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ORTHODOXY AND POLITICS IN THE 21ST CENTURY – UKRAINIAN
ORTHODOX CHURCHES AND THE WAR

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Abstract: The war between Russia and Ukraine which began on February 24, 2022, has multiple implications, including religious ones that should not be overlooked. Ukraine, a country with an Orthodox majority, has, since 2019, two Orthodox jurisdictions: one under the Moscow Patriarchate, led by Metropolitan Onuphrios, which has been repeatedly sanctioned by the Ukrainian state in the recent years and another one, recognised thorough a *thomos* in 2019 by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, led by Metropolitan Epiphany. During the war, the first one has been often considered agency of the Russians in the Ukrainian space and therefore, struggled to convince the Ukrainian state authorities of its independence. On the other hand, the second one, seeking the canonical recognition from the Eastern Orthodox World, has enjoyed the support of the state, who wants a national church to represent its interests. In our research, we will try to explore how the jurisdictions have been perceived during the war, to bring into attention the aspects of political theology that can be found in their activity and, at the same time, to emphasize the particularities of each.

Key words: Metropolitan Epiphany, Metropolitan Onuphry, politics, war, theology, canonicity, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.

1. Introduction

Political theology was an important topic not only in the Catholic and Protestant space where scholars like Carl Schmitt (Schmitt 1985) or Eric Peterson (Peterson 2011; Petrache 2012-2022, 223-246) provided valuable works in the field, but also in the Eastern Orthodox one (Stoeckl, Gabriel, Papanikolaou 2017; Morariu 2018, 153-157). Researchers like Cyril Hovorun have addressed themes such as the temptation of the Byzantinism (Hovorun 2024, 14-29), and also topics like the political and social religion (Hovorun 2018, 24-28). In practical terms, recent events, such as the War in Ukraine, have raised new questions regarding the relationship between religion and politics. The fall of the Soviet Union have left Ukrainian people with a profound religious sentiment. Thus, as two researchers have underlined recently, „according to the most recent census conducted in Ukraine, 63,4 % of the total population is Orthodox. Religious life plays an important role in Ukraine, as observer states that, for many reasons, Ukraine came out of communism more religious than Russia.” (Nate, Buda 2019, 23).

Still, within the Orthodoxy there are also factions. Some of them are visible in the digital era (Shevchuk, Shevchuk, Yakunina 2024, 140), being part of a populist discourse (Hojbotă, Nica, Bostan-Tofan 2023, 100), while others remain available just for insiders (theologians, clergyman or specialists in political theology). Therefore, although the majority of were affiliated to the Ukrainian Anthonomus Church that was part of the Moscow Patriarchate, there is also an Ukrainian Patriarchate ruled by Patriarch Philaret Denysenko (Denysenko 2018), along with several another factions. Apart from the one affiliated with the Russian Patriarchate, none of these groups was canonically recognised by the other Orthodox Churches and were all considered schismatics.

Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) was also considered the largest Orthodox Church in Ukraine (Nate, Buda 2019, 23). In 2019, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople recognised the Church formed by Philaret Densyenko, joined by two other previously unrecognised churches, as the autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine (for the thomos see: Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople 2019; Morariu 2020, 1-6; Jovic 2022, 67). This development significantly increased the tensions within the Ukrainian religious landscape. The messages sent both before and after by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in order to underline the fact that his intention was one of peace seemed to not have the expected effect. His messages regarding this new structure, sent both before and after the event of the release of the thomos,

stressed the need for peace and the fact that the intention was a peaceful one (Bartholomew 2017:195).

Denied both by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian policy makers (Ratajeski 2019a:11), as well as by some of the local Orthodox Church, yet encouraged by Ukrainian politicians, the new recognised Church had become a reality shortly after the aforementioned event. Parishes that previously belonged to the Moscow Patriarchate started transitioning to the new structure. Thus, as a scholar noted, at the time, more than 300 parishes switched the jurisdiction and joined the new recognised Ukrainian Autocephalous Church. Still, this represented only about 2,5% from all the parishes and monasteries affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine (Rozanskij 2019a:19).

As it can be easily observed, from the very beginning, there was a political interest in the issue of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine. The events that started on 24th of February 2022 further increased the political involvement in the religious matters. The purpose of this research is therefore to investigate if there was a political interest in the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine and, if so, what was its nature? In order to answer to this question, we will draw on the relevant literature on the topic and on the primary sources.

