



War & Peace

The role of religion in conflict



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About this whitepaper

In the war in Ukraine, religion plays an important role. Not only because of the role of patriarch Kirill, but because it highlights the process of the ideologisation of religion that took place in the Russian Orthodox Church. Yet, not only in the ROC but also in other denominations. Suffice it to think of the role the evangelicals played in recent American politics and we can recognise a pattern in which religion is not about faith and community, but about nationalism, hegemonism and so on. This ideologisation comes down to forging a narrative in which nationalistic and religious elements are merged into a new story about the uniqueness of a certain culture. That is the changing narrative, the narrative that once again wakens the old dream of one faith, one reign, one law. Unfortunately, this religious aspect is also one of the elements of surprise the Western countries met in the case of this war.

This whitepaper is based on the outcomes of two virtual round table meetings on the topic of War & Peace. Several articles were written as an inspiration for the round table discussions. We would like to acknowledge the authors of these articles, the round table report, and the introduction to this whitepaper: Laurent Tessier, Marko Pavlović, Clémence Sauty, Zonne Dijkstra, Anne Clerx, Emma Datema, Elise Vrijburg, and Matthias Smalbrugge.

Introduction





War in Ukraine and still no truce. On the contrary, heavier weaponry is used by the Russians and targets are far from being only military ones. As we have seen in Georgia, in Syria, war cannot be pictured without awful cruelty, injustice, and fathomless grief lasting for the decades to come.

Yet, it is a new war. Not because of its cruelty and the endless mourning, but because of two unexpected aspects. First of all, nuclear weapons have become an issue. Russia made clear it will not hesitate to use these weapons once it feels NATO threatens its vital interests. Though the language of 'rationality of deterrence' and of 'mutually assured destruction' was well known, it has never been so clear that one of the belligerents is indeed ready to use these weapons. The 'rationality' has now become a mere semblance. We are dealing with someone who seriously is ready to use these weapons. The narrative has changed.

In this changing narrative religion plays an important role. Not only because of the remarks of patriarch Kirill on the Ukrainian forces of evil or on the gay prides that so much corrupted Western society, but because of the visible process of the ideologization of religion that took place in the Orthodox churches. Yet, this is a process that cannot only be witnessed in the Russian Orthodox Church, we could already recognize a similar

phenomenon in the evangelicals communities of the US. Now, this ideologization comes down to forging a narrative in which nationalistic and religious elements are merged into a new story about the uniqueness of a certain culture. Such a unique culture should of course be preserved and defended against all possible menaces and threats, rightly because it is unique. This insistence on its uniqueness implies necessarily a return to essentialism, allowing the protagonists of this narrative to consider others as less unique, less worthy, less spiritual. In short, it opens the door to new stories of pretended superiority.

That is the changing narrative, the narrative that once again wakens the old dream of one faith, one reign, one law. Unfortunately, this religious aspect is also one of the elements of surprise the Western countries met in the case of this war. We never expected Russia to invade Ukraine in a full-fledged war. We never expected religion to play such an essential role. Religion, in Western eyes, is something private, a conviction or adherence based on individual choice. The shift religion has undergone has escaped us. Indeed, there is no return of religion in the traditional sense, but there is a paradigm shift that places religion in a completely another narrative than the one we were accustomed to.

Religion in the Russia-Ukraine conflict

Report written by Emma Datema



This report was based on our round table discussion that took place on April 1st, 2022.

On February 24 2022, Russia started, in the words of Russian leader Vladimir Putin, a “special military operation” in Ukraine. To Ukraine, this is not just a special operation, but rather an invasion and a direct threat to its independence. The conflict also affects religious institutions and academia. This allows for questions to arise on the role of religion in such international conflicts. Can religion exist independently outside its political and cultural context? How are theologians to position themselves when religion is used as a political tool? How does this affect liberal values?

The independent status of religion

Religion, in any form, always exists within a specific socio-cultural time and place. Therefore, religion is contingent on culture and thus also on the prevailing political conditions. Can religious institutions in times of conflict take an independent stance? In order to address questions like these, first it is to be discussed how one understands and possibly even defines religion. Given the close relationship between social norms, values, and religious understanding, it can be difficult to disentangle these concepts from one another. Focusing on the institutionalisation of religion, recent years have shown us that it does indeed

appear quite difficult for religious institutions to preserve a distance from their cultural and political context. In countries such as Poland or former Yugoslavia, religion has contributed to citizens recognising a civic identity, rather than a national identity. When religion takes such a prominent position in political and social debates, it appears impossible for religion to retain any sort of independence from worldly discussions.

Would religion even deserve an independent status? This takes us back to how to define religion. At an institutional level, it might not deserve one, given that existing religious institutions are closely tied to political institutions. Possibly at an individual level, that of the worshipper, it might be possible. Still, such a division between an institutional and individual definition of religion portrays a fundamentally Western understanding of religion. Therefore, arguing that religion can be independent at the individual level is a very Western way of interpreting religious independence.

