

# Parochial politics: The religious divide in the Ukraine

by [Molly Corso](#) in the [March 8, 2005](#) issue

Viktor Yushchenko's 52-to-42 percent victory over Viktor Yanukovych in the December 26 election in Ukraine reflected not only the centuries-old schism between western and eastern Ukraine, but also the split between the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP).

During the passion-filled campaign, in which the first vote was tossed out by the court because of fraud, almost everyone in the Ukraine took sides, including the country's diverse religious communities. As a rule, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate supported Prime Minister Yanukovych, whereas the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kiev and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, as well as the Muslim, Jewish and Protestant communities, supported opposition leader Yushchenko.

The UOC-MP is based in the eastern part of the nation, which has close ties to Russia and whose people are predominately Russian-speaking. Orthodoxy can be traced to the beginnings of Christianity in the Ukraine, but its modern history was formed in the 17th century in opposition to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Orthodoxy was used by the Russian Empire as a tool to "Russify" the Ukrainians in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was formed in the 16th century, reportedly to help foster closer ties with the ruling Lithuanian-Polish commonwealth, which was located in the western Ukraine.

Despite the Catholic-Orthodox difference in names, both churches follow the rites of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. However, the Ukrainian Greek Church is under the jurisdiction of the see of Rome.

According to Felix Corley, an expert on religious issues in the former Soviet Union interviewed by the BBC, the religious community in the Ukraine is probably the most divided of all of those of the former Soviet republics. In the case of the 2004 election, however, the friction was more political than theological.

Many observers felt that the political fight was merely another form of conflict between Russia and the West. Father Borys Gudziak, a rector of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, claimed that freedom of religion in the country was being threatened, and he pointed to Moscow's "open efforts to meddle in our affairs."

Several human rights organizations, including the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, issued a document on November 19 decrying the use of churches as political battlegrounds. "In a democratic society, the use of religious beliefs for political agitation is inadmissible. It is unquestionably an interference with the private life of citizens and a violation of the freedom of thought and profession of faith. . . . Such practices violate not only the principle of the state's neutrality, fixed in the European Convention on human rights protection and fundamental liberties, not only the principle of church and state separation, fixed in the Constitution of Ukraine, but the Ukrainian law 'On freedom of conscience and religious organizations' as well. . . . We are forced to state that the church becomes hostage to respective political powers in conditions like these" (quoted on the Web site of the Religious Information Service of the Ukraine). The document went on to accuse both parties of using churches to deepen civil strife, but especially cited Yanukovych's campaign.

Metropolitan Volodymyr Sabodan of the UOC-MP gave his blessing to Yanukovych while addressing the nation on television.

According to a letter of protest written by young members of the church, Metropolitan Sabodan declared Yanukovych a "truly believing Orthodox person, who is worthy to become the head of our state."

The protest letter went on to state that by giving Yanukovych his blessing, Sabodan encouraged clergy to campaign from the pulpit. The protesters claimed that Metropolitan Ilarion of Donetsk and Mariupol referred to Yanukovych as the "Orthodox president" and called Yushchenko "the servant of Satan."

Yushchenko's supporters among the religious leaders also used the media. A Roman Catholic priest, Father Oleksandr Hurskyi, told the *International Herald Tribune* (according to Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty) that he hoped Yushchenko would

become president. According to reports, Ukrainian Greek Catholic nuns were often present at Independence Square rallies for Yushchenko.

Ivan Demchak, head of the opposition's People Power Party in the western town of Chernivts, complained that campaigning by the UOC-MP was threatening the country. He was quoted on the Web site bukinfo.cv.ua as saying the Orthodox clergy were threatening the peace.

"The most terrible thing is that in their speeches they basically call for interreligious and ethnic animosity and intolerance," he said. "They use their religious authority to create psychological pressure and frighten people with 'Judgment Day' and great tragedy if they vote for the Ukrainian opposition leader."

On December 6, representatives from all denominations gathered at Independence Square with Yushchenko. The last of the religious leaders to speak was Father Hennadii of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate. According to RISU, Hennadii heard Yushchenko's confession in his native village of Khoruzhivka and gave him a blessing.

Both Yushchenko and Yanukovych are practicing Orthodox. Yushchenko has repeatedly defended the freedom of religion in Ukraine, including in the eastern section. "Don't believe these fairy tales, friends. We live in the third millennium, and it's humorous even to say such absurd things. Today who can close churches? This will never be, and, in the same way, the Russian language will never be forbidden," Yushchenko said in Russian.

His words, however, had little effect on some. On January 24, Krill Frolov, press secretary of the Union of Orthodox Citizens, reportedly called on the defeated Yanukovych to head the "rebellion of the Orthodox."