Fedor Krasheninnikov

THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH'S ISOLATION FROM THE PEOPLE

FREE RUSSIA FOUNDATION

THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH'S ISOLATION FROM THE PEOPLE

FREE RUSSIA FOUNDATION
JUNE, 2020

Free Russia Foundation

Author

Fedor Krasheninnikov

Translation

Catherine Fitzpatrick

Proofreading

Courtney Dobson

Layouts

Free Russia Designs

Fyodor Krasheninnikov is a Russian political analyst, journalist and public figure. In 2012, Krasheninnikov collaborated with Leonid Volkov (who currently coordinates the regional offices of Alexei Navalny) to release a book "Cloud Democracy" that analyzed the future of digital democracy in Russia and worldwide. In 2016, he released the dyspotian novel "After Russia" about the future of the country. Fyodor has additionally worked as an author and host of his own program on the "Echo of Moscow - Yekaterinburg" radiostation.

Since 2016, Fyodor has been writing op-eds and comments for the major Russian mass media (Vedomosti, The New Times, Russian edition of Deutsche Welle, the Republic website). Fyodor was one of the leaders of the 2018 campaign for the preservation of direct election of the head of the city of Yekaterinburg. In 2019 he helped run a campaign to save a park in the centre of Yekaterinburg.

Fyodor founded and was co-owner of two media companies and has attempted to develop and registered two political parties for the Russian opposition in the past. Fyodor Krasheninnikova graduated from the School of Philosophy Ural State University in Yekaterinburg.

CONTENTS

After more than thirty years of unrestrained proselytizing lavishly supported by the State, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has still failed to cultivate a broad following within the Russian society or even articulate a coherent intellectual core to respond to the challenges of modernity . To the contrary, it has grown desperately beholden to the funding it receives from the government and the oligarchs. This paper examines the preconditions which led to the current state of affairs, the specific nature of the situation of the Orthodox Church today in Russia, the role that it plays in the life of Russian society, and its prospects in the foreseeable future,.

CHURCH AND REVOLUTION

During tsarist times, the Orthodox Church enjoyed a privileged status throughout the Russian Empire. In the Code of Fundamental State Laws (vol. 1, chapter "On Faith," Art. 40) declared: The predominant and reigning faith in the Russian Empire is the Christian Orthodox Catholic faith of the Eastern confession. The dominant position of the Orthodox Church was expressed in the fact that the head of state (the emperor) was a member, and under the law in effect "cannot profess any other faith except the Orthodox." The law designated the emperor as the guarantor of the inviolability of the Orthodox teachings and its dominance over all other religions: "The emperor, as the Christian sovereign is the supreme defender and preserver of the dogmas of the dominant faith and guardian of the orthodox faith and all the holy deanery in the Church."

In Article 42, in the act of succession to the throne, the emperor is established as the Head of the Church. And this was not just a ritual function—the emperor was responsible for making appointments to the highest church offices (such as for the positions of its metropolitans and bishops) and had the right of supervision over the activity of the highest church institutions (there are numerous scholarly works on this topic, for example, "*Gosudarstvo i konfessii v pozneimperskoy Rossii: Pravovye aspekty vzaimootnosheniy*" [State and Confessions in Late Imperial Russia: Legal Aspects of Mutual Relations] by A.A. Safarov, Moscow, Prospekt, 2017—all quotations in this section are taken from it).

An important indicator of the primacy of the Orthodox Church was the granting by law of the exclusive right to make religious propaganda, even as the government at all levels was obliged to assist the Church in this effort and even, as the law stated, "persuade followers of other Christian confessions and those of other religions to accept its teaching." Until the publication on April 17, 1905 of the tsarist decree "On strengthening the elements of religious tolerance," leaving Orthodoxy was considered a criminal offense. In tsarist times, there was no line about ethnic affiliation in official documents (it appeared later in Soviet passports), although a person's confessional affiliation was recorded. And with such an approach, profession of the Orthodox faith essentially became a synonym for being a loyal subject of the Russian Empire, to which much of the population belonged. It goes without saying that such an approach forced many people to formally accept Orthodoxy, to avoid excessive attention from the tsarist government.

Funding of the Orthodox church came from the state budget and the government was the owner of most church buildings—for example St. Isaac's Cathedral in St. Petersburg was under the jurisdiction of the Russian Empire's Ministry of Internal Affairs.

This obvious proximity to the government led to a situation where among the democratic public and those opposition-minded toward the tsarist regime, the Orthodox Church was perceived as a reactionary political institution. The fact that the

Session of the Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, 1917. Photo: Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church (1917-1918)

Orthodox Church was perceived negatively by ethnic and religious groups broadly represented in tsarist Russia who were persecuted—from Old Believers to Jews—explains the significant representation of members of these among the revolutionaries as well as their aggressive attitude to the Church during and after the civil war. It is important to note that there were far more people from the community of Orthodox dissidents (Old Believers and other "schismatics") than Jews among the revolutionaries, but since they were all ethnically Russian this fact was practically not discussed publicly; moreover, the role of Jews in the revolution was traditionally exaggerated by publicists from the nationalist camp.

For its part, inside the church, no leaders were discovered capable of leading it through the revolution and making it a separate force in the unfolding resistance. That is also quite an important circumstance that haunts the Church even to this day; lack of experience of real self-governance in the Church and lack of autonomy from the state prevented it then—as now—from acting effectively in crisis situations.

In 1917–1918, a Church council operated that was supposed to draft new principles of church life in the changed conditions. Among the most important of its decisions was restoration of the post of patriarch, to which Bishop Tikhon was elected (Bellavin, 1865–1925, canonized by the ROC in 1989). Under the conditions of civil war and the strengthening dictatorship of the Bolsheviks, however, real opportunities for the Church for positive transformation were extremely limited. We cannot forget that a whole range of energetic and talented church leaders were forced to leave Russia.

THE CHURCH AND SOVIET GOVERNMENT 1918–1943

From the very beginning, the Soviet Communist government began to treat the Orthodox Church with hostility and quickly adopted a policy of confiscating Church properties and goods and totally destroying religious institutions as such—and most importantly, reducing the influence of the Church on the masses. We must note the special features of Orthodoxy to understand how heavily vulnerable the Church was to the anti-religious policy of the new government in Russia.

First, the structure of the Orthodox Church itself had for centuries been formed under conditions of government support. The Church never hid anything from the government and had not anticipated a situation when it would suddenly have to perform its rites and generally exist in secret and in spite of the government. The very ceremonialism and complicated hierarchy of the Orthodox Church makes it impossible to exist for long in opposition to the government or in secret from it. If Protestants need merely to gather to conduct a service, the Orthodox need icons, ritual objects, garments, a specially prepared space, and the main thing—priests. All of this was exploited by the Soviet government, which dealt a blow to the key figures and structures of the Church hierarchy, physically destroying it.

Secondly, the Orthodox Church was dependent financially on the state budget of the Russian Empire as noted above—essentially, before the revolution, it was part of the state machinery which was also funded and managed by the monarch and his government. Furthermore, it received substantial donations from the prosperous elements of society—the emperor's family, the nobility, the merchants, and wealthy peasants—as well as ordinary people. Since all these classes turned out to be oppressed or destroyed altogether, and their money confiscated, the Orthodox Church remained in a severely difficult material situation.

The repressions and the economic policy of the Soviet government virtually destroyed even most non-Orthodox religious groups, which seemingly had the habits of underground existence—mainly, again, the Old Believers. Under the tsars, they all existed through funds from rich members of the parishes, who provided them cash and buildings to continue their existence. The Soviet government destroyed prosperous people and the very concept of private property, thus undermining the very material and organizational base for existence of any religious activity in secret from the government.

Thirdly, the absolute majority of parishioners of the Orthodox Church was made up of semiliterate or completely illiterate segments of the population—for no other reason than that such people made up the majority of Russia's population. For these people, church books and the knowledge of doctrine were not the decisive factor in religious life but the rites and sacramental objects familiar since childhood: icons, relics, holidays, religious processions, and so on. After the intellectual core of Russian Orthodoxy was physically destroyed or driven from the country, Orthodox religious belief essentially remained captive to precisely this category of believers.

To destroy the influence of the Orthodox Church on the population, the Soviet government launched an offensive on all fronts. The hierarchs were subject to repressions; the property of religious communities was seized and destroyed; acts of public desecration were committed on sacred objects (icons were burned, reliquaries of saints were opened, and so on).

But the Bolsheviks' main weapon in its battle with the Church was the creation of situations where ordinary Soviet citizens simply could not take part in the customary rituals without coming into conflict with the new orders. First, religious holidays

ceased to be vacation days, which meant that taking part in their celebration became possible only at the price of leaving one's workplace, which in many cases would be interpreted by the government as a criminal offense. Second, the churches physically closed. Third, as has been said, the hierarchy and the most active parishioners were subjected to repressions.

As a result of these measures, the already low level of knowledge of Orthodox believers regarding the substantive side of their faith, fell definitively; religious texts were not published or distributed, and any religious education was perceived by the government as "counterrevolutionary activity" and was destroyed completely just like the very ability to conduct it.

Essentially, by the beginning of World War II, the Orthodox Church in Russia ceased to exist as an integral structure and did not represent any civic force, preserving only a residual influence on the millions of Soviet people who had been born and raised in another time. Paradoxically, it was the war that saved the Orthodox Church in Russia from total annihilation. On the one hand, the German occupation forces began to open the churches to draw the population's sympathies. On the other hand, the leaders of the Orthodox community, who had remained free from the first days of the war called on their flock to resist the Nazis—already by June 22, 1941, a statement was published by Metropolitan Sergiy,

Locum Tenens of the Patriarchal See, with a call to rise to the defense of the Motherland. Wishing to rally all the population of the USSR around the government, Stalin himself in his very first appeal to the public used the address "brothers and sisters," never used before by Soviet propaganda, but having clear religious connotations.

We must not forget that the USSR came to be the ally of the United States and Great Britain and had to demonstrate to them that the state of religion in Russia was not so bad as was thought in the West. In late October 1941, Averell Harriman, the special envoy of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, travelled to Moscow. He informed Joseph Stalin of the concern of the American public of the fate of the Church and relayed a request from the president to improve its legal and political status (*Pravoslavnaya tserkov' pri Staline i Khrushchev* [The Orthodox Church Under Stalin and Khrushchev], Moscow, 2005, p. 284). Desperately in need of Western aid and appreciating the current advantages of the change in religious policy, Stalin significantly weakened pressure on the Orthodox Church and other religious groups.

Essentially, a resurrected ROC became an element of Stalin's foreign and domestic political propaganda and was perceived by the government precisely in that role, and no other way.

ORTHODOX CHURCH IN POST-WAR USSR (1943–1988)

The details and nuances of the creation in 1943 of the "Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate" is beyond the scope of this essay. Let us just note that the new organization was even named differently than the Church was named under the tsars. First, there was no patriarch at that time (this post was liquidated by Peter the Great, who replaced it with the collegial Holy Synod, subordinate to the tsar). Second, the Church was named differently at different times; in the materials of the community for 1917–1918, it is called "Orthodox Russian Church/Orthodox Church of Russia." The difference is not very perceptible for those who do not know the Russian language and the context, but it is substantive: under the tsar and indeed until 1943, emphasis was made on the fact that the Orthodox Church in Russia is above all part of the world Orthodox Church, which operates on the whole territory of the state and without adherence to one ethnos. Stalin's name—*Russkaya pravoslavnaya tserkov* (Russian Orthodox Church)—sounds to the modern Russian-language person above all like the ethnic church of the Russian people, which in the end caused the problems with—again—Ukraine.

Essentially, in 1943, Stalin created a new religious structure with a new name, a system of governance and understanding of its own mission. The ROC was immediately placed within strict boundaries—to work with the flock that remained and in no way try to increase it, much less enter into some public polemic with the Soviet government.

