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## Strategy and Tactics of the Russian Orthodox Church towards Ukraine in the First Year of Volodymyr Zelensky's Presidency

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### Abstract

Following former President Petro Poroshenko's attack on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (of the Moscow patriarchate), and the subsequent election of Volodymyr Zelensky, the Russian Orthodox Church has had to change its tactics. While it retains strong representation in Ukraine, it no longer is as powerful as it was in the past. The real change, however, is how the Russian Orthodox Church operates on the global Orthodox stage. It is now seeking a way to present itself as the leader of the international Orthodox movement, rather than just as a Russian church.

### Battle for Control of the Ukrainian Church

More than one year has passed since the first round of the presidential election in Ukraine, when on March 31, 2019 it became clear that Volodymyr Zelensky would become president. A side result of the decision of voters was that the project of creating a single Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) would not be realized.<sup>1</sup>

The OCU was created as a single Ukrainian church from the two Ukrainian church organizations that had not previously been officially recognized by the Orthodox church system (or "world Orthodoxy"). The first of them was the relatively large Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (5,000 registered parishes, but not more than 3,500 in reality), while the second was the small Ukrainian Autocephalous Church (1,000 registered parishes, but not more than 600 in reality). The association also involved a small group of Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (hereinafter UOC) priests and two (out of 84) of its bishops. The founders of the OCU, which emerged as one of Poroshenko's campaign projects (the idea was announced only on April 18, 2018 and at the time of its creation was supported by no more than a third of the country's population according to public opinion polls<sup>2</sup>), promised to obtain Tomos (i.e., a document of

recognition) from the oldest Orthodox Church in the world—the Ecumenical Patriarchate. They managed to do this in the first days of 2019. Another of their promises—that the OCU would unite all or at least the vast majority of the Orthodox communities in the country has not been fulfilled. The UOC, which has more than 12,000 registered parishes (and more than 10,000 real parishes) and dominates as a religious institution (according to the number of registered communities) in 24 of the 27 regions of the country, refused to leave the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and join the OCU, which according to various estimates has from 3,500 to 7,000 parishes.<sup>3</sup> This gap is explained by the fact that there are a large number of registered but not actually existing parishes of the former Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate and Ukrainian Autocephalous Church.<sup>4</sup>

The open pressure of Poroshenko's supporters and his administration on the UOC also had no effect. The OCU supporters' arguments were addressed to ordinary believers and priests, and were actively promoted by "patriotic" media, regional and local authorities of some regions, political activists and simply "patriotic citizens."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, from December 2018 to April 2019, according to the head of the OCU, about 600 UOC communities (i.e. 5% of the registered ones) passed to

1 This article was written as a part of the project "Ideological Groups within the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia and Ukraine after 2012: A Comparative Study of their Influence on the Institutions of Church Governance and its Relationship with the State," supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

2 Олександр Саган: Москва не змогла зупинити процес підготовки Томосу для України // Левый берег (Київ), 11.07.2018; [https://lb.ua/blog/sagan/402545\\_moskva\\_zmogla\\_zupiniti\\_protzes.html](https://lb.ua/blog/sagan/402545_moskva_zmogla_zupiniti_protzes.html) (accessed 15 April 2020).

3 Cf. Nikolay Mitrokhin: "Atheisten des Kiewer Patriarchats". Die Kirchenfrage in der Ukraine nach dem Tomos," Osteuropa, 1-2/2020.

4 In an interview with the author, the head of one of the largest dioceses of OCU was confused about the calculations and could not say exactly how many—300 or 420—parishes he had. N. Mitrokhin's interview with Metropolitan Mikhail of Volyn (Zinkevich), Lutsk, 11 February 2020.

5 Patriotic is listed in quotes as the author does not question the patriotism of the rest of the country's population, but refers to the political self-positioning of some citizens as active or even professional "patriots."

it, and then the transitions practically stopped.<sup>6</sup> According to the UOC itself, it lost about 200 communities (84 voluntarily transferred to the OCU and 122 were occupied), and the same number of churches were transferred to the OCU by local authorities, but remain under its control.<sup>7</sup> According to the author's data, based on conversations with high-ranking church officials and activists both in Kyiv and in the most affected dioceses, the UOC has hopelessly lost at least 200 communities (and about 150 priests), some 250 communities have split up and it is impossible to serve in their churches (but the priests have remained in the UOC); another 100 communities serve in the same churches as before, but are formally transferred to the OCU.

