

Ultra-Nationalist Neo-Populism in Europe on the example of Ukraine

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Dear Madams and Sirs,

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak on the mentioned theme in the context of Ukraine. I will present here some considerations to the topic though I am not sure that this topic in its acute form is really actual for Ukraine.

First of all I would like to say about **geographical position** of Ukraine. It is a country in Eastern Europe. Its neighbors in the west are Poland and Romania, in the north – Belarus, in the south through the Black Sea – Turkey and in the East – Russia.

If we speak short about **its history**, we can mention that over 300 years **a large part of the country** belonged to the Russian empire – it was from 1654 till 1991. Through different kinds of population exchange, especially in the Soviet time there is a part of ethnical Russians and even more people of the mixed ethnical origin that prefer to speak Russian. According to the population census in 2001 ethnically Russians were over 17% of the population in Ukraine as a whole and over 22% under the living in the cities.

This “Russian” factor is especially important for the Ukrainian statehood since its independence in 1991. Since that time Ukraine has only one **official language** – it is Ukrainian. It is especially interesting when some politicians prefer Russian at home but are obliged to use Ukrainian in the public sphere. On the other side I know many cases that people have Ukrainian as mother tongue but speak Russian to their neighbors, colleagues etc. This complicated attitude to the Russian language is comparable to the attitude to the Russian state and to the previous common history in the Russian and Soviet empires.

At the same time we should know that the Russian factor plays different role in **different parts of Ukraine**. Usually we can speak about large difference between Central Ukraine, Western Ukraine and South-Eastern Ukraine. The large cities of South-East are for example Odessa and Donetsk, they exist since the end of the 18th century. Their existence itself was connected with the intensive industrial development of the 19th-20th centuries and is strong Russian influenced.

It is a great difference to Kiev, the capital of Ukraine that has its history since the 5th century. It lies in Central Ukraine, is multinational and has its own identity that is much longer than period of large Russian influence. The same and even more can be said about Lviv in the Western Ukraine: it exists since the 13th century and for a long time was under Polish control.

We should mention also **the west-Ukrainian factor as a whole**. The West regions of Ukraine became a part of the Soviet Ukraine first before the Second World War. Before 1940 they were under the control of Austria, Poland or Romania. This plays its role even today, because population of West Ukraine identifies itself much more with European culture and perceived Soviet Russia as an occupant.

So, as a whole geographically in Ukraine we can see three important parts. The **historical part of Central Ukraine** with Kiev as its center has long and brilliant history but was narrow connected to Russia over 300 years. The **South-East** has deep connection to the Russian culture, language, industrial development and statehood. It has comparatively short history but is an industrial heart of Ukraine.

The **Western Ukraine** perceives itself much more West-European. Many people there know Polish language and try to work in west-European countries. People there feel themselves often anti-Russian and are ready to defend Ukraine's independence against the Russian imperialism with weapon in their hands.

After **this introduction** now we can speak about the theme of our webinar. First of all we can reflect on the "**ultra-nationalism**". For a long time Ukrainian and Russian identities existed in our country parallel without real conflict with each other.

Here we should mention also **the factor of the Russian imperial policy**. An obvious change in this policy was proclaimed in **the Munich speech** of Vladimir Putin in 2007. Often it is considered in the West as a milestone of the Russia-NATO confrontation. In my understanding it is a global factor that pushes Russia to see Ukraine as a part of its influence's zone. Inner Ukrainian conflict since 2013 was a unique opportunity for Russia to defend its strategic interests in Ukraine.

Since **the Ukrainian revolution of dignity** of 2013-2014 the peaceful co-existence between Russia and Ukraine is under a large question. First of all it is because of the problem of **Crimea**. In March 2014 it was occupied by the Russian militaries, there was a kind of referendum and since almost 7 years in fact it belongs to Russia. Short after there was a conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk regions (neighbor regions on the Russian-Ukrainian

border). Since 2014 through military support from Russia there exist **two so called People's republics** that do not recognize the laws of Ukraine.

I suppose it is easier for you to remember about **the passenger aircraft MH 17** that flew from Holland to Malaysia. In July 2014 it was shot down while flying over eastern Ukraine that was controlled by the pro-Russian rebels. Almost 300 people were killed. This kind of shooting was not possible for the rebels. Many experts believe the Russian militaries were used for this attack.