From that time on, the Orthodox Church and its hierarchy were essentially incorporated into the Soviet nomenklatura and despite the fact that in the 1950s and 1960s the Church faced a new stage of persecutions (the so-called Khrushchev persecutions), the ROC no longer suffered such repressions as it had in the 1920s and 1930s, and in general such an attitude towards it. The Patriarch received an official residence, and automobile and several other attributes of affiliation with the elite. Periodically, the head of the Church met with the leaders of the Soviet state, which also underscored its integration into the system.

In the provinces, the bishops and priests ostensibly belonged to the privileged segments of the population by the level of their lifestyle. Above all, this was about material prosperity—the abbots of the big cathedrals had their own automobiles and significantly more cash than the average person, which in the Soviet era was already perceived as wealth.

It must be noted that in the 1960s—1980s, the Soviet government battled the Protestants much more persistently, especially those communities that were not prepared to make compromises that were impossible for believers. Nevertheless, the attitude of the Soviet government to the ROC at that time can hardly be considered normal; pressure and all kinds of actions of deterrence and provocation continued, and the strict control of the government over religious life continued. For example, the passport information of parents who wished to baptize their children had to be reported to the authorities, and during major church holidays, the police and patrols made up of Communist activists physically prevented people's access to churches, especially youth.

With the exception of several widely known examples, the parishes of the Orthodox Church in the USSR were not at all a center for anti-Soviet agitation and did not represent a danger for the Communist government at all—if for no reason other than that the entire life inside the church institutions permitted by the government were monitored and directed by it. A special agency existed for this purpose—the Council

for Religious Affairs under the USSR Council of Ministers, along with the institution of its authorized representatives in the provinces. It was this agency, in close cooperation with the KGB and the CPSU which kept daily surveillance over religious life and interfered in it.

It is no secret that from Stalin's time, the Soviet government actively used the organization of the Orthodox Church outside the USSR as a cover for its spy network or for advancing its interests. On June 5, 1943, Stalin signed a secret decree of the State Defense Committee, "On Approval of Measures to Improve Work Abroad of the Intelligence Agencies of the USSR," in which religious organizations were directly classified as agencies representing the interests of the USSR's foreign intelligence.[1] Already after the war, under pressure from the government, the ROC became involved in widespread ecumenical activity and, along with other religious organizations of the USSR, joined the World Council of Churches. According to the testimony of former KGB General Oleg Kalugin, priests and hierarchs of the ROC were actively recruited by Soviet intelligence agencies, including for use of their possibilities for legal residence in Western countries. This point is especially important in order to understand what happened next with the Church and what is going on today.

Meanwhile, overall, the Orthodox Church was viewed by the Soviet government as a social atavism which should exist until the carriers of religious consciousness who were born and received religious education before the revolution would die out naturally. And this policy worked: by the 1980s, the Church had become a haven for the famous *babushki* (grandmothers)—that is, Soviet pensioners born in the 1900–1920s who would continue to perform the rituals familiar since childhood, but in doing so did not strive at all either to be missionaries or to have any influence on society. The prevalence of older, little-educated women among the active parishioners is recorded in a whole number of published sociological studies.[2] According to the information cited, from thirty to sixty percent of active parishioners in the Soviet era were precisely these elderly women. Due to the destruction of the system of religious education, even those who continued to visit the churches in the best case had only the most general notion about rituals and knew a few prayers. Religious or theological texts were not in free circulation and the level of awareness of the public about the content of the Bible and the details of the Orthodox teaching was incredibly low.

The Soviet government very effectively exploited the special nature of Orthodoxy and its inherently conservative nature to its interests. The ROC restored in 1943 continued to use in its services the Old Church Slavonic language, incomprehensible to a speaker of modern Russian and not taught in school. Giving homilies in a language understood by the congregation was not welcome—except for especially designated situations, for example, patriotic homilies during the war with Germany. Thus, even if he came to church, the Soviet person without preliminary training most likely did not understand anything of what went on—even if the Bible was being read then, it was also read in Old Church Slavonic. Essentially, conservatism and the adherence to traditions helped the Soviet government to support the isolation of the Church from society.

---

1 P.N. Knyshevsky, *Istoriya total'nogo shpionazha: Gosudarstvennaya bezopasnost' i demokratiya*, [History of Total Espionage: State Security and Democracy], 1993, vol. 2, p. 45

2 L.I. Soskovets, "Sovetskiye veruyushchiye: obshchiye sotsiodemograficheskiye i kul'turnyye kharakteristik" [Soviet Believers: Common Sociological and Cultural Characteristics], 2004.

ORTHODOX CHURCH: FROM GORBACHEV TO PUTIN

The softening of Soviet policy toward religion began in 1986, when Mikhail Gorbachev, the new leader of the USSR, announced the policy of perestroika. In 1987, the practice of checking passports during baptisms was abolished, and former cathedrals and monasteries began to be transferred to the Church. In 1988, the Soviet government decided to widely celebrate the one-thousandth anniversary of the Christianization of Kievan Rus, and from that time on, the modern history of Orthodoxy in Russia should be counted.

From what has been said above, it is quite obvious that the Church itself was not prepared for some sort of wider role in society; it had neither the personnel capable of speaking to broad segments of the population, nor the skills to work with those coming to church for the first time; nor the experience of conducting missionary work; nor the readiness to change something inside the Church in order to make its teaching and practice more acceptable for the potential congregation, the majority of whom grew up and was formed in an atheistic environment and did not have even rudimentary notions about the essence of Christianity or else understood it in an extremely specific way, under the influence of atheistic propaganda and certain popular traditions.

When the leadership of the USSR turned to the leaders of the ROC with the question of what they wanted, they asked first for material support and the possibility to open more churches.

By the 1980s, Russia had become a country of closed churches—in every city, church buildings were closed and desecrated, and used not for their intended purpose. It was quite logical that for the initial periods the entire activity of the Church, and the enthusiasts who came to them, came down to obtaining church buildings at their disposal for the newly emerging communities and to conducting worship services in them. Many new people who became priests among other clergy came to the Orthodox Church on the wave of the return of church buildings to communities and their restoration.

Sociologically, on the eve of the changes, the ROC appeared as follows (the figures include both foreign parishes and parishes inside the USSR). In 1988, there were 3 theological seminaries, 2 theological academies, 76 dioceses, 74 bishops and metropolitans, 6,893 parishes, 7,397 clerics, and 22 monasteries (1,190 monks).

