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The end of the pro-Orthodox consensus

Religion as a new cleavage in Russian society[1]

Dmitry Uzlaner

In their famous study of cleavages, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) list 'religious vs secular' as one of the key lines that historically divide modern national societies. Opposition between secular and religious groups is an important dimension of political confrontation. Although the logic of this argument is solid, post-Soviet Russia has heretofore been a curious exception in this respect. Religion did not become socially insignificant and irrelevant as a result of the process of Soviet secularisation. On the contrary, after the fall of the USSR, religion attracted much attention, but with little confrontation or tension. There are, of course, disagreements among different religious organisations or even within them (Kostiuk 2002). There are 'cult controversies', including a significant debate concerning so-called sects and new religious movements (Shterin 2012). And the long and difficult struggle against militant Islamism continues. But religion in general – at least in its traditional form – has largely been a matter of consensus, not cleavage, for Russian society. This peculiar post-Soviet, or 'post-atheist', situation is called the 'pro- Orthodox', or sometimes the 'pro-religious', consensus in academic literature. In this chapter, I will analyse this peculiar consensus, which I argue is now falling apart. We are witnessing a slow but dramatic break-up of this pro- Orthodox consensus.

What is the pro-Orthodox (pro-religious) consensus?

Before discussing the pro-Orthodox consensus in detail, I will make certain theoretical clarifications. Following Karel Dobbelaere (2002; 2004: 230), I consider secularisation and desecularisation to be multi-dimensional concepts. These processes can happen on three distinct levels: the macro-level (Dobbelaere 2002: 29–35; the level of social structure or *societal* secularisation/desecularisation), the meso-level (Dobbelaere 2002: 35–38; the level where society and the individual meet, such as a community or an organisation) and the

micro-level (Dobbelaere 2002: 38–43; the *individual* level or the level of personal beliefs and practices). I refer to the meso-level not only in the sense of organisational secularisation/ desecularisation, as Dobbelaere implied, nor merely in the sense of 'change occurring in the posture of religious organizations…in matters of belief, morals and rituals' (Dobbelaere 2002: 25), but rather in a broader sense that includes popular attitudes to these organisations, public approval or disapproval of their activities, public trust or distrust towards their representatives, or a willingness or lack of willingness to follow their advice. In this sense, the concept of a 'pro- Orthodox consensus' refers to the meso- and partially to the macro-level, where the latter is seen as the logical continuation of the former. The term 'pro-Orthodox consensus' was coined by Furman and Kaariainen (2007a). These scholars consider the pro-Orthodox consensus to be one of the most vivid manifestations of a so-called religious renaissance in post-Soviet Russia. With this concept, they basically wanted to communicate a very simple idea: 'The "good" and "very good" attitude to Orthodoxy becomes the firm and 'definitive' attitude of the overwhelming majority, virtually universal' (Furman and Kaariainen 2007a: 20–22). This consensus is 'nationwide, inasmuch as the proportion of people whose attitude to Orthodoxy is "good" and "very good" is significantly larger than the proportion of believers' (Furman and Kaariainen (2007a: 22). Paradoxically, 'the "good attitude" to Orthodoxy is typical not only for believers, but also for the overwhelming majority of those who identify themselves as "undecided", "unbelievers" and even "atheists"' (Furman and Kaariainen (2007a: 22; see also Ładykowska in this volume). According to Furman and Kaariainen (2007b: 81), therefore, 'atheists and unbelievers are in a sense also part of this "pro-Orthodox consensus"'. So the pro-Orthodox consensus basically signifies the general acceptance of Russian Orthodoxy, and of the Moscow Patriarchate as the institutional embodiment of Orthodoxy, which is shared by everyone regardless of class, gender, income, occupation and even regardless of one's belief or unbelief.

