

**CICERO FOUNDATION GREAT DEBATE PAPER**

**No. 16/06**

*September 2016*

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**THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX  
CHURCH:  
TOWARD A NEW, GLOBAL  
ROLE?**

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Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper No. 16/06

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# **THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: TOWARD A NEW, GLOBAL ROLE?**

**Greg Simons**

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), or perhaps more specifically, the Moscow Patriarchate, is a widely recognised religious institution in the Russian Federation. Within the world of Orthodoxy (there are some 15 different autonomous branches of the Orthodox Church<sup>1</sup>), the Moscow Patriarchate is the largest in terms of the number of adherents and is one of the younger among the Orthodox Churches. In addition to having a high public profile, the Moscow Patriarchate also generates a lot of seemingly contradictory opinions, emotions and information concerning it and its activities. There are those that claim that the ROC has effectively understood the political changes that came with the Soviet collapse and have positioned themselves well to effectively place themselves in a position of influence in Russia's domestic affairs and foreign policy (Garrard & Garrard, 2008). Others say that the situation is much more nuanced, and the ROC is split along at least three competing internal lines that compete for power and influence in the direction of the Church, some of which believe that all politics should be forsaken as this is an unholy pursuit (Papkova, 2011).

## **THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA**

The Russian public seem to have diverse and divided views on the role played by religion in society, which is seen in various polls conducted on the issue. For example, one poll conducted by the Levada Centre revealed that 56 per cent of those polled were satisfied

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<sup>1</sup> Please see the following link for more details - [https://orthodoxwiki.org/List\\_of\\_autocephalous\\_and\\_autonomous\\_churches](https://orthodoxwiki.org/List_of_autocephalous_and_autonomous_churches).

with the role played by the ROC and religious NGOs in state politics.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously though, ever more Russians are growing sceptical about the growing role of religion society. This is specifically in relation to the potential harm from spreading religious convictions.<sup>3</sup> Not only is the Moscow Patriarchate active in the domestic affairs of the Russian state, but they are also very active in the global arena too. The relationship between the Russian State and the ROC is a complicated one, which demonstrates a breadth of activity, collaboration and cooperation. But this relationship does have certain boundaries that are marked by historical events that have marked the development of politics and identity in Orthodoxy.

Within the Orthodox world there are a number of key dates, which have impacted significantly on identity and politics. Among the first of these was the *Great Schism* in 1054, which saw a split that created the rift between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Another moment came in 1453 with the fall of Constantinople and the Schism that occurred with this event, which saw the rise of the notion of Moscow as the *Third Rome*, to take on the role and responsibility that was previously vested in Byzantium. A number of opportunities and threats have emerged for the ROC with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This can be seen in relation to the activities of the Moscow Patriarchate and their interaction with the Russian State.

#### THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE ROC: AN INCREASED COOPERATION WITH THE VATICAN

Foreign policy is an important aspect and issue to the ROC, the Department External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate<sup>4</sup> is a very influential and powerful body within the Church. It has been the body from where the last Patriarchs of the ROC have been drawn. The Moscow Patriarchate is very active on specific international issues and is well positioned to lobby its position. For example, in 2003 the ROC opened a diplomatic representation to

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<sup>2</sup> Kozlov, V., *Over 50% of Russians Approve of Orthodox Church Role in State Politics*, Russia Beyond the Headlines, [http://rbth.com/politics\\_and\\_society/2016/02/26/over-50-of-russians-approve-of-orthodox-church-role-in-state-politics\\_571197](http://rbth.com/politics_and_society/2016/02/26/over-50-of-russians-approve-of-orthodox-church-role-in-state-politics_571197), 26 February 2016 (accessed 1 March 2016).

<sup>3</sup> *Ever More Russians are Skeptical About Growing Role of Religion in Society*, TASS, <http://tass.ru/en/russia/810890>, 27 July 2015 (accessed 31 July 2015);

<sup>4</sup> The website of this body can be found in the following link - <https://mospat.ru/en/>.

European institutions in Brussels.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, join the ranks of the Roman Catholic Church in creating diplomatic representations in foreign countries, independent of official state diplomatic representations.

Those that argue that the ROC is merely a tool of Russian State foreign policy oversimplify the reality of the countervailing tendencies of the different streams of politics that influence this relationship. Sometimes the ROC and Russian State do openly collaborate on certain issues, such as was seen in the role in the role of President Putin and other members of government that acted as a go between in the indirect communication between the spiritual heads of the Roman Catholic Church and the ROC (this is influenced by the 1054 Great Schism).<sup>6</sup> In addition to the government-Church interaction in foreign policy, there is also Church-Church interaction and in spite of the differences between the Roman Catholic Church and the ROC, it has proven possible for the two denominations to cooperate on concrete foreign policy issues together. The Churches have pooled their resources to lobby secular bodies, especially on the issues of traditional family values and the rights of Christians in Europe.<sup>7</sup> The adherence to traditional family values has caused some tensions between the ROC and some other more liberal Christian Churches in the West. Cooperation and collaboration between the Roman Catholic Church and the ROC has gradually strengthened over the years and has recently taken a more formalised road. A Joint Declaration between the two Churches was signed by the Pope and Patriarch in Cuba in February 2016. There was a joint position on “the need to defend traditional Christian values, first of all in the field of family, in the context of secularising Europe and the rest of the Western world.” Other religious and political issues were taken up too, such as the contentious issues of Syria and Ukraine.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on this office, please visit their official website at <http://orthodoxru.eu/>.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley, A., *Putin, in Rome, Hints at Progress Toward Papal Visit to Russia*, The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/07/world/putin-in-rome-hints-at-progress-toward-papal-visit-to-russia.html>, 7 June 2000 (accessed 9 August 2016).

