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ZOIS REPORT

**ORTHODOXY, GENDER, AND
THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION:
MAPPING THE DISCOURSE
IN UKRAINE**

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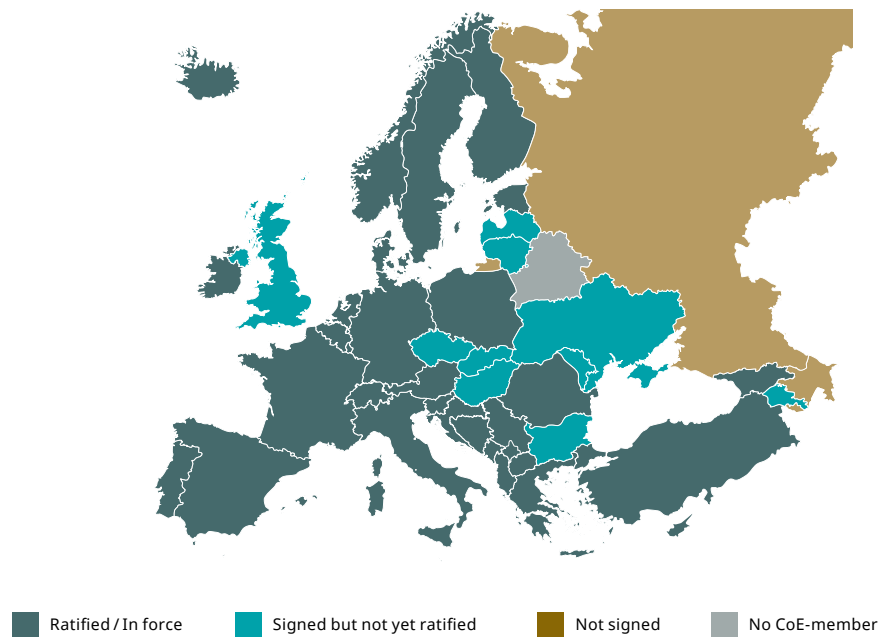
Summary

- Religious actors play a key role in opposing Ukraine’s ratification of the Istanbul Convention on domestic violence. Yet, the varying and contradictory arguments of Ukrainian churches on questions of gender have been insufficiently studied.
- The antigender movement is a global phenomenon, and the position of Orthodoxy in Ukraine mirrors the arguments and networks of religious antigenderism in Europe more widely. European integration also acts as a catalyst for gender issues, as does Ukraine’s religious pluralism, in which Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches are intertwined.
- Gender discourse touches on crucial teachings of Christian theology about anthropology and social ethics. Yet, although the notions of justice, dignity, and equality could serve as a bridge between Orthodox theology and gender

concepts, Ukraine's Orthodox churches refuse to engage with gender discourse.

- Alongside theological arguments, the churches' statements allow a wide space for identity arguments and, as a result, have caused a serious fundamentalist and right-wing shift. Those arguments leave no room for dialogue or even the removal of possible misunderstandings about gender concepts and pose a serious obstacle to theological research on gender roles, gender justice, and gender-based violence.
- Antigender discourse unites different churches and religions that otherwise have huge mutual reservations. While Catholic churches and Protestant communities rely on a long history of opposing gender discourse in Western societies, for Orthodox churches in the post-Soviet context, the possible ratification of the Istanbul Convention is a special trigger, as they feel a need to emphasise their indispensable status for transforming societies.
- Recent actions by Ukraine's churches and religious communities on the issue of domestic violence and steps towards a dialogue with NGOs on this topic are welcome gestures to overcome the deadlocked discourse about the Istanbul Convention. Yet, to avoid the suspicion that this shift is merely an insincere show of the churches' pro-European attitude, a profound theological engagement with structural violence and injustice has to follow.

FIGURE 1

Ratification of the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on violence against women

Source: Von Nederlandse Leeuw, source: Council of Europe website, status as of 9 March 2021, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=88122244>

Introduction

In 2011, Ukraine signed the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention. ► **FIGURE 1** Since then, struggles have continued unabated over the ratification of the convention and its implementation into Ukrainian law and society. One of the main obstacles comprises religious communities and conservative groups, which strongly oppose the use of the term 'gender' in the text of the convention. Family values and the fight against the implementation of gender in Ukrainian legislation on employment, education, hate speech, and domestic violence are the most frequent topics on the agenda in discussions between state institutions and religious actors.¹ In 2017 and again in 2020, plans by the Ukrainian government to ratify the Istanbul Convention were postponed because of religious intervention.²

These observations coincide with surveys that confirm that Orthodox-majority countries tend to hold more traditional and conservative opinions on family and gender norms. Yet, not least the current experience of Poland, where a ban on abortion and the country's impending exit from the Istanbul

1 See the homepage of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations (AUCCRO), <https://vrciro.org.ua/ua>.

2 Iaryna Grusha Possamai, 'Kyiv's Continuing Failure to Implement the Istanbul Convention', Wilson Center, 13 July 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/kyivs-continuing-failure-implement-istanbul-convention>.

Convention have caused massive protests, shows that Ukraine and Orthodoxy are not an exclusive case in the battle over gender issues in general and the implementation of the Istanbul Convention in particular. Churches in several European countries have publicly opposed the convention because of its expectation for signatories to normalise the concept of gender in their legislation and education.

