



RUSSIA AND EURASIA STUDIES PROGRAMME

Is Russia really on the road to theocracy? An exploration of church-state relations

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SINCE THE START of its illegal invasion of Ukraine, Russia has increased its trade and military cooperation with Iran. Many analysts assume that the Russian and Iranian regimes share certain “traditional” or conservative values, making cooperation more likely. Is it also the case that Russia is beginning to resemble Iran’s theocracy, or “regime of religion,” as the scholar Mehdi Khalaji has called it?

The Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, has assumed an increasingly prominent role in official Russian state propaganda narratives and in Russia’s war machine via the mili-

tary clergy. This is an insufficiently studied aspect of the Putin regime that deserves attention, though it is not a panacea for all the Russian puzzles analysts need to address.

According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, theocracy is “government by divine guidance or by officials regarded as divinely guided.” Is it possible that Russia could be moving towards a situation resembling theocracy? To explore this question, I use a slightly adapted version of Khalaji’s market-metaphoric model (hereafter, the model), drawn from his 2011 paper examining Iran’s Islamic theocracy. The model is outlined below.

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THE MODEL

Five criteria, adapted from Khalaji's paper on Iran's theocracy, may help us assess whether Russia is moving in a similar direction:

1. Religion is redefined to suit the purposes of the political leadership;
2. The political religious order is enforced by specialised institutions;
3. There are ambitions to monopolise the production of the good of salvation;
4. The political leadership is, at least in part, recruited from a bureaucratised clergy;
5. The above conditions mean that a state-led market regime of religion with customers (believers), a currency (state certificate for preachers), and the state as a central banker (enforcement institutions) is emerging.

Is today's Russia beginning to resemble the model? Let us explore the model's five criteria.

1. Religion re-defined

Without a doubt, Patriarch Kirill's leadership since 2009 has redefined Russian Orthodox theology to align with Vladimir Putin's secular political objectives.²

In brief, Russian Orthodoxy has been injected with a dose of politics in the form of the ideology of *Russkii mir*, the "Russian world," a false doctrine that is attractive to many Orthodox believers, but lacks grounding in canonical texts. *Russkii mir* is instrumental in the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, (ROC MP) legitimisation of Russia's war against Ukraine.

An example of this is the claim that the war against Ukraine is "holy," which was expressed in an ecclesiastical document about *Russkii mir* on 27 March 2024.³ The document is an "instruction" addressed to Russia's legislative and executive authorities, which indicates the ROC MP's self-image and the close partnership with the secular powers. Nothing in the document was particularly surprising, but compiling the ideas into a unified text creates a type of guarantee of legitimacy for secular policies of war and conquest. It strengthens the ROC

MP's role as an ideology producer and enhances the idea that the war is about religion. It claims that the "Holy War" in Ukraine (which the document admits began in 2014) is justified by its goal to "liberate" the Russian people from the "criminal Kiev regime" supported by the "collective West" that has fallen into "Satanism."

2. Enforcement institutions

Although Russia clearly does not have a direct equivalent to Iran's notorious morality police, the enforcement function does exist in other forms, albeit with limited reach in society. For instance, in practice, the judiciary's criminal courts are tasked with the enforcement of the political religious order in Russia by reviewing cases of insults against believers, as well as of clergy who deviate from the official theology of the ROC MP.

Since 4 March 2022, after the introduction of the so-called laws on "fake news" and "discrediting" of the Russian armed forces, the criminal courts have been used to punish clergy who do not toe the Patriarchate's political religious line. An example of an "offence" is to pray for peace rather than for victory during mass. Although not designed specifically to enforce the religious order in Russia, these laws and courts are effectively functioning as such. An example of their use is the 86-year-old accused of "discrediting" the army after writing an online article in which he expressed anti-war sentiments and claimed that the Kremlin is "satanic." He thereby effectively revised the Russian state's entire propaganda narrative.

There are, however, more specialised institutions of enforcement. A central enforcement agency of the political religious order in the Russian armed forces is the Main Military Political Directorate of the Ministry of Defence (MMPD; *Glavnoe voennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*). It is the functional heir to the Soviet military-political department, whose function survived after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and regained its organisational status as the MMPD in 2018. A key difference is that while its Soviet predecessor enforced an atheistic worldview, the MMPD actively encourages and enforces the current political religious order.

The MMPD manages the Ministry of Defence's work with uniformed service members who are religious believers. The military clergy, recreated in 2009, is the main spiritual propaganda tool in the MMPD's toolbox. Although the MMPD is technically secular — it

² While the Church has indeed repositioned itself on specific issues to align with the political leadership, it has also, since at least 2012, presented a social conservative ideology of "traditional values" to the state.

³ Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, 27 March, 2024.

is not an ecclesiastical entity supervised canonically by the ROC MP — it is powered by the ROC MP's theology via the military clergy, which has been managed by the MMPD since 30 January 2020.

While the MMPD enforces the political religious order in the armed forces, it is beginning to reach beyond the regular armed forces. In spring 2024, *TASS* reported that a new department for work with religious associations will be created in the National Guard (*Rosgvardiia*). An agreement with the ROC MP had already been signed. The new department is to be subordinated to the MMPD.

A signpost of further theocratisation would be the creation of a morality police (or the emergence of the same function in other institutions).

3. Monopoly on salvation

For years, the ROC MP has held a dominant role in Russian religious affairs and effectively began to resemble a national church after the constitutional amendments in 2020. Being a de facto national church signifies a near monopoly on the “production of the good of salvation in the market of religion” (continuing Khalaji's metaphor) in Russia. This claim is supported not only by Kirill's programmatic assertion in a sermon on 25 September 2022, where he lamented the “internecine warfare” in Ukraine, but also by his statement that anyone who, “driven by a sense of duty,” is killed in battle in Ukraine “sacrifices himself for others,” which the ROC MP believes “washes away all the sins that man has committed.” Given what we know of Russian atrocities and looting in Ukraine, this is a chilling message that brings to mind recent images of Hamas and the Islamic State, or further back in history, of Iran during the protracted Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. Just as war has shaped Iran's market of religion, it could also shape Russia's.