In fact, all the transitions and “crossings” occurred in the regions of Western Ukraine. They are characterized by a higher level of support for Ukrainian patriotism and ethno-nationalist parties (such as Svoboda, activists of former youth organizations, which were active agitators for the OCU and participated in the seizures of churches<sup>8</sup>) or in those regions of central Ukraine that were adjacent to the regions of western Ukraine (Khmelnitsky, Vinnitsky and Zhitomirsky). In other regions, including the rich Ukrainian patriotic intelligentsia in Kyiv, the transitions and “transitions” were of a single nature (in Kyiv just four parishes and about 12 priests, out of 400 parishes and almost 800 clerics).<sup>9</sup>

Instead of unifying the Orthodox churches, the former “divisive” communities were de facto legalized under the auspices of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, but this decision is currently not recognized by the vast majority of the 14 Orthodox churches in the world. Only three churches (the Ecumenical Patriarchate (January 6, 2019), Alexandria (Egypt, November 8, 2019) and Hellenic (Greece, October 12, 2019) have so far supported this decision. Another result of the OCU's creation was the appearance of about three hundred conflict points on the map of Ukraine in rural areas, where the old UOC community and the newly created OCU community argue about the church's affiliation.

Poroshenko left such a legacy in the religious sphere to Zelensky. The previous composition of the Verkhovna

Rada, which worked until June 2019 and was dominated by supporters and allies of the outgoing president, aggravated the situation by adopting a number of laws against Zelensky's Russian-speaking voters in the last six months of its work and limited the use of Russian in many areas. In the religious sphere, the old Rada continued to adopt amendments that discriminated against the UOC (for example, it, like all religious organizations in the country, had to re-register all parishes, but in many regions and in Kyiv, local officials, being “Ukrainian patriots,” refused to do so or did not respond to requests for reregistration) and even stripped it of its name. It was legally required to be called “ROC in Ukraine” to “not mislead” ordinary citizens. And the Ministry of Culture, which supervises religious policy in Ukraine on behalf of the state, confusingly gave the old church's name to the OCU, which became known as OCU-UOC.

So, what position have the ROC and UOC taken in this situation, and what has happened in their relations with the Ukrainian state over the past year?

### Arguments of the Parties

We can say that ROC during the open conflict with both the Ukrainian state and the Ecumenical Patriarchate has developed and implemented a rather complex and multi-level defense strategy, which can be divided into three levels: global, national and local.

The ROC is accused by the Ukrainian state and “patriotic public” of complicity in Russian aggression against Ukraine (which is partly true), full dependence on Vladimir Putin and campaigning in favor of Russia (which is also partly true<sup>10</sup>), as well as spying on and “zombifying” ordinary Ukrainians (which is not true). The UOC is not seen as an independent or autonomous structure, but as a direct continuation of “Moscow” in every Ukrainian village. In the opinion of the Ukrainian “patriotic public” it prevents the implementation of an informal rule that every national Orthodox state has its own independent church, depriving Ukraine of one of the attributes of independence. Proponents of this position are based on the sociology of mass polls, which demonstrate that most Ukrainians who call them-

6 Роман Романюк, Митрополит Епифаний: За спиной Филарета играют некоторые пророссийские силы // Украинская правда (Київ), 11.12.2019; <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/articles/2019/12/11/7234473/> (accessed 15 April 2020).

7 Микола Підвезняний, Михайло Глуховський, Станіслав Груздєв: Керуючий справами УОС МП митрополит Антоній: Після зміни влади стало легше // Главком, 23.12.2019; <https://glavcom.ua/interviews/keruyuchiy-spravami-upc-mp-brmitropolit-antoniy-pislya-zmini-vladi-stalo-legshe-648317.html> (accessed 15 April 2020).

8 For example, such right-wing and frankly neo-Nazi organizations as C-14 from Kyiv (14 was the number of the Galicia SS division), “Phoenix” from Khmelnytsky or “Edelweiss” (from the “Edelweiss” division of the Wehrmacht) in Vinnytsia.

9 Интеллектуальная элита: сколько священников УОС МП в Киеве перешли в ОCU // РБК-Украина, 02.02.2019; <https://styler.rbc.ua/rus/zhizn/intellektualnaya-elita-skolko-svyashchennikov-1549487861.html> (accessed 15 April 2020).

