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THE STRUGGLE TO ESTABLISH THE WORLD'S LARGEST ORTHODOX CHURCH

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During the synod of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Moscow from 18-20 August, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Aleksii II denounced calls to "confine the Church within the framework of the Russian Federation." The State Duma backed the ROC's geopolitical pretensions within the CIS by allocating 6 million rubles (\$216,000) to the ROC in Ukraine this year.

In early August, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma sent a letter to his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, asking Russia to return mosaics and frescoes from the Mykhaylivskyy Golden-Domed Cathedral in Kyiv. So far, he has received no response. The cathedral was built from 1108-13 and destroyed on the orders of Josef Stalin in 1934. Some of the surviving treasures were looted by the Nazis but returned in the late Soviet era. The cathedral was rebuilt from 1996-1999 with Kyiv city funds and is now under the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarch (UOC-KP).

The reconstruction of the cathedral has been seen as direct competition to the rebuilding of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, backed by Mayor Yurii Luzhkov. "Kommersant-Daily" deemed the Ukrainian cathedral's construction politically motivated because "Ukraine is pretending to be the successor to the whole tradition of Kyiv Rus." The ROC stands to lose the most from the unification of Ukraine's three Orthodox Churches into an independent (autocephalous) Church because Kyiv would resume its historical leadership among eastern Slavs as the direct descendant of Kyiv Rus and the Kyiv Metropolitanate (the city of Moscow was founded 600 years after Kyiv).

The ROC is also concerned about maintaining its influence. In the former USSR, two-thirds of ROC parishes were in Ukraine; today half of ROC parishes remain within Ukraine's borders. According to the Oxford-based Keston College, the ROC has a greater number of parishes outside the Russian Federation and within the former USSR (more than 9,000) than within the Russian Federation itself (7,000). In Ukraine, whose population is three times smaller than Russia's, there are two times as many Orthodox parishes as in the Russian Federation (14,000). This makes the Ukrainian Orthodox Churches potentially the largest Orthodox community of believers in the world.

Of the 14,000 Orthodox parishes in Ukraine, 8,000 come under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarch and the remaining 6,000 fall under that of the UOC-KP and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC). The combined total of nearly 15,000 ROC parishes within the former USSR gives the ROC the clout to back its historical claim of leadership within the Orthodox world as the "Third Rome." The "Second Rome" (Constantinople, known by its Turkish name of Istanbul) is therefore subordinate to itself. Ukraine, with its large Orthodox community, is key to the struggle between the ROC and the Patriarch of Constantinople for leadership and influence over the world's Orthodox believers.

Of particular concern to the ROC is Constantinople Patriarch Bartholomew I's declaration in June that Ukraine lies within its canonical territory. That claim, which is backed by the Greek, Romanian, Bulgarian, and Georgian Orthodox Churches, is based on Constantinople's non-recognition of the forcible transfer of the Kyiv Orthodox Metropolitanate to Moscow in 1686, making the ROC's control over Ukraine uncanonical in the eyes of Constantinople.

In 1924, Constantinople Patriarch Grygorii revived the Kyiv Metropolitanate by creating the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church (PAOC) at a time when 6 million Ukrainians lived in Poland. The UOC-KP and UAOC claim to be canonical descendants of both the Kyiv Metropolitanate and the PAOC and thus back Constantinople's jurisdiction over Ukraine. Ukrainian Orthodox Churches in North America came under the Patriarch of Constantinople's jurisdiction in 1995.

The ROC rejects any claims by Constantinople over Ukraine and describes its two rivals in Ukraine as "schismatics," demanding that they return to the bosom of the only "canonical" Church. As in Belarus, the ROC in Ukraine has allies among the left and pro-Slavic union political groups, and, ironically, its most ardent supporter is the Communist Party of Ukraine. It is therefore not surprising that the August Moscow synod refused even to discuss a request by President Leonid Kuchma, the metropolitan, and all but two of the bishops of the ROC in Ukraine to grant it autonomy.

Kuchma sees the granting of autonomy as a step toward the unification of the ROC in Ukraine with the UOC-KP and UAOC into an autocephalous Orthodox Church. All opinion polls conducted in Ukraine since 1992 give majority support among Orthodox believers to the UOC-KP. Confusion among many Orthodox believers is due to the fact that the ROC in Ukraine was registered as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) in 1990, even though it has never possessed any kind of autonomous status and is merely an exarchate of the ROC. Some 200 of the 1700 Orthodox parishes in Galicia, for example, belong to the UOC (ROC).

In an interview in "Tserkalo Tyzhden" in August, Patriarch Filaret of the UOC-KP said he believes that 60-70 per cent of the ROC in Ukraine would agree to join a united Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The establishment of such a Church would make Ukraine home to the largest Orthodox Church in the world, and Constantinople would have found itself a new ally in its historical struggle with the ROC for leadership over Orthodox believers. Such a move would also seriously damage the movement for eastern Slavic union within Ukraine, as the autocephalous wing of Ukrainian Orthodoxy supports Ukraine's integration into Trans-Atlantic and European structures. The author is an honorary research fellow at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta.