

# Church Competition During the Pandemic: the Case of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

by Tymofii Brik

*The collapse of the USSR resulted in religious revivals in all former republics, including Ukraine. Religion provided security and emotional support. It legitimized political elites, while some churches also offered public goods, substituting the state. With time, religion became a crucial component of the national identities. Despite many similarities to other primely Orthodox countries, Ukraine has been unique in its religious landscape. Several Orthodox jurisdictions have competed for the status of the national church, which allowed religious fragmentation in all regions of Ukraine. This paper shows the importance of religious pluralism in Ukraine during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021.*

**Key words:** Ukraine, pandemic, religious pluralism, religious supply, church competition

doi: 10.55337/YEND6820

## Introduction

In February 2020, two major and competing Ukrainian Orthodox Churches issued remarkably similar statements regarding the pandemic calling for peace and love of neighbor.<sup>1</sup> Religious leaders of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Ukraine-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) were equally concerned with the process of evacuation of Ukrainians from the Wuhan province, China. The government organized the evacuation and arranged a transfer of the evacuees to healthcare facilities in the small city of Novy Sangary. However, local protestors rioted against hosting 254 Ukrainians who just arrived from China. Witnessing high levels of hostility and clashes with the riot police, leaders of two major Orthodox churches called for peace. They made strong public statements condemning hostilities and calling for mutual aid and support.

Despite this similar response, soon after, their rhetoric would diverge significantly, also polarizing citizens of Ukraine. While the OCU quickly adopted social distancing policies and publicly complied with the government's regulations, the UOC-MP pushed anti-lockdown narratives challenging the government. When did this divergence happen, and what are the consequences of this divergence for religious behavior among Ukrainian believers? These questions are addressed in the article.

## **Religious Pluralism and Orthodox Competition in Ukraine**

Many scholars who studied religion in the post-Soviet region have consistently argued that the Ukrainian religious landscape is exceptionally pluralistic.<sup>2</sup> Religious pluralism in Ukraine goes beyond denominations and features a competition within the Orthodox church. Several Orthodox jurisdictions have competed for the status of the historically canonical and rightful church of Ukraine while also competing for parishes and political influence. Moreover, statistical models based on datasets from the 1990s to 2010s showed that religious identities and church attendance of Ukrainians were higher in regions with higher Orthodox competition.<sup>3</sup>

In Ukraine, a country where religion has become a significant part of public political discourses, religious pluralism became a significant part of politics.<sup>4</sup> It shaped the electoral behavior of Ukrainians and how political elites carefully constructed and updated their narratives.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, not surprisingly, religious pluralism and the competition between the Orthodox jurisdictions have become one of the most crucial variables which influenced how Ukrainian churches reacted to the pandemic.

### **To comply or not to comply? That is the Question.**

Although the religious landscape of Ukraine is both versatile and dynamic, unfortunately, this paper cannot cover all significant religious groups, including Greek Catholics, Roman Catholics, various Protestant churches, and Jewish and Muslim minorities. The two largest Orthodox churches will be compared, namely the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Ukraine-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). These were the largest and most potent Orthodox churches in Ukraine in 2020 – a period when the pandemic unfolded.

The OCU emerged in January 2019 when the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople signed the Tomos (decree of autocephaly), officially recognizing the OCU as a canonical autocephalous Orthodox Church within the territory of Ukraine. This church did not emerge out of nowhere. It amalgamated from two other Orthodox groups that existed in Ukraine since the 1990s and were not in communion with the rest of global Orthodoxy. In contrast, the UOC-MP has long existed in Ukraine with the status of a self-governing church under the Russian Orthodox church's jurisdiction. This status provided international legitimacy and communion with the rest of global Orthodoxy. Moreover, the UOC-MP has been superior in terms of the number of officially registered parishes. When the new OCU emerged, the UOC-MP felt threatened by a forceful merger with the new church. Although a small number of parishes did change the registration, this was relatively marginal. The UOC-MP resisted the idea of the UOC-MP and was engaged in numerous protests and public events mobilizing its members against this perceived threat.

