

The Church and Religious Diplomacy in Russia's Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT Religion is more than a national phenomenon, for it is concurrently a fundamental element of transnational identity. Accordingly, a state might be able to extend its soft power to its coreligionist neighbors by using religious ideas as the instruments of foreign policy. Russia shares Orthodox Christianity with some of its post-Soviet neighbors which were completely subject to policies dictated by Moscow until the dissolution of the USSR. Despite the independence of these former Soviet Republics, Russia still enjoys a high degree of influence in the post-Soviet space. Consolidating Moscow's grip on the near abroad is one of the main strategic guiding principles of Kremlin's foreign policy. When the communist era came to a dramatic end, Russian policymakers searched for an alternative to the ideology of communism and became aware of the potential role that Christianity could play in realizing their foreign policy goals. The main objectives of the authors are to answer the following research questions: 1- What is the role of the church as a source of soft power in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation? and 2- How effective is Russia's religious diplomacy (the use of religion as a non-coercive instrument) in Ukraine and Georgia? In their research hypothesis, they assert that Moscow's religious diplomacy has increased its influence in Ukraine and Georgia; but religion has contributed more to Russia's hard power than its soft power.

Keywords Church; Foreign Policy; Hard Power; Orthodox Christianity; Religious Diplomacy; Russian Federation; Soft Power; Soviet

Introduction

Religion is one of the cultural assets of Russia which has provided Kremlin with a means to exert influence on the Orthodox Christians of Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (Billt, 2011: 356-366). The importance of religious diplomacy in Russia is partly due to sharing orthodox beliefs with a segment of the population in the adjacent countries and partly due to the post-Soviet transformation which have strongly confirmed the obsolescence of the

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communist ideology. Moreover, Russia's failure to achieve the status of an ordinary Western country has paved the way for more solidarity between Russian conservatives and nationalists. Thus, many religious associations have been formed to support Putin's anti-Western rhetoric. Such a situation has spilled over into countries such as Ukraine and Georgia which are home to several groups that feel sympathy towards Russia (Lutsevych, 2016: 22-23). About 90% of the Georgian population adhere to Christianity, and 89% of whom are Orthodox. Whereas, Christians account for 78% of the Ukrainian population, including 90% Orthodox (Pew Research Center, 2017: 20). Ukraine and Georgia with their large Christian population are two of the main targets of Russia's religious diplomacy.

In the post-Cold War era, religion has been turned into a powerful component of the inter-state relations between the post-Soviet states because of the prestigious Orthodox Church of Russia. Hence, Kremlin is willing to use Church capacities to increase and apply its soft power (Petrenko, 2012: 7-8). The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is as concerned as the Kremlin about the impact of the external events on its followers in Russia and elsewhere. Consequently, this religious institution considers itself entitled to be involved in formulating and conducting Russia's foreign policy, even though Russia ought to be a secular state according to its constitution.

Theoretical Framework

According to foreign policy expert Joseph Nye, power which is the ability to influence others to achieve one's desired goals, can be realized by coercion, payment or attraction (Nye, 2013). The latter is associated with soft power. Attraction makes others want what you want. In other words, soft power determines the preferences of others (Nye, 2008: 95). Accordingly, it is occasionally possible to influence the behaviors of other actors without issuing orders. If they believe in the legitimacy of your goals, they will be persuaded to act as you want without being coerced or rewarded (Nye, 2004: 2).

Hard power resources, which are observable and measurable, include population size, territory, the size of the national economy, military forces, technology, etc (Zahran and Ramos, 2010:17). Soft power resources, which are not directly observable, are more diffused and more difficult to use (Nye, 2004: 99). Nye holds that public

diplomacy is a method by which states can promote and use their soft power (Nye, 2008: 94). Public diplomacy is conducted through creating and strengthening communications with the citizens of the target countries. Public diplomacy can take a variety of forms such as religious diplomacy, science and technology diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, sport diplomacy and so forth. The main goal of religious diplomacy is expanding communications among coreligionists in different countries.

