

“The Russian Orthodox Church has emerged as a powerful force for cultural, social, and political conservatism.”

## The Russian Orthodox Church's Conservative Crusade

KRISTINA STOECKL

This year marks the centenary of the Russian Revolution, which brought about the end of the tsarist empire and the beginning of Soviet communism. From the perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church, 1917 meant not only the onset of decades-long persecution of men and women in the Soviet Union because of their religious faith. It also led to the revival of the institutional structure of the Moscow Patriarchate, which had been displaced two hundred years earlier by Peter the Great.

Peter had brought the church under state control at the beginning of the eighteenth century by replacing the Patriarch of Moscow with a procurator, appointed directly by the tsar. The Russian Orthodox Church seized on the political turmoil caused by the revolution as an opportunity to elect a new patriarch: in an ironic twist of history, 1917 saw the church recovering institutional independence and facing dire peril at the same time. In the years that followed, thousands of churches and monasteries were shut down or destroyed, and many priests, monks, nuns, and believers were killed.

What remained of the church after years of persecution was eventually rehabilitated in 1941 by Joseph Stalin, when he sought to mobilize Orthodox support during World War II. Stalin allowed the election of a new patriarch, but he also created a tight administrative structure for controlling the church.

Throughout the history of the Soviet Union, the secret services controlled the activities of clergy through the Council for Religious Affairs. It is a well-documented fact that numerous clergy mem-

bers worked as informants for the KGB from the 1950s until the fall of the USSR. Archival materials published by the historian Adriano Rocucci offer a glimpse of how priests were approached by agents who had been instructed to show “no veneration,” to address the priests not with their clerical titles but by their “name and father’s name,” and to be just polite enough to “not put the feet on the table,” but sufficiently bold “to smoke in their presence.”

Under these conditions, Russian Orthodoxy broke apart. A handful of hierarchs, who were pampered by the state, represented the church in international meetings and ecumenical initiatives, while parish priests and the flock of believers faced oppression. Many were persecuted for their faith and sent to the gulag.

The church’s situation improved in the 1980s. During *perestroika*, the Soviet reform period under General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, persecution diminished and the church was gradually restored to a public role. In 1988, the thousand-year anniversary of the Christianization of medieval Kievan Rus’ (the forerunner of the Russian empire) was celebrated as a state event, complete with a commemorative gold coin, state honors for the patriarch and bishops, and a musical performance for hierarchs, members of the Politburo, and foreign diplomats at Moscow’s Bolshoi Theater.

### POST-SOVIET REVIVAL

When the Communist leadership finally collapsed in 1991 and the Council for Religious Affairs ceased to exist, the Russian Orthodox Church was restored to freedom and independence. Yet the breakup of the Soviet Union into independent states brought a host of new problems for the church. The Patriarch of Moscow continued to claim jurisdiction over Orthodox believers in

---

KRISTINA STOECKL is an assistant professor of sociology and head of the Postsecular Conflicts project at the University of Innsbruck.

the newly independent states and resented the establishment of local ecclesiastical structures, for example in Estonia and Ukraine. In the 1990s, the church also faced internal tensions between those priests and church members who had been dissidents and now demanded clarifications of the role church leaders had played under communism, and the hierarchy, which did not want to dig too deeply into the subject of collaboration.

During the same period the church was troubled by the revival of other religions in the country, which it regarded as direct competitors, and by an influx of foreign missionaries from the West. The Russia of the early 1990s was indeed a free market for religions, as the sociologist Paul Froese has shown in his book *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization*. But the situation sharply changed in 1997, when the Duma revised the religious-freedom law under pressure from the Moscow Patriarchate.

The 1997 law introduced restrictive measures including a 15-year waiting period for the legally required registration of religious organizations. That provision was intended to keep Christian missionary churches, many of which came from the United States, out of the country. The law also contained a preamble that accorded the Russian Orthodox Church a special place in the pantheon of Russia's "traditional religions." In this legislation, "traditional" referred to those faiths that had been present on Russian territory since the days of the tsarist empire.

Although the early post-Soviet era was a time of difficult transition and adaptation for the church, Orthodoxy experienced a revival. Thousands of religious buildings and artifacts were given back to the church by the state, a great number of Russians discovered the Orthodox faith, and the church resumed its role as a public religion. The most conspicuous sign of this revival was the erection of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in the heart of Moscow, on the exact same site where the Communists had demolished the previous cathedral to make way for a colossal Palace of the Soviets, which was never built.

