



POLICY BRIEF

Crisis in Ukraine: Brewing Religious Conflict

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PROMOTE UKRAINE

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SUMMARY

One important security challenge which is heavily underestimated in Europe –by both optimists and pessimists in relation to Ukraine – is the extremely serious role of the Church and ecclesiastical politics. The EU focus on reforms and conflict in the Donbas is crucial. However, there is a new clash emerging within Ukrainian society – a conflict between believers of the pro-independence *Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP)*, and of the ‘pro-Russian’ *Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP)*. MP controls a major part of the ecclesiastical infrastructure (parishes, holy places, monasteries, pilgrimages sites), but it has been losing both believers and its high moral ground; it is often accused of collaboration with, or support for, the aggressor – Russia.

The Kyiv Patriarchate is economically less powerful than its Moscow counterpart, but its congregation is growing and the OCKP claims a higher moral ground as the national-patriotic Church. A number of nationally-minded priests have departed from the Moscow Patriarchate, together with many believers. Some parishioners exerted pressure on their local clergy to take sides in this conflict. The situation has been aggravated by the dogmatic attitude of the Moscow Patriarchate in relation to the sensitivities and sacrifices of the Ukrainian people (for example, a refusal to discharge burial services for officers and soldiers fallen in the Donbas).

Even though ecclesiastical elites on both sides may not be as radical and conflict-prone as it might seem, it is possible that the situation on the ground can provoke violence and spark yet another conflict, which would be truly intra-Ukrainian and with a highly pronounced religious dimension. Unlike to war in Donbas, this type of conflict would be far less manageable and amenable to rational bargaining and negotiations. It can lead to a fragmentation of political space, the rise of radical far-right conservative politics and large-scale violence and chaos. The EU should be aware that in addition to post-modern liberal values, it still has to accommodate the significant cultural foundations of European Civilization such as Christianity, which can constitute a vast reservoir of soft power.

The EU should invite the major Christian Orthodox Churches of Europe, the moral authorities of the Christian Church, and their spiritual leader, the Oecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, to organise a round-table to resolve religious disagreements in Ukraine. Negotiations should be conducted concerning the joint use of and/or access to ecclesiastical property. The Ukrainian government should take firmer control of access to public services and/or use of public lands – a valuable asset to which MPs have enjoyed privileged access in recent years.

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Why is the Church relevant?

Ukraine has often been depicted in black and white terms: i.e. its pro-European and democratic forces were contraposed with pro-Russian conservative authoritarian forces. What is often missing in this type of analysis is that Ukraine - like Greece, Poland, Romania, or Italy -, is a highly religious society, and church politics seriously affect political life. The Church is one of Ukraine's most reputable social institutions. It enjoys highest level of trust in the Ukrainian society. According to recent polls 56.3% of Ukrainian trust the Church, which is much higher than the trust to government and president (9.7 and 13.5%) and even higher than trust to civil society (37%) or armed forces (53.1%) and volunteer organizations (55.1%)¹. There is clear trend for the Church becoming increasingly popular. The number of church-goers has also been on the rise over the past 15 years, growing from 57.8% to 70.4 %². Given its popularity, various political forces and entrepreneurs have been seeking to take advantage of and capitalize on church politics. This has generated serious tensions within Ukrainian society.

There are two major Christian Orthodox Churches in Ukraine which have political relevance. The largest is the long-standing traditional Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is subordinate to the Patriarchate of Moscow UOC-MP. It comprises 12.000 parishes across the country. It is part of the Russian Orthodox Church in terms of dogma, organization and administration. When Ukraine proclaimed its independence in 1991, a group of nationally-minded bishops broke away from the Moscow Patriarchate and created their own Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP). It has remained a non-canonical and comparably small movement (4000 parishes). In the early 21st century the two churches started talks on reunification. However, President V. Yanykovich effectively isolated moderate leaders of the UOC-MP and

supported a militant pro-Russian wing.

The situation became even more polarized during the Euro-Maidan revolution in Ukraine. For example, priests and monks of the UOC-KP opened the gates of the centrally located St Michael Monastery to provide refuge to students who were being pursued by the riot police, and rang the main bell to call on people to rise up against the government. Later, the monastery was turned into a hospital for wounded protesters. On the other hand, during the annexation of the Crimea and the hybrid war in Donbass, Russian troops and pro-Russian forces relied on the UOC-Moscow Patriarchate, its infrastructure and human networks.

