

Ukrainian Orthodox community – between Russia’s war and European integration

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the transformations that have occurred within the Ukrainian Orthodox community in response to Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, within the broader context of Ukraine’s aspirations for European integration. Specifically, it focuses on the changes and diversification of the overall perception of Europe as a political community and Ukraine’s position within it, the conflicts arising from the implementation of this vision, and the adaptation of it within the church (using the example of the calendar reform introduced in 2023). The study primarily relies on contextual and discourse analyses of texts from the two largest Ukrainian Orthodox churches: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, as well as the inter-religious All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations.

Keywords: Russia’s war against Ukraine, Orthodox Church, religion and politics, secularisation, Orthodoxy and European integration

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church (hereinafter referred to as ROC or the Moscow Patriarchate) became the most visible structure that still held together the former Soviet (and before that, Russian) empire. Even the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which replaced the former ‘superstate,’ could not measure up to its influence. Unlike the practically virtual CIS, in which Ukraine was a co-founder but never even ratified membership, the presence of the Moscow Patriarchate was visible in almost every settlement, from the capital to remote towns and villages in every part of the country. The clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC(MP)¹) and ROC, became part

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¹ The official name of this religious organisation and its status (independent or part of ROC) are currently the subject of fierce debate, including in court. Aligning with the *Conclusion of the religious expert examination of the Statute of Governance of the Ukrainian Orthodox*

of Ukrainian public life and ceremonial, even gaining a monopoly under certain presidents (e.g., Yanukovych).

With the outbreak of the war, often referred to as the ‘postponed war for independence,’ the issue of Ukraine’s agency has come to the forefront. This pertains not only to the state and its right to assert agency and determine its own political alliances but also to the local church. This correlation between state and church independence, which is particularly strong in countries of Orthodox culture, has accompanied a number of historical attempts at independence in Ukraine. A shift occurred in 2019 with the granting of independence to the Orthodox community in Ukraine, which summed up at least a century of aspirations for ‘our own’ church (although it did not completely resolve the problem of disunity) and, to some extent, became possible only in the context of Russia’s aggressive war.

Today, Orthodoxy, the largest confession in Ukraine, continues to be divided. Simultaneously, it faces a dual challenge: living in a situation of war and undergoing transformation associated with the country’s progress towards EU membership. Both Ukrainian Orthodox churches, the newly formed the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and UOC(MP), which (jointly) will be referred to in this research as the ‘Ukrainian Orthodox community,’ appear to have different or even opposing orientations and responses to these challenges. For UOC(MP), the connection with Moscow holds importance, while the OCU emerged, among other reasons, as part of an attempt to dissociate itself from it. OCU and its predecessors have supported Ukrainian resistance against Russia’s aggression since the war’s inception in 2014, while UOC(MP) could not find the words to condemn, or even name, the aggressor until February 2022. However, given the unprecedentedly high support for the pro-European vector in Ukrainian society (80-90%) (Sotsiolohichna hrupa ‘Reitynh’, 2023b, pp. 3-5), neither of the churches positions itself as clearly anti-European. Does this mean that Ukrainian Orthodox churches can be seen as partners on the path to possible European integration?

The article aims to examine the shifts that have taken place within the Ukrainian Orthodox community in response to Russia’s aggressive war against Ukraine, within the broader framework of Ukraine’s aspirations for European integration. The article will examine the attitudes of Ukrainian Orthodox churches towards political Europe and European institutions, the church’s visions of Ukraine’s geopolitical place in the context of the ongoing war, and the conflicts associated with the implementation of these visions.

Church on the existence of ecclesiastical and canonical ties with the Moscow Patriarchate (Derzhavna sluzhba Ukrainy z etnopolityky ta svobody sovisti, 2023), this article will use the abbreviation UOC(MP) to refer to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

1. Literature review

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in studies focusing on religion in Ukraine, with ongoing growth in this area. This surge in research attention can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, it is a natural consequence of the heightened interest in Ukraine following Russia's unprovoked and illegal war of aggression. Secondly, religion assumed a distinctive role in this conflict, leading to extensive transformations in both the Ukrainian religious landscape and the dynamics of global Orthodoxy.

