

Moscow's harsh reaction to Ukraine's expected autocephaly

Jadwiga Rogoża

On 14 September, the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) suspended its working relations with Constantinople in response to the Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew despatching bishop-exarchs to Ukraine who will make preparations to grant the Ukrainian Orthodox Church autocephaly (clerical independence). The Moscow Patriarchate has suspended its joint participation in the liturgy with the representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople as well as the ROC's participation in episcopal assemblies and all other structures which are co-chaired by representatives of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and withdrawn from the remembrance of Patriarch Bartholomew's name in its prayers. In a harshly-worded statement the Synod accused Constantinople of violating the canons of the church, and maintained its position that the subordination of the metropolis of Kiev to the Patriarchate of Moscow is historically justified.

The Moscow Synod's actions have been accompanied by a broad propaganda campaign, in which bishops have been supported by Russian journalists and political scientists. Metropolitan Hilarion, the head of diplomacy for the Russian Orthodox Church, has said that the decisions taken by the Synod of Moscow represent the Church's equivalent of breaking diplomatic relations. He portrayed a disastrous vision in which 'schismatics' are preparing for 'full-scale war' against the sole canonical Orthodox church in Ukraine, and will deprive it of its official status and property. The Metropolitan warned that attempts to seize Ukrainian churches belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Moscow will lead to bloodshed. The Patriarchate of Moscow has begun a diplomatic offensive, asking for support from canonical Orthodox churches in its dispute with Constantinople.

In Ukraine there are now three Orthodox Churches: the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Moscow (UOC, which has 52 dioceses and 12,000 parishes) and two non-canonical churches, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Kiev (UOC-PK, with 35 dioceses and 5000 parishes), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC, with 14 dioceses and 1000 parishes). [For more see Tadeusz Olszański, '[The fight for canonical independence for Ukrainian Orthodoxy](#)']. The efforts by the Ukrainian authorities and the UOC-PK to be granted a *tomos* – a decree from the Patriarch of Constantinople, the highest authority of the Orthodox churches (the ecumenical patriarch) granting Ukrainian orthodoxy autocephaly – have lasted for nearly three decades, although this year they have started to bring results. On 19 April the Ukrainian parliament, followed on 22 April by President Petro Poroshenko, supported the request for the *tomos* which the UOC-PK and the UAOC had previously lodged with the Patriarch of Constantinople. As a consequence, on 7 September Constantinople sent two emissaries (exarchs) to Ukraine, whose task is to undertake preparations for the creation of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

Commentary

- During its next synod in the first half of October, the Church of Constantinople is expected to take the formal decision to grant Ukraine autocephaly; according to the exarchs dispatched to Ukraine, this decision is already a foregone conclusion. The position of Constantinople was influenced both by the changes which occurred within the three Orthodox Churches existing in Ukraine after the Russian annexation of Crimea and the military intervention in the Donbas, as well as the tension between the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew II and Cyril, Patriarch of Moscow, as demonstrated (among other ways) by the ROC's boycott of the all-Orthodox council organised by Constantinople in 2016.
- For Russia, Constantinople's move to favour Kiev's attempts to win autocephaly heightens the risk of 'losing Ukraine' in yet another dimension – the religious. For the Russian Orthodox Church, this will mean the loss of some of its Ukrainian parishes, and thus the loss of the position as the largest Orthodox autocephalous church in the world, which will weaken its aspirations to lead world Orthodoxy and will deplete its income. Ukrainian autocephaly also poses an essential challenge for the Kremlin because its tool of leverage over Ukraine – the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate – will be weakened, and eventually lost. In the long term, Kiev's religious emancipation will face Moscow with the further shrinking of its influence in Ukraine, which Moscow sees as a key part of Russia's area of domination.
- Russia's mass propaganda campaign in response to the actions of Patriarch Bartholomew is intended to show Constantinople what the disastrous consequences of granting Kiev the *tomos* will be. Hierarchs of the church and pro-Kremlin publicists are warning of another great schism in world Orthodoxy, and of religious war and bloodshed in the fight for religious property in Ukraine. They have been referring to Patriarch Bartholomew as a heretic and schismatic. The split in the Orthodox world is being presented as an element – and, at the same time, as a consequence – of Russia's conflict with the West, in which Ukraine is being used to mount a political attack on Russia. In its dispute with Constantinople, the Patriarchate of Moscow's diplomats have been seeking support from Canonical Orthodox churches around the world, but so far they have only won the support of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Kremlin's officials have so far maintained silence, which may indicate that they see the granting of the *tomos* as a foregone conclusion, and at this stage do not want to involve their authority in a lost cause. However, after the decision by Constantinople, Russian politicians are likely to join in the propaganda campaign, by condemning the 'split in Orthodoxy' and rehearsing all the controversies and incidents, associated in particular with the takeover of church property.
- Moscow may take advantage of the 'religious war' with Kiev, as pictured by the Kremlin's propaganda machine, to consolidate Russian society around the Kremlin and the Patriarchate of Moscow, who will be presented as the defenders of canonical Orthodoxy from the political designs of the West. Russian society's broad identification with Orthodox Christianity (albeit largely cultural), and at the same time its hazy knowledge of Orthodox doctrine, mean that the public may indeed be prone to such manipulation.

Although around 75% of the Russian population declare themselves to be Orthodox, only 2-5% regularly participate in the life of the Church and receive the sacraments (according to data from several opinion polls conducted by Levada in 2012). We may expect that Russian propaganda will seek to divert the Russian people's attention from their internal problems by exposing or even fabricating images of violence associated with the conflict within Orthodoxy in Ukraine.

Jadwiga Rogoża, in collaboration with Tadeusz Iwański, Witold Rodkiewicz