

# *Sacrum* within *Profanum*. The Religious Factor in Russian Foreign Policy

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**Abstract:** *The religious factor in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation has become increasingly important in the last twenty years. By applying historical patterns the authorities are trying to use religious institutions (predominantly the Russian Orthodox Church) to rebuild the collective memory. The emergence of religion in Russian politics is connected with the search for national identity and with the efforts to present Russia as a unique civilization. The Church and the State are propagating a common vision of global order (multipolarism) and often act harmoniously on the international arena. The Kremlin exercises 'religious diplomacy' which serves to reinforce 'spiritual security', marking Russia's 'culture space' (russkij mir) and thus forging the foundations for a new image of Russia, while at the same time legitimizing Russian foreign policy in general.*

## Religious Organisations in the Face of Global Challenges: Political Aspects

Lately we have seen a surge in academic interest towards the issue of religion in foreign policy, especially since a growing number of sociologists have started to question the paradigm of secularism. Contrary to the post-war conviction that religion is destined to become extinct due to what seemed to be an irreversible process of the secularization of societies, in most parts of the world religion is far from disappearing from the public sphere. As a famous American sociologist of religion, Peter L. Berger, noticed — 'The World today is massively religious, is *anything but* the secularized world that had been predicted by so many analysts

of modernity' (Berger 1999: 11). Thus, Europe should not be perceived as a trendsetter, but merely a secular exception on a world scale.

Under the influence of global processes *sacrum* has found a new place in the life of the society — from the public sphere, which in many countries has become ideologically neutral, it has moved to the private one ('privatization of religion') and assumed different functions. Traditional religious institutions are being challenged by modernization, secularization, pluralistic world view and the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of conscience. Facing all this, according to Peter Beyer, churches can choose one of the two options: either to adapt to the conditions of modernization (pro-system/liberal option) or rebel and flee to the past, defending the tradition (anti-system/conservative option) (Beyer 2005). The liberal option favours an abstract definition of transcendence, tolerance, ecumenism, pluralism of Truth (a particular religion does not have a monopoly on Truth). Churches holding to the conservative option perceive global changes as a harbinger of disaster and focus on political mobilization of societies in the name of protecting morality, tradition and the Church as an institution itself. Global transformation has created favorable conditions for the activity of religious institutions. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd asserts that the observed resurgence of religion should be interpreted in the context of the struggle for redefining 'the political', 'the secular' and 'the religious' (Shakman Hurd 2008). Globalization has weakened the legitimacy of the state. There is a crisis of politics in general which is taken by many subjects, not only religious institutions, as a chance to establish the new rules of the game and their share in public life.

## The Conservative Choice of the Russian Orthodox Church after 1991

The analysis of several official documents published by the Russian Orthodox Church (hereinafter: ROC) in the years following the fall of the USSR indicates that the ROC is heading in the conservative direction rather than trying to adapt to the challenge of the modern times. Starting from 'The Basis of the Social Doctrine of the ROC' (2000) one can deduce the ROC's desire to become an influential and a privileged institution in the Russian Federation (Мчедлов 2002).

Officially, the ROC accepts the principle of a secular state but at the same time she emphasizes that the Church is separated from the state but not from the nation. As the Church carries the historical responsibility for the moral condition of the Russian people, she guards the precious tradition of the 'holy Russia' and the genuine Russian identity; she protects the Russian cultural heritage and the Russian collective memory. From this, in the opinion of most Russian orthodox hierarchs, arises the Church's mandate to play an active role in the public sphere and in solving acute social problems. The ROC is ready to cooperate with the state in the sphere of education, patriotic upbringing, stimulating the revival of cultural heritage, regenerating identity, delivering religious service at schools, in the army, in prisons,

hospitals, orphanages and the houses of social care. Furthermore, the symptoms of the anti-system option can be traced in the ROC's scepticism regarding globalization, pluralism of ideas, liberal democracy, capitalism or ecumenism which are perceived as concepts derived from the Western civilization and therefore alien to the Russian tradition.

