

UKRAINE: Autocephaly: Balm or bomb for Ukraine's Orthodox?

By Geraldine Fagan

East-West Church Report (vol. 26, no. 4, 2018) – They're singing the Lord's Prayer, you might take off your hat!" Hearing the elderly woman's reproach, a man of similar age meekly slides his cap down to his chest. The pair stand near the editor of the East-West Church Report amid a 5,000-strong crowd facing the iconic St. Sophia's Cathedral, built a thousand years ago by the first Christian rulers of Kyiv. The occasion is a government-sponsored Prayer for Ukraine on the morning of 14 October. This is both the Eastern Christian feast day of the Intercession of the Mother of God and—as of 2015—Defender of Ukraine Day, a public holiday honoring the armed forces.

A day prior, some news reports claimed that local bureaucrats had pressured people into attending the event.[\[1\]](#) Yet perhaps a third present spontaneously cross themselves and join in prayers. Many more sing the unofficial national anthem, "O Lord, Almighty and Only" [Ukrainian: "Bozhe Velykyi, Edynyi"] and respond to the customary western Ukrainian greeting, "Glory to Jesus Christ!" [Ukrainian: "Slava Iisusu Khristu!"].

These official prayers are in thanksgiving for a decision to grant autocephaly—or full independence—to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, affirmed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople on 11 October. The move has implications for the development of all Christianity in Ukraine, as witnessed at the event by speakers from the country's Greek and Roman Catholic Churches, and Bible Society.[\[2\]](#)

Rivals for legitimacy

Ukrainian Orthodoxy is unusually factious. Inside the country, the post-Soviet period has seen the emergence of three major contenders to the status of canonical— or legitimate— Ukrainian Orthodox Church, one under the Patriarchate of Moscow and two breakaway entities. Until now, only the first of these has been acknowledged by the wider Orthodox world. (In diaspora, two further Ukrainian Orthodox structures formally under the Patriarchate of Constantinople are headquartered in Canada and the United States.)

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) retains the largest number of registered parishes in Ukraine, with approximately 12,000 (Russia has approximately 17,000). Its main rival, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate), has approximately 5,000. A third body, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), has some 1,000 parishes, concentrated in three far western regions of Ukraine that lay outside the Soviet Union before World War II. [\[3\]](#)

This ratio did not shift dramatically for 20 years. But since 2014—when clashes with pro-Kremlin forces erupted in eastern Ukraine—public allegiance to the Moscow and Kyiv Patriarchates has see-sawed. Respectively 35 and 22 percent in 2010, it is now 19 and 43 percent. [\[4\]](#)

National security concern

The Kyiv Patriarchate's anti-Kremlin stance is a key factor. During the 2013-14 demonstrations centered upon Kyiv's Maidan Square which ultimately toppled the pro-Kremlin regime of Viktor Yanukovich, the Kyiv Patriarchate's nearby St. Michael's Monastery provided refuge to those fleeing police batons. Today, the monastery's perimeter forms a Memory Wall displaying the names and photographs of 3,367 Ukrainian combatants killed in the Donbass conflict during 2014-17.

Ukrainian Autocephaly

Addressing the 14 October crowd and television audience, Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko thus characterized autocephaly as a question of national security. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, he explained, prays for the Russian authorities "who have committed aggression against our country."[\[5\]](#) The Orthodox leader conspicuously absent from the podium was Onufry, the Moscow Patriarchate's Metropolitan of Kyiv. 14 October is also a special feast day for the nearby Intercession Convent, and he leads worship there for approximately 1,000 faithful. Most senior Moscow Patriarchate clerics in Ukraine, including Onufry, oppose the autocephaly project.[\[6\]](#)

For them, the ambitious figure of Patriarch Filaret, head of the Kyiv Patriarchate, is a particular obstacle.[\[7\]](#) Nearly 90, Filaret was staunchly pro-Kremlin when a predecessor to Metropolitan Onufry. As late as 1990 he expressed alarm that the growth of "the so-called Ukrainian autocephalous church" might contribute to the independence of Ukraine from the Soviet Union. Such a separation from Moscow, he maintained at that time, "fundamentally contradicts our thousand-year tradition in which the Russian Church has always been the

source of unity.”[\[8\]](#)

