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Religion and Nationalism in the Orthodox Religioscape: Southeastern and Post-Soviet Europe in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

This article analyzes the historical relationship between Orthodox Christianity and nation formation. In past centuries, most adherents to the faith lived in the Ottoman and Russian Empires, under the Moscow and the Ecumenical Patriarchates. These two empires followed different historical trajectories as they entered the modern world of nations, and their ecclesiastical institutions evolved very differently. This article uses historical experience, and the model developed in 19th century Southeastern Europe (SEE) to interpret the relationship between faith and nation in post-Soviet Europe. In SEE, the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (EP) fragmented because of rising national movements. Over the 19th century, as Greece, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria became independent or autonomous states, they adopted a new blueprint for the relationship between church and nation. In contrast, the USSR superseded Holy Russia. Abolished in 1721, the Moscow Patriarchate was revived in 1917 but faced Soviet persecution for decades. Within the post-Soviet nations that emerged after the USSR's 1991 dissolution, ecclesiastical institutions duplicated the model originally developed in 19th century SEE. National and religious conflicts became intertwined, and national antagonisms were disguised as ecclesiastical disputes. This article offers a guide for understanding post-1991 religious conflicts in Estonia, Moldova, and Ukraine, as well as the 2018 schism between the Moscow Patriarchate and the EP.

Keywords: Orthodox Christianity; nationalism; Southeastern Europe; post-Soviet

1. Introduction

The nation is a core community that affects collective religious identities and their relationship to political authority (Cesari 2021). The use of a particular faith for nation-building is among the most widely discussed theoretical linkages between religion and nationalism (see Brubaker 2012; Rieffer 2003; for an updated overview see Aktürk 2022). While Zubrzycki (2025) notes that "religious nationalism is one of the most significant political phenomena of the past decades," the association between religion and nation is not a historical novelty. Friedland (2001, p. 129) argues that "the emergence and form of the Western secular nation-state has itself everything do with Christianity."

In fact, Gorski (2000), Hastings (1997) & Marx (2003) have observed a link between confessional and national identities in early modern Central and Western Europe.

In principle, the Orthodox religious landscape, or religioscape (McAlister 2005) consists both of those regions that have served as the historical heartland of Orthodox Christianity, where Orthodox-majority nations exist today; as well as of multiple cross- and trans-national communities created because of the movement of people across borders. Historically, up until the early 19th century, most Orthodox Christians worldwide were

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located within the territories controlled by the Ottoman and Russian empires. From the 19th century forward, Orthodox Christians migrated to other world regions. By the 21st century, Orthodoxy communities are in the Middle East, Asia (India in particular), Africa and various diasporas located mostly in western Europe, Australia and North America (overview in Roudometof 2015). For these groups, the relationship between faith and nation is just as important as in the traditional Orthodox lands in Europe. Because of the article's historical focus and the reality of historical demography, the current inquiry is restricted to the traditional Orthodox heartland. For the Orthodox elsewhere, their encounter with modernity is substantively different and therefore it lies outside of this article's scope.

The predominantly Orthodox part of Europe has undergone modernization in uneven, contested, and temporarily distinct ways. Comparative analysis of the different historical trajectories and sound understanding of the relationship between religious, theological, or cultural proclivities and historical developments has not been a popular genre of academic work in this part of the world. This article compares the different historical trajectories of two main socio-cultural contexts to decipher the pattern of relationships between faith and modern culture in Orthodox Christianity. The terms "faith" and "modern culture" are used deliberately to avoid misleading or inappropriate assumptions. Faith is used instead of "religion," mainly because our understanding of "religion" is profoundly modern (Nongbri 2013). The phrase "modern culture" is used as a means of grasping the experience of Orthodox people who, over the last centuries, no longer live in traditional, overwhelmingly peasant societies, but in urban and relatively "advanced" or modern societies.

The analysis is organized as follows: It starts by discussing the two main regions, arguing that Southeastern Europe[1] (SEE) and post-Soviet Europe represent two historical contexts whose trajectories vary widely. Using a temporal comparison, we can understand current developments based on the past. The next part of the article outlines the articulation of a church-nation link for the nations of SEE. This link has provided the fundamental blueprint that marked the adjustment of Orthodoxy in the world of nations. Next is an analysis of the post-1991 developments within post-Soviet Europe, and an argument that this model also structures the relationship between individual national churches and modern nations. History does not merely repeat itself though. While the argument presented here is meant to outline the overarching pattern of the relationship between faith and modern culture within the Orthodox religioscape, different outcomes are possible because of different historical conjunctures and actions undertaken by local actors.

2. Methodological Considerations: The Two Contexts

Before addressing methodological issues related to specific contexts and of comparison, it is necessary to have clear definitions of Orthodox Christianity and of nationalism.

Orthodox Christianity consists of those ecclesiastical units that are linked to each other through a continuous stream of multiple and recurrent interactions (pilgrimages, visits, ceremonies, rituals, translations and circulation of religious content, joint actions, mutual assistance and so on) that construct and maintain a single religious landscape or religioscape.[2] Nationalism is seen as part of the modern "way of life" (Malešević 2025), that is, as the very modality of existence for people all around the world. This inquiry is not an effort to discern or compare distinct patterns of nationalism (for a recent attempt to address these matters see Mylonas and Tudor 2023). The scope of the current inquiry is limited to the relationship between faith and nation-formation. It is an interpretation[3] of the cultural proclivities or structures of meanings that have emerged within the Orthodox religious landscape since the 18th century. Hence, this work is broadly located within the genre of historical or comparative-historical sociology (for overviews, see Adams et al. 2005; Delanty and Isin 2003; Lachmann 2013).

As Demetriou and Roudometof (2020, pp. 59–60) note in their overview of methods for this branch of sociology:

[In comparative-historical sociology] the extent and nature of comparisons is part of the ongoing discussion among sociologists themselves. . . Although explicit comparisons of historical cases are made, analyses and reconstructions of single historical trajectories are far more typical. These treatments of history are indirectly comparative; that is, they feature comparisons between a single specific historical case and a theory, framework, or research paradigm. This can take several forms. . . In light of this broad and theoretically informed research strategy, a multitude of analyses of historical change are undertaken in dialogue with broader theoretical agendas. These analyses serve the expansion of sociological understanding and can be considered part of historical and comparative sociology.

