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Church politics as a weather vane of national politics in Latvia and Ukraine, 2017-2018.

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Abstract

This paper explores recent developments in the relationship of the church, the state, and society in Eastern Europe. In many Eastern European countries, the church has markedly increased its public presence. This trend has been accompanied by the church's closer involvement with the state, the growth of political and social conservatism, including the marginalization of women and sexual minorities, and the severance of the church's ties with their cross-border religious affiliates. This paper focuses on events in the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church (2016-2018) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (2018) which have contributed to an increased conservatism in national politics, signifying possible future developmental trends for these countries and for Eastern Europe.

1. Introduction

Recent events in the relationship of the church, state, and society in Eastern Europe suggest that the importance of the church in national politics is growing. A number of churches in Eastern Europe have established exceedingly close ties with the state, formally separated from their co-denominations abroad and have generally contributed to the growth of social conservatism and nationalism in their respective countries. These developments warrant closer examination and a possible re-evaluation of church-state relations in Eastern Europe. This paper focuses on events in the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church (2016-2018), and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (2018) and their effect on national politics. Throughout the past decade, there had been increasing domestic and international disagreements concerning their leadership, political involvement, property ownership, relations with cross-border affiliates, and social

inclusivity, particularly in regard to the rights of women and sexual minorities. In Latvia, these disagreements culminated in 2016-2018, when changes in the Constitution of the Latvian Lutheran Church outlawed the ordination of women, and the Latvian Parliament undertook to change the Law of the Latvian Lutheran Church to recognize the special status of the Latvian Lutheran Church. In Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in 2018 achieved its decades-long ambition to exit the Moscow Patriarchate and to become the *de facto* state church of Ukraine. These events attracted prompted support and opposition from various national and international groups. Currently, due to these events, in addition to internal consolidation and increasingly close relationship with the government, these churches have considerably enhanced their political presence in Latvia and Ukraine. They may have deliberately chosen to pursue a more conservative or nationalistic agenda and to cultivate closer ties with the state to increase their popular legitimacy and their political relevance, thus could be setting a pattern for the future of domestic politics.

Interestingly, these events in the Latvian and Ukrainian churches have often received contrasting interpretation by political, social, and ecclesiastical observers. An example is the rift between the Latvian Lutheran Church and its Western-based affiliate, the Latvian Lutheran Church Abroad, which has often been interpreted as “regressive” and detrimental to civil society, democratic values and social inclusion. By contrast, the split between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Moscow Patriarchate, many have regarded as a “progressive” renouncement of Russian authoritarianism, as an indication of Ukraine’s turn to the West, and as a sign of national consolidation (Petro, 2018; Yelensky, 2013). However, both events have also been associated with the increased politicization of the church and the growth of national conservatism in these countries. These events suggest that, in spite of considerable contextual and normative

differences, the church's role as a domestic political actor in Eastern Europe has been increasing. This paper hopes to avoid normative bias, and, by examining the cases of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, this paper seeks to contribute to an understanding of lesser explored aspects of church-society-state dynamics and to evaluate political developmental perspectives for these countries and for Eastern Europe.

This paper includes six parts. The introduction is followed by a brief overview of relevant scholarly works on church-state relations in Eastern Europe, a justification of the two case studies, a comparison of the two case studies, a summary discussion, and the conclusion. For its sources, this paper largely relies on news releases by state, public, and church media. The scope and the volume of this paper are deliberately kept modest, but it may be expanded in the future.

2. Literature Review

In the past few decades, state-church relations in Europe have received much scholarly attention. Even though religion is not regulated by the European Union, and religious matters are largely left to the discretion of its member states, scholars have recognized that religious aspects have played an important, yet often overlooked, part in the history and the current development of the EU. There is a growing recognition that church-state relations in Europe are more complex than previously thought and are far from being transparent, straightforward, or easily interpretable (Flere et al, 2014; Koellner, 2018; Stan, 2009; Stan and Turcescu, 2011).

