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CATHOLIC DIASPORA IN THE RUSSIAN MEDIA: "MARGINALIZATION" FROM OUTSIDE AND "SELF-SILENCING" FROM INSIDE

Victor Khroul

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The Catholic community in Russia consists of less than 1% of the Russian population. According to official data, there are about 600 thousand believers, the overwhelming majority of whom are citizens of the Russian Federation. But, paradoxically, the Catholic community is presented by the media mostly as a community of strangers with a 'non-traditional', imported faith. At the same time the Jewish community (more or less the same number of believers) is considered by the mass media to be 'traditional'.

After many decades of religious persecution the Catholic Church in Russia was in a very difficult position when it started to revive its ecclesiastical structures in April 1991. The church had no buildings (only two had been opened - in Moscow and Leningrad), there were essentially no priests (there were less than ten, many of whom had been working underground), and there was no Catholic literature or Catholic mass media, that is so necessary for evangelization and catechization.

Even a brief historical analysis of the development of Catholic media in the USSR and - since 1991 - in the Russian Federation, which takes into consideration such concerns as statistics and regional strengths, religious suppression/freedom, the opening/closing of media institutions, a Catholic presence in the public sphere, church-state relations and other criteria, allow us to divide the whole process into three periods.

The period of Soviet religious persecutions correlates with the time of underground *Samizdat* and illegal media activity of Catholic communities. From the moment of the re-establishment of a Catholic hierarchy in 1991, the new period of rapid media development, based on religious freedom and a Catholic revival in the country, started. It lasted till the time of restoring of dioceses in 2002. After 2002, according to our observations, media development slowed down, then stopped, as media were getting closed one after the other. The third period that we consider a time of "self-silencing" by the Catholic Church in Russia, continues to the present.

There are several reasons for the processes of "marginalization" and "westernization" of the Catholic community in Russia. Here I propose to examine state policy, the nature of the ecumenical context, the *de facto* media policy in Russia, and the policy of the Catholic hierarchy.

1. State Policy

According to the wide-spread public understanding, though not according to the law, as implemented by government policy, there are four so-called 'traditional' religions in our country - Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism. Their activity has priority in the public sphere, and, so

far, in media coverage. Catholics, Anglicans, Protestants, and other religions appear in the public sphere only occasionally.

"And while the concept of "traditional" religion is nowhere defined in Russian law, Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, its advocate for more than a decade, has been successful in convincing officials like President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to employ that term, something that in the Russian context can have serious consequences", so noted Paul Goble recently in his paper "'Non-Traditional' Faiths in Russia at Risk of Persecution," published by the web portal *Liberty of Faith*.¹

74 percent of the 23,000 legally registered religious organizations are members of Russia's four "traditional" religions – Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. The remaining 26 percent are members of other faiths, including primarily Catholics and Protestants, and they are facing increasing difficulties. That is because of Russian understandings of "majoritarian" democracy and of the way the rights of "majorities" and "minorities" are applied in religion.

Russians today, especially Russian officials, "often understand democracy almost exclusively in terms of the obligation of the minority to subordinate itself to the majority and as the right of the majority to dictate its will to the minority" and to "have the final word on all issues."² In the case of Catholics, in fact, the Russian government does not have its own policy, mostly it merely "mediates" and implements an Orthodox approach to Catholics.

Many experts agree that the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church towards Catholics has traditionally been negative. "The Pope's decision of February 11, 2002 to transform the temporary administrative structures of the Roman Catholic Church in Russia into regular dioceses stirred up a fury of protests in the Russian Orthodox Church",³ Alexander Verkhovsky reminded readers.

Patriarch Alexii II had stated in 1992: "We view this as an aggression against Russia" and added, that one of his predecessors, Patriarch Hermogen, "in tumultuous times opposed similar attempts of the Roman Catholic Church to penetrate into Russia."⁴

The Russian Foreign Ministry interfered in the conflict between the Patriarchate and the Vatican with an official protest note. Later on the Foreign Ministry denied visas to four Catholic priests and one bishop. Since no explanations for those acts were given, one can only assume that the Foreign Ministry stands in support of the Patriarchate against such an obvious symbol of the West as the Vatican.

In Russia, lack of experience of the two freedoms – of the press and of religion – as well as of the principles of difference between secular and religious understandings of the limits of freedom of expression, provide us interesting material for analysis.

Figure 1 below shows mutual correlations for media communications, when correlating freedom and religion categories with public opinion, institutional media, state/local authorities and the Catholic Church.

