

Ukraine and the Problems of Primacy and Autocephaly

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In 2019, two events manifested the institutional crisis in the global Orthodox Church: the liquidation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Exarchate for Orthodox Parishes of the Russian Tradition in Western Europe and the controversial creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) as a new autocephalous church. The Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate were the primary church institutions involved in these events. This essay analyzes the power struggle between the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Moscow Patriarchate, and the Orthodox churches in Ukraine that underpinned the creation of the new autocephalous church. I argue that the disparate interpretations of the OCU's tomos of autocephaly reveal fundamental disagreements about primacy in Orthodox ecclesiology. These disputes point to the need for a renewed definition of autocephaly and new attention to the dynamic of independence and interdependence that impacts Orthodoxy at the global level.

How We Got Here: A Brief History of Ukrainian Autocephaly

The movement for Ukrainian autocephaly originated in 1917 and gained momentum the following year, when Patriarch Tikhon blessed the convocation of an All-Ukrainian Council in Kyiv.¹ The Kyivan council was characterized by a struggle between au-

tocephalist Ukrainophiles and Russo-philic, and its authority was disputed when the bishops arbitrarily removed a sizable contingent of Ukrainian autocephalists and replaced them with delegates loyal to the agenda of the ruling bishops, who were determined to keep the Ukrainian church in the Moscow Patriarchate. Originally, the autocephalists' main objective was to modernize their church, primarily by introducing the Ukrainian language into the liturgy. After the balance of the conciliar constituency shifted from pro-Ukrainian to pro-Russian, the council rejected Ukrainization and adopted autonomy instead of autocephaly for the church in Ukraine.

This initial dispute produced a bitter lack of trust between the autocephalists and the Patriarchal Synod in Ukraine. The autocephalists went on to pursue both Ukrainization and self-governance by proclaiming their own autocephaly instead of requesting that it be granted by a mother church. The first proclamation of Ukrainian autocephaly occurred with the creation of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) in 1921. This church was controversial from the outset, since the October 1921 council that hastily established a new structure did not include any canonical bishops, and instead appealed to the spurious authority of a so-called Alexandrian method of conciliar ordi-

¹ See Nicholas Denysenko, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018).

nation of bishops to legitimize its actions. Not a single Orthodox church recognized the UAOC, despite its rapid growth and commitment to Ukrainization. The Soviet government liquidated the UAOC in 1930 during a show trial in Kharkiv that resulted in the deportation, imprisonment, and execution of bishops, clergy, and laity.

Despite global Orthodoxy's rejection of the first UAOC, the autocephaly movement sustained momentum in the twentieth century, as Ukraine was dominated by other European powers. Ukrainian clergy and intellectuals implemented Ukrainization in the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Poland and restored the UAOC in German-occupied Ukraine in 1942, at the initiative of Metropolitan Dionisii of Warsaw and with canonically ordained bishops. The bishops of this new UAOC fled to the West in 1944 and 45, after the Nazi defeat at the hand of the allies resulted in the absorption of occupied Ukrainian lands into the Soviet Union. In 1989, the Soviet government legalized the UAOC, and over a thousand parishes, clustered primarily in Galicia, left the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian Church of the Moscow Patriarchate for the re-born UAOC. In June 1990, the UAOC convoked a council and declared itself a patriarchate.

Alarmed by the popularity of the UAOC in the aftermath of Ukrainian independence in 1991, the episcopate of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine (UOC-MP) petitioned Moscow's Patriarchal Synod for autocephaly, in November 1991 and April 1992.² This was the first instance of a Ukrainian church requesting autocephaly from another church instead of proclaiming it. Moscow rejected the petition and attributed the autocephaly movement to state pressure on the Church. It also

forced the controversial leader of the UOC-MP, Metropolitan Filaret (Denysenko), to resign, but upon returning to Kyiv he rescinded his promise to do so. At a council held in Kharkiv in May 1992, the Moscow-aligned Ukrainian church elected Metropolitan Volodymyr (Sabodan) as her new primate. Filaret subsequently attended the June 1992 council of the UAOC on the premise of uniting the entire UOC-MP with the UAOC, but only one bishop of the UOC-MP supported him, since Moscow had just deposed Filaret.

The June 1992 council changed the name of the UAOC to the Kyivan Patriarchate, commonly known as the UOC-KP, and elected Filaret as patriarch. A minority of the UAOC refused to join the merger, in protest of the reception of the canonically-compromised Filaret, and retained the official name of UAOC. It changed course following the death of its last patriarch, Dmitry (Yarema), in 2000, by reverting to the status of a metropolia and proposing the canonical intervention of Constantinople in this crisis on the basis of her authority as Kyiv's mother church.

Between 1995 and 2018, then, Ukraine had three Orthodox churches. The UAOC and the UOC-KP each declared itself to be the legitimate Orthodox church in Ukraine. Both implemented policies of Ukrainization, primarily through the liturgical use of the Ukrainian language. Both were autocephalous on the basis of their connections to their historical antecedents, not because they had ever asked another church to grant them autocephaly (although they had asked other churches to recognize their autocephalous status). Officially, the UOC-MP remained committed to pursuing canonical autocephaly from 1992 to 1996. The healing of the Ortho-

² “Звернення Єпископату Української Православної Церкви до Святішого Патріарха Московського і всієї Русі Алексія II та Священного Синоду Руської Православної Церкви,” *Православний вісник* 4 (April 1992): 8–9.

dox schism in Ukraine remained possible thanks to the efforts of the three churches. Both the UAOC and the UOC-KP maintained official dialogues with the UOC-MP with the goal of reunification until this process began to collapse in 2011.³ The introduction of Patriarch Kirill's *Russkiy Mir* initiative, aimed at promoting Russian culture and ideology abroad, and the emergence of an episcopal block opposed to Metropolitan Volodymyr's commitment to unity and eventual autocephaly resulted in the hardening of the UOC-MP's position. Dialogue became conditional on the repentance of the UOC-KP and UAOC.

The Maidan Revolution of Dignity and the war in Donbass deepened the separation among the Ukrainian Churches. Instead of condemning Russian aggression and intervening on behalf of the Ukrainian people, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow has blamed "schismatics and nationalists" for inciting anger and violence in the public square and has consistently referred to the conflict in Donbass as a "civil war."⁴ While the UOC-KP publicly expressed solidarity with the Ukrainian people and proclaimed its patriotism, the UOC-MP stirred up controversy when Metropolitan Onufry (Berezovsky) and two other bishops refused to stand in honor of fallen Ukrainian soldiers in the Ukrainian Parliament in May 2015. Some UOC-MP clergy and laity were furious with their episcopate and refused to commemorate Patriarch Kirill during the liturgy.

In June 2016, President Petro Poroshenko and the Ukrainian Parliament asked the Holy and Great Council in Crete to grant autocephaly to the church in Ukraine.⁵ The Council of Crete did not act on the petition of the Ukrainian state, but it heard the

message clearly: a critical mass of Orthodox Ukrainians, possibly a majority—most of whom were not in communion with the rest of global Orthodoxy—sought to present their case for autocephaly to the highest authority in the Orthodox Church. It is notable that the petition to the council asked the bishops to *grant* autocephaly to the Church, not to recognize an already existing autocephaly.

April 2018: Ukrainians Ask Constantinople For Autocephaly

In April 2018, all of the bishops of the UAOC and the UOC-KP along with ten bishops of the UOC-MP signed an appeal requesting that the Ecumenical Patriarchate grant autocephaly to the Orthodox church in Ukraine. At this point, the UAOC and the UOC-KP already functioned as autocephalous—all they lacked was recognition by a canonical church. The KP in particular had previously requested recognition of its autocephaly, not an entirely new version of it. The Ecumenical Patriarchate never *recognized* the preexisting autocephaly of those two churches, but eventually *granted* autocephaly only after certain conditions were met.

The petition of the Ukrainian bishops marked a definitive departure from the pattern of either asking for recognition of self-proclaimed autocephaly or requesting that Moscow grant Ukraine autocephaly, as the UOC-MP had done in 1991 and 92. The difference between the two approaches reveals a key dispute among Orthodox Ukrainians: the identity of Kyiv's mother church. The fact that the UOC-MP had not requested Constantinople's intervention demonstrates that it did not regard the Ecumenical Patriarchate as its mother.

³ Met. Oleksandr (Drabinko), *Українська церква: шлях до автокефалії* (Kyiv: Duh i litera, 2019), 167–9.

⁴ "Orthodox Churches Under Threat in Ukraine," *Interfax/Russia Beyond*, January 23, 2016, https://www.rbth.com/news/2016/01/23/orthodox-churches-under-threat-in-ukraine-patriarch-kirill_561781.