Here are the figures for early 2019: facilities of the ROC operate in 77 countries (16 countries of the canonical territory, 61 countries of the far abroad); 309 dioceses (of these, 19 in the far abroad); 382 bishops, 40,514 clergy (35,677 elders, 4,837 deacons); 38,649 cathedrals or other worship buildings, not counting 977 parishes of the far abroad; 1,012 monasteries (972 monasteries on the canonical territory (474 male, 498 female) and 40 in the far abroad; 5,883 monks and 9,687 nuns live in the monasteries; there are 5 academies and 50 seminaries in which about 14,000 students were being taught at the start of the 2018–2019 school year; about 11,000 Sunday schools in which more than 175,000 students were being taught; 145 Orthodox general education organizations.[3]

To date, the Church's chief policy remains extensive expansion, and more frequently this leads to conflict with society inside Russia. Possibly, this is related to the mentality of the ROC leadership, a significant number of whom even today consists

3 *Statistika Russkoy Pravoslavnoy Tserkvi, Otkrytaya Pravoslavnaya Entsiklopedia, "Drevo,"* [Statistics of the Russian Orthodox Church, Open Orthodox Encyclopedia, "Tree"], Text edited February 28, 2019, accessed May 5, 2020 https://drevo-info.ru/articles/11316.html

of those formed under the Soviet government and who are oriented toward the mythologized tsarist period of history as a "golden age," supposing that the merging of the Church and state is the goal of the future.

We can approximately reconstruct their logic and this experience will enable us to understand many modern problems. The Soviet government physically closed the churches and forbid the faithful to visit cathedrals, since it understood that the majority, or at a minimum a significant percent of the population, was still prepared to do this. Therefore, the generation of religious people grew up with the thought that as soon as restrictions were removed, the citizens of Russia would pour into the churches and the situation would on its own return to the state of affairs before 1917.

It is quite possible that this is how it would have been if the collapse of the Soviet government and its atheistic policy had occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1980s and especially by the 1990s, however, the structure of society had totally changed.

Essentially, throughout the 1990s, the ROC sought its place in society and could not find it; Yeltsin and his entourage did not express particular interest in a close partnership with the Church, primarily because the values of the Church inherited from the tsarist and Soviet eras did not correspond to the values of the new Russia, and its influence on society was too low to seriously perceive it as an important political actor. In speaking of the ROC's values, we are dealing with political conservativism above all and the popularity among hierarchs and parishioners of the monarchist ideas, the rejection of democracy as such (the slogan "Democracy in hell, and in Heaven, tsardom!" was popular in these circles), and criticism of the concept of human rights and liberties.

It is worth noting separately the popularity of anti-Semitism and a conspiratorial understanding of the history of Russia, in which the execution of the family of the last emperor in 1918 is interpreted as "ritual murder." If in the 1990s public expression of such ideas was more likely the position of certain priests who took nationalist positions, then today even some prominent Church leaders close to the country's leadership such as Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov) do not shrink from speaking of ritual murder.[4]

The very history of the re-burial of the remains of the last tsar and his family is entirely noteworthy for understanding the attitudes of the ROC and the secular authorities in the 1990s: Boris Yeltsin made enormous efforts to reinter with great solemnity in the Romanovs' tomb the remains of Nicholas II, his wife and children. The government commission was headed by Vice-Premier Boris Nemtsov, but the Church leadership refused to acknowledge the remains as authentic—precisely because it was not prepared to renounce the popular version of the ritual murder, after which the remains were not supposed to have been preserved.

It must be said that the Orthodox Church in Russia hardly took consistent anti-Soviet positions and even the opposite—it was in the 1990s that it grew closer to those who were nostalgic for the USSR and went to rallies with portraits of Stalin. This is quite well explained both by the personnel structure of the Orthodox hierarchy and by the moods of its parishioners, most of whom are recent Soviet citizens frustrated by sudden poverty and loss of their bearings.

4 Elena Chinkova, Episkop Tikhon (Shevkunov), "Ubiystvo tsarskoy sem'i moglo byt' ritual'nym [The Murder of the Tsars' Family Could Have Been Ritual," Komsomolskaya Pravda, November 27, 2017, https://www.kp.ru/online/news/2945034/

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH UNDER PUTIN

The years of Putin's rule have become years of material prosperity for the ROC and the peak of its symbolic influence on society.

The extent to which the ROC is in fact influential is a question for discussion and events of recent weeks provide extensive grounds for reflection on this topic.

A key role in the strengthening of the Church's positions in society has been played not at all by the Church itself but by the new Russian government, that is, by Vladimir Putin himself and his entourage. It has been Vladimir Putin's personal religious sentiments and his understanding of the role and place of the Church in the history of the state that have become definitive in the ROC's current stage of life. At any rate, it is not any initiative "from below," or Orthodox party in parliament, or even any broad lobby in power in the ROC in the late 1990s. Its penetration into government agencies and educational institutions is not at all comparable to what is the case now. If under Yeltsin and at the beginning of Putin's rule, bureaucrats, deputies, and *siloviki* (law-enforcement, security and military) could quite publicly express their atheism, adherence to other denominations, or demonstrate indifference to Church problems, then by 2020 loyalty to the Church became part of loyalty to the government and personally to Putin, which, as we will see a bit later, would lead to certain costs.

The most important thing that the ROC achieved is the constant emphasis by representatives of the government of its special role in Russia and the no less hidden pressure by the authorities on other Christian denominations, above all, the Protestants.

Despite the fact that the special role of the ROC was never formulated legislatively, a phrase in the preamble of the current law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" on "the special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia, in establishment and development of its history and culture" has been interpreted increasingly more widely in recent years, and Putin in his public statements constantly emphasizes the special status of the ROC in Russia.

Putin's statement of congratulations to Patriarch Kirill on his seventieth birthday is characteristic: "The Russian Orthodox Church is a great proponent of love to the fatherland, its powerful, moral defender. It has always defended the principles of good, truth and loyalty in our country. The Russian Orthodox Church along with our traditional confessions is the chief spiritual bastion of both our people and our statehood"[5].