In the face of all this, the ROC calls for establishing legal and institutional frameworks for 'social partnership' of the state and the Church, which implies close cooperation between the Church and state bodies based on mutual agreements and supported by common institutions. Political scientists, commenting on that, claim that Orthodox hierarchs are striving for the Russian Church to be regarded as some kind of a confessional ministry responsible for the spiritual upbringing of citizens (Филагов 2007: 15–46).

However, the case is not that the Russian Orthodox Church questions the whole idea of modernization — the ROC hails modernization but demands that the process be based on the Russian tradition. The Church supports those social, economical and political changes which take into account the Russian cultural heritage founded on the Eastern Christianity.

At least three reasons can be outlined when answering why, at the beginning of the XXI century, the ROC favors the conservative option:

Firstly, it is the nature of Orthodox Christianity which is more conservative in comparison to Protestantism or even Catholicism (Trepanier 2007).

Secondly, it is the historical model. With the exceptional moment of the so-called 'Mongol yoke', for most of her history the Russian Orthodox Church was subdued to the sovereign and served to legitimize the authority, to shape identity, legitimize the serfdom of the peasants, legitimize the social hierarchy etc (Андреева 2001; Andrusiewicz 2004, 2005;). At the time of the Russian Empire a fixed model of Russian religious system was set, which seems to be re-established in the Russian Federation. The state authority aims to represent the pillar of the system and must be strong enough to manage and balance all religious institutions. All of the religious institutions are expected to be loyal to the authority since this is the condition which must be fulfilled in order to be allowed to practice religion (in the past this special relationship between the 'throne' and the 'altar' was symbolized by the oath of allegiance to the tsar taken by all priests). In the Russian Empire, the central authority (the monarch) was the creator of religious institutions — tsars supported centralization and the establishment of official institutionalized representation of each important religion (Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, Protestantism), they provided clergy through educational system, payments and pensions. Russian emperors were charting the goals for loyal religious institutions obliged to serve the interest of the state, which was also true in the field of diplomacy. In fact, since the reign of Ivan the Terrible religion has been a useful tool in Russian foreign policy (Riasanovsky 2005). Today the Russian state, despite the officially claimed neutrality of the authorities, resembles a license-giver which grants freedom and some privileges to the loyal 'traditional religions'.

The third reason for picking up the conservative option by the ROC is the domination of the conservative faction within the Church ruling body, the Holy Synod. Most experts distinguish three factions inside Russian orthodox clergy: 'liberals' calling for modernization and increasing the role of laymen; 'fundamentalists' denying any change, perceiving globalization, modernization, democracy and ecumenism as sinful and dangerous concepts; and,

finally, 'conservative pragmatics' occupying the centre, oriented at rapprochement with the state and equating the resurgence of religion with regaining the position of the institutional Church (Митрохин 2004). Under the patriarch Aleksij II the latter 'camp' exercised power in the Holy Synod.

The newly elected 16<sup>th</sup> patriarch Kirill (Gundiajew, born 1946), also belongs to the conservative pragmatics. Well-educated, with considerable diplomatic experience and political skills, he hopes to strengthen the ROC's position not only at home, but also outside Russia. On 27 January 2009, Kirill got 508 out of 677 valid voices, which gives him at the beginning of his reign a strong mandate. As for the new patriarch's political views, he shows signs of support for the 'dynamic conservatism', i.e. modernization based on the Russian tradition considered profoundly Orthodox.

Having been elected patriarch, he announced that the Church had ambition to play an even more active role in the public sphere and share with the state the responsibility in certain areas, most of all in education, upbringing, social care, which ultimately means the strengthening of 'social partnership'.

