

# A new 'Great Schism'?

## Theopolitics of communion and canonical territory in the Orthodox Church

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In October 2018, the Russian Orthodox cathedral of Alexander Nevsky on rue Daru in the 8th arrondissement in Paris welcomed parishioners with the following announcement printed in French, Russian and English on a poster fixed to the church door: 'Dear brothers and sisters! We inform you that our Archdiocese-Exarchate, under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, is in full communion with the whole Orthodox Church because the Ecumenical Patriarchate has not broken communion with the Patriarchate of Moscow and continues to mention it in the order of diptychs. All the Orthodox faithful can therefore participate fully in the liturgical and sacramental life of our parishes'. The announcement invited all 'the priests, deacons, monks, nuns, and faithful' to pray for the unity of the Orthodox Church and provided a short prayer for inclusion in the liturgy service.

This call for unity revealed not only a dissonance in the symphonic fellowship of Orthodox churches, but possibly one of the biggest schisms since the Great Schism of 1054 which divided Catholic and Orthodox churches and the Christian world between East and West. It was a call for unity by a diasporic church in response to the move of the Russian Orthodox Church to cut ties with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople (Istanbul) – the symbolic leader of Eastern Orthodoxy for centuries – following the latter's recognition of Ukrainian autocephaly. Rival to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church envisions itself as the actual leader of Eastern Orthodoxy, not only by virtue of being the largest, most powerful church in the Orthodox world, but also by claiming to be the 'third Rome' or the rightful successor of the imperial Byzantine Church.

Their dispute reveals conflicting sovereignties and the changing relationship 'between political communities and religious orders ... between power and salvation' (de Vries 2006: 25) in the Orthodox world. It mobilizes specific theologico-political formations, such as 'canonical territory' and 'communion', which address current geopolitical transformations and the globalization (deterritorialization) of Orthodoxy, and points to the realignment of religious and secular forces around contemporary political mobilizations.

Our attempt here to understand the current Orthodox 'schism' prompts a reconsideration of the relation between religion and politics in ways that go beyond subordinating religion to modern (secular) politics, as post-secular paradigms continue to do. It puts this 'event' in perspective, by relating it to other historical ruptures that have occurred within Christianity and investigates 'their potential both for social theory and for societal transformations', as Caroline Humphrey (2014: S217) suggests in her analysis of another important Orthodox schism in 17th-century Russia. For this, we will explore competing sovereignties in the post-Soviet space which culminated in the autocephaly (independence) of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine that triggered the Moscow-Constantinople 'schism', and will underline the work of theopolitics around the schism and beyond.

This case shows how the 'schism' is integral to the history and institutional dynamics of Orthodoxy where the logics of communion and canonical territory at times converge and at others clash, channelling claims for sovereignty, geopolitical projects and precipitating changes that reshape institutions and boundaries. At a time when anthropologists have started to take Christianity seriously,



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Fig. 1. Alexander Nevsky Orthodox Cathedral, Paris.

We would like to thank our reviewers, Gustaaf Houtman, Angie Heo and Simion Pop for their constructive comments and help.

1. While most observers relate this affinity of church and state to the symphonic model developed in the Byzantine Empire, the current Orthodox division along nation state lines is a modern historical development (Leustean 2014).

2. First declared in a new statute (*ustav*) in June 1988 in connection with the millennium celebration of the Kievan Rus, revised in August 2000 by the Bishop's Council (Oeldemann 2008: 231).

3. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is an Eastern rite church established in the 16th century which maintains the Orthodox rite but recognizes the authority of the Pope. Forbidden during the Soviet Union, it re-emerged in 1990, becoming the third largest church in Ukraine until now (Naumescu 2007).

4. According to a poll undertaken by the Drahomanov Sociological Center prior to unification, 52.8 per cent supported autocephaly, 19.1 per cent did not support it, while the remaining were not interested or undecided. 'Over half of Ukrainians support autocephaly of Orthodox Church – Poll', 20 November 2018. [https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all\\_news/community/social\\_questioning/73582/](https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/community/social_questioning/73582/) (accessed 21 January 2019).

