

# Ukraine: Religion and (geo-)politics

## Orthodox split weakens Russia's influence

### SUMMARY

Five years after the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople – widely seen as the spiritual leader (*primus inter pares*) of the Eastern Orthodox world – granted the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) 'autocephaly' on 5 January 2019, formalising a split from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The move follows an intensified Ukrainian campaign to obtain religious independence and thereby reduce the influence of the ROC, which plays a key role in the Kremlin's identity politics in the region.

This development could have wide-reaching implications. Such a blow to the ROC undermines the Kremlin's 'soft' spiritual influence. The Kremlin views the development as a question of national security and is unlikely to accept the defeat without resistance. The issue is expected to play a prominent role in the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine.

In a wider context — reflecting Moscow's nexus between geopolitics and religion — the decision of the ROC to sever ties with Constantinople in response to the decision to grant the OCU autocephaly could mark the beginning of a wider rift in the Orthodox world. Moscow appears to be exerting pressure on other Orthodox patriarchates to sever ties with Constantinople.



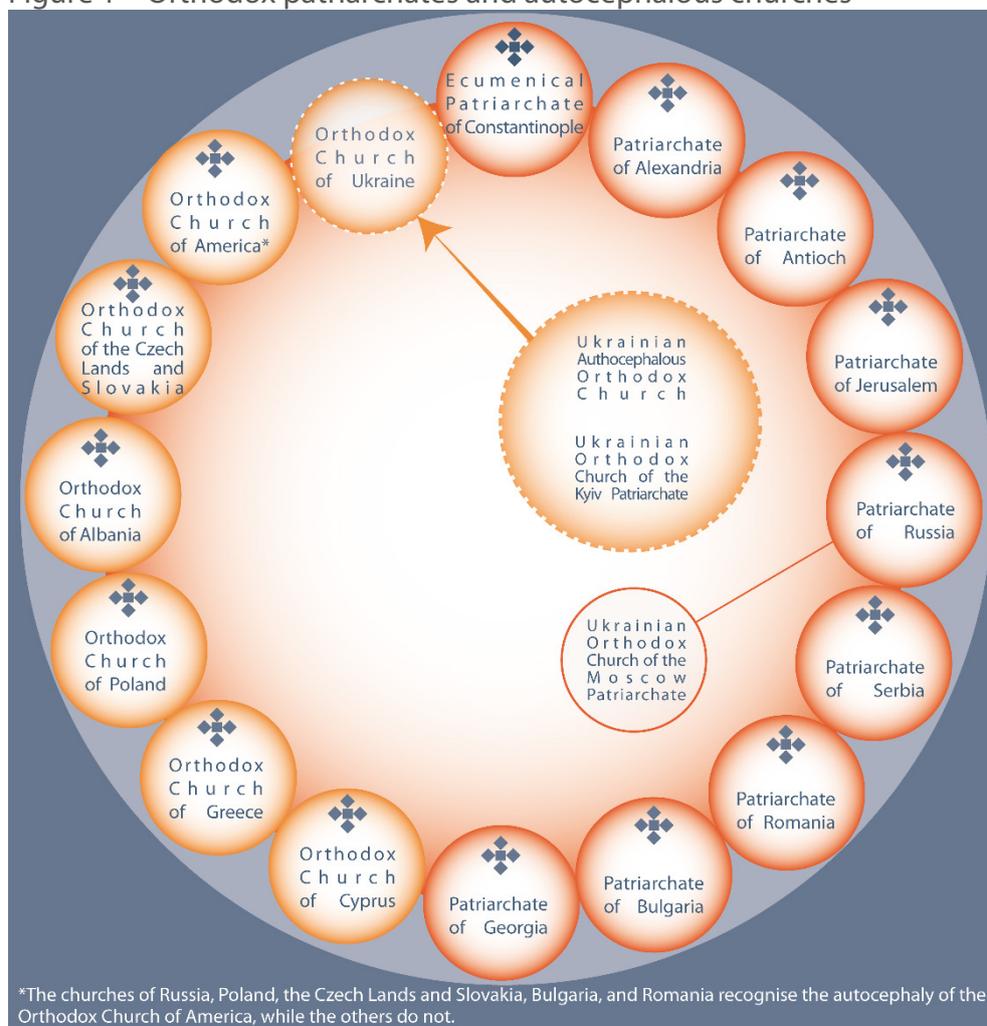
#### In this Briefing

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## The religious split between Moscow and Kyiv

