

# Can Churches Contribute to Overcoming Divisions in Europe?

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## The EU and its Neighbourhood Policy: Ukraine and Belarus

### *The EU Eastern Partnership*

The EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a new dimension of the EU Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) towards the countries in the east. It was set up in 2008. The official EU statement states that

*The EaP should bring a lasting political message of EU solidarity, alongside additional, tangible support for their democratic and market-oriented reforms and the consolidation of their statehood and territorial integrity.*

According to EU plans, the guiding principle of the EaP should be to offer the maximum possible, taking into account political and economic realities and the state of reforms of the partner concerned, bringing visible benefits for the citizens of each country. An essential component of the EaP will be, according to the EU statement, “a commitment to accompany more intensively partners' individual reform efforts.”

In the EaP the EU proposes bilaterally:

- New contractual relations: Association Agreements with the EU, based on shared values;
- Gradual integration into the EU economy: deep and comprehensive Free Trade Areas;
- Easier travel to the EU : the long-term goal of full visa liberalisation;
- Energy security cooperation: the interconnection and integration of energy markets;
- Regional development: pilot programmes based on EU cohesion policy.

In the EaP the EU proposes multilaterally a new forum to:

- Present EU legislation and standards;
- Share experience on reforms.

The EaP addresses four thematic platforms:

- Democracy, good governance and stability;
- Economic integration and convergence with EU policies;
- Energy security;
- Contacts between people.

EaP summits are envisaged every two years. The first was in Prague on 7 May 2009.

### *The EU and Ukraine*

The EU is seeking an increasingly close relationship with Ukraine, going beyond mere bilateral cooperation to gradual economic integration and a deepening of political cooperation. Ukraine is a priority partner country within the ENP. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) which entered into force in 1998 provides a comprehensive framework for cooperation between the EU and Ukraine in all key areas of reform.

At the Paris Summit in September 2008 an agreement was reached to start negotiations on an EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, which is to be the successor agreement to the PCA. Several negotiating rounds have since been organised, alternately in Brussels and Kiev.

In November 2009 the Cooperation Council adopted the EU-Ukraine Association Agenda and will prepare for and facilitate the entry into force of the new Agreement. For 2010, a list of priorities for action was jointly agreed by Ukraine and the EU. These priorities for 2010 covered a wide range, from political dialogue (for example, exchanging best practices on measures to protect minorities from discrimination and exclusion in accordance with European and international standards, with the objective of developing a modern legal framework, or developing close cooperation between the authorities and representatives of minority groups) to such matters as preventing and controlling communicable diseases. It is a long list of 78 items altogether. Whether all of them can be indeed called priorities remains to be answered.

The EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, Stefan Fuele, speaking recently on the relationship of the EU to Ukraine underlined:

*Reform is key to exploiting the enormous potential that exists in the relationship between the EU and Ukraine. ... Ukraine has undertaken a number of important economic reforms in recent months. What is important is that these reflect common reform priorities of Ukraine and the EU. As such they draw us increasingly close. For its part the EU will respond to these positive steps. Above all it will continue to support Ukraine in driving forward the reform agenda.*

Turning to the prospects for a new EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, Commissioner Fuele stressed that the Agreement offers Ukraine the prospects of political association and economic integration with the EU.

In this respect it is worth mentioning as well the perspective of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Catherine Ashton. In a speech in Athens in June 2010 she outlined three priorities for EU external action in 2010; these are, it seems, priorities not only for 2010 but for an extended period of time, maybe for the whole period of Ms. Ashton in the office. They are:

- To build up the external diplomatic service of the EU;
- To work with strategic partners;
- To deepen the EU's relations in the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood.

As far as the last point is concerned, Ms Ashton noted that we need creativity and persistence to help those countries complete reforms and modernise their economies. It might be a long course but we need to stay on it together.

The Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovich, visited Brussels in September 2010. He used the occasion to stress once again the key message: the need for reform. In particular, the statement issued about the meeting said that negotiations on the conclusion of an Association Agreement should be 'accelerated' and finalised 'as soon as possible'. This Agreement would include the conclusion of a deep and comprehensive free trade area, with a view to 'providing for the gradual integration of Ukraine into the EU's internal market'.

### *The EU and Belarus*

The EU relationship with Belarus stands on very different grounds. Belarus is the only European country which does not belong to the Council of Europe.

