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## The Role of the Orthodox Church in a changing Russia

### Toward A Modern and Holy Russia

Modernization has been used by the Russian government as a shorthand for its policies since President Vladimir Putin's first mentioned it in his May 26, 2004 speech, «No one will stop Russia on its path to democracy!». His speech is best remembered for calling for the doubling Russia's GDP, reducing poverty, and modernizing the army, health care, and roads over the next ten years. As president, Dmitrij Medvedev added a few more items to the list, but mostly he began referring to modernization in general as the creation of a "smart economy"<sup>1</sup>.

A common thread throughout all their speeches on modernization has been the focus on Russia's economic infrastructure. Almost nothing has been said, by either Putin or Medvedev, about the aspect that Max Weber felt was the most important in determining a society's ability to modernize, namely society's cultural and psychological preparedness for it. This is not an oversight. The government feels it does not need to elaborate any new social model because one already exists. It is called "Holy Rus" [*Svyataya Rus*] and is actively promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Church's immediate social agenda was laid out in 2000 in a document known as the *Basics of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church*. According to this seminal document the Church «does not give preference to any social system or to any of the existing political doctrines»<sup>2</sup>. Secular states were established by God to give human beings the opportunity to order their social life according to their own free will. Political pluralism is an important part of this, so both clergy and laity are free to choose whatever political convictions they desire, though these should not contradict «the faith

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### Abstract

The end of the Soviet regime has reverberated with an unexpected echo – the rise of Russian Orthodox Church. Flying in the face of conventional social science theory, which sees modernization as undermining the plausibility of religion, the Russian Orthodox Church has grown at the same time that the Russian government has been promoting sweeping social and economic modernization. While most Western observers see the two as mutually exclusive, apparently many in Russia do not.

This essay looks at how the Russian government's modernization agenda fits with the social agenda of the Russian Orthodox Church. It then looks at the passionate response the Church has evoked during the most recent election season. Finally, it looks at the prospects for a modernization that is not secular.

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(\*) The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

<sup>1</sup> D. MEDVEDEV, *Rossiya vperyod!*, in «Kremlin.Ru», 10 September 2009.

<sup>2</sup> S. CHAPNIN, *The Orthodox Church's Social Concept, Russia Profile*, 17 October 2005.

and moral norms of the Church's Tradition»<sup>3</sup>. But while the state's secular ambitions make non-intervention in each other's internal affairs desirable, complete separation is not the goal. The ideal relationship between Church and state is *symphonia*, a relationship that the Roman Emperor Justinian (482-565) described as producing "general harmony" for the human race<sup>4</sup>.

According to the Orthodox Church, in modern times *symphonia* manifests itself through a formal partnership between the Church and the state<sup>5</sup>. Within this partnership the Church has the obligation to promote peace and harmony, provide charity, and promote public morality through its spiritual guidance of public institutions such as the military, media, and schools<sup>6</sup>. For businessmen the Church has elaborated "Ten Commandments for Businessmen" highlighting their social obligations, which include paying taxes and providing fair wages<sup>7</sup>. This partnership even extends to foreign policy where the Russian Orthodox Church seeks to heighten the role of religious diplomacy, and assist in the construction of a multipolar world that respects diverse cultural worldviews<sup>8</sup>. In every nation of the globe, the Patriarch of Moscow Kirill says, the Church's task is to make that particular nation "a carrier of Orthodox civilization"<sup>9</sup>.

In the absence of any coherent secular alternative, Russian political authorities seem to have embraced the partnership model offered by the Church. Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev, have all spoken poignantly about the historical and cultural importance of Russian Orthodoxy, and appealed for more Church involvement in social affairs. In the past decade specific Church priorities, such as outlawing abortion, promoting family values, and expanding religious education in schools, have received both national and local government support.

When asked why they give so much prominence to the Church politicians will often say that they are «repaying the State's historical debt to the church»<sup>10</sup>. Others cite the practical political implications of the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church and its leaders are consistently ranked first or second among the most trusted institution of society<sup>11</sup>. The Church's deep connection with the broad swaths of the population was again revealed during last year's visitation the Belt of the Mother of God, a holy Christian relic from Mount Athos in Greece. Some three and a half million people waited in line to revere it during its one month tour of fourteen cities, making this the largest public event ever held in post-Soviet Russia. Afterwards, Patriarch Kirill commented that had this relic remained a year, forty million people would have wanted to venerate it, an indication, he said, that despite the persecutions of the twentieth century, Russians have preserved their religious faith "at a genetic level"<sup>12</sup>.