Numerous aspects of religion's manifestation in this war have been subjected to research scrutiny. These include the extent of the Moscow Patriarchate's involvement in the conflict, which spans from the propagation of anti-Western cultural influences to actions undermining Ukrainian statehood and direct support for the invasion (e.g., Denysenko, 2023; Kilp & Pankhurst, 2022). Also examined is the evolution of the religious teachings of the Russian World, which served as the ideological basis for the invasion (e.g., Babynskyi, 2023; Hovorun, 2022), evaluations and critiques of this teaching from the standpoint of Christian theology (Gallaher & Kalaitzidis, 2022; Hovorun, 2023; Shumylo, 2024); the study of the war's impact on the inter-Orthodox relations within the country and more broadly (e.g., Keramidas, 2024; Khrystokin & Lozovytskyi, 2024), etc.

One consequence of ROC's role was the formation of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which has received recognition from several Orthodox churches. This development not only represents the culmination of a long historical struggle for 'our own' church (Denysenko, 2018; Shchotkina, 2019) but also fundamentally reshapes the religious situation in the country (Fylypovych, 2023) and presents new opportunities for external relations with Orthodox churches and European institutions (Korniichuk, 2022).

Another relevant body of literature for this study focuses on religion within the European Union, exploring the presence of religious issues on the agenda of European institutions (Foret, 2015; Kratochvíl & Doležal, 2015), the evolution of EU policy on religion, and the promotion of freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental human right (Fokas & Anagnostou, 2019; Foret, 2014). More specifically, scholars have examined the Orthodox churches' perspectives on Europe and European institutions (Fokas, 2012, 2021; Leustean, 2018), shedding light on the main tensions between the two sides and the nuances of Europe's reception, which may resonate with sentiments within Ukrainian Orthodoxy under examination. Simultaneously, the collaboration of Ukrainian Orthodox churches, particularly their stance on European integration or their engagement with European institutions, is frequently overlooked by scholars.

2. Methodology

The article primarily relies on qualitative research methods. The study’s source base primarily comprised a series of texts produced by Ukrainian Orthodox Churches following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despite the decade-long duration of the Russian-Ukrainian war (since 2014), this chronological limitation stemmed from several reasons related to the rapid change in context and public sentiment that occurred after 24 February 2022, a date that clearly demarcated modern Ukrainian history into before and after. Among these changes, we can cite both the formation of a new broad consensus on the country’s European orientation and the shock of the atrocities committed by the occupation forces, which rendered the very contact with anything Russian painful and traumatic for a significant part of the population. It is worth mentioning here also the readiness of EU institutions in this particular period of time to align with Ukraine’s pro-European aspirations – by granting Ukraine a European perspective and candidate status, and by agreeing to open negotiations, all of which occurred in an impressively short timeframe. Taken together, these factors made the idea of accession, which had long been largely aspirational, more realistic and firmly placed it on the agenda of the churches in the last two years.

The study encompassed approximately 160 texts produced by two major Ukrainian Orthodox churches and one interreligious organisation during the specified period, which in one way or another addressed the topic of Europe and European integration and the general geopolitical orientation of Ukraine. These texts include official church documents, statements, and appeals, as well as sermons, interviews, public speeches, open letters, and news reports.

The texts were selected based on a predefined set of keywords and sourced from the materials of the official websites of the mentioned religious organisations. It is worth noting that ‘text’ in this study is understood as in a broad sense, encompassing a sequence of expressed meanings, symbols, and narratives. This approach facilitated the inclusion of video recordings of public speeches, discussions, and sermons in the research material, aiming to form a more holistic understanding of the positions of the mentioned religious organisations. Analysis of these texts involved examining both their content and context, their interrelation with other documents/texts, their evolution over the two-year period of the full-scale war, and their anticipated societal function (Davie & Wyatt, 2022). Such analysis necessitates employing linguistic and interpretive approaches to scrutinise preferred terminology, discern allusions and connections that contribute to overarching narratives advanced by an organisation, and elucidate the underlying identity formation processes (Heather, 2000).

In addition to the primary Orthodox churches (OCU and UOC(MP)), the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations (AUCCRO or the Council) serves as another source of material for analysis. Established in the late

1990s at the state's behest, the Council initially functioned as a platform for peaceful discussion and dispute resolution following Ukraine's independence in 1991, primarily concerning disputes over church property², restitution, and new missionary activity after the collapse of the USSR. As the religious situation stabilised in the early 2000s, the council's focus shifted towards fostering more equitable and partnership-based relations with the state.

