



Russian – Ukrainian Regional Conflict Seemingly Pervades Spiritual Plane

OE Watch Commentary: Within the framework of the ongoing regional conflict with Russia, the Ukrainian government recently achieved a long sought-after goal regarding the Ukrainian Orthodox Church: Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople (“first among equals” in the Eastern Orthodox faith) took the first step in formally granting autocephaly (independence) to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which had operated under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church since 1686.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church has been divided within three distinct groups since the end of the Cold War, the largest of which remained under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate (the Russian Orthodox Church). In some regions within the far west of Ukraine, the Uniate or “Greek Catholic” Church, not the Orthodox Church, still predominates; however, the overriding majority of Ukrainians belong to the Orthodox Church. The Ecumenical Patriarchate, in conjunction with the announcement of the granting of autocephaly, also openly declared its wishes that the parties involved do not resort to physical or any other retaliatory acts in the aftermath of its announcement. The Russian Orthodox Church then formally severed ties with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, causing what could be the largest schism in the church since 1054.

The Russian Orthodox Church maintains close ties with the Russian government. President Putin regularly showcases the connectivity between the spiritual and the secular in modern Russia and the Russian Ministry of Defense has announced plans to build what will be the world’s third tallest Orthodox Cathedral in Moscow, dedicated to the armed forces. This follows the announcement almost 10 years ago, by then-President Medvedev, of the introduction of the military position of chaplain within the Russian armed forces.

As the Ukrainian government continues to consolidate this recent spiritual step forward – President Poroshenko and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew signed an agreement on cooperation and coordination in Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) on 4 November – other national Orthodox churches have voiced opinions on the granting of autocephaly to Ukraine. The Serbian Orthodox Church (having its own issues with the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which unilaterally announced its independence from the Serbian Church in 1967) openly opposed Constantinople’s decision to grant Ukraine autocephaly in mid-October. According to the accompanying excerpted article, the Serbian Orthodox Church also noted its disagreement with the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s decision to rehabilitate the religious leaders of the two Ukrainian Orthodox groups not under the Moscow Patriarchate’s jurisdiction. This is important to note as the Serbian government continues to increase its security cooperation with Russia. **End OE Watch Commentary (Sarafian)**

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Petro Poroshenko and Patriarch Bartholomew sign an agreement “On cooperation and interaction between Ukraine and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.”

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Source: “Сербская православная церковь не признала решение Константинополя по Украине (The Serbian Orthodox Church did not recognize the decision by Constantinople on Ukraine),” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 12 November 2018. <https://kp.ua/politics/622498-serbskaia-pravoslavnaia-tserkov-ne-pryznala-reshenye-konstantynopolia-po-ukrayne>

The Serbian Orthodox Church did not recognize Constantinople’s decision on Ukraine.

... the (Serbian Orthodox Bishops’) Council regrets that the Patriarchate of Constantinople made a canonically unfounded decision to rehabilitate and recognize the two leaders of the Ukrainian splinter groups (the leaders of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church)

This was preceded by a synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (of Constantinople), which took place on 11 October... the synod supported the provision of autocephaly for the Ukrainian church... Meanwhile, the Russian Orthodox Church announced the complete cessation of Eucharistic communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople.