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# The Ecumenical Patriarchate as a Global Actor: Between the End of the Cold War and the Ukrainian Ecclesiastical Crisis

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## ABSTRACT

Following the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the advent of republican Turkey, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has struggled to maintain its existence and its ecumenical role, despite the obstacles that the Republic of Turkey has set before it. Yet, challenges have abounded within the Orthodox world as well. The Patriarchate has viewed Russian involvement in Orthodox ecclesiastical affairs with suspicion, if not outright opposition. This is like its former stance regarding Russian involvement in Orthodox religious affairs in the Balkans and the Middle East throughout the nineteenth century. This competition has been rekindled since the end of the Cold War, as the Patriarchate has grown in importance as a global actor. The Ukrainian ecclesiastical crisis, which brought the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate to loggerheads, provides an additional opportunity to measure the extent of Russian influence on the Orthodox Church. This article explores the history of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the republican Turkish era and the challenges it has faced. It also examines the dynamics that have developed since the end of the Cold War in its relations with Russia and Turkey through its confrontation with the Moscow Patriarchate particularly in light of the Ukrainian ecclesiastical crisis. This study aspires to shed light on the extent of Russian influence on Orthodox ecclesiastical affairs and explore the role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the global era.

## KEYWORDS

Ecumenical Patriarchate; globalization; Greece; nationalism; Orthodox Christianity; religion; Russia; Turkey; Ukraine

## Introduction

Russian influence in the Balkans and the Middle East has not been only military and linked to hard power, at times it has also been soft power-oriented and has employed ideational resources, especially religious ones.<sup>1</sup> Since the nineteenth century, Russian foreign policy has attempted to promote its interests in the Middle East through the establishment of close relations with local Orthodox institutions. On the other hand, the Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarchate, which holds a spiritual leadership position in the Orthodox Christianity, has struggled to maintain its existence and its

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<sup>1</sup>On the concept of soft power, see the classic Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in Global Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 5–11.

ecumenical role, despite the obstacles that republican Turkey has put in its way. All the same, challenges have also abounded within the Orthodox world itself. The Patriarchate has viewed Russian involvement in Orthodox ecclesiastical affairs with suspicion if not outright opposition. This issue is reminiscent of the stance it took regarding Russian involvement in the Orthodox religious affairs in the Balkans and the Middle East throughout the nineteenth century. Moreover, this competition has been rekindled since the end of the Cold War, as the Patriarchate has grown in importance as a global actor. The Ukrainian ecclesiastical crisis that brought about a confrontation between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate provides an additional opportunity to measure the extent of Russian influence on the Orthodox Church.

This article explores the history of the Ecumenical Patriarchate as a global religious organization based in republican Turkey and the challenges it has faced. It also examines the dynamics that have developed since the end of the Cold War in the institution's relations with Turkey and Russia through its confrontation with the Moscow Patriarchate especially considering the Ukrainian ecclesiastical crisis. It sheds light on the extent, as well as the limits of Russian influence on Orthodox ecclesiastical affairs and reaches preliminary conclusions on the Ecumenical Patriarchate's mission, as well as the role of global religious organizations.

### **The Ecumenical Patriarchate in republican Turkey**

The transition from the Ottoman Empire to republican Turkey that occurred at the conclusion of the First World War proved very turbulent for the Ecumenical Patriarchate, a seventeen-century institution that traces its roots to the late-Roman era and serves as the spiritual center of the Orthodox world. Considering the institution to be a bulwark of Greek nationalism, Kemalist authorities demanded its excision from Turkey. Diplomats discussed its future at the Lausanne negotiations in 1922–1923.<sup>2</sup> In the end, the treaty's text made no reference to it, and the Patriarchate was *de facto* allowed to continue its operations in the Phanar (Fener) neighborhood of Istanbul.<sup>3</sup> This did not change mainstream Turkish nationalist views; however, and many Turks considered the Patriarchate to be a “Trojan horse” or an “enemy within” that aimed to undermine Turkish sovereignty through the establishment of a kind of “Orthodox Vatican” within the walls of Istanbul.<sup>4</sup> Linking a stronger Ecumenical Patriarchate to a perceived threat of Turkey's partition was always

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<sup>2</sup>Alexis Alexandris, *The Greek Minority in Istanbul and Greek-Turkish Relations 1918–1974* (Athens: Center for Asia Minor Studies, 1983), 87–95.

<sup>3</sup>Elçin Macar, *Istanbul Rum Patrikhanesi* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2003), 99–112.

