

4th ECPR Graduate Student Conference

Jacobs University Bremen

4-6 July 2012

Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on Russia's Foreign Policy

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Introduction

The role of religion and religious institutions remains to be a prominent research focus in contemporary social sciences. It is the case in Russia as well, which is still struggling to overcome Soviet legacy, find new values, define a new identity, and reinstate its political weight in the international arena.

However, when talking of Church-State relations in the Russian case (a field mostly studied by researchers from Russia), the existing body of literature mostly tends to address such issues as:

- the history of Church-State relations,
- the Russian Orthodox Church (hereinafter abbreviated as ROC) and internal Russian politics,
- the Church and education policy,
- interfaith dialogue,

neglecting the role of ROC as a global actor in international politics and its ties with Russia's foreign policy. Moreover, when talking about Christianity and Christian Church as a political actor at global scale, it is most usual to talk of the Catholic Church and the Vatican, while the Russian Orthodox Church, which is also an important transnational religion¹, is often disregarded and underestimated as a political power.

So, I would like to go deeper in this issue and try to define the relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state in terms of Russia's foreign policy. But before doing so, let us give a brief overview of what ROC is and its status in modern Russia.

¹ See: Della Cava R. *Transnational Religions: The Roman Catholic Church in Brazil & the Orthodox Church in Russia*. *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 62, No. 4, Special Issue: Religion and Globalization at the Turn of the Millennium (Winter, 2001), pp. 535-550.

Russian Orthodox Church: An Overview

The Russian Orthodox Church was technically founded in 988 with the baptism of Rus, when it became the official religion of the emerging state. Following the great Schism of 1054 between the Western (Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) Churches, ROC became independent from the Byzantium in 1589 and was ruled by its own patriarch, which would be elected by the Local Council (council of bishops). With the ascension to the throne of Peter I, who was also the first to proclaim Russia an empire, in 1700, the Church was became dependent from the emperor: the institution of patriarchs was disassembled, and from 1721 to 1917 the church was ruled by the procurator of the Holy Synod, a government-appointed layman. I.e., the emperor was never officially head of the church, unlike some European countries (e.g. the British Empire).

Shortly after the dissolution of the Russian Empire in 1917, patriarchy was reinstated, and a new patriarch was elected to rule the church. The Decree on Separation of Church from State of 23 January 1918 declared all churches separated both from the state and from the educational system, and it deprived the churches of the right to hold property and of legal entity. Officially, the church was allowed to function but there was ambiguity in the position of the church and its adherents in a Soviet society. Formally, the rights of believers to practise were guaranteed by the constitution, and any form of discrimination was illegal. At the same time it was a society in which a dominant role was taken by a Communist Party that required its members to attack any 'religious prejudices and other views and morals alien to the socialist of life'².

The situation changed slightly during the Second World War, when the Soviet authorities chose to appeal to the traditional Orthodox values of 'sobornost' (which can approximately be translated as 'togetherness'), brotherhood and self-sacrifice³, and made certain concessions. The church was

² White S., McAllister I. *Orthodoxy and Political Behavior in Postcommunist Russia*. Review of Religious Research, Vol. 41, No. 3, Mar 2000, p. 361.

³ See: Corley F. *Religion in the Soviet Union: An Archival Reader*. London: Macmillan, 1996, 402 pp.

expected, in return, to endorse the war effort. After the war, the government continued the same policy, and now the church was called upon to consolidate its influence over the Orthodox churches in the Eastern European countries, which were falling under Soviet control⁴.

The church remained came into public focus again in the period known as the Khrushchevian Thaw that began in 1956, after Stalin's death, mostly due to the fact that it was being prosecuted once again. Though after Khrushchev's death and later onwards, there were no attempts to launch another comprehensive attack against religion; rather, there was a return to the situation obtained in the post-war period⁵. The church was seen as an unofficial mediator between the Soviet Union and foreign political forces that sought to influence Soviet people.

ROC re-emerged in the public sphere as a visible force at the end of the 1980s, in the period of perestroika and glasnost announced by the then-president Mikhail Gorbachev. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, earlier laws limiting church activities and its legal status were abolished, and its resurrection began. After 1991, over 15,000 churches in Russia only were restored or built, new parishes and monasteries were opened, more people started attending church (though in most cases not regularly) and defining themselves as Orthodox Christians — the Russian Orthodox Church became an ever-present social and political factor.

