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*Russian Orthodoxy and National Identity in Post-Soviet Russia*

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has been struggling to rebuild her identity and define what it means to be Russian. The Russian Orthodox Church plays an important part in the formation of post-Soviet national identity. Many Russians claim Orthodoxy as their religion, but do not actually practice or understand what it means to be Orthodox. The Church has an undeniable influence in the political sphere in Moscow, where the line between church and state policy is often blurred. While it is not the official religion of Russia, and the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion (to a certain extent), the Russian Orthodox Church is often treated with privilege over other religious organizations in the Russian Federation.

The Church’s influence over public education has increased significantly in recent years, and Vladimir Putin regularly refers to the Church’s importance regarding Russian culture and national identity. The main objective of this paper is to explain why Orthodoxy is such a powerful force in defining Russianness and to explore how the Church is attempting to strengthen its position in post-Soviet Russia through government action.

**Post-Soviet Identity Crisis**

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a serious question has been posed to Russia: What does it mean to be Russian? An outsider might scoff at this, thinking it foolish even to ask. On the surface, this is a very simple question with a very simple answer: to be Russian means to have been born in Russia. However, when we choose to dig deeper than the obvious, this question gives rise to polarizing debates with deeply complex, multifaceted answers.
To a Russian who lived during Soviet times, the dismantling of the USSR may have given rise to a serious identity crisis, feelings of humiliation, and even helplessness. For 70 years, Russia was the core nation of the Soviet people with much of the Russian national identity wrapped up in being the head of an empire, a big brother to all the Soviet people. For many Russians, the shattering of this common home and the separation of the Slavic nations was a breach against the natural order of things. From the point of view of Russian national identity, it contributed more than any other single historical event to the development of a sense of insecurity and vulnerability (Chulos, Piirainen, 2000). The transition from communism to a democratic state was anything but smooth, plunging Russia into a period of chaos that could only be pacified by attempting to establish a new sense of self, a new Russian idea. Licking wounds left by years of Soviet ideology, many Russians found themselves looking to their pre-Soviet past in order to build their post-Soviet future.

**The Russian Orthodox Church as a Driving Force of Russian Identity**

The Orthodox Church has been a deeply-rooted tradition in Russia since Prince Vladimir united “All the Russias” through conversion to Christianity in 988. Vladimir used Christianity as a catalyst for nation-formation, a way to form a common ground among the inhabitants of the Rus. With Vladimir considering Moscow to be “the third Rome” and the new beacon of Christianity throughout the world after the fall of Byzantium, “faith” in Orthodoxy became a public institution long before it became an individual ethos. Despite the superficial nature of this forced conversion, the daily lives of common Russians became infused with Orthodox rite and ritual over the following centuries. Although most of these Russians never completely lost touch with their pagan roots, Orthodoxy became a routine part of everyday life and identity (Franklin and Widdis 2004).
During Imperial times, the Church and autocracy seemed to go hand in hand. The clergy saw itself as the sole moral guide of the Russian people, while the Tsar viewed himself as the divinely ordained leader of the Russian empire. In 1832, Count Sergei Uvarov, Minister of Education from 1833-49, created the slogan “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationalism.” He considered these three factors to be what distinguished Russian society and protected her from Western corruption. This slogan was the official ideology of the imperial government of Nicholas I (Britannica 2012). With Nicholas II abdicating the throne and the Bolshevik revolution ripping through Russia in 1917, what was once a driving force of Russianness for hundreds of years came to an abrupt halt. Seemingly overnight, the pillars of religion that previously held up the Russian state crumbled into a fine dust swept away by the winds of revolution.

Many people consider the 70 years that followed the Bolshevik uprising to be an ideological vacuum that destroyed the very fiber of morality and Russianness. According to Zoia Krakhmal’nikova, a Jewish convert to Russian Orthodoxy, “Life in contemporary Russia is now no more than ‘pitiful shoots’ peeking up from the ravished soil into an ‘ideological vacuum,’” (Kornblatt 1996).

When asked about what it means to be Russian, many Russians will say that their spirituality is an undeniably strong component of their personal fabric. After 1917, the hammer and sickle pounded out this innate spirituality, replacing it with the Soviet ideals of community, work, and atheism. Although this sense of Russian spirituality should not be assumed synonymous with faith in Orthodoxy, or any religion for that matter, it is difficult to foster in a state where the official position is atheism.
The Soviet period was a time during which the State told you what it meant to be Russian. Soviet ideology was the prescription one had to follow in order to be a functioning member of society; spirituality was not one of the prescribed components. The Party told you what to believe, what to feel, how to live, how to work, what to read, what to say. Communism was the new religion, the head of state the higher power. To Lenin, the Russian Orthodox Church represented one of the principle flaws of Imperial Russia- a moral institution that gave justification to the whims of a privileged few over the benefit of the masses. It was because of this previous relationship between church and state that he so swiftly stamped it out. Under Soviet rule, churches were demolished or converted into museums dedicated to Soviet glory. Few believers held onto their faith during this period of religious depravity. Those who did, lacked the proper resources or knowledge necessary to preserve the faith and were left to practice in both privacy and danger.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, Russians were faced with a moral wasteland of religious decay. Their prescribed Soviet identity was pulled out from under their feet overnight. Soviet ideology had been more than guidelines to everyday behavior; it had also replaced the moral code previously established by the Russian Orthodox Church. Russians did not have the option to look back to the Soviet period for guidance because the new democratic state was meant to be the exact opposite of everything for which the USSR had stood for.