Despite the fact that the Council includes not only Orthodox churches but also Greek and Roman Catholics, the largest Protestant churches, Muslims, and Jews, its decisions and documents are relevant to this study. Firstly, according to the Statute, all decisions of the organisation are made on the basis of consensus, which also renders them decisions of the mentioned Orthodox churches. Secondly, AUCCRO members themselves often perceive the organisation as a means of bolstering their own voice in dialogue with the state and international actors, since this voice is not a standalone voice but is supported by a number of member-churches – presently, the council unites 17 religious organisations.

Each of the three organisations (OCU, UOC(MP), and AUCCRO) exhibits varying levels of interest and willingness to engage in discourse concerning Europe and the Russian-Ukrainian war, serving as sources of information in itself. Their respective focuses in addressing Europe, European countries, and Ukraine's position in the European cultural sphere vary, although certain themes may overlap with differing priorities. This diversity enables the identification of distinct approaches to envisioning Europe, European integration, the war with Russia, and Ukraine's geopolitical positioning. Notably, the concept of Europe presented in these appeals often reflects ambivalence, consistent with broader Ukrainian socio-political discourse (Bogomolov & Yavorska, 2010).

The above approaches to the vision of political Europe and Ukraine's place in it, which emerged from the analysed documents, were coded and later merged into more general narratives, which will be presented further in the article.

3. Discussion

This section will explore three aspects of the Ukrainian Orthodox community's life: the role of Europe and European integration in contemporary

² The conflicts were primarily caused by the diversity of the religious environment, which was artificially limited during the Soviet era. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and two autocephalous Orthodox churches emerged alongside the Moscow Patriarchate, the only one allowed in the USSR. As a result, in the 1990s, three to five historical owners or their heirs (Ukrainian Greek and Roman Catholic Churches, UOC(MP), Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) and Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate (UOCKP)) could claim ownership of the same church building, which just in the 1970s belonged solely to the only authorised Ukrainian Archdiocese of the ROC (since 1990 – UOC(MP)).

religious discourse, the ambivalence surrounding the perception of European integration within this framework, and the instance of calendar reform. The latter serves as an exemplar of a significant transformation in church life, facilitated by the convergence of the ongoing war and the European integration movement.

3.1. Europe and European integration in religious discourse

Over the past centuries, Orthodoxy has been perceived rather as in opposition to Europe and European civilisation. In political science, this distinction was ultimately solidified by Samuel Huntington in his ‘Clash of Civilisations,’ wherein he distinguished the so-called Orthodox civilisation and juxtaposed it with the Western/Catholic-Protestant one. Even the accession of Orthodox Greece to the European community, which occurred long before the book was written, was perceived as an exception that confirms the rule. The same applies to the accession of three other Orthodox-majority countries in the subsequent years – Cyprus (2004), Bulgaria, and Romania (2007)³ – which brought, according to Eurobarometer-2018, the total share of the Orthodox population in the EU to symbolically surpass that of Protestants (10.2% Orthodox versus 9.9% Protestant) on the eve of Britain’s exit from the Union (Britain, with its large population, had a sizable Orthodox community of 8.7%⁴) (European Commission, 2019).

To a large extent, in addition to a number of other oversights and simplifications, Huntington’s conclusions were based mainly on reducing world Orthodoxy to Russian Orthodoxy and extending to the entire religious tradition Russian anti-Westernism, which has deep cultural and historical roots in Russian society, reinforced in certain periods by fundamentalist interpretations of Scripture and Tradition and communist propaganda.

In the Ukrainian religious discourse, the topic of Europe and European integration is one of the visible non-theological topics, which, however, is present to varying degrees in the rhetoric of Orthodox churches – to a greater extent in the rhetoric of OCU and AUCCRO (which includes both OCU and UOC(MP)) and is barely articulated in the rhetoric of UOC(MP) (except for appeals to European institutions on alleged oppression, as will be discussed further in the text).