Starting in 2016, a new chapter was added to the law "On Freedom of Conscience"—"Missionary Activity"—which introduced a number of restrictions, above all aimed in fact at Protestants, was especially visible by that, to whom the law was applied.[6] [7]

The Russian government's special relationship to the ROC can be traced by the

---

5 Putin: "RPTs—glavnaya dukhovnaya opora gosudarstvennosti Rossii, Mezhgosudarstvennaya teleradiokompaniya" [The ROC is the Main Spiritual Bulwark of Russia's Statehood, Interstate Television Radio Company], Mir, November 22, 2016, http://mirtv.ru/video/46031/Interstate Television Radio Company], Mir, November 22, 2016, http://mirtv.ru/video/46031/ .

6 Anastasiya Kornya, "*Rossiyskiye khristiane-pyatidesyatniki pozhalovalis' v ESPCh na zakon Yarovaya*" [Russian Christian Pentecostals Complain to the European Court of Human Rights about Yarovaya's Law], *Vedomosti*, May 26, 2019, https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2019/05/26/802473-hristiane-pyatidesyatniki-pozhalovalis

7 "*FSB v Nizhnem Novgorode obvinilo v nezakonnoy missionerskoy deyatel'nosti neskol'kikh studentov iz Afriki*" [FSB in Nizhny Novgorod accused students from Africa of unlawful missionary activity], Takiye Dela, May 27, 2018, https://takiedela.ru/news/2018/04/27/missionerskaya-deyatelnost/

volume of official agreements on cooperation in all spheres which the state agencies conclude with religious organizations. According to data from 2013, the government clearly preferred the ROC as a partner, with seventy-four percent of agreements; next come Jews, nine percent; Muslims, six percent; Buddhists, Baptists, Adventists, and Pentecostals, three percent each. Local authorities in the Russian Federation's subjects that ordinarily note and acknowledge the multi-confessional nature of the population, nevertheless, preferred to make official agreements with the ROC, eighty-three percent, which is nine percent more than at the federal level.[8] (In the past years all these tendencies became stronger, and any cooperation of government institutions with Protestants practically ceased—even in such an area as work with prison inmates.)

Aside from the official relations of the government and in general the elite of modern Russia with the ROC, there are other levels of cooperation which are not so widely known and are discussed on the background of wide scale financial cooperation of the government and the ROC and participation of the ROC in the government's ideological campaigns.

First, active participation in the funding of a church became for many entrepreneurs a viable means of solving their business problems. Entrée into the close circle of sponsors of a certain parish, diocese, monastery, or entire church makes a business person a member of a kind of elite club where he can informally make connections with bureaucrats and *siloviki* at his level or even go to a new level of connections and influence. In some sense, this movement can be compared to the Masons, but rather in the form in which the Masons are depicted by their enemies: influential people gather and discuss their issues under the pretext of some rituals and ceremonies. In any event, the communal participation in pilgrimages and religious holidays of representatives of the political, power, and commercial elite is a fact of Russian life in the provinces and in Moscow. It must be noted that participation in such communities involves not only a demonstration of religiosity but an expression of loyalty to a certain set of political values—very conservative, even by the measure of what is considered conservative in the US. Moreover, such platforms for close, informal contact among bureaucrats, power ministers and entrepreneurs are fertile soil for corruption.

Second, Orthodox activism is offered as the only legal means of demonstrating civic activity, aside from participation in the government's political campaigns that is encouraged by the authorities. If a major businessperson begins to donate cash to some civic projects, this could provoke questions and suspicions—why is this being done, what are the purposes? Does this person want to become immensely popular with the public and what does he intend to do with this popularity? Funding of the church in any form is approved by the government; moreover, it does not lead to any special popularity of the sponsors beyond the bounds of a small circle of religious enthusiasts. That is, the government uses the church as a kind of safety valve—by investing significant amounts of money in civic projects, a business person sooner or later will become an influential political figure, but in Putin's Russia, he could endlessly fund the Church, and receive only awards, church medals, and the privileges of a participant in an elite club. The chief mission of the ROC under Putin, however, is to sacralize the regimen of his personal power through demonstrative and constant support by church leaders. Since the ROC presents itself as a representative of most of the population, its support is supposed to be considered yet another mandate of trust in Putin from the majority.

8 Sasha Sulim, "Rossiyskiye protestanti godami poseshchal lyudey v tyur'makh. Teper' ikh tuda ne puskayut" [Russian Protestants visited people for years in prisons. Now they are not permitted], Meduza, August 20, 2018, https://meduza.io/feature/2018/08/20/rossiyskie-protestanty-godami-poseschali-lyudey-v-tyurmah-teper-ih-tuda-ne-puskayut.

ROC AND PROTESTANTISM: A CURIOUS ASPECT OF THE PERSECUTION OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses provides great material for making sense of what is really going on in Russia. The question is this: why is such a denomination so small in number and with so little influence provoking such intense scrutiny?

First, what does it mean to be small in number? If we cast aside the officious slogans that eighty percent of the Russian population is Orthodox, these figures turn out to be completely different. In typical years even on the main feast day of the ROC, only three to five percent of the Russian population goes to the cathedrals, that is, it is a question of several million citizens which can thus be categorized as more or less active in the religious sense.

Attendance at regular worship services is far lower, which enables us to assess the number of active ROC parishioners at two to three percent in the best case, that is, about three to five million throughout all of Russia by various estimates. If we consider that at the time the Jehovah's Witnesses were banned, they numbered two hundred thousand, then the proportion begins to look quite different.

