**Ukrainian autocephaly and the Moscow Patriarchate**

How Russia’s religious hierarchs reject the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

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After five years of Russia’s escalating hybrid war against Ukraine, its multi-dimensional political, economic, civil, military and cultural conflict eventually reached, in late 2018, the religious sphere. The fundamental reconstitution of relations between the Russian and Ukrainian Christian communities expressed itself in early 2019 when Ukraine received a so-called “tomos” (“small book”). This document made, in Kyiv’s view, Ukrainian Orthodoxy canonically independent from Moscow. It was issued by Istanbul’s Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople — an Eastern Christian church that occupies a special place of honor in the Orthodox world.

How did this come about? What was the reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) high officials and priests to the Ukrainian Tomos? What arguments has the ROC used to deny the right of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) to be independent from Moscow?

**How Kyiv and Constantinople upset Moscow**

The arrival of Constantinople’s official document granting the Orthodox Church of Ukraine autocephaly in January 2019 was not only a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Kyiv’s religious autonomists also benefitted from a partly unrelated exacerbation of long-standing tensions between the Constantinople and Moscow Patriarchates — the world’s two most important centers of Orthodoxy. A conflict has been simmering between them since 2016, if not earlier, when the latter refused to participate in a major meeting of Eastern Christian hierarchs in Crete that was organised by Constantinople and had been planned for a long time.

Ukraine’s President from 2014 to 2019, Petro Poroshenko, in collaboration with the non-canonical or unrecognised Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate and Ukrainian Autocephalous Church, took resolute advantage of the resulting change of mood in Istanbul. After two earlier unsuccessful applications, they were able to quickly create and get officially recognised in late 2018 to early 2019 by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, a national and united Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). This was a goal that earlier Ukrainian leaders, and above all, the 2005 to 2010 President Viktor Yushchenko, had been striving to accomplish for many years, but had been unable to achieve. In early 2019, a large delegation from Kyiv went to Istanbul where the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate unanimously and officially approved an earlier decision to grant full autocephaly to the newly founded and united OCU.

A few months later, an acrimonious conflict between the new Church’s “Honorary Patriarch” and older hierarch, Filaret, and the new Metropolitan Epiphanius of Kyiv and All Ukraine Epiphanius spoiled the unification and autonomisation of the OCU. Yet, when autocephaly happened, this momentous and historic action caused exaltation among many Ukrainians — even among those not affiliated with the OCU, Christianity or any religion. On the other hand, the OCU’s independence from Moscow caused frustration and partly anger among many hierarchs of the ROC.

The ROC leadership only recognises a Kyiv branch of itself, the so-called “Ukrainian Orthodox Church” linked to the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), as legitimate in Ukraine. On the eve of the OCU’s acquisition of autocephaly, the ROC thus insisted that insofar as the UOC-MP had not asked for it, there is no Kyiv subject to whom a tomos can be bestowed. Moreover, Moscow argues that Constantinople has no right to bestow autocephaly on the ROC’s “canonical territory”, which includes Ukraine, according to the Moscow Patriarchate. In the ROC leadership’s view, the only canonical local Orthodox church in Ukraine was, is and can be the UOC-MP — the Ukrainian branch of an imagined all-Russian Eastern Christian community supposedly led by Moscow.

**How Moscow reacted to Constantinople’s challenge**

Following this ecclesiastical logic, Moscow has accused Constantinople of advancing a split within Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Hilarion Alfeyev, head of the ROC’s Department of External Church Relations, for example, argued: “If we are talking about granting autocephaly, to whom [should it be granted?]: the canonical [Ukrainian Orthodox] Church [of the Moscow Patriarchate] is not asking for it, and granting it to dividers means legitimising [an already existing] split [in Ukraine’s Orthodox community]”.

The ROC created a special web page “In Defense of the Unity of the Russian Orthodox Church” (edinstvo.patriarchia.ru) where the Moscow Patriarchate posts various more or less official materials expressing the Church’s position on Ukrainian Orthodoxy’s strive for canonical independence. For instance, ROC priest Georgiy Maksimov opined that Ukrainians are not in favor of having their own national Orthodox Church — a project allegedly desired only by religious and political entrepreneurs. Maksimov asserted that “possibly, this is the first time in history that we see a forced ‘granting of autocephaly’ which lets one to wonder about many things”.

