

THE POLITICIZATION OF UKRAINIAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY: ORTHODOXY AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR THE RECOGNITION OF GEOPOLITICAL INDEPENDENCE

LA POLITIZACIÓN DE LA HISTORIA RELIGIOSA UCRANIANA: LA INSTRUMENTALIZACIÓN DE LA RELIGIÓN ORTODOXA PARA EL RECONOCIMIENTO DE LA INDEPENDENCIA POLÍTICA

Manon Dehillotte

PhD - International Law
Public University of Navarra

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ABSTRACT

The question of the place of the religious factor, and more specifically Orthodoxy, in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is increasingly at the heart of reflections concerning the study of the ideological conflict that has opposed the two countries since 2014; insofar as it has become a highly strategic factor in it. Using the concept of historicization, the aim of this article is to determine how the Ukrainian religious landscape and its history are being politicized by the Ukrainian government, both to achieve national independence and to gain recognition for its geopolitical independence from Russia, at the expense of freedom of conscience. The aim is to demonstrate that the quest for Ukrainian spiritual independence, guaranteed by an Orthodox Church freed from the tutelage of the Moscow Patriarchate, is a means for the country to consecrate a historical, cultural and spiritual rupture guided by geopolitical interests, and by the desire to have its break with the former Soviet space recognized by the West.

KEYWORDS

Ukraine, Russia, Orthodoxy, historicization, recognition, politicization, religious history, freedom of conscience.

RESUMEN

La cuestión de cuál es el lugar que ocupa el factor religioso en el conflicto ruso-ucraniano y, más concretamente, la Ortodoxia, ocupa cada vez más el centro de las reflexiones relativas al estudio del conflicto ideológico que enfrenta a los dos países desde 2014, convertido en un factor altamente estratégico dentro del mismo. El objetivo de este artículo, utilizando el concepto de «historización», es determinar cómo el paisaje religioso ucraniano y su historia están siendo politizados por el gobierno ucraniano, tanto para lograr la independencia nacional como para obtener el reconocimiento de su independencia geopolítica de Rusia y, todo ello, sin la debida consideración hacia la libertad de conciencia. Guiada por intereses geopolíticos y por el deseo de que Occidente reconozca su ruptura con la antigua Unión Soviética, el objetivo es demostrar que la búsqueda de la independencia de Ucrania, garantizada por una Iglesia Ortodoxa liberada de la tutela del Patriarcado de Moscú, es un medio para que el país consagre una ruptura histórica, cultural y espiritual.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Ucrania, Rusia, Ortodoxia, historización, reconocimiento, politización, historia religiosa, libertad de conciencia.

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. 2. The role of Orthodoxy in the Russian-Ukrainian identity game. 3. Historicization and the need for recognition: theoretical and methodological details of the research. 4. The political reinterpretation of Ukrainian religious history. 5. Conclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union has given a new lease of life to the Orthodox Churches and their close links with the political powers, insofar as «it is in this communist national synthesis achieved by the Stalinist regimes at the end of their tether that the nationalism of the Orthodox Churches finds its origins»¹. In particular, the fall of the USSR saw the

¹ DÉRENS, Jean-Arnaud; GESLIN, Laurent, «Tempête sur les églises orthodoxes. Comment le conflit ukrainien déchire les mondes orthodoxes», *Revue du Crieur*, n° 21, 2022, pp. 50-67, p. 53.

rebirth of cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state, of which the closeness and close ties between Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill are the most significant illustration; witness a message from the Russian President addressed to the Patriarch on November 20, 2022: «As primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, you strive to preserve traditional spiritual and moral values in society, harmonize interfaith and interethnic relations, and improve cooperation between church and state. Your wise pastoral words serve to strengthen the nation and support people in difficult times»². The rhetoric used in this message echoes the political line followed by Vladimir Putin since he came to power in 2000, advocating the preservation of traditional Russian values and inter-ethnic dialogue within the Russian Federation as part of a nationalist discourse; a political line which also seems to have been adopted by the Russian Church. Several other examples testify to the closeness between the Russian President and the Patriarch of Moscow, notably when the latter declared on February 7, 2022, on the occasion of the leader's birthday, «God has placed you in power»³, or when he publicly affirmed his support for the war in Eastern Ukraine.

These elements testify to the political place occupied by the Russian Orthodox Church in the light of the discourses of political and religious institutions, which are sometimes intertwined. The phrase «God has placed you in power» explicitly states that Vladimir Putin was chosen, in the eyes of the Patriarch and the Russian Church, to guide the people of Russia to fulfill their destiny. But whose destiny are we talking about? That of the «Holy Russia» that Patriarch Kirill and the entire Russian Church has reappropriated, as Yauheni Smirnou reports in his article on the concept of *Russkiy Mir*⁴ in 2016 in the following terms:

«In 2009, Patriarch Kirill set out his vision of the Russian world, the core of which would be Russia, Ukraine and Belarus as heirs to the Kievan Rus'. While stressing the importance of the Russian language, culture

² Message from Vladimir Putin on the occasion of the birthday of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Russia, November 20, 2022, available on the official Kremlin website. [Online] <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/445/events/69873>, [Accessed September 1, 2023].