The pandemic crisis hit Ukraine at a moment of religious transformation: the

UOC-MP emerged and thrived for power while the UOC-MP held to its ground and mobilized its adherences for resistance. A balance between these two and between them and the state has influenced how Orthodox churches reacted to the pandemic. In 2020, the OCU was in better shape: (i) polls showed greater support among Ukrainians when compared to other Orthodox churches (ii) the state has recently acknowledged the OCU as the canonical church (even though the presidential administration already had changed in 2020). Therefore, not surprisingly (as demonstrated in what follows), the OCU complied with the governmental regulations of social distancing and stay at home policies. In sharp contrast, the UOC-MP was facing a (largely perceived and exaggerated) threat of extinction. As shown in what follows, the UOC-MP insisted on church attendance and maintaining worship despite the lockdown policies. This observation is consistent with the “club models” of religious behavior<sup>6</sup>. These models show that religious groups use strict regulations to enforce loyalty and promote ties within the group. In simple terms, the UOC-MP double-downed on its strict religious narratives and practices to sustain its congregation.

The differences between the narratives of the OCU and the UOC-MP were particularly salient in March and April 2020 during the preparations to Easter. This celebration is quite special for the Orthodox tradition which demands a necessary presence of people during masses. Therefore, the timing of the pandemic and social distancing could not have been worse for the Orthodox groups. While the OCU largely acted in the spirit of quarantine policies, the UOC-MP has challenged them significantly. On the surface, both churches proposed significant restrictions. They both suggested that icons should not be kissed or touched, that no more than 10 people should visit a church at once, that praying at home is good enough, and that people with symptoms should stay at home. Nevertheless, it was only the OCU that consistently promoted a message that the church should collaborate with the governmental isolation policies. In March and April 2020, the OCU issued various messages suggesting that people should make special prayer corners at their own homes with icons, scriptures, and candles; calling their congregation to stay home; and arguing that staying at home is a great virtue of altruism and spiritual asceticism. In contrast, the UCO-MP was not so consistent. Their officials stated that “they cannot prevent people from visiting churches”, they had systematically refused to acknowledge that some of their monasteries were affected by the Covid-19 eventually closing them for public, and the head of the church Onufryi suggested that only sick people should stay at home arguing that others could attend churches but stay outside and pray outdoors. Moreover, the UCO-MP organized mass cross processions announcing 7,000 participants.

What was the reaction of faithful Ukrainians? To address this question, three polls were executed asking respondents about their religious affiliation and attitudes towards religious practices as well as willingness to attend masses. These

surveys are described below.

### **Research Design**

At first, 1,176 respondents were surveyed on April 8-10 (2020) before Easter. Then 1,831 respondents were surveyed on December 24-28 (2020) before Christmas. Finally, a third poll was conducted among 1,001 respondents on April 24 before Easter in 2021. All surveys were conducted using Gradus, which is the smartphone application designed for quick polling and panel data collection in Ukraine.

Only urban Ukrainians participate in the panel. The results cannot be generalized to rural Ukraine (which is the caveat of this method). Nevertheless, research of religiosity in urban Ukraine is especially valuable in the context of the pandemic. Many offices and factories that were shut down were located in urban places. Furthermore, the UCO-MP organized a series of marches in the large cities Odesa and Dnipro, while other cities as Ternopil or Kyiv witnessed a lockdown of two major temples (Lavra). Religious motives were salient in urban Ukrainian places in all parts of the country. Therefore, urban Ukrainians were exposed to many events and debates around religion.

Respondents were asked whether they approve online liturgies, whether they believe that praying cures the coronavirus, and whether they believe that certain practices should be banned during the pandemic (e.g., church attendance during the religious masses, cross processes, and holy communion from the same spoon). In the first wave (April 8, 2020), only 598 respondents answered the questions about banning some practices. This wave was designed as a survey experiment with randomized exposure to this question. Regarding the other waves, there were no splits of the data.

### **Results**

In what follows, only major Orthodox groups are discussed (the OCU, the UOC-MP, and those respondents who identify with Orthodox Christianity with no partition by patriarchates). Unfortunately, this paper cannot address other religious groups even though they are included in the original sample.