Summing up recent trends the Patriarch has called for the "second Christianization" of Rus<sup>13</sup>. Church leaders prefer the term Rus or *Russkiy mir* (a term best translated as "Russian common-

<sup>3</sup> N. GVOSDEV, *The Orthodox Church and Democracy*, in «Russia Profile», 9 December 2004.

<sup>4</sup> J. MEYENDORFF, *Justinian, the Empire and the Church*, Dumbarton Oaks Papers, vol. 22, 1968, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> V. MITE, *Russia: Orthodox Church States Its Case for More Involvement in Foreign, Domestic Policies*, RFE/RL, 6 February 2004.

<sup>6</sup> *Patriarch Aleksii II: A Time When Opportunities Are Opening*, in «Trud», 9 April 2004, Johnson's Russia List (JRL) #8157.

<sup>7</sup> *Church Offers Ten Commandments for Businessmen*, in «Pravda.Ru», 9 February 2004, Johnson's Russia List (JRL) #8057.

<sup>8</sup> O. LIPICH, *Patriarch Alexis II: Time to Re-Comprehend. The Role of Orthodoxy in World History*, in «RIA Novosti», 3 February 2004, Johnson's Russia List (JRL) #8047.

<sup>9</sup> *Mitropolit Kirill otvetil na voprosy frantsuzskogo zhurnala "Diplomatie"*, in «Pravoslavie.Ru», 4 October 2005.

<sup>10</sup> *President Putin's Speech at the Meeting with Participants of the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church*, in «Kremlin.Ru», 6 October 2004.

<sup>11</sup> *Most Russians trust Church and the Patriarch-poll*, in «Interfax-Religion», 10 May 2012.

<sup>12</sup> *Rozhdestvenskoe intervyyu Svyateishego Patriarkha Kirilla*, in «Patriarchia.Ru», 9 January 2012.

<sup>13</sup> *Patriarch Kirill challenges Church to "reset" people's minds*, in «Interfax», 16 November 2010, Johnson's Russia List (JRL) #2010-#215.

wealth”) to Russia because they say it reflects the confessional, historical and cultural unity of the Orthodox community, which transcends national borders. Even savvy politicians can get caught up in this rhetoric, as when Putin referred to the reunification of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Church Abroad as «restoring the lost unity of the whole Russian world, whose spiritual foundation has always been the Orthodox religion»<sup>14</sup>.

Although Church leaders vigorously deny that they aim to create a theocracy, saying that divine revelation does not fit any specific ideological format, they have also been very critical of secularly based human rights and liberalism<sup>15</sup>. This has raised concerns among critics, who wonder just how far the Church might go to suppress them.

### The Critics of Liturgical Society

The conventional wisdom in the West is that, as the inheritor of the Byzantine tradition, the Russian Orthodox Church embodies all the negative characteristics of that inheritance – political subservience, obscurantism, bureaucracy – while displaying none of the attributes of Enlightenment thinking – social engagement and support for individualism. America’s most influential political scientist, Samuel Huntington, aptly summed up this view: “In Orthodoxy, God is Caesar’s junior partner”<sup>16</sup>. In Russian history this indictment goes back at least as far as Peter Chaadaev’s first *Philosophical Letter*. More recently, it has been popularized by such prominent media personalities as Vladimir Pozner and Alexander Nevzorov<sup>17</sup>.

To critics the Church’s social agenda is a direct threat to personal liberty. They demand a stricter and more formal separation of Church and state, which means that religion should be out of public sight and out of mind, a pattern that Western sociologists refer to as the “privatization” of religion. The Russian Orthodox Church counters that, while a separation of Church and State is perfectly understandable, in modern times antireligious sentiment among elites is so widespread that governments have become *de facto* instruments of secularization. The Church is therefore trying to counteract the privatization of religion that is the norm in the West.

This conflict recently crystallized around how society should respond to “Pussy Riot,” a group of three masked young women who staged a “punk prayer service” in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior on February 21, 2012. The group’s performance, which included a variety of vulgarities aimed at the Patriarch, Vladimir Putin, and Orthodox believers in general, was eventually halted by church security and the young women were escorted from the premises. But after the group posted a clip of the event on YouTube, the state prosecutor issued a warrant for their arrest on charges of hooliganism and conspiracy. The penalty for these range from a fine of 500,000 rubles (roughly \$16,500) to imprisonment for up to seven years.

Quite unexpectedly the women’s detention became a *cause célèbre* in Russia. While senior church officials condemned the group’s actions as sacrilegious and warned that this sort of behavior should not be trivialized, many artists and intellectuals, along with a few clergymen, called for the

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<sup>14</sup> Putin hails unification of Russian Orthodox Church, in «BBC Monitoring», 17 May 2007, Johnson's Russia List (JRL) #2007-#112.