5. The Russian Orthodox

yet remain mostly focused on individual transformation and ethical pursuits, it is worth exploring the effectiveness of theopolitics on the ground and the institutional and communal dynamics it triggers.

### Competing sovereignties in the post-Soviet space

Even though the break between Moscow and Constantinople patriarchates was triggered by the latter's recognition of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), this was only the latest in a series of fights over power and territory in the Orthodox world. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, several Orthodox churches emerged in post-Soviet countries, claiming their independence from Moscow. For this, they invoked the 'one nation, one faith' model prevalent in Eastern Orthodoxy, in which state and church sovereignty are closely intertwined.<sup>1</sup> The post-Soviet churches sought the recognition of their autonomy directly from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, despite being on what the Moscow Patriarchate considered as its canonical territory. This theological-political concept, which claims the sovereignty of a church over a particular territory and its subjects, was strategically deployed by the Russian Orthodox Church to defend its monopoly over the whole territory of the former Soviet Union (Martin 2019).<sup>2</sup>

Yet similar territorial claims were made by the aspiring national churches, so debates on canonical territory encompassed both local claims for autocephaly and Moscow's jurisdiction over lost territories. This led to the division of local Orthodox churches in countries like Moldova, Estonia and Ukraine into separate groups under the jurisdiction of the Moscow or the Ecumenical patriarchates (see Avram 2014; Engelhardt 2014; Naumescu 2007). Among these, the Ukrainian case is the most important for historical and geopolitical reasons, which makes the decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to grant autocephaly to the OCU the most daring and controversial of all.

Up until 15 December 2018, when this church came into being, Ukraine had three Eastern Orthodox churches and

Church has not always followed the state's imperialist politics, especially when they threatened its position and relations with other Orthodox churches – as in the conflict with Georgia or Ukraine (Werkner 2010).

6. 22 December 2018; source: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezident-pidpisav-zakon-shodo-nazvir-religijnoyi-organizaciy-52274> (accessed 26 April 2019).

7. <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=14829> (accessed 5 May 2019).

8. <https://azbyka.ru/kanonicheskaya-territoriya> (accessed 21 January 2019).

9. Dukhovnye razmyshleniya o raznom. *Dusha* 2018 12: 8.

10. The 2014 break of communion between the Orthodox Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem over the jurisdiction of Qatar diocese, another recent diasporic Orthodox community, followed the same pattern. <https://pravoslavie.ru/70416.html> (accessed 21 January 2019).

11. We thank Simion Pop for pointing out the genealogy of 'communion' in Orthodoxy and its institutional dynamics (see Ware 2004).

12. <https://kalakazo.livejournal.com/2469108.html> (accessed 21 January 2019).

13. <http://news.church.ua/2019/01/12/koli-dolyuxramu-virishuyut-lyudiyaki-v-nogo-ne-xodyat-ros/#more-255657> (accessed 16 Feb 2019).

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Engelhardt, J. 2014. *Singing the right way: Orthodox Christians and secular enchantment in Estonia*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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Humphrey, C. 2014. Schism, event and revolution:

one Eastern Catholic church<sup>3</sup> which emerged in the 1990s from a single Soviet-era Orthodox church. Its breaking up was the outcome of recurrent attempts to claim sovereignty for the Ukrainian church in the aftermath of Ukrainian independence. The first was the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) which drew on the nationalist tradition of Western Ukraine where an independent Ukrainian church functioned temporarily between 1917 and 1936/42. Its presence challenged the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine led by Soviet-era Metropolitan Filaret who, encouraged by the Ukrainian government, sought independence from Moscow but failed, and was deposed in 1992. The new Metropolitan elected in his place renamed the church as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) to reinforce his connection with Moscow, and excommunicated his opponents. In response, Filaret founded his own church, the UOC – Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) – which he led it until December 2018, when it reunited with the UAOC to form the Orthodox Church of Ukraine under a new patriarch, Epifaniy. Despite these divisions, the four churches share the same history, rite and ambition to become national churches, and their competition shaped the Ukrainian religious landscape for almost three decades.

The UOC-MP remains until today the largest Ukrainian church, counting more parishes than all the other Orthodox churches together, as well as major monasteries and pilgrimage centres in Ukraine. Yet this church is also very diverse internally, with regional groups holding different ideas about autocephaly and communion with other Orthodox churches (Mitrokhin 2010: 237). For them, as for the other Orthodox churches in Ukraine, politics at the parish and regional level play an important role in their political orientation and institutional belonging. Their uneven distribution across the country and dominance at the regional rather than national level helped maintain a status quo in the years after independence. The Ukrainian state also kept a careful distance from the competition between the churches and occasional attempts to form a state-church partnership have failed until now (Mitrokhin 2010). Nonetheless, these churches actively pursued their national aspirations by sustaining the foundation of an independent Kyivan Patriarchate to match the Ukrainian state. So, despite the religious fragmentation, the idea of autocephaly was very much present and shared by Ukrainians of all backgrounds, who hoped that one day these churches would unite into a national Orthodox church.<sup>4</sup>

This vision was further strengthened by their weak institutional commitments and the pervasiveness of Orthodoxy in Ukrainian society and culture as an 'ambient faith' (Wanner 2014a). The lack of institutional control at the grass-roots level (where parishes have shifted allegiance several times during the last 30 years) made churches very circumspect about making bold moves that could lead their communities astray. Furthermore, their efforts for autocephaly could only be achieved with the backing of the state – a recognition of the theopolitics of sovereignty which even in its modern forms, maintains the inherent sacrality of royal power (Hansen & Stepputat 2006: 301). In the end, it was the Ukrainian state that sought the unification and recognition of the national church in 2018, prompted by direct threats to its sovereignty from the war in eastern Ukraine and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.

This alignment of theopolitics and geopolitics provided the best opportunity to turn the national church into a reality and reunite the political and religious community within one territory. It was also an opportunity for the Ecumenical Patriarchate to restate its symbolic authority over the Eastern Orthodox commonwealth. The recognition of Ukrainian church autocephaly (and implicitly of state sovereignty) set in place a realignment of forces on

the political and religious levels beyond Ukraine itself. Based on an imperial logic which challenged the national sovereignty of post-Soviet states, Russia has been acting in the region – sometimes through direct conflict, as in the Georgian or Ukrainian wars. It has often used the Russian Orthodox Church to meddle in the religious affairs of the region and pursue its political ambitions.<sup>5</sup> Yet this time, the stakes are high for the Moscow Patriarchate, because the strength of its membership is based on the Ukrainian parishes under its jurisdiction. With the establishment of an independent Ukrainian church, it cannot claim Ukraine as its canonical territory anymore and thousands of parishes currently under its jurisdiction have the chance to change jurisdiction again as they did in the 1990s. Their choice is apparently much easier today, now that fewer options are at play, but it is highly politicized and will change the balance of power in the country and the whole region.

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian state tried to manifest its 'sovereign power' by threatening the UOC-MP with the nationalization of properties and by demanding that it remove 'Ukrainian' from its name.<sup>6</sup> This symbolic act, aimed at redefining the boundaries between 'our church' and the other 'foreign church' and turning UOC-MP into a proxy of the enemy state, did not have much purchase and was suspended by the Kyiv District Administrative Court in April 2019, one day after the election of the new Ukrainian president. Yet the effects of Ukrainian autocephaly and the ensuing 'schism' between the Moscow and Ecumenical patriarchates are felt across the Orthodox world, with people and parishes forced to take sides in a reorganization of institutional structures that threatens their belonging and access to the sacred.

### The theopolitics of communion and territoriality

Reverberations of the Moscow-Constantinople 'schism' were felt far beyond the post-Soviet space, revealing the inherent tensions of contemporary Orthodoxy: between the unity of faith of Orthodox churches and the territorial logic that divides them, and between 'national churches' and an increasingly global, deterritorialized community. The Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Paris, which posted the prayer for church unity, is a good example of the double bind that the theopolitics of communion and territory create: committed to a Christian fellowship, yet forced to inscribe itself into canonical jurisdictions.

