

The Ties that Bind

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The social transformations that have been taking place in Ukraine since late 2013 have **greatly affected inter-church relations**. The Orthodox Church under the Kyiv Patriarchate, which actively supported the EuroMaidan, emerged from the revolution with a strong moral ascendancy and enhanced its own reputation in the society. For the Moscow Patriarchate, these events turned out to be somewhat of a disaster. Only some priests supported the protests and the activities of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine are openly criticised by the society today.

Other than Ukraine there is no other country in the world with multiple Orthodox jurisdictions that have hostile relations with each other and are unable to reach a mutual understanding. The only similar example that comes to mind is the case of the Former Yugoslav Republics of Macedonia (FYROM) and Montenegro where, as in Ukraine, the Orthodox Churches sought to obtain the status of autocephaly (the Orthodox equivalent of ecclesiastic “independence”) from the central Church in Belgrade. However, in this case there were only two competing groups: one which aspired to remain under the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the other of which sought independence.

In contrast, in Ukraine today there are three Orthodox communities that cannot reach an agreement regarding the future development of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine. They include the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of Moscow Patriarchate (about 12,700 religious communities) and two independent groups: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyiv Patriarchate (about 4,700 com-

munities) and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (about 1,200 communities). This situation generates numerous conflicts in Ukrainian society as the disputes between the churches affect both interpersonal relations and the political process. The conflict intensifies in particular at a time of complex social and political upheavals, as happened in the early 1990s when Ukraine gained independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, or during social and political transformations such as at the time of the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014).

Common civilisational space

The strong connection between Orthodoxy and ethnic, national and political (as well as geopolitical) identity has led not only to internal conflicts between people of different identities, but also interstate controversies. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) remained one of the most powerful cultural and political links between Kyiv and Moscow. Although the Moscow Patriarchate recognises the existence of the state of Ukraine as a separate political entity, it continues to regard Ukrainian society as part of the common civilisational space – the “Russian world”. For this reason, any aspirations of ecclesiastical independence from Moscow are treated as unacceptable. In turn, the part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that insists not only on its right to be independent also stresses that the Ukrainian Orthodox tradition is substantially different from the Russian one. Unlike the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church functions as a community of mutually recognised independent, mostly nation-based, churches. Autocephaly, or ecclesiastical independence of individual churches, is a significant part of Orthodox tradition. However, so far the debate about the limits of such independence and the procedure of how it is obtained remains open in the Orthodox world.

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The controversy surrounding the issue of whether the Ukrainian and Russian ecclesiastic cultures are identical and how they differ is important not only in regards to what the Ukrainian Church should look like, but also whether the existence of an autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church makes sense at all. Since the church institutions emerged on the territory of modern Ukraine, the territories to the north of Kyiv (today forming parts of Belarus and western Russia) were under

the jurisdiction of the Kyivan Metropolitan. Christianity played a significant role in Kievan Rus' and was a part of the rapid development of literature, art, architecture, music and legal culture on these territories.

Byzantium, being at its peak in the tenth century, was a good example for Kievan Rus' to follow. In addition, the influence of the Balkan peoples played a big part in the development of Kyivan Christianity as well. Clearly, the Late Medieval Kievan Rus' was very different from what we now understand as a state – a politically and culturally integrated entity. Internal conflicts between the independent principalities led to a disintegration process which was completed by the Mongol devastation of Kyiv in 1240. In its aftermath, the Orthodox Metropolitan escaped to Vladimir-on-Klyazma and later moved to Moscow.

From the 14th century onwards the territories which eventually became Ukraine and the European part of Russia began to split apart. Today's central and western Ukraine were for many centuries part of the Lithuanian and Polish states and subsequently the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires. These processes deeply influenced the ecclesiastical culture and the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox cultures of Kyiv and Moscow gradually splintered during the 14th and 15th centuries.

