

Historic unification of Ukrainian Orthodox Church

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On 15 December in Kyiv, the Orthodox Church General Council of the Metropolis of Kyiv, which is subordinate to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, was convened. The attendees approved the statute presented by the Ecumenical Patriarch, and elected Metropolitan Epiphanius (bishop of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate, UOC-KP) to be its superior. Epiphanius will be granted the tomos, giving the Metropolis of Kyiv autocephaly (canonical independence), in Istanbul on 6 January 2019. The newly founded church will be called the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, thus commencing the process of unification of the church structures of three Ukrainian orthodox churches: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which recognises the primacy of the Moscow Patriarch. For the moment the number of priests and faithful of the Patriarch of Moscow that will move to the new Metropolis of Kyiv is not clear. The convening of the general council and election of the superior of the united church will not necessarily bring to an end the split within Ukrainian orthodoxy. This is merely the beginning of a complicated process that could trigger a series of conflicts within Ukraine and in Ukrainian-Russian relations.

The convening of the Kyiv council is a success for Petro Poroshenko, who agreed the granting of the tomos last spring with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in person. This will be a success actively exploited for the purpose of the presidential election campaign (31 March 2019), but does not guarantee that he will go through to the second round, let alone achieve ultimate victory.

Kyiv unification council

According to a decision made by the Ecumenical Patriarchate Council on 11 October this year, the Metropolis of Kyiv (founded in the 11th century, under the Moscow Patriarchate since the XVII century) was restored and returned to the jurisdiction of Constantinople, but at that time was still not given autocephaly¹. For the

Ukrainian church to be granted autocephaly, the unification council had to be convened. It was attended by representatives of all three churches: all of the KP UOC and UAOC bishops (42 from the KP UOC and 12 from the UAOC) and 2 bishops from the UOC (out of 73 current active bishops)². Each of the bishops was accompanied by one representative of the parish

¹ T. Olszański, 'The Ecumenical Patriarchate recognises the independence of the Orthodox metropolis of Kiev', *OSW Analysis*, 17.10.2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-10-12/ecumenical-patriarchate-recognises-independence-orthodox-metropolis>

² The UOC has 52 dioceses and 12,000 parishes, the UOC-KP – 35 dioceses and 5,000 parishes, while the UAOC has 14 dioceses and one thousand parishes. *Релігія і Церква в українському суспільстві: соціологічне дослідження-2018*; 25.04.2018, http://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2018_Religiya.pdf. Numbers of faithful vary and are not very reliable.

clergy and monks or laypersons. The meeting was jointly chaired in effect by the exarchate (delegate) of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the President of Ukraine. This system, known as the 'general council', ranks higher than the synod of bishops. Of the bishops of the UOC, it was attended by Metropolitan Simeon of Vinnytsia and Bar and Metropolitan Alexander of Pereyaslav-Khmelnytsky and Vyshneve, the principal advocate of autocephaly in the UOC. It was not attended by Metropolitan Sophronius of Cherkasy and Kaniv, who even last spring actively lobbied for autocephaly (due to the fact that he is 78 years old, the explanation that he was absent for reasons relating to health would seem plausible). The lower number of UOC bishops than expected (according to media reports, last spring a letter to Patriarch Bartholomew regarding the granting of autocephaly to the Ukrainian church was signed by 10 bishops of the structure) is due to pressure successfully being applied by Moscow and the continually high level of mistrust of the KP UOC.

All of the KP UOC and UAOC bishops, and only two out of the 73 UOC bishops, attended the council meeting.

The council meeting proceeded efficiently and only lasted a few hours. Bishops, priests, and laypersons approved the metropolitan statute and elected the superior, whose title will be Metropolitan of Kyiv and All-Ukraine. The person elected was Metropolitan Epiphanius (see biography attached), who is just under 40 years old, viceroy of Patriarch Filaret, *de facto* the person in charge of the KP UOC since 2013 (the Patriarch, almost 90 years old, remains the spiritual leader). The council met in the most sacred venue in Ukraine – in the grand nave of the Kyiv Cathedral of St. Sophia (the Wisdom of God), built at the beginning of the XI century at the foot of mosaics dating back to the time of construction, showing the Holy Mother of

