

Ukraine's Orthodox Church "Autocephalous Bloc": How Poroshenko Will Wage War Against Zelensky

By [Politeka](#)

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*In spring, Ukraine witnessed an event that will surely be written down in the country's history – the presidential elections were won by **Volodymyr Zelensky**, a showman who had never been involved in politics before. And as Zelensky's victory is astonishing so **Petro Poroshenko's** defeat is unexpected. It delivered a hard blow not only at his reputation as politician but also at his ego.*

Petro Poroshenko hasn't accepted the defeat and tries to rehabilitate himself in politics, which however hasn't brought any success so far. The Ukrainians don't trust the former president, and a criminal case against him can lead to imprisonment or make him leave Ukraine. To prevent this from happening and take revenge on Zelensky, Poroshenko turns to all means at his disposal – his connections in politics, law enforcement agencies, courts and business. At the same time, one of the main cards **up Poroshenko's sleeve is the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) which was created by the former president and unites many of those loyal to him.**

In Ukraine, Poroshenko created an image of an uncompromising fighter for religiosity. During the election campaign, his political consultants stressed that he formed the first recognized independent Church in the Ukrainian history. Many of OCU supporters believe that the merit of its creation belongs to Poroshenko and are ready to back him. The OCU hierarchy, led by Metropolitan Epiphany (Dumenko), is also extremely loyal to the former president; due to him, they came out of the shadow of the Filaret (Denysenko), primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyivan Patriarchate, and founded their new Church. All these led to the formation of the so-called "Autocephalous Bloc" involving OCU priests, business persons and, most importantly, politicians.

Out-of-favor politicians supporting Poroshenko

First of all, Poroshenko is supported by now-disgraced politicians who contributed to the **Autocephaly project**. One of Zelensky's main antagonists is **Rostislav Pavlenko**, the former director of the National Institute for Strategic Studies who was dismissed in May 2019. Pavlenko, one of the main ideologists of the Autocephaly project, is in rigid opposition to Zelensky, criticize his internal policy and the incompetence of his team. The new president has declared several times his intention not to interfere in Church affairs, and Pavlenko will do his best to undermine the apathetic Church agenda.

Andriy Parubiy, the former speaker of the Verkhovna Rada, is also ready to stand against Zelensky. Poroshenko's supporter had a number of conflicts with the new president over the past couple of months including the one which was caused by Zelensky's intention to

prematurely dissolve the Rada. Parubiy is close to his resignation after the recent parliamentary elections and is offended by Zelensky as well as many politicians of 2014-2019.

Incumbent Cabinet

Meanwhile, a large number of the former president's high-ranking supporters, who openly backed the autocephaly, continue to work in Ukrainian state bodies. One of the most dangerous opponents for Zelensky is **Andriy Yurash**, the director of the Department for Religious and Ethnic Affairs of the Ministry of Culture. It was Yurash who lobbied the president's unsuccessful trip to the Phanar. Given the fact that one of the main initiators of the Autocephaly maintains ties with Constantinople, it becomes clear that this trip was an attempt to make Zelensky dance to his tune.

It's unknown what document Zelensky refused to sign at the Phanar. The media claim that there were agreements on ecology but the point could be the transfer of Ukrainian stauropegions to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. If Zelensky had signed the agreement, it could have dealt a serious blow to his rating.

Moreover, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which scooped a large profit in Ukraine thanks to Poroshenko, can also exert pressure on Zelensky. Patriarch Bartholomew is rumored to have intended to discuss the criminal case against Poroshenko during Zelensky's visit to Istanbul but changed his mind at the last moment.

Despite the fact that the Yurash family integrated in the new government, it will remain loyal to Poroshenko, which means the ex-president keeps under full control the Department for Religious and Ethnic Affairs that oversees Church developments.

Zelensky is also opposed by Ukrainian **Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin**. Klimkin is still in office but he is in conflict with Zelensky and is said to leave his position soon. When it happens, Klimkin will join the opposition group of politicians backing Petro Poroshenko. Close ties of Poroshenko and Klimkin have lasted since the first was Foreign Minister. Poroshenko consistently awarded Klimkin and lent support to him.

Poroshenko's another person in the government is **Hennadiy Zubko**, the Minister of Regional Development. Zubko maintains close relations with the family of the former president. The Foundation of Poroshenko's wife Maria is funding a public organization of Zubko's spouse while the official himself assisted the employment of the brother of Andriy Yurash's daughter-in-law, Sofia Yurash, at his Department.

In addition to the above-mentioned officials, there formed a group of other senior politicians who support Poroshenko:

Minister of Youth and Sports Ihor Zhdanov. He was appointed after the Revolution of Dignity in 2014; Zhdanov was a commandant during the standoff at Kyiv's Maidan square. The minister claimed that he would hold onto his position to the last though he is said to be soon dismissed by Zelensky.

First Deputy Prime Minister Stepan Kubiv. He was against Zelensky during the election campaign. A member of the Petro Poroshenko Bloc.

Minister of Culture Yevhen Nyshuk. Spoke in support of the autocephaly

and Petro Poroshenko but is not yet in strong opposition to Zelensky.

Business

Many businesspersons still actively support Petro Poroshenko. The autocephaly project is being backed by businessman Andriy Matsola and a criminal kingpin Oleksandr Nalekrishvili also known as “Narik” (i.e. “Dope”).

Matsola is a close friend of Epiphanius and the deputy head of the Department of external Church relations of the OCU Eustratius (Zorya). Due to Matsola’s support, Filaret’s strong influence was reduced. He also undertook all financial expenditures during the implementation of the Autocephaly project.

Narik has been showing his piousness in recent years. He was also present at the ceremony in Istanbul when patriarch Bartholomew officially signed the Tomos. Nalekrishvili is the co-father-in-law of Andriy Pavelko, a member of the Petro Poroshenko Bloc.

Poroshenko was actively promoting his project so many business persons not only joined the “Autocephalous Bloc” but also became its sponsors.

The OCU as a weapon

Volodymyr Zelensky’s decision not to interfere in Church affairs may result in far-reaching consequences. Poroshenko intends to use the OCU as a tool to exert pressure on the elected president and the new Church can become one of the factors of his political defeat. Zelensky’s indifference to Church issues will weaken the state control over Church developments. Petro Poroshenko and his “Autocephalous Bloc” will support any canonical or schismatic movement to provoke a full-fledged conflict among Ukrainian believers to shatter Zelensky’s presidency.

And if Volodymyr Zelensky doesn’t want to lose his position, he will have to take the Church agenda and those who covertly or openly are ready to act against him into consideration.

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*Translated to English by **Nadia Bazuk***

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