

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine

Profiles of Eastern churches

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Orthodox Church in Kiev

Confusion characterizes Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine. Not one but three groups claim legitimacy as the national church of the predominantly Eastern Christian country.

Led by Metropolitan Volodymyr Sabodan, the “Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate” is an autonomous jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church of Russia. Canonically, it is the only ecclesial body recognized by the rest of the Orthodox world and it maintains the largest number of parishes in

Ukraine (perhaps some 6,000). It prevails, however, in the country's Russian-speaking areas in the south and east, where religious identity is weakest. Typically, Church Slavonic is used in the celebration of the sacraments.

The "Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Kiev Patriarchate" is led by Patriarch Filaret. Once a rising star of the Moscow patriarchate, he was excommunicated for advocating an independent Orthodox church in Ukraine. According to the 2006 findings of the Razumkov Centre — a Ukrainian think tank — about half of the Ukrainians who claim a religious affiliation belong to this community, which uses both Church Slavonic and modern Ukrainian in the celebration of the sacraments.

The "Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church" is the smallest of the three Orthodox bodies. It is led by Metropolitan Mefodiy Kudriakov, a native of western Ukraine, which is the epicenter of Ukrainian nationalism and where the church of three million is strongest. This community also uses Church Slavonic and modern Ukrainian.

In its well-regarded survey on religious affiliation in Ukraine, the Razumkov Centre found more than 62 percent of the country's 44 million people did not declare any membership. The authors report that, while many who did not self-identify with any group were Orthodox Christian, most were unaware either of the issues or of the divisions embroiling Ukrainian Orthodoxy.

Why then this schism among Ukraine's Orthodox Christians? In short, the polarization of the Ukrainian church reflects questions of Ukrainian identity and of Ukraine's relationship to its domineering neighbor to the east, Russia.

Origins. Ukrainians share common origins with Belarussians, Carpatho-Rusyns and Russians. All regard the medieval realm of Kievan Rus' as their own. In the ninth century, the Varangians — a Scandinavian tribe known for their ferocity and piracy — swept into Central Europe, settling among and intermarrying with the Eastern Slavs who lived there. Collectively called Rusyns, they established fortified towns along the Dnieper, Dniester and Don rivers, asserted control over the trade routes from the Baltic to the Black seas and developed uneasy commercial relations with Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium.

Strategically located on the Dnieper, the city of Kiev gradually assumed a dominant role. Its leader took on the title of *velikiy kniaz*, or grand prince, and he exacted fealty from weaker princes.

According to the 12th-century Rus' Chronicles, one of these grand princes (called Volodymyr in modern Ukrainian and Vladimir in modern Russian) sent out emissaries to learn more about the faiths of his neighbors: Byzantine and Latin Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

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