

# Autocephaly for the Ukrainian Church: Religious Transitions Before and After *Tomos* and Attitudes Towards it (the Case of the Volyn Region)

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The attainment of autocephaly by the Orthodox Church of Ukraine intensified the religious transitions of parishes that were preceded by individual parishioners' switches. The highest dynamics of such transitions occurred in the Volyn Region in the north-western part of Ukraine. These transitions refer exclusively to a switch from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine without affecting other religious communities. Most of the population supported the autocephalous status of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, for they consider granting autocephaly as a major historical event for the Ukrainian nation. The process of active religious transitions was primarily determined by the aptness of each parish community and political climate on a national level. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine was able to maintain its high regard, but with the change of political power in Ukraine in 2019, it lost political support. The process of religious transitions dwindled.

**Keywords:** sociology of religion, religious transitions, autocephaly in Ukraine, Orthodox Church, political support of church

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## INTRODUCTION

The state statistics in Ukraine and the data of sociological studies present the certain regional specificity of the country's religious institutions, which is a consequence of the different socio-economic situation in the regions, their historical and cultural development, ideology and values. According to S. Yaremchuk (2016), 3/4 of the entire network of religious organisations of Ukraine are located in its West and North-Central regions, which are the so-called centres of religious life in Ukraine. The religious network of the centre is saturated, stable and defined. These regions include Kyiv, the historical centre of Ukrainian Orthodoxy, and Volyn, the largest Orthodox region, the territory of the so-called total Orthodoxy.

Despite a stable religious situation in the region, the influence of external factors caused religious transitions – a change in the jurisdiction of the church parishes.

The first factor is a significant event in the history of Ukraine – the creation at the Unification Council on 15 December 2018 of a single national church with the official name of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). The church independence is fixed in an official document – a letter of honour, a decree called Tomos. On 6 January 2019, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople granted the Tomos on autocephaly of the OCU.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UPC KP) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UPC MP) were the largest Orthodox churches in Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) did not recognise the first church, and the jurisdiction of the ROC in Ukraine was represented by the UOC MP. The situation has changed after receiving autocephaly by the OCU, and as a foreign organisation, the UOC MP should have to indicate Russian, not Ukrainian, affiliation in its name; the church was legally subordinate to the ROC, but ceased to identify itself with it in its name – the MP disappeared after the Charter was changed. But the church is not only an institutional structure, it also includes local communities that can and should express their opinion.

The Tomos is an event of local and European contexts that took place in an important historical period. Ukraine is at war with the state, which officially controlled the religious sphere of Ukraine until the reception of the Tomos (Wanner 2022). We must take into account the fact that the military aggression of the Russian Federation as of 2018 affected the religious priorities of Ukrainians. This is the second external factor in this study.

The purpose of the article is to estimate how autocephaly for the Ukrainian Orthodox church affected religious transitions among the Orthodox churches of Ukraine, what accompanied the religious transitions in the most dynamic Orthodox region of the country – Volyn Region, and how they were perceived by its population.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Using sociological data, M. Parashchevin makes a disappointing forecast: ‘An exclusively political approach to the creation of a single national church will be rejected by many Churches, so it will have the opposite effect to the expected one (intensification of tension, separation, confrontation, instead of unification, integration)’ (Parashchevin 2017: 61–62). It is worth noting that the Tomos as a reform of the religious sphere of Ukraine led to some social unrest and disorganisation.

In *The Maidan and Church. Chronicle and Expert Assessment* (2015) researchers reflected the relationship between Maidan and the Church as the relationship between a civil society and institutionalised religious organisations. The conclusion was positive and very encouraging: the Church showed its willingness to cooperate with civil society; it turned out to be an effective source of ideological inspiration, and a responsible conscious civic position and activity, which means that the Ukrainian civil society needs just a civil Church. But the researchers studied the civil activity of the Churches that participated in the Maidan events, and therefore, supported it. The church as a network of many religious communities is not represented. The topic ‘*churches and civil society*’ is disclosed widely by V. Stepanenko (2019).

