THE UKRAINIAN ECCLESIASTICAL CRISIS AND ITS GLOBAL REVERBERATIONS: THE RUSSIAN EXARCHATE IN AFRICA AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract. This article explores the Ukrainian ecclesiastical crisis, focusing on the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2019 and its global repercussions. The study highlights the schism with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which views this move as a challenge to its canonical authority and geopolitical influence. A key case examined is the ROC's establishment of the Exarchate in Africa, traditionally under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, showcasing how theological disputes intersect with geopolitical ambitions. The article delves into issues such as nationalism, the Russky Mir ideology, and canonical principles to analyze the broader implications for Orthodox unity, synodality, and global mission. It argues that while the crisis threatens ecclesiastical cohesion, it also offers an opportunity for renewal, reflection, and a redefinition of Orthodox structures to better navigate contemporary challenges.
Keywords: Ukrainian Ecclesiastical Crisis, Autocephaly, Russian Orthodox Church, Russky Mir Ideology, Orthodox Unity and Synodality

Introduction

The granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2019 signaled a critical juncture in contemporary Orthodox history. This decision, intended to resolve divisions within Ukrainian Orthodoxy, triggered a *quasi*-schism with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and set in motion far-reaching pan-orthodox impacts. While rooted in Ukraine's aspirations for national and ecclesiastical independence, the crisis has deeply affected the unity of the Orthodox Church worldwide, exposing underlying tensions over authority, jurisdiction, and geopolitical influence.

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Historically, Ukraine's church has been at the center of competing claims by Constantinople and Moscow, dating back to the contested 1686 transfer of the Kyivan Metropolia to the Moscow Patriarchate. The 2019 autocephaly decision by Constantinople sought to restore Ukraine's ecclesiastical sovereignty, aligning with its broader political pivot away from Russian influence. This move, however, prompted the ROC to sever communion with Constantinople and mount a global campaign to delegitimize the OCU. The fallout extended far beyond Eastern Europe, challenging the equilibrium of authority within Orthodoxy and raising critical questions about the role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in granting autocephaly.

One striking manifestation of this crisis has been the ROC's establishment of an exarchate in Africa, a territory historically under the canonical jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria. This unprecedented move, in response to Alexandria's recognition of the OCU, underscores the intersection of theological disputes and geopolitical ambitions. By focusing on the Ukrainian crisis and its implications for African Orthodoxy, this paper examines the broader ramifications of the ecclesiastical tribulation, highlighting the challenges posed to Orthodox unity, canonical principles, and global mission.

1. The Ukrainian Crisis and Its Impact on Global Orthodoxy

0.1. Brief History of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy

The historical dimension of Orthodox autocephaly in Ukraine is deeply tied to the shared yet contested heritage of Kyivan Christianity, which serves as a cornerstone for both Russian and Ukrainian religious and national identities. In an insightful essay, Alfons Brüning explores the historical narratives and memory conflicts that have shaped the debate over ecclesiastical independence[2].

Kyivan Rus', baptized in 988 under Prince Vladimir, laid the foundation for Eastern Slavic Christianity, characterized by Byzantine influences and later distinct cultural developments. The adoption of Church Slavonic and engagement with both Byzantine and Latin traditions created a unique Christian identity in the region. However, the Mongol invasion in 1240 disrupted Kyiv's prominence, shifting

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2   In what follows in this subsection I am based mainly on Alfons Brüning, Orthodox Autocephaly in Ukraine: The Historical Dimension, Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer (ed.), *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 79–101.

ecclesiastical authority northward to city of Vladimir and eventually Moscow, while western regions like Galicia developed alternative ecclesiastical connections, including with Rome. The establishment of the Moscow Patriarchate in 1589 marked a significant shift, as Moscow claimed to be the successor to the Byzantine and Kyivan legacy. This claim intensified with the 1686 incorporation of the Kyivan Metropolitanate into the Moscow Patriarchate—a move contested by Ukrainians as uncanonical and a source of modern ecclesiastical disputes[3].

