

DANCING WITH THE CHURCH; RELIGION-STATE RELATIONS IN RUSSIA

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 Analysis

Orthodoxy became a major part of Russian identity following its approval as the official religion of Russia. Since then, the Orthodox Church's-Russian government relation turned into one of the most controversial subjects in the social and political life the Russia. This issue sprang out once again soon after Latvia granted free access to its KGB's archives in December 2018; as well as the exposure of the connections of Russia's clergymen - who are in high positions in the Moscow Patriarchate - with the KGB in the USSR period. In order to comprehend the relations between the political and the religious authorities in modern Russia, it is important to clarify the consistencies and changes that happened throughout history.

Russia, who adopted Orthodoxy in 988 AD, also adopted then-Byzantine's 'Symphony' model in religion-government relationship. This harmony and/or equality centered model believes that both the state and the church was obliged to

support one another, prohibited to interfere each other's area of authority nor to carry out actions that might affect each other's independence. In other words, while the church was supporting the political goals of the government, the government served as the protector of the religion.

After The Symphony Model

The Russian governmental and religious authorities acknowledged the polemics surrounding the 'Symphony' particularly when dealing with the threat of the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century, the church then announced their separation from the Istanbul Patriarchate in 1448, discharged cardinal Isidore who was Pontic Greek descent, from the degree of Moscow's metropolitan bishopric and replaced him with Ion who was Russian descent. However, a patriarchate in Russia couldn't be established from then until 1589. After Iov - the Moscow metropolitan bishop at the time - became the



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Moscow patriarch, Orthodox Church's influence on the government was steadily increasing. On the 17th Century, it was as if a double-headed body was emerging in the administration of the country. Naturally the church and government got into a political conflict due to their equally powerful positions. During the period of Peter the Great, the 'Symphony' model was terminated and this paved the way to the establishment of the Holy Synod, which was dependent on the government instead of the patriarchate. This marked the beginning of the church becoming an instrument for the government. Seeing itself as the protector of the Orthodox Christians living in the 19th Century Ottoman Empire, Russia used the church as their foreign political means even more. However, even when the significance of the church increased in the eyes of the government and the people, it was neither able to save itself from being a mere instrument nor did it enjoy its independence.

Even prior to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the church was divided into two and the Modernist movement, which was fed up with the clergy, was formed. The modernists quickly made contacts with the communists who seized power after their successful revolution. However, the Bolsheviks, who received the support of the clergy after promising them freedom of faith when they seized power, started taking actions to neutralize the church in less than a year. During the 23-year process between 1918 and 1941, most churches were shut down, tens of thousands of clergymen were massacred, and all possessions of the church were seized.

When the Nazi struck the USSR in 1941, the country needed the help of the Russian Orthodox Church to drive people to join the war. The patriarchate, which was deserted after 1924, was reinstituted and a new patriarch was elected in 1943. Similarly, the churches were reopened and executions of clergymen were stopped. But even after everything, the church could not enjoy its independence; on the contrary, it became a governmental institution controlled by the KGB.

As a consequence of the USSR's downfall in 1990, the government control over the church came to an end. In that period, the ultimate goal of the Russian Orthodox Church was to temper the power of foreign missionaries that were raiding Russia following the religious lacuna due to the USSR's downfall. It can be clearly seen that the Russian Orthodox Church was anxious about losing its influence on the Russian population and its distinguished place over the country's religious bodies. For this concern, the church started to play an active role in the political life of Russia in the 90's. The church developed a type of collaboration with its traditionalist and Eurasian oppositions against the Liberal Yeltsin authority. When Russia's law on religion came into effect in 1997, Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam were recognized as the traditional religions of Russia, whereas "external" religions' activities were limited. Another result of the law was the emphasis that the Russian Orthodox Church once again had a distinguished rank among religious bodies.

Putin and Orthodox Church

The alliance between the high-status Russian Orthodox Church and the government was almost official in the beginning of 2000's. Understanding that the Russian Orthodox Church shared a similar view with the Russian government regarding the role of Russia in the world, and the fact that this view is empowering the Russian nationalism, Vladimir Putin drew the church close as an ally and kept elevating its important rank in the Russian community. Correspondingly, the law on returning the churches' possessions was approved in that period. In the last 18 years, millions of dollars were allocated by state-own enterprises for the restorations of thousands of churches that had been harmed or ruined by the USSR. Since the beginnings of the 90's, about 25,000 Orthodox churches were either built or restored. Additionally, the Russian Orthodox Church gained many rights that widened its role in Russia's social life. For example, in 2010, Orthodoxy lessons were obligatory for trial purposes in governmental schools throughout

Russia's 19 regions. With Putin's re-election in 2012, the church's distinguished status among religious bodies was elevated even more. Within the scope of anti-terror law that was passed in 2016, missionary activities of non-governmental religious bodies were banned, leading to the intensified authority of Russian Orthodox Church.