As the authors admit, "this understanding renders the adjective comparative almost redundant [and] . . . wittingly or unwittingly, most practitioners tacitly accept it when they describe themselves simply as historical sociologists" (Demetriou and Roudometof 2020, p. 60). While the above remarks help situate this paper within the genre of historical sociology, this analysis does attempt to make a broad comparison or contrast between two main socio-cultural milieus of the Orthodox religioscapex.

To pursue such a task within the interpretative tradition conventionally leads to the employment of the contrast-oriented comparison, which is a standard conceptual strategy through which history and sociology intertwine (see Hall 1992). Bendix's (1978, 1984) work is the paradigmatic example of such comparisons, specifically, his strategy of analyzing historical trajectories through a contrast of socio-cultural contexts.[4] But, unlike Bendix (1978), the fundamental aim here is to compare different contexts to determine whether *a singular pattern or blueprint* emerges that signals the adjustment of the Orthodox faith to the modern world of nations. Hence, the analysis follows the morphological approach which, as Ermakoff (2019, p. 582) notes "tracks formal structures in the apparent maze of historical phenomena." To this end, as Ermakoff (2019) writes, analyses typically draw on various descriptive techniques—and in this instance, the author uses historical description or narrative to flesh out the structures of meaning that connect faith and nation.

Regarding the author's methodological choices, the following paragraphs explain the rationale for the comparison between the two main socio-cultural contexts of the Orthodox religioscape. During the West's early modern era (1500–1800), the majority of Orthodox Christians lived in the two empires (i.e., Ottoman and Russian) that controlled the eastern and southeastern part of the Continent. These empires had distinct political, military, and socio-economic features. Within them, the two main ecclesiastical institutions that exercised spiritual and administrative control were the Ecumenical Patriarchate (EP) of Constantinople and the Patriarchate of Moscow. In the modern era of nations and nationalism, these two regions experienced quite different historical trajectories; and the two key ecclesiastical institutions were affected by these.

Although over the 19th century national movements proliferated throughout SEE, the same cannot be said for the Russian Empire (Hosking 1998; Roudometof [2001] 2024; Rowley 2011). In Imperial Russia, the cult of the Tsar as a divinely ordained monarch did not allow for an easy transition from the absolute rule of kings to the rule of "the people." Bendix (1978, pp. 515–64) attributes this relative weakness of nationalism in pre-revolutionary Russia to the absence of a sizeable and functioning civil society, which could have enabled people to renegotiate their relationship against the Tsar's absolutism. In early 20th century parliamentarism was introduced but, shortly afterwards World War I (1914–1918) begun and, on the eastern front, the war eventually led to the empire's collapse in 1917. After the Russian Civil War, the USSR superseded the defunct empire.

The Soviet communists created a federal structure and instituted socialist republics that were theoretically sovereign (although in practice were controlled by the communists). Their creation, though, facilitated popular awareness of the linkages connecting peoples of various nations with specific geographical territories (Brubaker 1996). Overall, the USSR hosted a total of 153 "nationalities" (as these were officially called). These were inscribed in internal Soviet passports and were necessary for moving within the USSR. Individuals born to parents of different nationalities had to pick one of their parents' nationalities for their passport.[5] In 1991, the Russian Federation's secession led to the USSR's dissolution.

Post-Soviet Europe, therefore, is defined as those countries that were formally part of the Russian Empire and/or the USSR. This twin legacy shaped their historical trajectory, as most of their modern institutions were crafted under communism. For post-Soviet Europe, USSR's 1991 implosion was a key turning point in history. Following the communist regime's collapse, Russia Moldova, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Baltic states were able to initiate a process of free and open (re-)assertion of their nationhood, thereby joining the 21st century world of modern nation-states. This analysis therefore abandons the Cold War category of "communist" Eastern Europe; as well as its successor label of "post-communist." To put it plainly, the *long durée* is quite different for countries such as Hungary, Poland, or Czechia versus Russia, Ukraine, or Belarus. The aggregation of all these countries under a single "(post-)communist" label is misleading.

For current purposes and to place contemporary developments[6] into a broader historical context, it is necessary to highlight the different historical trajectories of the two main institutional actors, that is, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Patriarchate of Moscow. Historically, the active role of the Patriarchate of Moscow in encountering modernity has been limited. In 1721 Tsar Peter the Great abolished the patriarchate. In its place, a ministry was formed to oversee the local synod. While it might seem that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) henceforth became part of the state, it is of critical significance to draw a distinction between a national church and a state church. For a national church is aligned with the nation it serves and not with the ruler it obeys. While a national church might also be a state church, the opposite is not always the case: it is possible to institute a state church (that is, a church controlled by the state) which might not be a national church.[7] When Peter the Great brought the entire Russian Church under state control, the church lost its institutional autonomy. While the Church "continued to serve the needs of a state that now conceived of its own objectives in secular terms [. . . and] the Holy Synod continued to govern the church [. . .] later sovereigns mobilized the resources and charisma of religion to bolster imperial rule" (Engelstein 2001, p. 134). Certainly, lack of institutional autonomy did not prevent multiple entanglements between religious conservativism and modernity—but the sheer existence of ideas does not automatically translate into popular acceptance or institutional legitimacy.[8]

On an institutional level, the Moscow Patriarchate was revived only in 1917. However, soon afterwards, successive rounds of Soviet persecution followed (Davis 2003; Knox 2005). Once outright prosecution ended, the high clergy were placed under the KGB's tight supervision until the fall of communism. As a result, the institution's ability to operate autonomously was frustrated. The Russian church's post-1991 revival is a profoundly novel development: for the first time in centuries the church has been able to operate freely as a corporate actor looking after its own interests.

In contrast to post-Soviet Europe, SEE has a distinct historical trajectory. Since the 19th century, all its nation-states emerged out of the Ottoman state's gradual disintegration. For Romania, Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria their overriding objective was modernizing or "catching up" with "Europe." Their institutions were subsequently developed through the importation of Western standards, and these were modified and adopted to local specifici-

ties. The process operated to the detriment of the Ottoman Empire's traditional religious authority, that of the EP of Constantinople, which saw its administrative control shrink because of the rise in local nationalisms (Kitromilides 2019). The new national churches were situated within the newfound states and their clergy operated within this new framework in mind—a considerable shift in orientation in comparison to past centuries.