10 Яппарова Лиля: Вежливые батюшки. Как священники РОС участвовали в присоединении Крыма // Meduza, 16.03.2020; [https://meduza.io/feature/2020/03/16/vezhlyvye-batyushki?fbclid=IwAR3en5paVCt8L9ny3JBOqb3gvjDxZi6Y1GPl\\_vZF6Wua\\_\\_93Hy0B7ncNns](https://meduza.io/feature/2020/03/16/vezhlyvye-batyushki?fbclid=IwAR3en5paVCt8L9ny3JBOqb3gvjDxZi6Y1GPl_vZF6Wua__93Hy0B7ncNns) (accessed 15 April 2020).

selves Orthodox choose the OCU as their denomination, while only a minority chose the UOC.<sup>11</sup> The Ecumenical Patriarchate, in turn, sees the role of the ROC in “world Orthodoxy” as destructive, while the activities of the ROC in Ukraine in 2018 were assessed as unsuccessful and not contributing to the elimination of the split in the newly created national state. That was the reason for the cancellation of the Tomos issued by the ROC asserting its control over the Kyiv department fast 400 years ago and for the personal measures of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to consolidate the Ukrainian Orthodoxy, which ended with the creation of the OCU.

The ROC in turn accused the Poroshenko government and regional authorities of violating the rights of believers, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate in a sudden and flagrant invasion of the “canonical territory” of the ROC, which had controlled this area for 400 years. The ROC does not want to lose the UOC, which constitutes more than a third of its total parishes. And it retains a serious real influence on the administrative structures of the UOC. On the other hand, the UOC in its own conflict with Poroshenko has demonstrated its unity and perseverance in defending its position. In practice, many more people go to UOC churches than to OCU churches (for central and southern Ukraine the gap is a factor of 5–10 depending on regional specifics). The UOC in the vast majority of regions continues to build churches more actively than its competitor. This fact was confirmed by the author’s field research in southern and right-bank Ukraine in 2015–2020.<sup>12</sup>

### Global Level

The decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to directly interfere in the Ukrainian church situation caused the expected crisis in the system of “world Orthodoxy.” The Orthodox church was already actually divided into “Greek” and Moscow-backed coalitions. That is, on the one hand, the churches dominated by the Greek diaspora—Ecumenical Patriarchate, Hellenic, Alexandria and Cyprus—and on the other hand, the churches ideologically and organizationally connected with Moscow—the ROC, Antioch (Syria), Bulgarian, Georgian, Serbian, and Polish Orthodox churches, as well as the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia.<sup>13</sup> The Romanian and Albanian churches held more of a “progressive” position, the Jerusalem Patriarchate leaned toward

a “pro-Moscow” position, but remained largely independent in their judgments.

After an open conflict between the ROC and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the main tactical goal of the ROC was to block Fanar’s decision to recognize the OCU by other Orthodox churches. In addition to the obvious (but controversial in terms of motives and “canon rights”) fact of “invasion,” the ROC had the only rational argument—the reluctance of the largest Orthodox church in the country to receive the Tomos about autocephaly (independence). If the first fact was differently considered by the churches—in accordance with national history and attitude to Fanar, the second argument of ROC tried to support the real facts. Visits were organized to the “brother churches” of the bishops and clergy of the UOC, stating their position and the persecution they were subjected to for their faith. Bishops and priests from other churches began making official and unofficial visits to Ukraine to get to know the situation personally.

As a result, it turned out that the ROC, trying to prove itself, on the one hand, could not rely on many of its traditional allies (for example, the Bulgarian and Georgian churches, where there are large groups of ideological opponents of the ROC in the Episcopacy), and on the other hand, did receive unexpected support from “neutral” churches (for example, Albanian). A number of churches (Antioch, Serbian, Polish, Czech Lands and Slovakia) have definitely taken the ROC position. The Jerusalem Patriarchate volunteered to mediate the dispute between Moscow and Istanbul and organized a meeting of Orthodox Church leaders in Amman, Jordan, on February 27, 2020, dedicated to the ongoing conflicts in Orthodoxy, which was attended by the heads of the ROC (with the head of UOC), the Serbian and Czech Lands and Slovak Orthodox churches, a delegation of the Romanian Patriarchate and the Polish Church, in addition to the organizer. As might be expected in the absence of opponents, the reconciliation meeting was unsuccessful—the Ecumenical Patriarchate strongly condemned the organization of the meeting, insisting on its exclusive right to initiate general Orthodox events.