God as Orans. For centuries, the mosaics have been known as the 'Impenetrable Wall' and are considered a symbol and guarantee of the survival of Ukraine. The *tomos*, which establishes autocephaly of the Metropolis of Kyiv, was not granted to the superior at the end of the council meeting, but this is to take place on 6 January 2019, on Christmas Eve in the Julian calendar, in Istanbul. As the meeting of the Kyiv council was concluded successfully, this will be a formality.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church

The new church is to be called the 'Orthodox Church in Ukraine' (this is the form of names of autocephalic orthodox churches in Greek), while in Ukraine the form 'Ukrainian Orthodox Church' (*Prawosławna Cerkwa Ukrajiny*, PCU) will be used. Initially, it will be possible to use phrases that do not confirm to a single style, especially containing the words 'autocephalic' or 'pomisna' (particular). Contrary to common expectations, in Ukraine the Ukrainian United Orthodox Church was not given the status of patriarchate, but metropolis. Some commentators believe that the patriarchate will be the next step in the process of Ukraine gaining ecclesial independence, but this does not seem very probable. This is not only because of the self-proclamation of the Kyiv Patriarchate in 1992 (without reference to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other autocephalic churches) but also because modern Orthodoxy does not create new patriarchates³. Moreover, the Ecumenical Patriarch does not wish to antagonise other Particular Churches. It is possible however that the Metropolis of Kyiv could be elevated to the status of patriarchate in the future, but this will depend on how the process of uniting Ukrainian orthodoxy proceeds.

The elderly Filaret, whose ninetieth birthday on 23 January 2019 has been registered by the Supreme Council as a state ceremony, was

³ The last was appointed in 1925, for Romania, while the Bulgaria patriarchate proclaimed in 1955 was a return to the Bulgarian church structure of the middle ages.

awarded the lifelong title of honourable patriarch by the council. He intended to seek the position of superior of the new church but relinquished the plan when it was explicitly forbidden by Patriarch Bartholomew (the superior of the UAOC, Metropolitan Macarius, revealed that he was also forbidden from doing this) and probably conceded in return for the council's support for the candidature of Metropolitan Epiphanius.

When Poroshenko delivered his speech as the council meeting ended, he announced that the state would protect the rights of those who wished to move to the autocephalous church.

Future Kyiv metropolitans will not be confirmed by the Ecumenical Patriarch in any form, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate will also have no influence over the forming of the synod supervising the work of the metropolis. On the other hand, the Kyiv Metropolis statute drawn up in Istanbul provides for a solution that has never been seen in Ukraine before: the synod is to be made up of 12 bishops elected for terms of one year, while half of the members will be replaced semi-annually (the institution of permanent members of the synod has been abolished). This is a revolution in management of the church, and will be poorly received by many, while at the same time it will help to make the structure more democratic. The only forms in which the Kyiv Metropolis will remain dependent will be with regard to receipt of myrrh, which it will receive from Istanbul and not prepare on its own, and an obligation to consult the Phanar on canonisation. The former is a purely liturgical issue, and the latter probably practical: Patriarchate or Constantinople can object to certain candidates, and thus intervene in UOC canonisation policy (the canonisation procedure is not as formalised in the Eastern Church as in the Catholic Church).

Poroshenko's pre-election manoeuvring

The President of Ukraine was not only present at the council meeting (on the presidium alongside the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch) but he also made a speech at the beginning of the proceedings, whereby he informally became the joint chair. On 16 December, meanwhile, at a press conference, he revealed that in the days leading up to the council meeting he mediated personally in numerous disputes and conflicts between representatives of the churches. When the proceedings were concluded, President Poroshenko came out together with the new Metropolitan on to the square in front of the Cathedral of St. Sophia, where a patriotic and religious convention attended by several thousand people, chaired by Minister of Culture, Yevhen Nyschuk, had been going on since morning. Once the minister had formally presented Metropolitan Epiphanius, Poroshenko gave a speech. This procedure resembled the investiture of a bishop by monarch in the middle ages, a gesture that blatantly disregarded the division of church and state. In his speech, the President of Ukraine said on the one hand that he did not intend to create a state church, but on the other he suggested a special relationship between the state and the new Church that was in the process of being created, and announced that the state would protect the rights of those who wished to move from the UOC to the autocephalous church. In practice this will be intervention in matters of religion, and in fact the state will have no alternative – the Ukrainian state authorities retain the ownership rights to the churches and other religious premises.

