

THE AFRICAN EXARCHATE OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH (ROC): REASONS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT AND PROSPECTS OF FURTHER EXPANSION

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Abstract: The article examines the recent (12/29/2021) establishment of the African Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The setting up of the ROC's African Exarchate is related to the situation in Ukraine and was, particularly, was driven by the decision made by the Alexandrian Orthodox Church (AOC) to recognize the autocephaly (independence) of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (PCU), and by the subsequent rupture of relations between the AOC and the ROC. An analysis of the events preceding the establishment of the ROC's African Exarchate, the positions of the AOC and the ROC, as well as the expansion strategy may shed light on the prospects of the African Exarchate of the ROC.

Keywords: *the African Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), the Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, the Alexandrian Orthodox Church (AOC), the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU).*

INTRODUCTION

The African Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was created late 2021 in response to the decision of Patriarch Theodore II, the Head of the Alexandrian Church, to recognize the autocephaly (independence) of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) (Tsargrad TV, 2021) in November 2019. By accepting the autocephaly of the OCU, the Alexandrian Orthodox Church followed the suit of Constantinople, which recognized OCU's autocephaly in January 2019 (Khomenko, Denisov, 2019) and the Hellenic Greek Orthodox Churches, which did it October 2019 (Marchenko, 2019). The ROC labelled the recognition of OCU by Alexandria as schism. As a response to this move of Alexandria, ROC took a number of African Orthodox communities, which used to be under the jurisdiction of Alexandria, to its own jurisdiction and established the African Exarchate to manage the new coming African Orthodox communities.

The AOC considers the entire African continent, with the exception of the territory of the Sinai Peninsula, as areas under its jurisdiction. So, the establishment of

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the African Exarchate of the ROC was characterised by the AOC as a decision that caused “deepest sorrow” (Konstantinova, 2021).

BACKGROUND

Early 2019, Ukrainian Orthodox Churches had been under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate for more than three centuries, starting from the 17th century. Apart from these “canonical” Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which were subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, there were “non-canonical” churches, that is, not recognized by the ROC. Among these “non-canonical churches” are the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate (established in 1992) and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (established in 1917, dissolved in 1930, resumed operations in 1989) (Kosenok et al., 2017; Kuzio, 1997; Soldatov, 2020). In 2018, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church merged into one church, which is known as the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). This merger was administered with the support of the Orthodox Church of Constantinople. (RBC, 2018).

On January 6, 2019, the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Patriarch of the OCU in the Istanbul Cathedral had a joint service together. Following the service, the Patriarch of Constantinople signed a tomos (decree) on the autocephaly of the OCU (Khomenko, Denisov, 2017; Butler, 2019). P. Poroshenko, who was then the Ukrainian President, attended the signing ceremony and called it “the victory of good over evil, light over darkness”. Several months before this event P. Poroshenko described the religious unity of Ukraine and Russia as “a direct threat to the security of Ukraine” (Deutch, 2019).

The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill commented the tomos giving the autocephaly to OCU as follows: “It is not on his own that the Patriarch of Constantinople did what he did, by while being led by other people’s thoughts and from other people’s words<...> and while being under pressure from powerful political forces associated with one of the superpowers”. In October 2019, the Greek Orthodox Church supported the decision of Constantinople (Marchenko, 2019). In November 2019, AOC’s Patriarch Theodore II also recognized the autocephaly of the OCU (Tsargrad TV, 2021).

The penchant of the Ukrainian Orthodox churches for autocephaly/autonomy derives from the political process unfolding in post-Soviet countries. ROC’s Patriarch Kirill commented on this process as follows: “They try to involve the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in a deep conflict that divides society, and make it a hostage of this conflict <...> There are violent seizures of churches, court decisions are ignored, a slanderous information campaign against the church is being conducted, bills are being proposed in the Ukrainian parliament, the purpose of which is to discriminate and put the country’s largest religious community in the most difficult conditions <...> Our Church will never leave its brethren in trouble in Ukraine and will not abandon them” (Kosenok et al, 2017).

