AMarriage of Convenience

The Role of the Russian
Orthodox Church in
Contemporary Russian Politics
Since Vladimir Putin first became President of Russia in May 2000, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in society and its ties to the Russian government have grown. The Church has demonstrated its increased influence by supporting changes in Russia’s public policies, which now contradict the constitutional promise of secularism in Russia. The purpose of this paper is to discuss several examples of these changes and to show how the social mission of the ROC has influenced Russia’s foreign and domestic policy in recent years.

The organization of the Church today differs somewhat from its historical configuration, as well as from those of non-Eastern Orthodox churches generally. The ROC is one of fifteen autocephalous hierarchical Orthodox churches, which together make up the churches of Eastern Orthodoxy. Unlike in Roman Catholicism, there is no single earthly head of Eastern Orthodoxy. The Eastern Orthodox churches are, however, in full communion with one another, meaning that priests from any of the churches are allowed to minister to members of any of the other churches. Rather than maintaining an Eastern Orthodox papacy, each individual church has its own primate, the head of the ROC being the Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus’. The current charter of the ROC accords the Patriarch a number of duties and grants him executive authority over the Russian Church. Among his responsibilities are upholding the unity of the Church’s hierarchy, representing the ROC in its relations with state authorities, issuing decrees on the election and appointment of diocesan bishops, and overseeing the maintenance and acquisition of the Church’s property. Once attained, the rank of Patriarch is held for life.

If we look back at the original promise of secularity in the Russian Constitution, we can see how it is contradicted by the current state of affairs. Article 14 of Chapter 1 of the First Section of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which was adopted by national referendum on December 12, 1993 states, “1. The Russian Federation shall be a secular state. No religion may be established as the State religion or as obligatory. 2. Religious associations shall be separate from the State and shall be equal before the law.” Despite this decree, the Russian state and the ROC have already formed a unique partnership that continues to have a substantial impact on public policy in the Russian Federation today.

Before the establishment of the Russian Federation in 1993, no government in the history of the Russian nation had claimed to represent a secular state. Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which brought into power an officially atheistic Soviet Union, the state religion of the Russian Empire was Russian Orthodox Christianity. The Tsar of Russia was the official head of the Church, and held the title of Supreme Defender of the Church. Before the Soviet government took possession of church buildings in Russia, various groups and individuals had owned them. The ROC owned some, but certainly not all. The Tsar’s court owned some. Local institutions owned others, and private estate holders owned some as well. In the 1990s, Orthodox communities sprang up around historic church buildings, and the ROC demanded (and received) control of nearly all of those buildings. Since 2000, that property has increasingly been redistributed in favor of high-ranking members of the clergy. This change is one small example of many that illustrates the growing power of ROC leaders in Russian society since the founding of the new Russian Federation.

The ROC has grown in membership over the last couple of decades as well. According to Interfax, the percentage of Russians going to church has increased over the last 16 years from 57% to 71%. The change indicates that a growing number identify with the Church in some way. This interpretation is supported by other recent polls. When asked what role the Church plays in the country’s life, 73% of Russian respondents said they were sure that the ROC plays a positive role, and only 2% disagreed with them. In the same survey, 64% said they trust the Rus-
sian Church and 56% said they trust Patriarch Kirill. Of the respondents, 68% identified themselves as Russian Orthodox Christians. Clearly, an increasing segment of the Russian populace supports the ROC. As could be expected, this influence has translated to increased economic support for the ROC over that time as well. The Church today has an elite support system that is powerful in multiple sectors of society. Important bureaucrats, entrepreneurs and members of the intelligentsia favor public financing of the ROC’s increased influence can be seen in Russia’s foreign policy. It may seem strange, but the ROC now has a significant role in Russia’s national security strategy. Although much of the recent literature analyzing Russian foreign policy has neglected to discuss state/church collaboration, Patriarch Kirill and the ROC now play a role in both formulating and advancing Russian interests abroad. The ROC’s work with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) began in 2003 when then-Patriarch Alexey II officially visited Russia’s MOFA for the first time. During that meeting, the ROC and MOFA agreed to build a working relationship through a group dedicated to defending the ROC’s activity abroad and forming policies that would “deepen Russia’s ‘spiritual’ values.” As Foreign Minister Lavrov put it, the new group would enable the Church and Foreign Ministry to work “together realizing a whole array of foreign policy and international activity thrusts.”

Resulting from this collaboration, the notion of “spiritual values” and the need for “spiritual restoration” have become frequent rhetorical refrains in the MOFA’s strategic planning documents. For example, Russia’s 2003 National Security Concept emphasized “spiritual restoration” as essential for combating the “negative influence” of foreign religious organizations (including those that had already been working in Russia for decades). Although the term “spirituality” seems generic, the objective of the policy is clearly the restoration of Russian Orthodoxy to a de facto state religion. At the same time, the policy is designed so as to hinder the work of foreign-based religious organizations in Russia, which the ROC has referred to as threats to “the integrity of [Russia’s] national consciousness and cultural identity… and the spiritual and moral ideal that is common to all of us.” This policy expanded under the leadership of President Medvedev and has continued into President Putin’s third term.

Other examples show how Russia’s constitutional promise of secularism has been undermined since Putin’s ascension to power. For example, one may note that President Putin and the Church hierarchy spend quite a lot of time together in public. Putin is frequently followed by Church hierarchs (in full religious garb) at undeniably political events, and is shown by state media attending Church services on every religious holiday. No other religious organiza-
tion has its services broadcast on national television. In addition, Orthodox chapels can now be found in railroad stations and airports, with military units, and in police departments. It is also now common for Orthodox priests to sanctify banks, offices, homes, vehicles like tanks, ships and airplanes, and even military weapons. An ROC-endorsed course on “Orthodox Culture” is now offered in many public secondary schools even though similar courses are not taught for other religions.

