

“Broken Promises”: Conflicts between the Ukrainian (UOC KP) and Russian (UOC MP) Orthodox Churches

Is Ukrainians’ Criticism of the Ecumenical Patriarchate Fair?

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In July, Kyiv witnessed the celebrations of the 1030th anniversary of Kievan Rus Christianization. Two largest Ukrainian Orthodox confessions – the Ukrainian Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate (UOC KP) and the Ukrainian Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) – traditionally held separate sacred processions on different days.

The state-backed UOC KP’s procession was attended by President Petro Poroshenko, vast number of government officials and the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s delegates. Kyiv had assumed that the latter would come with the Tomos of Autocephaly (independence) for the Ukrainian Church but it never happened. And in his long speech, President Emmanuel Macron of France didn’t even hint at the date when this important for the Ukrainian faithful event could take place.

In April, President Poroshenko met with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in his residence in the Phanar quarter (Istanbul). As it was revealed later, one of the main agenda topics was the bestowal of autocephaly for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. At the moment, the church situation in Ukraine is complicated. The country faces a fierce conflict between the UOC KP and UOC MP backed by Kyiv and Moscow. The UOC of the Kyivan Patriarchate broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church in the 1990s, when the independent Ukrainian state emerged. However, it still has been recognized by none of the Local Orthodox Churches.

Poroshenko is said to be setting up the new Autocephalous Church with this religious organization as its cornerstone. Obviously, the “hostile” UOC MP won’t be included in the Single Local Church and will witness even higher pressure than now when its property is being [seized](#) or desecrated by pro-government radical nationalists.

Nevertheless, for Kyiv and personally Poroshenko the autocephaly project is a thing that really matters. On the eve of the 2019 presidential elections in Ukraine, the Tomos (if granted by Constantinople) should become one of the aces up his sleeve in the election race. That’s why it was decided to boost the process.

Since April, Poroshenko kept claiming that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church would likely become autocephalous on 28 July, when the UOC KP celebrates the 1030th anniversary of Kievan Rus Christianization. Many Ukrainians believed in their president’s words, and when the Tomos wasn’t granted, they lashed out not only at the government but also at

Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew personally.

For example, the author of one of critical articles, expressing his indignation, not just [accuses](#) Constantinople of undermining the process of autocephaly bestowal but suggests that it should be proclaimed unilaterally, without the Phanar's consent. Moreover, he blames Patriarch Bartholomew for his ties with Catholics and his inability to make firm decisions.

Besides that, the Ukrainians [fear](#) that the Phanar is concerned only with the matters of property. In particular, another critical article even [provides](#) a list of churches, buildings and territories which can possibly come into Constantinople's possession. However, the Ecumenical Patriarchate's representatives will need a place to live and hold divine services in. No one really means confiscating the property of Ukrainian Churches and handing it to the "Greek intruders".

Of course, not all Ukrainian media outlets criticize the Phanar, but such harsh statements like the above-mentioned aren't rare. The Ukrainians seem to have been hurt by broken promises. But what can the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Patriarch Bartholomew be blamed for? They didn't promise the Ukrainian people that the Tomos would be bestowed on a certain date, they only named it the ultimate goal. The Phanar clearly understands that against the background of the today's conflict between the faithful in Ukraine, autocephaly can be granted only after finding a way to heal the division. Why don't some Ukrainians understand this? Don't they see that they are throwing themselves under the bus by criticizing the Mother Church? The whole thing can easily come to naught: watching how groundlessly it is being criticized, the Patriarchate can turn away from Ukraine and never realize the dreams for autocephaly...

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