⁵ Ivan Kapsamun, "Ukraine's Parliament Appeals to Bartholomew: A Historic Step," *The Day*, June 22, 2016, <http://day.kyiv.ua/en/article/day-after-day/ukraines-parliament-appeals-bartholomew-historic-step>. Parliament published the Ukrainian-language text of the appeal here: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1422-19>.

The history of the Kyivan throne complicates the debate on the identity of the mother church of Ukraine. After the fall of Kyiv to the Mongolians in 1240, the seat of the Metropolia migrated north to Vladimir-Suzdal, and eventually settled in Moscow, retaining the title of “Metropolitan of Kyiv” in honor of the antiquity of the city-state of ancient Rus’. Constantinople restored the metropolitan of Kyiv during the period of the Florentine Union, and the see reverted to Orthodoxy in 1470. At almost the same time, the Metropolitan of Moscow declared autocephaly. The Ecumenical Patriarchate elevated the Church of Moscow to patriarchal status in 1589, while Kyiv remained under Constantinople’s jurisdiction.

The situation changed in the middle of the seventeenth century, when the Ukrainian Cossacks agreed to the treaty of Pereiaslav and came under the protection of the Tsar as a people with autonomous rights. Moscow began to pressure the Kyivan church, the leaders of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other sister churches, and the hetman (the Ukrainian head of state) to place the Kyivan church under the jurisdiction of Moscow. The history of this period is complicated, since many Ukrainians embraced the opportunity to advance their careers in the Moscow Patriarchate while others fiercely resisted subordination to Moscow. The canonical documents from 1686 indicate that Constantinople transferred the right to ordain the Metropolitan of Kyiv to Moscow.⁶ The patriarchal and synodal letters state that the Metropolitan of Kyiv is to regard the Patriarch of Moscow as his elder but should continue to commemorate the Patriarch of Constantinople first at the liturgy. Furthermore, the Patriarch of Moscow was not authorized to *appoint* the Kyivan Metro-

politan; he was simply to *ordain* the leader elected by the Kyivan eparchy.⁷ In the ensuing centuries, Moscow has interpreted this transfer as one of jurisdiction, whereas Constantinople has maintained that it retained jurisdiction over Kyiv and simply deferred ordination to Moscow for the sake of convenience.

The divergent interpretations of Moscow and Constantinople over the documents of 1686 explain the varying responses of all parties to the acts of intervention made by the Ecumenical Patriarchate on October 11, 2018. Constantinople had, interpreted Moscow’s governance of Kyiv as uncanonical, a statement that justified the tomos of autocephaly it gave the Orthodox Church of Poland in 1924. Furthermore, Constantinople continued to identify herself as Kyiv’s mother on multiple occasions. For example, then-Metropolitan Bartholomew visited Ukraine at the invitation of Metropolitan Filaret in July of 1991, and identified the Ecumenical Patriarchate in his public address as the “mother church” of Kyiv.⁸ These words were significant because of the divisions separating the UAOC and the UOC-MP. As the representative of Kyiv’s mother church, Bartholomew called upon these two Ukrainian churches to engage in dialogue for the purpose of resolving their differences. When Bartholomew visited Kyiv as Ecumenical Patriarch in 2008—at the invitation of President Victor Yushchenko, who hoped the patriarch could unite the churches and grant them autocephaly—he again referred to Constantinople as Kyiv’s mother church.⁹ This instance was even more significant since Bartholomew invoked that title to defend his patriarchate’s long-standing position on primacy. In the 2008 speech, Bartholomew mentioned the canonical prerogatives granted to

⁶ “The Ecumenical Throne and the Church of Ukraine: The Documents Speak,” Ecumenical Patriarchate, https://www.patriarchate.org/theological-and-other-studies/-/asset_publisher/GovONi6kliut/content/o-oikoumenikos-thronos-kai-e-ekklesia-tes-oukranias-omilounta-keimena.

⁷ See a detailed analysis of the 1686 agreement in Drabinko, 212–67.

⁸ “Слово митрополита Халкідонського Варфоломея в Софійському Соборі м. Києва (28 липня 1991),” *Православний вісник* 10 (1991): 8.

⁹ “Speech of his All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the Ukrainian Nation,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 53.1–4 (2008): 264–71.