The “wild 90s” were a time of chaos and instability (Lewis 2000). Russia was facing all the changes that came along with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The economy, government, and daily life were now different. When attempting to build a sense of identity and security, many people began looking back to their pre-Soviet past for a beacon of stability and Russianness. It only made sense that for many people, the Russian Orthodox Church represented
just that. The Church was the one institution that united the Russian people under Prince Vladimir’s rule as far back as 988 and was always present as a key component of Russian national identity right up until the Revolution in 1917. It is easy to understand why the Church would return as such a strong driving force of identity with the loosening of state controls over religion.

State control over religious activity began loosening in the late 1980s, and by the 1990s, the government began returning Church property illegally confiscated by the Bolsheviks. Before the Revolution, Church buildings had been owned by the royal court, private land owners, or state institutions, not the Church itself. This detail was forgotten and the Church acquired sole ownership of many of these properties. The return of property seized by the Bolsheviks made the Church the only social institution in contemporary Russia for which restitution worked (Mitrokhin 2009).

This loosening of state controls over religious activity and restitution of property by the government resulted in an influx of people requesting baptism in the Church (Lewis 2000). With the fall of the Soviet Union, baptism requests increased. The Russian people were thirsty for something more than prescribed state ideology. However, one should not confuse conversion with actual faith. Most of these new adherents were religiously untaught as a result of 70 years of state-backed atheism and knew little, if anything, about the new religion in which they were now taking part. According to a poll taken by the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center in 2006, 73% of respondents considered themselves to be Orthodox, but according to the Nation Master religious database, only 15-20% of people claiming to be Orthodox are regular practitioners. More recent data released by VTsIOM suggests that 37% are regular practitioners who attend church “from time to time” or atleast once a month (Interfax 2012).
A possible reason for this discrepancy is that many Russians viewed conversion to Orthodoxy as recapturing their cultural roots (Lewis 2000). This return to Orthodoxy symbolized a return to spirituality, a reawakening of the “Russian Soul” (*dusha*) that had been depraved for decades. For many people, Orthodoxy was an expression of Russianness regardless of whether or not they garner an actual belief in God. For these people, Orthodoxy was a vehicle by which to discover their cultural roots, rather than a system of belief.

As attendance hit a plateau in the early 2000s, the Church became increasingly in need of funding. The majority of its parishes were impoverished, with the rich minority not wanting to share their funds. Due to its inability to raise funds within itself, the Church turned its hope toward the state for financing, or to big corporate donations sanctioned by the state. Knowing that talk about restoring Russia’s spirituality in a time of moral and cultural decay would not be a sufficiently strong argument to obtain state financing, the Church’s main objective was to prove to state officials that they had a project or cause worth funding (Mitrokhin 2009).

One example of a project deemed worthy of state financing was the “Orthodox Encyclopedia,” which received funding from the Russian Federation’s budget in the 1990s. With continued financing in the 2000s, the encyclopedia developed into a huge internet project, becoming the main source of Orthodox information on Russian television. Part of the Moscow Patriarchate’s media resources and all of the Church’s research are being financed through this state-funded project (Mitrokhin 2009). The revival of Orthodoxy in the 1990s would not have been possible without support from the state. With the return of property previously taken, and with the help of state-financed projects, the Church was once again able to reach out in an attempt to reclaim its place as a staple of Russian identity and culture (Mitrokhin 2009).
The Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin

It is undeniable that any nation’s government plays a large role in the formation of its national identity. Russia’s capital, Moscow, is home to many different religious groups such as Islam, Judaism and Protestant Christianity; Russian Orthodoxy is the predominant group. The Patriarchate’s elevated status is not only apparent through the number of people claiming Orthodoxy as their own, but through state-church relations. The Church enjoys an elite support group composed of bureaucrats, members of the intelligentsia, and entrepreneurs ready to lend a hand in the broadening of Church financing by the state. Legislation, such as the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience, has been passed that blatantly favors the Russian Orthodox Church over other religions and Christian denominations. Vladimir Putin recognizes the Church’s significance in molding the emerging Russian national identity and cultural stability. The Orthodox Church receives special tax cuts on humanitarian aid imports that other religious groups do not enjoy. Even the landscape gives tell to this trend. One cannot look to the Moscow city skyline without seeing a magnificent view of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

In virtually all nation-states, religion routinely exerts political influence (directly or indirectly) at the national level; the role of churches in government policy is especially salient in post-Soviet Europe (Knox 2003.) Although no former Soviet bloc has established an official church, religion has had a considerable impact on state policy. The Patriarchate finds itself in an enviable position in modern-day Russia. One could easily compare Orthodoxy in Russia to Catholicism in Poland, where the Church is the pre-eminent conservative force in politics.

