

Ecclesial negotiations

by [David Heim](#) in the [March 30, 2016](#) issue

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Behind the historic meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill in February were years of complex negotiation between the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church, especially on the situation in Ukraine.

Stating that they are “not competitors but brothers,” the two leaders expressed their hope of overcoming historic divisions between Orthodox and Catholic, and they found a common voice on religious liberty, on concern for Christians persecuted in the Middle East, and on the need to defend traditional Christian teachings. But geopolitical concerns loomed large for both leaders, and their hard bargaining surfaced clearly in three paragraphs on Ukraine included in their joint declaration.

The declaration offers some support for so-called Uniate churches in Ukraine—the Ukrainian Greek Catholics who adhere to Orthodox traditions but are affiliated with Rome. These churches have long been resented by the Orthodox and were persecuted during the Soviet era. The document affirms the right of Uniate churches “to exist and to undertake all that is necessary to meet the spiritual needs of their faithful,” which is a concession of a sort by the Russians.

Yet the statement refrains from recognizing Greek Catholics as a church, calling them instead mere “ecclesial communities.” The document also insists that differences between the Orthodox in Ukraine should be solved “through existing canonical norms,” which seems to give the upper hand to the Moscow Patriarchate.

On the political front, the declaration refers to “the hostility in Ukraine” but makes no mention of Russia’s annexation of Crimea or Russia’s role in fomenting the conflict—about which the Russian Orthodox Church has been silent. The statement urges churches “to refrain from taking part in the confrontation,” essentially calling on Ukrainian Christians to be neutral in the debate over their nation’s future—a hard sell in western Ukraine, where the Greek Catholic churches are most established.

Ecumenical statements and gestures have a way of establishing their own momentum; the results are not always foreseen by the participants themselves. That Francis and Kirill have spoken face to face and committed themselves to defending religious liberty gives some reason to hope that spheres of cooperation and understanding can be widened.