At the moment, ROC has over 220 dioceses ('eparchies') around the world, with over 30,000 parishes⁶. It also has jurisdictions in 13 countries besides Russia: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Japan. Besides the numerous missions

⁴ Walters P. *The Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet State*. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 483, Religion and the State: The Struggle for Legitimacy and Power (Jan., 1986), p. 139.

⁵ Ibid., p. 143

⁶ (in Russian) Report of the Holy Patriarch Kirill at the Meeting of Archbishops, 2 February 2010. Available at <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/1061651.html> (Доклад Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на Архиерейском совещании 2 февраля 2010 г. Эл. режим доступа: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/1061651.html>)

and metochions, ROC also has its own representation offices at the UN in New York, OSCE in Brussels, and PACE in Strasbourg.

As of 2011, ROC was estimated to have over 150 mln adherents.

Current Church-State Relations in Russia

Such wide international presence of ROC itself suggests that it has certain interests outside Russia as well. Moreover, since during the course of history church and state in Russia had close relations most of the time (the church being a powerful yet rather dependent player), it is reasonable to expect that the two were bound to cooperate in terms of international relations, which in the case of the state implies foreign policy.

As Metropolitan Kirill (currently Patriarch since 2009) stated in 2001 at the conference on Religion and Diplomacy at the Diplomatic Academic by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there should be three main directions of Church-State cooperation in terms of foreign policy in Russia⁷:

1. Reclaiming Russian property and church property lost after the Revolution of 1917,
2. 'Protecting the rights of our compatriots abroad, including religious believers'⁸,
3. Jointly working towards the protection of a multipolar global world.

⁷ (in Russian) Kirill (Gundyaev), Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad Regions. *Religion and Diplomacy: Cooperation of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchy and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. Presentation at the conference 'Religion and Diplomacy' (Moscow, 27–28 April 2001). Available online at <http://www.mospat.ru/archive/nr106173.htm>. (Кирилл (Гундяев). Митрополит Смоленский и Калининградский «Религия и дипломатия. Взаимодействие Отдела внешних церковных связей Московского Патриархата с Министерством иностранных дел России». Доклад на конференции «Религия и дипломатия» (Москва, 27-28 апреля 2001 года) [электронный ресурс] / Русская Православная Церковь: Официальный сервер Русской Православной Церкви. — Электрон.ст. Режим доступа к ст.: <http://www.mospat.ru/archive/nr106173.htm>)

⁸ Ibid.

Of course, officially Church and State are separated in Russia⁹, and that is constantly stressed in the official statements by both parties. Moreover, speaking of public policy within Russia, there is often a lot of tension and criticism of one another regarding Russia's internal affairs (e.g., education, military reform, healthcare system, celebration of national holidays, etc.). V. Legoyda, the long-term head of the Synodal Information Department of the Moscow Patriarchate, constantly underlines that "The Russian Church has never in its history been so independent of the state as it is now; it treasures this independence".¹⁰

What is interesting, however, that when it comes to international matters, representative of the church and state official always voice a similar, if not the same, position, usually clearly pre-agreed. In the same interview, V. Legoyda continues that "the Church will never become a force that is in opposition to the administration"¹¹. One of the reasons for that is that ROC sees itself as a representative of Russia and of Russian people on the whole¹².

In return, ROC also agrees to be sometimes used by the state as a diplomatic tool in such international political situations when Russian involvement could otherwise be considered "a Russian intervention"¹³. Such was the case with Iraq, when the Russian government was consistently criticising the Western military intervention and later economic sanctions but could not afford having direct negotiations with country's officials (otherwise it would be criticised by the international community itself as well). So instead it was representatives of ROC who made a number of official visits to Iraq after terrorist attack of 9/11 and

⁹ Constitution of the Russian Federation. Article 14, §2.

