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RUSSIA – UKRAINE: The end of unity: How the Russian Orthodox Church lost Ukraine

The end of unity: How the Russian Orthodox Church lost Ukraine



Regina Elsner, a researcher at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS).

ZOiS (03.03.2022) – Since the end of the Soviet Union, dozens of theologians and scholars of religion elaborated on the complicated relationship within the church community of the so-called Holy Rus'. The Moscow Patriarchate defines its territory of spiritual responsibility in the borders of the Soviet Union—except for the old churches of Armenia and Georgia. The core of this spiritual community is Kyiv as the place of baptism of Rus' in 988 and Moscow as the residency of the head of the church, today Patriarch Kirill. Bitter as it is, the territory of the Soviet Union was always closer to the ecclesiastical understanding of this sacred territory than the Russian Federation and its independent neighbor states, and the Russian Orthodox Church made comprehensive theological, historiographical, and political efforts to design the unity of the people in a new way.

As in other places of the world, national independence has finally caused the establishment of an independent Orthodox Church in Ukraine. However, it was not Moscow as mother-church to release the Ukrainian Orthodoxy in its independence, because that would have questioned the unity of the one tradition. For three decades, the Moscow Patriarchate

succeeded in its concept of spiritual unity by underlining its respect for national sovereignty. This was a balancing act, but most Ukrainian Orthodox and global Orthodoxy committed to this concept and refused to acknowledge the self-proclaimed Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate in 1992.

The concept started to fail when, simultaneously, the Moscow Patriarchate strengthened its ideology of a common Orthodox civilization united by a conservative set of values and, on the other side, Ukrainian society engaged increasingly in European integration. During the first Maidan, or “Orange Revolution” in 2004, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) managed to handle the diverging claims from Russia and the West mainly due to the conservative agenda of the ruling elites in Ukraine. The second Maidan in 2014, the “Revolution of Dignity” with its clear pro-European political stance, however, challenged the attitude of unity seriously, as did the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, the violation of the national borders of Ukraine by Russia.

To maintain the reality of unity, the reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church was a slight yet effective shift in its ideology. Since 2014, the ideology of the “Russian World” ceased from official ecclesiastical statements as the church tried to avoid being equated to Russia’s imperial claims on sovereign nations. As a new frame, the defense of persecuted Christians evolved. With this concept, the Moscow Patriarchate not only legitimated Russia’s participation in the war in Syria and paramilitary activities in Africa. It also used the human rights framework to justify these state actions and its involvement in the territory of other Orthodox Churches. Since 2018, the Moscow Patriarchate systematically supplemented its concept of persecuted Christians in Ukraine with a massive campaign concerning violent attacks on property and believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Granted, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate had to face massive social and media pressure due to its remaining ties with the church of the aggressor state, suffering violent attacks and misleading legal initiatives like the draft law on renaming the church. These are cases of undermining religious freedom. The church vanished in the public discourse in Ukraine, trapped between its spiritual bonds with Moscow and its Ukrainian identity. Unfortunately, the Russian Orthodox Church refused to acknowledge both. While the Ukrainian Metropolitan Onufry became silent on almost all social and political issues in Ukraine to avoid new accusations, the Russian church leadership enforced its spiritual and socio-cultural claims on Ukraine. The discourse about the spiritual unity of Holy Rus', meaning Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, increased to counter the engagement of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It reached the level of negating the Ukrainian identity of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as a whole. After years of trying to keep the balance, the ROC joined the state propaganda about Ukraine as an inherent part of Russian identity and space of influence.

When the escalation of the full-fledged war in Ukraine was inevitable, the religious world watched the Moscow Patriarchate turn its back to Ukraine. When analyzing the reaction of Patriarch Kirill, the different meanings of words said and not said should be recognized because they will serve as a point of reference in future talks about the role of the church in this war. On the one side, the Patriarch and other speakers for the church (Metropolitan Hilarion, chair of the external office; Vladimir Legojda, head of the information department) demand peace, a dialogue for all conflicting sides, and a prayer for peace. In all statements on Ukraine, they also refer to the unity of the Christians in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia and to the special responsibility of the Moscow Patriarchate for these regions. Metropolitan Hilarion claimed several days before the invasion that "War is not a method of solving the accumulated political problems."

This quote now is used as a sign of dissent to the war within the ROC; however, the main focus of Hilarion in this interview is accusing the West of sharpening the “accumulated political problems,” and his commitment against war remains in general terms. The Patriarch did not contradict the words of “persecuted Christians,” which Putin used to justify his war against Ukraine on 21 February 2022. Until 4 March, neither the Patriarch nor any other speaker of the ROC used the word *war* to describe the situation in Ukraine. When monitoring the news on the website of the Moscow Patriarchate since 21 February, there are more reports about the activities of the ROC in Africa than about the situation in Ukraine, not counting several unconfirmed hints of alleged Ukrainian violence against churches of the UOC-MP, legitimizing armed acts of “defense.” There are no reports or pictures about the massive destruction of Ukrainian cities and cultural sites and no links to the statements by the hierarchy from the UOC-MP.

On the other side, we have to take into account the open support of the Russian military one day before the outbreak of war, when Russian armed forces were already arranged at the border to Ukraine in Russia and Belarus. On 23 February, Patriarch Kirill congratulated the heads of the Russian government on the occasion of the Day of the Defenders of the Fatherland, a Soviet tradition of glorifying veterans and male armed power. In his speech on that day, he said,

We live in peaceful times, but we know that even in peacetime there are threats. Unfortunately, even at the moment, there are threats—everyone is familiar with what is happening on the borders of our Fatherland. Therefore, I think that our military personnel cannot have any doubts that they have

chosen a very correct path in their lives. Because by following this path, you are protecting the people even without any military action. The strength of the Armed Forces, the might of the Russian army is already a weapon that protects our people. But in order for these weapons to be taken seriously by those who have bad intentions, the Armed Forces of our country must always be on alert.

Finally, in his sermon on 27 February, after ensuring his awareness of the “difficult circumstances encountered today by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate,” the Patriarch stated,

It must not be allowed to give the dark and hostile external forces an occasion to laugh at us; we should do everything to preserve peace between our peoples while protecting our common historical Motherland against every outside action that can destroy this unity.

He said this, remarkably, on the fifth day of heavy shelling of Russian arms on the peaceful–Orthodox–civilians in Ukraine. This implies the prolongation of the narrative that the violence is provoked by the West and justified as a defense. It is a scandalous ignorance of the situation of the people in Ukraine, which he claims to defend, a deliberate reversal of perpetrator and victim, and it is in open support of the ideology of the murderous regime. This statement marks a final split between Russian and Ukrainian Orthodoxy, even if this split is not a canonical one. This split, however, is not demanded or intended by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, whose bishops and priests appealed to Moscow for support in naming the reality. This split is performed by the Moscow Patriarchate itself through the refusal to take pastoral responsibility for its flock. Such a situation is unique in the history of Orthodoxy and will provoke further theological and canonical debates within global Orthodoxy. To be clear,

praying for peace is, without doubt, an important instrument of the church to impact conflict dynamics. When at the same time they neglect the very fact of war and its victims and warmongers, these prayers become false and dangerous.

Further reading about FORB in Russia and Ukraine on HRWF website

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