

Influence of Religiosity on the Political Participation in Contemporary Russia

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1. Introduction

Western Social Scientists of the beginning of the XXth century believed that the role of religion would little by little decrease until religion would only remain in the private sphere of people's lives. Nevertheless, from the 1960s we can witness the failure of the secularization theory predictions: new religious movements appear, "old" religions actively participate in the social life, churches cooperate with each other and governments, and the East is quickly Islamizing. Secularization Theory also didn't work in the case of the post-Soviet countries, where after 70 years of forced secularization, the 1990th were marked with significant surge in religiosity. Post-Soviet Russia can be characterized by impetuous religious revival: according to public opinion polls carried out in 1991 63% of Russian citizens perceived themselves as atheists, 28% as Orthodox Christians and only 0,5% as Muslims. The percentage of representatives of all religious traditions rose steadily from the beginning of the 1990th, while the quantity of atheists in the same period declined steadily: in 2010 only 8% percent of respondents called themselves atheists while 75% were Orthodox and 8% were Muslim.¹ Considerable part of contemporary believers attends churches and acts according to religious not secular ethics. Religion is an important factor in these people's lives. Religion influences political sphere and to some extent determines political behavior of citizens. Moreover, after a short period of decline in religious activities in the second half of the 1990th, the new wave of religious revival in Russia begins in the middle of the 2000th. In opposition to secularization theory thesis the Russian Orthodox Church is getting more powerful on the political arena: the process of differentiation of religious and secular institutions is going back and the Church splits with the State.

Besides religious revival, collapse of the USSR led to the political system democratization that regardless of the autocratic turn of the beginning of the 2000th still provides some opportunities for political participation: citizens can take part in elections, demonstrations and boycotts, can sign petitions etc. Thus, it becomes extremely important to study the determinants of political behavior in contemporary Russia and religion can be named among these determinants. In the USA people participate in religious activities and show high levels of religiosity. In the countries of Western and Northern Europe (that are often perceived as completely secularized) the level of religious participation is lower than in the USA but citizens remain very religious in the private sphere: they believe in God and afterlife and ground their moral judgments in religious values embedded in culture.

¹ VCIOM omnibus 1991-7 (Religion) / "Sophist" data-set.
"Do we believe in God?" / VCIOM press-issue № 1461.

The interrelation between individual religiosity and political participation is typical of both religious United States and secular Europe. Different factors influence the intentions of the Western people to take part in politics and among these factors one can name belonging to religious confession, the importance of religion in individual's life and the extent of involvement in the religious community. But does religiosity influence political participation in Russia and if it does then what aspects of religiosity (belonging to a religious tradition or the degree of religiosity) have the most influence? It is the question that will be addressed in this paper because the specifics of interconnection between religiosity and political participation in contemporary Russia haven't been investigated. The main goal of the research is to identify the specifics of influence that individual religiosity exposes on political participation in contemporary Russia.

Two *hypotheses* are tested in the paper: firstly, religiosity has an effect on political participation of contemporary Russians and, secondly, the most significant predictor is the degree of religiosity than belonging to a confession.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 examines major theories explaining the mechanisms through which religion can influence political participation. Section 3 is dedicated to Russian specifics of religiosity and political participation and statistical analysis of the data from European Social Survey is carried out in Section 4. Section 5 concludes.

2. How religiosity can affect political participation?

The interaction between religiosity and political participation is well explored for the Western countries while in Russia this field is very young and has just appeared. Thus, let's turn to the Western experience to find out through which channels religiosity can affect political participation.

