

UKRAINE: Ukrainian Orthodox Christians formally break from Russia

By Carlotta Gall

New York Times (06.01.2019) – <https://nyti.ms/2RziB8R> – ISTANBUL – The spiritual leader of Eastern Orthodox Christians worldwide recognized the independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in a four-hour ceremony in Istanbul on Sunday, formalizing a split with the Russian church to which it had been tied for more than four centuries.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader, handed a Tomos of Autocephaly containing a decree of independence to the newly appointed Metropolitan Epiphanius of Ukraine, cleaving millions of Ukrainians from the Russian Orthodox Church.

The independence effort outraged political and religious leaders in Russia. But for President Petro O. Poroshenko of Ukraine, who stood before an elevated throne throughout the ceremony in Istanbul, the occasion was an affirmation of independence from Russian influence in his embattled country and a boost ahead of elections in March.

“Tomos for us is actually another act of proclaiming Ukraine’s independence,” Mr. Poroshenko said in an address. “For Ukrainians, our own Church is a guarantee of our spiritual freedom. This is the key to social harmony.”

Recognition of the church's autonomy will resolve a problem for the many Ukrainians who had broken with Moscow and been declared noncanonical, he added.

The Ukrainian church had been under Moscow's jurisdiction since 1686, when, under pressure from Russia, it abandoned allegiance to Constantinople, the historical seat of the Eastern Orthodox Church now known as Istanbul.

With that longstanding relationship threatened by tensions between Russian and Ukraine, Mr. Poroshenko, as well as nearly 200 bishops and other church figures, gathered in December in St. Sophia's Cathedral in Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, to choose the head of the future autonomous Ukrainian church. That decision sealed the country's intention to sever religious ties from the Russian Orthodox Church and the Moscow patriarch, Kirill I.

"I support separating from the Russian church," said Dmytro Khanenko, 20, a Ukrainian student who was following the ceremony on Sunday, "but I don't like how politics is involved."

Politicians were using the issue to gain popularity, he said. "The fact that Ukraine is in conflict with Russia means it is good to show that Ukraine is less dependent on Russia," he said.

The Moscow patriarch claims to have oversight not only of Orthodox communities in Russia but also most of the areas of the former Soviet Union, but it has been struggling to maintain its hold over what his church views as a wayward province ever since Ukraine declared independence in 1991.

Patriarch Kirill oversees the world's largest community of Orthodox Christians, some 150 million faithful – half of the number of Orthodox Christians worldwide. The loss of Ukraine's Orthodox faithful would shrink the number of parishes under Moscow's control by a third.

Patriarch Bartholomew now oversees 15 separate Orthodox Churches from his seat in Istanbul, the ancient cradle of Christendom that the Orthodox still call Constantinople.

He had signed the Tomos in a civil ceremony with Mr. Poroshenko on Saturday, and sanctified it in a Mass on Sunday. The ceremony began before dawn, with priests chanting hymns under a single chandelier in St. George's Cathedral.

The Cathedral was flooded with light as the patriarch blessed the new Metropolitan, dressed in blue, white and gold vestments and a glittering miter. As he was handed the Tomos, bells pealed and the congregation broke into applause.

Hundreds of faithful filled the side aisles and galleries above, including many from the dwindling Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul. The Ukrainian delegation included cabinet members and the speaker of Parliament.

Both Patriarch Bartholomew and the new autonomous Ukrainian church described the occasion not as a schism but as a long-needed alignment of Ukraine's independent state and church.

The patriarch called on the new metropolitan not to exclude any believers from his church, including those loyal to Moscow, and urged him to build bridges and unite the people, said an official from the patriarchate, who spoke on the condition of anonymity in keeping with protocol.

"The Orthodox Church had 14 independent churches, and today it has 15," said Nikolas Papachristou, a spokesman for the Ecumenical Patriarchate. "Together they create our Orthodox Church."

Church and national leaders in Ukraine had been pressing for self-governance for the church for 30 years, since Ukraine became independent with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Metropolitan Epiphanius said in a speech during the ceremony.

"With the support of the Ukrainian state and our president, the separation has been eliminated, and the unity has been restored."

The Tomos, read out during the signing ceremony on Saturday, declares that the Metropolitan of Kiev and all Ukraine, representing the Holy Synod of Ukrainian bishops, should turn to the Patriarchate of Constantinople for all decisions in the

future.

“In this way, the affairs of the church in this country will be governed, as proclaimed by the divine and holy canon, freely and in the Holy Spirit, without hindrance, without any other external influence,” it said.

Mr. Poroshenko, the Ukrainian leader, expressed his appreciation on Twitter. “Thank you to the millions of Ukrainians around the world who prayed for the establishment of the Single Local Orthodox Church,” he wrote. “Thank you to the generation of Ukrainians who dreamed about this day.”

Part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that remains loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate declared that the Tomos for the new church of Ukraine had been signed in violation of canonical rules, the Russian news agency Tass reported.

The agency quoted Archbishop Clement, head of the information and education department of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, as saying that Patriarch Bartholomew was veering into factionalism by supporting the schism.

Much of the Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas on Monday, when a celebration will be held in St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev and the Tomos will go on display to the public.

There has been concern that the schism dividing the Ukrainian and Russian churches could provoke violent clashes over church

property, not least the famous monastery in central Kiev revered as the birthplace of Russian Christianity. President Vladimir V. Putin himself warned of that possibility last month.

Local Orthodox Christians attending the Mass on Sunday were barely aware of Ukraine's historical event and gathered after for an annual baptismal ceremony for the Epiphany on the shores of the Golden Horn, an inlet of the Bosphorus in Istanbul.

Dimitri, 32, who was born and raised in Istanbul but who did not want his last name published because of religious discrimination in Turkey, said "We are here to bless the water, especially for the fishermen."

"The split of the Ukranian church doesn't mean much to us, because we all believe in the same things," he said. "But we support the split, as far as we've followed it from the news. We don't think there is bad intention underneath. Jesus said God is one, it applies to this situation, too."

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