This diaspora church has been the centre of the Archdiocese of Russian Orthodox Churches in Western Europe, an independent association of Orthodox parishes under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate until recently. Established by Russian emigrants after the Russian Revolution of 1917, it subscribes to a conciliar, deterritorialized organization which challenges the national-territorial logic of Eastern Orthodoxy. Yet to maintain communion with the rest of Orthodoxy, it had to seek recognition from its mother church in Russia or the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which assumes authority over Orthodox diasporas. The latter recognized its autonomy in 1999 as a patriarchal exarchate (a mode of ruling at a distance, inherited from the Byzantine Empire); however, it reconsidered its decision after the new 'schism' dissolved the exarchate in November 2018 and demanded from them to join a national church.

The dilemma this diasporic community is confronted with nowadays is indicative of the ongoing difficulty of escaping the national-territorial logic. The attempt to reinscribe the diaspora church into a canonical territory and gain direct control over local communities across Western Europe was rejected by its members. The prayer for unity posted on the Paris cathedral's doors was a sign of the church's commitment to a unity in Christ and faith that challenges the theopolitics of canonical territory. Meanwhile,



**Fig. 2.** UOC-KP and UOC-MP chapels in Sykhiv, a Soviet-era district of L'viv, where the community split in 1993 following the separation of two churches.

**Fig. 3.** The installation of Patriarch Epifaniy as head of the OCU on 14 January 2019 in St Sophia Cathedral, Kyiv, with former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko on his right.

**Fig. 4.** Screenshot from 'Infographic on how to defend churches of UOC from seizures' which explains the difference between 'territorial' and 'religious community'. Video made by the Ukrainian non-governmental organization Public Advocacy.

the Moscow Patriarchate has stepped forward to create a new exarchate under its jurisdiction which has replaced the one dissolved by the Ecumenical Patriarchate.<sup>7</sup>

For the Russian Orthodox Church, this move is an extension of the theopolitics of canonical territory beyond its traditional sphere of influence which overlaps with the boundaries of the former Russian Empire and Soviet Union. It has required a shift of emphasis from territory to ethnos, in an attempt to extend its jurisdiction beyond the nation state and bring Russian diasporas under the umbrella of the 'mother church'. The revamped principle of 'canonical territory' was introduced to an international audience by Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), Bishop of Vienna, at the Catholic University in Budapest in 2005.<sup>8</sup> Grounding the concept in the early church tradition, the Metropolitan revealed how the theopolitical logic behind it addresses contemporary challenges within and beyond the Orthodox world. First, he claimed, every local Orthodox church has its own canonical territory, so the other churches must accept the wholeness of this territory and do not have

the right to establish their parishes within its boundaries – a reference to the Ukrainian case. Second, the change of state borders should not lead to the fragmentation of the church – a reference to the competing sovereignties in the post-Soviet context. He then introduced the notion of 'traditionally Orthodox countries' where other religions can exist under conditions established by the Orthodox church – basically restating the de facto practice in the postsocialist context where the state protected national churches against religious competition and pluralization (Hann et al 2006).

For the Russian Orthodox Church, canonical territory thus becomes a theopolitical instrument for managing intra- and inter-church relations and an effective mechanism for policing the boundaries of the sacred. It allows the church to claim not only the territory of the nation state, but any place where ethnic Russians live, and to defend a jurisdictional logic where unregulated religious markets are in place. More importantly, it tries to globalize the logic of canonical territory and alter the current arrangement of sovereign rights and institutional structures in the Christian world. Churches which violate its sovereign rights can thus be considered 'uncanonical', which means that their hierarchy, rite and sacraments will not be recognized anymore by the other Orthodox churches.

However, definitions of canonicity are based on the authoritative interpretation of church tradition and its canons, which in Orthodoxy is always partial, given its decentralized, synodical system that lacks a supreme authority. While such decisions have to be conciliar, the 'break of communion' can be unilateral – as the Moscow Patriarchate was in response to the decision of the Moscow Patriarchate to recognize the OCU. By taking this decision, Moscow is denying its members the right to partake in the sacraments of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, its priests to concelebrate with the other priests and is refusing to pray for the Ecumenical Patriarch in the holy liturgy.