<sup>4</sup>Michelangelo Guida, “The Sèvres Syndrome and ‘Komplo’ Theories in the Islamist and Secular Press,” *Turkish Studies* 9, no. 1 (2008): 48–9.

popular within the Turkish bureaucracy. Moreover, an atavistic opposition to the rising role of the Patriarchate prevented any dispassionate discussion about the possible benefits that the presence of the longstanding Christian institution might accrue to Turkey. Despite such adversity, it was under Patriarch Athenagoras (1948–1972) that a supranational vision for the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the spiritual leader of the Orthodox Christianity developed.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout republican Turkish history, the Patriarchate has faced multiple challenges. The Papa Eftim affair, which was the attempted violent takeover of the institution by a Turkish nationalist cleric in the 1920s, was only one of them. The Turkish state refused to confer the Patriarchate either an official “Patriarchate” or “ecumenical” status and recognize it as a legal entity, but instead treated it only as the religious authority of Turkey’s declining Greek minority.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, court decisions have persistently refused to use the term “ecumenical” and preferred the phrase “Fener Greek Patriarchate.” At times, the judiciary has even engaged in theological argumentation about whether the Patriarchate legitimately claims the ecumenical title, without regard for the fact that Orthodox communities around the world and other parts of global Christianity have recognized it as such.<sup>7</sup> The Patriarchate also has faced problems regarding its legal standing and often has seen its property confiscated and its rights violated because of this.<sup>8</sup> The situation started improving in the late 1980s, during the Turgut Özal administration, which was characterized by a more tolerant attitude toward non-Muslim minorities. A seminal part of this change was the permission that authorities gave for the renovation of the main building of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which had severely been damaged by a fire in September 1941 and had remained a state of ruin until the 1980s, since Turkish officials had previously not allowed its reconstruction.

### The Ecumenical Patriarchate as a global actor

The end of the Cold War heralded a new era for the Patriarchate. A rare opportunity arose for the confirmation of its ecumenical character. As the Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe were escaping Communist oppression, there was great promise for a better future for the Orthodox world. The ascension of Bartholomew to the patriarchal office in 1991 also proved rather timely. The Ecumenical Patriarchate became more extroverted and enjoyed

<sup>5</sup>Paschalis Kitromilides, *Religion and Politics in the Orthodox World: The Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Challenges of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 72–91.

<sup>6</sup>Baskın Oran, *Türkiye’de Azınlıklar: Kavramlar, Lozan, İç Mevzuat, İçtihat Uygulama* (İstanbul: TESEV Yayınları, 2004), 113.

<sup>7</sup>“Yargıtay, Quo Vadis?” *Radikal* 2, Jan. 7, 2007; Ergun Özbudun, “‘Democratic Opening,’ the Legal Status of Non-Muslim Religious Communities and the Venice Commission,” *Insight Turkey* 12, no. 2 (2010): 220–1; and CNN Türk, “Yargıtay’ın ‘Ekümenik Patrikhane’ Kararı,” CNN Türk, available online at [http://www.cnnturk.com/haber/haber\\_detay.asp?PID=00318&haberID=367568](http://www.cnnturk.com/haber/haber_detay.asp?PID=00318&haberID=367568).

<sup>8</sup>Özbudun, “‘Democratic Opening,’” 214–9.

increased recognition by international organizations. Under the leadership of Bartholomew, the Patriarchate witnessed a remarkable recovery, which was not only due to the more favorable international circumstances, but also because of a wide array of activities and initiatives that improved the soft power of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. These developments reinforced Bartholomew's image as *primus inter pares* and spiritual leader among of the world's Orthodox Churches. Relations with other Christian denominations and other religions improved as well. The protection of the environment became a new focal point of the Patriarchate's agenda and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew became one of the leading global advocates of environmentalism.<sup>9</sup> Then American Vice President Al Gore, who was also known for his environmental activism, called Bartholomew "the Green Patriarch." This gained him and the Patriarchate respect far beyond the borders of Orthodox Christianity. The Patriarch also nurtured good relations with the government in Ankara as well as with local authorities across Turkey. Thus, he gained permission to hold religious services in Orthodox Churches that had remained abandoned or had been used for other purposes after the 1923 mandatory population exchange agreement and the expulsion of the local members of Greek Orthodox clergy to Greece. The new circumstances reinforced the profile of the Patriarchate as being the herald of the Greek Orthodox cultural heritage throughout Turkey and brought it closer to numerous refugee associations in Greece and the Greek Diaspora.<sup>10</sup>

