Conference

Program ■ October 2-3, 2026 ■ Yerevan, Armenia

What Makes a Church 'National' in the 21st Century?

Politics and Poetics of Religious Nationalism in the South Caucasus, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe

Yerevan Center for International Education

Groupe Sociétés, Religions, Laïcités (GSRL) CNRS-EPHE/ PSL

Institut français de recherche sur l'Europe orientale, le Caucase et l'Asie du Nord (IRECA)

Photo by Narek Aleksanyan, 2026

YCIE

October 2, 2026

Welcome
10:00 – 12:00

Churches on the Fault Lines of National Divides

Chair: Silvia Serrano

Daria Saburova
National Identity and National Security in the Making of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy

Agnieszka Halemba
Greek Catholic Church in Transcarpathia - Between States and Nations

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12:30 – 14:30

Konrad Siekierski
In the Shadow of Georgian Orthodoxy: Armenian Apostolic Church in Post-Soviet Georgia

Solenn Marty
The Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo: A Strong Physical and Symbolic Presence that Shapes Nationalist Discourse

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15.30 – 18.30

Clergy and Laity Between Cultural intimacy and the Nation-State

Chair: Sergei Shtyrkov

Yulia Antonyan
A New Reformation from Above? Church–State Relations, Post-Imperial Political Context and Moral Authority in Contemporary Armenia

Tünde Komáromi
The Cultural Intimacy of Crisis: Interethnic Religious Exchange and Lived Orthodoxy in the Transylvanian Plain

Detelina Tocheva
Lived Economy, Gender and Hierarchy: A Ground-up Study of How the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is Made National

October 3, 2026

10:00 – 12:00

Ecclesial Structures and the Ambivalences of 'National Religion'

Chair: Jeanne Kormina

Anatolii Tokmantcev
Armenian Church and Laity: The Case of Hovhannavank

Florian Mühlfried
Grassroots Orthodoxization? Negotiating Sovereignty and Religiosity in Highland Georgia

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12:30 – 14:30

Rusudan Beridze
Sacred Memory and the Affective Poetics of the 'National Church' in Akhaltsikhe

Vlad Naumescu
Living in the End Times: Citizenship, Sovereignty and the 'Universal Church'

15.30 – 18.30

The Agency of Sainthood in the Making of National Churches

Chair: Detelina Tocheva

Sergei Shtyrkov
National Saints as Ancestors and as Relatives: The Hagiopolitics of the Russian Orthodox Church in North Ossetia-Alania

Jeanne Kormina
Saints as Ambassadors: St. Matrona of Moscow and the Global Geography of Russian Orthodoxy

Katerina Seraïdari
What Makes the Church of Greece 'National' in the 21st Century? A New Cult Emerging in Athens around Celtic Saints

Yulia Antonyan

A New Reformation From Above? Church–State Relations, Post-Imperial Political Context and Moral Authority in Contemporary Armenia

The paper offers an anthropological perspective on the situation of active confrontation between two forms of authority: secular and religious in post-revolutionary Armenia (2024–2026). Following the intense post-Soviet processes of desecularization and clericalization of institutions and social processes, Armenia, in the period after the Velvet Revolution (after 2018), almost immediately entered into processes of re-secularization. They first took the form of public debates and the gradual withdrawal of the Church from institutions of education, the military, and governance. After the 2020 war and the loss of Karabakh, these processes developed into a direct political and social confrontation between the Church and the government.

This confrontation, on the one hand, is embedded in a range of broader contexts: imperial, nationalist, political, and economic. On the other hand, the government's challenges to the Church are articulated in moral and religious terms: violations of clerical celibacy, the demoralization of the clergy, the Church's overreach beyond its proper authority, and its failure to fulfill its direct functions, such as the care of the souls of its flock.

In opposition to the Catholicos, the Prime Minister tries to construct new standards of piety and religiosity that he himself seeks to embody through his personal example. Thus, we observe a process structurally reminiscent of the European Reformation of the sixteenth century, when sovereigns began to support or even lead reform movements that established new norms of religious morality and agency, while in reality proclaiming the political independence from the Catholic Church and the Pope.

