Escalating the Populist Approach

The Case of Russia and the Significance of History

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Constructing a useful history is a crucial element of populist approaches to the public discourse. Since the end of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has become a mastermind of history and memory construction in Russia, and at the same time an important actor in international networks of the defense of the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). While the defense of so-called "traditional Christian values" is a strategy of many populists to limit rights of other religious communities or the rights of free speech or artistic freedom, the history of the ROC's approach to religious freedom deserves special attention. In a rather unique way, the ROC appropriated the memory of repression of Orthodox faithful during the Soviet Union to claim a special right to define where, when and whose religious freedom is under threat. The official justification of Russia's war against Ukraine by arguments of defending religious freedom symbolizes the peak of populist appropriation and perversion of this human right, and the limits of efficiency of international human rights coalitions.

Constructing a useful history by appropriating repression

Russia and especially the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) have been among the most influential actors in global networks for the protection of the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for a long time. The roots of this engagement trace back to the Cold War, and this history is particular important to understand the way in which the ROC uses the human rights discourse in the post-Soviet time. Since the 1950s, two developments that might seem paradoxical have taken place. On the one hand, the persecution of religion by the Soviet atheistic government gained new intensity after a short period of concessions during

World War II. On the other hand, after the late-1940s, representatives of the ROC were implemented in all major international institutions concerned with human rights and the human dimension of global politics, such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Conference of European Churches (CEC). The simultaneous persecution of faithful and collaboration of church representatives caused a kind of ecclesial schizophrenia, which was difficult to capture by ecclesiological concepts and therefore remained unaddressed in Russian as well as ecumenical discourses.

As part of Josef Stalin's attempt to use the ROC first for war mobilization and later for state propaganda, in 1946 the ROC was allowed to establish a "Department for External Church Relations." This department enabled the church to develop international ecumenical relationships, but it also served the task to support the Soviet foreign agenda. While the faith community in the Soviet Union underwent repression and partly direct persecution, the leadership advocated for religious freedom and against discrimination on international forums. This time of international religious diplomacy had several highly sustainable affects. First, it taught the church the language of human rights, which through the publications in church journals empowered the educated faithful and priests to reflect on their own rights and freedoms, but it also empowered the church diplomats to be a respected part of the international discourse even before conducting a theological discourse of the fundaments of human rights. Second, the church learned the protocol of international relations. As a result, a rather stable group of diplomats developed within the church, who as so-called travel cadre ("*Reisekader*"[1]) maintained a closed discourse about the place of the Soviet Union and the ROC in the international peace movement. As a third result, the participation of church representatives in the exchange between the blocks and the task to adapt theological ideas to the geopolitical discourses about disarmament, deterrence, social justice and coexistence strengthened a consciousness of a dualistic world. This dualistic approach is not alien to the theological perspective on worldly matters; however, with the dualism of systems, the theological approach shifted from eschatological to current sociopolitical aspects. Finally, the ROC and Russia became important allies and over time the leader of the societies and countries with a strong anti-American and

1 Beljakova, Nadezhda/Bremer, Thomas/Kunter, Katharina: "Es gibt keinen Gott!" Kirchen und Kommunismus. Eine Konfliktgeschichte, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder 2016, p. 128.

anti-Capitalist sentiment. The anti-colonial rhetoric and the demand for social justice – mainly advocated by protestant churches from the Global South – appeared very compatible with Christian principles and easy to comply with in contrast to the anti-Communist currents within the Catholic Church. These alliances proved sustainable beyond the end of the Cold War.

The ROC became a crucial actor in the discourse about religious freedom during the Cold War. For Western churches and other participants of the peace movement during the Cold War, the presence of the ROC was important because everyone was aware of the persecution of religions in the Soviet Union. Giving a leading voice to one of the most persecuted communities of a world religion in the international human rights activities was an important way to highlight the problem at that time. At the same time, especially German ecumenical partners tried to include the ROC in international contexts as a part of coping with their own guilt of World War II. Of course, most partners were aware of the political instrumentalization of the international activities of the ROC, but the aim to build bridges over the Iron Curtain was mostly stronger. The ROC thus received remarkable moral capital in the international context due to the persecution that Christians suffered under the Soviet regime, which at the same time supported the church diplomacy.