In the early 2000s, as Greek-Turkish relations entered a period of rapprochement and the political reform process that was associated with Ankara's efforts to join the European Union (EU) swept across the country, the status of the Patriarchate further improved. The Patriarchate emerged as a key supporter of Turkey's EU membership as well as of Greek-Turkish rapprochement and improvement of bilateral relations on all levels. This trend went against mainstream approaches of the Orthodox Church as a sponsor of Greek nationalism and an obstacle to Greek-Turkish reconciliation.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, a partial restitution for losses of immovable properties and churches occurred as did an improvement in the frequency and quality of contacts with the Turkish authorities. Indeed, the more relaxed approach regarding the ecumenical status of the Patriarchate of these officials reflected the new and more promising situation. The visit of Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in January 2011 was the highest-level visit to the seat

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<sup>9</sup>John Chrysavgis, *In the World, yet Not of the World: Social and Global Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 64–72; "Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew: Insights into an Orthodox Christian Worldview," *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 64, no. 1 (2007): 9–14; and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 65–78.

<sup>10</sup>Ihlas News Agency, "Orthodox Patriarch Hails Changing Turkey in Mass," *Daily Sabah*, June 22, 2014.

<sup>11</sup>Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, "The Orthodox Church and Greek-Turkish Relations: Religion as Source of Rivalry or Conciliation?" in *Religion and Politics in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Jeff Haynes (London: Routledge, 2009), 60–5.

of the Patriarchate since that of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes to Patriarch Athenagoras in 1952.<sup>12</sup> Most importantly the Patriarchate improved its relations with segments of Turkish society that traditionally had been suspicious of its operations. As its own struggle against a rising tide of Muslim conservatism continued, the Turkish, secularist middle-class gradually recognized the importance of the Greek and the other non-Muslim minorities as well as institutions, such as the Ecumenical Patriarchate, for the Republic's social wellbeing and as a bellwether of diversity and toleration.

Several other significant changes followed. For example, in December 2013, Turkey's most prestigious higher-learning center, Bogaziçi (Bosphorus) University, awarded Bartholomew an honorary doctorate. While the Ecumenical Patriarch had received numerous such honors from universities and other institutions around the world, this was the first time he had been so recognized in Turkey. More importantly, he was addressed as and recognized as Ecumenical Patriarch throughout the award ceremony. Meanwhile, a rising number of publications appeared that challenged conventional Turkish stereotypes concerning the Ecumenical Patriarchate<sup>13</sup> and raised the point that not only is the institution no threat to Turkish national security as conspiracy theorists claimed, but that it stands as a vital asset for Turkey's global image and the Republic's soft power. At the time, Turkey claimed to have a mediating role in intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and the presence of a seventeen-century Christian institution in Istanbul helped bestow legitimacy to this assertion. Considering this policy, it followed that Turkey should not pursue the diminution of the Ecumenical Patriarchate or permit its transfer to another country. On the contrary, the Patriarchate's presence in Istanbul was the best proof of Istanbul's contention that it was a truly global center and a tolerant meeting point for different religions and cultures. Ankara's ambition to play the role of impartial mediator in interreligious and intercivilizational dialogue could only be reinforced through the uncompromised operation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Similarly, Turkey's involvement with Spain in the UN-initiated Alliance of Civilizations initiative was meant for exactly the same purpose.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, administrative problems persisted despite the shifting tides. The requirement that the Ecumenical Patriarch must be a Turkish citizen substantially limited the pool of potential candidates for the position due to the demographic decline of the Greek minority. This put the very future of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey into question. While lifting the Turkish citizenship requirement as a prerequisite for the election of someone

<sup>12</sup>News Desk, "Turkish Minister's Visit to Orthodox Patriarchate Raises Hopes of End to Some Restrictions," *Daily Sabah*, April 1, 2011.

<sup>13</sup>Cengiz Aktar, "Önsöz," in *Tarihi, Siyasi, Dini ve Hukuki Açından Ekümenik Patrikhane*, ed. Cengiz Aktar (İstanbul: İletişim, 2013), 7–13.