<sup>15</sup> While the Church acknowledges the role that human rights played in the liberation of Russia from communism, and confirms its respect for human rights as a “central norm” of the legislation of the newly independent post-Soviet states, it objects to two aspects of secular human rights: (1) the idea that an individual has “moral autonomy” from divine authority; and (2) the assertion that an individual's rights are superior to those of any group. I. TORBAKOV, *Russian Orthodox Church Challenges “Western” Concept of Human Rights*, in «Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor», 7 April 2006, Johnson's Russia List (JRL) #2006-#83.

<sup>16</sup> S.P. HUNTINGTON, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, London: Simon & Schuster, 1997, p. 70.

<sup>17</sup> V. POZNER, *Pravoslaviye - beda i tragediya Rossii*, in «Vlasti.net», 23 July 2010; A. SOROKINA, *Nevzorov: 'Pravoslaviye ne mozhety byt' natsionalnoi ideei'*, «Dniester.Ru», 15 June 2011.

group's release saying that no real harm had been done. They argue that, in the aftermath of Vladimir Putin's re-election, this incident should be viewed as an issue of free speech.

Recently, Fr. Vsevolod (Chaplin), head of the Synodal Department for Church and Society Relations, added to the controversy by asserting a religious privilege in public affairs.

Speaking in May 2012 at St. Tikhon's Orthodox University for the Humanities, Fr. Vsevolod said that while «the Church is still only at the beginning of finding its way to a full fledged place in the life of society, [it] cannot but have a position that would give it the right to speak to those in power, in all spheres of public life, in fulfillment of its prophetic role ...as the voice of God in politics, in economics, and in any social processes, in people's private lives, and in their family lives». «We should not be afraid» he went on to say, «to suggest our own solutions for reconstructing the economy, including the global economy, [and] for the renewal of government life on the basis of Orthodox social ideals»<sup>18</sup>.

His words provoked a sharp response from several members of the Duma, including Communist Party delegates Valery Rashkin and Vasily Likhachev. Rashkin blamed Medvedev and Putin for encouraging the Russian Orthodox clergy in their excessive claims. «Religious beliefs can only affect one's personal life», Rashkin said, at least if one is talking about «normal citizens and not religious fanatics»<sup>19</sup>. One of the harshest criticisms came from Alexander Ignatenko, a member of the Presidential Council on Interaction with Religious Groups, who said it was important to return to a «clear and full realization of constitutional principles, according to which Russia is a secular state». He called for the creation of a government agency that would «depoliticize religion, and specifically to convert it into what it should be: the private affair of each person»<sup>20</sup>.

Fr. Vsevolod responded by saying, «it is impossible to return to the USSR, or to the Europe of the sixties ...no worldview – religious, agnostic, atheistic or liberal – can be isolated from social processes». The view that religion is a personal matter is, he said, «by definition totalitarian and far from any understanding of the realities of the modern world». He then pointedly admonished his critics that «the religious Renaissance of our country is by no means at an end»<sup>21</sup>.

Both sides have thus staked out strong positions. Critics of the Church see any prosecution of "Pussy Riot" as proof that the clericalization of Russian society has gone too far. They say that they respect the rights of believers, but have difficulty defining any public role for religious institutions. Their model seems to be a country like the United States where, as Yale law professor Stephen L. Carter put it, religion is «something without political significance, less an independent moral force than a quietly irrelevant moralizer, never heard, rarely seen»<sup>22</sup>. They regard the re-emergence of an Orthodox version of Russian political culture as incompatible with both democracy and modernity. It is precisely the Church's claim to social relevance in the modern world that critics find unacceptable, and which makes this an epic struggle for the soul of modern Russia.

### Modernization without Secularization?

Despite the overlap between the government's modernization agenda and the Church's Christianization agenda, I see three sources of potential conflict. First, since Orthodox Christianity sees no intrinsic value in political beliefs or actions, the Church's support for the policies of the government can ever only be conditional. The Church refuses to endorse candidates or parties, a point reiter-

<sup>18</sup> *Vsevolod Chaplin opredelil positsiyu RPTs*, in «Newsru.com», 17 May 2012.

<sup>19</sup> *Communist Party warns Church against meddling in secular affairs*, in «Interfax-religion», 25 May 2012.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Mesto tserkvi v gosudarstve i obshchestve*, in «Regions.Ru», 22 May 2012.

<sup>22</sup> S.L. Carter *The Culture of Disbelief*, New York, Anchor Books, 1994, <http://www.enotes.com/culture-disbelief-sale/culture-disbelief>.

ated most recently in the statements on the social activities of Orthodox Christians adopted by the Council of Hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church in February of 2011<sup>23</sup>. This fundamental indifference to politics remains a major impediment to the emergence of European style Christian Democracy in Russia.