¹⁰ Russian Church says it remains independent of state. Interfax News, 21 February 2011. <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=8228>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² It important to mention here that two words are translated from Russian as 'Russians' exist: one being '*rossiyane*' — *citizens of Russia*, the other being '*rusскиye*' — *ethnic Russians* (and presumably Orthodox Christians), *people belonging to Russian culture*. In the church's discourse, both are meant. According to the 2010 National Census, nearly 90% of the population define their ethnicity as Russian, and slightly over 80% define their religious affiliation as Orthodox Christianity.

¹³ (in Russian) Tserpitskaya O.L. Russian Orthodox Church at the Russian State: Cooperation in Terms of Foreign Policy. Saint Petersburg, 2005. 345 pp. (Церпицкая О.Л. Русская Православная Церковь и Российское государство: основы внешнеполитического взаимодействия. — СПб.; 2005.) PhD dissertation available online at http://www.soctheol.ru/avtor_art.php?id=172

regularly issue statements of harsh anti-American criticism, thus voicing the position of Russia without directly endangering the country's position within the international community. Another case is the Palestine, which had for decades been solely Soviet and later Russian sphere of influence, in contrast to the US-supported State of Israel. Having stable ROC-Palestine relations, concerning both Christian heritage in the region and current economic issues and economic interests of Russia on the one hand, and official interstate Russian-Israeli relations on the other hand enables Russia to avoid criticism as a double-player and yet remain a strong actor within the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Why Does the Church Have Influence on the Secular Political Process in Russia?

First of all, the Russian Orthodox Church is “an institution that sets norms and defines culture”¹⁴; it has a lot of current and potential resources to use and is widely recognised by other public actors.

Secondly, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, disentanglement of official communist ideology, and adoption of political pluralism, there has been much debate in Russia about national identity and national values. In the 1990s, right when the transition to democracy started, the new Russian authorities (particularly president B. Yeltsin and the team that initiated economic reforms, led by Y. Gaidar) were eager to promote liberal, capitalist values. However, the economic conditions and living standards of ordinary people were too tough for such values to take root.¹⁵ In other words, despite Russia being proclaimed a country aspiring for civil society and the rule of law, with human rights and democracy being its priority values, there still are lacunae in terms of national

¹⁴ (in Russian) Kasatkin P.I. *Russian Orthodox Church as an Actor of Contemporary World Politics*. MGIMO University Bulletin, № 6 (15). 2010. Pp. 148-149. (Касаткин П.И. Русская православная церковь как актер современной мировой политики / Вестник МГИМО-Университета. — 2010. — № 6 (15).)

¹⁵ A large number of researchers have shown since the works by R. Inglehart, A. Przeworski and others back in the 1980s that civil society that respect liberal values and values of democracy can only exist in the countries with a certain level of GDP per capita.

identity and national values. One of the institutes willing to fill such lacunae was, of course, the church.

Some authors actually state that a national ideology based on Orthodoxy can become a barrier for Russia in its relations with other countries, at least unless Russia actually adopts an official position on this point¹⁶. However, it is already fixed in the Russian legislation that the state recognises “the unique role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia and in the development of its culture and spirituality”¹⁷. The insertion of this phrase into the law, lobbied by clergymen, has been causing criticism of Russia by Western countries as it is seen as a legitimisation of human rights violations.

The reasons why the church has rather succeeded in pursuing its agenda in terms of values is, I believe, not due to the fact that it is ‘imposing’ particular opinions on the society or certain individuals (though such cases do exist as well) but rather by the fact that religious believers and the society on whole (where people mostly associate themselves with Orthodox Christianity) have adopted a whole system of beliefs and a specific hierarchy of values.

What are these values? In general, they can be characterised as openly:

- traditionalist,
- conservative,
- anti-Western,
- anti-globalist.

Moreover, most of the time church officials are rather blunt in their statements and actually use the wording above, which makes little room for doubt or misinterpretation of the church’s ideology, goals, and aspirations. For example, the St Petersburg Theological Academy headed by Bishop Konstantin

¹⁶ (in Russian) Tserpitskaya O.L. *Russian Orthodox Church at the Russian State: Cooperation in Terms of Foreign Policy*. Saint Petersburg, 2005. 345 pp. (Церпицкая О.Л. Русская Православная Церковь и Российское государство: основы внешнеполитического взаимодействия. – СПб.; 2005.) PhD dissertation available online at http://www.soctheol.ru/avtor_art.php?id=172

¹⁷ Premises to the Federal Act №125 “On the Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations” of 26 September 1997.

