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ORTHODOXY AND THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE CHURCH IN RUSSIAN POLITICS

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Despite her heavy political agenda, Madeleine Albright's first stop after arriving at Vnukovo Airport from London in February 1997 was the Danilovsky Monastery, where she had a brief meeting with Patriarch Aleksiy II of the Russian Orthodox Church.1 Albright's visit to the Russian Patriarch was unusual for a political trip, but diplomats noted that it was not surprising since the Orthodox Church has become an increasingly influential social force in Russia since the collapse of communism. The Russian Orthodox Church, indeed, is remarkable for the level of support it enjoys across the country. In a survey conducted throughout Central and Eastern Europe in 1996 to find out the level of confidence people had in state institutions, 72 per cent of respondents in Russia expressed great confidence in the Church, and this was the highest percentage in the former Soviet bloc.2 Searching for new social and moral values in an era of ideological crisis, it is not surprising that many Russians turned to religion. The rampant pessimism3 ordinary Russians have been feeling due to the worsening socio-economic conditions has helped revitalise the institution of religion. Although it is essential to note that identification with an Orthodox outlook does not necessarily imply a belief in God,4 the number of Russians who associate themselves with an Orthodox identity and self-expression is rising. According to another survey, even in Moscow, the centre of the Soviet establishment, 67 per cent of the respondents classified themselves as believers.5 The astonishing question, however, is how the Russian Orthodox Church has become one of the major players in Russian politics and could so rapidly develop popular prestige even among the ideologically diverse political circles. The history of the Church in Russia is in strong contradiction with this actual phenomenon. The servility of the Church and its exploitation by the tsarist autocracy directly stemming from the Church reforms of Peter the Great, then its subjugation under the oppressively atheistic rule of the Soviet communists make it hardly believable that the rise of the Church in the political arena is caused simply by the religious appetite of ordinary Russians. Thus, the central question to which this research addresses itself is what kind of political and social factors are responsible for this ambitious revival of the Church in Russia. It is an attempt at clarifying the vague alliance between Russian politicians and the Church leadership.

DERZHAVNOST, ORTHODOXY AND RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

As early as 1997, Vladimir Shlapentokh observed, "In the last two years, the liberals made a significant move toward the moderate nationalists and they rarely expressed the full liberal line to the extent they did from 1991 to 1994."6 In fact, this shift to the right cannot be applied merely to the liberals. Political extremism in Russia7 and the radicalisation of Russian politics, particularly during the last two years, has been an issue of growing anxiety for many political analysts. One of the factors giving way to this radical transformation has been undeniably the demoralising defeat in Chechnya and the fear of a chain reaction. However, the question of greatness and Russia's status in

the world, which has been deeply rooted in Russian culture since Chaadayev's famous question in 1836,8 has been the most important cause of the intensification of political tendencies in Russia. Russia's foreign policy humiliations (such as the Bosnian war, NATO's enlargement or the Kosovo crisis) have had important repercussions for internal politics. Despite the fact that 68 per cent of the respondents in a survey conducted in 1997 do not agree that the Russian Federation can be regarded as a great power (derzhava in Russian9),10 the imperialist persuasion still exists among Russian politicians, as well as ordinary people. Vladimir Pribylovsky rightly calls this "authoritarianism with great pretensions and few resources."11