4. Political leaders recruited from the clergy

Although this criterion has not been fulfilled, as no clergy hold key posts in the Russian government, the Orthodox faith nonetheless fulfils the function of a “unifying cultural factor” within the Russian ruling elite. A concrete example is the Minister of Defence, Andrei Belousov, who, according to leaked emails, begins each day with a prayer. It is also likely that the former Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, a close friend of President Vladimir Putin, is an Orthodox believer. He was secretly baptised during the Soviet period at the age of five in the town of Stakhanov, in Lugansk, present-day Ukraine. Regarding Vladimir Putin's faith, the scholar Dima Adamsky has convincingly argued that Putin holds

a sincere personal belief. Although there is not strictly a state clergy in Russia, and no clergy hold political positions in the Kremlin, it is worth noting that even in theocratic Iran, not all leaders are clergy.

A signpost of theocratisation would be if ROC MP clergy were appointed as ministers in the government.

5. The market of religion

As noted above, the ROC MP has a dominant position in Russia, and the market of religion is thus still mostly a matter of ambition. There are clear signs that the ROC MP strives towards the monopolisation of salvation, which is evidenced by, among other things, the Patriarch's recent comments on what constitutes Russian national identity (having Orthodox faith) and behaviour (celebrating Orthodox mass), and his notion that Ukrainians and Belarusians are actually Russians. This movement has become increasingly evident in recent years but has long been in the making.

There are important caveats, however. Although the Church is financially supported by the state and can be seen as being in symbiosis with the state, there is no state certificate for preachers. In Iran, the preacher's certificate opens up opportunities for doing business and making corrupt deals. However, there is no doubt that the Russian clergy has also benefited financially from corrupt deals, just as the clergy in Iran has. A by now famous sign of corrupt incomes is the 2012 discovery of a photo of the Patriarch Kirill on the ROC MP's website, in which someone had photoshopped away a 30,000-dollar *Breguet* wristwatch but forgot to remove its reflection in a mahogany table.

Notably, there may be a movement to create a state certificate for preachers. The Moscow Theological Academy and Seminar, where the clergy are taught, is subordinate to the ROC MP. However, on 5 February 2021, the postgraduate department of the Academy received state accreditation. This implies that the Russian state may be closing in on the ordination of priests.

Despite the notable absence of a currency (state certificate) in the market of religion, there are enforcement institutions within the religious political order, and the ROC MP clearly wishes to expand its customer base (number of potential believers). In November 2023, Kirill said in a sermon that the word “Russian” also includes Ukrainians and Belarusians and that belonging to the Russian people means to have “a deep Orthodox faith.” Given that the ROC MP is the de facto national church in Russia, the above claims could be seen as both visionary and programmatic, especially since they are made by a primary beneficiary of an expanding

Orthodox market of religion. Continuing with the market metaphor, the notion that the ROC MP seeks to expand its customer base is further supported by remarkable statements in an ecclesiastical document published on 27 March 2024, which outlines the “spiritual space of Holy Russia”:

From a spiritual and moral point of view, the special military operation [against Ukraine] is a Holy War, in which Russia and its people, [are] defending the unified spiritual space of Holy Russia. . .⁴

CONCLUSION

To summarise the results: (1) Religion in Russia is adapted to serve secular political goals; (2) Enforcement institutions, while not all-encompassing, do exist in disguised forms; (3) Today, the ROC MP is a de facto national church, which means that in Russia there is a near monopoly on salvation; (4) Orthodox faith is a unifying cultural factor among the Russian ruling elite, a sign of loyalty to the state; (5) Despite some elements being in place, the market of religion is more of an ambition than a reality. What lies ahead for church-state relations in Russia?

Unexpectedly, the *modus operandi* of Russian police in handling detainees in serious crime cases indicates the regime’s need for faith-based legitimisation of their actions. After more than two years of genocidal war against Ukraine, today’s brutalised regime is not only not even trying to hide its actions, but has also filmed and broadcasted images of detained Crocus City Hall terror suspects being beaten and tortured in March 2024. Previously, the torture of

detainees was widely known but publicly denied. This mediaeval-style spectacle showcases the regime’s brutality, and its lack of remorse implies that “the gloves are off.”

In other words, this means that the Putin regime is more closely tied than ever to its religious symbolic capital. Although religion is far from being the only important factor in Russian affairs, without the Church’s blessings and the guise of the Gospel, the Russian state would be little more than a state apparatus hijacked by a criminal group. (The latter is a conclusion I share with Jaanika Merilo, who made similar inferences in a recent publication.)

Although Russia’s state ideology remains a work in progress, it is clear that the role of a political Orthodox theology is a key resource in its creation and that the head of the Church, Patriarch Kirill, is a national propagandist. To illustrate this fact, on 3 November 2023, Putin awarded Kirill with the Head of State Prize for his contribution to strengthening the unity of the Russian nation. This signals that Russia’s emerging state ideology is a mix of theology, pseudo-theology, and pseudo-historically motivated neoimperialist narratives.

Signposts of further theocratisation to watch for include, for instance, the creation of a morality police (or similar functions emerging in other institutions) and the appointment of clergy as government ministers.

Although a full convergence with the Iranian regime of religion is unlikely, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, is likely to grow in importance for Putin’s regime in the years to come. ■

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⁴ Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, 27 March, 2024.