

Politics threaten plans for historic gathering of Orthodox churches

by [Tom Heneghan](#) in the [January 20, 2016](#) issue

A religious summit last held more than 1,200 years ago is now in jeopardy because of Syria's civil war.

The world's Orthodox churches, the second-largest ecclesial family in Christianity with 14 autocephalous (independent) member churches, had scheduled their first major council since 787 for May in Istanbul. Now it is no longer clear when or where the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church will be held.

The chain of events now threatening to affect the council began in November when Turkey, which opposes Syrian president Bashar Assad, shot down a Russian bomber that it said had strayed into its air space while attacking Syrian rebels. Moscow, which supports Assad, demanded an apology, and Ankara refused to give it.

The Kremlin reacted with a full range of diplomatic punishments, suspending a joint energy project, banning imports of some Turkish products, and canceling visa-free travel for Russians to Turkey. Russian president Vladimir Putin called the incident "a stab in the back by accomplices of terrorists" and threatened serious consequences for Turkey.

Out of the media spotlight, the Russian Orthodox Church, which has close ties to the Kremlin, also became active. Within days, Metropolitan Hilarion, head of external relations for the church, called off a trip he was about to take to Turkey for preparatory talks about the council.

Then another senior Russian cleric asked whether, under these political circumstances, the summit could be held as planned in Istanbul, which has been the center of the Orthodox world since it was known as Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire, before the Muslim conquest of 1453.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate, headquarters of the loosely tied Orthodox family, is based there, as is Orthodoxy's spiritual leader Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. The plan was to hold the council in Hagia Irene, a church-turned-museum in the Topkapi Palace complex where the Council of Constantinople confirmed the Nicene

Creed in 381.

In early December, Igor Yakymchuk, secretary for inter-Orthodox relations at the Moscow Patriarchate, hinted to RIA Novosti news agency that the council might be postponed.

“It is not known when it will take place,” he said. “If the situation deteriorates, it’s quite possible the council will be held elsewhere. It’s difficult to talk about.”

Yakymchuk made no suggestions, but Russian media began mentioning other possible venues, including Moscow and the Orthodox ecumenical center in Chambésy, outside Geneva.

The chill winds from Moscow are the latest twist in the start-and-stop preparations for the Great Council that go back to at least 1961.

In the 20th century, political upheavals and economic problems prompted many Orthodox believers to emigrate from their homes in Greece, Turkey, and the Middle East to Europe, North America, and elsewhere. Immigrants started parishes and dioceses of their own national churches, with the result that some major cities had several different Orthodox bishops.

Preparations for the pan-Orthodox council have highlighted differences between the large and well-funded Russian Church, which makes up about two-thirds of Orthodoxy’s 300 million-strong world membership, and the fragile Ecumenical Patriarchate, which is tightly limited by the Turkish state and counts only about 3,000 members in its independent Church of Constantinople.

One problem is how the 14 member churches should decide major issues. Some leaders favored majority voting, but the Russian Church insisted on and won a rule requiring consensus, which meant it retained veto power over any changes to be made.

Orthodox disagree over relations to other Christian churches, especially to Catholics, who since the Second Vatican Council have been interested in coming closer and allowing intercommunion among believers split since 1054.

While Bartholomew shows keen interest, the Russian Church has blocked progress because of its dispute with the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine, which is loyal to Rome. Moscow accuses it of trying to take property and poach believers from the

Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Russians, something the Greek Catholics deny.

The Orthodox also find complex questions of authority, such as deciding which autonomous member church is responsible for new communities in the diaspora or how to uphold the tradition of one bishop per city in Western countries.

Hilarion, one of the most important figures in preparations for the summit, tipped his hand last year when he said just holding the council would be historic and Moscow saw no need for it to make any changes. —Religion News Service

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