Moscow other argument was financial. Flows of pilgrims from Russia and other countries, where the ROC dominates, to the Orthodox shrines of the Mediterranean countries in the 2000s and 2010s were growing. Even the events of 2014 did not seem to have had much

11 Дмитрий Горевой: «Просто православные». К какой церкви себя причисляют жители Украины и кому из религиозных лидеров доверяют – соцопрос // Настоящее время (Прага), 15.11.2019; [https://www.currenttime.tv/a/ukraine-religion-sociology/30273242.html?fbclid=IwAR02QWB0cPexKz6OdvhEXZWPDj\\_UPwudnYbu7YxyHSqi78G7R\\_4\\_1JG0S4](https://www.currenttime.tv/a/ukraine-religion-sociology/30273242.html?fbclid=IwAR02QWB0cPexKz6OdvhEXZWPDj_UPwudnYbu7YxyHSqi78G7R_4_1JG0S4) (accessed 15 April 2020).

12 Research was conducted in Kyiv, as well as in the Vinnytsia (2018, 2020), Volyn (2020), Zaporizhia (2016), Kyiv (2018), Mykolaiv (2016), Odessa (2015–2016, 2018, 2020), Rivne (2020), Kherson (2016) and Khmelnytsky (2019) regions (oblasts).

13 Many of the leaders of these churches have studied at Soviet/Russian seminaries and spiritual academies, and they are affiliated with Russian Orthodoxy.

impact on this process. Greek monasteries earned money by sending relics from the Mediterranean to the Russian Federation. The ROC has invested directly or indirectly in support networks in this region for about 20 years.

The decision of Hellenic and Alexandria churches to recognize the OCU shocked the ROC. Many Greek bishops had developed strong ties with their Russian partners, and the Alexandrian Patriarch was a frequent guest of the ROC in Russia and Ukraine and had previously been a tough opponent of the Ukrainian “dis-senters.” At the same time, it became clear that in many churches that had not yet recognized the OCU, there were large groups of bishops who were willing to do so and that sooner or later it would happen. Some churches (such as the Romanian and Bulgarian ones) informally made it clear that they have not recognized the OCU, not because Moscow does not like it, but because they respect the position of the UOC and its head personally—the conservative but very authoritative Metropolitan Onuphry (Berezovsky).<sup>14</sup>

All this in the second half of 2019 apparently led the Moscow Patriarchate to decide to radically change its strategy in relation to “world Orthodoxy” and fight for influence in the global world with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in a much more sophisticated way than before.

Instead of friendship, hostility, or seeking a balance of interests with national Orthodox churches, the bet was on a “hybrid”—a network, multilayered system of friendship and business relations.

First, the ROC did not break off contact with the churches of Greece and Alexandria after they recognized the OCU, as it did with Fanar. With him they declared an open war, including attempts to open ROC churches on Turkish territory. Instead, the ban on joint worship only affected bishops of those Churches (including their heads) who mentioned in their public prayers (which list the heads of all Orthodox churches) Metropolitan Epiphanius (Dumenko), head of the OCU. This enabled the bishop, priests and laymen of the ROC to receive the sacraments and participate in the services of those numerous bishops in Greece and Africa who wished to maintain a relationship with the ROC and did not wish to recognize the OCU. At the same time, on 26 December 2019 the ROC stopped the functioning of the court of the Patriarchate of Alexandria in Moscow and removed its parishes on the African continent from nominal submission to the Patriarch of Alexandria, transferring them to direct management from Moscow (Stavropigia).<sup>15</sup> In this way the ROC preserves and tries to strengthen its alliance with the churches as

a whole (punishing its opponents), but at the same time shows that it can well establish and maintain individual grass-roots connections with the episcopate and dioceses, undermining church-wide decisions.

Second, on December 28, 2018, the ROC announced the creation of two new exarchates (large associations of dioceses within one church, formed on the basis of territoriality)—West European and South East Asian. The first included European countries west of Germany, the second to the south and east of mainland China. Of course, the ROC already had parishes and dioceses in these regions, but the creation of exarchates (the ROC has not had them outside the former USSR for a long time) means a new level of symbolic claims. Previously, in the system of “world Orthodoxy,” the Ecumenical Patriarchate was given the role of coordinator of Orthodox life outside the territories controlled by national churches and traditional patriarchates. National churches opened their parishes almost everywhere in their diaspora, but “canonically” vast areas of non-Slavic Europe, the Far East and South Asia, both Americas, Australia, and Oceania remained under the formal control of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, whose bishops headed national or regional assemblies of Orthodox bishops of different churches. The ROC exarchates are a clear effort to change this status. If they prove to be more effective than the meetings of bishops of the world churches in lobbying for the interests of the Orthodox, the ROC may fight for the position of “major Orthodox” in some countries of the “non-Orthodox” world.