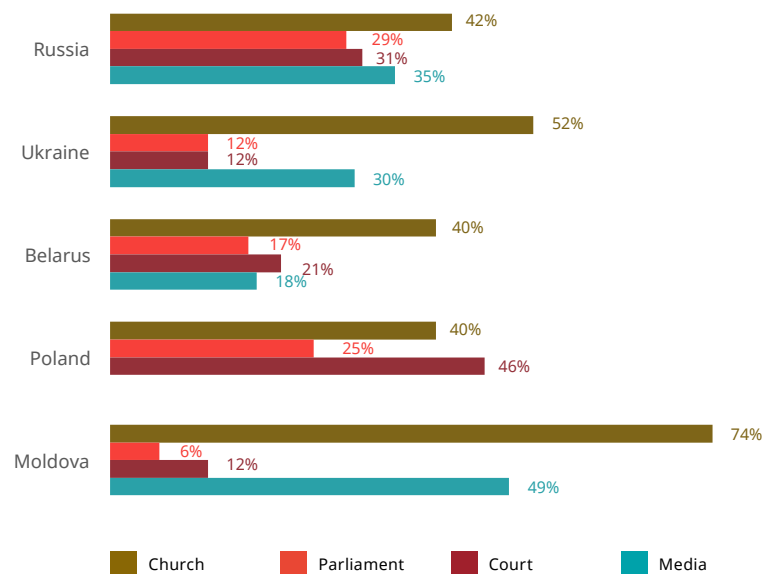
Religious arguments shape antigenderism in all societies. Often, religion appears to be a self-evident aspect of the antigender movement. Yet, the seemingly natural equation of religion and antigenderism not only hinders a more detailed analysis of the content of religious critique and the wider structures that affect churches' positions but also fails to recognise the diversity of attitudes within religion.

In most Western European countries, churches play an important but not a decisive part in debates about sociopolitical developments. In Ukraine, Poland, and Russia, however, churches have a stronger impact on social discourse and, partly, even on politics. ► **FIGURE 2** The reasons for this are manifold and embedded in Eastern Europe's distinctive history, post-socialist transformation, and alternative path of secularisation and desecularisation. Involving religious communities in processes of debate and lawmaking in the social sphere can be crucial for the outcomes of those processes. It is therefore necessary to analyse churches' arguments and positions in a comprehensive way.

FIGURE 2

Most trusted institutions

Percentage of people who say they trust, fully trust or mostly trust said institution



Sources: Russia – Levada Center, 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/2020/09/21/doverie-institutam/doverie-4/>; Ukraine – KIIS, 2020, <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=1005&page=1>; Poland – statista.com, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1193389/poland-trust-in-public-institutions/>; Moldova – Barometrul Opiniei Publice Republic of Moldova, Institutul de Politici Publice, Oktober 2020, <http://bop.ipp.md>

In this report, the implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Ukraine serves as a case study for the interwoven factors that shape the position of the Orthodox Church and the impacts of these factors on gender politics. Based on a close reading of official documents and on interviews with experts, the report analyses the different facets of antigender discourse among the branches of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine. The report explores the documents of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations (AUCCRO), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). In most cases, when it comes to issues of gender, homosexuality, and the Istanbul Convention, the two Orthodox churches refer directly to the documents of the AUCCRO.

Besides the conservative and fundamentalist tendencies and groups within the churches, a genuine theological process of learning about gender theories also plays a role. Moreover, local strategies of demarcation between different religious communities, as well as geopolitical conflicts and considerations, may all have crucial impacts on the churches' positions. This report starts by putting the Ukrainian case in context within the European development of antigenderism and religion. It then systematises the main theological, structural, and geopolitical aspects of the positions of the Orthodox Church, before analysing these positions in relation to the activities of religious actors in Ukraine's antigender movement.

European antigenderism and religion

The concept of antigenderism as a movement that involves an interplay of political, social, and religious right-wing populist actors has received increasing attention beyond feminist discourse in recent years.³ This is related to a noisy growth of voices in the political and public spheres that discredit all forms of struggle against gender discrimination as an ideology and a 'minority dictatorship'.⁴ But even beyond these voices, the concept of gender and the social and political practices associated with it are causing uncertainty.

Eastern European countries are no exception in this context. On the one hand, the gender discourse there acquires an additional geopolitical component. Acceptance of the concept of gender indicates an affiliation to the European project, in the eyes both of actors who favour fast European integration and of those who oppose it. On the other hand, identity discourse in the context of post-Soviet transformations intensifies the uncertainty caused by gender theories.

A recent analysis of antigenderism in Europe by German theologian Sonja Strube and others shows the role of religions and religious networks—especially the Catholic Church in Croatia, Hungary, Poland, and other countries—in

The concept of gender is causing uncertainty.

3 Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa, eds., *Anti-Genderismus. Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015).

