Gionathan Lo Mascolo (ed.)

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT IN EUROPE

Movements, Networks, and Denominations

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[transcript]

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Ukraine's Far-Right Movements and Their Connections to the Religious World

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Introduction

Recent years have demonstrated the attractiveness of right-wing ideas for many countries of the world. According to Cas Mudde, in 2019 and 2020, about two billion people lived in countries where the far right was in power, including India, the USA, Brazil, Poland, and Hungary (Mudde 2022, 102). Western Europe has not been an exception. Daniel Koehler declares that there has recently been a significant far-right surge, as seen in the electoral success of nationalist and right-wing parties, which are represented in the parliaments of 39 European countries (Koehler 2016, 87). Although in many cases, these parties have gained only minor influence or nominal representation, in a number of countries, the right has made significant gains, including the French National Rally (formerly the National Front), the Austrian Freedom Party, and the German Alternative for Germany. In many cases, an important part of the identity of right-wing forces is a religious component, such as the Hindutva (*Hinduness*) ideology of the right-wing People's Party of India, the pan-Catholicism of the Polish Law and Justice party, and the support of Trump by white Evangelicals. Therefore, the issue of the relationship between right-wing movements and religious communities is extremely interesting and important today, particularly in the Ukrainian context. In Ukraine, the fight for national liberation against Russia has been escalated by the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022, which has led to the active transformation of the religious field, together with the strengthening of patriotic and sometimes nationalistic discourses.

Examples of these processes are the legitimization in the broad public discourse of the Azov Battalion, which, after September 17, 2014, became the Azov

Regiment, and the national heroization of Stepan Bandera, who was awarded the title of *Hero of Ukraine*. These processes involve not only representatives of local authorities (renaming streets in honor of the leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists [OUN]), state authorities (giving Bandera the title of Hero of Ukraine), and parts of society (taking part in the so-called *Bandera marches*) but also church representatives, who mention Bandera in their sermons as "an immortal and bright symbol in the struggle for the Ukrainian state" (Ivasiuk 2020) and call on Ukrainians to take him as an example ("Ivano-frankivski seminarysty" 2019).

The methodological framework of our research is Rieffer's model of religious nationalism. She suggests distinguishing the subtypes of interweaving religious and nationalist discourses through the following categories:

- *secular* or *antireligious nationalism* (not impacted by religious factors);
- *instrumental pious nationalism* (using religion as an amplification factor);
- *religious nationalism* (primarily built on religious identity and rhetoric). (Rieffer 2003, 224)

The second category, *instrumental pious nationalism,* deserves special attention because it is exactly this type of connection between religion and nationalism that is most often employed in the situation of the post-Soviet space, including Ukraine (Rieffer herself regards this type as inherent in the religious situation of post-Soviet Russia). The peculiarity of instrumental pious nationalism is that religion is not a major category but rather an additional element for community unification; thus, it becomes a useful resource for national leaders to influence society and gain the trust of their electorates. Moreover, within this type, religion serves as a legitimization resource for new state institutions and for maintaining the authority of the state and leaders in times of crisis.

It occurs mainly due to influences such as language, the sacralization of ancient and modern history, and the justification of political plans. In particular, the appeal to religious grounds on the part of political and national leaders can often be traced to crisis times, when economic, military, and social institutions lose their power and religious and national rhetoric comes in useful. Instrumental pious nationalism differs from religious nationalism in the level of involvement of the religious factor in nation-building processes. At the instrumental pious nationalism level, religious institutions and the religious sphere do not have such a level of involvement in the political system; instead, the po-

litical system itself uses the dominant religion to unite and develop the national movement.

The far right and religion in Ukraine: "God! Ukraine! Freedom!"

Ukraine is a parliamentary–presidential republic, where the parliament has been the main source of power since 2014. Before the last elections in 2019, no one party had held a majority (226 out of 450 national deputies), which motivates politicians to cooperate, sometimes abandoning good or bad law projects. One of the structural reforms of 2014 was the decentralization process, which gives more space for local decisions and independence for community representatives. Ideally, such a reform also gives more space for developing local political leaders, as well as widening local authorities' possible impact on various decisions.

