

Religion and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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Religion and politics, church and state, are intimately connected in Eastern Europe, and so it comes as no surprise that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has a significant religious dimension to it. At the center of this religious aspect of the crisis is the struggle between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate on one side and, on the other, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, which was formally declared to be autocephalous by the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2019. Although the latter was given the status of self-governing only recently, both churches trace their roots back to the conversion of Grand Prince of Kyiv, Volodymyr (or Vladimir for Russians), in 988. From that point on, the development of the two churches is complicated and convoluted, with the Russian Orthodox church gaining autocephaly in 1448. The Ukrainian church was forced to switch subordination from Constantinople to the Moscow Patriarchate in 1686 and from that point until 2019, it was formally bound to Moscow, although two other Orthodox Churches were established in Ukraine prior to 2019.

The implications of the decision by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I to establish a Ukrainian autocephalous church in 2019 is analyzed in rich detail by Denys Shestopalets in an article in this issue. He calls this a “crisis of greater magnitude than other similar incidents and disputes,” analyzing its roots in the 1686 arrangement by which the Kyiv Metropolitanate was given over to Moscow and comparing the different representations of the events of 1686 that emerged in the years prior to the 2019 split. Russian political and religious leaders were infuriated by the recognition of the independence of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine in 2019; the position of Ukrainian Orthodoxy within the Moscow Patriarchate had served an important role in justifying the argument that Ukraine was simply part of greater Russia. Since then, there have been struggles between the two churches over everything from control of holy sites to the loyalties of small parishes. Before the invasion, it was estimated that 700 parishes operated as part of the Ukrainian church with the other 12,000 parishes still connected to the Moscow Patriarchate. This will change. If Russia manages to subdue Ukraine, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine will likely be subdued, and parishes may be forced to redirect their loyalties to Moscow. If Ukraine triumphs, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine will likely grow at the expense of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate. Whatever the result of the present conflict, though, it is already clear that religion is

tightly wound up in Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Mark Elliot's article in this issue offers readers an eye-opening account about the support of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kyrill for the invasion, calling it an "unholy alliance joining at the hip a predatory Putin and a sycophantic Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kyrill." He concludes, "At present Putin, with Kyrill in tow, is about the destruction of a democratic, religiously tolerant state that is home to arguably the most robust Christian population of any country in Europe."

There are other religious dimensions to this crisis, too many to enumerate adequately in this space. Religious groups are actively working from within and outside of Ukraine to help citizens who are fleeing Ukraine, and faith organizations are leading vigils for peace and raising funds to support Ukraine. The Jewish faith of Volodymyr Zelensky has become a part of his patriotism, a piece of the story about his heroic defense of the Ukrainian state and people. There's also a very different religious aspect to this crisis: some evangelical leaders in America have come out in support of Putin's invasion, calling it part of God's divine plan, even while Putin is smothering religious freedom in his own country. They are taking their cues from the Patriarch Kyrill, who justified the invasion publicly by saying it was about defending pure Christianity, stopping the spread of gay parades and human salvation. In this narrative, the conflict is a cultural war in defense of traditional values.

In the midst of any academic discussion on the religious aspect to this crisis, we cannot lose sight of the personal element. The world is watching with bated breath, hoping against all odds that the next news cycle will tell us that this is all over, that the Russian forces are returning home. As we wait, the destruction wrought by Russian artillery only increases, destroying buildings, roads, and communities. Even more heartbreakingly, as we wait, we are confronted with images of Ukrainian dead, civilians—even young ones—lost to the brutal weapons of war that are being now being used indiscriminately on Ukrainian soil.

Other articles in this issue do not directly address this situation, as they were written and submitted prior to the invasion, and yet they will now be read with the knowledge of the crisis. One of the articles in this issue of OPREE details the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine, starting with the assumption that the actions and attitudes towards this group can be seen as a litmus test for religious freedom in a given state. The article defends the Ukrainian state's treatment of the Jehovah's Witnesses, giving evidence that, with few exceptions, they have been largely unhindered in practicing their faith in Ukraine; virtually no complaints of violations have been

registered with human rights organizations. This signals strong support for religious freedom, particularly for non-traditional religions that are more vulnerable to religious freedom violations. The authors note the sharp contrast between the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine vs. their situation in Russia, where they were banned at the federal level in 2017 after facing decades of scrutiny and abuse. Hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses have been prosecuted as extremists since that time, many facing extraordinarily high fines or even imprisonment. Since the invasion, we are forced to consider a Ukraine without religious freedom, where all but the Orthodox churches within the Moscow Patriarchate face discrimination.

A different article, coming from Forum 18 and reprinted in this issue of OPREE, details the restrictions against non-Russian Orthodox religious groups in the rebel-held parts of Luhansk (Donbas). The religious restrictions are so severe that, according to Forum 18, all Protestant and non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox communities have failed to receive permission to exist, and those that are operating are either doing it secretly or have faced punishments. This article, as well as the one on the Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine, came to OPREE in February, but before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They now bear witness not only to the dire situation of religious freedom in Russia but offer a window into what we might expect to see if Ukraine were to be subjugated by Ukraine.

We stand with Ukraine, not only as a matter of peace, but in support of a future for Ukraine where religious freedom can flourish and where dialogue, respect, and peace among people of various worldviews—this journal's aim for its own articles—can be the future of Ukraine. Yes, like so many others, We Stand with Ukraine.

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