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Romantic nationalism revitalized the notion of a distinctive Ukrainian Christianity. Scholars and church leaders emphasized democratic and local governance traditions in Ukrainian Orthodoxy, contrasting with perceived Muscovite autocracy. These ideas culminated in the 1921 establishment of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), which sought to institutionalize these principles despite lacking recognition from other Orthodox Churches[4]. The Soviet era suppressed autocephalous movements, but Ukrainian ecclesiastical independence resurfaced after 1991 with the country's political independence. Competing narratives about the rightful heir to Kyivan Christianity persist among the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), and the UAOC. Each faction claimed historical legitimacy and continuity, reflecting deeper national and geopolitical tensions.

1.2. The Autocephaly Decision and the Global Orthodox reactions

In response to Ukraine's appeals for ecclesiastical independence[5], the Ecumenical Patriarchate took decisive action. In October 2018, it annulled the 1686 agreement

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3   On the differing interpretations which have influenced the debates over the 1686 transfer of jurisdiction, see Denys SHESTOPALETS, The Discursive Construction of the Past: The 1686 Resubordination of the Kyiv Metropolitanate, Ukrainian Autocephaly and the Conflict of Moscow and Constantinople, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42 (2022): Article 5.

4   For the emergence of the UAOC and its roots in liberation, Ukrainisation and modernization during the revolutionary period of 1917-1930, see Nicholas E. DENYSENKO, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation* DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018, 13–59.

5   In April 2018, the Ukrainian Parliament and President Petro Poroshenko formally appealed to the EP to grant a *tomos* of autocephaly. See Viktor YELENSKY, Orthodox churches,

granting jurisdiction over Kyiv to Moscow and lifted canonical sanctions on the leaders of the UOC-KP and UAOC[6]. This paved the way for the unification council of December 2018, where representatives of the UOC-KP, UAOC, and some bishops from the UOC-MP formed the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU)[7]. In January 2019, the Patriarch of Constantinople issued a *tomos*, or decree, officially granting autocephaly to the OCU[8]. This historic decision established the OCU as an independent Orthodox body under Metropolitan Epiphanius.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate justified this move as a necessary step to resolve divisions within Ukrainian Orthodoxy and restore canonical order. However, the ROC viewed it as a unilateral and illegitimate act that encroached upon its canonical territory. Already in October 2018, the ROC severed communion with Constantinople, asserting that the OCU lacked legitimacy and accusing the Ecumenical Patriarchate of violating Orthodox ecclesiology[9]. This marked the beginning of pan-orthodox tribulations, as other Orthodox churches were drawn into conflict, forced to take sides or remain neutral in a deeply polarized environment.

The fallout from the Ukrainian crisis reverberated across the Orthodox world, disrupting unity and reshaping the landscape of global Orthodoxy. The Orthodox Church of Greece and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria were among the

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nation-building and forced migration in Ukraine, Lucian N. Leustean (ed.), *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World*, London: Routledge 2020, pp. 39–40. This appeal, backed by civil and ecclesiastical authorities, emphasized Ukraine's historical ties to Constantinople and the need to heal decades of church schism.

6   Ecumenical Patriarchate, Announcement of the Holy and Sacred Synod of 11 October 2018, https://www.ecupatria.org/2018/10/12/announcement-of-the-holy-and-sacred-synod-of-11-october-2018/. (12. 10. 2024)

7   Cornelia Mureşan, Ukrainian Orthodox Church Autocephaly and its Ecumenical Consequences, *Review Ecumenical* Studies 12 (2018) 461–462.

8   Ecumenical Patriarchate, *Patriarchal and Synodal Tomos for the Bestowal of the Ecclesiastical Status of Autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine*, January 5, 2019, accessed December 12, 2024, https://ec-patr.org/patriarchal-and-synodal-tomos-for-the-bestowal-of-the-ecclesiastical-status-of-autocephaly-to-the-orthodox-church-in-ukraine/. (12. 10. 2024)

9   Russian Orthodox Church, *Statement of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church Concerning the Encroachment of the Patriarchate of Constantinople on the Canonical Territory of the Russian Church,* October 15, 2018.

first to recognize the OCU, aligning with Constantinople's stance[10]. Their decisions underscored the enduring primacy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in granting autocephaly, but also deepened divisions within the Orthodox communion. Other churches, particularly those aligned with Moscow, such as the Serbian and Antiochian Patriarchates, refused to recognize the OCU. These jurisdictions argued that the autocephaly process lacked pan-Orthodox consensus, challenging Constantinople's authority while emphasizing the need for broader ecclesial consultation[11].