2. Orthodoxy and politics in the 21st century – Ukrainian Orthodox Churches and the war

As Hovorun emphasizes in one recent research, „history demonstrates that crises help the churches develop.” (Hovorun 2024, 14). The Ukrainian War was for sure the starting point of a crisis that is still ongoing and whose consequences will most likely affect the next generations as well. It will also almost certainly force the Orthodoxy to reconsider some of its organisational principles and to generate new answers or solutions. The fact that the religious aspect is important was already underlined by scholars in the field (see, for example: Negron 2025, 1-15). A comparison between war and the recent Coronavirus made by a contemporary scholar underlines its different effects. „The Russian war against Ukraine is like the coronavirus: we may ignore it, but it does not ignore us. It can leave some ecclesial bodies suffocating and eventually breathless, as this has happened to the Russian Orthodox Church. Some other ecclesial bodies can survive it but would experience the so-called “long COVID”— discomfort and the loss of some capacities for years, if not decades. Like with the virus, ignoring the war does not help us to deal with it. On the contrary, the more we ignore it, the more damaging it is to us. To minimise the damage, we need to start by asking two basic questions: what is the Church, and how do we relate to her?” (Hovorun 2024, 15).

3. Orthodox Church in Ukraine belonging to the Moscow Patriarchate and its role in the War

While for Hovorun the war is something that everybody must confront, with an obvious theological meaning, for researchers like Shirin, it has become the main cause of a theological crisis (Shirin 2023). The discussion focuses on how religion can be used as a factor of division (Negron 2022, 1-19) and brings into attention the fact that Russian Patriarchate also took a position in the War, involving itself in matters that are more political than theological, thereby exceeding its authority. This fact is also reflected to a local level. On one side, the Ukrainian Anthonomus Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate tried to demonstrate that it hasn't any ideologically ties with Russia, by deciding to consecrate the Holy Myrrhon, a sign of autocephaly, and not one of autonomy, and by adopting declarations and positions meant to accentuate its distance from the Moscow Patriarchate. On the other, the Ukrainian state adopted a series of laws intended to ban it. A relevant example is the law from 20th of August 2024 (Markina 2024; Kovalev 2024). The accusations brought against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Russian Patriarchate relate to their relationship with Moscow and revolve around alleged acts of espionage. (Klein, Casper 2023).

As a result of this law, which followed the decision of certain parishes to shift from the Moscow Patriarchate to the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church established with the approval of the Ecumenical Patriarch, some priests from the former institution were forced to leave their churches, while many others were sanctioned. During this time, the Church belonging to the Russian Patriarchate insisted on the fact that there was a clear separation between its structure and Russia. This separation can be seen in its acts, attitudes and conduct. It was also emphasised that isolated cases of priests that expressed attitudes against Ukraine and were part of the Church did not represent the position of the institution. Some representatives of the institution, such as Metropolitan Anthony, its chancellor insisted on aspects like common Rus heritage and on the interpretation of the law in divine terms, underlining the fact that, thorough such an initiative, the Ukrainian state was not acting against the Church, but against God himself. Thus, according to reports at the time, it was in fact a struggle against the common heritage called the "historical Rus" and against Christ himself. (Klein, Casper 2023).

What is interesting is that, despite the law based on the aforementioned accusations, the Ukrainian officialities have not provided, to our knowledge, a detailed list of the problems caused by the Church or its representatives since the beginning of the War. The specific cases of priests who acted against their country were individually investigated and sanctioned. At the same time, despite of the law, the Ukrainian Orthodox

Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate still exists and operates in Ukraine. Furthermore, according to various statistics, which often contradict each other, depending on the orientation of the institution which has produced them, they seem to still have a substantial membership.

The fact that the “national security” argument was invoked as the justification for such a law (Dysa, Harmash 2024) highlights the political accent of the initiative and, at the same time, creates confusion among people, sociologists, and representatives of the different Churches. Thus, for example, Patriarch Porfirios of Serbia sent a letter to all the representatives of the Orthodox Churches and to other religious leaders, insisting on the fact that the Orthodox Church in Ukraine is persecuted by a so-called democratic government (Editor 2024). He even compared the situation with the one of his Church during the Second World War. “Given that during World War II, the Serbian Orthodox Church was banned and persecuted, we deeply empathize with your situation. The words of the Apostle Paul resonate with us: ‘If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it’ (1 Cor. 12:26),” wrote the Serbian Patriarch. “Today, the sister Church in Ukraine is persecuted by a so-called democratic government composed of its own compatriots, which makes the situation all the more difficult and absurd.” (Editor 2024).