Firstly, belonging to different religious traditions may lead to different levels of political participation of believers. Religious traditions are based on doctrines that can either prohibit or promote political participation of its followers.² Whereas Buddhists are generally not interested in politics and political actions because of this religion's philosophy of detachment, Christians are usually more active politically and in Islam politics and religion are inseparable. In other words, different religious traditions establish different behavioral norms in all spheres of life including politics and believers follow these norms. For example, American religious

² Wald, Kenneth D.; Owen, Dennis E.; Hill Jr., Samuel S. Political Cohesion in Churches, p197.

organizations that take part in politics usually tend to specialize in some political activities and these types of activities vary among confessions. Considerable amount of Black Protestant communities invite local candidates to make speech in front of the members and organize groups that register voters, Catholics organize demonstrations and lobby decisions in local authorities, while Evangelical Christians distribute booklets.³ Thus, belonging to a particular religious tradition can predispose the types of political activities that a person will take part in because they are perceived as common practice in his community. Furthermore, support for political activism may depend on the characteristics of particular religious community such as traditional moral values that are promoted by the church and whether it establishes severe discipline among its followers.⁴ Higher levels of discipline lead to political uniformity – consolidated support for some political actions or some political party among community members, while traditionalism may influence the overall inclination of community members to take part in politics in accordance with religious doctrines. Accordingly, in the USA Jews and Mainline Protestants whose communities are characterized by higher levels of within church cohesion are more inclined to vote than those from less cohesive communities.⁵

Secondly, the degree of person's religiosity can have an influence on his inclination to take part in politics because there is a great difference between identifying with religious tradition and following its rules and prescriptions. The degree of religiosity can be understood as both strength of beliefs (the extent to which God and religion are important for the respondent) and religious activism (church attendance rate).⁶ For instance, the major political cleavage in Europe today lies not between Protestants and Catholics, but between those who are integrated in their religious communities and those who are secular or have just formal ties with their communities. From this perspective the church is not only a community whose members share common values, but it is also an agent of socialization that promotes its values and behavioral patterns. Thus, the person who is more involved in his religious community is more likely to follow religious norms promoted by it, regardless of whether they imply political participation or absenteeism. Similarly, churches can serve as mobilization centers as they have an opportunity to convince their followers in importance of taking part in elections and voting for particular parties or candidates.⁷ Religious participation can also lead to political participation because individual can

³ Beyerlein, K. and Chaves, M. (2003) *The Political Activities of Religious Congregations in the United States*, p. 242.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Esmer Y. and Pettersson T. (2009) *The Effects of Religion and Religiosity on Voting Behavior*, p. 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁷ Macaluso T. and Wanat J. (1979) *Voting Turnout & Religiosity*, p. 160.

get used to participation regardless of what actual type of participation it is – religious or political.⁸

The interaction between political participation and the degree of religiosity may seem obvious and simple but it would be incorrect to assume this. On the one hand, higher levels of religiosity may lead to higher rates in political participation if we understand religiosity as church attendance, but on the other – a more religious person will be less likely to take part in politics because he devotes his time and thoughts to religion, not politics. Thus, different dimensions of religiosity will affect political participation differently as this effect is multidirectional and hard to capture.

Moreover, though the church attendance rate is rather popular as an indicator of religiosity it should be used cautiously because some religions oblige their followers to attend religious services regularly while in other religions church attendance can be highly voluntary or be due to following social, not religious norms.⁹ Finally, the degree of religiosity of respondent will show nothing if his religious affiliation is not taken into consideration: behavioral patterns are predisposed mainly by religious affiliation while the degree of religiosity can make them more or less obvious.

Whether the theories described above are applicable for the case of contemporary Russia is a big question because both religiosity and political participation in Russia differ greatly from those in the West and need thorough analysis that will be done in the following section.

3. Russian specifics

Religiosity in Russia is highly contradictory which can result from forced secularization and state atheism experience combined with extremely fast religious revival of the 1990th.

Firstly, Russian surveys usually demonstrate that in traditionally Orthodox regions the number of Orthodox Christians exceeds the number of believers in 20-30%: people that call themselves Orthodox are not necessarily religious as religious confessions that are traditionally Russian (like Orthodoxy, Islam and Buddhism in different parts of the country) usually play a role of cultural

⁸ Macaluso T. and Wanat J. (1979) Voting Turnout & Religiosity, p. 160.

