

Borderland churches: Faith and identity in Ukraine

by [John P. Burgess](#) in the [March 30, 2016](#) issue



TENT CITY IN KIEV: In January 2014, protesters controlled Independence Square and called for the protection of human rights. Photo © Alexandco.

The scenes at Kiev's Independence Square in November and December 2013 remain vivid in my mind. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians gathered to protest President Viktor Yanukovich's decision, under Russian pressure, to walk away from a cooperative agreement with the European Union. A tent city quickly arose on the square—which Ukrainians refer to as the Maidan—and other protesters occupied nearby government buildings. But in February 2014, when the security forces tried to clear the square, shots rang out. More than a hundred protesters died, as well as several dozen police officers, before President Yanukovich yielded power and fled the country.

Christian churches played a major role in these events. Bearded priests in liturgical garments opened and closed the day on the square by chanting prayers from the huge stage on which protest leaders rallied support. As the confrontation intensified, priests and monks entered the no man's land between the protesters and the security forces, held icons and crosses, and prayed for peace. Parishes provided food and medical supplies. Church leaders called for a government that would respect human rights and the rule of law. Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox believers came together to envision a nation freed from the clutches of political and economic corruption.

The events on the Maidan have led to calls to establish a national Ukrainian church, and much in Ukrainian history and culture suggests that such a church could help

unite the country. But Ukrainians differ as to which of their churches should play this role, and any effort to establish a national church might only deepen religious divisions and stoke narrow nationalistic political tendencies.

Moreover, the principal challenge before Ukrainian Christians today is how to work for reconciliation within a wounded nation, while overcoming the deep alienation that now separates Ukrainians and Russians. The way in which the churches relate Ukraine's need for national identity to the universal horizon of the Christian gospel will determine how well they succeed in this task.

The word *Ukraine* means borderlands, and many neighboring societies and invading military forces have shaped these borderlands for many centuries, including Greeks, Poles, Germans, Tartars, Jews, and Russians. The religious makeup is equally diverse.

That diversity includes Protestants, who, though only 1 to 2 percent of the population, enjoy a public presence that would be unimaginable in Russia or Belarus. The former mayor of Kiev, Leonid Chernovetskyi, attended an evangelical megachurch headed by a charismatic Nigerian pastor. The current head of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, Oleksandr Turchynov, is a Baptist. Numerous Protestant training institutes have sprung up, such as the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary and REALIS in Kiev. And Protestants have taken the lead in rebuilding homes in areas devastated by the war with the separatists.

However, the country's religious life is dominated by four distinct Christian entities, and each could and does make a case for being the national church of Ukraine: the Ukrainian (Greek) Catholic Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyivan Patriarchate, and a much smaller Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

At the Union of Brest in 1596, Orthodox bishops in areas dominated by the Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth placed themselves under the jurisdiction of the pope in Rome while retaining their Byzantine Orthodox forms of worship. Their churches became the Ukrainian (Greek) Catholic Church. In the 17th century, the remainder of the Orthodox Church in what is now Ukraine came under the influence and then the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate after having related to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople.

After the 1917 October Revolution, nationalists saw an opportunity for Ukrainian independence. A group broke off from the Russian Orthodox Church to form the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, a move supported by the Bolsheviks, who welcomed any measure to weaken religion, whether by external persecution or internal division. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Church, however, never attained canonical church status, nor did it attract the majority of Ukrainian Orthodox believers.

At the end of World War II, Stalin, with the cooperation of the Russian Orthodox Church (itself under firm control of the state), brutally liquidated the Greek Catholic Church in parts of Poland that the Soviet Union had annexed to Ukraine. Parishes were forced to become Russian Orthodox or be closed. Church leaders were arrested; most died in prison camps or were exiled. What remained of Greek Catholic Church life went underground. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Church experienced a similar fate.

Only in the late 1980s did these two churches reemerge. But an unsettled legal situation resulted in vicious battles over property rights, especially between Greek Catholics and Russian Orthodox in western Ukraine. Matters grew even more complex with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the establishment of an independent Ukrainian state.

In 1992, another group broke off from the Russian Orthodox Church to form the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyivan Patriarchate. Like the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, it does not have the official recognition of other Orthodox bodies.

Two wings formed within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate. One group sought even greater independence from Moscow while the other supported unity. The Greek Catholics were also pulled in different directions; some were more oriented to Latin practices, while others called for recovering the church's historic Orthodox, Slavonic roots, while remaining loyal to Rome.

