The Russian Orthodox Church and the Putin Regime: Still Bedfellows?

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MARAT SHTERIN, APR 10 2012

The relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church leadership, society and politics has been thrown into sharp relief by events in the last four months. In the autumn and winter of 2011-12, the Church leadership, the Moscow Patriarchate (MP), was forced to declare its position on the challenge to Vladimir Putin's rule from organised oppositional groups and grassroots movements. Two months later, the MP had to tackle a challenge to its own authority and appeal to society for support. Faced with these dilemmas, are the Church and the regime still happy bedfellows?

Pussy Riots Punk Politics in a Sacred Space: a challenge to the Church

To rewind these two events, on February 21, a fortnight before the Russian presidential election, five women clad in colourful, tight-fitting dresses and balaclavas entered the Cathedral of Christ Saviour in Moscow and forced their way to the altar.[1] Bowing and crossing themselves, they performed a song called "Holy Sh*t", appealing to 'Holy Mother, Blessed Virgin' to 'chase Putin out', criticising the Church leaders for worshipping as a saint the former 'KGB boss who throws protesters into prison', and accusing Patriarch Kirill of 'believing in Putin rather than God'. The women belonged to the Pussy Riot punk group, whose name alludes to their militant feminism and is also a satire on the word 'pat*riot*', which features so prominently in the vocabulary of both Putin and the Church leaders. In the eyes of many Russians, on the other hand, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour symbolizes holiness and patriotism: built in the 1860s to commemorate Russia's victory over Napoleon, it was demolished by the Stalinist government in the 1930s, to be rebuilt after the collapse of the Soviet state six decades later. Its sanctuary is also believed to contain holy objects, such as particles of Christ's and the Virgin Mary's robes. The women, however, maintained that rather than blasphemy, their performance meant to reassert the sanctity of the place by drawing public attention to the unholy alliance between the Church leadership and the Putin regime, symbolised by sacrilegious activities within its confines, such as hosting political and business elites at banquets with lavish gastronomic indulgence and inappropriate entertainment.

Although the entire episode lasted for less than a minute (as the performers were promptly restrained by the security guards), its reverberations have spilt over from the sacred space into the public arena and become a major issue, hotly discussed in the press, on television, and, most conspicuously, via the 'new media'. As a public political challenge couched in religious terms and expressed in a sacred space, it forced the Church leadership not only to go public, but also to decide on what concepts to evoke in referring to it, and to what institutions to appeal in tackling it. Among the preferred options, two have been particularly salient: condemning the act in the strongest possible terms as blasphemy, and demanding the strongest possible legal punishment. The two key spokesmen for the MP – Patriarch Kirill and Father Vsevolod Chaplin, deputy head of external relations, – have described the episode respectively as the 'the Devil's intrigues'[2] and 'extremist activity.[3] While the women's lawyers pointed out that offences of this kind are normally punishable under administrative law by 15 days of community service, both leaders have spoken out against leniency, thus implying support for the prosecution's charge under Article 213.2 of the Russian Criminal Code, which refers to 'hooliganism' involving vandalism, material damage, or personal injury, and stipulates up to seven years imprisonment. F. Chaplin has also raised the possibility of charging the musicians under the Law on Combating Extremist Activity.[4]

Post-Election Protests and Church Leadership: the challenge of politics

While the feminist punk singers attempted to make a political statement in a religious space, religious leaders have carefully avoided responding to them in political terms. While the women's outrage called for the Church to take moral sides on political issues, the Church leadership has chosen to evoke a mixture of religiously inspired morality and secular law and to avoid overt references to politics. In some important ways, this is consistent with what happened a few months earlier, amidst the first wave of open opposition to the Putin regime. Already in September 2011, Putin and Medvedev's presidential deal shocked many Russians, as it reminded them that, among other things, they were an 'electorate'.[5] Among those concerned were more politically minded Orthodox priests whose indignant voices could be heard in the Russian 'blogosphere'.[6] In response, the MP reiterated its ban on the clergy's involvement in political activities, reminding them of the necessity to separate faith and politics. However, some priests interpreted morality as relevant to politics and actively took part in monitoring both the Parliamentary election campaign and voting on the 4th of December. That was the day when the Patriarch called on voters to 'make a choice that will lead to … the glory of God reflected in people's faith, their lives, and the glory of our Fatherland'. He warned against 'divisions and political prejudices' that can 'destroy the unity of national life'.[7]

For all its apparent integrity, the Patriarch's call had an easily detectable affinity with the very name of Putin's ruling party, United Russia, and its claim to be the guarantor of the country's unity and stability against the inevitability of their opponents' politics of destruction. This apparent cosines, however, was in an uneasy relationship to the Church leadership's official rhetoric of being above politics. The post-election allegations of widespread electoral fraud and the open political manifestations against it presented a difficult test: this was a moral as well as a political issue and ordinary clergy were already raising it.[8] At some point, it almost seemed that the Church was rising to the challenge, as F. Chaplin spoke about the legitimacy of people's grievances and the necessity of reforming the electoral system.[9] However, many commentators mistook this recognition for an expression of sympathy for the protestors' political stance and methods. The evidence suggests a rather different explanation: it was more of an appeal to the regime to do something to allay legitimate grievances, while warning the protestors against the dangers of engaging in public expression of disloyalty to the government.