According to Table 1, most Ukrainians in all waves tend to ban practices which are directly associated with body and hygiene practices (kiss priest hand, use shared spoons), then a considerable number of Ukrainians agreed to ban physical attending of rituals (walks, church attendance). However, most Ukrainians remain tolerant to some generic rituals (baptizing a child, attending a memorial service) which has a significant cultural meaning but does not necessarily pose a threat from the virus. Another interesting observation from Table 1 is that at the early stages of the pandemic (wave 1), very few people tolerated religious practices. However, after 6 months (wave 2), and then after 6 more months (wave 3) the

context changed dramatically. A significant share of urban Ukrainians began to tolerate religion.

	2020 April (before Orthodox Easter)	2020 December (Before Orthodox Christmas)	2021 April (Before Orthodox Easter)
Kiss priest hand	88.3%	74.5%	75.0%
Shared spoon	86.4%	71.8%	73.9%
Walk with a cross	80.2%	49.9%	53.3%
Attend church masses	77.6%	48.0%	48.9%
Attend church celebrations	76.2%	46.8%	45.4%
Celebrate church festivities at home with large groups	68.9%	31.9%	36.0%
Gather for memorial service	67.1%	30.6%	34.4%
Baptise children	65.2%	18.7%	22.1%

Table 1. Percentage of respondents who agree that certain practices should be banned during the pandemic

Figures 1 to 3 describe attitudes towards the most controversial practices such as the same spoon communion, church attendance, and cross processions. These data show that the adherents of the UOC-MP displayed a stronger attachment to religious rituals. In contrast, members of the OCU were more likely to disprove these rituals. Only the first two waves are presented since they capture the trend of increased religious tolerance over time. Many more respondents were critical towards religious practices in wave one than in wave two. However, members of the OCU remained more critical than members of the UOC-MP.

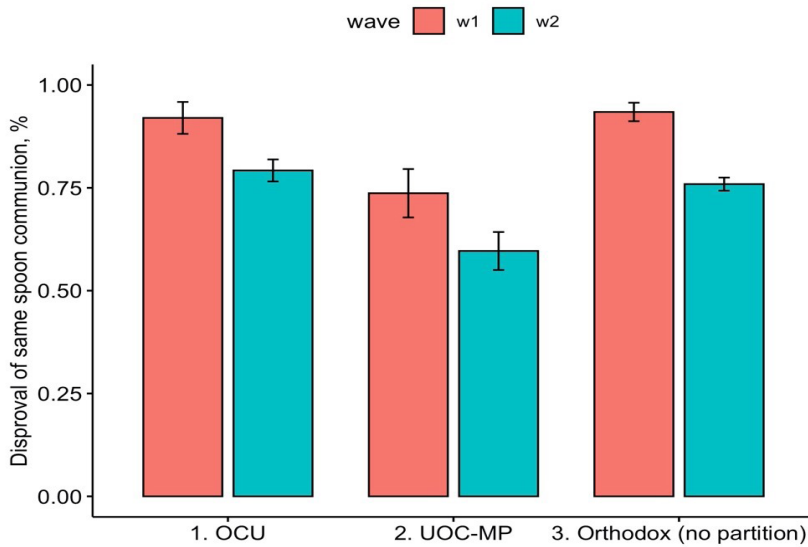


Figure 1. Disproval of the same spoon communion by the Orthodox respondents (8 April and 24 December 2020).

