

Russia: Politics of Religion

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It is presumed that in the context of the global economical crisis the societal role of the Russian Orthodox Church should increase. Moreover, under the new leadership the Church could become one of the main Kremlin's pillars to effectively decrease social tensions. Yet some issues remain to be clarified: was there some kind of a trade-off between the clergy and the government? What kind of trade-off and what to expect?

On the 27th of January, 2009 Russian Orthodox Church has elected the 62 year old Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad as its new leader, succeeding the former Patriarch Aleksy II. The newly elected head of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), Patriarch Kirill, has been enthroned at the Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on Sunday, February 1st, 2009. Analysts have predicted a landslide victory for Kirill long ago (Kirill received 508 votes in the secret ballot of the Church Council, while his challenger Metropolitan Kliment of Kaluga and Borovsk won only 169 votes). Since Metropolitan Kirill was appointed the interim head of ROC in December 2008 he was strongly supported by both Russian president Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, therefore, the several insights on Kirill's personality could help to foresee further developments of ROC's societal and political role.

Election of Kirill has caused controversial reactions in Russia because of his biography and personal beliefs. Patriarch Kirill (also known as Kirill Gundiaev) started his career in 1978 when promoted to the position of Metropolitan. In 1988, Kirill was appointed to lead the foreign relations department of the Church and became the most influential figure in ROC under Patriarch Aleksy, who was elected in 1990. He advanced in the church hierarchy at a time when the Church institution was closely monitored by the KGB and Politburo, and clerics who objected government control were routinely harassed and imprisoned. Moreover, in 1992 Kirill strongly resisted initiatives to create a church commission to clarify links between the Church and the KGB. In relation to that, it is believed that Kirill intensely cooperated with the Soviet security services himself. The parliamentary commission, chaired by a Soviet dissident Father Gleb Yakunin was formed despite opposition, and concluded that most of the church leaders, including Kirill, had provided information to the security services. Today Kirill adheres strongly to nationalist ideas on Russian role in the world and supports the concept of "Russian Civilization" which is naturally opposed to the West.

Kirill is an unusually public and outspoken religious figure in the Church, he is publicly known for his traditionalism and resistance

Issue 3 (18)

Analytical bulletin about political, economic and social processes in the CIS area.

Published by:

Centre for Eastern Geopolitical Studies



www.cegs.lt

to change. He runs television shows and frequently voices his opinion on secular matters, including current economic crisis in Russia. On the other hand, Kirill faces opposition from a strong conservative movement within the Church who portray him as being too modern and too eager for a rapprochement with the Roman Catholic Church as Kirill was in charge of contacts with the Vatican before getting elected as the Patriarch.

Despite internal frictions within the clergy, it is worth noticing that Kiril, the new head of ROC, is a very charismatic person, with high erudition and oratorical skills, which could enable the Church to engage more actively into the political processes.

The constitution of the Russian federation officially separates ROC from the state. However, practically, referring to old historic traditions ROC remains a de facto state institution, strongly supported by the Russian government and generating a vice versa support for the government. It should be noted, therefore, that ROC must comply with the defined "rules of the game". For example, Metropolitan Kliment (one of the staunchest supporters of ROC conservative politics) lost the Patriarch elections to Kirill partly due to some of his ambitions that could have had politically inappropriate effects. He insisted on introducing the basics of the orthodox culture as a discipline into the public educational system, despite the fact that this issue could polarize the Russian society. This reflects the political limitations imposed on the Church: it is only permitted to implement inner reforms if they do not create any additional financial and political costs for the Kremlin.

It is presumed, that in the context of the global economical crisis the societal role of the Russian Orthodox Church should increase and ROC could become one of the main Kremlin's pillars to effectively decrease social tensions. If ROC turns finally into Kremlin's "moral pillar", the consolidation of political power in Russia should be within the interests of ROC as well. Many experts agree that political polarization could cause increased disunity within the Orthodox Church. However, the internal debate is limited as the liberal wing within the Church is absent and a more intense conflict among the conservatives and ultra-conservatives is only likely under intense external stimulus. The overall opinion of the ROC remains hard. Back in 2007, Kirill as Metropolitan by that time, has expressed this position clearly in an interview for the Russian media: the Russian clergy does not approve the concept of "moral autonomy" and, in this sense, it does not approve the UN Universal declaration of human rights of 1949; what is more, the liberal thesis of human rights being more important than societal interests is also considered inappropriate. Such statements largely reflect the overall position of ROC. Thus many experts argue that the development of the Christian democracy (orientated towards the European protestant tradition) is largely impossible in the Russian society. Among other reasons it is also due to the fact that such democracy does not have ideological foundation or support in the orthodox Christianity and thus is incapable of playing a more distinct role in the political

domain. More precisely, current orthodox position that denies the principles of liberal democracy is very much in hand with the geopolitical concepts of Russian political elites that point toward the expansion of the Eurasian power.

In conclusion, several interpretations are possible of what the election of Patriarch Kirill actually means in broader terms.

Firstly, the ROC could retain the inner consensus and thus be unlikely to produce any sudden reformist decisions. The overall position of the Church would therefore remain conservative; however, the assignment of a new leader could produce more flexible external policies towards Roman Catholic Church or other confessions.

The second scenario relies on the fact that Patriarch Kirill is a highly active public figure; such rather untraditional publicity could force Kremlin to take into account the position of the Church more precisely. The political support of Kremlin was obvious during the pre-election period: the campaign contained all the features of a political election campaign from public allegations to opponents of Kirill to support of D. Medvedev, V. Putin, as well as the sidestep of Metropolitan of Minsk and Sluck Filaret, who encouraged his supporters to vote for Kirill. However, there have been indications that Kirill could be asking for something in return for becoming Kremlins mediator in efforts to dissolve social tensions. Some of these concessions may not suit the interests of the Russian political elites very well. Kirill has already expressed his willingness to strive for judicial means that would limit Kremlins control over ROC and ensure special guarantees for the clergy. Some experts argue that similar demands can hamper the predominant harmonious relations between the Church and the government.

The third scenario puts emphasis on Kirill's strives for increased and more goal-orientated Church participation in secular issues, such as the formulation of "socially responsible" politics. Such Church activism is expected to increase under Kirill's leadership. In combination with demands for more autonomy for the Church this activism could force Kremlin to adjust policies with the position of ROC from time to time, thus increasing the political influence of the ROC. This is especially important if one sees the Church not solely as a "moral pillar" for societal conflict regulation, but also as an informal institution of external relations. Firstly, the Church does play a significant role in relations with Russian communities abroad. Patriarch Kirill was among the leading initiators of integration of the Russian Orthodox Church abroad with the central ROC. This process took place in 2007 and was to rehabilitate the authority of the Russian government among the Russian orthodox communities beyond Russia's borders. Secondly, the Church does play a diplomatic role to a certain extent concerning Russian foreign bilateral relations. For example, the fact that Metropolitan Kirill participated in the consecration of a new orthodox cathedral in Havana alongside with the Cuban president Raul Castro and several Russian diplomats was interpreted by many experts as a sign of revival of bilateral Russian-Cuban relations. On the other hand, the increasing role of the ROC in Russian foreign policy

could also produce negative consequences for Kremlin. Activism of the former Patriarch Aleksy II who pushed for integration of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with the ROC resulted not solely in strong resistance from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church but also caused it to support the Orange revolution, as well as to turn to the overall opposition against Kremlin politics. ●