




## COMMENTARY


### An independent Ukraine Orthodox Church: why now?

**VOCAL**  
EUROPE

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In Ukraine, this year's celebrations for the Orthodox Christmas on January 7 assumed a whole new meaning, as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has now gained its religious independence - or autocephaly - from the Moscow Patriarchate. The official decree, called Tomos, was signed two days prior in Saint George's Cathedral in Istanbul, in the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the spiritual head of the Orthodox Christians, and of the Metropolitan Epifaniy, the new head of the Ukrainian Church.

The document officially places Ukraine under the canonical jurisdiction of Constantinople. The signing of the Tomos completes a process of recognition that started with the endorsement of Ukraine's request for autocephaly by the Constantinople Patriarchate in October 2018. However, the historical occasion carries much more than a religious significance.

Taking part in the festive liturgy for the formation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko praised the independence as the "spiritual foundation for state-building... equal to an act or referendum on Ukraine's independence". He continued by referring to the Tomos as further evidence of Ukraine's freedom, underlining how the decision was taken "in the defense of Ukraine". Finally, he stressed Moscow's aggressive opposition, interpreted as a will to keep Ukraine within the "Russian Empire"<sup>1</sup>.

Indeed, the political significance of the events has also been addressed by Russia with predictable contempt. During his annual conference, Russian President Vladimir Putin defined the situation as a "direct interference of the state in religious life"<sup>2</sup>, unprecedented in the post-Soviet era. Putin sees the move as a shift from a previous independence under the Moscow Patriarchy toward a dependence on Turkey and the Turkish Patriarchy, mentioning financial and political motives for this choice.

## The path towards autocephaly

Considering the age-old history of the Orthodox Church, the events of the past year seem to have happened rather quickly. However, the journey towards independence has not been an easy path for the Orthodox Church in Ukraine. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine underwent a structural split with the supporters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC) on one side, and two "breakaway" churches on the other, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP) and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), representing an independent Ukraine. Only the first one was considered legitimate in the Orthodox world<sup>3</sup>.

Past Ukrainian presidents have alternatively favoured one or the other, with former President Viktor Yushchenko strongly supporting the UOC-KP, Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovich openly endorsing the Russian Orthodox Church. Yushchenko had even issued a plea for Ukraine's Orthodox Christians to gain independence from the Russian Orthodox Church already in 2008 in the attempt to legitimize the church, but the power struggle could not be solved<sup>4</sup>.

The religious divisions in the country were further exacerbated by the events of 2014, and the two Orthodox factions were fighting for dominance as the churches failed to maintain neutrality after the military aggression in eastern Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea. The Kiev Patriarchate continued to grow in popularity.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/bez-nezalezhnoyi-cerkvi-nemozhлива-nezalezhna-derzhava-prezi-52426>

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59455>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cceol.com/search/gray-literature-detail?id=680216>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/30/world/europe/30ukraine.html>

## The end of Russian soft power in Ukraine?

The split of Kiev with the Russian Orthodox Church represent for Russia the loss of a significant element of its capacity to project its cultural influence, of a “soft power” resource, but also the loss of its ideological leverage. Russia-backed Orthodox churches have been often reported as tools to spread propaganda and even support separatists in Donbass. Moscow has now lost one of its means to deter the country’s westernization and integration in the Euro-Atlantic community.

With this step, Putin’s philosophy of the *Russkiy Mir*, or Russian World, understood as “a fraternal relationship between spiritually and ethnically kindred nations oriented towards Moscow”<sup>5</sup>, an imagined cultural and spiritual space shared by all Orthodox Slavs, is now collapsing. Moreover, the religious split serves to further consolidate Ukraine’s identity.

While many levels of Russian influence have weakened since the beginning of the conflict, it would be simplistic to believe that the newfound religious autonomy will manage to completely erase it. A recent research published by Chatham House underlines the vulnerabilities of Ukrainian society to Russian influence, mentioning for instance the fragile information space. “The penetration of Russian disinformation remains high, especially via social media and media outlets owned by Ukraine’s oligarchs, whose interest stand to be undermined by ongoing and proposed reforms”<sup>6</sup>, report the authors.