Sergey Lebedev (2015: 14), the author of the only article that tries to elaborate this concept further, identifies three meanings of the pro-Orthodox consensus:

> A trust within society toward the Church as represented by the Russian Orthodox Church; the prevalence of a positive image of Orthodoxy and the Church; the predominance of positive social expectations from the Church and religion, and from their interaction with society.[2]

This is the pro-Orthodox consensus at the meso-level. But how do Furman and Kaariainen conceptualise the macro-level of the pro-Orthodox consensus? They consider it to be a logical continuation of the meso-level. As if projecting the pro-Orthodox consensus into the future, they write,

in the religious sphere, these peculiarities of Russian society and its post-Communist development are manifested in the proclivity for a state Church, for the conferral to Orthodoxy of the status of an official ideology and for the limitation of the activities of other religions that are mostly new to Russian society … The old tsarist formula of 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality' and the Soviet formula of 'moral-political unity' are seemingly being re-created in a watered-down version, along with other ideological symbols … The Church and state power are together once again, and as they did before the Revolution of 1917, they are strengthening one another. A sort of 'interchange' of popularity and authority is taking place between the Church and the President of Russia, which enhances the further strengthening of the 'pro-Orthodox consensus' and the role of religion as a symbol of national unity.
(Furman and Kaariainen 2007b: 94)

Basically, Furman and Kaariainen connect the pro-Orthodox consensus with the traditional practice of close State–Church relations analysing the mesoand macro-levels as mutually enhancing one another. Lebedev (2015: 15) also considers these two levels to be seamlessly connected: 'The institutional element of the pro-Orthodox consensus is based upon the aligned interests of the two basic social institutions: the state and the Church (as represented by [the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church])'.

I will demonstrate below that this connection is highly problematic, and includes tensions and conflict too (see Köllner 2016; 2018). At the very point of transition from the meso- to the macro-level, the pro-Orthodox consensus is gradually beginning to disintegrate. The disintegration of this consensus on the meso-level is both the reason for and the consequence of the continuing movement of the pro-Orthodox consensus to the macro-level.

But what about the pro-religious consensus? Furman and Kaariainen state quite clearly that this consensus is 'actually "pro-Orthodox", and not "proreligious" per se'. They make this claim, because they believe that in Russia, 'the Russian Orthodox Church is thrown into sharp relief among all religions, towards most of which the [popular] attitude is considerably worse – and towards some of which it is simply negative' (Furman and Kaariainen 2007a: 22). Yet, I still insist that this consensus is 'pro-religious'. By 'pro-religious', I mean the general positive attitude towards religion in the sense of a broad approval of the transcendent dimension of human existence, as opposed to what Taylor (2007) called the 'immanent frame' and 'closed world structures'.

Although the concept of a pro-Orthodox consensus as such is not particularly important for scholars who study religion in Russia, since it was not developed any further since Furman and Kariainen first coined it, it is still very significant as a 'background concept'. Religious processes in Russia are still analysed against the backdrop of a pro-Orthodox consensus and a religious renaissance. These assumptions are taken for granted, too obvious to be discussed in detail within concrete studies of religious education, of 'the turn to traditional values', or of

new legal initiatives in the religious sphere, among others. The pro-Orthodox consensus is mentioned as a matter of fact, and then the discussion moves on (see Willems 2012: 30).
If we problematise this assumption, showing that the 'religious renaissance' is over and that the pro-Orthodox consensus is foundering, we would be able to analyse many events and ideas from a more robust perspective. We would be able to see, for example, the current religious processes that are going on in Russia in a multidimensional perspective. It is this intuition that guides my analysis.

Methodological reflections: what is happening to the pro-Orthodox consensus?

The main and sometimes the only instrument of the sociological analysis of religion in Russia is the opinion poll. Opinion polls show only slight variations in the pro-Orthodox consensus. In this sense, the position of the Russian Orthodox Church seems secure (Levada Centre 2017). For this reason, many scholars continue to mention the pro-Orthodox consensus as a given. Yet, what is it that makes me think that something else is going on here?
I strongly maintain that opinion polls, though revealing some important information, conceal important currents. A growing new reality, which is not yet fully visible, is beginning to undermine the status quo of the pro-Orthodox consensus and the religious renaissance. In order to notice this new reality, however, one needs to shift one's perspective.
Vyacheslav Karpov, in his conceptual analysis of desecularisation, makes an important distinction between the 'European' and the 'American' understandings of culture. In this context, he writes:

> The former tends to view culture as comprising supra-individual symbolic systems and steers clear of methodological individualism in its analysis. The latter more typically approaches cultures as aggregates of beliefs, values, attitudes, and norms shared by society's members and attributable to the individuals' locations in society.
> (Karpov 2010: 241)

This second 'American' approach to culture and cultural change still prevails. Karpov (2010: 241) continues: 'While survey-based assessments of religious trends have proliferated in recent decades, large-scale content-analytical studies of the arts, literature, philosophy, and other cultural subsystems have been marginal if not altogether forsaken by social scientists'. He then concludes, 'in the absence of long-term content-analytical studies of culture (including its contemporary audio-visual and digital manifestations), research on current secularizing and counter-secularizing trends produces an incomplete and potentially distorted portrayal of religion's status in modern society' (Karpov 2010: 242).

Karpov gives illustrative examples of how this overemphasis on opinion polls can distort our understanding of religious processes. For example,

> the actual and potential influence of radical Islamism may appear very small if we solely use survey data on Muslims' opinions to measure it. Yet, a different assessment of radical Islamism's influence could result from a study of religio-political ideas prevalent in school textbooks, state-controlled TV broadcasts, and numerous radical Internet sites.
> (Karpov 2010: 242f.)

Karpov then provides an even more telling example:

> A 1945 survey found that no Germans at all (0 percent) said Hitler was right in his treatment of the Jews, 19 percent thought he went too far, and 77 percent opined that Hitler's actions were in no way justified … Based on this post-factum conducted survey, the Holocaust becomes a fully incomprehensible event.
> (Karpov 2010: 243f. citing Gordon 1984: 198)

In my analysis of the pro-Orthodox consensus, I will follow Karpov's intuition and move beyond the standard analysis of opinion polls. In their stead, I plan to examine a broader cultural landscape in order to assess which new trends and developments have become visible since 2012.

The end of the Pro-Orthodox consensus

Other scholars have already begun to note problems with the pro-Orthodox consensus (see also Batiashvili, Iordache and Živkovic´ in this volume on other Orthodox countries). Alexander Agadjanian (2015: 254) writes, 'in spite of the common "pro-Orthodox consensus" and the reports of high approval ratings for the Church in surveys, some new groups and actors emerged who consciously resisted the rise of religion's public presence'. Likewise, Aleksandr Verkhovskii (2014: 69) has noted that 'the term "pro-Orthodox consensus," used until now by Russian political observers, is ceasing to be applicable, because for the opposition, criticism of the ROC [Russian Orthodox Church] is becoming not only permissible but also unavoidable'. Although such observations are prescient, no one has yet provided a systematic analysis of these new challenges and their influence on the pro-Orthodox/pro-religious consensus.

The Pussy Riot case as a turning point

Jürgen Habermas (2009: 55) once said that an intellectual's most important ability is 'an avantgardistic instinct for relevances'. In the Russian context, the task of intellectuals is performed by artists who possess this necessary 'modicum of the courage required for

polarizing, provoking, and pamphleteering' (Habermas 2009: 55). Correspondingly, it is exhibitions and works of art that have become the first sites of cultural change. As Agadjanian (2015: 254) writes,

> the most visible and widely mediated anticlerical activities happened to emerge in the sphere of the contemporary arts. A few exhibitions and performances directly targeted 'clericalisation', such as the 'Beware: Religion!' exhibition in 2003, that became a cause célèbre in courts, [and] a few exhibits at galleries owned or directed by Marat Guelman.

These performances turned out to be merely the prolegomena to a much more significant event.

