

Russkii Mir and the Future of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

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Most Ukrainian believers (about two-thirds) are Orthodox. Another Ukrainian church of Byzantine tradition adheres to Orthodox rite but recognizes the supremacy of the Pope: the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which operated underground until *perestroika* and is concentrated in Western Ukraine (about one-tenth of believers). There is also a fast-growing number of Protestant and non-traditional religious communities throughout the country.

Although Ukrainian Orthodoxy faces strong competition, its main challenge is its own internal divide. Part of Ukrainian Orthodoxy supports the creation of a united Ukrainian autocephalous (fully self-governing) church. At the same time, the major part of Ukrainian Orthodoxy is an autonomous part of the Russian Orthodox Church. Both the Russian government and Orthodox Church are trying to limit Ukrainian Orthodoxy's autonomy and use it as an instrument to involve Ukraine in the so-called *Russkii mir* (Russian World), a concept that both the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate support.

Split Orthodoxy

The Orthodox Church of Kyiv and All Rus was part of the canonical territory of the Constantinople Patriarchate from 988 until 1686, when the Ottomans, in coordination with Moscow, pressured the Patriarch of Constantinople to transfer it from the latter's jurisdiction to the Patriarchy of Moscow (established only a century before).

In 1990, the Ukrainian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (the ROC) gained a certain level of autonomy and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) was

created. Despite its proper name, the UOC is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate (MP) and therefore abbreviated in this memo as UOC-MP. The UOC-MP has the right to form its own synod and appoint bishops without formal approval of the Moscow Patriarch. The latter, according to the UOC-MP charter, only “blesses” the result of elections for the Metropolitan of Kyiv, the first hierarch of the UOC-MP.

After Ukraine became independent, the UOC-MP split and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) emerged, headed by Patriarch Philaret, a former exarch of the UOC-MP. The UOC-KP was joined by part of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC)¹, which supports the idea of a united Ukrainian Orthodox Church independent from Moscow. The UOC-KP is not recognized by other canonical Orthodox Churches nor by the UOC-MP, which is still the largest church in Ukraine with 12,430 communities (the UOC-KP has 4,482, the UAOC has 1,208, and the Greek Catholic Church has 3,700). If the UOC-MP were to secede from the ROC and unite with the UOC-KP, the total number of ROC communities worldwide would decrease by a third.

Polls show most Orthodox believers in Ukraine identify themselves with the Kyiv Patriarchate, despite its smaller number of communities. According to a poll by the Ukrainian Democratic Circle Center in February 2009, 39 percent of respondents said that a united Orthodox Church in Ukraine should be formed on the basis of the UOC-KP, while 24 percent supported forming it on the basis of the Moscow Patriarchate. In Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital, the number of supporters of the Kyiv Patriarchate is especially high. According to a March 2011 poll by the Ukrainian Democratic Circle, 49.8 percent of Kyiv respondents associated themselves with the UOC-KP and only 16 percent with the UOC-MP.

The UOC-KP, the UAOC, and the Greek Catholic Church are all in favor of an autocephalous Ukrainian Patriarchate. These churches have also publicly called for the respect of human dignity, non-interference in the electoral process, and the elimination of voter bribery. Their believers are more likely to vote for democratic or national-democratic candidates. The position of the UOC-MP is more complicated.

The UOC-MP and the “Russian World”

While Russian leader Vladimir Putin has described the dissolution of the USSR as the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century, Patriarch Kirill (Gundyayev), head of the Russian church since 2009, has equated it with the downfall of “historical Russia.”

One of the main directions of his policy is to build up the so-called “Russian World” (*Russkii mir*). According to Kirill, “Ukraine, Russia, Belarus – it is all Holy Rus!” Moreover, “the space of pastoral responsibility of the Russian Church includes not only individual countries of historical Rus, but also communities of people who associate their identity with Russian civilizational tradition but who live outside its canonical

¹ The UAOC existed in Ukraine since 1920 but was suppressed in the 1930s and reemerged only at the end of the 1980s.

territory and outside the canonical territory of other local churches.” In February 2012, in the presence of Vladimir Putin, Metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion (Alfeyev), head of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchy, emphasized: “Today one of the main tasks of our Church is what the Patriarch calls ‘the gathering of the Holy Rus’.”

