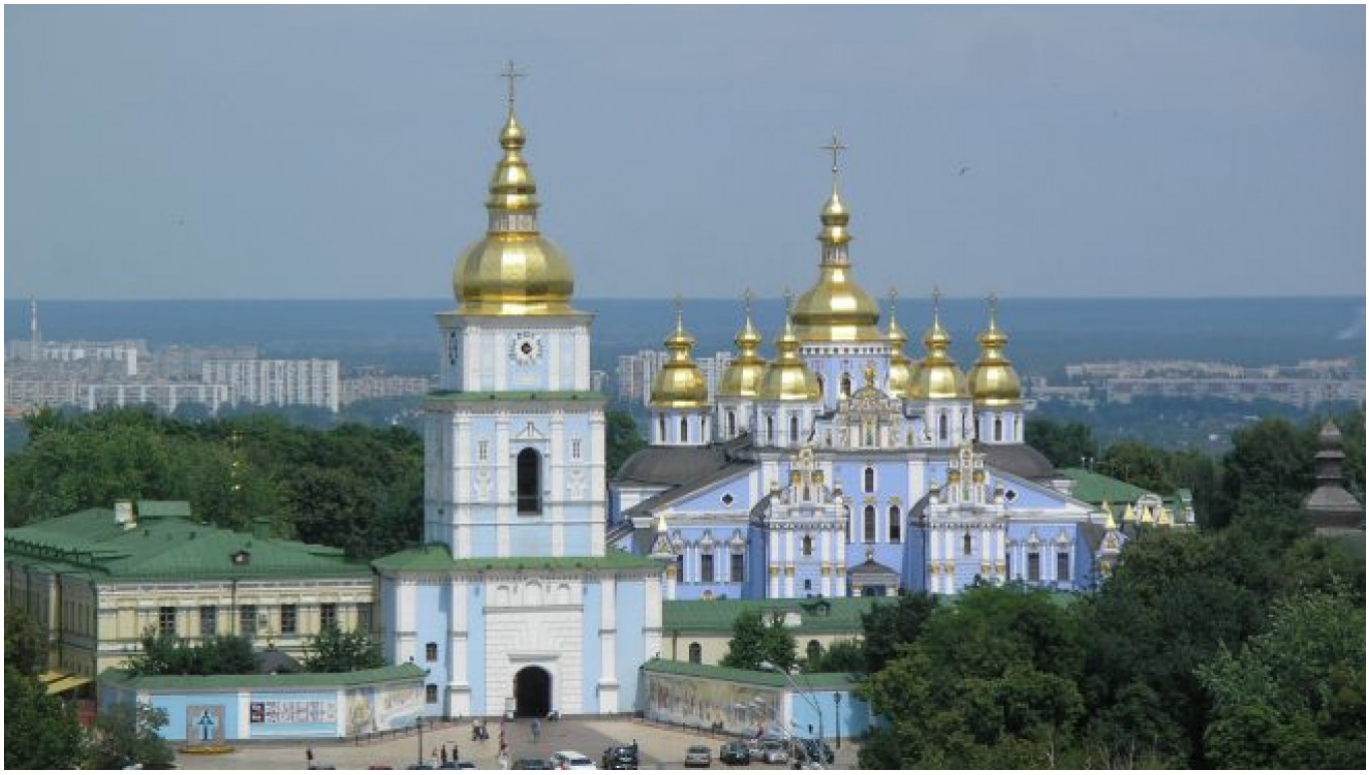
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Russian Orthodox Church Facing Ukraine Split

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly said that he considers Russians and Ukrainians "a single people." He justified annexing Crimea and providing military and political support to the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics with the claim that he was defending the "Russian world."

However, the conflict in Ukraine is the greatest breakdown of that "Russian world" since the reunification of Ukraine and Russia at the Council of Pereyaslav in the early 17th century.

One of the main factors contributing to the collapse of that "Russian world" is the schism rapidly forming within the Russian Orthodox Church (ROS). It now seems inevitable that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and its parishes will formally break with the ROS.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ROS was the only institution to maintain its jurisdiction over the entire post-Soviet territory. That was due to the efforts of former Patriarch Alexy II. A gentle, reserved, quiet but very effective leader, he was able to steer

the ship of the ROS through the storms of the 1990s.

It turned out that the largest "asset" of the ROS was the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). In 1990, the ROS granted maximum autonomy to the UOC-MP, giving it the right to appoint bishops and manage its own financial and economic affairs.

However, the UOC-MP remained legally and canonically a part of the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Metropolitan of Kiev and All Ukraine is a member of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Of the 30,000 total parishes in the ROS, 12,000 are in the UOC-MP. In fact, the UOC-MP has 45 dioceses, 186 monasteries, 20 religious educational establishments and approximately 10,000 clergymen.

As long as the UOC-MP is part of the Russian Orthodox Church, the ROS — headed by Patriarch Kirill — is the largest Orthodox church in the world. The withdrawal of the UOC-MP would spell disaster for the ROS along with Kirill, a tough, smart and ambitious man who wants to reign as leader of the Orthodox world.

The ROS leadership, and Patriarch Kirill personally, are perfectly clear on the stakes involved. That is why Kirill was not in St. George Hall of the Kremlin for Putin's historic "Crimea speech" on March 18 last year. Kirill also managed for some time to avoid voicing direct support for the annexation of Crimea and Russia's operations in eastern Ukraine.

However, he later decided to back the separatists, albeit in muted tones. That sparked a storm of indignation in Ukraine and fresh talk about the ROS as a hostile Russian political institution operating on Ukrainian territory.

Two more Orthodox churches arose in Ukraine as a result of the political upheavals during the collapse of the Soviet Union. They are the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP), headed by Patriarch Filaret and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) headed by Primate Macarius. Both churches splintered from the ROS at different times and neither is officially recognized by the Orthodox world.

However, the loss of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine has turned the mood in the east and south of that country from pro-Moscow to anti-Moscow. That is the main factor pushing the three Orthodox churches in Ukraine to unite on the basis of common nationality.

The UAOC has long sought to obtain legal status as an autonomous entity within the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, and has sent a formal request to Istanbul. At the same time, the war in eastern Ukraine has prompted the UAOC to intensify discussions with the UOC-KP about a merger of the two churches.

On June 8, 2015 a joint commission announced that the two churches were ready and had the desire to "soon merge into the Local Orthodox Church of Ukraine.'' Never before have two of the three Orthodox churches in Ukraine been so close to uniting. It is also worth noting that observers from Bartholomew I's Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople were on hand at the meeting. This is because only Bartholomew I has the right to recognize the legitimacy of each of those churches, as well as any mergers between them.

This places the UOC-MP headed by Metropolitan Onuphrius in a difficult situation. After all, his parishes are becoming increasingly anti-Moscow and inclined toward splitting with the ROS and combining all three Ukrainian Orthodox churches into a single entity recognized by Constantinople. Metropolitan Onuphrius is opposed to such a move, but the power of public opinion and the pressure of circumstances could force him to take that increasingly unavoidable step.

The first Ecumenical Council of Orthodox Churches in Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) to take place in a century is slated for spring 2016 and will be held with Bartholomew presiding. The Ecumenical Patriarch wants that meeting to succeed and will avoid making any decisions that could increase conflict — including decisions concerning Kirill and the Russian Orthodox Church.

However, after the Council has concluded, Bartholomew could formally recognize the canonical collapse of the great "Russian world" — a consequence of the earlier political and geographic collapse brought on by its would-be guardians.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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