

Religion and Political Crisis in Ukraine

Since the first internationally-recognized state boundaries were created in 1991 from the territories of the former Soviet Union, popular unrest and vociferous demands for reform have spiked during pivotal moments. In Ukraine these protests have taken the form of mass street protests, which coalesced into the 2004 Orange Revolution and, more recently, into the 2013-14 Maidan protests. Although there have been isolated forms of high visibility, high impact protest in Russia as well, such as the Pussy Riot punk performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior in 2012, the same level of broad mass initiatives to force reform have not occurred in Russia.

Although these two countries share a common cultural tradition of Orthodoxy, an Eastern Christian faith, in Russia Orthodox clergy, religious institutions and believers by and large help maintain the status quo by discouraging open unrest even though the popular grievances against judicial corruption, income inequality and negligible investment in infrastructure are comparable in both countries. In contrast, Ukrainian clergy, religious institutions and, above all, average believers have actively played a key role in fomenting demands for change justified by religiously inspired rhetoric and symbolism.

The instrumental use of religious sentiment in both contexts reflects the emergence of conditions in which religion is capable of playing an expedient role in forging a new governing and moral order. It is doing so, however, quite differently in both countries. Paradoxically, it is the common faith tradition that Ukraine and Russia share that has come to separate these two countries. Each one is becoming more religiously committed, thanks to a recognition of the galvanizing potential of shared religious sentiment, and yet simultaneously more secular in orientation as a reaction to the alien-

ating effects of clerical meddling in politics. The import of religion on politics and popular perceptions of political legitimacy were only heightened in both countries after the Maidan protests were sparked. This development provided the motivation to dedicate an issue of *Euxeinos* to changes in the religious landscape in Ukraine.

MAIDAN AS TURNING POINT

When Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich and his governing circle of oligarchic partners decided to privilege maintaining good relations with Russia by entering into the Eurasian Customs Union over taking the initial steps toward a trade agreement with the European Union, popular protests set in motion consequences that continue to test geopolitical alliances. After several hundred years of political union with Russia and a mere 23 years of independence, as far as the most vocal segment of the population was concerned, the future of the country was decidedly European. Protest over Yanukovich's decision combined with popular disgust over corrupt and self-serving governance that found expression in massive street protests in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, beginning on November 21, 2013. This coalesced into a broad social movement for reform that has come to be known as the "Maidan," after the main city square in Kyiv, Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or Independence Square. The Maidan protests, which at their height involved over one million people in a city with three million residents, were eventually disbanded on February 20, 2014 when President Yanukovich gave the order to clear the square of its protesters, resulting in the death of over one hundred people.

The audibility of the religiously-inspired rhetoric and the visibility of religious symbolism and clergy on the Maidan was ubiquitous

through each of the phases -- hopeful protests, violent struggle and now mass mourning and collective commemoration. This pronounced religiosity on the public square does not, however, reflect a "postsecular" rediscovery of religion after Soviet anti-religious campaigns to promote an atheist worldview. Rather, the instrumental use of clergy, religious sentiment and transcendent symbolism on the Maidan reflects the emergence of conditions in which religion is capable of playing an expedient role in the process of forging a new governing and moral order. During the protests, assertions of transcendence fed convictions that the massive efforts required of a humiliated and tired population to radically redirect governing practices were indeed possible (Fylypovych and Horkushi 2014). Religion was effectively used to bolster a sense of Ukrainian nationhood and has been instrumental in articulating and making manifest an embraced sense of Ukrainian nationality. Indeed, the meaningful role played by clergy and religious institutions during this pivotal moment of protest and struggle has irreversibly altered the balance of church-state relations in Ukraine. The power of the Ukrainian people to launch and sustain mass street protests is now undeniable. This power stems from a shared rejection of forms of governance predicated on a social Darwinian moral code of self-enrichment and the lawlessness and corruption that it bred. The response of the Ukrainian people was a revolution to reclaim their dignity.

The prolonged protests were tragically followed by an armed struggle for territory and influence that erupted in March 2014, beginning with the annexation of Crimea and developing into an undeclared war in eastern Ukraine. Carl von Clausewitz claimed that war is a continuation of politics by other means. The same could be said of religion, not only

in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, but in general as these two countries continue to rapidly evolve and forge new forms of governance. Religious institutions in Ukraine have altered the dynamics of their subservient state-allied role in governance, which in many respects constitutes a departure from traditional church-state relations within an Eastern Orthodox tradition. The implications in a variety of faith traditions of a recalibrated balance of powers among the state, the populace and religious leaders is a central theme explored in the articles that follow.