Turbulent rebirth

The institutionalisation of two separate ecclesiastical traditions started to take place only with the beginning of the modern era – when Orthodoxy underwent a turbulent rebirth in the Ukrainian territories. This was induced by the Union with Rome, concluded by a part of the Kyivan Metropolitan (today: the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church) as well as the influence of the Catholic Revival. Consequently, in the 16th and 17th centuries Ukrainian Orthodoxy acquired special features that distinguished it from Russian Orthodoxy. First and foremost was its flexibility – the ability to reform and an openness to western culture, primarily in relation to education. At that time Metropolitan Petro Mohyla, a student of Western European universities, founded the Kyiv academy, which was modelled on Jesuit education. Remarkably, many books published in Kyiv at that time were forbidden by Moscow.

Metropolitan Petro Mohyla conducted large scale reforms in the Kyivan Metropolitan with relative ease, while similar attempts at reform in Moscow were met with strong resistance and eventually the Raskol (schism). During the Baroque era numerous examples of original ecclesiastical architecture, music and fine art, philosophy and theology emerged on the Ukrainian territories. This ecclesiastical culture was substantially different than from that which was prevailing in the



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During the EuroMaidan Revolution, the clergy of all Christian denominations, as well as Jewish rabbis and Muslim clerics, sought to minister to the protesters' spiritual needs. They held ecumenical prayers, set up "ecclesial tents" where priests and pastors heard confessions and gave spiritual and psychological consolation as well as offering physical help.



The role of churches has been pivotal in the processes taking place in the post-EuroMaidan Ukraine, especially when it comes to rediscovering the value of a national and spiritual identity.

Photo: Wojciech Kozmic

Moscow state. Notably, the Kyivan Metropolitan remained under the jurisdiction of the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople at that time, whereas the Metropolitan in Moscow existed independently. Moscow declared independence from the Greek Church in 1448. This act was approved by the Greek Patriarchate in 1589 and the see in Moscow was raised to the rank of Patriarchate.

After the Hetman (head) of the early modern Ukrainian state (Cossack) entered into a political union with the Russian tsar in 1654, Kyivan and Moscovite ecclesiastical cultures began to unify. The political union was followed by the church union. Although the Ukrainian Orthodox leaders opposed consolidation with the Moscow Patriarchate, this act was nevertheless concluded in 1686.

The opportunity to re-establish a separate Ukrainian Orthodox Church only presented itself again in the 20th century. During this century, Ukrainian Orthodoxy made three attempts to proclaim autocephaly: in 1917–1934, 1942–1944 and 1989. The first two failed due to the unfavourable political situation. All three attempts to proclaim autocephaly were made simultaneously with efforts aimed at political independence from Russia. Since Ukrainian independence failed in the first two instances, so did the church's undertakings to gain autocephaly. The first real chance to proclaim autocephaly came realistically only after 1989 with the prospective dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Outlaws

The emergence of an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the early 1990s was strongly tied to Ukraine's political geography. The pro-Ukrainian movement had always held strong positions in the west of the country, which was also reflected in ecclesiastic matters. The autocephaly also gained most supporters in the western regions and thus the first autocephalous communities emerged there. This process was reinforced by the fact that the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church – during the Soviet period a symbol of resistance and struggle against the Soviet Union – emerged from the underground. It was a heavy blow for Moscow as one third of all parishes under the Moscow Patriarchate were located in three western Ukrainian oblasts (all of these communities were Greek-Catholic before 1946 when the Greek-Catholic Church was forcibly united with Russian Orthodox Church by Stalin).

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In order to constrain this process across Ukraine, a decision to broaden the scope of autonomy of the Ukrainian part of the Russian Church was adopted. While remaining under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Ukrainian part of the Russian Orthodox Church was re-named the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The major argument against the autocephalous movement was the “non-canonical” character of the religious organisations that sought independence from Moscow. Since each autocephalous Orthodox church had to be recognised by other autocephalous churches, those declaring independence from the Russian Church became “outlawed”, i.e. outside canonical law. It was through this argument that the Moscow Patriarchate could retain most of the ecclesiastical communities, priests and bishops under its jurisdiction. And the entities that sought legitimate autocephalous status, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC KP) and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), are to this day treated as non-representative institutions in the Orthodox world.