After failing to be elected Moscow Patriarch that same year, Filaret reversed his position on Ukrainian autocephaly and state independence in 1991. Today, notwithstanding Kyiv’s ongoing efforts at de-Communization, he still vigorously defends his and other Soviet-era bishops’ collaboration with the KGB.[\[9\]](#)

Given Moscow’s aversion to full independence for the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, President Poroshenko made overtures to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople– the senior Patriarchate in the Orthodox world. Following the president’s April 2018 meeting with Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, the Ukrainian parliament voted to support an appeal for autocephaly on the part of the state. In late August Patriarch Bartholomew hosted Patriarch Kirill of Moscow at his Istanbul headquarters. According to an alleged transcript of the meeting, Kirill disputed that Poroshenko and the Ukrainian parliament were legitimate representatives of the Ukrainian people, having “seized power as a result of a coup d’état during the Maidan uprising.”[\[10\]](#)

A week later, Constantinople dispatched two exarchs– bishops of its Ukrainian diaspora structures–to Kyiv as its representatives “within the framework of the preparations for the granting of autocephaly.”[\[11\]](#) The Russian Orthodox Church responded by suspending senior-level relations with Constantinople.[\[12\]](#)

On 11 October Constantinople went further, lifting Moscow’s

disciplinary measures against the heads of the two breakaway Ukrainian Orthodox entities, Filaret and Makary; restoring their faithful to Orthodox communion; and rescinding Moscow's authority to ordain the Metropolitan of Kyiv, granted in 1686.[\[13\]](#) Roundly rejecting these rulings, Moscow broke of all relations with Constantinople on 15 October.[\[14\]](#)

Unification council

A unification council tasked with forming the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine met at St. Sophia's Cathedral in Kyiv on 15 December. It elected a senior Kyiv Patriarchate hierarch, Epifany (Dumenko), as the entity's Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Ukraine, beating Metropolitan Simeon of Vinnytsia of the Moscow Patriarchate by eight votes. Out of 10 Moscow Patriarchate hierarchs reportedly among the 64 who voted, two participated publicly. Their synod took disciplinary action against them on 17 December.[\[15\]](#)

The situation is murky and volatile. Some Ukrainian Orthodox under Moscow fear the creation of the new church will lead to violent property seizures. While the Ukrainian government rejects this suggestion, it may prove powerless to curb ultranationalist groups hostile to any perceived Russian influence.

Such a possibility was also plain on the afternoon of 14 October, when over 8,000 Ukrainian nationalists—some bearing Nazi insignia—took to the streets elsewhere in Kyiv. Although marginal, these elements could swiftly mobilize against Orthodox remaining under Moscow. As one youth engaged in such

harassment in the far western region of Ivano Frankivsk explained in a 4 November BBC documentary, “These people don’t love Ukraine. They is Russia [sic].”[\[16\]](#)

Yet the situation is also less binary than may appear. The wife of a Ukrainian-speaking Moscow Patriarchate priest whose Ivano-Frankivsk village church was seized by nationalists also told the BBC that her son had fought against Russian-backed rebels in the eastern Donbass region: “What kind of enemy are we?”

Local opinion overlooked

Such nuanced local opinion within Metropolitan Onufry’s church lies unnoticed beneath the Moscow-Constantinople polemic. Particularly overlooked is patriotic defense of Ukraine combined with loyalty to the Moscow Patriarchate, still understood by many as the only canonical Orthodox option. Indeed, such sentiments are mainstream: Onufry himself may not have been at the 14 October event, but Metropolitan Avgustin of Bila Tserkva and Bohuslav—his church’s representative to Ukraine’s armed forces—read out a statement praising the Ukrainian military’s committed defense of the Motherland. He was warmly applauded.