The legacy of a repressed and persecuted church remained with the ROC and was effectively used in ecumenical and human rights networks after the end of the Soviet Union. Additionally, since the late-1980s, the revival of religious life strengthened the self-consciousness of the church and the attention of the international community. Relatively quickly, the ROC claimed to be the largest Orthodox church by numbers of faithful, thus demanding a priority role within the Orthodox community. As a result of the Cold War times, the ROC was an established participant in international networks, where other Orthodox churches or other religious communities especially from the socialist block only started to build contacts. On the other hand, the ecumenical and other international partners were grateful for the new freedom of faithful in the region and proud of their important contacts, and they valued the ecumenical openness of the ROC, which was not common for other Orthodox churches.

In 2000, the ROC took two decisive steps nourishing its reputation in these international contexts. The Jubilee Bishops Council approved the "Basis of the

Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church,"[2] the first socio-ethical document of an Orthodox church in history. The same council approved the collective canonization of more than 1,000 New Martyrs, Orthodox believers who died during the persecution of religion by the Bolsheviks and the Great Terror in the 1920 to 1930s.[3] The international ecumenical community paid considerable attention to both decisions. Without exploring these crucial events in greater depth, in the context of the discourse about FoRB two aspects are important. First, the Social Concept dedicates several paragraphs to the question of freedom of conscience in particular and human rights in general, marking them notably as lesser evil because they serve the defense of traditional religions in a secular world. However, they also underline in chapter III.6 "[…] that the spiritual value system has disintegrated and that most people in a society which affirms the freedom of conscience no longer aspire for salvation. If initially the state emerged as an instrument of asserting divine law in society, the freedom of conscience has ultimately turned state in an exclusively temporal institute with no religious commitments. The adoption of the freedom of conscience as legal principle points to the fact that society has lost religious goals and values and become massively apostate and actually indifferent to the task of the Church and to the overcoming of sin."[4] In the special document on human rights from 2008, the ROC underlined this understanding of FoRB as a right of religious communities to be protected, rather than a right of individuals to freely choose a religion, or none. FoRB thus has to serve the church to conduct its salvific mission, and remains alien to the perceived core of Russian Orthodox Christianity.

Second, the canonization of the New Martyrs drew attention to the history of repressed and persecuted believers and thus was a strong marker for the commitment of the ROC to FoRB. Without doubt, the losses of live and suffering of believers of the ROC due to their individual religious confession was ex-

2 Bishop's Council of the Russian Orthodox Church: The Basis of the Social Concept, Moskau 2000, https://mospatusa.com/files/THE-BASIS-OF-THE-SOCIAL-CONCEPT.pdf, accessed on: 20 Jul. 2023.

3 Bishop's Council of the Russian Orthodox Church: Деяние Юбилейного Архиерейского Собора о соборном прославлении Новомучеников и исповедников Российских XX века (Acts of the Jubilee Council of Bishops on the Conciliar Glorification of the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia of the Twentieth Century), Moskau 2000, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/423849.html, accessed on: 20 Jul. 2023.

4 For the English version, see: https://old.mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/iii/, accessed on: 26 Oct. 2023.

ceptional in numbers and strategy, although other religious communities were also under the threat of extinction. However, the canonization isolated the suffering of the believers from the history of collaboration and guilt within the institutionalized church and thus appropriated the legacy of the suffering for the whole church without addressing the different layers of entanglement of the church itself. For the commitment to FoRB, this means an immunization of the institutional church against the accusation of limiting religious freedom (practically through support of according political programs or theoretically by developing according ideologies). As Oleg Morozov describes, the canonization served to establish the mythology of a victim, which prevented any further process of self-critical approach.[5] For the international partner, it seems impossible or at least unimaginable that a church could favor limitations of religious freedom having suffered it so much in the nearest past, and honor the memory of the victims of religious persecution in such a way as the canonization of hundreds of martyrs. Who could be a better advocate for FoRB than a church resurrected from devastation?