The main reason behind the alliance between Putin and the church are related to their shared views on the Russian national identity. Both Putin and the church believe that Russia belongs to neither the East nor the West; that Russians are an exceptional community with an exceptional status. Adhering to the values of Alexander Dugin, this view developed a special kind of perspective on the relationship between the government and people. According to this notion, the government must be sovereign, the church must be open to collaboration with it, and the civilian must always support both the church and the government at all time. This understanding is used by the government to oppress the opposition and to justify the collaboration between the church and the government on oppressing non-governmental organizations and religious bodies who have different views on the country's national identity.

Another factor that is strengthening the alliance between the church and the government is the notion of "canonical territory" held dear by the Russian Orthodox Church, which describes religious authority with a specific geography. The Russian Orthodox Church's notion of "Russian/Slavic world" entails that all Orthodox bodies in neighboring countries are parts of one main church, hence transforming the church into an instrument for foreign policies for Putin administration, with the aim of being the sole power in its vicinity. Accordingly, Russia's main goal in the international arena is to control

Eurasia as a whole. As for the Russian Orthodox Church, it serves as a part of a softer force to support the Putin administration's expansionist policy in its vicinity.

Both the Putin administration and the Russian Orthodox Church are trying to deem the disputes between the West and Russia as a clash of civilizations. With this, especially after 2012, Kremlin increased its emphasis on the exceptional Russian identity discourse and began to demonstrate Putin as the protective saint of Russia. This policy which was used as a reaction towards the street protests that started after Putin's 2nd re-election in 2012, was maintained later on to be used to counter Putin's worsening image in the country's economic fall. Since the beginning, until Putin's 3rd administration, his legitimacy was based on his ability of elevating the life standards of Russian people. This was possible through the hot money flow provided by the high prices of natural resources being its main revenue. However, the sudden drop in the prices of energy resources in the beginning of his 3rd administration and sanctions of

the West on Russia caused the Russian economy to crumble. As a result, people's support in Putin plunged. Following these developments, Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church portrayed Putin as the protector of Russia against the West. Meanwhile, the West was portrayed to be spreading its values in Russia, changing the Russian national identity and becoming a nemesis that is trying to undermine Russia.

However, it would be a mistake to say that the church's support to the political authority as absolute. When an opposition within the Russian Orthodox Church takes form, it gets oppressed before it can grow. The most obvious example of that situation took place in 2012 when Putin was elected for the third time as president. Kirill, who was elected as the patriarch for the Russian

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Orthodox Church in 2009, gave an impression that he was standing close to liberal policies during the first 3 years of his term of office. The turning point was the street protests that started after Putin's re-election in 2012.

On the day when the protests started with the participation of thousands of people, the patriarch Kirill didn't rush to support Putin and instead made statements that were implicitly supporting the protestors. Yet after critical news about patriarch's fondness of luxury were published on government-backed media, the Russian Orthodox Church changed its tone and declared that protestors who are occupying the streets of Moscow were followers of the Western liberalism and that they were trying to tear the country apart.

Patriarch Kirill, who was describing Putin as "the God's miracle", started to support Putin's policies regardless of their incompatibleness with the benefits of the church. The latest example of this situation was the position of the Russian Orthodox Church, which supported the Putin administration during the annexation of Crime in 2014 and by supporting separatist groups in Ukraine. While the Russian Orthodox Church was defending the idea that Orthodox Ukrainians should be a part of the Russian church;

the Putin administration, with its expansionist policies against Ukraine, accelerated Orthodox Ukrainians' efforts of separating itself from the Moscow Patriarchate. Even though the Russian

Orthodox Church was aware of the fact that these policies were completely adverse to its interests, it didn't defy the Putin administration in the fear of losing its position in the government.

All in all, at present, with the fact that the relationship between the church and the government was reached through many different phases, the Russian Orthodox

Church has evolved into a government's soft force instrument in both internal and external policies. Even though Putin's period is said to be similar to the times in 17th Century when the relationship between religion and government was within the power of Czars; this notion seems to be too simplified. On one hand, the relationship between the church and the modern Russia government does bear some similarities with the Czarism era; on the other hand, modern Russia can also be compared to the USSR era when the Russian Orthodox Church was under the control of the KGB. Within this context, it is safe to say that the Putin administration is a nostalgic fusion of Russia's politics.

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