



Ukraine as a testing ground for a new Unia: threats and ways to overcome them

A report by Metropolitan Luka of Zaporozhye and Melitopol at the conference *"The Influence of the Patriarchate of Constantinople on the Fate of Orthodoxy in Ukraine,"* organized by the Center for Russian Studies at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade.

The events surrounding the uncanonical intervention of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and his Synod in the Ukrainian church crisis, leading to the creation of the *"Orthodox Church of Ukraine" (OCU)*, are rightly viewed by many Orthodox hierarchs and analysts as part of a larger project aimed at unifying the Christian world under the auspices of the Vatican with the participation of the Phanar. The efforts of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to promote the idea of *"first without equals"* and its active ecumenical dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church have led to significant changes in global Orthodoxy. In this context, the *"OCU"* project serves as an experimental platform for testing methods and practices aimed at disrupting the established order of relations among the Local Orthodox Churches and skewing the ecumenical dialogue. This report analyzes these processes, assesses their consequences, and explores ways to protect the canonical order in the current ecclesiastical situation.

In recent years, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople has actively promoted the concept of *"first without equals,"* which has raised many questions and concerns among other Local Orthodox Churches. This concept grants the Patriarch of Constantinople a special status in the Orthodox world, implying not just primacy of honor but also primacy of authority. As a result, Patriarch Bartholomew has assumed powers not provided for by the canons or the historical practice of Orthodoxy.

While promoting the idea of his primacy in the Orthodox East, the Phanar seeks closer ties with the Vatican. Joint services and prayers by representatives of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Roman Catholic Church have become commonplace. Notable are Patriarch Bartholomew's statements about his desire for unity with Catholics. For example, in 2021, during the celebration of St. Andrew the Apostle in Istanbul, a Vatican delegation led by Cardinal Kurt Koch was present. In his sermon, Patriarch Bartholomew emphasized that his meetings with Pope Francis strengthened the desire for a *"common Eucharistic Chalice."* This indicates active attempts by the Phanar and the Roman Catholic Church to move closer together. Similar statements have been repeatedly confirmed, especially in the lead-up to the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council in 2025.

In this context, it is important to emphasize that union has been repeatedly condemned by the Orthodox Church. As early as 2003, world Orthodoxy, through the heads of all Local Orthodox Churches, expressed a unified position on union and attempts to establish a Uniate patriarchate in Ukraine. This response was given in a memorandum by Cardinal Walter Kasper, who, on behalf of the Apostolic See, addressed His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Rus'. After Patriarch Alexy circulated the memorandum, the heads of the Local Churches sent their responses, including Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, who sent a special message to the Pope of Rome. In these messages, union was called an ecclesiological heresy with no place in Christianity, and the creation of a Ukrainian Uniate patriarchate was deemed an extremely hostile and unfriendly act toward Orthodoxy. Furthermore, in the Joint Declaration signed by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' and Pope Francis during the Havana meeting in 2016, the methods of Uniatism and proselytism were deemed unacceptable.

Nevertheless, despite this unified protest, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople continues to promote his ecclesiological concept of *"first without equals"* and to lay the groundwork for a global union. It is already evident that this push for unity will inevitably lead to profound changes in all aspects of Orthodox life, including the foundations of doctrine, liturgical practice, and canonical order. This is especially true in light of Pope Francis's recent statement on September 13, 2024, in Singapore, during a meeting with youth representatives from five different religions, where he declared that *"all religions are paths to God."*

Using Ukraine as an example, the Phanar is implementing a unification strategy that could later be applied on a broader scale. Its initial goal is to form a new union based on the *"OCU"* and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC). If this task is accomplished, the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Vatican will use the *"Ukrainian precedent"* as proof that the reunification of Orthodox and Catholics without changing the dogmas of their teachings is achievable and realistic.

The creation of the *"OCU"* in 2018 and the granting of a Tomos of autocephaly marked the starting point for this experiment. This is evidenced by subsequent events in Ukraine following this destructive step by the Patriarch of Constantinople.