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Religion has, apart from the religious house and its institutionalisation, also a major spiritual component. At times it can be useful to come back to such spiritual aspects, which allow one to reflect on what the original idea (without all the cultural components) behind a specific religion is. An example is the accusations

of abuse against the Catholic Church. This has led to reflections on whether the culture of such a religion, and the way it has been institutionalised, represents what the religion promotes. For this reason, it can be valuable to look beyond one’s own culture to understand how other cultures implement and practice religion.

The role of religious leaders

Although most would recognise that there is a certain relationship between religion and society, it is less agreed upon what exactly this relationship looks (or should look) like. In many Eastern European countries in which the Orthodox Church has a large role, most citizens will place the Orthodox Church in their top 3 most trusted institutions. This means that religious leaders have a lot of influence. Thus, political leaders are incentivised to have good relations with religious leaders. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation needed a new identity, and Eastern Orthodoxy served as some sort of glue. The Orthodox Church was able to bind countries like Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus with similar religious values.

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, is widely understood to endorse the war in Ukraine. The leader of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, in contrast, has openly condemned the

war. Also within the Russian Orthodox Church, priests have spoken out against the war. Similarly, the Russian Orthodox Church in Amsterdam has announced to be splitting from the Moscow Church. In this way they are opposing the leadership of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which has been strongly tied to Moscow's political interests.

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Nevertheless, religious leaders are often used by political leaders. In Poland, Catholic Church leaders were useful when they supported calls for nationalism in Poland. However, when Polish Church leaders called for additional support for migrants, they were ignored. Such use and the politicisation of religion appear to have increased since the end of the Cold War. Since unity was less found along an ideological division, religion has become increasingly important to sustain political narratives.

Religious freedom in academia

In theology, the academic study of topics related to religion, and the (lack of an) independent status between religion and politics also have implications. All professors of Catholic faculties of theology are

required to have papal approval (which can also be withdrawn) in order to do their work. When these theologians publish critical academic work, they can lose their licence. This leads to the question of what academic independence looks like. Even in countries where theology professors do not need a special licence granted by a religious institute, within the academic world researchers depend on funding and grants. This stimulates researchers (although independent from religious institutes) into a certain kind of research. In countries like Poland, where a religious licence is required, but research is also funded by religious institutes, there can be more deviation in the research topics. Independence in theology is thus not as straightforward as it might initially appear.

Cooperation in times of conflict

The Russian Orthodox Church has increasingly been using a narrative of superiority. In such times, finding common ground for cooperation becomes increasingly difficult. Still, to completely end cooperation and sever all means of communication can be incredibly dangerous. It means that no developments can be shared, and that the opposing parties become even further alienated from one another.

The same debate can exist within the field of theology. Also within the world of academia boycotts exist, in

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this case, for instance, against Russian scholars. In cases like that of the Russian Orthodox Church now, it is the theologian's task to analyse the Russian Church's tone of superiority. It can be questioned whether there is any use in remaining in contact with scholars who do not (or are not able to) analyse such situations honestly. Still, conversations can be useful. It will give insights into the, in this case, Russian understanding of the situation. Additionally, it will allow for the Russian theologians to be exposed to other views. The Russian Orthodox Church has a massive diaspora and a big intelligencia. It remains important to give scholars of Russia an open sphere to discuss similar matters as European scholars are discussing. If not, such scholars will be pushed further into their isolation, and it might alienate Russian theologians even further. Similarly, the fact that Russian scholars do not publish critical work does not give an honest indication of how they perceive the conflict and the position of the Russian Orthodox Church. Therefore, although their independence might be lost, value can always be found in the continued communication.

The position taken by Western scholars and how they position themselves in relation to Russian academia is also a reflection of the Western sense of superiority. Students in for instance Dutch universities



have asked for curriculums to be adjusted as a response to the Ukrainian-Russian war. Yet, it is unclear where universities should draw the line. If it is demanded that Russian scholars are taken out based on arguments against the Russian oppression, many more scholars (also non-Russian) are to be removed from the curriculum for their support for oppression in other situations. This would require large parts of the average syllabus to be removed, with names such as Voltaire and Heidegger taken out of the education system. The ideas of such thinkers will then not be communicated anymore, but will that truly bring our understanding of the world any further?

Can values be maintained?

Continuing to stand up for liberal values in times of conflict is not necessarily the easiest of tasks, yet it is something that needs to be done. Values are maintained if everyone lives up to them, especially in dangerous times. Threats to our values also allow for those values to be reinforced even stronger. Many European countries are helping Ukrainian refugees, also through citizen-led initiatives. These initiatives show the strength of dominant values of non-violence and social cohesion.

