

UKRAINE: ROC injects religion into electoral politics

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SUBJECT: The role of religion in Ukrainian political life and relations with Russia.

SIGNIFICANCE: Kiev has historical significance for all of eastern Slavic Orthodoxy as the capital of Kievan Rus, where Orthodoxy was first established as a state religion in 988. The recent visit of Russian Patriarch Kirill to Ukraine underscored the tensions that can arise from contested interpretations of Orthodoxy, and demonstrated Moscow's willingness to use trans-national religious issues for political ends. [Go to conclusion](#)

ANALYSIS: There are three main churches in Ukraine:

- the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which was granted autonomy in 1990 but remains subordinate to the Moscow patriarchate;
- the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP), which broke away from the UOC in 1991-92 and has declared itself autocephalous; and
- the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church, which predominates in the three western regions of Galicia.

Ukraine is also critical to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC):

- In Soviet times, when the autocephalous and Greek Catholic churches were banned, two-thirds of ROC parishes were in Ukraine.
- Even today, Ukraine has the same number of Orthodox parishes as Russia, although its population is about three times smaller.
- UOC parishes account for one-third of the ROC's total number of parishes.

Domestic politics. Geographically, the UOC also has significant influence in domestic politics. A common misunderstanding is that western Ukraine is 'Catholic' and eastern Ukraine is 'Orthodox'. However, of the seven western Ukrainian oblasts (regions) annexed by the Soviet Union during the Second World War, only Lviv, Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk have Greek Catholic majorities.

The majority of UOC and UOC-KP parishes are in central and western Ukraine, two regions that voted for Viktor Yushchenko in the 2004 presidential election and for 'Orange' political forces in the 2006 and 2007 parliamentary elections. This geographic concentration is a product of pre-Soviet history, socio-economic factors and a Soviet legacy, whereby religion has greater influence in the rural and small towns of western and central Ukraine. In 2004, Orthodox believers favoured Yushchenko over Viktor Yanukovich.

Support for autocephaly. Each of Ukraine's three presidents has supported Ukrainian autocephaly, and each has sought support in Constantinople for this position. The patriarch of Constantinople has remained cautious, not recognising the UOC-KP outright out of fear of harming relations with the ROC, the world's largest Orthodox congregation. Nevertheless, Constantinople does not recognise Ukraine as lying within the ROC's canonical sphere, and Ukrainian Orthodoxy remains a major area of dispute between Moscow and Constantinople. On the eve of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill's visit to Ukraine, UOC-KP Patriarch Filaret and Greek Catholic Archbishop Cardinal Lubomyr Husar issued a call for Ukrainians to support Orthodox autocephaly.

Kirill's visit. Kirill's visit over July 27-August 5 was his first since being elected patriarch in January ([see RUSSIA: New patriarch could energise church - February 3, 2009](#)). The visit opened with an affirmation of Russian-Ukrainian 'brotherhood' in Kiev, with the city depicted as a "common Jerusalem from which our Orthodox faith came". Kirill also emphasised the need to "preserve spiritual unity" between Russia and Ukraine.

In so doing, Kirill's visit aimed to stress the transnational character of the ROC, which -- unlike the nationally and territorially defined nature of other Orthodox churches, such as Serbia's -- seeks to maintain influence among Russian-speakers throughout the former Soviet Union.

Tightening the reins. Kirill used his visit to declare a new policy of reducing the UOC's autonomy. This would increase his control by downgrading the importance of the metropolitan of Kiev and all Ukraine, the titular head of the church. The patriarch underscored this policy shift by promoting two archbishops to metropolitans, a step that had only been undertaken by the UOC metropolitan since the church was granted autonomy.

These manoeuvres highlighted Moscow's concern over growing support for autocephaly within the UOC. Kirill repeatedly stressed during his visit that he was opposed to autocephaly for the UOC, and the ROC does not recognise the UOC-KP as canonical. Autocephaly was heavily "politicised", Kirill said, and the issue only divided Ukrainians. A senior ideologue of the ROC, Andrei Kurayev, threatened Ukraine with civil war if it moved towards autocephaly. However, attempts to exercise greater control are likely to backfire, and may lead to defections to the UOC-KP.

Electoral politics. Kirill's visit ended six days before President Dmitry Medvedev issued his aggressively worded open letter to Yushchenko ([see RUSSIA/UKRAINE: Moscow's policy is likely to backfire - September 1, 2009](#)). Kirill's visit and Medvedev's missive probably reflect a coordinated effort by Russia to influence Ukraine's January 2010 presidential election -- and specifically, to express support for Yanukovych:

- Yanukovych and other senior Party of Regions leaders accompanied Kirill on his tour of Ukraine, including to their political stronghold of Donetsk.
- Inter, Ukraine's most popular television channel, supports Yanukovych (and Arseniy Yatseniuk), and the channel widely publicised Kirill's visit.

In these respects, the visit resembled former President Vladimir Putin's travels to Ukraine in 2004, when Russian political consultants and financial support played a central role in Yanukovych's campaign.

Understandably, supporters of Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko (a presidential aspirant) reacted sharply to Kirill's visit. Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc deputy and deputy parliamentary Speaker Mykola Tomenko described Kirill's visit to Ukraine as aiming to "test out the idea of a new ideological doctrine of Russia". Tymoshenko senior political adviser Oleh Medvedev described Kirill's tour as that of an "imperialist" preaching a "neo-imperialist Russian world doctrine".

Geopolitical implications. Russia's increasingly shrill posturing may indicate its sense that Ukraine is slipping further away from Moscow's influence, and Kirill's visit was probably aimed at restoring belief in an 'Orthodox civilisation' as a prelude to greater unity among eastern Slavs. As a symbolic gesture to this end, Kirill offered to take up Ukrainian citizenship (while retaining his Russian nationality), ignoring Ukrainian legislation that rules out dual citizenship. However, Yanukovych campaigned in 2004 in favour of allowing Ukrainians dual citizenship, and if he wins the presidency in January, he may reverse this law.

Both Kirill and Medvedev have stressed the commonality of a 'spiritual space' between Russia and Ukraine, and placed the blame for the deterioration in relations on Ukraine's president and his nationalist policies:

- **Famine recognition.** Kirill reiterated the official Russian position on the 1932-33 artificial famine as having affected all of the Soviet Union (not just Ukraine), and he was weak in his criticism of Stalinism. This was a direct response to Yushchenko's international campaign to win recognition of the famine as 'genocide' against Ukrainians. At the annual meeting of the World Congress of Ukrainians on August 21-22 in Lviv, Tymoshenko asserted that Ukrainians have a right to their own history, and that her government would continue to view the famine as a genocide despite Moscow's protestations.
- **National history-making.** Kirill -- like Russia's political leaders -- condemned Ukrainian nation-building policies that have rehabilitated national historical figures, condemning these figureheads as 'traitors' to Russian-Ukrainian unity (see [RUSSIA/UKRAINE: Historical narratives provoke tensions - August 4, 2009](#)). Russia has strongly protested the commemoration of the 1709 Battle of Poltava and unveiling of monuments to Cossack leader Ivan Mazepa, whom the ROC excommunicated after his failed bid to secure Ukrainian independence with Swedish support.

CONCLUSION: Kirill's visit was analogous to Putin's pre-election manoeuvring in 2004, and reflected Russian frustrations that Ukraine is slipping further out of Moscow's sphere of influence. However, hard-line political and religious policies will only increase support for the development of an autocephalous church, and thereby intensify the very nationalist sentiments Moscow was hoping to rebuff.

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