³ In the words of Patriarch Kirill on the occasion of Vladimir Putin's birthday on February 7, 2022.

⁴ Russian words meaning «Russian World».

and shared historical memory, the patriarch places particular emphasis on the role of Orthodoxy as a key component of the concept»⁵:

The idea we're trying to demonstrate here is that Orthodoxy is intended to be the cement of the Russian world, of the whole of Russian civilization outside the borders that include present-day Russia and part of the former Soviet republics that make up the secular Kievan Rus'. And with good reason: in the Russian cognitive frame of reference, Kievan Rus' refers to the baptism of the Great Prince Saint Vladimir in 988 in the Ukraine (historians are unable to determine the exact location, which is either Kiev or the Crimean Peninsula), and is still commemorated in Russia on July 28 as «the Baptism of Russia». So, for the Russians, spiritual Russia, as well as the unity of the *Russkiy Mir*, was born in the Ukraine. Factually, this is a key element of the Russian imaginary in its process of reinterpreting history, at the root of a feeling of dispossession in the rapprochement between Ukraine and the West, or of a sense of humanitarian and moral duty to protect persecuted Russian-speaking minorities in Eastern Ukraine. Moreover, and as a direct consequence of this fact, the Orthodox Church and its organization have been and remain a key issue in Ukraine, in that the spiritual independence of one would guarantee the national and geopolitical independence of the other. Hence, the Orthodox question in the Ukraine was elevated to a high strategic factor in its conflict with Russia, as a parameter still linking the two countries on a cultural, historical and spiritual level. More than just an armed conflict, this article aims to show that it is also an ideological war over the reinterpretation of history for geopolitical ends, reflecting a vital need for recognition of a Ukraine at odds with the past, present and future of the Russian Federation.

2. THE ROLE OF ORTHODOXY IN THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN IDENTITY GAME

Given Russia's interpretation of its own religious history as intrinsically linked to Ukraine, it's clear that Orthodoxy is a particularly burning issue in all social spheres of Ukrainian society. Now made up of three Orthodox churches –the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriar-

⁵ SMIROU, Yauheni, «Le monde russe: un concept et son évolution», *La Revue russe*, 2016, n° 46, pp. 29-38, p. 33.

chate, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate, now defunct, and *Pravoslavna cerkva Ukraïny*⁶, whose autocephaly was validated by the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2019⁷– the Ukrainian religious landscape is now tinged with divisions, if not schisms, and quarrels over control of local metropolises⁸: all in the name of cutting all ties with its Russian neighbor. Former President Viktor Poroshenko's desire for Ukraine to finally enjoy a «Church without Putin» and «without prayers for the Russian army»⁹, as he famously put it, is in fact part of the process of independence from Russia that Ukraine has been pursuing politically, socially and economically for many years. It is therefore unequivocal that «with this new attribute of independence, Ukraine is pursuing its emancipation from Russia and asserting itself as a nation-state»¹⁰. However, only the Patriarchates of Greece, Cyprus and Alexandria recognize the *Pravoslavna cerkva Ukraïny*, while the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate remains the country's only canonically recognized church. While on the surface this autocephaly recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate appears to represent a loss of influence and power for Moscow on Ukrainian territory, it is claimed that Russia could use this autocephaly to stir up divisions between Ukrainians and Russians in the country, as well as to draw

⁶ At the instigation of Ukrainian President Viktor Poroshenko and the Rada, the Unity Synod was held on December 15, 2018, during which a merger took place between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephalous Church to form the *Pravoslavna cerkva Ukraïny*. With the intention of separating from the tutelage of the Moscow Patriarchate, this autocephaly of the two unified Ukrainian Churches was validated by the Patriarchate of Constantinople on January 6, 2019, In May 2019, the Primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Kiev, Philarete, challenged the merger at a local synod, «claiming to have been wronged by the former Ukrainian president and by Constantinople» and denouncing «a new situation of dependence, this time on the Patriarchate of Constantinople. « Tatiana KASTOUÉVA-JEAN; Maxime AUDINET, «L'autocéphalie de l'Église orthodoxe ukrainienne et ses conséquences politiques», *Observatoire international du religieux*, n°27, March 2019, [Online]: <https://obsreligion.cnrs.fr/bulletin/lautocephalie-de-leglise-orthodoxe-ukrainienne-et-ses-consequences-politiques/>; [Accessed September 25, 2023].

⁷ CIMBALO, Giovanni, «The omitted role of the Church in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict», *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, n°7, 2022, pp. 1-28 on the autocephaly process of the *Pravoslavna cerkva Ukraïny* and the internal conflicts within Ukrainian Orthodoxy, as well as the ensuing schism between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Patriarchate of Moscow.

⁸ DÉRENS, Jean-Arnaud; GESLIN, Laurent, cit.

⁹ According to former Ukrainian President Viktor Poroshenko in his December 15, 2018 speech.

