

MOSCOW AND GREEK ORTHODOX PATRIARCHATES: TWO ACTORS FOR THE LEADERSHIP OF WORLD ORTHODOXY IN THE POST COLD WAR ERA

The Moscow Patriarchate and the Istanbul Greek Orthodox Patriarchate are both transnational actors that have a claim of leadership over World Orthodoxy. The Post-Soviet era brought new challenges to both churches and specific goals: to maintain the integrity of their canonical territory and to gain influence within the Orthodox Church. This article examines the uneasy relation of Istanbul and Moscow under the leadership of two dynamic church leaders Bartholomeos I and Alexei II with special reference to the crisis over Estonia and Ukraine.

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Patriarch Alexei II of Moscow and all Russia died on 5 December 2008. He headed the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) for 18 years at a difficult time in its history as it managed the transition from a semi-official but restricted church in an atheist state to a semi-official church in a half reformed, unsettled post-imperial state.¹ The revival of the ROC however was accompanied by the new nationalist church movements in the near neighborhood of Russia. The newly independent countries of the ex-Eastern bloc turned to the Istanbul Greek Orthodox Patriarchate (IGOP) under the dynamic leadership of Patriarch Bartholomeos I, for recognition of their national churches. The challenges of the post-Cold War era pulled the two churches into serious rivalry for broadening their influence over the local Orthodox churches. While both churches paid lip service to the Orthodox unity, several serious clashes undermined any prospect of Orthodox reconciliation.

Historical Background

In the post-Cold War period, Moscow and Istanbul Patriarchates emerged as two centers of power in the Orthodox World. The rivalry between the two Patriarchates was not new but rather historical. After the fall of Byzantium (New Rome) to the Muslim Ottomans, Moscow considered itself the “Third Rome” – the guide, guardian and representative of the whole Orthodox community.² Moscow became an autocephalous patriarchate in 1589. Thus, the Russian Church remained for almost 400 years, the only Orthodox Church in a state ruled by a monarch of the Orthodox faith. The Russian Church is numerically dominant, but in the canonical hierarchy, Moscow Patriarchate is fifth whereas the “Ecumenical Patriarchate” of Istanbul is in first position. The interpretation of this hierarchy is a point of discord between the two churches. It is not at all clear just what primatial rights the Ecumenical Patriarch enjoys, but the Phanar certainly claims four rights at least:

1. The Patriarch had the right to establish a court of final appeal for any case from anywhere in the Orthodox world.
2. The Patriarch had the exclusive right to summon the other Patriarchs and heads of Autocephalous Churches to a joint meeting of all of them.
3. The Patriarch has jurisdiction, ecclesiastical authority over Orthodox Christians who are outside the territory of the local Orthodox Churches, the so-called diaspora.
4. No new “Autocephalous” Church can come into being without the consent of the Patriarch of Constantinople; this consent should express the consensus of the local Orthodox Churches.³

¹ Felix Corley, “Patriarch Alexy II: Priest who stayed close to the Kremlin while guiding the Russian Orthodox Church into the post-Soviet era”, *The Independent*, 6 December 2008.

² Alicja Curanovic, “The Attitude of the Moscow Patriarchate towards other Orthodox Churches”, *Religion, State & Society*, Vol. 35, No. 4, December 2007, p. 306.

³ Serge Keleher, “Orthodox Rivalry in the Twentieth Century: Moscow versus Constantinople”, *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1997, p. 125-137.

Meanwhile, from the point of view of the ROC, the Ecumenical Patriarch does not have the right to govern other local churches. Only under special circumstances, when a church cannot act independently is Constantinople entitled, even obliged, to help other churches and is allowed to stand in defense of the existing canon law on its own initiative; but it must not violate the rights of others.⁴ The ecumenical character of the Patriarchate was contested by Moscow, arguing that it was justified only in the Byzantine Empire.⁵ While the primate of Istanbul Patriarchate is considered *primus inter pares* in the church hierarchy, the Russian Church insists that the title was given because of the political centrality of the *City* at the time. Now these conditions simply do not exist, and Istanbul has jurisdiction over only a few thousand Greeks in Turkey and in the diaspora communities.

Conditions for the Post Cold War Rivalry between Two Churches

As the newly independent states of the ex-Soviet Union built their own nation-states, they looked for the blessing of Istanbul for their independent churches. IGOP was chosen by these nations because it cannot establish a hegemony like Moscow as its power center is in Istanbul and not in any of the Orthodox countries. Moreover, it has the international prestige and the support of the United States and the European Union. The West supported the IGOP in order to contain the influence of Russia during the transition period of the newly independent states of the communist bloc. The IGOP, proving to be sympathetic to these claims was accused by the Moscow Church of “trying to become the center of pan-Orthodox power.”⁶ During that period of rapid change, Bartholomeos played the role of *primus inter pares* and coordinator between the Orthodox Churches. The separation process of the national churches from the Russian Church’s jurisdiction opened the horizon of an extended power area for the IGOP. Thus the inter-Patriarchal rivalry has concentrated on three issues: jurisdiction, mediation in Orthodox disputes, and representing Orthodoxy in international arena.

The Moscow Patriarchate under the dynamic leadership of Patriarch Alexy II, became a main supporter of ethnic Russians and historic Russian interests in Estonia, Ukraine, and the rest of “near abroad” of the former Soviet Union. The orthodox vision of the Moscow Church, compared to IGOP, was more traditionalist, nationalist, even, reactionary.⁷ Nationalist awakening in the newly independent countries has drawn the Russian Church into conflicts with them. The examples of Ukraine and Estonia are illustrative of the rivalry between Moscow and Istanbul.

⁴ Znosko, 1973, Part 2, p. 126-27 cited in Curanovic, *art. cit.* p. 306.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ www.hri.org/news/greek/ana/1996/96-03-30.ana.html

⁷ Alexander Webster, “Split decision: The Orthodox Clash over Estonia”, *Christian Century*, Vol. 113, No. 19, p. 614.

The Problem of Estonia

At the end of the World War I significant changes happened in the structures of the Orthodox Church. On the western borders of what was then the Soviet Union, in the newly born republics of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the Orthodox minorities established themselves as autonomous churches. The first three joined the jurisdiction of Constantinople, and the Lithuanian diocese remained nominally under Moscow. In 1993, two years after Estonia gained independence from the USSR, 54 of the 83 Orthodox parishes in Estonia formally request to join the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate in Istanbul under the name of Autonomous Church of Estonia that represented the pre-war autonomous Estonian Orthodox Church. These 54 parishes, a majority in number, represent the minority of the Orthodox believers in the country, however a majority of ethnic Estonians. In 1995, distancing itself from Moscow, the Estonian government registered the formerly exiled Estonian Church as the “Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church”.⁸ The move was strategic, as this had been the legal name of the single Soviet era Orthodox Church in Estonia, which had belonged to the Moscow Patriarchate. Politically, the significance was that the exiled church had been officially recognized by the Estonian “nation”. The technical implication was that the exiled church now owned all Russian Orthodox Church property in Estonia. Furthermore, the newly recognized national church of Estonia was tax exempt, while, the Estonian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate was liable to high taxes.

This request for autonomy was supported by Bartholomeos I, who thought that it was Stalin who forced the Estonian Church to come under the jurisdiction of Moscow. Therefore after the independence they had right to separate from the Russian Church. On the issue of the separation of the churches, bilateral negotiations between Moscow and Phanar drove nowhere and bilateral relations severed. By late February 1996, the GOP expressed its desire to “reactivate” the Autonomous Estonian Apostolic Church on the basis of the tome or decision of the Ecumenical Patriarch in 1923.⁹ However, this move was interpreted as a challenge to the authority of the Russian Patriarchate which was even not consulted on this issue. In an official statement the Moscow Patriarch accused the IGOP of “violating all basic canonical rules existing in the Orthodox world by invasion into the territory of another local Orthodox Church.”¹⁰ Relations between the two patriarchates

⁸ Andrew Evans, “Forced Miracles: The Russian Orthodox Church and Post Soviet International Relations”, *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 33-43, 36.

⁹ Alexander Webster, *art. cit.*

¹⁰ “The Orthodox Church in Estonia: Chronology of a Divided Community”, *Syndesmos*, 23 February 1996.

had come to a serious rift in 1996 when Patriarch Alexy II deliberately moved to exclude, for the first time ever, reference to the ecumenical Patriarch's name during mass.¹¹ A compromise was reached soon, allowing each orthodox parish to be free to align with either Istanbul or Moscow during the interim. However, the property issue could not be solved. Moreover, the canonical status of the two churches in Estonia could not be dealt with. The division of the Estonian Orthodox in two rival churches endangered the new orthodox unity vividly supported by Patriarch Bartholomeos. Alexei II boycotted all forums in which the Autonomous Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Constantinople is officially represented.¹²