Moreover, pro-Russia narratives are still being spread by Russia-friendly or anti-government private TV channels. The feeling of insecurity caused by the ongoing conflict in the East and an opaque political environment represent other elements of state vulnerability to external pressure. Building resilience against Russian negative influence is a long-term projects that demands constant efforts and attention. Without downplaying the relevance of positive steps, regarding it as completed might even be ultimately damaging.

## Why now?

In light of the past failed attempts to gain autonomy from the Moscow Church, it is important to understand the conditions that led to this decision. In order to do so, we have to take into consideration more than the religious relevance of the events, looking instead at the wider political background, marked by a complex long-running conflict.

As previously observed, this split should be seen from a strategic point of view within the larger context of Ukraine’s path away from the Russian influence and towards a stronger independent identity. The UOC was seen as one of the last challengers of this process, a delegitimization of Ukraine’s language, history and culture<sup>7</sup>. For post-2014 Ukraine, spiritual independence became a matter of national security.

In comparison with former President Viktor Yushchenko, supporter of the UOC-KP and perceived as anti-Russian, President Petro Poroshenko is a deacon in the UOC. For this reason, Constantinople might have felt less inclined in considering his position as anti-Russian<sup>8</sup>. The formal approval of the Ukrainian parliament and Poroshenko’s legalistic approach, while still attracting

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668136.2018.1536780>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/civil-society-under-russias-threat-building-resilience-ukraine-belarus-and-moldova>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2018-06-13/fight-canonical-independence-ukrainian-orthodoxy-0>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-independence-for-ukraine-s-orthodox-church-is-an-earthquake-for-putin>



complaints for the state's involvement in religious affairs, contained the possibility of a strong action from the Russian Orthodox Church.

In this sense, Poroshenko was playing a game of high stakes, as a failure or even a major postponement could have negatively impacted his campaign for the presidential elections in March, severely reducing his chances for re-election in such a tight race<sup>9</sup>. Instead, the independence of the new church may greatly boost Poroshenko's chances in the run for the next election.

The move has, in fact, already proved to be highly popular in the country. In a nationwide public opinion poll conducted at the end of 2018, 24% of Ukrainians named the decision to give the Tomos of autocephaly to Ukraine as the main political event of the past year, ranking well above the introduction of the martial law and the incident in the Kerch Strait<sup>10</sup>.

Additionally, some consider that the struggle for power could be internal to the Orthodox Church, as the Greece and Constantinople Patriarchs are trying to prevent an increase in Russian interference<sup>11</sup>. Russia is seen as trying to assume a stronger ecumenical role in the Orthodox world. The emergence of an autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church has definitely reduced the size of the Moscow Church, with the two countries having almost the same number of parishes (14,000), despite the difference in size.

## The Turkish factor

One last factor to consider is the position of Turkey in the matter. As it is observable by the reactions to the process of independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the situation clearly represents a serious blow for Russia. The Orthodox Church is marginal in Turkey, despite its historical relevance, with Islam being followed 99.8% of the population<sup>12</sup>. However, Putin has mentioned the country directly during his press conference, referring explicitly to the new dependence of Ukraine “on Turkey, on the Turkish Patriarchate”<sup>13</sup>.

The Turkish state has officially remained out of the question, as it already had stated in 2008<sup>14</sup>, but it is difficult to imagine that such a decision would have been adopted without - if not a tacit approval - at least a guarantee of non-opposition from Ankara. Whether this means something for Russia-Turkey relations remains to be seen, as the two countries maintain a strong but complicated relation.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2018-06-13/fight-canonical-independence-ukrainian-orthodoxy-0>

<sup>10</sup> <https://dif.org.ua/article/pidsumki-2018-gromadska-dumka>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/barcin-yinanc/did-erdogan-say-no-to-putin-on-church-issue-140314>;  
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-independence-for-ukraine-s-orthodox-church-is-an-earthquake-for-putin>

<sup>12</sup> <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/turkey-population/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59455>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/barcin-yinanc/did-erdogan-say-no-to-putin-on-church-issue-140314>

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