⁹ Esmer Y. and Pettersson T. (2009) The Effects of Religion and Religiosity on Voting Behavior, p. 13.

traditions.¹⁰ Thus, being a Russian means belonging to the Orthodox cultural tradition while being a Tatar is equal to being a Muslim.¹¹

Secondly, the spread of religious beliefs in Russia goes hand-by-hand with low levels of religious participation that vary significantly between representatives of different religious traditions. Among followers of religions that are traditional for Russia such as Orthodox Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, religious participation rates are rather low (less than 30%) because in the perception of respondents these are cultural and not religious traditions. And among the followers of small religious traditions, especially Protestants and Catholics, the participation rates are much higher (more than 50%) that is explained by the severe discipline typical of these religions.¹²

Religious beliefs of followers of different religions are characterized by contradictions. Christian beliefs can mix with eastern beliefs and be supplemented by pagan superstitions.¹³ This is more typical of traditional Russian religions than for the minor religious groups. In the beginning of the 1990s traditional religions tried to recruit as much followers as they could and didn't have resources to educate these new followers.¹⁴ Finally, respondents that identify themselves as nonbelievers can attend church occasionally while among "believers" there are respondents that don't attend church at all and don't follow the norms of their religion.¹⁵

Political participation in Russia also has its typical features. Pensioners tend to be more active politically than people of other ages because they have time to devote to political actions. Russian citizens don't approve of taking part in demonstrations and meetings and attend them only in extreme cases. They also don't approve of signing petitions but can be rather active in complaint-making.¹⁶ If before 2011 Russians showed refusal to take part in politics, after 2011 young people and people of the middle age and middle income level also engage in politics though this tendency is typical only of big cities. Summary statistics of political participation of Russians in 2012 are shown in table 1.

(Table 1 is about here)

¹⁰ Kublitskaya E. *Specific Features of Religiosity in Contemporary Russia*, p. 100.

¹¹ Gavrilov A., Kofanova E., Mchedlov, M. *Confessional Peculiarities of Faith and Perceptions of its Social Functions*, p. 50.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 49.

¹³ Mchedlova M. *The Role of Religion in Contemporary Society*, p. 78.

¹⁴ Gavrilov A., Kofanova E., Mchedlov, M. *Confessional Peculiarities of Faith and Perceptions of its Social Functions*, p. 50.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 51.

¹⁶ Henry L. *Complaint-making as political participation in contemporary Russia*, p 244.

Summing up, Russians who call themselves Orthodox or Muslim (and they form the absolute majority in the country) are not necessarily religious: they may never attend religious services and know almost nothing about religious doctrines they should stick to. Thus in statistical analysis it is important to use both religious affiliation and the degree of respondent's religiosity in order to distinguish true believers from those who identify with dominant cultural tradition and are not religious at all.

4. Empirical analysis

The paper is based on the data from European Social Survey project, the 6th wave of which in Russia was conducted in 2012.¹⁷ For quantitative analysis Poisson regression model is used, where the influence of religiosity on political participation of Russians is controlled for socio-economic status of respondent that includes age, gender, education and income levels because there are stable differences between respondents belonging to different social groups in their inclination to take part in politics.¹⁸

Dependent variable is political participation measured as an additive index (the sum of political actions made by the respondent such as signing petitions, attending demonstrations, joining boycotts and voting).¹⁹ Index varies between 0 and 8 where 0 means that respondent hasn't took part in any political action and 8 means that respondent participated in every type of political action defined in the paper.

Independent variable is religiosity that can be measured in 4 different ways: as religious affiliation, church attendance frequency, praying frequency and religious self-esteem. In the regression model belonging to a religious tradition is coded like a dummy-variable and "Atheism" is a residual category. Thus, all significant religious tradition coefficients would be interpreted in comparison with atheists which allows us to check is there any difference between religious and non-religious people in their inclination to take part in politics.

Several measures of religiosity are used because church attendance represents institutionalized religiosity and social activism of the respondent, while religious self-esteem measure reflects

¹⁷ European Social Survey. URL: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

¹⁸ Brady H.E., Verba S. and Schlozman K. L. *Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation*, p. 272.

