

Chapter 64

How Civic Is Russia's New Civil Religion and How Religious Is the Church?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter demonstrates how and why a shift in the balance between civic and religious elements of a civil religion can take place, using Russia as an illuminating case study. Post-Soviet Russia is used to demonstrate how religion can be utilized to reinforce national identity and the legitimacy of the political system in the face of their civic weaknesses. The chapter demonstrates how, eventually, the civic-democratic political model officially designated during Yeltsin's presidency gradually changed to a more religiously grounded one, albeit a model that is not fully recognized, during Putin's rule. Moreover, the Russian case allows us to differentiate between two possible levels of civil religion: an official and openly communicated secularism, and an established church religion, promoted by the establishment in more subtle but not necessarily less aggressive ways. It further shows that just as the state has to adopt religious features in order to be deified, religious institutions have themselves to become more secular to be suitable for adoption as the state's civil religion.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2014, in the midst of a Russian-Western standoff over the Ukrainian crisis, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov explained Western antagonism towards his country by Russia's return to the Orthodoxy and its "traditional spiritual values". Lavrov told the members of Russian Council on International Affairs that the West is trying to "impose a western scale of values on all ". He characterized that as one that is "becoming increasingly detached from its own Christian roots and is less susceptible to the religious feelings of people of other faiths" (*Zapad otdalaetsia ot Rossii*, 2014). His words echoed Vladimir Putin's earlier sermon-like statement, made in September 2013 at the prestigious *Valdai* discussion club:

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We see that many Euro-Atlantic countries have moved away from their roots, including [their] Christian values. [...] Policies are being pursued that place a multi-child family and a same-sex partnership, a faith in God and a belief in Satan, on the same level. Excesses of political correctness reach the point where registration of parties, whose aim is the propaganda of pedophilia, is seriously discussed. People in many European countries are afraid or ashamed to talk about their religious affiliation. [...] This is the model that is aggressively being imposed all over the world. I am convinced this is a direct path to degradation and primitivization, to a profound demographic and moral crisis (Putin, 2013).

To hear such declarations from a former KGB man and a polished diplomat with a western-oriented education, who was brought up in the heart of the Soviet establishment, must leave the average observer at a loss. Indeed, Russia has come a long way since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but it has not necessarily reached the place that was initially anticipated. It seems as if Russia is on a historical spiral, recreating and reprocessing much of its recent and more distant past, but not fully departing from its previous social patterns. Accordingly, Putin's and Lavrov's statements sound as if the Cold War is back, but the Communist ideology fuelling it has been replaced with an Orthodox creed similar to the Slavophilism of the late Imperial era.

This chapter will demonstrate how and why a shift in the balance between civic and religious elements of a civil religion can take place, using Russia as an illuminating case study. Post-Soviet Russia is used to demonstrate how religion can be utilized to reinforce national identity and the legitimacy of the political system in the face of their civic weaknesses. The chapter will demonstrate how, eventually, the officially declared civic-democratic political model changes to a more religiously grounded one. At the same time, we will see that increasing long-term political involvement takes its toll on religious authority, turning it into a more secular and earthly institution, eventually diminishing the public's reverence and the church's societal influence.

The Russian case also suggests a certain theoretical novelty. It allows us to recognize and differentiate between two possible levels of civil religion: an official and openly promoted secularism, and an established church religion, promoted by the establishment in more subtle but not necessarily less aggressive ways. The latter enables the government to project popularly desired but controversial messages that do not formally bind it. In other words, this tacit civil religion allows the regime to enjoy its political benefits without bearing most of its public costs.

The chapter consists of four parts. The first offers a short historic overview of Russia's Church-State relations; the second addresses the place of religion during Yeltsin's rule, in a context of Russia's democratic consolidation and early nation-building efforts. The third and central part of the chapter provides a detailed analysis of the changing face of the State-Religion relationship during Putin's rule. Naturally, special attention is focused on the relationship between officialdom and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). In the fourth part, the author presents his conclusions and analyses of the described trends; he further hypothesizes on possible developments and scenarios regarding the State-Religion relationship in Russia and the future of its civic-religious balance.

HISTORIC OVERVIEW

It is impossible to adequately understand the current Russian religious resurgence without carefully looking into Russia's history and the bases of Russian national and political identity. Although religion's ability

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