Using the concept of social capital D. Myronovych and S. Salnikova note that ‘the relationship between religion and civil society in post-communist countries is problematized by state of this society – the absence or underdevelopment of civil institutions, low levels of interpersonal trust and social capital, lack of motivation’ (Myronovych, Salnikova 2013: 36). The growth of religious and church participation in Ukraine did not affect belonging to a wider range of public organisations and associations, and identification with Orthodoxy was more

often a marker of cultural identification than religious affiliation (Myronovych et al. 2013: 26). Perhaps Maidan contributed to the civic maturity of Ukrainians and the Church's readiness to become a communicative network that affects the nature of civic activity of Ukrainians. 'Revealing both the structures and the dynamics of religious identities in ultra-modernity', J.-P. Willaime remarks that 'no longer the sociological study of religious phenomena is simply an analysis of social determinants; it becomes instead ... the study of symbolic mediations, examining their influence on both social bonds and the formation of individuals as active subjects' (Willaime 2004: 373).

Sociologists determined the organizational nature of the Orthodox schism rather than the canonical one. 'In all three cases (Moldova, Ukraine and Bulgaria) the resources of political powers were used to legitimize the "newly created Orthodox structures"'. However, the outcome of legalisation 'depends on the hierarchical status of the Church, the level of its popularity (religious demand of the population) and political capital of the forces that supported the schism organizations' (Myronovych et al. 2013: 26). 'Strong relations between the models of religious functioning and the socio-political orders' are determined even in the context of religious homogeneity of society (Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik 2017: 68). Politicisation of religion affects democratic processes negatively (Susanto 2019), but religiosity prevents populist attitudes (Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik 2020). In the case of the attainment of autocephaly by the newly created religious organisation of the OCU, the state resource was also used, and the church opposition depended on political support or its absence very strongly.

The Ukrainian churches' quest for autonomy, their interpretations of the war and its causes, and the paths they have charted toward peace and unity, etc. are in the focus of research (Coleman 2020; Kravchuk, Bremer 2016). Th. Bremer (2020) supposes that receiving the Tomos will lead to a schism in Orthodoxy in the world in the future. He also focuses on the fact that for the majority of parishioners in Ukraine the issue of membership in the UOC MP is a matter of canonicity of the church, while for parishioners who live in other countries this is a political or patriotic question. T. Kalenychenko (2020) notes that it is necessary to take into account not only the ideological confrontation between the UOC MP and the OCU, but also two other competing institutions in the patriotic religious field – the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church (UGCC) and OCU.

In addition to the events described by other scientists, K. Wanner (2022) wrote about how Russia influenced Ukraine with the help of religion in her new book *Everyday Religiosity and the Politics of Belonging in Ukraine*.

## METHODOLOGY

In this study, we use various data in order to better understand the religious situation in Ukraine and in the Volyn Region in particular.

Statistical data of the Religious Information Service of Ukraine (RISU 2019) were used to determine the network of religious organisations and quantitative indicators of religious transitions.

The results of a sociological research of religious preferences of Ukrainians (N = 25 000, 1 000 per region; 1–17 February 2015) explain why the religious situation in the Volyn Region is in the focus of this study. A high level of Orthodox self-identification (97%) allows one 'to consider the Volyn region as a territory of total Orthodoxy ... measured 97% of Orthodox between parishioners of the Kyiv and Moscow Patriarchates ... are distributed as follows: UOC KP – 52%, UOC MP – 28%, just Orthodox – 20%' (Salnikova 2017: 56). The research was

conducted by the leading sociological companies of Ukraine: SOCIS, Razumkov Centre, KIIS and Sociological Group Rating (2015).

The Laboratory of Sociological Research (SRL) of the Lesya Ukrainka VNU has been conducting regional monitoring since 2008 (project manager S. Salnikova); the questionnaire also has a part about religion. The empirical data of 2015 and 2019 (N = 622 and N = 630, respectively,  $\Delta \leq 0.05$ , D = 1.4, RR = 0.9) are analysed in the article.

The opinion of the Volyn population about the Tomos was compared with the expert opinion (N = 36, 11–16 September 2018) obtained by the national research company Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (2018), experts from secular institutions predicted the consequences of receiving the Tomos.