This crisis exposed underlying tensions over the interpretation of primacy within Orthodoxy. Constantinople's claim to be the "first among equals" among autocephalous churches clashed with Moscow's assertion of its own status as the largest and most influential Orthodox church. This struggle for primacy was not merely theological but also geopolitical, reflecting broader power dynamics between Russia and the West[12]. The ROC framed its opposition to the OCU as a defense of Orthodox tradition against what it perceived as Western interference in the form of Constantinople's decision[13].

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10 In an extraordinary meeting, the Holy Synod of the Hierarchy of the Church of Greece recognized on 12th October 2019 the new established autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine, see on this regard *The Church of Greece on the Autocephaly of the Church of Ukraine*, accessed December 11, 2024, https://www.ecupatria.org/2019/10/15/the-church-of-greece-on-the-autocephaly-of-the-church-of-ukraine/. On 8th November 2019, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria officially recognised the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, see on the regard *Patriarchate of Alexandria Officially Recognizes Ukraine Autocephaly*, https://www.ecupatria.org/2019/11/28/patriarchate-of-alexandria-officially-recognizes-ukraine-autocephaly/. (12. 10. 2024)

11 For the reaction of the Serbian Orthodox Church, see *Position of the Serbian Orthodox Church on the Church Crisis in Ukraine.* http://arhiva.spc.rs/eng/position_serbian_orthodox_church_church_crisis_ukraine.html. (12. 10. 2024) In a letter dated on 31st Decemer 2019, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, Yuhanna X urged the Ecumenical Patriarch to prioritize unity and pan-Orthodox dialogue over unilateral decisions, see on this regard https://www.antiochpatriarchate.org/en/page/your-all-holiness-archbishop-of-constantinople-new-rome-and-ecumenical-patriarch/2101/, (12. 10. 2024)

12 On the intersection of geopolitical conflicts and ecclesial struggle for autocephaly in Ukraine, see Silviu Nate – Daniel Buda, Eastern European Geopolitics and Ecclesial Autocephaly for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church: A Hard Way for Ukraine, *Teologia* 80 (2019), 11–38.

13 On the accusations by ROC representatives and high-ranking Russian officials that Constantinople acted to destabilize the cultural-political role of the ROC in Ukraine, see Alexander Ponomariov, Ukrainian Church Autocephaly: The Redrawing of the Religious

Even from the time of Crimea's annexation (2014), the ROC portrayed the events as a civilizational struggle, a defense of Russian Orthodoxy against the Western attempts to fragment its unity through secularism and liberalism[14].

The establishment of the OCU and the ensuing pan-orthodox ecclesiastical crisis disrupted traditional understandings of canonical territory and the processes for granting autocephaly, raising critical questions about jurisdictional boundaries and authority within Orthodoxy[15]. Furthermore, the crisis underscored the intersection of religion and geopolitics, with the Ukrainian ecclesiastical dispute mirroring broader political struggles between Russia and the West. As the crisis unfolded, its effects extended beyond Eastern Europe, setting a precedent for future disputes and reflecting the urgent need for dialogue and reconciliation to preserve Orthodox unity.

2. Theological and Canonical Challenges of the Crisis

The Ukrainian ecclesiastical crisis has not only fractured Orthodox Church at a global level but also highlighted the interplay of theological principles and canonical norms in addressing jurisdictional disputes. At the core of the crisis lies the interplay between ecclesial autonomy and unity, as well as the enduring question of how the Orthodox Church navigates its commitment to synodality amidst geopolitical and ecclesial pressures. These tensions have profound implications for the integrity of Orthodox canonical order and theology.

2. 1. Ethnophyletism and Ecclesial Unity

The crisis has rekindled debates about the challenge of nationalism in Orthodox Churches or even *ethnophyletism*, a concept condemned as heretical in 1872 by

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Borders and Political Identities in the Conflict between Ukraine and Russia, *Russian Analytical Digest* 231 (January 2019) 2–6.

14 On this civilizational narrative, central to the ROC's rhetoric, see Mikhail Suslov, The Russian Orthodox Church and the Crisis in Ukraine, *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*, ed. Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 133–152, especially on pp. 143-147.