Indeed, in one of his pronouncements, F. Chaplin drew direct parallels between the current events and the unrests of 1905, 1917, 1991 and 1993.[10] This line was further reinforced by the Patriarch himself, who after two weeks of silence on the demonstrations, reminded the Russians of the 'bloodbaths' of the twentieth century, caused by the desire to assert "petty, human, [and] negligible truths". He condemned those who continued to pursue their 'human truths' through 'information technologies', which directs public opinion away from the God's truth and causes ever-increasing bloodshed. He concluded by appealing to the 'heirs of great Russia' to learn from the past lessons, to avoid the mistakes of the 1917 and 1990s, and to refrain from 'actions that can destroy their lives and […] God's truth". [11] Yet, while warning against the dangers of anti-government protests, the Patriarch appealed to the government to 'trust people and contribute to […] dialogue and communication, to overcoming misunderstanding and contradictions in order that neither human temptations nor mistakes … could divide people'. What may have looked like empty rhetoric had a well-considered emphasis on the role of powers that be as the sole legitimate agent of political action. According to this logic, the protestors may have had a righteous cause, but their political activism was an anomaly, as the right and responsibility of rectifying inadequate governance lies with those who govern. While continuing to remind the rulers of the merits of political integrity and honesty,[12] on February 8, amidst the presidential election campaign, Patriarch Kirill called a meeting at Moscow's Danilov monastery, his residency, where leaders of the 'traditional religions' reasserted their allegiance to Putin, with the Patriarch himself referring to Putin's era as a 'miracle of God'.[13]

The Church and the Putin Regime: an elective affinity amidst the politics of uncertainty

There is some logic in the Church leadership's rhetoric of being above secular politics while at the same time becoming increasingly involved in Russia's political battles. Contrary to the common view, its close ties with Putin's regime are based on not only reciprocal political expediency, but also on an affinity between aspects of the Church's social doctrine and the (mal)functioning of post-Soviet democratic political institutions. In this doctrine, the Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church,[14]published in the early 1990s, Church intellectuals (including

F. Chaplin and the then Mitropolitan Kirill) elaborated the principles of its institutional reconstruction after the decades of Soviet devastation. While professing loyalty to democratic institutions and government, the document makes it clear that the Church should see the secular state and democracy as imperfect and inferior to God's law. An echo of this view can be easily detected in the Church leadership's persistent criticism of 'western democracy', 'secularism', the adverse impact of new information technologies, combined with references to the 'Russian tradition' of government that includes a corporatist state ('sobornost'), personalized power, and aversion to political dissent. It is then hardly surprising that the Church leadership's response to Pussi Riots has been almost a mirror image of Putin's reaction to the 2011 post-election protests and to the challenge from opponents to his presidency.[15]

In practical terms, this stance has meshed well with the post-soviet politics of uncertainty, in which highly personalized power relationships between business and political elites partly substituted for properly functioning institutions (democratic or otherwise). The Church has benefited from this situation in at least three ways. First, as a historically rooted institution whose claim to authority lies beyond politics, it has enjoyed a great deal of credibility with Russians, up to eighty per cent of whom identify themselves as Orthodox Christians. Second, this 'symbolic capital' contributed to the Church leadership's good personal relationships with key persons in the government and gave it a strong bargaining position in pursing its interests in a variety of issues, from restricting foreign and sectarian proselytism (1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations) to restituting Church property.[16] Third, it created commercial opportunities for some clergy at different hierarchical levels – from the highest echelons to parish priests. But claiming to be an independent religious institution with the highest moral authority in the land while becoming close to a regime of Putin's variety comes at a price, in particular when the moral foundations of the regime are directly challenged.

In the continuing absence of established political parties, institutions, and processes, public rallies and outlandish performances become channels and forms for expressing social grievances and aspirations. As they involve relatively small numbers, their deliberate theatricality and performative challenge are designed to amplify their message by triggering the interest of the mass media and the Internet. Neither the Church leadership nor the Putin regime is any longer in control of their own image making. Furthermore, their close links risk becoming millstones on each other's necks. The electoral fraud and Putin's responses to the protestors created a challenge for the Church leadership that eventually culminated in Pussy Riot. In turn, the official Church responses to the debacle in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour has provoked a backlash, with a string of revelations regarding Patriarch's and other clergy's personal morality, including their wealth and commercial interests.[17] The Church leadership has to date benefited from under-institutionalised Russian politics while denying its involvement in it and calling on Russians to observe the highest standards of morality. It is now called on by many politically active Russians, including some from within the Church, to behave in accordance with its own declared moral standards.

The high profile of the recent events points to both the significance of the Church in Russian public life and profound disagreements among Russians over its leadership's position on vital moral and political issues. While most show affinity with MP's support for the Putin regime and its aversion to leniency towards the offenders, an active minority protests, including some clergy. Some polls indicate that 46 cent of all respondents tend to side with the MP's hard line on Pussy Riots against 35 per cent of those who beg to differ.[18] The latest statement of the Church leadership leaves no one doubting that it rejects any criticism and regards its critics as 'anti-Christian forces' bent on a confrontation and pursuing a 'hidden political motive, including an anti-Russian one'.[19] The potential issue for Putin and his allies, then, is that the Church leadership is proving to be a dividing force that antagonizes a relatively small but active and politically significant minority. The question is whether Putin takes this as an opportunity to distance himself from the Church, or whether he latches onto this affinity between the MPs demonization of its critics and his own propensity to refer to his opponents as 'anti-Russian'?

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[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/21/world/europe/21iht-letter21.html

[4] http://themoscownews.com/news/20120322/189556126.html

[5] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/25/world/europe/medvedev-says-putin-will-seek-russian-presidency-in-2012.html?pagewanted=all

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