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Additionally, these debates also raise questions on where our values come from. Historically speaking, Protestantism does not necessarily have a history of being tolerant. Still, this religious tradition has produced people like Locke, who have been at the forefront in the promotion of toleration. Regardless, history continues to be rewritten. Nowadays there is broad recognition not only for HIStory, but also HERstory, which shows that history continues to be reconstructed over time. In this way, history is not very static. In the same way, theology as an academic field continues to adapt to developments over time. In research on old works, it is always important to keep in mind that they were interpreted with a specific background and specific interests. Such interpretations can change over time. Similarly, our societal values do not necessarily follow a static or linear path. Strikingly, it might not be that easy to simply make a distinction between Western liberal values and values used in the Russian narrative. Russia uses many values that also the West is very strongly in favour of. Russia has started this 'special military operation' in order to denazify and protect the Russian speaking population from genocide. Many respected Western countries have used similar narratives to justify their intervention in other countries.

(Re)writing history

This discussion on religion in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict took place in the fifth week since Russia invaded Ukraine. Soon it was really clear that the proposed discussion questions were already a bit outdated. In an active conflict many updates follow one another, and continue to challenge the way that for instance values, narratives, and the role of religious institutions are perceived. There is also a certain value to this. It gives an indication of how such discussions are sensitive to continuous developments. Such awareness is important in theology, since, as previously discussed, not only new history is written (e.g. the Russia-Ukraine conflict), but already existing history continues to be rewritten.



The role of the Russian Orthodox Church

Report written by Elise Vrijburg



This report was based on our round table discussion that took place on April 14th, 2022.

The war in Ukraine has stirred public debate, and not only because of its immense grievances. Putin considers nuclear weapons no longer as an imaginative reflection of a world order, but also as a real tool in combating NATO. In this narrative, religion plays the role of the ultimate good that should be defended. How can we understand the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in this war? More so, how should we relate to this – not only as scholars, but also as citizens of the West?

Keeping in touch: a real dilemma

The current war does not only evoke tensions within the political sphere, but also in the academic community. Should Western scholars remain in touch with Russian universities? The answer to this question rests on the distinction between the personal and academic level. On a personal level, it might seem unnecessary to cut off ties with fellow scholars just for them being Russian. After all, not all Russians can be put on the same denominator. Yet, on an academic level, we confer a sense of legitimacy on universities by recognising them. Conversely, not recognising them is a form of symbolic shaming that could be used as a sanction against Russia. The question

remains whether these two levels could be separated, as we should not forget that scholars within Russian universities are heavily institutionalised. An alternative and meaningful way of engaging with them would be to help them change the dominant narrative of the role of religion in politics, for example by hosting conferences with orthodox scholars.

Nationalism as a political concept

Challenging this narrative will be more important than ever, as Putin is blending in the role of religion in complex and diffuse ways. How can we understand the role of religion in his justification for war? First, it can be seen as part of a Russian nationalistic discourse where ‘the Russians’ are one united people, including Ukrainian citizens. This becomes clear from Putin’s speech on Lugansk People’s Republic, in which he commented that their people have considered themselves Russian and orthodox since “time and memorial.” But more importantly, although this narrative is nationalistic, it is certainly not national. Instead, it can be understood as a meta-ethnic one, in which not one nation for the Russian people, but one Russian world for everyone is the goal. This is a turning point in the history of nationalism and theology.

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Identity and theology: (un)common grounds

Apart from the political sphere, we should also wonder how this narrative plays out in the personal one. The relationships between identity and theology differ on the level of individuals, groups, and factions. Although not necessarily so, Christian nationalism sometimes relates to ethnicity. This also helps us understand why not all Russian Orthodox Christians have moved away from their church following the war. Some of these people identify with the Russian homeland, implying that they cannot just turn away from their church without losing part of their identity.

Reaching out beyond borders

For those that are not turning away, how can we prevent their radicalisation? First, we should realise that there is a deep-rooted reason for why this nationalist narrative resonates with so many Russians. A full decade of the Yeltsin ruling, whose capitalist policy proved very damaging to Russia, did not



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particularly show a promising role for Western values. This does not mean Russia's propaganda ends at the Russian border, especially considering Putin's meta-ethnic narrative. Most evidently, it manifests itself throughout the region, for example in Georgia at the borders of the Kremlin. But more so, we should not be as naive as to think that the Russian Orthodoxy has not yet infiltrated the Western hemisphere. Think, for example, about the influx of Russian immigrants after the Russian Revolution in the seventies, or more recently the opening of the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Paris in 2016. Whether anything can be done to prevent radicalisation amongst Russians and other populations can be questioned. Propaganda, whether embedded in facts or lies, is pervasive - think, for example, about the fact that half of the American population still believes Democrats 'stole' the election from Trump.

The Good vs the Bad: a nuanced picture of the West

Beyond our naivety about the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, we could also question the role

we play in the war. Importantly, we cannot remain caught up in a story of us, the 'good West', versus them, the 'bad Russia'. First, we shouldn't see Putin's actions as merely a way to obtain his security interest.

For a long time, our politicians have engaged in a double narrative – we have supported Ukraine's wish to join NATO, but are not willing to stand up for its consequences now that it comes down to it.

There is also a genuine belief amongst him and his allies that Ukraine is truly part of the Russian world. This raises the stakes not only for him, but also for us as the West. We are not merely responding to a war criminal, but also defending our own security. Putin has also copied Western language and motives in his narrative, for example by relying on a broad meaning of 'justified self-defence' put forward by the United Nations, or by tapping into the European logic of a majority that gets to rule and a minority that does not. It is lastly important to remember that the West is not without its own blame. For a long time, our politicians have engaged in a double narrative – we have supported Ukraine's wish to join NATO, but are not willing to stand up for its consequences now that it comes down to it.

How to go from here?

The current war in Ukraine and the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church cannot be put in the mould of one story. Ideology and religion mingle in complex ways, nationalism extends beyond the nation, and the West is not without its faults. We will have to find a way to learn how to live with such ambiguity. How does this help us find a way out of the current situation? First, without neglecting its complexity, we should not make this war about everything. Pragmatically, in order to combat this war, we need a specific target. The West might not be blameless, but we are still upholding a rule of law and defending humanitarian rights. This brings us to the next point: the war does not only force us to look at Russia, but also at ourselves. We have seen that some of our democracies, such as the US, are showing signs of crumbling. In the coming years, we will have to come to an understanding with our own democracies. Lastly, although this fragility should not be taken lightly, we should also be able to put it in a long-term perspective. Demographics change and so do politics. Younger generations might not share the same nationalistic ideologies as older ones do. We can find hope in the fact that this older generation will once, too, have to step down.



Appendix

The growing hold of the Moscow Patriarchate over the European Orthodox world

Written by Laurent Tessier





Internal divisions over the war in Ukraine

On 3rd March 2022, Metropolitan Jean de Doubna,¹ Archbishop of the Orthodox Churches of the Russian tradition in Western Europe, signed a rare statement. In this statement, he “urges His Holiness Patriarch Kyrill⁵ [of Moscow] and the Holy Synod [government of the Russian Orthodox Church] to intervene firmly with the political authorities of Russia to put an immediate end to this war.” A war that he denounced, not without political courage, as “a grave sin before God.”²

This statement contrasts radically with the position of Metropolitan Antoine Sveryuk,³ the exarch [representative] of the Patriarch of Moscow in Western Europe, whose seat is in the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Paris. He relayed a declaration in which Patriarch Kyrill called on “the parties to the conflict to do their utmost to avoid civilian casualties,” without condemning the war waged by the Russian president against Ukraine.⁴

This difference in position between these two European Orthodox leaders illustrates the divisions within the Russian Orthodox world over the war in Ukraine.⁵ While some Orthodox leaders denounce the war, others, loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate, refuse to condemn it. This also provides a glimpse of the growing influence of Moscow on the European Orthodox world.

Paris, the cultural and spiritual centre of Russia in Europe

One of the most emblematic facts of this desire of the Moscow Patriarchate to regain a foothold in Europe is the inauguration with great pomp of the Holy Trinity Cathedral on 19th October 2016 in Paris.⁶ This imposing religious building decorated with five golden bulbs overlooking the Seine, composes, with the adjacent Russian cultural centre, a real pole of Russian soft power. Statutorily, this cathedral built with the support of President Putin is also the chapel of the Russian embassy, an extraterritorial zone.⁷

For Jean-François Colosimo, historian and theologian specialising in the Orthodox world, this Russian spiritual and cultural complex “represents Russian Orthodoxy as desired by [Patriarch] Kyrill, that is to say, a nationalist, conservative, clerical Orthodoxy which sees Vladimir Putin as its protector.”⁸ In early March 2022, when Russia declared war on Ukraine, anti-Putin tags were drawn on the cathedral’s facades. The Orthodox religious authorities decided to close the cathedral to the public. According to Jean-François Colosimo, this act of vandalism shows that in the eyes of some opponents of the war in Ukraine, this religious building is considered a lever of influence for the Russian government, which has itself subordinated the Church to the State.⁹

European competition between the Orthodox Patriarchates of Moscow and Constantinople

When it was inaugurated in 1861, the church of Saint Alexander Nevsky was the first Russian church in Paris. At that time, it depended on the Moscow Patriarchate. After the Bolshevik (atheist and anti-religious) revolution of 1917, it became the seat of the parishes of white Russian emigrants (monarchists). In 1931, the church, which had meanwhile become a cathedral, came under the protection of the Patriarchate of Constantinople with a special, provisional, and complex status that has evolved over the century. Although cut off from Moscow, the clergy and faithful will retain the Russian Orthodox tradition and rite.¹⁰

In 2018, the Patriarchate of Constantinople decided to dissolve the Russian Orthodox churches in Western Europe and integrate them into the Greek Orthodox jurisdictions (metropolises) of the countries where they are located. However, Archbishop John of Charioupolis, who is very attached to his church’s integrity, asked to be attached to the Moscow Patriarchate. This was in accordance with the wish of the clergy in the 1930s to return to the Moscow fold once the Soviet regime had fallen. This project caused divisions within the community, with a minority wishing to remain under the authority of Constantinople. The Russian Patriarchate accepted the request on 3rd November 2019.^{11 12}