Third, the ROC has clearly demonstrated its new strategy—to negotiate with those who want to negotiate by taking away from the Ecumenical Patriarchate the Archdiocese of Russian churches in Western Europe. This relatively small association of parishes (about 120) in Western European countries (France, Italy, Benelux, Great Britain, Germany, Scandinavia) was the last shard of émigré Russian churches that remained independent of Moscow. The other shard is the unrecognized Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCO), which the ROC joined in 2006. Some parishes of the Archdiocese have moved to the ROC over the past twenty years, helping them to solve their accumulated financial problems. Against the backdrop of the establishment of the OCU, Fanar suddenly liquidated the Archdiocese and invited its parishes to become part of their usual dioceses in Western Europe.

The latter, being a separate legal entity from the point of view of French law, refused to do so and decided to look for options to continue its existence within the canonical church of “world Orthodoxy.” The ROC

14 The source is the author's unofficial interviews with high-level informants within the UOC.

15 <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5553804.html> (accessed 15 April 2020).



managed to persuade the head of the Archbishopric and more than half of the parishes to return to their ranks, promising to keep the statutes and traditions of the Archbishopric different from those of the ROC. In October–December 2019 this process finally took shape, becoming a “punch on the nose” for the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which at the last moment changed its decision and invited the Archdioceses to seek forms of mutual cooperation. In addition, in Western Europe the ROC opened a new diocese in Spain and Portugal, a little earlier made a diocese in Italy, appointed there active bishops and priests with knowledge of the Romanian and Ukrainian languages. In these dioceses there is an active ordination of new vicar bishops, who should activate the communication of dioceses with parishes and serve in the national languages of diasporas. The ROC clearly intends to sharply expand its influence and the number of parishes, designed for labor migrants from the countries of the former USSR, who are now served in the Romanesque countries of Europe by priests of the Ecumenical Patriarchate recruited from among their compatriots.

And finally, the theological and canonical practice of the ROC began to undergo changes designed to facilitate global expansion. For example, in December 2019, the Holy Synod decided on a major change in naming practices at Baptism. If earlier all those who were baptized received names (if they did not have their own) associated with the Greek Christian tradition or the Russian variant, now it is allowed to leave the names that were carried by Christian saints in the national tradition. This is an important step in the localization of the global church and the rejection of the national component in its ideology. At the same meeting, it included in its memorial lists the names of local saints from Spain and Portugal who died before the split of Christianity into Orthodoxy and Catholicism, giving grounds to build temples in these countries designed not only for labor migrants from the post-Soviet space, but also for local residents.

In general, the conflict with the Ecumenical Patriarchate around Ukraine led to a paradoxical result. The ROC realized that in order to overcome the local problem or to compensate for the damage to its interests, it must move away from the old schemes of conflict pitting one “party” of national churches against another and prepare a global response that may force the Ecumenical Patriarchate (and its allies in the Ukrainian question) to backtrack. Or, if the conflict drags on, the ROC, as the largest Orthodox church in the world, will claim to reshape the Orthodox world by its global split.<sup>16</sup>

### ROC Actions at the National Level

The leadership of the ROC is *persona non grata* in Ukraine since 2014, so it cannot have any direct positive impact on the government and society or simply conduct business negotiations in this country. The management of UOC acts on its own behalf—as a religious association registered and existing under Ukrainian law and uniting citizens of the country. And, as mentioned above, it tries to assure the Ukrainian public of its full independence.

During the beginning of the Zelensky presidency, the UOC continued the line developed in 2014–2015. Then the ROC publicly distanced itself from direct complicity in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine (Patriarch Kirill was absent from the official ceremony marking Crimea’s accession to Russia, the structures of the UOC remained on the peninsula, the ROC fired two Russian clerics who publicly bragged about their trips to the militants in the Donbas and forbade others to do so), but individual priests, and the Patriarch himself participated in it. The ROC and UOC announced the collection of humanitarian aid for the people of Donbass, but only for those who fell under the control of the pro-Russian militants. UOC and ROC called for prayer and peace in Donbass, but did not make any statements condemning the initiators of the aggression. Individual priests in Donbass helped the militants, and many more of them were eagerly engaged in their “spiritual support.” At the same time, individual priests, parishes and dioceses of the UOC from central and southern Ukraine actively helped military hospitals where Ukrainian soldiers were treated, organized (without much publicity) humanitarian aid for them, and some priests traveled as military chaplains with Ukrainian forces.