What are the methodological implications of the different historical trajectories briefly outlined above? To examine how the encounter between Orthodoxy and nation-formation operated, this analysis uses 19th century SEE as the blueprint for understanding post-Soviet Europe. It does so *because* the formation of modern nation-states in SEE predates the formation of modern nation-states in the territories of the Russian empire. Moreover, the imposition of communist rule forestalled the full and unobstructed articulation of nationhood for those nations forcefully absorbed into the USSR. For these nations (inclusive of Russia) it took the USSR's dissolution to resume their nation-building efforts. The article's next two sections pursue a temporal comparison of these two different historical trajectories or pathways. The temporal comparison between the two historical contexts (SEE and post-Soviet Europe, respectfully) can reveal the overall general pattern regarding the relationship between faith and nation.[9]

3. Orthodoxy and Nation in SEE

From the early 19th century forward, the Ottoman empire's decline led to Greece, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria becoming either independent (e.g., the Kingdom of Greece in 1833) or autonomous states (e.g., pre-1878 Serbia, pre-1908 Bulgaria). In these predominantly Orthodox-majority states, Orthodox Christianity served as a key cultural marker for the construction of local national identities (see Roudometof [2001] 2024). This change in the faith's cultural meaning was the result of the emergence of a newfound link connecting the Orthodox confession to each nation (Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece) (Roudometof 2025b; Kitromilides 2006).

As argued elsewhere (Roudometof 1999), this nationalization was accomplished through both institutional and cultural means. Institutionally, the local states fostered the creation of autocephalous national churches (Greece in 1833, Serbia in 1878, and Bulgaria in 1878). Culturally, the meaning of the people's confessional membership changed: belonging to a national church no longer indicated membership in a universal religious unit but instead indicated membership in a national "imagined community". The newly established national churches were under the formal authority and informal influence of the new states, allowing them to sever the traditional ties of the Orthodox *Rum millet* and to erect new national bonds. That made sense at the time, as most people in the new states were illiterate peasants for whom faith was the only tangible cultural marker. For nation-building purposes, the transformation of formerly confessional ties into national ones was a reasonable route (Castellan 1984). The new churches were not under EP control (as the EP obeyed the Ottoman Sultan); the national language was used in liturgy (instead of the traditional Greek *koinoi*); and hierarchs, intellectuals, and activists popularized the notion that these churches were repositories of national heritage under Ottoman rule and in earlier eras. Educational systems, activists, and nationalist societies viewed these churches as an essential ingredient of national membership. This modern model was congruent with global international trends—for, over the 19th century, nationalism became the principal legitimizing force in the international system. This model was emulated across the region, as the Serbian and Greek cases inspired the rising Bulgarian nationalist movement.

Accordingly, the concept of autocephaly, a hitherto organizational and administrative measure within the Orthodox tradition, was transformed into a powerful nation-building tool. From the perspective of the Orthodox canon law, autocephaly was granted by the

overseeing religious authority (which was the EP for SEE) to territorial political units. But local states and national movements most often followed a unilateral and non-canonical way towards autocephaly (Šljivic and Zivkovic 2020). In fact, Serbia is the only case where this process was smooth—the EP granted church autonomy in 1833 because of Serbia's autonomy within the Ottoman Empire, with the Serb Church becoming autocephalous in 1878 in tandem with the recognition of Serbia as a sovereign state. In Greece, King Otto's regency created in 1833 the Orthodox Church of Greece (OCG) without the EP's consent. The unilateral decision sparked passionate religious conflict between proponents of religious unity with the patriarchate and advocates of the state-sponsored OCG. The dispute concluded in 1850, when the patriarchate issued a decree (Synodical *Tomos*) that normalized the OCG's status (see Roudometof 2025b). In 1852 Greek folklorist Spyridon Zambelios invented a new word: Hellenic Christianity [*ellinochristianismos*]—a key concept that helped link Orthodoxy to the nation (see Roudometof 1998 for further discussion).

In 1865, following the unification of Danubian principalities into modern-day Romania, an independent Romanian Orthodox Church was created—but the EP recognized it only in 1885. After World War I, a greater Romania was created, including the regions of Transylvania and Moldova. Reflecting the territorial changes, the Romanian see merged with the Moldovan dioceses in 1925 to form a Romanian Patriarchate (Gvosdev 2001, p. 221; Leustean 2007, pp. 723–26). During the inter-war era, Church and state collaborated extensively to promote the shared objective of nation-building and strengthening their authority in the newly added post-1917 regions.

It is indicative of the significance of independent ecclesiastical structures for nation-formation that the entire pre-1878 Bulgarian nationalist mobilization of the 19th century centers on the demand for a Bulgarian church separate from the EP—for having a separate church was justified on a national and not a religious basis. In 1870, the Ottoman state succumbed to the Bulgarian movement's demands and issued a decree (*firman*) that established the Bulgarian Exarchate as a separate ecclesiastical unit within the empire—a decision departing from past Ottoman practice that centralized the administration of religious communities. In response, the EP convened a synod in 1872 that condemned the doctrine of *ethnofyletismos*—a term that reflects the current concept of "ethnic nationalism." The 1872 decision led to the official excommunication of the Exarchate's followers who were labeled heretics fracturing religious unity in favor of ethno-national bonds. The subsequent schism lasted until 1945. It reflected a major shift in the meaning of church affiliation, as the "nationality principle" was officially acknowledged as a legitimate reason for creating a separate Orthodox church within the Ottoman Empire (Roudometof 2002, pp. 84–89).

According to the 1870 decree, it was up to the empire's Orthodox inhabitants to declare whether patriarchal or exarchate clergy ought to be the ones who served their religious needs. This ambiguity sparked armed confrontation in Ottoman-held Macedonia between rival pro-Greek and pro-Bulgarian paramilitary groups. For Bulgarians, the 1872 decision reflected patriarchal support for Greek claims in the region. The Greek side in turn viewed the Bulgarian Exarchate as a proxy agent that would pave the way for the eventual annexation of pro-exarchate regions into Bulgaria proper. This 19th century process of creating and legitimizing a church–nation link continued into the 20th century. The link offered the underlying foundation for the post-World War I population exchanges among the Balkan states. It was also the basis for the 1923 Lausanne Treaty between Greece and Turkey. The treaty stipulated a forced population exchange between the parties, with Orthodox Christians defined as "Greeks" and Muslims defined as "Turks." Each group was to move into their respective homelands—a practice labeled "ethnic cleansing" by the late 20th century.

