

Church and Geopolitics: The Battle Over Ukrainian Autocephaly

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The solemn presentation by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople of the so-called *tomos*, or a decree of autocephaly, for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to newly elected Ukrainian primate Metropolitan Epiphanius in Istanbul on January 7, 2019, marked the break of yet another link between Ukraine and Russia. This important ecclesiastical and geopolitical goal was achieved in spite of fierce resistance from Russia's Orthodox Church and state authorities. It was widely regarded as an impressive victory for Kyiv in its ongoing confrontation with Moscow that began in earnest five years ago with Russia's military intervention in Crimea and the Donbas. In a desperate attempt to stop the emancipation of Ukrainian Orthodoxy from its centuries-long subordination to Moscow, the Russian Orthodox Church [broke](#) communion with Constantinople, thus exacerbating the global conflict in Orthodoxy as well as Russia's alienation from the West. While his obvious role in this important achievement is likely to increase President Petro Poroshenko's chances of having his leadership mandate renewed in the upcoming March 2019 Ukrainian elections, it may also add to the Russian leadership's willingness to exert more resolute measures against Ukraine.

Religion and Society

The idea of getting autocephaly has been cherished by many Ukrainian clergymen, intellectuals, and politicians since the early years of Ukraine's independence as an important attribute of nationhood. Just two months after the proclamation of Ukraine's independence in 1991, a congress of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), an autonomous part of the Russian Orthodox Church, appealed to the mother church to grant it full autocephaly. However, Moscow postponed a decision on the matter and several months later orchestrated the removal of the main driving force behind the campaign, Metropolitan of Kyiv Filaret. In response, Filaret, with support of then-

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president Leonid Kravchuk, founded in June 1992 a new religious institution, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOCKP), which united the autocephaly-oriented clergy of the UOC and part of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), which had been established earlier as a “national” alternative to the Moscow-controlled UOC. While quickly establishing a strong presence in the west and center, UOCKP failed to win nationwide primacy, first and foremost due to its continued marginalization in the east and south with its Russia-friendly populations. No less importantly, it failed to achieve recognition as a “canonical” autocephalous church by other Orthodox churches around the world, a crucial barrier to its embrace by the majority of truly religious people in Ukraine. Two decades after its establishment, UOCKP remained twice as weak as the UOC in terms of number of parishes: 4,455 versus 12,230, according to the [2012 data](#) of the State Department for Nationalities and Religions. Even weaker, with 1,208 parishes as of 2012, was the part of the UAOC that rejected a merger with UOCKP but then experienced internal rivalry and further splits.

The three churches’ standing and popularity varied by region and changed with time in accordance with the preferences of successive presidents, parliamentary majorities, and local councils. Largely in tune with local preferences, the local authorities in the west and center favored UOCKP (in Galicia, however, it was overshadowed by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church subordinated to the Vatican), while in the east and south they primarily supported UOC. At the national level, the nationalist-leaning presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Viktor Yushchenko clearly preferred UOCKP while the more Russia-friendly presidents Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovich leaned toward UOC.

The **Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU)** resulted from the December 2018 merger of the:

- Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOCKP)
- Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC)
- Segments of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which is subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate (often referred to as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate or UOCMP)

However, at no time was a certain denomination prevalent enough to marginalize the other churches—a degree of pluralism that scholars considered to be an important factor contributing to the viability of Ukrainian democracy, in clear contrast to Russia and Belarus where the hegemonic Orthodox church became a tool of the authoritarian regimes. At the same time, the popular support for the churches perceived as truly national—particularly the stronger and more visible of them, the UOCKP—gradually grew well above the level warranted by their service capacity, while for the Moscow-controlled UOC the relation was the opposite. For example, 31 percent of respondents in a 2011 [survey](#) reported belonging to the former denomination and 26 percent to the latter, an obvious discrepancy with the above-mentioned number of parishes, which the researchers explained as reflecting people’s subjective identification rather than actual church attendance.

This subjective identification further strengthened after the Euromaidan revolution and Russian military aggression, which also brought about a marked increase in other dimensions of Ukrainian national identity such as the self-designation as Ukrainian and positive attitudes toward the Ukrainian nationalist guerillas who fought against the Soviets in the aftermath of World War II.² As survey data [demonstrates](#), support for the Ukrainian Orthodoxy's continued attachment to the Russian Church dropped from 19 percent in 2010 to 9 percent in 2018. The Ukrainian Orthodox people's consolidation around UOOCKP became much more popular (27 percent), as well as their unification in one church that would seek independence (23 percent).

In view of UOC's involvement in the separatist activities in the Donbas in 2014 and its failure to express a clear pro-Ukrainian stance at a time of war with Russia, many people called in online discussions for its outright ban. While such a radical move was not an option for the country's rather moderate leadership, growing support for an independent Orthodox church certainly encouraged them to make a resolute effort to achieve autocephaly. For Poroshenko, this was not only an important dimension of Ukraine's emancipation from Russia but also a key element of his strategy to win the patriotic electorate in the presidential election of March 2019 and, thus, reverse the steady decline of his popularity.

The Wooing of Patriarch Bartholomew

At the same time, the government's desire to achieve autocephaly and the support of the population for it were far from sufficient to make it happen. When Yushchenko pursued this goal a decade ago, it was not only the ambivalence of public opinion and the inability of Orthodox denominations to overcome their divides that precluded a favorable decision by Patriarch Bartholomew. While confirming Ukraine as part of Constantinople's—not Moscow's—canonical territory, he was at that time ready to offer to Ukrainian Orthodox believers only limited autonomy rather than complete autocephaly, an offer that UOOCKP reportedly declined. Although Bartholomew's rhetoric refuted the claim by the Moscow Patriarchy of having Ukraine kept within its sphere of influence, he did not, in fact, want to antagonize the Russian Church, which he preferred to have as a partner in ecumenical matters.