Regardless of whether OCU or AUCCRO addresses the topic, their stance on Europe and Ukraine’s European trajectory shares commonalities. One key aspect is that both organisations unequivocally endorse Ukraine’s accession to the European Union (e.g., see: Epifanii (Dumenko), mytropolyt, 2022a). Over the past decade,

³ Sometimes, Estonia is also included in this list. Despite its history as a predominantly Lutheran country, Orthodoxy is now the most widespread denomination in the country.

⁴ Further clarity is required on how Orthodoxy is defined in Eurobarometer research. Some studies, such as those by the Pew Research Center, classify Oriental Orthodox Churches (e.g., Coptic, Syriac, etc.) as part of Orthodoxy, despite them being considered a distinct branch.

a clear consensus has emerged in Ukrainian society in support of joining European organisations such as the EU and NATO, influencing the churches' stance. This shift in support was notably evident during protests in Kyiv's central square, historically known as the Orange Revolution, and became more pronounced during Euromaidan (2013-2014) and after the Russian occupation forces' invasion of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. By the end of 2014, within less than a year, over half of the population supported the Western trajectory, with support increasing steadily thereafter (Sotsiolohichna hrupa 'Reitynh', 2023b, p. 5). Notably, support surpassed 50% in all regions of Ukraine, including the south and east.

Instead, the speeches of Orthodox leaders build a slightly different chronology and system of coordinates – the imperative to choose the European vector is presented as a restoration of historical justice – a return to the path taken more than a millennium ago with the adoption of Christianity, which was, to some extent, a form of European integration at that time. A vivid example of such a presentation is represented by the annual speeches on the occasion of the anniversary of the baptism of Ukraine-Rus'⁵. As Metropolitan Epiphanius (OCU) stressed in one of these speeches:

the baptism of Kyiv and all of Rus'-Ukraine, which began on the banks of the Dnipro River in 988, laid the unshakable foundation of **Christian European Ukraine**. The emergence of the Ukrainian state did not occur merely three decades ago or as a result of the collapse of the godless tyranny of the Kremlin rulers, as our adversaries believe and falsely claim. Nor was it solely during the Revolution of Dignity [Euromaidan] that **we, as a nation, made our choice to be an integral part of the family of European nations**. However, more than a millennium ago, we completed the creation of **our state as a European state**, as the eastern outpost of Christian civilization [emphasis added] (Epifanii (Dumenko), mytropolyt, 2022b).

This direct reference to Ukraine's 'European biography' contrasts markedly with the speeches on the same occasion by Metropolitan Onuphrius, the head of UOC(MP). Taking a broader look at history, one of the prominent lines in Onuphrius' speeches was the power and size of the Kyivan state of the time, in particular, after the territorial conquests that preceded the baptism. He does not directly mention present-day Russia but refers to some of its parts: the Volga and Don regions, Krasnodar Krai, Kuban' (Ukrainska Pravoslavna Tserkva, 2022a), Mordovia (Ukrainska Pravoslavna

⁵ The name Ukraine-Rus' was introduced by the Ukrainian historian and political figure Mykhailo Hrushevsky (1866-1934) to emphasise the continuity between modern Ukraine and medieval Kyivan Rus'. The celebration of the Day of Baptism has a highly politicised history (see: Muzychenko, 2023). Since 2021, this day has also been celebrated as the Day of Ukrainian Statehood.

Tserkva, 2023), which, as the metropolitan emphasises, were then ‘part of one Rus’.’ It is worth noting that the mentioned territories often only partially belonged to Kyivan Rus and for a short time, reflecting rather a sense of affinity than historical accuracy. Thus, indirectly, there emerges a different historical and cultural space for Ukraine, which lies not to the west of Kyiv but to the east.