Constantinople by Ecumenical Councils, including canons 9 and 17, which allow the Ecumenical Patriarch to hear the appeals of bishops from other churches and to adjudicate them. He also noted that Constantinople had granted autocephaly to four churches at the request of their governments, even though these actions deprived the mother church of her jurisdiction. These interpretations justified the Constantinople's eventual intervention in Ukraine in 2018 and 19.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate's convocation of a unification council in December 2018 provided all Orthodox Ukrainians with an unprecedented opportunity to set aside their differences and to become a single, autocephalous body. The catch for the UAOC and the UOC-KP was that autocephaly would be granted by Constantinople to a new, united church. The Ecumenical Patriarchate would not recognize the autocephaly of the UOC-KP or the UAOC and would not call for the absorption of the other churches into one of those two bodies.

The Orthodox Ukrainians who requested autocephaly had to agree

to Constantinople's conditions, and this meant accepting Constantinople's definition of primacy, the most significant theological implication of the creation of the OCU. Autocephaly was conditional: it would be given if the churches united into a metropolia, a church that would exist temporarily as a metropolia under Constantinople's jurisdiction until autocephaly was formally imparted. For the UAOC and UOC-KP, the benefit of this step would be restoration to canonical intercommunion with the Orthodox Church. For the UOC-KP, however, it also entailed relinquishing patriarchal status, and Patriarch Filaret in particular opposed these conditions. The struggle was so fierce that the council very nearly collapsed, and took place only through the repeated interventions of then-President Poroshenko.

The unification council's outcome was the creation of the OCU and the election of Metropolitan Epiphanius (Dumenko) as primate. The OCU's statute, adopted at the council, and its tomos present the ecclesiological foundations of the new church, endorsing Constantinople's position on primacy and ecclesiology.¹⁰

¹⁰ "Patriarchal and Synodal Tomos for the Bestowal of the Ecclesiastical Status of Autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine," Ecumenical Patriarchate, January 6, 2019, <https://www.patriarchate.org/-/patriarchikos-kai-synodikos-tomos-choregeseos-autokephalou-ekklesiastikou-kathestotos-eis-ten-en-oukraniai-orthodoxon-ekkleasian>.

Patriarch Bartholomew hands the Tomos of Autocephaly to Metropolitan Epiphanius, 2019. Photo: Presidential Administration of Ukraine.



First and foremost, the OCU is truly autocephalous, but not through its own self-proclamation. It is autocephalous *through* the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This point is crucial to the tomos, as it represents Constantinople's self-definition as the mother church that freely gives of herself to the newly autocephalous church. Second, the tomos defines the OCU as the Church of Ukraine, not merely *in* it, to indicate that the OCU has no jurisdiction outside of Ukraine. This means that the OCU cannot have parishes or clergy outside of Ukraine's borders, and in many places of the Ukrainian diaspora, these churches are now under Constantinople's omophorion. Third, the OCU must receive its chrism from Constantinople, another mark of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's primacy inscribed here and also in the tomoi of other autocephalous churches. Fourth, the OCU is expected to consult the Ecumenical Patriarchate on all topics of an "ecclesial, dogmatic, and canonical character." This entire section of the tomos is prefaced with an affirmation of the necessity of preserving pan-Orthodox unity. The conditions clearly indicate that the Ecumenical Patriarch is the one responsible for preserving this unity, to ensure Orthodox interdependence instead of mutually exclusive ecclesial independence.

The tomos of autocephaly delivered two benefits to the new OCU: canonical autocephaly from the mother church of Constantinople and liberation from the legacy of subordination to Russia. The OCU's willingness to codify her acceptance of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's primacy demonstrates the value the Ukrainian bishops placed on recognition of their legitimacy. This value was so high that it was worth setting aside patriarchal status and the kind of absolute independence claimed by other Orthodox churches. The tomos, then,

became a token of victory for the OCU, of the realization of her longstanding goals of liberation and legitimacy.

The UOC-MP expressed its rejection of the OCU's tomos in many ways, especially by angrily rejecting the series of actions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate as an infringement on the canonical territory of Moscow, to which the Ukrainian church ostensibly belongs. The rejection of these actions became polemical when the UOC-MP followed Moscow in declaring that the Ecumenical Patriarchate had become schismatic by entering into communion with the UAOC and UOC-KP, and when the synod released a statement attributing Constantinople's initiative to a plot for union with Rome that allegedly originated with the Council of Florence in the fifteenth century.¹¹ As for the tomos of the OCU, Metropolitan Onufry describes it as a tomos of slavery to the tyranny of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.¹² Nine months after the imparting of this tomos, it has strengthened the resolve of the leadership of the UOC-MP to remain faithful to Moscow. If the tomos realized the OCU's aspirations for complete independence from Moscow, it strengthened the anti-autocephaly and pro-Moscow position of the UOC-MP, vindicating its position against an autocephaly *authored by Constantinople*.

