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# Ukraine Moves to Split Church From Russia as Elections Approach

By Reuters

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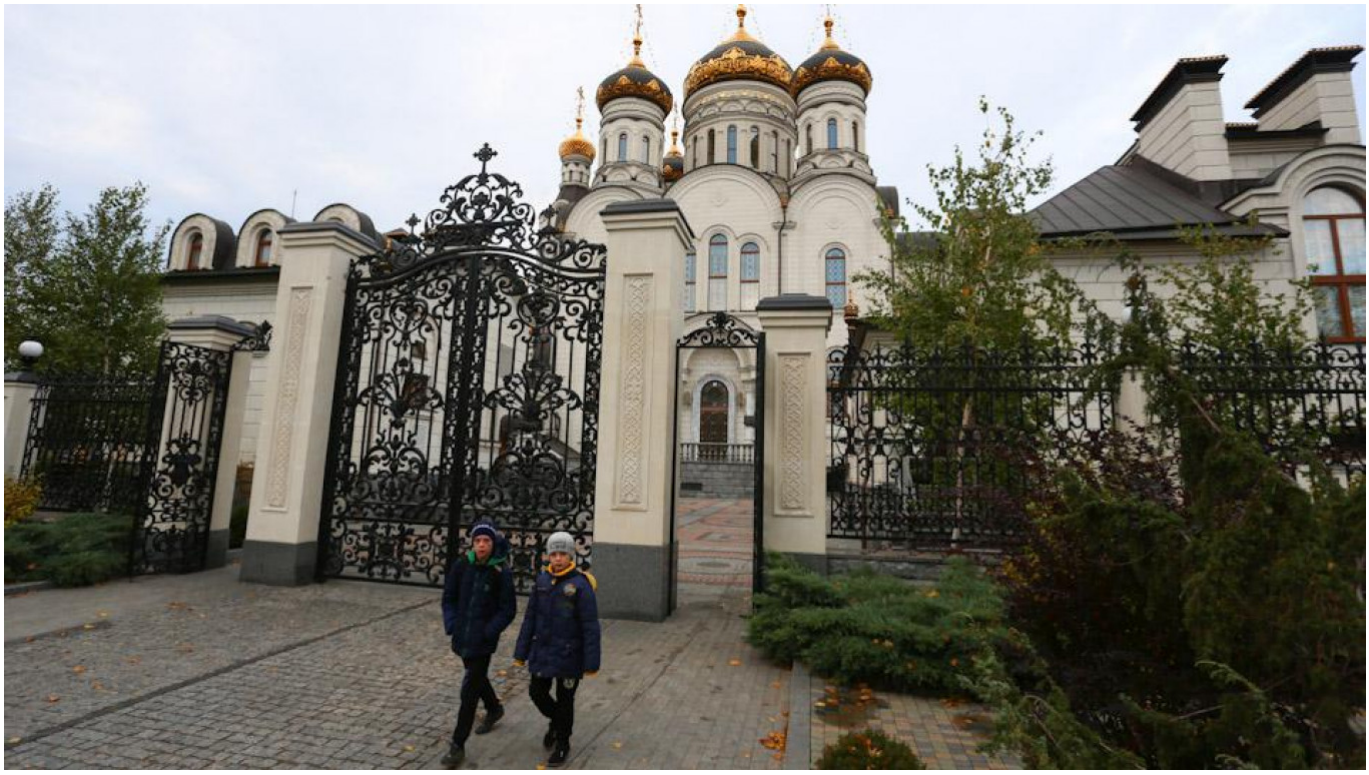

**Alexander Kravchenko / TASS**

Ukraine's Orthodox church could become independent of Moscow under the terms of a presidential initiative lawmakers approved on Thursday, a move that President Petro Poroshenko said would make it harder for Russia to meddle in Ukrainian affairs.

Ukraine's pro-Western leaders have sought step by step to move the former Soviet republic out of Russia's orbit, after Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014 and a Moscow-backed insurgency broke out in eastern Ukraine.

The Moscow Patriarchate is part of the Russian Orthodox Church and has a sizable following in Ukraine. Kiev considers it a tool for the Kremlin to wield influence.

Poroshenko met Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, in Istanbul last week, to seek support for giving autocephalous status —

effectively, making it independent — to the Ukrainian church.

**Link:**
http://old.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/ukrainian-question-divides-orthodox-world/573842.html

"Unity is our main weapon in the fight against the Russian aggressor," Poroshenko told parliament. "This question goes far beyond the ecclesiastical. It is about our finally acquiring independence from Moscow."

Poroshenko compared having an autocephalous church to Kiev's aspirations to join the European Union and NATO, "because the Kremlin regards the Russian church as one of the key tools of influence over Ukraine."

Asked about the issue on his daily conference call with reporters, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was quoted by Russian state media as saying:

"Of course, actions aimed at splitting up the churches are unlikely to be supported and unlikely to be welcomed."

A spokesman at Patriarch Bartholomew's office declined comment. Poroshenko has previously suggested he has the Patriarch's support for an independent church but could not divulge many details about their meeting.

The Moscow Patriarchate sees itself as the only legitimate Orthodox church in Ukraine. It vies for influence with the Kiev Patriarchate, a branch of the Orthodox Church that broke away from Moscow in 1992 after the fall of the Soviet Union, and other Orthodox and Catholic denominations.

The Kiev Patriarchate's leader has been sharply critical of Russian President Vladimir Putin and in 2014 called him possessed by Satan.

Putin in turn has cultivated strong ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, adopting more conservative policies and prompting critics to suggest the line separating state and church has become blurred.

Thursday's parliamentary motion was opposed by the Opposition Bloc, the heir to the party once headed by the pro-Russian former president Viktor Yanukovich. The party called the move a gambit by Poroshenko ahead of elections next year.

"We believe that the presidential campaign began today," its leader, Yuriy Boyko, said. "The bad news is that the presidential campaign begins with the most sensitive topic for society - the issue of religion. The state has no right to interfere in religious matters."

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