

A father figure. Under the golden domes of Bredgade, a 29-year-old priest from Brønshøj manages to unite both Ukrainian refugees and Russians who believe in Putin.

Russian with a small "r"

His dual identity is hidden in his name: Mikhail Christensen Sukhanov. He was born and raised in Brønshøj to a Danish father and a Russian mother. Today, he is a priest at the renowned Russian Orthodox Church of Alexander Nevsky in Bredgade, Copenhagen. His name belies the fact that he stands almost two meters tall, sports an impressive, full beard, and, at 29, has been given the pious task of uniting Russian and Ukrainian parishioners engulfed by war.

"He's Russian with a small "r" and Orthodox with a capital "O," says Mikhail Sukhanov, sitting in his blue station wagon on his way to visit a family of Ukrainian refugees in a suburb of Aarhus.

Although the church is called the Russian Orthodox Church, Mikhail Sukhanov's church is attended by Ukrainians, Russians, and people of all nationalities. This was never a problem before. It was so for decades, when this church was the only Orthodox church of its kind.

But the outbreak of war in Ukraine left its mark on the entire Orthodox world. In Russia, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, loudly spoke out against the moral decay of the West and supported Putin's invasion. In Kyiv, Zelensky expelled pro-Russian parishioners from holy monasteries, and several Orthodox priests were arrested for spying for Russia.

Now, both extremes of the conflict stand side by side every Sunday under the golden domes of Bredgade and make the sign of the cross. Russians who believe in Putin, Ukrainian refugees, and everyone in between. Before them stands young Mikhail Sukhanov, with his lush reddish-brown hair and a floor-length priestly robe that just covers the shoes he needs to buy at the Giant Shoes specialty store in Glostrup.

Communion in Brabrand

On the ground floor of the social housing building in Brabrand, Lyudmila opens the door. She is a Ukrainian woman of about forty, wearing a checkered shirt, a polka-dot skirt, and a white veil. She lights up when she sees Mikhail Sukhanov and kisses his hand before leading him through the front door, which he has to duck to reach.

She leads him into the living room, where an elderly woman sits on a black leather sofa. She also wears a white scarf, and she gazes with difficulty but expectantly at the great priest as he enters.

In the living room, the wallpaper is white sawdust, and an orange wool rug covers the floor. A large glass table stands against one wall, and in the corner sits a recently purchased plant, still in its Lidl bag. The room smells of perfume and nursing home in equal parts.

The woman on the sofa is Lyudmila's mother, Galina, and they are both refugees from Ukraine. They lived in the Donetsk region, but now their house has been bombed, and they have nowhere to return to. There's black smoke everywhere, as Lyudmila says in hoarse Russian.

Mikhail Sukhanov begins unpacking the large bag he brought with him. He arranges a row of icons of various saints on the glass table and takes out a large Bible. He turns his back to the two Ukrainian women and begins a monotonous mass in Church Slavonic. The women, one sitting, the other standing, cross themselves and repeat the phrases.

Galina developed a blood clot in her brain, leaving her paralyzed on one side of her body. Therefore, she can't go to church. Therefore, the church must come to her.

Even though they are Ukrainian, they are not bothered by the fact that Mikhail Sukhanov is half-Russian and a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church. All that matters to them is that he is Orthodox with a capital "O" and speaks a language they understand.

He gives them the blood and body of Jesus, a piece of bread, and a small glass of wine. Old Lady Galina gratefully accepts them with her healthy hand and downs the wine in one gulp. Mikhail Sukhanov wraps the holy offerings again. He says, "Glory to God" ("Glory to God"). Then he offers his traditional greeting—a silent blessing, meeting the gaze of those present, smiling, blinking long and slightly bowing his head.

Ukrainian Wedge

Caption: "It's Russian with a small "r" and Orthodox with a capital "O," says Mikhail Sukhanov when he has to explain why Ukrainians also go to church.

