

Churches Before the Russian-Ukrainian War

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Abstract Besides its effects on the world political scenario, the war conflict between Russia and Ukraine has also disrupted the already powder keg-like and torn-apart Ukrainian canonical enclosure with a number of repercussions in the ecumenical field. As the war escalates, the role of the Churches, with special regard to the Orthodox groups and the Catholic Church, fits into a very broad process encompassing ecclesiastical geopolitics, human rights and social concepts. The 'waltz' of stances and statements provides us with a changing framework but, at the same time, suggests some trajectories that help us shed light on a precarious and uncertain future.

Keywords Russian-Ukrainian war. Ecumenism. Ecclesiastical geopolitics. Orthodox Church. Catholic Church.

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1 Introduction

In approaching the investigation of phenomena and events in the making, it should be premised that the focus will be exclusively centred on matters of ecclesiastical geopolitics and its consequences in the ecumenical field. We will stick to the bare presentation of the facts, focusing on reactions, statements and postures coming from or concerning the religious world. Compared to cases in which the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Ecumenical Patriarchate (EP) had previously come to a confrontation over jurisdictional issues – Estonia, the USA and France being the most relevant ones – the Ukrainian case differs in some crucial features:

- Ukraine is a country with a vast majority Orthodox denomination and of deep religious sensitivity.¹ Within the history of Orthodoxy, Ukraine holds a very high symbolic value, especially for Russian culture. The conversion of Kyivan Rus' to Christianity, traditionally fixed at 988 following the baptism of Vladimir the Great and the inhabitants of the capital city, marks the founding of the Rus' Church and the origins of the famous image of Kyiv as the 'Russian Jerusalem'.²
- The ecclesiastical clash between Constantinople and Moscow generated a unilateral schism that is still unsolved. While in Estonia a similar rift was soon patched up, in Ukraine the tones have grown increasingly sour, producing a deep wound within Orthodoxy.³
- The Ukrainian case, well before the large-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, saw the active participation of local and global political institutions. The presidents and governments of Russia and Ukraine (and, more marginally, of the USA as well) have been heavily intervening in the spiritual sphere trying to orient the outcomes of the dispute, overlapping with the demands of the churches for their own political aims.
- The dispute over canonical territory⁴ is not limited to the political-religious context but is inscribed in an armed conflict.

1 This is evidenced by data resulting from the religious survey, for the period 2010-18: Державні документи, заяви і звернення Всеукраїнської Ради Церков і релігійних організацій, "Особливості релігійного і церковно-релігійного самовизначення українських громадян".

2 On the importance and sanctity of Kyiv (*Kiev Zlatoverchij*) for the Russian Orthodox world cf. Merlo, "Kiev città santa?".

3 Bremer, Brünig, Kizenko, *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations?*.

4 The notion of canonical territory is much debated in Orthodox Christianity. Starting with the Canons of the Apostles, different autocephalous Churches have developed the topic with different ecclesiological, pastoral, theological, and geopolitical implications. Cf. Grigoriță, "L'Orthodoxie entre automomie et synodalité"; Hilarion, "La nozione

Intra-Orthodox issues appear to be closely intertwined with the war events that have been going on in the country since 2014.

- This combination of elements led to the involvement of the Catholic Church in an intra-Orthodoxy divergence. The convergence of war and religious dispute somehow forced the pope to get directly involved and use his influence in building a path to peace. Many of his statements have been interpreted as a pro-side stand: the irritation of the Russian Federation that followed some of the pope's interventions – actually accused on other occasions of not properly speaking out against the invasion – affected, for example, the already fragile Catholic-Russian Orthodox relations, resulting in the cancellation of the meeting between Francis and Kirill scheduled for 2022. In this intermingling of geopolitical and ecclesiastical factors, the entire ecumenical dialogue is facing a diplomatic disruption that is extremely difficult to manage for all the actors involved, poised between a cautious approach that keeps glimmers open and a condemnatory attitude that raises walls too high. On its part, the ROC is called upon to definitively come to terms with its relationship with state power.

Such a state of things shows the peculiar seriousness of the Ukrainian case, a crucial divide for the near future of ecumenism.

2 Premise. Human Rights, Social Concept, Ideology, Territoriality: A Comparison Between the ROC and the Ecumenical Patriarchate

Addressing the geopolitical and jurisdictional issues arising from the Moscow-Constantinople watershed without dealing with the theological and anthropological divergence on the human person, human rights, freedom and pluralism, meaning the social concept of the churches under analysis, would have meant marring the present work with a serious epistemological gap.

di territorio canonico"; Bartholomeos I, *Incontro al mistero*, 305; Montan, *La Chiesa Particolare*, 45-8; Roudometof, "Greek Orthodoxy, Territoriality, and Globality"; Agadjanian, Rousselet, "Globalization and Identity". The ROC's vision is contained in the "Statute of the Russian Orthodox Church adopted by the Council of Bishops in 2000, amended by the Council of Bishops in 2008 and 2011 and adopted as amended by the Council of Bishops in 2013": <https://mospatusa.com/files/STATUTE-OF-THE-RUSSIAN-ORTHODOX-CHURCH.pdf>. This issue has enormous repercussions in the theological and ecclesiological fields on issues such as authority, synodality, ecclesial communion and primacy. It has been discussed, on several occasions, by the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church (as a whole).

For the Moscow Patriarchate (MP), human rights originate from a Western historical-cultural background that is not shared and perceived as foreign to the Orthodox tradition.⁵ Indeed, its primate, Patriarch Kirill, identifies the UDHR as the ultimate victory of anthropocentrism.⁶ The ROC was the first Orthodox Church to take the initiative in 2000 to systematize its social concept in parallel with the pan-Orthodox conciliar framework; an event that represented a major and much-discussed innovation in the field of Orthodoxy. The process began with the publication of *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* (2000), a document that ranges over many issues such as human rights, bioethics, the environment, and relations with political institutions. The Bishops' Council based the idea of human rights on the biblical teaching of man as a being in the image and likeness of God, a creature therefore ontologically free.⁷ With the development of secularism this inalienable acquisition would be transformed into a notion of the rights of the individual in which, having removed him from his relationship with God, the freedom of the personality is transmuted into the protection of the personal will expressed within the limits set by a state that should guarantee, in return, certain standards of individual well-being within society.⁸ The clash of civilizations⁹ that the ROC outlines to divide it from the West is remanifested, in 2006, in the document *Declaration on Human Rights and Dignity*¹⁰ issued by the World Russian People's Council – a nongovernmental organization chaired by the Patriarch of Moscow and based in the Patriarchate's facilities – which comes across as decidedly anti-Western, anti-liberal, full of ideological positions. The definitive Teaching of Human Rights is then formulated in 2008 directly by the Bishops' Council of the ROC under the title *The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Liberty, and Rights*.¹¹ If dignity is innate and not even sin can dent it ontologically, it can be obscured by an immoral life. The dignified life, a circumstance that enables the transition from image to likeness,

5 Stoeckl, "Il ruolo della Chiesa ortodossa russa", 108. On the stance of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the development of the human rights debate cf. Menozzi, *Chiesa e diritti umani*; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine*.

6 Kirill, "Obstoyatel'stva novogo vremeni: liberalizm, traditsionalizm i moral'nyye tsennosti ob'yedinyayushcheisya Yevropy", quoted in Stoeckl, "The Human Rights Debate", 217.

7 Chiesa Ortodossa Russa, *Fondamenti della dottrina sociale*, (IV. 6).

8 Chiesa Ortodossa Russa, *Fondamenti della dottrina sociale*, (IV. 7).

9 Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church*, 56.

10 Всемирный Русский Народный Собор, *Декларация о правах и достоинстве*.

11 Священного Синода Русской Православной Церкви, *Основы учения Русской Православной Церкви*.

can only be achieved through efforts to seek virtue and spiritual purity, reject error, and direct oneself to the good by a righteous employment of one's personal responsibility. Received dignity cannot be lost, but it is valued exclusively at the time of correct individual moral choices. The notion of dignity outlined is thus integrally connected to the ideas of morality and responsibility¹² and cannot be contemplated independently.¹³ Since human dignity is exercised only in morality, freedom, for the ROC, requires the observance of duties before the possession of rights. The doctrine of freedom expressed by the *Teaching* stems from the indictment of secular thought of ignoring the sinful nature of man in an anthropocentrism that focuses solely on "negative freedom", man's freedom to live according to his own individual preferences and rights, i.e., "freedom of choice". In contrast, the MP prefers to focus on "positive freedom", which is associated with a life of dignity, and which combines individual rights with collective duties. The former "freedom of choice", which can be interpreted as permissiveness, now becomes "freedom from evil", that liberation from sin that theology wants worked by Christ: without religious, spiritual and ethical dimensions there is no freedom, no human dignity.¹⁴ Since Orthodoxy considers the human being primarily in the context of his relations with the people of God and the community of the Church, his dignity is maximally manifested when he lives and fulfils his love for his neighbour in the social world, revealing the interrelational nature of the human person embodied in the *соборность sobornyy*, the principle of the spiritual community of people living together in 'catholicity'.¹⁵ A notion of human rights that separates the individual from the social communion and its shared moral values would at once nullify the transcendental dimension of man and the notion that the community is more than the complex of individuals, in that subtle but fundamental difference that separates the conditions of "living in a community" and "being communion".¹⁶ "The ability to direct one's will to good or evil is called freedom"¹⁷ confirms Patriarch Kirill, supported by Metropolitan Hilarion in stating that "for the believer true freedom is not the permissibility of everything, but the liberation from sin, the overcoming in one self of

12 Священного Синода Русской Православной Церкви, *Основы учения Русской Православной Церкви*.