Much of the recent research regarding the church-state relationship in Europe has been prompted by the EU expansion in 2004 and 2007. The existing theoretical church-state model which was broadly based on the separation of private and public domain, inadequately accommodated the new dynamics which were introduced by the new member states. For many of these states, religion was an integral part of their national identity; multi-level formal and

informal connections between the state and the church were of great importance (Koellner, 2018; Stan, 2009). In view of these factors, scholars suggested new theoretical approaches to the examination of church-state relations in the EU. A comprehensive framework was presented by Stan and Turcescu (2011) who suggested three theoretical models for the church-state relations in Europe: 1. A strict church-state separation (as in France and the Czech Republic). 2. The established church model (England, Scandinavia, Poland, Romania, Estonia, and Lithuania) 3. A pluralistic model (the Netherlands, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Latvia). Other theoretical approaches to church-state relations in Europe have focused on the increasingly complementary and common interests of the church and the state (Kilp, 2007; Koellner, 2018; Richters, 2013). Stahlberg (2018) has suggested that a new paradigm in church-state relations could be based on the general premise that the state relies on the church to enhance the state's legitimacy and, at least partly, to counteract various "centrifugal" political tendencies. Paradoxically, while the church can serve as a stabilizing factor which benefits the state in uncertain periods, the church can also become an obstacle in the establishment of a strong civil society with corresponding personal freedoms and democratic values which, in turn, are essential for a strong state (Stahlberg, 2018). Other attempts at conceptualizing church-state relations have used Hale's theoretical framework of patronalism politics to explain the role of religion in Eastern Europe. Such studies have suggested that the influence of church and patronalism on the society and politics in Eastern Europe have been curtailed by the presence of the EU (Hale, 2015; Warhola, 2019). However, some scholars assert that no single theoretical model could explain church-state relations, particularly the nebulous relations between the Orthodox church and the state (Makrides, 2018; Ladykowska 2018).

Due to more religiously-minded states joining the EU, there has been increased research regarding the compatibility of religion with democratic values (Stan, 2009; Makrides, 2018; Richters, 2013). Some observers have noted that the Orthodox Church has poorly adjusted to “modern secular statehood and liberal governance” (Makrides, 2018, p. 241). They have highlighted persistent violations of the separation of the state and the church and infringements on personal freedoms and secular institutions (Flere et al, 2014; Ladykowska, 2018; Zorgdrager, 2012). Other scholars have noted that national churches may have broadly supported their country’s ascension to the EU, but since then have become antagonistic to many EU laws and norms. Disagreements among scholars in these matters continue (Flere et al, 2014; Stan and Turcescu, 2011; Warhola, 2019). Additionally, there have been concerns about the Western bias toward the Orthodox church. As Koellner (2018) has noted, the Orthodox Christianity has often been considered “backward” in comparison to the religions of Western Europe, a bias that has contributed to the misinterpretation of historic connection between church and state in Eastern Europe. Two dominant theoretical frameworks have presented the Orthodox church either as simplistically submissive to the state authority or have interpreted church-state relations as mutually reinforcing (Koellner, 2018; Ladykowska, 2018). In the research of the Orthodox church’s role in politics, particular attention has been devoted to the Orthodox church’s relations with government, nationalism, transnationalism, and discrimination which are briefly reviewed below.

Extensive research in regard to ties between the Orthodox church and the government notes that, in much of Eastern Europe, the state controls the church through legal requirements, funding (including the diversion of a church’s pre-war assets), and by granting it a semi-official public platform (Daniel 2006; Flere et al, 2014; Kilp, 2007; Stan, 2009). This may support the

view of the Orthodox church as an instrument of the state. However, more often than not, the church is also seen as an active partner of the state which can influence the political discourse and shape the domestic political order through its support of specific political candidates and legislation (Koellner, 2018; Turcescu and Stan, 2009). Conversely, some scholars maintain that the Orthodox church is not necessarily ideationally subservient to the state; instead, it is an integral part of civil society (Daniel, 2006; Stan and Turcescu, 2011).