Metropolitan Onufriy, head of the UOC, took an outwardly wait-and-see stance, refusing to support Poroshenko’s ultra-patriotic rhetoric, but not expressing any outward sympathy for the “Russian world.” At the same time, he and the central administration of the UOC continued to depend financially on the Ukrainian oligarch and politician Vadym Novynsky, who moved to Ukraine from Russia only in the early 2000s and only in 2012 received Ukrainian citizenship. Novynsky is the head of the pro-Russian party “Opposition Bloc,” which had little success in the 2019 parliamentary election. The Ukrainian patriotic public believes that the ROC and Moscow continue to run the UOC through Novynsky.

The UOC at all sites continued to insist that it is an independent church with little dependence on Moscow. This position was not and is not true, as the UOC in reality in many of its decisions looks to Moscow’s posi-

16 On the Russian Orthodox Church global strategy, see the author’s article in the forthcoming issue of the German-language journal *Osteuropa* (3/2020).

tion, and in some cases is waiting for instructions from it. On the other hand, this position is justified because the UOC could “walk away from Moscow” (including with the support of Poroshenko) if it wanted to. And its independence and autonomy lies in the fact that the church itself wants to remain a part of the ROC. The list of reasons why the church wants to remain is long. We just note that the new Ukrainian authorities have generally agreed with this position and the president has distanced himself from resolving religious issues. Therefore, the defamation campaign, which was conducted against the UOC by the Ukrainian media as a whole has decreased, and Kyiv has stopped conducting a campaign to transfer UOC parishes to the OCU.

The UOC even managed to win several victories in the political confrontation. The initiators of the campaign against the church from the second echelon of bureaucrats were removed from their posts or did not enter parliament in the 2019 election cycle, which led to the victory of the Servant of the People party of Vladimir Zelensky. Moreover, several deputies from the Servant of the People systematically defend UOC interests, as well as the entire parliamentary faction of the opposition party Opposition Platform-For Life. Some of the country’s new leaders, including the head of the Ukrainian Security Service, have confirmed that they are parishioners of the UOC.<sup>17</sup>

However, in reality, the winners of the election have a negative opinion of the UOC. This view is due to the strong ties between the UOC leadership and Novynsky. Some of the UOC’s interests are taken into account as the interests of a strong political opponent. Accordingly, the Servant of the People exerted political pressure on the commission to select a candidate for the post of the head of a new service to oversee ethno-politics and freedom of conscience in order to prevent the election of Andrei Yurash, the head of the Department for Religious Organizations of the Ministry of Culture, who was one of the “fathers” of the OCU and openly expressed his extremely negative attitude to the UOC. At the same time, the Servant of the People party, having an absolute majority in the Verkhovna Rada, did not revise the discriminatory laws adopted against the UOC. According to unofficial information, Zelensky made a political decision to consider them following any rulings by European judicial and regulatory bodies, to which they were transferred to challenge the UOC lawyers. Zelensky made this move in order not to be reproached once again for a lack of patriotism, a common critique by

supporters of Poroshenko and the ultra-right part of the Ukrainian political spectrum.

However, both the new Minister of Culture and the newly elected head of the Department for Freedom of Conscience, despite claiming the equality of all faiths in the law, were quite clear and negative about the UOC, considering its existence primarily as a national security issue. Similarly, in February 2020, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry clarified its position during the scandal over the trip of UOC head Metropolitan Onufrija to support the Serbian Orthodox Church, which was being persecuted by the Montenegrin government. The Ukrainian Embassy in Montenegro, in a public statement, denied the head of the UOC the right to represent the Orthodox of Ukraine, claiming this role for the head of the OCU Epiphanius.

Ukrainian government media continue to give priority to Epifania and the OCU in terms of positive coverage. This bias is facilitated by the specific mentality of both UOC leaders—its head Metropolitan Onufrija and his First Deputy Metropolitan Antony (Pakanich). The first generally ignores any requests from the media. The second, while an excellent administrator, is not a good speaker often displaying a tough and arrogant way of presenting his thoughts. Of the other three regular spokesmen speaking for the UOC, two speak in the style of Antony. Only the smiling, young, handsome and “human” Epiphany, easily accessible to journalists, is an order of magnitude more successful media figure than the entire five official UOC speakers.

