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RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN THE UKRAINIAN MEDIA AFTER EUROMAIDAN

By Maksym Balaklytskyi

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During the EuroMaidan¹ Ukraine encountered the toughest trials of its state identity, national unity, and resistance to propaganda. The opposite side of this situation was the search for something “native” and “own,” something close to all levels, including media and religion; the demand for the shaping of the concept of patriotism, the renewed and popularized understanding of what it means to be Ukrainian.

The religious topic has taken a more natural, more significant place in the secular media. The media provide much more attention to the religious aspects of social processes, which significantly decreased journalists’ skepticism toward religious issues. This divide manifested in religious skepticism had been widening since the late 2000s when publications on the so-called “deviant” denominations and beliefs started to be increasingly accompanied with systematic invectives addressed to the largest religious confession in the country—Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOCMP).²

Multifaceted geopolitical and social transformations in and around Ukraine after EuroMaidan urge scholars to come to the opposite conclusions—from the glorification of

¹EuroMaidan (literally "Euro Square") is a reference to the demonstrations and civil unrest in Ukraine, which began in November 2013 with public protests in *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* ("Independence Square") in Kiev, in favor of closer integration with Europe. The protesters called for the resignation of President Viktor Yanukovich and his government, resulting in the 2014 Ukrainian revolution. By February of 2014, the protests lead to the fall of the Yanukovich’s government due to "abuse of power", "government corruption", and "violation of human rights".

² Настоятель Печерской Лавры с криками о блуде и абортах отобрал у журналистки телефон // Зеркало недели [Электронный документ]. — Режим доступа: http://zn.ua/SOCIETY/nastoyatel_pecherskoy_lavry_s_krikami_o_blude_i_abortah_otobral_u_zhurnalistki_telefon_.html [24.09.2012].

the religious aspect in these events³ to deep pessimism. According to Mark Elliott, editor of a reputable American bulletin on churches and missions in post-Soviet states,

Since I began editing the *East-West Church and Ministry Report* in 1993, perhaps no development in post-Soviet states has had more potential import for churches and Christian ministry in Europe's eastern reaches than the present political crisis in Ukraine. Already the impact has been widespread and profound with, sadly, no end in sight.

The conflict between post-Maidan Ukraine and Putin's Russia has had substantial—and will have ongoing—consequences for 1) relations among Ukraine's three Orthodox jurisdictions; 2) relations between Orthodox in Ukraine and Orthodox in Russia; 3) relations between Protestants in Ukraine and Protestants in Russia; 4) relations among Ukrainian Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches; 5) the status of missionaries and foreign clergy in Ukraine and Russia; and 6) last, but arguably as important as all of the above, growing Russian restrictions on freedom of conscience for non-Orthodox believers—in play before the Ukrainian crisis but definitely exacerbated by it.⁴

This article intended to test the above assumptions according to the points emphasized by Mark Elliott.

1. Inter-Orthodox relations in Ukraine. Due to the wave of EuroMaidan, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate and Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate created a commission to conduct their dialogue on unification. This should be compared with the recent statement of the patriarch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate, Filaret, who said that Russian President Vladimir Putin, “just like the first fratricide of Kyiv people in the history, has come under the influence of Satan.”⁵ Clearly, the patriarch sees the main enemy *not* in his former fellow believers from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate. A secular analogue of this position could be the singing of an obscene song about the Russian President by then-Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Andriy Deschytsia. The official did this in support of protesters at the Russian Embassy in Kyiv. It appears that in the midst of the current crisis there are more spokespersons of Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow

³ Майдан і Церква: хроніка подій та експертна оцінка. Упорядники Л. Филипович і О. Горкуша. — К.: Самміт-книга, 2014. — 656 с.

⁴ Mark Elliott. “A Theme Issue on the Impact of the Ukrainian Crisis on the Church and Christian Ministry.” In: *East-West Church Ministry Report*. Vol. 22, No. 3, (Summer 2014), p. 1.

⁵ Новий Каїн. Заява Патріарха Київського і всієї Руси-України Філарета // Церква.info [Електронний ресурс]. — Режим доступу: <http://cerkva.info/uk/patrosplannia/5417-new-kain.html> [5.09.2014].

Patriarchate who hold a pro-Ukrainian position, compared to the Maidan of 2004 (the Orange Revolution).