¹⁹ Driskell R., Embry E., Lyon L. *Influence of Religious Beliefs on Political Participation*, p. 305.

individual religiosity of the respondent which is not so much influenced by the religious community.²⁰

In accordance with Russian specifics of both religiosity and political participation the main hypothesis that is tested in the paper is that religiosity has an effect of political participation of Russians (H1). Moreover, the degree of religiosity will be more significant than religious affiliation (H2) because identifying with religious tradition in Russia often means identifying with cultural tradition while church attendance is more like a reflection of considered choice.

(Table 2 is about here)

Table 2 shows that if we control for the degree of religiosity Orthodox turn out to be less active politically than Atheists and Russian Muslims differ from Atheists even more. The coefficients are significant only in a full model which means that the difference stems from the combination of religious affiliation and the degree of religiosity and not from the respondent's identification with cultural tradition. Church attendance has a stable and positive effect on political participation both in full model and separately. And the effect of praying is positive too, but significant only if included separately. Religious self-esteem is not important.

The results obtained are very interesting but let's check if these differences are robust. First, we have to investigate the effect's robustness in time (tables 3 and 4). The interconfessional differences appear only in 2012: it was a year of several secular-religious conflicts which apparently had their effect on political participation. On contrast, the effects of church attendance and praying are stable in time and the coefficients don't vary a lot from 2008 to 2012. Religious self-esteem was insignificant in any year that's why I decided not to devote space and time to it.

(Table 3 is about here)

(Table 4 is about here)

²⁰ Wielhouwer, P. Religion and American Political Participation, p. 11.

Now it is important to check whether quantitative measures of religiosity have the same effect on representatives of different religious group (tables 5 and 6). We will take the largest groups: Atheists, Orthodox and Muslims. Here church attendance is significant for all groups but we need to notice that the effect for Orthodox is much smaller than for Atheists and Muslims but still it's significant and positive. Frequency of praying has a positive effect on political participation among Atheists and Orthodox but doesn't influence Muslims. Religious self-esteem demonstrated multidimensional unstable effect: negative for Orthodox in a full model and positive for Muslims when used separately.

(Table 5 is about here)

(Table 6 is about here)

5. Conclusion

Statistical analysis results show that political participation and religiosity in Russia are somehow connected and quantitative measures of religiosity turned out to be better predictors than religious affiliation and religious self-esteem. Orthodox and Muslims are less likely to participate in politics than the Atheists but this difference emerges only 2012 as a potential consequence of political cleavage. On the other hand, church attendance and praying frequency have a stable and positive effect on political participation that is much alike among confessions and within time. And religious self-esteem though being a compromise indicator of religiosity didn't equate the hopes: its effect on political participation is highly unrobust and multidimensional.

This paper is a first step towards identifying the channels through which religiosity affects political participation in Russia as we still don't know how religiosity is transformed into more or less support for political activism. In further research it will be important to use more accurate indices of political participation and conduct a qualitative study of religious communities in Russia exploring their attitudes towards politics.

Appendix

Table 1. Summary statistics of political activism

Number of political actions performed per year	N	% in sample
0	537	28,52
1	1041	55,28
2	133	7,06
3	100	5,31
4	39	2,07
5	20	1,06
6	9	0,48
7	4	0,21

Table 2. Regression analysis results for the influence of religiosity on political participation (additive index of political participation as dependent variable)

Variables	Full model	Religious affiliation	Church attendance	Praying	How religious are you?
Orthodox	-0.141** (0.0607)	-0.0273 (0.0486)			
Muslim	-0.205* (0.112)	-0.0107 (0.0996)			
Buddhist	-0.0693 (0.308)	0.0857 (0.304)			
Catholic	-0.135 (0.579)	-0.0293 (0.579)			
Protestant	-0.204 (0.318)	0.311 (0.305)			
Church attendance	0.0995*** (0.0225)		0.0790*** (0.0166)		
Praying	0.0237 (0.0144)			0.0301*** (0.0101)	
How religious are you?	-0.0174 (0.0117)				0.00640 (0.00848)
Controls (SES)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Constant	-0.693*** (0.128)	-0.712*** (0.124)	-0.785*** (0.124)	-0.728*** (0.122)	-0.730*** (0.126)
N	1,883	1,883	1,883	1,883	1,883

