

# The Rebirth of the Patriarch Of Moscow: Moscow Politics in Harmony with the Russian Orthodox Church?

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Global Research, August 08, 2015  
Modern Diplomacy EU

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)  
Theme: [History](#), [Religion](#)

*The Orthodox Church and the Christian tradition have always assumed a role of primary importance in Russian history and tradition.*

*The origins of Christianity in Russia go back to 988 and coincide with the baptism of Prince Vladimir the Great. He had come to Constantinople, following which the evangelization of the Principality Kievan Rus' started. The latter included the space currently occupied by the areas of Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus, considered the predecessor of the Russian Empire. Formed by Igor in 882, the Principality Kievan Rus' is the first political form organised by the Oriental Slav tribes placed on those territories. This gave rise to the common orthodox faith and the Russian people's sense of national belonging.*

Retracing the path of the Principality one can indeed observe that the Orthodox Christian Faith was immediately embraced by those populations. It also succeeded in asserting itself in the Eastern zones, where there was strong pagan influence. This barely digested the advent of the new creed and accompanied their evolution, acting as a stalwart for the Country's national and cultural identity. Orthodoxy is even granted with Scripture, which is surely a culture's fundamental principle. It was introduced via the spread of Christianity among the Slav tribes through the creation of the Cyrillic characters due to two great saints, Cyril and Methodius. It also constituted the prerequisite for the political and cultural development of the Principality of Kiev, leaving a heritage that would last even after its disintegration.

Indeed, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Orthodox religion regained that role it traditionally enjoyed.

To understand the extent of this phenomenon, one can analyze some statistics carried out by the *International Social Survey Programme*: "Russians return to religion, but not to Church 10/02/2014" relating to the number of the faithful in the Country between 1988 and 2008.

If in 1988, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox church counted 67 dioceses, 21 monasteries, 6,893 parishes, 2 academies and 3 theological seminars. In 2008 it counted 133 dioceses, over 23,000 parishes, 620 monasteries (including 298 male ones), 322 convents, 5 academies and 32 theological seminars, 43 schools for seminary preparation, 1 theological institution, 2 orthodox universities and 2 female diocesan theological schools.

Examining the data also reveals that between 1991 and 2008, the share of Russian adults

considering themselves orthodox had grown from 31% to 72%, while the share of the Russian population not considering themselves religious had dropped from 61% to 18%. However, research carried out by the *International Social Survey Programme* also reveals that the return to religion does not correspond to its practice. The research demonstrates two substantial facts: only one in ten of those declaring themselves religious attended mass at least once a month; the growth in practisers was ridiculous when compared to that in believers. The latter is borne out by the fact that from 1991 to 2008 it was just 5 percent, going from 2% to 7%.

The growth in the population towards the various religious affiliations was also analyzed over various demographic groups. This analysis revealed that from 1991 to 2008 there was an increase of around 38% in women approaching Orthodox religion, going from 43% to 81%; and an increase of 46% in men, going from 17% to 63%. It also reveals that the increase in identification with Orthodox religion grew by 43% in youthful groups, aged between 16 and 49, going from 26% in 1991, to 69% in 2008, and by 39% amongst those aged over 50, going from 40% in 1991 to 79% in 2008. One may further register that approach to the Orthodox Faith grew substantially in the population with a high level of education, and in particular graduates. This can be augmented by the facts that in 2008, women of faith were the majority and practicing more than men, and that the over-70s were a more religious group than the youngsters. Reference to age therefore, highlights that the elderly form the most religious: 82% of the over-70s declare they are orthodox, in comparison with 77% of people aged between 50 and 69 and 74% of those aged between 30 and 49. Finally, the 62% of youths aged between 16 and 29 remains.

Although the above-mentioned study displays a clear discrepancy between the practicing and non-practicing faithful, the great rebirth of orthodoxy in the Russian people cannot be denied. In this regard, it is interesting to quote the episode of great mass participation occurring in November 2011. Three million Muscovites, facing the cold and rain, poured onto the streets to venerate the belt of the Virgin. This had been brought from Mount Athos to the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (the church destroyed by Stalin and substituted by a pool, but rebuilt in a few years under El'cin).

There is no doubt that this rebirth was supported by the collaboration between the Church and political power. This significantly grew over time and intensified on the occasion of two events in particular: the election of Archbishop Cyril Somolensk as patriarch of Moscow and all Russia in 2009, and Vladimir Putin's return to power in 2012.

The Orthodox church's policies can actually be easily reconciled with Putin's vision and his strong call to the Country's traditions. Patriarch Alexei II had already set himself clearly apart from the Western concepts of "human rights" and "globalization", considering them unsuited to Russian specifics. Further, Cyril I, his successor, issued the "*Declaration of Human Rights of Russia's Orthodox church*", after repudiating the Western Universal Declaration of Man's Rights.

The intensification of relations between Church and State has become even more evident in recent years. Indeed, on the forth anniversary of the nomination of Patriarch Cyril, the Kremlin explicitly wished for the Orthodox church to raise its beneficent role in society. In a meeting between the State and religious exponents, held on 11 February 2013, Putin also underlined the need to give the Orthodox church more space. This extended, to political questions regarding matters like the family, education of youths and the patriotic spirit. With

reference to defending these values, in particular the family, Russia has often wished to confirm and remark defending traditional, natural values of human society. To this end it has underlined its conception of “family” – understood as the basic element in ordered development for State and society – and the realization of a political and social strategy favouring it. These have decisively contributed to inverting the very negative demographic trend afflicting the Country over the last decades, warding off out-and-out social disaster. If one considers that the “demographic Winter” striking Russia around 1991 to 2005 is now a common situation in most European states, there can be no doubt that the Russian model constitutes an international example.