The ROC advocated public school teaching of the Orthodox Culture course, referred to as “Foundations of the Orthodox Culture”, for several years before its introduction under President Medvedev in 2007. But the ROC’s mission for public education in Russia is much greater. According to the contemporary Church’s most comprehensive publication regarding its social mission, the Bases of the Social Concept, “It is desirable that the entire educational system should be built on religious principles and based on Christian values.” Considering the Church’s stated mission in regards to education, it is quite reasonable to expect that Church leaders will affect other novel changes in the Russian public education system over the coming years. We can expect to see additional ROC-inspired changes in Russian military policy as well.

The example of sanctifying state-owned weapons is quite interesting. Since 2000 there have been numerous reports of the Russian military utilizing the services of ROC clergy in this manner. It is now not unusual for ROC priests to bless the President’s nuclear launch code briefcase and to sprinkle holy water on S-400 Triumph surface-to-air missile systems in ceremonies that are then broadcast on national television. This is particularly striking because officially the Church objects to “consecrate[ing] places that can serve a ‘double purpose’ and establishments directly or indirectly encouraging sin.” Despite this objection, not a single high-ranking ROC priest has ever complained about the practice of sanctifying weapons of mass destruction.

These are not the only examples of ROC incursion into an ostensibly secular Russian military. In 2009, President Medvedev announced that the government would support chaplains representing Russia’s “traditional faiths” (including Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, in addition to Orthodoxy) while they provide religious services to members of Russia’s armed forces. While such a plan might seem non-discriminatory (putting aside for a moment the fact that representatives of “non-traditional” faiths, including protestant Christian denominations, would not be accommodated), in reality the military was well prepared to reject the admission of non-ROC chaplains, and it has done so by including a rule in the chaplaincy program that requires “adherents of a ‘traditional’ religious faith to account for [a minimum of] ten percent of a military unit before the state will authorize an official chaplain.” Although many members of Russia’s armed forces are not Orthodox Christians, very few military units are made up of more than ten percent adherents of one of the other three “traditional” religious groups. As a result, the military hired nearly one thousand full-time, paid ROC priests, but only two Muslim chaplains and one Buddhist chaplain as of October 4, 2013. For years Patriarch Kirill has advocated including Orthodox priests (to the exclusion of other clergy) in Russia’s military, so it is not surprising that he quickly praised President Medvedev’s plan, which is still in effect today under President Putin.

The ROC has also vocally supported President Putin and the Russian Duma while they place greater restrictions on the freedom of expression in Russia. The recent case of the punk rock protest group Pussy Riot, and the change in policy resulting from it, illustrates the ROC’s attitude towards speech that is critical of the Church’s politics. On February 21, 2012, "Russian Orthodox Church, Petropavlovsk"
Austronesian Expeditions
five members of the protest group entered the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow and staged a performance on the altar, in which they appealed to the Virgin Mary to “chase Putin away.” Both regime officials and ROC leaders were indignant following the group’s short but unexpected concert in the cathedral. Foreign Minister Lavrov called it “blasphemy”. Patriarch Kirill said the group had made a “mockery of a sacred place”. Others referred to the Pussy Riot members as “prostitutes” and “satanic devils” and called for them to be ripped to pieces on the ancient execution site at Red Square.

Most Russian critics at the time failed to notice that the “punk-prayer” was not directly directed against Orthodoxy in general, but specifically against the political role of the Orthodox Church and its support for the Putin/Medvedev regime. Several members of the band were put on trial for the crime of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred,” which carries a maximum sentence of seven years. On August 17, 2012, three of the group’s most prominent members, including Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina were convicted and sentenced to two years imprisonment. Amnesty International recognized the protesters as prisoners of conscience, while the Union of Solidarity with Political Prisoners recognized them as political prisoners. No ROC leader has publicly asked for leniency or forgiveness on the part of the regime. Instead, Patriarch Kirill called on the government to criminalize blasphemy, which it did on June 11, 2013. It is now a federal crime in Russia to conduct public actions that insult the feelings of religious believers, and the new criminal offense carries a punishment of up to three years in prison.

One of the complaints that the members of Pussy Riot cite as a motivation for their performances is Church-supported government policy that discriminates against sexual minorities. This final example of the ROC’s increased influence in public policy is the one that has gained the most international attention lately. In June 2013, President Putin signed into law a ban on “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations.” In short, the law says that anyone who is accused of promoting “non-traditional sexual relations” is subject to criminal prosecution. As a result of this law, anybody (including lawyers, judges, and politicians) who argues in support of gay equality can be fined.

Several international organizations have protested the law, and numerous public figures have criticized it. International boycotts have been called against Russian vodka producers as well as against the Winter Olympics in Sochi. Patriarch Kirill, on the other hand, supported the bill in parliament and praised President Putin for signing it into law, adding, “we must do everything in our power to ensure that sin is never sanctioned in Russia by state law, because that would mean that the nation has embarked on a path of self-destruction.” Although support for the law is by no means limited to the Church or its members, the Church’s strong promotion of the law and years of actively supporting such legislation has often been overlooked by both Russian and international critics.

An understanding of the Church’s increased influence in Russia, especially since President Putin’s first inauguration in 2000, is essential for understanding recent changes in public policy and for predicting future developments in Russian society. All of the policy changes discussed here show that the Russian government and the ROC are working together to undermine secularism in Russia. Despite Russia’s constitutional guarantee of separation of church and state, it seems that the regime and the ROC have found it in their interests to put an end to a very brief period of Russian secularism.

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