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HOW THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH VIEWS THE ‘RUSSIAN WORLD’1

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Abstract

The cultural concept of a “Russian world” (Russian: “ruskiy mir”) plays an increasingly important role today, and is not limited to political discourse. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which officially joined the “Russian World” foundation in 2009, has frequently referred to Russkiy mir in recent discourse. The term “Russian world” refers to a culture that differentiates itself from Western culture and is superior to it. Despite ROC usage of the term, understanding of Russkiy mir is diffuse. There are still some semantic constants which occur repeatedly. The most significant of these are a) the historical aspect, b) religion or religious origin, c) values, and d) supranational character. The Russkiy mir concept has gained even more significance during the latest event in Ukraine.

The Historical Content

The historical dimension contains a twofold perspective, directed both forward and backward. The Russian world is perceived as a concept that originated in previous generations. The term Rus, which comprises the pre-modern peoples and forms of governments of the East

1 This text was published in German in Russland-Analysen No. 289 (01/30/2015), pp. 6-8 (online only; download: http://www.laender-analysen.de/russland/archiv.php). We thank the editor for the permission to publish the English translation.
Slavs, refers to the community of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians during the entire time “in which we had a unified country, regardless of the prevailing political system” (according to Patriarch Kirill on November 3, 2009). Therefore the historical commonalities between the East Slavs are emphasized and these have weight not just for the present day but also for the future. Furthermore, the Russian world guarantees the cohesion of these nations in the future, regardless of contemporary political boundaries. It is therefore seen as something like a predetermined community, from which the constituent nations cannot secede, even if they would like to form other political entities. The culture extends deeper than political units.

**Religion, Religious Origins, Values**

As concerns the role of religion in the Russian world, the RO’s stance is ambivalent. Naturally, Orthodoxy is considered to be the religious basis of Russian culture. Even in speeches by the Russian president, the common baptismal font of Kiev, that is, the Christianization of the Rus at the end of the 10th century, out of which the Orthodox Church of Russia and its neighboring countries emerged, is often apostrophized. However, the religious facet of this concept is not exclusive. A significant role is assigned to Islam in particular, both as one of the traditional religions in Russia (according to the preamble of the religious law of 1997) and as a religion where shared values are defended. Above all, this concept functions as a contrast to Western European religious communities (generally with the exception of the Catholic Church), who are ostensibly unsuccessful at influencing their society or upholding Christian traditions. Genuine or perceived prohibitions against religious symbols in Western Europe (judgments against displaying crucifixes, the secularization of religious holidays, and so on) cause the representatives of the ROC to emphasize the meaning of religion and religious symbols in the
public arena. So this is a matter of suggesting that religion in Russian society should be important and dominant. Its public witness goes along with this fact, but also a greater shaping of societies according to religious principles.

These principles are described in the discourses of the ROC as, above all, moral values. Fundamentally, they transcend religion. As the Patriarch asserted on September 6, 2014, these values are: “in the culture to which we belong Biblical values, or for those who do not recognize the Gospel and belong to other religions, the values of their own religion, which are in moral regard consonant in many respects with Christian teachings.” There are several concrete expressions of such values, as for example, “piety, patriotism, love of fellow man, justice, harmony between nations and between religions, the striving for knowledge, industriousness, and respect for our elders.” It is because of the prevalence of these values that the countries of the Russian world can assume an esteemed place in human society. These assertions often go along with anti-Western sentiment, namely that these postulated values have been either forgotten in the West or replaced with others. An important role is ascribed to the difference between personal and community values. Whereas the West emphasizes the individual and his or her freedoms, it neglects the rights of groups, for example, nations or religious communities (and the family is also included here); correspondingly, religious freedom is demanded as a group right, not primarily as an individual one.

Language

According to the views of the ROC, this does not mean unity or uniformity in the Russian world. In fact, the different languages, cultures, and religious traditions of these people should be retained. This will have the following result, according to the Patriarch: “that there will be no
first or second rate peoples.” The Russian world is portrayed as a place with traditional variety, which certainly rests on common societal assumptions, but does not result in homogeneity. The frequently used concept of “the countries of the Russian world” implies that there can and should be different governmental systems.

This is also evident in the next element: language. There is no doubt that the Russian language assumes an important role. Church representatives emphasize its preservation and cultivation. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that the other languages are of secondary importance. The church communities of the ROC in other countries are urged to support language learning, so that above all younger generations do not forget the language of their origin. But the Patriarch emphasizes that it is also completely possible that courses in Ukrainian, Belarusian or Moldavian might be offered where needed.