The UOC-MP is not alone in interpreting the tomos as an act of submission. Patriarch Filaret of the UOC-KP attempted to sabotage the unification council both before and during its proceedings.¹³ His most significant complaint was ecclesiological. He regarded the OCU's statute and tomos as subordinating the new church to Constantinople. For Filaret, the church should be Ukrainian, and therefore subordinate to no one, neither Moscow nor Constantinople. Having obtained both the canonical rehabilita-

¹¹ "Журнали засідання Священного Синоду Української Православної Церкви," Ukrainian Orthodox Church, December 17, 2018, <http://news.church.ua/2018/12/17/zhurnali-zasidannya-svyashhennogo-sinodu-ukrajinskoji-pravoslavnoji-cerkvi-vid-17-grudnya-2018-roku/>.

¹² "Блаженніший Митрополит Онуфрій: Томос для «ПЦУ» — це томос рабства, а не автокефалії," Ukrainian Orthodox Church, July 11, 2019, <https://news.church.ua/2019/07/11/blazhennishij-mitropolit-onufrij-tomos-dlya-pcu-ce-tomos-rabstva-a-ne-avtokefaliji-video/>.

¹³ For Filaret's official interpretation of the creation of the OCU, see "Звернення Патріарха Філарета: ПРАВДА ПРО СОБОР У СВЯТІЙ СОФІЇ 15 грудня 2018 року," Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate, September 23, 2019, <http://new.cerkva.info/zvernennya-patriarha-filareta-pravda-pro-sobor-u-svyatij-sofiyi-15-grudnya-2018-roku/>.

tion and the recognition he had sought for over twenty years, Filaret attempted to galvanize the OCU's bishops to convoke a council in the summer of 2019 that would have elevated the OCU from a metropolia to a patriarchate. For him, this would have eliminated the problem of having exchanged subordination to the Russians for subordination to the Greeks. Only four bishops joined Filaret in reconstituting the KP, and he finds himself ironically in the same ecclesiological camp as those who deposed and anathematized him in 1997, the Moscow Patriarchate. Filaret's assessment of the OCU's tomos is the same as the UOC-MP's: they both assert that the tomos makes the OCU dependent upon and subordinate to the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

These disparate views on the tomos of autocephaly manifest two ecclesiological problems for Orthodoxy in Ukraine, issues ripe for further discussion and analysis. The first is the nature of autocephaly itself: does autocephaly imply the absolute independence of a local church? This notion suggests the possibility of isolation and alienation. Mechanisms of interdependence could mitigate that isolation, but this possibility raises the dark specter of subordination to this or that external patriarchal authority, an issue on which Ukrainians are clearly divided. The events that led up to Ukrainian autocephaly can set an agenda for Orthodox discussion on the nature of autocephaly. The inter-Orthodox pre-

paratory commission essentially had an agreement on the mechanism for declaring autocephaly in place prior to the council of Crete, but the churches were unable to resolve a dispute over the signatures on the tomos.¹⁴ Discussion cannot be limited to the process of proclaiming autocephaly, however. A renewal of inter-Orthodox deliberations on autocephaly must also explore the dynamics of interdependence and subordination as they relate to the existing mechanisms of autocephaly.

As for the Ukrainian situation, it is clear that the OCU's tomos has already developed into a repository of political theologies. It may represent a type of liberation for its OCU recipients, but it lacks references to the exercise of Christ's priesthood through the body of the Church. For better or for worse, though, the churches in Ukraine are now in the post-tomos epoch. It is possible for the OCU to change the meaning of the tomos by referring to it as a catalyst for exercising Christ's ministry in Ukraine by presenting Christ and being Christ's body to her people. If the tomos is truly a symbol of freedom from dependence on any foreign entity, on any state or church, then it has the capacity to become much more than a token of liberation, by proclaiming the salvation offered by Christ's death and resurrection to the people of Ukraine. This will be possible only when the Church devotes herself fully to evangelizing and serving the people. ✱

¹⁴ On the negotiations on proclaiming autocephaly, see Jivko Panev, "The Reasons to Proclaim or to Restore Autocephaly in the 20th and 21st Centuries," *Orthodoxie.com*, May 30, 2018, <https://orthodoxie.com/en/the-reasons-to-proclaim-or-to-restore-autocephaly-in-the-20th-and-21st-centuries/>.



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