Today, these churches have different regional strengths. The Greek Catholic Church is prominent in the west of the country, while the Autocephalous Church is concentrated in and around Kiev. The Kyivan Patriarchate is strong in both the center and the west. Moscow Patriarchate parishes are distributed more evenly, but dominate in the east and south.

Rates of affiliation are harder to measure. The Greek Catholic Church is estimated to attract 8 to 10 percent of the population, while the different Orthodox churches represent more than 50 percent. The Moscow Patriarchate has the most parishes and almost all of the country's Orthodox monasteries, but some surveys suggest that the Kyivan Patriarchate now exceeds it in the number of adherents. Nevertheless, many Ukrainians would be unable to say clearly what distinguishes one of these churches from another. People as easily drop into one parish as another to light candles or venerate icons.

In recent years, Ukrainian churches have put aside much of their divisive history and joined the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations. There, Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox have worked effectively on issues of common social concern. The churches have become remarkably united around two sets of issues: cautious economic integration of Ukraine with the West and a conservative moral agenda, such as restricting abortion, rejecting same-sex marriage, and advocating religious education in public schools. Prior to the protests of 2013, leaders of the Greek Catholic Church enjoyed warm relations with Vladimir (Sabodan), the metropolitan of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate, who skillfully held the different factions of his own church together.

At the national level, relations between Russia and Ukraine have been highly charged since the departure of Yanukovych, the annexation of Crimea to Russia, and the violent battles with Russian-supported eastern separatists. Many Russians regarded Ukraine as a “little Russia” whose language is nothing more than a village dialect of Russian. Even such prominent “democratic” figures as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Mikhail Gorbachev viewed the dissolution of the Soviet Union as—in Vladimir Putin's words—“a geopolitical tragedy,” because Ukraine (and Belarus) split off from Russia.

Russians and Ukrainians fought side by side in World War II; their cultures have common Slavic and Orthodox roots; their countries share a border of nearly 1,500 miles; and familial bonds run deep. By some estimates, a third of Ukrainians have relatives in Russia, while a quarter of Russians have relatives in Ukraine. Many Russians saw the Maidan revolution as anti-Russian and led by ultranationalist Ukrainians. Most Ukrainians see it differently. However close their nation is culturally and historically to Russia, Ukrainians have a distinct language and national identity that their bigger, sometimes overbearing neighbor has too often been unwilling to acknowledge. Even most Russian-speaking Ukrainians have supported national

independence. In contrast to Russian-speakers in Crimea, eastern Ukrainians, even those who support the separatists, do not aspire to union with Russia.

For the most part, Ukraine's churches rallied behind the protests at Independence Square. Students and faculty from the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv took a leading role, and one of its professors was shot and killed by the security forces. Near the square, St. Michael's Cathedral, a parish of the Kyivan Patriarchate, offered protesters refuge; some slept in the nave in front of the iconostasis, and other rooms served as a medical clinic and a morgue. The nearby St. Katherine's Lutheran Church also opened its doors.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate was more hesitant to endorse the protests, in part because it had cooperated closely with Yanukovich; Patriarch Kirill had attended his inauguration in 2010 and blessed him afterward in a prayer service. Nevertheless, even churches of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine eventually joined other churches and religious groups in calling for peaceful negotiations and national unity.

Significant differences in national vision soon became apparent, however. In Moscow, Russian Orthodox Church leaders asserted that Ukraine belonged to a distinctive Eastern Slavic civilization (“the Russian world”) that rejected the individualistic and libertarian ethic of the West. Meanwhile, leaders of the Greek Catholic Church called on the nation to commit itself to Western standards of law and justice, while maintaining a distinctive cultural identity. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyivan Patriarchate associated itself with an anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalism, while hierarchs of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate called on Christians to rise above the political fray and minister to the country's different factions.

All strands of Orthodoxy and the Greek Catholic Church are drawn to the notion of a national church that represents civil society and works cooperatively with the state for the good of the nation. Under such a model, the state guarantees religious freedom to all of Ukraine's religious bodies but acknowledges—and perhaps privileges—a Ukrainian church that guards the nation's historic identity, tracing its history back to Prince Vladimir, ruler of the Kievan Rus' empire, who converted to Christianity in 988 and Christianized the Kievan Rus'. President Poroshenko, himself a member of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate, has spoken of how such a church could contribute to national unity, although he has added that

the government should not assist in efforts to create it.