In the study, we will test the following hypotheses.

We suppose that (1) the ‘rejection by many Churches’ (Parashchevin) will manifest itself in transitions between *all* religious organisations in the Volyn Region. Since relations between the Church and society, in particular the community, are determined by the state of the community itself (Myronovych, Salnikova), (2) this state will be decisive in the ‘*negotiation process*’ regarding the religious transition; not quite civilised communications that go beyond the accepted norms of communication will necessarily be reflected in the media. According to the organisational nature of religious schisms (Reshetnyak) (3) the activity of religious transitions will depend on the political support and popularity of the church, which is measured by its presence in political discourse and level of trust, respectively.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Changes in the church jurisdiction are regulated by two laws of Ukraine.

According to the Law ‘*On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations*’ (1991), ‘The State admits the right of a religious community to be subordinate to canonical and organizational matters to any acting religious centers (administration) in Ukraine and beyond its and to change subordination freely’ (Part 2, Article 8). According to the Law ‘*On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on the Subordination of Religious Organizations and the Procedure for State Registration of Religious Organizations with the Status of Legal Entity*’ (2019), two thirds of the votes at a meeting of a religious community must be signed to change the subordination, but a procedure for changing jurisdiction was not described and this has led to additional causes for conflicts in some cases.

The first decade of Ukrainian independence was also characterised by transitions between three Orthodox churches – the UOC MP, the UOC KP and the UAOC (Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church). The formation of their organisational structures was accompanied by inter-confessional conflicts, mainly of a political and property-owning nature; communities were also involved in these conflicts. Despite this, the network of religious organisations increased. And a new round of religious transitions of communities intensified after the aggression of Russia against Ukraine in 2014 (RISU 2019), the peak of them was from December 2018 to April 2019, while they happened only occasionally in 2014 to 2018 (Table 1).

In the Volyn Region (2014–2018), there were only four religious transitions from the UOC MP to the UOC KP, and there was none from the UOC to the UOC (RISU 2019). Active religious transitions were preceded by individual transitions. Already in 2015, sociologists noticed a moving of parishioners<sup>1</sup> from the UOC MP to the UOC KP among residents of

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<sup>1</sup> Self-identification with a particular parish and service in it.

**Table 1. Religious Transitions from UOC MP to OCU, Ukraine (RISU, data as of September 2019)**

		Community, n	
		Monthly	Cumulative
2018	December	35	35
	January	153	188
	February	234	422
	March	94	516
	April	14	530
2019	May	1	531
	June	7	538
	July	1	539
	August	3	542
	September	4	546

the Volyn regional centre in the range from 3.8 to 4.4%. At the same time, trust in the church (3.5 out of 4 points) increased (Bilous, Martynyuk 2015). Parishioners of the UOC KP and UOC MP were 52 and 28% in 2015 (Rating 2015), and according to SRL, 58% (already OCU) and 23% in 2019, respectively.

According to the state statistics, the West-Ukrainian Region (Volyn, Zakarpattya, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Rivne, Ternopil, Chernivtsi) is the centre of religious life in Ukraine. But social tensions/unrest due to the transitions of religious communities from one church jurisdiction to another affected them in completely different ways. Four regions (Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Ternopil, Chernivtsi) appeared at the end of the list of administrative units of Ukraine by the number of religious communities of the UOC MP at all (Table 2).

**Table 2. Religious Transition from UOC MP to OCU (RISU, data as of 23 September 2019)**

Region	UOC MP, n	Transitions to the OCU	
		N	%
Volyn	669	123	18.36
Vynnytsya	943	90	9.54
Khmelnyskyi	998	63	6.31
Rivne	568	52	9.15
Zhytomyr	687	48	6.99
Ternopil	116	26	22.41
Lviv	74	19	25.68
Chernivtsi	305	19	6.23
Cherkasy	461	19	4.12
Chernihiv	566	18	3.18

Table 2. (Continued)

