

Media, identity and the Russian Orthodox Church

Greg Simons

State-Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) relations and how this is reflected through the mass media are the focus of this article. What is the exact role of the Church in everyday matters of society? Is the role of the Church constant or evolving? An important aspect will be the role of the Church in inducting individuals into the new social norms of contemporary Russian society.

Vladimir Putin came to power helped by his pledge of firm rule and restoring some of Russia's lost power and prestige. The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and the following years of chaos under President Boris Yeltsin seriously affected Russian voters who are suffering from poverty, collapsed public services (such as the health and educational sectors), the loss of a 'guaranteed' existence (pay and employment) and the loss of Russian status (no longer a superpower).

Officially, approximately 20% of Russians live below the poverty line,¹ which is set at US\$70 per month. The average monthly wage is a mere US\$185. A poll of 1584 people (margin of error 3.4%), conducted by the polling agency VTsIOM 9-13 January 2004, produced some clear results. 58% of respondents wanted the winner of the presidential elections (14 March 2004) to re-establish Russia's superpower status, 48% wanted the President to ensure that ordinary people receive a 'proper' income and 45% want the President to enforce more law and order.²

Russia is facing numerous social, political and economic problems. In order for Putin to fulfil some of the stated objectives of his 2000 presidential election campaign, some ground work needs to be undertaken to 'prepare' the people. This includes harnessing the power of the centres of cultural production. The ROC is an important part of society and one of the centres of cultural production. These include the armed forces, the education system, mass media and religion. Such institutions help individuals form their identity, find their place in society/the world and how they think and act. This helps individuals 'fit' into society by instilling deep-rooted norms and values.³

One of the first areas to be targeted was the media industry. A pretext that was used for greater State control of the mass media was the allegation that mass media were irresponsible and abusing their freedom of speech. This claim has been made again recently by Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov.

'A public council is needed to determine the information policy in electronic and print mass media. It is time to stop this flow of pornography and negative information that we are seeing on television.'⁴

In the year 2000, Putin sent a message to the media via the Doctrine of Information Security and his talk of creating a 'single information space'. There was no mistaking what was being conveyed: a clampdown upon editorial freedom, to be achieved by such means as agenda-setting. This message was reinforced by Media Minister Mikhail Lesin in his speech while congratulating Russian journalists on their professional holiday (13 January):

'The importance of your work is determined not only by your ability to communicate objective information to the audience. We are building a single information space and are uniting the country.'⁵

In spite of the clampdown on the media, there has been very little public reaction to the move by the authorities. A variety of reasons and circumstances can account for this almost non-existent reaction to the threat against freedom of the press. One such reason is the public's trust in public institutions. In a recent poll conducted by ROMIR, 1500 Russians were asked several questions including, 'What public institutions do you trust the most?' 50% said that they trust the President; 28% stated they do not trust anyone; 14% named the ROC; the government, army and media rated 9% each. When asked, 'What source of information do you trust the most?' Central TV received 39%; central press 8%; central radio 7%; regional TV 4%; regional press 3.2%; regional radio 3%; and the Internet 2%. A third question in the survey enquired, 'Do you think censorship of the mass media is needed?' 41% believe that there must be censorship; 76% said that there needs to be some kind of censorship; and only 19% stated that there should be no censorship in the mass media.⁶

The public's image of the mass media has been coloured to an extent by events in the recent past. Mass media in the Soviet Union were used to collectivise and motivate the people to achieving various objectives given by the authorities. The collapse of communism and the imposition of a market economy caught the media woefully unprepared and eventually forced them to seek financial support, which could not be met by the State. This call was answered by the business elite (the so-called oligarchs), who used their media assets to accumulate political capital. Conflict emerged between various financial empires that were competing for the spoils of the privatisation process and the mass media were at the forefront, engaging in black PR (kompromat) and representing the views of their owners. Eventually, the Russian public came to view domestic media outlets as the puppets of their owners.

Church and State under Putin

In February 2004 the Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, gave an address at the opening of the 8th World Russian People's Congress. He talked of the importance and the links between Church and State:

'Russia's future and its position in Europe are inseparable from civilisational, cultural and spiritual traditions, which are rooted in our country's history. However, the development of Orthodox Christianity is unthinkable outside the global context, where the most important issues of our foreign policy are addressed now. The preservation of spiritual and cultural identity is, therefore, one of the imperatives of this era to Russia.'⁷

The 'First Family' have not hidden their close connections to the ROC and have openly celebrated their Orthodox faith. As Head of State Putin attends major Church events, such as the Orthodox Christmas and New Year. The Patriarch Alexis II and the President then go through the ritual of extending publicly announced greetings and congratulations to each other. Alexis II has publicly supported Putin on a number of issues, such as Chechnya. One month before the March 2004 presidential elections, the Patriarch once again publicly endorsed some of Putin's initiatives. The ROC lent its support to two of Putin's major programmes: the anti-corruption drive and promoting private pensions. The anti-corruption drive, which has featured heavily in the State-owned media, was also taken up by the Church. This was done through a re-interpretation of the Ten Commandments. Among the 'new' commandments, has appeared 'thou shalt not bribe'. The newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda quoted a Church official at a congress, who said that delegates were going to be asked for new interpretations of the Ten Commandments, with a view for dissemination to the business community.⁸

On 4 February 2004, the ROC waded further into the debate on business ethics and social responsibility. At the congress mentioned above, discussions on a variety of topics, from contract enforcement to privatisation were discussed. A statement that emerged from the congress stated that tax avoidance was theft from orphans, the elderly and the handicapped.⁹ Such bold public statements by an institution such as the ROC are a valuable form of political legitimisation for Putin and a big boost for his re-election campaign.

