

# Unorthodoxy in Russia. The Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church

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*The Russian Orthodox Church is as resurgent today in Russia as Russia is, itself, on an international level. Ever since the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church, in accordance with an unofficial alliance with the Kremlin, which began during the tenure of Boris Yeltsin and has continued under Vladimir Putin's time in office, has propelled itself to filling the ideological void in Russia.*

Under the incumbent Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus', Kirill, more than five thousand new churches have been built in Russia, while there are plans to construct 200 new churches in Moscow, alone. In tandem with the building of new churches has been the rapid increase in the number of clergymen; over the past eight years, the number has grown by 10,000.

Whilst the Russian Orthodox Church has, today, regained the land that it lost following the October Revolution, when the Bolsheviks confiscated this from it, the church is also gaining additional lands, making it one of the largest and wealthiest landowners in modern-day Russia.

Priests have replaced political commissars in the Russian Armed Forces and the Russian Orthodox Church is penetrating the education system in Russia, which are two immensely significant feats.

Where the Russian Orthodox Church has not been able to penetrate is policymaking; or, rather, the Kremlin will not allow this, having set the scope and limits for the role of the church in Russian society. That can be contrasted with the considerable influence that the Russian Orthodox Church exerted on policy in Tsarist times, when it was the spiritual defender of an absolute monarchy.

Nonetheless, today in Russia the Russian Orthodox Church is taking full advantage of the powers which have been resurrected for it by the Kremlin. And the leadership of the church has certainly taken a leaf out of the book of the defunct Communist Party of the Soviet Union concerning symbolism, by constructing vast numbers of churches, monasteries and theology schools, demonstrating to the Russian people the power of the church, like how the communists signified Bolshevik power to the Soviet people when they erected thousands of statues and busts of Vladimir Lenin.

But is the power that the Russian Orthodox Church wields justified? And how does the ordinary Russian feel about the clericalisation of Russian society?

In historical and present-day terms, the Orthodox faith is the crucial part of the Russian DNA. To be a Russian is to be an adherent to the Orthodox faith. For Russians, being Orthodox means, more than anything else, recognition that Russia is distinct from the West

and not subservient to the West. Russians can point to the fact that it was the Russian church that broke away first, long before the Reformation, from the Catholic tradition thereby ensuring, amongst other things, that foreign forces would not be permitted to have influence within Russia. The East-West Schism, of 1054, constitutes a proud period of history for Russians, symbolising their resistance to foreign diktats.

As someone who was baptised in both the Church of England and the Greek Orthodox Church, I believe that churches, irrespective of denomination, have an important role to play in all Christian countries, especially today with the curse of corporate capitalism and neo-liberal economics that are so prevalent in the world. And in the case of Russia, I believe that the Russian Orthodox Church has a historic mission to help maintain unity in Russian society, defend Russian culture from foreign, especially Western, influences, encourage Russian patriotism, and preserve the independence and sovereignty of the Russian state.

But the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church has become too extensive in modern-day Russia. The church is acting in a similar way to how the Communist Party of the Soviet Union acted, though, of course, it does not have anything near to the power that the communists held and exercised in Soviet times. However, it is a moot point as to whether the leadership of the Russian church would like the power that the Bolsheviks – whom they were persecuted by but also collaborated with, benefiting in numerous ways in doing so – once enjoyed.

According to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the country is a secular one and there is to be no national ideology for Russia. Whilst I fervently agree, for more than one reason alone, that Russia should be secular, the clericalisation of the country by the Russian Orthodox Church is undermining this. And whilst I disagree that Russia should not have a national ideology, believing this to be one of Russia's biggest weaknesses today, the Russian Orthodox Church is attempting to project itself as the country's ideology, which is not to the liking of much of the Russian population, with many Russians feeling unsettled by this.

Despite being far more resilient than what the West had thought when it placed its sanctions on Russia as a result of the crisis in Ukraine (which, incidentally, the United States and the European Union precipitated by undermining Ukrainian democracy), the Russian economy is still fragile. Because Russia has not diversified its economy, relying overwhelmingly, instead, on the revenue which it accumulates from energy supplies and defence exports. As a result of that, together with the effects of Western sanctions and the justified increase by the Kremlin of the defence budget, to counter the very real and increasing threat from NATO, many Russians, especially outside of Moscow and St Petersburg, are falling into poverty. Economic disparities across the Russian Federation are increasing, while the gap between rich and poor is widening. And that sad development is being accentuated by how elements of the rampant capitalism that so destabilised Russian society in the 1990s has begun to return to Russia.