Region	UOC MP, n	Transitions to the OCU	
		N	%
Odessa	613	9	1.47
Zakarpattya	626	8	1.28
Mykolaiv	286	6	2.1
Kharkiv	370	6	1.62
Ivano-Frankivsk	29	5	17.24
Poltava	487	4	0.82
Dnipro	643	4	0.62
Kyiv (city)	268	3	1.12
Kirovohrad	308	3	0.97
Sumy	393	3	0.76
Zaporizhya	371	1	0.27
Donetsk	474	1	0.21
Kherson	371	0	0
AR of Crimea	535/300	0	0
Luhansk	179	0	0
Sevastopol	63	0	0

Volyn is the 4th region by the number of churches of the UOC MP and the 1st region by the number of religious transitions. By percentage, Volyn is in the third place (after Lviv and Ternopil regions); but given the small number of churches of the UOC MP in those two regions, we can rightly say that Volyn is the leader in the transition of religious communities from the UOC MP to the OCU.

The tension and confrontation were characteristic of a number of communities (Parashchevin 2017: 62). Local and national media periodically (in the most active period, Table 1) reported inappropriate and even illegal events that accompanied the process of religious transition: a *confiscation* of the signed lists for changing the church jurisdiction (*Volyn online*, 02/14/2019. <https://surl.li/gnboi>), and the priest's shooting towards the parishioners (*Public radio, Lutsk district*, 02/23/2019. <https://surl.li/gnboy>, <https://surl.li/gnbpf>), and blocking the road by parishioners (*Concurrent. News Agency*, 07/03/2019. <https://surl.li/gnbps>), fights (*Concurrent. News Agency*, 05/04/2019. <https://surl.li/gnbqg>), schisms (*5th channel*, 04/18/2019. <https://cutt.ly/EH9I8Bj>), etc. It is important that these isolated conflicts did not go beyond the sphere of religion, and basically the rural communities managed to cope with the emotional tension.

It is necessary to underline that active religious confrontations began in December 2018 and ended in April 2019 (Table 1). The beginning coincides with the creation of the OCU, the period coincides with the election campaign of the President of Ukraine P. Poroshenko, who initiated the receiving of autocephaly of the OCU. After the elections in April 2019, the new president of Ukraine, V. Zelenskyi, declared non-interference in the religious sphere.

According to SRL in 2019, 56.4% of Volyn residents supported granting the Ukrainian Church the right to autocephaly, 17.1% of them did not support it and 26.5% did not have an opinion. The opinion about the Tomos depends on belonging to a particular church (Table 3).

Table 3. **Attitude to the Tomos and Religious Belonging\***, SRL (May, 2019)

Support	Attitude to the Tomos			Total**	
	Not support	Difficult to answer			
UOC MP	% within UOC MP	28.8	40.8	30.4	100
	% of Total	6.7	9.4	7.0	23.1
OCU	% within OCU	75.6	7.3	17.1	100
	% of Total	44.3	4.3	10.0	58.5
Other	% within Other	50.5	8.1	41.4	100
	% of Total	9.3	1.5	7.6	18.3
Total		60.2	15.2	24.6	100

\* Chi-square, statistical significance at 0.000.

\*\* The discrepancy between the distribution in the Table and the univariate distribution is an effect of data weighting due to the multistage random sampling.

The Evangelical and Catholic churches,<sup>2</sup> as well as the UAOC, either supported the autocephaly of the OCU, or were unable to give a clear answer. It is interesting that 30.4% of the parishioners of the UOC MP cannot determine their attitude to the OCU receiving autocephaly and about the same number of them (28.8%) supports it. Among OCU parishioners, the situation is more certain (Table 3).

The question about the attitude to the Tomos was open-ended. These responses were grouped by the percentages for the supporter/not supporter cohort and from the total (in the following text, a part of the total population of Volyn is indicated in parentheses).

The cohort of Tomos supporters is 56.4%. A group of people for whom the Tomos is *'strengthening of Ukrainess'*, strengthening of Ukrainian identity and national unity, the formation of *'national consciousness'* dominates; it is *'world recognition of the Ukrainian people'*, which *'appeared on the religious map of the world'*, *'world recognition of its formation as a nation'*. This was stated by 17.3% of respondents from the cohort of Tomos supporters (or 9.7% of the inhabitants of Volyn).