2. Relationships between the Orthodox in Ukraine and Russia. An unprecedented phenomenon took place in the form of an open letter of Onufriy (Berezovskyi) to Vladimir Putin. In this letter, bypassing his leader patriarch Kirill, then—Locum Tenens of Kyiv Metropolitan Cathedra—and now Kyiv Metropolitan—appeals to the head of the neighboring state as a “guarantor of the rule of law in the Great country to stand in the way [i.e. *prevention*] of the divide, to prevent bloodshed and fratricide of the nations that have emerged from the same Dnipro river baptistry.”⁶ A similar, albeit much smaller, challenge of the secular circles (without explanations) was the prohibition to enter Ukraine for the head of External Relations of Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Ilarion (Alfeyev)—one of the deputies to patriarch Kirill. Eparchies in Crimea have been retained as a part of Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate and not transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church, just as in case with Protestants in this region. Thus, the situation is highly controversial. On September 9-12, 2014, the Norwegian capital Oslo hosted a roundtable *Ukraine-Russia: the Meeting of Leaders (Authorized Representatives) of Churches and Religious Organizations of Russian Federation and Ukraine*. Ukraine was to be represented by religious organizations—members of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations. Russia was supposed to be represented by the leaders and other representatives of Russian Catholic Church, Protestant churches, Jewish and Muslim communities. As we can see, participation of Russian Orthodox Churches was not announced.

3. There are still political controversies between Russian and Ukrainian Protestants. Negotiations between the leaders of Ukrainian and Russian Protestant Churches held in Jerusalem brought purely nominal results. Protestants have already cancelled a number of joint plans and international events that had to take place in Ukraine. For instance, the *Russia without Orphans* Alliance “froze for an indefinite

⁶ Местоблюстител ь УПЦ митрополит Онуфрий направил письмо Президенту РФ В. Путину // Православіє в Україні [Електронний ресурс]. — Режим доступу: <http://orthodoxy.org.ua/data/vazhno-mestoblyustitel-upc-mitropolit-onufriy-napravil-pismo-prezidentu-rf-vputinu.html> [2.03.2014].

term”⁷ cooperation with Pentecostal pastors from Eastern Ukraine, Hennadiy Mokhnenko and Serhiy Demydovych, due to their open pro-Ukrainian position. There are reasons to suggest that the long-term forms of cooperation between Ukrainian and Russian Protestants will also be harmed.

4. Regarding the statement that “relations between Ukrainian Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Churches” have become more complicated: this appears rather doubtful. Protestants stood together with Orthodox priests between Berkut police and the protesters at Hrushevskogo Street in Kyiv, calling to avoid violence. During the EuroMaidan (being under the leadership of Metropolitan Onufriy) and later on, the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations issued joint appeals, which were at times very straightforward. For instance, the most resonant of them was titled *The Appeal of Ukrainian Churches and Religious Organizations Regarding International Aggression*, March 2, 2014. EuroMaidan became the experience of ecumenical interaction and inter-confessional balance.⁸ The attempts by the security services to pressure the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church through the Ministry of Culture by prohibiting the said church (under the penalty of canceling its registration in Ukraine) to participate in the EuroMaidan protest caused resistance among representatives of various religious denominations. Common troubles bring unity. In response to repressions against local communities of Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate, Crimean Tatars offered the latter their mosques for conducting services.

5. In our opinion, there are reasons to beware the worsening of the status of missionaries and foreign clergy in Russia. This worsening did not start yesterday but at least since 1997 when discriminatory laws on “traditional” and “non-traditional” Russian religious organizations were introduced.

6. Mark Elliott admits that “Russian strengthening of restrictions on religious freedom for non-Orthodox believers...[was] started before the Ukrainian crisis.” In fact,

⁷ Альянс «Россия без сирот» заморозил сотрудничество с Демидовичем и Мохненко // Мир Вам! [Электронный ресурс]. — Режим доступа: <http://mirvam.org/2014/09/05/альянс-россия-без-сирот-заморозил-со/> [5.09.2014].

⁸ Солдатов А. Доктор философских наук, религиовед, мирянин УПЦ МП Юрий Черноморец: «Если бы не позиция Церквей, у нас бы реально была бы гражданская война — так взаимно были озлоблены все» // Портал-Кредо.ру [Электронный ресурс]. — Режим доступа: <http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=authority&id=2069>.

this tendency applies to the “wrong” Orthodox as well. A lot of useful resources on this issue are available at www.portal-credo.ru.

Every phenomenon has various aspects. The positive side of the current crisis is the strengthening of internal tolerance in covering religion by the Ukrainian media after EuroMaidan. For the purposes of this article, “internal tolerance” means refusal to emphasize inter-confessional contradictions and scandals and ending “anti-sect” hysteria.

The reason for this was the determination of the common adversary. Such an adversary is embodied by the Russian Federation with its major confession, the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. This church has a number of characteristics of the state religion. For now, “Russia died as a brand” for Ukrainians, admits Maks Skybynskyi, correspondent at *Novoe Vremya* magazine.⁹ The word “Russian” (anything Russian) is becoming the point of rejection, and the “antonym” of everything Ukrainian. This applies to the religious (church) sphere as well.

