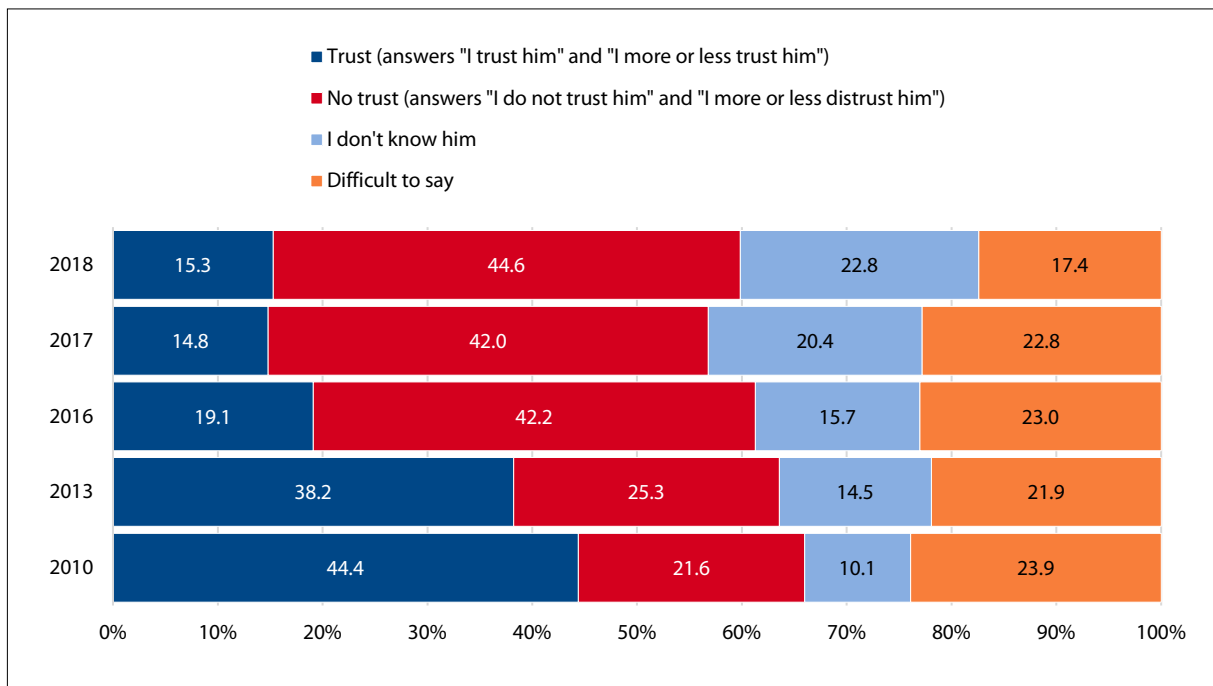
Church Schism: the Ukrainian Perspective

Figure 1: You Consider Yourself a Member of Which Church? (percentage of faithful who identify themselves as Orthodox)



Source: representative opinion poll by Razumkov Centre, in: *Characteristic Features of Religious and Church Self-Identification of Ukrainians, Trends 2010–2018*, p. 16, http://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2018_Religiya.pdf

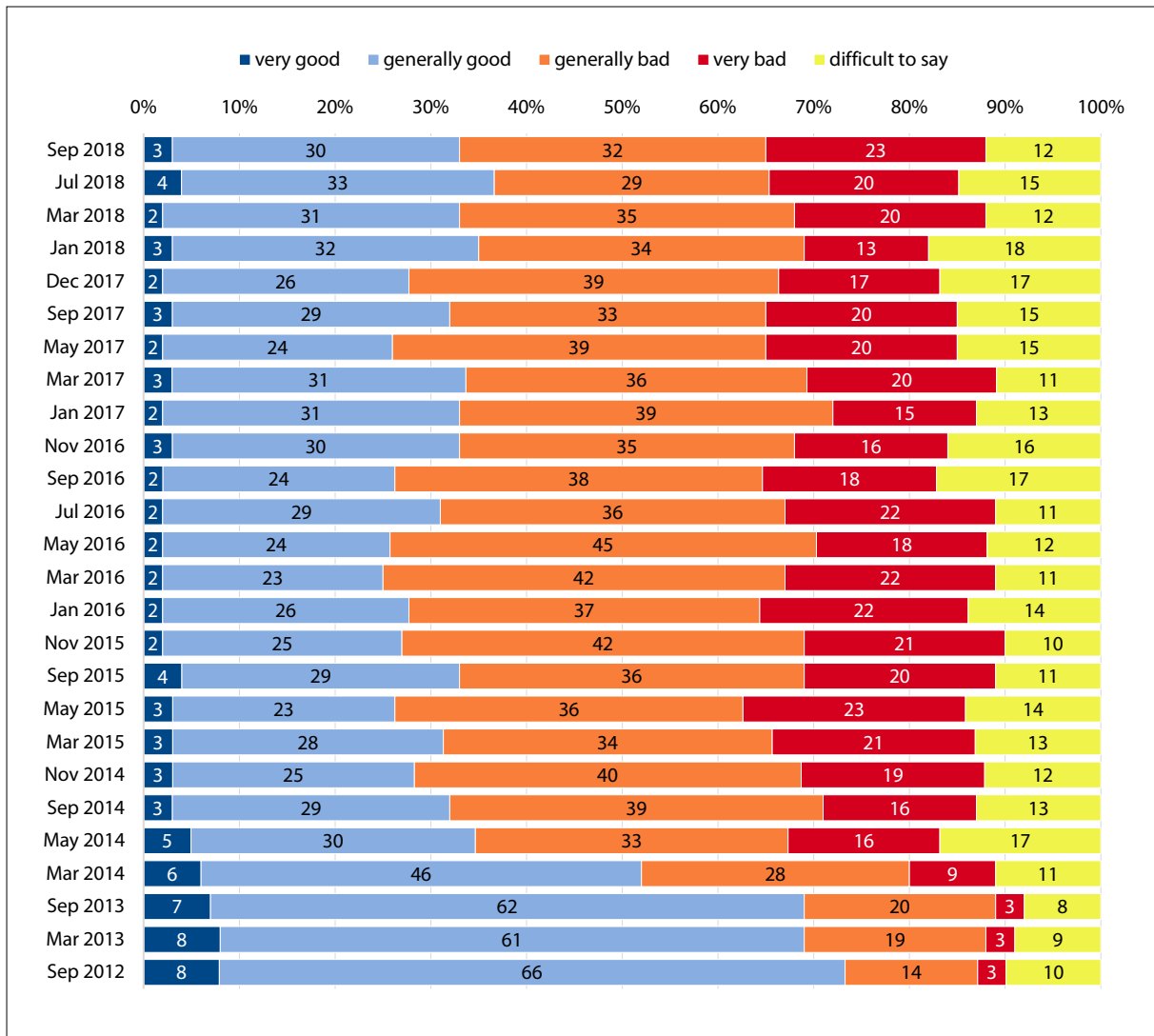
Figure 2: Trust in the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill I (in %)