The first parties that can be attributed to the right wing appeared in Ukraine in Soviet times (1990–1991): All-Ukrainian Union "State Independence of Ukraine" and Ukrainian National Assembly–Ukrainian People's Self-Defense (Ukrainian Rebel Army [URA-UNUU]). In the first years of independence, the Social National Party of Ukraine (since 2004, the All-Ukrainian Association "Svoboda" [Freedom]) and the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists also emerged. For a long time, these parties could not achieve significant electoral success. According to Eduard Andriuschenko, the main reasons for the unpopularity of right-wing movements in the 1990s and early 2000s were their irrelevance against the background of the difficult socio-economic agenda and their lack of appeal to the nationally oriented electorate, which favored the center right, particularly the Rukh (Movement). During this period, right-wing parties remained a regional, Western Ukrainian phenomenon (Andriushchenko 2015, 91–92).

Christianity was the main religious reference point for many Ukrainian right wingers (though not the only one, as powerful positions among the far right have always been occupied by neo-pagans). The main support that these movements received was from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC KP), the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC). At the same time, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) was seen as an *enemy power*. There were tight relations between these right-wing movements and Christians churches. For example, the UOC KP had representatives from

URA-UNUU, and the UGCC had representatives from the All-Ukrainian organization Trident, named after Stepan Bandera. URA-UNUU mostly provided paramilitary support to the UOC KP, starting with their storming of Kyiv Pechersk Lavra on June 18, 1992, and ending with paramilitary support for the capture of *disputed* churches and protection services for the Kyiv Patriarchate. For the members of Trident, Christianity was the basis of their worldview: the most popular slogan was "God! Ukraine! Freedom." From the beginning, the organization provided courses for chaplaincy, and morning and evening prayers were a mandatory part of the training. Much attention was paid to lectures on religious topics, and the organizational oath was taken on the Bible (Andriushchenko 2015,140–141).

Electoral success awaited the right-wing parties only in 2012, when Svoboda received 10% of the vote in the parliamentary elections ("Rezultaty vyboriv" 2012). Their growth in the political life of Ukraine took place against the background of the events of the Euromaidan and the anti-terrorist operation in the east of the country. The main two parties that attracted people were Svoboda and Right Sector, which united Trident, Patriot of Ukraine, and other smaller organizations. In February 2014, a new Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine was formed, which included four representatives of Svoboda (Oleksandr Sych, Andrii Mokhnyk, Ihor Shvayka, and Ihor Tenyukh) and one of the previous leaders of Trident (Serhii Kvit). Svoboda alumni Andrii Parubii and Oleh Makhnytskyy headed the National Security and Defense Council and the Prosecutor General Office. Since the events of late 2013–early 2014, and against the background of the occupation of Crimea, there have been changes in the public perception of the right wing, and their legitimization among broad sections of the population has begun.

Religion and nationalism in the Ukrainian context: "To be Ukrainian means to be Orthodox?"

Today, more than 100 faith communities are represented in Ukraine, embracing 35,453 religious organizations, 93 religious centers, and 301 religious administrations.[1] Christianity, represented primarily by Orthodox churches of different jurisdictions (the main churches are the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

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1   See the report on the religious organizations network: https://dess.gov.ua/statistics-2 020/.

of Moscow Patriarchate [UOC MP], the Orthodox Church of Ukraine [OCU], and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate [UOC KP]) and others, remains the predominant religion and is closely linked to national identity and the process of Ukrainian state formation. Overall, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant religious organizations constitute about 97% of the whole religious landscape. Orthodoxy forms the largest group (its different branches make up about 55% of Christians), with Protestantism in second place at around 30% and Catholicism third with approximately 15% (19,860 Orthodox communities, 10,774 Protestant communities, and 5,280 Catholic communities). The largest Catholic community in Ukraine (and the second-largest religious community overall) is the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), which, as of 2021, comprised around 8.8% of the population (*Osoblyvosti* 2021). UGCC followers are located primarily in the western regions of Ukraine.

There are a variety of other religious communities in Ukraine, though considerably fewer than in many other European states. The Crimean Tatars are a Muslim ethnic group indigenous to the Crimean Peninsula. Together with immigrants from the Muslim regions of the former Soviet Union (primarily the Volga–Ural Tatars, Azerbaijanis, and representatives of the peoples of North Caucasus and Central Asia), Muslims make up around 0.9% of the population, according to the most recent census. Current estimates indicate a Jewish population in Ukraine of between 56,000 and 140,000—or approximately 0.2% of the population.[2]

There is another important organization called the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations of Ukraine (AUCCRO), which unites almost 95% of the religious organizations.[3] Its main task is to provide a platform for inter-religious dialogue, but it is sometimes hard to form any mutual decisions, as consensus is the decision-making method of the Council. The defense of so-called traditional values is usually coordinated through the AUCCRO, which unites 16 major religious organizations, including Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants, as well as Jews and Muslims.[4] Of almost 50 public

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2   On the number and composition of the population of Ukraine, see the results of the all-Ukrainian population census of 2001: http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/results/general/nationality/.