The post-Soviet leadership of the ROC appropriated the identity of a persecuted church without the authentic experience of persecution. They used it as moral capital within the Russian society, framing critique against the church as new persecution and demanding legal persecution of its critiques to avoid falling back into communist times,[6] but also in its relations with the West. The authority of this church in alliances for religious freedom largely draws on its claim to "know what persecution really means" and therefore being able to recognize destructive ideologies from afar and being somehow a natural defender of true religious freedom. Thus, the ROC established permanent representations to the European institutions and the UN to defend the rights of re-

5 Morozov, Oleg: "Легенды и мифы российской истории: историческая политика руководства Русской православной церкви в начале XXI в." (The Legends and Myths of Russian History: the Russian Orthodox Church's Approach to History at the Start of the Twenty-First Century), in: Alexey Malashenko/Sergej Filatov (eds.), Монтаж и демонтаж секулярного мира (Assembling and Disassembling the Secular World), Москва: Российская политическая энциклопедия (Росспен) 2014, pp. 255–322.

6 Filatov, Sergej: "Русское православие, общество и власть во времена политической турбулентности. РПЦ после осени 2011 г." (Russian Orthodoxy, Society, and the Regime During the Times of Political Turbulence. The Russian Orthodox Church After the Autumn of 2011), in: Alexey Malashenko/Sergej Filatov (eds.): Монтаж и демонтаж секулярного мира (Assembling and Disassembling the Secular World), Москва: Российская политическая энциклопедия (Росспен) 2014, pp. 9–41.

ligious communities, and the topic of religious freedom became a cornerstone of its international appearance in ecumenical and interreligious contexts.[7] Especially in ecumenical dialogues, the end of the obvious Soviet political instrumentalization of the dialogues nurtured the hope for a constructive and experienced Orthodox partner with an ecumenical openness, which many other Orthodox churches lacked.

However, the appreciation of the ROC in ecumenical and human rights networks ignored several important aspects. First, the ROC was no longer representative for the churches in former Soviet countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia or the Baltic states. Although the Moscow Patriarchate claims the structural jurisdiction over large parts of the former Soviet Union, the people of these new independent countries often developed an independent social consciousness and – seemingly even more importantly – an independent memory culture. Repression and instrumentalization of religion during Soviet times played a visible role in the public discourse as other than Orthodox repressed communities, which came back from the underground and demanded justice. In the international contexts, the religious communities of Ukraine, Belarus or Moldova nevertheless appeared exclusively as part of the Russian Orthodox delegations, without its own voice.

Second, the leadership of the ROC has been complicit with the Soviet leadership in the persecution of religious minorities, most prominently the Greek-Catholic Church in Ukraine and Belarus, as well as Orthodox dissidents, reflecting a historical fact that has never been addressed by the church. This leadership of the church did not change or undergo de-communization after the end of the Soviet Union. The memory of the New Martyrs allowed essentially eliminating the collaboration of church representatives from the official historical narrative and underlining the picture of a persecuted and resurrected church. In addition, religious dissidents in the Soviet Union – if they survived – largely remained repressed dissidents within their church in post-Soviet Russia. None of the officially and individually repressed priests like Gleb Yakunin, Alexandr Ogorodnikov, Georgij Edelshtejn or Alexandr Men – all of whom fought for FoRB with quite severe personal consequences – gained some kind of acknowledgment or promotion. Finally, the appreciation of FoRB by the leadership of the ROC never included a similar engagement for

