



# The new Ukrainian Autocephalous Church and its image in the ecumenical space

**Author:**Iuliu-Marius Morariu<sup>1,2</sup> **Affiliations:**<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania<sup>2</sup>Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa**Research Project Registration:****Project Leader:**T. van Wyk **Project number:** 22153145**Project Description:**

Rev. Iuliu-Marius is participating in the research project, 'Political Theology', directed by Dr Tanya van Wyk, Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

**Corresponding author:**Iuliu-Marius Morariu  
maxim@radiorenasterea.ro**Dates:**

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An important moment in the recent history of the Eastern Orthodox Church was for sure the recognition granted to the Ukrainian Orthodoxy by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople with the Tomos of autocephaly (2019). Praised by some Orthodox churches and damned by other, it was preceded by some attempts of negotiation initiated by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and by a few meetings between the representatives of the aforementioned institution, Russian Patriarchate and the Ukrainian local churches that was later recognised by Constantinople and by a Schism between the Constantinople and Moscow. At the same time, it divided the local Orthodox churches between the ones who sustain one or the other side or prefer to remain in a neutral state and determined later meetings like the one from Amman in Jordan (2020), between leaders and representatives of the Orthodox Church. Conscious of the relevance of the event and its potential consequences, we have tried here to see how it was reflected in the ecumenical space. Therefore, we have proceeded to the investigation of the journals from the ecumenical area that spoke about it, and we analysed the way how they saw it and emphasised the main elements that have raised their interest. Together with the ecclesiastical challenges, we found that they were also interested in this problem not only for its theological meaning but also because of its geopolitical relevance. The research, based on the literature investigated, therefore presents the Ukrainian problem and its image in the ecumenical space.

**Contribution:** The research investigates how the image of the Eastern Orthodox Church changed in the ecumenical space after the foundation of the New Ukrainian Church and the debates that followed inside of the Orthodox space in this context. It is linked with the scope of the journal due to the fact that investigates a topic relevant for the ecumenical area and presents a topic that can contribute in the future to the change of the relationships with different churches with the Orthodox one.

**Keywords:** Filaret Denysenko; the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew; Moscow Patriarchate; political theology; Kiev; ecumenism.

## Introduction

An important moment in the history of the Orthodox Church, which will for sure bring challenges and will influence also the ecumenical space, the foundation of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church, prepared from 2018, that officially came into fruition with the *Tomos* released by the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the Baptism feast from 2019 (<https://www.archons.org/documents/2170772/4799571/eBook+Ukraine+FINAL/a64e778b-651e-4a08-baee-4d591a70a651>, viewed 12 March 2020), was already debated both by the specialists from the Orthodox space (Ciocoi 2019) and from the ones coming from different Christian denominations. To try to offer a conclusion about the meaning and the end of this event that generated a debate not only between the Ecumenical Patriarchate that created the possibility of its creation and the Russian one that was the most disturbed by such a decision would surely be impossible yet, as soon as there are still many things unclear, whilst to make predictions about the possible evolution of the situation would surely be unacademic.

Therefore, the aim of this study is none of the above. In fact, it tries to see which are the main journals from the ecumenical space that speak about the Ukrainian situation, what are the main aspects that arouse their interest and what is the general attitude towards the events and the two Patriarchate that are debating their primacy in Ukrainian space and how the political implication in the problem is seen. Regarding the Orthodox relevance, it has been already written and we are conscious of the fact that the future ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox churches will be surely influenced by that (either that there will be a new member Church in the World Council of churches [WCC] and the Russian Patriarchate will have less members, or that all the Orthodox communities will decide to ban the new Church). Whilst the historical background of the problem has been already presented in different analyses previously published (Bremer & Senyk 2019a:27–36), we do not insist here on this aspect, but we try only to mention the main aspects of the contemporary

situation. Amongst the main journals that have paid attention to the above-mentioned aspects are the following: *Irenikon* from Chevegtone, *Istina* from Paris, the Portuguese *O Odigo* or *Asia News* from Rome. In the same time, we also try to see how the situation is reflected in journals such as *The Ecumenical Review* from Geneva, *St Vladimir Quarterly* from Crestwood (with Orthodox background) (Bremer & Senyk 2019a:27–58), *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* from Paris and another journal coming from Protestant space. Intended to be a review of literature, the research tries to bring into attention a complicated contemporary problem and to see which are the topics that make the ecumenical area to pay attention to an Orthodox question that will surely have a global relevance and will determine the re-shifting of the ecumenical dialogue with the aforementioned space.