¹⁰ MARANGÉ, Céline, «L'Église autocéphale d'Ukraine», *Esprit*, n° 3, 2019, pp. 25-29.

closer to other Orthodox Churches that have remained neutral on this issue.¹¹ Religion is thus a particularly complex component of Russian and Ukrainian political, spiritual, historical and cultural aspirations, insofar as it seems to be the subject of a discourse that is now politicized and in the throes of historicization. Adopting a constructivist point of view, this article aims to determine how Orthodoxy, politicized and subject to a reinterpretation of history, is a fundamental element in Ukraine's endeavor to construct and recognize its national narrative, leading to the assertion of its independence. The aim is to show that the *Pravoslavna cerkva Ukraïny* is now taking a full part in the war, playing not only a spiritual but above all a political role in the conflict, since it is now fighting everything to do with Moscow alongside the Ukrainian political authorities. In spite of all the considerations and scenarios envisaged, and since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022, it is undeniable that the religious component, and more specifically Orthodoxy, is proving to be a parameter of paramount importance in the ideological confrontation between the two countries¹².

The axiom of this reflection takes up the idea put forward by Nataalka Boyko and Kathy Rousselet in 2004, namely that «religion contributes to the choice of a political and social model for Ukraine»¹³. Based on this principle, the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in 2019 takes on its full meaning, insofar as it is intended to become the symbol of Ukrainian independence from the Moscow Patriarchate in particular, and from Russia in general. Arguing that the religious factor encourages several conceptions of national identity in Ukraine, the *Pravoslavna cerkva Ukraïny* would become the driving force behind what the two authors call «Ukrainity» and the Moscow Patriarchate's Ukrainian Orthodox Church the guarantor of «Sovietism»¹⁴. While according to some,

¹¹ MARANGÉ, cit.

¹² See among others G. CIMBALO, cit.; MARANGÉ, cit.; MAKARIAN, Christian, «Ukraine et orthodoxie», *Revue de Défense Nationale*, n°849, 2022, pp. 19-22; ROUSSELET, Kathy, «Les Églises orthodoxes dans la guerre en Ukraine», *Bulletin de l'Observatoire international du religieux*, n°36, March 2022, pp. 8. PAPARELLA, Ivo, « Ukraine, Russie et Églises orthodoxes: enjeux géopolitiques », *Revue de Défense Nationale*, n°849, 2022, pp. 43-47; DÉRENS, Jean-Arnaud; GESLIN, Laurent, cit.; ALOISIO, Christophe, « La guerre en Ukraine et l'hiver de l'Église orthodoxe », *Études*, n°12, 2022, pp. 69-80.

¹³ BOYKO, Nataalka; ROUSSELET, Kathy, «Les Églises ukrainiennes, Entre Rome, Moscou et Constantinople», *Le Courrier des Pays de l'Est*, n°1045, 2004, pp. 39-50, p. 48.

¹⁴ «Ukrainity» is the conception of a Europeanist Ukrainian identity based on «a reinvented Ukrainian tradition», a religious «ethno-national model», seeking a break with the

the choice of national identity depends on religious obedience, others, like Jean-Arnaud Dérens and Laurent Geslin, nuance this correlation, which is sometimes not as clear-cut as it seems:

«However, we must be wary of imagining that religious affiliation and national identity coincide perfectly. In many villages, there's just one church, which all the faithful attend, without wondering whether it depends on Moscow or Kiev. It's quite possible to consider oneself a Ukrainian patriot while attending a «Russian» church, either out of habit or because no other choice is possible»¹⁵.

Considering this situation, which must indeed be that of many faithful, how, nevertheless, is it perceived? If Orthodoxy is becoming a structural factor for Ukrainian society, it is also becoming a strategic identity factor for Russia, insofar as «it enables Moscow to make Orthodox living outside its borders 'compatriots' on an equal footing with Russian speakers»¹⁶, thereby placing the national factor at the heart of both Ukrainian and Russian religious conceptions. From Russia's point of view, it's a question of conceiving a Church that radiates beyond physical borders, a Church that «affirms the identity of a single Slavic culture, common to Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, the existence of a single people in the three countries where the Orthodox religion, without national distinction, is the unifying element. Following a logic linked to the Soviet heritage, the homeland, defined by Christian origins - the baptism of Rus in 988 - and a common religion and history, supplanted the nation. Orthodoxy became the religion of a homeland, transcending national divisions. (...) National affirmation and religious disunity are considered sins»¹⁷. This Church, at the heart of the *Ruski Mir*, is the focus of the Kremlin's attention, as it guarantees spiritual unity between «compatriots» abroad and Russia, for whom it is the «national narrative» that prevails, since «it is on Ukrainian soil that Slavic Orthodoxy historically originated.»¹⁸.

former Soviet space; and «Sovietism», nostalgic for the Soviet Union and devoted in all respects to Russia. To this, the authors add «Creolity», grouping together those who politically affiliate with the Ukrainian state but culturally identify with Russia. BOYKO, Natalka; ROUSSELET, Kathy, cit. p. 44.

¹⁵ DÉRENS, Jean-Arnaud; GESLIN, Laurent, cit. p. 57.

¹⁶ MAKARIAN, Christian, cit. p. 20.

¹⁷ BOYKO, Natalka; ROUSSELET, Kathy, cit. p. 44.

¹⁸ MAKARIAN, Christian, cit. p. 21.

It is clear that the national dimension of the Orthodox Churches cannot be overlooked, insofar as «Orthodox Christianity has for many centuries had another well-established characteristic: state powers have tended to shape the administration of the Churches as they see fit, while ecclesiastical leaders have shown a certain docility towards political power, whoever it may be»¹⁹. This refers to the «principle of accommodation», dear to Orthodoxy, which holds that «the organization of the Church should follow the organization of politics»²⁰. This was indeed the case in Ukraine, where the autocephaly of the *Pravoslavna cerkva Ukraïny* was achieved under the impetus of political power, from which it is today a symbol of tutelary and spiritual deliverance. Although this represents a significant step forward for the Ukrainian side in its desire to free itself once and for all from Moscow, it should be noted that «the current situation foreshadows new conflicts and, above all, a continuation of the national evolution of the various churches.»²¹; but above all, there remains a question that this article aims to answer, and which Christophe Aloisio expresses in the following terms: «The burning question that the Ukrainian conflict poses for ecclesiology is that of the function of history in the conception of the Church.»²²

3. HISTORICIZATION AND THE NEED FOR RECOGNITION: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL DETAILS OF THE RESEARCH

The key concept for understanding the process of politicization and reinterpretation of Ukrainian religious history is that of historicization. This is a term derived from historicism, which Paul Hamilton defined in 2003 as «a critical movement insisting on the primordial importance of historical context for the interpretation of texts of all kinds»²³, and which Karl Popper described as a «bad method»²⁴ insofar as «belief in historical destiny is pure superstition»²⁵. But historicization is not tainted by

¹⁹ ALOISIO, Christophe, cit. p. 71.

²⁰ MARANGÉ, cit. p.26.

²¹ DÉRENS, Jean-Arnaud; GESLIN, Laurent, cit. p.62.

²² ALOISIO, Christophe, cit. p.80.

²³ HAMILTON, Paul, *Historicism*, Psychology Press, 2003, pp. 211, pp. 1-2.

²⁴ POPPER, Karl Raimund, *The Poverty of Historicism*, Psychology Press, 2002, pp. 156, p. xi.

²⁵ POPPER K., op. cit., p. ix.

this reputation, and here meets a very different definition from those given to historicism. According to a literary definition given by Éric Bordas, historicization is characterized by «the enunciation of history in narrative discourse through the configurative assumption of a constructed fiction. [...] Historicization, defined as a mode of enunciation, is the invention-revelation of a sensitive subject –the subject or object of configurative discourses: configured or configuring– from which a set of values, more or less normative, is discovered, which we will call ideology»²⁶ Although this definition is part of a framework for the study of literature, it is the only one to address the method of its use, namely discourse, as well as its objective: that of creating a new system of norms. Here, historicization is approached as a process of manipulating historical data to serve one's own interests on an international scale. The historicization of the religious component –in this case, Orthodoxy– on the Ukrainian side, or on the Russian side, serves no other purpose than to legitimize geopolitical ambitions. The use of historical data in the construction of national independence thus undertakes to combine «on the one hand, the major trends in the writing of history (especially ancient history) and the modes of representation of the past (essentially territorial), and, on the other, the construction of new references of national identity»²⁷. Around a Ukrainian national narrative that is trying, not for the moment to create a future for itself, but rather to construct a past, is articulated the undertaking of the political power and *Pravoslavna cerkva Ukraïny* to regain control over the lost territories of the Donbass, as well as «partly reinvented Ukrainian traditions»²⁸; Moscow's rhetoric about an indivisible *Russki Mir* with a shared, centuries-old history, and its new drive for territorial conquest, also feature «the role of historical discourse» aimed at «explaining the genius of each people. «But also «the notion of territory to which historical discourse attempts to give an often-artificial depth»²⁹.

This article will therefore consider the phenomenon of historicization as the foundation of the process of role and recognition that Ukraine and

²⁶ BORDAS, Éric, «De l'historicisation des discours romanesques», *Revue d'histoire du XIX^e siècle*, n°25, 2002, pp. 171-197, p. 171-172.

²⁷ VALTER, Stéphane, *La construction nationale syrienne. Légitimation de la nature communautaire du pouvoir par le discours historique*, CNRS Éditions, Paris, 2002, pp.399, p. 6.

²⁸ BOYKO, Natalka; ROUSSELET, Kathy, cit. p. 40.

²⁹ VALTER, Stéphane, op. cit., p. 9.

Russia are pursuing on the international stage today. Indeed, this research has chosen to analyze the question of the place of Orthodoxy in Ukrainian national and geopolitical ambitions from a constructivist angle, highlighting the importance of ideas in the analysis of a social structure and in the construction of state interests³⁰. In 2008, Ian Hurd summarized the phases in the process of identity construction and the emergence of state interests as «influenced by their interactions with others and with their social environment», drawing on the work of Alexander Wendt³¹, Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett³²:

«This [the social constitution of interests] includes the processes of socialization and internalization (Hurd 1999), the search for social recognition and prestige (Wendt 1999, ch. 5), the effects of social norms on interests and behavior (including the desire to create norms that legitimize one's behavior) (Hurd 2007a), and the presence or absence of a sense of «community» (Adler and Barnett 1998)».³³

The last two phases of the process described by Hurd are of particular interest to us in the case of Ukraine. While we know that there is an intrinsic relationship between the affirmation of identity and the prestige of a nation³⁴, it is equally certain that a «sense of community»³⁵ is also essential for a state in its policy of recognition, hence the predominant role of historical data in this undertaking. In Martha Finnemore³⁶ and Jutta Weldes' idea³⁷, taken up by Hurd, it is asserted that «constructivists find it useful to examine the historical construction of 'national in-

³⁰ WENDT, Alexander, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

³¹ WENDT, Alexander, op. cit.,

³² ADLER, Emmanuel; BARNETT, Michael, «Security communities in theoretical perspective», in *Security Communities*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 3-28.