The latest data from the Pew Research Center indicate that 71 percent of Russians today are adherents of the Orthodox faith, compared with 36 percent in 1991. Even though church attendance remains low (6 percent), popular religiosity is

widespread. In the summer of 2017, the display of the relics of Saint Nicholas, on loan from the Italian city of Bari, brought large crowds of believers to Moscow's main cathedral. Six years earlier, 400,000 turned out for a chance to see the relics of the Belt of the Virgin Mary.

### FIRST AMONG EQUALS

In the post-Soviet era, the Russian Orthodox Church has emerged as a powerful force for cultural, social, and political conservatism. Its official teaching, laid out in 2000 in the Social Doctrine, emphasizes patriotism, close church-state relations, and social conservatism. But it also contains a passage in which the church declares its readiness to engage in "civil disobedience" if the state should pass laws that contradict church teachings.

The Russian Federation is secular, but its constitution calls for church-state cooperation, not disestablishment. In addition to the Russian Orthodox Church, other "traditional" religions such as Buddhism and Islam also have cooperative relations with the state.

A recent event was emblematic of the Russian model of relations between the state and religious groups. November 2016 saw the unveiling in Moscow of a monument to Saint Vladimir, the medieval prince

under whose rule Kievan Rus' was Christianized in 988—the event that the waning Soviet government had deemed worthy of a millennial celebration. The monument was placed just outside the Kremlin walls, sending a highly political message that did not go unnoticed by commentators. Vladimir's act of conversion to Christianity and the subsequent baptism of the Rus' took place on the Crimean peninsula. Staking a claim to the memory of Saint Vladimir and raising a monument to him amounts to a strategic statement by the Russian government, emphasizing a historical basis for Russia's ownership of the Crimean peninsula, which it unlawfully annexed in 2014.

There is another detail from this celebration that merits attention. The inauguration of the monument was attended by a selected group of Russian religious leaders, whose appearance served as a showcase for Russia's model of restricted religious establishment. The religious leaders in attendance were Patriarch Kirill of Moscow; the chairman of the Council of Muftis of Russia; the Chief Mufti and head of the Central Spiritual Directorate of

---

*It would be a mistake to think that Russian Orthodoxy today is a monolithic bloc.*

---

Muslims; the Chief Rabbi of Russia; the head of the Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church, Metropolitan Kornilii; the Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Moscow; and the leader of the traditional Buddhist Sangkha of Russia.

In a group portrait taken at the event and posted on the Kremlin's website, the patriarch is standing at the front, next to President Vladimir Putin, while the other religious leaders are lined up in the first row of the audience. Thus arrayed, each in colorful garb or a conspicuous hat that made it easy even for a lay observer to discern which religions were represented, they epitomized the Russian model of church-state relations: the state is Orthodox, with the president and patriarch at the top; the other religions are minor partners and bystanders.

### **PUTIN'S PATRIARCH**

Patriarch Kirill entered office in 2009 with the reputation of a modernizer. For many years he had acted as head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations. Founded in 1946, it had coordinated church diplomacy during Soviet times. Kirill spent a large part of his career during the Soviet era in the department and is therefore well versed in negotiating for the needs of the church while keeping the interests of the state in mind. Under his leadership, the department established offices in Brussels and Strasbourg.

Since assuming office, Patriarch Kirill has created several new departments inside the Patriarchate, including one for church-society relations. The first head of this department, Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, made his top priority a fight against juvenile justice reforms that Russia had committed to undertake as a signatory of the European Social Convention. It was the first large-scale public battle waged by the Russian Orthodox Church against the state.

Rallying against a legislative proposal drawn up under then-President Dmitry Medvedev, Orthodox activists asserted that implementing international standards in matters of children's rights would lead to the removal of children from Russian families. The underlying message of the campaign was that the church would not allow "foreign rights standards" to prevail over the traditional mores of the Orthodox family. The protest was successful; the reform stalled and was eventually withdrawn by Putin in 2012.

By that year, when Putin returned to the presidency for a third term against a backdrop of street

protests over alleged irregularities during the December 2011 parliamentary elections, the Moscow Patriarchate was institutionally and ideologically prepared to become an important public player. It soon became very clear that the public role it had in mind was a close partnership with the Putin administration.

The event that sealed this pact was a provocative performance by the punk rock band Pussy Riot in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in the spring of 2012. The young women in the band entered an altar space in the cathedral that was off-limits to the public and staged what they called a "punk prayer" in which they insulted the patriarch and shouted, "Mother of God, banish Putin." They were forcibly removed by security guards, but later posted a video of the performance on the Internet. Three of the band members were arrested and put on trial for hooliganism.

The trial crystallized contrasting interpretations of the role of the church in Russian society. Conservative believers demanded that the band members receive heavy punishment for blasphemy; more liberal-minded priests and believers wanted to see them acquitted. The church leadership favored leaving the matter to the legislature. The accused women themselves insisted that "the language of protest must have a legitimate place inside the church." The judges took a hard line, convicted the women, and handed down prison sentences.