The offer to engage much more strongly with Belarus was set out in the document *What the EU Could Bring to Belarus* released by the European Commission in November 2006. It contained the perspective of the EU entering into a full partnership with Belarus as part of the ENP. But progress in the EU-Belarus relationship is conditional on steps by Belarus towards the realisation of the fundamental European values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

In November 2009 the Council welcomed increased high-level EU–Belarus political dialogue, the establishment of an EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue, intensified technical cooperation and the active participation of Belarus in the EaP as ways of building mutual understanding and creating opportunities to address issues of concern.

Because of lack of progress on issues of human rights and democratisation, the Council was not able to lift restrictive measures in place against certain Belarusian officials; it decided to extend them until October 2010.

Recognising the importance of enhanced people-to-people contacts, the EU made clear that it would consider the possibility of negotiating a visa facilitation agreement with Belarus, in parallel with negotiations on a readmission agreement.

### *Civil Society Involvement*

The involvement of civil society is an important and sensitive theme in the ENP. Lack of civil society participation in the programme has been strongly criticised by a number of NGOs and church-related organisations. The new

EaP initiative makes an effort to address this deficiency in previous programmes.

The Civil Society Forum was launched on 16-17 November 2009 in Brussels. The overall aim of the Forum is 'to promote contacts among Civil Society organisations and facilitate their dialogue with public authorities' in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The second Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (CSF) took place on 18-19 November 2010 in Berlin. According to the official report

*The principal aim of the meeting was to take stock of what had been achieved in EaP since November 2009, when the initial meeting of the Forum took place, and to discuss how the Forum should evolve in the future. Participants prepared recommendations for the 2nd meeting of EaP foreign ministers on 13 December 2010.*

With strong involvement of church-related agencies, and coordinated by APRODEV, a programme for the involvement of Civil Society in Eastern Europe and Central Asia has been developed. In this framework the first seminar of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), the instrument which finances the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Strategic Partnership with the Russian Federation, was organised by the Transcarpathian Advocacy and Development Centre. It took place in March 2009 in Yanoshi, Ukraine. It was the beginning of a series of ENPI seminars within the APRODEV network in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine. All seminars have the objective of developing policy recommendations in the context of the Mid-Term Review of the ENPI's Common Strategy Papers and National Indicative Programmes 2011-2013.

How can the goals of the Eastern Partnership be advanced by a Civil Society Forum? It can

- Receive, analyse and disseminate information on the activities of the (EaP);
- Propose recommendations for the management authorities of EaP partner countries, the European Commission and other stakeholders;
- Conduct ongoing monitoring of the implementation of EaP tasks and the introduction of individual programmes.

#### *Partnership EU – Ukraine: Risks and Challenges*

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine did not deliver promised reforms. The main result was largely cosmetic political change garniture in Kiev. As a follow-up reaction, the new Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, seems poised to adopt far-reaching decisions which are likely to deliver results exactly opposite to the Orange efforts. For example, he has pursued a quick agreement with Russia on prolonging the stay of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea until 2042 and has been talking about strengthening the economic ties between Russia and Ukraine.

Unlike Ukraine's previous pro-western leadership, the pragmatist Yanukovich administration is not negative to the strengthening of ties with the east. The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and its related Free Trade Area must be seen in this new perspective. In the view of Volodymyr Yermolenko, an analyst at the Kiev-based NGO Internews-Ukraine, the long-term postponement or failure of Ukraine's Association Agreement might mean the death of the Eastern Partnership. Association deals are the cornerstone of the Partnership policy. But if the biggest eastern partner, Ukraine, puts its agreement on ice and the second largest, Belarus, continues to play cat-and-mouse with the EU, what is left?

Yermolenko highlights another concern. There might be a problem with different interpretations of the Eastern Partnerships by various groups on both sides. The Eastern Partnership is officially aimed at helping the EU's neighbours conduct reforms. But some EU states have always seen it as a chance to create 'buffer states' between themselves and Russia in the context of lingering hard security concerns. This approach brought no good to the West in the past. It seems the stakes will still be high in the coming years. Can the West learn from history?

Another potential problem is the asymmetrical character of EU-Ukrainian relations. There is widespread opinion among the population in Ukraine that the EU is demanding a lot but is not able to offer as much. After the rather chaotic performance of the previous government, which followed the ideals of the Orange Revolution but was able to fulfil very little from its original ambitions, many people ask pragmatic questions: How are the officially-announced 'improvements' in EU-Ukrainian relations actually manifested in everyday life? There is widespread disappointment that the EU is not in position to acknowledge explicitly that Ukraine has the prospect of becoming a member of the EU. There is also widespread disappointment that the EU is not able to improve visa facilitation and in this way clear the way for easier communication and personal contacts between people on both sides.