In fact, this symbolic act constitutes a powerful weapon, used many times in the history of Christianity to settle questions of doctrine, legitimacy and authority. It found its utmost expression in the Great Schism of 1054 when the Catholic and Orthodox churches broke communion and excommunicated each other, an act which hasn't been completely overturned until this day (the churches cancelled the excommunication in 1965, but haven't returned to full communion yet). It has been used in the 1990s by the Moscow Patriarchate in Estonia and Ukraine to counter local claims for autocephaly and now again to challenge the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

From the Ukrainian side, the decision of the Ecumenical Patriarch to recognize the new OCU was an act of reparation, of '(re)making communion', that opened the door for the 'uncanonical' Ukrainian churches and their believers to rejoin the Orthodox commonwealth. The other Orthodox churches, however, are slow to acknowledge it. Russian Patriarch Kirill condemned this decision as an act of 'invasion' of the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church and broke communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, an act which antagonized the Orthodox world. The meaning of his act and its consequences for Orthodox Christians were explained to the broader public in the Russian Orthodox journal *Soul (dusha)*, distributed free of charge in Orthodox parishes across Russia. Asking whether it matters which patriarch one prays for in the church, the journal responded in the language of purity and contamination: when somebody gets sick, we avoid contact with this person in order not to be infected and isolate her until full recovery. The same rule works in spiritual life: 'when somebody violates the church canons, he automatically starts spreading the virus as all spiritual diseases are highly contagious'. Hence, believers have

**Fig. 5.** Celebrating communion (Eucharist) in a family Orthodox camp in Ufa region, the Russian Federation.



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to avoid any contact with unrepentant violators of God's laws, let alone share the Eucharistic chalice – the source of absolute purity.<sup>9</sup>

So, breaking or making communion is a symbolic practice (Douglas 1966) which captures a whole institutional dynamic: restructuring the boundaries of the sacred and people's access to it, redefining the true 'canonical' churches and separating them from the 'schismatics'. Its theological connotations are imbued with territorial claims and jurisdictional matters, as this 'schism' and other similar cases show.<sup>10</sup>

The call for church unity posted by the Russian Orthodox cathedral in Paris used the same logic of communion to respond to the Moscow Patriarchate's attempt to divide and rule the Orthodox world. It stressed that the church welcomes all Orthodox believers to participate in the liturgical life and sacraments of their church, which remains in full communion with the other churches and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It reminded Orthodox Christians that they should not give in to communal politics, but be united 'by the bond of an unwavering love' around their bishops and patriarchs under the sovereign power of God. This position, shared by other Orthodox Christians in Ukraine and Russia, shows that the theopolitics of communion can sometimes align with, and at other times undermine, those of canonical territory.

The power of 'communion' (Gr. *koinonia*; Rus. *sobornost*) comes from the Eucharist, the 'body of Christ' that also constitutes the Church. Historically, this notion developed from its sacramental roots to encompass the local community sharing the Eucharist, the spiritual communion of the living and the saints, and the ecclesiastical unity of churches that share the same faith. In this sense, communion articulates the meaning of 'church' at all levels, from the individual to the institutional, and grants legitimacy and authority to them by virtue of the sovereignty of God over the Christendom.<sup>11</sup>

Communion thus grasps together the mystical, collective and political dimensions of Orthodoxy: from the act of communion to the fellowship of churches. Its mystical meaning is supported by the profound materiality of the act of transubstantiation. The bread and wine, which become the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, are given by a priest to each believer with the same spoon – an act which unites them in Christ, in faith and in church and signifies the purity of communion and community. The sharing of the Eucharist brings people into a spiritual communion with