## ***Common Vision, Common Front: Reasons for Rapprochement between the State and the Church in Russia***

The rapprochement between the Church and the Russian state authorities is facilitated by the concurrence of the ROC's and Kremlin's visions. The big trauma caused by the social and economical turmoil of the 1990s aroused in the Russian society a longing for the restoration of the authority of the central power. Vladimir Putin largely fulfilled this yearning, announcing 'the dictatorship of law' and promising to rebuild the national identity, morality, patriotism and the spirit of the nation by appealing to tradition and by cooperating with the 'traditional religions' (orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism). The state-Church cooperation on domestic matters is based on the concept of 'social partnership' and the watchword 'revival of the conservative values'. According to the Kremlin's plans, the ROC should get involved in projects concerning education and upbringing, raising morality and subsidizing the social care system. The Church is to legitimize the government and appease any potential social discontent but above all she is expected to provide a coherent system of symbols, a sense of continuity, a common point of reference for citizens; she is to function as an institutionsymbol helping to rebuild the Russian collective memory severely damaged during the time of the USSR (Mitrofanova 2005; Яхонтова 2008).

The cooperation of the state and the Church on the international arena is also based on the common vision of the world order and Russia's place in it. At least four points could be mentioned here: the post-soviet area, global order, Russia's identity and its mission. The territory of the former Soviet Union is perceived by both subjects as a sphere of exclusive Russian influence. Since the end of 1991 Russian diplomats have been using a notion 'the near abroad', claiming that this region is a sphere of Russian special interest and as such of

exclusive Russian influence. The ROC came to the same conclusion even before Kremlin, announcing in October 1991 the doctrine of 'several states but one patriarchate', which implicated that the fall of the USSR was not a reason for destroying the unity of the Church obliged to keep the integrity of her 'canonical territory' (Рябых 2001). What is important is the fact that both notions refer to the same area: 'the near abroad' includes all the former Soviet republics but the three Baltic states and the 'canonical territory' encompasses the ex-Soviet countries except Georgia and Armenia. The Kremlin and the ROC share the conviction of preserving Russian domination in the post-Soviet Eurasia and tend to prevent the interventions of other actors.

Moreover, both subjects favor multipolarity. Since the time of Yevgeny Primakov Russian diplomacy has been promoting the idea of a multi-polar world as a way of balancing the global power system. This doctrine of geopolitical multipolarity is complemented by the ROC's civilisations' multipolarity which simply 'replaces' world powers from the state doctrine with civilisations. Eventually, behind the two different theoretical visions one goal can be discerned: bringing *Pax Americana* to an end. The Russian Federation is working on an alliance of Moscow, Beijing, Delhi and Tehran which corresponds to an 'alliance of conservative civilisations' praised by the ROC.

The way of perceiving the global order as system of interaction between civilisations is connected with Russia's quest for an identity. During the presidency of Vladimir Putin more and more highranking officials, including the head of state and Foreign Office minister, started to present Russia on the international arena as a distinct civilisation described by three terms: 'Eurasian' (preferred by the authorities), 'orthodox' (preferred by the ROC) or simply 'Russian' (Панарин 2002). The cultural uniqueness is often used by the Kremlin as an argument against the charges leveled by the West which criticizes Russia for 'bending' democracy. The Eurasian civilisation must not copy the political system invented in Europe but has to find its own solutions suitable for its tradition. One of the possible solutions is symbolized by the concept of 'sovereign democracy' promoted by presidential experts or a parallel one discussed within the orthodox elites — 'orthodox democracy'. Emphasizing cultural uniqueness for political goals is well exemplified by the following documents published by the ROC: 'The Declaration of Human Rights and Dignity' (2006) and 'The Basis of the ROC's Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights' (2008). In order to guard its civilisational sovereignty, Russia presents its own catalogue of 'orthodox human rights' (Ситников 2006; Новик 1999).

The 'Russian civilisation' is the only one capable of preventing the 'clash of civilisation' and the only one which has the potential to mediate between the West and the East, the North and the South and play a role of a 'bridge-civilisation' due to its tradition of multireligious and multiethnic tolerance. This brings us to the question of Russia's mission, which implies ending the American domination and reshaping the unipolar order. For this reason, Russia has to initiate, coordinate and develop close and harmonic cooperation between Delhi, Beijing and Tehran. Furthermore, the Kremlin, supported by the ROC, is to keep global patronage over the dialogue of confessions, cultures and civilisations.