<sup>14</sup>On Turkish official views of the "Alliance of Civilizations initiative," see Ali Balcı and Nebi Miş, "Turkey's Role in the Alliance of Civilizations: A New Perspective in Turkish Foreign Policy?" *Turkish Studies* 9, no. 3 (2008).

to the office of the Patriarch would be the ultimate solution, officials preferred to make a temporary arrangement. Their fix was to grant Turkish citizenship to numerous bishops and deacons within the Ecumenical Patriarchate and it appeared to relieve the dilemma, as the pool of potential patriarchal candidates increased.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the difficulty was merely alleviated but not fundamentally resolved: this *ad hoc* decision did not address the underlying cause of the problem, which was the Turkish state was still challenging the genuine ecumenical nature of the Patriarchate through its citizenship requirement. Indeed, addressing such minority grievances through the granting of privileges or ad hoc solutions reflected the broader issue of the weakening of state institutions and the shift toward a model of personalistic government based on the authority of Prime Minister (and later President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.<sup>16</sup> The referendum of June 24, 2017, which introduced the current strong presidential system, confirmed that underlying trend.

The Patriarchate's relations with the government of Turkey faced a further significant challenge when the Gülen crisis broke out. As the Gülen movement had been involved in interreligious dialogue under the auspices of the Turkish government for many years, the Patriarchate had been one of its natural interlocutors. Promoting interreligious toleration and dialogue had been a key priority while reinforcing relations with one of Turkey's key religious actors appeared to be a prudent and desirable approach.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as soon as the movement fell out of grace with the Turkish government, the Patriarchate promptly interrupted its relations with the Gülenists. Nonetheless, such swift action did not prevent the relapse of anti-minority and anti-Patriarchate conspiracies bruited by some pro-government media. This included an attempt to implicate the Patriarchate in events related to the July 15, 2016 coup and brought to memory old, anti-Christian stereotypes that some of the Turkish public still harbored. Thus, the Patriarchate appeared to many once again as being a "fifth column" that was conspiring against Turkish interests.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Heybeliada (Halki) Seminary**

In 1844, the Ecumenical Patriarchate established the Heybeliada (Halki) Seminary with the aim of providing religious education to clergy and laity alike. The school rose to prominence as it provided the Ecumenical Patriarchate with its key personnel. More importantly it served as the main Orthodox institution for the training of clergy from all the Orthodox Patriarchates and Autocephalous

<sup>15</sup>Ayla Jean Yackley, "Turkey Offers Citizenship to Orthodox Archbishops," *Reuters*, July 21, 2010.

<sup>16</sup>Toygur Sinan Baykan, *The Justice and Development Party in Turkey: Populism, Personalism, Organization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 106–41.

<sup>17</sup>Turan Kayaoglu, "Constructing the Dialogue of Civilizations in World Politics: A Case of Global Islamic Activism," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 2 (2012): 142–3.

<sup>18</sup>Mustafa Akyol, "The Russian Libel against the Ecumenical Patriarch," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 9, 2016.

Churches, and this reinforced the ecumenical character of the Patriarchate. The seminary survived the transition from the Ottoman to the republican era and continued serving the needs of the Ecumenical Patriarchate as a vocational school. Nevertheless, it eventually fell victim to negative reciprocity concerning minority rights and repercussions related to the Cyprus question. It was closed in 1971, when a law banned all private higher education institutions, which included the famous Robert College (f. 1863).<sup>19</sup> While Robert College resumed its operations, having transformed itself into the public Boğaziçi (Bosphorus) University, the Ecumenical Patriarchate refused to reorganize the Seminary under the auspices of any Turkish state university. Patriarch Bartholomew, himself a graduate and faculty member of the Seminary, meanwhile declared the reopening of the Seminary as one of the principal objectives of his administration.

As the Cold War provided for new opportunities and challenges for the global role of the Patriarchate as the spiritual center of Orthodox Christianity, resuming the operation of the world's leading Orthodox theological school in Istanbul would constitute a big boost for the Patriarchate. Nevertheless, neither the rising international status of the Ecumenical Patriarchate nor the Greek-Turkish rapprochement sufficed for such a development to occur. The liberalization of higher education brought on by legislation and the concomitant possibility of establishing private, nonprofit universities has failed to attract the interest of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which insists on the restoration of the *status quo ante*. In other words, the Orthodox institution wishes to avoid the risk of being subjected to the authority of Turkey's Higher Education Council (*Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu-YÖK*), which would be the case if the Heybeliada (Halki) Seminary were to be reestablished as a private, nonprofit university.<sup>20</sup>

Despite repeated reports about the imminent reopening of the seminary, these turned out to be inaccurate. Moreover, Ankara has linked the seminary's reopening with Greek-Turkish relations and the resolution of long-standing problems in Western Thrace and the rights of the region's minority. Thus, a solution to the dispute over the seminary has apparently become entangled again in a reciprocity conundrum. For its part, the Turkish government has expected a shift in Greek policies regarding the appointment of muftis, or Muslim religious jurists, in Western Thrace.<sup>21</sup> Once more, negative reciprocity concerning questions of religious freedom have become a burden in ongoing

<sup>19</sup>Nimet Ozbek, "Theological School of Halki (the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary) in the Context of Freedom of Education and Instruction of Minorities in Turkey," *Journal of Islamic State Practices in International Law* 3 (2007): 29–31.

<sup>20</sup>Istanbul Desk, "Halki Seminary to Undergo Status Change to Allow for Reopening," *Hürriyet Daily News*, Aug. 26, 2013.

<sup>21</sup>Recognizing the right of the minority to elect their local muftis became a key demand of Turkey with reference to the reopening of the Heybeliada (Halki) religious seminary. The official Greek position claimed that the appointment – and not election – of the muftis was inevitable, given the judicial duties that muftis have enjoyed according to the Treaty of Lausanne. The abolition of the judicial role of muftis and the effective involvement of the minority population to the appointment of its religious leaders remained a challenge that the Greek state has so far avoided addressing.



discussions between Greece and Turkey.<sup>22</sup> This development points to how entrenched the issue had become as far as human rights are concerned. Undeniably, the authorities do not consider fundamental liberties as something that is guaranteed for all citizens regardless of their religious and ethnic affiliation and instead these individuals remain subject to retaliatory measures that are meant to deliver messages to other states. On this point, the reader might note that the February 2019 visit by Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to Heybeliada and the former Seminary raised international media awareness of the issue but failed to lead to any breakthrough.

### **The Panorthodox Synod**

With all that being stated, respect for the rights and the institutions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate within the Republic of Turkey will not automatically mean its confirmation as a global actor. Apart from restoring the rights of the Ecumenical Patriarchate vis-à-vis the Turkish state, at the outset of the new millennium two major events have punctuated the institution's resolve to confirm its ecumenical status. The first has been the organization of a Panorthodox Synod, or a council of all Orthodox Churches around the world, which allows the Orthodox Church to discuss important issues, such as the mission of Orthodox Christianity in the global era, the role of Orthodox diaspora, relations with other Christian churches, as well as strictly theological questions. The organization of this church council was intended to underscore the soft power of the Ecumenical Patriarchate within the Orthodox world. Officials originally planned this to take place at the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul at the Hagia Eirene (Aya İrini) Museum, the church where the Second Ecumenical Synod took place. The synod's venue had to be moved to Crete, however, due to the sharp deterioration of Russian-Turkish relations that followed the downing of a Russian aircraft by a Turkish one on the Syrian-Turkish border on November 24, 2015 and the mounting security concerns that were associated with the affair. Nevertheless, the Panorthodox Council, which aimed to become a manifestation of Orthodox unity and to convey the response of Orthodox Christianity to burning global questions, faced boycotts from some of the participating institutions. The decision of the Patriarchates of Moscow, Antioch, Bulgaria and Georgia not to attend the Panorthodox Council highlighted deep divisions within the Orthodox world. Beyond the pretexts put forward for their absence, it was widely assumed that the Moscow Patriarchate orchestrated the boycott in an effort to undercut the prestige and the soft power of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. While the absence

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<sup>22</sup>Samim Akgönül, ed. *Reciprocity: Greek and Turkish Minorities: Law, Religion and Politics* (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2008); and Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, "Europe Overshadowed: Reciprocity as a Race to the Bottom in Religious Freedom," in *Under the Long Shadows of Europe: Greeks and Turks in the Era of Post-Nationalism*, ed. Othon Anastasakis, Kalyso Nicolaidis, and Kerem Oktem (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

of the Moscow Patriarchate and the other invitees appeared to confirm Russia's strong influence within the Orthodox world, it also paradoxically enabled there to be a unanimous decision that paved the way for granting autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

### The Ukrainian ecclesiastical crisis

The Ukrainian ecclesiastical crisis has emerged as a litmus test for the ability of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to perform its intended ecumenical role.<sup>23</sup> The famous Soviet adage “nationalist in form, socialist in content,” which aimed to justify the administrative division of the Soviet Union along lines of nationality, proved inaccurate in the late 1980s, when nationalism succeeded in outliving socialism throughout the Soviet realm. Conflicts, such as the one between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over Nagorno-Karabakh, underlined the inability of the Soviet regime to suppress national identities and was compounded by the economic failure that had brought the Soviet Union to the brink of collapse.