In the background: Ukraine, a dividing line in the Orthodox world

This change of authority in the context of rivalry between Constantinople and Moscow is a winning political strategy for the Moscow Patriarchate. More broadly, this event illustrates the division of the Orthodox world, the most important dividing line of which today runs through Ukraine.¹³ Indeed, in October 2018, despite warnings from the Moscow Patriarchate, Patriarch Bartholomew I officially recognised the independence (autocephaly) of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.¹⁴ This decision was taken against the crisis background of opposition from a large part of the Ukrainian people to the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014.¹⁵ In response, the Moscow Patriarchate banned its clergy and faithful from participating in religious services in churches belonging to the Patriarchate of Constantinople.¹⁶

In the name of the continuity of the Russian state

In this dynamic of rivalry with the Patriarchate of Constantinople, Patriarch Kyrill can count on the help of the Kremlin. Indeed, the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Russian State, jointly, are gradually taking back

control of several Orthodox religious buildings in the name of the continuity of the Russian State. In fact, legal battles between representatives of the Russian authorities and descendants of Russian exiles have taken place around the world, from Argentina to South Korea, and more particularly in France.¹⁷

In December 2011, the Nice Orthodox Religious Association (under the Patriarchate of Constantinople), which has been responsible for St Nicholas Cathedral since 1923, was forced by the French courts to hand over the keys of the building to the Russian Federation, which claimed ownership. After 7 years of legal battle, the Court of Appeal considered that there was “a legal continuity between the Russian Empire and the State of the Russian Federation.”¹⁸ In February 2021, however, Russia failed to recover another Orthodox church in Nice, with the court recognising the religious association as the rightful owner after having cared for it for over a century.¹⁹

Putin and Cyril for the return of Holy Russia

This rivalry between the Patriarchates of Moscow and Constantinople, and the legal battles waged by the Russian authorities to recover the ownership of certain religious buildings, is part of a Russian soft power strategy. This strategy aims not only to compete with

the Patriarchate of Constantinople in its universal claim – and to make Moscow ‘the third Rome’²⁰ – but also to make the Russian Orthodox Church the armed arm of the Kremlin.²¹ “The Russian power,” underlines Vladimir Fedorovski, a French-Russian diplomat and writer of Ukrainian origin, “is the altar and politics; the real teammate of the President of the Federation is not Medvedev²² but Patriarch Kyrill.”²³



Church and politics in Ukraine

Written by Marko Pavlović





How did the problem arise?

Orthodox Christianity is the largest religion in Ukraine, with 78% of citizens describing themselves as followers of the faith.¹ In December 2018, a significant change to Orthodoxy was made when Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the head of the entire Orthodox Church, granted autocephaly for the new Orthodox Church in Ukraine. In that way, he recognised the legitimacy of the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU).² To grant autocephaly means to give the highest degree of independence that an Orthodox church can have. This decision was welcomed by the then Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, who congratulated the OCU on its establishment and independence.^{3 4}

However, this event caused controversy throughout the Orthodox world because prior to declaring its independence, Ukraine's Orthodox believers already belonged to another church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC).⁵ This church has historically been under the spiritual jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).⁶ Therefore, two Orthodox churches now exist in Ukraine. This has led to a debate over which church is legitimate and has created a series of organisational and political problems. Crucially, the Orthodox Church has not historically faced this type of situation. Whilst multiple Protestant churches often exist within one state, this is usually not the case for two Orthodox churches. This split has forced Orthodox churches beyond Ukraine

to choose sides and has had a knock-on effect for the political as well as religious divides in the region.

What does the term autocephaly actually mean in the Orthodox faith?

Before examining the tension between the two Orthodox churches in Ukraine, it is important to understand the concept of autocephaly and how it differs from other forms of Christianity in Europe. Unlike the Catholic Church, headed by a pope who has inviolable authority, the Orthodox Church represents a union of independent churches.⁷ The Ecumenical Patriarch, who sits in Istanbul, is recognised by all Orthodox churches as the first among equals.^{8 9}

Orthodox churches, opposite from Catholicism, operate in different languages and do not have a central leader.¹⁰ Therefore, each Orthodox Church is a separate institution depending on the nation, for example Greece, Serbia, or Bulgaria.¹¹ To acquire independence, a part of one Orthodox Church must seek independence from the so-called mother church of which it is currently a part. If that mother church wants to grant independence (autocephaly), then she gives that without the interference of other churches.¹² The recent developments in Ukraine directly contradict the traditions of the Orthodox faith, because the Ecumenical patriarch interfered into the ROC's territory.