In the course of the presentation, the author will attempt to analyze the current Armenian situation in terms of the extent to which it can be characterized as an attempt at "top-down" reformation as a tool of re-secularization, the regain of political sovereignty and the hidden forms of struggle against the political opposition.

Rusudan Beridze

Sacred Memory and the Affective Poetics of the "National Church" in Akhaltsikhe

In the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) engaged in an inclusive, ecumenical dialogue that emphasized shared Christian spiritual and theological bonds. During his pastoral visits to the historically multiconfessional borderland of Samtskhe-Javakheti in 1978 and 1988, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II actively paid tribute to local Catholic figures and preached unity, famously proclaiming to the non- Orthodox parish, "Now we all are one, there should be no division in you." However, over the ensuing decades, this discourse of co-existence inverted into a rigid theological and political exclusion, directly reflecting the broader rise of religious nationalism in Georgia.

This paper explores how this macro-level shift from inclusion to hegemony is physically and symbolically negotiated at the micro-level through the strategic manipulation of the urban religioscape. Drawing on Yuri Lotman's concept of the city as a text and Yael Navaro-Yashin's concept of affective geography, I analyze the material and semiotic reorganization of Akhaltsikhe's multi-layered urban fabric. Rather than attributing this transformation to a single source, I argue that the visual production of the GOC's dominance is co-produced through a complex interplay between top-down institutional policies and bottom-up local initiatives.

By tracing the construction of the Ascension and Shalva Akhaltsikheli churches, alongside the erection of public monuments – most notably the statue of the canonized Golden Age monarch, Saint Queen Tamar, the first of its kind in Georgia – this study illustrates how both state-church authorities and local actors collaboratively rewrite the city's historical text. For instance, the mythologized memory surrounding the warmth felt at the "heart" of Queen Tamar's statue illustrates the strategic sacralization of a medieval monarch, highlighting how the symbolic excavation of the past imbues spatial interventions with affective force and anchors religious nationalism in urban space.

Utilizing a multi-method approach that combines ethnographic data, interviews, archival press analysis, visual sociology, and mental maps, I demonstrate how these monuments and sacred structures function as non-human agents and affective mediators. Ultimately, the paper argues that the "making of the national church" in a multicultural borderland relies on a negotiated consensus between institutional power and the affective poetics of space, through which the celebrated myth of "boundless tolerance" is systematically replaced by a dominant Orthodox reality.

Agnieszka Halemba

Greek Catholic Church in Transcarpathia - Between States and Nations

There are two Greek Catholic Churches in Ukraine, linked administratively only by their (separate) subordination to the supreme authority of the Holy See: the present-day Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), whose history dates back to the Union of Brest concluded in 1596 between the Vatican and several Orthodox bishops, and the Mukachevo Greek Catholic Eparchy (MGCE), whose origins lie in a similar union signed in 1646 in Uzhhorod. The histories of these two ecclesiastical administrations developed largely in parallel – most importantly, they operated amidst different nation-building processes and ideologies, and were influenced by various state formations and external imperial ambitions. This parallel existence continues until the present, although the collapse of the Soviet Union and especially the conflict with Russia since 2014 have brought some important changes and discussions.

During the Soviet era, when the Greek Catholic Church was repressed, the underground education of priests in Transcarpathia (i.e. within the territory of the present-day Mukachevo Greek Catholic Eparchy) saw the existence of two parallel currents, which rarely cooperated with one another and were linked to two political projects that, until recently, were perceived as opposed to one another. This opposition with regard to different political visions for Transcarpathia with regard to neighbouring national ideologies, shaped also much of the post-socialist era.

In 2002, Transcarpathia became the site of Marian apparitions, tended by Greek Catholic priests and the faithful, which gained the reputation of being one of the fastest-growing pilgrimage centres in Ukraine. This place reflected the national struggles in Transcarpathia and its relations with Ukraine and Hungary, as well as other conflicts of a national and a national nature. Now, however, it appears that the MGCE is slowly but steadily transforming from a place where various political agendas and national identities clash into the most stable source of support for the Ukrainian national idea amongst local religious organisations.