(Goryanov) held a conference on 3-4 May 2001, together with two secular institutes, on the subject 'the spiritual and social problems of globalisation'. The conference adopted a final document, which states, among other things, that "The ideology of globalisation is in opposition to the Christian world outlook and incompatible to it".¹⁸

Basing on and being deeply rooted in the 'traditional Russian culture', ROC's doctrine is based on the idea of Moscow being "the Third Rome", Russians being "the God-bearing people", and insisting on Russia's unique development path.

ROC officials have also, on numerous occasions, sided with Muslim leaders and public officials of Arab countries experiencing discomfort and political and economic pressure from the Western countries. As Metropolitan Kirill (now patriarch) actually said in 2004 during his official visit to Kuwait, "Certain phenomena that are considered to be sinful from both Christian and Muslim point of view are often treated as a norm in the modern system of human rights, which is based on secular, liberal values"¹⁹.

ROC officials thus oppose the societies built on the values of "traditional religions" (i.e. Islam and Orthodox — "true" — Christianity) and the spiritless (and, seemingly, non-Christian) secular liberalism-based Western societies.

All this thus implies that all liberal and democratic values, which are coming from the West and therefore clearly marked as Western, i.e. foreign, i.e. not-Russian, i.e. anti-Russian, harmful for the Russian people, and undermining Russian stability. I believe it is important here to quote Article III.2 of the church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights that says²⁰:

¹⁸ Cited by: Verkhovsky A.M. *The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Nationalist, Xenophobic and Antiwestern Tendencies in Russia Today: Not Nationalism, but Fundamentalism*. Religion, State & Society, Vol. 30, No. 4, 2002. P. 342.

¹⁹ (in Russian) *The Russian Orthodox Church is Going to Strengthen Cooperation with the Persian Gulf States*. Newsru.com, 4 August 2004. Article available online at: <http://www.newsru.com/religy/04aug2004/kuwait.html>. (РПЦ намерена углублять сотрудничество со странами Персидского залива. Newsru.com, 4 августа 2004 г.)

²⁰ Official document adopted by the church in 2008. <http://www.mospat.ru/en/documents/dignity-freedom-rights/iii/>

“Human rights cannot be superior to the values of the spiritual world. <...> It is inadmissible and dangerous therefore to interpret human rights as the ultimate and universal foundation of societal life to which religious views and practice should be subjected.”

As the document follows²¹,

“The acknowledgment of individual rights should be balanced with the assertion of people’s responsibility before one another. <...> Some civilizations ought not to impose their own way of life on other civilizations under the pretext of human rights protection. The human rights activity should not be put at the service of interests of particular countries.”

An earlier document, the Russian Orthodox Church’s Basis of the Social Concept, that among other things defines the church’s missions in terms of international relations and national foreign policy, can also be helpful in understanding why the church adopts such views and tries to push them both internally and externally. So, among ROC’s missions the document names²²:

1. Asserting Christian values.
2. Peacekeeping at international and interethnic level; facilitating understanding and cooperation between nations and individuals.
3. Charity and social protection, especially in flashpoints and in situations outside Russia that concern Russians and/or Orthodox Christians.
4. Promotion of the Church’s influence through both secular and clerical media.
5. Global eco-protection initiatives.
6. Economic activities for the benefit of the Church, state, and society.
7. Helping maintain a multipolar world and defeating the dangers of globalisation.

²¹ Ibid., Article III.4.

²² Official document adopted by the church in 2000. Available online at <http://www.mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/>

Finally, the church and the state simply appear to have similar interests and are very protectionist of them.

All these, therefore, could be called the main reasons and best possible justifications for Russia's lack of intention to adjust to Western political processes and continue to pursue its own political and economic agenda (both internally and externally) regardless of criticism from abroad.

The Ways in Which the Church Influences Russia's Foreign Policy

The actual influence, in my view, of the Russian Orthodox Church in terms of the country's foreign policy can generally be seen in two ways: direct and indirect.

By *direct influence*, I mean such situations when ROC actually calls for direct actions (not in the interests of the church itself only) on behalf of state officials that represent the country in the international arena.

