

Reconfiguring the Moscow Patriarchate's power relations: the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine

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DISCUSSION



Reconfiguring the Moscow Patriarchate's power relations: the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine

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Power is always a relationship, a ratio between interdependent social actors (Elias 2008). One actor can become established by monopolising sources of power and using them to exclude another, but as soon as the power disparity diminishes, the former outsider tends to retaliate (Elias et al. 2008). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has shifted the balance of power in the configurations of the Moscow Patriarchate (MP) with other actors, with consequences not just in Russia and Ukraine, but beyond. This essay, from the perspective of a sociologist with fieldwork in mind, identifies actors and relationships that should now be prioritised for research by scholars of Eastern Orthodoxy.

In the territory of Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP), is a diverse rather than monolithic institution, and within it there are movements of change and moments of contestation (Tolstaya 2020). The MP has supported the war in Ukraine, from Patriarch Kirill's sermons through to parish priests' blessings of soldiers and military equipment, yet, at the start of the full-scale war, nearly 300 clergy signed a petition calling for an immediate ceasefire (Dubtsova 2023). While it is important to hear divergent voices, for the time being, our research as western scholars is limited by practical and ethical considerations. Ethnographic research in Russia is unlikely to be approved by ethics committees at British and American universities. While discourse analysis of the MP's official statements can be undertaken digitally (Dubtsova 2023), research with individuals, while the war is waged and censorship in Russia is imposed, may not be fruitful, and may still, unless entirely passive, put participants at risk.

Just as war potentially strengthens the power of the MP in its domestic configuration so in Ukraine for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). The establishment of the OCU, supported by the Ukrainian government, has put it in a position of power relative to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC MP). However, the Ukrainian state's eviction of monks from the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra (Saliashvili 2023) and the change of the Church Calendar (Hann 2024) represent significant actions that potentially undermine the autonomy of religious actors. While of longer-term research interest, the priority, for now, must be research that can neither harm research subjects nor hinder the Ukrainian struggle.

Elsewhere in post-Soviet territory, and beyond, migration from Russia prompted by the war has a potential impact on configurations of the MP in host countries. Kazakhstan, Georgia and Mount Athos are potential case studies. Between April and October 2022,

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over 170,000 Russian citizens received individual identification numbers in Kazakhstan, evidence of residency required to open a business or bank account and register a car or property (Galina 2023). During a visit to Almaty in November 2023, I observed that the MP was thriving. Whether a growing Church in a secular but majority-Muslim state will be permitted longer term remains to be seen. In Georgia, it is unclear how lower, but still significant, numbers of Russian emigres may impact the delicate balance between the MP, the Orthodox Church of Georgia and the Church of the Genuine Orthodox Christians of Greece (Matsuzato 2010). With potentially looser ties to Moscow and growing numbers of Russian emigres, will the MP in these jurisdictions increasingly differ from the MP in Russia? Will local variations emerge as a result of the urgent issues raised by war?

Further afield, in the multinational Holy Community of Mount Athos, Ukrainian autocephaly already had an impact before 2022 (Bordeianu 2020). 'Slavification' of the Holy Mountain is a long-standing concern of both the Greek state and the Ecumenical Patriarchate (Speake 2002), and my own fieldwork in July 2022 and May 2023 revealed the presence of long-stay monks as well as pilgrims, both Russian and Ukrainian. How will this play out?

Elias et al. (2008) observed that as soon as the power disparity diminishes, the former outsider group tends to retaliate. Bulgaria provides a potential case study of their theory. In Sofia, the MP has lost control of the Church of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker (*Orthodox Times* 2023), a church originally consecrated for the Imperial Russian diplomatic mission and, more recently, the site of pilgrimage to the tomb of St Seraphim of Sofia. The close analysis of a particular church, as in Halemba's study (2023) of a very different context, may prove fruitful in revealing changed configurations of power. Sofia's Church of Saint Nicholas is illustrative of how the global role of the MP (Curanović 2007) has diminished.

Elsewhere, hastened by war, how many former MP Orthodox Christians now under the Ecumenical Patriarchate would now call themselves Russian Orthodox? Similarly, how many of the former Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia Orthodox Christians are now in the Church of the Genuine Orthodox Christians of Greece? Changing self-identification is of importance to scholars of Eastern Orthodoxy, not just as a focus of interest itself, but also in its implications for how we approach our research subjects and the precision of our nomenclature when reporting our findings.

The alliance between the MP and the Russian state (Curanović 2007) has been a source of mutual strength for both parties. Since 24 February 2022, on the domestic front, their alliance seems as strong as ever. However, to use a sporting analogy of the type Elias was fond of, in matches played away from home the state has effectively been sin-binned, leaving the MP relatively unprotected on the field of play. Their opponents, responding to this shift in the balance of power, have formed new configurations. These relationships should now be prioritised for research by scholars of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Disclosure statement

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