On 5 January 2019, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople — widely seen as *primus inter pares* of the estimated 200-300 million Eastern Orthodox Christians worldwide — signed a tomos (decree) granting independence to a unified Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). The tomos was presented to the Primate of the OCU, Metropolitan Epiphanius – elected by secret ballot at the 15 December 2018 church unification congress – on the Orthodox Christmas Eve on 6 January, in the Patriarchal Church of St George in Istanbul. The [ceremony](#) was attended by Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, and by Ukrainian Parliament Chair, Andriy Parubiy.<sup>1</sup> This step formalised the [decision](#) to grant the OCU autocephaly from Moscow, confirmed at an October 2018 Holy and Sacred Synod (council of bishops) of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, [honorary primacy](#) of the Eastern Orthodox churches.<sup>2</sup> The question of autocephaly had been looming for decades, but drew increasing attention after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Ukraine. More recently, pro-autocephaly efforts gained political traction in the wake of the Maidan revolution of 2013-2014, Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its ongoing hybrid war against Ukraine, including its actions in eastern Ukraine. In April 2018, the Ukrainian Parliament [backed](#) Poroshenko's appeal to Bartholomew to grant the [OCU](#) independence.

Figure 1 – Orthodox patriarchates and autocephalous churches\*



The official title of the primate of the OCU is '[Metropolitan of Kyiv and all Ukraine](#)'.

Source: [Thomas Bremer et al.: Die Orthodoxen Kirchen der byzantinischen Tradition](#), 2013, and EPRS.

## Another dimension of Ukraine's nation-building process

Following years of campaigning by Kyiv and speculation about the OCU's impending autocephaly, the recent move has been rendered '[a second independence](#)' for Ukraine. OCU independence adds yet another dimension to Ukraine's ongoing efforts to move away from Moscow's sphere of influence, as it helps boost [national integration](#). Religion is seen as a key aspect of Ukraine's evolving national identity, which includes the struggle for hearts and minds amid Moscow's hybrid war against the country. OCU autocephaly undermines the Kremlin's concept of a '[Russian world](#)' (*Russkiy Mir*) that extends beyond Russia's borders and has a shared, Moscow-led spiritual, cultural and state heritage going back to the medieval Kyivan Rus (which included parts of the territory now belonging to Russia) and the founding of the Rus Church in Kyiv in the 10th century.

The reactions from Kyiv and Moscow to the tomos signify the importance that both sides attach to OCU autocephaly. Moscow Patriarch Kirill – who is set to lose parishes, bishoprics and income – dismissed the OCU as an illegitimate union of 'schismatics' and a 'theatre of the absurd'. Poroshenko – who led the post-Maidan movement for autocephaly and is campaigning for re-election in March 2019 under the slogan 'Army, Language, Faith' – has called on the Orthodox world to recognise the OCU. He [said](#) that 'We have finally freed from Russian captivity our ancient church, whose history goes back to [10th century] Prince Volodymyr ... We have broken the last fetters that bound us to Russia and its fantasies of Ukraine as canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church'. In October 2018, he [stated](#) that OCU autocephaly is a 'guarantee of the spiritual freedom' of Ukraine, leading to the 'fall of the "Third Rome"' (the notion that Moscow is the ultimate centre of [true Christianity](#)).

## Religious demography of Ukraine

In absolute terms, Russia and Ukraine have the [largest populations](#) of Orthodox Christians: some 100 million in Russia and 35 million in Ukraine. The Orthodox branches in Moscow and Kyiv developed separate traditions in medieval times; the Russian tsar consolidated the two churches in 1686 after creating a union with Ukraine. Whereas the Soviet Union officially embraced atheism, both [Ukraine](#) and [Russia](#) reconnected with their Orthodox roots after the fall of the Iron Curtain. However, the new post-Soviet borders were not mirrored by the churches. While the ROC remained the only major Orthodox church in Russia, Ukraine's Orthodox Christians were divided among [three Orthodox denominations](#): the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) and the small Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), originally a dissident church (from Moscow) during the Soviet era. A fourth church – the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church – is of the Orthodox tradition and recognises the authority of the Pope in Rome.<sup>3</sup>

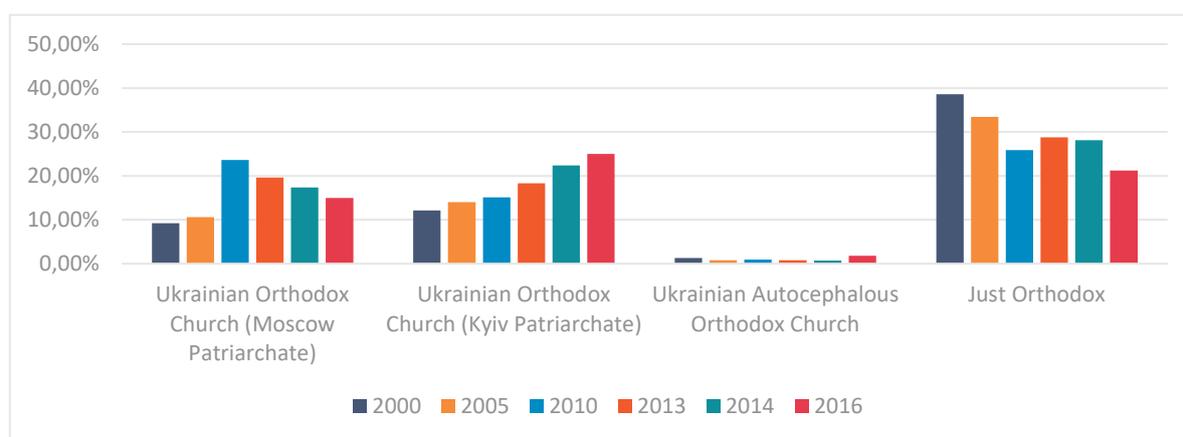
## New religious identities and rivalries

In late 1991, the all-Ukrainian [sobor](#) (synod) of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, called by Metropolitan Filaret Denysenko, requested [autocephaly](#) from Moscow. In April 1992, the sobor of the ROC rejected the request and replaced Filaret. In response, in June 1992 a part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, led by Filaret, decided to separate from the ROC and unite with the UAOC to form the UOC-KP. However, the UAOC refused the union. Since then, the three Ukrainian Orthodox churches – the UOC-MP, the UOC-KP and the UAOC – have existed separately and competed over parishes, church property and churchgoers in Ukraine. The 15 December [unification council](#) of the Orthodox Churches of Ukraine voted to merge the UOC-KP, the UAOC and parts of the UOC-MP. With 12 251 registered religious entities as of January 2011 (including 11 952 communities) and 9 680 clergymen, the UOC-MP has hitherto been the largest in terms of [religious entities](#). The UOC-KP had 4 508 registered associations (including 4 371 communities) and 3 021 clergymen. The UAOC had 1 227 registered religious associations (including 1 190 parishes) and 699 clergymen. Since the OCU was granted autocephaly, more than 300 parishes of UOC-MP — mostly in the western and central part of Ukraine — had [moved](#) to OCU as of 12 February 2019.

## Ukraine's churches and the revolution of dignity

The revolution of dignity increased the visibility of religious personages as active civil-society participants on the Maidan. While in November 2013 protesters initially distanced themselves from political and religious figures, the UOC-KP emerged as a particularly strong pro-Ukraine factor during the protests. St Michael's Monastery (under the UOC-KP) provided sanctuary for the injured, and spiritual leaders from different denominations (including the UOC-MP) erected tents at the Maidan. The victims of the revolution became known as the '[heavenly hundred](#)', indicating an association between patriotism and religious sentiments. The UOC-KP's support for the protesters, combined with the effects of Russian-backed separatism in the east (which eroded support for the ROC), has helped boost the UOC-KP's following more in the past few years than it has since [1991](#).

Figure 2 – Poll asks Ukrainians: To which Orthodox Church do you belong?



Source: [Kyiv Post](#), June 2016.

## Reactions from Moscow

Autocephaly of the OCU is considered a severe blow to the Kremlin's projection of soft power, not only in Ukraine and the wider region, but also in the rest of the world. Unsurprisingly, Moscow and pro-Kremlin agents have responded harshly to the development:

- On 12 October 2018, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, called the decision by Constantinople '[provocations](#) orchestrated by Patriarch Bartholomew' 'with direct and open support from Washington'. On the same day, Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesperson warned that Russia 'defends the interests of the Orthodox Christians', just as 'it defends the interests of Russians and Russian-speakers' (echoing the justification for Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea).<sup>4</sup>
- On 15 October, the Holy Synod of the ROC decided to sever ties with Constantinople, [stating](#) that it is 'impossible for all the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church to concelebrate with the clergy of the Church of Constantinople'.<sup>5</sup>
- Speaking to the World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad, a forum of Russian expatriate communities worldwide, on 31 October 2018, Putin [thanked](#) the ROC for boosting 'cultural and humanitarian ties between our compatriots abroad and Russia'. He warned of 'dire consequences' from 'political intrigues'.
- Russian hackers from the Fancy Bear group – indicted by the United States special prosecutor for their role in the 2016 US presidential election – have allegedly been targeting senior [aides](#) to Patriarch Bartholomew amid the autocephaly debate. Bartholomew has [accused](#) the Russian side of using 'black' propaganda.

