

Veera Laine, *Research Fellow*

HOLY RUS CHALLENGED

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN CHURCHES IN UKRAINE HAS CONSEQUENCES FOR RUSSIA, UKRAINE AND THE ORTHODOX WORLD

The initiative to create an autocephalous national Orthodox Church in Ukraine, proposed by the political leadership of the country, now seems more likely than ever before. The Russian Orthodox Church duly risks losing its economic support and status in the Orthodox world, which has political implications for Russia as well.

In April 2018, President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko requested the Archbishop of Constantinople to grant autocephalous (independent) status for a new, national Ukrainian Orthodox Church. According to the president, this would be a way to ‘cut the last knot’ tying the country to the empire, namely Russia. The initiative as such is nothing new: previous presidents of Ukraine have also supported the idea of a national Church in order to increase independence from Moscow. Previously, however, the realization of the plan has never seemed as likely as it does now.

The majority of Ukrainians identify themselves as Orthodox. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the largest of the three Orthodox Churches operating in

Ukraine is the formally autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. In 1992, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate detached itself from the Moscow Patriarchate. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, originally established in 1921 and existing in exile from the 1930s until the 1990s, is rather marginal in size. Of the three Churches, only the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is canonically recognized by the rest of the Orthodox world.

The canonical recognition of the Church is of paramount importance for committed Orthodox believers because it is the only guarantee of the spiritual authority of the Church. However, not everyone

in Ukraine can be assumed to fully support the idea of creating a ‘national’ Orthodox Church, as many practical issues concerning the future of the potentially new autocephalous Church are unclear. How the new Church structure would be formed, and who would serve as the Patriarch of the local Ukrainian Orthodox Church remain to be decided.

The final decision on the matter rests with the Archbishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, who has historically-rooted authority in the Orthodox world. In July, he gave a statement supporting the idea of granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Church – and in September, he announced that the official decision will follow soon. Even

having chosen his side in the conflict, Bartholomew I cannot ignore the views of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which is the spiritual home for approximately 100 million Orthodox believers.

The ROC has had an uneasy relationship with Constantinople for a long time. In the current dispute, the ROC sees granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as its vested right because Ukraine belongs to its canonical territory. Today, there is practically an open conflict between the ROC and the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In September, the Holy Synod of the ROC announced that the Moscow Patriarchate no longer includes the prayerful commemoration of the Patriarch of Constantinople in its liturgy, and will not take part in any theological structures chaired by it.

Losing the parishes in Ukraine would constitute a significant symbolic and financial loss for Moscow. It would also mean that the ROC, which has been trying to increase its influence within the Orthodox world, would appear much weaker. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2014, the representatives of the ROC have been cautious in their public statements precisely because they sought to avoid those risks. The Church, however, could

not prevent the political conflict from spilling over into the religious sphere.

In Russia, for at least a decade up to now, the Orthodox Church and the secular state leadership have both applied the idea of the ‘Russian world’. The concept refers to the unity of the post-Soviet space in general, and between Russia, Belarus and Ukraine in particular. Even though definitions vary, the concept of the ‘Russian world’ points to the unity of (culturally defined) Russians, which extends beyond the borders of the current Russian Federation. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the term took on irredentist connotations, especially outside Russia. The ROC recognizes the unwelcoming attitudes towards the concept, but in its view, the idea of the united Russian world is still much stronger than national sovereignty. For the ROC, the Russian world is essential as it is seen as a parallel to the historical Holy Rus, a Christian community created by God.

For several years, the Russian state leadership has borrowed the religious-conservative rhetoric of the ROC, and enjoyed moral support from the Church. Thus far, the relationship seems to have been mutually beneficial. If the ROC is indeed to suffer a significant loss of

status in Ukraine, it will inevitably affect its political position in Russia as well.

Even if the outcome of the current struggle is not yet clear, it has already had serious consequences. The disagreements between the ROC and the Patriarchate of Constantinople have escalated into a direct conflict. Moreover, the ROC now risks losing its influence in the ‘Russian world’. In light of the close relationship between the state and the Church in Russia, the loss of status of the ROC in Ukraine, but also elsewhere in the Orthodox world, will have an effect on Russian politics and might even result in a more aggressive foreign policy line.