<sup>7</sup> *The DCER Secretariat for Inter-Christian Relations*, The Russian Orthodox Church Department for External Church Relations, <https://mospat.ru/en/department/sekretariat-3/>, accessed 9 August 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Zolotov, A., *How the Pope-Patriarch Declaration may Impact Russian Foreign Policy*, Russia Direct, <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/how-pope-patriarch-declaration-may-impact-russian-foreign-policy>, 16 February 2016 (accessed 18 February 2016).

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE WAR WITH GEORGIA

The Georgian Patriarchate and Moscow Patriarchate played a positive role in the wake of the 2008 Georgian-Russian War, at a time when secular politics and communication between the Georgian and Russian governments was virtually non-existent. Both Churches ensured that indirect communication between the governments continued through them (Simons, 2015). It was seen as an opportunity by the Churches to fulfil their duty to the peoples of their countries, attempting to gradually cool down the political conflict. At times there is a dilemma created in international relations when secular and religious politics collide. When there is a potential conflict between secular and sacred politics, history tends to show, when the ROC is in a position to make its own decision it tends to favour Church politics. Returning to Georgia, such a dilemma was presented in the aftermath of the 2008 War and the fate of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Moscow Patriarchate refused to recognise the attempt at independence of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church.<sup>9</sup> This decision was done with the understanding that if they did so, it would break Canon Law and likely create yet another schism, with the Georgian Patriarchate.

## INVOLVEMENT IN (POST-) CONFLICT SITUATIONS

One of the areas that the ROC has become involved in the global arena is in conflict and post-conflict situations. Historically, this has included the plight of Serbs and Serbian Orthodox buildings in Kosovo. As with the Russian government, the ROC has been very critical of Western intervention in the Balkans, although for a different reason. The main criticism is centred on the desecration and destruction of holy sites and places of worship of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which the ROC terms as constituting religious persecution.<sup>10</sup> The Russian Foreign Ministry has been critical, but for values and norms that echo Western

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<sup>9</sup> *Georgian Patriarchy Refuses to Recognise Abkhaz Orthodox Church*, Sputnik, <http://sputniknews.com/world/20090916/156147781.html>, 16 September 2009 (accessed 9 August 2016).

<sup>10</sup> *Concerning the Growing Tension in Kosovo and Metohija*, The Russian Orthodox Church Department for External Church Relations, <https://mospat.ru/en/2013/02/05/news80484/>, 5 February 2013 (accessed 9 August 2016).

criticism of Russia, such as the violation of human rights.<sup>11</sup> The ROC has also been very vocal on the plight of Christian communities in the Middle East and North Africa, especially in the wake of regime change and the Arab Spring that has seen those communities ‘cleansed’ from many areas where they had a long history. This issue has not been particularly problematic or divisive to Orthodox unity, however, the situation in Ukraine has proved to be another matter.

## UKRAINE: COMPETING CHURCHES

In June 2016, the first planned meeting of the heads of all Eastern Orthodox Churches was planned to take place, it would have been the first occasion that this would have happened in over 1000 years. As it happened, four of the Church heads pulled out of the meeting, including Patriarch Kirill of the Moscow Patriarchate (others were from the Bulgarian, Georgian and Antioch Patriarchates). This seemed to be based on political, rather than theological reasons. “Geopolitics, after all, have prevented Orthodox bishops from uniting since their last meeting in the year 787”.<sup>12</sup> Competition between the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine via different political sponsors has intensified, even before the events of Euromaidan (Simons, 2015). In the midst of the political conflict, there have been some moments of attempts to bring about some sort of respite in the name of unity. On the eve of the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Grand Prince St. Vladimir the Great, Patriarch Kirill wrote to Presidents Putin and Poroshenko to call for peace to honour the memory of the “Baptizer of the Holy Rus, who laid down the foundations of the spiritual unity between the Russian and Ukrainian people, who taught us Christian love and forgiveness.”<sup>13</sup> Ukraine has been a political battle ground for centuries, with Orthodoxy being caught in the middle of this conflict. This is owing to the fact that religion is not merely a spiritual matter, but also

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<sup>11</sup> *Russia Wants an Investigation on Violations of Rights of Serbs in Kosovo*, Serbian Orthodox Church, [http://www.spc.rs/eng/russia\\_wants\\_investigation\\_violations\\_rights\\_serbs\\_kosovo](http://www.spc.rs/eng/russia_wants_investigation_violations_rights_serbs_kosovo), 2 November 2011 (accessed 9 August 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Cicowlas, O., *Ukrainian Question Divides Orthodox World*, The Moscow Times, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/ukrainian-question-divides-orthodox-world-53509>, 1 August 2016 (accessed 1 August 2016).

<sup>13</sup> *Patriarch Kirill Launches Anti-War Appeal to Putin, Poroshenko on the Eve of Russian Christianisation Day*, Interfax Religion, <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=12209>, 27 July 2015 (accessed 31 July 2015).

encompasses secular identity and political influence in a socially and politically volatile region. There is a lot at stake, both politically and for Orthodoxy.

## CONCLUSION

The ROC plays an active role in global affairs, especially within the context of a conflict or post-conflict situation and in lobbying their value and norm based visions for society to secular political bodies. The geographic focus of the ROC seems to be aligned towards Europe, the Former Soviet Union, the Middle East and North Africa. In addition to working with governments, including the Russian government, they do cooperate and collaborate with other religious bodies. There seems to be an increasing level of political pressure applied, which is at times offset by long standing theological and canonical considerations. The personal political ties that were created during the Soviet times are gradually eroding with time and circumstances. This was noted and acknowledged in a face to face interview with a priest at the Russian Orthodox Church's Department for External Church Relations several years ago. However, there are new ties being created, such as the diplomatic representation in Brussels and the improving relations with the Roman Catholic Church.

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