In regard to the church's role in shaping views concerning national identity and the rise of nationalism, it is recognized that religion is closely associated with the formation of national identity in most of Eastern Europe, and that religion and nationalism are mutually reinforcing (Batiashvili, 2018; Kilp, 2007; Payne, 2007; Sremac and Ganzevoort, 2018, Stan and Turcescu, 2011; Zivkovic, 2018). The Orthodox church is seen as ethno-centric, and, in most Eastern European states, it has been perceived as the patron of traditional cultural and national values, often appropriating historical symbols, events, and places (Batiashvili, 2018; Richters, 2013; Zivkovic, 2018). Scholars have also noted several ambiguous aspects of transnationalism in church-state relations. The state has encouraged the church to tailor its cross-border ties, as seen in the examples of Estonia, Macedonia, and Ukraine (Richters, 2013; Zivkovic, 2018; Petro, 2018). Generally, the national Orthodox churches' transnational relations have become politicized, particularly in the context of the state's anti-Russian or anti-Western political agendas (Batiashvili, 2018; Richters, 2013; Yelensky, 2013).

Lastly, scholars have noted the role of the church in the discrimination and exclusion, particularly in regard to women and sexual and religious minorities. Several churches in Eastern Europe have played a decisive role in the state's decisions to extend or to deny civil rights to minorities (Flere et al, 2014; Iordache, 2018; Kilp, 2018; Richters, 2013; Sremac and

Ganzevoort, 2015; Stan and Turcescu, 2011; Turcescu and Stan, 2009). These actions have often resulted in opprobrium from the EU and the international community, but they may also have enhanced the church's domestic standing (Iordache, 2018).

In sum, Eastern Europe remains a “bastion of institutionalized and, specifically Christian, privilege”, and there are strong indications that the churches of Eastern Europe have ambiguous co-existence with the political order based on liberal, Western European-style democracy (Soroka, 2013, p. 218).

3. Methodology

This paper examines the dominant churches of Latvia and Ukraine, the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. They contrast and share similarities in several aspects, which are outlined below.

Pronounced similarities between the Latvian and Ukrainian churches include their established national symbolic role, their close ties with the state, including their reliance on the state for material support, the presence of other influential religious denominations, and strong, conservative leadership. Both churches are regarded as broadly respected symbolic national entities due to their historic roles, and they are generally accepted arbiters of national spiritual values (Petro, 2018; Yelensky, 2013). The state has extended significant privilege to these churches in regard to their property and tax benefits, sanctioned religious instruction in public schools and the military, and has ensured their presence at official functions (Richters, 2013, p. 41-63). However, in both Latvia and Ukraine, there are other comparable religious denominations: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine; in Latvia, the Orthodox church and Roman Catholic Church, with Latvian Lutheran Church being only slightly predominant. In both Ukraine and Latvia, the members of the Orthodox Churches, which are

associated with the Moscow Patriarchate, are mostly Russian-speakers (Kudors, 2012; Pew, 2017). The Latvian Lutheran Church's leader, Archbishop Janis Vanags, and the leader of the Ukrainian church, Patriarch Filaret, have established themselves as strong leaders with alleged autocratic tendencies and political ambitions (Losiev, 2012; Petro, 2018). Both churches, until recently, had ties with religious co-affiliates abroad; the Latvian Lutheran Church Abroad, a diaspora church with considerable prestige and presence in Latvia; and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's hierarchical supra-structure, the Moscow Patriarchate.

There are also considerable disparities between the two churches. In size, they are vastly different: appr.10 million membership in Ukraine which is growing vs. appr. 700,000 in Latvia which has been decreasing. Latvia is an established member state of the EU with largely secular population, while Ukraine, with its strongly religious population, has been embroiled in a war with Russia and aspires to become a member of the EU (Petro, 2018; Pew Research, 2018; Stan, 2009). The Ukrainian Orthodox Church has a strong rival, Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate, while in Latvia, Evangelical Lutheran Church is the dominant representative of Protestantism and has generally amicable relations with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches (LETA, 2018; Pew Research, 2017).

Due to their similarities and differences, both churches serve as relevant and illustrative examples of the growing importance of the church in the politics of Eastern Europe. The following comparison of the two churches focuses on three aspects: their relations with the state, their relations with their cross-border affiliates, and their position regarding the rights of women and minorities. These three considerations figure prominently in recent church politics; they have been subject to public discussion; and they may be indicative of long-term trends. The main goal of the comparison is to examine the role of these churches in the increasingly conservative

domestic politics. However, an examination of their cross-border affiliations and their role in fostering discrimination highlight additional important and often overlooked aspects of the church's domestic political involvement in Eastern Europe.