But why is the economic state of Russia relevant in the context of the powers of the Russian Orthodox Church? Well, because the Russian people need more jobs, better salaries, better housing and better pensions, instead of thousands of more churches being built in their name. Russians value security and stability, both in their personal lives and on a national level, more than anything, and they are becoming dispirited in seeing significant amounts of Government money going to the church, while they are, at the same time, struggling with

the cost of living. The Russian Orthodox Church, like the communists in Soviet times, is guilty of self-indulgence. And it is now common for Russians to lament at and mock priests today for driving about in Mercedes cars.

I understand and support the Kremlin's unofficial policy of allowing the Russian Orthodox Church to play a major role in Russian society, especially as a way of maintaining social cohesion at a time when the threat from the West against Russia, in military, political, economic and cultural terms, is becoming ever more dangerous. But, because the church has accumulated too much power and too much wealth, and is misusing these, the Kremlin's position could backfire if Russians start to turn not, of course, on the Orthodox faith but on the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church. We should remember that, in 1917, the Russian Orthodox Church was, rightly so, a source of immense anger for the Russian people because of how its leadership was living a life of privilege when Russians were living in abject poverty.

I must add that there is a practical reason for not building more churches in Russia: namely, that most Russians, whilst identifying as Orthodox, do not attend church services, even at Christmas and at Easter. It is believed that between four to ten per cent of Russians attend church regularly. So why build thousands of more churches? And who is really benefiting from the building of those churches? Contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ, and like all other churches in the world, the Russian Orthodox Church is being run as a business, with the people at the very top accruing the benefits. That says something not about the Russian Orthodox Church per se but human beings in general and their lust for money and materialism. In practice, the leaders of Christianity, Communism and Capitalism, across the world, have all been guilty of self-indulgence.

The Russian Orthodox Church is also guilty of propagating misleading information. By having canonised the last Tsar of Russia, Nicholas II, the church is projecting him in a completely unacceptable way. He was a weak and incompetent leader who presided over a system of government which was responsible for terrible crimes against its own people, such as Bloody Sunday, in 1905. Nicholas II was anything but a saint (in fact, saints do not exist). Further to that, the Russian Orthodox Church calls him a "victim", in reference to his murder at the hands of the Bolsheviks, which was a heinous act – he and his family should actually have been sent into exile abroad. But what about the victims of Nicholas II? What about the approximately two million Russian soldiers who perished on the Eastern Front, in World War One, in what was a totally needless war for the Russian Empire and one that Nicholas II took Russia into and oversaw?

Naturally, the Russian Orthodox Church regards the Bolshevik revolution with scorn, because its land, wealth and privileges were taken away from them by Lenin, which was, largely speaking, a justified act by the communist leader. Today, the Russian Orthodox Church talks about how the revolution resulted in the territory of the Russian Empire being lost. But, is that really an accurate appraisal? The answer is: No. Lands were, indeed, lost, and these were: Finland, the Baltic States, Poland, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. But the vast majority of the lands of the Russian Empire were preserved by Lenin and his Bolsheviks and these soon would form the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (incidentally, it would not be long until the Baltic States, eastern Poland, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina would once again be governed by Moscow, during the years of Joseph Stalin).

Finally, the Russian Orthodox Church lauds the White Armies and its generals in the catastrophic Russian Civil War, calling them "Russian patriots". But there is a fundamental

problem with that claim because the White Armies, during the civil-war, fought side by side with armies from the US, UK, France, Czechoslovakia and Japan that had invaded Russia. One can justifiably call the White Armies and its generals traitors for having fought with armies which had invaded the Motherland. It should be noted that a factor in accounting for the victory of the Bolsheviks in the civil-war was the presence of foreign armies fighting with the White Armies, which resulted in huge numbers of Russians joining the ranks of the Red Army in order to defend Mother Russia from the clutches of foreign invaders.

The Orthodox faith is what makes being Russian Russian. And the Russian Orthodox Church has an important role to play in Russian society today. However, unorthodox acts by the Russian Orthodox Church are damaging the church in the eyes of the Russian people – and this is dangerous for Russia. The church should be working on patriotism and cohesion and not on accumulating more and more wealth and land for itself. For now, Russia does not have a national ideology, and I sincerely hope that this will change one day soon because there are serious questions about what Russia stands for. In short, Russia has an identity crisis at home and abroad. So, for now, the Russian Orthodox Church is all that Russia has to fill that void. But the church must behave in a measured way and in a responsible way, staying true to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Because if, one day, the Russian people turn their backs on the Russian Orthodox Church (note: not on the Orthodox faith), then where will that leave Russia in what has become an exceedingly dangerous world for her? That is a question that should reverberate along the Russian corridors of power.

*Dr Marcus Papadopoulos is a specialist on Russia.*

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