

Analysis

The Role of the Church in the New Russia

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Abstract

The close relationship between church and state has a long history in Russia. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was in many respects faced with a completely new situation. After a period of suppression or toleration within highly restricted boundaries, it was now able to act with a large and unaccustomed degree of freedom. At the same time, it had to seek out a place for itself in the new structure of Russian society. This was not an easy task for the ROC. Today, the church regards itself as a representative of the interests of the people, which does not necessarily imply opposition to the government. The ROC believes that both former president Vladimir Putin and his successor Dmitry Medvedev are faithful stewards of these interests. The state, in turn, regards the church as a guarantor of social cohesion. The majority of the population trusts the church and regards it as an institution capable of communicating values and strengthening unity within society. Both state and church will have to prove that these positions offer a sufficient response to the challenges of a globalized world.

A North Pole Liturgy

In early August 2007, a Russian submarine passed below the North Pole and planted a Russian flag on the seabed in a step that evoked international derision, but was also regarded as evidence of Russia's claim to the Arctic, and particularly to its natural resources. Several months later, on 6 April 2008, Russian Archbishop Ignatius of Petropavlovsk and Kamchatka celebrated a liturgy at the North Pole; during this service, the mayor of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky was baptized. After his return from the expedition, which had been organized by the air transport wing of the domestic intelligence service (FSB), Archbishop Ignatius expressed his satisfaction at the successful cooperation between the church and the armed forces, and pointed out that in former times, Orthodox priests in Russia had blessed the soldiers before battle, but that today, soldiers were helping the priests to bring the word of God to the ends of the earth.

Though one may wonder at such occasionally unusual formats of the ROC's public engagements, there can be no doubt that it has a central place in Russian society today. Outside of the political sphere, there is no other actor that enjoys a similar degree of recognition and respect. However, its actions are those of a supporter of the powers that be; in recent times, there have been no public statements by the church criticizing any measures or plans of the government. On the contrary, it has even endorsed government policy in matters that were completely unrelated, or at best tangential, to church interests, ranging from support for Russia's plans in the Arctic to criticism of independence for Kosovo.

State and Church in Russia

The close relationship between the church and the state has a long history not only in Russia, but in Orthodox Christianity in general. In the Byzantine Empire, from where Christianity was brought to Russia, the Greek term for this relationship was "symphonia," or "consonance": State and church are assumed to have fundamentally identical interests, and their engagement is devoted to the same cause. In Byzantium, Orthodox Christianity was the state religion, and conversion to another faith was unthinkable; only the few foreigners residing in the empire were permitted to practice their own faiths. This tradition is also found over vast stretches of Russian history. Although there were attempts to adopt a more liberal approach during the "Russian Enlightenment," it was not until 1905 that an edict of tolerance was decreed, ending discrimination against other religions.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ROC was in many respects confronted with a completely changed situation. After a phase of suppression and – since the Second World War – toleration within narrowly circumscribed limitations, it was now able to act with a large and unaccustomed degree of freedom. At the same time, it had to seek out a place for itself in the new structure of Russian society. Some church representatives assumed that the relationship would resume seamlessly where it had left off in 1917, i.e., that Orthodox Christianity would be restored as the state religion and the state would return to Orthodox foundations. The church had a very critical stance towards democracy, not least because the term carried connotations of widespread poverty, social insecurity, and a

degree of freedom in society that the church regarded as libertinism. Thus, several church representatives supported the cause of the rebels in the putsches against Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, while the majority of clerics were noticeably reticent and waited to see how the situation would develop.

The Orthodox Church in the New Era

This hostile stance towards the new state of affairs was reinforced by the religious freedom that allowed other religious groups and communities to become active in Russia. Although the many sects and denominations that engaged in massive advocacy for their beliefs during the 1990s were unable to achieve sustainable successes and today only have a marginal existence, they left the ROC with the impression that the West intended to use such groups to lead Russians astray from their traditional religion and weaken the Orthodox Church in Russia. The 1997 Law on Religion, which replaced a liberal law of 1990, met these concerns by giving a clear advantage to Russia's "traditional" religions (Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism) and thus provided the possibility of creating administrative hurdles for other religious communities, especially at the local and regional levels.

The main conflict in the field of religious competition emerged not in Russia, though, but in Ukraine, where in the late phase of Perestroika, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic ("Uniat") Church regained official license to found congregations, after having been outlawed and forced underground by the Soviet government in 1946. This church, which perceived itself as being explicitly Ukrainian, quickly spread at the expense of the ROC, which lost most of its congregations and churches in western Ukraine. That, however, was the region where the ROC had had its congregational base and from where it had recruited the bulk of its priests. Rapid compensation for these shortcomings came as many new congregations were founded in Russia (their number rose from 6,742 in 1986 to 27,942 at the end of 2007) and sufficient junior priests were trained. What remained was a legacy of bitterness concerning the situation in Ukraine, which is frequently perceived as methodical persecution, and a longstanding deterioration of relations with the Catholic Church, which was blamed for this development. These hard feelings have yet to be resolved.