3   See the official website in English: https://vrciro.org.ua/en.

4   On the AUCCRO, see Krawchuk (2014). One of the AUCCRO's aims is to serve as a forum where religions can coordinate their positions so that they can speak with one voice on various social issues and conduct a dialogue with civil authorities.

documents (statements, declarations, and letters) issued by the AUCCRO between 1996 and 2021, around one-third are dedicated or directly refer to the need to protect family values. Moreover, 25 documents argue against *gender ideology* and state recognition of same-sex marriage, which are presented as a threat to the "national security of Ukraine" and to public morality (Vasin 2021, 139, 237, and 259). If we compare this focus on family, sexuality, and reproduction to the space dedicated to questions of injustice, inequality, poverty, migration, and ecology (less than a dozen documents in total), we see an important asymmetry between the former and the latter.

Thanks to the religious pluralism and a high level of competitiveness between religious organizations, and because the Ukrainian state does not formally back any of the larger churches, a system of religious *denominationalism* has been established in Ukraine, that is, a system in which all religions have equal rights and compete with one another. This situation stands out through its liberal nature and the scale of religious pluralism, and it is very similar to the model that has developed in the USA (Brylov et al. 2021, 8).

The Pew Research Center published data on the religious landscape in Central and Eastern Europe, Ukraine included, in May 2017, showing that 51% of Ukrainians believed that being Orthodox also means being a true national representative of your country (Pew Research Center 2017). Ukrainians defined their religious identity through national, cultural, and family traditions (46%), peculiar properties of faith (12%), both of the aforementioned factors (12%), and other factors (7%). Moreover, 12% explained their being Catholic or Orthodox as primarily due to the national–cultural factor. Another strong position was religious exclusivism. Generally, this is tending to decline, but 33% of the respondents believed that only their faith paves the way to heaven. Orthodox-dominated countries showed higher national pride, with people being more likely to state that their culture is better than other cultures. More religious people were prone to be proud of their nationality: 48% of Ukrainians very proud of their nationality said that religion has importance.

The use of nationalism in religious rhetoric is remarkably attractive for political and religious leaders in the post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine. What is happening can be best understood as *instrumental pious nationalism*, even though there is much more religious pluralism. In Ukraine, ethnic nationalism dominates and is actively instrumentalized by different religious organizations.

The use of ethnic–national rhetoric and the politicization of religion by Ukrainian religious leaders, as well as their attempts to instrumentalize re-

ligion, are features of religious rhetoric used to mask anti-state activities, for instance, in the conflict in Ukraine. All of this embeds religion into the national idea. In the Russian case, it cleaves society by differentiating the conflicting groups; in Ukraine, the power balance shifts to certain privileged religious organizations.

At the same time, since the beginning of the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, almost all religious organizations in Ukraine have taken strong pro-Ukrainian positions. Ministers and religious leaders of all faiths have coordinated systematic assistance to victims of the war, built personal connections with government leaders, established humanitarian corridors for evacuation, accommodated refugees, delivered in-kind humanitarian aid, and much more (Brylov and Kalenychenko 2022).

The far right and the Orthodox world

Even in the Orthodox world of Ukraine, religious leaders are focused on using national–ethnic rhetoric to gain the attention of some social groups. There are typical roles played by „*pro-Ukrainian*" (e.g., the OCU and the UGCC) and „*pro-Russian*" (the UOC MP) churches. However, the first group has several representatives. For example, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is used by several far-right organizations that declare their own contributions to its creation and its protection from the influence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate. Such organizations include Tradition and Order, C14, Brotherhood (led by Dmytro Korchynskyy), National Corps, Orden, Katehon, Sisterhood of St. Olga, and All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda.