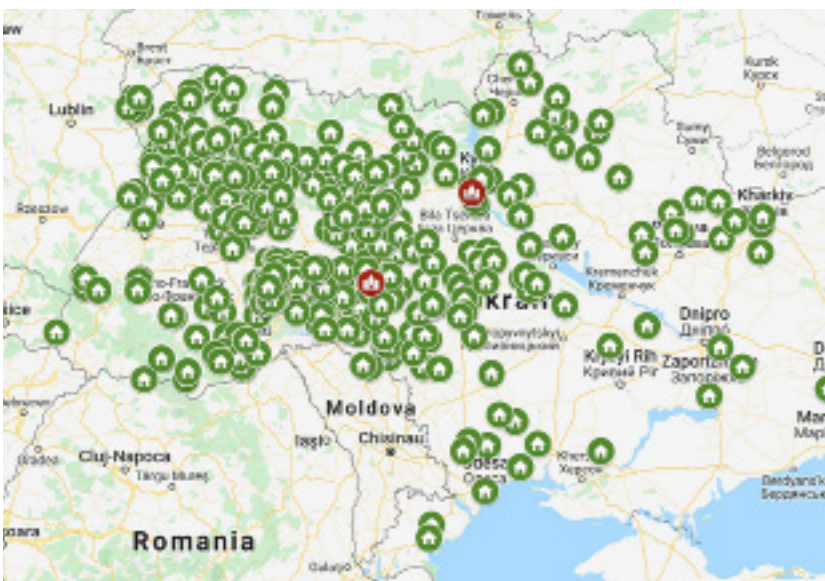
each other and with Christ, and in this sense recreates 'the Church' in each instantiation. For pious believers, the Holy Communion is essential to spiritual improvement and a form of spiritual hygiene to purify the self (Pop 2017). But most Orthodox Christians rarely partake in the sacrament. So, communion also works as a ritual of separation of the true believers from the rest and a powerful boundary-making practice: between believers and non-believers, sinners and moral Christians, but also between 'true' and 'false' churches, as the history of Christianity shows. Extended to the fellowship of churches, the Eucharistic communion reflects their unity in Christ and the equal status they have in front of God, regardless of their size and power. This makes communion potentially subversive to worldly claims for power and authority over Christian communities, and especially to the theopolitics of canonical territory. Russian Orthodox commentators were quick to point this out in response to Patriarch Kirill's decision to break communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. They reminded him that the church is led by God and it is against Christianity itself to 'rip apart' (*razorvat*, conventionally translated as 'to break') the Eucharist. 'Eucharist is one, unbroken and undivided ... It is the only one for all times till the end of the world ... Only anti-Christians can try to rip apart the BODY OF CHRIST', one of them remarked.<sup>12</sup>

Orthodox Christians tend to criticize the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes, whether in fights for territory, competition or conflict, for nationalist or imperialist pursuits. Regardless of their levels of church attendance or religiosity, they are aware that political arguments couched in theological language might have a strong impact on their lives. Following the new 'schism', Orthodox Christians in Ukraine and beyond were forced to make choices about their belonging and to join collective decisions about the affiliation of their parish church to one church or the other. In many cases, local communities found themselves divided, as in the village of Pasechnaya, Khmelnytskyi oblast, where the priest and its followers were expelled from the church by political activists. In an open letter to the Russian independent Internet journal *Akhilla*, one parishioner called the situation 'absurd', because it destroyed basic local solidarity. 'I am not against the Orthodox Church of Ukraine ... [but] I am for peaceful resolution of all conflicts, with love for one's neighbour and without hatred' (Kozak 2019).

In their considerations regarding changing their affiliation with Moscow or not, Constantinople or Kyiv



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**Fig. 6.** Activists from Pasechnaya visiting Metropolitan Antony (Makhota) of the OCU to ask for the transfer of their parish despite the opposition of parish members and priest.

**Fig. 7.** Crowdsourced online map of the Ukrainian churches that have changed their affiliation from UOC-MP to the OCU since January 2019.