Any analysis of contemporary religious life in Russia should begin with the Pussy Riot case as a key turning point, as the very episode that revealed what was hidden below the surface of the Russian religio-political iceberg. It revealed the 'social guts' that had until then remained cloaked beneath a smooth social fabric. While one would be hard-pressed to argue for the artistic dignity of Pussy Riot's 'punk prayer' performance in February 2012, the debates that followed set the stage for many further trends and developments (see Uzlaner 2014). Literally all of the cultural phenomena that I consider here are rooted in the 'punk prayer' in the broadest sense (i.e., not just in the performance itself, but also in the debate that ensued, in the legal consequences, etc.). The whole story could be seen as a 'social drama' that, in the words of Victor Turner (1975: 35), brought:

> fundamental aspects of society, normally overlaid by the customs and habits of daily intercourse, into frightening prominence. People have to take sides in terms of 'deeply entrenched moral imperatives', and they must then weigh their 'loyalty and obligation' to specific social affiliations.

The Pussy Riot incident revealed what Turner calls the 'root paradigms' of Russian society concerning Church–State relations, the presence of religion in the public sphere and much more (see Schroeder and Karpov 2013).

The 'punk prayer' took place at a peculiar moment – a period of mass political protests against alleged electoral falsifications during the Parliamentary elections of 4 December 2011, which marked 'a watershed in the political history of post-Soviet Russia' (Yablokov 2014: 622) and the beginning of a new electoral cycle that would end with Vladimir Putin being elected to become President of the Russian Federation for the third time on 4 March 2012. Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church since 2009, had made certain statements that were widely interpreted as supportive of Putin's return to the presidential post and as disapproving of anti-government civil protests.[3] The 'punk prayer', which would itself become a watershed in the religious history of post-Soviet Russia, was a reaction to this sequence of events, reflected in its text:

Patriarch Gundiaev[4] believes in Putin
Would be better, the bastard, if he believed in God!
The Virgin's belt won't replace political gatherings
The eternal Virgin Mary is with us in our protests.[5]

The full lyrics express a list of tensions connected to the Russian Orthodox Church – the dark Soviet past of the Church hierarchy, the limitations of basic liberal freedoms in the name of religious traditions, the persecution of homosexuals, discrimination against women, the luxurious lifestyle of some priests, the financial machinations of the Church, the penetration of religion into secular schools and, of course, the support of the ruling political regime. This constitutes a nearly exhaustive list of ongoing conflicts surrounding Orthodoxy.

The Pussy Riot case turned out to be a catalyst of the two processes. On the one hand, Church–State relations intensified with a strong turn to 'traditional values' and a public resurgence of Russia's civilisational identity as the last bastion of traditional Christian values (Sharafutdinova 2014; Stepanova 2015; Tsygankov 2016; Agadjanian 2017; Østbø 2017; Robinson 2017), in addition to a new legal reality of laws supporting Russian Orthodox positions and giving the Church real legal instruments to fight its critics and rivals.[6] This is probably what Furman and Kaariainen (2007b: 94) had in mind when they wrote that 'the Church and state power are together once again', as a logical extension of the pro-Orthodox consensus to the macro-level. On the other hand, the tension between parts of civil society and the Russian Orthodox Church was also beginning to grow. The 'punk prayer' was just the beginning of a cascade of media scandals that significantly aggravated the Church's reputation – the apartment with dust,[7] the Patriarch's vanishing watch (Schwirtz 2012; Jarzyñska 2014), pedophilia and homosexuality scandals,[8] and a series of car accidents involving drunken priests.[9] This negative wave of media attention was so strong that Church officials began to claim that there was a targeted campaign and even an 'information war' against the Church.[10] A segment of Russian society was none too pleased about this new stage of State–Church relations.

Contrary to expectations, the extension of the pro-Orthodox consensus to the macro-level turned out to be its death knell. Instead of remaining a matter of consensus, religion was quickly becoming a matter of constant tension and confrontation. Patriarch Kirill acknowledged this fact when he explained the reason for this 'information war' against the Church through a self-justifying interpretation:

The Church has become 'uncomfortable' for a certain part of society, because it has raised its pastoral voice louder and louder to testify to the world about the Truth, [to distinguish between] what is God's truth and what is a lie.[11]

To a certain extent, the Patriarch is quite correct in his reflections. Scholars who study religious developments in Russia, including Agadjanian (2006:174), have directed attention to:

> a striking gap between both the dynamics and the values of … two sets of data: ideational religiousness has rapidly risen and come close to European and world averages, but practical religiousness has not changed much and remains one of the world's lowest.