³³ HURD, Ian, «Constructivism», in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, 2008, p. 22, p. 6.

³⁴ WOOD, Steve, «Nation, national identity and prestige », *National Identities*, Vol. 16., n°2, 2014, pp. 99-115.

³⁵ HURD, Ian, op. cit., p. 6.

³⁶ FINNEMORE, Martha, *National Interests in International Society*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1996; FINNEMORE, Martha, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 2003.

³⁷ WELDES, Jutta, *Constructing National Interests: The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999.

terests'»³⁸ insofar as «the historical construction of states as sovereigns can constitute an important element of any account of how states interact with norms»³⁹ and thus how they will act on the international stage.

In the case of Russia, the focus here is on the construction of its image through the notion of «great power»⁴⁰, expressed explicitly or implicitly. Indeed, in the Russian cognitive frame of reference, the idea of great power refers not to Russia's current characteristics, but to its history and future, forging a national consciousness not based on the present, but on a glorious past heralding a messianic destiny in the Eurasian space⁴¹. From this Russian conception of power stems the primary notion of a «set of roles»⁴², encompassing all the behaviors a great power will adopt when defining itself as such. The place of the near abroad in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation is therefore inseparable from the constant concern about the role it must play there, thus defining its status and rank in the international order. Whether it's the desire to overturn the post-Cold War world order by opposing Americanism head-on, nostalgia for its two lost empires or a duty of humanitarian responsibility towards its diaspora⁴³, the Russian Federation is in the process of regaining influence over its near abroad, of which it considers Ukraine to be an integral part.

It's undeniable that «on a pre-theoretical level, we seem to accept quite naturally that the actions of state actors often obey the intention of ensuring that other states respect the collectivity they represent and obtain recognition for it through appropriate measures»⁴⁴. However, in the case of the Ukraine, this raises a question. Having gained national independence on August 24, 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet

³⁸ Hurd, Ian, *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 10.

⁴⁰ URNOV, Mark, «'Greatpowerness' as the key element of Russian self-consciousness under erosion», *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, n° 47, 29 octobre 2014, pp. 305-322. p. 306.

⁴¹ SCHMIDT, Matthew, «Is Putin Pursuing a Policy of Eurasianism?», *Demokratizatsiya*, 2005. https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/13_1_Y35592282447U832.pdf.

⁴² URNOV M. cit., p. 312.

⁴³ CULLEN DUNN, Elizabeth; BOBICK, Michael S. « The empire strikes back: War without war and occupation without occupation in the Russian sphere of influence », *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 41, n°3, pp. 405-413.

⁴⁴ HONNETH, Axel, «La reconnaissance entre États. L'arrière-plan moral des relations interétatiques», *Cultures & Conflit*, n° 87, 2012? pp.27-36, p. 27.

Union, a country recognized by the entire international community, what, if not whom, is Ukraine seeking recognition from? If the Kremlin's justification for its armed intervention in Ukraine in February 2022 was a humanitarian duty to protect its compatriots abroad, the underlying interest was to counter European and American influence in Ukraine, so that Russia could maintain its influence over its near abroad. In fact, it is not recognition as a sovereign state that Ukraine is seeking, since it already enjoys sovereignty, but geopolitical autonomy from Russia, and cultural and spiritual independence as a people in its own right, with its own history, spirituality and culture.

In this respect, the choice of the concept of historicization, coupled with a constructivist interpretation, will serve as the basis for the analysis of the reinterpretation of Ukrainian religious history in this article. On the basis of legal and concrete facts, we will attempt to interpret the empirical elements that point to a politicization of the religious question in Ukraine, on the part of the Ukrainian government and the *Pravoslavna cerkva Ukraïny*, which are attempting to oppose and break away, no longer territorially and politically with Russia, but rather to initiate a definitive break with its civilizational heart.

4. THE POLITICAL REINTERPRETATION OF UKRAINIAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY

Political reinterpretation inevitably involves the intervention of the Ukrainian state in the country's religious affairs. In this section, we will analyse and interpret the events and restrictive measures taken against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated to the Moscow Patriarchate, all of which were initiated by the current political authorities.