Language is not understood simply as a cultural bond to one’s (former) homeland, but just as much as a testimony to Orthodoxy. In an address, Patriarch Kiril reproaches young people who like to speak with a foreign accent, accusing them of rejecting “the Russian language, Russian culture, and Orthodox beliefs.” This is interesting insofar as the Church, in its inmost essence, specifically in the liturgy (religious worship service), rejects Russian itself and conducts the service exclusively in Church Slavic. In Ukraine, however, the parishes which are part of the community of the ROC are permitted to conduct their services in Ukrainian. Since the not canonically Orthodox churches in the Ukraine permit their priests this privilege, it is likely that the ROC was under great pressure to do the same. However, the use of the modern written language is not permitted in Russia.

But how do the representatives of the ROC view the importance of the nation or the political space constituted by the Russian world? We might say at the outset that the Russian
world is specifically understood as a supranational entity. The ROC, too, defines itself in its official rules as a multinational church. The Russian world refers to the Rus, not to Russia. Therefore it is open to all peoples who consider themselves members of this cultural unit, regardless of their national belonging.

**Supranational Character**

We might ask the question: how fully committed do the citizens of other nations wish to be to the Russian world? This does not seem to be a problem for church officials. Metropolitan Ilarion, the unofficial deputy of the Patriarch, refers to “peoples who have always considered themselves one unified people and who continue to represent themselves as a unified cultural-religious entity.” From the point of view of the people themselves, this idea can be understood as assimilation, but this point of view is not shared by the ROC. Behind this expression, we see the idea that modern political boundaries do not vitiate cultural unity. As a rule, however, the phrase ‘the Russian world’ means the Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldavia. Sometimes other countries are mentioned, as for example, Kazakhstan.

The fact that the Russian world is divided among several countries implies a process of integration. And in fact, church representatives compare this process with the one that the European Union has experienced. At the same time, there is an emphasis on the idea that because of their common religious roots, the process of integration in the Russian world could progress more successfully than in the EU. At the same time, it is also noteworthy that the ROC has worked intensively to influence political processes within the EU. It maintains a delegation in Brussels and important church officials regularly attempt to meet with and advise the highest officials of the EU.
The Political Enterprise and the Views of the ROC

It is evident that the exact way the ROC views its role in the Russian world cannot be defined specifically, but remains vague. In fact, it is often contradictory. There is no master plan that the church would seek to realize behind it, but rather an attempt to define and occupy a role for the ecclesial and religious dimension of the entity that is in harmony with political realities. The ROC has not acted in this arena but reacted.

That the concept does not lend itself to definitive political initiatives can be seen by the fact that the Russian world defines itself as supranational. That is part of the reason for the lack of clarity in church thinking in this area. Nevertheless, we can assert that there is in fact a unity of goals between the political project “the Russian world” and the aims of the church.

In the everyday life of the church, the Russian world concept plays no significant role; however, representatives of the ROC do appear at events like “the Worldwide Council of Russian Peoples” (in Russian: “Vsemirniy russkiy narodniy sobor”) and gain relatively widespread publicity thereby. There is scarcely any evidence for changing such projects into concrete political realities. Just as the worldwide centers of “Russkiy mir” largely confine themselves to language courses for non-Russian speakers and libraries for Russians abroad, we do not see the church congregations in foreign countries sponsoring any particular political activities.

We still have to hold on to the idea that different political opinions within the ROC might lead to tensions that could also affect the church’s attitude toward the Russian world. Such a variety of attitudes could be seen a few years ago in the case of the “Pussy riot”. At the moment, this multiplicity of views mostly affects the Ukraine. The church affiliated with the ROC (the
Ukrainian Church of the Moscow Patriarchate) is facing division. The large majority of the parishes identify themselves with the Ukraine and presently, they are attempting to achieve ecclesiastical independence; several parishes have already switched to the uncanonical Kyiv Patriarchate. The result is relatively restrained statements from church authorities on the Ukrainian question since the leaders of the ROC know that if they promulgate a clear position, they stand to lose a large percentage of the faithful in Ukraine. In that case, their concept of the Russian world would also be lost. While we can speculate today as to whether this concept has been realized as the Eurasian customs union on a political level, on the ideal plane, we are left with the banal statement that there is a common history of the East Slavic nations. But for shaping the present, this fact seems to have no meaning at all.

Translated from German by

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