

Relations severed between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople: the prospect of a new schism

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On 15 October, the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) decided to sever relations and eucharistic communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (PC). This decision is a reaction to the decision by the Synod of Bishops of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which on 11 October annulled its decision of 1686 to transfer the metropolis of Kiev to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, and confirmed that it would continue to work for the establishment of an autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine. In a special statement, the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church said that “the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople has hypocritically, by its reckless and politically motivated decisions, introduced even greater division and deepened the suffering of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church”.

The decision by the Synod of the Russian Church means in practice that the faithful and clergy of the ROC will not be able to participate in the sacraments together with the clergy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Synod of the ROC in Minsk has also called upon other Orthodox Churches to make a “proper assessment” of the activities of Constantinople. The actions of the Synod have been accompanied by an intense propaganda campaign in the Russian media, in which the bishops of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople are referred to as ‘schismatics’ and accused of succumbing to American political influence.

In Ukraine, the report about the breaking of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)’s eucharistic unity with Constantinople was commented on by important politicians and clergymen. The speaker of the Ukrainian parliament Andriy Parubiy stressed that in this way “the Kremlin has initiated an international religious conflict between Orthodox churches”. Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin called the ROC “schismatics”. From among the clergy, spokesmen for the two branches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church made statements. Archbishop Eustratius, a spokesman for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kiev Patriarchate, said that this decision confronts the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with the dilemma of whether to deepen the division within world Orthodoxy by joining the Russian Orthodox Church, or whether to remain in union with it through the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In turn, Archbishop Clement, the head of the informational-educational branch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate, said that the actions of Constantinople are “an annexation of the territories of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, comparable to the annexation of Crimea”.

Clement called for the convening of a meeting of autocephalous Orthodox Churches to discuss Constantinople's decision, while recognising that the RCP has a moral and canonical right to suspend relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Commentary

- The decision by the synod in Minsk is a reaction to the provisions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople of 11 October, which has opened the way for the establishment of an autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine. The adoption of these provisions means failure for the ROC, as it will lead to a number of adverse consequences, such as loss of control over a significant part of Ukraine's parishes and the revenues flowing from them, and above all, the loss of its position as the largest Orthodox Church in the world, and hence the prestige which comes from that (over a third of all the parishes subordinate to Moscow are found in Ukraine). The appearance of a church in Ukraine which is recognised in the Orthodox world but independent of Moscow will also be a blow to the Russian government. Evidence of this includes the fact that on 12 October the issue of the Ukrainian Church's autocephaly was discussed at a meeting of the Russian Security Council. The Kremlin is aware that it is losing the instrument to influence Ukrainian society which the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate had hitherto been. Realising the failure, the official representatives of the Russian authorities have exercised restraint in commenting on the provisions of the synod; the president's spokesman Dmitry Peskov limited his remarks to expressing concern and the hope that the interests of the Russian Orthodox church would be respected.
- By breaking ties with the Patriarchate of Constantinople, the RCP wants to put pressure on the Patriarch of Constantinople by blackmailing him with the possibility of a split in the Orthodox world and the prospect of isolation. Moscow wants to saddle Patriarch of Constantinople with the blame for the split, and is counting on support from other canonical Orthodox Churches (see Annex). To judge from the media coming out of Moscow, we may conclude that Russia is not sure of obtaining such support. The main Russian TV station *Piervy Kanal* has expressed the belief that most churches will sympathise with Constantinople and the Patriarchate of Moscow will find itself in the minority, with the reservation that this will be a relative minority, because the Russian Orthodox is equal in size to the number of believers gathered in all the world's other Orthodox Churches. The choice of Minsk as the location for the announcement of the ROC's decision is also intended to emphasise that the territory of the canonical Church covers not only Russia, but also the other areas which once belonged to historical 'Holy Rus'.
- The decision by the Russian Orthodox Church to break the unity of the eucharist will probably increase the number of the Moscow Patriarchate's bishops in Ukraine, as they will join the new Ukrainian Orthodox Church after the *tomos* is obtained. The new body will probably be created after the synod of unification, which is expected to convene towards the end of this year. The process of unifying the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine will likely cause social conflicts in Ukraine. We may expect that Moscow will try to exploit these tensions to build its own narrative about Ukraine as a 'fallen state' which is unable to ensure stability on its territory and will thus hinder the process of unification. It

remains possible that the Russian authorities, by using the instruments available to them (propaganda, activating the clergy and activists of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate), will deliberately provoke such conflicts: street protests, disputes over church property and places of worship. Moscow is already using pro-Kremlin media to prove that Ukrainian autocephaly has a political context: media manipulations portray Patriarch Filaret as an adherent of extreme nationalism.