7 Stoeckl, Kristina/Medvedeva, Kseniya: "Double Bind at the UN: Western actors, Russia, and the traditionalist agenda," in: Global Constitutionalism: Human Rights, democracy and the rule of law 7 (3/2018), pp. 383–421.

the freedom of other religious communities. In the late-1990s, the negative attitude in relation to other religious communities in Russia among Orthodox elites was still very high.[8] Since then, the Orthodox currents in growing xenophobia and faith-based discrimination within Russian society have been constantly growing, without any intervention by the ROC's leadership.[9]

Looking at this history of appropriation of the experience of repression by the ROC leadership, the problematic conditions of an international actor in the system of advocating and protecting religious freedom who has its own long and publicly negated story of fighting human rights become obvious. The situation of the ROC since 2012 – when the church leadership enforced its collaboration with the autocratic state against a free civil society – is therefore not a new development. Thus, acknowledging this distinct pre-history could be a first step towards understanding the ambiguity of the ROC's participation in international coalitions for FoRB.

Freedom of religion as a weapon

The second dimension of the ROC's instrumental approach to FoRB after the construction of the useful history of faith-based repression during the Soviet Union is the consolidation of a post-Soviet civilizational identity as the last defender of traditional – redemptive – Christianity. During its engagement in overcoming the East-West divide during the Cold War, the ROC positioned Russia and Russian Orthodoxy as an organic part of Europe, namely the Western civilizational sphere. With the end of the Soviet Union and the search for the roots of Russian identity, anti-Western sentiments and an alleged ontological difference to the Western identity were revived, having been part of Orthodox and Russian thinking in the previous centuries. Using different older

8 Furmann, Dmitrij/Kääriäinen, Kimmo: "Люди на тающей льдине (Ценностные ориентации религиозной элиты России)" (People on the Melting Ice Floe. Value Orientations of Russia's Religious Elite), in: Voprosy Filosofii (1/1999), pp. 27–33.

9 Verkhovskij, Alexandr/Pain, Emil: Цивилизационный национализм: российская версия «особого пути» (Civilisational nationalism: the Russian Version of the "Special Path"), in: Emil Pain (eds.): Идеология «особого пути»: истоки, содержание, последствия (Ideology of the "Special Path": origins, content, consequences), Москва: Три квадрата 2010, pp. 171–210; Sibireva, Olga: "Challenges to Freedom of Conscience in Russia in 2022" (13 Apr. 2023), https://www.sova-center.ru/en/religion/publications/2023/04/d47036/, accessed on: 21 Jul. 2023.

concepts of Moscow as the Third Rome, Eurasia, the Holy Rus' or the ancient Katechon, this worldview sees Russia as opposing a collective West, which it describes as secular, liberal, hedonistic, persecuting Christians in the name of minority rights and disseminating destructive ideologies like gender ideology to commit genocide against traditional cultures. This is depicted as an existential threat not only for Russia but also humankind, including paying special attention to the anti-colonial currents in societies of the Global South. Thus, Russia fulfills a messianic role in an apocalyptic battle.

These ideas build on deep anxieties of a society, which for seven decades heard about the will of a fascist West to destroy it. The only power able to stop fascism has been Russia during the Second World War with the help of the ROC. In this construction, Russia and the ROC will be the only credible force able to stop new offenses of fascism or other destructive ideologies like Marxism in the future. Both the ROC leadership and the political elites in post-Soviet Russia invested huge efforts in constructing a paradigm of Russia's victory over evil through the history of World War II as the main identity marker for Russian society in the 21st century. Within this construction, again many questions had no place, such as the issue of guilt, failure, atrocities by the Soviet army, the annihilation of the diverse ethnic, cultural and religious identities within the Soviet Union and the distinct alternative narratives of this historical landmark by the people of the republics, especially in Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic states. The homogenization of diverse memories and identities provided by the Soviets was continued by the joint memory politics of the political and ecclesiastical elites in 21st-century Russia.