Another striking difference between these speeches is the reference to the Russian-Ukrainian war, which has been mentioned in virtually every public event in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion. In the above-quoted speech, Epiphanius attempts to fit this war into the centuries-long confrontation between various historical formations, to which modern Ukraine and Russia belonged, from the struggle of the ‘princely army’ [ukr. *kniazhoho vojinstva*]⁶ against the [Golden] Horde to the struggle for liberation from the ‘Babylonian captivity of Bolshevik godlessness’ and the tyranny of the Kremlin (Kremlin, not Russia⁷) (Epifanii (Dumenko), mytropolyt, 2022b). In contrast, Onuphrius uses more vague language, for which UOC(MP) has often been and is being criticised. Even though the war is referred to in his speeches, he avoids naming it directly as a war, let alone identifying and condemning the aggressor. Instead, he uses substitutes such as ‘the bloodshed that is on our land’, ‘[state of] killing each other’, and ‘people dying and giving up their lives’ (Ukrainska Pravoslavna Tserkva, 2022a; Ukrainska Pravoslavna Tserkva, 2023) etc. Such language is of such broad scope that each listener may interpret it in divergent ways, potentially encompassing both external aggression and internal civil conflict within the Ukrainian state, as propagated by Russian propaganda for almost a decade.

Infrequent references to the Russo-Ukrainian war in the rhetoric of UOC(MP) can coexist with elements of a fully Russian-Soviet vision of history and historical continuity. A striking example is Metropolitan Onuphrius’ address on the anniversary of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. While acknowledging the aggressive nature of the Afghan war, in which Ukrainians were also forcibly involved⁸, Ukraine has since 2004 commemorated this day as the Day of Commemoration of Participants in Military Actions on the Territory of Other States, albeit without ceremonies and celebrations. In contrast, the metropolitan refers to it as a day to honour ‘soldiers-internationalists,’ a term also used in Russia and Belarus, framing it as a heroic chapter of the past. He urges Ukrainian

⁶ Reference to the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia as (one of) the successor(s) of Kyivan Rus’.

⁷ Shifting towards Europe, Muscovy adopted the name Russia (derived from [Kyivan] Rus’) in 1721 to legitimise its presence in Europe. English sources commonly conflate Rus’ and Russia, viewed in Ukraine as historical usurpation. Since ‘the big war,’ Ukraine often prefers ‘Muscovy’ or ‘Kremlin’ over ‘Russia’.

⁸ Russia has actively used and continues to use minorities in its wars. The protest against the use of Ukrainians in Soviet military campaigns became one of the demands of the lesser-known outside Ukraine ‘first Maidan’ – the Revolution on Granite (1990), which directly called for enabling Ukrainian conscripts to serve solely within Ukraine.

servicemen combating Russian invaders (here the role of Russia is explicitly named) to emulate the ‘service to God and the Fatherland’ exemplified by these soldiers (Onufrii (Berezovskyi), mytropolyt, 2024). Such historical continuity, comparing Ukrainian defence efforts to Soviet-era ‘defence of the Fatherland’ through military interventions abroad, may seem more fitting in relation to Russian occupation forces in Ukraine—as fighters who are on foreign soil—than to the Ukrainian army defending its own territory against external aggression.

The themes of war and Europe appear as interrelated in a number of the analysed documents. The war, in this context, appears both as a continuation of the defence of own choice and destiny of the European future and as a forced way of defending the principles and values of European civilisation, which strengthens the narrative of Ukraine as a ‘defender of Europe’, a country that is defending Europe against the ‘new Horde’, which is used more widely in the socio-political rhetoric.

Overall, in the analysed documents, references to Ukraine frequently incorporate the epithet ‘European’ or allusions to its ‘European future’ or ‘European values.’ This recognition of Ukraine’s connection with Europe is presented in various ways: (1) Ukraine and Ukrainians are portrayed as part of the ‘European family,’ re-joining this family — a narrative prevalent in Central European countries in anticipation of EU accession; (2) Ukraine is depicted as a defender of Europe, particularly in the face of Russia’s aggression, but also as a country with a relatively high level of (declared) religiosity and the significance of religion in society; and (3) Ukraine is characterised as a country ‘on its way to Europe.’

The latter represents a common occurrence of opposing ideas in political discourse, where Ukraine is simultaneously positioned both ‘in the heart of Europe’ and as ‘on the path to Europe’ [From where?!]. This reflects attempts to equate Europe and its heritage with the EU, as evidenced by the spelling of ‘Europe’ as EUrope. As Middelaar points out, the term ‘Europe’ in the political sense has increasingly come to refer not so much to the geographical area but to those who contribute to building Europe, primarily the EU institutions and countries, thus narrowing its scope (van Middelaar, 2013).