13 Stoeckl, "The Human Rights Debate", 221-3.

14 Stoeckl, "The Human Rights Debate", 225.

15 Marsh, Payne, "Religiosity, Tolerance and Respect", 204.

16 McGuckin, "The Issue of Human Rights", 188.

17 Kirill, "God's Design of Man and the Freedom of Will", in *Freedom and Responsibility*, 84.

everything that hinders spiritual perfection”.¹⁸ It is in the context of the community that this is realized, a community to which the person owes his moral responsibility and in which at the same time he receives, as a member, equal dignity with any other member. What has been expounded so far intersects, in a fine as legitimate operation conducted by the ROC, with the political sphere. Kirill has long clashed with his European counterparts, both religious and secular, over the Western liberal provenance of human rights, condemning their misuse for the purpose of insulting and damaging religious and national values and ensuring that traditional Christian morality was slowly integrated and diluted into the system of human rights and freedoms, until it disappeared.¹⁹ This system, a new universal standard, also aims, Kirill argues, to sideline Russia and the Orthodox tradition through imposed processes of Europeanization and globalization,²⁰ forcing acceptance of liberal stereotypes of behaviour without critical evaluation and presumptuously scorning the valuable contribution the Orthodox world and Russia could make.²¹ The collective nature of human rights and the individual’s obligations to the community stand out in the basic teaching promoted by the ROC where it is explicitly stated that a person does not have the right to go against his or her own culture or nation.²² According to Stoeckl, the *Teaching* is used by the ROC as a foreign policy tool.²³ The previously enunciated clash of civilizations is presented as a clash between a secular, individualist and liberal worldview and a religious, communitarian and traditional vision.²⁴ The ROC does not simply position itself against an individualistic understanding of human rights but represents itself as the sole defender of a conception of human rights that includes the ethics and obligations to society that the UDHR itself speaks of in Article 29, rejecting an expansive interpretation of HR and advocating, supported by Russia,²⁵ the defence of “traditional values” and resistance against “ideological monopoly in the sphere of human rights”:²⁶ the rights claimed by the Lgbtq+ community and feminist groups, the various rights to euthanasia,

18 Hilarion, *Orthodox Witness Today*, 228.

19 Kirill, “The Russian Church and the Christian Dimension of Human Rights”, in *Freedom and Responsibility*, 131-6.

20 Marsh, Payne, “Religiosity, Tolerance and Respect”, 206.

21 Kirill, “The Russian Church and the Christian Dimension of Human Rights”.

22 Священного Синода Русской Православной Церкви, *Основы учения Русской Православной Церкви о достоинстве, свободе и правах человека*, IV.3; IV.5.

23 Stoeckl, “L’insegnamento della Chiesa ortodossa russa”, 104.

24 Stoeckl, “L’insegnamento della Chiesa ortodossa russa”, 107.

25 Cf. UNHRC, *Promoting Human Rights*.

26 Stoeckl, *Il ruolo della Chiesa ortodossa russa*, 112.

abortion, human cell testing, civil unions, and surrogacy are portrayed as explicitly opposed to “traditional values”. “No state or group of states has the right to monopolize the interpretation of human rights”, Lavrov stated, affirming that the Russian Federation together with its partners would continue to persevere on the issue of the intrinsic relationship between human rights and traditional values,²⁷ identified as “dignity”, “freedom” and “responsibility”. The ROC’s alternative proposal is known as *Christian humanism*.²⁸ It is meant to confront “Christianophobia”,²⁹ a specific form of aggressive secularism that targets, in the ROC’s reading, Christian-majority European regions through the implementation of the liberal conception of HR by which the rights of minorities and minority religions tend to be privileged in spite of those of the majority, without considering how precisely the latter may be the most vulnerable group.³⁰ The ROC decides to stand as the spokesperson for Christians in Europe, carving out a positive/propositional role for itself by implementing an approach that can be defined as “constructive traditionalism”³¹ which allows it to position itself as an interlocutor in a cross-cultural debate and to open itself with ideological renewal to modern society without renouncing a conservative stance.³² In this struggle against ideological monopolies on the issue of human rights and in support of “traditional values” led by Kirill, the ROC will come to place the values of the Motherland and the nation³³ above human rights, going on to play the role of the moral agenda³⁴ of Russian foreign policy. The model promoted by the ROC (constructive traditionalism-Christian humanism) is based on a series of conceptual opposites:

- neo-liberal ideology vs. conservative traditionalist view
- secularism vs. religion
- individual human rights vs. collective rights of community, nation, family.³⁵

Regarding the territory issue, the ROC adopts the so-called reterritorialization. The reterritorializing current draws on the traditional Orthodox social mission of “reuniting the dispersed” regardless of their

27 Stoeckl, *Il ruolo della Chiesa ortodossa russa*, 113.

28 Stoeckl, “The Human Rights Debate”, 219.

29 Stoeckl, “The Human Rights Debate”, 220.

30 ROC, “Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting”.

31 Stoeckl, “The Human Rights Debate”, 221.

32 Cf. Stepanova, “The Place of the Church in Society”.

33 Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church*, 88.

34 Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church*, 91-118.

35 Stoeckl, “The Human Rights Debate”, 218.

ethnic, political, and social differences, in a reinterpretation that recasts the mission as an action to counter contemporary forms of pluralism aimed instead at dividing, separating, and crumbling the religious memory of peoples.³⁶ In the case of Russia, this tendency has fallen into the overlap between the ROC's mission and the purposes of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Especially since the Putin administration, Payne³⁷ reports, the two bodies have strengthened their collaboration and worked together on multiple fronts in order to secure the rights and "spiritual security" of the Russian diaspora, regain property that formerly belonged to the Russian Empire, lost during the communist period, and expand the Russian government's influence in the world. The ROC, through the spread of Russian Orthodox Christianity, signaled that it was united with the state in promoting a greater Russia, operating the equivalence 'Orthodoxy equals Russianness'. In the 2000 *Russian National Security Concept*, Putin administration chose to pursue a state policy that would not only protect Russia's cultural and spiritual-moral heritage and historical traditions, but also prohibit the use of individual freedom to give vent to violence or primal instincts in order to maintain the spiritual and moral well-being of the population.³⁸ With the definition of "spiritual security", Putin brought religion under the aegis of the state, superimposing identity, national culture and Orthodoxy. In this, the effective polarized pattern of an Orthodox Russia bound to its own spiritual, cultural and moral traditions opposed and attacked by militant secularism, foreign religions, customs, erroneous and sinful ideals was replayed. Since the entire national apparatus is in danger, the defence of faith thus becomes a matter of national security. This marks the boundary of freedom of conscience³⁹ and serves as a means of compacting the Russian Orthodox people against threats to their spiritual and cultural well-being, thereby limiting the amount of freedom experienced in civil society.⁴⁰ Moreover, Putin was explicit in this regard when he stated that "in the dialogue with other Sister-Churches, the Russian Orthodox Church has always defended and hopefully will continue to defend the national and spiritual identity of Russians".⁴¹ Russians, however, are not only residents within the Federation, but anyone who is part of the Russian diaspora in the world. The state then, by such an operation, asserts the right to intervene to safeguard the spiritual security of any Russian

36 Payne, "Towards an Orthodox Understanding", 613.

37 Payne, "Spiritual Security", 712-13.

38 Russian Security Council, 2000 *Russian National Security Concept*.

39 Cf. Elkner, "Spiritual security in Putin's Russia".

40 Payne, "Spiritual Security", 716.

41 "Russian Orthodox Church to work for Russian identity - Putin", Interfax, 3 February, 2009, quoted in Payne, "Spiritual Security", 715.

(who as such can only be Orthodox) in any country in the world: wherever there are Russians in the world there is the ROC, and wherever there is the ROC there is the Russian Federation. Payne⁴² and Zarakhovich's⁴³ thesis is that the ROC and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs work together on the transnational expansion of the Federation and the strengthening of Russian culture in the world through a globalized church that would act as the main ideological arm of the Russian state and a vital foreign policy tool, so that a superpower such as Russia would come to correspond to a "superchurch". Outside national borders, the ROC would therefore move as a geopolitical actor aiming to expand Russian influence in the world. The exercise of joint church-state diplomacy emerges clearly when Lavrov⁴⁴ declares that the Foreign Ministry actively assists Russian diaspora communities in meeting their spiritual needs, including by building new houses of worship, while Kirill⁴⁵ states that he works with institutions for the unification of the Russian people, to promote "Russianness" in strengthening the people's union with their homeland, and for the transfer of churches built around the world before the communist period to Russia, as property belonging to the Federation and not to the ROC. For Kirill, any principle of independence and acculturation is to be rejected: the goal of the Moscow Patriarchate is to prevent the assimilation that invests Russian Orthodox outside the Federation, so as to keep them culturally separate and faithfully anchored in Russian religious identity.⁴⁶ Russia, in its attempt to consolidate itself as a world superpower, uses the ROC as a means to serve as a unifying and centralizing identity and cultural factor.⁴⁷ Considering that the ROC does not recognize the interpretation of canon 28 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, it openly challenges the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the voice of world Orthodoxy.⁴⁸ Thus, while embodying the model of reterritorialization, the Moscow Patriarchate, like the Ecumenical Patriarchate promoter of deterritorialization, also acts, outside the dialectical contrast, according to transnational logic and global aspirations. The ROC however, in being transnational, still pursues the invigoration of Russian national identity.⁴⁹

42 Payne, "Spiritual Security", 726-7.

43 Zarakhovich, "Putin's Reunited Russian Church".

44 The Diplomat, "Diplomacy Needs a Moral Foundation".

45 Kirill, "Cooperation Between the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian Diplomacy", 158-9.

46 Payne, "Spiritual Security", 722.

47 Payne, "Spiritual Security", 727.

48 Payne, "Spiritual Security", 725.

49 Agadjanian, Rousselet, "Globalization and Identity", 40-1.

Like the ROC, the EP has also developed specific interpretive perspectives, directions, directives and guiding principles on human rights and social ethos,⁵⁰ for the first time independently in the document *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*,⁵¹ the result of the three-year work of a Special Commission chaired by Chryssavgis, approved by the Holy and Sacred Synod in January 2020. The urgency of the work undoubtedly lies in the pressing need, faced with the challenges of contemporary times, to explicate a social concept capable of clearly explaining “the axiomatic and self-evident truths”⁵² of theology and to pronounce on such central issues as human rights, racism, bioethics, climate change, social justice, politics and secularism, wealth distribution, migration crisis, war, ecumenical dialogue, and the relationship between science, technology and religion. It is reasonable to read in the publication of such a document the desire to express the full and complete worldview of the EP and to define its (and the Church’s) mission on earth, consequently providing a valid model and example for the other churches as well and, at the same time, a response to the previously unilateral systematization of the ROC. The goal of the Commission, as we read in the “Preface”, was to strive “to avoid empty abstractions and to offer concrete moral proposals”.⁵³ The human being, conceived as the receptacle of divine love, consequently enjoys an “infinite and inherent dignity”, an “effect of God’s image” in everyone (§12). He is called to become a partaker of the divine nature by the attainment of ‘theosis’ and to live through participation in the community of the body of Christ, where everyone can enter into full union with God, in an overlap of spiritual life and social life (§3). An entire chapter is devoted to human rights. It states that since “the historical roots of such ideas reach down deep into the soil of the Gospel”, Orthodox Christians “should happily adopt the language of human rights” which, although it “may not say all that can and should be said about the profound dignity and glory of creatures fashioned after the image and likeness of God”, nevertheless constitutes “a language that honours that reality in a way that permits international and inter-faith cooperation in the work of civil rights and civil justice, and that therefore says much that should be said”. In light of this, “the Orthodox Church” – in the conception of the EP – “lends its voice to the call to protect and advance human rights everywhere, and to recognize those rights as both fundamental to and inalienable from every single human life” (§61). A similar argumentative procedure is conducted