As previously mentioned, legislation has been passed which gives Orthodoxy an advantage over other religious organizations in Russia. Article 14 of the Russian Federation’s
The Russian Federation shall be a secular state. No religion may be instituted as state-sponsored or mandatory religion and 2) Religious associations shall be separated from the state, and shall be equal before the law.” While Russia’s constitution contains provisions to protect its people against discrimination on the grounds of religious belief, the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations puts serious restrictions on this “freedom of religion.”

To backtrack a bit, the 1990 Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic’s law “On Freedom of Religion” allowed religious groups to exist and practice a wide range of religious activities in Russia without obligation to register with the government. A religious group’s only incentive to register was for tax exemption purposes. The 1997 legislation created a distinction between religious groups and religious organizations. Religious organizations would enjoy recognition from the government, while religious groups would not, making it impossible for religious groups to exert meaningful influence in the religious sphere.

In 1997, the Russian Duma passed new legislation which provided that groups seeking to function as religious organizations in Russia must register with the government. In order to register with the government such groups must have been considered to be in accordance with historical religious traditions. Further, religious groups were accorded a historical tradition-status, and therefore, a religious organization, only if they existed in Russia prior to 1982. Foreign missionaries and religious influences would therefore lose any clout in the Russian religious sphere, and their opportunity to make an impact would be nipped in the bud. When the law was first introduced, then-President Boris Yeltsin vetoed the legislation having received complaints from other dominant religions in Russia that felt that the law gave an unfair
advantage to the Patriarchate. Within months, however, pressure from the Russian Orthodox Church and a conservative Duma resulted in the president signing a new law into effect, despite a virtual absence of revisions (Knox 2003).

One of the main proponents of the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience was the Russian Orthodox Church which viewed the influence of foreign religious groups as a threat to the stability of a fragile Russian culture. The Orthodox Church petitioned the state to tighten regulations on religious activity because of its growing concern about Russians turning from Orthodoxy to foreign religions. The Orthodox Church viewed the work of foreign missionaries in Russia as a catalyst for the widespread decay of national identity and Russian heritage and disorder in the religious community. The preamble of the 1997 law gave special mention of the Russian Orthodox Church as being a significant component of Russian tradition, history, and culture. Furthermore, the law gives mention to other dominant religions in Russia- Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism. The text of this law makes a differentiation between traditional and non-traditional religions in Russia, creating a loophole, which seems to undermine the Constitution’s stance that all religious associations shall be equal before the law.

Government-backed architectural projects have also benefited the Church. The Cathedral of Christ the Savior was consecrated in 1883 under decree of Tsar Alexander I that a church be built to memorialize Russia’s victory over Napoleon in 1812. The cathedral was destroyed 48 shorts years later under Stalin’s hand. Today, having been rebuilt, the cathedral dominates the Moscow cityscape, along with Red Square and a controversial monument of Peter the Great. The reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was more than a simple restoration. It
symbolizes the resurgence of Orthodoxy and spirituality in Russia and the strong influence of Orthodoxy in the political sphere (Knox 2003).

Yuri Mikhailovich Luzhkov, the now former mayor of Moscow, initiated the reconstruction of Christ the Savior in 1992, securing him favor with Patriarch Aleksii II of the Russian Orthodox Church, who also happened to officiate Yeltsin’s inauguration the previous year. Several years and hundreds of millions of dollars later, the cathedral was consecrated in August 2000.

The reconstruction of Cathedral of Christ the Savior is shrouded in controversy. With estimated costs ranging from 250 million USD to 500 million USD (Knox 2003), many Muscovites were up in arms about the Kremlin’s project. A large portion of the money that went toward the cathedral’s rise from the ashes came from the federal budget. Furthermore, companies with which Luzhkov had business connections received tax exemptions if they chose to donate. Many Russians, Muscovites included, viewed the use of these federal funds as a direct violation of their national welfare at a time when money was desperately needed elsewhere, such as the improvement of Russia’s schools. The reconstruction of Cathedral of Christ the Savior also fueled resentment of Moscow in areas outside the capital that did not have the city’s wealthy status.

Despite the economic controversy surrounding its reconstruction, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior is a testament to the intersection of church and state in post-Soviet Russia (Knox 2003). Its reconstruction laid the groundwork for building a relationship between the Patriarchate and the Kremlin that would last long after the Yeltsin administration. It is clear that this post-Soviet restoration reflected the widespread feeling that the physical reminders of Orthodoxy did
(and still do) reflect a sense of national identity (Franklin, Widdis 2004). Not only does it symbolize the reemergence of religious expression in Russia, it symbolizes the government’s recognition of Orthodoxy as a historical component of Russian national identity, placing Moscow in the center of it all.

More important than architecture to identity-formation is the influence of powerful politicians. The Russian Orthodox Church faced many changes under the administration of Vladimir Putin, the head of the United Russia party and the most powerful political figure in the country. The Church lost many of the perks it enjoyed during Yeltsin’s time in office. It was during the Yeltsin years that the Church received properties previously allocated by the Bolsheviks, enjoyed tax breaks and subsidies, and acquired the privileged status of a “traditional religious organization” under the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience (Knox 2003). Although Putin’s religiosity is apparently deeper than that of his predecessor, the Church received almost nothing under him. Transfer of property back to the Church decreased and became largely dependent on personal sentiments of regional leaders. State tax breaks and subsidies received under Yeltsin were replaced by assistance to certain parishes and monasteries in need of financial help. Even large corporate donations made to the Moscow Patriarchate needed the approval of the presidential administration (Mitrokhin 2009).

Although Putin’s sympathies toward the Church seem to be more compartmentalized than Yeltsin’s, he regularly emphasizes the centrality of Orthodoxy to Russia’s historical and political development. Putin opened his 1999 New Year’s address with, “Humankind is witnessing two major events: the new millennium and the 2000th anniversary of Christianity.” The Patriarch blessed him in the Kremlin after his Presidential inauguration in 2000. Putin recognizes, “[The Church’s]enormous role in the spiritual unification of the Russian land after
many years of life without faith, moral degradation, and atheism.” He further acknowledged the Church’s role as a key force in promoting social stability and unity around the moral priorities of justice, patriotism, good works, constructive labor, and family values (Knox 2003.).

Putin and United Russia, the main pro-Kremlin party in the Russian political sphere, rely heavily on support from the Russian Orthodox Church. His stance against Western liberalism has led to an increase in government-backed support of the Church over the last few years. In 2007, he urged Orthodox believers to take an active role in the Presidential elections that would be occurring that December and March. In return for their votes, the President promised further government support for the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church. Promises such as these make it difficult to see the established separation of church and state as outlined in Russia’s constitution.

Perhaps the most significant event involving the Church during the original Putin years was the reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, or the ROCOR, which was created by exiles following the Revolution. Reunification provided the Russian Orthodox Church with a good opportunity to eliminate the possibility of parishes which disagreed with the Moscow Patriarchate leaving and joining the ranks of the ROCOR. Reunification with the ROCOR made the Church a more powerful force at home and abroad.

Reunification was the biggest piece of Church news in the Russian media in 2006-2007. Putin’s involvement in that process undoubtedly increased its significance in Russian public opinion. With respect to post-Soviet Russia, the reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church
with the exiled ROCOR symbolized the reconciliation of White and Red Russias, thus ratifying the success of “New Russia” (Mitrokhin 2009).

Furthermore, in January of 2012, Putin addressed the country on Russia’s “national question” (natsionalny vopros). He spoke about the problems the country is facing in regard to national identity and their possible solutions. Stressing the importance of tolerance and warning against the dangers of a nationalist or separatist mentality, he celebrated Russia as a multi-ethnic melting pot with the Russian mentality as the nation’s core, guiding force for everyone living within her borders. While any person living in Russia should not forget their faith and ethnicity, Putin stressed that above all else, he must be a Russian citizen proud of his country.

Regarding religion, Putin explained that the laws of the Russian state must take into account the national and religious backgrounds of its citizens. Stressing the importance of Russia’s traditional religions, Putin explained, “And of course, we look forward to active participation in this dialogue about the traditional religions of Russia. At the heart of Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism- with all their differences and peculiarities- are the basic common moral, ethical, and spiritual values of compassion, reciprocity, truth, justice, respect for elders, and the ideals of family and work. Nothing can replace these value systems, and they must be strengthened. I am convinced that the state and society should welcome and support the work of Russia’s traditional religions in the education system and social sphere.”

Despite his seemingly cool attitude toward the Church relative to state financing as compared to Yeltsin, Putin has continued to champion the Church as an important component of Russian culture and national identity. He has repeatedly regarded the Church as the moral glue
holding together the shaky and uncertain national identity forming in post-Soviet Russia. However, Putin has been hesitant to focus solely on the Church when speaking about the moral and religious culture of post-Soviet Russia. He also places heavy importance on Russia’s other traditional religions, thus taking the spotlight off of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Education System

In the late 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church began making moves to establish the Orthodox catechism in the public school system. Knowing that it would be difficult to establish such a curriculum on the national level, efforts were aimed toward governors on the regional level who were sympathetic toward the Church. The course was to be called the “Foundations of Orthodox Culture,” and would formally establish teaching Orthodoxy as a cultural study with federal support (Mitrokhin 2009).