The genesis of the church-political problem in Ukraine

In order to understand why Ukraine is so important to the ROC, it is crucial to understand the history of the faith in the two nations. Russians were baptised for the first time in the current Ukrainian capital of Kiev back in 994, and the city has long been seen as the cradle of Russian Christianity.¹³ For centuries, the Ukrainian Orthodox faith has been considered as a part of the ROC.¹⁴

Therefore, Patriarch Bartholomew's 2018 decision to form a new Orthodox Church in Ukraine broke with hundreds of years of tradition. Crucially, this decision was made without an invitation from the Russian Patriarch.¹⁵ With its political and symbolic significance clear, this decision was celebrated by Ukrainian politicians with President Poroshenko immediately congratulating the OCU, thanking Patriarch Bartholomew, and rejoicing that they were no longer under Moscow's domination.¹⁶ After this event, the ROC cut off all communication with the Ecumenical Patriarchate as a sign of protest.¹⁷

Ukraine triggers a split

The situation in Ukraine has divided different national branches of the Orthodox faith in Europe. The Bulgarian, Serbian, Moldovan, and Estonian Orthodox churches refused to recognise the newly-formed OCU.¹⁸ On the other hand, Greek, Cypriot, and Alexandrian churches have publicly recognised its legitimacy.¹⁹

As for Russia, the Moscow Patriarchate has accused the Ecumenical Patriarch of only having recognised the new church in Ukraine due to political pressure from the United States.²⁰ The Russian Metropolitan has alleged that the attempt to form a new Ukrainian church is part of a plan from the United States to destroy the ROC.²¹

A new front of international tensions?

The controversy over which Ukrainian church has legitimacy has also become a part of the US-Russia relations. US Secretary of State at the time, Mike Pompeo, stated that the US supported religious freedoms as well as the freedom of members of religious communities, including the OCU.²² The current president of the US, Joe Biden, had a meeting with UOC representatives in 2018 and expressed his open support for the establishment of an independent church in Ukraine.²³ However, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, responded to this by stating

that the establishment of the non-canonical OCU was a direct provocation supported by Washington.²⁴ This was added to by Russian President Vladimir Putin who stated that the OCU had been formed with the purpose of creating a national division between Moscow and Kiev on the religious level.²⁵ Three years have passed since the declaration of independence, but the situation has remained unchanged. No more Orthodox churches have recognised the OCU, and the political positions of the relevant countries remain the same.

Is there a solution in sight?

For now, there have been no expressions of a desire for negotiations between the Moscow and Ecumenical Patriarchs. This means that there are still two Orthodox churches competing for legitimacy in Ukraine.

In addition, this unresolved question has further emphasised the rivalry between the Moscow and Ecumenical Patriarchates,²⁶ as well as pro-Russian and pro-European Ukrainians. The emergence of the OCU is a reflection of the complex, and potentially controversial, relationship between the Church and politics in the Orthodox faith. It is too early to know whether the problem in Ukraine will set new norms in the functioning of the Orthodox faith and perhaps leave a permanent impact on the church and politics, but it is sure to be an issue that is worth further investigation in the future.



Ukraine on the EARS dashboard

Written by Anne Clerx



their deep regret over the suffering of the Ukrainian people.¹⁹ They call believers of their communities not only to help the victims and refugees, but also to put pressure on the government to keep fighting for dialogue instead of using violence.²⁰ On the dashboard, we see that similar calls were made by the Interreligious Council of Albania²¹ and representatives of the Evangelical Church in Germany.²²

Besides urging for an end to the war, religious institutions are also offering help to Ukraine. This ranges from Dutch parishes collecting money for aid,²³ to Belgian communities organising prayers,²⁴ and Finnish communities launching an emergency fundraiser to help affected families.²⁵

Support for Ukraine from Orthodox leaders

As described above, the Russian Orthodox Church is heavily tied into the war. Nevertheless, several Russian Orthodox communities have explicitly distanced themselves from Vladimir Putin, or denounced the Russian attacks on Ukraine. For example, the Russian Orthodox community of the Protection of the Virgin Mary in Bonn, Germany, has done so.²⁶

In addition, over 200 priests and deacons of the Russian Orthodox Church have signed a petition against the war. Even though this is not the Church's

