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Strengthening the State-Religion Nexus in Post-Maidan Ukraine

The Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as Nation-Building Strategy after the Revolution

Marco Puleri and Nina Vukoslavcevic

In this paper, the authors aim to reveal the slight variations in the role played by the tie between a state-religion and a nation-building strategy. To explore better how religion may become an intrinsic part of national identity, the authors focus here on the case of Ukraine, where the process of autocephaly was finalized in 2018. This paper shows how the Ukrainian officials endeavoured to endorse a new ideological agenda characterized by the close connection between religion and nationalism, obtaining a rally-round-the flag effect that made religion increasingly important for the Ukrainian national identity.

Keywords: Ukraine, Autocephaly, National Identity

1. Introduction

It is quite obvious that the future of church-state relations in Ukraine will depend heavily on the choices made by the newly independent state in its nation-building strategy. It is equally true that the religious policy of the government and the response to it on the part of organized religion will influence the process of nation-building¹.

At the turn of the millennium, Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokyh reflected upon the uncertain future of church-state relations in independent

¹ S. Plokyh, *Church, State and Nation in Ukraine*, in «Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe», 19, 5, 1999, pp. 1-34, here 1.

Ukraine. In his 1999 article, Plokyh invited to look at the formation of religious policy in Ukraine through the lens of the controversial dynamics of the nation-building agenda adopted in the first decade of the newly-independent state. On the one hand, under the first president of Ukraine, Leonid Makarovych Kravchuk (1991-1994), we witnessed how the major goal in the church-state relations «was directed toward the establishment of a *de facto* state church of the Ukrainian Orthodox denomination»²: along these lines, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) «enjoyed substantial support from the government»³, and gradually became «a rallying point for national democrats who wanted a “Ukrainian Ukraine” in linguistic, cultural, and political terms»⁴.

On the other, it was under Leonid Kuchma (1994-2005) that the «new government’s decision to support the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) fully corresponded to the broader policy of the presidential administration on questions of nationality, culture and language»⁵, which was now directed towards a rapprochement with Russian cultural heritage and political elite. Most fundamentally, Plokyh could already observe how the emerging state-religion nexus in independent Ukraine ran along the contradictory dynamics of nation-building, whereby the promotion of the different shapes of the Ukrainian “national idea” could easily be related to the respective stances claimed by the plural religious institutions of the newly-born state⁶.

Similarly, in a global perspective, the question(s) that arise in today’s academic debates around the state-religion nexus do not address the conflict, but rather discuss the link between religion and nationalism: today the issue lies at the core of international relations (IR), especially so in the context of contemporary identity politics⁷.

² *Ibidem*, p. 14.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

⁶ Or, as Plokyh put it: «In the area of church-state relations, current Ukrainian governments face the dilemma of either forging an alliance with the traditional (national) churches, or allowing “all flowers to bloom,” with consequent equal treatment of all denominations, including those closely linked to neighboring states (especially Russia and Poland)», *ibidem*, p. 1.

⁷ As Francis Fukuyama argues, in public and academic debates we have been predominantly accustomed to see political struggles as a response to economic conflicts, while in recent decades we undoubtedly witnessed a proliferation of identity conflicts.

At the same time, the role of religion as a significant political factor has only recently been recognized as playing or having played an essential part in world politics within the IR literature⁸. Most fundamentally, religion, and the church as the institution promoting it, are most deeply entrenched in the shaping of national identity in South-eastern and Eastern Europe – with religion representing a source of national unity and pride⁹.

Moreover, in countries with a predominant Orthodox population, the needs for autocephaly and political independence seem to complement each other, even though this is a notably under-researched phenomenon when compared to other components of national identity-formation¹⁰. Furthermore, the general public in Orthodox-majority states is keener to think about religious identity mainly as a

Thus, identity politics has been used as the framework to examine many of the global developments, especially in connection with religion: among the most relevant ones, for example, since 2020 we witnessed increased religious antagonisms in India and China. See F. Fukuyama, *Against Identity Politics. The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy*, in «Foreign Affairs», 97, 5, 2018, pp. 90-114; J. Klocek, *Combating Religious Discrimination in India and Beyond*, United States Institute of Peace, 13 May 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/05/combating-religious-discrimination-india-and-beyond> (4 April 2023); A. Kohli and S. McGoey, *As Global Pressure over Human Rights Abuses in Xinjiang Picks Up, China Remains Defiant*, International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 15 August 2021, <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/as-global-pressure-over-human-rights-abuses-in-xinjiang-picks-up-china-remains-defiant/> (4 April 2023).

⁸ For example, Jeffrey Haynes and Jack Snyder define religion as an understudied factor within the IR. See C. Hann, *The Nation-State, Religion, and Uncivil Society: Two Perspectives from the Periphery*, in «Daedalus», 126, 2, 1997, pp. 27-45; *Religion and International Relations Theory*, ed. by J. Snyder, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011; J. Haynes, *Handbook on Religion and International Relations*, Cheltenham-Northampton MA, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021.

⁹ See N. Sahgal and A. Cooperman, *Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe*, PEW Research Center, 10 May 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/> (4 April 2023).