Table 3. Robustness checks: time (part 1)

Variables	Full model			Religious affiliation		
	2012	2010	2008	2012	2010	2008
Orthodox	-0.141** (0.0607)	0.0567 (0.0573)	0.0436 (0.0539)	-0.0273 (0.0486)	0.112** (0.0478)	0.0823* (0.0454)
Muslim	-0.205* (0.112)	-0.0863 (0.112)	-0.0797 (0.115)	-0.0107 (0.0996)	-0.0309 (0.105)	-0.0533 (0.106)
Buddhist	-0.0693 (0.308)	0.937*** (0.277)		0.0857 (0.304)	1.029*** (0.271)	
Catholic	-0.135 (0.579)	-0.320 (0.581)	0.973*** (0.241)	-0.0293 (0.579)	-0.224 (0.579)	1.051*** (0.239)
Protestant	-0.204 (0.318)	-0.163 (0.709)	-0.0837 (0.581)	0.311 (0.305)	-0.138 (0.709)	0.0561 (0.579)
Church attendance	0.0995*** (0.0225)	0.00395 (0.0224)	0.0814*** (0.0220)			
Praying	0.0237 (0.0144)	0.0313** (0.0130)	0.0170 (0.0131)			
How religious are you?	-0.0174 (0.0117)	-0.00352 (0.0114)	-0.0332*** (0.0112)			
Controls (SES)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Constant	-0.693*** (0.128)	-0.897*** (0.117)	-0.695*** (0.111)	-0.712*** (0.124)	-0.919*** (0.113)	-0.738*** (0.108)
N	1,883	2,108	2,091	1,883	2,108	2,091

Table 4. Robustness checks: time (part 2)

Variables	Church attendance			Praying		
	2012	2010	2008	2012	2010	2008
Church attendance	0.0790*** (0.0166)	0.0404** (0.0176)	0.0677*** (0.0168)			
Praying				0.0301*** (0.0101)	0.0354*** (0.0101)	0.0268*** (0.0100)
Controls (SES)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Constant	-0.785*** (0.124)	-0.894*** (0.112)	-0.765*** (0.108)	-0.728*** (0.122)	-0.877*** (0.111)	-0.713*** (0.107)
N	1,883	2,108	2,091	1,883	2,108	2,091

Table 5. Robustness checks: confessions (part 1)

Variables	Full model			Church attendance		
	Atheists	Orthodox	Muslim	Atheists	Orthodox	Muslim
Church attendance	0.137*** (0.0379)	0.0619* (0.0323)	0.130** (0.0627)	0.136*** (0.0320)	0.0643** (0.0273)	0.130** (0.0506)
Praying	0.0108 (0.0318)	0.0378** (0.0174)	-0.0345 (0.0512)			
How religious are you?	-0.00985 (0.0169)	-0.0347* (0.0179)	0.0633 (0.0457)			
Controls (SES)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Constant	-0.845*** (0.185)	-0.360* (0.200)	-2.612*** (0.625)	-0.873*** (0.179)	-0.483** (0.189)	-2.313*** (0.564)
N	805	936	120	805	936	120

Table 6. Robustness checks: confessions (part 2)

Variables	Praying			How religious are you?		
	Atheists	Orthodox	Muslim	Atheists	Orthodox	Muslim
Praying	0.0585** (0.0255)	0.0390*** (0.0151)	0.0502 (0.0405)			
How religious are you?				0.0155 (0.0149)	-0.00354 (0.0156)	0.0832** (0.0420)
Controls (SES)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Constant	-0.849*** (0.179)	-0.445** (0.185)	-2.143*** (0.556)	-0.899*** (0.185)	-0.376* (0.199)	-2.473*** (0.607)
N	805	936	120	805	936	120

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