

Ministry in Eurasia: Churches as Agents of Change

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Because of its fear of change and Western influence, the Russian government is closing in on its neighbors in the post-Soviet region. This time, the major presidential candidate is presenting himself as the defender of Holy Russia and real Christianity, as well as the emperor of the “Fifth Empire” that has arisen to replace the “Red Communist Empire”¹. Thus, religious persecution in Russia is escalating, and those who don’t oppose the West are regarded with suspicion and labeled as “foreign agents.”

This label refers to both organizations and individuals, and is used almost like a verdict. But what if these “agents” can help Russia and other post-Soviet countries be more open to the world and make societal changes that are greatly needed? We are not talking about agents that serve just one country, but rather those that serve on a global level, and therefore, can serve many different countries. The Church is perhaps the most significant of these agents.

In my brief reflections, I would like to highlight just one thought regarding the role of the Church in the socio-political processes in Eurasia, where Russia is striving for mastery. No matter what plans might be made in the Kremlin, the transformation of this region is in the hands of the Church. And transformation will happen, even if the Church is facing a time of difficulty.

So, why the Church? Simply put, because there is no greater force on earth. If society undergoes transformation without the Church, then it will be a harmful transformation. And, people in Russia and its Orthodox neighbors still place deep trust in the Church. About 77% of people in Moldova have great confidence in the Orthodox Church². And in Belarus, about 84% of people identify as Orthodox³. Finally, with a credibility rating of 48%, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is the fourth most trusted institution in Russia, following the presidency (75%), the Russian army (69%), and the Federal Security Service (57%)⁴. It’s also interesting that the level of trust in the Siloviks (the

¹ Alexander Prokhanov. *Symphony of the Fifth Empire* – M.: ЭКМО, 2007.

² Zmiter Lukashuk. 95% of Belarusians identify with a certain denomination, and only 64% of them believe in god 64% <https://euroradio.fm/ru/95-belorusov-otnosyat-sebya-k-opredelyonnoy-konfessii-v-boga-veryat-64-iz-nih>.

³ The Church has the highest level of trust: sociologist <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=62033>.

⁴ Institutional credence <https://www.levada.ru/2017/10/12/institutsionalnoe-doverie-3/>.

Russian word for politicians serving in the Russian military or security service) has grown significantly in recent years.

The situation in Ukraine is somewhat similar, but also unique. According to a poll conducted by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology, Ukrainians place the most trust in the Church (56.7%), volunteers (53.5%), and the armed forces of Ukraine (53.1%)⁵. It is important to note that, in Ukraine, along with many other former Soviet nations, most people trust the Church as a social institution, rather than as a bastion of moral authority. In fact, according to data from the Razumkov Center, 63% of people trust the Church, but only 42% recognize its moral authority (in 2010, it was 56%)⁶.

This brings to mind a passage from the Gospel of Mark: “I believe; help my unbelief!” Many times, when people say they have trust, what they really mean is they want to have trust. As Jesus’ disciples asked, “To whom shall we go?” Who can we trust if not the Church? In nations where government and civic leaders are weak, the Church is the only alternative. And even if the Church withdraws from its civic responsibilities, the status quo is still impacted. That is why the Kremlin and ROC are fighting against missionary activity under the cover of the anti-terrorist Yarovaya law. After all, missionary activity impacts the nation’s religious landscape, which in turn, impacts the public sphere.

Missionary activity is a form of social outreach, and the authorities are afraid of any outreach that is uncompromising or ideologically motivated. It is precisely those churches that conduct effective ministry activity that can become agents of change in the post-Soviet region. But only those that remain faithful, even in the midst of persecution, can rejuvenate the Church at large and impact their society.

Renewal happens when people can imagine a better way of life, but sadly, many young people in Russia can’t imagine a life different than what they experience under President Putin. This can lead to a very destructive mindset: “We will destroy this world of violence down to the foundations, and then we will build our new world. The one who was nothing will become everything” (from the Russian socialist anthem version of “The Internationale”). Just like 100 years ago, Russia is facing a very simple yet extremely significant choice: a bloody revolution or spiritual reformation.

Meanwhile, look at the pictures that were taken on September 16, 2017 in downtown Kiev. This wasn’t a new Maidan filled with protests and civil unrest, but rather, it was a day of thanksgiving, on which hundreds of thousands of Evangelical Christians gathered together. It was a revolution of the Spirit, and this is where real change begins.

We have only one choice “in the shadow of the Kremlin.” We must help the Church unlock its transformational potential and lift up its prophetic voice so that it may transform the world. There is no other institution that can do this. Churches are agents of change, messengers of reconciliation, and prophetic voices speaking to the governing

⁵ Ukrainians radically do not trust governing institutions: a poll <https://apostrophe.ua/news/society/2017-02-01/ukraintsyi-radikalno-ne-doverayut-institutam-vlasti--sotsopros/85391>.

⁶ CHURCH, SOCIETY AND STATE RESISTING CHALLENGES AND THREATS OF TODAY (informational material) http://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2017_Religiya.pdf.

authorities. If the Church fails to regain its moral credibility, its missionary activities will be ineffective. If we don't want Eurasia to suffer war and destruction, then we must do everything we can to help the Church take the initiative, regain its independence, and embrace its special calling in politics and society.

If we want to help the countries of Eurasia, then we must start with the Church, and the best way to help the Orthodox Church is to encourage its leaders to pursue more evangelical activities that convey openness and truthfulness. And if we believe in the power of change, then we must maintain international partnerships with promising spiritual and intellectual church leaders who are capable of turning new pages in the history of Eurasia – pages of renewal, reconciliation, awakening, and transformation.

Let churches be called “foreign agents” in Russia. We know the truth. These churches are global agents of positive change, and in this time of conflict and division, only the Church can transcend borders for the common good, build bridges that bring people together, and free the nations of Eurasia from destruction.