Keeping these facts in mind, in some alarming cases the attempt to define and orient States’ policies supporting families and young mothers is even more important and current. It aims to guarantee correct demographic development, crucial for effect on the process of State’s main internal and external policy. In this regard, President Putin has often insisted how humanity today clashes with very serious challenges, like continuous attacks on the institution of the family. This explains why Putin’s Russia is very interested in demographic and family matters. Protecting the rights and interests of families, motherhood and childhood is a priority for public authorities. This actively support and encourage politics and initiatives in their favour: they, benefit from the close collaboration with non-governmental organisations and voluntary citizen associations. Russia’s objective is to defeat this long-lasting demographic deficit, by reaching a fertility rate with a replacement ratio of 2,1 instead of its current 1,7.

Indeed, for the Russian authorities the problem of birth reduction cannot only be attributed to the economic sphere. It has deeper, cultural roots hence the need to intervene in the fields of education and information too. On many occasions, both Putin and Patriarch Cyril have emphasised that the globalised financial system caused the world economic crisis as of 2008, creating and making hegemonic speculative, parasitical financing. It is also responsible for the ethical, moral yielding developing international to create a dangerous ‘tendency to destroying human society’. This moral crisis had exacerbated a tendency to selfishness and individualism. These phenomena appear in Russia as the “social orphan”: 80% of abandoned children normally have both parents, who intentionally choose not to bring them up.

One may further note that a new agreement between the Church and the Counts’ Court was recently signed in Moscow. It aimed to raise morale in Russia, impaired by corruption, a real blight there; and safeguard the national spiritual, historical and cultural heritage, necessary for the social good. On the occasion of signing, Patriarch Cyril declared that “The work of the Counts’ Court has a substantial impact on society’s moral climate. We know that corruption degrades human beings. And if corruption reaches a significant extent, it erodes the healthy fabric of society and undermines the basis of the State.”

In fact, for Cyril, the “current vices, connected with theft of public and state property” are attributed to the difficulties faced by the population in the ’90’s and early 2000’s. They are, “the collapse of the economy, the destruction of certain ideals and the attempt to create new ones”.

For these reasons, the Kremlin considers the Church a fundamental ally to preserve Russia’s spiritual and cultural identity. Politics and the Church are intertwined: the Kremlin needs to promote the Church as an organ representing the nation’s values to regroup consensus; it is opportune for the Church to collaborate with politics to promote choices protecting the

family and safeguarding public morality. With reference to safeguarding life, the Orthodox church has worked hard to explain that abortion is nothing but the killing of an innocent human being. The work of many NGOs promote the pro-life cause in Russia.



Another emblematic case of the common political strategy linking the Orthodox church and the Kremlin is the anti-blasphemy. This was adopted following the episode of three feminist activists, Pussy Riot, who played in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. Their rock music, blasphemous in character, was performed on the platform of the altar, to protest against Putin's policy. For the secular authorities the gesture was considered as one by hooligans or vandals; for the Ecclesiastical leaders it was blasphemous profanity.

Further, the Church supported the new regulations limiting access to abortion; and Putin's law forbidding the publication of material portraying homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals.

The Orthodox church's action also spreads internationally, appearing as the promoter of dialogue between different religions and cultures. Patriarch Cyril actually stated the need to build orthodox geopolitics, in line with Putin's foreign policy. To favour this role, the "Inter-Religious Council of the Russian Federation" and its analogous "Inter-religious Council of the CSI" (Community of Independent states) were set up in 1998. Orthodox Christians, 230 million in all, include: countries orthodox by tradition (Belarus, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Macedonia, Moldavia, Montenegro, Romania, Russia, Serbia, the Ukraine), with their own orthodox national Churches, countries containing orthodox ethnic-cultural minorities (Albania, Czech Republic, Finland, Poland, Slovakia), and countries containing orthodox faithful, principally in Western Europe. Patriarch Cyril often visits countries from the former Soviet belt to consolidate cultural, religious, but also political relations. The Orthodox church moves in the former Soviet area, which the Kremlin aims to regroup. All this, supports the government's foreign policy, continually appealing to a shared values between the "sister nations" with "a unique story, a unique Church and unique future".

To closer understand the importance of it, one may refer to Eirini Patsea's luminary work, *"Church diplomacy: Greece, Russia and beyond"*. The author stresses that "after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Orthodox post-Soviet states chose to submit to the spiritual leadership of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople; not the Patriarchate of Moscow. It was important, for those states and for their western interlocutors, that they cut the cord from the ROC and the Soviet politics". Or, as prof. Anis H. Bajrektarevic vividly remarked in his recent editorial on Greece: "Russia is a legal, not an ideological, successor of the late Soviet Union. Many in Greece and Latin America mingled the two".

With reference to foreign policy, the situation lived in the Ukraine following the conflict is also interesting. In this country Orthodox church exponents were submitted to pressure from the Ukraine's new "nationalist" authorities and other organisations. The latter wished

to take over faculties to transfer the clergy depending on the Moscow Patriarch under the Kiev Patriarch (the latter not recognised, not even by the Constantinople Patriarch). In this regard it should be stressed that the Ukraine counts the highest number of orthodox parishes after Russia.

To conclude, it is fundamental to underline that this type of collaboration between Church and state has facilitated the rebirth of faith in Russia. It is possible in the traditional acephalus-national reality of Orthodoxy, which has made the “symphonic” Caesaropapism the true foundation of Russian identity for centuries. It is then clear that the model cannot be exported. However, the National character of the orthodox Ecclesiastical reality has not hindered the possibility of an “orthodox ecumenism” open to international dialogue between cultures and religions.

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First published by [www.moderndiplomacy.eu](http://www.moderndiplomacy.eu)

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