When Patriarch Kirill spoke about the war in Ukraine as a "metaphysical" battle in March 2022, he consequently relied on this prepared narrative of Russia fighting the good battle against evil. Russian civil society has experienced this battle before when the Russian state together with the ROC instrumentalized the human rights discourse to enforce illiberal politics.[10] Individual and civil rights and freedoms have been repressed since 2012, at the latest. These legal repressions have been strategically justified with the "defense of traditional Christian values": spiritual-moral values and a concept of "spiritual security" became part of the National Security Strategy,[11] NGOs and religious

10 Stoeckl: Double Bind.

11 Stoeckl, Kristina: "Russia's Spiritual Security Doctrine as a Challenge to European Comprehensive Security Approaches," in: The Review of Faith & International Affairs 20 (4/2022), pp. 37–44.

organizations like Jehovah's Witness or non-mainstream Muslim communities have been banned as extremists or "foreign agents," domestic violence has been de-criminalized to defend the sacred sphere of the nuclear family, LGBTIQ people have been forced to invisibility, and criticism of the ROC in artistic ways has been framed as "humiliation of religious feelings." At the same time, the so-called "traditional values" have remained extremely fluid and vague.

It was Ukraine's commitment to the European integration since at least 2013/2014 with the Euro-Maidan that posed a particular danger for Russia's salvatory civilizational project. For Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are integral parts of their Russian space, as they are for the ROC as part of the ecclesial jurisdiction and spiritual civilization. However, in Ukraine, independent national policies and social dynamics as well as a rule-of-law approach to the historical religious plurality made it impossible to push the same legal restrictions. The populist attempts of simplification and enemy images could not gain comparable success due to the strong appreciation of cultural and religious diversity after the Soviet Union and the lack of glorification of the past. The narration of "traditional values" could not take ground in a society with diverse traditions. The same counts for an exclusive claim of religious freedom for one Orthodox tradition as there are other Orthodox and several other confessional and religious communities that shape the public discourses.

After 1990, the Ukrainian Orthodox community tried to detach from the Russian influence, although even the global Christian community accepted the claim of the ROC that Ukraine "somehow" belongs to the Russian church. Until now, the majority of observers in the West perceive Orthodoxy in Ukraine as Russian Orthodoxy in Ukraine and therefore support the Russian colonial approach to Ukraine and consequently the accusation of the ROC that Ukraine would oppress parts of the Russian faithful. The reluctance to acknowledge religious autonomy in Ukraine (and Belarus) on the global stage and the tendency to subscribe to the Russian view on Ukraine had a crucial impact on the ability of Russia to develop a narrative about the persecuted Christians in Ukraine.

Since 2018 and the establishment of the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the ROC – with the support of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – has engaged in systematic reporting and monitoring of violent and rhetorical attacks on the Ukrainian Orthodox church. They have reported about the "state persecution of Christians" on the international level, namely to the European

Parliament, OSCE and the UN.[12] This argument is an important part of the Russian propaganda about Ukraine as a Nazi regime with satanic and genocidal tactics. At the same time, religious freedom is restricted extensively in all occupied territories, priests and faithful are deported, temples destroyed and sacred places humiliated.[13]

In the first weeks of 2023, the whole dilemma of the role of the ROC in the international defense of FoRB became obvious. After months of hesitating, the Ukrainian government changed its politics in relation to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which has been a major gateway for Russian influence in Ukraine but tried to detach from Moscow since spring 2022. In an attempt to defeat all collaboration and impact from the Russian aggressor within Ukraine, the state enforced pressure on the church, its major monasteries and hierarchs, posing legal investigations and sanctions on them. Empowered by this strategy, large parts of society supported a radical ban of the UOC and cases of violence against buildings and faithful of the UOC emerged. Several draft laws against the church were submitted, most of them in conflict with general principles of FoRB. The international community – both political and ecumenical – had kept silent on these developments for quite a long time, as most of them were sympathetic with the emotional sentiment behind the developments and with a country threatened with elimination. As a tragical result, the ROC – who was a major ideological pillow of the aggression against Ukraine – was the only public voice advocating for the rights of the UOC to religious freedom. After months of ambivalent signals from the ecumenical partners in relation to the warmongering position of the ROC leadership, all attempts to isolate them from international recognition failed at the moment when the international community had to acknowledge the highly questionable course of religious policies of the Ukrainian government. Arguing with the historical memory of