President Poroshenko stated that he considered the granting of autocephaly the 'final winning of independence' and the autocephalous metropolis to be a 'Putin-free church'. Poroshenko wishes to be recorded in history as the person who saved the country from Russian aggression and finalised the process of Ukrainian emancipation, severing not only political, but also religious ties with Russia.

Poroshenko's involvement in the Ukrainian autocephaly is not only an attempt to gain a place in history. First and foremost, it is an attempt at re-election. Clearly, the initiative launched in the spring was designed to regain popularity among the public (his support in the polls currently stands at around 11%) and secure electoral victory. This is one area in which he cannot be attacked by any of his opponents in the patriotic camp (his main rival political, Yulia Tymoshenko, is strongly in favour of this decision). Poroshenko's current ratings suggest he would not go through to a second round, and to make up the losses he needs a significantly more substantial success. It is even possible that Poroshenko will decide not to run (he suggested this at a press conference on 16 December). On the other hand, the part he played in bringing about autocephaly⁴, and in particular his speech of 15 December, demonstrate that more than next year's elections are at stake – also at stake is a position that in the event of defeat (or withdrawal from confrontation) will enable him to return to politics after a certain period of time or in some other capacity. Also at stake is a place among Ukraine's 'independence fathers'. During the inauguration eucharistic liturgy, Metropolitan Epiphanius officially thanked President Poroshenko, saying that it would not have been possible to obtain autocephaly had President Poroshenko not been involved.

Prospects for the new church

The outcome of the council meeting means that a new situation has arisen in Ukrainian orthodoxy, but does not amount to a solution that overcomes the current split. This is only the beginning of a process that will be fraught with difficulties and could trigger a series of conflicts within Ukraine and in Ukrainian-Russian

relations. Two structures of equal status and similar strength will co-exist in Ukraine (in terms of the number of dioceses, although the UOC has the upper hand with respect to the number of parishes), and there is mutual hostility between the two. The PCU and the UOC will both enjoy strong support – first one from Kyiv, the second one – from Moscow. This only makes them likely to be used in instrumental fashion for political purposes. Thus, in addition to a gradual move of UOC faithful to the new structure, the two structures can be expected to fortify their current positions and try to draw faithful to their side. This scenario, which becomes more likely the closer the elections get, could not only destabilise Ukraine further but also be a pretext for Russia to escalate its strong-arm measures against Ukraine.

A key question will be drawing as many UOC faithful, priests, and bishops to the autocephalous church.

While it should be possible for the KP UOC and UAOC structures to be transferred without serious difficulties, the key question will be drawing as many UOC bishops, priests, and faithful to the autocephalous church as possible. The fact that the council meeting was only attended by two UOC bishops and in the past the notion of autocephaly was supported by ten, could mean at present that pressure on the part of the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church has a greater effect than the PCU's power to attract. Although, once the official process of granting autocephaly is completed, some adherents can be expected to move to the new church, at the moment it is hard to predict how many will do so. Moreover, at the moment the PCU will rely predominantly on the former Kyiv Patriarchate, which will probably hamper the process of drawing UOC bishops and priests to the new church, at least during the lifetime of Honoura-

⁴ For more details see T.A. Olszański, 'The fight for canonical independence for Ukrainian Orthodoxy', *OSW Commentary*, 13.06.2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2018-06-13/fight-canonical-independence-ukrainian-orthodoxy-0>

ble Patriarch Filaret (for many, this person is the rock of offence). On the other hand, for some time there has been information about various kinds of pressure being exerted by the Ukrainian local authorities on individual UOC bishops and priests to draw them to the new church. This pressure should not be expected to abate.

During the process of building the unified church, disputes will arise over the use of religious premises. These will have to be resolved by the secular authorities.

The situation regarding sympathy among the faithful in what was the 'Moscow' UOC remains unclear, especially as currently no opinion polls can be considered credible. Earlier surveys showed that following the breakout of war with Russia, some of the orthodox faithful changed from the UOC to the KP UOC for patriotic reasons. In Ukraine, there was (and probably still is) a large group of people who are simply 'orthodox' worshippers, who ignore the split between the orthodox churches or who do not understand it. The attitude of these 'culture orthodox' believers will be important. These are people whose religious affiliation is primarily or solely an element of their social identity, while matters of sacrament are less important. In these new circumstances, the patriotic faithful can be expected to change to the new church, and the anti-patriotic (anti-Kyiv) faithful to concentrate (and become active) in the 'old' church.

