

BULLETIN

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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief), Katarzyna Staniewska (Executive Editor),
Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk, Roderick Parkes, Beata Wojna

Patriarch Kirill's visit to Poland

Andrzej Turkowski

During the visit of Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill I, representatives of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland (RCC) and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) will sign a proclamation calling the two nations to reconcile. Given the substance of the proclamation as well as the close cooperation between the ROC and Russian state authorities, the meaning of the document goes beyond the religious sphere and constitutes another step in the Polish–Russian dialogue. Moreover, gradual rapprochement between both Churches may transform the religious factor, which historically has had a negative impact on Polish–Russian relations, into an element that may bring the two nations closer.

On 16–19 August, at the invitation of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill will visit Poland. It will be the first trip ever to Poland by a head of the ROC. On the second day of his stay, Patriarch Kirill and the chairman of the (Roman Catholic) Conference of the Polish Episcopate, Archbishop Józef Michalik, will sign a proclamation embracing an appeal to the nations of Poland and Russia to reconcile. The Patriarch will also meet with representatives of Polish authorities, including President Bronisław Komorowski. The visit of the head of Russian orthodoxy has momentous meaning for relations between the two Churches as well as substantial potential to invigorate the Polish–Russian dialogue.

Dialogue of the Churches. The dialogue between RCC in Poland and the ROC started in September 2009, and the first official visit by representatives of ROC took place on 26 February 2010 in Warsaw. During the meeting, the sides decided to start work on a proclamation by both Churches, agreed on the scope of issues to be addressed in the future document, and settled on a joint commission to coordinate further activities. After the last round of talks, on 15 March 2012, it was announced that the final version was agreed and the signing would be announced in August.

The proclamation will embrace a call to forgive mutual harms, reconcile, and to search for paths of understanding, as well as an appeal to undertake the task of developing the dialogue between both nations. The issue of Polish–Russian history will be raised on a general level, because of the two sides' different interpretations of some of the events. Representatives of the RCC and ROC will declare their conviction that a lasting reconciliation is possible only if based on a solid truth about shared history. Moreover, the proclamation will define common challenges for the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, including the need to defend Christian values in a more and more secularised Europe, a defence upon which both Churches call their worshippers to act.

The Orthodox Church's role in Russian Politics. Since the fall of the USSR, there has been a rise in the Orthodox Church's role in Russia's public space, based on Russians increased identification with orthodoxy as well as cooperation between the Church and the state institutions. The first trend manifested itself in the number of Russians who call themselves Orthodox Christian, increasing from 30% in 1989 to 70% in 2008 (although a mere 6-8% of Russians participate in services at least once a month). In Russians' lives, Orthodoxy plays a role as a source of identification and is treated to a high degree as tradition.

The sign of rapprochement between the state and the ROC was the legally guaranteed status for Orthodoxy as a so-called traditional religion, along with Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism; also there was a recognition of Orthodoxy's special role among the privileged religions. The inclusion of religious components into public events, the manifestation of religiosity by the most important politicians, and financial support granted the Church by the authorities are also signs of rapprochement. What is more, Orthodoxy constitutes an important component of state ideology and is seen by the ruling elites as a base for the spiritual recovery of the society as well as a factor strengthening the national consciousness, and thus Russia's national security (its "civilisational sovereignty") when threatened by globalisation and westernisation.

Cooperation between them also concerns foreign policy. During regular meetings of the Working Group on cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a scope of joint undertakings is discussed and actions relating to inter-religious dialogue, the Patriarch's foreign visits, the maintenance of cultural and spiritual ties with Russians living abroad, as well as the activity of the Church in international organisations, are planned. Cooperation between the ROC and the state is enhanced by a convergence of views on international relations issues essential to Russia. Similar to the state's authorities, the ROC aspires to play the role of an integration centre in the post-Soviet space, where it projects its vital interests. Both secular and religious authorities present a hostile attitude towards the activities of external actors (for example, the U.S., EU, or non-traditional Churches) on Russian territory. The state and the Church have a similar view on current world events—both institutions criticised NATO intervention in Kosovo and then-Patriarch Alexy II sent an official letter to the UN Secretary General as well as to the U.S. president calling for an immediate halt of NATO's action. They also shared opposition to the American intervention in Iraq and, in Syria, to the possible externally-led change of President al-Assad's regime.

Conclusions. The signing of the proclamation will be, from the perspective of Polish–Russian relations, the most important event during the visit of Patriarch Kirill I. The document itself is religious in nature, but because of its content and the significant roles both Churches play, its importance also includes social and political dimensions. It signifies the engagement of institutions that enjoy respect and that influence vast parts of the societies in Poland and Russia in the Polish–Russian dialogue.

Given the ROC's critical attitude towards the Soviet Union period, Poland may gain an important ally in its struggle to fully unravel the totalitarian regime's crimes, and in this context the further opening of archives. The rapprochement of the two Churches may result in changing the religious factor, which historically (including modern history) has had a negative influence on bilateral relations, into an element with a positive impact on the dialogue of Poland and Russia. Given the nature of ROC's relations with the state, Kirill's visit to Poland must have been approved by Russian authorities, which confirms that the existence of the will to continue rapprochement with Poland exists among Russia's political elite. For the Russian side (both the state and the Church), the success of the dialogue, as well as the high interest of society and Polish authorities to Kirill's visit, will lead to an increase in the ROC's prestige in Russia and abroad.

The proclamation by the Polish RCC and the ROC may play a similar role in the development of Polish–Russian relations as the letter from Polish bishops to their German counterparts published in 1965. At the same time, it is important to note that unlike the beginning of the reconciliation process in Polish–German relations, the proclamation by both the dominant Polish and Russian Churches does not contradict the positions held by state authorities, but instead falls in line with the steps made on political levels in recent years. Moreover, contrary to the events of 1965, the proclamation is a joint text and not two separate letters. Moreover, despite the fact that signing of the proclamation is an event unprecedented in the history of Polish–Russian relations it does not signify the mere opening of the reconciliation process, but rather its widening. Additionally, dialogue between the Polish and German Churches took place in an unfavourable international context—both sides were separated by the Iron Curtain. In the case of the Polish–Russian process, the international environment, including the position of the closest partners (for example, Germany or the U.S.) is favourable to the two countries' rapprochement.

Patriarch Kirill's visit also holds importance in the context of general relations between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church, as confirmed by a part of the document about common challenges for both Churches. Kirill's stay in Poland may be a step towards Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Russia.