¹⁰ See D. Zabarah, *Autocephaly: A Delayed Transition from Empire to National State?*, in «Acta Slavica Iaponica», 33, 2013, pp. 47-65, here 47. The link between religious identity and national identity is not as vivid in the Catholic-majority states. For example, in the Czech Republic the share of people identifying as Catholic declined from 44% in 1991 to 21% in 2017, see Sahgal and Cooperman, *Religious Belief and National Belonging*, cit. Data for the Czech Republic is from a 1991 survey by Pew Research Center's predecessor, the Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press. Czechs were interviewed as part of Czechoslovakia in 1991. The 2017 survey was conducted in eighteen countries.

part of the national culture, rather than a matter of individual faith¹¹. Therefore, nation-building in Southeastern and Eastern Europe was, and still is, predominantly based on religion¹². After the blooming of national autocephalous churches in the 20th and the 21st centuries, autocephaly has become increasingly important as it has gained a national and an emotive notion¹³. As David Little argued at the height of the post-Cold War wave of state-formation and nation-building: «There is something worth examining about the recurring correlation of religious belief with ethnicity and nationalism»¹⁴. Even though there exists a number of studies on nationalism¹⁵, IR scholars inadequately addressed the changes affecting national identities over time, and the consequences these changes hold for international relations¹⁶. It is no surprise that Neophytos Loizides emphasizes how the identified research gap is most visible especially in regard to Eastern Europe: in particular, the matter of concern goes around the auto-cephaly-sovereignty nexus¹⁷.

The efforts of secular states to obtain a national church is what makes autocephaly a particularly puzzling phenomenon: actually, gaining the recognition of the status of autocephalous church does not only represent a foreign policy goal, but at the same time it is also tightly linked to the process of nation-building and the development of national identities themselves¹⁸. This puzzle, consequently, does not represent only a religious issue, since autocephaly is understood

¹¹ Sahgal and Cooperman, *Religious Belief and National Belonging*, cit.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ See D. Šljivić and N. Živković, *Self-Ruled and Self-Consecrated Ecclesiastic Schism as a Nation-Building Instrument in the Orthodox Countries of South Eastern Europe*, in «Genealogy», 4, 2, 2020, pp. 1-36.

¹⁴ D. Little, *Belief, Ethnicity, and Nationalism*, in «Nationalism and Ethnic Politics», 1, 2, 1995, pp. 284-301, here 285.

¹⁵ E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1983; B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983; E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992; W. Connor, *Ethnonationalism. The Quest for Understanding*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994; A.D. Smith, *National Identity*, London, Penguin Books, 1991.

¹⁶ A. de la Garza, *A Post-structuralist Approach to National Identity After the Cold War: The Case of Mexico*, PhD Diss., London, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2004, p. 5.

¹⁷ N.G. Loizides, *Religious Nationalism and Adaptation in Southeast Europe*, in «Nationalities Papers», 37, 2, 2009, pp. 203-227, here 203.

¹⁸ See Šljivić and Živković, *Self-Ruled and Self-Consecrated*, cit., p. 3.

not only as an objective in itself, but also as a way of strengthening sovereignty – especially when perceiving the latter as being under threat. Therefore, the recognition of a national church seems to be linked more with the power of the state and the church that exists within that state: i.e., the status of autocephaly not only raises the issue of a relationship between states, but also concerns the link between state and church. It follows that the literature needs to better engage with the question of the role of religious independence within the processes of national identity-formation and nation-building, and thereby also state sovereignty.

In light of the above-mentioned remarks, in this paper we aim to improve our understanding of the role played by the religion-state nexus *vis-a-vis* nation-building strategy. As many scholars emphasized, the legitimization of national identity through religious sentiments generally occurs in states which are experiencing a political turmoil¹⁹, states which did not have time to consolidate a firm national identity²⁰, and/or states in which the church plays an important role in social and political life, e.g. has the status of the most trusted institution²¹. To better explore how religion may become an intrinsic part of national identity, here we will focus on the case of Ukraine, where the process of autocephaly has been recently finalized – although not necessarily the same can be said for the process of national identity-formation.

Since the analytical focus of this paper is the role of religion in the process of nation-building, this paper relies on poststructuralist theoretical underpinnings, and uses discourse analysis to make how the religion-state nexus works visible. In this paper we will devote our attention to three types of politically influential actors: the government, the religious leaders, and the civil society. Finally, since here

¹⁹ B.-A.J. Rieffer, *Religion and Nationalism: Understanding the Consequences of a Complex Relationship*, in «Ethnicities», 3, 2, 2003, pp. 215-242, here 230.

²⁰ E.K. Jenne and F. Bieber, *Situational Nationalism: Nation-building in the Balkans, Subversive Institutions and the Montenegrin Paradox*, in «Ethnopolitics», 13, 5, 2014, pp. 431-460, here 439.

²¹ For example, polls by the Razumkov Centre show that 59.8% of Ukrainians trust the church: this value shows how people trust more in the church, rather than in the government. See M. Mischenko, *The Society's Expectations of Church and Interchurch Relations* (public opinion survey), Razumkov Centre Ukraine, 13 November 2018, <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/component/k2/international-conference-reconciliation-strategies-the-role-of-churches-in-ukraine?fbclid=IwAR0Ue0-tLITSOADmIx-8tygKIAMODo3J2qxr9iKkspUOU917wDciEfs-Y> (4 April 2023).

autocephaly is observed as a tool to consolidate the independence endangered by the “external other”, we will also explore the way it is associated to the broader debate about sovereignty. For this reason, in this article the role of Russia – i.e., the way the state-religion nexus is articulated in the Russian Federation – will be also explored.