Tünde Komáromi

The Cultural Intimacy of Crisis: Interethnic Religious Exchange and Lived Orthodoxy in the Transylvanian Plain

Existing scholarship on Eastern Christianity frequently demonstrates how dominant religious structures are incorporated into the grand narratives of the nation-state. This paper looks beyond top-down discourse to adopt an anthropological perspective, examining the grassroots politics and poetics of a national church through lived, interethnic religious practices. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork (2013–2018, supported by ERC Grant No. 324214) in a multi-ethnic Transylvania village and the nearby Marian pilgrimage site of Nicula, this study explores how the Romanian Orthodox Church is actively used and reinvented in a pluralistic society.

The local social landscape is ethnically and confessionally split between Hungarian Calvinists, Orthodox Romanians, and Orthodox Roma. While formal boundaries remain rigid, and historical traumas regarding forced mid-twentieth-century Greek-Catholic conversions linger silently, acute existential crises—including grave illness, suspicion of witchcraft, and the returning souls of the dead—frequently prompt cross-confessional religious transfers. Utilizing Michael Herzfeld's concept of cultural intimacy, this paper analyzes how troubled Hungarian Calvinists navigate their own community boundaries to seek help from Orthodox priests and seers. Because the Calvinist pastor strictly dismisses these afflictions as "pagan superstitions," Calvinist peasants (particularly women) manage this external threat of institutional embarrassment through secrecy. Mediated by Romanian neighbors and friends, they covertly engage in unorthodox practices: ordering prayers at Nicula, touching the miraculous icon with the clothing of the sick, and attending the Orthodox holy unction ceremony. While this religious transmission is highly functional rather than a total conversion, it reveals how the everyday authority of a national church relies on its ability to handle vernacular anxieties. Ultimately, this paper addresses whether these secretive, crisis-solving cross-overs yield a shared, subterranean culture of survival across Romanian, Hungarian, and Roma populations in the Transylvanian Plain.

Jeanne Kormina

Saints as Ambassadors: St Matrona of Moscow and the Global Geography of Russian Orthodoxy

Every national Orthodox Church develops its own pantheon of saints through which it tells a history of its own, one that cannot be reduced to the history of Christianity at large. Saints link territory, religion, and statehood, while the emergence of new saints offers a glimpse of how a Church seeks to present itself to its own faithful and to the outside world. Yet saints often acquire social and political lives that exceed the intentions of those who canonize and promote them. A figure initially promoted as an instrument of internal mission may eventually come to represent both Church and state abroad — all the more effectively because she is not perceived as representing either.

The best-known contemporary Orthodox saint in Russia—and perhaps the most recognizable Russian saint outside the country—is St Matrona of Moscow. Before her Church-wide canonization in 2004, she was known only within a very limited circle. Her rise to fame was the result of a large-scale campaign by the Moscow diocese. It transformed a modest peasant woman from the Tula region, who had moved to Moscow along with people from her native area in the 1930s, into a Moscow counterpart to St Xenia of Petersburg, the patron saint of Russia's former capital. Matrona soon became extraordinarily popular both in Russia and abroad. Believers see her as an embodiment of "popular" Orthodoxy, but her significance also rests on her association with Moscow, inscribed in both her name and her biography. Today, it is difficult to find a Russian Orthodox church, whether in Russia or elsewhere, without an icon of St Matrona. In this context, "of Moscow" comes to stand for "Russian," referring at once to ecclesiastical jurisdiction and to the state.

In this paper, I approach saints as unwitting ambassadors of national Churches. By following the travels of Matrona's icons and relics, I examine how her cult crosses state, national, and cultural boundaries while marking and extending the ecclesiastical space of Russian Orthodoxy. Yet ethnographic evidence suggests that Matrona's spread does not provoke the resistance sometimes directed at more overtly political symbols of Russian Orthodoxy. Nor is "of Moscow" necessarily perceived as a sign of Russian expansion. Its political significance can remain largely unnoticed because Matrona enters new settings above all as a healer and a source of help in personal misfortune. This is precisely what makes her such an effective "ambassador": she represents Church and country without appearing to represent either.

Solenn Marty

The Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo: A strong Physical and Symbolic Presence that Shapes Nationalist Discourse

Despite the unilateral declaration of independence in 2007, neither the Serbian government nor the Patriarchate of Belgrade recognise the existence of a Kosovar state. Consequently, they both still regard it as the region of 'Kosovo and Metohija', and consider this region to be the very heart not only of Serbian Orthodox Christianity but also of the Serbian people's identity.

The analysis of the social and material organisation of these Serbian communities still living in Kosovo forms the core of my PhD project, which I began in october 2025 at the EPHE, with Alfonsina Bellio and Detelina Tocheva as supervisors. It is based on archival research, open-ended or semi-structured interviews, and fieldwork. According to the initial findings of my research, the role of religious actors within the Serbian communities of Kosovo already appears to be a central element in understanding how these communities function, but also in understanding how they define themselves and why they remain in place despite political tensions.

As a central pillar of local life, the Church serves as an 'existential being justification' for a large proportion of Kosovo's Serbian communities, which she seeks to sustain in order to preserve a historical, cultural and religious heritage regarded as the very heart of Serbian identity. Beyond Kosovo's boundaries, the territory's significance as a factor in religion and identity is particularly emphasised by the Church. Furthermore, the religious dimension constitutes one of the main – if not the main – arguments of the political parties, organisations and activist movements that are engaged within the territory or the local populations, sometimes with the support of the Church but also by acting against the initiatives of the local clergy. Recent debates on the creation of a Kosovo Orthodox Church, not recognised neither by the Patriarchate of Belgrade nor the one of Tirana, particularly highlight the political and identity-defining importance of the Church in Kosovo.

Then, the initial findings of the anthropological research I am conducting on the Serbian communities in Kosovo seem to shed light on the issues of religious nationalism in the Balkans in the contemporary era.

Florian Mühlfried

Grassroots Orthodoxization? Negotiating Sovereignty and Religiosity in Highland Georgia

In this presentation, I examine changing forms of sovereignty in highland Georgia through the transformation of a sacred site in Omalo (Tusheti). Moving from Soviet to post-Soviet contexts, I trace the transition from state-centred sovereignty—articulated through both violence and developmental care—to dispersed forms of sovereignty enacted by the Georgian Orthodox Church, private capital, and local practices. Drawing on anthropological approaches that foreground care as a constitutive dimension of sovereignty, I conceptualise sovereignty as a relational and materially grounded practice rather than a fixed attribute of the state. In this case, sovereignty is negotiated and mediated by stakeholders from the local community, the Georgian Orthodox Church, and business actors. By symbolically adding a roof ornamented with Orthodox icons over a site often associated with "traditional beliefs" or "pagan practices," the Church introduces a set of hierarchical values in which it assumes a dominant position. This dominant position, in turn, serves to legitimize capitalist interests in the region.

Daria Saburova

National Identity and National Security in the Making of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy

Rather than treating the ongoing promotion of a national church by the Ukrainian state as a "historically necessary" step in the affirmation of its political sovereignty on a regional scale, "catching up" with other predominantly Orthodox countries in obtaining autocephaly, this paper examines the concrete mechanisms through which the current nationalization of Ukrainian Orthodoxy is enacted and contested by those who fail to identify with a specific nation-building project. The Ukrainian case allows to observe in real time not only how a church becomes "national", but also how a church becomes a "threat to national security", and how both of these processes are intertwined in the state's struggle for legitimacy. The making of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) as a national church not only excludes, but rests on active practices of othering and unmaking of religious institutions promoting a competing vision of state-church relations. In the current context of war and intensified nation-building, this process operates through a combination of coercive and ideological instruments aimed at dismantling the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (formerly of the Moscow Patriarchate): legal regulations, judicial procedures, property redistribution, media discourse, and symbolic distinctions between legitimate and suspect forms of religiosity.

Drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews among the UOC communities, my paper focuses on how clergy and parishioners respond to these processes. Faced with legal pressure, loss of property, and public suspicion, UOC clergy and parishioners oscillate between narratives of martyrdom and strategies of accommodation. In reaction to pressures to demonstrate political loyalty and national conformity, many articulate a distinction between the universal and apolitical character of Orthodoxy and what they describe as the politicization of religion within the project of a "national church." They refuse to place state symbols in church and to adopt Ukrainian as a liturgical language, continue to commemorate Russian saints, and justify the mentioning of the Moscow Patriarch in the name ritual continuity. At the same time, UOC communities continue to assert their own claims to Ukrainian identity through appeals to the historical continuity of Kyivan Christianity, of which they believe to be the only true representatives. In this way, the making of a national church simultaneously generates counter-claims of canonicity and moral distinction among those positioned as religious and political outcasts.

