



PISM | POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 53 (903), 23 August 2016 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski (PISM Director) ● Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka ● Anna Maria Dyner ● Patryk Kugiel ● Zuzanna Nowak
Sebastian Płóciennik ● Patrycja Sasnal ● Rafał Tarnogórski ● Marcin Terlikowski ● Tomasz Żornaczuk

The Religious and Political Nature of the Pan-Orthodox Council

Anna Maria Dyner, Piotr Kościński

The decision of the patriarchates of Antioch, Georgia, Bulgaria and Russia not to participate in the council held in Crete from 19 to 26 June means that the meeting cannot be considered “Pan-Orthodox” as intended. The four declined to attend for reasons of jurisdiction and ambition. Unofficially, the council discussed issues of the divided Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the status of the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia. In future, Orthodoxy will be increasingly influenced by the rivalry between the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which holds the honorary presidency, and the largest Patriarchate of Moscow and All Russia.

The Council’s Message. During the council, Orthodox hierarchs discussed six topics relating to, among other things, the autonomy of the individual churches and the global mission of Orthodoxy. The result of debate was published in the *Message of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church*. It was signed by 10 patriarchs and metropolitans, including Sawa, the Metropolitan of Warsaw and all Poland. The document condemned fundamentalism, war and persecution (including for religious reasons), and expressed concern about the situation of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East. Bishops pointed out that human rights are a guarantee of protection of citizens against the arbitrariness of the state, and urged the faithful to provide the necessary assistance to refugees according to the abilities of individual churches. In addition to the *Message*, the most extensive document produced by the council is the *Mission of the Orthodox Church in the Modern World*. Both point to the increasing involvement of the Orthodox Church in world politics.

Preparations for the Pan-Orthodox Council have been underway since 1961. According to doctrine, it is necessary to convene the council when dogmatic controversies or serious pastoral problems arise within the Orthodox community. For years, contemporary challenges forced the churches to reach a consensus concerning the reform of Orthodoxy. But even the manner of convening the council was a source of disagreement, and some of the churches refused to participate. As a result, the council lost its “Pan-Orthodox” character and its provisions apply only to the churches that signed the resulting *Message of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church*.

"No" to the Council. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church was first to withdraw, citing financial reasons. Most likely, the decision was a result of consultation with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), as there are strong ties between the two. Antioch and Georgia followed Bulgaria. The withdrawal of the Patriarchate of Antioch is linked to history and jurisdiction; one of the five ancient patriarchates, Antioch does not agree with the growing power of Constantinople. The reasons for the decision of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) were ties with the ROC (Abkhazia, even with a Russian military presence, comes under GOC jurisdiction) and doctrinal disputes over the ecumenical dialogue, criticised by the GOC. Considered as conservative, the patriarchates of Georgia, Antioch (and Serbia) oppose the formula of the dialogue, supported by the patriarchs Bartholomew of Constantinople and Kirill of Moscow. The dispute over ecumenism is also apparent inside the ROC, where opponents describe the policy of openness led by Patriarch Kirill as “heretic”.

The Russian Church was the last to withdraw. One of the reasons was the provision that each of the churches at the Crete council would have three representatives and be entitled to one vote. This was contrary to the tradition that each of the bishops had one vote. It also limited the abilities of the ROC, representing more than half of the 300 million Orthodox Christians. Equalisation with smaller churches was badly received by the Russian clergy. The

Russian bishops also wanted to postpone the meeting because of the controversies between the churches. Representatives of the ROC held that, because of its number of believers and its resulting importance, the Russian Patriarchate (rather than the Patriarchate of Constantinople) should convene the council. This illustrates the conflict between Kirill and Bartholomew, which arose when Bartholomew announced a return to the idea of Pentarchy (the five most important centres of the Church), and offered the place reserved for the Patriarch of Rome to the Church of Cyprus instead of Russia. Since then, Kirill has been trying to unite Eastern European Orthodoxy, as a counterweight to the consolidation of the Orthodoxy of the Mediterranean, led by Bartholomew.