There are other examples which could have been relevant to this study. In Macedonia, its Orthodox Church has exited the influence of the Serbian Patriarchate, not unlike Ukraine's exit from the patronage of Moscow (Koellner, 2018; Zivkovic, 2018). In Moldova and Romania, their Orthodox churches have served as powerful advocates of conservatism and have directly influenced legislation (Iordache, 2018; Turcescu and Stan, 2009). However, these examples represent the Orthodox church only. The selection of the Protestant Latvia and the Orthodox Ukraine illustrates the range and diversity of the Eastern European states where the influence of the church is growing.

4. Case studies of Latvia and Ukraine

Latvia

Stan and Turcescu (2011) in their overview of Eastern European churches and politics characterize Latvia as "religiously pluralistic" (p. xi). However, the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church is the largest and the most influential religious denomination in Latvia. It comprises 700,000 members, 309 parishes, and 213 priests (LR Tieslietu Ministrija, 2017), and it has been under the leadership of Archbishop Janis Vanags since 1993. After being mired in internal conflicts, which reached an apex in 2016-2018 due to disagreements concerning the ordination of women, the inclusion of sexual minorities, and historical legacies, the church has undergone internal consolidation, and has expanded its political and cultural influence in Latvia.

The Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church (LELC) traditionally has enjoyed a privileged role in the state. Latvia has had well-institutionalized relations between religious groups and the

government, as may be seen in the large number of official state-church advisory institutions (Kudors, 2012; Stan and Turcescu, 2011). The state has granted the church many economic privileges including exemption from financial accounting to the state and considerable state subsidies for the maintenance of churches and church properties (Avotins, 2019). The state has ensured religion instruction (elective) in public schools (Kudors, 2012; Stan and Turcescu, 2011). Often, in regard to the LELC, the state has extended its support to the extent of skirting the separation of church and state. This was particularly conspicuous during the 2018 Parliament's move to recognize the LELC as a historical and legal continuation of the pre-war Latvian Lutheran Church. This created a dispute between the LELC and its counterpart, the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church Abroad (LELCA). In this dispute, a broad spectrum of political parties generally supported the LELC, and it would have resulted in significant tangible and intangible benefits for the LELC, including the ownership of historic churches and other valuable real estate holdings (Avotins, 2019; LSM, 2018e).

On its part, the LELC has demonstrated increasingly greater involvement in politics, fostering closer association with conservative political parties and nationalistic circles. In contrast with its political non-commitment of previous decades, the LELC has recently indicated that, while remaining formally separated from the state, it would attempt to coordinate its membership's support to approved political parties and candidates (LSM, 2018a). The church's influence has been highlighted by its 2018 collaboration with the nationalistic-conservative Latvian Green Party and the Latvian Farmers' Union Party to prevent the ratification of the Istanbul Convention on violence against women. A main argument in the LELC's opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention was its incompatibility with the Constitution of Latvia, a clearly political argument (Mustillo, 2018). Recently, the LELC sought to enhance its official

presence by asking the President's office to formally announce the installation of its new bishops (LSM 2018d). While this request was denied, it indicates that the LELC regards the formal separation of state and church as malleable. Similar activities have contributed to the church's reputation as the guardian of traditional values and have considerably enhanced its standing with conservative circles and organizations (Mustillo, 2018; Veidemane, 2019).

The rift between the conservative LELC and the liberal LELCA, in addition to highlighting their ecclesiastical differences, indicated LELC's ambitions to secure its domestic standing regarding a potential rival entity. The split between the LELC and LELCA was two-fold: ecclesiastical, regarding the ordination of woman and the acceptance of sexual minorities; and legalistic, hinging on claims of the historical continuity of the pre-war Latvian Lutheran Church and its former properties which included valuable historic real estate (LSM, 2018b). The LELC's split with the LELCA had been viewed with alarm by liberally inclined groups in Latvia and abroad (Block, 2016; PBLA, 2018), but it has received the support of the more conservative groups at home and abroad. This split contributed to its image of the LELC as a protector of domestic national values against the perceived influence of alien Western values (Kilp. 2015; Veidemane, 2019)