Following the official demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the independence of Ukraine raised myriad questions including that of the relations between the Ukrainian and Russian national identities. Russian historians consider the Kyivan Rus principality that arose in the ninth century to be the first Russian state, and Kyiv is viewed as the cradle of Russian civilization before its center of gravity moved to the Muscovite Rus principality in the thirteenth century.<sup>24</sup> The Kyivan Church belonged within the jurisdiction to the Ecumenical Patriarchate until a synodal decision in 1686 transferred its management of ecclesiastical affairs – but not its full jurisdiction – to the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the Church of Ukraine was divided following the collapse of the Russian Empire and with the rise of the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> Due to the centrality of Kyiv and Kyivan Rus to the Russian national narrative, accepting Ukrainian independence was hard for Russians to swallow and much more difficult than accepting that of other parts of the Empire, such as Georgia or Tajikistan. In Russia's effort to maintain its hegemonic position over the public sphere in these newly independent republics, Orthodox Christianity

<sup>23</sup>Ukraine was not the first country where a jurisdiction crisis broke between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate. The Estonian ecclesiastical crisis preceded it in 1996, when the Estonian Orthodox Church split from the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate conferred it with the status of Archdiocese. Nevertheless, the symbolic significance of the Ukrainian ecclesiastical crisis was no match for that of the Estonian one.

<sup>24</sup>Sophia Senyk, *A History of the Church in Ukraine, 2: 1300 to the Union of Brest* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2011), 17–33.

<sup>25</sup>Thomas Brusanowski, “Autocephaly in Ukraine: The Canonical Dimension,” in *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*, ed. Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer (Cham: Springer, 2016), 68–72; and Alfons Brüning, “Orthodox Autocephaly in Ukraine: The Historical Dimension” in *ibid.*, 87–97.

<sup>26</sup>Nicholas E. Denysenko, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 113–45; Thomas Bremer, “Religion in Ukraine: Historical Background and the Present Situation,” in *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*, ed. Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer (Cham: Springer, 2016), 7–14.

emerged as a valuable tool of soft power despite the atheism of Russia's leadership even during the period of Communist rule. As Orthodox Christianity had served for centuries as a unifying element for populations of diverse ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, authorities hoped that it could provide a crucial bond for the populations of the newly established post-Soviet republics that maintained significant cultural bonds with Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, the unifying role of Orthodox Christianity had already been challenged by nationalism in the Balkans back in the nineteenth century. The rise of Greek, Bulgarian, Romanian, Serbian, and Albanian nationalist movements challenged the unifying role of Orthodox Christianity and brought the Ecumenical Patriarchate under severe pressure. In fact, Balkan nationalisms sought to subjugate Orthodoxy and convert it into a reservoir of symbolic resources that proved crucial for their appeal to the uneducated Balkan peasants. All the while, the Ecumenical Patriarchate struggled to defend its place among its multiethnic flock and considered "ethnophyletism" a heresy. This fragmentation of what had been the Orthodox millet under Ottoman rule served the foreign policy interests of the Sublime Porte's traditional foe, the Russian Empire. Ironically, about a century after the end of the First World War that had signaled the end of the "Age of Empires" and the advent of the "Age of Nation-States," the Russian Orthodox Church was still facing the same uphill struggle that the Ecumenical Patriarchate had confronted in the nineteenth century as it tried to prevent the disintegration of its flock along nationalist lines.

While Ukraine avoided ethnic conflict at the time of its independence in 1991, it emerged as a new state that was divided along linguistic and cultural lines. A Ukrainian-speaking population located in the central and western provinces coexisted with a mainly Russophone population in the eastern and southern provinces of the nascent country. While the Ukrainian-speaking population developed a loyalty to the independent Republic of Ukraine, the situation with its Russian-speaking counterpart was more complicated. Some of the latter citizens identified themselves as Russians and not Ukrainians and maintained a loyalty toward the Russian Federation. Over time, a political struggle for the consolidation and proliferation of Ukrainian national identity became strongly intertwined with the ecclesiastical politics of the country.<sup>27</sup>

Apart from the presence of the Greek Catholic, or Uniate, Church in the western provinces of the country, there emerged three Orthodox Churches in the 1990s. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC–MP) under the leadership of Archbishop Onouphrios (Onufrij),<sup>28</sup> the

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<sup>27</sup>Irina Du Quenoy, "Christian Geopolitics and the Ukrainian Ecclesiastical Crisis," *War on the Rocks*, Oct. 30, 2018.

<sup>28</sup>Denys Shestopalets, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, the State and the Russian-Ukrainian Crisis, 2014–2018," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 20, no. 1 (2019): 51–4.

Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC–KP) of Archbishop Philaretos (Philaret) and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) led by Archbishops Mstyslav, Demetrios (Dymytriy), Methodios (Mefodiy) and Makarios (Makariy). Inevitably the ecclesiastical status of the country became a very complicated and hotly contested issue.<sup>29</sup> While the first Church was connected to the Moscow Patriarchate and was recognized as the legitimate Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Moscow treated the other two as schismatic. The Moscow Patriarchate defrocked Archbishop Philaretos, but that did not prevent him from continuing to preside over the UOC–KP.

In the meantime, the rapid deterioration of Russian-Ukrainian relations took a toll in the realm of ecclesiastical politics. The 2006 and 2009 natural crises between Russia and Ukraine and the November 2013–February 2014 Euromaidan revolution, which took place over a decision of the Victor Yanukovich government to suspend an association agreement with the European Union and seek membership of the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Economic Union, both paved the way for a more acute crisis. All the while, the politics of religion featured very strongly in what became a crucial moment in modern Ukrainian history.<sup>30</sup> Russia’s subsequent annexation of Crimea and the invasion of the Donbass region posed a formidable challenge to Ukrainian sovereignty and brought tensions to a peak. In such an atmosphere, questions of religious affiliation became heavily politicized<sup>31</sup> and securitized.<sup>32</sup> Under these circumstances anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine peaked, and the government sought to minimize Russian influence in the public sphere, including ecclesiastical affairs. This meant that the position of the Russian-influenced UOC–MP had to be challenged.<sup>33</sup>

Considering this development, the Ukrainian government contacted the Ecumenical Patriarchate and requested its intervention to resolve the crisis. While the Ecumenical Patriarchate initially abstained from taking any specific action until the convocation of the Panorthodox Synod, it changed tack following its Russian boycott. Thus, the Ecumenical Patriarchate retracted the 1686 synodal decision that transferred the management of ecclesiastical affairs of Kyiv and Ukraine to the Moscow Patriarchate, and thereby restored its canonical jurisdiction. The Ecumenical Patriarchate then established an Exarchate that prepared the ground for the promulgation of a *tomos*, or a document, that conferred autocephaly on the Orthodox Church of

<sup>29</sup>Iannis Carras, “Can Ukraine’s Divided Church Help Heal the Divided Country?” *OpenDemocracy*, Jan. 15, 2015.

<sup>30</sup>Denys Shestopalets, “Churches, Politics, and Ideological Struggles in Ukraine: The Case of the Euromaidan Protests (2013–2014),” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 21, no. 1 (2020): 5–10.

<sup>31</sup>“Church and State in Ukraine after the Euromaidan: President Poroshenko’s Discourse on Religion, 2014–2018,” *Politics and Religion* 13, no. 1 (2020): 168–71.

<sup>32</sup>“Church as an Existential Threat: The Securitization of Religion in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine,” *Journal of Church and State* 62, no. 4 (2020): 730–39.

<sup>33</sup>Mikhail Suslov, “The Russian Orthodox Church and the Crisis in Ukraine,” in *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*, ed. Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer (Cham: Springer, 2016), 134–8.

