

Russia celebrates Ukraine's 1025th anniversary of Christianity

Opinion

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Celebrations this weekend marking the 1025th anniversary of the baptism of Kyiv-Rus has less to do with Christianity, or Christian ethics, and more with the deft, ongoing assault on Ukrainian spirituality and Ukraine's national identity. It's a grand public relations gimmick orchestrated by the Russian government and Russian Orthodox Church.

By Paul Peter Jesep, JD, MPS, MA* Often I have publicly commented, "Ukrainians don't need anyone's permission to be a church." Celebrations this weekend marking the 1025th anniversary of the baptism of Kyiv-Rus has less to do with Christianity, or Christian ethics, and more with the deft, ongoing assault on Ukrainian spirituality and Ukraine's national identity. It's a grand public relations gimmick orchestrated by the Russian government and Russian Orthodox Church. Authoritarian President Vladimir Putin is making full use of Orthodoxy to bolster his image. In Moscow, before traveling to Kyiv this weekend for the religious celebrations and meeting with Ukrainian President Viktor Fedorovych Yanukovych, Putin and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill [welcomed 15 Orthodox canonical church leaders](#). Putin and Kirill excluded the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, with a combined membership exceeding 20 million, because they are schismatic for refusing to be under Russian jurisdiction. [Putin told the canonically gathered](#), "Orthodoxy gives people a moral compass." He added, "Today when people are once again searching for moral support, millions of our compatriots see it in religion. They trust the wise, pastoral word of the Russian Orthodox Church." If evangelicals in the United States need another reason, why there must be a separation of church and state, this is it. [Putin](#) will fly to Kyiv to participate at a prayer service at the cradle of Eastern Slav Christendom, the [Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra](#). The soon-to-be divorced, former KGB officer has found Jesus though he may have a view much like the Grand Inquisitor in the *Brothers Karamazov*. The Grand Inquisitor thought Jesus incarnate and the second coming redundant. The hierarchy had everything under control. It's no surprise the Russian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate is an extension of Putin's foreign policy and helps to legitimize the slide toward authoritarianism. Putin's scheduled talks with Viktor Fedorovych regard "key subjects of bilateral cooperation, primarily that in the trade-economic and cultural-humanitarian fields, and exchange opinions on relevant issues of integration cooperation on the Eurasian territory." Expect Viktor Fedorovych, as he has done many times in the past, to genuflect before Putin as much as he will before the icons at the Lavra. No doubt, he'll throw in a "Hospody, pomyluj" (Lord, have mercy) to Putin as well. Despite Viktor Fedorovych's conditioning, he would do well to remember Ukraine is not Eurasian, but squarely rooted in Europe. Ukraine is at a major crossroads. Will it gain entry to the European Union (EU) and take a gigantic step outside Moscow's shadow, or will it become part of the primarily third-world economies of the [Commonwealth of Independent States](#) (CIS)? The CIS is comprised of former Soviet republics having the clear potential to drag down Ukraine's economy. Ukraine doesn't need the CIS. The CIS desperately needs Ukraine and Ukraine needs the EU. Independent of Putin's threats against joining the EU, Viktor Fedorovych has made a mess of his handling of imprisoned former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. There is a

solution. Let her go to Germany for medical treatment and, if she's smart she'll ask for political asylum. She's free and one of the biggest obstacles to Ukraine joining the EU is gone. Tymoshenko's credibility to run for president outside the country becomes complicated and very difficult. The 1025th celebrations, excluding much of the Ukrainian Orthodox community not formally recognized by its club of brothers, is another example why Ukrainian political and religious leaders are mistaken to seek canonical recognition from a political-religious leader in Istanbul. The ecumenical patriarch's symbolic, ceremonial, and ecumenical legitimacy is largely contingent upon the approval of the Russian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate. Moscow will never permit a Ukrainian church canonical recognition if it is not directly under its authority. Independent of the need to exploit Ukraine economically, Russia without Kyiv has a cultural, historical, and spiritual identity crisis. Regardless of Russia's identity problems, it merits repeating, "Ukrainians don't need anyone's permission to be a church." Ukrainian religious and political leaders need to stop asking for approval or affirmation. They answer to God, conscience, and their own people, not Moscow or Istanbul.

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