2. *The State-Religion Nexus in Post-Soviet Politics*

Whereby Orthodoxy as a religious tradition «is organized on a nation-state model. State churches by and large serve a particular nation»²², in the case of Ukraine, as Catherine Wanner emphasized, we witnessed a rather peculiar situation, where «there are four churches [...] all claiming to be national churches»²³. At the same time, the issue of establishing «an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church to complement statehood» has been frequently raised by each Ukrainian president since 1991²⁴, thus emphasizing the role played by national religious institutions to legitimize and strengthen national sovereignty. It was only in 2018, as a result of the policies implemented by the first post-Maidan political elite, that we witnessed one of the «major shifts in the *status quo* of Ukrainian Orthodoxy which had remained relatively stable for more than two decades», bringing to «an unprecedentedly high level of intertwining between religion and politics in the public sphere of Ukraine»²⁵.

Adopting a historical perspective, as Plokyh suggests, the «influence of Soviet religious policy on the practice of church-state relations in independent Ukraine can be scarcely exaggerated», since all the major promoters of the reform of church-state relations after the collapse of the USSR «were products of the Soviet era»²⁶. Thus, among the major legacies of the Soviet era we may identify a kind of

²² C. Wanner, *Orthodoxy and the Future of Secularism After the Maidan*, in «Euxeinos», 17, 2015, monographic issue, *Religion and Political Crisis in Ukraine*, ed. by C. Wanner, pp. 8-12, here 8.

²³ C. Wanner, *Ukraine: Church and State*, in «History Today», 64, 4, 2014, pp. 18-19, here 18.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ See D. Shestopalets, *Church and State in Ukraine after the Euromaidan: President Poroshenko's Discourse on Religion, 2014-2018*, in «Politics and Religion», 13, 1, 2020, pp. 150-179, here 150-151.

²⁶ Plokyh, *Church, State and Nation in Ukraine*, cit., p. 8.

«legal and illegal state surveillance of religious life and active intervention of the state authorities in church affairs»²⁷. Officially, still on the eve of Ukrainian independence, the Supreme Council of Ukraine (Verhovna Rada) proclaimed the complete separation of church and state, after adopting the 1991 law on religious associations: the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was again legalized, while in June 1992 the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) was renamed the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP). While the latter was a non-canonically recognized church, the UAOC was re-established in 1990, embodying the symbolic legacy of the struggle for Ukrainian statehood after the collapse of the Tsarist Empire, when it was first created²⁸. Along them, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate started to play a relevant role in establishing connections with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), as being an integral part of it. Here we may already identify an important distinction between Ukrainian and Russian religious institutions, whereby in Ukraine «the moral authority of clergy has evolved differently from that of their Russian counterparts»²⁹. In the aftermath of Euromaidan, Wanner argued:

The Orthodox Church in Russia has historically had a symbiotic relationship with the state, referred to as *simfonia*, or mutual co-operation between church and state. In contrast, during the current crisis in Ukraine, as during the Orange Revolution in 2004, clergy from a wide spectrum of religious organisations were visible participants³⁰.

As for Russia, a concrete example of this «mutual co-operation» is the conceptual approach to the idea of *Russkiy mir* (Russian world), which is functional for both the foreign policy ambitions of the Russian state and the hegemonic status of the ROC in the former imperial and Soviet space. It is no surprise that Russia, in the process of negating Ukraine's distinguished national identity, developed alternative identities, which are, for the most part, built around the idea

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

²⁸ Wanner, *Ukraine: Church and State*, cit., p. 18.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

of *Russkiy mir* – an ideology reinforced by the ROC, which slowly turned into an equivalent of the Russian/Orthodox/Slavic civilization³¹. As Mikhail Suslov observed, even in the national Orthodox geopolitical imagination, since Patriarch Kirill of Moscow became the head of the ROC in 2009, this began to signify, along with the twin concept of Holy Rus', «an ethnically and religiously united landmass, comprised of Russia proper, Belarus, Ukraine, and, depending on the geopolitical appetites of ideologues, parts of other post-Soviet republics»³². In other words, together with Wanner, we may assume that the «concept of a Russian World, as an imagined community based on the Russian language, culture, and Orthodoxy, categorically denies the very possibility of an independent, autonomous Ukrainian nation and church»³³. It is often misused as Russia's ethical responsibility “to defend Russians”, since the Russian patriarch openly advocates it in order to rationalize Russian political, military, and ecclesiastical presence in Ukraine³⁴.

On the one hand, the war in Donbas, which Metropolitan Onufry (Berezovsky) described as a «civil war»³⁵, the refusal of some of the clergy to provide burial services to the deceased, and the aid provided to Russian troops undoubtedly increased the determination of Ukrainian clerical and political elites for religious independence from Russia³⁶. On the other hand, even if Euromaidan initially occurred as a political phenomenon, the way this need for a political change later unfolded was not secular: religious symbols were heavily incorporated in the protest, and a mass daily prayer for peace was held by

³¹ See T. Zhurzhenko, *A Divided Nation? Reconsidering the Role of Identity Politics in the Ukraine Crisis*, in «Die Friedens-Warte», 89, 1-2, 2014, pp. 249-267, here 249.

³² See M. Suslov, *The “Russian World” Concept in Online Debates during the Ukrainian Crisis*, in *Eurasia 2.0. Russian Geopolitics in the Age of New Media*, ed. by M. Suslov and M. Bassin, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2016, pp. 295-316, here 295.