Ukraine.<sup>34</sup> It also canceled the defrocking of Philaretos. Then, on January 5, 2019, Archbishop Epiphanius was appointed as Archbishop of the Autocephalous Church of Ukraine. His selection pleased the Ukrainian government but incensed its Russian counterpart.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that the Ecumenical Patriarchate had decided to intervene in the Ukrainian ecclesiastical conflict and confer legitimacy to those Ukrainian bishops who espoused the end of Russian ecclesiastical influence over the Church of Ukraine was understood as direct provocation by the Moscow Patriarchate and a blow to Russian attempts to use Orthodox Christianity as a tool to maintain influence in Ukrainian affairs. Thus, the Moscow Patriarchate decided to sever all ties with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Russian attempts to use Orthodox Christianity as a cement between Russians and Ukrainians had failed. Moreover, the decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to confer legitimacy on a Ukrainian Orthodox Church pointed at the limits of the Russian instrumentalization of Orthodox Christianity, which was promoting Russian national interests through the construction of an imperial “Russian world (*Russkiy Mir*)” vision,<sup>36</sup> that incorporated Ukraine as well as Belarus to Russia.<sup>37</sup> The establishment of a Ukrainian Orthodox Church independent from Russian influence was an inevitable consequence of Russia’s reckless decisions regarding Ukraine.<sup>38</sup> It was Moscow’s actions in Crimea and Donbass that alienated millions of Russian-speaking Ukrainians from Russia and reinforced Ukrainian efforts at nation-building. By annexing Crimea and invading the Donbass, Russia brought a large part of Ukraine’s Russophone population closer to the Ukrainian-speaking population who already considered Russia to be a threat to Kyiv’s sovereignty. On the other hand, had the Ecumenical Patriarchate abstained from resolving the dispute, it would have dealt a heavy blow against its claim to be the spiritual leadership of the Orthodox world. Its attempt to resolve an ecclesiastical dispute and secure ecclesiastical unity in a deeply divided country certainly displeased Russian national interests in Ukraine.<sup>39</sup> Yet, what was at stake in Ukraine from the point of view of the Ecumenical Patriarchate was not the victory of Ukrainian or Russian nationalism. It was its ability to stand above nationalist divisions and confer legitimacy on ecclesiastical actors who were seeking unity through its intervention.

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<sup>34</sup>Tornike Metreveli, “The Making of Orthodox Church of Ukraine: Damocles Sword or Light at the End of the Tunnel?” *Religion & Society in East and West* 47, nos. 4–5 (2019): 1–4.

<sup>35</sup>Denys Shestopalets, “Religious Freedom, Conspiracies, and Faith: The Geopolitics of Ukrainian Autocephaly,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 18, no. 3 (2020): 29–31.

<sup>36</sup>Cyril Hovorun, “Interpreting the ‘Russian World,’” in *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*, ed. Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer (Cham: Springer, 2016), 168–70.

<sup>37</sup>Neil MacFarquhar, “Russia-Ukraine Tensions Set up the Biggest Christian Schism since 1054,” *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 2018.

<sup>38</sup>Iannis Carras, “Moscow, Kyiv, Constantinople: What Happens after the Ukrainian Church Crisis?” *OpenDemocracy*, Feb. 21, 2019.

<sup>39</sup>Du Quenoy, “Church and State in Ukraine and the Power Politics of Orthodox Christianity.”

## Conclusion

The Ecumenical Patriarchate's activities in the post-Cold War era have pointed to the potential for religious organizations to claim a crucial role concerning key global questions, such as the environment, as well as in conflicts in the global era where religion emerges as a principal identity factor. Through the rising role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Orthodox Christianity could no more be dominated by Russia. In particular, it could no longer act as a tool for the consolidation of Russian soft power over Russia's "near abroad," or the post-Soviet republics that had become independent but remained under Russia's political and cultural influence. Russian soft power in the post-Soviet space and the development of the "Russian world" vision can no longer rely on Orthodox Christianity to be a servant of Russian nationalism. In the nineteenth century, it was the Russian Empire and the Moscow Patriarchate that nurtured the rise of Panslavism in the Ottoman Balkans and thereby dealt a heavy blow against the influence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The fragmentation of the Greek Orthodox, or *Rum, millet* into national communities proved inevitable given the rising appeal of nationalism and the subjugation of Orthodox symbolic resources to a host of nationalist projects. As the October Revolution of 1917 and the establishment of the Soviet Union had served as a cover for the continuation of Russian imperial practices under Soviet guise, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed for the resumption of this process in the newly independent republics that Russia considered to be part of the "Russian world."

Ironically the processes with which the Ecumenical Patriarchate had to deal in the nineteenth and early twentieth century have also confronted the Moscow Patriarchate within the former Russian imperial domains in the period since the end of the Cold War. At the time of this writing, this protracted political crisis has acquired dramatic and explosive dimensions with Russia's invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022. Meanwhile, the Ecumenical Patriarchate's involvement stands as a prime example of a historic institution reclaiming its role as the responsible spiritual leader of the Orthodox world. Managing the vicissitudes of Russian and Turkish politics cannot be easy; yet the Ecumenical Patriarchate has lived up to that task, and all the while it has reinforced its ecumenical role, promoted peace and introduced an Orthodox agenda that has relevance for the global era.

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