3.2. Ambivalent perception of European integration

The Ukrainian Orthodox churches consider Europe and European institutions not solely in a theoretical sense. Despite the specificities of the religious situation in Europe (Berger et al., 2008), the traditional ‘secular canopy’ in the policies of European institutions (Foret, 2015), and the efforts of Russian propaganda to portray collective Europe as a ‘godless space’, the involvement of European institutions in religious issues, particularly the promotion of freedom of religion or belief, has become relatively systematic since the late 1990s. In 2013, the *EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief* were adopted, making the

promotion of freedom of religion and belief a part of the EU’s external efforts (Council of the European Union, 2013).

Prior to the Russian invasion, Ukraine enjoyed a fairly high level of freedom of religion, which was generally on par with the European average (Pew Research Centre, 2009). The beginning of the invasion dramatically worsened the situation. On the one hand, the Russian occupation forces and the Russian-installed authorities in the occupied territories began the systematic persecution of a number of religious groups in the name of protecting ‘Russian Orthodoxy’ (see: The Institute of Religious Freedom, 2015), which had been granted a privileged position. ROC’s support for the war has only intensified since the start of the full-scale invasion and has manifested in numerous ways, from endorsing the invasion through rhetoric and sermons (e.g., “Patriarkh Kirill podaril Rosgvardii ikonu”, 2022), to declaring forgiveness of sins to Russian soldiers who died attempting to occupy Ukraine (Smith, 2022), and urging the church to ‘mobilise’ resources to support the occupation campaign (“Patriarkh Kirill prizval RPC”, 2023) etc. On the other hand, the legitimisation of the invasion by the Moscow Patriarchate has put the Ukrainian authorities in a position to limit its negative influence, which has also tested authorities’ commitment to protecting freedom of religion.

The aforementioned policy of counteraction took various forms during the decade of war. Primarily, it involved advocating for the establishment of a recognised alternative to the Moscow Patriarchate. The self-proclaimed autocephalies that emerged in the early 1990s (UAOC, UOCKP), despite their significant influence in Ukrainian society, were isolated from global Orthodoxy due to their unrecognised status. With the onset of the invasion, adherents of UOC(MP) faced a significant moral dilemma (belonging to a church that supports a war against their own state), but their options were limited to either joining unrecognised churches or leaving the Orthodox church entirely. Following extensive negotiations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, that had even preceded the war, the unified OCU formed (uniting former self-proclaimed churches and a part of the pro-autocephalous faction of UOC(MP)), which became recognised by a few local Orthodox Churches. The establishment of this church was accompanied by a wave of parish transfers between jurisdictions, mostly from UOC(MP) to OCU. The situation was complicated by the fact that, under Ukrainian law, parishes could transfer, with the support of two-thirds of the community, along with their property (such as church buildings and land). This loss of the monopoly on ‘recognition’ was perceived by UOC(MP) as an attack upon its rights, which became a central theme in its appeals to European institutions.

In this context, the EU features in the discourse of Ukrainian Orthodox churches in several capacities: (1) as an exemplar of upholding a high standard of respect for human rights (including freedom of religion), (2) as an ally and simultaneously (3) an adversary in safeguarding these rights.

The issues addressed in such appeals will significantly vary depending on the religious organisation. Thus, for UOC(MP), the central theme revolves around constraints on their own rights by the Ukrainian authorities. In pursuit of systematic collaboration with European bodies, the church even established a special Representation to European international organisations in 2017. In its activities, the Representation consistently avoids mentions of both the religious annexation of its own parishes in the occupied territories, which ROC has incorporated into its structure, and the repression of other religious organisations in the occupied territories. Repression, in this case, encompasses not only coercion to re-register religious organisations or the prohibition of certain religious groups and the confiscation of their property, but also the abduction, torture, and killing of dissenting clergy. According to the head of the State Service for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience, only since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, almost 40 Ukrainian priests, monks, and pastors have been intentionally killed in the occupied territories (Churikova & Ameryky, 2024). It is noteworthy that despite the prevailing caution regarding Ukraine's path towards European integration, these complaints regarding alleged violations often come with arguments asserting that such actions by the Ukrainian authorities are incongruent with the country's aspirations for European integration (e.g., see: *Ukrainska Pravoslavna Tserkva*, 2022b).

