

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, a Kremlin's Trojan horse in Ukraine's presidential election?

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (18.02.2019) - Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia hopes that he will be able to visit Ukraine in the future to meet with the believers of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, he said in an interview timed to the 10th anniversary of enthronement as reported by Tass News Agency.

He was quoted as saying: "I hope that God would bring about my visit to Ukraine. Political situation[s] and conjuncture are fleeting occurrences. Today we have these political forces, then others... I still retain hope that I would be able to pray in the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, to meet with my believers, with the hierarchs of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which, at the present time, heroically defends canonical Orthodoxy."

On the eve of the presidential election in Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill should not make such a statement for multiple reasons.

First, his words will be perceived in Ukraine as covert support for candidates oriented towards Russia rather than candidates focused on Kyiv and as an attempt to influence the votes of local populations in predominantly Russian-speaking regions. Hopes for a change at the head of the Ukrainian state are clearly expressed in the Patriarch's words. In the current geopolitical context, it will be viewed as another blatant intrusion of the Kremlin in an electoral process abroad. This comes at a time when Putin uses his political weight to dissuade Orthodox Churches in the European Union from recognizing the autocephaly granted to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Second, Patriarch Kirill is bringing water to the mill of those who accuse the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate, of being a 'foreign agent' of an 'aggressor country' and of being instrumentalised by Moscow. This move of Patriarch Kirill will also put Metropolitan Onufry of the UOC in a very uncomfortable situation, given the tenuous ecclesiastical links to the Russian Orthodox Church. For example, the UOC participates in the election of the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church but this is not reciprocal as the Metropolitan of Kyiv is elected locally.

Surely, the Patriarch's statement will fuel increased social and political hostility towards the UOC. It will also give arguments to those who push or force UOC parishes to switch to the new Orthodox Church recognized by the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

On 17 January, the Ukrainian parliament adopted a bill setting the procedure for changing the affiliation of religious communities in the country. It specifically targets 'those' that are part of "the structure of a religious organization whose governing center is located outside Ukraine", in 'a' state, which is recognized by law as having committed military aggression against Ukraine. Concretely, it is the sole UOC in communion with the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow that is on the radar. The bill provides for specific limitations of the activities of 'such religious organizations.' Among other things, it restricts access to military units for their clergy and chaplains.

Interreligious conflicts would be highly detrimental for the social, political and regional stability of Ukraine. Neither President Poroshenko, who personally deployed huge efforts to obtain the autocephaly of a 'truly' Ukrainian Orthodox Church before the presidential election, nor the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church should instrumentalise religious divides for political purposes. It is unfortunately the trend that we are

witnessing on both sides and the EU should not remain a passive observer of such a situation.