Katerina Seraïdari

What Makes the Church of Greece "National" in the 21st Century? A New Cult Emerging in Athens Around Celtic Saints

The monk Porfyrios Kafsokalyvitis (1906-1991) was recognized as a saint by the Patriarch of Constantinople in 2013. He prophesied that when Greeks start to venerate Celtic saints, Anglicans will become Orthodox. In the monastery he founded near Athens in the 1980s, Porfyrios dedicated a chapel to Celtic saints – the first of its kind in Greece. A disciple of Porfyrios, K. Ganotis (1933-2023) wrote, some years before his death, a liturgy in honor of these saints, that was validated by the Archbishop of Greece. The son of Ganotis being a priest in a central chapel of Athens, decided to dedicate a part of it to Celtic saints. A nun, who directs a monastic dependence (metohi) near the monastery founded by Porfyrios, undertook the task of iconography. These persons are the initiators of a new form of cult in the Athenian religious landscape, publishing books about these saints, organizing conferences on a parish level and celebrating religious feasts in their honor. They are also in contact with Orthodox parishes established recently in Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

A new narrative is being constructed through these initiatives, which propose a more global view of Orthodoxy. According to it, "all the saints in Europe before the Schism were Orthodox". That also means that before 1054, all Christian Europeans were Orthodox. In Greece, this gives a new missionary role to the Church of Greece and puts Greek devotees at the center of international challenges, such as the massive conversion of Anglicans and Catholics (in the case of Ireland) or "return", according to the new narrative, to Orthodoxy.

In this case, new forms of cult are introduced not in order to unmake this "national" church, but in order to consolidate its pioneer role and its open-minded and dynamic image. These initiatives show how a broader Christian tradition (linked to a specific region and to a linguistic family) can be "nationalized" and how the model of the "chosen people" (the Greeks being capable of realizing, through their efforts, the words of a prophecy) is reenacted.

Sergei Shtyrkov

National Saints as Ancestors and as Relatives: The Hagiopolitics of the Russian Orthodox Church in North Ossetia–Alania

This paper examines the contemporary transformation of Orthodox sainthood in the Republic of North Ossetia – Alania (Russian Federation), focusing on the ways in which hagiographic discourse is mobilized in the production of ethnic and religious identity. Based on ethnographic observation in Vladikavkaz, including field encounters in ecclesiastical settings and analysis of sermons and liturgical language, the article argues that sainthood is increasingly reinterpreted through idioms of kinship, descent, and shared "blood," generating a fusion of religious and ethno-national imaginaries.

Central to the analysis is the introduction of the term srodniki ("relatives") into episcopal and liturgical discourse, where it is extended from commemorative usage to denote saints as collective ancestors of the Ossetian people. This semantic shift, promoted by diocesan leadership, enables the construction of an ethno-religious continuity linking contemporary believers with saintly figures of the past.
The article argues that this "hagiopolitical" strategy transforms saints into ethnic emblems rather than primarily moral exemplars or intercessors. As a result, canonization practices are subordinated to broader projects of cultural and national representation. Ultimately, the discourse of "our saintly relatives" illustrates how Orthodox Christianity in North Ossetia becomes embedded in processes of ethnicization, where theological categories are reinterpreted through the logic of genealogy and, increasingly, biological reasons such as DNA.

Konrad Siekierski

In the Shadow of Georgian Orthodoxy: Armenian Apostolic Church in Post-Soviet Georgia

This paper discusses the situation of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC), Armenia's national church, in the neighbouring Georgia, where a similar role has been assumed by the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). As a consequence of the post-Soviet state-supported rise to power and the nationalising policies of the latter, the AAC lost many of its pre-Soviet shrines, while several other prominent churches, especially in the cities of Tbilisi and Akhaltsikhe, have acquired the status of "contested churches", which has effectively led to their neglect and partial ruination. The resulting situation of "infrastructural invisibility", as I suggest calling it, of the AAC, fueled by the GOC's widespread narrative of Armenian shrines being constructed on Georgian land or even on the ruins of earlier Georgian churches, forms a part of the GOC's larger project of "georganisation" and "orthodoxisation" of Georgia. My examination of this process builds on an ongoing ethnographic fieldwork I have conducted in Georgia since 2024 within the research project "Religious Domains of Infrastructure and its Role among Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia".