- A 7 January 2019 report on Russian state TV Rossiya 24 called the OCU 'an uncanonical religious organisation', and concluded that the tomos is 'fraught with a catastrophe'.<sup>6</sup>

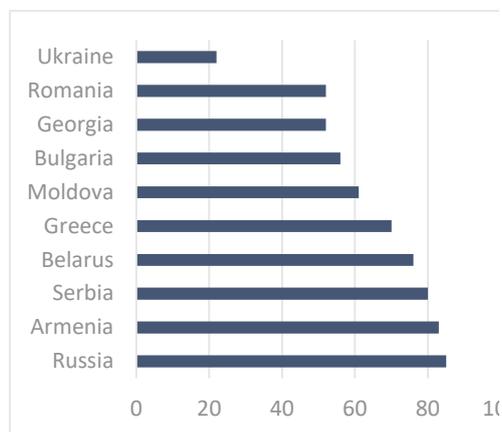
## Religion and geopolitics: Moscow's strategic nexus

With an estimated 150 million followers worldwide, the ROC is projecting its spiritual influence widely beyond Russia's borders, and has traditionally been a key soft-power tool for the Kremlin. Even during the Soviet era, the Kremlin attempted to influence international religious organisations and to further Soviet policy goals through a religious propaganda [apparatus](#). The actions and statements of the regional heads of the local committees on religious affairs were expected to reflect the official Kremlin positions. The oversight process involved the KGB and Soviet foreign policy structures such as the Soviet Academy of Sciences' institutes abroad.

### 'Spirituality' in Putin's strategic relativism

Under Putin – partly inspired by the Russian religious and nationalist philosopher Ivan Ilyin – the role of spirituality and Orthodox religion has increasingly been elevated to that of a mythical [unifier](#) of all Slavic people in the 'Russian world' (*Russkiy Mir*). Responding to mass demonstrations in 2011-2012, the Kremlin boosted its ties with the ROC, promoting a [patriotic narrative](#) that involves conservative values, according to which the Kremlin protects all Russians against Western moral threats. In 2015, spiritual-moral values were explicitly identified as a matter of Russian national security. The December 2015 [Russian National Security Strategy](#) explicitly lists the preservation and development of 'traditional Russian spiritual and moral values' as a long-term national strategic interest. It can be said that Orthodox Christianity is a key part of Russia's strategic narrative: 'a [core component](#) of the Russian state itself, shaping its own self-conception and setting expectations on Russia's role in the world and how it should be recognised'.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Russia under Putin is pursuing a 'post-truth' path of strategic relativism,<sup>8</sup> where [nothing is true](#) and political narratives circle around spiritual superiority.

Figure 3 – Percentage agreeing that 'a strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West'



Source: [Pew Research Center](#), 2017.

### Russia's aggression abroad undermines its soft power

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow adopted a [neutral stance](#) towards Russian military incursions into Ukraine, including Crimea, in 2014, amid concerns about losing followers. Nevertheless, a number of Russian Orthodox priests in eastern Ukraine have openly sided with pro-Russian separatists, blessing them and letting them store ammunition in [churches](#). Moscow's aggression in its Orthodox neighbourhood has affected Kirill's standing abroad, undermining the Kremlin's own soft power.

### The links between religion and national identity

According to a 2015 [Pew Research Center](#) report, many Orthodox Europeans perceive the national patriarchs as the main religious authority. However, roughly one in six or more Orthodox Christians view the Patriarch of Moscow as the highest Orthodox authority, even though they do not self-identify as ethnic Russians or Russian Orthodox. A 2017 Pew [study](#) suggests a particularly strong association between religion and national identity in Orthodox-majority countries in eastern Europe. At the same time, most agree that 'a strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West' (see Figure 3). Whereas an average of 66 % agreed with this statement, Ukraine was an exception, with only 22 % agreeing.

