



Lithuanian  
Centre  
for Social  
Sciences

# "Conscience does not close my eyes": The Orthodox Church in Lithuania in the Context of the War in Ukraine

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## The aim and methodology

- I will discuss the consequences of the conflict among Orthodox Christian clergy in Lithuania, which took place in April-May 2022 and was inspired by the support of the Patriarch of Moscow Kirill for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- The research is based on the qualitative analysis of discourse constructed in the popular Lithuanian online Lithuanian-language newspapers (**delfi.lt** and **lrt.lt**). A total of 144 articles from both media sources were selected for the analysis.
- The research covers the period from 24th **February 2022** (start of the war in Ukraine) to **7th February 2024** (establishment of an alternative to the Orthodox Archdiocese of the Moscow Patriarchate for Orthodox Christians in Lithuania).
- The online media (newspapers) is considered as a significant informational platform for developing public discussion on issues of the identity of the Orthodox Christian community in Lithuania in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.



Photo: The Wall Street Journal

## Historical context of Orthodox Christianity in Lithuania: between global, Russian and local traditions

The Orthodox Church in Lithuania has a history of more than 700 years and a relationship with different traditions of Orthodoxy: global (Byzantine), Russian (Moscow) and local (Grand Duchy of Lithuania).

- The spread of Orthodoxy in Lithuania dates back to the 14th century when the first metropolinate was established by the Patriarche of Constantinople in 1317.
- The tradition of GDL was absorbed into Russian Orthodoxy after the transfer of the Kiev Metropolitanate to the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Moscow in 1686.
- The Orthodox Archdiocese of Vilnius and Lithuania was established in 1839 after the liquidation of the Union of Brest (1596).
- The attempts of political authorities to separate the Archdiocese from the Moscow Patriarchate in 1918–1939 were unsuccessful.
- After 1991 the Orthodox Church was recognised as a traditional religious community in Lithuania and given the right to govern itself according to its own canons.



Photo: Русский календарь (1932)

## Orthodox Archdiocese of Vilnius and Lithuania on the eve of the war in Ukraine in figures

- According to the 2021 census, 105.6 thousand (3.7%) of the population in Lithuania identify themselves as Orthodox Christians. The archdiocese of Vilnius and Lithuania consist of 5 deaneries, 55 parishes, 67 clergy, 1 male and 1 female monastery (2020).
- The administrative centre of the archdiocese is the Monastery of the Holy Spirit (1597) in Vilnius. It houses a metropolitan, an administrative office, an institute for religious education and development, a library, and a pilgrimage centre.
- In 2011, **72.8% of Orthodox Christians identified themselves as Russians**, 9.3% as Belarusians, 7.8% as Ukrainians and 6.3% as Lithuanians. **However, only 51.5% of Russians**, 32.3% of Belarusians, and 59.1% of Ukrainians identified themselves as Orthodox.
- Until 2022, the services were usually held in the Church Slavonic, and less frequently in Belarusian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Greek languages. Due to of the growing needs of the faithful of mixed ethnic identity, the liturgy in Lithuanian began to be celebrated in Vilnius in 2005.