Agadjanian (2006: 174) indicates that by this, he means that religion matters as 'a working symbolic resource which is still "good to think with" concerning the basic foundations of society'. But this vague 'semiotic religiosity', as Agadjanian (2006: 174) calls it, has very little relevance for actual social practices, for the way people live and make important decisions. What Patriarch Kirill has attempted to do is to transform this symbolic resource – including the pro-Orthodox consensus – into something more tangible, by way of real influence on state decisions, real legal privileges, real influence on the way people live, love, have sex and raise children (see Filatov and Malashenko 2011). In that sense, he has disrupted the post-Soviet religious *status quo* described by Agadjanian as the high symbolic significance of religion that is compensated by its almost total absence in everyday existence. It is, therefore, no surprise that such a disruption has quickly created high levels of tension around religious issues. The pro-Orthodox consensus has begun to break up, and religion has quickly turned into one of the most fraught cleavages in Russian society.
All these tendencies were revealed during the Pussy Riot case, which has henceforward marked the formation of a new religious landscape in Russia. Below, I will describe the most interesting cultural phenomena that illustrate my thesis that we are on the verge of a collapse of the pro-Orthodox consensus.

Leaving the Russian Orthodox Church – the phenomenon of ex-believers

One of the most significant signs of dramatic change in the religious landscape is the phenomenon of ex-believers. People often leave churches, but only in the second decade of the twenty-first century have these former believers revealed themselves to be such a visible cultural 'event'. By 'ex-believers' I mean those who previously had a lengthy, intense experience within the Russian Orthodox Church – as monks, priests or pious laymen – but who, for one reason or another, decided to quit the Church. These people, moreover, decided not only to quit, but also to make their negative experiences available for public consumption.

This phenomenon has come about for several reasons. First, the generation that was attracted to the Church during the religious renaissance and the pro- Orthodox consensus is beginning to reflect on what went wrong with what Patriarch Kirill calls 'the miracle … of the rebirth of the faith'.[12] In addition, thanks to social media we now have new sources of information beyond the vertical sources under state or Church control. Finally, something has changed in the cultural climate that has persuaded people to remain silent no longer, but to speak openly in public. They feel that their experience has relevance not only for their personal lives, but also for a wider audience.

There are numerous examples of ex-believers who are publicly active, but I will limit this discussion to the three most significant. Maria Kikot' (2017) published a bestselling autobiography, *Confession of a Former Lay Sister*. This book began as a series of blog posts (Kikot' 2016), which attracted much attention (with thousands of comments under each new post) and was eventually published by a leading Russian publishing house. *Confession* tells the story of a young woman who sincerely and deeply converted to Orthodox Christianity and became a novitiate in one of the most famous convents of Russia. Instead of experiencing a deep spiritual transformation, however, she experienced a humiliating life in a quarrelsome community of women headed by a tyrannical Mother Superior who was literally creating a cult around herself. In the end, the heroine decided to leave the convent, having become deeply disillusioned with her former ideals and spiritual advisers. The popularity of this book could be explained by the intimate way the author describes the underbelly of the Russian religious revival and the supposed triumph of the Christian faith. *Confession* was not the only book of its kind published in recent years. A former priest, Dmitry Savvin (2017), has published a similar book which describes the everyday life of a typical Orthodox diocese. Grigorii Baranov, a former monk (Monk Mikhail) who spent dozens of years at a distant monastery before deciding to leave, is another telling example of an ex-believer. After quitting Orthodoxy, Baranov launched a vigorous social media campaign on *YouTube*, reflecting on his personal experience and inviting other people with similar experiences to share their stories with the general public. He conducts interviews with leading Russian atheists (Nevzorov and Baranov 2013) and creates video content with telling names like 'Orthodoxy as a way to degeneration', 'Orthodoxy in law' and 'The Orthodox Taliban'.[13] In 2014, with a goal to offer 'assistance in the deliverance from Orthodox dependency', Baranov started the project 'Rastserkovlenie' ('De-Churching', meaning gradual deliverance from Church life, a deliberate wordplay on 'votserkovlenie', the Church's recent conscious effort to 'in-church' nominal Orthodox believers).[14] This project offers psychological support for those

who have decided to quit Orthodoxy but have encountered problems as they have moved in that direction.