Photo: Tilda Dössing

A few weeks later, Mikhail Sukhanov greets you in Bredgade with the same smiling wink and firm handshake. The Sunday service has just ended, and the back rooms of the church are filled with the creaking of floorboards and voices speaking different languages. Mikhail Sukhanov finds an empty room with portraits on the walls and a large dark oak table.

"I clearly remember the first time the congregation gathered after the war began," says Mikhail Sukhanov in his calm, deep voice. "There was a very tense atmosphere, and no one said anything."

Most Ukrainians and Russians living here know people who have been hit hard by the conflict, he explains. Many have relatives on both sides of the border, and in the post-war months and years, they experienced firsthand the strength of loving family ties. They escalated into fierce hostility.

Mikhail Sukhanov, always dressed in priestly vestments, also experienced this firsthand. Drunk Ukrainians nearly beat him up in the metro. People shouted insults in the streets. Swastikas were painted on his church in Aarhus and parishioners were evicted.

"This is all based on a misunderstanding," says Mikhail Sukhanov, beginning a long lecture on the history of theology.

The Alexander Nevsky Church, built in 1883, was for many decades the only Orthodox church in Denmark. Regardless of whether you were Greek, Bulgarian, or Serbian, you came here if you were Orthodox.

This isn't usually a problem, since although there are Greek, Bulgarian, and Russian Orthodox Churches, they all profess the same theology. The difference lies in the language the priest speaks and the religious authority to which he belongs.

If Mikhail Sukhanov and his church have come under fire after the war in Ukraine, it was due to a series of statements by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, who supports Russia's war in Ukraine.

Mikhail Sukhanov disagrees with this point of view, and he isn't obligated to. "People mistakenly believe that we are dictatorially ruled from Moscow. More likely, we are dictatorially ruled from New York," laughs Mikhail Sukhanov.

When the church in Bredgade was built, it originally belonged to the Moscow Patriarchate. But after the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Orthodox Church was suppressed, and so the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia created its own ecclesiastical structure with the convenient name: the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. It is headed by a Synod in New York.

Therefore, Mikhail Sukhanov can afford to speak out against the war, which he has also stated in several sermons. "War is the result of human sinfulness, and the Church can in no way accept it. Therefore, we must pray that God will soften the hardened hearts of both sides," says Mikhail Sukhanov.

Theological Twisting

However, things are not that simple. Although Mikhail Sukhanov knows Bible passages by heart and can perfectly reproduce Plato's epistemology, he immediately becomes more hesitant when it comes to the background of the war.

He is certainly against the war, but he can't bring himself to publicly condemn Putin. "It's difficult to judge people. Be it Zelensky, Putin, Trump, or Obama—I don't know them. I know they do things I may not agree with, but I cannot judge the person themselves. It contradicts my faith," he says.

This also applies to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus'. Although the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia still has its own structure, it reunited with the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007.

This means that theological communication has been restored, and Mikhail Sukhanov commemorates Kirill repeatedly during every service. Several Russian Orthodox Churches in the West have publicly criticized the Patriarch of Moscow, but Mikhail Sukhanov cannot bring himself to do so.

"Yes, he said several things that deserve criticism. But we must remember that he has to care for several million Orthodox Christians, as well as maintain a mask before the state," he says, emphasizing that the patriarch cannot speak freely under Putin.

He also laments the arrest of priests and bishops with ties to Moscow in Ukraine, believing it to be based on a misunderstanding.

"People are outraged that Ukrainian priests commemorate Kirill, but they did so long before the war. We must remember the local patriarch, otherwise we will lose what makes us Orthodox Christians. This is a spiritual issue that has nothing to do with national loyalty," says Mikhail Sukhanov.

Unmentioned

In the back rooms of the church, a hungry crowd has gathered, preparing for their first meal after a 24-hour fast, typical for Orthodox Christians, who ideally fast for half the days of the year.

One of them is Nikolai Petterson, who has just removed his golden robe after attending the service. The 27-year-old data analyst from Novo Nordisk sits down next to him and, with a Lenten air, explains that he, too, is Danish and Russian and has been a churchgoer all his life.