The ROC interprets the granting of an independent status to the OCU as a mere instrument used for Ukrainian domestic political battles. In the words of Maksimov: “The ‘acquisition of a tomos’ [was] one of the main points of the electoral campaign of the [then] incumbent Ukrainian President [Petro Poroshenko] who wanted to be re-elected for a second term this spring”. Such a political dynamic was indeed part and parcel of a larger Ukrainian public campaign accompanying Kyiv’s effective interaction with the Ecumenical Patriarchate that led Constantinople to officially recognise the newly united OCU. Yet, abortive Ukrainian attempts to achieve independence from the Moscow Patriarchate had been made by Kyiv’s Orthodox hierarchs as early as during the short-lived Ukrainian People’s Republic in 1918 (if not before).

One hundred years later, ROC representatives accused the Ecumenical Patriarchate of provoking, by its support of Kyiv’s canonical independence, an alleged suppression of Orthodox believers by the Ukrainian state. Maksimov also declared that “[…] Patriarch Bartholomew [I of Constantinople] behaves as if he is not noticing that his actions have launched state persecution of the canonical Church of Ukraine [i.e. of the UOC-MP]”. In fact, Kyiv does not limit the activities of the UOC-MP in Ukraine. The Ukrainian parliament merely resolved, in December 2018, that the UOC-MP has to rename itself so as to make clear in its official designation that it represents a foreign national church.

In another line of argument against Ukrainian religious autonomy, the ROC appears to be worried about human rights violations in Ukraine, and accuses respective western organizations of double standards. The aforementioned Hilarion Alfeyev of the ROC’s Department of External Church Relations claimed that “[…] repressions of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church [of the Moscow Patriarchate] are not coming to an end. Western human rights organizations try to ignore the current issue not because they do not know about it, but because the current western political mood does not allow for Ukraine to be an anti-hero. The anti-hero of the west can today be only Russia”.

**How the Moscow Patriarchate follows the Kremlin**

In both of the above lines of argument, the Moscow Patriarchate repeats tropes of disinformation and defamation found in the Kremlin’s foreign discourses. With regard to both religious and non-religious matters, post-Euromaidan Ukraine is portrayed as an aggressor state supported by a duplicitous west. In contrast, Russia and its agents abroad are introduced as victims of groundless accusations and ruthless repressions.

No wonder that the ROC resorts to traditional Russian anti-Americanism when commenting on Ukrainian autocephaly. For instance, Patriarch Kirill stated that: “The concrete political goal was well-formulated by, among others, plenipotentiary representatives of the United States in Ukraine and by representatives of the Ukrainian government themselves: it is necessary to tear apart the last connection between our people [i.e. the Russians and Ukrainians], and this [last] connection is the spiritual one”.

This argument follows the general discourse of the ROC that western human rights are mere fakes. Kirill continues: “We should make our own conclusions [concerning this issue] including on the tales which [the west], for a long time, tried to impose on us, during so many years, about the rule of law, human rights, religious freedom and all those things which, not long ago, were regarded as having fundamental value for the formation of the modern state and of human relations in modern society.”

The ROC’s head thus warns that “Ukraine could become a precedent and example for how easily one can do away with any laws, with any orders [and] with any human rights, if the mighty of this world need it.” Kirill goes as far to equate Bolshevik terror against the ROC during the Soviet period and post-Soviet Ukraine’s strive for an autocephalous church: “The Ukrainian situation is a reflection of the politics of the revolutionary authorities in the Soviet Union directed at the destruction of the Russian Orthodox Church.”