The first link in the Ukrainian state's intervention to regulate the country's Orthodox affairs is undoubtedly decree no. 820/2022 dated December 1, 2022 On the decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine of December 1, 2022 «On certain aspects of the activities of religious organizations in Ukraine and the application of special personal economic measures and other restrictive measures (sanc-

tions)»⁴⁵. This decree of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, which came into force on the day of its publication, provides, following an examination of «the activities of religious organizations on the territory of Ukraine in the context of the Russian Federation’s military aggression against Ukraine», «to ensure spiritual independence, prevent a split in society on religious grounds, promote the consolidation of Ukrainian society and protect national interests»⁴⁶. This legislative text tells us several things about the way religious affairs are now managed in Ukraine. In addition to the economic and legislative restrictions «aimed at preventing the activities in Ukraine of religious organizations affiliated with centers of influence in the Russian Federation»⁴⁷, it is clear that the Ukrainian religious landscape is now a matter for the country’s National Security and Defense Council, making the Orthodox Church and its organization a *de facto* national security issue. This decree therefore testifies to the need for the Ukrainian government, in the wake of Russian aggression, to go beyond the rupture already enshrined in the January 2019 schism by seeking to wipe out the Ukrainian Orthodox Church’s checkpoints, writings, clergy and influence on the country. This is evidenced by the actions of the Ukrainian Security Services (SSU) against anything remotely affiliated with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Indeed, when we visit the official SSU website, and enter the keyword «orthodox» in the search engine, we come across over 60 documents, statements and actions by the SSU services, all concerning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church⁴⁸. The terms «dubious», «suspicion», «propaganda» and «security measures» appear repeatedly in the titles of these documents; for example: «The SSU takes security measures on the premises of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in three oblasts»⁴⁹, «The SSU issues a notice of suspicion to the Metropolitan of the Diocese of the Moscow Patriarchate, Ukrainian

⁴⁵ Text of the decree available on the official website of the President of the Republic of Ukraine, [Online] <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/8202022-45097>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

⁴⁶ According to the preamble to decree no. 820/2022 of December 1, 2022.

⁴⁷ According to article 1 of decree no. 820/2022 of December 1, 2022.

⁴⁸ Cf. the link to the official SSU website with the keyword «orthodox» as a search indicator, [Online]: <https://ssu.gov.ua/en/search?query=orthodox>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

⁴⁹ Statement and photos available on the official SSU website, [Online]: <https://ssu.gov.ua/en/novyny/sbu-provodyt-bezpekovi-zakhody-na-objektakh-upts-mp-u-trokh-oblastiakh-ukrainy-2>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

Orthodox Church»⁵⁰, or «On the premises of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in the Ternopil and Prykarpattia regions, the SSU finds propaganda material denying the existence of Ukraine»⁵¹. This information bears witness to the fact that a policy of repression against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is underway in the country, and that the political authorities, at the highest level, consider the management of religious affairs to be highly strategic in the context of the armed conflict with Russia. On the very day that decree no. 820/2022 came into force, the President of the Republic of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenski, was quick to guarantee Ukraine's «spiritual independence», after asserting that «we have already achieved it and we will ensure the full independence of our state», while continuing that «we will never allow anyone to build an empire within the Ukrainian soul»⁵². Spiritual independence, then, is affiliated to the national independence of the country which, 31 years earlier to the day on December 1, 1991, organized the referendum for the unification of the Ukrainian territory. The choice of this date is therefore a powerful symbol for the political powers that be, as President Zelenski reminded us in his speech⁵³, choosing to consecrate the country's religious and spiritual independence and its emancipation from Russia on the same day it freed itself from the USSR when it collapsed. History and politics intertwine, giving even more support and legitimacy to the repression of the Ukrainian

⁵⁰ Statement and photos available on the official SSU website, [Online]: <https://ssu.gov.ua/en/novyny/sbu-povidomya-pro-pidozru-mytopolytu-odniiei-z-yeparkhii-upts-mp>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

⁵¹ Statement and photos available on the official SSU website, [Online]: <https://ssu.gov.ua/en/novyny/sbu-znaishla-v-objektakh-upts-mp-na-ternopilshchyni-ta-trykarpatti-propahandystski-materialy-shcho-zaperechiut-isnuvannia-ukrainy>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

⁵² According to the words of the President of the Republic of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenski during his speech on December 1, 2022 available on the official website of the President of the Republic of Ukraine, [On line]: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/mi-garantuyemo-ukrayini-duhovnu-nezalezhnist-zvernennya-prez-79577>; [Accessed on September 27, 2023].

⁵³ «On December 1, 31 years ago, a referendum was held to unify the entire territory of our state. [...] The people confirmed the proclamation of Ukraine's independence - freely and legally. It was a genuine referendum, not some kind of imitation. It was an honest referendum, and that's why it was recognized by the whole world» From the words of the President of the Republic of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenski during his speech on December 1, 2022 available on the official website of the President of the Republic of Ukraine, [Online]: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/mi-garantuyemo-ukrayini-duhovnu-nezalezhnist-zvernennya-prez-79577>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

Orthodox Church in the eyes of the Ukrainian public, as a continuation of the independence process begun 31 years earlier.

