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The Orthodox Churches of the Moscow Patriarchate in the Baltic States' attitude towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine

On May 18, 2022, the Lithuanian Prime Minister asked the Patriarch of Constantinople to separate the Lithuanian Orthodox Church from the Moscow Patriarchate. Then, on September 8, the Latvian Saeima adopted a law on the independence of the Latvian Orthodox Church. Moreover, on October 12, the head of the Estonian Orthodox Church was ordered by the Estonian government to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Patriarch Kirill's statement on the hostilities in Ukraine. Although the Orthodox Churches have thus far not supported the war in any way and have not incited hatred between nations, the reactions of the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian authorities should be seen in the context of growing concerns for their national security.

Lithuania. So far the Orthodox Church in Lithuania has been subordinate to the Patriarch of Moscow Kirill, but it has not had the same autonomy as the churches in Latvia and Estonia. In May, Ingrida Šimonytė, the Prime Minister of Lithuania, asked the Patriarch of Constantinople for permission to break the Lithuanian Orthodox Church (LOC) from the Moscow Patriarchate. In her letter, she expressed her support for the request of some Orthodox priests to transfer their canonical subordination from Moscow to Constantinople. A significant number of Lithuanian Orthodox believers opposed Patriarch Kirill's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

However, Inocentas, the Metropolitan of Vilnius and Lithuania, was surprised by the Prime Minister's letter to the Patriarch of Constantinople. According to him, clergy who accept the possibility of seceding from the Moscow Patriarchate pose a threat to the stability of the Lithuanian Orthodox community. Previously, Metropolitan Inocentas had even dismissed a few Orthodox priests who recognized their allegiance to the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

At the end of June, Lithuania banned Patriarch Kirill from entering the country. Then, in July, Bishop of Trakai, Ambrose, met Patriarch Kirill in Moscow. It was negatively assessed by the Lithuanian media, but some members of the Orthodox community argued that it would lead to greater independence of the LOC.

Latvia. The Latvian Orthodox Church (LOC) is considered an autonomous unit, but its links to Russia have been viewed as a threat to state security for a long time. For this reason, at the beginning of September the Latvian Saeima adopted amendments to the law on the LOC proposed by President Egils Levits regarding the independence of the LOC from the Moscow Patriarchate. 73 deputies voted for the amendments, three were against, and one abstained. The law provides that the LOC is an independent (autocephalous) church and is not a subject to any pastoral authority other than in Latvia. The law prohibits any influence or power over the LOC by the Moscow Patriarch. By October 31, 2022, the LOC will have had to adapt its statute to the new legal requirements, and by October 1, it had to provide the President's Chancellery with the information about the current head of the LOC, metropolitans, archbishops, and bishops. However, the law is not related to faith teachings or issues of canon law. On September 20, the Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia authorized the Minister of Justice Jānis Bordāns to appeal to Patriarch Kirill with a request to issue a tomos of autocephaly to the LOC.

Such a decision must be approved not only by the Russian Orthodox Church, but also by a council consisting of clergy, religious, and lay representatives of the Orthodox Church.

The OC has not opposed the government's act, seeing this decision as a way to remain 'legally independent from any church structure outside Latvia,' while "maintaining spiritual, prayer, and liturgical communion with all canonical Orthodox churches in the world.' The law also requires the removal of prayers for the Moscow Patriarch during services.

Estonia. The Estonian Orthodox Church (EOC) is an independent church operating under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. In a speech on March 19, 2022, the EOC, together with representatives of the Estonian Council of Churches, called for an end to hostilities in Ukraine and for help for refugees, while at the same time encouraging the Orthodox believers in Estonia to separate themselves from political disputes. However, while the EOC condemned "Russia's special military operation", it did not provide a "political assessment of the situation". For this reason, it was inferred that the EOC supported the violence and called for the continuation of the war. Further, the greetings sent by Patriarch Kirill to Metropolitan Eugene, the head of the EOC, on the occasion of his 65th birthday, in which Patriarch Kirill emphasized the unique relationship between both churches and the need to maintain unity within the Orthodox Church, fostered additional criticism of the EOC.

