

Patriarch Kirill in Ukraine – the servant of God in the service of politics

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Kirill, the Patriarch of Moscow and All-Russia and head of the Russian Orthodox Church, paid a visit to Ukraine from 20 to 28 July. The patriarch of Moscow's third visit this year to Ukraine served to promote the idea of an Orthodox civilisation covering the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, as well as the unification of all Orthodoxy in Ukraine under the banner of Moscow. Presumably, the patriarch's undisclosed aim was also to conciliate the Ukrainian government with plans to strengthen the dependence of the biggest Ukrainian Orthodox church on the Patriarchate of Moscow. These plans are part of a Russian strategy to strengthen its political, economic and cultural presence in Ukraine.

The new Ukrainian government's ostentatious gesture of friendship towards the Patriarch of Moscow – although somewhat nuanced by a certain restraint on the part of President Yanukovich – brought forth violent protests from the competing Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Kyiv and from nationalist circles. If the government decides on a policy of openly supporting the Moscow Patriarchate, this may disturb the fragile state of relative religious peace in Ukraine, and simultaneously make it impossible for President Viktor Yanukovich and his party to win a broader electorate before this autumn's local elections.

Patriarch Kirill visited Odessa, Dnepropetrovsk and Kyiv, and also met Viktor Yanukovich in Crimea. A service was held in Kyiv's St Sophia Cathedral (in which Prime Minister Mykola Azarov and speaker of parliament Volodymyr Lytvyn also participated), as was the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Monastery of the Caves at Pecherska Lavra, on the occasion of the 1022nd anniversary of the conversion of the kingdom of Rus to Christianity, in which bishops from Russia and Ukraine participated; these events were symbolic of the closer relations between Ukraine and Russian Orthodoxy. The principal motif of the visit was an appeal to 'maintain the spiritual unity of the people' on the basis of the ideal of Holy Rus, as declared during the ceremony at the Monastery of the Caves on 28 July. During the patriarch's visit, he appealed for the building of 'the world of old Rus' and of an 'Orthodox civilisation' which would unite those Slavic peoples who trace their origin back to the tradition of Holy Rus – namely the Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian peoples.

Representatives of the Patriarchate have portrayed the above-mentioned project as applying exclusively to the spiritual reality. However, it is difficult to avoid the impression that it fits into the Kremlin's wider plans for integration by returning to the *de facto* political, economic and cultural domination of Ukraine by Russia. Purely political elements are also present in this campaign; one such is the appeal by the patriarch to change the name of a street in the

centre of Kyiv from 'Ivan Mazepa' (a Ukrainian hetman, seen in Russian historiography as a traitor) to 'Lavra'.

The patriarch's visit provoked violent protests from some nationalist circles (such as the Svoboda party), as well as from the hierarchy and the congregation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Kyiv.

On the unity of Orthodoxy

The calls to unite Orthodoxy were aimed at strengthening the links of the hierarchy and the congregation of the biggest Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, which is dependent on the Patriarchate of Moscow, with the Patriarch of Moscow himself. In this Church, which since 1992 has had a certain autonomy, tendencies towards greater independence from Moscow have arisen, which have been supported by some of the hierarchy. The patriarch's aim was to neutralise these tendencies and support that part of the leadership which has declared itself against autonomy and favours deepening ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. This explains the choices of Odessa and Dnepropetrovsk for the Patriarch's visit, as the bishops of these areas are seen as most favourably inclined to the Patriarch's ideas.

As is traditional, the patriarch of Moscow refused any possibility of dialogue with the representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Kyiv, which is seen as non-canonical, and is treated by Moscow as schismatic. The path to unity is to lie in 'repentance' by the head of that church, Patriarch Filaret, and the return of his clergy and congregation to the Moscow church. Because of the enmity between the leaderships of both churches, this scenario is unrealistic.

Yanukovych and Kirill – the limits of their alliance

The patriarch's visit falls within a broader context of the improvement in relations between Russia and Ukraine during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovych. At the same time, however, it suggests certain dangers to this approach, linked with the new government's overly ostentatious support for the Orthodoxy of the Russian obedience.

The previous President, Viktor Yushchenko, supported the idea of an autocephalous Orthodox Church created independent of Moscow, but the current President Yanukovych does not support this project. As a declared follower of the church of Moscow, he has publicly paid his respects to the head of that Church, and on the day of his inauguration, he accepted a blessing from Patriarch Kirill, which led to much criticism.

The patriarch's current visit was assured unheard-of media coverage by the government; live transmissions lasted for several hours each day on state television. The forces of law and order did not allow any demonstrations by opponents of the visit in any of the public places which the patriarch visited. For his part, he awarded President Yanukovych the Medal of Holy Prince Volodymyr, first class, and praised him as a politician who was undertaking the spiritual task of awakening the nation.

It is relevant that the patriarch's visit to the president and the medal ceremony were private in nature, and were not covered excessively by the media. This could have been important to Yanukovych, to avoid accusations of exaggerated pro-Russian sentiment and favouring the Patriarchate of Moscow.

It seems that the government's overly demonstrated 'friendship' with the patriarch and their exclusive support for the Moscow church do not, in the longer term, meet either their own interests or those of Yanukovich himself. It is in the government's interest, especially with regard to this autumn's local elections, to draw in the electorate from central and western Ukraine, for whom favouring the Moscow church is unacceptable. Furthermore, in the longer term, such a policy would also damage the fragile religious peace in Ukraine, which the government should take care to maintain.

Appendix

Ukrainian Orthodoxy has been divided since the 1980s. The main structure is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Moscow, which has broad autonomy, but formally recognises the authority of the patriarch of Moscow. It alone is recognised by the global Orthodox community as the canonical (valid) Church. The two other structures, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Kyiv and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, have criticised it for its pro-Russian stance, and have even accused it of national treason (these accusations may be valid but only concerning the activities of some of its monasteries and lay organisations). Nationalist politicians have also added their voices to these criticisms. In turn, the Kiev Patriarchate has openly taken nationalist positions. In Ukraine, the clashes of confessions are an important element of broader political clashes and conflicts.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Moscow (UOC PM) has 11,539 parishes. It predominates in eastern, southern and central Ukraine. Only in the Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk and Ternopil regions of western Ukraine is the UOC PM not the biggest church in terms of number of parishes. Just under 11% of Ukrainians profess adherence to the UOC PM.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Kiev (UOC PK) has 4128 parishes, of which 43% are found in western Ukraine. The UOC PK is also present in the centre and south, and is most weakly represented in the east. Although its organisation is weaker than that of the UOC PM, it has a larger congregation (15% of the population).

The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) has 1184 parishes, of which the great majority (70.8%) are found in western Ukraine. 1% of Ukrainians belong to this church.

According to research, 22% of Ukrainians consider themselves unbelievers, and 40.5% are believers, but not members of any church.