His attitude was defended also by other primates of the Eastern Orthodox Churches like Anastasios Yannoulatos, recently departed. Although a Greek, the primate of the Orthodox Church in Albania criticized Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s decision to recognise the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which he considered a mistake. From his perspective, this decision did not solve the problem, but generated other schisms. According to his view, the autocephaly was not requested by the Church itself, but by schismatics, which makes the situation fundamentally different from previous cases in the history of other local Churches (Aleksandrov 2025). At the same time, the heads of other Orthodox Autocephalous Church have not reached a common decision, either in the recognition or rejection of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church or concerning the status of the Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate. This situation keeps the issue unresolved and will likely lead to a new schism within the Orthodox world. Beyond the theological issues, the political layers of the situation cannot be overlooked. Aspects like „the security of the state”, used to justify the banning of the aforementioned Church are not theological in nature and, at the same time, accentuate the involvement of the members of this institution in matters that are not related to their work field or vocation, namely political affairs. At the same time, the lack of response of the Patriarch of Moscow, who could certainly make a statement on the matter and contribute, in one way or other, to finding a solution to the problem, further complicates the situation and does not help bring it to a resolution.

4. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and the War

While the Ukrainian Orthodox Church tied to the Moscow Patriarchate was considered a Russian tool in the Ukrainian lands, the other Orthodox formation was always presented as an alternative supporting the autonomy of the country in opposition to Russia. Even the previously discussions regarding the potential recognition of a Church formed by the former schismatic Church ruled by Patriarch Philaret Denysenko, together with the two other Churches that later merged, benefited at the time from political support (Isachenov 2018:17). At the same time, while the Ukrainian president of that time, Petro Poroshenko accepted the invitation of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine declined it (see: Bremer & Senyk 2019a, 37, for a detailed description of the situation at that time).

After the thomos (Oeldemann 2019, 289), the problem of canonicity still remained a topic of debate. The fact that the Crete Pan-Orthodox Council from 2016 (Perşa 2017, 131-132) has not released a document that brings into discussion in a detailed way aspects related with topics such as how autocephaly can be obtained, created discussion. Thus, the new elected Metropolitan Epiphany found himself in the delicate position of seeking recognition within the Orthodox world. While some Churches, such as the one in Poland, decided to recognise Constantinople decision, others, like the Albanian Church, voiced vehement criticisms (Aleksandrov 2025). The fact that shortly after the recognition of the Church, Patriarch Filaret Denysenko criticized it and was removed from the new synod of the Church (Editor 2020) caused also rumours on the validity and professionalism of the new recognised church. This, along with other factors, such as the fact that out of ten bishops from the Moscow Patriarchate who announced their intention to join the new Church, only two did, and one soon changed his mind, raised further doubts. Still, from the point the view of the Ukrainian state, this was the official Church since its recognition. The Church benefited from the support of the state and it remains, until nowadays, well represented in terms of communication and public image. Its official website, *Ukrainian Orthodox Church* is bilingual (Ukrainian and English and updated) and its leader takes part in official events. At the same time, since the beginning of the War, the representatives of the church have received support from the state and have acquired some churches formerly belonging to the other formation (a situation that had occurred before as well).

Besides, during the War, the bishops of the church were always at the center of the events. Some of their priests were killed and buried as national heroes, and the hierarchy has taken a clear stance condemning the war. Also, since its recognition, there was a continuous struggle with the Orthodox church tied to the Moscow Patriarchate, which continues

until today (Orthodox Church of Ukraine 2019). Yet, despite of the existing tensions, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church has also kept the door open for potential dialogue regarding the union with the other faction. Repeatedly emphasized in the documents that address this topic, the pursuit of peace appears to be not only a political issue, but also a core part of its vision. Hence, for example, a recent document mentions that „His Beatitude Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Ukraine Epiphany, repeatedly emphasized that the unification of Ukrainian Orthodoxy should take place peacefully, without violence, on the Gospel principles of love. The events of recent months have shown that the decision to move to a single Local Ukrainian Orthodox Church is made by an absolute majority of the votes of the faithful, and the process of the church unification is peaceful and implemented in accordance with the current Ukrainian legislation.” (Orthodox Church of Ukraine 2019).

While the discourse of the Ukrainian Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate focuses rather on justifying the distancing from Russia and on asserting that its members no longer belong to or support its actions or attitudes, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church emphasized the patriotic dimension of faith. Thus, Metropolitan Epiphany, the bishops and the priests have regularly attended or organised commemorative services dedicated to the heroes who have fallen in the war (Orthodox Church of Ukraine 2019a) and have written about their sacrifice.

In an attempt to justify its canonicity, still questioned by some of the Orthodox Churches, despite of the fact that there have passed six years since the release of the thomos by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the Metropolitan Epiphany tried also to celebrate on various occasions with the „first among equals”. In certain situations, their meetings were not limited to celebrations and common calls for peace, but also included practical initiatives. Therefore, among the recent initiatives, the one that took place on 15th of March 2025, should be mentioned. There, the two heads of the Church spoke about the need to end the war, and the Ukrainian Metropolitan also raised the question of the repatriation of Ukrainian children held by Russia. Both criticized the ideology of „Russian World” (Besanço 2022, 17), insisting on the fact that is being used to justify evil (Bogdanovski 2025).

It was not only the canonicity that Metropolitan Epiphany sought to affirm during these years. He also actively engaged in ecumenical movement and worked to present the cause of his country. In this respect, he visited the World Council of Churches in Geneva, held discussions with its leaders trying to present the situation, spoke about the war and met with the students at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey (World Council of Churches 2024). His visit there was a fruitful one, as reflected in the way the way the representative of the ecumenical institution has marked it. The General Secretary of WCC, Rev. Prof Dr Jerry Pillay, promised to use his skills to mediate the war situation and spoke about future colla-

boration between the two institutions. „Pillay said, “The meeting was a very informative, engaging and enlightening discussion on the issues in Ukraine. I was deeply impressed with their positive aspirations to end the war, support dialogue and find solutions to encourage good relationships at all levels in spite of the current challenges, including among churches. We have discussed possible steps forward and plan to act on them as soon as possible.” (Bogdanovski 2025).

Moreover, Metropolitan Epiphany discourse about the war was constant and had at least two key words. The first one is the seeking for peace. The leader of the Church spoke about a topic that can be considered interdisciplinary. He insisted on the fact that peace is not only an concept with theological relevance, although it defines an important branch of spirituality, namely the mystical one, represented in the recent times by authors like Saint Silouane the Athonite from Athos (Athonite 1976), or his disciple, Saint Sophrony Sakharov (Ionescu 2019; Neacșu 2018; Siladi 2013), but, at the same time, is a word with a deep political meaning. He is aware that, in the contemporary context, the second sense is more important for his flock and therefore, in his sermons he speaks about it. Also, he understands the war and its end as a part of the Ukrainian people and speaks about the victory of his country in some of his sermons. For example, in the sermon from April 14th he says: “We are praying and doing our best to help our valiant army of warriors, volunteers, and people of good will — and we will certainly win, since we are united. (...) Confident that God will continue helping us in our struggle, we will soon be celebrating Ukraine’s victory in this persistent struggle for freedom, and for the right to our independent state, with its own Orthodox Church.” (Luxmoore 2023).

Evidently, his sermon definitely contains political accents. Moreover, his approach could be classified by some of the critics as what Hovorun called Byzantinism (Hovorun 2018, 24-28; cf. Iorga 1972). Of course, his ideas come in convergency with the ones of other religious leaders in Ukraine, like the primate Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the head of the Greek-Catholic Church there, who had a similar discourse. Compared with the attitude of Pope Francis, who proved to have a certain reserve and to keep a certain distance in the matter, their attitude looks different and closer to the war context. This fact explains why the attitude of the head of the Catholic Church was criticised by some of the Ukrainian leaders, who preferred a more direct message, with a favourable orientation towards Ukraine (Luxmoore 2023).

5. Conclusions

As we have tried to demonstrate, the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, holds significance not only in geopolitics, history, or sociology, but also in the field of political theology. The fact that in Ukraine, a

country with an Orthodox majority, there are two Churches of the same tradition, one part of the Moscow Patriarchate and the other still struggling for canonicity, but recognised by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, raises questions both outside and within the Orthodox world. The same questions arise from the fact that two Orthodox countries are at war with each other. From the perspective of the political theology, there are some important aspects to consider. One is the struggle of the church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate to prove that it does not endorse the Russian ideals and attitude, in order to continue existing and to avoid further sanctions from the Ukrainian state. Another aspect is the constant effort of the Ukrainian Anthonomus Church to receive the recognition of its canonicity from the leaders of the Eastern Orthodox Church worldwide. At the same time, there is a difference in the public discourse of the two Churches and a difference of perception within Ukraine. While the first seeks to demonstrate that it should not be confounded with Russia and Moscow Patriarchate, the second one tries to prove that the war is wrong and peace should be achieved, but not under any circumstances. Metropolitan Epiphany, the bishops and priests of this church often attend different memorial services honoring the war heroes and call the attention to the need for Ukraine's victory in the war. At the same time, he tries to become a religious leader that pleads for his country both in the Orthodox space, where he visits on various occasions the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in an attempt to seek for help and to send a message to the Orthodox World, but also in the ecumenical field, where he has gained attention from the general secretary of the World Council of Churches and other important representatives of this organism with global representation. Another important aspect is that, while the proprieties of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church tied to the Moscow Patriarchate are being seized by the state in an effort to ban it, the other Church receives both logistic and financial support from the government. What it is also interesting is that, regardless of the constant polemics between the two formations, Metropolitan Epiphany continues to keep the door open for peace and addresses the possibility of achieving it. Nevertheless, since the outbreak of the war, the issue remains unresolved, and conclusions are yet to be drawn.

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