Brexit and the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church: The Return of Nationalism

During the last weeks of June 2016, two major international events took place, namely the ‘Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church’, on the island of Crete (June 16-27), and the British referendum that narrowly voted to leave the European Union (June 23). At first sight, the two events are unrelated. One is the product of extensive inter-Orthodox dialogue that began in 1923, nearly a century ago. The other is the expression of the democratic political vote that took place in Britain, on Europe’s western periphery. Although neither event referred to the other, both are representative of tectonic shifts in the international liberal order of the post-Cold War era.

What do they have in common?

First, the holding of the Orthodox Synod was agreed on at the time of Russia’s takeover of Crimea in March 2014. For the last two years since its announcement, regular meetings of hierarchs planning the agenda were interspersed with references to the religious and political situation in Ukraine. Subtle allusions to Russia’s geopolitical ambitions were also made during the Brexit debate, to the extent that on the day when the official results were made public, President Putin declared his dissatisfaction with this British criticism. Ukraine was the unseen face of both the Synod and the British referendum. Fracture between European political elites was particularly evident during the last two years. The British Prime Minister Cameron was notably absent from meetings between Chancellor Merkel, President Hollande and President Putin negotiating the Donbass conflict and the Minsk accords.

Second, the Synod and the Brexit vote took place at the time of unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Syria. The decision of the Patriarchate of Antioch, based in Damascus, not to attend the Synod, demonstrated the struggle for religious and political survival in the Middle East. Its conflict with the Patriarchate of Jerusalem over the jurisdiction of the faithful in Qatar denoted the geopolitical strategies of churches and their search for authority, recognition and regional influence. The forced displacement of Syrian refugees also made headlines during the debate on the British referendum, to the extent that a few days before the vote, a poster with migrants marching towards Europe was presented as a sign of a veritable siege on the British coast.

Third, and more importantly, the Synod and the Brexit vote indicated the return of nationalism to the midst of the international liberal order in post-Cold War Europe. The British decision to leave the European Union has been presented in the media precisely in this way, as a unique ‘British’ case. The refusal of the Russian, Georgian and Bulgarian churches to attend the Synod emphasised the ‘national’ dimension of the Orthodox church. Before being part of the wider family of the Orthodox commonwealth, these churches are ‘national’ with close links to state structures, diplomacy and political interests.
Both the Brexit decision and the Synod will shape the future of the European continent for years to come. The conflict in Ukraine continues to produce headlines and its religious dimension remains unsolved. Will an independent national Ukrainian Church be recognised by the other Orthodox churches? The dramatic forced displacement of people in Syria challenges the very survival of Christian communities in the Middle East. Will religious communities in the Middle East engage with their counterparts or focus exclusively on national objectives? These are potent questions directly linked to nationalism. The unleashing force of nationalism in Europe shapes the ways in which religious communities and state structures engage with the international liberal order. The rebuttal of the status quo was evident on the first day after the official conclusion of the Orthodox Synod, when the Moscow Patriarchate criticised the ways in which decisions were adopted by stating that ‘democracy is irrelevant in church life’. Both churches and states will become more involved in the return of nationalism as a subterfuge to European integration and liberal values. The impact of the Brexit vote and the holding of the Synod may not immediately reverberate across Western Europe, but more in the East, where the interplay between Eastern Orthodoxy, geopolitics and nationalism provides the source for transnational alliances based on interests, security and political power.