¹ Paul Goble. "Non-'Traditional' Faiths in Russia at Risk of Persecution." *Liberty of Faith*. <http://www.libertyoffaith.org/?p=81&cpage=2>

² www.baznica.info/index.php?name=Pages&op=page&pid=5964

³ Alexander Verkhovsky. Religious Xenophobia: Within Religious Orders and Between Religious Orders. <http://www.religion.sova-center.ru/publications/194EF5E/1951317>

⁴ Ibid.

Fig. 1.

| | Freedom | Religion |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Public audience | Lack of experience Civic society crisis Demand for “strong order” | Country of “non-believers” Spiritual hunger Lack of information in public sphere and interactivity |
| Mass media | No will to fight for freedom Political and economic dependence Law and ethical problems | Interest – sensational but not essential Marginal place of religion in “hierarchy of attention” No experts/no formation, poor coverage as a consequence |
| State/Local authorities | Law implementation problems Lack of responsibility | Formal and informal preferences “De jure” and “de facto” - double standards Cases of suppression |
| Catholic Church in Russia | No human rights activity, Very weak implementation in spite of clear social teaching , No protests against the government | Subordination to Orthodox Lack of solidarity with protestants No evangelization activity “Ghetto” behaviour |

We must also add that the impact of state policy on media policy is becoming more and more visible in Russia, and so “non-traditional” Catholics became a factor of suspicion also for some state-controlled media. That is why we observe some “marginalizing” effects towards Catholics in the secular media.

2. Ecumenical context

The first ecumenical factor with strong media impact is *Orthodox understanding of the Pontifical Commission “Pro Russia” instruction “General Principles and Practical Norms for Coordinating the Evangelizing Activity and Ecumenical Commitment of the Catholic Church in Russia and in the Other Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)”*, issued 1 June 1992.⁵ According to the document, the Catholic authorities are asked to provide for an ecumenical formation for their clergy and to promote a climate of trust and peaceful cooperation. They should also ensure that no Catholic activity appears to establish “parallel structures of evangelization” over against the Orthodox.

The *Pro Russia* Commission also instructs Catholic authorities to inform local Orthodox bishops of all their important pastoral initiatives, especially of the opening of new parishes. And in a key passage the document even states that Catholic pastors should “endeavor to cooperate with the Orthodox bishops in developing pastoral initiatives of the Orthodox Church. They should be pleased if by their contribution they can help to train good Christians” (n. 4).⁶

⁵ English translation in *Origins* 22/17 (October 8, 1992) 301-304. French: *Plamia* 85 (Christmas 1992) 39-47 and *La documentation catholique* 2056 (September 6 & 20, 1992) 786-790. A Greek translation was published in the July 21 and 28, 1992, issues of *Καθολικὴ* (Athens). Italian: “Direttive per l’apostolato cattolico nell’ex Unione Sovietica, *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3415 (October 3, 1992) 66-75. Slightly edited versions of the document were published in both the English and French editions of *Ecumenism* [Montreal] 107 (September 1992).

⁶ <http://www.cnewa.org/ecc-bodypg-us.aspx?eccpageID=81&IndexView=alpha>

Metropolitan Hilarion of Kostroma (as head of the External Relations office of the Moscow Patriarchate) stresses, that “Catholic bishops and apostolic administrators should inform the ruling bishops of the Orthodox Church of all important pastoral initiatives, especially the creation of new parishes”, and “notify representatives of the Orthodox Church of any initiatives of a social character (including educational and charity activities).”⁷

Hilarion went on to claim that the principles “have unfortunately not been followed by Catholic structures in Russia and the CIS, leading to tensions between Orthodox and Catholics in these countries.” No facts are given, but the accusation is present.

Catholic media activity as a tool of evangelization is not likely in Russia. Its development may cause interest in Catholic teaching and even persons asking for baptism - which means “proselytism”.

The second important factor is *the manner of coverage of Orthodox-Catholic relations*, both in Western and Russian media. Catholics in Russia are used to generalized accusations going on over many years about “proselytizing activity” and “stealing Orthodox souls” without concrete facts given. Russian Catholics are used to not seeing our bishops and priests invited to take part in big Orthodox-Catholic events. No bishops, no priests, no lay people. Catholics used to be silent in order not to harm ecumenical dialogue. The problem is that, according to observations, in many cases they have no right to reply when they are accused.