In post-1945 SEE, the communist regimes' stance regarding the local national Orthodox Churches was rather opportunistic. Their overall orientation was contingent on whether the communists were in advantageous position to exploit the church–nation link to further their own objectives. In post-World War II communist-led Yugoslavia, for example, the regime's overall objective was to contain Serb nationalism and that led the regime to offer autonomy for the regions of Vojvodina and Kosovo. In this case, frustrated Serb nationalism was expressed in Orthodox rhetoric (see Buchenau 2005). Simultaneously, the Yugoslav communists promoted the creation of a Macedonian Orthodox Church (Gonis 2001, pp. 270–80). In 1959 a laity–clergy congress in Skopje led to the revival of the historic see of Ohrid. The Serb Orthodox granted autonomy to the revived see. But by 1967, the Macedonian Orthodox Church uncanonically declared its own autocephaly from the Serb Orthodox Church. This declaration was meant to assist with the post-1945 nation-building efforts in the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (which eventually became the current Republic of North Macedonia).

This opportunistic attitude is also present in other local states. While the Albanian communists practically destroyed the country's national Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian communists assisted in turning the country's autocephalous church into a patriarchate (Gonis 2001, pp. 159–61). In communist Bulgaria, celebrations of national events continued to include those with clear religious undertones: the 1962 bicentennial anniversary of the publication of Father's Paisii's 1762 *Slavonic-Bulgarian history*, which is considered the starting point for the Bulgarian national revival; and the 1970 centennial anniversary of the creation of the Bulgarian Exarchate provide prominent examples (Hopkins 2009, pp. 181–218). Romania's communist regime gradually subordinated the Orthodox church's hierarchy: in 1949, the Romanian Church became a public body, enabling the state to supervise its activities (Gvosdev 2001, pp. 224–25, 299). Initially, over the 1947–1958 period, the church was able to maintain a symbiotic relationship with the regime. But later, when Ceausescu imposed his own autocratic rule, the Romanian *Securitatet* (the infamous secret police) effectively gained control over the Orthodox church's organization. The Church was extensively used to bolster the regime's legitimacy and control over the population, often with the higher clergy's close collaboration (Leustean 2009).

In SEE, Greece was the only country outside communist control. In Greece's case, conservative religious activists became extremely influential during the first half of the 20th century. During World War II and Greece's occupation by the Axis powers, and later, during the Civil War (1944–1949), these activists lent their support to anti-communist forces and contributed heavily to the identification of Orthodoxy with anti-communism (Logotheti 2017). This association was further promoted during Greece's military dictatorship (1967–1974) and was weakened only with the regime's collapse and Greece's post-1974 democratization (more in Roudometof 2025b).

As this summary illustrates, nationalizing Orthodox Christianity was a process that operated under communist and non-communist regimes alike. Thus, the faith was linked to each respective nation, and the modern blueprint "State/Church/Nation" superseded the pre-modern model "Empire/Church/Emperor" (Makrides 2013, p. 332). While this modern model resembles confessionalism, there are no religious differences among the national churches. People belong to different national churches *because* they belong to different nations—it became common to designate Orthodox Christians through mixed hyphens such as Serb-Orthodox, Greek-Orthodox, Bulgarian-Orthodox, Russian-Orthodox, etc.

Pew Research Center's (2017) survey of Orthodox countries shows that, by the 21st century, in most Orthodox nation-states, religious and national membership had become intertwined. The self-declaration of religious membership is synonymous with national membership and not meaningfully connected to religious observance. When respondents

therefore declare that membership in the Orthodox Church is an important prerequisite for belonging to the nation, they merely express this symbolic link between faith and nation. The declaration of membership to the Orthodox church is a matter of semiotic importance predominantly relevant for the public domain (Agadjanian and Roudometof 2005).

The connection between Orthodox Christianity and national belonging might be summed up as follows: from its origins in 19th century SEE, the nationalization of the faith gradually became the overarching process that has structured the current understanding of Orthodox Christianity as a union of autocephalous and/or autonomous national churches (inclusive of the ancient patriarchates) that recognize each other (see the full list in Leustean 2014). According to the results published by Pew Research Center (2017), respondents in nearly all Orthodox nations consider their own archbishop or patriarch to be the supreme religious authority. These national churches have extended their reach into immigrant communities (overview in Roudometof 2015). With nationalization being the overarching process, in the course of the 20th century the EP has operated in a dual capacity: first, as the overseer of transnational Greek communities (mostly in the USA); and, second, as a supra-national arbiter, using its ancient administrative right to hold jurisdiction over unattended territories or to take under its wing groups of religious adherents expelled or otherwise marginalized—an important constituency during the post-1945 Cold War confrontation between the communist East and the capitalist West (Roudometof 2014, pp. 144–48).

4. Orthodoxy and Nation in Post-Soviet Europe

This section aims to show that post-Soviet states have pursued a strategy of nation-building that links Orthodoxy and nation—a link that, as shown in the article's previous section, was originally articulated in 19th century SEE. Following the USSR's 1991 dissolution, the post-Soviet nation-states were free to initiate a (historically belated) process of national self-assertion. The USSR's dissolution affected different nations in different ways: while in some cases national communities felt that they were able to regain control over their state, in other cases, the USSR's dissolution was felt as traumatic (Alexander 2012, p. 11; see also Cesari 2021, pp. 240–317). That was particularly intense for Russia itself, for some 30 million Russians were left outside the borders of the Russian federation.