Finally on October 12, Metropolitan Eugene issued a statement condemning the war between Russia and Ukraine. The Metropolitan was called upon by the Estonian Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Justice to submit such an opinion, otherwise he risked revocation of his permanent residence permit in Estonia.

Estonian authorities welcomed the statement by the EOC, which represented a formal break from Patriarch Kirill's statement, in which he called the war in Ukraine as "holy", giving it his blessing. Moreover, Estonian authorities stated that no organization, including religious ones, could support the war because doing so posed a threat to state security.

The reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP). The Baltic states' authorities' approach has been met with great criticism from the ROC MP, especially in relation to Latvia. Archpriest Nikola Balashov, advisor to the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill, described the policy of the Latvian government towards the LOC as "the medieval confessional monarchies' style" and accused President Levits of "brutal violation of the rule of no interference of state secular power into the religious sphere", thereby declaring that relations between the state and the Church should be separated. Similarly, the Patriarchal Exarch of Africa, Metropolitan Leonid of Klin, insisted that the LOC should have opposed and ignored the decision of the Latvian authorities. Interestingly, Russian Muslims also expressed indignation over Latvia. Leaders of Islamic organizations published a statement in which they call this decision a "gross interference in the spiritual life of religious institutions, disrespect for the rights and interests of believers and their historical choice".

Conclusions.

1. Orthodoxy is one of the most important religions in the Baltic States. While it is not a significant religion in Lithuania (about 4% of believers), in Latvia it is the most relevant, and a fourth of inhabitants of this country identifies as Orthodox (this percentage remains constant: 26% in 2019 – the same number as in 2014). The second largest religion here is Catholicism with 20% of the population, and the third is Lutheranism with 17%. Over the past thirty years, the number of Orthodox parishes in Latvia has tripled. In Estonia, one of the least religious countries in Europe, Orthodox believers constitute 16.5% of the population.
2. The Orthodox Church in the Baltic states has a stable position due to a large Russian-speaking minority, especially in Latvia and Estonia. Patriarch of Moscow Kirill visits to Latvia (2006, 2014) and Estonia (2013) created great enthusiasm not only among Orthodox believers, but also among non-practicing Russian-speaking people. Not only did Kirill play the role of moral leader, but he also acted as a diplomat, having meetings with state representatives and delivering a special political message calling for the restoration of historical ties between the Russian people (see “IEŚ Commentaries no. 563”).
3. Especially after 2014 and the annexation of Crimea, the Orthodox Churches in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have been considered a threat to state security and stability. In the opinion of the authorities, there is a risk that the leadership of the ROC MP could unilaterally liquidate the independence of the Orthodox Churches and de facto change their canonical status. Patriarch Kirill’s statement on September 25, 2022 that Russian soldiers who died in combat in Ukraine would be absolved was of great importance (for more see “IEŚ Commentaries no. 627”). These words provoked a harsh reaction from Estonian authorities.
4. It seems that the Orthodox Churches in Lithuania and Latvia were not consulted before the changes in their legal status. Thus, the decisions were criticized by some followers, who argued that no political body could grant autocephaly to the church, as only the Moscow Patriarchate could do so in accordance with church law. In Estonia, the EOC synod expressed concern that accusations and calls for the church to make political assessments and statements about current events are constantly emerging.
5. The vocal support for the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Orthodox Church caused not only a harsh reaction from the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian authorities, but also changes in the communities themselves. Members of the Orthodox clergy had already acted against the war and called for separation from the Moscow Patriarchate. To avoid a schism, the clergy who publicly criticized Patriarch Kirill were degraded or expelled from the priesthood. In the near future, there will certainly be a discussion on the possibility of bringing the Orthodox Churches in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.