To strengthen the geopolitical and spiritual unity of the “Russian World,” Patriarch Kirill made an unprecedented number of visits to Ukraine – ten times during three and a half years in office. The first one in the summer of 2009 lasted for ten days. For the first time in the ROC’s history, its Holy Synod had a session in Kyiv’s Pechersk Lavra.² Metropolitan Agathangel of Odessa, leader of a pro-Moscow wing in the UOC-MP synod, stressed that Kirill “is not coming here as a guest, but as a master, as the head of the entire Russian Orthodox Church.” In early 2012, during Putin’s electoral campaign, Metropolitan Agathangel emphasized:

“Only with Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin do Russian people who found themselves, through no fault of their own, outside the Russian state and abandoned by ‘democrats’ – as well as all people of good will who live within the CIS and recognize that our power and even our survival rests in unity alone – [only with Putin] do they place their hopes for the restoration of historical justice, for a new integration based on the millennial God-given unity of Holy Rus.”³

The ROC actively supports the Russian government’s integrationist plans. A 2010 Patriarchal Council “Economics and Ethics” pointed out that, “the Common Economic Space needs international integrative ideology and new applied business ethics, based on the values of Orthodox civilization.” President Yanukovych, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov, other representatives of the Ukrainian government, and several members of the National Academy of Sciences are all members of the Patriarchal Council.

A serious destabilizing factor in Ukrainian politics today is the activity of so-called “Orthodox NGOs,” which are directly and indirectly supervised by the Moscow Patriarchy. These organizations, such as the Union of Orthodox Citizens of Ukraine “United Fatherland,” the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods of Ukraine, the Orthodox Brotherhood of St. Alexander Nevsky, and the All-Ukrainian Association “Orthodox Choice” actively agitate against “Western influence” and Ukraine’s European integration. They perceive Ukraine’s independence to be an historical deviation. During the 2004 presidential election, some of these organizations helped UOC-MP parish councils adopt resolutions in support of Yanukovych, who worked hard to establish his image as a sincere believer and a true adherent of “canonical Orthodoxy” (in contrast to Viktor Yushchenko, who was described as “schismatic” for supporting the creation of a united autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church).

² Lavras are the most respected Orthodox monasteries; three out of five ROC lavras are in Ukraine.

³ <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1493429.html#ixzz23iuoe7oo>

Attempts to Limit the Autonomy of the UOC-MP

A second wing of the UOC-MP is autocephalist. In 2005, Archbishop (later Metropolitan) Sophronius of Cherkasy appealed for the Patriarchates of Moscow and Constantinople to recognize the UOC-MP's canonical autocephaly. Sophronius also happens to be an outspoken critic of the historical politically-motivated anathema the ROC placed on seventeenth-century Ukrainian hetman Ivan Mazepa. Not as outspoken as Sophronius but also a supporter of UOC-MP autocephaly is Archbishop Alexander (Drabinko) of Pereyaslav-Khmelnytsky, secretary to Metropolitan Volodymyr of Kyiv, the Primate of the UOC-MP.

Some recent changes in world Orthodoxy could potentially become a precedent for Ukraine. In 1996, part of Estonian Orthodoxy returned to the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (as it was in 1923-1940). The Ecumenical Patriarchate has also accepted jurisdiction over the "Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada" (in 1990) and the "Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA" (1995). In 2008, it accepted jurisdiction over the entire territory of China (which the ROC considers its canonical territory). In September 2011, the meeting of the Patriarchs of the four oldest Orthodox Churches (Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch) and the Primate of the Autocephalous Church of Cyprus was held in Constantinople. Although the Moscow Patriarchy ranks fifth in the Orthodox diptych ("list of honor"), its representatives were not invited to Constantinople. The final statement of this meeting called for strict adherence to recognized canonical boundaries (and the Constantinople Patriarchy has stated several times before that the transfer of Ukraine to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchy was not done in canonical fashion).

The authority of 77-year-old Metropolitan Volodymyr is strong enough, for now, to unite the different wings of the UOC-MP. He has also been trying to restrain the influence of the Church's pro-Russian wing. Examples of this are:

- A December 2007 meeting of Metropolitan Volodymyr and Bishop Alexander (UOC-MP) with Archbishop Demetrios and Archimandrite Evstratius (UOC-KP). This was the first publicly known sign of dialogue between the UOC-MP and the UOC-KP.
- The condemnation by Volodymyr and the UOC-MP Council of Bishops in December 2007 of organizations that represent so-called "political Orthodoxy."
- The UOC-MP synod's January 2008 assessment of the Great Famine (1932-1933) as a genocide of the Ukrainian people. Volodymyr described this event (the *Holodomor*) as an attempt "to destroy the very soul of the people, bring them to full spiritual slavery." (Meanwhile, a representative of the pro-Moscow wing, Metropolitan Onufriy of Chernivtsy, considered that "the *Holodomor* was suppression, on the part of the Lord, of our pride, which rebelled against the life of man....We got what we deserved.")
- The promotion of Archbishop Sophronius, an outspoken supporter of UOC-MP autocephaly, to the rank of metropolitan in 2008.
- Volodymyr's failure to ever mention the concept of the "Russian world."

At the same time, Volodymyr has stressed that there is no reason to change the current status of the UOC-MP, as, to his mind, it already has the same scope of rights as Orthodoxy's other fifteen canonical autocephalous Churches.