One of the key elements of this project has been the cooperation between the *"OCU"* and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC).

Since the Euromaidan and the events of 2014, joint prayers and actions by representatives of the Dumenko structure and the Uniates have become commonplace in Ukraine. These joint efforts are intended to demonstrate mass support and the possibility of uniting the two confessions. However, it is clear that such initiatives are driven not by spiritual need but by political expediency and the desire to create the appearance of unity.

The head of the *"OCU,"* Epiphanius Dumenko, has repeatedly stated his desire to deepen relations with the UGCC, emphasizing that any possible unification would depend on the global Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. *"This key (the key to uniting the two Ukrainian religious organizations – Metropolitan Luka) does not lie in Ukraine but in Rome and Constantinople, where ecumenical discussions are taking place. In the future, our relations here in Ukraine will depend on this. But these relations are good, and I believe they will only improve in the future,"* said the head of the *"OCU"* on September 12, 2019, during a meeting at the National University *"Lvov Polytechnic."*

The presence of Catholics at the services of *"hierarchs"* and *"clergy"* of the *"OCU"* directly illustrates the further movement toward union.

Another significant direction in expanding the *"Overton window"* for Uniate interests has been the operation to practically absorb and *"digest"* one of the parts that separated from the *"Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church" – the "UAOC (o)"* (formerly the Kharkov-Poltava Diocese of the UAOC) by the UGCC. This process was sanctioned and approved by the Vatican, which de facto created the first precedent in modern Ukrainian history for the transition of a religious structure, which had positioned itself as Orthodox, into union. According to experts, this initiative should be considered a kind of final testing of technologies for integrating Ukrainian Orthodoxy into Catholic structures. In this regard, it is worth noting that the process of merging the *"UAOC (o)"* with the UGCC was not halted even after the creation of the *"OCU"* as a point of assembly for various organizations that had left Orthodoxy for schism. This once again demonstrates that the Uniates do not perceive the structure formed by the Phanar as a long-term, independent, or equal player in Ukraine's religious sphere. Moreover, they are preparing a much less significant and less favorable role for the *"OCU."*

Its characteristics and outlines can be judged by the interview of the head of the UGCC, Sviatoslav Shevchuk, with the publication *"Obozrevatel,"* dated March 18, 2019.

First, the head of the Ukrainian Uniates noted that he had received the consent of the head of the *"OCU,"* Dumenko, to hold regular meetings to discuss the prospects and parameters of rapprochement between the two structures. Second, this process will occur within the framework of a roadmap agreed upon by the parties (Shevchuk emphasized that the UGCC already has such a roadmap, which can be modified according to the vision of the *"OCU"*; de facto, this means that the Uniates will make their concept the basis for the corresponding merger). Third, it is clear from Shevchuk's interview that the UGCC will focus on a soft and careful absorption of the *"OCU."* In this regard, it is planned to refrain from forming a common structure for now and to focus primarily on restoring *"Eucharistic communion"* and *"the possibility of celebrating the Divine Liturgy at one Altar"* with the organization headed by Epiphanius. Fourth, the head of the Uniates made it clear who he sees as the senior and who as the junior partner in the future tandem. According to him, the UGCC – unlike the *"OCU"* – is not a *"local church"* whose parishes are located exclusively in Ukraine. This gives the Uniates the right not only to seek patriarchal status but also, as a *"global church with de facto established patriarchal governance structures,"* to take over the spiritual care of the entire Ukrainian diaspora. Fifth, Shevchuk conspicuously avoided answering the question of whether a possible unification of the UGCC and the *"OCU"* would be a union of *"equals."*

In practice, the absorption of the *"OCU"* by the Uniate Church will occur in a very delicate and inconspicuous manner. As Shevchuk said, the Uniates do not seek to create any common mega-structures with the *"OCU"* at the initial stage. The focus is on establishing *"Eucharistic communion and common liturgical service,"* which will be the desired result for the Catholics. After all, if the Uniates convince representatives of the *"OCU"* to serve together and, so to speak, *"partake from one Chalice,"* this will be a clear recognition of the spiritual authority of the Pope of Rome over the Dumenko structure. After this, only a small step will separate the *"OCU"* from de facto joining the UGCC.

At the practical level, one of the most important mechanisms for advancing this process will be the ideological indoctrination of the *"clergy"* of the *"OCU"* and the formation of a common *"theological"* basis justifying the new union. In particular, this conclusion is supported by Dumenko's words, spoken in an interview with the ICTV channel shortly after his election as head of the new religious structure.

"We have outlined a certain path for our future cooperation (with the UGCC) and will continue to seek points of contact that will unite us. This includes the sphere of spiritual education and other aspects of our existence," stated the head of the *"OCU"* at the time.

It is also worth noting the recently announced decision to jointly celebrate Easter in 2025, as announced at the Synaxis of Hierarchs of the Ecumenical Throne. According to the publication *"Romfea,"* in May 2025, an official celebration of the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council will take place in Nicaea (Bithynia) with the participation of Pope Francis. The press service of the Patriarchate of Constantinople stated that the Synaxis expressed a desire for Eastern and Western Christianity to celebrate Easter together. This is intended to mark the beginning of establishing a common date for its celebration each year. Such a step underscores the Phanar's intention to move toward union with Rome.

In this context, it is important to understand the interest of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in establishing unity with Rome.

As noted by Professor Kyriakos Kyriazopoulos of the Faculty of Law at Aristotle University of

Thessaloniki, the Vatican's goal in its ecumenical dialogue with the Phanar is to turn the Autocephalous Local Orthodox Churches into Uniate churches. The Papal See wants the *"Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches,"* issued in 1990 by Pope John Paul II, to apply to all Orthodox Churches. This document includes dogmatic rules that impose the Pope as a leader with primacy of authority.

The realization of this plan is possible only if Patriarch Bartholomew becomes de facto the *"Eastern Pope,"* who can unilaterally govern the entire Orthodox world and impose decisions favorable to the Roman Catholic Church. This is the immense power, recognized by the Vatican, that the head of the Phanar seeks, destroying conciliarity on his path, legitimizing schismatic structures, and weakening those Orthodox Churches that oppose the widespread transformation of Orthodox Christians into Uniates.

The processes initiated by Patriarch Bartholomew have already led to the destruction of pan-Orthodox unity and deep divisions in the Orthodox world. Today, we are witnessing the formation of a new model of global Orthodoxy, in which the Patriarch of Constantinople occupies a central position with unprecedented powers and privileges. This changes the very nature of Orthodox ecclesiastical structure and contradicts the conciliar principle underlying the Orthodox Church.

The main blow is directed at the Russian Church and the Churches of the Balkan region, which are the strongest opponents of union and the power ambitions of the Phanar, introducing *"the smoke of worldly pride,"* as the Carthaginian fathers once wrote to Pope Celestine of Rome. The goal of the Patriarchate of Constantinople is to weaken these Churches by fragmenting and isolating them internationally (a process already observed in the Baltics).

Ukraine is the primary pilot project in this strategy. The next targets may be Moldova, Belarus, and the canonical territory of the Serbian Church, where the creation of separate *"churches"* modeled after the *"OCU"* (*"parade of autocephalies"*) is planned.

In this context, I would like to draw special attention to the support provided by the UGCC and the Phanar to the head of the Montenegrin schismatic structure, Boris Bojović. For instance, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church facilitated his legitimization by inviting the leader of the *"MOC"* to the conference *"Together Through Hard Times of War: The Experience of Post-Yugoslav Countries and Ukraine"* (Lvov, April 17–18, 2024).