## Are Orthodox believers more vulnerable to disinformation?

The ROC's influence in former Soviet countries neighbouring Russia, exerted through its branches in this region, gives the Russian state political [leverage](#). According to an index published by the non-governmental 'Ukrainian Prism' Foreign Policy Council, active followers of the Orthodox Christian Church in Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are particularly vulnerable to Kremlin-led disinformation. This index notes religion as a 'precondition' for channelling propaganda, explaining that the Russian leadership – 'conscious of the role played by Pope John Paul II in supporting the Solidarity movement in Poland, thereby contributing to the demise of the Soviet Union – began using the same techniques to strengthen Russian 'imperial imperatives' through the ROC.

### Timeline: The path to OCU autocephaly

**988:** Prince Volodymyr the Great, the ruler of Kyivan Rus, a state encompassing Ukraine, Belarus and the European part of Russia, adopts Christianity. Kyivan Rus falls under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the centre of the Byzantine Empire.

**1054:** The Great Schism (split) of the Christian Church results in the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople is now 'first among equals'.

**1325:** Kiev Metropolitan Peter moves his seat to Moscow, after Kyivan Rus falls to the Mongols.

**1686:** Ecumenical Patriarch Dionysius issues a tomos transferring the Kyiv Metropolis to the jurisdiction of Moscow, which now has its own patriarchate.

**1917-90:** After the 1917 revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) faces persecution. Thousands of clergymen are killed or sent to gulags (labour camps). Survivors choose to cooperate with the KGB. Since then, the ROC has considered itself as holding jurisdiction over the entire territory of the Soviet Union.

**1990:** The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), which was set up in 1921 but eradicated by 1937, is revived. Amid increasing independence efforts in Ukraine, the Russian Synod in Moscow gives its existing local arm the name Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). This was to date the only Ukrainian denomination recognised by the Orthodox world.

**1996:** Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew grants the Estonian Orthodox Church independence.

**1992-2016:** Three Ukrainian presidents, Leonid Kravchuk, Victor Yushchenko and Petro Poroshenko, raise the issue of an independent Ukrainian church with Bartholomew.

**April 2018:** Poroshenko and Ukraine's Parliament formally ask Bartholomew to issue a tomos on setting up a Ukrainian church independent of Russia. The UOC-KP, the UAOC and a group of pro-Ukrainian bishops of the local pro-Russian church support the push.

**15 December 2018:** At the unification congress in Kyiv, Metropolitan Epiphanius is elected head of the unified Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU).

**31 December 2018:** In a letter to Bartholomew, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia urges him to refrain from creating a new church structure in Ukraine.

**5 January 2019:** Bartholomew signs the tomos officially granting autocephaly to the OCU.

**6 January 2019:** Bartholomew hands the tomos to Metropolitan Epiphanius.

Source: [BBC Monitoring](#).

## Outlook: competing narratives

### External developments

Whereas the [US](#) has expressed support for the autocephalous OCU, Moscow's reactions – reflecting the strategic stakes – have been harsh. Patriarch Kirill has been pushing to garner support from Orthodox churches in neighbouring countries, and is likely to continue to do so.

- On 15 October, ROC leaders met in Minsk, where Kirill had called a [synod](#) to discuss the situation. He also met with Belarusian President, Aleksander Lukashenko, who vowed that church members 'will try to maintain unity'.
- Ahead of an announced visit to Moldova by Patriarch Kirill, which was cancelled for undisclosed reasons, Moldova's pro-Kremlin President, Igor Dodon, stated that 'Moldova has been and will remain a canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate' ([Interfax Religion](#), 16 October). Dodon offered to host a pan-Orthodox council on the issue. On 31 October, Kirill gave Dodon a religious honorary [order](#) for his support, while the head of the Moldovan Orthodox Church was granted Russia's Order of Friendship.
- On 12 November 2018, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) [stated](#) that it 'does not recognise' Patriarch Filaret and Metropolitan Makaryi (the leaders of 'schismatic groups' in Ukraine) or 'their followers'. The SPC called on Orthodox leaders to 'confirm and strengthen the unity of the Orthodox Church'. The SPC is itself engaged in disputes with unrecognised breakaway churches in North Macedonia and Montenegro.
- The ROC [decided](#) on 28 December 2018 to set up a patriarchal exarchate in Paris, covering Andorra, Belgium, Great Britain, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Spain, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, the Netherlands, France and Switzerland. Another new patriarchal exarchate for south-east Asia will be based in Singapore.

### Developments in Ukraine

Although the process of getting recognised by the other autocephalous Eastern Orthodox churches might take decades, OCU autocephaly is significant for Ukraine's national identity and thus a key political issue. Analysts argue that the successful autocephaly campaign could [boost](#) Poroshenko's chances of re-election on 31 March 2019. Some [allege](#) that he is using the OCU to his own ends, while the UOC-MP can use the situation to present itself as a victim of persecution, echoing pro-Kremlin [propaganda](#). Experts [warn](#) that any violence sparked by the church dispute could be blamed on Kyiv. The OCU as an identity-forming institution will likely continue to play a key role in the country's nation-building process, not only in the run-up to the presidential election and the October 2019 parliamentary elections, but also afterwards.

### Inter-church tension likely to continue or to spread, despite public wariness

The UOC-MP is challenging the Ukrainian Parliament's April 2018 [resolution](#) on autocephaly before the Supreme Court, which reports that it has received [three](#) similar lawsuits. Judging from Moscow's harsh reactions and the loyalty pledged by the UOC-MP to Patriarch Kirill, inter-church tensions in Ukraine are likely to continue. There is [concern](#) that disagreements over parishes and real estate could escalate. Potential flashpoints include the Pechersk [Lavra](#), the biggest and oldest monastery in Kyiv, half of which is owned by the UOC-MP and half by the Ukrainian state. In November 2018, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) searched the home of Metropolitan Pavlo, father superior of the Pechersk Lavra. The SBU [accused](#) him of 'incitement of interconfessional hostility'. The SBU has [warned](#) that Russian security services' 'targeted instigation' of interconfessional conflicts in Ukraine could become the pretext for an 'open military invasion by the Russian armed forces'.

Overall, Ukrainians' emotional engagement in inter-church conflicts seems limited. In a public [opinion poll](#) published in November 2018 by the Ukrainian Razumkov Centre, 31 % of respondents

said they saw the reasons for inter-church conflicts as 'purely political', 28 % said conflicts occur 'mainly over assets and real estate' and 25 % said that church hierarchs 'crave power'. Nevertheless, the process through which each local parish will decide to which denomination it will belong could be a source of long-lasting tensions.

## Will Russia be the only casualty of a schism?

As mentioned above, inter-church tensions in Ukraine involve the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople as the main protagonists. These tensions are not new: in June 2016, the Moscow Patriarchate [boycotted](#) the first pan-Orthodox council in 1 200 years, held in Crete. A [statement](#) published by the ROC said that the Council of Bishops of the UOC[-MP]) 'regards the decisions of the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople of 11 October 2018 concerning the Ukrainian ecclesiastical issue as void and not having any canonical power'. However, according to Russian (Putin-critical) daily [Novaya Gazeta](#), the 'only casualty of the current Great Schism will be Russia itself'. The daily [argued](#) that Russia is 'adding religion and culture to the political and economic factors of its geopolitical marginalisation and withdrawal from the global agenda'. The issue may further strengthen Bartholomew's position as leader of the Orthodox world.

## MAIN REFERENCES

Snyder, T., *The Road to Unfreedom*, Crown Publishing Group, 2018.

Perchoc, P., [Religion and the EU's external policies: Increasing engagement](#), EPRS, December 2017.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> [Ukraine receives Tomos officially and forever](#), Religious Information Service of Ukraine, 6 January 2019.
- <sup>2</sup> There is also an Oriental Orthodox 'family' including the Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian, Syrian, Indian and Eritrean churches.
- <sup>3</sup> [Church and Religion in Ukraine: The Religious Dimension of the Current Conflict](#), Radboud University, September 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> Putin added that Kyiv 'is the mother of Russian cities' and that the medieval state of Kyivan Rus 'is our common source and we cannot live without each other'.
- <sup>5</sup> Moscow has [suspended relations](#) with Constantinople before: the ROC severed ties with Constantinople in 1999, after Constantinople added the Estonian Orthodox Church to its jurisdiction. Since then, two Estonian Orthodox churches have [coexisted](#) peacefully: one subordinate to Constantinople and the other subordinate to Moscow.
- <sup>6</sup> BBC Monitoring, [Russian state TV says new Ukrainian church 'uncanonical'](#), 7 January 2018.
- <sup>7</sup> Miskimmon, A. and O'Loughlin, B., *Russia's Narratives of Global Order: Great Power Legacies in a Polycentric World*, [Politics and Governance](#), 2017, Vol. 5, Issue 3.
- <sup>8</sup> See Snyder, T., *The Road to Unfreedom*, Crown Publishing Group, 2018, pp. 195-196, 249, 273.

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