During the process of building the unified church, use of religious premises will be a crucial issue, especially in towns where there is only one orthodox church, and also with respect to a church that has special spiritual significance. It is almost certain that there will be disputes and conflicts enflamed by supporters of rival political groups and Russian agents alike (especially in regard to highly important sites).

The importance of Ukrainian orthodox communities, consciously wishing to preserve the relationship with the Moscow Patriarchate, should also not be underestimated. These will be clustered around all the large monasteries, most of which are pro-Moscow, and Metropolitan Agatanghel of Odessa, as well as oligarchs and the Opposition Bloc and lay orthodox activist, Vadim Novinsky.

These problems will have to be resolved by the secular authorities, since under the Ukrainian Law on Religious Belief of 1991 the state's sole partner is local 'communities of the faithful' (parishes, communities of monks, curia, and other institutions), while churches as such are not recognised as legal entities. Meanwhile, all religious premises are owned by the state (the status of premises constructed after 1991 is not clear) and the state authorities can make them available for use by the faithful. This gives the authorities, especially local authorities, significant potential for exerting pressure. Attempts to take over UPC churches by force can also be expected. At times these will be provocations on the part of Russia in nationalist organisations, at times their own measures, and at times measures aimed at disinformation⁵.

The fate of two *lavras* (monasteries of special spiritual rank), Pochayiv and Kyiv-Pechersk, will be particularly important. Both are controlled by supporters of the radically pro-Russian orthodoxy. In both cases, in recent weeks, measures have been seen that show that Kyiv is putting pressure on *lavra* leadership. The location of the Pechersk *lavra* in the city centre makes it sensitive. Activities of any kind centred around it will take place with the world (journalists but also diplomats) watching, and therefore any provocation there will have major repercussions.

Odessa might also become a hotspot in the coming months. Odessa is not so much

⁵ Information disseminated on 15 December, saying that an unidentified group had occupied the UOC cathedral church in Vinnytsia (which was dispersed after a few minutes), could be a foretaste of what is to come.

pro-Russian as anti-Kyiv, and is particularly hostile towards the current Ukrainian powers and susceptible to provocations on the part of agents working to spread Moscow's propaganda and influence. It is the seat of the above-mentioned Metropolitan Agatangel. For the time being it is not clear how Moscow will react to the council's decisions, in particular de-

priving Metropolitan Onufry of the title of Metropolitan of Kyiv and the expected revocation by the Ukrainian authorities of the right to use the name of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by the structures, not unified into the new church. Russia will certainly try to enflame the conflicts that are emerging and provoke new ones.

Text finalised on the morning of December 17.

APPENDIX

Biography of Epiphanius, Metropolitan of Kyiv and the whole of Ukraine

Metropolitan Epiphanius was born Serhii Dumenko on 3 February 1979 in the district of Odessa, but moved as a small child to Chernivtsi, where he lived in a rural area in the county of Storozhy-nets. In 1996 he joined the UOC KP seminary in Kyiv. He completed a doctorate in theology in 2003 and studied philosophy at the University of Athens in 2006–2007, later becoming a lecturer at Kyiv Theological Academy. In 2007 he was ordained as a monk, he took holy orders and became a priest in 2008, and was made a bishop in 2009. In 2008 he became secretary to Patriarch Filaret, in 2010 he was appointed Dean of the Kyiv Theological Academy, in 2012 he became Metropolitan of Pereyaslav-Khmelnytsky and Boryspil, and in June 2013 – viceroy and *locum tenens* to Patriarch Filaret, with right of succession. This was due to a decision made by the UOC KP synod not to elect a new patriarch following the death of Filaret (in order to aid the unification of Ukrainian orthodoxy). Metropolitan Epiphanius therefore became the *de facto* leader of the Kyiv Patriarchate UOC. Filaret undoubtedly selected Epiphanius for his outstanding skills, and as a trustworthy figure.

Metropolitan Epiphanius is a theologian and academic lecturer. He speaks Greek and has written approximately 50 academic articles. His rapid career meant that in the meantime he did not gain any experience doing pastoral work (he has never been a parish priest or bishop of a diocese). He represents a new generation of Ukrainian priests. When he finished secondary school, Ukraine was independent and so he is not tarnished by the legacy of the Soviet attitude to churches – (including the actions of the KGB in this area). His few interviews reveal that he is in favour of Ukraine's integration with Europe and a radical severing of the ties still connecting the Ukrainian state with Russia.

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