50 Cf. Elsner, “Toward an Orthodox Social Ethos?”.

51 Ecumenical Patriarchate, *For the Life of the World*.

52 McGuckin, “The Issue of Human Rights”, 179.

53 Bentley Hart, Chryssavgis, “Preface”.

with regard to human freedom. “True human freedom” – the document states in full adherence to Orthodox theology – “is more than the mere indeterminate power of individuals to choose what they wish to do. [...] It is the realization of one’s nature in its own proper good end [...] which for the human person entails freely seeking union with God”. But even if the “conventions of human rights cannot achieve this freedom for any of us” – the positive freedom that lies not in the exercise of individual choice but in the opportunity to escape the constraints and boundaries of human nature⁵⁴ – this does not detract from the fact that “those conventions can help to assure individuals and communities liberty from an immense variety of destructive and corrupting forces” reasoning that “the language of human rights is indispensable in negotiating the principles of civil justice and peace” and at the same time “serves the highest aspirations of human nature by enunciating and defending the inviolable dignity of every soul” (§62). The change in approach from the ROC’s dissertations – notwithstanding that the documents are inevitably shaped by the contextual challenges of a historical era in constant mutation – appears evident, just as different are the intentions and purposes and irreconcilable are quite a few landfalls on issues of social concept. The defensive and conservative attitude closed to the forms of the contemporary world promoted by the MP, though mitigated by a sincere proactive and constructive spirit, becomes in the case of the EP all-round confessional openness, closeness to the instances of actuality, without relinquishing critical judgment. Such a conciliatory vision, theologically traceable to the order of divine economy, leads the document to declare that

Orthodox Christians should support the language of human rights, not because it is a language fully adequate to all that God intends for his creatures, but because it preserves a sense of the inviolable uniqueness of every person, and of the priority of human goods over national interests, while providing a legal and ethical grammar upon which all parties can, as a rule, arrive at certain basic agreements (§12).⁵⁵

The approach advocated by the EP is that of a ‘spiritual ecumenicity’, a form of globalization in which the bonds of love, brotherhood and cooperation should unite all human beings of every ethnicity, language and culture, while safeguarding the distinction and particularity of any religious or cultural minority.⁵⁶ Rejecting the theory

⁵⁴ Payne, “Towards an Orthodox Understanding”, 620.

⁵⁵ Ecumenical Patriarchate, *For the Life of the World*.

⁵⁶ Bartholomew, *Address Given at the 1999 Annual Davos Meeting*.

that globalization is nothing more than “a means of making humanity homogeneous, of influencing the masses and causing a single, unified and unique mode of thought to prevail”,⁵⁷ the See of Constantinople, in the figure of Patriarch Bartholomew, is in the forefront of defending the religious freedom of every minority and a “civil society based on pluralism, tolerance, respect of human and minority rights and democracy”.⁵⁸ “Above all, there must be respect for the rights of the minority within every majority”, Bartholomew argues, because “when and where the rights of the minority are observed, the society will for the most part be just and tolerant”.⁵⁹ Certainly, one could simplistically assume that such a pattern of inclusive and welcoming “Christian globalization” based on the inalienable rights that God has granted to human beings might constitute in the case of the EP a response to its current minority status in a hostile country with a clear Islamic majority. To assert this, however, would be to completely ignore the theological perspective that the EP has long developed and that Bartholomew’s Patriarchate in particular advocates and supports. As argued by Moltmann⁶⁰ and Payne,⁶¹ Trinitarian theology fully legitimizes this positioning. The model of plurality in diversity expressed by Trinitarianism designates a communion of love, harmony and reciprocity that, by virtue of the necessity of relationship, interprets otherness as an indispensable part of unity. According to this view, human society should be based, using the patristic understanding of the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity, on the pattern of sociality and community of its heavenly counterpart. “Our social program is the doctrine of the Trinity”,⁶² Bartholomew confirms. Human beings are called to reproduce on earth the perichoresis or movement of mutual love that unites, in a *koinônia* of love, the three persons of the triune God.⁶³ Since only within human consortium is the person able to exercise his freedom, the other becomes the signifies of every human being’s life.⁶⁴ Living in communion and relationship with the other (the religious

57 Bartholomew, *Address Given at the 1999 Annual Davos Meeting*.

58 Bartholomew, “Speech at 4th meeting between the Orthodox Church, the European People’s Party and the European Democrats Group in Istanbul, (June 2000)”, quoted in Maghioros, Tsironis, “Human Rights and Orthodoxy”, 230.

59 Bartholomew, “Address of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the Plenary Assembly of the European Parliament”, in *In the World, Yet Not of the World*, 160-70.

60 Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*; Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*.

61 Payne, “Towards an Orthodox Understanding”.

62 Bartholomew, “The Role of Religion”, 441.

63 Bartholomew, “The Role of Religion”, 441.

64 Yannaras, *Variations on the Song of Songs*, 4.

other, the political other, the ideological other, etc.) becomes for Orthodox Christians a necessary consequence of their belief: in a context in which everyone is the same thing, one would therefore nullify the relationship that underlies the nature of the *prósôpon*. If the concept of the individual is the destruction of the person and his or her social nature, the relationship in which human beings exist with each other is the ultimate guarantor of their uniqueness, specificity, dignity. “Rooted in the very ontology of the person as revealed in the Trinity, one’s otherness recognized by another includes the recognition of his or her freedom”:⁶⁵ we can reject assumptions that look outside theology for the reasons for such an orthodox conception of human rights and plurality, which turns out to be essential implication of the Trinitarian theology. One does not trace, in a framework thus sketched, the elevation of the motherland and the nation above human rights nor the defence of or identification with a single people as is the case with the ROC,⁶⁶ but that ‘Christian globalization’ or ‘spiritual ecumenicity’ which, in firm opposition to that which in various forms annihilates and attacks human nature, promotes dialogue and human rights on a universal level.⁶⁷

Regarding territory issue, the EP chose the line of transnationality. In the second half of the twentieth century the Patriarchate emerged as a representative transnational organization of Orthodox Greeks worldwide later coming to assume the image of a global institution⁶⁸ supported by the synchronous elaboration, by Orthodox theologians and academics close to the Patriarchate, of the positive theological vision of globalization, pluralism, otherness that we reported above. Deterritorialized religiosity provided an opportunity to adapt Orthodoxy to the contemporary and renew the status of the Patriarchate by transforming it into a truly supranational institution. Respecting the independence of the other territorial autocephalous churches, the patriarchal thesis wants all the remaining regions of the globe to fall under its jurisdiction because of its traditional status as *primus inter pares* and because of the canonical authority derived from the decisions of Ecumenical Councils II and IV, especially under Canon 28 of Chalcedon which attributes jurisdiction over “barbarian lands” to Constantinople,⁶⁹ theoretically binding on all Orthodox churches. Consequently, it is considered the only authority capable of conferring or revoking canonical status on local churches. Bartholomew further expanded the perspective of spiritual

65 Payne, “Towards an Orthodox Understanding”, 620-1.

66 Payne, “Towards an Orthodox Understanding”, 625.

67 Cf. Bartholomew, “The Role of Religion”, 432-55.

68 Cf. Grigoriadis, “The Ecumenical Patriarchate as a Global Actor”.

69 Payne, “Spiritual Security”, 726.

ecumenicity, making it a cornerstone of his work. He first wanted to revive the convention of synods with the participation of all Orthodox patriarchs and representatives of the local autocephalous Churches, rebuilding a sense of pan-Orthodox unity and assuming the role of institutional arbiter with a strategy of strengthening its canonical status. Also, through his more than decade-long commitment to interreligious and ecumenical dialogue and dedication to the sensitive social and environmental issues, he succeeded in ensuring that the EP could relate to the Papacy from global headquarters to global headquarter. Rejecting the theory of deterritorialization, the Patriarchate's social and theological vision rather recognized in it a possibility to strengthen the prestige of the Church and to confirm the Patriarchate's position as a global agent, representative of all Orthodox Christianity without constraints of ethnicity or territoriality. "It is inconceivable for the nation to be declared a decisive factor in church life, for the Church to deliver an ethnocentric discourse, to ally itself with nationalist political movements", Bartholomew said. "The true Orthodox faith is impossible for it to be a source of nationalism. Wherever nationalism appears in an Orthodox context, it has other roots and motivations" - he said - concluding that "the Ecumenical Patriarchate, although in the maelstrom of nationalisms, has not surrendered and maintains its supranational character".⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Roudometof observes, the patriarchal promotion of a deterritorialized religiosity allows for considerable flexibility in jurisdictional disputes that can express itself in the opportunistic and inconsistent use of its canonical authority⁷¹ to selectively accept or reject attempts at national autocephaly.⁷²

The different view on the relations the Church should have with political power represents together with the divergences on human rights (rights in accordance with the values of the motherland vs. inviolability of rights with respect to national interests) a decisive factor underlying the uneven advances in ecumenical dialogue. The disintegration of Orthodox unity is an effect arising from such underlying issues, so divisive as to undermine, in competition with additional causes that transcend the strictly religious realm, a firmly shared theological-doctrinal framework.