Evidently, the broadest spectrum of appeals to European institutions and countries is articulated by AUCCRO, which to a certain extent, is associated with its collective voice. Long before the full-scale invasion, the Council emerged as one of the active opponents to a range of European policies and initiatives, particularly those related to reproductive rights, protection of women's rights, and others. With the onset of 'the big war,' its appeals varied from social concerns (e.g., establishing humanitarian corridors and supporting displaced Ukrainians) to broader security matters such as introduction of no-fly zone, military aid for Ukraine, holding Russian authorities accountable for the war, and seeking restoration of justice, etc.

In most of these latter calls, European countries and institutions emerge as allies in the fight against Russian aggression and its consequences. However, the clear pro-European position and support for European integration often coexist with calls for the protection of 'true European values' and the restoration of European religious/Christian identity. Any opposition to the conservative religious approach (even from European institutions and organisations) is often framed as an attack on the European choice of Ukrainians (*Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy*, 2022; *Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations*, 2021, 2023).

3.3. Closer to European family: the case of calendar reform

In line with the aim to 'return to Europe' and align with other local Orthodox churches, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine initiated a reform of its calendar (see: Bokoch, 2024; Skrypnykova, 2016). Discussions regarding calendar modification

within the global Orthodoxy have persisted for over a century. While the Catholic Church reformed the Julian calendar (that was established even before the Christian era) in the late 16th century, some Orthodox churches only began considering reform in the early 20th century. The Pan-Orthodox Council of 1923 endorsed the adoption of a revised version of the Julian calendar, developed based on calculations by Serbian mathematician and astronomer Milutin Milanković. This new calendar, named the Revised Julian calendar, boasted superior accuracy compared to both the Julian and Gregorian calendars. For the following eight centuries, the Revised Julian and Gregorian calendars would coincide (except for Easter), but disparities would reappear again after year 2800.

The issue of calendar reform has emerged as a contentious topic for several Orthodox churches. In the 1920s, only the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Romanian Patriarchate, Patriarchate of Alexandria, and the Churches of Greece and Cyprus made the decision to adopt it. Subsequently, several other churches followed suit, but a complete transition across all of Ecumenical Orthodoxy never occurred. In some churches, such as those in Greece or Bulgaria, this transition led to divisions within the communities, serving as a deterrent for other churches to pursue similar reforms, although the extent of this factor's influence varied from one church to another.

Before the outbreak of war, Ukraine not only lacked consensus but also failed to garner any significant support for calendar reform. None of the Ukrainian autocephalous Orthodox churches that emerged in the 1990s regarded calendar reform as a priority. Similarly, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church did not view such an update as necessary, despite its logical merit in this case.

The first notable step towards reform occurred in 2017, when the Ukrainian parliament amended the Labour Code to officially recognise December 25 as a public/state holiday. Interestingly, to manage the number of non-working days, December 25 was added, while May 2, one of the two days commemorating Labour Day—so important in the Soviet calendar—was removed. At the time of this amendment, only about 1% of Ukrainians expressed an intention to celebrate Christmas exclusively on December 25. Another 15.5% planned to observe both December 25 and January 7 (Christmas according to the Julian calendar). The majority of respondents, totalling 76%, favoured the 'traditional' celebration on January 7 (Fond 'Demokratychni initsiatyvy' im. Ilka Kucheriva, 2017).

According to sociological surveys, support for the transition to the revised calendar gradually increased over subsequent years. However, in the year of the full-scale invasion, it almost doubled, accompanied by a significant decrease in strong opposition to the change. The number of those clearly against the transition declined from 44% in 2021 to 19% in 2022 and reached a record low of 11% in 2023 (Sotsiologichna hrupa 'Reitynh', 2023a, p. 34). As of mid-2023, almost two-thirds of Ukrainians (63%) supported the transition to the revised calendar, with 46% fully supporting it and another 17% rather expressing support. Predictably, Greek Catholics exhibited the greatest support for the transition (92%), followed by OCU

(68%). UOC(MP), whose leadership strongly opposed the transition, found itself in an unexpected stance. Despite the fact that within this church there is the highest level of opposition to the calendar reform (35%), almost half of its faithful (45%) would still support the transition (Sotsiologichna hrupa 'Reitynh', 2023a, p. 33).