Then, the Uniates provided Bojović with their information platform – the RISU portal. In an interview with this resource, the Montenegrin *"hierarch"* stated that his structure hopes to receive a Tomos of autocephaly from the Patriarchate of Constantinople. He also claimed that his structure maintains close contact with the Phanar, which, according to him, sent observers *"to study the internal organization"* of the so-called Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

The problem is that in 2019, in an interview with the Serbian publication *"Kurir,"* the head of the Phanar assured that he would never grant autocephaly to the *"false"* (as he put it) so-called Montenegrin Orthodox Church. Moreover, when asked whether autocephaly would be possible if the *"MOC"* were headed by someone else (instead of Mihailo Dedeić), he categorically replied: *"No, no, and no! The Church in Montenegro is the Serbian Orthodox Church, and no changes will ever happen there."*

And now, after several years, some *"contacts"* with the Montenegrin schismatics have emerged. Thus, the Phanar has once again demonstrated that its words and statements cannot be trusted.

As in the case of the UOC, when Patriarch Bartholomew repeatedly stated that he recognized Metropolitan Onufry as the only canonical head of Ukrainian Orthodoxy, but later invaded someone

else's canonical territory and granted autocephaly to Ukrainian schismatics.

Who can guarantee that he will not do the same later with the Serbian Orthodox Church? In the Ukrainian scenario, representatives of the "UOC-KP" also maintained unofficial contacts with the Phanar for many years and ultimately achieved their goal when the political situation changed. And the contradiction between Bartholomew's public statements and his actions was obscured in a stream of sophisticated arguments.

In light of the above, the readiness of the Local Churches to defend the purity of faith and canonical order is of particular importance. The conciliar mind of the Universal Church must assess the actions of the Phanar related to the promotion of the idea of "*first without equals*" and the movement toward union with the Vatican. These actions go beyond jurisdictional disputes and require deep reflection and discussion at the pan-Orthodox level.

Given the current situation, I propose for discussion some measures of a pan-Orthodox nature to protect the unity, canonical order, and doctrinal purity of Orthodoxy:

1. **Strengthening the "Amman Format":** The Amman meeting, initiated by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, was one of the first steps toward discussing the current crisis in the Orthodox Church. This format can be developed as a permanent platform for dialogue and exchange of views among the Local Churches. Regular meetings within this framework will help develop a common vision and mechanisms for protecting canonical order and preventing future schisms.
2. **Theological dialogues and councils:** Important in preserving unity is the discussion of theological issues related to canons, ecclesiology, primacy, and conciliarity. The organization of theological commissions, including representatives from different Local Churches (e.g., those participating in the "*Amman Format*"), would allow for a deeper analysis of existing problems and the development of well-founded responses to theological challenges.
3. **Strengthening the role of Local Councils:** Local Orthodox Churches can hold their own Councils to develop unified positions on key issues of canonical structure and relations with other Local Churches. The recommendations and decisions of such Councils can then be presented for pan-Orthodox discussion.
4. **Pan-Orthodox condemnation of schismatic actions:** Local Churches must unite in opposing canonical violations and schismatic actions, publicly condemning them. This will help prevent the spread of false teachings and preserve church order.
5. **Engagement with laity and clergy:** It is necessary to strengthen internal church ties and

involve both clergy and laity in discussing complex issues. Internal church dialogue will help create a unified position on pressing problems and strengthen internal unity.

6. **Countering external pressure:** Local Churches must unite to defend against external interference, whether political pressure, actions by radical groups, or ecumenical initiatives that undermine doctrinal foundations and disrupt canonical order. Church diplomacy at the international level should also contribute to the protection of church interests and traditions.

7. **Unified information space:** Creating a pan-Orthodox information space that explains the positions of Local Churches on controversial issues is an important tool for countering disinformation and manipulation. Official church media and online platforms can help inform believers about the Church's position and strengthen its authority.

The development and implementation of these measures, I believe, will allow the Orthodox Church to preserve its unity and identity and adequately respond to the challenges of our time.

Metropolitan Luka of Zaporozhye and Melitopol (Kovalenko)

October 22, 2024

Source: <https://mospat.ru/en/authors-analytics/92391/>