



# BULLETIN

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## Role of the Orthodox Church in Russian Foreign Policy

by Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz

*The recent visit to Ukraine paid by the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill confirms that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is intensifying steps aimed at unifying Orthodoxy in the post-Soviet area, also through strengthening the links of the hierarchy and believers with Patriarch Kirill himself. The present policy of the new head of the ROC is in line with the general objectives of Russian foreign policy, constituting a crucial element of Russia's public diplomacy towards CIS states, but the external priorities of the Orthodox Church and of the Russian state are likely to clash in the future.*

**Orthodox Church in the Post-Soviet Area.** After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ROC was faced with an entirely new situation. After a phase of suppression, it was now able to respond to the divisions within the Orthodoxy in the post-Soviet area. In some communities the dispute was often between those claiming that the Moscow Patriarchate had no jurisdiction over their territory and those wishing to remain under Moscow's ecclesiastic control. In Ukraine, for example, the Orthodox believers profess adherence to three major churches: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate (15% of the population), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate (11%), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (1%). In Moldova and Estonia in turn many communities relinquishing the Moscow Patriarchate have chosen the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The missionary activities of other Christian churches constituted yet another challenge that the Russian Orthodox Church had to face after the demise of the Soviet Union. The Catholic Church was the most significant rival for the ROC in this respect, with its activities in the post-Soviet area—focused on rebuilding the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine and establishing Roman Catholic dioceses in Russia—strongly criticized by the Orthodox hierarchs, who were accusing the Vatican of proselytism.

The Russian Orthodox Church has also enjoyed some success over the past few years, including a rise in the number of Russian citizens describing themselves as Orthodox believers. According to a Levada Centre polls conducted in 2008, 71% of the population profess adherence to the ROC, compared to 69% in 2007, 60% in 2004 and 59% in 2003. Another success for the ROC was the recognition—in May 2007—of the Moscow Patriarchate's jurisdiction by the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia.

**Patriarch Kirill's Foreign Policy.** After the death of Patriarch Alexius II in December 2008, the ROC Local Council elected Archbishop Kirill, Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, a new Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. The new patriarch had earlier headed the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Relations, frequently filling in for Alexius since 2002 due to the latter's deteriorating health. After his election in January 2009, the Patriarch Kirill quickly invigorated the ROC's foreign policy thanks to his extensive international experience and his relatively young age. During his first year as patriarch he visited Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

The main objective of the Patriarch Kirill's international activity is to overcome the effects of the split within the Orthodox Church and strengthen the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate in the CIS states. The patriarch often emphasises in his speeches that the ROC should not be constrained by state frontiers, so he displays the national flags of the former Soviet republics around his throne and calls for building the "Russian world" (russkiy mir) as a concept uniting all the peoples

of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus who trace their origins back to the Holy Rus. This is in line with the general objectives of the new Russian foreign policy towards CIS member states which is aimed at enhancing Russia's political, economic and cultural presence in those countries.

The Patriarch Kirill's third visit to Kyiv this year suggests that Ukraine is seen by the ROC as a country crucial to the unity of Orthodoxy in the post-Soviet area. With the Moscow Patriarchate for years striving for control over all churches in Ukraine, the present policy is not necessarily intended to bring immediate results. The Patriarch Kirill tries first of all to win over the sympathy of believers and to prepare the ground for a future confrontation with the Orthodox secessionists. The problems within the churches unrecognised by the Orthodox Christianity also play in Kirill's favor as demoralisation in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate is progressing and a leadership crisis persists in the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. In an attempt to boost his popularity in Ukraine, Kirill has suggested that he might rotate his place of residence between Moscow and Kyiv every six months and he has offered to acquire also Ukrainian citizenship, changing his title to "Patriarch of Moscow, Kyiv and All Russia." He has also tried to maintain good relations with all major politicians in Ukraine: not only with President Viktor Yanukovich, but also with his predecessor Viktor Yushchenko and with former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

Patriarch Kirill's international activities have improved Russia's undermined image in Georgia. After the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, the ROC managed to preserve good relations with the Georgian Orthodox Church and organise humanitarian aid for people in areas affected by the war. The Moscow Patriarchate also recognised the jurisdiction of the Georgian Orthodox Church over the territory of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, despite the changed political situation.

Just 18 months after his election as patriarch, Kirill has already received more from the state than his predecessor. The process of returning to the Church property seized by the communists has gained impetus. The state has agreed to attach chaplains to military units, and a new course about Orthodox Christian culture will be offered in public schools. The majority of the Russian population trusts the Church and regards Patriarch Kirill as a person capable of strengthening unity within society, what means that the ROC could play the role of a mediator in the case of a political crisis in Russia.

**Prospects for State-Church Cooperation in Russian Foreign Policy.** The state regards the ROC's engagement in the "near abroad" as an important element of Russian public diplomacy. The similarities in foreign policy objectives notwithstanding, the priorities of the two actors may diverge in the future. Positive relations with the authorities of CIS member states are crucial to ROC's missionary activity, so the Moscow Patriarchate fully respects the sovereignty of former Soviet republics and does not support any revisionism, while for the Kremlin political instability in other CIS countries often enhances its position abroad.

Relations between the state and the Church might also deteriorate on account of differing views on the socio-economic modernisation of Russia. The Orthodox hierarchs are often critical of Western values and hence oppose the process of opening up Russia to the world, also by discouraging the development of dialogue with the Catholic Church. The state authorities, in turn, are aware that openness to other Christian churches is an element vital to Russia's successful modernisation. A good example of the new Russian approach was President Dmitry Medvedev's decision of December 2009 to raise the level of diplomatic representation in the Holy See.

Intensive international activities of the ROC in some former Soviet republics mean that social instability rooted in religion disputes may arise in Ukraine or Moldova. This undesirable situation may also result in a suspension of economic reforms in countries that are at the heart of the EU's Eastern Partnership program. In order to maintain the fragile religious and social peace there, EU officials should include religious dialogue into this program, while maintaining an equal distance to all religious denominations.