## The new Ukrainian Autocephalous Church and its image in the ecumenical space

Whilst *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* presented in 2017 the peaceful message of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew dedicated to the Ukrainian situation<sup>1</sup> and later monitored his attitude towards the problem, other journals like the ones from Occidental space had diverse approaches. For example, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* from Paris dedicates its 1st number from 2019 to the Orthodoxy, its definition and heritage; other journals edited by Catholics, Protestants or coming from the lay space mentioned the Eastern Orthodox churches only in situations like the one generated by the recognition of Ukrainian Autocephalous Church by the Constantinople Patriarchate. On the other side, journals such as the aforementioned one prefer to insist rather on the definition of the ecclesiology and the organisation of local churches (Depret 2019:65–85; Makrides & Seraidari 2019b:23–43; Molokotos-Liederman 2019:45–64), and just to mention the problem that we intend to present (Makrides & Seraidari 2019a:11), the fact that let us think that, although it is seen as an important aspect, the other Christian traditions feel reserved in discussing it or realise an objective evaluation, before the release of one made by the Orthodox churches.

One of the American important journal that speaks about the Ukrainian ecclesiastical situation is *The Christian Century*. Since the beginning of the Donbas conflict, the editors of this periodical, most probably, as their names suggest it, with Slavic background, speak about the potential danger of a church split on ethnical basis (Kishkovsky 2014:18–19). Later, in 2018, they also spoke about the negotiations of Philaret Denysenko and the other groups with the Ecumenical Patriarchate and also underlined the political dimensions of the problem:

1. At that moment, the Greek Patriarch underlined the fact that: 'Unity and peace are highly desired and essential for the people and the Church of Ukraine. This spirit of unity is at once a fragile treasure as well as a gift from above, which has been entrusted to us by the Trinitarian God for our safekeeping and delight. It is this same spirit of unity that we fervently pray and hope for in order that it might also prevail in Ukraine' (Bartholomew 2017:195).

Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, who is running for re-election next March, has pushed Bartholomew to grant independence to the Ukrainian church. His efforts received a fillip earlier this month when the Ecumenical Patriarchate announced that it was sending two bishops to Ukraine as a step toward declaring ecclesiastical independence for the church there.

The Russian church responded by declaring that it would not participate in events headed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and would not even remember Bartholomew in its prayers. (Isachenov 2018:17)

In 2019, the editors of the same journal informed their readers about the split of the Orthodoxy in Ukraine (Weir 2019:16–17) and also spoke about the important role played by the political space in this problem. The same aspect was also emphasised by Ukrainian researchers from American Centres such as Cyril Hovorun, who teaches in the Orthodox Centre of Fordham University (Hovorun 2016:43–50), but also in the ones written by the Orthodox researchers coming from the outside of the problem (Editor 2018a:1; Oeldemann 2019: 288–294). Like in other Occidental journals and like the attitude of the WCC, the attitude will be reserved and the authors will limit only to the historical description of the problem, avoiding its ecclesiological, political or economic implications.