15 Especially on the concept of canonical territory, see Johannes Oeldemann, Canonical Territory: A New Paradigm of Orthodox Ecclesiology with Ancient Roots, E. G. Farrugia – Z. Paša (eds), *Autocephaly: Coming of age in communion: Historical, Canonical, Liturgical and Theological Studies*, vol. II, [OCA, 315], Roma: Pio 2023, 1159–1190.

a Pan-Orthodox Council held in Constantinople[16]. Ethnophyletism, defined as the conflation of national identity with ecclesiastical jurisdiction, has been a persistent challenge for Orthodoxy, especially in in the context of modern nation-states or even in that of Orthodox diaspora[17]. It should not be undermined that, historically, Orthodox church's liturgical, theological, and canonical identity was shaped primarily within the Byzantine framework, which provided a model of unity beyond ethnic or national identities. The legacy of Byzantium, with its multi-ethnic and transnational nature, therefore, could and should serve as a reminder that the Church's mission is eschatological and universal, not confined to national interests or cultural particularities[18].

In the case of Ukraine, it seems that the demand for autocephaly was driven by both ecclesial aspirations for self-governance and nationalistic motivations, reflecting broader trends of religious nationalism in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, there are still prophetic voices within Orthodox theology that critique the tendency of Orthodox churches to become vehicles for nationalistic ideologies, describing this alignment as a distortion of the Church's mission. Pantelis Kalaitzidis, for example, a prominent Orthodox theologian, emphasizes that the Church's identity transcends national and ethnic boundaries, calling for a renewed focus on the universality of the Gospel and the pan-Orthodox ethos[19]. These critiques are particularly relevant in light of the Ukrainian crisis, as they underscore the dangers of reducing ecclesiastical unity to nationalistic ambitions.

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16 These events are directly linked to the ecclesiastical dimension of the Bulgarian national awakening, which eventually led to the so-called Bulgarian schism that plagued the unity of the Orthodox Church for more than seven decades. On this regard, see Vassilis Pnevmatikakis, "Les causes du Concile de Constantinople (1872) sur le phylétisme : le contentieux ecclésial gréco-bulgare au XIXe siècle", *Contacts* 249 (2015), 17–39.

17 On this regard, see Gregorios Papathomas, Ethno-phyletism and the [so-called] Ecclesial "Diaspora", *St Vladimir's heological Quarterly,* 57 (2013) 431–450.

18 Dimitrios Keramidas – Nikos Kouremenos, Byzantine, National and Ecumenical Orthodoxy, *Nationalism and Ecumenical Orthodoxy*, Thessaloniki: Cemes Publications 2021, 9–20.

19 See, among others, Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Orthodox Theology Challenged by Balkan and East European Ethnotheologies, *Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox Theology in a Global Age*, 2023, 108–159.

2.2. Russky Mir Ideology and its ecclesiastical implications

The *Russky Mir* ("*Russian World*") ideology represents a vision that merges Russian Orthodoxy with geopolitical aspirations, positing Moscow as the spiritual and cultural leader of a transnational Orthodox civilization. Rooted in the concept of Moscow as the "Third Rome," this ideology ties the spiritual unity of Orthodox Slavic peoples—especially Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus—to Russian cultural and ecclesiastical dominance[20].

The Ukrainian ecclesiastical crisis exemplifies the conflict surrounding *Russky Mir*. The Moscow Patriarchate's opposition to the autocephaly of the OCU is deeply connected to its vision of Ukraine as a central component of the *Russky Mir* framework. In a sermon delivered on March 6, 2022, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow framed the conflict in Ukraine as a metaphysical battle against Western liberal values, particularly criticizing the acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights, which he associated with "gay parades.[21]" He suggested that the war was a defense of the *Russkiy Mir* against such influences, thereby reinforcing the ideological narrative that positions Ukraine within a shared civilizational space under Russian spiritual and cultural leadership.

By granting autocephaly, Constantinople challenged this ideological narrative, fracturing the unity that Moscow seeks to maintain through its ecclesial and cultural influence. In his December 2022 speech in Abu Dhabi, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew addressed the ideological underpinnings of the Russian Orthodox Church's actions, particularly the promotion of the *Russkiy Mir* concept. He criticized the Russian Church for aligning with state policies and actively promoting this ideology, which envisions a transnational Russian sphere encompassing Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and other territories. Patriarch Bartholomew highlighted that this alignment has led to the instrumentalization of religion for political and military objectives, thereby undermining Orthodox

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20 Cyril Hovorun, Interpreting the Russian World, Andrii Krawchuk-Thomas Bremer (eds), *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 163–171. Cf. also Viorel Coman, Critical analysis of the Moscow Patriarchate vision on the Russian–Ukrainian military conflict: Russkiy mir and just war, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 76 (2023) 332–344, especially pp. 337–340.