During the conference “To Give a Soul to Europe. The Mission and Responsibility of the Churches” (Vienna, May 2006) Moscow Patriarchate priest Igor Vyzhanov, secretary for inter-Christian relations in the Department for External Church Relations, called upon Russian Catholics “to stop looking at Orthodox, if not through the gun-sight, then through very bad binoculars”.⁸ This appeal was widely quoted by the media, but the media did not look for somebody among the Russian Catholics to reply to this accusation. Everything said by officials of the Russian Orthodox Church was taken as axiomatic and true, journalists (with a few exceptions) did not try to check the facts, (unfortunately, normally there are no facts in such accusations) or at least to give the floor to those accused. This is a problem of professionalism, of maintaining standards and objectivity for balanced coverage.

A priest of the Moscow Patriarchate remarked that “the time of ‘cavalry-like attacks’ made by Catholic missionaries from Eastern Europe has already passed.” It is evident from this speech who is guilty of very poor relations between Orthodox and Catholic believers in Russia. Are there any facts to substantiate the “cavalry-like attacks made by Catholic missionaries from Eastern Europe”? The audience has been given nothing as proof. It simply has to believe it.

The organizers of the conference in Vienna did not give the floor for a reply. The mass media did not mention any voice expressing doubts about the accusations of the highly positioned Orthodox priest.

3. Media Policy

Despite a general friendly attitude of the Russian media towards Catholics, media texts represent them as a community of foreigners. In most cases it is not an intentionally invented and approved policy, just convention, not comprehended and reflected upon enough. Journalists are poorly informed about the life of the Church and this leads to numerous mistakes and distortions.

⁷ Then Bishop Hilarion of Vienna and Austria. The Practical Application of the Principle of Canonical Territory. <http://www.stmarywichita.org/bh2.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=1387>

Coverage of different faiths is disproportionate, with the highest priority being to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The effects of such coverage for Catholics are dramatic sometimes. Local authorities as a part of the audience, perceive Catholics as strangers (foreigners). So on many decisions by authorities (approving land for church building construction, issuing visas for foreign priests, etc.) they are not in favor of them.

The mass media pay attention to the Catholic Church only during Christmas, Easter, St. Valentine's Day, and Carnival, with an emphasis on how these holidays are exotic in Russia and how they are celebrated in the West.

What then are the essential features of the "marginalizing" media policy? Specific elements to note are the language employed, the area of coverage, and a form of ethnic determinism.

A. Language.

Journalists systematically use words adopted from foreign languages for Catholics, when there are Russian words with totally the same meaning and connotation. The problem is not only with language but with adequately reflecting reality. Ethnic or territorial limiting of Christianity by national or territorial frames appear as a distortion of Christianity.

This creates the stereotype that Catholics do not want to integrate into local culture. Meanwhile Catholic worship is held in Russian, the majority of Catholics use the Russian language in everyday life, as well as in publications and documents. Appeals of Catholics to remove the foreign label from mass media content were not heard by journalists.

Russian journalists become involuntary participants in the marginalization of the Russian Catholic Church. They help form the image of the "Church-stranger" in the minds of the ordinary media audience and in the perceptions of official decision makers. That is dangerous for both believers and officials.

This is a vicious circle. The feedback loop in word usage becomes evident. Society looking for patterns turns to media, journalists refer to existing language practices.

B. Area of coverage.

Catholics are described simply as a Western phenomenon, plus there are certain "geographic" circumstances causing distortion about a Catholic minority in Russia.⁹ Media texts in cyberspace represent the Catholic Church as the Church of foreigners.

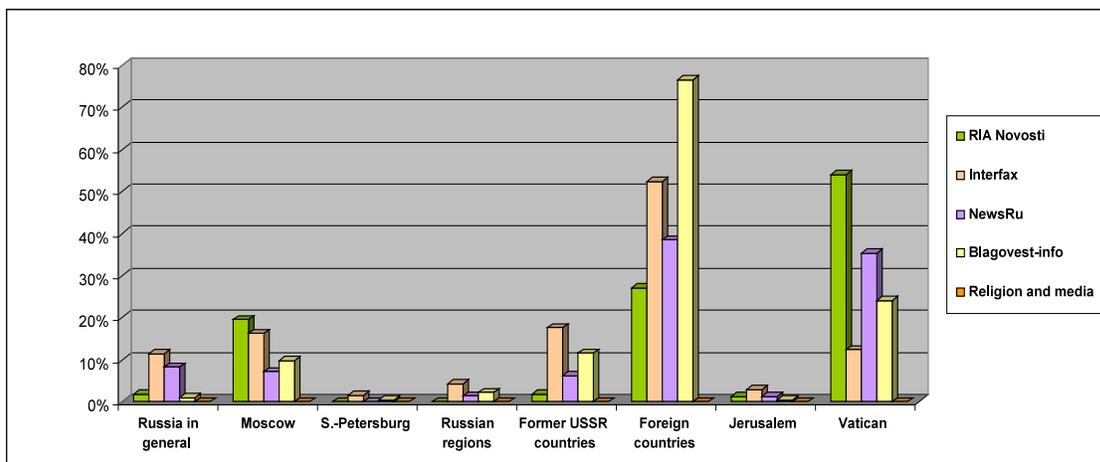
The Russian Catholic hierarchy expressed protests about such "marginalization" many times, especially after Catholics were declared as 'non-traditional' religion in Russia, despite the fact that a Catholic presence in the country was deeply rooted over many centuries. Finally we have a false and corrupted image of the Catholic Church in the Russian media.