70 Falasca, "Intervista. Bartolomeo".

71 Roudometof, "Greek Orthodoxy, Territoriality, and Globality", 79.

72 Roudometof, "Greek Orthodoxy, Territoriality, and Globality", 86.

3 Ukraine: Ecclesiastical and Political Reflections Before and During 2018 Events

Since the complex and turbulent history of the Churches in Ukraine and the jurisdictional fragmentation of its territory is well known,⁷³ so let us proceed by focusing on very recent times. Before the events of 2018,⁷⁴ there were three Orthodox denominations in the Ukrainian canonical precinct. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) counted 14 dioceses, 12 bishops and 1167 parishes. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) had 35 dioceses, 42 bishops and 5167 parishes. Lastly, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) consisted of 52 dioceses, 73 bishops and 12,348 parishes.⁷⁵ It should also be considered, in addition, that the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), the country's largest non-Orthodox religious group, has 16 eparchies, 45 bishops and more than 3500 churches on Ukrainian soil. There is no sufficiently certain data regarding the number of believers in these denominations. According to the Ministry of Culture, the UOC-KP has followers primarily in the central and western oblasts, with a smaller number in Zakarpattya Oblast. The UOC-MP is present in all regions of the country, but it has a smaller presence in Ivano-Frankivsk and Lviv Oblasts in the western part of the country. Most UAOC adherents are in the western part of the country, while followers of the UGCC reside primarily in the western oblasts of Lviv, Ternopil, and Ivano-Frankivsk.⁷⁶

In such a religious divide,⁷⁷ we see how politics took on increasing prominence: the nationalist UOC-KP and UAOC received the reciprocated support of independence leaders, whereas the

73 Cf. Merlo, *La costruzione dell'Ucraina contemporanea*; Merlo, "Una chiesa per la nazione"; Merlo, *All'ombra delle cupole d'oro*; Bociurkiw, "The Church and the Ukrainian Revolution"; Bociurkiw, "The Autocephalous Church Movement"; Bociurkiw, "The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church"; Ul'janovskij, Andrusyšin, *Cerkva v Ukrajin's'kij Deržavi 1917-1920 rr.*; Sysyn, "The Third Ribirth"; Denisenko, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine*.

74 For the pre-2018 development, cf. Krawchuk, Bremer, *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*; Shestopalets, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate"; Napolitano, "L'autocefalia della chiesa ortodossa ucraina". For the later events, cf. Coleman, "Orthodoxy and Autocephaly in Ukraine"; Bortnyk, "Church and Exclusivism in Ukrainian Orthodoxy".

75 Державні документи, заяви і звернення Всеукраїнської Ради Церков і релігійних організацій, "Особливості релігійного і церковно-релігійного самовизначення українських громадян".

76 U.S. Department of State, "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ukraine".

77 Cf. Kuzio, "In Search of Unity and Autocephaly"; Wawrzonek, *Religion and Politics in Ukraine*.

Moscow-dependent UOC-MP could count on the support of pro-Russian leaders, whom it backed in return along with the Russian Federation. This pattern can be observed in every presidential election. In 1994, for example, Kravčuk, favoured by the UOC-KP and the UAOC, lost to Kučma who, supported by the UOC-MP, dissolved the Council for Religious Affairs that advocated the creation of a state church.⁷⁸ By contrast, in 2004, pro-Russian candidate Janukovyč (later president from 2010 to 2014) collaborated with the UOC-MP to promote anti-religious freedom legislation that would have made other Orthodox churches in the country illegal. The victory of pro-European Juščenko prevented the implementation of the draft law and revealed to the public the overlap between the interests of the Moscow-linked church and the plans of the pro-Russian ruling class. While the religious factors were of great significance in the Ukrainian nation-building process,⁷⁹ they were also used to reinforce the political-spiritual bond with Russia. For decades two nationalist churches eager to be recognized by the EP managed to coexist, with mixed fortunes, with a third church that was subordinated to Moscow. In 2008, on the occasion of the 1020th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus', Aleksij II and Bartholomew visited Ukraine. Juščenko, who on that occasion aspired to the granting of autocephaly for a unified Ukrainian church, as did Metropolitan Filaret (UOC-KP), reserved for the Constantinopolitan primate a head-of-state welcome that he did not accord his Russian counterpart. Once again, Bartholomew did not take action.⁸⁰ The following year, the visit of the newly elected Patriarch Kirill had precise political implications. First of all, it can be noted that Kirill consciously chose Ukraine for his first patriarchal visit: "the first thing that came to my mind after my appointment to the patriarchal seat" – the patriarch stated – "was to visit the Holy Land of Kyiv, to pray to Prince Vladimir [...] for our Holy Church and for our people".⁸¹ The speeches he delivered during the trip clearly revealed the role Ukraine plays for the Russian Church:

Rus' comes from here, from these hills of Kyiv along the Dnipro. Here are the foundations of our faith, the beginnings of our Church, the birth of our state sovereignty from which the independent states were later derived. Here lies our historical past.

⁷⁸ Cf. Kuzio, "In Search of Unity and Autocephaly"; Wawrzonek, Religion and Politics in Ukraine.

⁷⁹ Cf. Garzaniti, "Alle radici della formazione".

⁸⁰ Payne, Tonoyan, "The Visit of Patriarch Kirill", 256.

⁸¹ "Vizit Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla na Ukrainu" published in Zhurnal Moskeovskoi Patriarkhii on 9 September, 16-43, quoted in Payne, Tonoyan, "The Visit of Patriarch Kirill", 257.

And I may surprise some of you by saying that, in a sense, this is where our future will also be decided to a large extent. When I say “we” or “our” I mean all of us who belong to the unique civilization of ancient Kyivan Rus, which flourished, developed and became a powerful actor in world civilization.⁸²

The patriarch’s words well express the ROC’s approach about the Ukrainian case. Kirill’s vision contemplates a *Russkiy mir* in which Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, which share the conversion to Orthodoxy of tenth century Kyivan Rus’, form a single cultural and value entity though remaining politically independent states.⁸³ His goal is to preserve the “Eastern Slavic civilization”, of which he presents himself as the spiritual leader: from this viewpoint, the Holy Rus’ church, which has its roots in Kyiv, unifies the Slavic world and is a necessary means of maintaining said unity.⁸⁴ The decision to visit Ukraine then becomes part of the plan to strengthen the ROC and compact its branches under the canonical jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate (MP). Therefore, in making what he called a pilgrimage to the mother of all Rus’,⁸⁵ the place where “Russianness”⁸⁶ was forged, he wanted to highlight the inseparability between the Russian Church and Ukrainian territory. Indeed, it is no coincidence that in reference to the Slavic peoples, Kyiv is called “our common Jerusalem”.⁸⁷ Until 2014, the year of the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in the Donbass and Crimea, the patriarch made an annual pastoral trip to Ukraine for celebrations of St. Vladimir, which led nationalists to accuse him of playing the role of “government official” and pursuing purely practical goals⁸⁸ in the wake of a political agenda aimed at colonizing Ukraine⁸⁹ as a satellite state of the Russian spiritual empire⁹⁰ through the MP. In 2010, the proximity of the Russian primate benefited Yanukovyč, who was elected president and received Kirill’s blessing in person upon taking office. After his dismissal and the period of severe political turmoil of Euromaidan, the new president since 2014

82 Kirill, “Прямой эфир с Патриархом Московским и всея Руси Кириллом. Полная версия”.

83 Roussellet, “The Russian Orthodox Church and the *Russkii Mir*”.

84 Payne, Tonoyan, “The Visit of Patriarch Kirill”, 260.

85 Patriarch Kirill’s interview for Интeр TV Channel, 30 July 2009.

86 Cf. Agadjanian, Pankhurst, Roudometof, *Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age*.

87 Payne, Tonoyan, “The Visit of Patriarch Kirill”, 257.

88 MCC, “Vizit Patriarkha Kirilla v Ukrainu i reaktsiya v Rossii”, 2 August, quoted in Payne, Tonoyan, “The Visit of Patriarch Kirill”, 260.

89 MCC, “Vizit Patriarkha Kirilla v Ukrainu i reaktsiya v Rossii”, 2 August, quoted in Payne, Tonoyan, “The Visit of Patriarch Kirill”, 260.

90 Zolotov, “The Old New Player”, 13.

Poroshenko, a pro-European and nationalist, made the formation of a single autocephalous Ukrainian Church a personal political battle.⁹¹ In 2016, Ukrainian affairs came crashing down on the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church held in Crete. More than 1,200 years after the last ecumenical council recognized by the Orthodox Church (Nicaea II, 787), and after more than half a century of preparations, a pan-Orthodox council was indeed scheduled to gather again. During the weeks leading up to the opening date of June 20 and after taking part in the entire preliminary stage, the Churches of Antioch, Georgia, Bulgaria and Russia withdrew one by one. These very heavy and unexpected rejections were a consequence of a set of factors ranging from dogmatic issues to geopolitical events. However, considering that the Council was only convened by unanimous synodal decision at the Chambesy meeting in January of the same year, it seems to us that the real cause of the rupture can be traced to geopolitical turmoil. Indeed, at the very outset of the Council there was the Verhovna Rada's request to Patriarch Bartholomew to nullify the 1686 act⁹² that had transferred the Kyiv metropolis under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate and to become the advocate of the resolution of the heated division existing within Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Confirming this, Lavrov stated that he would not allow the ROC participation since the Council represented a political attempt outside the Orthodox to bring schism, primarily using the crisis in Ukraine and anti-Russian rhetoric to damage the positions of the ROC.⁹³ Faced with the ROC's repeated negligence, the EP finally decided to intervene in 2018.⁹⁴ Taking up the political demands and thrusts coming from the UOC-KP and UAOC, the Phanariot Synod revoked the 1686 conciliar *tomos* and created, through the Council of Reconciliation in December 2018, a new configuration which the two non-canonical churches converged into and which was granted autocephaly: the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (UOC).⁹⁵ This decision had been discussed in August of that year by Bartholomew and Kirill during the last and very long confrontation between the two at the Phanar in which they failed to reach an agreement. President Poroshenko, who had signed a bilateral agreement with Bartholomew in November, was thus able

⁹¹ Brylov, Kalenychenko, Kryshtal, "The Religious Factor in Conflict"; Shestopalets, "Church and State in Ukraine". Cf. Puleri, Vukoslavcevic, "Strengthening the State-Religion Nexus".

⁹² Cf. Tchentsova, "The Patriarchal and Synodal Act of 1686".

⁹³ Двери на православнето, "Външният министър на РФ коментира Всеправославния събор".

⁹⁴ Cf. Napolitano, "Introduction. The Historical-National Roots".

