



Challenges of religious situation in Ukraine

Development of the religious situation in Ukraine in the context of potential securitization and politicization of Orthodoxy, reduction of religious pluralism and growth of conservative attitudes

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The development of the religious situation in Ukraine following the events of Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in its eastern regions resulted in a number of challenges and risks. The following analysis provides an overview of the phenomenon of securitization and politicization of religious sphere in the context of the autocephaly of Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Securitization of the Orthodoxy (and religious sphere in general)

Active use of religious instruments by Russian in the form of UOC (MP)¹ as well as developments on the domestic political arena such as presidential elections have led to the growing level of politicization of the religious sphere in Ukraine. Furthermore, the importance of establishing 'national church' has been linked directly to the question of national security. The latter process have led to a phenomenon known as securitization of Orthodoxy in Ukraine, which resulted in creation of an image of external enemy, among others through application of religious instruments. In case of Ukraine, Russian Orthodox Church in general and Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) in particular started to be portrayed as growing threats (or even enemies) to national security. This argument can be found in multiple speeches of the former president Petro Poroshenko, who has consistently emphasized that the essence of autocephaly of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine (so-called Tomos) lies in separation from Moscow: "Tomos means going away from Moscow, a strong Ukrainian army means going away from Moscow"². Placing religion in the same conceptual category as 'army' and 'language' was also reflected in pre-election campaign of the former president. "Army, language and faith is not a slogan. It is a formula of today's Ukrainian identity. The army defends our land. The language defends our hearts. The church defends our souls" – P. Poroshenko declared in his Annual Address to the parliament (Verkhovna Rada)³ and wrote in his Twitter⁴. Consecutively, most experts considered presidential elections as the main driving force behind the changes in the religious landscape. It is expected that the religious-driven conflicts may somewhat diminish (or transform into latent form) after electoral year is over, under the condition that the authorities will not continue to use the religion in mobilizing their electorate.

Some commentators believe that the Unification Council of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine turned into the legalization of the UOC KP, its de facto "rebranding"⁵. The UOC (MP) was represented merely by two bishops. An address to the Patriarch Bartholomew was signed by ten bishops of the UOC (MP). Epiphanius, "the right hand" of Patriarch Filaret, was elected the head of the new local church, however a part of leaders of the UOC KP and all representatives of the UAOC voted for other candidate, representative of the UOC (MP) Simeon. These observations point to possible internal opposition in the newly established Orthodox Church of Ukraine (followers of Metropolitan Mykhail from the UOC KP, bishops of the UAOC and representatives of the UOC (MP)). It remains to be seen whether it will be used as a constructive or destructive element in the dialogue between the churches.

Described examples demonstrate largely unpreparedness of Ukrainian political elites to recognize the subject character of the UOC (MP). It shows their willingness to reduce complex inter-church processes merely to external pressure exerted by the enemy country (Russia). P. Poroshenko has argued that this pressure from ROC resulted in modest support of the autocephaly by the

¹ There are the following abbreviations in the text: UOC (MP) — Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate); UOC KP — Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate; UGCC — Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church; UAOC — Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church; OCU — Orthodox Church of Ukraine; ROC — Russian Orthodox Church.

² Poroshenko: the Words "Good Bye, the Greasy Russia" Became a Meme in Ukraine. The President in Lviv has Enumerated Events, Leading to Break with Russia //

https://lb.ua/news/2018/12/08/414467_poroshenko_slova_proshchay_nemitaya.html

³ Address of the President of Ukraine to Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine "On Home and Foreign Situation of Ukraine in 2018" // <https://www.president.gov.ua/news/poslannya-prezidenta-ukrayini-do-verhovnoyi-radi-ukrayini-pr-49726>

⁴ <https://twitter.com/poroshenko/status/1042673802390503424>

⁵ Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun: "If the Charter Is Revised, the Tomos Will Be Revised As Well" //

https://lb.ua/society/2018/12/18/415253_arhimandrit_kirilo_govorun_yakshcho.html?fbclid=IwAR0DL7A2MmR-5tuPovW8UHkwWtJxEuvru4KHMw_vPOXeJ8UhNmBQ_iz6DaQ

representatives of UOC (MP)⁶. The approach of authorities to one of the two⁷ major Orthodox churches in Ukraine complicates the dialogue between the government and different confessions. For that reason, forecasts for further development of religious situation are rather negative — in particular, should property disputes between two Orthodox jurisdictions come into spotlight. Further marginalization of the UOC (MP) in the public discourse by Epiphanius, the new leader of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, known for his anti-Russian views can be also expected⁸. During his first mess as a head of the OCU, on December 16 in St. Michael's Cathedral, Epiphanius did not mention Patriarch Kirill, which could indicate his decision to break up the communication with the ROC even before the Orthodox churches were formally unified⁹. However, in his later speeches Epiphanius used a more diplomatic language, which could be taken as a sign that the OCU might refrain from direct conflicts with the UOC (MP).

Contrary (or owing) to media discourse which positioned UOC (MP) as a “fifth column”, as well as pressure on the part of security structures and government, UOC (MP) has been able to consolidate (at least to some extent). Only two hierarchs participated in the Unification Council of the Orthodox Churches. Among the possible reasons for such decision one should not neglect the pressure from pro-Russian forces inside the UOC (MP) and from sponsors like V. Novynskyi. Consolidation is also seen in the fact that, according to the Chancellor of the UOC (MP) Anthony, at the end on 2018, the UOC (MP) had documented positive dynamics in terms of all statistical figures¹⁰. Most experts argue that the head of the UOC (MP), Onuphrius, maintains control over the church. It is expected that the position of the UOC (MP) in inter-confession relations will be determined primarily by him.

To sum up, if the current tendencies continue, further deepening of the split between Ukrainian believers, marginalization of the UOC (MP) and its stigmatization as a “fifth column” will remain as challenges to effective interreligious dialogue.

⁶ Poroshenko: We Underestimated the ROC's Influence on Subordinate Structures // <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2018/12/16/7201409/?fbclid=IwAR2MJWcONTITp7dTUu30M6tiUc7drcAteoiL4tKJzJsGmS SeNM4uRTsq5So>

⁷ After Unification Council of December 15, 2018, in Ukraine there are the UOC MP and Orthodox Church in Ukraine (OCiU) of Constantinople Patriarchate.

⁸ Metropolitan Epiphanius. How Long Will the Hand of Moscow Proceed Jostling in the Ukrainian Souls? // <http://rivne-cerkva.rv.ua/news/2614-chi-dovgo-shche-v-ukrajins-kikh-dushakh-bude-nishporiti-ruka-moskvi.html?fbclid=IwAR2XJSBYn0eWsmiDXGTf6kcjaT8aSduJftrO3k2-7W9E50c9xdliSBWHHCg>

⁹ Epiphanius Was Mentioned in Constantinople, but He Ignored Kirill // <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-russian-46585475>

¹⁰ This Year, in Ukrainian Orthodox Church a Number of Parishes and Monasteries Has Increased // <https://pravlife.org/uk/content/za-rik-v-ukrayinskiy-pravoslavniy-cerkvi-zroslo-kilkist-parafiy-i-monastyriv>

Reduction of religious pluralism and the rise of conservative attitudes

Ukraine always stood out among post-Soviet and East-European countries in terms of embracing and protecting religious pluralism. The establishment of 'national church' might lead to restriction of religious freedoms for the rest of faith communities. It may also negatively impact religious pluralism in the country.

Religious freedom of the UOC (MP) may be considered restricted by the prohibition on cooperation between the UOC (MP) military chaplains and the National Guard¹¹ and the Ministry of Defense¹². Some experts consider such decision a logical step due to a hybrid war with Russia, thus not seeing it as a restriction of religious freedom. However, this state-led initiative already encountered an acute reaction from a leader of Jewish community in Ukraine, Yaakov Dov Bleich¹³, who at the time of this analysis was also heading All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO):

"For those breaking the law, regardless their affiliation with one or other church, there are law-enforcement bodies who will make these people abide by the law and hold them liable. But if you say that an individual who serves in a church has no right to be a chaplain, then one should assume that believers, who are part of the Moscow Patriarchate should not serve in the army as well. Is this conclusion correct? That would be absurd"¹⁴.

The representatives of religious organizations responded in a controversial way to the draft laws No. 5309 on renaming of religious organizations based in an enemy country (December 26, 2018) and No 4128-d "On Amendments to Some Laws of Ukraine Concerning Subordination of Religious Organizations and the Procedure of State Registration of Such Organizations with the Status of Legal Entities" (effected on January 17, 2019). According to Yaakov Dov Bleich:

"The necessity for the state, to support a new church, entitles a danger that a state may fail to understand its role. That is, after the end of the process (of church formation) it should not interfere with these issues. We now feel unsafe after adoption of the law in Ukraine that obliges the church (UOC MP) to change its name. This means that the state wants to decide for the church on the way it will call itself... I was convinced that the law would not be passed and if it would, I was 100% sure that the President wouldn't sign this law because it contradicts the Constitution of Ukraine. This is very dangerous."¹⁵.