The Duma responded by quickly passing a law that criminalized "insulting the religious feelings of believers." The Pussy Riot episode sealed the pact between the patriarch and Putin. The state stepped into the role of the protector of the church against "secularist liberals," and the church became the propagator of an ever-narrower socially conservative normative framework that has unleashed the persecution of all kinds of protest and expression of opinion.

Since 2012, the Duma has passed a series of legislative measures reflecting the socially conservative vision of the church, including a ban on public display of "nontraditional relationships," enacted in 2013, which outlaws gay pride parades or any other public manifestation of homosexuality, and a law criminalizing offensive language in literature, film, and theater. A proposal to exclude abortions from coverage under the public health service is in the legislative pipeline.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has repeatedly found Russia guilty of passing

laws that discriminate against people on grounds of conscience or sexual orientation, to no avail. Under Putin's authoritarian rule, the Russian Supreme Court has dismissed the judgments of the ECHR as incompatible with Russia's legal sovereignty. The Russian Orthodox Church is complicit in this deprecation of international human rights standards. The church's representatives frequently accuse the ECHR judges in Strasbourg of harboring a liberal and antireligious bias.

The most recent of these laws reflecting the church's hard-line agenda, enacted in February 2017, raises the threshold for the prosecution of domestic violence, in effect allowing abuse to go on for a period of up to a year. Conservative members of parliament, in particular Yelena Mizulina, who was also the driving force behind the "gay propaganda ban," and activists of the Russian Orthodox Church's right wing hailed this law as a defense of the traditional Orthodox Christian patriarchal family.

Like the previously enacted laws, this latest one has a dual purpose: it gives the Russian government an opportunity to show the international community that it will not bother to respect the human rights standards and instruments to which it has committed as a member of the United Nations and the Council of Europe, while allowing the Russian Orthodox Church to impose its socially conservative vision on Russian society. However, the domestic violence law also exemplifies the dangers of the state's embrace of the church: conservative hard-liners inside the church are strengthened and moderates, who doubt it is really in the interest of the church to be seen as condoning wife-beaters, are sidelined. Even some commentators in circles close to the patriarch criticized the domestic violence law, bringing to the surface an ideological rift inside the church.

## INTERNAL DIVISIONS

It would be a mistake to think that Russian Orthodoxy today is a monolithic bloc. The seemingly all-powerful Patriarch Kirill is under pressure from inside the church in several ways. First, Kirill faces considerable opposition from the fundamentalist wing. This relatively large group, prevalent in monastic circles and influential among bishops and the politically conservative laity, criticized the patriarch's decision to meet Pope Francis in Cuba in February 2016 as "heretical." The same fundamentalist wing was also likely the driving force behind the patriarch's decision to withdraw from the

Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in Crete in June 2016. Conservatives opposed this meeting, the first pan-Orthodox assembly since the Council of Nicea in 787, because it would have improved conditions for an ecumenical opening toward other Christian churches.

Secondly, the Russian military aggression in Ukraine has opened up a territorial split inside the church, raising the specter of an autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox Church. For now, most Orthodox parishes in Ukraine are under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, which decides on the nomination of bishops and priests. But the military conflict in eastern Ukraine and the war-mongering by radical Russian priests, who were only half-heartedly called to order by the patriarch, have frustrated many believers and made a breakaway of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from Moscow more likely. Losing jurisdiction in Ukraine would be a serious problem for the Moscow Patriarchate because this could cause a chain reaction in other countries, completely redrawing the map of global Orthodoxy and diminishing Moscow's influence.

Thirdly, not all Orthodox believers in Russia are happy with Kirill's strategy of close church-state relations. A small liberal opposition is taking shape inside the church, dissenting against the patriarch's concessions to the fundamentalist hard-liners and the close relationship between the church leadership and the government.

The patriarch and his advisers appear intent on steering a middle course, with occasional concessions to both the fundamentalists and the liberals in order to preserve the image of neutral leadership. But it is unlikely that the current patriarch will do anything that could put at risk his good relations with the Putin government, whose antiliberal course he wholeheartedly supports. The Moscow Patriarchate today seems still haunted by the church's experience during the Soviet era, when official church pronouncements disseminated by the Department of External Church Relations in cooperation with the Kremlin were completely divorced from the reality inside the church.