Still, the understanding of the complexity of the problem would call for the knowledge of its historical background. This explains why many researchers who intended to approach this topic insisted on the historical approach. Amongst all the texts that can be subsumed to this area, the one of Alfons Brüning (2016:79–101), published previously to the official end of the dialogue between Ecumenical and Russian Patriarchate, and the one of Thomas Bremer and Sophiy Senyk (Bremer & Senyk, 2019a:27–58) emphasise the situation in the best way possible, being very documented in this sense. The English version of their chronicle from *St Vladimir Quarterly* was also accompanied by a French approach of the problem published in *Istina* journal from Paris (Bremer & Senyk 2019b:25–50), and that insisted more on the pragmatic aspects than on the historical aspects. In the aforementioned article, the two authors insisted on the fact that the need for the understanding of the history of the problem is caused by the current evolution of the situation. They therefore underlined the fact that:

All Orthodox bishops of Ukraine – those of the 'Ukrainian Orthodox Church' (UOC), UOC-KP and UAOC – have been invited by Patriarch Bartholomew to a 'council' in which they are to form a new church structure. The overwhelming majority of the UOC hierarchy has once again rejected this intrusion of the EP into the affairs of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine and almost all the hierarchs of the UOC have returned the invitations to Constantinople. (Bremer & Senyk 2019a:37)

It is also important to say that they do not only speak about the invitation addressed by the Ecumenical Patriarch to all the Orthodox denominations from the Ukrainian space (highlighting the desire of the Greeks to bring all the factions to dialogue and probably to listen to all the parties before

reaching a decision) but also the fact that the initiative has been greeted both by the leaders of other local churches, such as the Greek-Catholic one.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, despite the amplitude and the depth of the historical analysis that presents also the main canonical aspects that are relevant for the contemporary discourse and actualised in meetings like the one from Crete (2016) (Jovic 2017:103–114; Morariu 2016: 247–25, 2019:1–6, 2020: 27–28; Nate & Buda 2019:11–38; Perşa 2017: 151–157), the authors are not able to say who grants the autonomy and autocephaly at the level of jurisdiction (Constantinople, Moscow or an ecumenical council; the fact that is today debatable even amongst the Orthodox autocephalous churches). They, therefore, show that:

Nation is not an ecclesial category. Nation, however, is nowadays a reality which has ecclesial implications as well. It would therefore not be correct to deprive Orthodoxy in Ukraine the right of having an autocephalous church once we understand the political and national character of the modern autocephalies. The question in the present conflict is not so much about autocephaly as such (though it is an issue Orthodoxy should reflect upon – at the end of the day, autocephaly is not the only conceivable model for church organization), but rather on the way it is being gained in Ukraine. When autocephaly is used for political purposes, it becomes an instrument of politics, and its ecclesial impact is weakened. (Bremer & Senyk 2019:45)

In the same note, the two authors wonder in the article from *Istina*, which are the hidden forces behind their recognition (Bremer & Senyk 2019b:33), and also raise questions like the meaning of ‘mother Church’ term and its practical outcomes (Bremer & Senyk 2019a:36–37). At the same time, after a brief review of the situation, they speak also about the strange aspect of the Ecumenical Patriarchate decision, namely the release of the excommunication, which was not followed, as expected, by the recognition of their canonical structures.<sup>3</sup>

The same number of the aforementioned journals also host another article dedicated to the same problem (Ratajeski 2019:5–24). Without insisting so much on the historical dimension of the problem, but rather on its sociological relevance, the author presents the Orthodoxy in the confessional context of the Ukrainian space, speaking about the relevance of religious feelings for the people of this nation and showing that according to the statistics, 71% of its citizens have religious feelings (Ratajeski 2019:5). One aspect that places the author on the Greek’s side is the emphasis on the fact that the bishops of the Russian policy makers have refused several times the recognition of the autonomy of

2.‘In addition, many people from the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) have spoken out for the autocephaly of Ukrainian Orthodoxy, among them its head, Major Archbishop Shevchuk’ (Bremer & Senyk 2019a:39). They will also insist on the political influences on the decisions, showing that: ‘It would be interesting to reflect upon the question of who are the driving forces behind the decisions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate’ (Bremer & Senyk 2019a:38).

3.‘It is important to note that the Patriarchate of Constantinople raised the excommunications addressed to the two non-canonical churches’, Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) and ‘Ukrainian Church—Kiev Patriarchate and their believers, but did not recognize their ecclesial structures. Canonically, these persons are currently in communion with Constantinople in their personal name, but have no canonical ecclesial structures’ (Bremer & Senyk 2019b: 33).

Ukrainian Orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup> The political aspect is therefore present there too, in an approach whose aim is to underline the fact that the Russian political authorities influence also the decisions of the Russian Orthodox Church to which the Ukrainian canonical Orthodox structure was subordinated.

Another journal that seems to sustain the Greek side and the Ukrainian new structure is *AsiaNews*, a Catholic journal of information that often hosts also theological research or notes regarding global Christian actuality. In a number published after the Constantinople Thomos, Vladimir Rozanskij notes that almost 300 parishes from the Russian structure will join the new Church (Rozanskij 2019a:19). In another research, he and another researcher presented that in 2002, Ukraine has 2781 Orthodox Parishes belonging to the Moscow jurisdiction, and it would be interesting to see how many of them will remain at the end of 2019 in case of a future counting (Rozanskij & Zacharova 2019:19). It is mentioned there the fact that:

At least 300 Russian parishes have passed under the new Ukrainian Autocephalous Church. To a first glance we speak there about a still limited percentage: 2, 5% from all the infrastructures of Moscow Patriarchate from Ukraine, if we count also the monasteries, the dioceses and the synod administrations. (Rozanskij 2019a:19)

The same author also speaks about the strategic relevance of ‘Pocyaiv lavra’, both for the Russian belonging structure as for the new-recognised one, about the fact that the attitude of the local believers played a crucial role in the problem and spoke about the fact that, despite all the pressures, there was a peaceful process. At the same time, he insists on the fact that, although they had announced 10 bishops to pass, only two made the step and one went back (Rozanskij 2019a:19). Rokzanskij continues to inform journal’s readers about the situation of the newly established Church. This time, the pretext of his article was constituted by the feast of the Baptism of the Russian people, celebrated each year (Rozanskij 2019b:9). This time, the fear was that one of the bishops belongs to the Russian Patriarchate. Being announced 250–30000 participants from the part of the Kiev local Church, 20000 people finally arrived according to the calculations made by the local police and the event took place in the most peaceful way. In order to prove its consequence in the decision, the Ecumenical Patriarchate sent its representatives to the event (Rozanskij 2019b:9). An important aspect that followed to Constantinople decision and was not ignored by the author of the chronicle or by the two parts was the communication released by the Romanian Patriarchate that is interested in the faith of the Romanian people from this area and wants to have a vicariate there. The one who answered promptly to this request and shows his disponibility to satisfy the Romanian request was the Metropolitan Epiphanyus, the head of the new-recognised Church. He released an official and public letter to the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, hoping that this will bring him

4.‘The recognition of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has long been sought by the Ukrainian Orthodox hierarchs and the country’s politicians, but denied by Russian policy makers’ (Ratajeski 2019a:11).



recognition from this important local Church and will constitute the starting point for future recognitions too. His action not only determined the Russian Patriarchate to get angry but also determined the former head of the Church, Filaret Denysenko, who was ruling till now just left them shortly after the recognition. Therefore, the author note here:

The decision to come into the meeting of the Romanians has generated the irascibility of the 'emeritus' patriarch Filaret, who spoke about the 'sale of the own canonical territory'. As an answer, the Ukrainian Minister of Culture declared the juridical close of his patriarchate, and the pass of his churches to the autocephalous Church. Filaret has contested the decision, but there too is expected a victory of Epiphany. (Rozanskij: 2019b:9)

Shortly after the moment of the recognition from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeev, the head of external communication of Russian Orthodox Patriarchate, hold a conference in 'Manna' Ecumenical Centre from Bary in Italy and also spoke about this problem. His speech was integrally published in a Catholic journal of Italian and Portuguese languages, a fact that proves the interest shown to the problem by the Christians belonging to these traditions. Amongst other aspects, he tried to present the Ukrainian problem as one of the entire Orthodoxy and presented it to the Moscow Patriarchate as a victim of it. He emphasised the fact that:

Today, the Russian Orthodox Church, like the whole Orthodoxy, is experiencing difficult times due to the political and ecclesiastical situation in Ukraine. The bishops and priests of the Ukrainian Canonical Orthodox Church are persecuted for their faith in the ecclesiastical unity; searched, they themselves are threatened, persecuted and deprived of the right of free movement in the country, they try by all means to determine their participation in arbitrary meetings that aim to create an arbitrary structure, broken by the Russian Church, but the bishop, clergy and believers they are steadfast in guarding the ecclesiastical unity, they do not give in to the threats and the 'temptations' of power and the 'rulers of this world of darkness' (Eph. 6:12). (Alfeev 2019:8)

The editor of the journal refused to comment the affirmations of the Russian bishop, but it was easy to see the 'victim' accents and the fact that words like 'persecution' was a keyword of the presentation and that, using rhetorical aspects tried to raise awareness from listeners side. At the same time, a careful reading of his words shows the aspects of political theology (Mallon 2018:4; Shestopalets 2019:43) that can be found on both sides and that was previously presented by the other researchers too.

Journals like *Istina* from Paris dedicated their first number for 2019 to the Tomas of autocephalous church, but they also wrote about the previous and aftermath situations (Editor 2018b:420–434, 2019:242–245). A long chronicle, signed by its editors inside the last number from 2018, presented the situation of the debates, offering a brief presentation of the context, the debates that took place, the decisions of the delegates and the documents released both by Constantinople and Moscow Patriarchate. The last one (Editor 2018b:420–427) contains

not only four resolutions regarding the Ecumenical Patriarchate, namely: stopping of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's liturgical remembrance, stopping the concelebration, the participation of the Russian Church in all episcopal assemblies, theological dialogues and multilateral commissions but also regarding the broad structures presided over or co-chaired by Constantinople and approving the St. Synod's declaration regarding the anticanonicity of the Patriarchal acts in Ukraine (Editor 2018b:421). Historical background of the problem was also presented together with the history of the schisms that took place before in between the two patriarchates and the communities from 11 October 2018 (released by Constantinople) and the one from 15th of October from Minsk (Editor 2018b:427–434).

According to the latest document, the key point of the debate is not constituted by the political aspects, the situation of the two 'un-canonical' churches recognised but by the fact that the Ecumenical Patriarchate pretends to have a privilege and a statute that according to the Russian Synod affect the plenty of Orthodoxy:

Deciding to offer forgiveness to the leaders of the schism and to 'legalise' their hierarchy, the Holy Council of the Constantinopolitan Church refers to the 'canonical privileges of Constantinople Patriarchate' that does not exist, consisting in 'receiving callings from the hierarchs and clerics from all the autocephalic churches.' These pretensions, in the form that they are used today by Constantinople Patriarchate, have never sustained the plenty of Orthodoxy. (Editor 2018b:430)

The same article, structured as a real documentary, which concludes also with a communication of the Assembly of the Orthodox Russian and the other bishops from France, published on 16th of October 2018 (Editor 2018b:434), presents also the opinion of the Orthodoxy from Occident regarding the problem and one of the Russian bishops in diaspora (which decide not to take part anymore to any assembly where the Greek bishops will participate, until the end of the debate).

The same journal published shortly after, in the second number from 2019, another article containing the declaration of Moscow council held in Moscow on 2nd of April 2019 (Editor 2019:242–245).

The bishops from Russian space will not only insist on the political dimension of the debate but also on the fact that, at that moment, no one of the local churches ratified the document and it brings rather an approach based on the interpretation of the historical documents than on the theological arguments. Notable to *Istina's* presentation is the desire for objectivity of the editors. For this reason, they prefer not to realise a narrative presentation of the situation or a critical approach of the episode, but to publish the documents of both sizes and the ones of the Orthodox communities from France, in order to allow the reader to develop its own critics and to achieve the decision that he or she considers appropriate.