Second, the Russian Orthodox Church does not see itself as just one constituency among many in society, but rather as the very heart and soul of society. Its purview therefore exceeds that of any other social groups, even the government, for while the government may speak to the values of society in the present, the Church speaks to the values of society over its entire existence, in this case for the eternal values of Holy Rus’.

Finally, the Russian Orthodox Church intends to reverse the secularization of society. It can therefore support a modernization that results in tangible benefits for the poor, but it cannot support any form of modernization that results in further secularization. What the Russian Orthodox is looking for can best be described as modernization without secularization.

Whether or not such a thing is even possible is the subject of intense debate in Russia. Western social scientists typically regard secularization as a central characteristic of modern society. Orthodox critics of modernity, however, believe that an alternative might be found in the writings of Russian religious philosophers of the early twentieth century. Their writings, which are just now being rediscovered in Russia, are full of references to “creativity”, “freedom”, and “new social and political ideals” – the very issues at the heart of social and psychological modernization – but rooted in Russia’s Orthodox heritage<sup>24</sup>.

In a nutshell, Russia’s religious philosophers argue that the transformation of society is a task that comes as naturally to the Church as the transformation of the individual. When individuals are transformed by the Church they express their compassion through good works. When an entire society is transformed by the Church, all its political, economic and social institutions become the focus of that compassion.

Ultimately, the end goals of modernization and Orthodoxy are in direct conflict. The pluralism, individualism and commercialism sought by the former contradict the Truth, shared goals, and permanent values sought by the latter. For the time being, however, Russia’s modernization has the Church’s blessing, for even as it implements its short term social agenda, it retains free rein to pursue its long term objective – the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

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<sup>23</sup> *Obshchestvennaya deyatnost pravoslavnykh khristian*, 2 February 2011, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/print/1400931.html>; *Praktika zayavalenii i deistvii ierarkhov, dukhovenstva, monashestvuyushchikh i miryan vo vremya predvybornykh kampanii*, 2 February 2011, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/print/1400896.html>.

<sup>24</sup> See N.N. Petro, *The Challenge of the "Russian Idea": Rediscovering the Legacy of Russian Religious Philosophy*, in N.N. Petro (ed.), *Christianity and Russian Culture in Soviet Society*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1990, pp. 203-233.

### Relevance of religion in Russia

73% of Russians are sure that today the Russian Church plays a positive role in the country's life, only 2% disagree with them, sociologists from the Public Opinion Foundation say. 64% of Russians say they trust the Russian Church, 56% trust Patriarch Kirill. 8% of respondents do not trust both of them, 14% trust them partially. Others found it difficult to express their opinion on the question. During the poll held on April 28-29, 2012 in one hundred cities and towns, 68% of respondents said they considered themselves Orthodox Christians, 6% adhered to Islam, 1% of respondents said they belong to other Christian confessions and 20% said they are atheists<sup>1</sup>.

In the last 16 years the percentage of Russians going to Church has increased from 57% to 71%. 7% of respondents go at least once per month, 30% from time to time, and 34% rarely. The percentage of those who do not go to Church has decreased from 42% to 26%<sup>2</sup>.

A record 82% of respondents acknowledged that they believe in God, according to a poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation and an obscure religious research group called Sreda. Atheists accounted for another 13% of the populace. The survey covered 1,500 respondents in 44 of Russia's 83 regions and was conducted in spring 2011. The poll, which was limited to Russia, contrasts with the findings of a similar survey by global research company Ipsos conducted last month among 23 of the world's most populous nations. The Ipsos poll also indicated that Russia is the most religious nation in Europe but showed only 56% believed in "God or a Supreme Being", compared with 51% in Poland, 50% in Italy and 18% in Sweden. A similar poll by state-run VTsIOM put the number of Orthodox Christians in the country at 75% last year. But it indicated that only 4% of them observed religious rituals daily, while 32% ignored prayers, Christmas and Easter services and all other rituals<sup>3</sup>.

1. *Most Russians trust Church and the Patriarch - poll.*, in «Interfax-Religion», May 10, 2012. Available online at: <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=9342>, accessed 5/11/2012.

2. *Доля россиян, приходящих в храмы, за 16 лет возросла с 57% до 71% - опрос.*, «Interfax-Religion», February 27, 2012. Available online at: <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=44361>, accessed 2/27/2012.

3. A. ODYNOVA, *Survey Says Russia Most Pious Nation in Europe*, In «Moscow Times», May 5, 2011, cited in Johnson's Russia List #2011-#80. Available online at: <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/>, accessed 6/6/2011.