The only place where the UOC has obvious support is in the courts, which have granted most of UOC’s claims for blocking the Ministry of Culture’s claims for failing to comply with laws passed by the previous parliament. These actions are quite energetically “highlighted” by the near-church Internet media (primarily the website of the “Union of Orthodox Journalists”), which (again with the help of Novynsky) broadcast from Kyiv and try to present a “human rights” position in covering conflicts involving the UOC parishes.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the ROC and UOC as a whole have taken the position of “cold neutrality” in relation to the majority of Ukrainian politicians, and in Ukrainian society only seeks the support of its parishioners, ignoring all other citizens. The Moscow Patriarchate protested against Poroshenko’s pressure on the UOC, but with Zelensky’s arrival it pushed Ukrainian issues to the periphery of its attention. At the same time, Patriarch Kirill (Gundyaev) gradually gave up his regular statements about

17 Микола Підвезняний, Наталія Сокирчу, Іван Баканов: СБУ – не Ватикан, не держава в державі, тут не буде окремих законів і обраних // Главком (Київ), 13.11.2019; [https://glavcom.ua/interviews/glava-sbu-ivan-bakanov-sbu-ne-vatikan-ne-derzhava-v-derzhavi-tut-ne-bude-okremih-zakoniv-i-obranih-639635.html?fbclid=IwAR0tB\\_pL\\_GrZTFt1usQYrPVJ-122ZbxxGEmR7rEEpxYm8G7Xb5Y1wqMSWYw](https://glavcom.ua/interviews/glava-sbu-ivan-bakanov-sbu-ne-vatikan-ne-derzhava-v-derzhavi-tut-ne-bude-okremih-zakoniv-i-obranih-639635.html?fbclid=IwAR0tB_pL_GrZTFt1usQYrPVJ-122ZbxxGEmR7rEEpxYm8G7Xb5Y1wqMSWYw) (accessed 15 April 2020).

18 <https://spzh.news/ru> (accessed 15 April 2020).

the identity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples and their brotherhood. Every such statement since 2014 has caused a sharp negative reaction among the majority of the Ukrainian political class and yet another accusation against the UOC. Kirill's annual reports to the Moscow Diocesan Assembly, which are de facto his reports to the entire ROC in this regard, are indicative. From appeals about the brotherly people (2015), his rhetoric has migrated to "brothers in faith" in Ukraine and their problems (2019). The UOC leadership could have given up public demonstrations of friendship with Novynsky and tried to find a common language with the new leadership of the country, just as Metropolitan Volodymyr (Sabodan), the former head of the UOC, did with regard to the "orange" president Viktor Yushchenko, whom he managed to tame and thus obtain a favorable status. However, the current leadership of the UOC refused to do so and remains content with formal neutrality in relations with the state. The main interactions of the UOC with the Ukrainian state are now taking place at the local level.

### Local Level

The main problems of the UOC at the local level (and in Ukraine in general) are the results of the policy of forcing the transition to the OCU carried out in January–April 2019 by local administrations in the western and some central Ukrainian regions, district and local administrations, which were led by active supporters of Poroshenko and right-wing radical parties. Approximately 200 communities joined the OCU voluntarily or fearful of closure (if they were on the territory of state institutions where, by presidential order, all activities of the UOC as a "representative of the aggressor state" were banned in December 2018). In the vast majority of other cases, however, decisions to "transfer a community" to the OCU were not made by the community itself at the parish assembly, but by the territorial (rural) community. Its meeting was organized and conducted by the local government, often with the participation of representatives of radical right-wing organizations who came from the regional center to "agitate for Tomos" and de facto ensure that there were no opponents at the meeting. Such a transition was made possible by new amendments to the Law on Freedom of Conscience adopted in January 2019, which were very vague in terms of the norms for deciding on the transition. Thanks to the efforts of the village administration, it was enough to collect the signatures of 300 people from the village where 1,500 people lived, to hold, or imitate with them, a "meeting of the village community," not to ask for the opinion of the 50–70 people who actually went to the church every Sunday, including the parish council, to re-register the community to the OCU. Next, political activ-

ists and OCU sympathizers tried to seize the church, get the keys from it and demand of the priest that either he joins the OCU too, or is expelled from the village, losing the right to live in the parish house.

Accordingly, the approximately 350 communities that the OCU already considers its own are in fact in at various stages of the process: the community has mostly made the transition with the priest, but there is still a part of the community that gathers in a private house and meets with a visiting priest; the community has mostly made a transition, but the priest refused and stayed with a part of the community to form a new parish and serve in his (or her) parish house; the community has split in half and the church is closed and sealed by the police; the OCU community was formed but was not able to receive the church where the UOC serves; the priest joined the OCU but the community as a whole remained in the UOC, expelled the priest and received a new one; the OCU parish was formed and recorded only on paper, the UOC community remains and still controls the local church. All these categories are only partially and not systematically accounted for in the statistics collected by the Kyiv Metropolitanate (the governing body of the UOC), but willingly presented at the regional and local level by people involved in this confrontation.

In the first months of 2019 in hundreds of villages in six of the seven regions of Western Ukraine (except the Transcarpathian region), as well as in Khmelnytsky, Vinnytsky, Zhytomyr regions there were fierce skirmishes between OCU supporters who tried to seize churches and UOC supporters who tried to keep them. Village priests and UOC activists, who were left without any obvious help from Kyiv and even more so from Moscow, were organizing networks of mutual support. Larger parishes (mostly urban) took the active part of their parishioners out to support smaller rural parishes. Since in any case it was a clash involving hardly more than 100–150 OCU supporters (and usually many fewer), UOC supporters, when they managed to assemble a defense in many cases were quite effective in their efforts. The most significant UOC losses were incurred in three regions of the Galicia sub-region (Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk and Ternopil), as well as in the southwestern districts of Volyn and Rivne oblasts, and the northwestern and central part of Khmelnytsky oblasts directly adjacent to Galicia. In the Vinnitsky region, where the ruling metropolitan of UOC passed to the OCU, only 26 parishes out of a thousand are considered to have made the transition. This was due to the strong resistance of the clergy, primarily the clergy of Vinnitsa itself and the decision of the head of the local department of internal affairs to investigate the practice of fabricating decrees issued by rural gatherings.



UOC's current tactic in these regions is to legally confront OCU supporters, who often grossly violated the legislation that had been adopted in their favor. With Novynsky's money, a system has been created to finance lawyers in the regions who file lawsuits in courts on behalf of UOC communities. For example, according to an employee of the Vinnytsia Regional Department for National and Religious Communities, she practically does not see her boss at work, as he is constantly present at court sessions. The UOC community has filed about 60 lawsuits against various regional administrations for illegal re-registration of their parishes, and the head of the department typically has to oppose these claims alone.<sup>19</sup> Former President Poroshenko, in turn, as far as it is known, refused financial support for the OCU he created and the latter has no money for lawyers to protect its interests. Metropolitan Simeon of Vinnytsia (who moved from the UOC to the OCU) has already publicly complained that he "lost everything (...) out of 320 parishes I have 20 left," and that if the legal onslaught continues, he may be evicted from his cathedral and residence, which he "privatized" when he left the OCU.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, at the local level, the UOC is vigorously counterattacking through legal means to protect its interests and restore justice to those parishes and churches where it actually has communities.

## Conclusion

Summing up, we can say that the quite unexpected and energetic actions of President Poroshenko and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in relation to the ROC

across Ukraine is expected to lead to active resistance at all levels. At the same time, Ukrainian politicians who expected to easily defeat the seemingly conservative and unpopular church in their country (and score a significant amount of political capital from it) faced an ambivalent reaction from both the ROC (UOC) itself and Ukrainian society. After Poroshenko's political career collapsed, effectively demonstrating that Ukrainian society does not see the construction of a national church as the most important issue facing it, Zelensky's subsequent presidential administration is pursuing a cautious policy towards the UOC. The UOC, in turn, is getting used to the role of "one of" and not the most politically important church in the state. It is mastering the strategy of fighting for its legal and human rights while employing new media tactics.

The ROC as a whole, or rather the Moscow Patriarchate, also found itself in a new situation, when its "legitimate interests" received little support. Because of this, it is actually forced to rebuild the architecture of "world Orthodoxy" for itself. And in order to speak on equal terms with Fanar, and to keep the communities of Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus in its ranks, it really needs to become a "global church" by giving up the status of a "national church of Russians" or even Russian-speaking members. This is perhaps the main outcome of the "Tomos story," which has changed little in the balance of power of the Orthodox churches within Ukraine, but has led to the beginning of big changes within the ROC.

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19 Author's interview with Larisa Schepel (died, 25 March, 2020), February 2020, Vinnytsia.

20 Михайло Глуховський: Митрополит Вінницький та Барський Симеон «Я втратив дуже багато: у мене було 320 парафій, зараз лишилося 20...» // Главком, 23.06.2019.