4 See, for example, the rhetoric of parliamentarians of the Alternative for Germany party: 'Dr. Christine Baum MdL: keine Minderheiten-Diktatur', AfD-Fraktion im Landtag von Baden-Württemberg, 14 October 2020, <https://www.afd-fraktion-bw.de/aktuelles/3470/Dr.+Christine+Baum+MdL%3A+keine+Minderheiten-Diktatur>.

the fight against gender equality.⁵ At the same time, a profound theological analysis of the dogmatic foundations of critiques of gender theories is taking place, which gives hope that hardened positions may be overcome.⁶

In Eastern Europe, Orthodoxy is a crucial element in the resistance to gender-sensitive policies, as highlighted by surveys by the Pew Research Center.

'In Orthodox-majority countries, views on sexual and gender norms are more traditional and conservative than in Catholic-majority or religiously mixed countries. Adults in Orthodox countries are more likely than those elsewhere to reject homosexuality and to oppose same-sex marriage and legal abortion. Higher shares in Orthodox countries also favor traditional roles for women in marriage and society; many say that women have a social responsibility to bear children, that men should have greater rights to jobs when jobs are scarce and that wives must always obey their husbands.'⁷

Pew Research Center, May 2017

In the post-Soviet space, there has been a lack of detailed studies on the structures and content of gender critiques and the role of religion in these discourses. That is even though numerous analyses of the region's new conservatism and disputes over so-called traditional values point to a crucial role of the dominant Russian Orthodox Church.⁸

Discussions of gender justice in Ukraine are particularly revealing against this background. Not only does European integration act as a catalyst for gender issues in the country, but so too does religious pluralism, in which Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches are intertwined. The content, structures, and contradictions of antigender discourse can be illustrated particularly clearly in this context.

5 Sonja A. Strube et al., eds., *Anti-Genderismus in Europa. Allianzen von Rechtspopulismus und religiösem Fundamentalismus. Mobilisierung – Vernetzung – Transformation* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021).

6 Bernhard Grümme and Gunda Werner, eds., *Judith Butler und die Theologie. Herausforderungen und Rezeption* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020).

7 Travis Mitchell, 'Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe: 5. Social views and mobility', Pew Research Center, 10 May 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/social-views-and-morality/>.

8 Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, eds., *Postsecular Conflicts: Debating tradition in Russia and the United States* (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2020); Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga, eds., *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Regina Elsner, 'Gender und die traditionellen Familienwerte: Der Beitrag der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche zur russischen Identitätskonstruktion', in *Gender-Nation-Religion. Ein internationaler Vergleich von Akteursstrategien und Diskursverflechtungen*, edited by Maren Behrens et al. (Münster: Campus, 2019).

The theological foundation of attitudes towards gender

For a church, theological arguments are fundamental to any discussion, even if the issue in question is not a purely ecclesiastical topic. Gender discourse touches on some crucial teachings of Christian theology regarding anthropology and social ethics. In the Western Catholic and Protestant academic traditions, these questions have received in-depth theological research, although this is not always sufficiently studied and adapted by church leaders. In Ukraine, Orthodox theology is still evolving because of the legacy of Soviet repression and post-Soviet institutional processes. As a result, the gap between academic theology and its interpretation by church leaders does not play a key role in this study, which focuses instead on official statements.

Anthropology: sex and family

In the major texts of Ukraine's Orthodox churches on gender politics, the main argument centres on the 'unnatural interpretation of sex' allegedly propagated by supporters of the Istanbul Convention and other antidiscrimination initiatives.⁹ The churches teach a rigid biological understanding of two complementary sexes, referring to biblical texts about God's creation of 'male and female' (Gen 1:27). In this perspective, gender threatens the God-made duality, as it introduces diversity and extends the understanding of sex from a natural determination to a characteristic with cultural, social, and individual components. The church's conviction about this natural order forces any recognition of the autonomous individual to be subordinated—or even excluded as 'unnatural'.¹⁰ Yet, the biblical interpretation of the duality of sex also serves as the foundation for a commitment to gender equality.

For the church, gender threatens the God-made duality of the sexes.

'We have always advocated and will continue to advocate equal social rights and opportunities for women and men'.¹¹

Metropolitan Epiphanius, head of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU)

As a result of the church's binary understanding of sex, the definition of family is also based on the natural complementarity of the two sexes, with no space for social or cultural context or personal choice. This concept of the heterosexual family has been given a sacred aura as a 'small church', which includes a patriarchal matrix with the man as the head of the family and the

9 Metropolitan Epiphanius, speech at the AUCCRO meeting with the prime minister of Ukraine, 20 August 2020, <https://www.pomisna.info/uk/vsi-novyny/promova-predstoy-atelya-na-zustrichi-vseukrayinskoyi-rady-tserkov-i-religijnyh-organizatsij-z-prem-yer-ministrom-ukrayiny-2/>.

10 See also the AUCCRO statement on homosexuality, 15 May 2007, <https://blago.church.ua/2015/11/19/deklaraciya-vrciro-pro-negativne-stavlennya-do-yavishha-gomoseksualizmu-ta-tak-zvanix-odnostatevix-shlyubiv/>; Metropolitan Panteleimon, comment on draft law no. 3316, 5 May 2020, <https://family.church.ua/archives/9410>.

11 Metropolitan Epiphanius, speech at the AUCCRO meeting; X.1; X.5 of the Basis of Social Concept of the ROC, <https://blago.church.ua/socialna-koncepciya/>.

woman as the caring and loving keeper of the home.¹² Defining the woman's key role as a mother establishes a special status, which aims to legitimise equal but different forms of dignity for women and men.