Journalists systematically use words adopted from foreign languages. This creates the stereotype that Catholics in Russia are foreigners who do not want to integrate into local culture. Meanwhile Russian Catholic Bishops' Conference data say: masses are held in Russian, the majority of Catholics are ethnic Russians using Russian in everyday life; Russian is used in Catholic publications and documents.

⁹ This minority consists of 1% of the Russian population.

The Center for Mass Communication Studies conducted a survey of news agency materials about religious life.¹⁰ The main conclusion was that the media appear as the instrument of marginalization of “strangers” (see figure 2).

Fig. 2. Geography of Media Texts about Catholicism



The media strengthen opposition between “our faith” and “faith of outsiders”. Ethnic and geographical determinism takes place. Myths and stereotypes of mass consciousness dominate in information agencies.

Dependence of the media on state policy in the religious sphere exists. It is not strongly articulated but could be seen in signs of attention to religious organizations (to “traditional” religions – Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism).

C. Ethnic Determinism.

In mass consciousness, the stereotype that “Russians are Orthodox”, which contradicts both Orthodox and Catholic doctrines, is very much alive in mass media content. There is an evident temptation for journalists to feed the audience not with what is happening in reality but with what fits into people expectations, based on myths and stereotypes.

3. Policy of the Catholic Hierarchy

“Rapid development” - these words of Pope John Paul II are precise to characterize the growing presence of Russian Catholics in the public sphere, and for the development of the Church media between 1991 and 2002. As Catholic institutions grew and strengthened, local mass media began to appear - radio stations (Moscow and St. Petersburg), television (Novosibirsk), and the publications of a seminary, college, Caritas, monastic orders, and congregations, as well as numerous parish bulletins, were started. Aside from that, the return of intensive publishing activity also included Russian-language publications of basic liturgical and dogmatic texts as well as a large quantity of theological literature addressed to diverse audience groups.

¹⁰ Gapless content-analysis of text published on web-sites of five Russian information agencies in January-October, 2007 was conducted at the Faculty of Journalism, Moscow State University Lomonosov.

Since it was very difficult and expensive to get access to the government-controlled television and radio stations, print media (newspapers and magazines) played a special role in uniting the Catholics of Russia.

A. The Press

The recognition of the extreme need to find Catholics, return them to the bosom of the Church as well as preaching the Gospel among people who had never heard of Christ after three generations of atheism led to the first establishing of the monthly magazine “Truth and Life” (December 1990), and then to the launch of the weekly Catholic newspaper “The Light of the Gospel” (October 1994).

There were several other publications (see fig. 3). Most of them disappeared, but some still exist, as occasional publications.

Fig. 3. Catholic press in Russia (without parish publications)

| <i>Publisher</i> | <i>Publication (started/closed)</i> | <i>Circulation</i> | <i>Frequency</i> |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Russian Bishops' Conference | The Light of the Gospel (1994 - 2007) | 4500 | weekly |
| Diocese in Novosibirsk | Siberian Catholic newspaper (1995-2008, 2009 - till now) | 2500 | monthly |
| Diocese in Saratov | Climent (2005-2008) | 1000 | 4 times a year |
| Truth and life | Truth and Life (1991-2008) | 2000 | monthly |
| Franciscan publishing house | Your Messenger (1994-2002) | 1500 | 2 per year |
| | Little knight (1994-1997) | 1000 | 2 per year |
| | Brother Son (2006-2009) | 500 | 6 per year |
| Silesians' publishing house (Moscow) | The Holy Joy (1994-till now) | 1500 | monthly |
| Catholic Seminary in Saint-Petersburg | Vocation (1994-till now) | 500 | monthly |
| Catholic College in Moscow | Theology (1992-1997) | 1000 | 6 per year |
| Catechization center in Saint-Petersburg | Rainbow (2005-till now) | 500 | 6 per year |
| Catechization center in Moscow | Stromaty (1997-1999) | 1000 | monthly |
| Kaliningrad vicariat | The Kaliningrad Catholic messenger (1992-1997) | 1000 | monthly |

“Svet Evangelia” was a national Catholic newspaper. It provided information about the history, traditions and liturgy of the Catholic Church for readers from all over the Russian Federation as well as readers from former Soviet countries, the United States and Western Europe.

