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Patriarch Kirill's Holy War

Russia's all-out attack on Ukraine on 24 February this year resulted in the polarisation of attitudes of clergy in the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Some clergymen, headed by Patriarch Kirill, supported the aggression. Others distanced themselves from Vladimir Putin's decision and the Patriarch's position, or even protested against the war. The continued fighting in Ukraine and the growing number of civilian victims may result in an increase in separatist tendencies within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which would significantly weaken the influence of the Russian Church in Ukraine.

The Russian Orthodox Church after the annexation of Crimea. The commencement of Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014, which led to the annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of Donbas, did not result in any major changes to the position of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. However, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) accused church structures, including the Patriarch himself, of allowing their visits to Crimea and Donbas on the eve of the annexation to be used as a cover by the Russian military intelligence to prepare the Crimean operation. Patriarch Kirill's position was, however, highly balanced. He continued his "brotherhood of nations" rhetoric and did not come out clearly for either side of the conflict. What is more, he decided not to take part in the state ceremonies to mark the incorporation of Crimea into Russia. A similar position was demonstrated by most of the clergy and hierarchy of the UOC MP.

One attempt to weaken the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine was the attempts at autocephaly, supported by President Petro Poroshenko. In spite of Russian pressure, this ended in success in 2019, resulting in partial unity of Ukrainian Orthodoxy. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine was formed, which by January 2022 had been joined by around 700 parishes of the UOC MP. Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine accelerated the abandonment of the Church loyal to Moscow, a process supported by local authorities in Ukraine. More than 7,000 parishes currently belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The granting of autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by Patriarch Bartholomew provoked a heated dispute between the Patriarchs of Moscow and Constantinople, which continues to this day.

The Church and the new stage of the war against Ukraine. The Russian attack triggered an unexpected reaction from the UOC MP. In a sermon on 24 February this year, its head, Metropolitan Onufriy, defending "Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity" asked Vladimir Putin to "immediately cease this fratricidal war". He additionally appealed to the faithful to maintain calm, courage, mutual help and support for the Ukrainian army "standing guard and, protecting and safeguarding our land and our nation". This exceptionally patriotic sermon came as a great surprise, as Metropolitan Onufriy had been considered a clergyman completely loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate and to Russia. The worrying tone of Metropolitan Onufriy's sermon was noticed by Patriarch Kirill himself, who, in an appearance on 9 March this year assured that he would pray for Metropolitan Onufriy, the Episcopacy, and Ukrainian clergy. He also added, "Our Church is one, whether in Russia or in Ukraine [...] we shall pray for the Unity of Holy Rus', so that no forces dare divide our nation and, of course, that no forces may divide our Church".

The Patriarch's fear of a schism in the Orthodox Church goes hand in hand with unambiguous support for the Russian aggression against Ukraine and for Vladimir Putin's nationalist narrative. In a sermon on 6 March this year, the Patriarch claimed that attempts over the past 8 years to destroy Donbas were a consequence of opposition to actions by those who "claim authority over the world" aiming to impose their "values", consumerism and "freedom". These were symbolised by "gay parades". In Patriarch Kirill's opinion, Donbas cannot be left at the mercy of sinful forces which strive to leave it lost and wallowing in corruption. In this interpretation, Russian aggression

against Ukraine is an attempt to protect both Christian values and the persecuted Russian-speaking Orthodox population, and Ukraine itself has been subordinated to the "depraved West".

In his sermon of 9 March, Patriarch Kirill stressed that Ukrainians and Russians are practically one nation, joined by a common faith and cultural heritage. According to him, the conflict is caused by outside forces trying to foment discord between brother nations. Similar ideas are also promoted by certain Ukrainian political groupings. In the Patriarch's opinion, these actions are intended to weaken Russia, which has become a "strong, powerful state". Ukraine is being exploited in a geopolitical game, armed to start a conflict with "its brother in blood and faith".

On 13 March, Patriarch Kirill made the symbolic gesture of presenting General Viktor Zolotov, Commander of the Russian National Guard Service, with an icon which has to "inspire young soldiers who had taken their oath, joining the path of defending the Motherland".

Protests against the war. On 1 March, around 300 Russian Orthodox clergy issued an open letter regarding cessation of military action. The signatories warned against the "terrible Judgement of God", from which no "earthly authority" would protect the participants in the invasion. It was stressed that the Ukrainian nation had the right to choose its fate by itself, "not at gunpoint, without pressure from the East or the West". The clergymen also criticised the authorities of the Russian Federation for mass punishments of people taking part in peaceful anti-war protests. There was also an appeal to both side of the conflict for dialogue, stressing that there was no other alternative to violence.

The largest protests against the Russian attack on Ukraine appeared among the faithful and clergy of the UOC MP. The aforementioned fears by Patriarch Kirill of a potential schism in the Church are mainly connected with the positions of 17 of the 53 UOC MP dioceses and numerous clergymen who had stopped mentioning Patriarch Kirill in their liturgy. We should add that these included the monks of Lavra Pecherska, which is considered a bastion of Russian Orthodoxy in Ukraine. Metropolitan Onufriy did not condemn this behaviour. Russia's continuing aggression will contribute to a further deepening of the divisions within the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

On 13 March, Patriarch Kirill was also criticised by scholars connected with the Christian Studies Centre at Fordham University and the Volos Academy for Theological Studies in the USA. In their declaration, they stated that Russkiy Mir - the Russian World - was a "false teaching". The Patriarch was additionally accused of propagating "religious nationalism". Russia's aggression against Ukraine was also condemned, as it results from that harmful and indefensible teaching. Criticism of the Russian invasion was also expressed by the Orthodox Churches of the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Greece and Lithuania. The number of incensed Orthodox hierarchs is constantly growing. The World Council of Churches has also requested that Kirill exert pressure on the Russian leadership. Kirill apparently responded that "forces which mainly treat Russia as an enemy are gathering at her borders", and that the West was involved in a wide-ranging geopolitical operation "aimed at weakening Russia".

Conclusions. Patriarch Kirill's unambiguous response taking the side of the Russian authorities and presenting the invasion of Ukraine as a war between good and Western decadence may seriously undermine the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church and its position among the world's Orthodox Churches. On the other hand, the shared language of the secular and spiritual leaders and the creation of an ideological justification for the conflict, supported by the authority of the Church, testifies that the war against Ukraine may be an exceptionally long and bloody one. And treating the aggression in categories of morality, of a fight between good and evil, limits the scope of any possible compromise.

The alliance between the altar and the throne has a long history in Russian church tradition, dating back to the 15th century at least. The Moscow Patriarchate, reactivated in 1943, was fully controlled by the Russian security apparatus, and close contacts between church hierarchs and the authorities of post-Soviet Russia form one of the key elements in the legitimisation of Vladimir Putin's regime.

Growing anti-Russian sentiment can be observed among the Ukrainian population, accusations of collaboration are directed at Orthodox clergy of the OUC MP, and there is increasingly frequent talk of the necessity to radically limit

Russian influence in Ukraine. The image of the aggressor is undermined by the shelling of churches, including the monastery at Sviatohirsk Lavra. According to polling carried out by the Rejting Group on 8-9 March, 52% of OUC MP faithful surveyed are in favour of cutting ties with the Moscow Patriarchate. Only 13% are opposed.

The longer the Russian aggression lasts, the more likely is the scenario of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate separating from Russia and joining the Orthodox Church of Ukraine or creating independent structures. A scenario in which the war leads the Ukrainian authorities to dissolve the structures of the UOC MP in Ukraine cannot be ruled out either.