This doesn't happen too often but the most recent example (as of June 2012) is the situation around Abbot Ephraim in Greece at the end of 2011 — early 2012. Shortly after returning back home after a nearly month-long visit to Russia (which included an official meeting with the then-prime-minister V. Putin), Abbot Ephraim of Vatopaidi Monastery in Greece was arrested by the Greek police and charged with property fraud. The monastery received state property worth at least €100 mln²³, then Abbot Ephraim made an attempt to sell it to private investors, which would have been disastrous for Greek taxpayers in the situation of the economic crisis. This should have been and was supposed to be an internal Greek affair: both the Constantinople Patriarchy, which the monastery belongs to, and the Hellenic Church of Greece intended to keep it so

²³ As estimated by the specially created parliamentary investigatory commission: Falikov B. *Greek Warning*. Gazeta.Ru, 16 January 2012. Article available online at http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2012/01/16_a_3963233.shtml (Фаликов Б. Греческое предупреждение. Газета.ру, 16 января 2012 г.)

and discouraged any foreign intervention in the situation²⁴. However, Russia, which sees Greece as its strategic partner and supporter within the European Union and prefers to maintain conflict-free relations with the country, quite unexpectedly bombarded Greece with harsh criticism and openly supported anti-Greek protests in front of Greek consulates in Russia. Such criticism was inspired and initiated by the Russian Orthodox clergy, as they saw the Greek situation as potentially replicable in Russia and therefore dangerous (especially in the view of property restitution processes the church is going through).

Most often, however, one can trace *indirect influence* of the church on Russia's foreign policy. This manifests itself in:

- The underlying ongoing process of value-setting,
- The church's having a strong voice and claiming to represent public opinion in the media and the church's official documents and statements internally,
- The choice of countries the Patriarch or other high-ranking church representatives pay official visits to,
- The statements of the church's representation offices at the UN, OSCE, and PACE,
- Providing conceptual and ideological justifications for the Russian agenda (i.e., in a way working as a pro-government think tank).

Thus, the church has supported and provided justification for Russia's official position on:

- Western military interventions in Former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria,
- re-integration and realignment of forces on the post-Soviet space, especially on Russia's aggressive policy against independent Ukraine's pro-Western reforms, and the promotion of Russian language and culture in the country,

²⁴ Ibid.

- the expansion of NATO towards Eastern Europe, especially other Orthodox post-socialist Eastern European countries, which are seen as Russia's zone of interest and sphere of influence²⁵,
- the expansion of the European Union that led to the inclusion of several Orthodox countries (also having historically strong ties with Russia) into one of the most important and influential global actors,
- US-Russian relations,
- Middle East conflict, etc.

Discussion

On the whole, it is hard to deny that on occasions the Russian Orthodox establishment has sought to use its traditional status as the national Church to put pressure on the authorities to decide controversial issues in its favour²⁶. So, in my paper I want to show that despite regular claims by both sides that the church and state are separated in Russia, in reality both are closely connected in terms of pursuing the same policy, and that the Russian Orthodox Church precisely (the Moscow Patriarchy, not ROC missions or affiliated autonomous churches abroad) has been playing an increasingly significant role in representing the interests of Russia abroad and justifying its increasingly conservative agenda.

It is necessary to mention that such conservative, isolational foreign policy also affects Russia's internal policy of the protection of 'traditional Russian values' from Western influence, resulting in, e.g. banning Halloween at schools, deterioration of the situation with LGBT rights, bringing religious studies (i.e.

²⁵ In the late 1990s — early 2000s, ROC also helped negotiations on visa matters with these countries, in the end ensuring visa-free regime between Russia and all non-EU Orthodox countries.

²⁶ See: Ellis J. *The Russian Orthodox Church: Triumphalism and Defensiveness*. London: Macmillan, 1996, 240 pp.; also: Knox Z. *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2005. 257 pp.

Orthodoxy studies) to public schools in some of the regions; and these effects should not be neglected.

So, the importance of the church as a factor of Russia's foreign policy and political development of the country should not be underestimated.

In order to prove this point, further research should be developed with a view to measuring the effect of the Russian Orthodox Church's influence on policy-making and determining the extent to which Russian foreign policy agenda is defined by such influence.

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