21 Patriarch of Moscow Blesses War Against Gay Prides, *Bitter Winter*, March 6, 2022. https://bitterwinter.org/patriarch-of-moscow-blesses-war-against-gay-prides/. (12. 10. 2024)

unity[22]. This stance reflects Constantinople's view that granting autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine was a necessary step to counteract the divisive effects of the *Russkiy Mir* ideology and to restore canonical order and unity within the Orthodox Church, free from political exploitation.

Criticism of the *Russky Mir* ideology has been sharp within theological circles, particularly for its alignment of religious and national identities, which risks distorting the universal mission of the Church. The *Declaration on the "Russian World" (Russkii Mir) Teaching*, issued by a group of Orthodox theologians in March 2022, explicitly condemns the ideology as a dangerous form of "ethnophyletism," the heresy of equating the Church with a single nation or ethnic group[23]. The declaration emphasizes that *Russky Mir* replaces the Kingdom of God with an earthly vision that sanctifies state power and national identity, subverting the Church's mission and its synodical ethos. The declaration critiques *Russky Mir* as a "false teaching" that deifies the state through a theocratic framework and divinizes Russian culture at the expense of the Church's universal message. It states: "the teaching of the 'Russian World' is profoundly un-Orthodox, un-Christian, and against humanity.[24]" By conflating Orthodox Christianity with the geopolitical ambitions of the Russian state, this ideology distorts the Church's role as a spiritual institution and compromises its witness to the Gospel. The theologians urge Orthodox Christians to reject all ethno-phyletist ideologies, warning that such teachings undermine the unity and catholicity of the Church. Additionally, according to Ioannis Kaminis *Russky Mir* reflects an attempt to extend Russian Orthodoxy's reach globally, often at the expense of canonical norms and ecclesial

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22 Bartholomew: Russian Church Has Sided with Putin, Promotes Actively the Ideology of Russkiy Mir, *Orthodox Times*, December 2022. https://orthodoxtimes.com/bartholomew-russian-church-has-sided-with-putin-promotes-actively-the-ideology-of-rousskii-mir/. (12. 10. 2024)

23 The *Declaration* was first simultaneously published by the Fordham Center for Orthodox Christian Studies on *Public Orthodoxy* (https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching) and the Volos Academy for Theological Studies on *Polymeros kai Polytropos* (https://www.polymerwsvolos.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/). (12. 10. 2024) It has since been republished in various platforms; for example, see its reprint in B. Gallaher – Pantelis Kalaitzidis, A Declaration on the Russian World (Russkii Mir) Teaching: Coordinators of the Drafting Committee, *Mission Studies* 39, 2 (2022), 269–276.

24 Gallaher–Kalaitzidis, *Declaration*, 272.

unity[25]. The African Exarchate, for instance, illustrates how this ideology drives Moscow's expansionist ecclesiastical policies, raising concerns about its alignment with Orthodox theology and mission

3. The Establishment of the Russian Exarchate in Africa

The establishment of the ROC's Exarchate in Africa in December 2021 represents a significant moment for the global dimension of the Ukrainian ecclesiastical crisis. The move, prompted by Moscow's dissatisfaction with the Alexandrian Patriarchate's recognition of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) can be considered a significant departure from the Orthodox canonical conception of territoriality and has had far-reaching ecclesiastical and geopolitical implications. The creation of the Exarchate, with its two dioceses (North Africa and South Africa), reflects both the ecclesial aspirations and geopolitical strategies of the ROC.

3.1. Background and Motivations

The decision to establish the Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa by the ROC was preceded by escalating tensions between the Patriarchates of Moscow and Alexandria. The primary trigger was Patriarch Theodore II of Alexandria's recognition of the OCU. On November 8, 2019, during a Divine Liturgy in Cairo, Patriarch Theodore II commemorated Metropolitan Epiphaniy of Kyiv in the diptychs, acknowledging *de facto* the *tomos* of 2018. The accompanying announcement of the Alexandrian Patriarchate emphasized the principle of synodality as central to Orthodox governance, highlighting that this was a collective decision of the Alexandrian Patriarchate, reflecting the consensus of its hierarchs while praying for peace and stability within the Orthodox communion[26].