Over the following pages, the East-West Church Report presents diverging views—for and against autocephaly—held by two hierarchs of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). Both are auxiliary bishops of Kyiv, were born and raised in Ukraine, and are in their 40s. (The pro-autocephaly hierarch is one of those now facing disciplinary

measures for participating in the 15 December unification council.) In forthcoming issues, the East-West Church Report will feature less prominent Orthodox voices in Ukraine, as well as a range of other local views on the situation for Christians in the country, including with respect to religious freedom and the Donbass conflict.

[1] For example, [in Russian] <https://123ru.net/kyiv/169810378>

[2] [In Ukrainian] https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=61&v=bo_7FE9a-0Q

[3] The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) is officially called the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. "(Moscow Patriarchate)" is added here for clarity. [In Russian] <https://religsvoboda.ru/content/religioznayastatistika-na-1-aprelya-2018-goda>; [In Ukrainian] http://mincult.kmu.gov.ua/document/245234300/Form1_MCU_Nakaz260-29032017.xls.

[4] [In Ukrainian] Biblioteka Tsentru Razumkova, Osoblyvosti Religiinoho i Tserkovno-Religiinoho Samovyznachennia Ukraïns'kikh Gromadian: Tendentsii 2010-2018 rr., Kyiv, 2018, 17.

[5] [In Ukrainian] "Vystup Prezidenta Ukraïny pid chas uchasti u molytovnomu zakhodi za Ukraïnu," 14 October 2018; <https://www.president.gov.ua/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-pidchas-u-chasti-u-molitovnomu-za-50446>.

[6] [In Russian] <http://news.church.ua/2018/11/13/postanovlenie-sobora-episkopov-ukrainskoj-pravoslavnoj-cerkviot-13-noyabrya-2018-goda/?lang=ru>

[7] [In Russian] "Mitropolit Cherkasskii Sofronii: UPTs MP dolzhna uchastvovat' v ob''edinitel'nom sobore," Akhilla, 26

October

2018,

<https://ahilla.ru/mitropolit-cherkasskij-sofronij-upts-mpdolzhna-uchastvovat-v-obedinitelnom-sobore/>

[8] Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, Fond 89, Opis 8, Delo 41.

[9] “A Conversation with Patriarch Filaret,” Atlantic Council, 19 September 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29J7coFPcqs>; [In Ukrainian] “Kisel’ov. Avtors’ke. Gist’ patriarkha Filaret,” Telekanal Priamii, 31 December 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVsbQbUNWYE>

[10] [In Russian] “Ekskliuziv: Dialog Varfolomeia – Kirilla po ukrainskomu voprosu,” Orthodoxy Info, 28 September 2018, <https://orthodoxia.info/news/экссклюзив-диалог-варфоломеякирилла/>

[11] [In Greek] <https://www.ec-patr.org/docdisplay.php?lang=gr&id=2563&tla=gr>

[12] “Statement of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church concerning the uncanonical intervention of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church,” 14 September 2018, <https://mospat.ru/en/2018/09/14/news163803/>

[13] “Announcement of the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople,” https://www.uocofusa.org/news_181013_1.html

[14] [In Russian] “Zaiavlenie Sviashchennogo Sinoda Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v sviazi s posiatel’stvom Konstantinopol’skogo Patriarkhata na kanonicheskuiu territoriiu Russkoi Tserkvi,” 15 October 2018, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5283708.html>

[15] [In Russian] “Stalo izvestno, kak budut vybirat’ Predstoiatelia novoi Tserkvi,” RISU, 15 December 2018,

https://risu.org.ua/ru/index/all_news/orthodox/orthodox_world/73913/; “Stalo izvestno, skol’ko golosov na vyborakh poluchil Predstoiatel’ Epifanii,” RISU, 17 December 2018, https://risu.org.ua/ru/index/all_news/orthodox/ocu/73933/; “Sinod UPTs (MP) nazval ob’edinitel’nyi Sobor ‘raskol’nicheskim’ i zapretil v sluzhenii mitropolitov Simeona i Aleksandra,” RISU, 17 December 2018, https://risu.org.ua/ru/index/all_news/orthodox/uoc/73950/

[16] “Ukraine’s Church – Rejecting Russia,” BBC News Channel, 4 November 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b0brfr0m/our-world-ukraines-church-rejecting-russia#>

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