³³ C. Wanner, *Everyday Religiosity and the Politics of Belonging in Ukraine*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2022, p. 15.

³⁴ Zhurzhenko, *A Divided Nation?*, cit., p. 258.

³⁵ See *Mitropolit Onufriy: Neobkhodimo prekratit voyni i perestat ubivat drug druga* (Metropolitan Onufry: It Is Necessary to Stop the War and Stop Killing Each Other), in «Ukraina.ru», 14 July 2022, <https://ukraina.ru/interview/20150714/1013658370.html> (4 April 2023). Henceforth, the English translations are by the authors.

³⁶ V. Samokhvalov, *Crisis in Ukraine: Brewing Religious Conflict*. Policy Brief 1, Promote Ukraine, February 2018, https://www.academia.edu/36213056/Crisis_in_Ukraine_Brewing_Religious_Conflict (4 April 2023).

priests in Kyiv³⁷. Undoubtedly, the clergy of the UOC-KP played an important role in the so-called “Revolution of dignity” as a strong pro-Ukraine factor³⁸. It is also important to mention that the people who died during the protests are known as “the heavenly hundred”, suggesting a linkage between patriotism and religious feelings³⁹. This type of discourse can also be seen in the later references by Patriarch Filaret (Denysenko) in his public speeches, where Vladimir Putin is equated to Judas and Satan⁴⁰.

Besides religion and glorifying national myths, Ukrainian nationalism significantly takes into account entire historical oppression coming from Russia. President Viktor Yanukovich’s retreat of the EU accords in favor of aligning with Moscow, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and the war in Donbas are all added to the book of older grievances such as the *Holodomor*⁴¹. Different practices of alienation, humiliation and anger the citizens of Ukraine had felt boiled over and were finally articulated in the Revolution of dignity⁴². Whereby it began with political, military, and economic concerns, Euromaidan then has swiftly extended to religious affairs.

In light of these developments, between 2014 and 2018, prominent politicians, together with president Petro Poroshenko, took upon a key part in lobbying for autocephaly. Equally important were the religious actors, such as Patriarch Filaret, Metropolitan Epiphanius I of Ukraine, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople and Patriarch Kirill, among others. It is interesting to note that in August 2018, before the ROC cut ties with the Ecumenical Patriarchate,

³⁷ See A. Perkins, *Of Little Green Men and Long Black Robes: The Role of the Orthodox Church in the Conflict in Ukraine*, lecture held at the 21st Annual Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Pennsylvania, 7 November 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/12/little-green-men-long-black-robos-role-orthodox-church-conflict-ukraine/> (5 April 2023).

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ N. Bentzen, *Ukraine: Religion and (Geo-)politics. Orthodox Split Weakens Russia's Influence*, European Parliamentary Research Service, 3 February 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635525/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)635525_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635525/EPRS_BRI(2019)635525_EN.pdf) (5 April 2023).

⁴⁰ Patriarch Filaret quoted in A. McDuffee, *Putin's Possessed by Satan, Says Ukrainian Clergyman*, in «The Atlantic», 6 September 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/its-not-putins-fault-hes-possessed-by-satan-says-ukrainian-clergyman/379741/> (28 April 2023).

⁴¹ Wanner, *Orthodoxy and the Future of Secularism*, cit., p. 16.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 10.

Kirill met with Bartholomew, in the last attempt to stop the autocephaly from finalizing⁴³. In the meeting, his words were: «Your All-Holiness, if you give autocephaly to Ukraine, blood will be poured out»⁴⁴.

This process reached its zenith on 15 December 2018, when a joint council of the UOC-KP and the UAOC decided to merge into the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). On 6 January 2019, the newly elected primate of the OCU, Metropolitan Epiphanius, received a *Tomos* of autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, while Filaret received the title of honorary patriarch⁴⁵.

Furthermore, the responses from Moscow show how much significance the autocephaly holds for both parties, and prove that the OCU's autocephaly did, in fact, destabilize the notion of the *Russkiy mir* (Russian world)⁴⁶. For example, the Moscow Patriarch Kirill labelled the OCU as an unlawful union of schismatics⁴⁷, while Russian

⁴³ K. Liik, M. Metodiev and N. Popescu, *Defender of the Faith? How Ukraine's Orthodox Split Threatens Russia*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 30 May 2019, https://ecfr.eu/publication/defender_of_the_faith_how_ukraines_orthodox_split_threatens_russia/ (5 April 2023).

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Patriarch Filaret was the leading figure in the process of acquiring autocephaly. His first attempt to negotiate the status of an independent Ukrainian Church, back in 1991, resulted in his deposition as a primate of the UOC-MP, which further prompted him to establish an independent parallel structure, thus creating the UOC-KP. For more information on this see Shestopalets, *Church and State in Ukraine*, cit., p. 161. After receiving the title of honorary patriarch, which bore little power, in the newly established church, the conflict between him and Epiphanius ignited. On this see an article *Filaret's "Council" Restores UOC-KP with All its Structure, Property and Criticizes Tomos*, in «Religious Information Service of Ukraine», 20 June 2019, https://risu.ua/en/filaret-s-council-restores-uoc-kp-with-all-its-structure-property-and-criticizes-tomos_n98714 (5 April 2023). This further resulted in Filaret's heavy criticism of the *Tomos* and departure of the OCU to the previously dissolved UOC-KP.