In post-Soviet Russia, the revitalized Orthodox Patriarchate of Moscow emerged as the de facto representative of the nation for the millions of Russians living in those republics of the former USSR that gained independence following its implosion. The ROC granted autonomy to its local branch in Ukraine in 1990 which henceforth became known as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). In 1992, the ROC granted autonomy to its branches in Moldova, Latvia, and Estonia. While these ecclesiastical units became administratively independent from the Moscow Patriarchate regarding their internal affairs, the ROC preserved the right to withdraw their autonomy at any given time. In Belarus and Kazakhstan, the ROC performed a rather formal change in administrative status and strong ties with Moscow remained. Lastly, in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Lithuania, and in the post-Soviet states of Central Asia—where Orthodox Christianity is a minority faith—the ROC kept the status quo.

Subsequently, the ROC began stressing the notion of "spiritual unity" over the new territorial divisions. Russian Orthodoxy became what Della Cava (2001) called a "transnational religion," that is, a faith operating beyond the post-1991 Russian Federation's borders. But how was one to call this newly formulated "trans-national" (i.e., trans-border) sphere or field of influence? The notion of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) as a sphere of historically Russian Orthodox influence (Naydenova 2016) was subsequently developed to offer an answer to this question. The term "Russkiy" in *Russky Mir* is meant to evoke the spiritual identity of the original Kievan Rus' (e.g., the historical first Russian state created before

1000AD). It thus refers mainly, albeit but not exclusively, to the territories of modern-day Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. In principle, it is possible to add a genuine transnational or diasporic dimension to it. That is, the notion can be extended to all those who share: (a) the Orthodox faith; (b) a reliance on Russian language; and (c) a common historical memory and view on social development. The ROC thus developed a missionary understanding of its role as defender and protector of "Russian civilization."

The initial ecclesiastical notion was soon combined with state objectives. In June 2007, Russia's President Vladimir Putin inaugurated the Russkiy Mir Foundation, a state-sponsored entity that promotes Russian language and culture throughout the world (Petro 2018; for an extensive overview, see Soroka 2022). For the Russian state, *Russkiy Mir* became part of Russia's arsenal to project its "soft power." While the ROC's policies and actions have become an intellectual resource to justify the Russian state's foreign policy objectives (Curanović 2018), for the ROC, *Russkiy Mir* is God's project. From within these lenses, Ukraine was seen as a "gray zone" that occupies an ambiguous position between East and West (Wawrzonek 2014).

The notions of "Russian world" and "Russian civilization" blend national belonging with membership to the ROC. That is because Russian Orthodoxy in the modern context operates as a marker of Russian identity as such; and not as a universal religion that addresses all of humanity without reference to the particularistic ties of ethnicity, language, or race. Although 82% of Russians call themselves Orthodox, only 42% self-identify as believers. Of those who do not self-identify as believers, 50% still call themselves Orthodox as do some 42% of atheists (statistics from Garrard and Garrard 2008, p. 245). Despite ROC's institutional revival and activism, regular church attendance levels remain low (see Pew Research Center 2017). While statistical data showcase an abrupt increase in the public association with Orthodoxy, it is necessary to acknowledge, as Krindatch (2004) does, that this reflects the perception that Russians should be Orthodox, and that individuals tend to view Orthodoxy as part of their national identity. In the post-Soviet era, a renewed sense of Russian identity significantly helped with the ROC's revival. As Knox (2004, p. 87) notes "Russians have long regarded the ROC as the protector of national interests and the defender of national traditions".

Given the briefly outlined national context, it is reasonable to suggest that *Russkiy Mir* represents the Russian version of the nationalization of the faith, already initiated in 19th century SEE. In fact, in its blend of national and religious membership, *Russkiy Mir* resembles the already mentioned 19th century notion of Hellenic Christianity.[10] Indeed, the ROC's official documents make direct allusions to the church-nation link. The earliest explicit public reference is in ROC's first major public statement on its role in post-Soviet Russia, the *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*:

The patriotism of the Orthodox Christian should be active. It is manifested when he defends his fatherland against an enemy, works for the good of the motherland, cares for the good order of people's life through, among other things, participation in the affairs of government. The Christian is called to preserve and develop national culture and people's self-awareness. (Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate 2000, vol. II. p. 3)

The above is an early codification of the ROC's official viewpoint, which was further elaborated in subsequent years.[11] It is undeniable that the ROC has entered the politics of nationalized religion: since the turn of the 21st century, the Church has increased its role in the army, public schools, universities, retirement houses, and prisons; meanwhile, it fosters a reinterpretation of Russia's past that confirms its own centrality in national history (Shakhanova and Kratochvíl 2020; Koellner 2024).

While the above discussion refers extensively to the ROC, all actors across post-Soviet Europe have simultaneously pursued similar policies. That caused a clash between the successor post-Soviet states' attempt to nationalize their ecclesiastical institutions and the ROC. Subsequently, a series of ecclesiastical disputes emerged whereby church membership served as a proxy for national belonging. The ecclesiastical disputes in Estonia, Ukraine, and Moldova exemplify this pattern of national conflicts cloaked in faith-related guise.

After Estonia's 1918 independence, the ROC granted autonomy to the Orthodox Church in Estonia (formally called the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church). At that time, the vast majority of Orthodox in Estonia were ethnic Estonians. By 1923, the EP had brought the new church under its own ecclesiastical jurisdiction. When in 1944, Estonia was forcefully incorporated into the USSR, the Moscow Patriarchate reestablished its ecclesiastical authority. The local Orthodox metropolitan fled to Sweden to escape communist rule. In exile, a separate synod was established under the EP's authority. Then, the EP declared its own 1923 decision "inoperative," and accepted the post-1944 status quo, while the exiles remained under its protection. During the Soviet period, some Orthodox parishes in Estonia continued to function under the ROC.

After communism's collapse, the Moscow Patriarchate restored the Estonian Church's autonomy, albeit under its own authority. Thanks to Soviet-era migration of Russians into Estonia, current Estonian Church membership consists mostly of Orthodox Christians of Russian descent (Payne 2007, pp. 840–41; Mudrov 2016). But there are also Orthodox ethnic Estonians, as well. With all of that in mind, then, in 1993, the State Department of Estonia recognized the formerly exiled synod as the official Orthodox Church in the country. The decision granted all legal rights—inclusive of rights over property as well as buildings—to the formerly exiled church.

