



Political Ideology and Religious Tolerance in Today's Russia by Pavel Bayov¹

Russia's democratic institutions are seriously threatened. Primary sources of this threat are not only the Russian government's abandonment of liberal reforms; nationalistic, "extreme-right" movements; or the "authoritarian psychology" of many Russians as elaborated in Theodor Adorno's famous research describing a typical "authoritarian personality" found in many societies. A far more dangerous threat to Russia's budding democratic institutions, I believe, originates from the Russian Orthodox Church and its hierarchs. I dare say that the Church has somewhat paradoxically become the torch-bearer of Russia's Communist legacy, subsuming the role of the Communist Party in the monopolization of an often xenophobic "purely Russian" popular ideology. In the Cold War being waged by the Church, an ideological Iron Curtain is being drawn in an attempt to shut out all "non-traditional," "alien" religions. For example, a common Church slogan promoting its supreme place as Russia's "official" religion is reminiscent of patriarchal, "us versus them" Soviet-era propaganda: "This Motherland is our traditional ecumenical territory. Never cross the line!" If we are condemned to witness the emergence of a new authoritarian regime in Russia, it will inevitably be actively engaged with Russia's "most traditional" Church.

Most disturbing is the overt manner with which the Church lobbies Russia's executive powers and manages to attract more than its fair share of national media praise, while President Vladimir Putin unambiguously demonstrates his religious preferences. In addition to the above-mentioned Communist legacy, the reasons for Russia's cozy Church-state relations and lack of concern for religious freedom are many, including the Orthodox Church's historically jealous rivalry with other confessions, namely Protestantism, Catholicism, and the Russian Old Believers; imperfect Russian legislation and practice protecting religious freedom and ensuring the separation of church and state; and problems of incompetence and weak civil consciousness among media representatives. Last but not least, whether as Cold War arch-enemies or post-Cold War allies, the powerful in Russia and the United States have studied each other's policies for decades. As the influence on U.S. policy makers of both the "war on terror" and the Christian right agenda grows, so does the convenient cooperation between Russian policy makers and Church hierarchs.

A society's protection and even promotion of religious diversity can be an insightful barometer of both civil society and open society. Threats to plurality and social openness also tend to threaten religious freedom. There are some 200 religious confessions and denominations in Russia today (compared with about 250 in the United States), and reducing them to a common demonimator would be a virtually impossible task. The founders of American democracy were fully aware of the importance of the protection of religious freedom when they enshrined this protection in the First Amendment to the American Constitution. Yet in Russia, actual practice runs counter to the legal ban on espousing religious superiority and the affirmation that "all religious organizations are separated from the State and equal before the Law" (see "Law on Freedom of Worship and Religious Organizations," Items 3 and 4, 1997). In addition to the extraordinary media attention lavished on the Church and its activities, the above-mentioned legislation is not backed up by any implementation mechanism and is severely limited by the "fifteen years" rule, according to which a religious organization can be officially registered ONLY after it is able to document its existence in Russia for not less than fifteen years (Item 11, 1999 following a review of the 1997 Law by the Constitutional Court).

The current trend in Russia to blame all failed reforms on the so-called "problem of Liberalism" also serves to strengthen the Russian Church-State monopoly. This "problem" is discussed broadly in academic circles,

¹ Pavel Bayov is an International Policy Fellow. More details of his current research can be found at <http://www.policy.hu/bayov>

media, and among government officials, and the character of the discussion is disturbing. Some experts say that the poor socio-economical situation that Russia currently finds itself in emerged entirely as a result of the "wrong direction" of reforms undertaken during the last 15 years. By "wrong direction" the pundits mean, as a rule, the liberalization of economics. They claim that Russia's failed economic liberalization has proven that Liberalism is not consistent with Russian mentality and traditions and therefore not suitable for Russian society. Moreover, Liberalism and all those associated with Liberalism are primarily responsible for Russia's unsuccessful development and present circumstances.

Blaming Liberalism and Liberals is natural enough. It is a common human reaction, especially by those in power, to blame something or someone else when the things become worse and worse. But in Russia I believe the ever-increasing cries of the anti-Liberalists in government, media and academic circles is a semi-coordinated political campaign aimed at creating yet another diversion shielding the Russian executive from criticism about its increasingly authoritarian tendencies (not to mention those of the Church). Certain demands were made by some Russian authorities to a number of well-positioned actors who carry out their mission according to the old rules—they orchestrate an ultimately futile, tragic-comic game of "playing possum" with all of society, including themselves, targeting a Russian elite who now define themselves more by corporate interests than ideological preferences.

Of course what the anti-Liberalists fail (or refuse) to recognize is that true economic liberalization has never occurred in Russia. The same people who blame Liberalism for all of the country's ills claim that the most suitable ideology for Russians is Conservatism. That is, a special, narrowly conceived Russian brand of Conservatism, back by the Orthodox Church of course, and involving more aggressive politics toward the U.S. and the West and Russia's "reasonable isolation" (i.e. protectionism in favor of current of the economic and political monopolies). The Russian brand of Conservatism even promotes the development of the so-called "military mind" of the Russian people by introducing education in "traditional Russian religions" in Russian schools (the assumed connections between traditional religions and military thinking are anyone's guess). Such proposals are seriously considered and discussed even among established and respected academics, political experts, journalists and writers (see for example the proceedings of the Moscow State University sociology conference "Sorokin Readings" held in December 2004).

As the Librarian of Congress and founder of the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars James H. Billington once said, "The human ability to create good made democracy possible, but his ability to create evil made it necessary." Recent efforts by the Russian executive and Orthodox Church leadership to consolidate political, economic and religious power has increased the potential for evil in Russia today. Such circumstances make independent policy analysis and the development of Russian democracy and democratic institutions, including those protecting religious freedom, all the more urgent.