Monitoring of journalistic materials on religion is carried out by websites *Religious Information Service of Ukraine* (RISU.org.ua) and *Religion in Ukraine* (religion.in.ua). RISU director Taras Antoshevskyi gave a comment for this article. During the recent period, religious observers of secular media now have a much heavier workload. Among such publications are printed newspapers *Den'* (columns by Yuriy Chornomorets, Myroslav Marynovych), *Dzerkalo Tyzhnya* (feuilletons by Kateryna Schotkina) and *Ukrayina Moloda* (Yaroslava Muzychenko), online newspaper *Ukrayinska Pravda* (Lyubomyr Huzar's blog), and *Focus* magazine (among the most notable are features by Dmytro Fionyk). The internet does not limit the volume of written pieces and offers an audience of a size fully comparable with the printed publications, which promotes the development of a religious journalists' guild.

Military terminology appears to be the most appropriate here. There is an ideological mobilization of the Ukrainian society—first of all, through the media. The annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in the East of Ukraine with still more evident participation of the Russian regular army caused the Ukrainian society to become

⁹ Скибинский М. Россия умерла как бренд // Новое время [Электронный ресурс]. — Режим доступа : <http://nvua.net/opinion/skibinskij/Rossiya-umerla-kak-brend-5050.html> [25.07.2014].

polarized based on the people's support for either pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian sides of the conflict.

The call to support this mobilization was also addressed to small and quite exotic religious movements (publications to the effect of “what are Krishna followers doing at Maidan” or reproaches by Mykola Malukha and Oleksiy Hordeyev on the deficit—in their opinion—of patriotic position among Ukrainian Protestants”).¹⁰

According to Taras Antoshevskiy, special attention of the secular media was drawn by the participation of priests in EuroMaidan events. The appeals of clergymen started to be heard when EuroMaidan became a tragic place, a place of violence. Then the protesters themselves began to invite priests, asking for their prayer, support and attention of their churches to the Maidan. Consequently, media attention to the religious aspect has grown as well. The church entered the social and political realm and, according to Antoshevskiy, began to play a peacemaker's role. Journalists were interested how one or another religious movement views EuroMaidan and whether its clergy are present at the protest. The more terrible the situation at Maidan was getting and the more aggression from the authorities there was, the more the media were interested in the position of churches. This can be illustrated by the daily traffic of the aforementioned monitoring website RISU. At the early stages of EuroMaidan, risu.org.ua had 10,000-12,000 visitors a day (nodal dates), and in more quiet days it could even be below 10,000 visitors. Meanwhile, during the periods of conflict escalation the traffic exceeded 20,000 visitors. Journalists' attention to RISU was demonstrated by numerous reprints from this website. In response to the church reactions to a crisis (an official appeal, etc.), there were requests from journalists to comment and to recommend church officials who could communicate with the press.

Later, when EuroMaidan entered its most fatal phase, the Church became, on one hand, the place of shelter and, on the other hand, the mediator in the negotiations of between the protesters and the government. Commitment to the ideals of pro-European Ukraine (as a political orientation) became a sufficient ground to clear religious

¹⁰ Малуха Н. и Гордеев А. Церковь, далекая от народа // Идеи для Бога [Электронный ресурс]. — Режим доступа: <http://www.ideas4god.com/2014/07/01/cerkov-dalekaya-ot-naroda/> [1.07.2014].

organizations of any suspicion about their deviant nature or the potential harm they may cause their adherents in Ukraine or even Ukrainian society as a whole.

Social mechanisms of self-preservation have strengthened. How can this victory be retained? Who will help in the time of crisis? A generally not fanatically religious Ukrainian society signaled this search for support, authority, and protection—even if this help has a religious character and origin. This signal was captured, amplified and broadcasted by journalists.

The war puts an end to the harassment of juniors in the armed forces (the so-called “didivschyna”). Moreover, the attributes of pro-Ukrainian position in any religious organization are now accepted ever more readily.

Pro-Ukrainian (and, in fact, pro-European) journalists addressed the majority church—Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate—with a demand for “ukrainization” (cultural and political) and transformation in the church for people, in the civil movement rather than “a pro-government confession”.

As Antoshevskiy suggests, after EuroMaidan two main issues of journalists’ interest have been shaped: first, the position of Moscow Patriarchate in Russia and Ukraine; second, how Ukrainian churches help the army, refugees, and the anti-terrorist operation. In this period, the health condition of UOCMP's Metropolitan Volodymyr worsened. A short time later he died and the election of his successor took place. Observers mentioned a nostalgic memory of Metropolitan Volodymyr. Kateryna Schotkina argued that public trust for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is, above all, due to the authority of the deceased Metropolitan. Numerous publications discussed the election of the new head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and his persona. Challenging for everyone was his high moral authority as a man of prayer and a monk never involved in any church or political fraud. The dominant forecast was that the new Metropolitan Onufriy will continue Volodymyr’s course for retaining the status quo: the church’s unity with Moscow under moderate “ukrainization,” mostly in external communications.