All three of the large Orthodox churches, as well as the Greek Catholic Church, have sought to influence national identity. At different times, each of these bodies has asserted its claim to be the national church.

After the Orange Revolution in 2005, an earlier protest movement, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyivan Patriarchate aspired to become the national church, perhaps in union with the Autocephalous Church. When Yanukovich was elected president, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate seized its opportunity to shape the nation. During the protests of 2013, the Greek Catholic Church emerged as the conscience of the nation. Today, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyivan Patriarchate again regards itself as having the best chance to be the national church.

On one level, only the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyivan Patriarchate appears to be large enough and Ukrainian enough to play this role, and some Moscow Patriarchate priests and parishes have come over to its side. Perhaps the first item on its agenda is to gain recognition from other Orthodox bodies. Ukrainian émigré communities play a key role here. In 1996, most of the Ukrainian Orthodox churches in Canada and the United States came under the jurisdiction of the ecumenical patriarch. Since 2013, North American Ukrainian Orthodox leaders and the ecumenical patriarch have opened dialogue with the Kyivan Patriarchate, even though it is currently considered a schismatic, noncanonical church.

The ecumenical patriarch has called for a council of the world's autocephalous Orthodox churches sometime in 2016, and the question of approving an autocephalous Ukrainian church or a Ukrainian Orthodox Church with a primary relation to Constantinople rather than Moscow, will surely be under discussion, either officially or behind closed doors.

The Moscow Patriarchate has expressed deep opposition to recognizing an autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox church and has moved to give its churches in Ukraine greater national legitimacy. Metropolitan Onufry, head of the Moscow Patriarchate churches in Ukraine, is allowing his priests to choose whether or not to include Patriarch Kirill's name in the church's prayers. Patriarch Kirill himself has chosen to stay away from Ukraine, so as not to imperil his Moscow Patriarchate parishes and monasteries, which represent a third to a half of the Russian Orthodox

Church as a whole. And after a breakdown of negotiations with the Kyivan Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church is now in conversations with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate about possible unification.

All of these efforts to seize the role of national church obscure, however, what is arguably the most important question for Christians: how to contribute to reconciliation within Ukraine and between Ukraine and Russia. To be sure, under conditions of Russian aggression and economic collapse, few Ukrainians are ready to speak about reconciliation. Nevertheless, Ukrainian Christians have a unique opportunity—and perhaps responsibility—to mediate between state and society, Kiev and the separatists, Europe and Russia, and Eastern and Western Christianity.

But difficult questions arise: Would a national church truly unite the nation or merely favor some religious and political interests within the country over others? Would a national church foster a too-narrow Ukrainian national identity or would it establish conditions for more honest and just relations with the Russian Federation and the Russian Orthodox Church?

A different option would be for the heirs of Prince Vladimir to affirm Ukraine's genuinely pluralistic religious landscape and promote religious freedom, perhaps as understood in the United States. Many Ukrainian Protestants favor this solution, but it presents the Orthodox churches with intractable questions that have plagued Orthodoxy in the West: multiple Orthodox jurisdictions in the same national territory and the presence of noncanonical Orthodox churches next to canonical ones. A U.S. model of religious freedom might simply splinter Ukrainian Christians into ever more rival groups, as so often happens in North American Protestantism. Would possibilities for national reconciliation and reconciliation with Russia widen or would they narrow as churches fight to guarantee a place for themselves in a religiously pluralistic and competitive Ukraine?

Ironically, the Moscow Patriarchate is the church that retains the greatest responsibility and the greatest potential for promoting reconciliation both within Ukraine and between Ukraine and Russia. It alone spans all parts of Ukraine and the border between Ukraine and Russia. A Russian Orthodox Church that could think of itself as less Russian and more as the universal church of Jesus Christ could help both Russians and Ukrainians think beyond national identity.

Karl Barth wrote that the only justification for any nation's existence is a calling from God to contribute something distinctively good to humanity. He added that the Christian life should always be centripetal, affirming as God's blessing the specific national context that has nurtured the church while impelling people to learn how the gospel has incarnated itself in their context. Ukrainian churches that stop at the question of national identity cannot fulfill this calling.

Read the sidebar article on [ecclesial negotiations](#).