

Ten Days, Fourteen Delegations: Some Thoughts on the Format of the Upcoming Pan-Orthodox Council

by [*Andrey Shishkov*](#)

The forthcoming Pan-Orthodox council is conceived as a council of delegations of all universally recognized autocephalous churches, which are headed by their primates. In reality, the difference between the Pan-Orthodox council and the synaxis of primates is insignificant. The Pan-Orthodox council format assumes that one delegation has one vote and decisions are made by consensus. The number of votes in the conciliar decision-making process coincides with the synaxis – fourteen votes.

But is this format enough to identify risks and issues and to find solutions? Is it representative of the Orthodox Church?

I think this issue needs a differentiated approach. The council of delegations could be acceptable for decision-making, but for issues that excite deep divisions, this format is not representative enough. The ongoing discussion on the published drafts of documents shows us a rather wide range of opinions, not only among common believers, but also among bishops. Part of the episcopate responds to the documents and to the council very negatively, and some such bishops are not included in official delegations. It is not difficult to predict that they will not change their mind and will escalate their attacks on the council after it. Some problematic issues (such as ecumenism) are necessary to discuss in an enlarged format.

Of course, this option assumes that the June conciliar session will not be the only one. Two of the largest councils of the 20th century – Vatican II and the Moscow council of 1917-18 – lasted for several years. The most realistic approach to extend the council's format is the participation of all Orthodox bishops. Some primates, as well as a significant part of a conservative episcopate, clergy and laity, also support this format of the Pan-Orthodox council.

First of all, the participation of all the bishops as members of their church communities (dioceses) eliminates the problem of representativeness. As responsible for the flock entrusted to them, they cannot ignore the opinions of the faithful of their dioceses. Implementation of the council in this format would identify and take into account at least a substantial part of the responses to the conciliar agenda items. This format also opens the doors of the pan-Orthodox council to the bishops of the Orthodox Church in America.

Why has such a format not been chosen from the very beginning? Let's consider the main concerns about this decision: 1) In practice this format does not allow reaching consensus. One dissenting bishop among hundreds can disrupt the decision. 2)

Decision-making by a majority of votes puts in a better position churches with a large number of bishops. There is a danger that the Russian Church would begin to dictate her conditions. 3) The voice of small churches – such as the Church of Czech Republic and Slovakia with only four bishops – would not be heard.

These fears reveal several problems in the logic of the opponents of this format. Firstly, they imagine the procedure for the organization of the debate and decision-making at the council rather one-dimensionally. Either the principle of consensus or the majority of votes is usually figured as a decision-making mechanism, but there are no proposals that would allow combining both principles.

No doubt that the principle of consensus would not be adopted for this format when the entire episcopate participates in the council. Consensus can only be achieved in a situation with a small enough number of votes, but it ceases to operate effectively when

the number of those voting comes to more than five hundred. The function of this principle is to serve as a filter for decision-making.

It is obvious that the format for the participation of the entire episcopate needs the majority-principle for the decision-making. However, to take into account the interests of the autocephalous churches, there should be a mechanism to veto decisions. For example, at the Moscow council of 1917-18, it was the so-called Bishops' conference, which included all bishops of the council (only 14% of all the delegates), who possessed veto power.

In the case of the Pan-Orthodox council, a synaxis of primates could be a "canonical filter." This would solve the problem of the possible dominance of the large churches and infringement of the small ones. An example of the last meetings (2008, 2014, 2016) showed us that the primates discuss and solve problems together, so they could evaluate decisions of the council in view of the Church's needs and the interests of their local churches.

Secondly, the above-mentioned concerns reveal a total lack of confidence, which the opponents of this format demonstrate to the episcopate. Some assume that opening the council to all the bishops, would lead to factions based on ethnic or autocephalous (i.e., territorial) foundations. Just as likely, bishops would form factions on the basis of ideology (along the conservatism–liberalism divide), rather than on the territorial principle. And we can expect that the Greek, Russian, Georgian, etc., bishops would support each other for ideological reasons. As the running discussion on the published conciliar drafts shows, certain ideological concerns (such as opposition to ecumenism) stretch beyond nationalist identification.

The insufficiency of the format adopted by the forthcoming Pan-Orthodox council does not mean that the June session cannot receive the Pan-Orthodox status. As I mentioned above, this issue should be treated differentially. But I would suggest three procedural forms that could still be implemented simultaneously in order to allow the Pan-Orthodox council to have the greatest possible impact:

- 1) Synaxis of primates – to make decisions on important organizational issues;
- 2) The meeting of the delegations of autocephalous local churches – to discuss and adopt the church documents and regulations;
- 3) The meeting of the entire episcopate – to debate and adopt of the church documents that generate discord among the episcopate and the faithful, with the Synaxis of primates possessing a veto.

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