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Russian pressure weighs heavily on Orthodox Church election

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[Balkan Insight](#) (18.06.2024) -The election of a new patriarch is intensifying divisions within the Bulgarian Orthodox Church between pro-Russian and anti-Russian factions.

Bulgaria's election calendar was packed this month, as citizens headed to the polls for dual elections – European and parliamentary – on June 9. It was the sixth time Bulgarians had voted for a government within three years.

But these are not the only elections Bulgarians are talking about Another important election is for a new leader or patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the largest faith group in the country.

After Patriarch Neophyte died in March, the Church started a process for electing its new primate. The election is planned for June 30. But the process is already proving bumpy and is becoming entangled in geopolitical controversies over the decision of some Church hierarchs to warm ties with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which Russia bitterly opposes. Several Metropolitans and Bishops, such as Nikolay of Plovdiv, Kiprian of Stara Zagora, Yakov of Dorostol, Zion of Velichka and Vissarion of Smolyan attended a co-liturgy with Ukrainian hierarchs and global Orthodoxy's nominal leader, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, in Istanbul last month.

Concelebrations like this are normal aspects of Church life. In some cases, it may also signal acceptance of a new Church as equal and autocephalous (independent). However, due to the lack of official recognition by the Bulgarian church of the Ukrainian Church's autocephaly, this step took some by surprise. Metropolitan Gabriel of Lovech says there were no discussions about the Istanbul trip in the Church's governing Holy Synod.

"We were unaware there would be such a trip to Istanbul. There was no decision for such a visit. That is a personal trip by some bishops. We [only] learned about it from the media," he told Bulgarian National Radio (BNR).

The Orthodox Church of Bulgaria has so far not recognised the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Church, granted by the Ecumenical Patriarch in 2019 and rejected by Russia's Church.

Although the presence of Bulgarian representatives in the co-liturgy does not amount to recognition, the complaint is that the Holy Synod has not concluded the matter, and so its hierarchs should not in principle rush ahead in such an uncoordinated way.

A special Bulgarian Church commission was established in 2018 to examine the issue of Ukrainian autocephaly, but there is no sign that it has concluded its work.

Ivan Zhelev Dimitrov, a theologian and a long-time observer of Orthodox Church developments, says the Bulgarian Church has not recognised the Ukrainian Church's autocephaly, so the concelebration in Istanbul looked like an arbitrary act by those bishops who attended it.

Recognising the Ukrainian Church's independence "would mean severing centuries-old ties with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)", he said, referencing the branch of the Church in Ukraine still tied to Moscow.

According to him, the act was a canonical violation because the Bulgarian Synod did not greenlight it. Such acts "can be seen as PR stunts, but also show the lust for power of some of the Metropolitans," he added.

Funeral of late patriarch revealed tensions

The Ukrainian Church was at the centre of attention during Patriarch Neophyte's funeral in March, when its leader, Metropolitan Epiphaniy, attended, angering some. "He wasn't invited by our Synod. Some of us decided that if he wanted to participate in the service, we would not serve with him. We were very decisive, and thank God, he didn't even try," said Metropolitan Gabriel of Lovech.

Epiphaniy claimed he was invited to travel to Sofia, without specifying by whom. But the Russian Ambassador in Bulgaria, Eleonora Mitrofanova, on the day of the funeral, referred to his presence in Sofia as a provocation, blaming the Ecumenical Patriarch.

"This is not just tension but a huge provocation, including towards the Bulgarian Church. This is a provocation because this Church is not recognised by the Bulgarian Church. This is an absolute provocation on the part of the Phanar (Patriarch Bartholomew's residence)," she said.

Moscow seeks Patriarch 'close to Russia'

The Ukrainian Church debate continues to have an impact on the Bulgarian patriarchal election, causing rifts in the Synod and wider Bulgarian society. As the election approaches, Moscow has been increasing pressure on Sofia.

Soon after the concelebration in Istanbul, the Russian Church said it had cut ties with those Bulgarian hierarchs present in Istanbul. Judging by the timing of the decision, this looked like a political message sent ahead of the election.

Metropolitan Luke of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), which is still canonically attached to the Russian Orthodox Church, wrote a letter on 4 June asking the Bulgarian hierarchs not to recognise the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, OCU. He said it risked inching the Orthodox Church towards a schism bigger than the one of 1054, referencing the year of the historic split between Rome and Constantinople.