The Role of Soft Power in Russia's Foreign Policy

In early 2000s, Russia faced a wave of color revolutions in its “near abroad” and noticed the vulnerability of its regional power. As a result, soft power gained a prominent place on Moscow's foreign policy agenda. Furthermore, the demonstrations against the results of the parliamentary elections and chaos in Ukraine forced the Kremlin to pay more attention to the use of soft power.

According to Putin, soft power is composed of instruments and methods to achieve foreign policy goals. These instruments are non-military and are designed to exert influence. Alexy Dolinsky holds that Putin's interpretation is different from Nye's interpretation of soft power. American scholars hold that attraction and persuasion are pivotal components of soft power. Whereas Russian officials emphasize the importance of the leverages of influence (Dolinsky, 2012).

Although terms such as soft power have entered Russian foreign policy jargon, Western understanding of soft power cannot help us to analyze Russia's foreign policy actions. Moscow's activities can be described as "soft coercion" instead of soft power (Lutsevych, 2016: 4), particularly in Ukraine and Georgia where Russia's soft power have been practiced in an unappealing manner. Russia has been accused of using a mixture of soft power capability and militarism in Ukraine (Lazescu, 2017).

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is a very valuable instrument of expanding the Kremlin's soft power. The ROC supports and completes the role of the hard power resources (Lazescu, 2017). In other words, Russia's religious diplomacy, which must inherently be aimed at promoting and applying soft power among the Orthodox coreligionists, has been turned into a foreign policy instrument for the

justification of Russia's maneuvers in its near abroad. Using Joseph Nye's conceptualization, one should say that Russia's soft power is enhancing its hard power (Nye, 2013).

The Role of the ROC in Russian Politics and Government

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was officially founded in 998 AD and became independent from the Roman Church in 1859 (Petrenko, 2013: 3). The ROC has benefited from friendly relations with the Russian state over the centuries, and the two institutions have experienced a less strained relationship in comparison to other predominantly Christian countries. Before the October Revolution in 1917, Russia was a "denominational state" based on an obligatory religion. During the Soviet rule, Christianity was marginalized due to the atheist beliefs of the Marxists (Sebentsov, 2011: 48).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the secular nature of the Russian state was strongly confirmed by the constitution. Since 2000, the ROC has been gradually allowed to play a role in the political life of the country to such an extent that has made some observers question the Kremlin's commitment to secularism and the separation of religion and state (Biltt, 2011: 367; Zhdanov, 2016: iv). Such warnings may be prone to exaggerate the truth. In fact, the Kremlin and the ROC cooperate because of their shared interests. They both need the support of one another to realize the goals of reunifying the Orthodox Church in the post-Soviet space and winning political support of the Orthodox nations in Russia's near abroad (Sebentsov, 2011: 51). The ROC has zones of influence around the world including in the former Soviet territories (Savin, 2015). The ROC has jurisdiction over approximately 220 Dioceses or Eparchies, and has special envoys in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Brussels, the United Nation in New York and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg (Patrenko, 2012: 4-5).

In 2007, the "Act of Canonical Communion of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia" (ROCOR) was signed by the representatives of the Russian state and the ROC (Rimestad, 2015: 233). Since then, a new period in Russia's foreign policy has begun which is characterized by the concerted efforts to consolidate the "Russian World" and join forces with the ROC to support the compatriots abroad (Payne, 2010: 712). The "Russian

World” is an idea to promote and reinforce Russian culture, language and values around the world, particularly among the Russian speakers abroad. The “Russian World” idea is being propagated by a government-sponsored NGO called the Russian World Foundation or Ruskiy Mir Foundation¹ (RMF), which cooperates with the ROC to achieve its goals (Biltt, 2011: 385). In other words, the ROC acts as an agent of the RMF (Moiseyenko, 2017: 104), because the underlining assumption of the formation of the “Russian World” and its associated foundation is spiritual unity of the Orthodox nations (Wawrzonek, 2014: 758).