Armed with the intention of teaching Orthodoxy as a necessary part of Russian culture, then-Patriarch Aleksii II set out to persuade federal education authorities that, based on successful experimentation in different regions, it was necessary to implement the curriculum in the national education system. Unfortunately for the Church, support for the course was not met with much enthusiasm. Despite sanctions posed in 2002 by the Minister of Education who sympathized with the Russian Orthodox Church, educators resisted implementing the course, seeing a lack of demand amongst parents and their children (Mitrokhin 2009). Secular and other non-Orthodox religious groups also voiced concerns that the introduction of this course would be showing blatant favoritism toward the Russian Orthodox Church at the federal level.

The initiative lost more steam with the of change of cabinet members and the installation of Andrei Fursenko, a close comrade of Vladimir Putin, as Minister of Education. Blocking any
further development of the “Foundations of Orthodox Culture” as a federal initiative, he proposed the introduction of a course entitled “World Religions,” which would provide an overview of all the world’s religions and be taught in a secular fashion. The Church was displeased with this option, as it took the spotlight off of Orthodoxy as the beacon and savior of Russian culture in a time of moral decay.

In December 2007 at the Kremlin State Palace for the 15th International Christmas readings, Patriarch Aleksii II spoke in favor of implementing the course, urging that it was not unconstitutional by any means, but rather an important part of being a Russian in touch with one’s cultural roots. Andrei Fursenko was present as Aleksii II addressed the crowd: “Including the fundamentals of Orthodox culture in the school curricula cannot be an infringement on the principle of the secular character of the state recorded in the Constitution. Quite the contrary, this will be an effective means of dispelling nationalist, extremist prejudices that corrode the mind, the prejudices that thrive on society’s religious ignorance.”

While many believe the purpose of education is to do just that- provide the upcoming generation with sufficient education in the necessary realms of academia- Aleksii II believed that the spiritual and moral aspect must prevail as the most important facet of educating Russia’s youth and stressed the importance of studying Orthodoxy as a “culturological” subject. “Contemporary education assumes a practical, at times mercantile character…the chief purpose of education is to teach every person to heed conscience…Every cultured person should know the history of culture of his or her country.” Furthermore, on the subject of Darwinism, a sentiment that many modern Russians adhere to, he said that, “If anyone wants to think that he originated from a monkey, let him think so; but he should not impose his views on others.”
Many could, and did argue that implementing “The Foundations of Orthodox Culture” as a mandatory course would be just that- imposing the views of the Russian Orthodox Church in a federal establishment in which many people did not adhere to the beliefs being taught. The Russian Orthodox Church rightly shares the belief that it has played a major role in Russia’s history, identity-formation, and culture. However, there is a fine line between acknowledging this fact and the government treating the Church with favoritism. Putin seems to realize this, as he is often very careful to mention the importance of Russia’s other traditional religions when speaking about the Church’s moral significance in post-Soviet Russia.

Of course, opposing parties were not going to fall for the guise of Orthodoxy being taught as a fundamental, secular aspect of Russian identity and culture. The Church pushed forward, however, finding hope in the fact that some regions had made the course mandatory and that Svetlana Medvedeva (wife of Dmitri Medvedev) had agreed to become a member of the Council on Spiritual and Moral Upbringing, a council primarily set up to lobby and advance the agenda for implementing “The Foundations of Orthodox Culture.” The process came to a halt, however, after the inauguration of Medvedev and the death of Patriarch Aleksii II in 2008 (Mitrokhin 2009).

Despite setbacks caused by the rejection of the course and the death of its Patriarch, the Church did not give up its hope of educating the religiously and ethically starved masses on the importance of Orthodoxy in Russian culture. The idea of a new course entitled “The Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” was introduced by the Russian government in 2009. The course would give parents and their children the option to choose an area of study from six different modules based on Russia’s “traditional religions” and a secular ethics options. The different courses the families could choose from would be the basics of
secular ethics, the basics of Orthodox culture, the basics of world religions, the basics of Islam, the basics of Buddhism, and the basics of Judaism. Regardless of the chosen module, the first lesson for each child would be the same: “My Motherland-Russia.” The course would go through an experimental trial in selected regions. If the course proved to be a success, the experiment would go nationwide by the end of 2012.