12 Elsner, Regina: 'Verfolgte' Kirche in der Ukraine? Kriegspropaganda, Kirchenkonflikt und globale Konsequenzen, ed. by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (= Monitor Religion und Politik), Berlin 2022, https://www.kas.de/de/monitor/detail/-/content/verfolgte-kirche-in-der-ukraine, accessed on: 21 Jul. 2023; Elsner, Regina/Fenno, Iryna: Religionsfreiheit: Ukraine, ed. by Internationales Katholisches Missionswerk missio e.V./Renovabis e.V. (= Länderberichte Religionsfreiheit 59), Aachen 2023, https://www.missio-hilft.de/missio/informieren/wofuer-wir-uns-einsetzen/religionsfreiheit-menschenrechte/laenderberichte-religionsfreiheit/laenderbericht-059-ukraine.pdf, accessed on: 23 Dec. 2023.

13 Institute for Religious Freedom: Project Locked Faith. The voice of believers during the war in Ukraine (2022), https://lockedfaith.org/en/c/4, accessed on: 21 Jul. 2023.

Soviet politics against the Orthodox community and expecting "new martyrs" on Ukrainian soil, the ROC masterfully appropriated the FoRB discourse to gain international recognition despite its justification of months of Russian atrocities.

Culture wars learned and escalated

As a final point, it is worth recalling that Russia and the ROC have not invented new or original ways of misusing the freedom of religion in the ways described by Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges in the introduction to this book. As Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner showed for the case of Culture Wars, Russia and the ROC first learned a lot from Western populist allies.[14] However, the major difference compared with the Western ways of populist appropriation is the fact that in Russia it is the institutionalized church, its leadership and official structures who support this appropriation in systematic ways and in close alliance with the state. At present, for Western societies the leadership of churches are an important opposition to populists, even in such countries like Italy or Hungary, and to some extent even in Poland. However, the ROC is no marginal player in both Orthodoxy and Christian ecumenism. It seems that the straight commitment of this official church to a perverted concept of human rights and freedom of religion has been very attractive for Western conservative actors. Prior to the escalation of Russia's war, with the ROC conservative actors in the West received a recognized ecclesial authority that they miss in their own churches.

Russia's war against Ukraine and its outright justification with the alleged defense of traditional values and Christian religious freedom are a radical and horrible escalation of the populist appropriation of FoRB. At present, it is unclear whether this escalation will have some kind of impact on the agenda of other illiberal or populist actors. The ambivalent or hesitant reaction of conservative networks and ecumenical allies like the Vatican or the WCC to the illiberal religious ideology of the war and the situation of religious communities in Ukraine point to a certain deadlock of their engagement for FoRB. They appreciated Russia's straight commitment to religious freedom – perceived as the only conservative human right in contrast (and not in complementarity)

14 Stoeckl, Kristina/Uzlaner, Dmitry: Moralist International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars, New York: Fordham University Press 2022.

to other, liberal individual human rights for too long – and it is still not obvious that they changed their mind in the face of this militant escalation.[15] The short analysis given before suggests that the former uncritical approach to the ROC's history of repression and usage of history is one important key to this deadlock. Take this history seriously and confronting the ROC with these ambiguities at least on the ecumenical level would be a first step for a credible advocacy for FoRB in Ukraine and Russia as well as in those regions like Africa or the Middle East where the ROC also claims a leading role in defending persecuted Christians.

15 Elsner, Regina: "Frieden im ökumenischen Dialog mit der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche," in: RGOW 51 (2023), pp. 18–21.