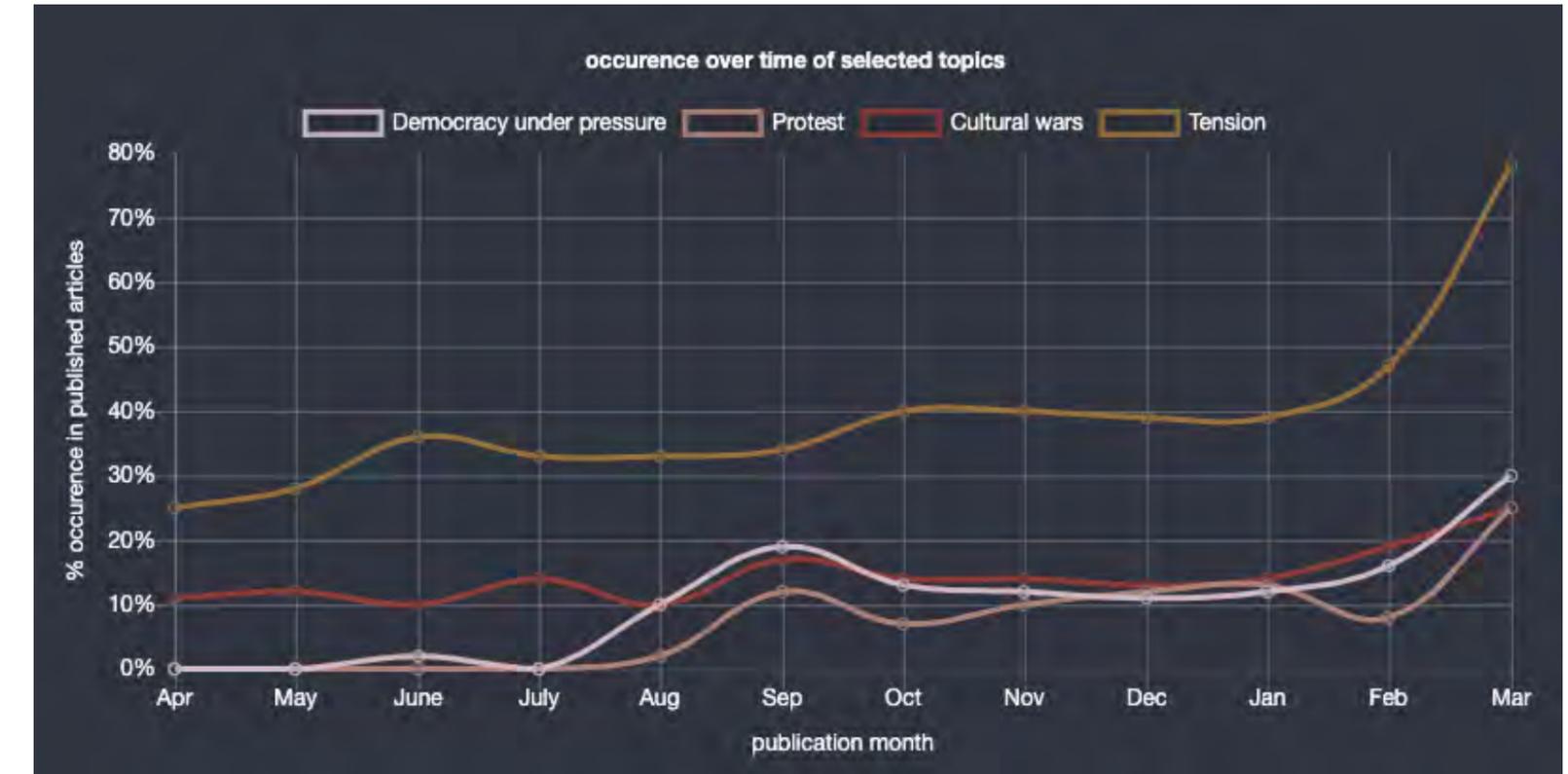
official position, it is an indicator that Putin does not have full support of the institution.^{27 28} In the World Council of Churches, voices are even rising to temporarily exclude the Russian Orthodox Church because of their ties with the Russian invasion of Ukraine.²⁹

What is next?

We see that media coverage of topics such as tension and democracy under pressure has gained importance in the past weeks. To illustrate, 78% of all summaries added in March until now relate to the topic of tension in some way, a huge increase from earlier months. With the war between Russia and Ukraine still going on, these topics may remain important on the dashboard over the next weeks or even months.

Learn more on the EARS dashboard

The [EARS dashboard](#) allows you to gain insight into a large number of topics, including *tension* and *democracy under pressure*. It is a free tool that enables you to make similar connections as described above, and to find out about new relationships between interesting subjects across Europe. Please visit the [dashboard](#) to learn more.



Insights from the dashboard: Tensions in Eastern Europe and LGBTQ+ rights

Written by Clémence Sauty



instead of testifying “to the Lord.”¹ The debate over homosexuality reveals tensions within Christianity.

On the other hand, tensions in Eastern Europe caused by the Russian expansionist war against Ukraine threaten LGBTQ+ people in the area. There are indeed no LGBTQ+ rights in Russia. The Russian Constitution was amended in order to prevent queer people from marrying. Moreover, LGBTQ+ associations are targeted as “foreign intelligence.” Public communication about queer topics is prohibited, especially among minors. As a consequence, Pride marches are forbidden.

Besides, within the Federation of Russia, the Chechen Republic purged LGBTQ+ people in 2017 and in 2019, meaning that an unknown number of men and women were imprisoned in concentration camps and tortured to death.² The ambitions of the Russian army in Ukraine therefore worry LGBTQ+ people in the area.

LGBTQ+ rights reveal tensions among Orthodox churches

In the Russian war against Ukraine, religious and geopolitical motives are entwined. In order to better understand this connection, we can bring the third word *Orthodoxy* into the equation. A dashboard summary then gives a valuable clue in understanding the interaction between the events in Russia and Ukraine, and tensions around LGBTQ+ rights.