The problem was further complicated by the fact that in spite of pursuing the same goals, these two entities could not reach an understanding. However, the controversy is rooted in interpersonal conflicts (the UAOC itself suffers from internal strife and thus rapidly becomes marginalised). But today we see that the union agreement could be reached and this process is supported by both communities and the political authorities. At first the Ukrainian political elite supported the autocephalous movement (in particular, Leonid Kravchuk, the first president of independent Ukraine, supported the Kyiv Patriarchate), but this did not last long. The subsequent president, Leonid Kuchma, did not want to sour relations with Moscow and therefore supported the Moscow Patriarchate Church.

The majority of lower ranking officials also supported an ecclesiastical relationship with Moscow. Yet there were always conflicts between the communities of the Moscow and Kyiv Patriarchates, particularly during the first years of Ukraine’s independence when each church developed its own structure. The debate on the ideological level remains active to the present day. Prior to the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, Ukrainian sociologists noted a consistently friendly attitude towards Russians and Russia among the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians. This changed dramatically after military activities were launched in the eastern regions of Ukraine.

Mental dependence

During the course of 24 years of independence each church has evolved in its own way. From the beginning the autocephalous movement had little chance for

substantial progress, as none of its leaders were capable of competing with the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine. Thus, the first leaders of the autocephalous movement looked to the Ukrainian diaspora: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the United States and Canada, which was unable to ensure normal development of the church in Ukraine. The situation changed when one of the greatest bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate, Filaret (Denysenko), joined the autocephalous movement. He managed to turn it into a viable and powerful structure due to his remarkable organisational talent and influence. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to say that the current level of development of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate should be credited to him. The church, however, had to start from point zero since a substantial part of facilities, monasteries and educational institutions remained with the Moscow Patriarchate.

Interestingly, the Kyiv Patriarchate remains mentally dependent on the Moscow Patriarchate since virtually all of the spiritual leaders of the autocephalous movement – bishops and priests – received education in Russian theological schools. Based on this experience, Patriarch Filaret created a church in Ukraine which is modelled on the Moscow Patriarchate in Russia. Hence, when it comes to the structure, the church is tempted to become the “state Church” of Ukraine, which is the case of the Moscow Patriarchate in Russia. A key difference here is the interpretation of Ukrainian nationality. The leadership of the Russian Church treats Ukrainians as a sub-ethnicity of the “Russian people” whereas the Kyiv Patriarchate considers Ukrainian nationality to be self-contained. The rationale for having an independent church is therefore based on this factor (“Independent state – independent church” is the permanent motto of the autocephalous movement). Yet, even the styles of clothing worn by hierarchs of the Kyiv and Moscow Patriarchates are the same, and the Bible used in the UOC KP was translated from Russian by Patriarch Filaret. Theological education offered by UOC KP institutions is modelled on Russian theology, although the studies are in Ukrainian.

All this indicates that mental independence is much more difficult to achieve than to proclaim autocephaly. At the lower level, one of the main features that distinguishes the Kyiv Patriarchate from the Moscow Patriarchate is that the church service is in Ukrainian as opposed to the Church Slavonic language, which is used in all churches of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church

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of the Moscow Patriarchate also uses this liturgical language based on its Russian pronunciation and only occasionally uses Ukrainian in the western regions.

Convergence of churches

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) has taken its own path of development during the years of independence. In the 1990s the concept of a Ukrainian identity, as opposed to the imperial and Soviet paradigm of a common three-part identity of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, was difficult to understand for many people in the central and mostly eastern parts of Ukraine. However, over time the Ukrainian society has become more self-aware of its own identity, history, culture and religious traditions. Thus, a large group of believers, priests and bishops within the UOC (MP) emphasise their distinctiveness from the Moscow Patriarchate. At some point, the emergence of such a “pro-Ukrainian” group became a threat to the UOC KP since the latter declares its distinction based on nationality. Nevertheless, a significant convergence between the UOC KP and the UOC (MP) could be observed from 2004 to 2010. The gradual change in the mentality of the UOC (MP) was to a great extent caused by the Orange Revolution when, for the first time and on a large scale, opinions were openly expressed that Ukraine should pursue a pro-European, and not a pro-Russian, path of development.