Also noteworthy are the biographies of those who have been detained during the persecution. Among the leaders of the Jehovah's Witnesses' communities in cities in the North of Russia that are small in population, there are some rather high-ranking government employees, successful local business people, members of the middle class, conscientious workers and pensioners—that is, those segments of the population that the ROC considers its flock and which the government would like to see as its bulwark. Reports of the persecution of Jehovah's Witness are extremely numerous and provide an impression this confession is widespread, as well as a sense of its ordinary members.[9]

We will risk presuming that the attack on the Jehovah's Witnesses was undertaken not because there are very few of them, but in fact because compared to the small number of religiously active people in Russia, there are rather a lot of them, and taking into account their missionary activity, they would become only greater in number. It is possible that the decisions about their ban was enabled by some data obtained by the authorities about the number of communities of Jehovah's Witnesses, and the prospects for their growth. In any event, official data in the last year of legal existence of the organization in Russia looked like this: 175,000 members of communities and about 300,000 who visited the meetings of this group at least once per year.[10]

Ever since the 1990s, when missionaries of any confessions could come to Russia freely, the ROC leaders have been experiencing constant anxiety about competition with them. Even though now any missionary activity in Russia is essentially prohibited, the fruits of the efforts of the Protestant missionaries of the 1990s yielded abundant crops. While the ROC was preoccupied with building new churches and establishing connections with the government at all levels, the Protestant churches were working with the segments of the population who for various reasons either were disappointed in the ROC or had never felt a desire to join it. All of this led to

9 Преследование Свидетелей Иеговы, Национальная общественная организация «За права человека," загружено с https://www.zaprava.ru/cat/presledovanie-svidetelej-iegovy/ 5 мая 2020.

10 Юлия Глозман, Тимофей Усков, Иван Барило: Свидетели Иеговы, Сетевое издание - Интернет-портал "Общественное телевидение России," загружено с https://otr-online.ru/korotko-i-yasno/svideteli-iegovy/ 5 мая 2020.

real influence by the non-Orthodox confessions on the population—far broadly than is officially accepted to presume. In fact, it is difficult to determine its real scale; considering the government's religious policy, Protestant communities try not to attract attention to themselves and their number.

There is an important aspect which is often overlooked; despite the fact that the majority of descents of Russian sectarians in the prerevolutionary era lost touch with their religious traditions, and the majority of the prerevolutionary non-Orthodox communities ceased their existence entirely, they are not prepared in any case to perceive the ROC as a "the church of their ancestors," as it imagines itself. For them, the Protestant churches are not alien or foreign, not to mention that the Baptists, again, were represented in the tsarist era. Possibly, this also determines the success of the work of the Protestant missionaries.

The leadership of Russia and the leaders of the ROC understand that the persecution of widely represented Protestants in Russia (Baptists, Adventists, and Pentecostals) is fraught with great political costs. Unlike the Jehovah's Witnesses, which are marginal in world Christianity, the chief Protestant denominations have a powerful lobby primarily in the US.

But undoubtedly, the repressions against the Jehovah's Witnesses were intended to cool the missionary zeal of the Protestants and intimidate the ordinary person with the idea that any religious belief outside Orthodoxy may turn out to be criminal after the latest law passed by the government. At any rate, now Adventists and adherents of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (the Mormons)—by virtue of their relatively small numbers, and by virtue of the fact that both of these confessions are ideologically tied to the US, which under the conditions of anti-Americanism fostered by the government, it is sufficiently suspicious just on its own. The latter are entirely viewed by Russian intelligence officers as agents of the US intelligence services and therefore their activity is restricted and heavily surveilled.

ORTHODOX CHURCH ON THE EVE OF CHANGES

Excessive trust in the government, which always helps and supports it, and a strange conviction that most of the population supports the Church leadership, forces the ROC to react inappropriately to new challenges. It appears that many hierarchs, especially those who have made a theological career in the last 20 years, have really believed that the Church is an equal partner with the government, and perhaps even its mentor and supervisor, and therefore pressure can be put on the government and they do not have to subordinate to it if its decisions seem incorrect.

But no clear evidence of any noticeable influence by the ROC on society exists; moreover there is every sign that in reality, its influence is limited to a comparatively small circle of those who regularly attend worship service and which has already long ago reached its peak.

At a minimum, 20 years of open and very consistent imposition of Orthodoxy under conditions where the missionary activity of Protestants and Catholics was restricted by government forces has not led to any significant growth of attendance at services. We can only surmise what the religious life of Russia might have been if the state had refrained from openly playing on the side of one of the confessions and entirely ceased to interfere on religious matters.

Despite all the public statements of the country's leadership, including those cit-

Patriarchal Cathedral of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Resurrection of Christ - the Main Cathedral of the Russian Federation Armed Forces, 2020. Photo: kremlin.ru

ed above, by the end of the 2010s, the ROC was becoming an increasingly inconvenient partner for the government. On the one hand, it demands constant attention, provision of financial support, and repression of those whom it does not like. In fact, the funding streams within the ROC are not monitored by the government fully, which provokes irritation in high-placed bureaucrats; they would like to know how much money the church really has, where it is from, and where it goes.

Unlike Western countries, where major religious organizations build hospitals and are involved in public charitable projects, the ROC is consumed exclusively with its own projects and instilling its influence in schools and state agencies; furthermore, it does not want, and more likely can't, run any large-scale social work.

The real, mobilizing possibilities of the ROC are extremely low; that is, the current government of Russia can hardly count on being able to get people out on the streets in its support, or on the contrary, to provide the passive loyalty of a significant part of the Russian citizenry. In practice it was just the opposite: the government was forced time after time to provide assistance to the Church, even to the point of assigning military academy students to take part in processions and to use pro-government mobilizing networks to turn out mass numbers at Church events.

The situation in Ekaterinburg, for example, was characteristic in this case. For nine years (2010–2019) there was a battle between the urban community and the Church and its sponsors regarding the construction in the center of town of a new Orthodox cathedral. At the Church's demand, three times the government provided construction lots in a central part of the city, and three times citizens organized visible protest actions. The stand-off grew particularly heated in the spring of 2019 when the question of the construction had seemingly been decided in favor of the church and

they had even managed to build a fence at the construction site. But the protests of several thousands of citizens forced the government to back down and forced the Church to capitulate. A detailed description of this story is beyond the scope of this article, but it is important to note that if outraged citizens went out to protest voluntarily, and with a risk to their own safety and freedom, then nothing came of a similar mobilization of Orthodox activists. Despite wide scale agitation for actions in support of the cathedral and all kinds of bonuses for its participants, they have never managed to mobilize a significant number of participants. In the end, the government realized that society's outrage was substantial and cancelled the construction, putting the Church in a ridiculous position: the leadership of the diocese never understood how it was possible to yield to pressure from protesters and announced that the construction would start soon, cursing those who did not allow it to begin.