The problem for Russians, however, is how to combine these great pretensions with few resources. This has been a handicap even recognised by leading Russian politicians. During the crisis in Kosovo, the ex-prime minister, Sergei Stepashin, for instance, argued that it was wrong to keep saying how 'great' Russia is while it is "treated like a third-rate power."12 Nevertheless, nostalgia for the prestigious status in international politics that the country benefited from during tsarist and Soviet times is increasing overwhelmingly. Combined with the search for a new national identity stemming from the shock of losing an empire, these ambitious national aspirations have revolved around the concept of derzhavnost and are supposed to be achieved today through an inevitable turn towards a Slav and Orthodox emphasis in foreign policy. It is worth noting that this Russian concept of derzhavnost has acquired a special missionary connotation as well. According to Metropolitan Ioann, a great power structure (derzhavnoe stroitel'stva, a concept infused with the notion of religious sacredness) must be considered within the framework of universal meaning since the fate of Russia may determine the fate of the world.13 However, the way this special task of Russia is perceived is a very xenophobic one. In an interesting article that appeared in Rus' Derzhavnaia, Count S. Uvarov's 'Theory of Official Nationality'14 was described as a protective and peace-loving ideology in comparison to the aggressive nationalism of Europe, which targeted the Rus during the last century.15 However, because nationality and autocracy are not applicable under the current circumstances of the modern world, the author's emphasis was rather on Orthodoxy. During the Russian public's debate of NATO's enlargement, Sovetskaia Rossiia specifically mentioned the centuries-long geopolitical war between Russia and reactionary forces of the West.16 Even Gennadiy Zyuganov argued that there were powerful forces in the world that hate Russia itself and everything associated with it.17 In these premises, the hostile attitude of Russian political circles towards Western involvement in areas that are supposed to be part of Russia's sphere of influence is not surprising. It is also quite normal that the new parameters of Russian foreign policy are based on such newly expressed values as 'Orthodox solidarity' or 'Eurasianism'. The fact that the Church, after the Soviet experience of nearly 70 years, has become part of Russian foreign policy execution and has served as a means of justification for almost all Russian politicians from differing political spectrums is extremely new and spectacular.

In a joint statement following the meeting in Moscow on 7 June 1999, Aya Mohammed Ali Taskhiri, the president of Iran's Culture and Islamic Relations Organisation, and Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad condemned US-led NATO for its aggression against Yugoslavia, which they saw as part of Western liberal-secular society's aim to impose itself upon the rest of the world. Both religious leaders argued that the twenty-first century would be the century in which Western civilisation confronts other civilisations, namely Muslim and Orthodox. There was no fatal confrontation between Orthodox Christianity and Islam and no predetermined conflict between the two great religions.18 A Church journalist, Y. S. Isatov, who took part in a delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church that, under the leadership of Patriarch Aleksiy II, visited Yugoslavia during the NATO bombardment, ironically wrote that from the first moment in Belgrade he had the impression

his country was not only on the side of NATO, but, more important, on the side of "American culture."19 The Russian Orthodox Church indeed exhibits a growing apprehension towards other religions, including Christian, denominations and the influence of Western culture. Struck by post-modern cults of Western civilisation, which are supposed to be alien to the Russian culture, the Church leadership very carefully works out the Church's social influence to strengthen spirituality (dukhovnost) in Russian life. Consequently, although having faced intense criticism at home and abroad, they warmly welcomed the Russian Federation Law on the Freedom of Assembly and Religious Associations of 26 September 1997, to stop, in A. N. Pekshev's words, "[The] spiritual colonialisation of the Russian nation".20

The Church's activities and growing role in politics, particularly following the crisis in Kosovo, have been issues of partial criticism since a considerable part of Russian society still adheres to the Soviet view of religion. Against the accusations of being too much involved in politics, Patriarch Aleksiy II argues that the primary motives of the Church leadership during the crisis in Kosovo have revolved around its duty to promote peace.21 The war in Kosovo, however, provided the Church leadership with a more important opportunity to save its international prestige, which was rapidly going down the drain in the ex-Soviet world. Its deteriorating relations with, and lost hegemony over churches in ex-Soviet countries, particularly in Ukraine, have been important obstacles for the assertive role the Russian Orthodox Church thinks of for itself in the post-communist era. Thus, the Serbian case has helped the Russian Orthodox Church re-assert its damaged position within the Orthodox world. In his visit to Belgrade in April 1999, Patriarch Aleksiy II particularly stressed the spiritual unity between Russian and Serbian Orthodox churches.22 Under these circumstances, there emerges a vague alliance between the Russian government and the Church leadership. While the Russian government allows Metropolitan Kirill to be included in the mission of Russia's special envoy, Viktor Chernomyrdin, to Belgrade23 to demonstrate Orthodox solidarity between Serbia and Russia, the Patriarch justifies and strengthens the Russian government's anti-Western stance with a spiritual outlook. He accuses Western powers of assuming that the Belgrade regime was acting according to its geopolitical interests, while the Serbian forces' main motives were related to the need to defend the priority of spiritual existence.24