The completely different direction of pro-Russian nationalism can be seen in the rhetoric of some UOC MP leaders. This also has connections with social and political organizations such as Opposition Platform "For Life," the anti-vaccination movement, and the Union of Orthodox Journalists, as well as with national deputy Vadym Novynskyy and religious figures such as Metropolitan Agafangel (Savvin) in Odesa, Metropolitan Luca (Kovalenko) in Melitopol and Zaporizhzhya, Metropolitan Pavlo (Lebid) in Vyshgorod and Chornobyl, and Archbishop Iona (Cherepanov) in Obukhiv. The situation has changed, and it remains in the process of deep change following the Church Council of May 27, 2022, convened by Metropolitan Onufriy, which gathered not only bishops but also local priests and believers from different regions of Ukraine. The Council's

published resolution[5] called for full independence from the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as for the decentralization of regional eparchies and possible dialogue with the OCU. These changes have not yet been formally reflected in church regulations, but they have created many conflicts inside church society, as well creating outside misunderstandings relating to the new direction of the church's development.

One of the examples of this was the direct call from one of the priests of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to fight LGBTIQA+ people marching in the Kyiv Pride parade. This event, as well as other social issues such as the implementation of the Istanbul convention, abortion, and school education, causes many conflicts. In the summer of 2019, one of the priests called for an attack on LGB-TIQA+ people "to protect family and traditional values of Ukraine" (Kuzmenko 2019). Overall, the rhetoric of *traditions* and *Christian values* is more often used to promote right-wing political elements and can serve as a right-wing marker in public narratives.

The case of the UGCC

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is the biggest non-Orthodox church in Ukraine, with many international connections.[6] On some issues, the UGCC is very much in line with the right-wing political agenda (as is the case in other countries, Russia included), while on other questions, there exists a profound discrepancy between the UGCC and the right.

In 2006, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) proposed the creation of a "strategic alliance" between the Orthodox, Catholic, and pre-Chalcedonial Churches in defense of "traditional moral values such as family, childbearing, and marital fidelity," which would resist liberal Christianity and secularism (Hilarion Alfeev 2006). Five years later, in his first post-election press conference, the head of the UGCC, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, declared that the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church would "feel very comfortable" belonging to such an alliance (Shevchuk 2011). However, the idea of an alliance has never transformed into an institution, while relations between the UGCC and the ROC have sharply degraded since the annex-

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5   For the full text of the Council's decision, see http://kdais.kiev.ua/event/postanova-27 052022/.

6   For a brief introduction, see Avvakumov (2016).

ation of Crimea. However, the UGCC, like the majority of churches of various denominations, has been sticking to a conservative agenda.

In its public discourse, the UGCC, like other churches, seems to be prioritizing issues of reproduction and sexuality over other social issues. The Synod of the UGCC Bishops published "A Pastoral Letter on the Dangers of Gender Ideology" in 2016 (Synod Yepyskopiv 2016), while the senior clergy have been consistently vocal against same-same marriages. Compared to other All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUC-CRO)[7] members, the UGCC has more specialized institutional and human resources working in the domain of *traditional values*, such as the School of Bioethics and the Institute of Marriage and Family Life, both at the Ukrainian Catholic University, and a cohort of Western-educated specialists in moral theology and bioethics based all around the country. In 2020, three UGCC Commissions (Family, Laity, and Justice and Peace) were united into one, entitled Family and Laity. The disappearance of a reference to issues of justice and peace—in the middle of the conflict in the east of Ukraine—may also be a sign of the asymmetry mentioned earlier, in which reproduction and sexuality are prioritized over questions of social justice.

On many issues, however, the UGCC takes positions that are at odds with the radical right. One of these is the question of European integration. The UGCC consistently argues that Ukraine—built on a Christian foundation—naturally belongs to Europe and should join European institutions (Shevchuk 2013). The liberal tendencies of the EU in the domain of ethics are considered to be a correctable moment of immaturity, as it were, rather than something that should force churches to resist European integration. Moreover, Shevchuk has been critical of the "extreme radicals who oppose a united and reconciled Europe" and of populists who have come to power in European countries (Shevchuk and Levantovych 2017). Ecology is another issue where the UGCC has been very pronounced in its support, both at the official level—through its declarations and activism in the Ecological Bureau—and in many grassroots initiatives.[8] The UGCC has a vibrant department of pastoral care for migrants, which is, however, focused on supporting UGCC members in the diaspora rather than helping internally displaced persons and

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7   For the official website of the AUCCRO, see https://www.vrciro.org.ua/ua.

8   For the official documents, see the bureau's website: https://www.ecoburougcc.org.ua. The UGCC has recently sponsored the Ecumenical Social Week, an international forum on integral ecology. See Dukhovych (2021).

immigrants, who are taken care of by Caritas and other charities. The UGCC supported the vaccination campaign against COVID-19 through declarations, public vaccination of senior hierarchs, and the opening of its churches as vaccination centers. Shevchuk has criticized COVID-19 conspiracy theories (Shevchuk 2020), while the Ukrainian Catholic University fired a philosophy professor who was a militant anti-vaxxer ("Vykladacha UKU" 2021).