For 27.4% of Volyn people from the cohort of Tomos supporters (or 15.4% of the total), the Tomos is an event of a historical and national character.

The group of people considers that the Tomos as a purely ecclesiastical issue is quite significant – these respondents are 15.3% (or 8.6%). They believe that the Tomos will contribute to the independence of the Ukrainian Church, its development, unity, renewal and support. But many respondents also associate the independence of the Church with state independence – 9.0% (5.0%); their answers may be the slogans *'For Ukraine – the Ukrainian Church'* (or *'in Ukraine there should be a Ukrainian church'*), *'Independent State – [means] an independent Church'*, etc. And 10.1% (5.7%) respondents associate the Tomos exclusively with state independence; they

<sup>2</sup> They were also more likely to choose the 'Difficult to answer'.



believe that it *'enhances the independence of Ukraine'* and *'the authority of the state'*, it is *'an important condition for state development'*, *'increases the level of respect for Ukraine'* as a state.

The next group of respondents – 11.3% (6.3%) – consider the Tomos *'an important step for the development of the country'*, entailing *'positive changes'*, *'reforms'*, *'new chances and opportunities'*, and *'social cohesion'* and *'social stability'* in the long term; some respondents are grateful to politicians for their assistance to the reception of the Tomos; some respondents warn them against further influence on the Church.

Speaking about the state and church independence, 6.9% (3.9%) of respondents directly indicate the independence from Russia and Moscow, including the economic one, and 3.8% (2.1%) of respondents indicate the independence from the ROC or MP as the church and patriarchy of the country-aggressor. Some people express *'reluctance to pray for those who bless the killing of Ukrainians'*.

It is important that most Volyn people define the Tomos as a unifying factor (73.1 or 56.4%), and not a separating/opposing one (10.7 or 6.0%). Another 16.8% (9.4%) of the respondents could not explain their point of view, confining themselves to the short phrases *'this is fine'*, *'there is no reason for a different attitude'*, *'it is difficult for me to explain briefly'*, some even answered *'I will not say'*, etc.

Among the cohort of the Tomos not supporters (17.1%) a group of people who believe that *'all this is not right'*, *'not necessary'*, *'stupidity'*, *'why is this?'*, *'and without the Tomos so fine was'* dominates – there are 19.0% of such respondents (or 3.2% of the total sample). 10.5% (1.8%) of the respondents indicated a lack of personal interest, among them there are representatives of other faiths and those people for whom *'I do not care, but I am against'* is the main motive. The same number of respondents – 10.5% (1.8%) – believe that *'God is one, and the church does not matter'*. And the same number of respondents – 10.5% (1.8%) – believe that the Tomos is the cause of social destabilisation, as it contributed to *'the split of the country'*, *'quarrels in society'*, *'the destruction of good relations between people'*.

A little fewer respondents – 9.5% (1.6%) – associate the Tomos with the church schism within the country and international conflict.

The same number of respondents – 9.5% (1.6%) – considers the Tomos to be *'not real'*, *'fiction'*, therefore the OCU is *'not a canonical church'*, but only *'an association of schismatics'*.

The next notable cohort of respondents – 13.3% (2.3%) – defines the Tomos as an interference of power and politics in *'the church affairs'* in order to *'divert attention'* from *'more important reforms'*, *'problems'*; *'The war still did not stop from this'*. A small cohort of respondents – 4.8% (0.8% of Volyn residents) associate the Tomos with the name of President P. Poroshenko, calling the received church autocephaly a *'political game'*, *'PR'*, a *'scam'* of Poroshenko.

The reasons of those who did not support the Tomos are more blurred. Among the reasons are personal rejection and official non-recognition, a statement of social destabilisation and political support. The last two explanations can be based both on personal observations of the respondents and on the informational news that they are watching and reading.

Also, 13.3% (2.3%) of respondents could not or did not want to explain their attitude.