THE ENIGMA OF RUSSIAN POLITICS AND THE CHURCH LEADERSHIP

There are two questions of vital importance for Russia's future that preoccupy an anxious Russian public: what is to be done to preserve the territorial and moral integrity of contemporary Russia? What is left to replace the old-fashioned communist ideology or irksome democratic-liberalism? A variety of intellectual and political movements have made efforts to fill the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of communism, but due to either a lack of willingness or political opportunism, none of them has worked efficiently. The current emphasis in the Russian political élite is undeniably Orthodox identity. Among political circles from left to right there is a growing interest in the unitary role of the Church. Anatoliy Stepanov, for instance, argues that Russian state ideology must be religious, since an ideology should not fall into contradiction with science and morality and is obliged to prevent the country's collapse and help society preserve its national ideals. He requests, therefore, the immediate restoration of the Russian Orthodox Church in its traditional form.25 Even the Communist Party, the leading body of Soviet atheism, has adopted a very moderate approach to the Church and religion. According to Zyuganov, the Russian Orthodox Church, which for centuries has strengthened the spiritual-moral and cultural-historical unity of the peoples of Russia, is going to be one of the most important sources for the reunification of the dismembered country.26

The problematique of vital importance for Church's future henceforth is the intention of Russian politicians to use the institution of religion whether as a useful means of social development or as an important source of political exploitation. The Church leadership, being aware of such fragile premises of Russian politics, very carefully works out the extension of the Church's social and political influence by establishing close connections with different groups and institutions of society, with the universities and academics in particular.27 But it also welcomes the unitary social role Russian political circles want it to assume. To stress the Church's role in the revival and strengthening of a Russia that is "a successor to the historical Rus,"28 Patriarch Aleksiy II says that the Church has always been "the embodiment and symbol of the unity of the Russian land, keeping it together in times of great historical trials."29 Nevertheless, in the realm of politics, the Church leadership officially announces that it welcomes dialogue and contacts with political organs of the state unless they have political overtones.30 In 1997, the Council of Bishops ruled that no clergymen was allowed to join a political party or campaign in elections and that no political organisation would receive a Church blessing or be allowed to speak on behalf of the Church.31 When some rumours appeared in June 1999 that Metropolitan Kirill was offered presidential candidacy by Vozrozhdenie, a democratic movement, the Church leadership repeated its political neutrality.32 The reason behind the Church's reluctance is its firm determination to preserve its freedom in relation to the state and to stop the division among the clergy, which was observed during the conflict between the Russian parliament and President Yeltsin in 1993.33

In an interesting 'interview with Aleksander Pushkin' in Savvinskoe Slovo, the author wrote that, in contrast to the West's historical experience where the spirituality controlled by the Pope was independent of civil rights, in Russia religion had served as a mediator between monarchs and subjects.34 Contemporary Russia is justifying Nikolai Berdyaev's famous argument that the Russians are a "conglomeration of contradictions." There has emerged a wide gap between ordinary citizens and politicians. More important is the fact that, due to different interpretations of the Soviet legacy, Russian society is also divided in itself. As in its relation to the state, the Russian Orthodox Church has adopted a very careful approach particularly on matters of historical repentance that may cause further social confusion and division. In a sense, it assumed the role of mediator. The best example reflecting this phenomenon is the Church's stance during Russian public's discussion concerning the idea of a restoration of the monarchy in Russia.

At the beginning of 1997, some rumours suddenly appeared in Moscow that the Kremlin had plans to restore the monarchy. Debates over the last tsar and his family were not surprising for the Russian public. The myth of Nicholas II as the embodiment of the good, old Russia that was destroyed by the Bolsheviks had already been created in various popular circles. There were signs reflecting this growing popular interest in tsarist roots, such as recruitment from the existing police in St Petersburg of the gorodovie, the quintessential symbol of tsarist law and order.35 However, virtually nobody expected such a radical step and within a very short period a full-scale discussion started.36 In reality, the idea of a restoration of the monarchy in Russia did not receive popular consent.37 Undoubtedly, the motives of the Kremlin in initiating this controversial issue were centred on political manoeuvres to direct public attention from pressing internal problems. It was not surprising, therefore, when Sergei Iastrzhembsky, President Boris Yeltsin's press secretary, announced that the debate was part of a political futurology and had nothing to do with reality.38 Soon, the issue became forgotten. However, Russia still could not be reconciled with her history.