Internationally, various hierarchs and institutions affiliated with the UGCC are close to US conservative Catholic actors such as the Knights of Columbus and George Weigel. However, these links are built more on the foundations of the traditional religious freedom movement and anti-communism than on a specifically right-wing agenda. Domestically, the UGCC maintains relations with most mainstream parties. It usually gets along better with parties that are based in Western Ukraine, where most Greek Catholics live. Although on issues of *traditional values*, the Church's position coincides with that of the right-wing movements, the UGCC attempts to resist being instrumentalized by them ("UHKTs ne pidtrymuye" 2013). In rare cases where UGCC clergy express xenophobic or anti-Semitic views, they are reprimanded by the Church hierarchy.[9]

As we have already mentioned, the UGCC cooperates with some right-wing movements (in particular, Trident) at the level of chaplains. An example of such cooperation is the activity of Father Petro Burak, a cleric of the UGCC and a military chaplain of the separate tactical group Volyn. After 1994, he served as the main chaplain for Trident and then started his service as chaplain for the newly created Right Sector. After the Right Sector created its combat unit, the Volunteer Ukrainian Corps (VUC), Fr. Burak became the chaplain of the Fifth Battalion of the VUC. According to him, "I am not the only one. There are many of us. The creation of a volunteer corps chaplaincy service was even declared" (Malko 2015).

At the same time, the UGCC is in conflict with some right-wing forces. According to Taras Wozniak, a similar conflict exists between Svoboda and the UGCC. Wozniak claims that this conflict began in 1994, when the support for the progenitor of Svoboda, the Social National Party of Ukraine, fell almost six times (from 10–15% to 2%) due to the recall of the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. As a result, after Svoboda came to power in Lviv, pressure be-

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9   One of the most famous cases was that of the priest Mykhaylo Arsenych. See "Za ekstremistsku promovu" (2013).

gan on the Ukrainian Catholic University and persons associated with it, such as Fr. Borys (Gudziak) and Myroslav Marynovych (Kabachii 2012).

Conclusion

The connections of far-right movements with the religious world in Ukraine are today undergoing serious transformations, primarily related to the Russian invasion in Ukraine. As expected for movements prone to violent practices, military units with a high share of supporters of far-right ideas (e.g., the Azov Regiment, informally closely associated with the right-wing National Corps) have proved to be among the most capable units. Suffice it to mention the long defense of Mariupol and the Azovstal plant, which was led mainly by the Azov Regiment (Honcharenko 2022). Accordingly, many of those who were previously considered far right are now perceived as heroes and defenders of Ukraine. Against the background of such sentiments, it is natural to strengthen and expand ties between right-wing movements and those religious organizations that focus on Ukrainians' patriotism. This is more visible for UGCC and OCU believers, who are becoming closer due to national–patriotic rhetoric, in contrast to the neutral position of the UOC MP. By contrast, the UOC MP has started its own process of changes, while being seen by part of Ukrainian society as the *church of the occupiers*. If it were to take a pro-Ukrainian position, it would be another change to the religious landscape.

Despite the desire of most religious organizations to distance themselves from the representatives of the far-right camp, they are united by the discourse of the *protection of traditional values*[10] and their opposition to *gender ideology* and strengthening the position of the LGBTIQA+ community in the public sphere. Frequently, such rhetoric of *traditional values* is united with a pro-Russian position due to the desire to *save the sinner from the world of sin*. It would be of great importance to check the correlation between the far-right vision and the defense of *traditional values*, the *Christian world*, etc., as the manner of *protecting traditional values* could develop in different political directions.

We can also mention certain common narratives, primarily related to *traditional values*, in most Ukrainian Christian organizations and right-wing movements. At the same time, contacts between the church leadership and the far

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10   It is no coincidence that one of the largest right-wing organizations in Ukraine is called Tradition and Order.

right are non-public, although due to the active role of right-wing and far-right movements in resisting Russian aggression, we can expect the expansion of official cooperation. The relationship between the political right and religious circles can largely be described as an example of the above-mentioned instrumental pious nationalism, aiming largely at the use of religious slogans for political purposes. Thus, religious organizations are faced with the dilemma of following the reactionary model as it was before or taking a more active role as part of Ukrainian civil society.

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Erratum

p. 355, last line of the main text, for "50 public" read "150 public".