The leadership of the UOC (MP) was particularly affected by the fact that the revolution was largely supported in those regions that were under the strong influence of the Moscow Patriarchate, that is in central and western Ukraine. This was also a signal for Moscow that church loyalty does not necessarily mean political loyalty. In addition, this “Ukrainianisation” process was discreetly supported by the previous Metropolitan of Kyiv under the Moscow Patriarchate – Vladimir (Sabodan). His support was criticised by the most pro-Russian representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine and Russia, who always had quite strong positions in Ukraine.

Upon the passing of Vladimir (Sabodan), the pro-Ukrainian movement within the UOC (MP) became orphaned. The new head of the UOC (MP), a loyal pupil of the Moscow religious school and monastery tradition, is strongly committed to the leadership of the Russian Church. On a side note, it is also worth pointing out that the leaders of the UOC (MP) have been silent about the annexation of Crimea by Russia, as well as Russia’s extensive support of the pro-Russian separatists in the east of Ukraine.

It should also be mentioned that Ukrainian society is to a large extent secularised and the number of active believers in both churches is far from what is offi-

cially declared. However, the truth is that Ukrainians also treat church identity as something that is closely related to their national identity. The most recent polls show that 74 per cent of Ukrainians claim that they are Orthodox. Therefore, even those who are not active members of any of these churches often state their adherence to a particular church exclusively based on their national identity. Accordingly, the opinion surveys constantly reveal that the number of believers of the Kyiv Patriarchate (38 per cent) is significantly higher than that of the Moscow Patriarchate (20 per cent), even though the latter has more registered communities (39 per cent claim that they are “simply Orthodox” without signifying a jurisdiction). These numbers are, nonetheless, quite questionable as it is most likely that the number of active parishioners in both churches is more or less equal. In western Ukraine where the UOC KP clearly has more parishes (the region as a whole is more religious), they are also larger. Conversely, in the east, which is dominated by the Moscow Patriarchate, the parishes are small.

Demand for unification

The social transformations that have been taking place in Ukraine since late 2013 have greatly affected inter-church relations. The Kyiv Patriarchate, which actively supported the protest movement (its central monastery, the Mikhailovsky Monastery in Kyiv, first sheltered the protesters from police, and later was transformed into a field hospital for casualties), emerged from these events with a strong moral ascendancy and enhanced its own reputation among the Ukrainian society. Patriarch Filaret was not afraid to criticise Viktor Yanukovich for the use of force against the protesters and the number of his supporters increased across the country.

For the Moscow Patriarchate, as in 2004, these events turned out to be somewhat of a disaster. Only some priests supported the protests. Yet, as in 2004, a large number of ordinary believers from this church participated in the protests. Not surprisingly, today the activities of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine are openly criticised by the society. In this context, the public demands unification of the churches and a stop to inter-religious tensions within the state.


The Moscow Patriarchate actively attempts to stay neutral in the conflict, although it must also be stated that many of the UOC (MP) believers and priests express more and more disappointment with the church leaders. Seemingly, the latter, in the face of unconcealed Russian aggression against Ukraine, have no courage to take the side of Ukrainian society and try to keep neutral. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow is heavily criticised, as he de facto supported Russian aggression against Ukraine which, for many people affiliated with this church, conflicts with their

patriotic feelings towards Ukraine. As a result, the Kyiv Patriarchate, despite lacking canonical legitimacy in the Orthodox world, has gained a moral legitimacy in

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the society. This means that the problems of Ukrainian Orthodoxy cannot be resolved in the future without taking into account the position of this church.

The greatest expectations for such a solution today are placed on Bartholomew I, the Patriarch of Constantinople, who is considered to be “first among equals” in the Orthodox world and thus can act as an arbitrator in resolving the situation. The Ukrainian Orthodox Churches in the diaspora under his jurisdiction have also tried to get involved in this process. Those believers, priests and bishops who now feel very uncomfortable remaining under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, but do not wish to follow

the path of the self-proclaimed Kyiv Patriarchate, also hope for Bartholomew’s intervention. It remains unknown whether the Patriarch of the former imperial capital, the New Rome, will dare to go against the Patriarch of the “third Rome” (Moscow). All previous attempts of such interventions in Ukrainian matters were blocked by Moscow. Would this time be any different? 

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