The gap between the official positions taken by the hierarchy and the church's pastoral mission became visible during Kirill's trip to Antarctica after his meeting with Pope Francis in Cuba. Speaking to a group of Russian researchers at the Bellingshausen scientific station, he hailed Antarctica as a model for humanity, calling it "the only place on Earth where there are no weapons, no wars, no hostile competi-

tion. . . . [I]t is a kind of a model of an ideal human-kind.” Some observers suggested that the real purpose of the visit was to support the Kremlin’s claims to a share of Antarctica’s natural resources, but Orthodox critics in Russia ridiculed Kirill’s speech and photographs of him standing next to penguins, saying that they showed how detached he has become from the ordinary people of Russia and the very real problems they face.

### ‘TRADITIONAL VALUES’

The Russian Orthodox Church has played an active role in Putin’s efforts to reestablish a Russian sphere of influence as he pursues confrontation with the West, both in geopolitical and in ideological terms. The church has been a staunch supporter of Russia’s military engagement in Syria, which it has consistently portrayed as a defense of persecuted Christians in the Near East.

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, the current head of the Department of External Church Relations, underscored the church’s criticism of the approach taken by Western countries to this problem during the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians, held in Washington, D.C., in May 2017. The metropolitan accused the Western powers of glossing over violence targeting Christians and cited the Russian Orthodox Church’s own history of persecution at the hands of Soviet Communists as a testament to resistance and perseverance. Hilarion’s appearance at the summit was organized by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, which illustrated how segments of the Russian Orthodox Church are actively engaging in transnational Christian networks that promote social conservatism across different denominations.

The church has taken a consistently antiliberal stance on human rights, most notably in its promotion of the concept of “traditional values” and in the human rights doctrine it released in 2008. This approach has been adopted by the Kremlin. In a series of resolutions introduced at the United Nations Human Rights Council between 2009 and 2012, Russia called for “promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms through a better understanding of traditional values of humankind.”

In the eyes of the Russian Orthodox Church, “traditional values” are righteous expressions of public and private morality that are under siege by

advocates of gender equality and children’s rights. The church hopes that promoting and defending these values will halt the spread of liberal notions about human rights. Russian diplomacy succeeded in bringing this issue before the UN and in rallying global support for the resolutions. Western countries opposed to the resolutions were in the minority, and failed to block them.

Countries of the global South and other emerging economic powers find the Russian position attractive because it places a higher priority on national legal sovereignty than on supranational rights standards, and demands multipolarity in international affairs instead of Western domination. The Russian Orthodox Church’s antiliberalism is also attractive to conservative Christians in the West, who resent the liberal and secular character of their own societies.

This is particularly true in some of the newer member states of the European Union, which have recently experienced a political right turn. Frequently, conservative resentment over rapidly

changing societies is combined with a general opposition to the EU and Brussels’s meddling in national affairs. Some right-wing parties in Europe have not only adopted the antiliberal rhetoric of traditional values, but have also come to see Pu-

tin’s Russia as a model for a more authoritarian approach to governing. In this context, the Russian Orthodox Church today plays an active role in Russian foreign policy and in Russia’s confrontation with a secular Western Europe.

The church has arguably been less successful in helping to reassert Russia’s sphere of influence in the territory of the former Soviet Union. The term “Russian World,” which the church introduced as a concept of transnational cultural and confessional unity, has backfired since Putin started to use the notion as justification for “protecting” ethnic Russians in Ukraine and other nearby countries. As the anthropologist Catherine Wanner has pointed out, the involvement of Russian fighters in the armed conflict in the Donbas region, mobilizing to defend the “Russian World,” could cause Orthodox Christians in Ukraine to break away from the Moscow Patriarchate in the future. Meanwhile, the Patriarchate’s ambition to become the largest multinational and multilingual Orthodox church, with jurisdictions in different sovereign states, is waning.

---

*The Pussy Riot episode sealed the pact between the patriarch and Putin.*

---

Observers of church-state relations in Russia frequently argue over the question of whether the church is the driving force behind the conservative and authoritarian turn of the current Russian government, or merely an instrument of Putin's rule. But it is important to recognize that the church has consistently worked to create a socially conservative public sphere since the fall of communism, even during periods when Russian governments have pursued policies of liberalization, modernization, and democratization. At the same time, the Moscow Patriarchate has acted as an antiliberal force in international and interfaith relations since the Soviet period.

Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 did not create the conditions for the conservative turn seen in Russian society today; he simply seized

on a readily available program. The same is true for Russia's antiliberal and anti-Western human rights policies, which draw on ideas developed by the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations.

Are the reasons for the Kremlin's adoption of an Orthodox-tinted conservatism in domestic and international affairs personal and religious—after all, Putin presents himself as a believer—or pragmatic and political? That is a question of secondary importance. The indisputable fact is that the ever-narrower framework of socially conservative norms in Russia has provided the pretext for repression of all kinds of civic protest, contributed to renewed ideological polarization in international relations, and caused divisions within the church itself. ■