The prudence in response to the actions of state is expressed by the Protestant community of Ukraine. On the opinion of representatives of the Protestant community, this was a reason for a visit

¹¹ Avakov Prohibited Appointing Priests of the UOC MP as Chaplains // <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2017/08/17/7152458/>

¹² Representatives of the UOC MP Reported that the General Staff Instructed to Keep Their Chaplains Away // <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2018/11/8/7197645/>

¹³ This sort of acute reaction of Mr. Bleich might also have relation to a recent scandal, concerned with discovery, in the premises of Kyiv synagogue, of eavesdropping equipment, installed by the officers of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) (see: http://sinagoga.kiev.ua/node/13709?fbclid=IwAR1uEOgBP_u0oseq0K1tw4u2tL74rk8c8TmVhVWX9jTciMq6zD1VSHnAWFg)

¹⁴ Yaakov Dov Bleich: I Will Ask the President, the Parliament to Hold on with Implementation of Law on Renaming of the UOC MP // <https://glavcom.ua/interviews/yakov-blayh-prositimu-prezidenta-radu-pochekati-iz-vikonanniam-zakonu-yakiy-zobov'yazuje-pereymenuvati-upc-mp-557969.html?fbclid=IwAR26s6U-CrXn91rbv63ohTXsJ-vcBHqkoKu6PzXwYkNBneBL8vdKhEFOVqw>

¹⁵ Ibid.

of the former president P. Poroshenko to the Ukrainian Bible Society on February 13, 2019 and his meeting with the heads of the largest Protestant churches¹⁶. In the background of the unification processes in the Orthodox community, an attempt to implement the similar scenario among the Protestants took place. The Ministry of Justice, on the Day of Unity — January 22, 2019 — has registered the public union “All-Ukrainian Council” and its Spiritual Council consists of the Head of the Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Ukraine, Senior Bishop of the Ukrainian Church of the Evangelical Faith Christians Mykhailo Panochko; the President of the All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists Valeriy Antoniuk; the Senior Bishop of the Ukrainian Free Church of Evangelical Christians Vasyl Raichynets; the Head of Ukrainian Christian Church “New Generation” Andriy Tyshchenko; the Bishop of the Council of Independent Evangelical Churches of Ukraine Anatoliy Kalyuzhny and other leaders of religious organizations. The former Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchynov was elected as the coordinator of the Council¹⁷. Some experts consider this initiative to be characteristic of the recent tendency - using religion as a political tool in the presidential and parliamentary elections.

There are some concerns that the establishment of state-supported “national church” could lead to the adverse process of clericalization of social life by some confessions starting with the newly established Orthodox Church of Ukraine. For instance, according to M. Kemper, militarization and securitization of the Orthodoxy hinders development of liberal and civil theology with its critical exploration, as well as assurance of place for the church’s role in history and modernity, for the dialogue with religious dissidents¹⁸. There is a danger that a new unified church in Ukraine will be reactionary and obsessed with “traditional values”, thus resembling to some extent its counterpart and main competitor from Russia. K. Shchotkina expresses similar concerns, pointing out that the establishment of national church would most probably be accompanied with increase of conservative attitudes both inside church structures and in the whole of society¹⁹. On the other hand, some experts believe that the nationalization of the Orthodoxy won’t take place because it requires state funding which has not been the case for Ukraine.

All of the experts interviewed for this analysis agreed that the threat to religious pluralism is closely linked to instrumentalization of the “religious question” on the part of political elites²⁰ and the use of religion for political purposes. Establishing a “national church” in Ukraine could be regarded a political project, one of the objectives of which was a process of consolidation of Ukrainian society in the face of external and internal threats. As a result, certain social groups started blaming Greek Catholics for their non-participation in the unification process. Highly influential figures in the Greek-Catholic community of Ukraine such as M. Marynovych have already warned about overall

¹⁶ Today the President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko Has Visited the House of Bible // <https://www.ukrbs.org/index.php/novyny-ubt/135-prezident-ukrajini>

¹⁷ Evangelical Churches and Public Leaders Have Established “All-Ukrainian Council” // https://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1950%3A1&catid=34%3Aua&Itemid=61&lang=uk

¹⁸ Kemper M. (2018). “Streit um die Orthodxie der Ukraine: die Risiken der kirchenpolitischen Eskalation,” *Osteuropa*, 68, 8-9: 143-154.