⁴⁶ After Putin assumed his office, Orthodoxy has been used as a soft-power tool, and religion was translated as the mythical unifier of all Slavic people under the concept of *Russkiy mir*, which is used as the base for the new Russian state ideology. The *Russkiy mir* is used to foster the patriotic narrative and conservative principles, which guard all Russians from Western immorality and globalization. For example, in 2015, spiritual-moral values were openly recognized as a Russian national security issue. For more on this see K. Skorkin, *The New Church Politics of Ukraine*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 December 2018, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/78026> (3 April 2023).

⁴⁷ See his quote in *Patriarch Kirill: ROC Will Never Agree to Independence of Ukrainian Church*, in «Religious Information Service of Ukraine», 11 November 2016, https://risu.ua/en/patriarch-kirill-roc-will-never-agree-to-independence-of-ukrainian-church_n82192 (5 April 2023).

president Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov cautioned that «just as Russia defends the interests of Russians and Russian speakers [...] Russia will defend the interests of the Orthodox»⁴⁸, which is a subtle nod to Russia's annexation of Crimea.

In a similar vein, Poroshenko described autocephaly as «a victory for Ukraine and a defeat for Russia, no less important, perhaps even more important, than victory at the front lines»⁴⁹. A vital theme of his rhetoric was the framing of autocephaly as a geopolitical issue⁵⁰. This fusion of religious and political discourses indicated a leaning toward redefining the limits of secularity in Ukraine. To put it in another way, after 2014 Poroshenko translated the UOC-KP's agenda into a state ideology⁵¹, significantly strengthening the close relationship of religion and nationalism.

3. The Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as a Discursive Construction

The process of forming a distinguished Ukrainian national identity was built, among other things, around the idea of having an autocephalous church. This issue is connected to the national interest – as it has been voiced by Poroshenko numerous times⁵². The autocephaly has been repeatedly portrayed by Poroshenko as openly connected to state independence, as it is «*de facto* another Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine», «equal to the independence referendum», and as a «pillar of the Ukrainian state and nation»⁵³.

⁴⁸ See Peskov, quoted in T. Balmforth and N. Zinets, *Russia Vows to Defend Believers in Ukraine Church Dispute*, in «Reuters», 12 October 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-church-kremlin-idUSKCN1MM18O> (4 April 2023).

⁴⁹ See Poroshenko's original quote in A. Roschenko, *Poroshenko priravnyal polucheniyu tomosa k pobede na fronte* (Poroshenko Equated Receiving Tomos with Victory at the Front), in «Ukraynskaja Pravda» (Ukrainian Truth), 15 January 2019, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2019/01/15/7203856/> (4 April 2023).

⁵⁰ Shestopalets, *Church and State in Ukraine*, cit., p. 156.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² For example, see the address of Poroshenko on granting autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, Kanal 5, 19 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAz53teLr9Q> (4 April 2023).

⁵³ He addresses this topic in several of his speeches, in this order: *Address by the President of Ukraine to the Verkhovna Rada "On the Internal and External Situation of Ukraine in 2018"*, 20 September 2018, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/videos/>

This provided a significant impetus for his 2019 presidential campaign, which was formulated along the catchphrase «Army, Language, Faith». This campaign slogan was a frequent point of contact in Poroshenko's and Filaret's rhetoric: army, language, and the autocephalous church are formulated as the main anchors of Ukrainian identity. Poroshenko even said that «the state cannot be established» without all three⁵⁴. The excerpt from Filaret's talk from 2016, in which he stressed that «in order to establish the Ukrainian state we need two things: a strong army and a united autocephalous Orthodox Church», supports this⁵⁵.

Another frequent focal point of the president's speeches was the emphasis on the role of the church as a guarantee of national security. Poroshenko presented the OCU as a «matter of national security» which would strengthen Ukrainian statehood⁵⁶. Similarly, Poroshenko added that «not a single patriot doubts the importance of an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church for an independent Ukrainian state. Such a church is the spiritual guarantor of our sovereignty»⁵⁷.

Finally, the role of autocephaly in strengthening Ukrainian identity as being Western-oriented is also clearly articulated in Poroshenko's speeches. Poroshenko emphasized this when he said that «autocephaly is a component of our state's pro-European and pro-

poslannya-prezidenta-ukrayini-do-verhovnoyi-radi-ukrayini-pr-1006 (28 April 2023); Poroshenko's participation in the TV show *Svoboda Slova*, ICTV, 12 March 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZV9HcuO4V54> (4 April 2023); and *1030th Anniversary of the Christianization of Kievan Rus is Celebrated in Zarvanytsia*, 15 July 2018, <https://uatv.ua/en/1030th-anniversary-christianization-kievan-rus-celebrated-zarvanytsia/> (28 April 2023).

⁵⁴ See P. Poroshenko, *Poroshenko ozvuchil "formulu sroemennoy ukrainskoy identichnosti"* (Poroshenko Announced the "formula of modern Ukrainian identity"), in «Obozrevatel», 20 September 2018, <https://news.obozrevatel.com/politics/poroshenko-ozvuchil-formulu-sroemennoy-ukrainskoj-identichnosti.htm> (4 April 2023).

⁵⁵ See Patriarch Filaret's text *Yedyna Pomisna Tserkva v Ukrainy – shlyakh do prymyrennya u svytomu Pravoslav'i* (A United Local Church in Ukraine Is a Path to Reconciliation in World Orthodoxy), in «Dukhovna velych L'vova», 17 September 2016, <http://velychlviv.com/patriarh-filaret-yedyna-pomisna-tserkva-v-ukrayini-shlyah-do-prymyrennya-u-svitovomu-pravoslav-yi/> (3 April 2023).