To a certain extent, the sacred aura of the family also legitimises a ban on external intervention in internal conflicts. This is one of the main arguments used by the Russian Orthodox Church to oppose legal protection against domestic violence, which it perceives as anti-family.¹³ The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, however, has not adopted this position.

Social ethics: violence and sin

Gender discourse also touches on social ethics as the theological discipline concerned with societal structures. Violence as a form of behaviour in individual and social contexts could be expected to be an important subject for theological debate, especially in Ukraine, which is suffering an ongoing armed conflict in the east of the country and has experienced violent repression of protest. The churches' documents about domestic violence—as well as armed conflict—reject violence, but they do not present any wider theological or ethical concept of violence, such as systemic or structural violence. Rather, violence is interpreted within the category of sin, which refers to personal, individual acts against God's will.¹⁴

'Any violence is a flagrant violation of human rights and Christian values. In particular, domestic violence should not take place in our lives, because the family is the domestic church.'

Metropolitan Epiphanius

Domestic violence, in this framework, is seen as an individual offence by one person against another, thus violating God's teachings of love and human dignity. Accordingly, the churches' solution to this kind of violence consists of individual confession, repentance, and reconciliation. The main political strategy proposed by the churches for combating domestic violence is the improvement of morality and traditional family values in society through Christian education.¹⁵

Domestic violence is seen as an individual offence.

Both theological arguments make clear that they do not provide a firm foundation for a comprehensive discourse about gender issues. Proponents of these arguments refuse from the outset to engage with what they see as an

12 Bishop Panteleimon, speech at the international forum 'The Large Family and the Future of Humanity', Moscow, 10 September 2014, <https://family.church.ua/archives/2002>; X.5 of the Basis of Social Concept of ROC, <https://blago.church.ua/socialna-koncepciya/>.

13 'Clarifications on the assessment of the term "domestic violence", other similar terms and related concepts and approaches', Patriarchal Commission for Family and the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, 25 January 2015, <http://pk-semya.ru/dokumenty-komissii/item/2136-poyasneniya-nasilie.html>; Belarusian Orthodox Church, <http://ecumena.by/?p=654>.

14 'AUCURO appeal to the Parliament on the inexpediency and risks of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention', AUCURO, 10 December 2018, <https://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements/uccro-appeal-to-parliament-against-istanbul-convention>.

15 'Resolution on "Community mobilisation against domestic and gender-based violence"', 26 March 2019, AUCURO, <https://vrciro.org.ua/ua/news/resolution-community-mobilization-against-domestic-violence-and-sex-based-violence>.

‘unnatural’, ‘anti-family’, and ‘anti-Christian’ concept—although the notions of justice, dignity, and equality could serve as a bridge between Orthodox theology and concepts of gender. Yet, the theological insistence on biological sex and the natural order fails to address social constructs and the cultural shaping of gender roles that cause structural violence—the main focus of the Istanbul Convention. While the discourse on sin and morality may inform the consciences of believers, references to religious righteousness might be unconvincing in a broader, pluralist society.

Interestingly, none of the Orthodox academies has so far conducted any theological research into the biblical understanding of the sexes, the different roles of men and women in the Bible and church history, or structures of violence that go beyond personal wrongdoing. Apart from the joint statements of the AUCCRO—in which Orthodoxy has, of course, a decisive voice—neither of Ukraine’s Orthodox churches has made any official statements of its own on the topic of domestic violence or the Istanbul Convention. Apparently, issues of gender and gender-based violence are of no relevance in the churches’ internal discourses and are perceived as purely external threats.

A fundamentalist and right-wing shift

All of the churches’ statements on gender issues and the Istanbul Convention leave a wide space for further arguments beyond theological reasoning. These arguments indicate a strong linkage between religious declarations and elements of identity politics, since gender is discredited both as an alien concept and as an ideology.

Gender as an alien concept

The church texts analysed claim to defend the common identity of ‘the majority of Ukrainian citizens’, who allegedly oppose any measures that would harm the principles and values of Ukrainian society.¹⁶ Thus, the AUCCRO stated in 2020:

‘The majority of the people of Ukraine do not support ratification of the [Istanbul Convention]. The reason for this is the imposition by this document of a gender ideology, which does not concern protection against domestic violence, but significantly harms the moral principles and family values of Ukrainian society.’¹⁷

¹⁶ ‘AUCCRO appeal to the Parliament’, AUCCRO.

¹⁷ ‘AUCCRO explanation against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention’, AUCCRO, 12 June 2020, <https://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements/uccro-against-istanbul-convention-and-gender-ideology>.

‘When it comes to the equal rights of women and men, the protection of every person from domestic violence, and the human right to life, both our church and the religious community of Ukraine as a whole in word and deed testify to the support of these principles.’

Metropolitan Epiphanius

These arguments assume that Ukraine has a homogeneous society that allows the church—as a major social institution—to speak on its behalf. And these statements imply that gender discourse and any questions connected to it are alien to Ukrainian identity.