Moscow sees the Estonian issue as a move to curtail the rights of ethnic Russians and an overt example of discrimination against the Russian minority. The problem of rights of the tiny Russian orthodox minority in Estonia was only a small part of a greater puzzle. The battle between the two churches over Estonia is a side shadow of a greater war over Ukraine and ultimately for the primacy of the Orthodox Churches. Indeed from the Estonian point of view the move was an obvious retaliation against Russification and Soviet occupation. For Moscow, Estonia is as part of a larger conspiracy theory, "a rehearsal for a plan to divide the Russian Church and separate the Kiev metropolis from the Moscow Patriarchate."¹³

Discontent over the Ukrainian Issue

Ukraine has become the major battlefield between Moscow and the IGOP in the post cold war period over the subject of jurisdiction, and consequently the primacy within the Orthodox world. Ukraine has the most complicated religious scene in the Orthodox world. The most powerful institution is still the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. However, Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kiev Patriarchate claim to be the true and purely Ukrainian national churches of the country. Ukraine is by far the most important country for Russia in its near abroad. A large Russian ethnic mass is located in Ukraine out of a population of 48 million.¹⁴ Ukraine is also an important actor for the security of Russia and Europe, and has a great economic potential with its resources.¹⁵ For the Moscow Patriarchate, it represents the biggest Orthodox population after Russia. Modern day Ukraine covers the central parts of old "Kievan Rus" which became the cradle of orthodox Christianity in Russia with the baptism of the people of Kiev in 988. For this reason, claims the Moscow Patriarchate, Orthodox Ukraine is an

¹¹ www.hri.org/news/greek/ana/1996/96-03-30.ana.html

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Interfax*, 2 November 2000.

¹⁴ According to the results of the 2001 survey eight million Russians live in Ukraine. This number represents 17 percent of the population.

¹⁵ Ian Bremmer, "The Politics of Ethnicity: Russians in the New Ukraine", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 1994, pp. 261-283, 262.

inseparable part of the Russian Church.¹⁶ Moreover, two thirds of the parishes belonging to the Russian Patriarchate are located in Ukraine.¹⁷ For IGOP, a say over the Orthodox in Ukraine would be essential for its prestige and authority as the leader of all Orthodox in the world. However, this is a delicate issue. The large mass of the Orthodox in the country are under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. According to the canonical rules there can be no more than one canonical church over a territory. Thus a hasty decision for recognition may create a major schism between two major churches of the Orthodox world. Therefore, Istanbul tries to conduct a wise foreign policy that avoids any decision that would alienate Moscow.

President Kravchuk of Ukraine made a personal appeal to Patriarch Bartholomeos for recognition of the Ukrainian ecclesiastical autocephaly but received no positive response.¹⁸ Leonid Kuchma, elected president in July 1994, adopted a more neutral policy. In 1995, the Moscow Patriarchate was alarmed by Bartholomeos' decision to take under its jurisdiction two Orthodox Churches located outside the country: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church of North and South America and the diaspora. The Moscow Patriarchate also reacted negatively to meetings between Bartholomeos and Ukrainian politicians connected with the UOC-KP, nor did the visit of the Patriarch in 1997 contribute to an improvement in inter-church relations. Moscow supports reunification of the Orthodox Churches only under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. If the Ukrainian Orthodox Church becomes autocephalous without the consent of Moscow, the latter will cede its base to the IGOP. However, because there cannot be two canonical churches in one territory if Patriarch Bartholomeos united and recognized both UOC-KP and UAOC this could be problematic. This process of the coming together of Ukraine's Orthodox Churches and their eventual autocephaly is unlikely to happen without further conflict between Kyiv and Moscow and between Moscow and Istanbul.

Mistrust between the two Patriarchates has increased since the Orange Revolution. After his victory Victor Yushenko, supported by the uncanonical churches, announced the creation of a united Ukrainian Orthodox Church as one of the priorities of his policy. The new president ordered that steps be taken to bring about dialogue between the jurisdictions. As soon as he took the power, the new president of Ukraine, Victor Yushenko, asked support from Patriarch Bartholomeos, for a united independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church.¹⁹ During the celebrations of the 1020th anniversary of Russia's Baptism in Kiev,

¹⁶ Gerd Stricker, "On a Delicate Mission: Pope Jean Paul II in Ukraine", *Religion, State & Society*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2001, pp. 216-225, 216.

¹⁷ Taras Kuzion, "In Search of Unity and Autocephaly: Ukraine's Orthodox Churches", *Religion, State & Society*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 1997, pp. 393-415, 415.

¹⁸ Myroslaw Tataryn, "Russia and Ukraine: Two Models of Religious Liberty and Two Models for Orthodoxy", *Religion, State & Society*, Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 155-172, 162.