Analyzing the religious factor in Russian foreign policy one should mention a peculiar notion, which appears in the National Security Doctrine (2000) — 'spiritual security'

(*духовная безопасность*) (Беспалько 2006). It refers in part to the protection of Russian identity, Russian tradition and culture. At least two aspects of 'confessional security' could be determined: the inner one, connected to preserving the peace between Russian citizens of different confessions and the outside one, concerning the issue of civilisation's sovereignty, i.e. the ability to withstand the cultural pressure of other world powers and preserve Russia's own cultural space (*русский мир*).

Coincident visions backed by the shared concern for 'religious security' provide the ground for common action on the international arena of the Russian state and the Church.

## The Cooperation of the Kremlin and the ROC on the International Arena: Practical Aspects

The presence of the religious factor in foreign policy - activity of the religious institutions as well as references to religious symbols or notions interpreted for political goals - can be defined as a particular type of state's international activity — 'religious diplomacy'. Thus, at the beginning of the XXI century the Kremlin is engaged in 'religious diplomacy' — it skillfully plays with the 'orthodox identity', charts the goals and helps to build the position of Russian religious institutions (only those loyal to the Kremlin) on the international arena. Among its targets one can distinguish those in the post-Soviet area and in the rest of the world.

In the nearest Eurasian neighborhood the ROC should concentrate on integrating the Russian Diaspora (it is worth mentioning here the so-called Medvedev Doctrine, which claims Russia's rights to intervene and protect its citizens living beyond its borders), keeping the 'near abroad' as a sphere of Russian exclusive influence and nourishing the sensation of closeness in the so-called Orthodox Slavic triangle of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

In other parts of the world the Moscow Patriarchate is expected to preserve the ties between the Russian Diaspora and the Homeland in order to build up their potential as a community able to act as an organized and influential lobby in a particular state (a recent opportunity in this field is a growing Russian Diaspora in Israel). The Church is also involved in marking the invisible borders of the Russian cultural space (e.g. placing crosses on Sakhalin, the Crimean Peninsula or Antarctica) which is connected with Russia's ambition to become a world power (Simons 2005). Above all, the Church is to initiate and lead the interfaith dialogue, as well as to create a positive image of Russia on the international arena, which can be achieved by Church diplomacy in relations with the states and with international organizations and by the Church's peacemaking activity.

What is important, is that the ROC is perceived by most states as an institution unofficially representing the Kremlin and thus a gesture toward the ROC is often a signal to the Russian authorities, e.g. a visit of the patriarch can be a sign of a thaw in relations with Russia. This attitude to the ROC is justified, if one considers the support which the ROC receives on the international arena from the Kremlin and the Russian Foreign Office. They

both lend their support to the ROC in various ways, building this way the ROC's potential as a transnational subject. In particular, Russian diplomats often raise the problems concerning the Church during their official visits (e.g. Vladimir Putin at a meeting with the Chinese authorities in October 2004 raised the issue of the Orthodox minority's status). Besides, the state tends to enlarge the Church's facilities outside Russia (e.g. *Sergievskie Podvorje* was returned to the ROC by the Israeli government at the personal request of Vladimir Putin in 2005). It also subsidizes the building of new churches directly or by involving state-owned companies (e.g. in the Republic of South Africa in 2001 or in Jordan in 2007). Furthermore, the state supports the international initiatives of the Church, e.g. the Kremlin backed the summit of the leaders of religions in Moscow on 2–5 June 2006, which preceded the prestigious G8 Summit in Petersburg, the government is also active in *The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations* — UNAO (2005) and it is promoting the idea of creating a consultative institution within the UN — the Religious Council.

