



The war in eastern Ukraine and clash in Black Sea Church used as political tool

The situation in eastern Ukraine can be described as a permanent and ongoing (-armed) conflict. Lives continue to be destroyed. The rebels of the two “People’s Republics” - Donetsk and Luhansk - and their backers in Moscow continue to provoke Ukrainian government forces. The Kiev government is doing little to win the “hearts and the minds” of the people in these two eastern republics. Tensions persist.

From time to time the continuing conflict in eastern Ukraine gets coverage in the national and international media. What is in the news is the persistent corruption coupled with the decline in living standards in the country that occupy the public. The rule of law remains low in Ukraine and that allows the government’s administration to pressure journalists, opinion makers and the broader civil society including churches for instance to speak out more in patriotic, nationalistic and uncritical wording. However, a political democracy needs critical opinions!

Identity of civil society is changing

For years, civil society has tended to be seen as liberal: supportive of human rights, democratic reform and the protection of minorities. Often, it is still these “progressive” causes that appeal to younger activists. However, today also in Ukraine, civil

society involves an increasingly diverse mix of people and political goals, with those on the right gaining traction. Ukraine has seen radical national activists protest against Russian interference, while socially conservative groups, as in other Central European countries, focussed on religious and family values have grown. Identifying and belonging to a people, church and religion has apparently become a necessity for many. It mainly means turning against the other person who does not belong to his own group.

Russia wants to continue to exercise influence

The outcome of the 2018 presidential elections in Russia confirmed Vladimir Putin as its ongoing president. The presidential elections in Ukraine on 31 March 2019 will probably clarify the new direction the Ukrainian government is going to follow. The Minsk peace process¹ is not very popular and not part of the current debate. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, Ukraine began building defensive fortifications along its eastern border.

Russia does not want Ukraine to end up in the Western sphere of influence. Russia sees Ukraine as historically belonging to it. The cradle of Russian civilization is largely in Ukraine. It seems that there is a majority among the Russian public opinion having the Crimea annexed as historically part of their country. At the same time, the annexation of the Crimea is illegal and that is why the Russia-Ukraine conflict will remain internationally visible.

Black Sea clash

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minsk_Protocol

On 26 November 2018, the Ukrainian parliament has promulgated martial law for the next 30 days in all republics bordering on Russia after a weekend of naval confrontation off the disputed Crimean Peninsula in which Russia fired on and seized three Ukrainian vessels amid renewed tensions between the neighbours. While a 2003 treaty designates the Kerch Strait and Sea of Azov as shared territorial waters, Russia has sought to assert greater control over the passage since the annexation.

Since 2014, Russia views the Kerch Strait as its own territorial waters. It also claims territorial waters around Crimea. Russian officials fear a Ukrainian attack on the expensive, recently opened Crimean Bridge linking the Peninsula with Russia. The Russians no longer want free passage for Ukrainian vessels through the Kerch Strait without approval by Russia.

Churches used in political play

In October 2018, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew recognized Ukraine's "autocephalous" independent Orthodox Church.² This recent new fact in Ukrainian society was not unexpected but reflects about the relationships between churches and nation states and is in this case, a country in transition, a dangerous fact that makes good neighbour ship between Russia and Ukraine even more complicated. Why is that? This is all about contemporary politics. There are some 12.000

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-church-russia/russian-orthodox-church-breaks-with-constantinople-in-row-over-ukraine-idUSKCN1MP24G>

churches in Ukraine that could become a new Russian-Ukrainian battleground.

For more than 300 years, the church in Ukraine has been part of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The split of the two churches is one more consequence of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that began in 2014. President Petro Poroshenko who is standing for re-election in 2019 wants this move and sees himself as the father of the nation using the super-patriotic triple slogan of “Army, Faith, Religion” in his campaign. He uses or misuses the relationships of the churches in his political campaign. Nevertheless, church leaders should be independent and should not become part of the nationalistic bargain. It is also clear that Russia will defend all the Russian Orthodox Christians “everywhere”. The Moscow ROC still has millions of adherents in Ukraine and it is the default mother church of many who also regard themselves as Ukrainian citizens.

The new autocephalous church will only be able credibly to call itself Ukraine’s national church if it can persuade thousands of priests currently loyal to the ROC to defect, along with their parishioners and churches. The split of churches within Ukraine and between the ROC and the Ecumenical Patriarchate is a step backwards towards unity and cooperation.³ Is it splitting first and then working together again afterwards? The World Council of Churches has a file on top to mediate and to look for new forms of cooperation.

³ <https://www.dw.com/en/ukrainian-church-wins-independence-battle-against-moscow-patriarchate/a-45854480>

However, more important might be the religious dimension of the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine. It is possible that the church situation on the ground can provoke violence and spark yet another dimension to the conflict, which would be truly intra-Ukrainian and with a highly pronounced religious dimension. These types of conflict might be less manageable and can lead to fragmentation of political space, the rise of radical far-right conservative politics and largescale violence and chaos. There are groups of muscular young men who are prepared to fight for both churches. There are hundreds of villages and towns in eastern Ukraine where the ROC is strong.

Religious politics are now another reason to be worried about what 2019 will bring with the election campaign and the result of it in Ukraine.

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