In 2008, Ukrainians celebrated the "Day of Baptism" (of Kyivan Rus by Prince Vladimir), which became an official holiday on July 28 according to a 2008 presidential decree by Viktor Yushchenko. Each side tries to use this celebration for its own purposes in the struggle for influence in Ukraine. During his visit to Kyiv in July 2008, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, openly stated that for seven centuries Ukrainian Orthodoxy belonged to the canonical territory of Constantinople. Meanwhile, Russian Patriarch Kirill annually uses this holiday to head religious celebrations in Kyiv to support the idea of unity with Moscow, while parallel counter-celebrations are held by Patriarch Philaret of the UOC-KP in support of autocephaly.

In contrast to all his predecessors, President Yanukovich expresses a clear preference for the UOC-MP. In February 2010, Yanukovich accepted the blessing of Russian Patriarch Kirill in Kyiv even prior to his inauguration at the Ukrainian parliament. Representatives of the UOC-KP were not invited to many of the official events. Local authorities in some regions provided financing from local budgets to build new UOC-MP churches, and they exerted pressure on UOC-KP religious communities to move to the jurisdiction of the UOC-MP.

In early 2012, representatives of the so-called "Odessa and Donetsk groups" in the Holy Synod of the UOC-MP attempted to remove Metropolitan Volodymyr. Taking advantage of his illness and a hospital stay, the Holy Synod was held twice in January and February under the chairmanship of Metropolitan Agathangel, who assumed for himself the non-existent title of "Topmost ('первенствующий') Member of the Holy Synod" and took for himself the seal of the head of the UOC-MP. He convened the Synod despite a letter from Volodymyr stating that "the convocation of the Holy Synod, according to the charter on management of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, is the sole responsibility of the head of the UOC."

Moreover, some bishops planned to propose to establish a medical commission that would hold an examination of Volodymyr and determine his ability to continue serving as Metropolitan. This did not happen, but Archbishop Alexander (Drabinko) was removed from his position as permanent member of the Holy Synod, head of the Department of External Church Relations, and editor-in-chief of the official church website (although he remained Volodymyr's secretary). Also, a commission on changes to the charter of the UOC-MP was created. In the media, these events were called "the raid and seizure of the UOC."

Subsequently, however, again under Volodymyr's direct leadership, the Holy Synod in May and July 2012 suspended most of the above-mentioned resolutions, issued a new seal, and openly reprimanded one of the participants of the "coup," Archbishop Ionaphan. Volodymyr pointed out that the commission on changes to the charter "has no right to change the current charter; moreover, it is not authorized to modify the canonical status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church." He also expressed doubts about the suitability of Metropolitan Hilarion of Donetsk "as head of the aforementioned

commission, taking into consideration his vision of the future way of church life in Ukraine, as it almost eliminates the current canonical status of our Church.” According to Volodymyr, 32 of 34 UOC-MP bishops had a negative attitude toward even the existence of such a commission.

Volodymyr’s close associate Archbishop Antonyy was appointed chartered secretary (“управляющий делами”) of the UOC-MP and received the right to supervise bodies created by the Holy Synod, including the commission on changes to the charter.

Conclusion

It is disturbing that under President Yanukovych the Ukrainian government outwardly exhibits a preference for the UOC-MP. Ukrainian experts and civil society members generally agree that:

- No preferences should be given to any church.
- The question of unifying the divided Orthodox churches is not the state’s responsibility; the state can only support dialogue between churches.
- It is not acceptable that Ukraine’s state television excessively broadcasts the visits and statements of the Moscow Patriarch.
- Religious activities should be covered in the media without politicization.
- The role of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations should be increased, and draft laws regarding church issues should be passed to parliament after consultation with this Council.
- Parliament should refrain from adopting legislation that will allow preference to be granted to certain religious organizations (for example, a legislative proposal calling for the full transfer of the famous Pochayiv Lavra, partially owned by the state, to the UOC-MP).
- The role of world Orthodox autocephalies, first of all the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, in mediating ecumenical dialogues in Ukraine should be increased.

After two years in power, President Yanukovych seems to have finally understood the danger of subordination to Moscow, including spiritually. Observers were intrigued as to whether there would be a meeting between Yanukovych and Russia’s Patriarch Kirill during the latter’s visit to Ukraine in July 2012 to celebrate the Day of Baptism. They met, but only after the official conclusion of the Patriarch’s three-day visit—short compared to previous trips. As Kirill’s visit coincided with the twentieth anniversary of Volodymyr’s Primacy as UOC-MP Metropolitan, he felt the diplomatic need to recognize “the right choice made by Ukraine 20 years ago.” On the eve of Kirill’s visit, Volodymyr appeared to have rebuffed attempts to limit UOC-MP autonomy. But given his age, the struggle will continue.

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