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Orthodoxy in Estonia: Between Autonomy and National Security

The restoration of Estonian independence led to the division of the local Orthodox Church into two: one subordinate to the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the other dependent on the Moscow Patriarchate. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Estonia took a harder line on the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. This resulted in administrative decisions such as the expulsion of Metropolitan Eugenius and attempts to sever ties with the Moscow Patriarchate. In response to new legal regulations aimed at limiting the influence of the Russian Church, changes have been made to the church's organisational structure. However, disputes over the Church's future status and its relations with other Orthodox jurisdictions remain ongoing. The situation remains dynamic and affects the security of the state.

Historical background of the events. Orthodox missionaries arrived in areas that are now part of Estonia as early as the Middle Ages. However, German settlement and the powerful position of the local nobility (Ritterschaft) led to the Evangelical Church's dominance in Inflanty, secured by privileges granted by Polish monarchs, among other things. Inflanty was also an area where Old Believers and representatives of various Orthodox sects sought refuge from persecution. The growth of Orthodoxy in this region was supported by the Russian authorities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and was a result of the area's dynamic economic development thanks to the expansion of important transshipment ports in Riga and Tallinn. Orthodoxy also developed thanks to the mass conversion of Estonian and Latvian peasants. In the mid-19th century, there was a rumour among them, fuelled by Orthodox missionaries, that the Tsar would offer land allotments in the warm southern Russian provinces to each convert. Over 100,000 Latvians and Estonians converted as a result of the 'warm lands movement'.

Following Estonia's independence in 1920, Patriarch Tikhon granted autonomy to the Estonian Orthodox Church. However, in 1922, under pressure from the secular authorities, the local church applied for autocephaly from the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which was granted the following year. With the beginning of the Soviet occupation in 1940, the Estonian Church was deprived of all forms of autonomy and autocephaly, though this was restored during the period of German rule. After World War II, the Church was absorbed into Russian Orthodoxy once again, a situation that lasted until the country regained its independence. In 1990, Estonian Orthodoxy split to form the Estonian Apostolic Church of the Patriarchate of Constantinople (EACPC). In 1993, the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (EOC MP) was granted autonomy.

Institutional changes: Following Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the Estonian authorities became more interested in the activities of the Estonian Orthodox Church. This was partly a consequence of statements made by the Moscow Patriarch, who openly supported Russia's aggression against Ukraine. It was also prompted by concerns about the loyalty of the local Orthodox clergy. On 5 February 2024, the Police and Border Guard Board informed Metropolitan Evgeny, the head of the EOC MP, that his temporary residence permit in Estonia would not be extended (see "[IES Commentaries](#)" no. 711). The hierarchy had to leave the country the next day. This decision was opposed by the ECP PM Synod. In April 2024, the Ministry of Internal Affairs held meetings with EOC MP parishes in an attempt to persuade them to break away from the Moscow Patriarchate. On 6 May 2024, the Estonian parliament recognised the Moscow Patriarchate as an 'organisation supporting Russian aggression' in its resolution¹.

¹ *Riigikogu declared the Moscow Patriarchate an institution sponsoring Russia's military aggression*, Estonian Parliament, <https://www.riigikogu.ee/en/news-from-committees/constitutional-committee/riigikogu-declared-the-moscow-patriarchate->

Then, on 30 July 2024, Raivo Küyt, a representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, met with Bishop Danil of Tartu, representing the ECP PM, and Steven-Hristo Evestus, a lawyer representing the monastery in Pühtitsa. The Estonian authorities demanded that the EOC MP be completely independent of Moscow, both canonically and legally. The EOC MP proposed a two-stage process: first, changes to the statute; then, talks with the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, with the aim of uniting Orthodoxy in Estonia. On 20 August 2024, the EOC MP Synod voted to change its name to the Estonian Orthodox Church. However, the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced that it could not accept this change, as the religious community in question does not represent all Orthodox Christians in Estonia. On 31 March 2025, the new name, the Estonian Christian Orthodox Church (ECOC), was officially approved, and the necessary changes were made to the statute.