**The Moscow Patriarchate plays hardball**

Another line of the ROC’s resistance to Ukrainian independence has been to repeatedly point out the initial absence of support for Kyiv’s autocephaly from other Orthodox churches around the world. Moscow presents itself as allegedly expressing an opinion from below and the position of the majority of Orthodox Christians. Metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion declared triumphantly in early 2019: “As of today, no local Church has recognised the lawlessness that was executed by [the Ecumenical Patriarchate of] Constantinople”. Indeed, there is so far only limited international support for Ukrainian religious autonomy. Yet, this is a phenomenon that relates to the ROC’s foreign influence itself.

The fact that the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople had already in October 2018 lifted the excommunication of Filaret, the Patriarch of the now merged Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate and Metropolitan Makariy, Metropolitan of the former Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, when deciding to grant independence to Ukrainian Orthodoxy, had also enraged the Moscow Patriarchate. As a result, the ROC went as far as to break off Eucharistic communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Protodeacon Konstantin Markovich from the Saint Petersburg Theological Academy even announced that “Bartholomew [I of Constantinople] and his Synod have, according to canonical logic, to be excommunicated and given to anathema”.

The ROC treats the actions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople as being arbitrary and in breach of Orthodox canons. As Maksimov says: “Orthodox people of various countries observe with perplexion and horror how the primate [Bartholomew] of the esteemed [Orthodox] Church [of Constantinople] suddenly announces as his canonical territory what was, for more than 300 years, recognised by all [Orthodoxy], without exception, as part of another local Church, and named people who were unanimously recognised as dissidents by all Orthodox Churches as part of a canonical Church threatening, at the same time, to announce as renegades those [i.e. Moscow’s representatives in Ukraine] with whom all local Churches are in Eucharistic communion”.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople should have, in the ROC leadership’s opinion, respected the Moscow Patriarchate’s canonical territory. Protodeacon Markovich stated: “If Patriarch Bartholomew [I of Constantinople] indeed had desired to heal the schism in Ukraine, he could have taken upon himself the role of a peacemaker and mediator between the conflicting parties, and could have used his not insignificant influence and authority, which he enjoys by virtue of his status as the prime First Hierarch of the Ecumenical Church for advancing fruitful dialogue between the hierarchy of the canonical Ukrainian [Orthodox] Church [of the Moscow Patriarchate] and schismatics which would have led to reconciliation and reunification of the dissidents with the canonical Church [i.e. the UOC-MP]”.

This line of argument follows an accusation that the ROC had already been advancing for several years before — namely that the Primate of the Constantinople Patriarchate is acting as if he represents a superior Church. Priest Mikhail Ulanov says: “…the current pretenses of Constantinople are not simply manipulations in the sphere of church politics or a fight for spheres of influence against Moscow. They are an attempt to revise Orthodox Ecclesiology”.

**The ROC between religion and politics**

The shrill tone of these and many other similar ROC announcements illustrates a fundamental dilemma for the Moscow Patriarchate. The ROC has — as a national church of a state engaged in increasingly violent regional and geopolitical battles for influence — become hostage to the more ambitious and expansionist moods and viewpoints of Russia’s political elite. Whether in its quarrel with Constantinople or in its confrontation with Kyiv, the Moscow Patriarchate — copying the Kremlin’s approach to both international organization and the Ukrainian state — follows outdated patterns of great power assertiveness.

When defining its position towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the ROC should have instead followed general Christian and, specifically, Orthodox principles. The Moscow Patriarchate could have come out in defense of the Ukrainian brother-nation’s state territory and with a critique of the Kremlin’s hybrid war against Kyiv. As a supposedly pacifist force in favor of Eastern Slavic unity, it should have condemned Russia’s official annexation of Crimea and unofficial occupation of the Eastern Donbas.

Yet, as a de facto branch of the Russian government, the ROC followed Putin in his attempt to redefine Russian geopolitics or even world politics in the early 21st century. The way Constantinople and Kyiv reacted to the Kremlin’s and ROC’s challenging behavior in political and religious affairs was predictable. In fact, it was unavoidable, once the Moscow Patriarchate chose the path of partial silence on, and partial support of, the Kremlin’s new foreign aggressiveness. As the above quotes indicate, Russia’s recent political, diplomatic, economic and cultural isolation may further increase from a gradual segregation of its religious life from the Christian world.

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