2020-2021, AOC’s Patriarchate maintains its relations with the OCU. As a response, the ROC began its advancement on the African continent. The first steps were taken in December 2019, when ROC took “Russian-speaking” African Orthodox parishes, where parishioners are citizens of Russia or Russian speakers), to its

jurisdiction. Before that these parishes, like all other Orthodox parishes in the African continent, were under the jurisdiction of AOC.

As the ROC's priest Maximov claims, from this moment on other Africans Orthodox churches are trying to get under the jurisdiction of ROC (Maksimov, 2022). At first ROC's leadership was not ready to consider these applications as it took effort to improve relationships with AOC, but to no avail.

In August 2021, AOC's Patriarch held a joint service with the Patriarch of the OCU (Rossaprimavera, 2021). This joint service was heavily criticised by ROC as ROC considered it as further approval of "schism". Following that ROC conducted research and by December 2021 was ready to accept under ROC's jurisdiction those African Orthodox communities which had applied before. To coordinate these new-coming African Orthodox communities, ROC decided to establish an exarchate on December 29, 2021. On the same day, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church received 102 clerics from 8 African countries under its jurisdiction (Patriarchia, 2021). By the end of July 2022, the number of African clerics who had joined had doubled (Exarchate-Africa, 2011).

According to the "Internal Regulations on the Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa" dated March 24, 2022, "The Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa is a canonical division of the ROC, created in order to coordinate the liturgical, religious and educational, publishing, social, educational and missionary activities of the dioceses and other canonical divisions of the ROC" (Patriarchia, 2022). The African Exarchate included two dioceses - North African (31 countries) and South Africa (23 countries) (ITAR-TASS, 2022). Metropolitan Klinsky Leonid Gorbachev was appointed head of the exarchate, who stated that the African Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church is "an absolutely new powerful structure on a continental scale that requires scrupulous, detailed study and elaboration" (RIA News, 2022).

Importantly, Metropolitan Klinsky was not chosen by accident as the Head of ROC's African exarchate. For almost 10 years he has been ROC's envoy to AOC. During his service, he visited many African countries, which enabled him to get first-hand knowledge about AOC's policies in Africa. Since the establishment of the African Exarchate, its head Leonid, Metropolitan Klinsky, regularly reports repeatedly on his progress in his telegram channel as well on his official site.

THE POSITION OF THE AOC

AOC reacted painfully to the decision to create the African Exarchate of the ROC and the withdrawal of more than 100 clerics from their jurisdiction in one day.

On January 10-12, 2022, AOC's Holy Synod held an urgent meeting, calling the establishment of the African Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church as "immoral interference by the Russian Church" (Orthodox Times, 2022) which is against the rules of Orthodoxy (Gall, 2019). The AOC's statement published after this meeting stated that "this anti-canonical <...> intervention of the Russian Patriarchate <...> is dictated by motives, which are far from Christian", and that African clergy who come under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church would be severely punished (Gall, 2019).

At the same time, the AOC does not take any responsibility and considers its acknowledgement of OUC's autocephaly as purely legitimate. While explaining its position, AOC points to the fact that the Orthodox Churches of Constantinople and

Hellas acknowledged the autocephaly of the OCU even earlier, in 2019. Moreover, representatives of the Church of Alexandria consider the recognition of the OCU to be lawful in connection with the conflict unfolding in Ukraine after 2014. On its official website, the OCU condemns the creation and expansion of the African Exarchate of the ROC, and also reports on meetings with Orthodox leaders from different countries to clarify its position and motives of the ROC.

A number of Greek, British and American media supported the position of the OCU, and also welcomed the recognition of the autocephaly of the OCU by Fener.

Greek researcher Georgiy Gamakopolous from the Fordham Institute (Fordham) emphasised in an interview with the Atlantic publication that the recognition of Ukraine's autocephaly is a major geopolitical defeat for the Russian Orthodox Church (Deutch, 2019). An article in the American newspaper *The New York Times* states that the Patriarch of Constantinople is the "spiritual leader" of the Orthodox world, and his decision is not subject to dispute (Doroshenko, 2018). According to *Ukrainian Week*, the recognition of autocephaly is a "threat to Russian imperialism" (Tucker, Menhard, 2018).

Employees of the Swedish Institute for Security Policy and Development believe that "for the Kremlin, the Russian Orthodox Church is just a tool <...> for transforming the post-communist geopolitical space in the interests of Russia" (Ukrinform, 2022). An article citing the BBC *Ukraine* argues that the recognition of the autocephaly of the OCU by Patriarch Theodore of Alexandria is a signal to other Orthodox churches, many of which can follow the example of one of the oldest Orthodox churches (Sereti, 2018). The head of the Centre for Ecumenical, Missiological and Natural Research (CEMES), Professor Petro Vasiliadis, said that "most Ukrainians view Russia as an aggressor country, and the Moscow Patriarch as *persona non grata*" (Sherwood, 2019). H. Sherwood, a journalist for the British newspaper *The Guardian*, wrote that the SBU (Security Service of Ukraine) accused the Moscow Patriarchate of being a "weapon of the Kremlin" (Interfax, 2022).

THE POSITION OF THE ROC

The position of the ROC is that the recognition of the autocephaly of the OCU is non-canonical, schismatic and dictated exclusively by political reasons, while the creation of the African Exarchate of the ROC was only a forced reaction to the appeals of Africans who did not want to be associated with the split initiated by Alexandria (Gorbachev, 2022). The head of the African Exarchate, Metropolitan Leonid of Klin, emphasised that the approval of the autocephaly of the OCU was made by Patriarch Theodore alone, without convening the Holy Synod and without consulting the episcopate, which contradicts established rules.

Representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church have repeatedly stated that until 2019 they considered Africa a territory under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Alexandria (Patriarchia, 2022). In response to the statement of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church on January 12, 2022, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church responded 10 days later that the decision to establish the African Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church was made only after "the Alexandrian Patriarchate recognized the independence of the Ukrainian schismatics", and that the Russian Orthodox Church does not "claim to be a canonical territory of the ancient Church of Alexandria", but simply "provides canonical protection to those Orthodox clerics

of Africa who do not wish to participate in the lawless legitimization of the schism in Ukraine” (Drevo, 2016).

The ROC sees its task in Africa as helping the Orthodox in their striving not to be involved in a church schism. The question of schism and schismatics is a painful one for the church environment. After the autocephaly of the OCU, which was recognized by the AOC, Orthodox Russians on the African continent could no longer attend the AOC churches, as this is equated with support for the Ukrainian “schismatics”. And the Orthodox priests sent by the Russian Orthodox Church to Africa were no longer ready to mention the Patriarch of Alexandria during the service.

As it says in the second canon of the Council of Antioch, “<...> let it not be allowed to have communion with those who are excommunicated <...> If any of the bishops, presbyters, deacons, or any of the clergy turns out to be communicating with those who are excommunicated, let him himself be out of communion ecclesiastical as producing confusion in the church order” (Maximov, 2021). That is, one who enters into communion with schismatics becomes a schismatic himself. Thus, following the second canon of the Council of Antioch, it is permissible to take under one’s jurisdiction clerics who would like to save themselves from schism (Mikolenko, 2022).

Some representatives of the ROC express the point of view that the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church in Africa is not unconditional and that the Russian Orthodox Church is simply restoring its canonical presence in Africa. According to the priest of the Russian Orthodox Church and a member of the Expert Council under the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation on countering religious extremism, Georgy Maksimov, who at the same time is most probably the second person in the Exarchate, highlights that until the 20th century the Patriarchate of Alexandria did not claim the entire African continent as its canonical territory. The generally recognized canonical territory of the Patriarchate of Alexandria was the area of modern Libya, Egypt, and Ethiopia (Maximov, 2019).

Closer to 1930, Patriarch Metaxakis of Alexandria decided that the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church of Alexandria should extend to the entire African continent and began to call himself “Patriarch of Alexandria and all Africa” (Maximov, 2019). The decision of Metaxakis was of a one-man nature and was not coordinated with other churches.