Until recently, the churches underlined this argument by pointing to the fact that the term ‘gender’ was not found in any Ukrainian legislation and thus could not be perceived as applicable to Ukraine. In November 2015, however, the Ukrainian parliament adopted antidiscrimination provisions for the country’s employment laws and therefore introduced the term ‘gender’ into the legal system. The Ukrainian churches, which strongly opposed these measures, then assumed what they saw as a proper understanding of gender as the ‘equal legal status of women and men and equal opportunities for its implementation’—in contrast to the concept in the Istanbul Convention, which, according to the churches, ‘understands the concept of “gender” as socially established roles, behaviours, activities, and characteristics that a society considers appropriate for women and men’.¹⁸ In the churches’ view, the use of the term ‘gender’ in the Istanbul Convention manipulates the true Ukrainian commitment to nondiscrimination and replaces the common understanding of two sexes with a variety of genders.

Gender is seen as a direct threat to Ukraine’s demographics.

This argument relates to the issue of demographics. If gender calls into question the integrity of the widely accepted ‘natural’ family, it would be a direct threat to Ukraine’s demographics, which the AUCCRO has described as ‘catastrophic’ because of the high divorce rate and the number of children in single-parent families.¹⁹ Furthermore, the churches have accused the ‘distorted’ understanding of gender of having negative consequences for the Ukrainian youth. Instead, by proposing instruments to fight the country’s demographic situation, the churches demand continued cooperation with state institutions to ‘support families, motherhood and fatherhood [and] implement programmes in the educational process, from preparation for married life and the [minimising] of abortion to the complete replacement of all closed institutions for orphans with family-type orphanages’.²⁰

‘Those who promote the Istanbul Convention actually oppose the future of Ukraine.’

Metropolitan Epiphanius

Thus, the churches have used two arguments to externalise the threat of gender to Ukrainian identity. On the one hand, after the introduction of the

¹⁸ ‘AUCCRO appeal to the Parliament’, AUCCRO.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

term ‘gender’ into Ukrainian employment law, the churches’ construction of an alternative understanding of gender protects their ability to claim they are properly committed to antidiscrimination measures. Those measures are in contrast to supposedly dangerous moves from foreign actors, which, the churches argue, undermine Ukrainian policies of family and values. On the other hand, the churches have constructed a homogeneous Ukrainian society, in which any commitment to gender is marked as either unnatural or un-Ukrainian, ignoring any possible diversity within Ukrainian society and churches.

Gender as an ideology

Attempts in the churches’ documents to grasp the concept of gender are limited to descriptions of an ideology. This ideology, the texts claim, ‘replaces the usual notion of biological sex, which is defined according to primary sexual characteristics, with a new gender ideology, which gives a person the freedom to choose his or her own “gender” and the corresponding social role’.²¹ The churches ‘cannot accept and approve a purely ideologically motivated interpretation of the term “gender”, not as the equivalent of the natural sex, male or female, but as a personal conviction’.²²

The accusation that gender is an ideology relates to Ukraine’s experience of state ideology during the Soviet Union. This view emphasises the danger of forcefully creating a new world and a new human being while repressing all dissent. Metropolitan Epiphanius put it clearly in a speech at the AUCCRO meeting with the prime minister of Ukraine in summer 2020:

‘The twentieth century has shown the disastrous consequences of the introduction of ideologies that are intolerant of another position in the lives of states. Should we experiment again on societies just because they are ‘new-fangled lights’ that they want to ‘enlighten’ us with? One hundred years ago, under the slogans of progress and the latest advances in science, Marxist-Bolshevik class ideology had already been imposed on us, and anyone who questioned its principles became an ‘enemy of the people’. We do not want Ukraine to become a state where, under the slogans of the struggle for freedom and rights, people will be persecuted, fined, and their rights and freedom will be restricted. Therefore, we consistently oppose initiatives motivated by ‘gender ideology’, including the ratification of the Istanbul Convention.’²³

Labelling gender as an ideology, and the intended connection with the historical experience of ideology, leads to a comprehensive rejection of the concept of gender. That, in turn, makes it impossible to start any kind of dialogue.

The arguments on identity in the churches’ statements on gender issues mark a serious fundamentalist and right-wing shift. They leave no room for dialogue or even for the removal of possible misunderstandings about

21 Ibid.

22 Metropolitan Epiphanius, speech at the AUCCRO meeting, 20 August 2020.

23 Ibid.

The accusation of gender as an ideology relates to Ukraine’s experience during the Soviet Union.

gender concepts. Moreover, the documents pose a serious obstacle to theological research on all questions of gender roles, gender justice, and gender-based violence within the churches and theological concepts. At the same time, the statements open the door to alliances with right-wing populism and fundamentalist religious radicalism.

Contradictory alliances

Analysis of the Ukrainian churches' statements shows their unambiguous and uncompromising position on the concept of gender. It is clear that the Orthodox Church has some theological arguments in opposing gender, yet these arguments reveal a lack of contemporary theological methods in addressing questions of social justice and human sexuality.

This poor theological understanding may be one reason for the small numbers of independent texts and studies by the churches themselves, in contrast to the frequent publications of the AUCCRO and other religious actors. There are two other explanations for the lack of independent documents, both connected to the political context. First, the churches avoid making their own statements to safeguard their independent positions. Second, they can improve the political impact of their positions thanks to the support and expert input of other communities.

To understand this interaction among religious actors, three major aspects have to be taken into account: the role of Catholic churches, the positions of Protestant and evangelical communities, and the relationship between the two Orthodox churches in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic Church

Although the Orthodox churches represent most of Ukraine's population and religious communities, other denominations have a crucial impact on the positions of the AUCCRO and of the Orthodox churches. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) plays an important role in the religious landscape of western Ukraine in particular and in the national and European identity of Ukraine in general.

On questions of gender policy, the UGCC refers to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which draws on more than fifty years of theological discourse about feminism and gender. Although academic Catholic theology has made huge progress in reframing its biblical, historical, and pastoral teaching of social justice and human dignity in past decades, the church's official teaching remains hostile to gender discourse, which is perceived as ideological and unnatural.²⁴

²⁴ See, for example, "Male and female He created them": towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education', Congregation for Catholic Education, Vatican City, 2019, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf.

Official statements like the UGCC's December 2016 'Message on the Danger of Gender Ideology' refer to Vatican statements and the comprehensive Catholic tradition of the natural order and the liberal misunderstanding of human freedom. The main thesis of the message is:

Gender ideologies, by denying the existence of objective human nature, the complementarity of man and woman, the values of marriage, actually deny the existence of the Creator himself and cross out the truth about man as His image.²⁵

Furthermore, on gender issues, the UGCC—as well as the smaller Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine—broadly uses the rhetoric of the Catholic antigender movement, which is connected to actors like Gabriele Kuby and the papal foundation Church in Need. Kuby was one of the main speakers at the 2014 Family Congress in Moscow; two of her books have been published and presented by her in Ukraine, and her opinion pieces frequently appear in Ukrainian publications.²⁶ The brochure 'Faith compass: gender ideology' by Church in Need is a joint publication with Gabriele Kuby; complete with biblical references, it fosters an unscientific and populist approach to gender, sexuality, and family.²⁷ These connections remain understudied within Ukraine's Catholic context, although they are of crucial importance because of their potential to lead to right-wing radicalisation.

Protestant and evangelical churches

A second group of major religious actors in the field of antigender policies consists of various Protestant and evangelical communities. Within the AUC-CRO, representatives of these churches are the most uncompromising voices in the antigender debate.²⁸ They are well connected to evangelical structures in the United States (US), which are known for their fundamentalist commitment to traditional family values, antigender policies, and the pronatalist movement. In 2019, a majority of evangelical and Protestant communities in Ukraine established the All-Ukrainian Council with the aim to 'preserve and spread Christian values in Ukrainian society and counteract the total onset of immorality and other negative phenomena that threaten the future of our country'. One of the council's declared goals is to 'resolutely oppose the imposition of gender and LGBT ideology on Ukrainian society'.²⁹

25 'Message of the Synod of Bishops of the Kyiv-Halych Archdiocese of the UGCC on the Danger of Gender Ideology', Religious Information Service of Ukraine, 3 December 2016, https://risu.ua/poslannya-sinodu-yepiskopiv-kiyevu-galickogo-verhovnogo-arhiyepiskopstva-ugk-stosovno-nebezpeki-gendernoji-ideologiji_n82387.

26 For example, the Christian Rescue Service, with the blessing of the Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine: <https://crs-center.org/>; the Catholic web page 'Semja pod pokrovom Bogoroditsy': <https://www.simyapidpokrovom.lviv.ua/>.

27 For a comprehensive analysis, see Sonja Strube, 'Expertise zur KIN-Broschüre „Gender-Ideologie. Ein Leitfadent“, 6 July 2016, https://www.kath-theologie-cms.uni-osnabrueck.de/fileadmin/PDF/STRUBE_Expertise_zu_Genderismus-Brosch%C3%BCre_Jan_2015_6.7.2016.pdf.

28 Author off-the-record interview, February 2021. The report on antigender movements in Ukraine also points to the strong impact of Protestant groups: 'Гендер чи Антигендер: Хто атакує демократію в Україні?', Ukrainian Women's Fund, September 2020, <https://www.uwf.org.ua/news/11901>.

29 'About Sobor', Sobor, <https://sobor.com.ua/about>.

Compared with Orthodox churches, Protestant and evangelical churches have fewer boundaries when it comes to political engagement. Accordingly, the All-Ukrainian Council is coordinated by the politician and former secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchinov. In a comprehensive article in 2018, Turchinov opposed the shift in Ukrainian politics towards an acceptance of gender; he was supported in this view by various religious leaders. In the text, he elaborated on the parallels between neo-Marxism and gender ideology.³⁰ These arguments have also been used by Metropolitan Epiphanius and by Maxim Vasin, the co-director of the Institute for Religious Freedom, whose main activity is the project Stop Violence!³¹ Turchinov has been welcomed by Metropolitan Epiphanius several times since the latter's election as head of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to discuss the 'popularisation of traditional family values in society'.³²

Intra-Orthodox relations

Finally, the special situation of Orthodoxy in Ukraine has a particular influence on the social position of both Orthodox churches. Until 2018, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) was the only officially acknowledged Orthodox church in Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) was a legal structure not recognised by other Christian communities as a church but involved in all public communications within the AUCCRO. Opposition to gender was a unifying issue not only for inter-religious and interdenominational cooperation but also for the clashing Orthodox churches. This remained the case even after the split in world Orthodoxy in 2019 and the recognition by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), the successor to the UOC-KP.³³

Opposition to gender was a unifying issue even for the clashing Orthodox churches.