Goran Blagoev, a Bulgarian journalist and historian, said that the Russian Church is clearly deeply interested in the upcoming election.

"In the past, former Patriarch Neophyte took account of the Russian Church's position on matters such as OCU's independence and the question of Macedonian autocephaly. The previous patriarch, Maxim, was also deeply connected to Russia. The Russian Church's interest now is to see a new Bulgarian patriarch who will be close to Russia and a protector of Russian interests," he explained.

"The Russian Orthodox Church is starting to lose ground in Bulgaria, which is why it is offering support to those Metropolitan bishops who stay on the Russian side," he said.

Blagoev says one way of assessing Russia's power in Bulgaria's Church is by seeing who hasn't condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine. "One of them is Metropolitan Gavril of Lovech, who in 2022 concelebrated with Metropolitan Anthony, who's in charge of the Russian Orthodox Church's Department for External Relations. Metropolitan Daniel of Vidin is another," he added.

Last year, Bulgaria expelled Russian Archimandrite Vassian Zmeev from Sofia along with two other representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church on suspicion of espionage, branding them a threat to the country's national security.

Controversial bishop eyeing top job

Among those who led the Bulgarian Church group in Istanbul was Nikolay of Plovdiv who is often mentioned as a possible new patriarch. However, he has stated that he will not become the patriarch. Lately, he is seen as one of the hierarchs close to the 'Euro-Atlantic' faction in the Church.

But both Blagoev and Dimitrov view the actions of Nikolay with mistrust. Commenting on his intention to stay out of the race, Blagoev stressed how Nikolay had used neutral wording when he spoke about it. "He didn't say 'I will not run for the patriarch's position' but said: 'I will not become patriarch'. There is a subtle difference," Blagoev insisted.

Professor Dimitrov accused Nikolay of being inconsistent. "Nikolay studied in Moscow and in the past welcomed the Russian Patriarch Kirill. Now he speaks against him. Back then, he didn't speak kindly about the Ecumenical Patriarch. Now he wants to be seen as close," he said.

When Pope Francis visited Bulgaria in 2019, Nikolay spoke strongly against him, saying that the Pope's goal was to subjugate all the Orthodox Churches to Rome. Before that, he called the Pope a heretic and also slated the ecumenical movement, saying that it represents a flawed concept because it attempts to reconcile fundamentally opposing forces.

Just before Bulgaria's 9 June elections, Nikolay also was seen in the company of the controversial Bulgarian politician and oligarch Delyan Peevski. Peevski defended Nikolay from the attacks by the Russian Orthodox Church regarding his trip to Istanbul, characterising its meddling in Bulgaria as part of its "hybrid war" against European values. His Movement for Rights and Freedoms party is expected to participate in a future government coalition with the centre-right GERB party. Peevski has been sanctioned by the US and the UK for alleged corruption.

The Ukrainian Church was centre of attention during Patriarch Neophyte's funeral in March, when its leader, Metropolitan Epiphaniy, attended, angering some. Photo: EPA-EFE/SERGEY DOLZHENKO

New leader's priorities aren't just Ukraine

The last patriarchal election took place in February 2013, after the death of Patriarch Maxim, who was elected when Bulgaria was still a communist country, in 1971.

The candidate must have been a Metropolitan for at least five years and be 50 or older. Each diocese elects five representatives (three clergy and two lay people) to the electoral college, apart from Sofia, which has a larger representation. The Holy Synod shortlists three names from the list of candidates at least seven days before the election. To be

elected patriarch, a candidate needs to receive two-thirds of the votes by the electoral college.

The biggest priority for the new patriarch should be to bring the Church closer to its believers, said Goran Blagoev. "Despite the high trust in the Church as an institution, the Church has very few social projects, which are sporadic across its eparchies (dioceses) and not integrated into a larger concept," he said.

But, either way, the new patriarch will also have to take a clear position about the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine – including the burning issue of the recognition of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Blagoev said the Bulgarian Church did not do itself a favour in 2017 when it failed to do more regarding the recognition of the Macedonian church. No less important, he said, will be reducing the influence of politics in the Church's life.