⁹⁵ Cf. Parlato, "L'autocefalia della Chiesa ortodossa ucraina, interpretazioni dottrinali e strutture ecclesiali".

to rejoice, seeing a key point of his program fulfilled in the run-up to the upcoming elections.⁹⁶ The election of Metropolitan Epifanij put an end to the jurisdictional bipartition of Ukrainian Orthodox denominations that had been going on until then. When invited to the Council, the UOC-MP declined the invitation.⁹⁷ The sharp reaction of the Russian Holy Synod resulted in the interruption of Eucharistic communion with the Constantinopolitan see, hence the unilateral schism that is still going on. From then on, the rift between the EP and the ROC, fuelled by continuous occasions of confrontation, would grow wider and wider. Patriarch Bartholomew hoped that the establishment of the UOC would allow Russians and Ukrainians to unite into one national multi-ethnic church. This is what he said in this regard in 2021:

If Moscow had shown a willingness to cooperate, becoming aware of the emerging historical, social and ecclesiastical conditions, the issue would have been resolved many years ago. For three decades Moscow has been blatantly blind to the tragic ecclesiastical situation in that country. It essentially prevented a solution from being found in order that Kyiv, which the Church of Russia had taken from the Church of Constantinople - profiting from historical circumstances and events - would not escape Moscow's control. The granting of an autocephalous status to the Church of Ukraine by the Ecumenical Patriarchate thus was not only ecclesiological-ly and canonically correct, but also the only realistic solution to the problem.⁹⁸

On the other hand, in pursuing his well-known geopolitical design of a clash of civilizations⁹⁹ in which the Russian world finds itself surrounded, Kirill argued:

The Phanar did not simply make a mistake, but committed a crime. [...] Patriarch Bartholomew was under pressure from powerful political forces of one of the world superpowers. [...] The logic was to distance Russia, Orthodox Russia from its Orthodox brothers and sisters in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. [...] The intention: the rift between the Russian Church and the Greek Orthodox.¹⁰⁰

96 Cimbalo, "L'evoluzione dei rapporti".

97 Merlo, "L'ortodossia ucraina: verso l'unità o la frantumazione?", 190.

98 Falasca, "Intervista. Bartolomeo".

99 Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church*, 56.

100 Prezzi, "Lacerazione nell'ortodossia", 2.

In the Russian patriarch's view, Bartholomew would have submitted himself to U.S. liberalism and the Western logic of weakening Russia.¹⁰¹ Once again, the Moscow primate overlapped the fate of the ROC and that of the Russian Federation and was backed up by Lavrov's statements that hold the Ecumenical Patriarch politically responsible, at the behest of the U.S., for "sowing discord in Ukraine by creating a purported Orthodox Church of Ukraine" and "burying the influence of Orthodoxy in today's world".¹⁰² The then chairman of the MP's Department for External Church Relations Metropolitan Hilarion stated that it was quite obvious that the U.S. government was behind the EP's actions.¹⁰³ The U.S. government's meetings with the Ukrainian ecclesiastical hierarchy that took place in 2018, and the repeatedly expressed support for it, constitute indeed historical evidence that in the Ukrainian case political and spiritual aspects cannot be separated. Hilarion accused Bartholomew of dogmatic aberrations, denial of synodality, transgression of the bimillennial canonical tradition, substitution of the patriarch for Jesus Christ and papism.¹⁰⁴ The latter replied to these "speculations" by pointing out that contributing to the arbitration and settlement of disputes between the churches is nothing more than the precise canonical responsibility of the Constantinopolitan see.¹⁰⁵

4 Some Consequences of the 'Schism'

In addition to impacting ecumenical dialogue,¹⁰⁶ the UOC was the subject of bitter debate among the other Orthodox autocephalous Churches from the ecclesiological perspective. A general attitude of caution prevailed, apart from a few more explicit sides, which flowed into the call for the convening of a pan-Orthodox synod on the matter. To date, no synod is scheduled. Well before the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war with the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the aftermath of the 'Schism' had extended the clash between the two sees on so many fronts that the wound was already considered

101 Hilarion said: "Patriarch Bartholomew is part of a big geopolitical project, a project aimed at further weakening Russia, at driving a wedge between the peoples of Russia and Ukraine. And the Russian Orthodox Church, which unites these peoples, is now probably the main obstacle to the implementation of the U.S. plans". <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/21720/>.

102 Prezzi, "Lacerazione nell'ortodossia", 2.

103 Hilarion, "By His Invasion in Ukraine".

104 Ivanov, "A Letter of BOC Bishop". Cf. Видинский Даниил, митрополит, "За единство Церкви".

105 Prezzi, "Lacerazione nell'ortodossia", 3.

106 Smytsnyuk, "The New Orthodox Church in Ukraine".

irreparable.¹⁰⁷ After the disavowal of the Phanariot throne, the ROC decided to intervene in the foreign canonical territories¹⁰⁸ that it asserts for itself, claiming the full legitimacy of its actions.¹⁰⁹ This had of course already happened in disputed jurisdictions and in historically unorthodox strategic areas such as China.¹¹⁰ In this instance, however, the dispute will encompass Orthodoxy in its entirety. In this light it could be read the fact that, in May 2022, the Serbian Orthodox Church, close to Moscow, anticipated the Phanar in reinstating and granting autocephaly to the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which until then had been non-canonical, causing the irritation of Bartholomew, who had received the request from political and ecclesiastical authorities. Since the schism with the Serbian Church lasted since 1967, it seems to us that it is not a coincidence that the granting of autocephaly came at this precise moment in history. Moreover, the fact that this happened at the hands of the Serbian Church and not from Constantinople seems to us to be attributable to the fact that only in this way could the ROC - which totally delegitimized the Phanar - have recognized this operation. In fact, the ROC promptly recognized the new Church,¹¹¹ which was in all evidence more inclined to an anti-Atlanticist posture that could not have declined with Constantinople.¹¹² What happened in Africa, a geographic area where the Orthodox presence is placed under the legitimate patriarchal authority of the historic see of Alexandria, is extremely more severe. The decision taken in December 2021 by the Russian Synod to establish two dioceses for Northern and Southern Africa in an Exarchate dependent on the MP therefore appeared as a reckless violation,¹¹³ a

107 Cimbalo, “Il ruolo sottaciuto delle Chiese”.

108 A detailed reconstruction of the issue of territorial principle and the ecclesiological repercussions on the Ukrainian case can be read in Bremer, “New Approaches in Ecclesiology?” and Erickson, “Territorial Organization of the Orthodox Church”.

109 The primatial authority from which the role and functions of the EP derive are openly opposed by the MP. The main accusation is that of improperly using the term “ecumenical” through a flattening on the meaning of “universal”, which, relating originally to Universal Sees all, is arbitrarily “exclusivited” in favour of the Patriarchate of Constantinople only. While at first the definition of “ecumenical” could be accepted, insofar as it was intended to cover exclusively the territorial extent of the Imperial borders, the ROC claims the fact that there are no texts and laws enumerated in the *Nomokanon* that speak of the See of Constantinople as the head of all the Churches or that impose its universal jurisdiction beyond Byzantium. This point of view, better explained, is published on the ROC website: <https://mospat.ru/en/authors-analytics/87448/>.

110 Rozanskij, “Il Patriarcato di Mosca”.

111 ROC, “Russian Church Recognizes Macedonian Orthodox Church”.

112 The Orthodox Church of Macedonia’s gratitude to Kirill and ROC’s satisfaction with this reconciliation emerge from “Patriarch Kirill’s telephone conversation with Archbishop Stefan of Ohrid and Macedonia”, DECR, 13 January 2023.

113 Cf. Parlato, “Recenti controversie sulla giurisdizione”.

harsh reaction to Patriarch Theodoros II's support to Bartholomew on the Ukrainian case, regarding which he had initially expressed closeness to Kirill. The recognition of the UOC triggered the wrath of Moscow, which welcomed the transfer of 102 priests from the Patriarchate of Alexandria and created a series of dioceses (Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria, Libya, Central Africa, South Africa, Seychelles) in the canonical territory of another autocephalous Church.¹¹⁴ Even more striking is the scenario loomed by the ROC of even intervening in Constantinople: "We cannot deny Orthodox believers in Turkey pastoral care" – said Hilarion – "given that the Patriarch of Constantinople has sided with the schism".¹¹⁵ A valid bugbear for other autocephalous Churches not to support the EP over Ukraine, the plan would include a series of aids for the Phanariot clergy most hostile to Bartholomew. "The bishops of the Patriarchate of Constantinople" – the metropolitan continues, – "keep telling us that «autocephaly [of Ukraine] is a fait accompli». Therefore, if that is the case, then the division in Orthodoxy is also a fait accompli".¹¹⁶ A dual jurisdiction in the heart of Orthodoxy, with the ROC intruding into the already very fragile canonical enclosure of the EP, would mark the point of no return in the internal relations of the Orthodox Church.

On the Ukrainian political side, Porošenko's presidency had bequeathed two controversial laws on how to transition to the autocephalous Church and on changing the name of the ROC-dependent church from "Ukrainian Orthodox Church" to "Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine", causing a legal disruption that jeopardized the UOC-MP's properties and legal recognitions.¹¹⁷ During the 2019 presidential election, the Kyiv Administrative Court declared law enforcement processes illegal, ensuring legal cover for clergy and ecclesiastical structures.¹¹⁸ The election as president of Zelensky, who won with a plebiscite percentage (73.23% in the second round), saw voters reward for the first time a candidate who was not exposed in the religious sphere and favoured less state interference.¹¹⁹ The war events of 2022, however, forced Zelensky to change his approach. Without venturing into the so-called recentism, let us take a look at some aspects of the impact of the war on the Ukrainian ecclesiastical situation

114 Rozanskij, "La Chiesa russa si prende l'Africa".

115 Prezzi, "Scisma ortodosso: Mosca accelera".

116 Prezzi, "Scisma ortodosso: Mosca accelera".

117 Prezzi, "Lacerazione nell'ortodossia", 4.

118 Prezzi, "Ucraina: Zelensky e le Chiese".

119 Prezzi, "Ucraina: Zelensky e le Chiese".

5 The Churches, the Conflict and the Catholic-Orthodox Relations

Following Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, which marked the final escalation of the conflict, Patriarch Kirill's conduct has been consistent with the positions and ideology he previously expressed. After all, his proximity to Putin¹²⁰ and the centrality of his action in the political-spiritual project of the *Russkiy mir* left no room for other unlikely paths. It should not be forgotten that during the years of his residence in Geneva, where he represented the ROC at the World Council of Churches, Kirill worked for the KGB with the aim of mitigating criticism against restrictions on religious freedom in the Soviet Union and negatively influencing the Council with regard to the USA.¹²¹ The dense relations and cooperation between the ROC hierarchy and the Russian intelligence services from the late 1960s onward, publicly well known since 1991, aimed precisely at supporting, both politically and religiously, the big geopolitical-spiritual project of Soviet Russia, which saw forced control of the ROC as the means to best deploy its designs. The regime focused its action mainly on interreligious dialogue, on the WCC and international organizations and on the attempt to influence global public opinion from a pro-Soviet perspective.¹²² Despite the political changes since the end of the Soviet era,¹²³ this remains the geopolitical and ideological framework in which the current Patriarch Kirill was formed. It is no wonder that on 6 March 2022, in expressing himself on the conflict, the primate of Moscow portrayed a scenario of confrontation between the righteous in faith and the sinners, between the dignified observers of divine law and the perverse propagators of the Western value heresy of false freedom.¹²⁴ The war is described as a "test", a "test of loyalty" to which people are called in order to reject "the gay pride parade" in a determined resistance to the countries of perdition. It is such resistance, such "fundamental rejection of the so-called values that are being offered today by those

120 Cf. Rubboli, *La guerra santa di Putin e Kirill*; Codevilla, *La nuova Russia (1990-2015)*; Codevilla, *Stato e Chiesa nella Federazione Russa*; Gabashvili, *Prima e dopo la fine*; Garrard, Garrard, "Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent"; Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church*; Papkova, *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics*; Wallace, *The Orthodox Church and Civil Society*.

121 Besson, Odehnal, "Putins Patriarch war Spion". Kirill's predecessor, Patriarch Alexy II, was also a KGB agent.

122 Cf. Roccucci, "La Chiesa ortodossa russa e la Conferenza delle Chiese"; Codevilla, *Lo zar e il patriarca*; Bremer, *La Croce e il Cremlino*; Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia*; Kotzer, *Russian Orthodoxy, Nationalism*.

123 Cf. Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church*.

124 Cf. Stoeckl, "The Human Rights Debate", 212-32.

who claim world power” that has brought martyrdom to the “suffering land of the Donbass”, suffocated for eight years “by human sin and hatred”. In this sense, the struggle acquires “not only physical, but metaphysical significance”.¹²⁵ An anthropological study by Kormina and Shtyrkov focused on the Russian Orthodox clergy’s search for a moral justification for war. Here the theme of a *bezdukhovny* (spiritually poor) West emerges repeatedly,¹²⁶ along with the belief that the West aims to destroy Orthodoxy as the foundation of Russia’s political and spiritual power.¹²⁷ Hence, even in Metropolitan Pitirim’s sermons, the nature of war as a struggle between Good and Evil, between the corrupt West, expression of the devil and Sodom, and Holy Russia, whose soldiers are nothing but martyrs.¹²⁸ The study then shows how over time the eschatological dimension gives way to a pastoral and missionary reading of war, devoid of any political interpretation. The conflict thus becomes an opportunity for moral transformation, divine warning, and the sacrifice of new saints: this would allow the clergy to justify the atrocities of war to themselves, not focusing on the role of the state but only on supporting men in battle.¹²⁹ The inextricable link between Orthodoxy, homeland and people was made manifest several times by the patriarch throughout the conflict.¹³⁰ On 10 April, Kirill called on the people to unite around the authorities for the sake of the motherland and repel external enemies. On 8 May 2022, at the Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, Kirill expressed his support for all those defending the homeland, asking to pray that the army would have the necessary spiritual strength during special military operations.¹³¹ On Christmas Day, 7 January 2023, he exhorted to love the homeland and defend it with sacrifice: “I would like to wish all of us to love our homeland, our people. This is the kind of love that often requires sacrifice, as is the case today on the battlefield. [...] Always be ready to love the Motherland, to serve it [...] and to defend it”.¹³² On 19 January 2023, he went on to call on parishes to support the military materially and spiritually in the face of the attempt by united Europe and the entire Western world to conquer Russia, arguing that “both

125 Kirill, *Patriarch’s Homily*, 6 March 22.

126 Kormina, Shtyrkov, “State of Uncertainty”.

127 Kormina, Shtyrkov, “State of Uncertainty”.

128 Kormina, Shtyrkov, “State of Uncertainty”.

129 Kormina, Shtyrkov, “State of Uncertainty”.

130 A very thorough study about Kirill’s war justification rhetoric and his loyalty to Putin is covered in Rousselet, *La Sainte Russie contre l’Occident*.

131 Napolitano, “Il patriarca Kirill e la guerra”.

132 БИЗНЕС, “Патриарх Кирилл пожелал детям любить Родину и быть готовыми ее защитить”.

the Church and all those who influence and can influence our society must do everything for Russia to win”, as it stands as the last stronghold of “traditional values such as family, sense of duty and patriotism”: “we stand for the Motherland, we stand for our people”.¹³³ In a homily delivered on 3 May 2022 at the Kremlin’s Cathedral of the Archangel, the Russian primate went so far as to deny the invasion: “Russia has never attacked anyone. It is surprising that a large and powerful country has never attacked anyone, but has only defended its borders”.¹³⁴ Such statements generated quite a few issues within Orthodoxy and ecumenical dialogue. On the Sunday of Orthodoxy 2022, a group of 293 ROC presbyters published a call “to all those on whom the cessation of the fratricidal war in Ukraine depends” for “reconciliation and an immediate cease-fire”, making a decisive stand against the war.¹³⁵ Another section of the Russian clergy – still a minority – is hesitant to speak out, given the near impossibility of publicly condemning the conflict without facing severe consequences from the Church hierarchy, or because of a varied array of pastoral, material, personal, and social motivations, and seeks alternative, non-explicit strategies of intervening.¹³⁶ On 13 March of the same year, more than 1,500 Orthodox intellectuals and theologians signed the document “A Declaration on the “Russian World” (Russkii mir) Teaching” published by Fordham University with which, “in the wake of the unacceptable and horribly destructive invasion of Ukraine”, they condemn as heresy the concept of *Russkiy mir* used by the Patriarch of Moscow to justify the war and “the connivance of the Russian Orthodox Church” and Patriarch Kirill, who “invaded the Orthodox Church” with “a vile and indefensible teaching [...] profoundly un-Orthodox, un-Christian and against humanity”.¹³⁷ Within the ROC, the voices of Metropolitan Onufrij, primate of the UOC-MP, and of Metropolitan John of Dubna, head of the archdiocese in Western Europe linked to the Moscow See, also rose against Kirill. The fact that the Russian Metropolitan of Kyiv himself firmly opposed Kirill by referring to “fratricidal blood” and the “sin of Cain”¹³⁸ is indicative of how a decisive battle for Orthodoxy is being played out on

133 Kirill, Святейший Патриарх Кирилл”.

134 Kirill, *Patriarch’s Homily*, 6 March 22.

135 “Beati gli operatori di pace. Appello di presbiteri della chiesa ortodossa russa alla riconciliazione e alla fine della guerra”: <https://www.monasterodibose.it/comunita/finestra-ecumenica/14998-beati-gli-operatori-di-pace>.

136 Rousselet, “Quelles résistances?”.

137 “A Declaration on the ‘Russian World’ (Russkii mir) Teaching”. <https://www.academia.org/en/news-announcements/press/963-a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching>.

138 Scaramuzzi, “Ucraina, le bombe russe”.

the Ukrainian ground. Indeed, while on the one hand it would be unthinkable for Moscow to deprive itself of its jurisdiction in Ukraine (since losing it would imply a significant impoverishment in terms of size and prestige), on the other hand the UOC-MP is faced with the anger of the Ukrainian believers and clergy who see themselves attacked by the ecclesiastical institution to which they belong.¹³⁹ Foreseeing a risk of a vast migration of dioceses to the UOC, on 27 May 2022, the UOC-MP decided to make changes to its Statutes such as to establish “full independence and autonomy”¹⁴⁰ from the MP, condemning the conflict and communicating through official channels its disagreement with Patriarch Kirill’s and the ROC’s stance on the war.¹⁴¹ The status change was approved by the Council with 95% of the votes in favour, but an open wound still exists. Should this not be a bluff to keep communities and parishes in agreement with Moscow, the future of the Russian Patriarchate, which would see its control over Slavic Jerusalem crumble, appears to depend on the outcome of the war. However, separation from Moscow did not imply a merger with Constantinople for the former UOC-MP.¹⁴² In fact, not all the dioceses that disavowed Kirill switched to the UOC: indeed, a petition of 430 priests from the UOC-MP called for declaring an autocephaly and removing the patriarch.¹⁴³ They now make up a kind of autocephaly in the making, concerned about getting through the war unscathed.¹⁴⁴ In other words, the fragmentation persists. On the other

139 On the religious sentiment of Ukrainian Orthodox refer to the anthropological study by Wanner, *Everyday Religiosity*.

140 The choice of terms used by Metropolitan Onufrij is significant. He walks a fine line, aware of the canonical weight that terms such as “autocephaly” would have. The operation of the UOC-MP in an autonomist key was conducted in a very rapid and unspoken manner. The stages of the separation process and the convening of the Council are dealt with in detail in OrthodoxTimes 2022, “The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: War and another Autocephaly”: <https://orthodoxtimes.com/the-orthodox-church-in-ukraine-war-and-another-autocephaly/>.

141 Собор Української Православної Церкви, “Постанова Собору Української Православної Церкви від 27 травня 2022 року”.

142 This can be seen from the Resolutions of the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of 27 May 2022. It is clear that the UOC-MP does not recognize the UOC and the apostolic succession of its members just as it attacks the decisions of Bartholomew and the Ukrainian political authorities: “The Council perceives the existence of the schism as a deep painful wound on the Church body. [...] The formation of the ‘Orthodox Church of Ukraine’, only deepened misunderstandings and led to physical confrontation. [...] The OCU representatives need to: stop the illegal seizure of churches and forced transfers of parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), realise that their canonical status [...] is significantly inferior to the freedoms and opportunities for the implementation of Church activities as compared to those that are provided for in the Statute of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. [...] To recognise the canonicity of the hierarchy of the OCU, it is first necessary to restore the apostolic succession of its bishops”.

143 Rozanskij, “Kirill invita a difendere Mosca”.

144 Kalenychenko, Brylov, “Ukrainian Religious Actors”.

hand, a large number of parishes, which are granted the freedom to deliberate by majority vote on the possibility of moving from one jurisdiction to another, joined the autocephalous Church blessed by Bartholomew. Figures reported in early 2023 by Kyiv Metropolitan Epifanij show that approximately 1,500 religious communities chose to move from the UOC-MP to the new UOC since the 2018 council, including as many as 700 since February 2022.¹⁴⁵ An investigation by journalist Horyevoy, furthermore, speaks of about 1100 relocated communities until December 2022, of which more than 600 after the war escalated.¹⁴⁶ Meanwhile, on the Ukrainian political side, between December 2022 and January 2023 President Zelensky signed a series of decrees aimed at ensuring Ukraine's "spiritual independence". The Ukrainian intelligence service's discovery of a series of links between invaders and Moscow-linked clergy, accused of espionage and collaborationism, triggered a regulatory process that should lead to the banning of any church entity affiliated with Russian centres of influence.¹⁴⁷ Among the most painful losses for the MP are the two churches of the Assumption and Refectory of the Upper Lavra¹⁴⁸ in Kyiv, in which they are no longer allowed to officiate pending their legal assignment to the UOC.¹⁴⁹ This is another point where the Ukrainian political and religious spheres have become tied hand in glove: the pressure of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and government on the UOC-MP has been increasing more and more, producing a long series of operations and decrees¹⁵⁰ and inducing violent eviction from UOC-MP churches several times. The instrumentalization of religious question by politics was also the subject of an investigation by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, which identified in the Rada's recent legislation the danger of discriminatorily restricting UOC-MP religious freedom.¹⁵¹ The intelligence focus on the UOC-MP has been justified by the fact that the UOC-MP was unable to effectively break away from Moscow and the collaborationists, eventually opting for a wait-and-see policy poorly tolerated by the Rada.¹⁵² Thus, on both the Russian and Ukrainian sides,

145 Кошкіна, "Митрополит Епіфаній".

146 Geslin, "Reportage. La guerre des clochers".

147 Brylov, Kalenychenko, Mandaville, *Assessing Kyiv's New Focus*.

148 The move of these two crucial churches, it should be emphasized, was not due to their community's request to join the UOC, but to a political decision by the Ukrainian government for internal security reasons, which was met with protests from the monks residing there in response.

149 Brylov, Kalenychenko, "Inter-Orthodox crisis in Ukraine".

150 Brylov, Kalenychenko, "Inter-Orthodox crisis in Ukraine".

151 Brylov, Kalenychenko, "Inter-Orthodox crisis in Ukraine".

152 Brylov, Kalenychenko, "Inter-Orthodox crisis in Ukraine".

religion is being used, Wanner points out, as a proxy war and as a political resource within the armed conflict.¹⁵³ Back to Kirill, a harsh attack toward him also came from his former close collaborator Hovorun,¹⁵⁴ who accuses him of being the main instigator of the conflict. Putin's ideology, which he defines "the patriarch's gift", is nothing - he argues - but "political orthodoxy" with which he has designed a clash of "a divine Russia against a satanic Ukraine", an invaded Jerusalem to be liberated in a crusade. Therefore, Putinism "must be deconstructed theologically".¹⁵⁵ This is what has been happening on the home front. In addition to that, blameful words also came from Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew:

In the face of the death of innocent people, the bombing of unarmed civilians, the razing of whole cities, in the face of this human tragedy, you cannot have sermons declaring a war 'holy.' This is something very sad. It causes us the deepest sadness and pain. But it causes more pain to the Ukrainians themselves. Because you cannot declare yourself a brother to a people and bless the war your state is waging against them. You cannot stubbornly insist that the Ukrainian church belongs to you and let the faithful...be killed and their churches destroyed by Russian bombardments. Unless they hope the military invasion will settle their ecclesiastical claims.¹⁵⁶

Bartholomew's accusations are not lightweight. In his Easter homily of 2022, he insisted on the Church's obligation to act effectively as an agent of peace.¹⁵⁷ There is no shortage of occasions when the Constantinopolitan primate strongly condemned the war. On his part, head of the UOC Epifanij called for Kirill's removal as patriarch on charges of heresy, appealing to the other hierarchs of the autocephalous Churches. However, having a condemning council is not an option not only because of the opposition of patriarchs close to Kirill but also because of the possible implications and the canonical difficulty of enforcing such a far-reaching decision. As Brylov and Kalenychenko point out, Epifanij's rhetoric has evolved over time. He currently argues, along with Bartholomew, that the only viable

153 Wanner, *Everyday Religiosity*.

154 A reading of his writings on the current conflict is very useful: Hovorun, "Can 'Ecumenism as Usual' be Possible"; Hovorun, "Russian Church and Ukrainian War"; Hovorun, "Religione civile e ortodossia politica".

155 Varadarajan, "The Patriarch Behind Vladimir Putin".

156 Kathimerini of Cyprus, "Vartholomaios: Ukraine's suffering".

157 Βαρθολομαῖος, "Πατριαρχική Απόδειξις ἐπὶ τῷ Ἀγίῳ Πάσχα 2022".

path is the existence of a single Orthodox Church in Ukraine.¹⁵⁸ the UOC.¹⁵⁹ In this, he is fully supported by domestic politics. An alternative route for Kirill's dismissal would be a highly unlikely deliberation by the Russian Holy Synod itself. In January 2023, Metropolitan Epiphany's meetings with Francis¹⁶⁰ first and Bartholomew later revealed some cracks even outside the ROC front. To understand their genesis, it is now necessary to step outside the borders of Orthodoxy and briefly trace the sequence of Francis' statements on the Russian-Ukrainian war.

In December 2022, the pontiff published a collection of his 129 speeches against the Russian invasion delivered in the period 13 February-13 November 2022, under the title *An Encyclical on Peace in Ukraine*. The high number of said speeches, which has increased to date, served as a testimony to his day-to-day commitment to the search for peace. Nevertheless, the attitude of the bishop of Rome, at least in the first months of the conflict, was branded as ambivalent with the main imputation being that he did not adequately take sides in condemning Russia. As a matter of fact, while offering humanitarian assistance and expressing closeness to the Ukrainian people - there have been countless appeals for peace for Ukraine since 2014 - the pontiff long avoided identifying the aggressor. Far from being the result of causality, Francis' communication strategy responds to a precise desire to differentiate the reactions of the Catholic Church from the inevitably harsher reactions of the Orthodox Churches involved with the aim of keeping open a channel of dialogue with Moscow and bringing diplomatic pressure by direct means. From the very beginning, the pope declared that the Holy See was "prepared to do everything" to "put itself at the service" of peace.¹⁶¹ His goal is to foster mediation and peace negotiations to stop the bloodshed through the work of Vatican diplomacy.¹⁶² We must assume, however, that Francis is responding with this strategy to the tradition of impartiality (or active impartiality) that the Holy See has repeatedly manifested throughout history in the face of major war conflicts.¹⁶³ In view of the long-awaited meeting with Kirill,

158 Православна Церква України, "Слово Священноархімандрита Києво-Печерської Лаври з нагоди першого богослужіння в Успенському соборі".

159 Brylov, Kalenyuchenko, "Inter-Orthodox crisis in Ukraine".

160 The meeting took place within the hearing of the delegation of the Pan-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations. Cf. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/01/25/230125a.html>.

161 Francis, *Angelus*, 6 March 2022.

162 Francis, *Angelus*, 13 March 2022.

163 Cf. Stehlin, "The Emergence of a New Vatican Diplomacy"; Graham, *Vatican Diplomacy: A Study*; Riccardi, *La guerra del silenzio*; Ticchi, "Foundations and forms of the impartiality"; Coppa, "Pope Pius XII"; Kent, Pollard, *Papal Diplomacy*.

later cancelled, scheduled for June 2022, on 16 March Pope Francis had an online conversation with the Patriarch of Moscow to talk about “the war in Ukraine and the role of Christians and their pastors in doing everything to ensure that peace prevails”.¹⁶⁴ The two agreed that churches should “not use the language of politics, but the language of Jesus” and also agreed on the “exceptional importance of the negotiation process”.¹⁶⁵ In addition to that, when expressing himself on the victims of the conflict, the pope placed the deaths of Russians side by side with those of Ukrainians on several occasions. Criticism from the Ukrainian Embassy to the Holy See also followed the decision to have a Ukrainian woman and a Russian woman share the cross together in the 2022 Way of the Cross as a sign of reconciliation. “A pope never appoints a head of state, much less a country, which is superior to its head of state”, Francis said in an interview with *La Nación* on 22 April 2022, announcing the postponement of the meeting with Kirill (“it could lead to a lot of confusion”) and reiterating that he was “willing to do anything to stop the war”.¹⁶⁶ After having immediately condemned the conflict and branded it as “sacrilegious”, “an outrage against God, a blasphemous betrayal of the Lord”,¹⁶⁷ the tone and content of the pontiff’s statements changed in May 2022. On 3 May Francis revealed that he had asked for a meeting with the Russian president at the Kremlin, which was denied, to ask him to stop Russia’s destructive advance, which was however made easier by NATO’s mistakes. Most importantly, for the first time he spoke harshly about Kirill:

I talked with him 40 minutes. He spent the first 20 with a piece of paper in his hand reading me all the justifications for the war. I listened to him and said, “I don’t understand anything about this. Brother, we are not state clerics, we cannot use the language of politics, but the language of Jesus. We are pastors of the same holy people of God. That is why we must seek ways of peace, make the fire of weapons cease”. The Patriarch cannot turn into Putin’s altar boy.¹⁶⁸

His statements were promptly labelled in an official note from the MP’s Department of External Ecclesiastical Relations as “regrettable”, “wrong-toned” and guilty of leading away from the establishment of a constructive dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church

¹⁶⁴ Vatican News, “Videochiamata del Papa con Kirill”.

¹⁶⁵ Vatican News, “Videochiamata del Papa con Kirill”.

¹⁶⁶ Morales Solá, “¿De qué serviría que fuera a Kiev?”.

¹⁶⁷ Francis, General Audience, 13 April 2022.

¹⁶⁸ Fontana, “Intervista a Papa Francesco”.

and the Russian Orthodox Church.¹⁶⁹ In November 2022, the pontiff wished to clarify:

When I speak about Ukraine, I speak of a people who are martyred. If you have a martyred people, you have someone who martyrs them. [...] The one who invades is the Russian state. This is very clear. Sometimes I try not to specify so as not to offend and rather condemn in general, although it is well known whom I am condemning. It is not necessary that I put a name and surname.¹⁷⁰

At the same time, Francis made a distinction by claiming that the cruelest militaries are those who, although Russian, do not belong to the Russian tradition such as Chechens,¹⁷¹ Buryats and so forth.¹⁷² Such a distinction was unwelcome and caused great irritation among the Russian diplomatic body. In December 2022, the Holy See was still pinning hopes on a mediation by the Vatican, as stated by Secretary of State Parolin: “We are available, I think the Vatican provides the right ground. We have tried to offer opportunities to meet with everyone and to *maintain a balance* [italics added]. We offer a space where the parties can meet and start a dialogue”.¹⁷³ This offer was rejected precisely because of Pope Francis’ statements, which were not followed by apologies.¹⁷⁴ It is also worth mentioning the unprecedented historical moment on 8 December 2022, when the pope, while publicly advocating peace for Ukraine, was forced to pause because of visible tears of emotion. On 24-25 January, going back to mentioning Epifanij’s visits, the metropolitan met first with the pontiff and then with the president of Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, cardinal Koch. Thanking for spiritual and material support and mediation efforts, Epifanij announced his willingness to “join the broad Orthodox-Catholic ecumenical dialogue” by engaging “directly with the Apostolic See”.¹⁷⁵ An equally warm visit to the Phanar took place on 26-27 January, when Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew renewed the closeness of the Mother Church toward the UOC. Above all, as far as our interests are concerned, he declared:

169 ROC, “Commentary by the Communications Service”.

170 America News, “Exclusive: Pope Francis”.

171 Cf. Kovalskaya, Tsormaieva, Yangulbaev, “Les Tchétchènes et la guerre”.

172 Kovalskaya, Tsormaieva, Yangulbaev, “Les Tchétchènes et la guerre”.

173 Agensir, “Guerra in Ucraina: card. Parolin”.

174 Tass, “Still No Apologies From Vatican”.

175 Православна Церква України, “У складі делегації ВРЦіРО Митрополит Епіфаній зустрівся з Папою Франциском”.

We are glad that you had the opportunity to inform His Holiness Pope Francis first-hand about what is happening in Ukraine. We hope that after the briefing you had at the Vatican [...] Pope Francis will take a clearer stance on the war in Ukraine. And that, by putting aside political and diplomatic balances, he will stand closer to you and influence in favour of Ukraine many Catholic countries, toward which his words are directed.¹⁷⁶

It seems clear that Patriarch Bartholomew did not particularly like the posture held by Pope Francis following the escalation of the conflict. This emerges again when he points out that, on the contrary, “the Ecumenical Patriarchate and we personally have very naturally condemned the unjust, unjustifiable and evil war that the Russian Federation has initiated against Ukraine from the very beginning”.¹⁷⁷ The Russian-Ukrainian war, therefore, also brought a little tension to the very firm Rome-Constantinople axis.

6 Final Remarks

The future of the Orthodox denominations in Ukraine surely depends on the outcome of the war, which does not seem likely to conclude anytime soon. In the event of a Russian victory, we have seen that, the Moscow Patriarchate is expected to emerge weakened anyway. The former UOC-MP will have to find a way out so as not to be incorporated by the ROC (some dioceses have already been incorporated) and maintain a hard-line stance on the conflict, though not falling under Phanariot jurisdiction. Faced with further self-proclaimed autocephaly, it is not excluded that Kirill may decide to force his hand and grant it himself, anticipating any independence yearnings. As far as the UOC is concerned, the movement of formerly Moscow-linked communities toward it will continue in the event of a Ukrainian victory. However, the UOC will have to deal with the dioceses in the occupied territories, which it is unlikely to be able to maintain and with the millions of faithful in the diaspora, being unable to create new jurisdictions outside the country. As Hovorun argues, the perception of the UOC among churches that did not support its autocephaly has now completely deteriorated.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, with Brylov and Kalenychnenko, it will have to reckon in the future from the dependence and

176 Βαρθολομαίος, “Ο Προκαθήμενος της Εκκλησίας της Ουκρανίας στο Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο”.

177 Βαρθολομαίος, “Ο Προκαθήμενος της Εκκλησίας της Ουκρανίας στο Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο”.

178 Hovorun, “Everyone Is Still Losing”.

gratitude owed to the state of Ukraine that so strenuously defended it.¹⁷⁹ The society, briefly, results more polarized, and the division between UOC and UOC-MP further threatens national unity in the midst of a war and of course in the future perspective.¹⁸⁰ Amidst all this, ecumenical dialogue is at a standstill. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict brought the internal rift within Orthodox Christianity to a point of no return: the “schism” that has been going on since 2018 has involved more and more local Churches, and as long as the war adversity continues, a rapprochement between the parties can be ruled out. While avoiding interfering in the Orthodox agon, the Catholic Church is striving to keep the ecumenical framework in place. After a period of glimmers of hope between the Roman Catholic Church and the ROC, a new impasse stalled everything. The pontificate of Benedict XVI had in fact reinforced relations between the sees, as confirmed by Patriarch Kirill and President Putin, who recognized in Ratzinger “a staunch supporter of traditional Christian values”.¹⁸¹ Afterward, Francis and Kirill had achieved further accomplishments in the 2016 Joint Declaration of Cuba:

We are pained by the loss of unity. [...] Mindful of the persistence of many obstacles, it is our hope that our meeting may contribute to the re-establishment of this unity willed by God, for which Christ prayed. May our meeting inspire Christians throughout the world to pray to the Lord with renewed fervour for the full unity of all His disciples. [...] In our determination to undertake all that is necessary to overcome the historical divergences we have inherited, we wish to combine our efforts to give witness to the Gospel of Christ.¹⁸²

Among other things, the statements on Ukraine, then shaken by the clashes in the Donbass, appear prophetic and betrayed:

We deplore the hostility in Ukraine that has already caused many victims, inflicted innumerable wounds on peaceful inhabitants and thrown society into a deep economic and humanitarian crisis. We invite all the parts involved in the conflict to prudence, to social solidarity and to action aimed at constructing peace. We invite our Churches in Ukraine to work towards social harmony, to refrain from taking part in the confrontation, and to not support any further development of the conflict.¹⁸³

179 Brylov, Kalenychenko, “Inter-Orthodox crisis in Ukraine”.

180 Brylov, Kalenychenko, Mandaville, *Assessing Kyiv's New Focus*.

181 DECR, “Condolences”; Tass, “Benedict XVI was staunch defender”.

182 Francis, Kirill, “Joint Declaration”, 12 February 2016.

183 Francis, Kirill, “Joint Declaration”, 12 February 2016.

Faraway times. The ROC has now barred participation in the International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church as long as the EP is involved. On the part of the Holy See, which is committed to a diplomatic balancing act, however, the search for a direct channel of communication with the Moscow See does not seem to cease. One new attempt was made on 13 May 2023, the day of a private audience at the Vatican between Pope Francis and President Zelensky. Faced with the pontiff's offer to act as an intermediary, Zelensky reiterated that he did not "need mediators between Ukraine and the aggressor who occupied our territories" but a "plan of action for a just peace in Ukraine",¹⁸⁴ urging to "condemn Russian crimes [...] because victim and aggressor cannot be put on the same level" and to adopt the Ukrainian peace formula "as the only effective algorithm for achieving a just peace".¹⁸⁵ The Kremlin reacted positively to the latest attempt at appeasement, stressing, however, that "any effort in this direction will make sense only if Russia's well-known principled stance on possible peace negotiations is taken into account".¹⁸⁶ Net of any tension, the Bishop of Rome launched in June 2023 a mission entrusted to cardinal Zuppi to foster paths of peace. Francis' address in August 2023 at the 10th National Meeting of Young Catholics of Russia, in which he dwelt on the positive legacy of Great Mother Russia¹⁸⁷ – asking young Russians to be inspired by it – caused yet another media and political earthquake. While positive reactions came from the Kremlin¹⁸⁸ via the Spokesman Peskov, Kyiv and Ukrainian Christian groups accused the pontiff of engaging in imperialist propaganda and spreading pro-Russian positions, sharply shutting down his role as a mediator through Zelensky's adviser Podolyak's reaction statements.¹⁸⁹ The pope's pacifist equidistance and the now too many diplomatic incidents that have resulted from it, albeit harsh condemnation of the conflict, seem to have carved out for him the role of the main global actor in the struggle for peace while resetting to zero, on the other hand, apparently permanently in the current state of affairs, his concrete political power to mediate between the sides.

184 Statement by Ukrainian President Zelensky on Italian TV show *Porta a Porta*, RAI, 13/05/2023.

185 Zelensky's Twitter profile: <https://twitter.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1657415728427941893?s=20>.

186 RIA, "Foreign Ministry Assesses Vatican Attempts to Help End Conflict in Ukraine".

187 The passage from pope Francis' speech delivered in his own words to Russian Catholic youth gathered in St. Petersburg, witnessed and recorded on camera, does not appear on the Vatican's official website.

188 Tass, "Kremlin Welcomes Pope's Words".

189 24 Канал, "Критическая инфраструктура и производства России будут уничтожены: интервью с Михаилом Подоляком".

On its part, the Phanar, which bet on Ukrainian autocephaly, can only remain on a position of sharply harsher condemnation. Whether this divergence will also cool the relationship between Francis and Bartholomew remains to be seen. Despite some resentment, an inevitable expression of the role that one or the other play with regard to the war in Ukraine, contacts between the two Churches continue to be flourishing and both sides are moving forward with determination on the path of mutual rapprochement. Regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war, a replay of the primordial biblical fratricide of Cain and Abel, the concerns expressed by Pope Benedict XV on the occasion of a heartfelt call for peace during World War I gain renewed value:

There is no limit to the measure of ruin and of slaughter; day by day the earth is drenched with newly-shed blood, and is covered with the bodies of the wounded and of the slain. Who would imagine as we see them thus filled with hatred of one another, that they are all of one common stock, all of the same nature, all members of the same human society? Who would recognize brothers, whose Father is in Heaven?¹⁹⁰

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¹⁹⁰ Benedict XV, *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum*.

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