Moscow interpreted this recognition as a deviation of the Orthodox canonical norms. On December 26, 2019, the synod of the ROC stopped the eucharistic communion with Patriarch Theodore, citing his recognition of what Moscow

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25 Ioannis Kaminis, The Russian World: A Version of Aggressive Ethnophyletism, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 44 (2024) 5, 1–17.

26 The Patriarchate of Alexandria Recognizes the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, *Orthodox Times*, November 8, 2019. https://orthodoxtimes.com/the-patriarchate-of-alexandria-recognizes-the-orthodox-church-of-ukraine/. (12. 10. 2024)

described as a "schismatic group"[27]. The ROC claimed to have received numerous petitions from clergy within the Alexandrian Patriarchate who opposed Patriarch Theodore's actions as un-canonical and sought to transfer to Moscow's jurisdiction[28]. However, according to Evangelos Thiani, a local cleric from Kenya, these petitions were rooted less in doctrinal disputes and more in long-standing frustrations over administrative neglect, racial discrimination, and financial inequalities within the Alexandrian Church[29].

In September 2021, the ROC's Holy Synod formally considered these petitions, culminating in the establishment of the Exarchate in December 2021, incorporating the North African and South African dioceses.[30]. This unprecedented move, led by Metropolitan Leonid (Gorbachov) as the newly appointed Exarch, was framed as a pastoral response to clergy in Africa who rejected Patriarch Theodore's recognition of the OCU and sought canonical protection under the Moscow Patriarchate. The new Exarchate included over 100 parishes across several African countries[31]. The Alexandrian Patriarchate reacted strongly, condemning this initiative as a deeply unethical and divisive action. In an official statement, Alexandria described the move as "an immoral blow" and accused the ROC not only of violating canonical norms by invading the jurisdiction of an ancient patriarchate but also of aggressive attempt related to Russian geopolitical ambitions in Africa[32].

27 Russian Church Stops Eucharistic Communion with Patriarch Theodoros of Alexandria, *Pravmir*, December 26, 2019. https://www.pravmir.com/russian-church-stops-eucharistic-communion-with-patriarch-theodoros-of-alexandria/. (12. 10. 2024)

28 On the position of the ROC regarding the petitions from the African clergy, see N. Voronina – Daria Turianitsa, The African Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC): Reasons for the Establishment and Prospects of Further Expansion, *Scientific Conference with International Participation FRESKA* (2022), 104–105.

29 Evangelos Thiani, The Russian Orthodox Church in Africa – For Political or Ecclesial Reasons?, *Studies in World Christianity* 30 (2024), 258–259.

30 Russian Orthodox Church Establishes Exarchate in Africa, Orthodox *Christianity*, January 5, 2022, https://orthochristian.com/143723.html. (12. 10. 2024)

31 History of the Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, *Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa*, https://exarchate-africa.ru/en/history/. (12. 10. 2024)

32 Patriarchate of Alexandria: 'We Face an Immoral Blow from the Orthodox Russians, *Orthodox Times*, December 29, 2021, https://orthodoxtimes.com/patriarchate-of-alexandria-we-face-an-immoral-blow-from-the-orthodox-russians/. (12. 10. 2024)

3.2. Geopolitical Dimensions

The Exarchate's creation is not merely an ecclesiastical act but also a geopolitical strategy that aligns closely with Russia's broader ambitions in Africa. Patriarch Kirill's address at the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit underscored this alignment, presenting the ROC's actions as part of a historic and ongoing relationship with Africa: "Russia has never viewed the African continent as a space for profit or as an object for colonization, and has never spoken to the people of Africa in an arrogant tone, from a position of superiority and strength. In difficult historical moments, we have always tried to show solidarity and provide mutual assistance to each other". He also elaborated on the historical presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Africa, noting the establishment of Russian churches in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including in Abyssinia, Egypt, and Tunisia, and highlighted the continued development of Russian Orthodox parishes in Africa to this day[33]. By emphasizing Russia's non-colonial approach, Kirill sought to differentiate the ROC's presence from Western influences, portraying it as a genuine partner to African nations.