Last year, Bartholomew showed better dispositions to Ukrainian calls for autocephaly. Observers argued this may have been partly due to the Moscow Patriarchate's refusal to participate in the 2016 Ecumenical Orthodox Council, the organizing of which was considered as one of the most important achievements of Bartholomew's career. Apart from his personal resentment against Russian clerical leaders, Bartholomew's current

² For more, see: Volodymyr Kulyk, "[National Identity in Ukraine: Impact of Euromaidan and the War](#)," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 68, No. 4, 2016, pp. 588-608; Volodymyr Kulyk, "[Shedding Russianness, Recasting Ukrainianness: The Post-Euromaidan Dynamics of Ethnonational Identifications in Ukraine](#)," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 2-3, 2018, pp. 119-138.

support for Ukrainian autocephaly was likely driven by his wish to use the Constantinople-friendly Ukrainian Church as an ally in competition with Moscow for the primary role in global Orthodoxy. Moreover, he was arguably less constrained than earlier by the Turkish authorities under whose jurisdiction his institution functions in Istanbul, as the alienation between Turkey and Russia made the former unwilling to use its leverage for helping the latter.

In any event, after his meeting with Patriarch Bartholomew in April 2018, Poroshenko summoned the heads of the parliamentary factions to [tell](#) them that Ukraine was “as close as ever” to obtaining autocephaly but they needed to help achieve that goal by urging their colleagues to support an official appeal to Constantinople. Despite a protest from some Moscow-friendly opposition deputies, a solid majority of MPs promptly supported the appeal. Backed by a similar appeal from the leadership of UOCKP and UAOC, the parliamentary vote allowed Bartholomew to treat the plea for autocephaly as reflecting the will of the Ukrainian Orthodox people and, therefore, to start the process leading to the emergence of a fully independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church. It was announced that the process was to involve the creation of a new unified church consisting of clergy from the two heretofore-unrecognized denominations and those in the UOC willing to join them, after which Constantinople would recognize the new church as equal to the world’s fourteen other independent Orthodox churches.

Perceiving Ukrainian autocephaly as dangerous to Moscow’s role in the world and its influence on Ukraine in particular, the Russian Church and state authorities tried to prevent it from materializing. As Bartholomew’s emissaries paid visits to leaders of the Orthodox churches in order to win their support for the recognition of the Ukrainian aspiration, high-ranking Russian clerics and government officials traveled to the same destinations with the opposite goal. Moreover, a group of UOC dignitaries visited Istanbul to talk Bartholomew into reconsidering his intention, while in Ukraine the UOC clergy [distributed](#) among their parishioners an appeal to the Constantinople Patriarchate protesting against the “legalization of the schism.” For their part, the leadership of the UOCKP sought to persuade Orthodox leaders in other countries that the Ukrainian people supported autocephaly, and their effort was backed by Ukrainian officials and diplomats. Although there were few public statements on the matter, observers believed that most of the Orthodox churches refused to ally with Moscow against Constantinople, preferring to wait until the decision was announced. At least in one case, the pressure backfired as traditionally Russia-friendly Greece [accused](#) Moscow of interference in its internal affairs over this and other issues and went as far as expelling several of its diplomats and denying visas to a number of clerics.

Bartholomew withstood all pressures, including from Moscow Patriarch Kirill who paid him a visit-of-last-hope in late August 2018. The plans for Ukrainian Orthodox autocephaly could now not be reversed. Crucial steps were taken in October 2018 when the Constantinople Patriarchate revoked its decree of 1686 that led to the Ukrainian

church's subordination to Moscow and restored the clerical prerogatives of the bishops and priests of the two churches that Moscow had declared schismatic. Although the Moscow Patriarchate responded with a drastic decision to break communion with Constantinople, these steps paved the way for the convention on December 15 of a constituent council of clergy and laity, which proclaimed the establishment of the new unified Ukrainian Church and elected its primate who was to receive the certificate of autocephaly from Bartholomew's hands.

No Domino Effect

Constantinople reportedly insisted that the primates of UOCKP and UAOC renounce their claims to the leadership of the new church, but Filaret managed to arrange for his protégé, Metropolitan Epiphanius, to win, and thus he retained considerable control over the new Church's affairs. For their part, UOC leaders and their patrons in Kyiv and Moscow succeeded in preventing all but two of that denomination's bishops from attending the constituent council, which undermined the unifying ambitions of the autocephaly champions and impeded the transfers of UOC parishes to the newly created Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OUC).

Although such transfers were reported from the very first days after the constituent council, they were too few to produce a domino effect leading to a significant reduction of the Moscow-loyal denomination. Even the completion of the autocephaly process in early January 2019, when the certificate was presented to the new Church's leader, did not visibly facilitate transfers, with less than 200 parishes switching sides by the end of January, a tiny fraction of the UOC's total of more than 12,000 parishes. The main reasons for this apparent stagnation of process are believed to be pressures on hesitant priests from the UOC leadership and their influential supporters and the lack of a clear legal mechanism that would allow parishioners to make a transfer on their own initiative.

Unless a drastic change in the sociopolitical context of Ukraine accelerates (or stops) the process, it is likely to take years, during which time the independent Church will coexist with the one subordinated to Moscow. While this prospect disappoints many Ukrainian patriotic believers (and even patriotic non-believers), the important fact of the matter is that the new autocephalous church was accomplished without violence, which would have been used by Russian propaganda against Ukraine and undermine the Ukrainian government's reputation in the West. Still, it cannot be excluded that Russia might provoke violence in order to destabilize Ukraine and discredit Poroshenko as the elections approach.

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