

Russian Orthodox Church warns of further fragmentation of schismatic groups in Ukraine



MOSCOW, December 15. /TASS/. After the creation of an Autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine, schismatic religious groups will grow in number in that country, the Reverend Alexander Volkov, spokesman for Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, told TASS.

“As for those rulings passed in the ancient St. Sophia’s in Kiev (the St. Sophia’s Cathedral) desecrated by that gathering, we can say that schismatics elected a schismatic as their new head, and honestly speaking, nothing has changed for that schismatic group,” he said.

“However, if Ukraine used to have two schismatic branches earlier, their fragmentation and multiplication in the future can be foreseen. We cannot but feel sorry for the hapless Ukrainian nation who are tormented by the insane will of their current political leaders,” Volkov concluded.

The canonical Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate will continue serving in Ukraine after a new church – the Autocephalous Orthodox Church – was established in that country, the Reverend Alexander Volkov, spokesman for Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, told TASS.

“The Russian Orthodox Church is praying in its whole plenitude for a comprehensive consolidation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church headed by His Beatitude, Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev. Canonical Orthodoxy has entrenched itself today. People have believed deeper in the truth of the evangelical phrase ‘I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it’,” Father Alexander Volkov said. “Now, we clearly realize that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church will continue its upward advancement and its service in Ukraine through thick and thin.”.

On Saturday, Ukrainian President Pyotr Poroshenko declared the establishment of a new church in the country – the Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Metropolitan Epiphany of Pereyaslav and Belotserkovsk, who had earlier served as a bishop of the uncanonical Kiev Patriarchate, was elected head of the new church. He is expected to visit Istanbul, alongside Poroshenko, in January to receive the Tomos (decree) of Autocephaly (independence) from the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople.

‘Orthodox Church of Ukraine’

A high-ranking representative of Ukraine’s new church, Archbishop Eustraty (Zorya), said on Saturday that foundation documents refer to the new religious institution as the ‘Orthodox Church of Ukraine.’

“The name ‘Orthodox Church of Ukraine’ stands in the charter that was adopted today. Nevertheless, it would be correct to refer to it as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. I think that all those issues will be formulated and defined more precisely,” the official said.

Archbishop Eustraty added that before the start of the unification council, held in Kiev earlier in the day, two schismatic Ukrainian churches – the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kiev Patriarchate) and the Autocephalous Church – have declared their formal voluntary dissolution.

Belarus describes new church as 'schism'

The creation of a new church in Ukraine is nothing but schism, the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church's Synodal information department, archpriest Sergiy Lepin, told TASS on Saturday.

"From the formal point of view, this church is schismatic for us, and contacts are ruled out," he said.

The archpriest added that relations with Ukraine's new church are possible only "in the general civil dimension" and expressed hope they would be "good-neighborly."

He also welcomed the Ukrainian government's pledge not to persecute representatives of the canonically Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

"We can only welcome the fact that no one will be persecuted, but it is important that those words were not just empty promises," he said. "We also hope that the Ukrainian government realizes that persecution includes not only physical or financial pressure, but also informational and political aggression, and supporters of the Moscow Patriarchate must be protected from them, too."

Church crisis in Ukraine

Kiev has attempted to create a Local Orthodox Church in Ukraine independent of the Moscow Patriarchate since 1991. In April 2018, Poroshenko wrote a personal letter to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople asking for autocephaly for the Ukrainian church.

The Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople decided at its meeting held on October 9-11 to proceed with granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Church. It revoked the 1686 decision on transferring the Kiev Metropolitanate under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate and announced plans to bring it back under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It also reinstated the heads of two non-canonical churches in Ukraine, Filaret of the Kiev Patriarchate and Makariy of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church, to their hierarchical and priestly ranks.

On October 15, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church said in response to that move that full communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople was no longer possible.

On November 13, the Council of Bishops of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church held its meeting in Kiev Pechersk Lavra (the Kiev Monastery of the Caves).

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church announced after the meeting it did not recognize Constantinople's decisions on Ukraine and said it was severing full communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church also spoke out against joining the process of granting autocephaly to Ukraine's church and said it opposed its name change.

On December 5, Poroshenko announced that the so-called unification council to create the Ukrainian autocephalous church would take place on December 15. He said that Patriarch Bartholomew had sent letters to bishops of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church "inviting them to take part in that historic event."

On December 7, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's Holy Synod said that the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople had no canonical right to convene any church meetings in Ukraine and that "neither the clergy nor the laity have been authorized to represent the Ukrainian Orthodox Church at that meeting."

On Saturday, the St. Sophia's Cathedral in Kiev hosted a so-called 'unification' council held under the auspices of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and brokered by the Ukrainian authorities. Only two from 90 archbishops of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church attended the assembly.