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RUSSIA-UKRAINE: How Putin is exploiting Orthodox rivalries in Ukraine

How Putin is exploiting Orthodox rivalries in Ukraine

The Russian president says the government in Kiev is repressing the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is attached to the Moscow Patriarchate

By Marguerite de Lasa

La Croix International (23.02.2020) – <https://bit.ly/33QXAPi> – Russia's President Vladimir Putin has accused Ukraine's government of repressing the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is attached to the Patriarchate of Moscow.

Putin added the religious tensions to the two countries' already explosive political situation on Monday during a televised address in which he acknowledged the independence of the pro-Russian separatist territories in Eastern Ukraine.

"Kiev continues to prepare a crackdown against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate," he claimed.

"The Ukrainian authorities have cynically turned the tragedy of the split in the Church into an instrument of state policy," the 69-year-old strong-arm leader said.

To support his indictment of Ukraine, Putin is exploiting Orthodox tensions in Ukraine, which pit hierarchs and common believers who wish to remain tethered to the Moscow Patriarchate and those who are part of autocephalous (independent) Church attached to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Recognition of a church in Ukraine independent of Moscow

The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I granted autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in 2019, thereby officializing its independence from the Russian Orthodox Church.

Up until then the 25 million Ukrainian Orthodox believers were canonically dependent on the Moscow Patriarchate.

“Patriarch Bartholomew has thus allowed Ukrainians to be fully Orthodox and fully Ukrainian, without wondering what their link to Moscow is,” said Jean-François Colosimo, an Orthodox theologian and editor.

Faced with the autocephalous Church, the Patriarchate of Moscow wants to impose itself as the main force of Orthodoxy, relying on symbolic and material reasons.

“Moscow does not intend to give up its hold on Kiev, which is the place of baptism for all the Russians,” Colosimo pointed out.

The first conversions to Orthodoxy from the Slavic world took place in Kiev in the 9th century.

“Ukraine is also a large part of the resources of the Patriarchate of Moscow, in terms of geography, as well as the number of priests and faithful,” the theologian said.

“It is clear that in the current situation, the Kremlin considers the Patriarchate of Moscow as a diplomatic instrument,” Colosimo noted.

Jivko Panev, another Orthodox theologian and journalist, said these tensions between the two Churches are above all ecclesial in nature.

“For the Ukrainian Church of the Patriarchate of Moscow, what is important is to remain in canonicality,” said Panev, who is also the founder of the information website Orthodoxy.com.

Orthodox who've remained faithful to Moscow, an element of destabilization

The Ukrainian government favors the autocephalous Church and “tends to accuse the branch that has remained faithful to Moscow of being an element of destabilization for Ukraine,” Colosimo said.

A survey conducted last July by the International Institute of Sociology in Kiev found that 58% of Ukrainians who are Orthodox say they belong to the autocephalous Church, while about 25% identify with the Church attached to the Patriarchate of Moscow.

But that is not the whole story.

“It is possible that there are Ukrainian Orthodox faithful to Moscow, who at the same time feel very patriotic,” claimed Colosimo.

Such is the case with Bishop Victor Kotsaba of Barychivka who is currently the administrator of the Moscow-linked Eparchy of Kiev.

“The Ukrainian Orthodox Church supports our government, our president and all the leaders who currently have a great responsibility,” he said on February 16.

He added that his Russian-affiliated Church was ready, “in case of a total war, to bless the people in the defense of (their) homeland” in Ukraine.

Read [more](https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/how-putin-is-exploiting-orthodox-rivalries-in-ukraine/15685) at:
<https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/how-putin-is-exploiting-orthodox-rivalries-in-ukraine/15685>

Photo: The Moscow Patriarchate wants to impose itself as the main force of Orthodoxy. (Photo by SADAK SOUICI / LE PICTORIUM/ MAXPPP)

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