However, the two churches' affiliations to different parts of the Orthodox world pose a challenge for their commitment to the antigender movement. Gender discourse is perceived as a backsliding of European integration, which the UOC-KP had actively supported in an effort to counter Russian influence over Ukraine. As such, the representatives of this church—and, later, the OCU—had to adapt their rhetoric and take a more differentiated approach to the integration process. As a result, the OCU's antigender strategy has been characterised by patriotic alliances and notions of Ukrainian identity, for instance through cooperation with the conservative cross-party association Values, Dignity, Family in the Ukrainian parliament and with the All-Ukrainian Forum for the Family.³⁴

30 Oleksandr Turchinov, 'Neo-Marxism or a journey into the abyss', 11 December 2018, <https://turchynov.com/news/details/neomarksizm-abo-podorozh-u-bezodnyu>.

31 Vasin refers to an article by two Polish scholars, Aleksander Stępkowski and Joanna Banasiuk, 'Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence: theoretical foundations', in *Юридична Україна*, nos. 5–6 (2018): pp. 4–13, which probably also informed the text of Turchinov. <https://mvasin.org.ua/2018/12/1647>.

32 Meeting of Metropolitan Epiphanius and Olexandr Turchinov, 5 February 2021, <https://www.pomisna.info/uk/vsi-novyny/mytropolyt-epifanij-zustrivsy-a-z-oleksandrom-turchynovym/>.

33 See Regina Elsner, 'Orthodox Church of Ukraine: Challenges and Risks of a New Beginning', *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 231: pp. 9–13.

34 Sviatoslav Yurash, 'Цінності. Гідність. Родина. Чому це важливо?', *Golos*, 31 January 2020, <http://www.golos.com.ua/article/327014>. For information about the 2019 All-Ukrainian Forum for the Family, which was organised by the association and the All-Ukrainian Sobor, see 'Відбувся IV Всеукраїнський форум сім'ї', <http://crs-center.org/vidbuvsya-iv-vseukrayinskiy-forum-sim-yi/>.

Through antigender discourse, the churches seek to defend their public role in a secular society.

At the same time, the OCU has close relationships with the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its dioceses in the US and Canada, which have actively supported the new church since its formation. In 2020, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its American archdiocese published a basic document on social ethics, which openly questioned the traditional biological and natalist narrowing of sexuality.³⁵ The document admittedly avoided the term ‘gender’, thus missing an opportunity to commit to this facet of justice. Yet, by acknowledging that homosexuality, bisexuality, and other sexual identities are not matters of individual choice, the authors made a huge step towards a dialogue on gender questions. It remains to be seen how the OCU will react to this move.

The UOC, in contrast, tried to retain a more apolitical position, especially after 2014, when every public statement by the church on social and political matters was interpreted as the messaging of the Moscow Patriarchate—the Russian mother church of the UOC—or as Russian propaganda. The representatives of the UOC therefore placed an emphasis on biblical and moral arguments and avoided direct references to European integration or to the Russian discourse on traditional values. The Moscow Patriarchate strictly rejects not only gender discourse but also any legislative measures against domestic violence in general. Eschewing accusations of its dependence on Moscow, the UOC has refrained from such statements and has committed to the activities of the AUCCRO in the fight against domestic violence.

Antigender discourse is one of the key spheres in which the churches seek to defend their public role in an increasingly secular society. Perhaps surprisingly, the fight against gender equality unites different churches and religions that otherwise have major mutual reservations. This international phenomenon has been described by Russian theologian Andrey Shishkov as ‘Ecumenism 2.0’, which refers to a conservative form of ecumenical relations carried out by the strongest critics of the ecumenical movement.³⁶ Both conservative evangelical groups and several Orthodox churches are highly critical of the ecumenism represented by the World Council of Churches and other international and regional initiatives, even though they unite against the common enemy of a secular society.

Yet, for Ukrainian churches, acceding to this movement is problematic, because one of the main guardians of traditional values at the international level is the Russian Orthodox Church.³⁷ It is a major challenge for the churches in Ukraine to find an independent way of opposing gender equality measures without either embracing the Russian antigender narrative or risking their own commitment to European integration.

35 ‘For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church’, Greek-Orthodox Archdiocese of America, Lent 2020, <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos>.

36 Andrey Shishkov, ‘Two Ecumenisms: Conservative Christian Alliances as a New Form of Ecumenical Cooperation’, *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov’ v Rossii i za rubezhom* 35, no. 1 (2017): pp. 268 – 99.

37 See the research of Kristina Stoeckl and the ERC-funded project Postsecular Conflicts: <https://zenodo.org/communities/postsecularconflicts/?page=1&size=20>.