In a remarkably interesting interpretation, Mikhail Suslov highlights that this recalibration stems from the declining relevance of the *Russky Mir* framework, historically tied to Russia's Orthodox neighbors. Geopolitical tensions, particularly the war in Ukraine and the even partial recognition of the OCU, have eroded this framework's effectiveness. In response, the ROC has pivoted toward the Global South, presenting itself as a universal church with a mission extending beyond regional boundaries[34]. Although the ROC presents the Russian ecclesiastical expansion in Africa as a response to pastoral needs, it is evident that this narrative is closely intertwined with ideological objectives. By adopting anti-colonial rhetoric, the ROC integrates Soviet-era legacies of solidarity with the Global South into its contemporary outreach. This approach not only seeks to expand Russia's ideological and religious influence but also reinforces its opposition to the Western hegemony. An additional element is the self-portrait of the ROC's presence in

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33 Address by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the Russia-Africa Summit, *The Russian Orthodox Church* (Moscow Patriarchate), July 27, 2023. http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/6045854.html. (12. 10. 2024)

34 Mikhail Suslov, The Russian Orthodox Church Turns to the Global South: Recalibration of the Geopolitical Culture of the Church, *Religions* 15, 12(2024), 1517. (https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121517). (12. 10. 2024)

Africa as a proponent of traditional Christian values, including familiar integrity and resistance to secularisation. This positions it as a moral partner to African societies facing the pressures of globalisation[35].

In a way to conclusion

The discussion of the above thematic units should reveal that the ecclesiastical crisis that arose with the declaration of the autocephaly of the OCU is not merely a temporary interruption of the Eucharistic communion between some local Orthodox churches. Instead, it represents a critical turning point for the Orthodox Church, with implications for its mission in the contemporary world and its ecumenical witness. The establishment of the Russian Exarchate in Africa, a continent traditionally under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria, represents a troubling violation of Orthodox canonical order and a dangerous precedent for the expression and effectiveness of Orthodoxy's mission in the contemporary world. The institution of parallel jurisdictions carries the risk of undermining the principle of territorial unity, fragmenting communities and weakening the Church's capacity to respond to the spiritual and pastoral needs of its flock. It would be a simplistic assumption to believe that the Ukrainian ecclesiastical conflict is solely about jurisdictional issues or questions of ecclesiastical authority. Rather, the significant danger that emerges is that this crisis is ultimately about the Church's ability to embody its unity in diversity and to bear a credible witness to the Gospel in an increasingly fragmented and polarised world.

Nevertheless, it is encouraging to recognise that this crisis presents an invaluable opportunity for the Orthodox Church to engage in a process of reflection and renewal. Indeed, it requires the Orthodox Church to confront with honesty and self-criticism a number of issues, including those of ecclesiastical authority, applied synodality, and the desired balance between its universal pan-Orthodox unity and the autonomy of local individual Orthodox churches. After all, the notion of autonomy in the Orthodox ecclesiology inherently signifies full interdependence.

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35 On the promotion of the conservative police agenda by the ROC in the service of the Russian foreign policy, see the insightful article by George Soroka, International Relations by Proxy? The Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church, *Religions* 13, 3 (2022), 208, in which, however, the African case is referred only occasionally.

It is not an isolated achievement but requires a continuous and diligent effort in evangelization, reaching beyond the confines of the local community, while simultaneously integrating this autonomy into the broader communion of the universal Church[36]. A way forward will necessitate a redefinition of the structures of communion that respects the distinctive histories of local churches while affirming the primacy of Christ as the ultimate source of unity. The realization of this vision would serve to enhance the Church's capacity to offer a compelling testimony and reinvigorate its missional ethos.

The long-term outcome of the Ukrainian ecclesiastical crisis will serve to test the resilience of the Orthodox Church in maintaining its unity, as well as its capacity to navigate the tensions and challenges posed by historical developments, ecclesiastical authority issues, and geopolitical factors. The potential for this moment to become either a stumbling block or a stepping stone will depend on the willingness of the Orthodox world to address its divisions with courage, humility and faith. By reclaiming its role as a symbol of unity and peace, the Church will be able to transform this crisis into an opportunity for renewal, both within its own ranks and in relation to its mission in the world.

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