⁵⁶ See the address of Poroshenko on granting autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, cit.

⁵⁷ See President Poroshenko, participation in the TV show *Svoboda Slova*, ICTV, 24 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMB8LwBsQVM> (4 April 2023).

Ukrainian strategy»⁵⁸. Furthermore, Epiphanius repeated Poroshenko's words: «Without a unified, nationally independent Orthodox church, we cannot build a strong, powerful, European, independent Ukrainian state»⁵⁹.

In broader terms, in his discursive construction Poroshenko “weaponizes” autocephaly in the political struggle against the Russian “other”, going «far beyond church life»:

The issue of autocephaly goes far beyond the Church's fence. This is an issue of our national security. This is an issue of our statehood. This is an issue of the world politics. [...] Over this year, we have become even more convinced that the Autocephalous Church is the key to independence⁶⁰.

According to Poroshenko's discursive construction, dangers and threats are almost exclusively tied to Russia and, by default, to the ROC. While frequently repeating the premise that «the ROC is acting at Russia's command», Poroshenko uses «the ROC» and «the Russian state» interchangeably, further fusing religious and political notions⁶¹. Differently, when asked whether the OCU will serve as a national church, the former president rejected this idea, claiming that Ukrainians have a free choice in spiritual matters⁶². Yet, during the presentation on the 2018 celebration of the Independence Day, Poroshenko did not fail to alienate the UOC-MP by saying that it «blesses the hybrid war of Putin against Ukraine», highlighting how

⁵⁸ See P. Poroshenko, *Vystup Prezydenta Ukraïny pid chas uchasti u molytovnomu zakhodi za Ukraïnu* (Speech by the President of Ukraine during the Prayer Event for Ukraine), 14 October 2018, <https://kharkivoda.gov.ua/news/95460> (4 April 2023).

⁵⁹ See Epiphanius, quoted in G. Soroka, *A House Divided. Orthodoxy in Post-Maidan Ukraine*, in «BBC News Ukraïna», 1 March 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-47408699> (28 April 2023).

⁶⁰ See P. Poroshenko, *Speech by President Poroshenko on the Results of the Unification Synod*, in «The Ukrainian Weekly», 21 December 2018, <https://www.ukrweekly.com/uwwp/speech-by-president-poroshenko-on-the-results-of-the-unification-synod/> (5 April 2023).

⁶¹ See P. Poroshenko, *Focus: Odyn den z Petrom Poroshenkom* (Focus: One Day with Petro Poroshenko), in «Ukrinform», 5 May 2018, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/2454834-focus-odin-den-z-petrom-poroshenk.html> (4 April 2023).

⁶² See the address of Poroshenko on the occasion of the VII National Prayer Break - fast, Kanal 5, 31 May 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gjhagt5MXjw> (4 April 2023).

he would refrain from calling such churches Ukrainian, since they are not for (ethnic) Ukrainians, which indicates that his understanding of the Ukrainian self does not include Ukrainians who belong to the ROC⁶³.

On the other hand, Patriarch Filaret put the guilt explicitly on president Putin using Bible-inspired rhetoric to compare Putin to Cain, who murdered his brother Abel: «With great regret I must now say publicly that among the rulers of this world [...] there has appeared a new Cain, not by his name but by his deeds»⁶⁴. The patriarch later continued in the same tone, saying that Putin, like «Judas Iscariot, has become possessed by Satan»⁶⁵. By othering and linking Russian people and the ROC and/or UOC-MP's followers with enemies, and aggressors, they are simultaneously differentiated from Ukrainians.

The above-mentioned statements by Poroshenko lay out a notion of religion as being inseparably tied to national identity, which, in turn, elicits a strong emotional response from his audience. For example, when explaining how the government needed to intervene in the autocephaly process, Poroshenko clarified that «autocephaly is granted not so much to a specific church as to a country»⁶⁶.

Another Poroshenko's speech follows the same religious-themed pattern:

None of us could imagine that in 30 years Ukraine would establish itself as an independent state and that we would need a United Local Orthodox Ukrainian Church as much as we need the breath of our life. Why is this so important? Because every one of us understands that a state cannot exist without a church. A nation cannot exist without a church⁶⁷.

⁶³ See the address of Poroshenko on the occasion of the 27th anniversary of Ukrainian independence, in «The Ukrainian Weekly», 31 August 2018, <https://www.ukrweekly.com/uwvp/president-petro-poroshenkos-speech-at-the-military-parade-in-kyiv/> (28 April 2023).

⁶⁴ Patriarch Filaret, quoted in McDuffee, *Putin's Possessed by Satan, Says Ukrainian Clergyman*, cit.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ See the address of Poroshenko on granting autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, cit.

⁶⁷ See the address of Poroshenko on the occasion of the VII National Prayer Breakfast, cit.

Significantly, Patriarch Filaret's speech from 2010 is in tight correlation with Poroshenko's:

If there is an autocephalous church in Ukraine, then it means that there will always be an independent Ukrainian state. The independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church depends on the state. If there is no independent state, then there will be no independent church. If there is – there will be an independent church. Therefore, the independence of the state and church are interrelated⁶⁸.

