

Russian pressure forces historic Orthodox summit to meet in Crete

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PARIS (RNS) The first major council of the world's Eastern Orthodox churches in more than 1,200 years will take place in Crete after the influential Russian Orthodox Church said political tensions between Moscow and Ankara ruled out holding it in Turkey.

The compromise, reached at a recent preparatory meeting held outside Geneva, means the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church will not take place as planned in Hagia Irene, a church-turned-museum in Istanbul where the Council of Constantinople confirmed the Nicene Creed in 381.

Explaining the decision, Patriarch Daniel of the Romanian church said the change was made because "it should be in an Orthodox Christian country. Turkey is a predominantly Muslim country now."

But the move also comes in the wake of strong pressure from the Russian church's pro-Kremlin leadership to change the venue after Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet that strayed into its airspace from neighboring Syria in November.

Russian church officials even hinted that the council, scheduled for June, might not take place at all.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, spiritual leader of the second-largest church family in Christianity, made clear in his opening address to the meeting that the 14 loosely linked autocephalous, or independent, Orthodox churches could not delay much longer.

Bartholomew is based in Istanbul, once Constantinople, which was the center of the Orthodox world until the Muslim conquest of 1453.

The Russian Orthodox Church has far outgrown all other member churches in recent centuries and now makes up about two-thirds of Eastern Orthodoxy's 300 million-strong membership rolls worldwide.

Preparations for the council have highlighted tensions between the large and well-funded Russian church and the fragile Ecumenical Patriarchate, which is tightly limited by the Turkish state and counts only about 3,000 members in its church.

The Moscow Patriarchate was a leading voice in delaying the council, originally due to open in 2015, and successfully insisted on consensus voting instead of the majority voting that Bartholomew preferred to streamline Orthodoxy's cumbersome decision-making procedures.

In his opening remarks, Russian Patriarch Kirill said Moscow also objected to some member churches' push to coordinate the date of Easter with other Christian denominations.

Pope Francis, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, and Pope Tawadros II of the Coptic Orthodox Church—which belongs to a smaller Orthodox family of churches—have recently called for a common Easter date.