This analysis leads to the conclusion that the religious factor in Russian foreign policy can play a double role. Most of the time it serves as an instrument of Russian diplomacy, which is *inter alia* the case of relations with Muslim states or the Orthodox countries of the EU (Bulgaria, Romania, Greece). For instance, in order to be granted a status of an observer in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, Russian authorities emphasized the important role of Islam in shaping the Russian culture and identity. Moscow achieved its goal in 2005, which noticeably improved its relations with Muslim states and gave her an advantage in relations with the world of Islam comparing to Western countries. Another good example concerns Russia's stance on Iran, which is also based on cordial relations between the religious leaders of the two countries. Since 1997 a bilateral commission 'Islam-Christianity' has held regular meetings (five so far, in Tehran and Moscow) and in 2001 Aleksij II met the Iranian president Muhammad Hatami. Reference to 'Slavic-Orthodox solidarity' helps Moscow to build trust and good atmosphere in relations with the orthodox EU countries, which are sometimes referred to as the 'Russian Trojan horse', for they support Moscow-lobbied projects at Brussels' expense, e.g. the Russian South Stream, which endangers an alternative project of the EU ('Nabucco' pipeline).

Using religion for political reasons belongs to the instruments of *Realpolitik*. However, sometimes religion is not only a tool but also a factor influencing Russia's way of perceiving the global order, a reason for political action. This usually happens in the cases concerning the Russian identity, most of all the 'Slavic' or 'anti-Occidental complex'. This explains, for example, Moscow's questioning of Ukrainian sovereignty, which is viewed as a betrayal of the Russian Nation of one faith (Orthodoxy), one language (Russian), one history and common future. The tensions present in relations between the ROC and the non-canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Churches (above all, the Kievan Patriarchate) have become a political issue, which emerged during the 'Orange Revolution' (2004/2005) or the celebration of the 1020th anniversary of the baptism of the Kievan Rus (25–27 July 2008) (Грецкий, 2008). Another example of religion being used not as a tool but rather a reason for political action is the war in the former Yugoslavia (1992–1995) when the Russian government, under the pressure from society demanding to protect the 'Serbian brothers' in the name of "Slavic-Orthodox solidarity", decided to put strategic relations with the West at stake and play a role

of Slobodan Miloshevič's advocate (Oslisches 1999). Religion-based stereotypes complicate Russia's relations with the USA (Тренин 2006). A firmly rooted tradition of *antioccidentalism* deforms Moscow's perception of Washington. Most of Russian political elites attribute to Washington a desire to destroy Russia's sovereignty, culture and identity. Therefore, the main goal of Russian diplomacy is to abolish *Pax Americana*. The conviction that Washington tends to destroy Russia makes Moscow risk and support their potential opponents in the closest neighborhood — China, India and Iran.

At the beginning of the XXI century the religious factor in Russian foreign policy has a few functions. First of all, it serves to rebuild the collective memory of Russians and the national identity of Russia as a particular, sovereign civilisation equal to the Chinese, Indian or Western one. It further legitimizes Kremlin's politics, the new desired multipolar order and a positive image of Russia as a 'civilisation-bridge' between the West and the rest of the world. Furthermore, religious institutions serve as an additional diplomatic channel, additional representation in international organization (e.g. the Council of Europe, the UE) and they are involved in peacemaking process. Finally, one should not forget about the mission of Russia which assumes preventing the 'clash of civilisation', creating an alternative to the American model of development, which would provide grounds for a more harmonious, socially just and stable global order.

The religious factor does not possess the capacity to determine the main political course in Russia's foreign policy — it is not as crucial as the question of nuclear weapons, security or the division of the spheres of influence. It does, however, have a certain impact on shaping the identity and the country's perception of foreign affairs. As a key component of culture, religion has a certain evolutionary quality — slowly but surely it forms certain views within the society so that the results of its influence can often be acknowledged in the perspective of generations. By shedding some light on this aspect of Russian foreign policy we hope to bring forth less obvious elements of the Russian foreign policy in order to better understand Russia and its choices, fears, plans and aspirations.

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