The decision caused a rift with the overseer authority of the Moscow Patriarchate, which filed a lawsuit to protect the ROC's property rights and canonical territory (that is, the territory over which a church holds the rights of ecclesiastical jurisdiction). In response to the ROC's actions, the formerly exiled church appealed to the EP. On 20 February 1993, the EP officially recognized the formerly exiled church and appointed Archbishop John of Finland as *locum tenens* (a temporary place holder). The Moscow Patriarchate viewed the EP's decision as an undue interference and a violation of the ROC's ancient rights over its canonical territory. In response to the EP's actions, the ROC suspended communion with the EP, causing a brief schism within Orthodox Christianity. While this dispute was relatively brief, it was nevertheless a sign of things to come.

Another similar dispute took place in the post-1991 Republic of Moldova. Moldova was briefly integrated into the greater Romania of the interwar era, where a substantial portion of its inhabitants were ethnic Romanians. After communism's collapse, the Romanian Orthodox Church resurrected a defunct bishopric in Moldova (the metropolitan see of Bessarabia) with jurisdiction in Romania and Ukraine. The Romanian Church's action was widely understood as an expression of cross-border Romanian nationalism. The controversy over the metropolitan see of Bessarabia lasted for an entire decade (1992–2002) (for overviews, see Turcescu and Stan 2003; Grigore 2016; Biliuță, 2025). Because Moldova was under the Moscow Patriarchate during the Soviet era, the ROC had its own bishopric in the region. The creation of a new rival bishopric in the same jurisdiction caused a dispute between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the ROC. The Moldovan government refused to register the newly created metropolitan see for almost a decade. The Romanian Church filed a legal appeal to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). When faced with the possibility of a negative outcome at the ECHR, the Moldovan government felt coerced to recognize it. After 2007, the two churches were able to improve their relations (although these were further affected by the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war).

The existence of multiple overlapping ecclesiastical institutions also became a major cause of disagreement in post-1991 Ukraine. To grasp the broader context, it is necessary to note that the clash between Russian and Ukrainian nationalists broadly reflects two distinct regional profiles within post-Soviet Ukraine.[12] These have emerged out of the different historical experiences and attitudes regarding the post-Soviet or Eurasian area (Riabchuk 2015; Harris 2020; Hillis 2017; Schmid 2019). Roughly speaking, the split is between the east and west of the Dnieper River, with the east oriented towards Russia and the west towards "Europe" or "the West." As discussed below, this split was connected to rival Orthodox churches and caused the involvement of third parties into Ukrainian ecclesiastical affairs.

As already mentioned, by 1990 the ROC granted autonomy to the UOC-MP, which used to be the only Orthodox Church in Ukraine that was canonically recognized. Until 2018, this church consisted of 52 dioceses, 73 bishops, and 12,348 parishes. Its parishes represented approximately 40% of all ROC's parishes, which explains the significance of Ukrainian territory for the ROC (as well as its material motivations for maintaining its claims). Its principal rival was the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) with 35 dioceses, 42 bishops, and 5167 parishes. The UOC-KP was reestablished in 1995 in response to the creation of an independent Ukrainian state but has its roots to Ukraine's short-lived pre-Soviet era.[13] Ukraine's main ecclesiastical institutions adopted familiar objectives from Orthodoxy's past nationalization.[14] No reliable data exists regarding the number of these churches' religious adherents, but in terms of location, the rough consensus is that UOC-KP's followers were in Ukraine's central and western regions, while the UOC-MP had a presence throughout Ukraine, except in the west.

According to the ROC's point of view, the UOC-KP was a schismatic and uncanonical institution. In contrast, the UOC-KP's initial objective was to obtain canonical recognition by a higher ecclesiastical authority; and the ultimate goal was to unite all Orthodox in Ukraine in accordance with the principle of a single church for a single state.[15] In contrast, for the ROC, Orthodoxy in Ukraine (just like in other post-Soviet republics) is part of *Russkiy Mir*. From the 1990s forward, church membership became a marker of national identity and subject to politicization. It is worth noting that the individuals' actual religious behavior was akin to that of citizens in other European countries and the dispute did not entail religious differences—after all, both rival churches operated according to the Orthodox tradition. Rather, belonging to a church was imbued with connotations related to the political importance of church membership (Warner 2010; Yelensky 2010). This is the principal reason that membership in rival ecclesiastical institutions in post-1990 Ukraine evolved into an issue related to national identity and an issue for political and cultural mobilization. In effect, the split between the two main rival Orthodox churches reflected the use of confessional membership as a marker for two rival blueprints of Ukrainian national identity (one looking toward "the West" and the other looking toward "the East").

What happened in Ukraine up to 2014 broadly duplicated the pattern originally observed in 19th century SEE—membership in rival Orthodox churches became a cultural signifier for expressing rival political visions. Specifically, whether Ukraine should look west (to the EU and NATO) or east (towards Eurasia and Moscow). Orthodoxy's instrumental redeployment into Ukraine's domestic politics contributed to polarization. In nationwide surveys between 2000 and 2016, the percentage of people who identified solely as "Orthodox" (without referring to a specific church) dropped from 38.6% to 21.2%; while UOC-KP's percentage rose from 9.2% to 15% (cited in Jedraszczyk 2019, p. 241).

The 2014 Euromaidan Revolution was a turning point that signified the victory of Ukrainian nationalist forces, and their victory affected the interplay between ecclesiastical politics and geopolitical contests.[16] While the UOC-MP was undergoing "Ukrainization" since the (earlier) 2004 Orange Revolution, the 2014 events placed it in a difficult position.