Up to a certain point the conflicts had a largely rhetorical nature. However, in 2014, several important events led to an escalation of tensions between believers of the two Churches. The long-standing moderate leader of the UOC-MP, Archbishop Vladimir, passed away. Despite some efforts on the part of President P. Poroshenko to support a moderate groups in the UOC-MP, a radical pro-Moscow wing gained the firm upper hand. The leading pro-Russia are closely linked with the main sponsor of UOC-MP, the businessman Vadim Novinskiy, who created a number of media resources which regularly criticize government policies and the independent Ukrainian church.

The Shifting sands of the Ukrainian Church

Obviously, it would be a gross generalisation to describe the UOC-MP as being under the thumb of Moscow or of Kremlin spies. The Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine is an agglomeration of various factions. Some sections of the clergy decided to take the side of the Ukrainian state and express their patriotic sentiments, although remaining part of UOC-MP. Others (approximately one hundred) openly rejected the Moscow Patriarchate and together with their

¹ 'Trust to Social Institutions', *Press Release*, Kyiv: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 1.2.107, available at <http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=678&page=1>.

² *Religion, Church, Society and State: Two Years after Maidan*: Kyiv: Razumkov Centre, 26 May 2016.

parishioners joined the Kiev Patriarchate. Some bishops proclaimed a neutral and pacifist attitude. This reconciliatory move was, however, undermined by the active and very visible moves of the militant pro-Russian part of the UOC-MP.

There have been numerous cases of bishops and priests of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine pledging their loyalty to the “Russian World” (broadly perceived as a Moscow neo-imperial project). Some of them have actively supported and personally participated in a Russian hybrid war against Ukraine³. Russian troops in Crimea and (pro)Russian forces in Donbass have relied on the support of the UOC-MP and have sometimes used their infrastructure. Pro-Russian troops in Donbass have persecuted the clergy of UOC-KP and any other denomination perceived as pro-Western. All this has led to further distrust and animosity on the part of Ukrainians towards the ‘Muscovite Church’⁴. Right after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Ukrainian nationalists sought to undermine the influence and presence of the UOC-MP in Ukraine. UOC-MP was put under pressure to vacate several buildings across Ukraine (in Lviv, Poltava and Kiev).

At the same time, UOC-MP has a significant and highly visible presence in the most symbolic sites of Ukraine, including numerous important buildings in the Ukrainian capital, monasteries and pilgrimages sites. Some of the plots of land which had been used to build new churches were illegally taken over by UOC-MP with the tacit approval of the Yanykovich government, which demonstrated its benevolence toward the Moscow Patriarchy. Currently UOC-MP is trying to transfer the property of parishes to the bishops, who are easier to control from Moscow. This adds to the frustration of supporters of the far less privileged, but increasingly popular and pro-Ukrainian Kyiv Patriarchate. This shifting dynamic creates all of the structural conditions for a conflict.

Unfortunately, President Poroshenko (himself an active and pious believer of the MP) chose to distance himself from the conflict. This ‘over-sensitive’ attitude turned inter-confessional relations into the big grey zone of a power vacuum, which creates further conditions for radical moves, violence and conflicts.

Sparks which almost made a war

The level of frustration of the broader Ukrainian society with the UOC-MP is so high that any event which would be considered minor under different circumstances can lead to the outbreak of violence against the UOC-MP. The radical position of the UOC-MP does not help the situation. For example, when a priest of UOC-MP in the eastern Ukrainian regional centre of Zaporizhia refused to read a burial service for a child who had been baptized in UOC-KP sparked a massive anti-MP campaign, entitled ‘Bring a Doll’. Thousands of Ukrainians brought boxes with broken children’s dolls to the doors of the premises and churches of the Moscow Patriarchate. Nationalists and veterans of the Russian-Ukrainian war in the East joined the campaign against the UOC-MP. Some of the more hot-headed activists called for the creation of vigilante movements concerned with ‘religious security’ and pursuing ‘non-patriotic priests’.

It should be noted that despite its ‘non-patriotic stance’, UOC-MP still enjoys significant popularity among Ukrainians. In the last 25 years, UOC-MP has created a broad base of activists, including mobile groups of violent and militant supporters. They have threatened and even assaulted some of the participants of the ‘Bring a Doll’ action. These acts of violence have been encouraged by the local clergy of the UOC-MP. For example, a local clergyman in Zaporizhia, Prothiereas Ryabko, when asked to comment on the incident, stated „We do not condemn, and do not intend to condemn, this incident. Our

³ https://petrimazepa.com/kazaki_razboiniki_itogi

⁴ The murder of several protestant priests in May 2014 by the Orthodox Army of the Donbass is a case in point. But even the official Russian state did not hesitate to expel Kiev Patriarchate priests from their buildings in Crimea.

Church is a closed military organisation which intends to fight the devil in Ukraine”⁵. It was only by chance that the incidents did not grow into a large scale conflict.

In response, Ukrainian nationalists decided to initiate a campaign against the privileges of the UOC-MP. On February 4, a group of supporters of UOC-KP gathered in front of a newly-built church of the UOC-MP in Kyiv and demanded its removal from the territory of the cultural preserve of the National Historical Museum. A performative act of starting a fire next to the Church was prevented by the police. The perpetrators were brought to court. However, hundreds of pro-independence activists gathered in front of the court protesting against the charges.

Similar incidents against UOC-MP have taken place in other parts of Ukraine. Currently, supporters of UOC-KP are initiating legal suits against UOC-MP for taking the land and illegal buildings of churches. Even though many such buildings were indeed the outcome of a semi-legal or illegal land-grab, there are still significant numbers of Ukrainians who support UOC-MP and are active members of the community. When pressed to vacate premises or switch their loyalty to the Kiev Patriarchy, priests of the UOC-MP announce their willingness to undergo self-sacrifice and martyrdom on behalf of truly (pro-Moscow) Orthodox believers in Ukraine.

Both sides seem to be highly radicalized and conflict-prone, and if the Ukrainian government does not take immediate measures, the next conflict in Ukraine could be a real inter-confessional clash, which would be likely to provoke a genuinely home-grown civil war, involving thousands of Ukrainians on both sides. This war will have a very pronounced religious dimension and will be more cruel than the war in Donbas. Given the high level of religiosity and politicisation of religion in Ukraine, this type of conflict is far less manageable than the conflict in the East and will not be amenable to rational bargaining and negotiations. It is likely to lead to a fragmentation of political space, the rise of radical far-right conservative politics and

the onset of large-scale violence in Ukraine. This dramatic situation requires immediate action, intellectual innovation and moral leadership on the part of the European Union.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The EU should remember that in addition to liberal values it possesses significant cultural foundations and experience in building secular nation-states in negotiation with Christianity. Christian civilization remains present in Europe in a number of local communities in the Eastern part of the continent. To prevent this part of Europe’s periphery from religious radicalisation, the EU should more actively engage with the moderate wings of Christianity, both Western and Eastern. In the case of Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity, this should become one of the important aspects of its state-building effort in Ukraine. The EU and its member states should deploy all of its expertise in building relations between the state and various churches in order to prevent inter-confessional conflict in Ukraine. Some of the most urgent and obvious political measures should include the following.

The European Union should invite the major Christian Orthodox Churches of Europe, the moral authorities of the Christian Orthodox Church, and its spiritual leader, the Oecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, for a broader discussion of religious dialogue in Europe and Ukraine. This roundtable discussion should concern itself with issues of recognition of the de-facto status of the UOC-KP and other national non-canonical Churches. Broadening format of such discussion to entire European continent would allow to break conflictual dichotomy ‘Orthodox East’ vs. ‘anti-Orthodox Europe’, which is often deployed by anti-European populists.

The EU should bring ecclesiastical issues to the forefront of dialogue with Ukraine and other countries of the Eastern Partnership where the Church enjoys a high level of respect, such as Armenia, Moldova and Georgia. Summer schools with a focus on dialogue and interaction between the EU and

⁵ <http://gordonua.com/news/society/protoierey-upc-mp-ryabko-ob-otkaze-otpevat-rebenka-ne-otpevali-i-otpevat-ne-budem-225683.html>

Christianity should be organized in order to address destructive myths about the “anti-Christian nature of the European project”, which have been spreading across the region. Some efforts made by the EU StratCom East provide an instructive example for such engagement. Further engagement with religious societal actors is of crucial importance. Post-conflict reconciliation in the Balkans provides numerous examples for conflict-prevention in the Eastern periphery.

Setting aside divisive aspects, the EU should start dialogue with the Orthodox Church in order to formulate a joint mission of securing good governance in the EaP countries. Drawing on common ethical values, the EU and Orthodoxy could formulate a joint mission of fighting corruption and political radicalism and other forms of hatred. This could lead to a more successful transition to market economy, the promotion of reforms and of moderate consensus in the society.

The EU should launch a special dialogue with the Ukrainian government on the regularization of ecclesiastical activities in Ukraine. This policy should aim at removing conflictual elements in church-related aspects of social life. For example, the Ukrainian government should ensure equal access of all confessions to maternity clinics, burial services and cemeteries. It should pursue a policy of fair allocation of the land and remove the land property rights of communities and parishes. The Ukrainian government should collaborate with the Church in order to ensure the proper training of clergy and the development of their moral qualities. Government support to the Church and its taxation privileges should be conditional on the Church’s compliance with and loyalty to state policies.