When speaking about the autocephaly, even in 2016 Poroshenko articulated it as a way of attaining peace and unity in Ukraine⁶⁹. He frequently repeats how the church independence is a «key element» and an «absolutely necessary attribute» of Ukrainian statehood⁷⁰. For example, in his 2018 address to Ukrainians, Poroshenko stated:

The task of establishing an independent local Church is of the same importance as the visa-free regime and the Association Treaty with the EU, both of which we have already achieved. It is also of the same importance as our common struggle for membership in the EU and NATO which is still ahead. This is a question of national security and our defense in the hybrid war because the Kremlin uses the ROC as one of the key tools for influencing Ukraine⁷¹.

On the other hand, the UOC-MP is presented, as Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) says, as a legitimate, canonical, and «multinational

⁶⁸ Find Patriarch Filaret's quote in *Pomestnaya tserkov v novykh politicheskikh usloviyakh: Press-konferentsiya Predstoyatelya UPTs (KP) Filareta v "Glavrede"* (Local Church in the New Political Circumstances. Press Conference of the Primate of the UOC-KP), in «Glavred», 7 April 2010, <http://www.glavred.info/archive/2010/04/07/132656-1.html> (4 April 2023).

⁶⁹ *President at Meeting with Representatives of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations: Main Spiritual Weapon of our Victory is Unity*, 24 April 2016, https://risu.ua/en/president-at-meeting-with-representatives-of-the-all-ukrainian-council-of-churches-and-religious-organizations-main-spiritual-weapon-of-our-victory-is-unity_n79272 (28 April 2023).

⁷⁰ More on this in Poroshenko's participation in the TV show *Svoboda Slova*, cit.

⁷¹ See the address of Poroshenko on Granting Autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, cit.

Orthodox Church»⁷². As the texts analyzed above show, the Ukrainian pursuit of autocephaly was based on history: the main argument was that the Ukrainian Church's demotion to Moscow was in fact uncanonical. Extraordinarily, an additional argument was made, and a geopolitical one: the continued existence of the Ukrainian state rests on an autonomous OCU⁷³. Even the Ecumenical Patriarchate used the political argument⁷⁴, when it claimed that the acquiring of the autocephaly «protects the individuality and identity of the Ukrainian people»⁷⁵.

This blending of religion and politics indicates a certain kind of nationalism, and here Barbara-Ann J. Rieffer's definition of pious nationalism can be used to further explain this. Namely, according to Rieffer, religious sentiments are used as a tool to unite people, by giving them a certain sense of identity and belonging/loyalty to a state⁷⁶. In Ukraine, pious nationalism comes to play two important roles. Firstly, in foreign policy, it is used to foster an idea that church independence and state independence are inseparable, with an aim to weaken certain harmful ideologies, such as the *Russkiy Mir*⁷⁷, and

⁷² See Metropolitan Hilarion: *Actions of the Uniates Have Caused Great Damage not Only to the Ukraine and Her Citizens, but Also to the Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue*, in «Pravmir», 4 June 2014, <https://www.pravmir.com/metropolitan-hilarion-actions-caused-great-damage-ukraine-citizens-also-orthodox-catholic-dialogue/> (4 April 2023).

⁷³ V. Chervonenko and S. Khomenko, *Mytropolyt Epifaniy "My ne mayemo prava rozpalyuvaty v Ukraïni relihiynyy front"* (Metropolitan Epiphanius: "We Have no Right to Incite a Religious Front in Ukraine"), in «BBC News Ukraïna», 1 October 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-47408699> (4 April 2023).

⁷⁴ More on this at the link <https://emvolos.gr/trimelis-antiprosopeia-toy-oikoymenikoy-patriarheioy-stin-oykrania-gia-toys-eortasmoys-tis-1030is-epeteioy-apo-to-vaptisma-ton-ros/> (28 April 2023).

⁷⁵ It should be mentioned that one of the motives for the Ecumenical Patriarchate to issue the UOC's autocephaly was its rivalry with the ROC on canonical supremacy in the Orthodox world. This rivalry is further connected to the *Russkiy Mir*, since its positive outcome presumes the superiority of the ROC. More information can be found in the article by L.S. Tonoyan and D.P. Payne, *The Visit of Patriarch Kirill to Ukraine in 2009 and its Significance in Ukraine's Political and Religious Life*, in «Religion, State and Society», 38, 3, 2010, pp. 253-264, here 256.

⁷⁶ Rieffer, *Religion and Nationalism*, cit., p. 230.

⁷⁷ *Russkiy Mir* makes a clear distinction between the sacred, religious East, and the godless West. Ukraine's possible candidacy in the EU, as opposed to the Eurasian Economic Union, would instantaneously signify its failure. This is brilliantly analyzed in the text by C. Hovorun, *The Cause of the Ukrainian Autocephaly*, in *Religion*

to severe connections with Russia⁷⁸. Secondly, when it comes to domestic politics, the autocephaly campaign was used as Poroshenko's populist scheme to establish himself as the "father of the nation" and to boost his (slim) chances in the upcoming 2019 presidential elections⁷⁹.

4. Conclusions

Even though the church-state divide exists on paper, the church continuously participates in the Ukrainian political life. This becomes clear when we take into account that priests encourage voters to elect a specific political figure, support revolutions, and call on government officials to pardon other politicians⁸⁰. This paper has shown that the country officials tried to endorse a new ideological agenda, characterized by the close connection of religion and nationalism, resulting in a rally-round-the-flag effect which made religion increasingly important for the Ukrainian national identity⁸¹.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the issue of autocephaly has politicized Ukrainian society along ethnic lines, which was apparent when the Ukrainian parliament called for the UOC-MP to re-enlist with a different name, the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, which is problematic since some of the UOC-MP followers are not ethnically Russian⁸². Even though the question of autocephaly did

During the Russian Ukrainian Conflict, ed. by E.A. Clark and D. Vovk, London-New York, Routledge, 2020, pp. 180-191.