In this situation it is of the utmost importance to develop relationships between EU nations and Ukraine at levels that go beyond official and political frameworks.

## **Churches in Ukraine and Belarus**

### *Orthodoxy in Ukraine and Belarus: Two Different Countries on the Church Landscape*

The Orthodox Church in Belarus is an Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church: a self-governing church province.

In Ukraine the situation is more complex. At the moment there are three rival Orthodox Churches. This situation has to be understood in relation to political and social developments in Ukraine. Ukraine is the largest postsoviet nation, characterised by a strong drive towards national self-awareness and independence. These efforts are mirrored on the ecclesial scene, in particular

by those sectors of the population who are aiming to create an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Of the three Churches, one is an integral part of the Moscow Patriarchate. Many Ukrainians would argue that this is a remnant of an outmoded structure that needs to be replaced by new structures reflecting the new situation of an independent Ukraine. The other two Orthodox Churches claim an independent character. But they are not recognised by other churches of the Orthodox family and are considered as renegade Churches without proper ecclesial authority.

### *The Uniate Church in Ukraine*

The existence and activity of the Uniate Church in Ukraine is a significant and sensitive element in the relations between the Russian Orthodox Church (the majority Church in Ukraine) and the Vatican. In order to understand this tension, several elements need to be taken into consideration: history, as well as social and political reality.

### *Churches in Eastern Europe: Some Characteristics*

Churches in Eastern Europe tend to be more characterised by an emphasis on traditions than is average in Western Europe. This can be illustrated by the example of letters which were sent recently by some bishops of the Uniate Church to Churches and political leaders in the west, and which received wide attention. Among issues of concern were:

- 'Moral responsibility for the catastrophic state of the Church in the EU';
- 'Renunciation of heresy and confession of the true Catholic faith';
- Critique of 'historic-critical theology and regard for other religions';
- Critique of 'occultism, Freemasons and homosexuality';
- Re-evangelisation and the formation of a new generation of priests.

Concerns addressed in these letters are not limited to one particular Church. They represent a widespread climate of religious feeling in Eastern Europe. They indicate that understandings of the status of the Church in society, of 'being the Church,' ecclesial identity, and of the ethical principles guiding many of Churches' actions in society are very different in Eastern and Western Europe.

### **East and West in Europe: Do They Speak with a Common Voice?**

The east and the west in Europe are not just two parts of the same continent. They also represent different histories, mentalities and cultures, different spiritualities, and sometimes different values.

There is wide recognition of east-west specificities in some areas, and at the same time a closing of eyes when it comes to the acceptance of recognised differences in some other areas.

Nikolai Berdyayev identifies some characteristics of the eastern and Russian soul:

- Nationalism;

- Anarchism;
- A drive for apocalyptic solutions;
- A tendency to claim universal validity;
- A specific structure of society including giving high value to spirituality and religiosity.

General specific characteristics of eastern culture include an appreciation of close links between public ethics/morality and religion and a high regard for the role of the Church in society.

One of the major themes in dealing with church and society issues in Western Europe is that of secularism. European institutions, in particular the EU and Council of Europe, build on universality of secularism and certain values supposedly linked with secularism. The most relevant values are in this respect those linked with the existence of European institutions: democracy, human rights and rule of law. These are considered as universally valid and in this respect as necessary conditions for meaningful progress in relations between the EU with its partners. These are closely linked to whole list of other values. The question of the universality of values or their idiosyncratic manifestations in different settings and the question of legitimacy of differences in appreciating and living values are therefore of utmost importance and sensitivity.

Between east and west in Europe there is enough ground for a wide range of common issues and for reaching an agreement on a list of common values. Nevertheless there are clear and significant differences in the eastern and western perspectives on some issues: the family; human sexuality; the role of the church in society; even human rights. These differences are often labelled as differences between Orthodoxy and Protestantism. They are not. They are rooted not only in religion, but also at the same time in culture, anthropology and social concepts marking the life of community. There are Protestant churches in Eastern Europe that are in their ethical stands in many respects closer to Orthodox theology and ethics than to western Protestant theology.

In this respect it is instructive to take into consideration the ethical perspective of the ROC expressed in several church documents expressing the official position of the Church in addressing social and economic issues or human rights. They generally characterise western theology as decadent, having given way to liberal influences which are not compatible with Christianity. Meanwhile Orthodoxy, and in particular Orthodoxy of the eastern type, is the guardian of true Christianity.

In December 2007 the Church and Society Commission of CEC organised a conference in Brussels on the theme 'Values, Religion and Identity'. We invited leaders from all the CEC member churches. This was the first occasion that these top representatives had come together to discuss the theme of Christian values against the background of European political developments. One interesting outcome of the meeting was the recognition of internal differentiation in the value discourse among churches in Europe.