THE ROC AND THE CORONAVIRUS EPIDEMIC

An even more intriguing situation developed on the eve of the celebration of Easter by the Orthodox Church on April 19, 2020. Essentially, the secular authorities in the majority of Russia's regions and primarily in Moscow forced the Church to abstain from a public celebration, and Patriarch Kirill was even supposedly to personally call on the faithful not just to pray at home, but to conduct the ritual of blessing the kulichs (the pascal cake). This took place after attempts by several local Church leaders to resist the decisions of regional administrations and public health services; that is, the authorities were forced to put pressure on the ROC, apparently, at the highest level.

The coronavirus epidemic caught the entire world unawares, but the ROC ended up in a much more difficult situation than other churches and religious communities. And here it is necessary to return to the topic mentioned at the beginning of this article.

For decades, the main content of the Orthodox religious life was visiting cathedrals, especially on major feast days. The believer could never hold the Bible in his hands, could not understand the point of what was going on during the worship service, but if he wore a cross around his neck, and had icons at home he had purchased at the church, and if he at least attended worship services now and then—this was quite enough so that he considered himself a faithful son of the Church, and the Church itself was quite satisfied. A significant portion of the Church economy relies exactly on the physical visiting of cathedrals—believers buy candles, icons, brochures, order all kinds of prayers, and so on. But the main point is that in recent years, the ROC has insisted especially strongly on its special status in society. The Church represented itself as a supernatural and miracle-working divine hierarchy that is immeasurably higher than all earthly laws and rules. And the government supported it in this conviction, emphasizing the ROC as a "traditional confession" and providing it with other measures of support.

The news that churches were closing in Europe due to the pandemic provoked outrage and protest from the most radical representatives of the ROC, and one of the influential Orthodox spokesmen, the head of the ROC's Commission on Family

Affairs, Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov called for resistance to the government.[11] First, sanitation measures were perceived as an apocalyptic conspiracy; that is, there was a belief that dark forces look for any means of harming Christianity and all epidemics are thus only a diabolical deception. Second, the radicals understood immediately that as the pandemic spread, Russia may embark on such measures as well, and that would mean the strongest blow against them.

As Orthodox Deacon Andrei Kurayev, an influential Orthodox publicist, noted correctly, the very call to sit home and not visit the cathedrals even on Easter, which the patriarch himself was voicing, could lead to the reform of all religious life in Russia. Above all, the very fact of the Church leadership's admission of their helplessness in the face of spreading of the virus placed in question what had been said about the Church and in the Church in recent years. In some sense, this looked like an admission that the Church cannot provide either protection or healing—that is, just what the ROC has claimed to do, in propagandizing a cult of relics, icons, and rituals that were supposed to help believers in their daily lives.

Second, the forced capitulation before the sanitation regulations of the secular government discredited those leaders of the Orthodox radicals who insisted in the end not to obey the government's regulations and seek protection and healing in the churches. It turned out that there were very few fanatics and they had no influence either inside or outside the church. Most Orthodox believers turned out to be quite loyal citizens and obeyed the demands of the public health authorities. Even in those ROC dioceses where clergy did not consent to close the churches, the actual attendance at Easter services was minimal.

Third, the agreement of the ROC leaders to meet the demands of the authorities halfway discredited them in the eyes of the radical and conservative part of the congregation, which continued to hope till the end that the Church would not back down from a wide scale celebration of Easter.

Fourth, the forced calls to pray at home and assurance that being a believer and attending church is not one and the same undercut the economic foundation of the ROC. On the eve of Orthodox Easter, reports appeared that the public health measures imposed by the authorities had hurt the ROC's income, and official ROC spokesman V. Legoid even called on parishioners to donate cash directly to the accounts of priests, which is not surprising; in its economic structure, the Church is close to a small or medium catering, trade, or service business; that is, it is critically dependent on daily visitors. Under the conditions of the quarantine, visits to the churches had fallen off considerably or the churches were completely closed, which nullified any financial donations. If the situation dragged on because of the pandemic, the ROC would end up in even greater financial dependency on the government, because only with the help of infusions from the state budget could its losses be compensated. And here an interesting questions emerges: would the government, under the current situation, give the ROC cash just like that, or would it demand even more control over its finances and influence over its policy? Meanwhile, on a number of issues sensitive for the Kremlin, the ROC was forced to take a special position for reasons of internal church relations: the Crimea remains under the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church; and Abkhazia is recognized as the canonical territory of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

---

11 "Protoiyerey Smirnov prizval pravoslavnykh ne podchinyat'sya vlastyam Italii iz-za koronavirusa" [Archpriest Smirnov calls on the Orthodox not to obey the Italian authorities due to the coronavirus], *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, February 28, 2010, https://www.mk.ru/social/2020/02/28/protoierey-smirnov-prizval-pravoslavnykh-ne-podchinyatsya-vlastyam-italii-izza-koronavirusa.html

Fifth, the mandatory and rather strict public health measures of the Russian authorities, who were concerned about spread of the virus, created mutual tension between the government and the ROC. On the one hand, the government encountered attempts by some Church figures to resist its decisions, which could not pass unnoticed. On the other hand, for the first time since the Soviet era, the ROC was confronted with the fact that the government might demand from the Church obedience to requirements it disliked, and it had no real levers for opposition to this, just as it never had. It was particularly humiliating and illustrative that Putin personally did not say anything at all regarding the restrictive measures on the ROC, granting broad rights to impose restrictions to local authorities and public health physicians, who were the ones to issue regulations about not holding any public worship services.