⁷⁸ Shestopalets, *Church and State in Ukraine*, cit., p. 171.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰ The case of Yulia Tymoshenko makes this clear. For more information see *Heads of Ukrainian Churches Ask President Yanukovich to Release Tymoshenko*, in «Religious Information Service of Ukraine», 3 April 2012, https://risu.ua/en/heads-of-ukrainian-churches-ask-president-yanukovich-to-release-tymoshenko_n55792 (4 April 2023).

⁸¹ A graph provided by the Pew Research Center shows a sharp rise in share of adults who describe themselves as Orthodox in Ukraine: namely, in 1991 only 39% of population described themselves as Orthodox, while in 2015, twenty-four years later, it is 78%, which is 39% more than before independence. See Sahgal and Cooperman, *Religious Belief and National Belonging*, cit.

⁸² L.N. Leustean and V. Samokhvalov, *The Ukrainian National Church, Religious Diplomacy, and the Conflict in Donbas*, in «Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies», 2, 2019, pp. 199-224, here 223.

politicize Ukrainian society, the role of the OCU as an identity-forming establishment might indeed reinforce the Ukrainian national identity, but it could also alienate Ukraine's largest minority groups, thus undermining the foundation of an open, liberal society, which was one of the original Euromaidan goals.

Furthermore, Mykola Riabchuk and Mikhail Molchanov argue that both Russia and Ukraine are using history, religion, and language issues as a nation-building tools. Riabchuk further claims that relations will not be stabilized until Russia starts perceiving Ukraine as neutrally different and truly independent, as opposed to either "good" or "bad"⁸³, while Molchanov writes that the Ukrainian government should slightly alter the discourse on the Russian people, as the divide in Ukraine would heal better without vilification⁸⁴. He claims that the Russian imperialistic and superior notion needs to be deconstructed, just as the narrative describing Ukrainians as «almost the same people», part of the «Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian brotherhood», in order for democratic rebuilding of relations to happen⁸⁵.

Nonetheless, at one point, the discourse of the Russian officials began to indicate a shift from soft to hard power. Threatening messages about protecting Russian religious and language minorities, articulated by, for example, Peskov, Sergey Lavrov, and Putin preceded the 2022 Russian invasion⁸⁶. Eventually, Ukraine's defiant continuation with Western integration and its historical struggle of pursuing political and religious independence created a risk for Russia's idea of *Russkiy mir*, national security, and imperial identity⁸⁷, which further contributed to the complete transition from soft to hard power.

⁸³ M. Riabchuk, *Ukrainians as Russia's Negative "Other": History Comes Full Circle*, in «Communist and Post-Communist Studies», 49, 1, 2016, pp. 75-85, here 76.

⁸⁴ M.A. Molchanov, *Russia as Ukraine's "Other": Identity and Geopolitics*, in *Ukraine and Russia. People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, ed. by A. Pikulicka-Wilczewska and R. Sakwa, Bristol, E-International Relations Publishing, 2015, pp. 206-221, here 208.

⁸⁵ Riabchuk, *Ukrainians as Russia's Negative "Other"*, cit., here 79.

⁸⁶ See Peskov, quoted in Balmforth and Zinets, *Russia Vows to Defend Believers in Ukraine Church Dispute*, cit.; Lavrov quoted in R. Popeski and L. Kelly, *Russia's Lavrov: Either Ukraine Fulfills Moscow's Proposals or our Army Will Decide*, in «Reuters», 26 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russias-lavrov-either-ukraine-fulfills-moscows-proposals-or-our-army-will-decide-2022-12-26/> (5 April 2023); and lastly, V. Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (5 April 2023).

⁸⁷ Hovorun, *The Cause of the Ukrainian Autocephaly*, cit.

Lastly, after a full-scale war indeed broke out, it may seem that Samuel Huntington's ambiguous "clash of civilizations" theory (1996) fell into water, since it anticipated that states with predominant Orthodox populations will not wage wars between themselves⁸⁸. What Huntington failed to observe is that in Eastern Europe Orthodoxy is not detached from national identity: in fact, religion, and the church through it, are deeply entrenched in the national identity⁸⁹. Putin himself outlined this idea in his article preceding the military invasion, titled *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*⁹⁰. In this document, Putin claims that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are the same people, who trace their Orthodox Christian roots to Volodymyr the Great, the prince whose baptism in 988 in Kyiv led to the Christianization of the region known as the Kievan Rus⁹¹. This further implies that some of his motives for conquering Kyiv could be interpreted as being part of a "spiritual quest", which unleashed a globally condemned invasion of Ukraine and the largest refugee crisis in Europe since 1945⁹².

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⁸⁸ S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁰ See Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, cit.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

⁹² N. Denysenko, *Ukrainian Autocephaly: A Challenge to Russian Neo-Imperialism*, in «Canopy Forum on the Interactions of Law & Religion», 17 April 2022, <https://canopyforum.org/2022/04/17/ukrainian-autocephaly-a-challenge-to-russian-neo-imperialism/> (4 April 2023).