One church figure who attended the conference was then Bishop Hilarion of the ROC, who was at that time responsible for relations between the ROC and the EU. Today he is Metropolitan Hilarion, the Chairman of the Department of External Church Affairs of the ROC. His views are now those shaping the ecumenical and external relations of the ROC. At the conference he spoke as follows:

*Values of Christianity and values of secular humanism stand on opposite sides of the barricades. The secular, worldly, anti-churchly and anti-clerical orientation of modern humanism is obvious. It is precisely because the humanist ideology is acquiring increasingly clearer characteristics of militant secularism that the conflict between it and religion becomes ever more similar to a battle for survival – a battle not unto life, but unto death. .... The potential explosiveness of today's inter-civilizational situation is to a significant degree caused by the fact that the Western liberal-humanistic ideology, acting on the idea of its own universality, is imposing itself on people who were raised in other spiritual and moral traditions and have different value systems. These people see in the total dictate of the Western ideology a threat to their identity. The evidently anti-religious character of modern liberal humanism brings about non-acceptance and rejection by those whose behaviour is religiously motivated and whose spiritual life is founded on religious experience.*

The differences between this attitude and the widespread self-understanding of western Churches is evident. However, in order to be able to have a meaningful dialogue between different parts of Europe it does not help either to look with suspicion at each other, or to claim that one position is more universal than other. The necessary condition for a meaningful dialogue is to respect each other, to acknowledge differences and at the same time to value them as legitimate, as a possible source of enrichment and not necessarily simply as obstacles that need to be overcome.

## **European Integration: a Task for the Churches**

### *Involvement of Churches in Belarus and Ukraine in Society*

In order to get a picture of the reality of church life in the east let us look at the self-description of the social activities of the Orthodox Church in Belarus:

*The role of the religion in the society in Belarus has been in last decades significantly changed. Religious values became provide ethical frame for life and thoughts of most of the population. The role and authority of religious organisations, especially the Church has been substantively increased. One of the most important areas of the productive cooperation between the religious organisation and the state is area of spiritual and ethical education. It has been changed the*

*attitude of the society to spiritual values. In this respect has to be appreciated the role of the state. The state recognises the Church as one of the most important institutions having influence on forming spiritual, cultural and national traditions of the Belorussian nation... Important role in this respect is given to church youth organisations and the existence of youth centres. In Belarus play social work of church youth organisations an important role. Children organise visits in homes, hospitals and orphanages they help handicapped, they organise educational and cultural activities. There is a wide range of activities of the Church in addressing the social needs. In all this work is demonstrated a good relation between the state and the Church, which the most visible in cooperation on several joint projects, in particular in area of social work and education.*

The leaders of the Orthodox Churches are also giving increasing support to work for taking care of creation.

#### *The Conference of European Churches*

CEC was established as an organisation for creating a bridge between east and west in Europe. In its 50 years of existence it has taken a number of initiatives aimed at creating various forms of dialogue and cooperation between these two parts of the continent.

In the context of European dynamics an important question for CEC is: How do we understand the term 'European integration'? CEC stresses that European integration is more than the EU enlargement. European integration in its proper sense is more than the creation of a free trade zone; it is more than a limited view focused on economic aspects. It has other dimensions - social, cultural, ethical, religious - which need to be taken into consideration.

The Orthodox Church in Belarus participates at the work of CEC through its membership of the Russian Orthodox Church. The only Protestant Church in Ukraine and Belarus which is a member of CEC is the Ukrainian Transcarpathian Reformed Church.

ENP and EaP do not figure on the list of priorities for the Churches' engagement nowadays. However, at the EU level there is intensive work on the part of some church-related development agencies, which through the coordination of APRODEV are involved in support of civil society in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet countries of Central Asia.

Existing activities of church-related NGOs are more visibly labelled as church-linked programmes rather than as addressed to anonymous civil society. However, it could be wished that Churches in Western Europe were more intensively involved in getting more familiar with the situation in the east.

## **Conclusions**

Relations between east and west in Europe have in general terms two characteristic features, which reflect deep ambivalence.

In the east the attitude to the west is marked by suspicion which has long-term historical and cultural roots. In the west the attitude to the east oscillates between ignorance and a self-centredness claiming a superiority that can be more or less expressed as 'we are the masters and you have to follow our rules'.

It seems that the only way to overcome doubt and mistrust is to put more emphasis on personal relations, using already established schemes and bringing them closer to the peoples' understanding.

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