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Annex

The reactions of the Orthodox Churches in the Balkans and Georgia

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church has not taken an official position on the emancipation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Traditionally, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has been oriented towards Russian Orthodoxy and has not maintained contacts with non-canonical Orthodox churches in Ukraine. However, in the face of the intensifying dispute over the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, there has been friction within the Bulgarian Orthodox Church between the strongly pro-Russian and the more moderate factions, the latter including the Bulgarian Patriarch Neophyt. Most of the hierarchy wish to avoid taking a firm position in the dispute between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Patriarchate of Moscow, because it desires to maintain good relations with the government of Bulgaria. Deputy PM Valeri Simeonov has supported Ukraine's attempts to obtain autocephaly, and has criticised the attitude of Russia and the Moscow Patriarchate, stating that it will lead to destabilisation and internal schisms in Ukraine.

The Romanian Orthodox Church has not taken an official position on the emancipation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. However, we should expect that it will come down on the side of Constantinople, with which it has traditionally had a very good relationship. Relations between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church have been traditionally complicated by rivalry for influence in the Republic of Moldova, in which the dominant role is played by the Moldovan Orthodox Church, subordinate to Moscow. The Bessarabian Metropole, which operates in the same area but is associated with Bucharest, is currently of only marginal importance. Because of these problems in the relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Moscow Patriarchate, the first meeting of the Patriarchs after the fall of Communism only took place in 2017.

Moscow's position is unequivocally supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which has accused Patriarch Bartholomew of deepening divisions in the Orthodox Church and in Ukraine. The position of the Serbian Patriarchate stems not only from its close cooperation with Moscow, but also its fears of the rise of other independent churches in Montenegro, Macedonia and Croatia. The SCP has repeatedly criticised ethnophiletism (i.e. the tendency to cause divisions in the Church along ethnic lines), and is of the opinion that the Patriarch of Constantinople has no right to grant autocephaly without the consent of the other Orthodox Churches.

The process of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's emancipation is being followed with particular attention by the non-canonical Orthodox churches in Macedonia and Montenegro. These bodies' hierarchs are hoping that the award of the *tomos* to the Ukrainian Orthodox church will increase the chances of normalising their own status within the Orthodox community. The Macedonian Orthodox Church split from the Serbian Patriarchate in 1967, and is not recognised by any other Orthodox Church. In 2017 the Bulgarian Patriarchate offered to assist the Macedonian Orthodox Church in obtaining canonical status. However, the Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew, who is of Greek origin, rejected the possibility of recognising the Orthodox church under its present name because of the dispute between the Greek and Macedonian governments over the constitutional name of Macedonia. The non-canonical Montenegrin Orthodox Church was established in 1993 by Metropolitan Michael and Montenegrin national activists. It is of only marginal importance and has a small number of followers (around 50,000), and is supported only by other non-canonical Orthodox churches (including that of Ukraine). In Montenegro, the strongest religious institution by far is the Serbian Orthodox Church, which the authorities in Podgorica have accused of acting against the interests of the state of Montenegro.

The Greek Orthodox Church has not announced its official position on the granting of autocephaly to the Ukrainian Church. It has adopted a wait-and-see attitude, refusing direct consultations on the matter of Ukraine and the ROC. One might assume its position to be somewhat sceptical, however, on the basis of the declarations by some of its hierarchs, as well as the fact that at the beginning of October the head of the Greek Orthodox Church, Hieronymus II, refused to meet Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, who was visiting Greece at the time.

The Georgian Orthodox Church will decide upon its position during a holy synod which will take place 'in the very near future'. From media reports, it is clear that there are deep divisions among the hierarchs; some of them, more Western-oriented, support Constantinople, others Moscow. In this situation, any compromise will be an achievement for Patriarch Elias II (the hierarch, aged almost 86, enjoys great authority with most Georgians). It must be recalled that the Russian Orthodox Church recognises Abkhazia and South Ossetia as its canonical territory. There are fears that if the Georgian church supports the independence of the Kiev metropole, this may lead to the incorporation of the Orthodox structures of both territories into the Moscow Patriarchate, and possibly Moscow granting autocephaly to Abkhazia, which has been demanded by the latter's religious leaders.