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1 PREFACE

LUCIAN LEUSTEAN

The armed conflict in eastern Ukraine that broke out in April 2014 followed months of political and military uncertainty in the region. From the start, the global mass media lamented the lack of public communication between Ukraine and Russia. When meetings took place between the countries' political leaders, photographs of awkward handshakes reinforced the impression that progress was strained. One particular meeting between Ukrainian Presidents Petro Poroshenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin stood out. On October 17, 2014, the two leaders met in Milan under the auspices of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. The discussions focused on concrete steps to reach a demarcation line between the belligerent forces and to alleviate the gas dispute between Ukraine and Russia. Although only limited progress was made in finding a solution to the conflict, the meeting was significant in demonstrating the thin line between religion and politics.

The day before, on October 16, Putin stopped in Belgrade, where he was welcomed by a military parade to mark the centenary of the start of World War I. Serbian Patriarch Irinaeus and Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić awarded him the highest honor, the Order of the Republic of Serbia, for promoting close relations between Russia and Serbia.

On October 17, the political negotiations in Milan were paralleled by comparable discussions in Rome. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, in charge of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church's Department for External Church Relations, attended one of the sessions of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Catholic Bishops. The Assembly was summoned by Pope Francis to assess the role of the family in contemporary society. At the end of the session, Hilarion gave an interview with Radio Vatican that

offered an insight into the theological discussions and the nature of the conflict in Ukraine. Hilarion began by stating that churches "should not interfere in a political confrontation." His remark was poignant since after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine witnessed the emergence of three competing Orthodox churches, the largest of which was the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. This church has at times been at odds with other Ukrainian churches, in particular the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which notably took a pro-European stance at the start of EuroMaidan protests. While Hilarion confirmed that churches "found themselves on different sides of the barricades," in his opinion, "the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate [...] does not wish to identify with a particular segment of the political spectrum but supports all [of the] people."

Most importantly, Hilarion denied that the conflict in eastern Ukraine could lead to the emergence of a national Ukrainian church, stating that "calls to establish an autocephalous Church are actually calls to tear away the Ukrainian Orthodox faithful from the united Russian Orthodox Church [...] There is no other reason for the existence of a schism than to state that an independent state should have an independent Church [...] [Between Ukraine and Russia there is] a spiritual relationship which has existed for many centuries going back to our common Dniester baptismal font of Prince Vladimir."¹

The meetings in Milan and Rome were connected. As Alicja Curanović shows in her paper, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian church and the Russian political regime have worked

¹ The Russian Orthodox Church, Department of External Church Relations, "Metropolitan Hilarion's Interview with Radio Vatican," October 17, 2014, <https://mospat.ru/en/2014/10/17/news109671/>.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine witnessed the emergence of three competing Orthodox churches.

Since 1991, Orthodoxy has gradually moved to the center of political power in Russia, from both an institutional and an ideological perspective.

together “in a quest for status” both at home and in international affairs. The Russian Orthodox Church, representing the largest number of Orthodox faithful, has built on this state support by promoting “traditional values” to foster relations with predominant Orthodox countries (hence, the close mutual relations between Russia and Serbia). Since 1991, Orthodoxy has gradually moved to the center of political power in Russia, from both an institutional (with the Church’s Department of External Church Relations working closely with state institutions) and an ideological perspective. In particular, an emphasis on the ideological difference between Russian Orthodoxy and the West has found echo in the political elite’s anti-Western rhetoric.²

Curanović’s paper, based on a presentation at the Transatlantic Academy’s October 29, 2014 workshop on “Orthodox Christianity and Foreign

² For an overview of Russian church-state relations in post-Cold War period, see Z. Knox and A. Mitrofanova, “The Russian Orthodox Church” in L. Leustean (Ed.), *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 38-66.

Policy” held in Bucharest, Romania,³ provides an overview of the complexity of church-state relations and the far-reaching impact of Russia’s employment of Orthodoxy in foreign affairs. Future negotiations to solve the conflict in eastern Ukraine will have to take into account not only agreement on a demarcation military line and the gas dispute between Ukraine and Russia, but also the role of churches in national/transnational identity. Hilarion’s timely claim regarding the complex “spiritual relationship” between Ukraine and Russia may prove highly potent, whether in resolving or exacerbating the conflict.

³ The Bucharest workshop was held in cooperation with the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation of the German Marshall Fund of the United States. I would like to thank the other conference participants and particularly the other presenters, Iuliana Conovici, Daniela Kalkandjieva, Paschalis Kitromilides, and Natalia Shlikhta. <http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/events/2014-10-29/orthodox-christianity-and-foreign-policy>.