In [this article](#), specialist in the study of Orthodoxy, Katie Kelaidis, explains that “Orthodox Christians disagree about what their relationship to the liberal, secular, rationalist world should be.” The dividing lines of this disagreement tend to match the contours of national borders.

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title

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summary

[opinion piece by Katie Kelaidis, a writer and historian].The war between Russia and Ukraine, if there will be one, will be a religious war between two Orthodox Christian states even though superficially this war appears a conflict of territory.On the one side there is the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople that is in favour of human rights, freedom, and trust

On the one hand, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople represents the Greek side of Orthodoxy. He is rather supportive of human rights, religious freedom and trust in science. On the other hand, the Patriarch of Moscow represents the Russian side of Orthodoxy. He advocates for traditionalist Orthodoxy and conservatism.³

Are LGBTQ+ rights the tip of the iceberg?

Religious tensions, notably about LGBTQ+ rights, reveal the dividing lines in the current conflict. The war mapped out different Christian theologies, different ways of relating to God, and different notions of human dignity and love.

Indeed, opinions about LGBTQ+ rights usually go with many more ethical and political views. They are the visible tip of the belief iceberg. Different Orthodox attitudes towards queer people denote different stances towards human rights in general.⁴ Therefore, the tensions around LGBTQ+ rights matter, even to those who are not directly affected by them.

Learn more on the EARS dashboard

The [EARS dashboard](#) allows you to gain insight into a large number of topics, including LGBTQ+, Orthodoxy, and tension. It is a free tool that enables you to make similar connections as described above, and to find out about new relationships between interesting subjects across Europe. Please visit the [dashboard](#) to learn more.



Loyalty or resistance to Moscow? A difficult dilemma for Russian Orthodox churches

Written by Zonne Dijkstra



Religious reasons for the Russian invasion

The Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow plays a prominent role in the Russian war against Ukraine. Patriarch Kirill, spiritual leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, openly supports the invasion of Ukraine. Commentary on the war suggests that he even provides a justification for it. This justification is claimed to be based on a narrative that frames the holy East as opposing the morally depraved West. In this narrative, the invasion represents a kind of ‘holy war’ against the ‘godless’ influences of Western culture.¹ In one of his sermons, Patriarch Kirill refers to Western practices like the acceptance of homosexuality and LGBTQ+ Pride events as reasons for the war against Ukraine. He seems to be claiming that Russian culture needs to be protected from such ‘sinful’ cultural patterns.² In this way, Patriarch Kirill can be viewed as justifying the war against Ukraine.

Yet another religious justification for the Russian invasion is the fear of the destruction of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine. In 2018, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine separated from the Moscow Patriarchate to start an independent existence. This schism has been cited by both the Kremlin and Patriarch Kirill as a reason for invading Ukraine.³

Loyalty or resistance?

These considerations show that the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow plays a major part in the war against Ukraine. Because of this, Russian Orthodox churches worldwide are facing a difficult dilemma: should they stay loyal to Patriarch Kirill or disconnect from the Moscow Patriarchate as a sign of resistance to the war?⁴

In March 2022, a Russian Orthodox church in Amsterdam decided to disconnect from the Moscow Patriarchate. The church spoke out against Moscow, expressing disapproval of the war against Ukraine. Despite this being customary, they refused to pray for Patriarch Kirill during their church services because of his supportive attitude towards the war. Eventually, the clergy of the church decided that they were no longer able to stay loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate. They chose to transfer to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.⁵

By leaving the Moscow Patriarchate, this Amsterdam church expressed resistance to and disapproval of the Russian invasion. Some other Dutch Russian Orthodox churches, however, responded to the schism of the Amsterdam church with disapproval. They stated that Russian Orthodox churches ought to stay loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate, despite its association with the war against Ukraine. A reason for this conviction is the idea that religion and politics are essentially separate matters. By disconnecting from Moscow, they believe

that the Amsterdam church is guilty of mixing up religion and politics.⁶

Religion and politics: separate or intertwined?

The question is whether the idea that religion and politics are separate is plausible in this context. The answer seems to be simple: it is not. In Russia, religion and politics are deeply intertwined. Russian church services are not strictly religious. They typically involve the sanctification of Russian national identity. It can be said, then, that they have a religious-nationalist character. In a way, the Russian Orthodox Church represents the exaltation of Russian national identity to a holy status.⁷

This interlacing of Russian religion and politics is also visible in the reasons given for the Russian invasion of Ukraine: the Russian Orthodox Church employs a religious-nationalist narrative that sanctifies Russian nationalism in order to justify the war. Because of this, the separation of religion and politics is hardly applicable to this context. When it comes to the Russian war against Ukraine, religion and politics are not separate matters. Therefore, the dilemma between loyalty or resistance to Moscow has to be informed by the political situation.



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