If we try to speak about **ultra-nationalism in Ukraine** we should remember this history of Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk. This nationalism was reaction against in fact occupation of a part of the territory of Ukraine. Of course there can be different factors of cultural or language influence, but here is obviously **the matter of territorial integrity** that belongs to the sphere of national security.

Now we can make the next step. We have already said there are factor of cultural influence and factor of national security. But what do we have with the problem of the ultra-nationalism?

Because of the conflict with the Russian Federation in some groups of Ukrainians there are radical sentiments both against citizens of Russia and Russian speaking Ukrainians. For example in April 2019 in the last months of the President Petro Poroshenko in power a new law “On ensuring the functioning of **Ukrainian as the state language**” was adopted. It supports Ukrainian language as a tool of communication in mass media and in public sphere. In Ukraine there are different ethnic minorities but in general this law was directed first of all against wide usage of the Russian language.

Much more important for the religious sphere were initiatives against the Church bodies that are in some way connected to their centers in the state that has been **recognized as an aggressor-state**. This complex formulation is used in **the law #5309** that was adopted by the Ukrainian Parliament in December 2018. Till now this law is challenged in the judicial system of Ukraine.

But it is very important for the concurrent relationships between the Orthodox Churches in our country. First of all this law is directed against the Church I belong to – its title is “**Ukrainian Orthodox Church**” but according to the Church legislation it is connected to the Russian Orthodox Church. It is an important case and I could have devoted the whole presentation to this theme.

If we speak short, it is a part of the state policy in its support of the Church body that for several decades was outside of the communication with the World Orthodoxy. Its title was “Kiev patriarchate” and from my perspective it was first of all a religious instrument for supporting independent national existence. It strived for its full independence first of all from its roots with the Russian Church that have existed over 300 years.

In the time of President Poroshenko (from 2014 till 2019) the state bodies were used to solve the difficult situation in the Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Since 1992 in our country there were **two larger Church structures with similar title** – “Ukrainian Orthodox Church” and “Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kiev Patriarchate”. The first was in connection to the Moscow Patriarchate, it means the Church in Russia. The second was unrecognized as the Church body in the family of the World Orthodoxy and was usually with wide nationalistic sentiments against Russia. It means that many people motivated nationalistic in the political sphere could find support in this Church structure.

By the end of his presidency at the end of 2018 Poroshenko tried to use the Church factor as **a tool in his pre-election campaign**. He was successful in searching for the procedure for recognition of the old “Kiev Patriarchate” under the new title “Orthodox Church of Ukraine”. Now some Greek Orthodox Churches prefer to be in contact with this new Church body and are in conflict with the Russian Church.

But **the main conflict remains unresolved** and lies within Ukraine. My Church – “Ukrainian Orthodox Church” that has the largest number of parishes and is widely represented in almost all regions of Ukraine has struggle with the state bodies that perceive it as an instrument of the Russian imperial policy.

The question here is **how much can the state be involved in the religious sphere** or should this sphere be outside of political struggle? For the Orthodox Church in the centuries of its history was usual to have positive relationships to the state where it existed. Sometimes it is called “symphony” between the state and the Church. Nowadays we experience a struggle between them in Ukraine. It is even more correctly to say that the Ukrainian state supports one of the Orthodox Churches in its religious concurrence with the other Orthodox Church.

Sometimes I use for explanation of this situation the term “instrumentalization”. It means that the Church structure is used for the goals that are outside of the Church sphere as preaching of the Gospel, salvation of the souls etc. It is understandable in the situation of the

political and military conflict with the neighbor state but in a long perspective is destructive for the Christian mission in the society.

After all these considerations I would like to mention **the theme of populism**. In the case of modern Ukraine it is connected to the theme of nationalism not really directly. I admit that our President Poroshenko has used nationalistic rhetoric in the Church sphere as well as religious arguments in his pre-election campaign. But the result was that he lost the presidential campaign with an enormous difference 25% to 73%.

His opponent and the newly elected President of Ukraine is Volodymyr Zelenskiy. He has little interest in the religious sphere and became popular as a showman that has had no political experience before. He was elected from two dozens of different candidates that represented different political programs etc. It means that the voting was first of all not “for” but “against”. It means against the policy of the previous President Poroshenko. What will be the result of presidency of Zelenskiy will be seen later.

In any case in this very moment the nationalistic rhetoric has lost in the opinion of the large majority of Ukrainians. And it remains an open question whether the new leader of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskiy is less populist than his predecessor Petro Poroshenko.