In Andrei Zolotov's words, Nicholas II was "a symbol of an ideal, religious monarchism," which is very different from the political monarchism proclaimed by some marginal political groups.39 For

many Russians, "Sanctification of the last tsar was an act of historical repentance for the sin of the revolution that was committed by their nation and a way to help establish their personal connection with God and with Russia's past."40 It is, however, a sensitive issue for the Russians since a large part of society still adheres to the Soviet view of the Romanovs. It took the Church's Commission on Canonisation five years to research every aspect of Nicholas' life and death. The official canonisation of the imperial family has been closely interwoven with the monarchist and chauvinist movement in Russia. It was, therefore, important for the Church leadership not to play into the hands of political monarchists and radicals. Metropolitan Yuvenali, chairman of the canonisation commission, stated that the canonisation of the imperial family would not be a canonisation of the monarchist regime.41 Besides, while the council said that the imperial family did not deserve sainthood for anything they had done before Nicholas' abdication in February 1917, the bishops ruled that the humble Christian way in which the imperial family faced their imprisonment and death by firing squad in 1918 qualified them as saints.42 Additionally, Patriarch Aleksiy II refused to attend the funeral in 1998, claiming that the bones were not authentic. By avoiding, through its arbitrary decision, the subject becoming a new source of confusion and division in Russian society, the Church very carefully accomplished its task.

CONCLUSION

Several scholarly works analyse the Russian idea in the post-communist era.43 They have different options, but the common point of them all is their emphasis on Orthodox identity and the need for the Church's unitary role in Russian society. Undoubtedly, the relationship between the state and religion will continue to play a major role in Russia's social and political development. However, as far as Russia's special features are concerned, one dilemma leads to another and problems become part of various vicious circles. The growing role of Orthodoxy in Russian politics could not be contested if Russia were a country with merely one belief. However, neither ethnic origins nor religions are monolithic in the Russian Federation today. Although Patriarch Aleksiy II points out that eighty per cent of the Russian citizens are Orthodox,44 the remaining twenty per cent is important enough for it not to be alienated. According to the constitution, Russia is a secular state where all religions are to be treated equally. Nevertheless, accusations of preferential treatment of Orthodox Christians by the federal government45 are an issue of serious concern and a potential source of future conflicts.

1 'Albright Arrives to Pitch NATO Plan', Moscow Times, 21 February 1997, pp. 1-2.
2 'High Public Confidence in the Church', Transition, Vol. 2, No. 7, 5 April 1996, p. 24.
3 According to a survey by the Fund of Public Opinion, in July 1996 only 16 per cent of respondents believed that life would become worse, while in May 1997 the percentage of those who shared this view was 64 per cent. See Vladimir Shlapentokh, 'The Four Faces of Mother Russia', Transitions, Vol. 4, No. 5, October 1997, p. 65.
4 Elena Chinyaeva, 'Russian Orthodox Church Forges a New Role', Transition, Vol. 2, No. 7, 5 April 1996, p. 14. The author, drawing from a variety of sources, concludes that people construct their own understanding of Christianity: 32 per cent identify religion with morality, 20 per cent with culture, 12 per cent with service to people, 10 per cent with national traditions and nine per cent with personal salvation. Only 2-3 per cent of those who call themselves Orthodox regularly participate in religious services.
5 'Moskvichi veriat v boga no v tserkov' khodiat redko', Segodnia, 23 April 1997, p. 2.
6 Vladimir Shlapentokh, 'Creating 'the Russian Dream' after Chechenya', Transition, Vol. 3, No. 2, 7 February 1997, p. 28.