There are several factors contributing to the prominent role of the ROC. For instance, in the Russian National Security Concept of 2000, “spiritual security” was mentioned. Although the ROC was not directly discussed, the necessity of cooperating with the ROC to effectively deal with the challenges and threats against spiritual security including the weakening of spiritual values and cultural expansionism of the rival countries was implicitly addressed (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2000: 3-6). Thus, the relevance of low politics for high politics in Russia has led to the increased involvement of the ROC in politics (Lomagin, 2012). Not surprisingly, this religious establishment played a prominent role during the crises in Georgia and Ukraine. A turning point in promoting the role of the ROC in Russia occurred in 2008, when Patriarch Kirill who was formerly in charge of the ROC’s department of foreign relations and had been a longtime representative of the Moscow Patriarchate at the World Council of Churches, improved the ROC’s relations with the state (Freeze, 2017). Such a situation has led to intensifying influence of the ROC in Russia’s foreign policy to an unprecedented extent. The ROC is involved in the formulation and execution of the Kremlin’s foreign policy (Biltt, 2011: 365).

Kirill arranged for the reclaiming of the Church properties which were seized by the communists during the Soviet era, defending Russian compatriots abroad, and supporting the idea of a multipolar world (Lomagin, 2012). The ROC seems to share the Kremlin’s geopolitical perspective. Patriarch Kirill holds that the “Russian World” concept points to a type of spiritual identity of Eastern Slav civilization (Petro, 2015). His point of view is inherently geopolitical, because

¹ Фонд “Русский мир”

Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova belong to Eastern Slavic civilization.

It is obvious that Russian government is deliberately co-opting the Church in foreign relations. In 2011, for instance, Medvedev admitted that Russian government failed to support compatriots abroad. He added that the Kremlin was counting on the ROC to do this task (Ruskiy Mir, 2011). In addition, the ROC is prepared to take part in supporting the Christians and Russians abroad, and even wants to pave the way for the creation a multipolar world through cooperation with the state (Petrenko, 2012: 5).

Russia's Religious Diplomacy in Ukraine and Georgia

The Religious Diplomacy of the Russian Federation has gained momentum because of the significant political role of the ROC. Thus, Orthodox Christianity is now one of the soft power resources of Russia. Since the ROC is an important social institution which represents a major component of Russian culture and values, it is believed to be one of the institutions capable of coping with the post-Soviet identity crisis (Petrenko, 2012: 7-8).

Russia's religious role in Ukraine must be discussed as one of the instruments of hybrid warfare. According to the 2014 statistics of the Ukrainian Department of Culture, there were 762 Orthodox religious organizations under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate in Donetsk (Vasin, 2014). The Russian Federation's foreign policy concept in 2013 facilitated cooperation between Russian institutions and these orthodox religious groups, and for the first time mentioned that civil society agents in its near abroad can contribute to the attainment of Russia's foreign policy objectives (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013). The Russian World Foundation has arranged an appropriate institutional framework for the activities of the pro-Russian groups in Ukraine. The ideological support for these groups is provided by the ROC. Thus, the ROC is not an independent actor in Ukraine and acts in a coordinated manner with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian World Foundation (Kuzio, 2018: 465).

Since 2014, the so-called defenders of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) have come into existence in the Eastern parts of Ukraine. These groups encompass

Cossack forces and act violently on religious grounds. The ROC has formed a special Synodal Committee to cooperate with the Cossacks. According to the human rights activists in Ukraine, this committee is a xenophobic group claiming to be the defender of the Orthodox people and the values of the “Russian World”. The ROC in coordination with this committee organized the Gnomes paramilitary camp to train the young Cossacks in Crimea (International Partnership for Human Rights, 2015: 8-10).

The results of a survey conducted in 2017 showed that only 22% of the people of Ukraine and 50% of Georgians think that Western influence must be balanced by a powerful Russia (Pew Research Center, 2017: 127). Thus, one may conclude that wherever Russia has tried to use its soft power to achieve its politico-military objectives, public confidence in the role of Russia has declined among the Orthodox coreligionists. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian Church was under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Kyiv Patriarchate was founded in the aftermath of the disintegration of the USSR, but its independence was not recognized by the ROC and other Orthodox Churches of the world (Kozelsky, 2014: 226). The independent-minded Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) made the ROC feel insecure. As a result, the ROC was encouraged to act aggressively against the UOC. In contrast, a friendly relationship between the ROC and the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) have culminated in a more lenient attitude of the ROC towards Georgia (Sagan, 2015: 17).

Russia counts on the Georgian Orthodox Church to counterbalance Tbilisi’s pro-Western orientation. The Kremlin needs to work with the ROC to take advantage of the GOC’s position in the country. The five-day war of 2008 between Russia and Georgia represents a successful instance of such cooperation. The Kremlin exploited the ROC as an instrument for deescalating the crisis and normalizing political relationship. Although the GOC is not dependent on the ROC, it does not support the pro-Western tendencies of the Georgian political establishment and opposes the expansion of Western values. A survey shows that the GOC was the most trusted institution in Georgia in 2014 (Kakachia, 2014: 2). However, the Georgian people’s confidence in the Orthodox Church does not automatically turn into support for Russia. According to another survey, 51% of the Georgian respondents believed that Russia was the biggest threat for their homeland (Lukyanov, 2012).

The five-day war of 2008 was a turning point for Russia's policy towards the near abroad. Despite the full-fledged military conflict between the two neighbors, the ROC and the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) managed to maintain friendly relations and to act as the only diplomatic channel between Tbilisi and Moscow (Conroy, 2015: 621). Patriarch Kirill submitted the letter of Patriarch Ilia of Georgia to Putin and Medvedev (Lomagin, 2012). The ROC and the GOC were remarkably effective in mitigating political tensions after the war (Simons, 2016: 6). The ROC never questioned the consequences of the August War which led to the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. Nevertheless, the ROC has maintained a mild and flexible attitude towards Georgia since 2008. Although Abkhazian clergies had been traditionally independent-minded, the ROC reiterated its support for the continuity of the jurisdiction of the Georgian Orthodox Church over Abkhazian and South Ossetian Diocese (Kornilov & Makarychev, 2015: 248).

Some observers hold that the ROC wanted to prevent the GOC from recognizing the UOC by such sympathetic acts (Kakachia, 2014: 4). When Patriarch Ilia refused to recognize the independence of the UOC, the ROC got what it wanted in return for its leniency. Likewise, the Kremlin has been wise to take advantage of the GOC politically. In 2013, Putin praised the efforts and achievements of Patriarch Ilia during his 35 years of leadership in the GOC (Putin Meeting with, 2013). Russian religious diplomacy in Georgia has been more conformist in comparison with its actions in Ukraine. Furthermore, the ROC cannot be characterized as an independent religious institution and has embarked on consolidating Russia's military victories in Ukraine and Georgia.

Conclusion

The Russian Federation is defined as a secular state by its constitution. Nonetheless, the secular nature of state cannot be precisely explained by its interactions with the religious institutions in its neighboring countries. On the one hand, Orthodox Christianity is an irrefutable element of the Russian national identity. On the other hand, numerous sets of interests that the state shares with the ROC have challenged the principle of the separation of church and state, especially when it comes to the use of soft power. One of the main features of the ROC since

1991 has been its transnational nature and its special status in the post-Soviet territories. The government of the Russian Federation has reduced the main objectives of the ROC to its geopolitical aspirations in Ukraine and Georgia. The ROC and the Russian state have been working in a mutually-beneficial manner in the post-Soviet years. The post-communist Russian government has supported the ROC in its domestic activities, and the ROC has helped the achievement of the Kremlin's foreign policy goals. Russian religious diplomacy as a soft power instrument of foreign policy has greatly contributed to Russia's hard power.

The ROC's invisible hands have been used to restore the status of Russian traditional identity as a rival to Western identity, and to reinforce regional integration in the post-Soviet space as an aspiration which the Kremlin is pursuing under the banner of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Eurasian Economic Union. The two political and religious institutions have been working together and been a source of strength for each other's initiatives. However, such an arrangement might eventually become counterproductive, because the practice of exploiting soft power tools to realize hard power goals may culminate in disregarding the importance of attraction and persuasion and at best lead to the emergence of some sort of "soft coercion".

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