FIGURE 3
Wordcloud based on analysed documents



Source: Keywords of the analysed statements by AUCCRO

Conclusions and outlook

By analysing the discourse of Ukraine's Orthodox churches on the Istanbul Convention and related antidiscrimination measures, this report has documented the theological challenges, fundamentalist tendencies, and complicated relations of the antigender movement in Ukraine and internationally. Two open questions remain, and both point to possible perspectives in a deadlocked situation.

First, opposition to the Istanbul Convention has so far focused on the question of gender. Yet, the theological analysis shows that there is another important field related to the convention's original aims: the question of violence. The churches at no point contend this topic, but nor do they deal with it in a serious manner, and so it leaves a particular gap in the discourse.

In 2017, Ukraine's religious communities connected their rejection of the Istanbul Convention with a call for Ukrainian legislation on domestic violence. Two years later, the AUCCRO declared its joint commitment to the fight against domestic violence and violence against women.³⁸ And in 2020, the Institute of Religious Freedom and the ACCURO launched the project Stop Violence!, which is financed by the CanadaFundUA for local initiatives.

³⁸ 'Resolution on "Community mobilisation"', AUCCRO.

To date, the project's statements merely cite individual reasons for violence, such as alcoholism or a lack of pastoral and psychological support for families suffering conflict.³⁹ Religious communities aim to contribute to their declared alternative to the Istanbul Convention, yet they consistently avoid the term 'gender' and concepts related to gender theories, thus missing the structural problem of gender-based violence. As project expert Tetiana Kalenychnenko has said, the work of the initiative has so far remained on a declarative level.⁴⁰

Yet, planned project outcomes, such as a theological and practical understanding of the causes of domestic violence, public discussions of ways to prevent and counter violence, and psychological and spiritual support for both victims and perpetrators of violence, relate directly to established concepts of structural gender-based violence.⁴¹ For the time being, the new project's decisive positive attitude and the absence of negative rhetoric in its statements are encouraging signs.

Second, analysis of religious networks shows significant echo chambers, which exclude or marginalise every other point of view on gender questions. The OCU, which has been forced to relate to the more open position of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, is so far the only challenge to this closed form of communication. According to an expert on the relations between religious communities and politics, the churches have made no attempt to reach out to pro-gender NGOs or the academic community for an exchange or dialogue on gender-related topics.⁴² The Stop Violence! project's dialogue with NGOs has so far included only organisations that are not outspokenly pro-gender.

However, those NGOs that advocate the adoption of the Istanbul Convention, equal gender rights, and antidiscrimination measures with a European standard, like the Ukrainian Women's Fund, La Strada, and Women in Media, also lack religious expertise and often limit their perspectives on radical fundamentalist movements.⁴³ None of the major online platforms on gender issues provides topical information about religious approaches to gender roles, structural violence, or antidiscrimination strategies. More remarkably, the database of a women's organisation that supports victims of domestic violence gives no information about religious shelters or other offers. Similarly, the new homepage of the Stop Violence! project links only to the Kyiv-based support group Caritas and no other organisations, networks, or shelters in Ukraine.

39 See also 'Instruction for pastoral workers Combating Domestic Violence' by the Conference of Roman-Catholic Bishops in Ukraine (27 December 2020), which addresses only personal reasons and solutions for domestic violence: <https://kmc.media/2021/02/04/protydiya-domashnomu-nasyilstvu-instrukciya-dlya-dushpastyriv.html>.

40 Tetiana Kalenychnenko, 'Domestic violence in Ukraine: what role for religious leaders?', ZOIS Spotlight 5 / 2021, 11 February 2021, <https://en.zois-berlin.de/publications/zois-spotlight/domestic-violence-in-ukraine-what-role-for-religious-leaders/>.

41 'Appeal of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations on the need to combat domestic violence in Ukraine', AUCCRO, 1 December 2020, <https://family.org.ua/ua/news/uccro-statement-against-domestic-violence>.

42 Author off-the-record interview, February 2021.

43 Ukrainian Women's Fund, <https://uwf.org.ua/>; La Strada, <https://la-strada.org.ua/>; Gender in Detail, <https://genderindetail.org.ua/>.

A 2020 study by the Ukrainian Women’s Fund into antigender movements in Ukraine underlines the need for better communication with religious actors. The report admits: ‘A number of organisations analysed do not have a natural antigender orientation. They only situationally use prepared slogans . . . or pick up other people’s narratives.’⁴⁴ Without doubt, improving the contacts between religious and civil society organisations to gain a better level of mutual understanding would be a crucial step towards avoiding further radicalisation of the antigender movement.

Finally, the UOC is absent from the public profiles of both the Stop Violence! project and the call for a dialogue with women’s NGOs. Compared with the OCU, the UOC probably has stronger theological resources and lesser tendencies towards right-wing rhetoric due to its transnational structure. However, the UOC has dropped out of the discourse because of its geopolitical entanglement with Russia and the aggressive antigender stance of the Moscow Patriarchate. Both the OCU’s efforts to raise its profile as a strong voice of Ukrainian Orthodoxy and the UOC’s attempts to maintain a neutral and apolitical position paralyse the churches’ abilities to foster theological dialogue on crucial social issues.

⁴⁴ ‘Гендер чи Антигендер: Хто атакує демократію в Україні?’, Ukrainian Women’s Fund, September 2020, <https://www.uwf.org.ua/news/11901>.

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