The population of the Volyn Region defines the Tomos not so monosemantic as experts. For the population, this is primarily an event of a historical and national character, for experts it is a political and geopolitical issue, and only some experts believe that *'this act means restoring historical justice, and the giving voice to Ukrainian Orthodoxy and it is issue of national dignity and security'* (Kucheriv 2018). Neither the population nor experts perceive the Tomos as a *'purely religious'* matter.



It is noteworthy that for the both periods before (2014–2018) and after the Tomos (2018–2019), trust in the Church as a social institution has not changed: according to SRL data, the indicator was 3.5 out of 4 points in 2015 (Bilous, Martynyuk 2015: 88) and 3.8 points in 2019.

## CONCLUSIONS

In order to determine how autocephaly for the Ukrainian church affected religious transitions among the Orthodox churches of Ukraine, the region with the highest level of religious Orthodox identification and also with the largest number of parish communities of the UOC MP was selected. It is the Volyn Region.

The dynamics of religious transitions in Volyn is the highest in Ukraine, while the transitions were exclusively from the UOC MP to the OCU, without affecting other religious communities. The individual transition of parishioners from MP churches to KP ones was observed before the creation of the OCU (2018). Among the population of Volyn there was a readiness for religious transitions. This is evidenced by their opinion regarding the receiving of autocephaly by the OCU: the majority of Volyn inhabitants (56.4%) supported it, 17.1% did not support it, and 26.5% were undecided. The opinion about Tomos depends on the church affiliation: parishioners of OCU and Evangelical churches mostly support Tomos, Catholic churches support or are undecided, UOC MP are undecided, but more those who support and are undecided in total. There was no 'rejection by many Churches' of the autocephaly of the OCU, and religious transitions took place only for the two churches. The first hypothesis was rejected.

Readiness for religious transitions facilitated civilised communications in the process of changing jurisdiction; some negative cases were presented in the media, but the conflicts were resolved. The activity of transitions and their number after ensuring legal procedures are also related to the state of parish communities, and the decrease in the number of transitions from the West to the East of Ukraine confirms the second hypothesis only taking into account the regional factor.

The process of active religious transitions was largely determined by the political support and popularity of the church as well. It was found that the dynamics of religious transitions covers two periods: the inactive one (2014–2018) and the active one (December 2018 – April 2019) – from receiving the Tomos until the presidential elections in April 2019. Since 2014, Ukrainians needed understanding, support and complicity of the church in the Russian-Ukrainian war. The church as a social institution was on the side of society, but with the change of power in 2019, it lost political support. This means that the process of religious transitions has not been completed.

New transition activities began on 24 February 2022.

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## **Autokefalijos suteikimas Ukrainos bažnyčiai: religiniai perėjimai prieš ir po *Tomos* bei požiūris į jį (Voluinės sritys atvejis)**

### *Santrauka*

Ukrainos stačiatikių bažnyčiai įgijus autokefaliją, sustiprėjo parapijų religiniai perėjimai, kurie prasidėjo atskirų parapijiečių išėjimu iš Maskvos patriarchato pavaldumo. Tokie perėjimai intensyviausi buvo Ukrainos šiaurės vakarų dalyje esančioje Voluinės srityje. Šie perėjimai išimtinai susiję su Ukrainos stačiatikių bažnyčios išėjimu iš Maskvos patriarchato jurisdikcijos. Šis procesas nepaveikė kitų religinių bendruomenių. Dauguma gyventojų palaiko autokefalinę Ukrainos stačiatikių bažnyčios statusą, nes mano, kad autokefalija yra svarbus istorinis įvykis ukrainiečių tautai. Religinių perėjimų proceso aktyvumą daugiausia lėmė kiekvienos konkrečios parapijos bendruomenės polinkis ir nacionaliniu lygmeniu – politinis klimatas. Ukrainos stačiatikių bažnyčia sugebėjo išsaugoti didelę pagarbą sau, tačiau 2019 m. pasikeitus Ukrainos politinei valdžiai ji prarado politinę paramą. Religinių perėjimų procesas sunyko.

**Raktažodžiai:** religijos sociologija, religiniai perėjimai, autokefalija Ukrainoje, stačiatikių bažnyčia, politinis bažnyčios palaikymas