The Orthodox Church and the New State

The ROC today regards itself as the guardian of the people's interests – a perception that does not, however, imply opposition to the government; instead, the church believes that both former president Vladimir Putin and his successor Dmitry Medvedev are faithful

stewards of these interests. In a service held immediately after Medvedev's inauguration, Patriarch Alexius II indicated that he expected Medvedev to continue the course set by his predecessor, and stated: "I hope that you will be able in the coming years both to achieve a great deal for the development of civil society and the advancement of the strength and power of our state." The majority of the population seems to share these sentiments, trusting both the previous and the current president. Even if only a minority of Russians are observant churchgoers (as is the case in Western European states), the church has also enjoyed a large degree of trust in political matters in the years since the fall of Communism. This is not, however, because the church is seen as having a particularly keen political intuition, but because it gives expression to views supported by a widespread social consensus.

The participation of the patriarch at state functions, such as the recent inauguration of the president or the church service that followed the ceremony, provide evidence of the close relationship between the ROC and the state. While this relationship does exist, it is worth remembering that the German Bundestag also celebrates an ecumenical service at the beginning of each legislative period as well as ahead of each session of the German Federal Assembly (the body which elects the head of state, the Federal President), and that there are other important state occasions that are routinely attended by representatives of the major churches in Germany. This fact cannot therefore, on its own, serve as evidence of an inappropriate nexus of church and state, particularly when taking into account that the number of observant Christians in the German population is no higher than that in Russia, while the public respect enjoyed by the two major churches is noticeably lower. One should therefore avoid attributing too much importance to such symbolic acts.

The particular importance of the ROC should be sought not so much at the political, but at the social level. It is the one institution that enjoys widespread credibility and is not critical of the state or the government. This status, more than any direct influence, is what constitutes its importance. In the initial years after the end of the Soviet Union, it was absolutely indispensable for leading politicians to be seen as devout Orthodox Christians in order to acquire a positive image and win elections. In the meantime, this is no longer necessary; there are other ways of ensuring a favorable outcome in elections. Nevertheless, it is still advantageous for the reputation of public figures if they appear to be Orthodox. However, this does not constitute political influence on the part of the church, either, but is a consequence of its role in society.

Mutual advantages

The relationship between the Russian state and the ROC is mutually advantageous. For the church, the state constitutes a space within which it can act in a secure and privileged manner. It is able to pursue its pastoral care activities, and although military and prison ministries are the most frequently mentioned fields of church activity in collaboration with the state, it is important to remember that it can now found new congregations, build churches, publish books, and engage in missionary work without restrictions – activities that were, for all practical purposes, completely prohibited in the Soviet Union. It is therefore experiencing a hitherto unknown freedom to develop and meet its obligations in the new Russian state. The ROC's proximity to the state is, on the one hand, rooted in history; the Byzantine tradition that has determined the entire history of the ROC – apart from the Soviet period – is still very much in effect. Naturally, the relationship today is a different one, since the church's injunctions are no longer state laws and the state is not organized along ecclesiastical precepts; but the close nature of their relationship is seen in other phenomena, such as the protection extended to church holidays or the state's recognition of a special role for the church in the Law on Religion.

The state itself, on the other hand, regards the church as a guarantor of cohesion within society. The majority of the population trusts the church and regards it as an institution that promulgates values and can reinforce the intrinsic unity of the country. While a majority of Russian citizens believes the church should abstain from involvement in political issues and problems, only a minority of respondents believes that the ROC's engagement in Russian political affairs is excessive. In general, therefore, the predominant sentiment is one of satisfaction with the factual influence of the church. The implication for the state is that the church constitutes a cohesive force for Russia whose influence is not too strong and is notably not directed against the government. Additionally, the state and the government gain further affirmation of their course through an institution of great popular authority.

The influence of the ROC does not extend to the entire society, but only to the ethnic Russians (as well

as members of other traditionally Orthodox nations). Non-Russian peoples, most of whom predominantly adhere to other religions or denominations, are not subject to its authority. On the other hand, even non-believing Russians are often convinced of the benefits of the Orthodox Church; one downright absurd example is that of Gennady Zyuganov, the first secretary of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, whose statements on ecclesiastical and religious topics have frequently been marked by a great deal of goodwill and who is pictured on the dust jacket of one of his books standing in front of a gonfalon, while the inside jacket displays an icon of the Mother of God.

Ready for the challenges of a globalized world?

Representatives of the ROC have also gone on record with statements concerning international relations and Russia's relationship with the West. Generally, such statements include criticism of the "New World Order" and emphasis on Russia's greatness. Another recurring element is a critical evaluation of human rights. These are often regarded as a Western concept that has no validity for Russia. According to this view, individual rights cannot trump those of the collective; instead, community and concordance are seen as superior to plebiscitary democracy. Based on this argument, and not simply on moral grounds, the ROC is opposed to the activities of gay rights organizations that have recently caused a stir in Russia. Here, too, the church's position is largely identical with that of the authorities.

It appears, therefore, that the church is not at all, as is often assumed, a conservative or even reactionary institution influencing the course of the Russian state and society. Rather, it is generally in line with reason of state – not because of opportunism, however, but because a consensus exists on these matters, which is *per se* regarded by the church as a valuable asset. Both the state and the church in Russia will have to demonstrate that such positions are sufficient responses to the challenge of a globalized world.

Translated from the German by Christopher Findlay

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Further reading:

- Dimitry V. Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime 1917- 1982* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984)
- Anderson, J.: *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- Davis, Nathaniel A.: *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003).