De facto, the expansion of the Alexandrian Throne on the African continent has only been undertaken in the second half of the 20th century. For a long time, other Orthodox churches neither criticised nor supported Alexandria’s activities in Africa. Only in 2001 did Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople issue a tomos recognizing the jurisdiction of the AOC in Africa.

At the same time, the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church in Africa has its own history. Even before the decision of Patriarch Metaxakis, parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate were established on the African continent: in 1914 in Egypt (1914); in Bizerte, Tunisia (1920); in Algeria (1922); in Rabat, Casablanca, Morocco (1927) (Mikolenko, 2022).

Thus, according to G. Maksimov, since the Church of Alexandria chose the path of schism, the ROC undertook efforts to restore its jurisdiction on the African continent, the history of which goes back more than a hundred years.

Reasons for Active Transition of African Churches to the ROC

The reasons why many African clerics readily come under the jurisdiction of the ROC have raised many questions. In December 2021, during the creation of the African Exarchate, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church accepted a petition from 102 African clerics. According to ROC Priest G. Maksimov, on January 14, 2022, about half of all Orthodox clerics in Africa filed a petition to transfer to the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church (Maksimov, 2022). At the same time, the African clergy are well aware that the transition is fraught with serious consequences for both the African churches and their priests who made such a decision (Kulchytsky, 2019).

Exarch Metropolitan Leonid identifies the following reasons: disagreement with the recognition of the autocephaly of the OCU for “canonical reasons”; social problems ignored by the AOC, and “weak care for the flock” (Nezavisimaya gazeta, 2019). Whereas this opinion may be considered biased and one-sided, let's look at some of the reasons in more detail.

Firstly, a number of African clerics agree with the ROC that the recognition of the autocephaly of the OCU by the Alexandrian Orthodox Church is a non-canonical schism associated with political reasons. At the end of December 2019, 102 African clerics expressed their disagreement with the recognition of the OCU in open and several closed letters to Alexandria (Maximov, 2019). When the African clergy sees that Constantinople is interfering in the politics of Ukraine, they may begin to wonder if the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople might one day interfere in the political life of African countries? Even now, the Patriarch of Alexandria did not involve the African clergy in any way in the discussion of the issue of the autocephaly of the OCU (Maximov, 2019). According to Metropolitan Leonid, when the Patriarch of Alexandria arrived in an African country, when asked by the clergy about the autocephaly of the OCU, he answered: “It's none of your business, it's between me and Patriarch Kirill” (Nezavisimaya gazeta, 2019).

Secondly, African clerics are not satisfied with the attitude of the AOC towards its clergy. G. Maksimov, a priest of ROC who visited many Orthodox parishes on the African continent, mentions the lack of career growth for priests as one of the reasons. With a population of more than 1 billion on the African continent, about 10 million in Greece, about 1 million in Cyprus, out of 37 bishops of the AOC (bishop is the highest rank in the “white” clergy), only 5 are Africans, 1 is an Arab and 31 are Greek (Pew Research Center, 2001). The bishops of the Orthodox Church do not live in Africa permanently: they live in Greece and visit Africa for about two weeks a year, give Greek flags to local residents, distribute humanitarian aid (including second-hand clothes), take a few photos for reports and they rush home (Pew Research Center, 2001).

G. Maksimov mentions segregation as another reason for dissatisfaction. For example, in Zambia, in one parish there are two different Orthodox churches “unofficially” for whites and for blacks and as result of such discrimination an African cannot enter a church for whites (Pew Research Center, 2001). When the Patriarch of Alexandria arrived in Tanzania, he met only with the Greeks and did not even go out to the African priests.

Among the situations in which G. Maksimov was not personally present, but which he heard about, was the case when a Greek bishop publicly reprimanded an

African cleric in the Congo, calling him a “black monkey” (Maksimov, 2022). Of course, there have been pastors among Greek missionaries who have had a loving attitude toward African parishioners and clergy, but such pastors have not reflected the overall policy of the AOC (Maksimov, 2022).

Another important fact - the Orthodox churches in Africa are completely dependent on funds coming from Alexandria (Pew Research Center, 2001). Local residents, businesses and other organisations are not allowed to make donations. At the same time, the problem of underfunding is visible. Since the remuneration of African priests of the AOC is less than \$100, they have to work after the service in the church. Priest Maksimov cites the story of a Tanzanian priest whom he knew, who died of exhaustion after the refusal of the Patriarch of Alexandria to provide him with financial assistance (Maksimov, 2022).

Prospect of ROC on the African continent

While discussing the future perspectives of the ROC on the African continent, we should consider two main issues: whether the ROC is interested in expanding its influence in Africa, and what conditions are favourable and which may have a negative impact on the growth of its influence.

According to the statements of the leadership of the exarchate, the ROC never sought to challenge the AOC in Africa and decided to do it now, only when all other possibilities were exhausted. Does this mean that if the AOC suddenly abandons the OCU, the exarchate of the ROC in Africa will be disbanded? In a speech dated February 16, 2022 The head of the African Exarchate, Metropolitan Leonid, said that the exarchate would not be dissolved even in the event of normalisation of relations with the AOC: “If tomorrow the blessed Patriarch of Alexandria Theodore withdraws his decision to recognize the schismatic OCU, we will immediately sit down at the negotiating table and look for a compromise <...> But the Exarchate will not be abolished <...>” (Nezavisimaya gazeta, 2019).

The high degree of interest of the ROC in strengthening its position in Africa is indicated by the goals and objectives that it sets for itself. According to Metropolitan Leonid, the exarchate has identified a number of short-term and long-term steps that are not limited to spiritual development. The strategy is related to “a wide range of areas from providing a humanitarian mission”, including humanitarian aid, medical care, infrastructure projects, to protecting the rights of Christians. Among the tasks that the exarchate immediately began to solve is helping priests and families who were kicked out of the AOC “on the street”. Among the strategic points, he mentions a special training of the African episcopate. Students from Africa have already been selected who will soon begin their studies in Moscow under the mentorship of Exarch Leonid. In addition to it the exarchate actively holds meetings with African presidents, prime ministers, heads of diplomatic departments.

Furthermore the internal motivation of the exarchate, as well as the availability of mostly state resources, it is necessary to consider external factors - the conditions in which the African Exarchate will have to implement its policy.

External factors include the growing popularity of Christianity on the African continent. In 1910, most Africans professed indigenous African religions, and only less than 20% were adherents of Christianity or Islam. By 2010, more than 85% of Africans belonged to either Christianity or Islam (Alfeev et al, 2018). As of 2018,

there were only about 500 Orthodox Christians in Africa despite the fact that the total number of Christians in Africa is about 600 million (Poznyak, 2017). Syncretic trends dominate among Christian movements on the African continent: neo-Pentecostal or charismatic churches, as well as African independent churches, which are considered non-canonical or “sects” by the ROC.

A potential challenge for the ROC in Africa is the gender issue. Churches are expected to be involved in the fight against gender-based violence and the emancipation of women in general. The African Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church should be prepared for the fact that the absence of female priests may make Orthodox churches less competitive in Africa.

CONCLUSION

The creation of the Patriarchal Exarchate in Africa is an epochal event, more than just the restoration of the ROC's presence on the African continent or the use of “soft power” in the geopolitical struggle. Nevertheless, the significance of the creation of the exarchate lies more in the symbolic plane than in the practical one. Before talking about the large-scale presence of the exarchate in Africa, the number of African clerics who have joined the ROC should “grow” in different ways many times, which will require large resources. Successful implementation of such a large-scale project is possible only with the support of society and various government agencies.

Another possible challenge will be whether the African Exarchate will be able to adopt more flexible policy, not only to accept gender diversity among the clergy of the church, but also to speak the same language with its flock, accepting the diverse cultural and linguistic diversity of the continent.

Finally, in order to successfully spread the influence of the ROC in the long term, it is important to deal not only with solving specific pressing problems, be it difficulties with drinking water or the fate of priests expelled from their homes, but also to build a strategy for spreading traditional Orthodox values on the African continent, built on a verified compromise between respect for local traditions and culture, on the one hand, and adherence to the basic and most significant Orthodox principles, rules - on the other hand.

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