Not only did the Maidan protests ultimately lead to a string of unforeseen actions and reactions with global implications, they also mark a turning point in church-state relations in Ukraine that do not find their counterpart in Russia at this time. The implications of this pivotal moment are fundamental and far reaching. Religious organizations have begun to reconfigure understandings of cultural space, religious boundaries and their relation to state borders and issues of sovereignty. This, in turn, informs assessments of political legitimacy, moral authority and allegiance. In short, religious communities in Ukraine and Russia have been invested with new roles, albeit different ones. These new roles are rendering these societies more secular and more religiously inclined simultaneously. Most importantly, they are also creating cultural and political differences that separate these two countries from each other in spite of their long shared history. These larger dynamics increasingly have ramifications for the religious landscape within Ukraine as well.

REGION, NATION AND BEYOND

It had become conventional wisdom among scholars, journalists and the informed public to speak of the regionally divided nature of

Ukrainian political life. Little thought, however, went into identifying just what those regions were. Did the “regional” split in Ukraine go beyond the east-west / pro-nationalist-pro-communist / pro-European-pro-Russian binary divides that were so commonly used to describe the divisions in Ukrainian society? If so, how? Is there merit to Vladimir Putin’s insistence on the necessity of federalism in Ukraine as a ruling mechanism due to the country’s pronounced regional divisions?

The “Region Nation and Beyond: A Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Reconceptualization of Ukraine” research project, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, was conceived as an attempt to rethink regionalism in Ukraine to come to a greater understanding as to how particular regions are envisioned by those who live in them, and what informs that vision. What are the dynamics that transform a particular space into a cultural and political place that has a name and to which people attach meaning and allegiance? The project provides answers to these questions by exploring the formation and ramifications of regionalism in Ukrainian society from five distinct viewpoints: history, religion, language, literature and economics. The goal is to take a fresh look at the dynamics of change that bring regions into being and change them over time, and analyze the significance of regions for Ukraine and the surrounding countries today.

No one could have predicted that this project would have become so timely. As head of the research group on religion, I have long recognized the political utility of religious symbolism as well as the role of religion in defining spaces as sacred and then forging attachments to those spaces. Over a decade ago, I began to argue that some of the sharpest differences since the collapse of the USSR separating Ukraine from Russia in terms of political

policies, social institutions and cultural values were emerging in the sphere of religion. (Wanner 2007) And, now, once again, on the heels of the Maidan protests and its aftermath, I find myself stressing the importance of religion in shaping people’s reactions to the violent conflict that continues to rage in eastern Ukraine as I write. (Wanner 2014)

To analyze these dramatic developments, the Region, Nation and Beyond project sponsored a conference organized by myself and Viktor Yelensky in Kyiv in September 2014. The goal of this conference was to consider the myriad roles religion was playing in the acute political crisis facing Ukraine. The articles in this issue concerning Ukraine written by Myroslav Marynovych, Oleksandr Sagan, Nikolai Mitrokhin, Mykhailo Cherenkov, Yuri Chernomoretz and myself were first presented during this conference. They offer diverse perspectives on the sources and ramifications of this strife as it has affected religious institutions and the everyday religious practices of the faithful. These articles pay particular attention to the shifting obligations of clergy in terms of their understandings as to whom religious institutions serve and to the changing nature of what religious institutions can expect from state authorities.

The aforementioned articles are complemented by additional articles by Oleg Yarosh, Yuliana Smilianskaya and Wilfried Jilge in this issue that consider how religious practice is changing as a result of the dramatic disruptions to everyday life that have ensued since the Maidan protests. They consider changes in religious practice and consciousness from the perspective of members of non-Eastern Christian faith groups and from the very large segment of the Ukrainian population that consider themselves not religious at all. And yet, the radically different atmosphere that has en-

gulfed the country since the violence broke out in eastern Ukraine continues to provoke evolutions in political and cultural orientations in which religious institutions continue to play a vital role. Very few other social institutions are capable of generating the moods and motivations necessary to sustain prolonged aggression and few are in a position to provide comfort to those forced to bear witness to senseless destruction of human life.

As the importance of religion for understanding and responding to these convulsive changes is unlikely to fade, rather only to accelerate in this part of the world, the initial conference in Kyiv in 2014 has given birth to an ongoing research group, "Religion in the Black Sea Region." This new initiative aims to consider religion and religious practices that not only situate Ukrainian regions within Ukraine, but also Ukraine within a greater geopolitical region. This means that readers of *Euxeinos* can look forward to more articles on this important theme.

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