

Orthodox Christianity

The sound of schism

A church split in Ukraine reverberates around the world

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS across the globe are bracing themselves for the Lenten fast, a seven-week period of vegan fare and prayer that starts on March 2nd. But few expect this annual ritual to close the rift that runs through eastern Christendom. A dispute that flared a year ago over the proclamation of an independent church in Ukraine has ricocheted across all the other countries where Orthodox Christianity is practised. Diplomats in Moscow, Washington and elsewhere are watching, because behind the arcane arguments over history and canon law lies a geopolitical standoff.

From the beginning, President Vladimir Putin and his supporters have denounced the new Ukrainian body as an encroachment on Russia's spiritual sphere of influence and a machination of American diplomacy. The United States backs Ukraine's right to ecclesiastical independence. Mike Pompeo, the American secretary of state, made a point of meeting the new Ukrainian primate, Metropolitan Epifaniy, when visiting Kiev on January 31st. Both deplored religious persecution in Russian-controlled bits of Ukraine and laid flowers in memory of slain Ukrainian soldiers.

The global row formally pits Bartholomew I, the Istanbul-based Patriarch of Constantinople who inaugurated the new Ukrainian body, against Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. The former has a historic role as "first among equals" in the Orthodox world; the latter boasts geopolitical heft. Bartholomew insists that he is the only legitimate Orthodox authority in Ukraine.

Both camps have had successes and disappointments as they work to influence the remainder of the Orthodox world. In a boost for Bartholomew, the churches of Greece and the Patriarchate of Alexandria, which is responsible for Africa, have followed his line over Ukraine and incurred the wrath of Moscow. Bishops in the ancient church of Cyprus are divided.

Russia seemed to score a point by inducing the Patriarch of Jerusalem, a Greek, to invite his fellow primates to a deliberation in Jordan scheduled for February 26th, in open defiance of Bartholomew. But the invitation has had fewer takers than expected, and most of the world's senior ethnic Greek hierarchs will probably stay away. Prelates closer to Moscow, such as those in Belgrade and Damascus, are more likely to attend.

In the background is a chill in relations

Turkish justice

Guilty of caring

ISTANBUL

Half a victory for the Gezi Park protesters

THE FINAL hearing in the trial of the environmental activists was rushed. Throughout the case, the court had failed to scrutinise evidence. So on February 18th, when the judge told the defendants they were acquitted, a stunned courtroom broke out in applause. The relief was short-lived. Ruling-party officials tweeted their disapproval, and by nightfall Osman Kavala, the best-known of the group, was arrested again.

The philanthropist, who has spent his fortune saving historic monuments and promoting dialogue with Armenians and Kurds, is now charged with aiding an attempted military coup in 2016. The new investigation lets the government ignore the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which in December ordered Mr Kavala to be freed and said his detention

was meant to muzzle civil society.

In the protest case, the prosecution wanted Mr Kavala sentenced to life for allegedly masterminding anti-government protests sparked by plans to demolish Istanbul's Gezi Park in 2013. The proof? He bought pastries and gas masks for protesters. Now he could face another life sentence. Prosecutors have yet to explain what the lifelong leftist was doing in a military uprising linked to an Islamist sect. But Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has used the attempted coup to justify thousands of dubious arrests. Turkey's judiciary is ranked 109th out of 126 countries on the World Justice Project's rule-of-law index.

Mr Kavala's acquittal and re-arrest suggest a governmental power struggle. But such decisions "would never be made without President Erdogan's consent", says Garo Paylan, a leftist MP. The president says Mr Kavala takes orders from "the famous Hungarian Jew", referring to his work with the Open Society Foundations founded by George Soros.

Gezi Park still stands, a scruffy patch of grass and trees. But Turkish civil society has melted away, as has any appetite for street protests. Seven years ago, the construction of a giant mosque near the park, one of Mr Erdogan's pet projects, was a divisive issue. The mosque has since gone up without a whimper. Ahead of his acquittal, Yigit Aksakoglu, one of Mr Kavala's co-defendants, described how the surreal trial had upended their lives. "I feel like I've been vacuumed into a movie," he said. "Damn the park, let them build whatever they want to build."



I just can't acquit you

between Russia and Greece, whose common Orthodox faith has served over the centuries either as a bond or a point of competition. Recently, Greece has been disappointed by Russia's pragmatic dealings with Turkey, including arms deliveries, and has drawn much closer to America and Israel in energy projects and military matters.

Greece's foreign minister, Nikos Dendias, insisted on February 6th that efforts were being made to mend ties with the Russians, but he also ruffled their feathers by noting the persistence of their medieval aspiration to be the Third Rome (that is, the guardian of Christian dogma in succession to Rome and Byzantium). Meanwhile Moscow's embassy in Greece this week complained that America is sponsoring a

"schismatic construct" in Ukraine that is dividing the Orthodox family.

Russo-Greek rumblings are affecting parts of Greece where pious Russians venerate holy sites. The Patriarchate of Moscow has published a list of Greek dioceses, including Athens, which Russian pilgrims have "no blessing" to visit. These are the areas whose local bishops have signalled support for the new church in Ukraine.

In Ukraine itself, some ordinary churchgoers feel less passionate about the split than their spiritual masters do. A recent poll (excluding the Russian-held areas) found that 34% of Ukrainians identify with the new independent Orthodox church and 14% with the Moscow-aligned one. Another 28% say they are simply Orthodox and refuse to pick sides. ■