Ukraine's Orthodox Crisis

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Row over church’s independence could leave country more vulnerable to Russian influence.

A power struggle has split the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, just six months after the country celebrated the creation of the unified Orthodox Church of Ukraine independent from the Moscow Patriarchate. Honorary Patriarch Filaret Denisenko was seen as a leading campaigner for this independent church and instrumental in obtaining a Tomos, the document confirming the Ukrainian Orthodox Church’s autocephaly from the Patriarchate of Constantinople. But the 90-year-old firebrand cleric now claims that the Tomos has not granted the church true independence.

As head of the Kyiv Patriarchate, one of the country’s three orthodox confessions, Filaret has now announced that he will not join the newly formed church. Metropolitan Epiphanius, who heads the fledging unified Orthodox Church of Ukraine church, has promptly stripped Filaret of his rights to govern his diocese, although he retains the status of a bishop.

IWPR spoke to Filaret about why he thinks that the Tomos leaves Ukraine even more vulnerable to Russian interference.

IWPR: What role does religion play in the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia?

Filaret: The war waged by Russia was directed against the Ukrainian people. The Ukrainian people were inspired by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Kyiv Patriarchate. Kiev Patriarchate supports the independence of the Ukrainian state, supports it morally and inspires the people to defend Ukraine. If it were not for this church of Kyiv Patriarchate, I think Putin would have already been in Kyiv. Due to the fact that there’s the church of Kyiv Patriarchate, Putin did not go beyond some areas of Donbas. The Kyiv Patriarchate played a great role in this war. On the other hand, the Ukrainian Church of Moscow Patriarchate assists Russia in spreading the lie that this aggressive war, the capture of our Ukrainian territories of Crimea and Donbas is not an aggressive war waged by Russia but a civil war of Ukrainians against Ukrainians. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate defends the interests of Russia by suggesting that the war is not waged by Russia.

There is this notion in many orthodox countries that despite all Kremlin machinations, Russians still should be treated as brothers in the same faith. What do you think of this concept?

I would like nothing better than for the Christians of Ukraine and the Christians of Russia to live like brothers. We want it. But today it is not possible because Russian Christians support Putin who is an aggressor and a tyrant. We want them to stop supporting Putin and the war that he wages, as true Christians would do.

What’s the importance and the impact of Ukraine’s struggles to obtain autocephaly, including in the context of the war?

We need the recognition of the Ukrainian church in order to enter into relations with other orthodox churches. But the Tomos does not grant us full autocephaly. If there is no independent church in Ukraine, Putin will conquer the Ukrainian state. If he conquers the Ukrainian state, he will go far beyond, capturing the Baltic states, Poland.

Most of the world’s canonical Orthodox Churches seem to be hesitant to recognize the Ukrainian Orthodox Church’s autocephaly. What do you think are their reasons?

Not just most Orthodox churches - the Tomos granted by the Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople is not recognized by any of the world’s 13 orthodox churches. That’s why this Tomos did not bring us anything good. It brought us more problems. This Tomos split the Kyiv Patriarchate from inside. Another reason for their reluctance is that Russia tries to use its influence on these churches to make sure they won’t recognize this Tomos.

Everyone expected Russian pressure, but no-one thought that the Tomos, hailed as a major achievement, would fragment and split the Ukrainian Church instead of unifying it. What happened?

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate did split due to the fact that we believed that this Tomos would grant us autocephaly, full independence. We believed and wanted it to be this way. Instead,
all we’ve got was the Tomos that placed us under the dependence not of Moscow, but of Constantinople. Thus, this Tomos resulted in splitting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyiv Patriarchate.

Dependence is dependence, no matter how you look at it. We don’t want to be dependent either on Moscow or on Constantinople. We want to be both an independent state and an independent church. We want to be free and we won’t settle for less.

**On June 20, you said would not have signed the Tomos had you read its contents beforehand. Do you still stand by that?**

I confirm that. We didn’t know the content of the Tomos – had I known what it entailed, we would not have agreed to hold this council and to accept it. This Tomos did not bring us recognition by other churches. It split the Ukrainian orthodoxy which was whole and united before. All it brought us is trouble... we were told that the Tomos would mean autocephaly. And we thought that this Tomos would be the same as the one of other churches – Romanian, Greek, Bulgarian, Georgian and others... But as it turned out we didn’t get that kind of Tomos, what we got was a document that puts us in subservience.

**Is there a chance that Ukraine might lose the Tomos altogether?**

It depends on the Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, not on us. He can revoke this Tomos. Even if he does so, it will not bring us great problems - it already brought greater problems by splitting the Kyiv Patriarchate.

**And if that were to happen, would it tarnish your legacy as a religious figure?**

I will not be the one to blame for that. We wanted the Tomos granting us the independence and the autocephaly. They deceived us. And as it is they who deceived us, how can I be responsible?

**The Ukrainian Orthodox church announced that although you remain an honorary patriarch and bishop, you have lost the right to your diocese in light of your latest actions. What happens next?**

This decision has nothing to do with our church. On June 20, we held a local council, which is the supreme body of the church governance; this local council took a decree saying that we withdraw from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and we stay within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyiv Patriarchate. So, their decision has nothing to do with us.

**Is a compromise possible? How are you going to solve this dispute?**

Maybe there will be four churches in Ukraine: Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyiv Patriarchate, Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate, Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), and possibly this autocephalic church. And the Tomos is to blame for that. If it wasn’t for the Tomos, Ukrainian orthodoxy would grow and be united. The Tomos split us.

**Isn’t it Russia that benefits from this confrontation?**

Indeed it does - Russia really benefits from this situation. Russia is glad that as a result of the Tomos, we now have this schism and infighting.

**In light of that, would not it better for the Ukrainian churches to put aside their differences and cooperate in order to oppose to Russia?**

We cannot unite based on a lie; we can unite only based on the truth. The truth is that Ukraine should have an independent church as Ukraine is an independent country. With that, the Kyiv Patriarchate will become once again as great as it used to be and will have the same influence as it used to have on Ukrainian society... We believe that the truth will prevail. And the truth is that the Ukrainian state is independent and this independent Ukrainian state guarantees peace in Europe. If there’s no Ukrainian state, there will not be peace in Europe because Russia will go further. Europe should ensure that Ukraine will remain an independent state. In order to do so, it is necessary to have an independent church. If Europe allows the dependence of the Ukrainian church through Moscow or Greece, that will bring harm both to Ukraine and to Europe.

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