¹⁹ <http://www.ec-patr.org/docdisplay.php?lang=en&id=383&tla=en>

the President asked Patriarch Bartholomeos to bless the creation of a unified local Ukrainian Church that would be independent from the powerful Moscow Patriarchate. Bartholomeos was very prudent on the issue and avoided giving a clear response. The Ukrainian Church problem is obviously a political rather than an ecclesiastical problem. Interestingly enough, the split of the church with the contribution of the IGOP in Estonia could be realized despite the crisis between the two churches. However, Ukraine is much more an important country and Russia is jealously safeguarding its power zone in Ukraine. For Ukraine the jurisdiction of the IGOP represents the detachment from Russia but also rapprochement with the West. In a similar fashion Estonia preferred the jurisdiction of the IGOP which represents a more open, democratic and ecumenic interpretation of the religion. In contrast with Istanbul, the Russian Church is seen as an outdated symbol of Russian domination and a more restricted, ethnic, xenophobic version of the religion.

Who Will Represent the Orthodoxy?

The two churches had also disputes in Western Europe over the jurisdiction of the Biarritz, Nice and the Diocese of Sourzh.²⁰ Simultaneously with rivalry in the sphere of jurisdiction, there is also struggle between the two Patriarchates of Moscow and Constantinople for the role of mediator in the Universal Orthodox Church. At the same time, churches which are in conflict try to profit from the tensions between the two Patriarchates. The Serbian schism illustrates this very well: Belgrade, which disapproves independence of the Orthodox Churches of Macedonia and Montenegro, expected Patriarch Alexy to take part in the negotiations whereas Skopje and Podgorica hoped for the mediation of Istanbul. Bartholomeos also offered his assistance to Moscow and Bucharest (regarding the archdiocese of Bessarabia) and to three Ukrainian Orthodox Churches. However, the mediation was rejected by Moscow who came to the conclusion that IGOP's help would mean acknowledging its privileged role in the Universal Orthodox Church.²¹

The two Patriarchates also compete for the right to represent Orthodoxy worldwide. In order to achieve this goal both churches have to establish relations with non-Orthodox transnational subjects and exercise an active foreign policy. In the international arena Istanbul tries to present itself as an open and progressive church in contrast to a benighted and xenophobic ROC. The contrast is clear in the attitudes of the Patriarchates towards the Vatican. While the late Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow refused to allow the Pope to make an official visit to Russia and considered ecumenism a kind of "catholic proselytism", Bartholomeos I underlined the need for the cooperation of all Christians. The warm welcome

²⁰ Curanovic, *art. cit.* p. 308.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 309.

which Pope Benedict XVI received in Istanbul during his visit in 2006 had a significant and positive impact on the image of the IGOP. The common prayer of the two hierarchs and their declaration of cooperation on behalf of Christian Europe were widely seen as a serious step towards rapprochement between the eastern and western churches. The fact that the Moscow Patriarchate is not participating in this initiative weakens its position in Europe. The late Patriarch Alexei was a known critic of globalization and liberalism, while Bartholomeos takes part in events symbolizing global change, such as the forum at Davos in 2006.²²

Conclusion

The idea of unity in the divided Orthodox Church encountered serious challenges in the ultimately political atmosphere of the post Cold War period. Patriarch Bartholomeos I of Istanbul and Patriarch Alexei of Moscow had to tackle with new problems and strive to assert themselves as real leaders of the Orthodox world. Despite the serious rift between the two churches in an era marked with misunderstandings and serious accusations, the late Patriarch Alexei of Moscow made one of his last journeys to Istanbul for an Assembly of the Orthodox Primatees in order to ease the tensions. After the demise of Alexei II, the new Patriarch of Moscow will be enthroned on 1 February 2009. The difficulties of the two churches are to remain if the Moscow Patriarchate acts as a bastion of Russian nationalism and a keen defender of Russian government's policies home and abroad. Patriarch Bartholomeos has no choice but to insist on his historical title "ecumenical" at the expense of the Moscow Patriarchate, his flock in Turkey counting only few thousand souls. The Kremlin supports the Russian Orthodox Church's international activities and its claim for the leadership of the Orthodox world. In the same manner the Patriarch in Istanbul has found powerful allies such as the U.S. and the EU for its claim of the leadership to encounter Russian influence over Orthodox nations. The era which will begin with the enthronement of the new Moscow Patriarch on 1 February 2009 will be full of surprises and new alliances within the Orthodox itself.

²² Patriarch Bartholomeos was at Davos as a member of the Turkish delegation.