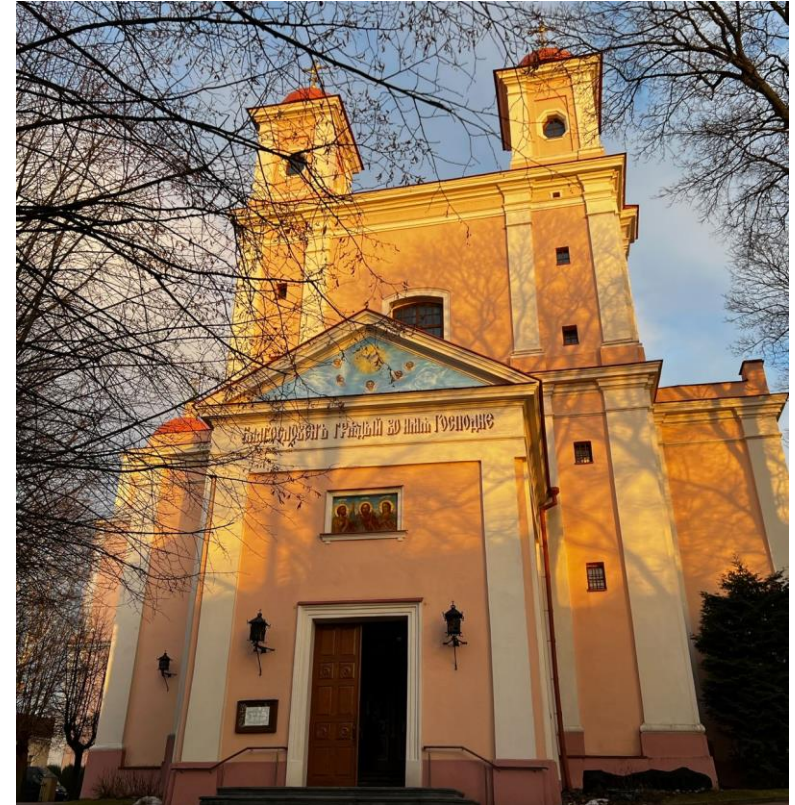


Photo: Orthodoxy.lt

## The Orthodox Church in Lithuania through public discourse: An instrument of „Russian world“ ideology?

The links between the Archdiocese and the Moscow Patriarchate have become a relevant issue in Lithuanian public discourse since Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014, and have been repeatedly associated by some Lithuanian public figures with support for the Kremlin's foreign policy and the ideology of the 'Russian world'.

- *It is hardly needless to say that the Orthodox Church in Lithuania, according to its historical traditions, deserves a status of independence no less than the Orthodox Church in Japan, not to mention Latvia and Estonia, where these ideas only came about with the tsarist Russian Empire. Of all the EU countries, only the Baltic States have such a dependence on the Moscow Patriarchate, and of these, the Lithuanian Orthodox Church is the most dependent.*

A similar debate was stimulated by the Synod's decision in 2018 to denounce Constantinople's acceptance of the Russian Orthodox Church's canonical jurisdiction over the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, contained in a letter of 1686, and its recognition of autocephaly. On this occasion, the Lithuanian media asked whether the Lithuanian Orthodox Christian believers would

- *pretend that nothing had happened and at the same time turn away from the Patriarch of Constantinople, isolating themselves, together with Moscow, from the Orthodox world, or whether they would take advantage of the historic opportunity and act according to the canonical law as a church of an independent state.*

## Or "completely independent of Moscow"?

From 2014 to 2022, representatives of the clergy have repeatedly denied that there are close ties between the Archdiocese and the Patriarchate of Moscow:

- *[Archdiocese] is completely independent from Moscow, financially and in many other respects. Not a single cent of the Lithuanian Orthodox Diocese goes to Moscow and not a single cent comes to the Lithuanian Diocese from Moscow. Our bishop also manages his diocese independently - he decides who to ordain, who to send to seminary, etc.*

They condemned the possible interference of state authorities in matters of change of ecclesiastical jurisdiction:

- *In a democratic society, it is completely unacceptable for other religions to interfere in the internal life of the Orthodox religious community and to interpret who should be independent and who should be dependent. This is the norm in Communist China, where the Orthodox Church was required to be independent from Moscow;*

**Five days before start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine**, the chancellor of the Archdiocese stressed the unity of the faithful despite differences in political views and ethnic background:

- *You know, from 2014 until now we have been able to work peacefully despite our different views <...>. But I have said repeatedly, and I will say it again, that in our parishes, despite our different views, the faithful are able to stand side by side in prayer. Our parishes do not fall apart because a Ukrainian or a Russian says I will not go to church because this one is praying and the other one will not go because that one has come.*

## Still united: Orthodox Christian clergy at the Evening Prayer for Ukraine on 2 March 2022



Photos: BNS / Lukas Balandis

## The Orthodox Metropolitan of Vilnius and Lithuania: „We in Lithuania do not agree with it“

Metropolitan Inokentiy addressed a letter to the Orthodox Christian community on 17 March 2022, in which he condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, distanced himself from Patriarch Kirill and also hinted at the possibility of reconsidering the close relations with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC):

- *As you probably have already noticed, Patriarch Kirill and I have different political views and perception of current events. His political statements on the war in Ukraine are his personal opinion. We in Lithuania do not agree with it.*
- *I would like to openly state here that we, the Orthodox in Lithuania, having the opportunity to independently solve our intra-church affairs, will continue to strive for even greater church independence, believing that the Lord grants such in His own time.*
- *We live in a free, democratic country. Lithuania is not Russia. This is a different state, a different society with its spiritual and moral climate.*



## The cause of the „conflict of conscience“ among the clergy of the Moscow Patriarchate

In April 2022, two priests had contacted the Archdiocese regarding the obligation to commemorate Patriarch Kirill's name during a Liturgy:

- *while serving in the parish of the Assumption of Our Lady of Vilnius, I cannot mention Patriarch Kirill in the liturgy; it is against my conscience. I cannot call him "the great lord and our father". And if I have to continue to do so, I am leaving.*

On May 2022, the Metropolitan Inokentiy suspended at total of five priests "for breaking their oath". They all were dismissed from the priesthood by the Church Court in June 2022.

A group of five dismissed by Metropolitan priests have appealed to the Patriarch of Constantinople to allow them to switch jurisdiction from the Patriarchate of Moscow.



## The role of Lithuanian political institutions in the conflict of the Orthodox Christian clergy

Mayor of Vilnius R. Šimašius during the meeting with suspended priests made a statement that „As citizen of Lithuania, I find it regrettable that churches dating back to the time of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania belong to an illegal organization that initiates war and the killing of peaceful people" and *"My proposal is to go back to the time before 1686, when the Orthodox churches were taken over by the Moscow Patriarchate"*.



Photo: P. Peleckis / 15 min



Photo: Orthdoxtimes.com

In May 2022 Prime Minister I. Šimonytė has written to Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, to support an appeal by Lithuanian Orthodox Christian priests aiming to break away from Moscow's jurisdiction. *"They have the right to practice their faith without a conflict of conscience"* - she added.

## While waiting for the answer from Constantinople ...

Since August 2022, the activities have been carried out by the "Centre for Initiatives of Orthodox Christians", a non-governmental organisation founded by the five priests who protested against the statements of Patriarch Kirill and like-minded people.

- *KOIC unites Orthodox believers, who do not accept the politicization of the Moscow Patriarchate. The community includes local believers of various nationalities, Ukrainian refugees, Belarusian and Russian dissidents.*



**Трансляції  
Різдвяної  
Божественної  
Літургії з Литви**

7 січня,  
субота, 10.00  
з Вільнюса:  
[ortodoksas.lt](http://ortodoksas.lt)  
без коментарів

8 січня,  
неділя, 10.00  
з Анкищай:  
[baranauskas.lt](http://baranauskas.lt)  
коментарі українською



### Malda už Ukrainą

Visagali Viešpatie, išklausk savo vaikų maldas, maloningai pažvelk į Ukrainos šalį šių sunkių išbandymų metu. Palaimink ir stiprink jos žmones, suteik pergale prieš užpuolikus, dovanok taiką ir ramybę. Siųsk, Dieve, Savo dangiškosios kariuomenės vadovą – arkangelą Mykolą, kad padėtų ginantiems savo Tėvynę.

Dar meldžiamės, Tau Dieve, už Lietuvą ir pasaulį – tegul tarp visų pasaulio tautų klesti tarpusavio supratimas, meilė ir taika. Juk tik Tu, mūsų Dieve, gali mus išgelbėti, ir Tave – Tėvą Sūnų ir Šventąją Dvasia – mes garbiname dabar ir visados, ir per amžių amžius. Amen.



