

The Making of Orthodox Church of Ukraine: Damocles Sword or Light at the End of the Tunnel?

Preface

On 6 January 2019, the Ecumenical Patriarch (EP) of Constantinople Bartholomew signed a decree on autocephaly that allowed Ukraine to have its canonical independent church a separate from the Russian one. This marked a monumental event for Orthodox Christianity in general and the beginning of a new era for religion in Ukraine in particular. This article briefly examines the process of the making of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) as reflected in the politicization of religion in Russo-Ukrainian relations and conflict between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and EP. Before moving to the contextual part and an argument, however, it worth defining a few central terms and concepts used during this article.

Definitions

First, the concept of autocephaly (from Greek literary translated as “property of being self-headed”). In a nutshell, it means self-governance of the highest status. Autocephalous churches have the right to resolve internal issues independently and appoint their bishops or elect a patriarch. There are in total 14 autocephalous churches that are recognized by all the other churches. There are two more churches – the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Orthodox Church of America - that are recognized at least by some members. In Ukraine’s case, before the creation of the OCU in December 2018, the bishop of the only canonical Orthodox Church was appointed by the ROC, and hence this organization operated as a part of ROC. The second term is a patriarch who is the head of the church. Unlike the Catholic Church, Orthodox Churches do not have a Pope or any central authority to whom these autocephalous churches report. The decentralized structure of the Orthodox churches has several organizational ambiguities regarding at least two burning questions that are raised by the creation of OCU – the procedures of autocephaly granting and defining canonical territory. Moreover, the organizational structure of Orthodox Churches allows the intertwining of religious and ethnocultural categories of practice and makes them prone to nationalism (see Mylonas 2003). I approach this concept from the modernist perspective (see Gellner 1983) and refer to it in Hearn’s definition which suggests looking at nationalism as the “making of combined claims, on behalf of a population, to identity, to jurisdiction, and to territory...” (2006, p. 11-12). Lastly, there is yet another term that I use in this article in conversation about Ukrainian autocephaly – canonical territory, which means that “for a given region only one bishop can be in charge” (Bremer, Senyk 2019: 40).

The Making of OCU: Context and Process

Before autocephaly, the only canonical Orthodox Church in Ukraine was Ukrainian Orthodox Church, also often referred to as UOC - Moscow Patriarchate. To make the contextual nuances complicated, Ukraine had two more Orthodox churches – one of Kyiv Patriarchate (KP) and another - Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC). None of them was recognized as canonical by other Orthodox churches. According to the data from the Department of Religious Affairs (in early January 2018), UOC-MP had 12,348 parishes, KP – 5,167, and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) – 1,167 (Religious Information Service of Ukraine (RISU), 2019). Therefore before the creation of the new church and later its canonical status, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow patriarchate was the major Orthodox organization (if measured by a number of parishes). January 2019 was a game-

changer when the newly formed OCU received autocephaly from EP of Constantinople. Firstly, how did the process of granting autocephaly go and what ecclesiastical body has received it? Secondly, who has the right to grant autocephaly? Thirdly, why has the autocephaly been given to Ukraine quite recently and not before?

The OCU was established in late December 2018, and bishop Epiphanius was elected as its head. This organization comprised of UAOC, KP as well as included two bishops and a dozen priests from UOC Moscow Patriarchate (Bremer, Senyk 2019). However, before the creation of OCU, there was an important sequence of events that led to it. At first, President Poroshenko, together with the Ukrainian parliament, formally addressed EP with a request to grant autocephaly in spring-summer of 2018. The initial idea was to gain autocephaly on the 1030th anniversary of the Baptism of Kyivan Rus. After a few meetings in EP's headquarter in Istanbul and Kyiv, it became more evident with statements of the EP of Constantinople that Patriarch Bartholomew planned to grant autocephaly to Ukraine, yet it remained unclear when it should have materialized. In response to EP's statements on autocephaly, ROC initiated a meeting with Patriarch Bartholomew in August 2018, which resulted in an open disagreement between the two parties (Figure 1, the trajectory of most recent events preceding the creation of OCU).

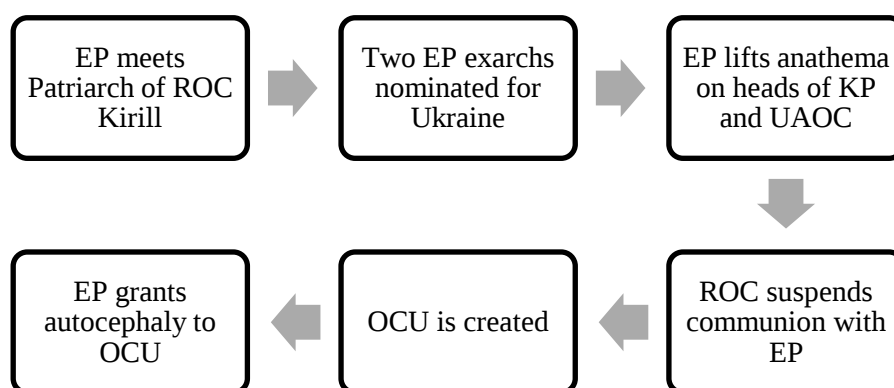


Figure 1. Trajectory of events.

The second question about the right to grant autocephaly is more complicated due to a lack of consensus over general rules on the granting process. As of today, there has been the practice of two models of granting autocephaly: either through the Patriarch of Constantinople or through the so-called mother church - the church that owns the canonical rights on the territory that strives for autocephaly (see Bremer, Senyk 2019). The problem is that both the EP of Constantinople and the ROC consider Ukraine as its canonical territory. This somewhat counterproductive debate between the armies of historians, theologians, and (now) politicians, reaches a consensus on the fact that Christianity came to Kyivan Rus from Byzantium in the late tenth century. However, this consensus ends in a deadlock on other major issues related to the status of Orthodoxy in Ukraine.

Christianity indeed came in the tenth century from Byzantium to Kyivan Rus; the latter was a pre-modern loose federation (Bremer, Senyk 2018). Before the 13th century, the time when Mongols conquered Kyivan Rus, heads of churches resided in Kyiv. In the 13th century, the seat of the bishop moved to Vladimir and in the 14th century to Moscow, but the head of church still had the title of Metropolitan of Kyiv at the time. Things got more complicated in

1448 when in Muscovy (Northern Rus at the time), the prince and his bishops elected a new Metropolitan of Kyiv without the consent of the Patriarch of Constantinople de facto creating an alternative to Kyivan ecclesiastical province. The latter later acquired the title of Metropolitan of Moscow. The breakthrough in this political-religious saga, however, was the passage of Kyiv's see from the Patriarchate of Constantinople to Moscow in 1686. This transfer was predominantly a result of pressure exerted by Moscow to force the Patriarch of Constantinople to succumb to the passage, and to ensure the legitimization of this act by enforcing other Orthodox patriarchates to agree (Bremmer, Senyk 2019: 33).

Last but not least, yet another question on Ukrainian autocephaly is “why now?” given that previous efforts of the Ukrainian government and clerical elites of applying for autocephaly failed to deliver it? There are a few possible yet more speculative answers. Firstly, one might argue that Ukrainian autocephaly became a matter of competition and prestige between ROC and EP Constantinople. The competition for the status of the dominant church in the Orthodox world. ROC has (or had) the largest canonical territory, although the greater share of its parishes is located in Ukraine. Despite the lack of formal power of the Patriarch of Constantinople over other autocephalous churches, his rank is what Orthodox churches refer to as *primus inter pares*, meaning the first among equals. He is considered the successor of Andrew the Apostle. Yet again, beyond the symbolic part, the Ecumenical Patriarch does not possess legal power over other autocephalous churches. Therefore, one might argue Ukraine was a test field for EP of Constantinople to demonstrate and perpetuate its power versus ROC.