Many of the readers had access to the usual forms of church and worship life. “Svet Evangelia” brought them into contact with Christianity throughout the world and deepened their knowledge of their faith.

B. Radio and Television

There are neither Catholic television channels in Russia nor any regular broadcasts on secular channels. In Novosibirsk the Catholic television studio "Kana" was operating (1994-2008). It was founded by Bishop Josef Werth. For the most part, the studio produced "Catholic Video Magazine" for parishes in the former Soviet Union. It included news of Catholic life in Russia and other countries, information about the Pope's activities, news reports from parishes and all sorts of church organizations, feature stories about charitable work and Christian mass media, the testimonies of believers and interviews with interesting people.

The "Dar" Catholic radio station in Moscow broadcasted one hour every day on a Christian radio channel (1995-2009). The channel's broadcast schedule consisted of four parts: the Orthodox radio program "Sofia", the religious radio program "Blagovest", the Catholic radio program "Dar" and the youth program "Prologue". Specialists qualified in history, theology, literature, psychology and sociology hosted the programs. They included both priests and lay people. Aside from the programs that present information on different topics, there are also programs that allow listeners to talk on-air with the hosts about a wide variety of different issues. The broadcasts were aimed at widening inter-confessional dialogue and searching for the common ground that people from different branches of Christianity share.

C. Internet

The bishops of Russia were planning to take serious steps to develop Catholic internet projects soon. The site *catholic.ru* was expected to be transformed into a portal for all Russian-speaking Catholics living in the former Soviet Union. A special seminar dedicated to the subject was held from February 10 to 14, 2003 in Warsaw. At the seminar, participants prepared a project that called for the establishing of a dynamic and streamlined office for the dissemination of information. The project was never implemented, not even partially.

4. The "Self-silencing" Phenomenon

Since mid-2000 the Catholic hierarchy itself does not seem to seek publicity and a presence in the mass media. Last year's experts underline the process of "self-silencing" of Russian Catholics (closing newspapers, radio stations, other media).

We use the word "silencing" in the sense, explored by Father John Flynn in his article "Silencing the Pope" published by Zenit agency January 20, 2008. He focused on the case of the intolerance of radical secularism that led Pope Benedict XVI to cancel his planned visit and speech at Rome's La Sapienza University.

But the Russian case differs a lot. Mostly there were no external but largely internal factors that try to silence the Catholic community in Russia. It is not somebody from outside - state authorities, radical secularists, other religious' leaders, etc - but Catholics themselves who are the main players in the silencing process. That is why we call it "self-silencing".

What are its main features? Open and outspoken positions towards both the external world and the local Catholic community gradually changed back to "no comments" style and a "conspiratorial" mentality, without providing any explanations to either the external world or the local Catholic community. There were no public explanations regarding the closing of media one-by-one - "Svet Evangelia" (2007), Russian National TV studio "Kana" (2008), Catholic radio station "Dar" (2009), etc.

If anyone (journalist, scholar, politician, whoever) would like to obtain some very basic official information regarding the Catholic Church in Russia (number of parishes, believers, priests,

bishops, structures, institutions, whatever) - at the moment there is no source. The official Russian Catholic Bishops' conference website from 2008 is permanently "under construction".

Catholics became "invisible" on the religious landscape in Russia and its public sphere.

5. Conclusion: What are the Ways for Transition from Strangers to Citizens?

When we take into consideration:

- State control (political, economic, social, cultural),
- Low religious activity in the public sphere, lack of influence,
- Vicious circle: no religious content – no interest to religion; no interest – no content,
- Ethnic approach to religious identity ("if you are Russian you should be Orthodox"),
- "Ghetto" approach and "conspiratorial mentality" of Catholics,
- Lack of resources to be competitive in the field of traditional mass media,

then the most effective strategy for Catholics, in order to change their image in the public sphere and the perception of them by the government, must include:

- legal standing for their rights, guaranteed by Constitution and Russian law
- equal and transparent dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church
- openness towards mass media,
- providing official and 24/7 accessible sources of information
- step-by-step education of secular journalists (meetings, "open doors" days, etc.)
- cheap and effective new media usage (blogs, forums, etc.)
- and - last but most important - being active citizens, not passive spectators of the games played above their heads.

According to latest observations, the "self-silencing" time for Catholics continues. Proposed strategies for change are still far from implementation.