Orthodox Christians could not really separate the political from the spiritual-sacramental. Very concrete issues came into play, relating to their access to the sacred: being able to bury their family members in the local cemetery, visit other churches and pilgrimage sites and bless their Pascha in church at Easter. Those who decided to join the OCU considered the sovereignty of their church and country, but also the fact that this allowed them to rejoin the Orthodox commonwealth and enter into communion with the other Orthodox Christians. Those who decided to stick to the UOC-MP might have bought into its theopolitics of canonical territory, which counters the nationalism of the Ukrainian state, but they also saw the church they attended as a bulwark of stability and continuity. The arguments on both sides were quite similar, concerned with the truthfulness of their church and rite and coined in the language of communion, canonicity and sovereignty. For them, the continuity of tradition that the Orthodox Church stands for provided a more stable reference in a context of political instability and economic crisis.

The Ukrainian state had its own interest in this process but it did not enforce its preference at the grass-roots level directly. Instead, it passed a law in January 2019 which allows religious communities to vote on their decision to change affiliation from one church to another, just as they did in the 1990s. Law No 4128-d specifies that a religious community may change jurisdiction with two-thirds of the votes of the parish assembly. Counter to the ‘collectivist’ vision of canonical territory, the law emphasizes the

individual rights of believers to choose their church. This could be a welcome reminder of the constitutional secularism of Ukraine if it were not for the instrumentalization of the ‘schism’ in the wake of the 2019 presidential elections. However, the law does not give a definition of the ‘religious community’ and its membership, so things get really muddled on the ground. Unlike their Western counterparts, national Orthodox churches do not feel compelled to register parish members officially, assuming that everyone living in the territory of a particular parish belongs to it, as the logic of canonical territory implies.

In practice, this may involve careful scrutiny of regular and occasional churchgoers, ‘sectarians’ and residents of other faiths, as well as cultural or nominal Orthodox and other in-between categories. Most Orthodox communities thus oscillate between the two principles – sharing territory and sharing communion – but assume an overlapping of the political and religious community from the start. This is now threatened by the ‘schism’, as the previous example shows. If local residents who actively participate in the life of the parish (usually a minority) decide to remain in the same church for fear of becoming ‘schismatics’, but the territorially defined community votes for joining the new Ukrainian church, the majority wins against the committed churchgoers.

This process is further complicated by property issues, overlapping church jurisdictions and political allegiances at the regional level. Stories of parish transfers from the UOC-MP to the OCU carried in the media appear as either hostile takeovers or acts of collective will, depending on the source. Despite the partiality of media accounts, one can see how the theopolitics of communion vs canonical territory are reproduced on the ground. For example, in the meeting of another parish community in the Vinnytsia region, central Ukraine, priests and lay activists considered allowing only to those who know the Orthodox Creed by heart to vote, in an attempt to separate ‘true believers’ from the rest. The suggestion ‘caused confusion, then grumbling and then laughter’ among the people gathered to decide on the transfer of their church from Moscow Patriarchate to the OCU. In the end, most people voted for the transfer, leaving those who opposed it without a church or priest.<sup>13</sup>

Playing at various levels at once, the theopolitics of communion and territory are effective in reorganizing both religious structures and people’s lives, despite the ambient faith and lack of institutional commitment across Ukraine. If religion is a continuation of politics by other means, as Catherine Wanner (2014b) suggested, this ‘schism’ shows how Orthodoxy can be recruited by different, even contradictory, political projects which employ its territorial logic to make claims of sovereignty, sacredness and belonging. But geopolitics do not always go along with theopolitics, and Orthodox Christians are politically engaged as much as they are religiously concerned. The theopolitics of communion offer a space for divinely sanctioned action that can divide but also unite and unsettle claims for power and territory.

By choosing the kingdom of God over this-worldly sovereigns, Orthodox Christians may still be able to transcend institutional boundaries and divisions precipitated by such politics of differentiation. After all, Orthodox Christianity has a long history of schisms that have provided new beginnings, and each time, the possibility of reimagining a Christian community that is truer to God, as Russian Old Believers believed (Humphrey 2014). However, the revolutionary potential of such beginnings tends to be tamed by the need to inscribe it in the church tradition where change is encompassed by the continuity of faith. As always, the speed of changes triggered by the new ‘schism’ will have to adjust to the slow historicity of Orthodoxy. ●