7 For an excellent account of this subject, see: Aleksandr Verkhovskiy, et al., Politicheskii ekstremizm v Rossii, Moscow, 1996.
8 Influenced by the schools of thought of the two German philosophers, Schelling and Hegel, Pyotr Chaadayev's (1793-1856) scandalous question-Where is Russia's place in world history?-started a long-lasting debate in Russian intellectual life that ended up in the famous struggle of the nineteenth century between the Westernists and Slavophiles. Chaadayev himself claimed that Russia was neither an Eastern nor a Western country. Russia, isolated geographically, lacked historical continuity and could be labelled as a country without history. Although forgotten in the Soviet times, the Russians are re-discovering this brilliant but provocative thinker. In the perestroika era, his letters and articles were published again. See: P. Chaadayev, Stat'i i pis'ma, Moscow, 1989.
9 Certain Russian words cannot be directly translated into English. The concept of derzhavnost or the word derzhava are two typical examples of this difficulty. Derzhava, in the literal sense of the term, means 'political power', but in the modern Russian political lexicon it has acquired the meaning of great power, while derzhavnost is associated with the notions of strong statehood or great power status.
10 'Posledniy god Rossii', NG-Stsenarii, 10 April 1997, p. 5.
11 Vladimir Pribylovsky, 'What Awaits Russia: Fascism or a Latin American-Style Dictatorship?', Transition, Vol. 1, No. 10, 23 June 1995, p. 7.
12 'Deal Seen as Russia's Capitulation', Moscow Times, 4 June 1999, pp. 1-2. Stepashin added that Russia could only speak of its greatness when it achieves a "European level" in gross domestic product, standard of living and development of science and culture.
13 Metropolitan Ioann of St Petersburg and Ladozhskaia, 'Derzhavnoe stroitel'stvo', Derzhava, No. 1, 1994, p. 7.
14 The Theory of Official Nationality that was formulated by Count S. Uvarov (1786-1855) in 1832 was based upon three principles: Orthodoxy (pravoslavie), autocracy (samoderzhavie), nationality (narodnost'). It served until the February Revolution of 1917 as the ideological basis of the political regime in Russia.
15 N. I. Pozdniakov, 'Bol'shoe viditsia na rasstoianii', Rus' Derzhavnaia, No. 19-21(32), 1996, p. 5.
16 Yuriy Belov, 'Odna Rossiia, nam drugoy ne znat', Sovetskaia Rossiia, 23 November 1996, pp. 1-2.
17 'Zyuganov Solicits Orthodox Community's Votes', SWB, SU/2654 A/18, 3 July 1996. Also see: 'Zyuganov Plays Orthodox Card, Promises to Develop New State Ideology', SWB, SU/2651 A/3, 29 June 1996.
18 'Moslems, Orthodox Find Common Foe', Moscow Times, 8 June 1999, p. 4.
19 Y. S. Isatov, 'Ot voiny k miru', Savvinskoe Slovo, No. 4 (5), 1999, p. 2.
20 A. N. Pekshev, 'Kommentarii', Federal'niy zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii o svobode sovesti i o religioznikh ob'edineniiakh, Moscow, 1998, p. 5.
21 'Mirotvorchestvo- nash dolg', Pravoslavnaia Moskva, No. 17-18 (191-192), May 1999, p. 7.
22 'Sviateishiy Patriarkh Aleksii II posetil Belgrad', Pravoslavnaia Moskva, No. 15-16 (189-190), April 1999, p. 3.
23 'Prokurorov s advokatami prizvali na Balkanskiy front', Segodnia, 29 May 1999, p. 3.
24 Patriarch Aleksiy II, 'Mir na pereput'e', Nezavisimaia Gazeta, 11 June 1999, pp. 1, 8.
25 Anatoliy Stepanov, 'B poiskakh smysla', Sovetskaia Rossiia, 4 January 1997, pp. 5, 6.
26 'Zyuganov Solicits Orthodox Community's Votes', SWB, SU/2654 A/18, 3 July 1996. Also see: 'Zyuganov Plays Orthodox Card, Promises to Develop New State Ideology', SWB, SU/2651 A/3, 29 June 1996.
27 V. Tomachinskiy and A. Yegortsev, 'Vera i nauka pomogayot drug drugu', Sud'ba i vera,