The rival churches were a focal point of domestic politics. Clergy under the UOC-MP and UOC-KP alike tended to display a patriotic attitude towards the Ukrainian state; but some clergymen supported the post-2014 separatists (Jedraszczyk 2019, pp. 246–47; see also Krawchuk and Bremer 2016). While the UOC-MP was often viewed as Kremlin's tool, Russian-language media published statements made by UOC-MP clergymen who fled to Russia and were critical of post-2014 Kyiv leaders. The support clergymen offered to pro-Russian rebels and the blessing of the flags of the Donetsk and Luhansk separatist republics were actions that received negative publicity.[17]

In a sermon delivered at Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral on 14 March 2014, Russian Patriarch Kirill stated that the Church respects "state sovereignty" and "the desire to build independently [. . .] national lives" but added "that this does not mean that the realization of this sovereignty should be accompanied by the destruction of a common, united spiritual space" (quoted in Roudometof 2025a, p. 297). Being absent from the official ceremonies of the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol to Russia on 18 March 2014, reflected this stance. A similar sentiment colored his 19 March 2014, declaration that the ROC's jurisdiction is not determined by political preferences, ethnic differences, or state borders. After Crimea's annexation, the ROC's Holy Synod left local parishes under the UOC-MP (Jedraszczyk 2019, p. 240). Crimea's 2014 annexation and the post-2014 conflict in the Donbas effectively destroyed the notion of *Russkiy Mir* as originally advocated by Kirill (i.e., Ukraine and Russia as fraternal nations). From 2014 on, references to *Russkiy Mir* were mainly confined to Russia (Jedraszczyk 2019, p. 242). Consequently, this notion was further revised to allow for renewed emphasis on state-building and on the Russian nation's role as founder of Russian civilization (Wawrzonek 2016, pp. 40–41). Responding to the term's cooptation by the state, the ROC begun to use the term *Sviataia Rus'* (Holy Rus') instead of *Russkiy Mir* (Naydenova 2016).[18]

In 2016, Ukrainian affairs affected the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church held in Crete. The event had been in preparation for a long time. The EP promoted the council as the first ecumenical synod of the Orthodox Church in over a millennium. Days before the event took place in June 2016, 245 of the 450 members of the Ukrainian Parliament addressed an appeal to the EP, requesting that autocephaly is granted to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. As a result of the conflict with Russia, they argued, Ukrainian Orthodox Christians had rejected Moscow's religious sovereignty. The ROC, with the full support of the Russian state, formed a coalition against Ukrainian attempts to gain autocephaly. The Russian government viewed the entire affair as an effort by outside forces to cause a schism within Orthodoxy and confirmed that it would not allow ROC participation to the Council. One by one, the Patriarch of Antioch and the churches of Georgia, Bulgaria, and Russia withdrew their participation in the Council, despite having agreed to participate earlier that same year. The Council eventually took place in Crete, but its decisions were subject to serious restrictions. According to canon law, absentees do not have to abide by the synod's decisions. In turn, this meant that the council's decisions lack universal acceptance among the Orthodox churches (for details, see Leustean 2018; Makrides and Rimestad 2021).

In 2018, to increase his chances in the upcoming 2019 presidential elections, Ukrainian President Poroshenko tried again to gain recognition of an autocephalous church by the EP. This time, the EP agreed to establish a new Orthodox Church of Ukraine, independent from Russia and granted a decree (*Tomos*) of autocephaly in a ceremony on 15 December 2018, at Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv (Jedraszczyk 2019, pp. 250–51).[19] Subsequently, representatives of the previously unrecognized Ukrainian Orthodox Churches elected Epiphanius (Dumenko) as the new church's Primate. Within six months, some 500 parishes moved to the new church (for details, see Casanova 2022). In response, in October 2018 the ROC suspended communion with the EP (Soroka 2022, p. 9). In effect, a major schism

within Orthodox Christianity took place. The ROC has further broken communion with the Churches of Greece and Cyprus and the Patriarchate of Alexandria over their recognition of the new autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

5. Conclusions

Unlike analyses that focus on contemporary developments regarding the relationship between ecclesiastical institutions and nationalism in Eastern Europe, this article has adopted a long-term perspective. Such a perspective allows a far clearer understanding of the historical relationship between Orthodoxy and nation. Although the article has showcased the role of Orthodox Christianity in nation-formation processes, it has not offered evidence that the nationalisms of Orthodox-majority nations fall under the popular label of "religious nationalism." As Rieffer (2003) argues, in cases of religious nationalism, religion and nationalism become inseparable; while elsewhere religion is an element offering cohesion to the "imagined community."

Moreover, comprehension of contemporary developments within the Orthodox religioscape needs to avoid the trap of essentializing Orthodoxy. Orthodox Christianity has undergone diverse cultural fusions throughout its long history (for a summary see Roudometof 2014). As this article has shown, the faith's nationalized version is the consequence of Orthodoxy's encounter with and adjustment to modernity. This nationalized version emerged out of a church-nation synthesis initially crafted in 19th century SEE. This blueprint was initially extended into post-1917 Eastern Europe, but the creation of the USSR suspended any meaningful efforts to construct a church–nation link.

It was only after the fall of communism that state and non-state actors enforced this blueprint. In post-Soviet Europe, the reassertion of Russian Orthodoxy and the simultaneous effort to nationalize the ecclesiastical institutions of post-Soviet republics created the earlier discussed series of disputes in Moldova, Estonia, and Ukraine. In these cases, nationalist disputes appeared as debates over ecclesiastical autocephaly or independence and resemble the 19th century disputes in SEE over the same issues. The overall pattern that emerged in post-Soviet Europe is a replay of Orthodox Christianity's nationalization in 19th and 20th century SEE—although it is not mere duplication, as the specifics and the historical conjuncture are quite different. The situation reflects the mixture of nationalism and religion that has come to dominate the post-Soviet space. While numerous analyses have castigated pro-Russian nationalist positions, the acknowledgment of the fundamentally nationalist nature of the ongoing "religious" disputes has not always been forthcoming.

From the perspective of the *long durée*, the reemergence of this pattern in the 21st century affirms that the nationalized version of Orthodox Christianity remains the globally dominant version of this faith. Nationalization has contributed to accelerated conflict among rival nations, whereby the geopolitics of nationalism disguise themselves as ecclesiastical disputes. The truth of the matter is that, as this discussion has shown, there is little that is "religious" *as such* in the disagreements among the ecclesiastical institutions.

Obviously, there is no foregone conclusion based on these long-term trends: while such ecclesiastical disputes were successfully mediated or at least appear to have been resolved in Estonia or Moldova, the situation developed quite differently in post-2014 Ukraine—and that is the case for reasons related more with Ukrainian and Russian nationalisms instead of matters of faith per se. Local and international actors can steer such disputes in markedly opposite directions, as the Moscow–Constantinople schism illustrates. The re-emergence of this broad historical pattern in the 21st century Orthodox religioscape might have long-lasting consequences that go beyond the specifics of individual cases. The post-2018 schism between the EP and the ROC has fragmented the Orthodox religioscape. It remains to be seen whether religious and secular leadership can negotiate its resolution.

