

Russian Orthodox Church Reform Called Biggest Since 1991

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Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill is founding a dozen new eparchies across the country, a move some see as the greatest church reform since the Soviet dissolution, and others as a ploy to strengthen his power.

In continuation of a territorial reform begun in March that has already seen the creation of eight new eparchies, including three in the North Caucasus, the Holy Synod on Thursday approved the creation of 13 more — in the Irkutsk, Orenburg, Ryazan, Saratov regions, as well as in Kazakhstan.

Vladimir Vigilyansky, a church spokesman, [told](#) Kommersant that the reform would improve governance of the eparchies by changing the Soviet-era structure, where a single eparchy would often span thousands of kilometers.

Many regional priests have welcomed the reform, saying it will help bishops establish closer

relationships with the churches they oversee.

"It was often an issue that the priest could see his bishop only a few times in his lifetime, and the bishop was not aware of the church's everyday life," Father Andrei, of the Church of the Assumption of the Mother of God in Angarsk, in Irkutsk region, said by phone Saturday.

For instance, Irkutsk's new Bratsk eparchy will oversee several areas around that city, the region's industrial hub, with a population of 250,000.

"The bishop from Bratsk can pay attention to the northern parts, where you have districts with only one priest," Father Andrei said. It will cut costs for traveling because some places can be reached only by helicopter.

John Farina, a religious studies professor at George Mason University, regarded the move as a sign of religious revival in the post-Soviet nation.

"The opening of new churches is but one sign of the re-emergence of religion in Russia," Farina said. "There are countless others, ranging from new religious movements to the actions of the great historical faiths."

But some saw the increase in eparchies as an attempt to consolidate the power of Patriarch Kirill, who is seen as both a religious and political figure in Russia.

"The creation of new eparchies will, of course, improve the governance of the church. But at the same time, the patriarch is strengthening his power — after all, new bishops are loyal to him," Roman Lunkin, president of the Guild of Experts on Religion and Law, told Kommersant.

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