

Religious Divisions Threaten to Further Inflammate Ukrainian Civil War

Not admitting the head of the Russian Orthodox Church to Kiev is like barring the Pope from Rome, but that is just what the U.S.-backed Ukrainian government has done, explains Dmitry Babich.

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During the American Civil War, in which 620,000 people were slaughtered on the battlefields alone and hundreds of thousands more injured, the organization of the Roman Catholic Church in the American north and south remained [united](#) throughout the war and after.

The same cannot be said for the four-year-old civil war in Ukraine, which has deepened existing divisions among Orthodox Christians in the country.

Tensions are rising to the point that the Ukrainian government has been accused of suppressing the celebration of the 1030th anniversary of the coming of Christianity to ancient Rus, the proto-state of Eastern Slavs, which included the territories of modern Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. The government is being blamed for involvement in an effort to eliminate the original historic church of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), because of its affiliation with Russia and the word “Moscow” in its name.

The UOC-MP currently includes more than 12,000 of about 18,000 parishes in Ukraine, and is headed by Ukrainian Metropolitan Onuphrius, under the higher spiritual authority of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus, seated in Moscow.

On July 27, a solemn march celebrating the 1030th anniversary of the baptism of Rus by Prince Vladimir the Great of Kiev in 988 AD drew 250,000 faithful of the UOC-MP in Kiev despite the attempt to sabotage it by the U.S.-backed Ukrainian government of President Petro Poroshenko. According to numerous testimonies by UOC-MP’s priests, published in the Ukrainian press, transportation was cut off from outlying parishes and believers were intimidated.

But, if we believe the government, these actions weren’t a suppression of religion, but rather “required by a specific situation.” The Poroshenko regime, formed in the beginning of the civil war that followed the U.S.-backed 2014 bloody coup in the “Euromaidan” uprising, is favoring a split-off of the traditional church by an anti-Moscow church known as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP) headed by a self-proclaimed leader named Patriarch Filaret (born, Denisenko).

Denisenko, a former cleric of the Moscow Patriarchate, left the UOC-MP in 1992 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. He had lost an ecclesiastical election and tried to form his own church. Denisenko was then excommunicated. His church is not recognized by any of the other members of the international community of Orthodox churches.

There is no single authority in the Orthodox Churches similar to the Roman Catholic pope; rather there are independent or auto-cephalic regional Patriarchs considered equal in authority, with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Istanbul (formerly Constantinople), regarded as first among equals (*primus inter pares*) primarily for historic reasons because Constantinople, before its takeover by Turks in 1453, was the center of Orthodox Christianity.

None of these Orthodox Patriarchates recognize either the UOC-KP or “Patriarch” Filaret Denisenko. But now the Poroshenko government, together with Denisenko, is moving to reverse that situation. They have called on Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul to remove the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate and recognize a new, single independent Orthodox church in Ukraine, severing all ties to Moscow.

The single church in the Poroshenko-Denisenko plan would carry the UOC-KP name with the authority, according to Denisenko, to seize all churches, temples, chapels, monasteries and other properties belonging to the UOC-MP.

It would mean dispossessing the historic UOC-MP, which has direct “apostolic” continuity with the 1030-year-old original Kievan church and Christianity in the Eastern Roman empire, once brought there by Christ’s own disciples. UOC-MP said they would not pray in church together with the excommunicated Denisenko.

A Warning from Kirill

Russian Patriarch Kirill, speaking in Moscow at the celebrations of the 1030th anniversary of Vladimir’s baptism of Rus, warned against attempts by secular authorities in Ukraine to interfere with church affairs or to split the historic church.



Orthodox faithful inside Ukraine, both ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians, see the plans of Poroshenko's government and Denisenko as an illegal assault on their tradition and religious heritage. In addition, some deputies in the Ukrainian Rada (Parliament) have warned that there could be "bloody consequences" if the properties of the UOC-MP are confiscated and its members forced to join a new church.

With a decision from Bartholomew expected next month, events took an important turn with the announcement of a [planned](#) Aug. 31 meeting between Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul. The announcement was made in early August through the ROC's press service, which called the upcoming meeting a "very important talk" between the two Patriarchs.

Though the Ecumenical Patriarch doesn't play the same role as the pope in the Roman Catholic Church, Bartholomew is nonetheless in a "make or break" position. All Russia and all of Ukraine will be anxiously watching that meeting, especially after the tensions that surrounded the UOC-MP's celebration in Kiev of the 1030th anniversary of Christianization.

The core issue is that Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox believers have belonged to the same church since Russia's conversion to Christianity in 988 AD. Against this powerful tradition, the government authorities in Kiev are spreading fear against the UOC-MP among some Ukrainian Orthodox believers that has been unheard of since Christianity was de facto "rehabilitated" in 1988 in the former Soviet Union during the celebrations of the 1000th anniversary of the Baptism.

The 1000th year anniversary celebration took place under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who broke the 70 years long tradition of enforced state atheism in the Soviet Union. The USSR had one legal Russian Orthodox Church (persecuted by Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev)- the same that had existed in the Russian empire toppled by Bolsheviks in 1917. Church leaders say Ukraine's government cannot erase the united Church's history, which goes back to Prince Vladimir and to apostolic times.

According to the historical record, the Baptism of Kievan Rus by Vladimir had the support and participation of the Greek Church in Constantinople, then the official church of the Eastern Roman Empire, later known as Byzantium. The first Orthodox bishops and metropolitans (equivalent to Western archbishops) in Russia were Greeks from Constantinople who got their “apostolic succession” from Christ’s disciples.

The petition to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to approve the invention of a new “united” Ukrainian church that eliminates the UOC-MP would violate this sacred apostolic succession, says the Moscow Patriarchate. The UOC-MP has also protested that neither Poroshenko nor the Rada are empowered to ask Bartholomew to change the church’s organization in Ukraine.



“The strength of the Russian Orthodox Church and its Ukrainian sister UOC-MP lies in the apostolic succession, which the current Ukrainian government can neither provide nor imitate,” the Russian Orthodox Church’s spokesman said. “The state cannot ‘create’ a church, nor should it aspire to do it. But this is exactly what the Ukrainian authorities are trying to do, urging the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to merge with Denisenko’s entity and asking from the ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople an autocephalous status for this new ‘united’ Ukrainian church of their own invention.”

“This initiative is an abuse of power, an interference of state into church affairs,” UOC-MP’s the spokesman said.

The UOC-MP has remained the only public organization in Ukraine which still legally has the word “Moscow” in its name, and for millions of Ukrainian citizens, ethnic Russians or not, any kind of legal linkage to Russia is still valued.

Kiev’s Moves Against Russia

Almost immediately after seizing power in 2014, the new regime in Kiev terminated air flights between the two countries and banished Russian television and radio from Ukraine’s cable networks. One of the new regime’s first acts was to ban the Russian language, an extreme move that was quickly reversed. But constant attempts are made by the Ukrainian government to shut down the Russian embassy, introduce a new visa regime between Russia and Ukraine or seal the borders, making it extremely difficult for millions of Russians and Ukrainians to see their family members.

The historic role of the Moscow Patriarchate has provided a spiritual and cultural link for tens of millions of people, who in the 1990s suddenly became divided by newly emerged borders. In the period of the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991 the Russian church proved wiser and more flexible than the Soviet state.

“Russian Orthodox Church then gave its ‘periphery’ so much autonomy, that this prevented the collapse of the whole structure,” said Yevgeny Nikiforov, the head of the Orthodox-oriented radio station Radonezh, and a specialist in Russian church history. “The unified state might collapse in tears, but the church did not follow it. It remained alive and did not give up its right to cater to believers on all sides of the newly emerged borders.”

Even in Soviet days the Moscow Patriarchate allowed sister churches in Ukraine, Belarus and

Moldova to have their own budgets, to appoint their own bishops and to run all their “earthly” activities (education, manufacture of church items, etc.) without consulting Moscow. In return, the Russian Orthodox Church remained in “eucharistic union” with them, with representatives of these churches participating in the election of the Russian Patriarch of the ROC. Believers in all of these countries were treated as equals.

It seems clear why Poroshenko’s regime is opposed to the UOC-MP. The church openly condemns the ongoing civil war in Ukraine, refuses to call it “Russian aggression” and retains the word “Moscow” in its name. In addition, pro-government Ukrainian nationalist organizations often accuse the UOC-MP of being “a pro-Moscow group of separatists in priests’ attire.”

Patriarch Kirill denounced the attempts by Ukrainian authorities to divide and subdue the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-MP while speaking to a convention of the world’s Orthodox churches’ representatives in Moscow on July 27. He underscored what the attempt by the Poroshenko government’s religious takeover means and how it could further inflame the Ukrainian civil war.

“For our church,” Kirill said, “Kiev is the same ... holy place as Jerusalem is for Christians of all creeds.”

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