Source: representative opinion poll by Razumkov Centre, in: *Characteristic Features of Religious and Church Self-Identification of Ukrainians, Trends 2010–2018*, p. 8, http://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2018_Religiya.pdf

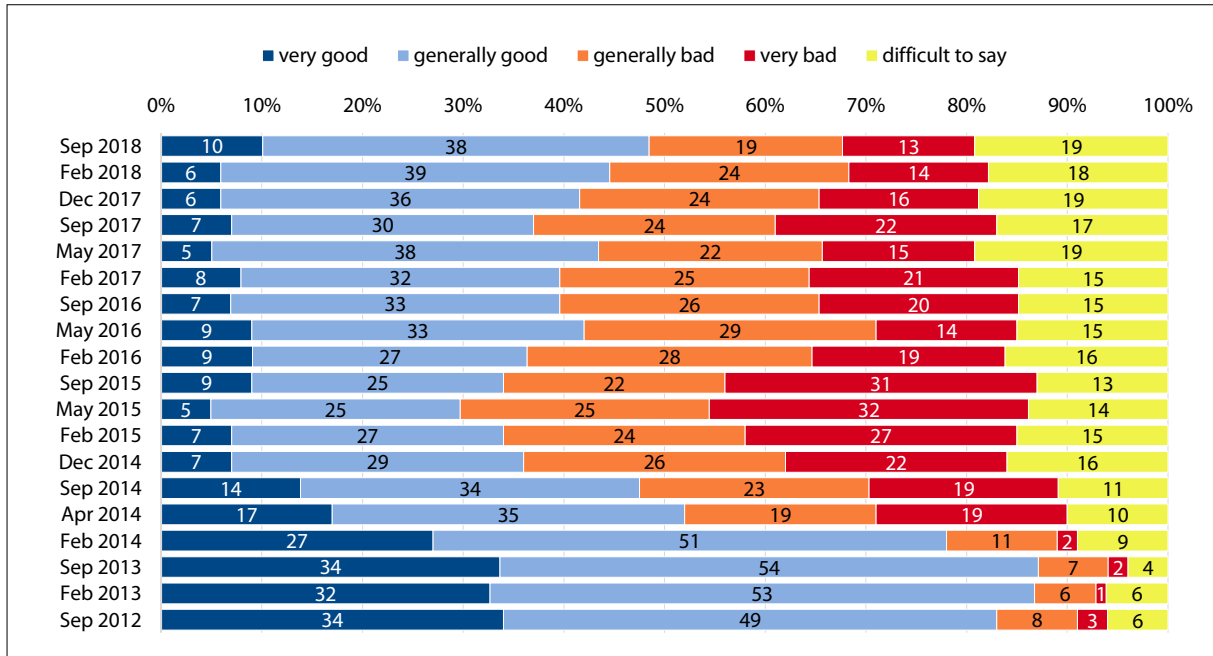
Ukrainian–Russian Relations

Figure 1: What is Your Current General Attitude towards Ukraine? Poll of the Russian Population (September 2012 – September 2018, %)



Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center from September 2012 to 20 – 26 September 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/10/15/russia-ukraine-relations-3/>, published 15 October 2018 (caption adapted by the Russian Analytical Digest)

Figure 2: What is Your Current General Attitude towards Russia? Poll of the Ukrainian Population (September 2012 – September 2018, %)



Source: representative opinion polls by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology from September 2012 to 8 – 23 September 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/10/15/russia-ukraine-relations-3/>, published 15 October 2018 (caption adapted by the Russian Analytical Digest)

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

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