The same methodology was also embraced by *Irenikon* journal, edited by the Catholic community of Chevegtone from Belgium. Starting with its 2nd number for 2018 (Editor 2018c:229–281), each one of them contained information and documents regarding the Ukrainian situation. The fact that the journal knew usually a delay explains why there can be found documents regarding the problem from a number that chronologically corresponds to a period when the conflict did not start yet. Here, the official appeal of President Petru Porochenko to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew was summarised (Editor 2018c:274) together with the attitude of the two parts: the description of the activity of the delegations and the critics of Alfeyev regarding the procedure adopted. Next number contained the later documents (Editor 2018d: 394–443), namely the one that finally took to the schism, whilst the last number for 2018 (Editor 2018e:554–614) contained documents published also by *Istina*, namely the official documents that brought the schism together with opinions like the one of the Metropolitan Anthony of Boryspil and Bovary (Editor 2018e:602–603), Head of Communication of Kiev formation of the Orthodox Church subordinated to Moscow.

Therefore, as it can be seen, the Ukrainian autocephaly and the debates that accompanied it have raised the interest of the Ecumenical space and were emphasised in important journals from this area.

## Conclusion

As we have also tried to show it in the present research, the situation of the Ukrainian autocephaly and the aspects that have accompanied it constitute important aspects not only for the Orthodox space but also for the entire Christian one. Because of the fact that it represents a moment of recent history, general and definitive conclusion regarding it would be premature and inadequate. Neither the local Orthodox churches nor the other Christian ones have tried to offer them. Still, there were aspects that generated their curiosity and made them to start writing about this topic and to make it one of the most important events of the Orthodox life after the Pan-Orthodox council of Crete. And they are concerned regarding the way how this new Church can split Orthodoxy and influence the Ecumenical dialogue in the future, because of the fact that any attempt to take a position coming from the Ecumenical space (excepting the avoid of the problem) offends one of the two important parts of the debate, namely the Ecumenical Patriarchate from Constantinople and the Russian one from Moscow.

For this reason, as we could see from the rows above, the WCC and the Ecumenical Movement preferred to keep the distance in this problem and refused to mediatise it or to express their opinions. Most probably, the fear of a Russian withdrawal from WCC or the one to make Constantinople Patriarchate get angry with them played an important role in this aspect. Therefore, the Catholic space looked more interested in this problem than the Protestant ones (probably

also under the influence of the enthusiasm of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church in the foundation of a new Orthodox jurisdiction there). Still, there were also many local communities and theological journals and reviews that have tried to approach the topic and to present its potential outcomes and the way how it can shift the relationships of the Orthodox space with the rest of the Christian world or the ones of the Orthodox communities amongst them.

A potential answer at the question ‘which were the main aspects that determined the ecumenical environment to get interested about the problem?’, there must be mentioned the fact that the problem is on one side a deep theological one that could contribute to the repolarisation of the dialogue with the Orthodox space by creating new poles of influence, but also the fact that it is also a question of geopolitics (the fact that explains the deep implication of Ukrainian politicians in the mediation and their letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch). For these aspects, most of the approaches did not insist so much on the theological and doctrinaire aspects that constitute the background of the problem or on the canonical elements that define it, but rather on the historical background of the topic, pragmatic changes that bring inside the Orthodox world, potential outcomes in case of recognition or the way how such an event makes the Church life to look very similar with the political one.

The wish for objectivity determined also some journals to avoid a critical evaluation of the situation and even a chronicle dedicated to it. Instead of this type of research that could generate protests or debates, journals like *O Odigo* from Bari, *Istina* from Paris or *Irenikon* from Chevegtone preferred to publish the documents released by the protagonist institutions of the debate, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Russian one and the ones of the Orthodox communities from diasporas like the French one and to add only when needed, small marks with explicative value.

As a general conclusion, we can therefore underline the fact that the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, granted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate with the occasion of Epiphany feast in 2019 and yet in process of debate and recognition, was an important event not only for the Orthodox space but also for the ecumenical one, whose consequences are still visible and will most probably also be visible in the near future (and can only be supposed, not predicted). The way how important Christian communities from the Orthodox and Ecumenical area will see it and will contribute to its integration and acceptance or to its rejection will surely shift not only the relationships between the Orthodox communities but also the ones from the Christian space.

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The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

## Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this work.

## Ethical consideration

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## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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