Among the factors supporting reform, researchers identify several, ranging from consistent communication and increasing awareness of the issue to a somewhat emotional desire to symbolically distance from the country-aggressor (Russia) and the Moscow Patriarchate as its representative and supporter. The influx of Ukrainian temporary asylum seekers in countries west of the Ukrainian border likely also played a role. Finding themselves in an environment where religious life predominantly follows either the Gregorian or Revised Julian calendar, they and their families in Ukraine have become more receptive to change.

Aside from its political connotations, the issue of calendar reform also has a practical dimension: the discrepancy between the Julian and astronomical calendars is not static and is continually expanding. Within less than a century, due to imperfections in the Julian calendar, the date of Christmas (if no adjustments are made) will shift to January 8. This implies that change is inevitable for the religious community in the foreseeable future (in less than 80 years). The scope for choice is essentially narrowed down to selecting between a significant change such as calendar reform, which will yield a long-term solution, or minor yet recurrent 'shifts' in dates. The only alternative to change is effectively abandoning the calendar altogether.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the transition to the Revised Julian calendar had implications not only for the religious community but also for public state celebrations, necessitating the adjustment of certain holidays with religious origins. An example is the Day of Defenders and Defendresses of Ukraine⁹. Prior to 2014 (the onset of Russian aggression), this day was commemorated as Defender of the Fatherland Day on February 23, a remnant of the Soviet era (in the USSR it was known as the Day of the Soviet Army and Navy). Following the outbreak of Russian aggression, the observance of this day was shifted to October 14, aligning with the Cossack tradition of honouring the Ukrainian army on Pokrova (Intercession of the Theotokos). With the calendar change, the date of the celebration was further moved to October 1, in accordance with the holiday date according to the revised calendar.

Conclusions

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has altered the status quo and catalysed a number of changes that previously seemed impossible (much like the war itself). One of these changes has been the gradual overall consolidation of Ukrainian society and progress

⁹ Recognising women's significant role in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, where they constituted over 20% before the full-scale invasion, the holiday's name was officially adjusted to emphasise both sexes.

towards European integration. The Ukrainian Orthodox churches, which encompass the majority of Ukrainians, have not been immune to the influence of this shift in public sentiment, as reflected in their general rhetoric and discourse. Balancing the intricate intertwining of the European aspirations of their congregants and their historical and geopolitical backgrounds, the churches are formulating their own visions of a political Europe and Ukraine's position within it. These visions represent a complex expression of the delicate interplay between religious beliefs, political landscapes, and collective identities at play in contemporary Ukraine.

On the one hand, each of the Ukrainian Orthodox churches declares support for the nation's Western political trajectory. Furthermore, religion frequently serves, or is at least portrayed by the churches, as a pillar in legitimising the pro-Western movement (the narrative of a European family), a stance accentuated against the backdrop of earlier appeals to Orthodox/Slavic unity compromised by the ongoing war. On the other hand, a closer examination reveals the intricate constructions underlying this vision, amalgamating disparate historical narratives often at odds with each other (narratives of defending Europe and advancing towards Europe; the vision of the EU as both an ally and an opponent). The avowal to defend the European choice and uphold genuine European values in this context sometimes translates into opposition towards European institutions, particularly evident in the churches' conservative social stance.

The instance of calendar reform serves as a compelling illustration of a shift within an extremely conservative domain. The swift and extensive adoption of this change, largely validated by the efforts towards alignment with 'Europe' and other local Orthodox churches (most of which situated westward, not eastward, of Ukraine) underscores the strength of Ukrainian society's adaptability and the potential for possible transformation.

Finally, it is worth noting that this review constitutes only a segment of the broader discourse concerning the role of religion in European integration processes and the interactions between religious entities and European institutions. Specifically, regarding Orthodox churches, this realm has received relatively limited scholarly attention. Considering that presently six out of nine EU candidate countries are countries with a strong Orthodox majority, it is reasonable to anticipate that this subject will assume heightened importance in the forthcoming years. Of particular interest is not only the examination of attitudes and aspirations towards European integration but also the challenges confronting churches in the course of integration, the establishment of ties with European institutions, and the dynamics among Orthodox churches themselves within the Union and on the path toward it.

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