Church influence on education in contemporary Russian society

On the Orthodox Christmas Eve (6 January 2001) Alexis II delivered his message to the people. Whether out of genuine concern as an indicator of a future plan, he outlined some of society's major problems and the source of those problems:

'We are still experiencing many difficulties and problems – poverty, social vulnerability, the threat of terrorism and crime, the propaganda of immorality, the epidemic of alcoholism and drug addiction, and other appalling vices. [...] As the root of all of these evils is the injury of the human soul, it is impossible to change society for the better without faith, hope and love.'¹⁰

In September 2001, Alexis II celebrated his 40th year of service in the ROC. He used this opportunity, when interviewed for the programme Details (on the State channel RTR), to propose the need for the Church's involvement in education:

'We understand that after 70 years of an atheistic education, the issue should not be posed today of introducing religious education into school or high school education. But we are proposing that the history of Orthodox culture should be introduced as a subject, because our culture is based on Christian principles, on Orthodox traditions, and every cultured person should know about the principles of his or her Orthodox culture.'¹¹

In a December 2001 article in *Argumenty i Fakty* Deputy Education Minister Yury Kovrizhkin concluded that Russia's young people are potential victims of totalitarian sects and religious extremism, which meant that 'saving' them from this was a priority. To do this he summed up what would be needed in order to be successful in this goal:

'[...] close co-operation between the Church and the State on the issues of education, the environment and human rights.'¹²

The current Deputy Education Minister, Leonid Grebnev, has reiterated his predecessor's call for religious knowledge education and tied the issue to identity:

'We all admit that we have only one state language, Russian, and that it is a mandatory subject in schools. [...] (Russian Language) is part of Russian culture, which every person who lives or wants to live in Russia should understand, and the understanding of culture implies the idea of its religious underpinnings, without which no culture can exist.'¹³

In spite of political pressure against the introduction of Orthodox culture lessons, the Minister of Education, Vladimir Filippov, released a 30-page description of the proposed course in mid-November 2002. He said that it was only submitted for consideration.¹⁴ The report was a recommended syllabus for the Orthodox culture class (which was already at this stage taught in some schools) and was sent to all schools by the Education Ministry.¹⁵ However, this appears to be a case of a high-ranking political figure using his position of power to announce that the government will permit such lessons to commence. Hierodeacon Kiprian Yashchenko, Dean of the Pedagogical Department at St. Tikhon Orthodox Theological Institute, commented on his involvement in the report. 'Yes, we are separate from the State, but we can co-operate, can't we?'¹⁶ By the end of their Orthodox culture classes, students are expected to be able to write a paper on one of the 64 subjects given. Some of the listed subjects are; 'Faith and Science', 'Moscow as a Third Rome' and the 'Orthodox Understanding of Freedom'.¹⁷

According to statistics released by the Patriarch, Alexis II, on the official website, the ROC possesses a powerful educational arm of its own. Such a varied educational offering, which caters for every stage of education, could be used as a means of shaping the future youth of the nation. The Russian Orthodox Church has declared that it has:

- 133 dioceses (136, taking into account those of the Japanese Autonomous Orthodox Church) in various countries.

- Over 23,000 parishes.
- Pastoral service is carried out by 156 bishops including 130 diocesan and 26 vicar bishops; 12 bishops are retired.
- There are 620 monasteries including 298 male monasteries and 322 convents.
- 160 monastery representations and 38 hermitages.
- 5 theological academies.
- 32 seminaries.
- 43 pre-seminaries.
- 1 theological institute.
- 2 Orthodox universities.
- 6 training pastoral courses.
- 2 diocesan theological schools for women.
- Several choir-conducting and icon-painting schools and departments.
- Sunday schools at most of the parishes.¹⁸

Conclusion

Although the entities of Church, State, mass media and education appear to be diverse and relatively loosely connected, they should not be treated as being separate and independent of each other. To do so would run the risk of missing the bigger picture as they support and complement one another to achieve what seems to be the greater goal – the re-establishment of a strong, centralised State. These elements form the foundations of cultural production, induct individuals into society by instilling in them senses of right and wrong, values, ideals and ideology. They work to create how individuals place themselves in society, nationally and internationally.

As an influential medium and a centre of cultural production, the mass media came under a lot of intense pressure and were among the first of the public institutions to be targeted by the authorities (for control). The media business is a highly dangerous profession. According to the Russian Union of Journalists over 200 media workers have been killed in the Russian Federation since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As has been seen recently, legal and economic restraints are being accorded greater use by the federal centre (such as the NTV, ORT and TV 6 incidents, to name a few cases offhand). This has not totally removed the threat of physical harm. Conditions for mass media in the centre and the periphery vary greatly. The provincial mass media are under prolonged and intense pressure from the regional authorities, which often spills over into violence against specific 'offending' media outlets.

A strong association exists between 'Russianness' and the Russian Orthodox faith, extolled by such writers as Dostoevsky. In a time of crisis people search for their roots as a means to find a path to the future. Russia has turned to the ROC before in times of dire crisis, such as was witnessed in the resurrection of the faith following the German invasion in June 1941. In a process pushed from above, the current economic, social and political upheaval has left many searching for meaning and a way out of the situations in which they find themselves. In this instance, the ROC and State-owned mass media act to support, sustain and perpetuate the incumbent political power.

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Notes

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Greg Simons recently submitted his doctoral thesis *Ideology, Image-Making and the Media in Putin's Russia*. He is currently based as a researcher in the Department of East European Studies, University of Uppsala, Sweden.