Another possible explanation of “why now?” is the implications of the responses of the Orthodox churches of Ukraine to domestic political processes on public opinion. For example, how churches responded to the Euromaidan Revolution influenced public opinion on their status in society, which could have shaped an overall opinion of EP on the future of Christianity in Ukraine. If one compares recent poll results (2018) to previous years, for example, from 2000 to 2018, UOC-KP reached its highest support and showed a steady increase as opposed to a decline of UOC-MP over the last decade (which declined from 34.5 in 2010 to 19.1 in 2018) (Razumkov Center 2018). To take this illustrative example, during Euromaidan, KP opened the doors of its cathedral to protesters, and the church's space was used as a hospital for the wounded during the government's attacks. KP framed its narrative on national identity as being standing by the people of Ukraine during the most difficult times. The UOC - Moscow Patriarchate, on the other hand, opted for a relatively neutral and anti-revolutionary stance during the Euromaidan, which was interpreted as hostile to the cause of the revolution. As my ethnographic research in Ukraine has shown, UOC's responses were interpreted de facto support for the Yanukovich regime. Moreover, the responses of the clergy to revolution, an ongoing war in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea generated conflicts which at times resulted in interconfessional changes. When priests from the UOC of Moscow Patriarchate did not give service or properly mention of the soldiers killed during the war in Eastern Ukraine, this resulted in conflict between priests and parishioners, which in turn led to either change of canonical jurisdiction or skirmish between communities of believers.

People In-Between: Blurry Lines Between (Geo)Politics and Religion

The process of granting autocephaly has made already existing blurry lines separating religion and politics even blurrier. President Poroshenko of Ukraine was politically involved in campaigning for autocephaly, both with the EP and on the domestic front. On the other hand, Kremlin affiliated media channels heavily invested in the anti-autocephaly campaign, whereas the Ukrainian church autocephaly was on the agenda at the Russian Federal Security Council meeting in October 2018. Putin headed the meeting, which was attended by the Prime Minister, Heads of Russian Intelligence and Counter-intelligence Agencies, as well as Ministers of Defense, Internal and Foreign Affairs. This sheer example shows how important religion is for political elites.

The political discourse ‘Unified State, United Church’ advocated by Ukrainian political elites clashed with the project of the Russian World (Russkii Mir). Unified state, united church discourse intertwines elements of civic nationalism, territoriality, and religious particularism. State emerges as a staunch defender of religious identity which is a matter of national security. Religion in this discourse is a vital security element of the Ukrainian statehood. Russkii Mir, as a project and discourse, is advocated by Patriarch Kirill of Russia and constitutes an ideological foundation of Russia’s foreign policy towards its neighbouring former Soviet states (see Metreveli 2018), an essential attribute of what Marlène Laruelle calls Russia’s Eurasianism (Laruelle 2008). If one has a closer look at micro-sociological implications of the two discourses on inter-confessional relations, one encounters how distinctive categories of practice are negotiated and modified through a process of interpretation and interaction with the state as well as interconfessional competition.

My current research shows how the two competing discourses of Russkii Mir and Unified State, United Church operate on elite and grassroots levels. In doing it, I focused on examining the process of interconfessional changes from UOC MP to KP and now OCU. Studying the communities that took part in interconfessional changes gave a compelling insight into how religion interacts with nationalism on the grassroots level. The competing elite discourses perpetuate what I refer to as an identitarian in-betweenness as a distinct category of practice. As opposed to multiple identities, when people can identify with a few or several identities at the same time, identitarian in-betweenness is a hybrid category. It is characterized by undecidedness in motive narratives for interconfessional change and fluctuation in religious behaviour. Identitarian in-betweenness occurs in response to ‘hybrid nationalism’ (Metreveli 2016) when people are intentionally or unintentionally forced to choose one identity over the other. The discourse of the Ukrainian political elites puts the category of religion as a vital element of Ukraine’s national security and statehood. As the argument goes, if one is patriotic, ‘Ukrainian enough,’ the choice is between being pro-Ukrainian and loyal to the cause of freedom vs. pro-Russian and anti-national. Despite the legal attempts and the rhetorical statements in defence of the Ukrainian secular identity on behalf of the KP, OCU as well as the Ukrainian government, the secular identity of the Ukrainian state is volatile and fluid. Whether and to what extent a distinct category of identitarian in-betweenness explains interconfessional behaviour shifts (or significant lack of thereof) remains to be seen. The outcome of 2019 Ukrainian Presidential elections, however, will have implications on whether the elite discourse on religion and national identity prevails.

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