Threat to security. The Estonian Parliament (Riigikogu) is currently reconsidering amendments to the Act on Churches and Assemblies, which aim to prevent religious organisations in Estonia from inciting hatred or violence. The first version of the Act, which was adopted by the Riigikogu on 9 April 2025, was rejected two weeks later by President Alar Karis. He stated that the restrictions on religious freedom and the right to association set out in the Act were disproportionate and not in line with the Estonian Constitution. President Karis therefore deemed it necessary for the Riigikogu to reconsider the Act and ensure it aligns with the Estonian Constitution. The law primarily affects the Estonian Orthodox Church, which, once the amendment is approved, will be required to sever all ties with the Moscow Patriarchate. The Act states that a religious organisation may not be run, controlled, or financially linked to a religious community, spiritual centre, governing body, or spiritual leader of a church in another country, if they threaten national security or support aggression and violence. At the same time, the Act is accompanied by a memorandum emphasising Estonia's commitment to religious freedom. However, while respecting freedom of religion and association, the state must also consider challenges that threaten national security, public order, and social cohesion. The amendment to the Act also addresses who can serve as a member of the clergy on the board of a religious community in Estonia, and sets out requirements for the statute of a religious community.

The Russian Orthodox Church towards the religious situation in Estonia. On 11 April 2025, Patriarch Kirill addressed leaders of local Orthodox churches, Christian leaders, heads of state and international organisations regarding the Estonian Parliament's adoption of a law effectively banning the activities of the Estonian Christian Orthodox Church. In his address, Patriarch Kirill emphasised that the new legislation violates the freedom of religion guaranteed by Estonia's constitution and international legal instruments. He called for prayers and support for the persecuted community. Those addressed included the heads of Orthodox churches, such as the patriarchs of Antioch, Georgia and Serbia, as well as leaders of other denominations, including Pope Francis and Coptic Patriarch Tawadros II. Politicians addressed included the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and the President of the USA, Donald Trump, as well as international organisations such as the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe. The letters were accompanied by the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church's position of 10 April, which condemned the Estonian regulations for discriminating against believers.

Conclusions. As a result of the institutional changes that have taken place in the EOC MP since 2022, the organisational structure of the Orthodox Church remains complex. Metropolitan Evgeny, who has left Estonia, continues to officially lead the Church. The new law stipulates that individuals without the right to reside or stay in Estonia cannot be clergy or members of the religious community's board.

There is much to suggest that work on the law will continue, as there is a consensus among the parliamentary majority on this matter, and it will enter into force. The president did not question the purpose of the amendment, but pointed out the ambiguity in the regulations. Once the law comes into effect, the Orthodox Church will have two months to sever ties with the Moscow Patriarchate.

an-institution-sponsoring-russias-military-aggression/#~:text=Today%2C%20the%20Riigikogu%20passed%20a%20Statement%20where%20it,Moscow%20Patriarchate%20an%20institution%20sponsoring%20Russia%E2%80%99s%20military%20aggression (13.05.2025).



This may prove difficult, as the authorities of the ECOC and the Pühtitsa religious congregation both disagree with the changes, believing them to be intended to “put pressure on religious communities”. Furthermore, “submission to the new law would mean breaking monastic vows.”

Although relations between the Orthodox churches in Estonia are rather frosty, in September 2024 the EACPC declared its willingness to help the EOC MP become independent from the Russian Orthodox Church. It suggested that the EOC MP should be placed under the jurisdiction of an autonomous vicariate of the EACPC parish. The current Russian congregations and monasteries would be able to retain their customs, language, and liturgical calendar – there are minor differences between the two Orthodox churches in terms of liturgy, iconography, and language usage – but they would be administratively affiliated with the EACPC and subject to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. However, according to the followers of the EOC MP, this would lower the status of their church because the vicar at the head of the EOP MP would only have powers within the limits set by the EACP bishop.

The Council of Churches, the main ecumenical organisation uniting the major churches in Estonia, also made several proposals while the bill was being drafted. For instance, a representative of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church said that much of the tension surrounding the bill could have been avoided if the EOC MP had unequivocally indicated its distance from the Moscow Patriarchate.

The actions of the Estonian authorities are reminiscent of those taken by Latvia, where amendments to the law on the Latvian Orthodox Church were adopted in September 2022, confirming its independence from foreign church authorities. Conversely, similar decisions taken by Ukraine regarding the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate have not yet been fully implemented. Since 2018, Ukraine has been unable to force this church to change its name, and the implementation of provisions for the dissolution of religious communities dependent on authorities based in territories occupied by the aggressor state has been slow. The key problem is social protests and lobbying led and coordinated by Russian Orthodoxy. However, similar situations are very unlikely in Estonia due to the small size of the community, the lack of a political culture of protest and the country's geopolitical conditions.