Another plotline developed from numerous facts that ministers of this church (more than any other one) in Ukraine’s East used to bless separatists and give them military aid, such as ammunition. At first, patriarch Kirill and his inner circle tried to

maneuver and avoid giving direct assessment of the situation. But later, as Antoshevskiy wrote, “hierarchs’ statements served as guidance for mercenaries.” For instance, Ilarion argued that the ones to blame for the events in Eastern Ukraine are “the uniates and dissenters”. Later, the separatists announced, “We have come to fight with the uniates and dissenters.” Thus, as Antoshevskiy argues, the church “points out who should be fought against.” Journalists speculated how to react to the fact that “the Moscow church in Ukraine acts as the fifth column.” The majority of believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate are Ukrainians. However, a large and active part of this confession is culturally and politically “oriented towards Moscow.” Therefore, the church can be a part of the national security system. Any sermon of a priest will have an influence on the congregation. And usually its content may be construed through one political lens or another, as well.

Soldiers in the anti-terrorist operation zone ask for spiritual and psychological support, prayer, and baptismal crosses. Their dominant requests and needs are of a non-material nature. This gives a way for journalists to see the Church (in the general meaning) in a different light, not merely as a place for rituals. For many readers interviews with clergy of various confessions who work in the anti-terrorist operation have become a true revelation.

The Ukrainian media have, in fact, suspended the so-called “anti-sect hysteria”—information war with “wrong” believers and their religious organizations. There is a significant improvement in the attitude to Protestants, particularly represented by the “de facto fifth president of Ukraine” Oleksandr Turchynov (there was a notable assessment of his persona in the introduction to the interview he gave Sonia Koshkina¹¹) and Pentecostals of Sloviansk town—martyrs and benefactors.¹² This unique situation when a Protestant preacher chairs a post-Soviet country became a challenge for journalists. With an extra effort, Ukrainian media community broke away from the attempts to manipulate the acting President’s religious affiliation.

¹¹ Кошкина С. Александр Турчинов: «При вторжении со стороны Чернигова, русские танки уже через пару часов могли быть в Киеве» // Левый берег [Электронный ресурс]. — Режим доступа: http://lb.ua/news/2014/06/27/271204_aleksandr_turchinov_pri_vtorzhenii.html [27.06.2014].

¹² Фионик Д. Восхождение. Кто убил четырёх христиан в осаждённом Славянске // Фокус. — 2014. — № 34.

Before the current events, Protestants in the East of Ukraine were predominantly cosmopolites. Now they can see that their apolitical position cannot protect them from expropriation of their church buildings, arrests, and kidnappings of priests by separatists.

The pro-Ukrainian position of Crimean Tatars inspired journalists' timid attempts to cover Islam, and Jewish rabbis turned into political consultants.

So, the following were the most resonant themes in the media:

- Participation of priests and other clergy in the EuroMaidan protest: ascent of the Church *support* of the Ukrainian society;
- Activity of military chaplains in the anti-terrorist operation: emphasis on the readiness of Church representatives to put their life and health at *risk*;
- How religious organizations respond to the armed conflict (help, volunteering): focus on the *charitable work* of the Church;
- Sad chronicles of religious repressions in Donbas: emphasis on the *martyrdom* of the Church.

Today this topic does not seem narrow and overly specialized. We can say that currently religion is at times the second most highly rated topic in the media, comparable to sports. Although it is doubtful that Ukraine can expect a religious analogue of UEFA Euro 2012 in the near future. The Roman Pope has already visited Ukraine. Moreover, Pope John Paul II had a more symbolic meaning for Ukraine in 2001 than the calls and prayers of Francis I for peace in Ukraine.

The intensity of secular media attention to religion is an attempt to create counter-propaganda, use religious senses, the unifying potential of religious symbols and mottos in formulating and strengthening of resistance at all levels—ideological, political, cultural and military.

All these instances give reasons to see here the reaction of Ukrainian journalists to external threats rather than the shaping of *culture and tradition* of religious tolerance and respect to the (religious) “Other”. What should be done to change this state of affairs is a topic for future study. However, it is already clear that a lot will depend on the social strategy of religious organizations, their objective necessity and appropriateness in the social life of the Ukrainian society. It will also depend on whether the Ukrainian media

sphere is able to resist media commercialization, as well as on the ability of Ukrainian society to form the demand for civilized religiousness.

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