CONCLUSIONS

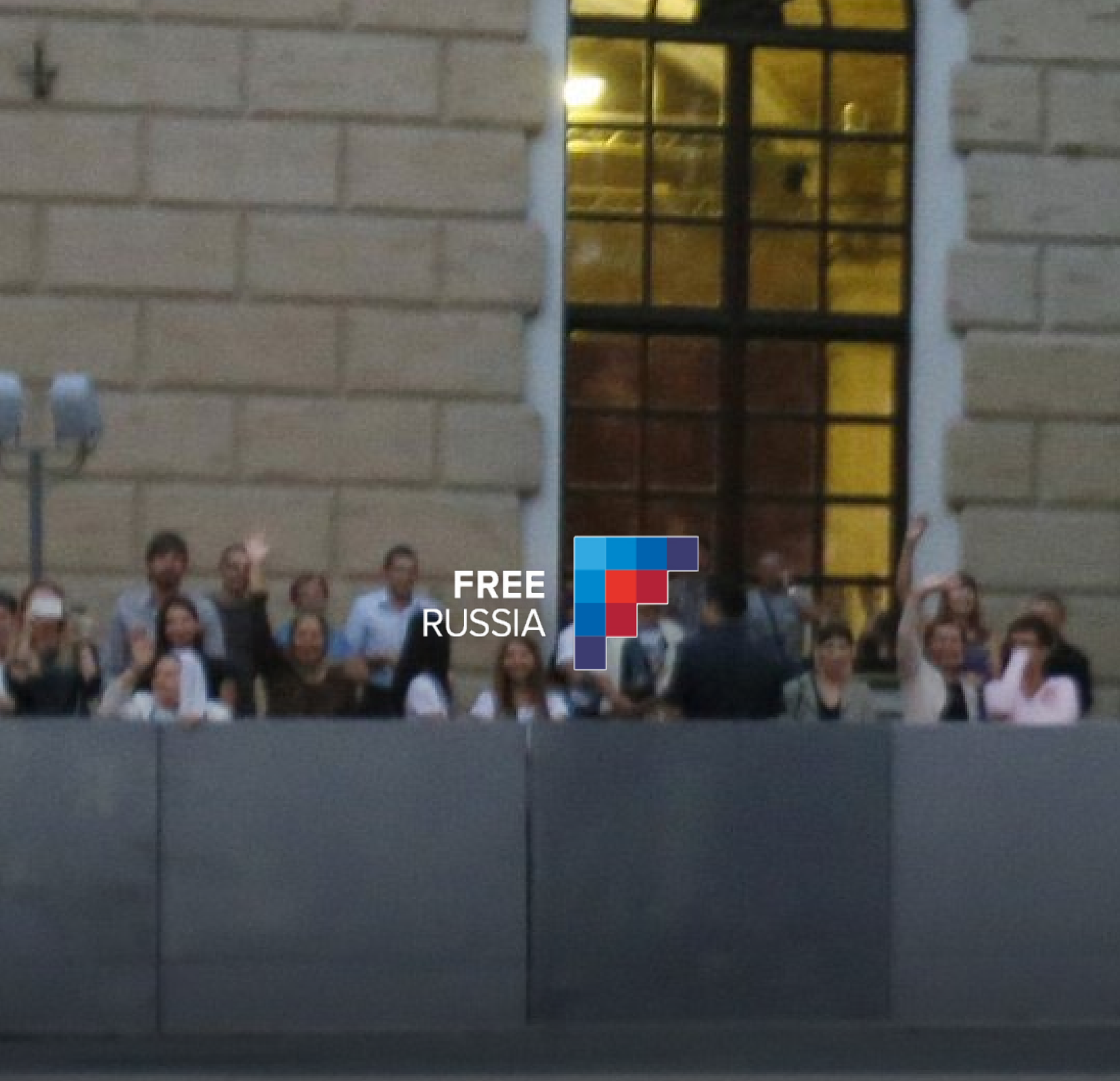
To reiterate what has been said in a concentrated form: the Orthodox Church in Russia, relying on the tsarist government, avoided both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. In its organizational structure, it remained above all a bureaucratized state agency for spiritual affairs, and in interactions with parishioners, a rather archaic organization, ascribing too much meaning to the trade in rites and religious artifacts. Even before the revolution, intellectual life and the study of Christian and Orthodox theology were peculiar to a very narrow circle of Orthodox hierarchs and believers, and after the revolution and the civil war, they nearly ceased altogether. The Soviet government deliberately turned the ROC into a spiritual ghetto for old people and marginals who by virtue of their background and upbringing were not prepared to accept Communist values. It was in this form that the ROC encountered perestroika. Despite the collapse of Communist and atheistic ideology, the Church did not want, or simply could not make use of the opportunities opening up for preaching and extending its influence on society, preferring once again to become a partner of the government, which solved all of its financial and organizational problems, demanding in exchange only unconditional loyalty.

Thirty years after the collapse of atheistic ideology in Russia, the most famous spiritual leaders of the ROC are the church administrators, and their real influence on society does not go beyond the bounds of the limited audience of active parishioners, that is, some percentage of the population. The ROC has not promoted any figure who the entire nation, regardless of their confessional affiliation and personal religious beliefs, would perceive as an indisputable spiritual authority; moreover, Patriarch Kirill is not such a figure.

The ROC, in its current form, as a social, organizational, and financial structure is extremely fragile and may collapse in the very foreseeable future, opening up the way for both schism inside the Orthodox community between the more liberal and more conservative, and creating new opportunities for Protestant and Catholic missionaries.

Essentially, the ROC is now approximately in the same position that it was on the eve of the revolution in 1917; it supports the government, it is subordinate to the government, it is dependent on the government, yet even so has no special influence either on the government or society. Worse, a significant part of society, especially the young and opposition-minded have perceived the ROC as an ideological subdivision of the government, and not at all as the bearer of some meaningful ideas and values.

The Putin regime is being brought closer to its decline, and the coronavirus epidemic, or more accurately its economic and moral consequences may play an even more important role in this process than might have been supposed. The inevitable collapse of the Putin regime will also destroy the ROC in its current form, because as has been emphasized above, its entire current status in society and its influence including even on its own parishioners is built on comprehensive support by the government and the artificial restriction on the freedom of missionary activity for other confessions, and on the ability to criticize the ROC and its leadership in the media.



www.4freerussia.org
info@4freerussia.org