While the Ukrainian political authorities are seeking to legitimize the concepts of history and national independence by linking them to Ukraine's religious independence, they are also seeking to gain the support of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which has made no secret of its conflict with the Moscow Patriarchate and has declared its full support for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Indeed, several high-profile meetings took place between President Volodymyr Zelenski and the authorities of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, such as the one between the Ukrainian President and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in Istanbul on July 8, 2023, or the one with the Patriarch of Chalcedon, as representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Ukraine, on August 10, 2023. During these meetings, it was affirmed that «the Ecumenical Patriarchate, as the mother Church of all Ukrainian Orthodox, is always on their side»⁵⁴, in the words of Patriarch Bartholomew I, or the following formula: «We stand firmly behind you at this difficult time. You can be assured of our support and of everything we can do in the name of the Ecumenical Patriarchate»⁵⁵, in the words of the Patriarch of Chalcedon. This support from the Ecumenical Patriarchate comes as no surprise, given that Patriarch Bartholomew I's view is that «Ukraine is historically part of the Church of Constantinople, and for political reasons was temporarily ceded to Russia»⁵⁶. Here again, history plays a key role in legitimizing Ukraine's desire for spiritual independence, and in justifying the support it receives. Here too, the Ukrainian religious landscape became a theater of spiritual warfare for control of the metropolitanates between the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which, directly under American influence, initiated demands for repression of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church⁵⁷. In this undertaking, his-

⁵⁴ In the words of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I as reported by the official website of the President of the Republic of Ukraine, [Online]: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/u-stambuli-volodimir-zelenskij-zustrivsvya-zi-vselskim-patr-84193>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

⁵⁵ According to the words of the Patriarch of Chalcedon as representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate reported by the official website of the President of the Republic of Ukraine, [Online]: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-zustrivsvya-z-predstavnikom-vselskogo-p-84813>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

⁵⁶ PAPPARELLA, Ivo, cit. p. 45.

⁵⁷ Giovanni Cimbalo explains that the Ecumenical Patriarchate finds itself under the influence of the United States, particularly when it comes to recognizing an autonomous

tory, politics and religion continue to merge, to such an extent that every event becomes a source of recognition and legitimization of spiritual independence. In this respect, let's take a look at the visit to Ukraine by US President Joe Biden in February 2023, and in particular the event of his visit to the Monastery of St. Michael's Golden Dome alongside President Zelenski. During this visit on February 20, 2023, the official website of the President of the Republic of Ukraine reports that «The heads of state familiarized themselves with the history of the temple and its operation at the time of the Russian invasion»⁵⁸. An architectural masterpiece of the Kievan Rus' era, whose first milestone was set by Prince Yaroslav the Wise and perpetuated by his descendants, the Monastery of St. Michael with its golden dome is now the object of a historical, cultural and spiritual reappropriation by the Ukrainian state, when it is also an essential component of Russian religious history. US President Joe Biden's visit to the site is another strong message sent to Russia. The Ukrainian government is asserting its legitimacy in welcoming heads of state to a shrine it sees as a symbol of Russia's independent religious and monarchical history, whereas in fact the Kievan Rus' is the very proof of a spiritual and political history shared by both countries. Moreover, the Ukrainian state is expressing its desire to show the whole world, and above all the Western world to which it wishes to belong, that its spiritual independence is consolidating its diplomatic and geopolitical independence, through the reinterpretation and affirmation of its own religious history. The seizure of certain buildings of the Monastery of the Lavra of the Caves, then belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and the expulsion of its monks in July 2023, are also noteworthy events in this undertaking. This event was particularly publicized in Russia as an «illegitimate and spiritually immoral step», as the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated in a press release, considering that «The Kiev Lavra of the Caves is no ordinary monastery, it is the center of canonical Orthodoxy, and at the same time one of the oldest Lavras of the ancient Russian state. Founded in the 11th century by St. Anthony (Antony) Pechersky, this monastery quickly became the

Ukrainian Orthodox Church, under the guarantee that the Patriarchate of Constantinople will retain its funding for the Orthodox diaspora in North America and Australia. CIMBALO, Giovanni, cit.

⁵⁸ Event covered by the official website of the President of the Republic of Ukraine, [Online]: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/lideri-ukrayini-ta-ssha-vshanuvali-pamyat-zagiblih-ukrayinsk-81109>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

center of spiritual life in ancient Russia»⁵⁹. Needless to say, inside the Monastery of the Lavra of the Caves is the tomb of the Great Prince Yuri Dolgoruki, then considered the founder of the city of Moscow, which explains Russia's particularly virulent reaction to its search⁶⁰. The Monastery of the Lavra of the Caves is therefore a highly symbolic place in Russian and Ukrainian religious history, whose appropriation by one would inevitably trigger the dispossession of the other, and vice versa.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is determined to wage war against the Ukrainian government's seizure of religious and spiritual sites and property, even though it claims to have «no administrative links with the Moscow Patriarchate»⁶¹, according to Nicétas Chekman, the lawyer defending the Laure des Grottes Monastery and its management against the SSU. Chekman asserts that the SSU's assessment of the monastery was biased against the Ukrainian state, claiming that the monastery's management had ties with Moscow. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is affiliated to the Moscow Patriarchate, maintains the view expressed in the Resolution of the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of February 27, 2022, namely that it «condemns war as a violation of God's commandment» and that it does not share «the position of His Holiness Patriarch Cyril of Moscow and of all Russia on the war in Ukraine. «It is particularly regrettable that the recent actions of the Patriarch of Constantinople in Ukraine, which led to the formation of the «Ukrainian Orthodox Church», have only aggravated misunderstandings and led to physical confrontations.»⁶². Following this, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church expresses its reprobation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church against the seizures of its places of worship and