The LELC's decision to exclude women from the priesthood in 2016 was an important indication of its the growing conservatism. In spite of its forty-year practice of the ordination of women, in conformance with the majority of the world's Lutheran churches, the LELC stopped the practice in the mid-1990s and formally prohibited it in 2016 (LSM, 2016). This action was compounded by the church's 2018 explicit opposition to the ratifications of the Istanbul Convention, a legislation by the Council of Europe which aimed to prevent violence against women. In this, the LELC became closely allied with the Roman Catholic Church and the

Latvian Orthodox Church, in contrast with other Protestant denominations in Latvia and Europe. While the LELC justified its opposition on the grounds that the Convention unduly emphasized various gender and sexual aspects, including gender equality, it was widely regarded as an articulation of Church's conservatism and its dislike of Western values (Mustillo, 2018). In regard to religious minorities, the LELC's leadership has been explicitly disapproving (Kilp, 2015; Veidemane, 2019). In 2005, the Archbishop, citing immutable ecclesiastical principles, expelled from the church several prominent members, including the Dean of Faculty of Theology at Latvia University, who had expressed their support for gay rights (LU, 2005). However, the conservative principles of the LELC became subdued when it established a formal alliance with the gay-friendly, women-ordaining German Lutheran Church in Riga to ensure control of a valuable historic property, St. Peter's Church. This concession suggests that the church is willing to compromise its ecclesiastical principles in order to pursue opportunistic policies (LSM, 2017).

Many of the LELC's actions have been opposed by large segments of Latvian society and members of the church. In 2018, prominent Lutheran priests publicly protested the "highjacking of the church" (Alsins et al, 2018). The immediate reason for their outcry hinged on the church's castigation of a dissenting priest (who, incidentally, along with a number of other priests and parishes left the LELC and joined the LELCA). This public dissent indicated significant opposition to the conservative politics of the LELC (Alsins et al, 2018; LELBAL, 2018; Vanags, 2018). The public support for LELC remains uncertain, particularly in light of the largely secular character of Latvian society. It is likely that the LELC will increasingly seek the support of the state and ally with other conservative groups and forego seeking support among other Protestant affiliates or society at large.

Ukraine

In comparison with Latvia, the religious map of Ukraine has been more complicated. Since the 1990s and until last year, there were three main Orthodox denominations: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church which remained under the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), and the much smaller Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC). In October 2018, the UOC, which had been in a prolonged conflict with its formal superior, the Moscow Patriarchate, was granted independence by another Orthodox hierarchical supra-structure (Koshkina, 2018). From 2019, the UOC-KP and the UAOC have melded into the united Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). Currently it has appr. ten million members and appr. seven thousand parishes, and its numbers are increasing. Since 1992, it has been under the leadership of Patriarch Filaret (Koshkina, 2018; Markovich, 2016; Petro, 2018; RISU, 2011; Williams and Polityuk, 2018)

The UOC has a long history of close relations with the Ukrainian state. However, the state's traditionally preferential treatment of the UOC has recently become more pronounced. Ukraine's President Poroshenko has had personal involvement in the UOC-KP's gaining independence from the Moscow Patriarchate. He and his conservative-nationalistic ruling party *Solidarity/Poroshenko Bloc* have supported the UOC's ambition to become a *de facto* state church thus likely ensuring the church's support in the future elections (Coyle, 2018; DW, 2019; LETA, 2018; Petro, 2018; Skorkin, 2018). Along similar lines, other leading political figures, political parties, and the Parliament have supported the UOC-KP's split from Moscow and endorsed it as *the* Ukrainian national church (Bugriy, 2015; Petro, 2018). The Parliament has introduced several bills granting the state significant discretionary powers regarding the church, including a strict state control over Orthodox churches which have remained associated with

Russia and are regarded as opponents of the UOC (Petro, 2018; PRI, 2019; RT, 2017). Currently, the Orthodox religion is a compulsory subject in public schools. These state actions are regarded by many as a violation of the separation of the church and the state which is set forth in the Ukrainian Constitution (Sremac and Ganzevoort, 2015; Zorgdrager, 2012).