Anatoliy Tokmantcev

Armenian Church and Laity: The Case of Hovhannavank

In October 2025, Catholicos of All Armenians Garegin II rescinded the ordination of Fr. Aram Asatryan, a priest serving at Hovhannavank. Nevertheless, when the bishop of the local diocese arrived to enforce the Church’s decision, local residents defended the priest and his right to continue serving as the head of their parish. They claimed that the church belongs to the community and that, therefore, the right to decide who serves there belongs to them rather than to the Catholicos. Even though the defrocked priest no longer had the authority to issue marriage certificates, several young couples asked him to perform wedding ceremonies, further defying the official Church’s decision.

This case reflects the logic underlying Armenian Christianity and relationships within the Armenian Church. In Armenia, the principal source of authority in Armenian Christianity is one’s membership in the Armenian community and, therefore, one’s innate Christianness. The Armenian Church as an institution is generally perceived as an extension of Armenian Christianity that, while strengthening the Armenian community, is not essential to one’s Christianness.

Detelina Tocheva

Lived Economy, Gender and Hierarchy: a Ground-up Study of How the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is Made National

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) has long behaved as Bulgaria's national church. Starting from the state's emancipation from the Ottoman Empire, the idea of a national church continued to be promoted under the communist regime as part of the national grand narrative and politics. Postsocialist policies renewed the state-driven nationalization of the Church. The constitution of 1991 recognizes Eastern Orthodoxy as Bulgaria's "traditional religion". The 2002 Confession Act states that this faith has played a role in the formation of the state and that it is represented by the BOC, headed by the patriarch. A law introduced in 2019 backed up these postsocialist milestones by establishing a state subsidy in order to provide the priests with a salary.

These top-level dynamics have contributed to the making of a national Church. While taking them into consideration, this paper addresses the other side of the coin. An analysis of parish clergy's and their family members' experience trains a spotlight on a related yet different process of bottom-up consolidation of the national church shaped by the mundane lives of its insiders. Three intersecting areas are central: the lived economy of the Church, gender and relation to the hierarchy. Combining a sense of embarrassment and rueful self-recognition, the meaning of stories told by priests and their family members swings between outrage, admission of regretted church malfunction and jokey self-irony. While repeatedly told by insiders as part of common knowledge among the parish clergy, these stories can be seen as offending and intolerable if they are told by an outsider. These characteristics allow placing the analysis of my ethnographic material within the conceptual framework of cultural intimacy proposed by Michael Herzfeld (2016). In addition, I take inspiration from a recent article by Jennifer Cash (2023) to advocate a ground-up study of what makes the postsocialist churches national. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork that I have conducted since 2023 in Sofia and its region, in urban and rural settings.

Vlad Naumescu

Living in the End Times: Citizenship, Sovereignty and the ‘Universal Church’

This paper speaks to the workshop theme from the margins by examining how Russian Old Believers in Romania have negotiated their position between Orthodoxy, nationalism, and the state. Unlike Old Believers in Russia and their ambivalent relationship with the state, which demanded loyalty while remaining suspicious at their allegiance to God (Martin 2017), Old Believers in Romania viewed the state as a contingent and ultimately temporary political order within their eschatological horizon. Yet, in their efforts to maintain collective autonomy, they developed pragmatic ways of self-representation and interpellation that became emancipatory acts of citizenship. Drawing on my recent book, I discuss Old Believers attempts to straddle competing sovereignties in the name of a universal church encompassing 'all Old Orthodox Christians.' This challenges ingrained assumptions about Orthodoxy’s affinity to the nation-state and its political community and opens a space for forms of popular sovereignty that unsettle hierarchies of political belonging and nationalist imaginaries.