⁵⁹ According to the statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation «on the pressure exerted by the Ukrainian authorities on the management of the Kiev Grotto Lavra in the middle of Lent», available on the official website of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in France, [Online]: https://france.mid.ru/fr/presse/sur_la_pression_exercee_par_les_autorites_ukrainiennes/; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

⁶⁰ MARANGÉ, Céline, cit

⁶¹ As quoted by Nicétas Chekman in an interview with the online journal <https://orthodoxie.com/> published on August 16, 2023, [Online]: <https://orthodoxie.com/grande-interview-avec-lavocat-du-monastere-de-la-laure-des-grottes-de-kiev/>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

⁶² According to the Resolution of the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of May 27, 2022 available on the official website of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, [Online]: <https://news.church.ua/2022/05/28/resolutions-council-ukrainian-orthodox-church-may-27-2022/?lang=en#2023-09-27>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

property, but also concerning its canonical status, which it describes as «not autocephalous and clearly inferior in terms of freedoms and possibilities for implementing Church activities compared to those provided for in the Statutes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church»⁶³.

A new form of war is thus taking shape in the Ukrainian religious landscape, a political war and a war of ideas over the country's religious history, in which the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are staking their legitimacy. Yet, despite the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's statements condemning the war and disagreeing with the views of the Moscow Patriarchate, the war is still perceived as a threat by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian government. Its spiritual communion with the Moscow Patriarchate is proving to be a major obstacle to the political power's desire to obtain total spiritual independence for Ukraine, to such an extent that «Henceforth, the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate will be obliged to indicate, in its title, its belonging to Russia»⁶⁴.

5. CONCLUSION

This article aimed, through the concept of historicization and from a constructivist angle, to establish an analysis on the current politicization of Ukrainian religious history; then a direct consequence of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict raging since 2014. Through a succession of facts and concrete events of repressions against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church on the part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in close cooperation with Ukrainian political power and the Ecumenical Patriar-

⁶³ According to the Resolution of the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of May 27, 2022 available on the official website of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, [Online]: <https://news.church.ua/2022/05/28/resolutions-council-ukrainian-orthodox-church-may-27-2022/?lang=en#2023-09-27>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

⁶⁴ According to the Multimedia Portal of Ukraine's Foreign Broadcasting Ukrinform in an article concerning the adoption of Bill No. 5309 on «Amendments to Ukrainian law, concerning freedom of conscience and religious organizations, relating to the names of religious associations that are part of a religious organization, whose center is located outside Ukraine, in a country legally recognized for perpetrating military aggression against Ukraine and / or temporarily occupying part of its territory» of December 2018, [Online]: <https://www.ukrinform.fr/rubric-polytics/2605665-la-rada-oblige-leglise-orthodoxe-du-patriarcat-de-moscou-a-changer-de-nom-les-premieres-reactions.html>; [Accessed September 27, 2023].

chate, it is undeniable that the question of Orthodoxy in Ukraine goes far beyond the spiritual framework and has become a notorious strategic issue in the ideological conflict pitting Ukraine against Russia. Ukraine's desire to acquire spiritual independence is driven by the desire to have its geopolitical independence recognized by the international community as a whole, and more specifically to prove to the Western world that it has definitively taken the path of a total break with its Russian neighbor.

On the other hand, the policy of repression against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church seriously calls into question the question of freedom of conscience in Ukraine, since it is now clear that the faithful who go to churches affiliated to the Moscow Patriarchate will be considered traitors in the eyes of the political authorities. The concerns of the international community were expressed on this issue in the minutes of the 9245th meeting of the United Nations Security Council on January 17, 2023, at the request of Russia, as demonstrated by the following words: «At a meeting of the Security Council convened at the request of the Russian Federation, the Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights expressed concern this afternoon about restrictions on freedom of religion and freedom of association throughout Ukraine, both on Government-controlled territory and on territory occupied by the Russian Federation. «The politicization of religion is another sign of the damage inflicted on the social fabric by this conflict, commented the United Arab Emirates, with China for its part stressing that mismanagement of religious issues can be an obstacle to reconciliation»⁶⁵. Moreover, the shift in Ukraine's religious landscape could run counter to its interests in Europe, and in particular to its aspiration to join the European Union, with its total disregard for the freedom of conscience of the Ukrainian Orthodox and Russian-speaking faithful. And let's not forget that Ukraine has been a signatory to the Council of Europe's «Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities» since September 15, 1995, and that this came into force in

⁶⁵ According to the minutes of the 9245th meeting of the United Nations Security Council on January 17, 2023, available on the official website of the United Nations, [Online]: <https://press.un.org/fr/2023/cs15178.doc.htm>; [Accessed September 28, 2023].

the country on May 1, 1998⁶⁶. Aside from questions about freedom of conscience, which is apparently not a priority issue for the Ukrainian state, it would seem that the politicization of the Orthodox question in the wake of the Russian-Ukrainian war has only served to increase what some now call the «geopolitical winter»⁶⁷ in which Eastern Europe, and more broadly the world, finds itself.

⁶⁶ CIMBALO, Giovanni, «Orthodox Churches and States in Europe: Problems and Perspectives», *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, n° 10, 2023.

⁶⁷ ALOISIO, Christophe, cit. p. 69.