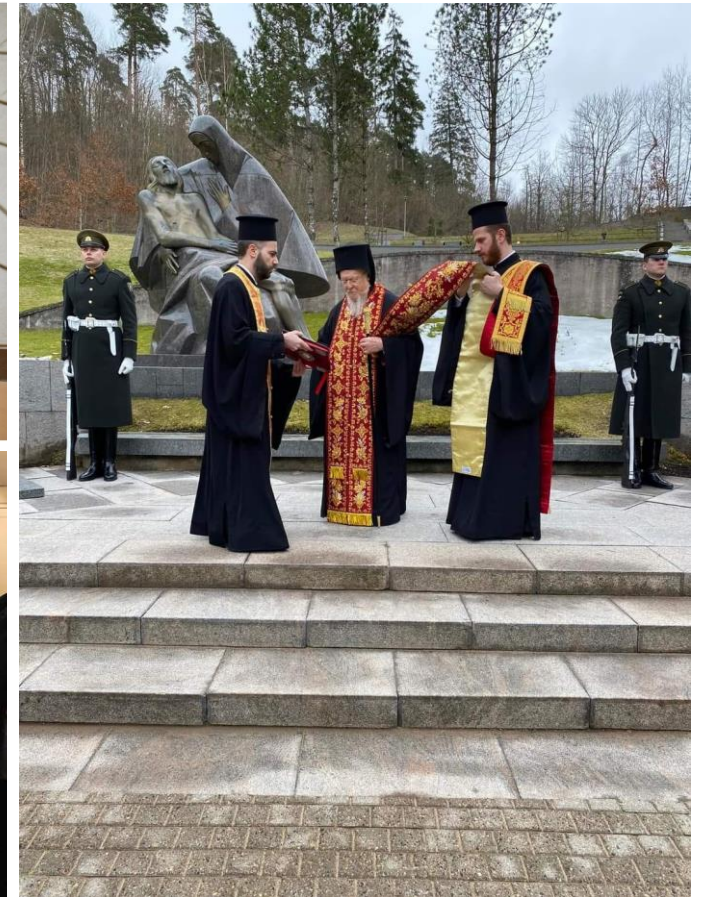
**KRIKŠČIONIŲ  
ORTODOKSŲ  
INICIATYVŲ  
CENTRAS**



## A historical visit of Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople to Lithuania

On February 17, 2023 the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople has reinstated five dismissed Lithuanian priests. On March 3, they received a permission to lead the liturgy.

In March 2023, the Ecumenical Patriarch signed a cooperation agreement with the Prime Minister of Lithuania, defining and encouraging closer relations and cooperation in various areas of common interest.



## An Exarchate of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Lithuania

Ecumenical Patriarch revealed that the prospect of cooperation for the establishment of an Exarchate of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Lithuania is opening up: *“As mentioned in the Agreement of Cooperation, we support the aspirations of both the group of Lithuanian Orthodox priests and believers representing various other ethnic communities in Lithuania to follow their conscience and to restore historical justice by practicing their faith in a church under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate”*. On the basis of this agreement, The Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate established the Exarchate in Lithuania on 1 May 2023.



## The position of Archdiocese of Vilnius and Lithuania

- Metropolitan Inokentiy accused the Orthodox clergy who spoke out in favour of moving to Constantinople's jurisdiction of taking "the path of schism", bringing "confusion to the Orthodox environment", and "threatening the stability of Lithuanian society".
- In May 2022 Metropolitan Innokentiy appealed to the Moscow Patriarchate to grant the Archdiocese of Vilnius and Lithuania the status of a self-governing church.
- In February 2023, Metropolitan Inokentiy announced that he would not accept the decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople to reinstate five Orthodox priests from Lithuania,
- He allowed the parish of St Paraskevi in Vilnius to celebrate a mass for refugees from Ukraine, without mentioning the name of the Moscow Patriarch Kirill.



## The Orthodox Church in Lithuania: between Moscow and Constantinople

- The Archdiocese of Vilnius and Lithuania: 5 deaneries, 50 parishes, 62 clergy, 1 male and 1 female monastery.
- The Exarchate of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in Lithuania: 10 communities and 10 priests.



Photo: orthodoxy.lt



Photo: Ortodoksas.lt



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Thank You!