¹⁹ Shchotkina K. After Tomos: What the Church and the State Are to Expect // https://risu.org.ua/ua/index/expert_thought/authors_columns/kshchotkina_column/72760/

²⁰ See, for instance: (2018) “Einfach orthodox?” Ukraine: die Gläubigen und die Gesellschaft,” *Osteuropa*, 68, 8-9: 119-138.

impatience associated with attempts to promptly “force” the Greek Catholics and the Moscow Orthodox Church into joining the unified church²¹.

The unified Orthodox church will most probably strengthen its positions in the western regions of Ukraine and this may cause certain tension between the OCU and the UGCC, taking into account the latent conflict already present between the UGCC and the UOC KP²². It is still unclear how the newly created OCU will develop its policy regarding Greek Catholics. It is hard to predict its future attitude toward the growth of UGCC influence in the regions where this church was not traditionally present. Certain reservations regarding the OCU have been shared by Major Archbishop of the UGCC Svyatoslav during his meeting with the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Netherlands in Ukraine Eduard Hoeks, on December 18, 2018. According to the Head of the UGCC, the Unification Council is an important, historic moment in the life of Ukrainians. However, it is important that this process will be followed not merely by change of form, but a change in quality²³.

Overall, UGCC representatives assess positively the unification process between the Orthodox churches. However, the opinions of the interviewed experts vary significantly regarding further relations between the OCU and the UGCC. They range from a lack of the UGCC’s capacity (resources) to further expand its social base to possible growing role of Greek-Catholic Church to eastern regions of Ukraine.

To sum up, there is a certain danger associated with the development of conservative/fundamentalist attitudes in the Ukrainian society, reduction of religious pluralism, rise of religious nationalism and religious-based violence. Furthermore, the usage of patriotic discourse in order to change the status quo and reshape the religious landscape should be seen as another potential factor for disagreements.

Experts’ neutrality is being increasingly undermined due to the fact that scholars start to be involved in interreligious struggles, thus often using their expert status to advocate for interests of a specific religious group and to proliferate polarizing language. An analytical report to the Annual Address of the President of Ukraine to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine²⁴ prepared by the National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS)²⁵ serves as an example of this observation. The report, without references to original sources, emphasized that “...in the area of Antiterrorist Operation (ATO), the UOC (MP) has expressly supported the terrorists”. Moreover, authors of the document argue that “hundreds of thousands of believers and more than 500 parishes have already joined the Ukrainian Orthodox

²¹ Marynovych M. Unification Council: To Avoid Recurrence of the Past and Ensure the Future // https://risu.org.ua/ua/index/expert_thought/authors_columns/mmarynovych_column/73892/?fbclid=IwAR2UBVtbtzDrMsiz8ewyorFI9LQgeCtHFvSevxJ65vEet_klQ5KydCLGr4

²² Religious Front. Why and in What Way the UGCC is Standing Against the UOC KP, on the Side of Moscow Patriarchate // <http://kyiv-pravosl.info/2015/04/24/relihijnyj-front/>

²³ Head of the UGCC Commented the Result of the Unification Council // https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2018/12/18/7201613/?fbclid=IwAR0mmV7ikOMQVF0f7Rh0vzQsbrb2PyGIDS1NQ_K6233HLeb51GiXpVLPaw4

²⁴ Analytical Report to the Annual Address of the President of Ukraine to Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine “On Home and Foreign Situation of Ukraine in 2018”. – Київ, 2018.

²⁵ Since July 31, 2018, the Institute has been headed by Postyslav Pavlenko, former Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration of Ukraine, proponent of establishing the autocephalous Orthodox church in Ukraine.

Church of Kyiv Patriarchate” which is contradicts available data, according to which, in the period of 2014-2018, about 70-80 parishes have changed their affiliation²⁶.

Among the additional dangers in the religious realm, one should mention the growing influence of the militarized Neo-Pagan groups, closely related to volunteer battalions (so called “dobrobats”)²⁷. Although the interviewed experts believe that the Neo-Pagan groups are unable to substantially affect the religious situation in general, they might still take part in military activities.

Transnational Islamist networks consisting of representatives of various Jihad groups (from representatives of Caucasus Emirate and militants of anti-Assad troops to followers of the so-called ISIS), constitute another challenge. These individuals are also affiliated with ‘dobrobats’. Long-standing conflict inside the Muslim community of Ukraine has facilitated the proliferation of such groups and strengthened them. The economic and political instability surrounding Euromaidan and Antiterrorist Operation (ATO) in the East of Ukraine created an opening for an increase in the flow of Jihadists from Turkey via Ukraine to European countries. According to assessments of former militants, Ukraine currently might be hosting several hundreds of former soldiers who fought in Syrian and Iraqi wars. Additional factors that contribute to concentration of illegal Jihadists (mostly from the countries of former Soviet Union) in Ukraine include: 1). popularity, in Ukraine, of Russian language, common for people, born and raised in the countries of former Soviet Union, 2). confidence in the fact that Ukraine never grants extradition of foreigners to their countries of origin; 3) neutral attitude to the Muslims, 4) easiness in obtaining the falsified documents for unobstructed movement. In fact, today’s Ukraine serves a temporary asylum for people, detained in Turkey and deported to Ukraine²⁸.

Representatives of Crimean Tatars’ Mejlis, expelled from the annexed Crimea (in particular, Mustafa Dzhemilev who is Ukrainian president’s commissioner for the Crimean Tatar people) have already attempted to privatize the “Islamic question” on the territory of “continental” Ukraine²⁹. Due to such activities escalation of the conflict between the largest community of the Ukrainian Muslims together with the Clerical Board of Ukraine’s Muslims (CBUM) headed by Achmed Tamim, and Mejlis with its support groups (representatives of Hizb ut-Tahrir, Crimean Tatarian Salaphites and DUMU-Umma³⁰) remains to be a real possibility that can further challenge religious balance in the country.

²⁶ Lelych M. Take on Faith: What Prevents Orthodox Parishes from Moving from One Church to Another // <https://daily.rbc.ua/rus/show/prinyat-veru-meshaet-pravoslavnym-prihodam-1537813292.html>; Boyko M. POC = FSS // http://vgolos.com.ua/articles/rpts-fsb_305058.html

²⁷ Perun on the Base of Azov Unit. Sport Tournament After Victory of Sviatoslav over Khazarria. AZOV media // https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=25&v=lcYMOaw9MLc

²⁸ Serhatskova K. On a Way from ISIS: How Former Militants of “Islamic State” Appear in Ukraine, Hromadske // <https://hromadske.ua/posts/kolishni-boioviki-islamskoi-derzhavi-v-ukraini>

²⁹ Interview by Yulia Lytvynenko. Guest — Mustafa Dzhemilev. Of November 3, 2018. Priamyi TV Channel // <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLjC9skXvig>

³⁰ Clerical Board of Ukrainian Muslims “UMMA” headed by Said Ismagilov, affiliated with Alraid Association, Ukrainian subdivision of Muslim Brotherhood international movement.

Conclusions

Experts expect the level of politicization and securitization of the religious sphere to be reduced after presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019. In light of the earlier described challenges associated with the above mentioned phenomena, the decision-makers in the country arguably have the most influence on further development of the situation. As a result, the chances for religion-based conflicts to be prevented will increase significantly should the authorities:

- refrain from attempts to legally restrict rights of certain faith communities (for instance – those “with administrative centre in the enemy country”);
- act according to the laws of Ukraine in situations of property disputes between confessions;
- promptly respond to attempts of the local authorities to take the side of one of the confessions.

Russian political elites could also play a significant role in preventing interreligious conflicts. Both Kyiv and Moscow view religion through the prism of the ongoing armed conflict and their long-term political goals. Both sides most likely will make steps toward interreligious harmony only under the condition of reaching a more general peace agreement. Even if both sides will eventually opt for peaceful solutions, they will have to introduce further measures to address religious polarization that has become a peculiar feature of Ukrainian society since “Revolution of Dignity”³¹.

All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO) can play a key role in preserving religious balance. Since its establishment the Council developed mechanisms of inter-confessional dialogue between the conflicting actors and became a unique platform for dialogue for most of Ukraine’s faith communities. Participation of the AUCCRO warrants that the dialogue activities will encompass all confessions in Ukraine. At the same time, it is highly unlikely that AUCCRO will interfere with the internal disagreements in the Orthodox community.

³¹ Manko J., Miller A. 2018. “Ukraine’s Church Politics in War and Revolution,” in O. Oliker (Ed.), *Religion and Violence in Russia: Context, Manifestations, and Policy*, June 2018, a Report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program, pp. 256.