But it is reasonable to expect that such resolution can only take place after the settlement of ongoing geopolitical competitions.

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Notes

1 The author uses SEE as the successor term to "the Balkans," a term understood to have negative connotations (see Todorova; more in Roudometof [2001] 2024). Jelavich and Jelavich (1977) have argued that SEE or the Balkans should include nation-states created out of both the Habsburg and the Ottoman empires. It is self-evident that such a classification is ill-suited to the article's topic.

2 Historical scholarship has recognized the existence of this politico-religious network, with authors suggesting different terms. These range from Obolensky's (1971) Byzantine commonwealth to Kitromilides' (2007) Orthodox commonwealth to Shepard's (2006, vol. 7, p. 52) "cultural–religious" sphere or "force field".

3 The notion of interpretative sociology (or 'verstehende soziologie') has its classical roots in Max Weber's approach. By far the most influential approach in recent decades is the one by Alexander (2003). For a recent discussion see Goldberg and Singell (2024).

4 For an overview/discussion of methods in historical sociology see Demetriou and Roudometof (2020). The analysis pursued here implements Elias' (1987) argument in favor of analyzing socio-historical developments in the *long durée*, in contrast to far more popular short-term approaches.

5 As Greenfeld (2020) notes, there is no word for "ethnicity" in Russian. This notion is a Western scholarly concept, with deep roots in US history—in 20th century USA, ethnicity superseded "race." Over time, the connection between ethnicity and biology was relaxed, and "ethnicity" usually entails a cultural dimension in scholarly discussions.

6 While in the 21st century Russian Orthodoxy amounts to nearly 40% of the approximately 300 million Orthodox Christians in the world today, all of EP's jurisdictions amount to fewer than 20 million members. Since the fall of communism, these two institutions have articulated opposite ideological viewpoints. The EP is more liberal and open to global currents; in fact, it has endorsed and promoted a newfound Orthodox cosmopolitanism (for a discussion, see Makrides 2023). In contrast, the post-communist ROC has become hostile to the West and adopted a more defensive stance. Both sides have articulated contrasting interpretations on human rights, territoriality of Orthodox governance, and Orthodoxy's broader social policy (see Falivene 2023; Stoeckl 2016; Kratochvíl 2025).

7 The historical weakness of the ROC is also related to the adoption of the 1666–1667 church reforms by the Russian Patriarchate. The reforms created a gulf between demotic understandings of Orthodoxy and the official imperial version that bolstered the Tsar's credentials as the sole protector of Orthodox Christians. The result was the emergence of Old Believers, a group that rejected the official church and imperial authority. By late 19th century, nearly 40% of peasantry belonged to them (Bushkovitch 1992, p. 54).

8 For in-depth discussions of the various Russian Orthodox engagements with modernity, see Engelstein (2001) & Strickland (2013). The latter offers a splendid genealogy of the synthesis between nationalism and religion in pre-revolutionary Russia.

9 For a recent example of a similar (but not identical) use of the past as a guide for understanding the present, see Rabinowitz (2023). The author builds his argument through a comparison between the 19th century Gilded Age and the 21st century Digital Age to highlight the "return" of exclusionary or "defensive" nationalism in modern democracies. In this analysis, a similar logic is followed—with the obvious difference that the intertwining between religion and nation-formation is examined in two different socio-cultural milieus (SEE and post-Soviet Europe).

10 It is certainly not widely known that in 19th century religious texts the Greeks are referred to as "God's chosen people" and "holy Nation" (quoted in Petrou 1992, p. 181). In other words, this association is most definitely not a religious innovation that belongs to the 21st century.

11 See the 2006 Declaration on the Rights and Dignity of Man of the 10th All-World Russian People's Council and the 2008 Fundamentals of the Russian Orthodox Church's Teaching on Dignity, Freedom, and Human Rights (cited in Soroka 2022, pp. 5–6).

[12] While the self-assertion of Ukrainian nationalism is widely recognized, there has been less attention in recognizing nationalism's significance for Putin's popularity in Russia. Petersson (2020) argues that Putin's enduring popularity is linked to his explicit commitment to reclaim Russia's endangered superpower status—that is, claiming to "make Russia great again" in the global context.

[13] UOC-KP's roots go back into Ukraine's history—as the initial declaration of an autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox Church took place against the backdrop of 1921 post-revolutionary Ukraine. In contemporary Ukraine, these roots are of obvious paramount significance. This article does not claim to offer the full history of Orthodoxy in Ukraine—it only uses selected aspects of the historical record for comparison.

[14] To these two main contenders one needs to add the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), with 14 dioceses, 12 bishops, and 1167 parishes, as well as the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), the country's largest non-Orthodox religious group, with 16 eparchies, 45 bishops, and more than 3500 churches on Ukrainian soil. Most UAOC and UGCC followers were in Ukraine's western regions (all data from Falivene 2023, p. 264).

[15] For a discussion of Ukraine's ecclesiastical units post-1917, see Denysenko (2018). Suffice to say, ecclesiastical independence was proclaimed alongside the short-lived independence of post-1917 Ukraine. It was once more proclaimed in 1942 under the pro-Nazi Ukrainian regime. Denysenko correctly connects the quest for autocephaly to Ukrainian nationalism, but as this discussion shows, this is part of a broader pattern.

[16] For a discussion of the consequences of the Euromaidan revolution, see Petro's (2022) analysis of the way several important political constituencies impacted the trajectory of events. On the ROC's role in promoting the post-2022 war narrative, see Kilp and Pankhurst (2024). The authors point out the close-knit relationship between the cultural trauma of communism's collapse and the Russian response.

[17] In post-2014 breakaway Donbas, developments were shaped both by the Russian government as well as by Russian radical right-wing intellectuals (see Kiryukhin 2023). While Russia played a decisive role in the development of the conflict in the region, the "Russian Donbas" ideology also affected Russia itself.

[18] The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for this point.

[19] As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, the naming of the new autocephalous Church is deliberate: it makes a reference to the territorial unit (Ukraine) and not to a specific nation (such as calling it "Ukrainian Orthodox Church"). The more inclusive name was a wise choice, as it was important to facilitate the absorption of smaller or rival congregations into the new administrative unit.

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