

Berkley Forum

Whose Conflict? Whose Unification?

By: Kristina Stoeckl

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Responding to: **The Future of Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine**

The German weekly Die Zeit recently published an [interview with Alexander Hug](#), the head of the mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to the war zone in Eastern Ukraine. Hug said that what impressed him most during the four and a half years he worked directly at the front line was the suffering and resilience of the civilian population, who did not believe in the meaning of this war. "People often told us," Hug recalls, "that it was not their war being fought there." This assessment of an armed conflict with clear responsibilities, namely that of ongoing Russian aggression, is puzzling for the outside observer, but it is also humbling for the political commentator and scholarly analyst. Where professionals identify and categorize forces and responsibilities, those directly affected may just feel loss and alienation.



It is certainly not my intention to compare the terrible war in Eastern Ukraine with the situation of the Orthodox churches in the country, yet, the sense of alienation and disenfranchisement on the side of those affected by conflict appears relevant in this context.

On December 15, 2018, Orthodox bishops will unite in Kiev's Saint Sophia Cathedral to discuss the future of the Orthodox churches in Ukraine. The council has been called up by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which hopes to set an end to decades of division between canonical and uncanonical

Orthodox church structures in Ukraine. The tensions before this council are high; one side—the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate—has already announced it will not participate.

But this expected absence is not the only rift in the process. [Cyril Hovorun, who is an expert on the events in Ukraine, said in an interview](#) a few days before the gathering that it was still unclear who would actually be eligible to vote during the council. Apparently, the Patriarchate of Kiev wanted this to be a council of bishops only, whereas the Ecumenical Patriarchate insisted that laypeople should also be fully-fledged members of the council and have the right to vote. Hovorun also spoke about a “feud” between Constantinople and the Patriarchate of Kiev over the question of secret or open voting procedures. [Nicholas Denysenko, who has called the religious situation in Ukraine a "multigenerational divorce,"](#) highlights yet another conflict line in the unification process, namely between the Patriarchate of Kiev and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. We can be sure that the Moscow Patriarchate rejoices over these internal divisions and bets on the process to fail. The picture is, in short, [complicated and more complex than conveyed by political actors in Ukraine](#), according to which there is one Ukrainian Orthodox Church just waiting to receive autocephaly.

The risk that many commentators see in this situation is that ordinary Orthodox believers may end up estranged from their factious hierarchies. [Nicolai N. Petro is critical of the unification process](#) and asks whether forming a popular church in Ukraine may not turn out more difficult than creating a state church. He fears that “Poroshenko and the patriarchs have unleashed a process that will add considerably to the overall messiness of Ukrainian politics, and leave much bitterness in people’s hearts, long after they are gone.” But even commentators who are in favor of Ukrainian autocephaly are concerned by the overtly political dimension of the process and by the risk of [religious nationalism](#). Thomas Bremer and Sophia Senyk [endorse the idea of a united and autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church](#), which “could provide Orthodoxy with an independent local Church from where new impulses for church life, theology, ecumenical dialogue, and relations towards ‘the world’ can emanate,” but they have reservations about the ways in which unification is being attempted.

What we can take away from this overview of commentaries on the situation of church unification in Ukraine is that risks lie not only with the various forces and strategies on each side, but also with the increasing complexity and conflictuality of the process itself. How will Ukrainian Orthodox believers feel about these conflicts? Whose conflicts and whose unification will they see?

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