He looks at him, frowning slightly, when asked how the war has affected the parishioners. "Here, Christ is above all," he says, unable to recall a single conflict in the church since the war began.

When asked about Patriarch Kirill's statements and Nikolai Petterson's own position on the war, the data analyst pauses for a long moment, staring tensely into the air: "I don't really understand it, so I won't comment on it." On the other hand, some people remember the conflicts within the church well, such as Ukrainians Valeria Bondarenko and Viktor Lakodenko. They are housed in the basement, which also houses party rooms and a children's playroom.

"In the first year after the war, we didn't participate in any social events. We'd come to services and then go home. We also had Ukrainian friends who stopped going to church altogether," says Valeria Bondarenko in fluent Danish, offering a cup of sweet tea.

In 2009, she and her husband came to Denmark for an agricultural internship, where they met and fell in love. They settled down, had three children, and have been attending church in Bredgade ever since. So, watching the war that erupted in our homeland on a television screen from Denmark was surreal.

"It's so hard that we can't visit our relatives," says Valeria Bondarenko, whose family lives in Kherson, just 40 kilometers from the fighting. She apologizes, wiping away tears.

A fair-haired boy with a silver cross around his neck and a plastic Christmas tree in his hands runs in from the playroom. He throws himself into the arms of his mother, who explains that playing together in church with Russian and Ukrainian children was also difficult.

"They have no filter, so I had to teach them not to tease each other about whose side they were on in the war," she says.

The adults' strategy was simply not to talk about it, explains Viktor Lakodenko, comparing it to political disagreements in a family. It's easier to pretend it doesn't exist.

The couple's Ukrainian friends decided to leave the church because of its ties to the Moscow Patriarchate and the political line of Patriarch Kirill. Victor and Valeria understand this, but for them, Christ always comes first.

"We're used to coming to this church, and that's the only thing we know. We don't come here for Patriarch Kirill, and we can ignore his statements because we put God above nationalism. Some Russians could learn a lesson from this," says Valeria Bondarenko.

Caption: Mikhail Sukhanov not only serves as a father to the entire community, but also finds time to be a father to his four children. Photo: Tilda Dössing

The Role of a Troll

Mikhail Sukhanov rests his large forearms on the oak table and folds his hands. Recently, a middle-aged man wrote to him on Facebook. He wanted to join the church because he was a big fan of Putin. "I wrote that he made a mistake and advised him to join a political party," says Mikhail Sukhanov.

"For Orthodox Christians, political issues are relative." The Church existed 2,000 years before Putin, and I hope it will exist for many thousands more. The only legitimate reason to become Orthodox is the pursuit of eternal life."

The young priest always becomes very skeptical when politics and religion mix, he explains, pointing to a portrait behind him.

"That's Esbern Trolle. Without him, we wouldn't be sitting here today," he says. Esbern Trolle was a Supreme Court lawyer who, after parishioners lost their case in both the city and high courts, intervened and saved the church in Bredgade from falling into Soviet hands in 1925.

The Alexander Nevsky Church was built with the support of the Russian tsarist regime, as the then Danish princess Dagmar converted to Orthodoxy after her marriage to Tsar Alexander III.

Therefore, Mikhail Sukhanov believes the royal house was complicit in this game at the time, as Empress Dagmar was the aunt of the then King Christian X. He speculates that the king personally knew Esbern Trolle and recommended him to the parishioners.

In any case, the church in Bredgade and the Royal Palace maintained a close relationship over the years, and when the church underwent major renovations in 2009, it was generously supported by the Queen Margrethe and Prince Henrik Foundation.

Therefore, Mikhail Sukhanov also sent a letter to the Court Marshal's Office inviting him to the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Supreme Court victory, which would take place in October. Much to his disappointment, they responded with a curt and cold refusal. "It's probably because of the times," says Mikhail Sukhanov.

Caption: "For Orthodox Christians, political issues are a matter of chance. The Church existed 2,000 years before Putin and, hopefully, will continue to exist for many thousands more," says Mikhail Sukhanov. Photo: Tilde Dössing