The project had the backing of President Medvedev and in 2009 he urged the development of such a curriculum, stressing that participation should not be mandatory, “I think the experiment may be held in a number of regions… the choice of students and their parents must be exclusively voluntary. Any compulsion or pressure will be totally unacceptable and counter-productive.” Medvedev went on to stress the importance of the course being taught by secular teachers in order to avoid religious bias in the classroom.

The Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation took on the project. In November 2011, the Ministry’s Public Council sat down to discuss the results of the experimental phase of the course. The public session was attended by religious representatives and the Ministry’s staff members, including Minister of Education, Andrei Fursenko. State Secretary and Deputy Minister of Education and Science, Igor Remonenko, elaborated on the experiment’s results pointing out that the course was introduced in 21 constituent entities and was studied by about 480,000 students in 9,980 schools. The results showed that the families chose the modules in the following order: 42% of the families chose to study the secular ethics module, 30% chose to study the Orthodox culture module, 18% chose the world religions module, 9% chose the Islam module, 1% chose the Buddhism module, and less than 1% chose the Judaism module.
The experiment proved to be successful according to Alexander Adamsky, a member of the Public Council and head of Evrika Institute of Education Policy. He explained that there were few conflicts amongst students studying different modules and the goals of the course were effectively attained. Other members of the council further stressed the importance of the course in developing tolerance and respect among students with different beliefs, and that nurturing this tolerance is a social challenge that the education system must face. Minister of Education Fursenko urged that the ideas of the Public Council be taken into consideration when further developing the course and conceded that, “The course gave positive results because these issues are discussed in families more seriously now. The collaboration of different confessions in the course of our work became more open in the center and in the regions where it was introduced,” (Ministry of Education Press Room 2011).

It is interesting to point out that when given the choice, only 30% of families chose the module on Orthodox principles. While the Orthodox module was the most popular among the religious options, almost half of the study population opted to learn about secular ethics. It could be that the influence of the Orthodox Church simply is not strong in the face of a secular society which had under atheistic rule for 70 years. The results could also be a matter of geography. Russia is a large, diverse country and religious preference varies greatly depending on where one is located. Perhaps parents simply wanted to give their children an opportunity to expand their horizons and learn another religion or secular ethics. Furthermore, if children have grown up in an Orthodox home, parents may have no desire for them to be taught Orthodox principles in a secular setting. Whatever the reason, one should take note that the majority of the sample population did not choose to learn about the basics of Orthodoxy. This presents a problem for the Church which is trying to regain its position as a stronghold of Russian national identity.
At present, proponents of the new course argue that it will foster a sense of unity and
tolerance among students with different religious backgrounds, while implementing a sense of
moral duty that had been previously lacking. The Church is satisfied, at least partially, with the
fact that students now have the option of studying an Orthodox-specific course. By focusing on
the younger generation, the Church will be able to work on instilling former “moral values” as
well as extensive aspects of Russian culture that were long suppressed or lost during Soviet
times.

While those in favor of this initiative, which is now set to take place on the national level
this year, view it as a way to implement strong moral values in Russia’s children through
education, some view it as a way to further divide Russia’s children, rather than bring them
together under the umbrella of strong moral fiber. Some critics, like Andrew Glotser, author of a
book on the fundamentals of Judaism, who worked at the International Jewish Community of
Moscow, find the introduction of such a course alarming. “This is a very dangerous trend,
especially in Russia as a multiethnic and multireligious country. This applies to future
generations of Russians. If they grow up in an atmosphere of religious division, it will be very
difficult for them to feel part of a single nation…the President made a political decision
supporting the entrance of the Russian Orthodox Church into the school…this question should
not have been solved politically,” (Velk 2010).

There are also voices of dissent coming from within the clergy. Metropolitan
Panteleimon of Krasnoyarsk fears that teachers will not be able to fully grasp the essence of
Orthodox principles. He argues that deep aspects of the Orthodox religion cannot be understood
when taught in a secular setting. Receiving instruction by secular teachers with no prior
knowledge of Orthodox theology could lead to the corruption of these principles.
Even though the curriculum does give the children and parents a choice of which religion the student will study, it is clear that some feel that this is yet another means by which the government may implement the dominance of Orthodoxy through state sanctions. Whether this new initiative will be successful on the national level is another story entirely. Russia is a huge country, to say the least; implementing something like this on the national level, especially in the face of opposition, is a lofty goal that is bound to face major challenges along the way.

The implementation of “The Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” has not been the Church’s only attempt to influence the Russian educational system. In 2009, Patriarch Kirill invited United Russia deputies to his office to voice concerns over a European Union-backed plan to introduce sex education into the Russian school system. The Duma’s ratification of the European Social Charter, which guarantees people the right to housing, health, education, and employment, among other things, would grant Russia membership into the Council of Europe. The charter requires public schools to offer sex education— a matter strongly opposed by Patriarch Kirill. The Patriarch believes that parents should be responsible for educating their children on sexual matters, not the government (Odynova 2009).