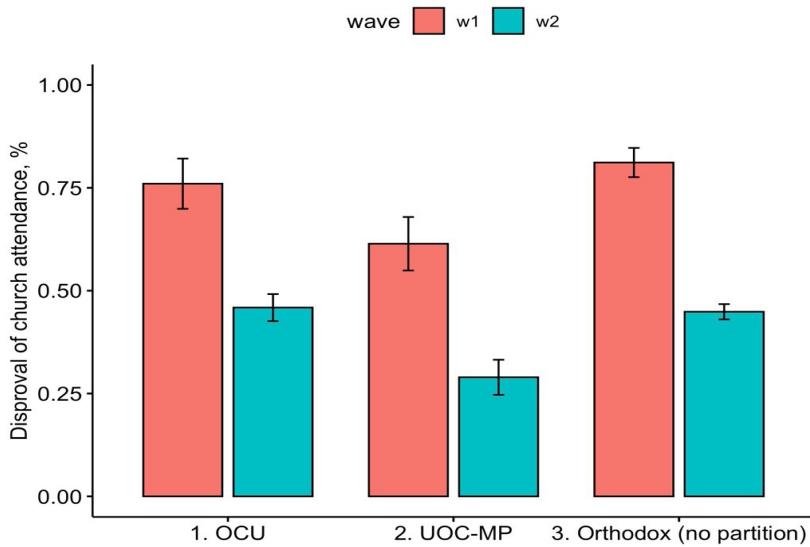


Figure 2. Disproval of church attendance during religious celebrations by the Orthodox respondents (8 April and 24 December 2020).

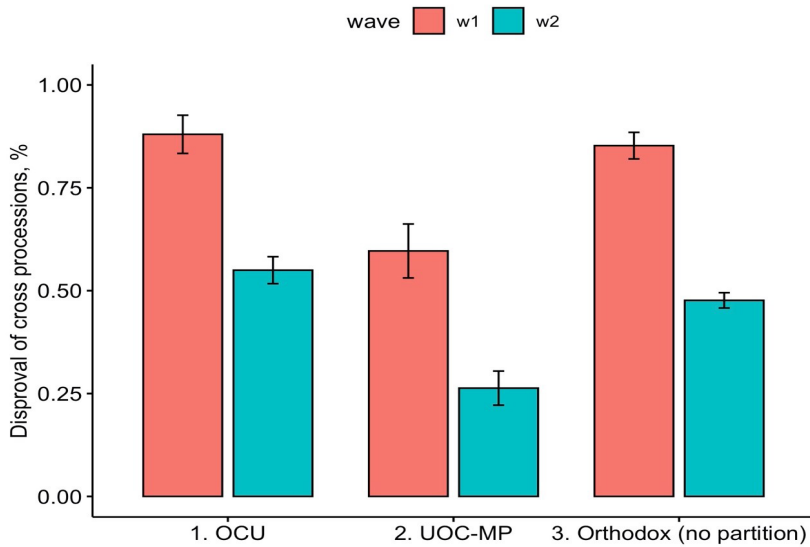


Figure 3. Disproval of cross processing by the Orthodox respondents (8 April and 24 December 2020).



## Conclusions

The pandemic has been a major challenge to all religious groups in Ukraine. Although two major Orthodox churches shared the sentiment of peace, love to neighbors, and mutual aid, their narratives, and practices during the Easter preparations from March to April 2020 diverged significantly. According to the official statements published on the respective webpages, the OCU fully complied with the governmental social distancing policies. In sharp contrast, the UOC-MP provided narratives against the lockdown and demanded church attendance. This differences in narratives correlated with religious attitudes of respondents. Members of the UOC-MP were most supportive of religious rituals and traditional religious practices and they also were more likely to believe that praying cures the coronavirus. Whether churches shaped individual attitudes by promoting specific narratives or, in the other way around, churches reacted to the demand of perishers cannot be answered by the data now. Nevertheless, official statements and surveys show a clear trend of divergence between two major Ukrainian Orthodox groups.

## About the author

Tymofii Brik received his PhD from the University of Carlos III in 2017. He is the director of the Center for sociological studies at the Kyiv School of Economics. Prior to this appointment he was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at New York University (2019-2020), and a Visiting Vucinich Fellow at the Stanford Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies (spring 2018). He is also an editor at Vox Ukraine and a board member of CEDOS. Tymofii's paper on religious supply and church competition in Ukraine, published in *Sociology of Religion*, won him an award for "Best young sociologist in Ukraine in 2018." His recent studies appeared as chapters in compilations published by Palgrave Macmillan, Routledge, and Ibidem-Verlag.

## Endnotes

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