Moscow, 1999, p. 8.
28 'Orthodox Patriarch Addresses Yeltsin at Inauguration Ceremony', SWB, SU/2687 B/2, 10 August 1996.
29 'Patriarch Stresses Role of Orthodox Church in Reviving Russia', SWB, SU/2516 B/2, 23 January 1996.
30 'Opredelenie Archiereiskovo Sobora Russkoi Pravoslavnoy Tserkvi o izaimootnosheiiakh s gosudarstvom i svetskim obschestvom', Pravoslavnaia Moskva, No. 7(103), March 1997, p. 11. Also see: 'Zaiavlenie Sviateishego Patriarcha Moskovskogo i Vseia Rusi Aleksiia II i Sviaschennogo Sinoda Russkoy Pravoslavnoy Tserkvi', Pravoslavnaia Moskva, No. 2-3(98-99), January 1997, p. 2.
31 Andrei Zolotov, 'Bishops Boost Tsar's Sainthood', Moscow Times, 22 February 1997, p. 4.
32 'Church Says No to Priests in Politics', Moscow Tribune, 8 June 1999, p. 5; 'Delo tserkvi-molit'sia', Segodnia, 29 May 1999, p. 2.
33 Ibid.
34 Galina Semenova, 'Interv'yo daet', Savvinskoe Slovo, No. 4 (5), 1999, pp. 3-4.
35 Anna Badkhen, 'Tsarist Police Force to Return to St Pete', Moscow Times, 8 February 1997, p. 4.
36 On some interesting articles of this period about pro-, or con-arguments, see: Denis Dragunskiy, 'Monarkhiia, XX vek', Itogi, No. 10(43), 11 March 1997, pp. 44-48; Aleksandr Soldatov, 'Prestol poka vakanten', Itogi, No. 10(43), 11 March 1997, pp. 51-54; 'Rossiyskaia monarkhiia: Iskushenie vtoroe', Sovetskaia Rossiia, 23 January 1997, p. 4; Aleksandr Mekhanik, 'Tsar' izbran-narod likuet', Nezavisimaia Gazeta, 25 February 1997, p. 2; Alexander Minkin, 'Only the Tsar Can Save Russia from Lebed', The Exile, Moscow, 6-20 February 1997, p. 4; N. Fadeeva, 'Stoiascheie u Trona...' Zavtra, No. 9(170), March 1997, p. 6.

37 According to a poll conducted by the All-Russia Public Opinion Centre, 91 per cent of the respondents (2406 adults living in different parts of the country) opposed the idea of restoring the monarchy to Russia ('Most Russians Oppose the Restoration of Monarchy', Interfax News, 12 February 1997). The results of another survey indicated that while 65 per cent of the respondents opposed the idea, only 13 per cent supported it ('Posledniy god Rossii', NG-Stenarii, 10 April 1997, p. 4).
38 Vitaliy Tsepliaev, 'Sergey Iastrzhembskiy: Memuarov ne dozhdetes!', Argumenty i Fakty, No. 5(850), January 1997, p. 3.
39 Andrei Zolotov, 'Russia Battles over Tsarist and Leninist Relics', Moscow Times, 26 March 1997, p. 9.
40 Ibid.
41 'Doklad Mitropolita Krutitskogo i Kolomenskogo Iuvenaliia, predsedatelia komissii cviaschennogo sinoda po kanonizatsii sviatykh, na Arkhiereyskom Sobore Russkoy Pravoslavnoy Tserkvi', Pravoslavnaia Moskva, No. 7(103), March 1997, p. 6.
42 Ibid.
43 For some of them, see: Sovremennaia russkaia ideia i gosudarstvo, Moscow, 1995; H. H. Gokol and S. V. Alekseev, Rossiiskaia ideia i natsional'naia ideologiia narodov Rossii, Moscow, 1996; Igor' Chubais, Ot russkoi idei k idee novoi Rossii, Moscow, 1996.
44 Valentin' Uvarov, 'Uchenye i politiki o russkoy national'noy idee, Pamiat', No. 2(17), 1997, p. 8.
45 In June 1999, for instance, a dispute emerged in Vladivostok between the local Muslim community and Orthodox Christians. When public demonstrations erupted against a plan to build a new mosque because the mosque would have towered 300 metres above the church, city authorities revoked permission. Orthodox priests were at the heart of a vocal protest campaign ('Vladivostok Kills Bid for Big Mosque', Moscow Times, 2 June 1999, p. 3).