Kirill left the meeting with an agreement that he would now be able to preview all legislation being considered by the State Duma. The Russian Orthodox Church does not share this privilege with any other religious group in Russia. The Public Chamber, a state institution created in 2005 to analyze draft legislation, is not even afforded this right. During their meeting, Deputies Andrei Isayev and Vyacheslav Volodin explained to the Patriarch that ratifying the European Social Charter would not lead to any actual changes in current Russian legislation. When Kirill asked that the Duma hold preliminary consultations on all questions that may raise
doubts in order to avoid mutual misunderstanding, the deputies from the pro-Kremlin party agreed (Odynova 2009).

This arrangement raises questions about the separation of Church and state, as set out by the Constitution, shedding some light on the growing clout the Church has experienced since Putin’s rise to power in 2000. The agreement has received mixed reactions from critics. Boris Nemstov, a former deputy prime minister and leader of the Solidarity opposition group, warned that it could lead to even closer ties between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church. He also called it a ploy for Putin’s pro-Kremlin party to boost its ratings during the economic crisis. Other critics are not as concerned and feel that the Church will have little-to-no influence on state policy making regarding sex education. Communist Deputy Sergei Obukhov explained that he had no problem with the Church weighing in on legislation as long as other faiths were allowed the same privilege.

Supporters of the charter stress that sex education is desperately needed in Russia, where a fight is being waged against rising HIV rates. Olga Romanova, a writer who trains teachers on sex education, feels that the agreement reached between Patriarch Kirill and the United Russia party will not result in much influence over legislation concerning sex education. Romanova stated that, “Our government is separate from the clergy...It will just lead to nothing. Everyone wants the children to live, and most of the clergy consist of intelligent people,” (Odynova 2009). The fact that Putin and his party would even entertain such an arrangement lends credence to the rising concern that the government places a higher value on the Russian Orthodox Church than on other religious groups when it comes to legislative decisions.
Given its elevated position in society, how exactly does the Patriarchate feel about the official separation of church and state? In 2000, Metropolitan Kiril of Moscow issued a statement saying, “We are not striving to resurrect the role in which the Orthodox Church exercised in the Russian empire…this is so detrimental to the Church’s own mission. The separation of church and state is unquestionably favorable to the Church and we will always insist on this fundamental principle,” (Knox 2003). Metropolitan Kiril further explained that while separation of church and state is necessary, it is imperative that dialogue and cooperation between the two entities remain open for the good of the people. This means that when making decisions, the state should take the moral stance of the Church into consideration.

The Patriarchate seems to enjoy its elevated status in Russian society, however when faced with the decision to fulfill the role it had in pre-Soviet Russia, the Church would probably be reluctant. When we look at the plight of Orthodoxy over the past century, this reluctance makes perfect sense. In 1917, the Church went from privileged to persecuted overnight. With Lenin attempting to obliterate the tie between religion and government, the status of the church became more dependent on the state than ever before. Its mere existence became endangered, and it took nearly 70 years before it could reemerge as a legitimate entity. Therefore, it is easy to understand why the Orthodox Church would be reluctant to take on the role it exercised in pre-Soviet Russia. It seems open and willing to accept the benefits that come along with being the oldest religious institution in modern day Russia without the encumbrance of responsibility that would accompany an official position within the state.

The Russian Orthodox Church, Nationalism, anti-Semitism
The rapid re-entry of the Russian Orthodox Church in the post-Soviet era has an additional complicating aspect that must not be overlooked. Some people take the idea of embracing Orthodoxy further than a celebration of the national to the level of the threateningly nationalist (Franklin & Widdis 2004.). This renewed Orthodox zeal has lent a hand in fostering the already present sense of xenophobia and anti-Semitism in Russia. Many ultranationalists hold the view that to be Russian you must be Orthodox, regardless of the millions of people not practicing Orthodoxy who consider themselves to be culturally or ethnically Russian. These nationalists often look to the Church as a way of promoting and justifying their anti-Semitic views, putting the Patriarchate in an awkward position.