The Council and the Case of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. One of the most important questions during the pre-council dispute was the desire of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOCKP), not considered canonical, to obtain autocephaly. The UOCKP's Patriarch Filaret, whose title is not recognised beyond the borders of Ukraine made the appeal (and not for the first time). According to the Patriarch, the UOCKP should have a status analogous to that of the Polish Church. A similar appeal was issued by the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), which complicated the situation as it is impossible to have more than one independent Orthodox Church in a given country.

The UOCMP currently has approximately 12,300 parishes, but only 15% of Ukrainians say that they are members. The UOCKP has 5,000 parishes and a declared membership of 25% of Ukrainians. The UAOC has 1,200 parishes, and declared membership of less than 2%.

Although the issue of the divided Ukrainian Orthodoxy was not raised officially on Crete, it was discussed unofficially. Consent for UOCKP autocephaly depends on the mother church. There is a dispute over proceedings between Kyiv and Moscow. The Patriarchate of Kyiv claims that the act of 1686 under which the Kyiv metropolis (under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople), was subordinated to the Patriarch of Moscow was adopted in violation of the canons of the Orthodox Church. Thus, says Kyiv, the question of autocephaly should be decided by Constantinople.

Just before the council, Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada adopted an appeal to Patriarch Bartholomew about giving the "local church" (unspecified) autocephaly and reunifying Ukrainian Orthodoxy. During the vote, 245 deputies were in favour, 20 were against, and one abstained. The appeal stated that, as the war in Donbas is supported by Russia, the Ukrainian people do not want to be led by the Russian Patriarch. Ukrainian MPs stressed that Kirill is partly responsible for the Russian hybrid war against Ukraine. In turn, the Opposition Bloc collected 39 signatures for an alternative letter to the Patriarch of Constantinople. They expressed concern over attempts to change the "canonical" order in Ukraine and undermine the role of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

The ROC decision not to participate in the Crete council meant that Ukrainian Orthodoxy was not represented. The UOCMP wasn't present, and the UOCKP and UAOC, as non-canonical, had no right to be there. In Ukraine there is, however, a feeling that the ROC lost out by its absence, and that, even if the matter of Ukrainian Orthodoxy remains unresolved, there is a chance that it will be settled in the future. It can be expected that autocephaly will be sought not only by the clergy, but by leading Ukrainian politicians, using the antagonism between the patriarchates of Moscow and Constantinople. But, for political reasons there is no chance for a coalition of churches with the goal of gaining independence for the Ukrainian Church.

A Political Backdrop to Religious Disputes. The dispute concerning the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia was held on the council sidelines. Canonical unity within the ROC was restored in 2007, but many of the faithful and the clergy (including those in the U.S.) would prefer the supremacy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, as they don't want to be a part of a church associated with the Russian authorities and previously accused of collaboration with the secret services of the USSR.

Controversy over canonical subordination also exists in Moldova and Estonia. The Moldovan Orthodox Church, subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate, exists alongside the Besarabian Metropolis, founded by the Romanian Orthodox Church. In Estonia, some of the parishes belong to the ROC and some to the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In both countries, divisions are related to political issues and a clash of interests between the patriarchs. The actions of the ROC are often part of Russian foreign policy.

Conclusions. The absence of representatives of the four churches at the council on Crete is an expression of the division within Orthodoxy. The Patriarchate of Constantinople is perceived, in the main, as reformist, while Antioch, Bulgaria and Georgia are viewed as reformist. The division is also connected with disputes about doctrine, politics and prestige.

Yet, even though the council cannot be called "Pan-Orthodox", this doesn't mean problems for unity within the Orthodox community, because the individual churches will operate as before. Despite decentralisation and the multiplicity of local traditions, Orthodoxy has never suffered a doctrinal collapse. Individual Orthodox churches will be increasingly influenced by the rivalry between the patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow and All Russia. Both have their supporters and opponents, which means that we should not expect another council to be convened in the near future. Deepening of the current doctrinal disputes is possible, which could lead to even greater tensions between the Orthodox churches. Doctrinal disputes are not of political nature, and on some issues (such as ecumenical dialogue), the two patriarchates work together.