The UOC-state relations are at least partially based on the presence of a common external enemy, Russia, and it has been a leitmotiv to the UOC's support of the state (Euromaidan, 2017; JTA, 2013; Richters, 2013). For decades, the UOC's leader, Patriarch Filaret has been an outspoken supporter of nationalist politicians and candidates (Zorgdrager, 2012). In the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2014 Euromaidan events he explicitly sided with the anti-Russian, nationalistic political forces (Williams and Polityuk, 2018). As the UOC has been widely regarded as a symbol of Ukrainian national identity, its political support of the state has been particularly valuable (Richters, 2013). In 2012, Patriarch Filaret rallied public opposition to Ukraine's participation in the Euroasian Customs Union (Stetson, 2013). In 2014, after the election of the new, nationalistic government, Patriarch Filaret, during his visit to Washington, campaigned for the United States' security assistance to Ukraine (Bugriy, 2015).

The split between the UOC and the Moscow Patriarchate has had important symbolic and materialistic consequences for the UOC. The UOC's hostility toward the Russian Orthodox Church and its leadership is closely associated with Ukraine's conflict with Russia, Ukraine's nationalistic sentiments, and Ukraine's pro-Western ambitions. In addition, there are other domestic political considerations which have contributed to the split between the UOC and the Moscow Patriarchate. The UOC-MP, which has remained under the hierarchy of the Moscow Patriarchate, has been a significant political and religious rival to the UOC-KP, and, in contrast with the UOC-KP, has traditionally supported Ukraine's pro-Russian parties and political

candidates (Richters, 2013). Repeatedly, the UOC has claimed that the UOC-MP serves as a Russian agent in Ukraine and it should be disciplined (Bugriy, 2015). Currently, the Parliament, at the request of the UOC, has imposed the name change on the UOC-MP, designating it as the Russian Orthodox Church, thus decidedly delegitimizing it (Kupfer, 2018). Additionally, the UOC is establishing its rights to properties formerly held by the UOC-MP (Petro, 2018). This political maneuvering has eliminated the UOC's political and religious rival and ensured the UOC's dominance in Ukraine.

The UOC has traditionally held conservative views about the role of women and minorities. It has been known to lobby in support of the anti-abortion law in 2012-2013 (Pyzik, 2014). While some of its views on women's rights and sexual minorities have recently become more muted, allegedly to smooth Ukraine's bid to join the EU, the UOC fundamental antagonism to minorities remains, as seen in Patriarch Filaret's explicit condemnation of homosexuality and same-sex marriages (LGBT Human Rights Center, 2015). The UOC has successfully established itself as a defender of public morality, but many of its views and actions conflict with democratic values, personal freedoms, and equal rights (Zorgdrager, 2012). However, its views have been supported by large swaths of the Ukrainian society, thus enhancing the UOC's role as the upholder of traditional values which are seen as being endangered by the influx of Western values (Skorkin, 2018).

As a result of these developments, the UOC's role in the Ukrainian politics currently can be considered as entrenched. Through political maneuvering it has marginalized its rival religious organizations and established itself in a particularly privileged position within the state for the foreseeable future. This is evident in the 2019 presidential elections, where the church has

expressed its support of the current President Poroshenko, but it is also being courted by other presidential candidates and political figures (RT, 2019).

Summary Comparison Table of Ukraine and Latvia

	Ukraine	Latvia
Dominant confession	78% of population identify as Orthodox Christians, more than half of them, UOC; a growing trend.	30% of population identify as Lutherans; a declining trend
Other confessions and unaffiliated population	UOC-MP, 10% of population identify as Roman Catholics, 5% unaffiliated	15% of population identify as Orthodox, 17% as Roman Catholic, 20 % unaffiliated
Religion identified as important	By 51% population	By 11% population
Freedom House Indexes (2018)	Aggregate score 62/100 (“partly free”)	Aggregate score 87/100 (“free”)
Member of the EU	No	Yes
Democracy score (2018)	4.6/7 (“hybrid regime”); declining ratings.	2.1/7, (“consolidated democracy”); declining
Civil society index (2018)	2.75/7; declining ratings	2.0/7; slightly declining
Church relations with cross-border affiliates	Openly contentious	Moderately contentious
Church relations with the state	Extended state support	Moderate state support
Inclusivity toward women and sexual minorities)	No women in the priesthood; antagonism to sexual minorities; 85% population oppose same-sex marriage	No women in the priesthood; antagonism to sexual minorities; 77% population oppose same sex marriage

(Freedom House, 2018; LRTM, 2017; Petro, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2017, 2018; Stan and Turcescu, 2011)

5. Discussion

In summarizing these three aspects of church-state relations in Latvia and Ukraine, there appears a pattern of increased church involvement in politics and a consistent alignment with conservative political circles. This trend may not always be simple or straightforward, but the church has clearly demonstrated its ambition to increase its political relevance in Latvia and Ukraine. It should be noted that church-government relations in both countries are clearly reciprocal, and also are related in their common affinity in support of nationalism and traditionalism. While this affinity may be less distinct in the more secular and relatively stable state of Latvia, it is more pronounced in the more religiously inclined and conflict-torn Ukraine. In Latvia, the politics of the LELC often are seen as largely uncondusive to the development of the national consensus or an inclusive society, and they conform with the ideas of only limited strata of society. Conversely, in Ukraine, the church can rely on broad popular and political base. These national dynamics support the conceptual view of the role of the church as a stabilizing factor in periods of transition and as an inhibiting factor in fostering democracy and civil society (Stahlberg, 2018). However, in both cases, the church has enhanced its political presence.

An examination of the cross-border affiliations of the LELC and the UOC further confirms the entrenchment of the church-state ties in Latvia and Ukraine. This aspect of church-state relations was selected to examine how the church's relations with religious affiliates abroad may condition and modify its domestic activities. In this regard, Latvia and Ukraine create an interesting contrast: The UOC severed ties with a less democratic, less "modern", less Western-oriented religious entity, the Moscow Patriarchate. The LELC parted with a more democratic, more "progressive", more Western-oriented entity, the LELCA. However, for both the UOC and the LLC, the effect of their split was largely similar. It served to enhance their domestic standing

symbolically, politically, and materialistically. This suggests that the church's decision to sever their cross-border ties may have been influenced by their long-term political considerations.

Regarding the church's stance on the rights of women and minorities, there are indications that it has contributed to the politics of exclusion in Latvia and Ukraine. It would appear that the LELC has become increasingly conservative and aligned with the agenda of nationalistic political circles, while the UOC has become less conservative. These differences may be ascribed to broader political factors. Latvia has been a member of the EU since 2004, but has experienced a recent rise of populism. Ukraine is aspiring to become a member of the EU, and thus, while remaining associated with nationalistic political circles, may be more amenable to lip-service in support of pro-Western values. Again, this implies that the church's ecclesiastical principles can be tailored by political considerations.

This comparison also suggests that the church's increasing influence in Eastern European politics is not necessarily affected by specific religious affiliation (Orthodox or Protestant), the state's membership in the EU, or the presence of an external threat (Russia), in spite of suggestions to the contrary (Ladykowska, 2018; Makrides, 2018; Stahlberg, 2018). The developments in the UOC could have been anticipated in the light of decades-long consolidation of nationalism, anti-Russian sentiments, and the continuity of the Church's political presence in Ukraine (DW, 2013; Richters, 2013). On the other hand, the events regarding the LELC are more surprising, as they ensued in a largely secular society which self-identifies with democratic European values, is relatively open, and has historically had high levels of inclusivity. In this context, one would have expected the LELC to become more "democratic" and open-minded. However, it apparently considers an alliance with conservative political and religious partners to be more advantageous and more in sync with its underlying principles.

Overall, the comparison of the LELC and the UOC suggests that churches in Latvia and Ukraine have become consolidated and ideologically entrenched in order to remain politically relevant in a changing world. Unfortunately, as scholars have noted, as the state and the church seek to create their own model of “modernity” which is based on the incorporation of religion in the public sphere, it does not necessarily bode well for the future social and political development in Eastern Europe (Ladykova, 2018).

6. Conclusion

The premise of this paper is that church-state relations may indicate political trends on a national level. However, the relevance of the events described in this paper may transcend Latvia and Ukraine. In other parts of the world, growing social and political conservatism and an accompanying discrimination are closely related to the power of the church, be it the Catholic Poland, the Orthodox Russia, or the Islamic Brunei. As the title of this paper indicates, the recent events in the Ukrainian and Latvian churches could be regarded as a weather vane of national politics. The present church-state relationship is an under-researched aspect of politics, and, an examination of its full impact requires further in-depth research and comparison with other Eastern European states and other regions.

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