Pamyat, a Russian political organization founded in 1985, was the first political group outside the communist party that served as a rallying point for anti-Semitic ultranationalists. It became Orthodox and monarchist in 1988 and anti-communist in 1990. One of Pamyat’s leaders, Dmitry Vasiliev, considered himself to be an Orthodox Fascist. (Chulos & Piirainen 2000.) Vladimir Zhironovsky, another Pamyat leader, relied heavily on nationalistic rhetoric while repeatedly attacking the Jewish community in Russia. Pamyat’s ideology was heavily laden with anti-Semitism, blaming the Jews for being the main source of Russian misfortune, economic hardship, and the denationalization of Russian culture. The organization would regularly begin its meetings with the ringing of church bells. This is but one example of the disturbing trend among nationalist groups to mix anti-Semitism with symbols of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Extreme anti-Semitic voices can sometimes be heard from within the Church as well. In 1993, the late Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg published an article on the danger that Jews pose to the Russian people. In his article he stated, “Let us look around. What proof does one
need in order to understand that against Russia, against the Russian people, a dirty war, well paid, well prepared, unceasing and bitter is being waged?” In an attempt to save the Church’s image from being tarnished as a result of Ioann’s anti-Semitic sentiments, Patriarch Aleksii II restricted the right of the former Metropolitan to speak in the name of the Russian Orthodox Church (Kornblatt 1999). On the matter of anti-Semitism within the Church itself, Father Aleksii Borisov feels that, “The vast majority of Orthodox Christians are neutral about the question of anti-Semitism. As for those who take an active position, I’m afraid that anyone who consciously counters anti-Semitism would be in the minority.” Borisov blames this sense of anti-Semitism, and the neutrality on the matter, on a lack of Christian education for Russians new to Orthodoxy (Kornblatt 1999).

Patriarch Aleksii II was a voice within the Church that spoke out against anti-Semitism. He treated Russia’s traditional religions with respect, including Judaism. Patriarch Aleksii II became one of the first major religious voices to call for an end to anti-Semitism in Russia. After the Patriarch’s death in 2008, Zinovy Kogan, a spokesman for the Russian Jew Congress, emphasized that, “It’s very important to say that he didn’t divide the Jewish world. It was all the same to him; it didn't matter if they were Orthodox, Reform or Chabad. He stood with all of them,” (Slater 2008). His support of the Jewish community gave the Church a step in the right direction of religious tolerance.

As the Russian Orthodox Church struggles to define itself in post-Soviet Russia, it needs to respond to the nationalist voices on the conservative right who often refer to Orthodoxy and spirituality while spouting anti-Semitic rhetoric. While there have been voices within the Church speaking out against anti-Semitism, more steps need to be taken. The church needs to address a
clergy that is sometimes guilty of mixing anti-Semitism and Russophilia with faith, and it must make an effort to educate the large portion of Orthodox Russians lacking adequate Christian education in order to combat the sense of nationalism and anti-Semitism common among believers. Nationalism is a dangerous idea with which the Russian people may choose to toy when struggling to form a new national identity.

**Conclusion**

Since the emergence of a new democratic state in 1991, Russia has been faced with the task of forming a new national identity after 70 years of adherence to Soviet ideology. When attempting to build a sense of identity and security, many people began looking back to their pre-Soviet past for a beacon of stability and Russianness. After the fall of the Soviet Union, many Russians flocked to the Russian Orthodox Church seeking baptism. However, one must not make the blanket assumption that conversion is the same as faith. In fact, only a small minority of those claiming to be Orthodox are active believers whom attend services regularly.

Then why is Russian Orthodoxy the predominant religion in Russia? The answer is simple. Many view the reemergence of Orthodoxy in post-Soviet Russia as a return to the cultural roots, the very essence of Russianness. Prince Vladimir united “All the Russias” all the way back in 988 through conversion to Orthodoxy; it was a prevalent component of national identity for nearly 1000 years before the insurgence of communism in 1917.

The government has consistently helped the Church assert its role as a moral guide of post-Soviet Russia. The state recognizes the impact of the Russian Orthodox Church as a historical component of Russian national identity and even encourages it through legislation such
as the 1997 “Law on Freedom of Conscience” and projects similar in nature to the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

Russia’s younger generation now has the opportunity to study the basics of Orthodox culture in the public school system, allowing the Church to instill former “moral values” and huge parts of Russian culture that had been suppressed during Soviet times. Perhaps this exposure to the basics of Orthodoxy will compel young people to attend church more often, or for the first time. Even Vladimir Putin, the most powerful man in Russia, recognizes the Russian Orthodox Church as an undeniable force of Russian national identity, acknowledging its traditional role as a key force in promoting social stability and moral unity in Russia. During Putin’s administration, the Church was strengthened at home and internationally through its unification with the ROCOR. In January of this year, Putin once again acknowledged the Church’s importance in regard to the Russian national question.

On their journey to forming a new national idea, Russians need to be wary of the rising sense of nationalism and anti-Semitism in post-Soviet Russia. Many of Orthodoxy’s new adherents lack Christian education as a result of decades of state-sponsored atheism. While the Church should celebrate the influx of people turning to Orthodoxy, it must take steps to educate the religiously ignorant. Although clergy members have spoken against anti-Semitism, such as Patriarch Aleksii II, a few voices are not enough. Whatever one chooses to believe about this intriguing and ongoing admixture of power, politics, religion, morality, and education, it is impossible to deny the powerful influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the formation of national identity in post-Soviet Russia and the hand the government has lent in promoting its dominance over other religious and cultural organizations within the state.
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