The online mass media project called 'Ahilla' serves as our final example. Created in 2017 by a former priest, Alexei Pluzhnikov,[15] Ahilla's main goal is to offer 'reflections on the life of the Russian Orthodox Church [and] an independent look from the inside, as well as from the outside'.[16] In Ahilla's manifesto, one encounters a typical story of an ex-believer who has experienced disappointment on his spiritual path and has decided not to remain silent, but to make his disappointment public.[17]

Ahilla publishes online materials that tell the stories not only of former priests or monks, but also of anonymous people from within the Church. The latter are the voices of those who want to talk about the problems they are experiencing, but who are not yet ready to join the group of 'exes'.[18]

The members of this group of 'exes' are far from univocal. Some of these former Orthodox Christians, like Baranov, have turned to atheism and antireligious ideas. Others have remained loyal to Christianity, but have begun a serious public reflection on what has gone wrong with the Church and what should be done next in order not to allow Russian society to spurn Christianity completely. In this regard, the statement of The Society of Christian Enlightenment, a community of believers who, after a negative experience with the Russian Orthodox Church, decided to start an independent reflection on the fate of Christ's teachings, is illustrative:

> The Pussy Riot incident and the unprecedented reaction to it by Church and state authorities testifies that today in Russia a dangerous situation for our society has taken shape, leading to the discrediting of Christianity and of the Russian Orthodox tradition in people's eyes. The anticlericalism of part of [Russian] society is acquiring radical atheistic forms and is leading to the total negation of our national religious tradition.[19]

The phenomenon of the 'exes' is the clearest manifestation that the pro- Orthodox consensus, together with the religious renaissance, is over. Even if not all former believers turn to atheism or any other form of antireligious ideas, the naïve 'trust' and 'positive expectations' that existed when the pro-Orthodox consensus was forming within Russian society no longer exists.

Orthodoxy as a new site of conflict

Another new reality is that religion has become an issue around which constant conflicts, broadly debated in mass media, are erupting. This is a new and quite recent phenomenon. Sergey Filatov (2014: 17) argued that:

since the end of the 1980s, an informal consensus has existed in Russian society concerning the inadmissibility of criticizing the activities of priests and especially of the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church. The very few mass media outlets that have violated this consensus were not that popular. This informal ban on criticism was connected to the compassionate attitude to the Church and to believers, who suffered greatly under the Soviet regime.

Thus, the Church was until recently virtually exempt from criticism and free to do whatever it pleased. The situation is changing, however, with the 'punkprayer' as the critical turning point, and this change has been quite painful, as more recent conflicts have shown. These constantly erupting conflicts are numerous, covering a wide range of spheres – including the political, legal and economic spheres. I have narrowed my analysis here to the cultural sphere specifically. I will assess two types of cultural opposition: one concerning the struggle for property and the other concerning the freedom of artistic expression and the various attempts to limit this freedom for the sake of traditional moral norms.

The Church vs museums

The process of the restitution of Church property has led to intense public debates in Russia concerning the reasonableness of such a practice (Köllner 2018).[20] This has become especially heated when the property in question has been occupied by a museum or another cultural site such as a school or a university.

The biggest debate of this kind is the case of Saint Isaac's Cathedral in St Petersburg, the largest cathedral in the city. It is currently occupied by a museum – the Saint Isaac's Cathedral State Museum-Memorial. In 2015, the Russian Orthodox Church launched a campaign to return this cathedral to its control. In January 2017, the governor of St Petersburg declared that the cathedral would soon be returned to the Church. St Petersburg's Union of Museum Workers considered this statement to be the start of the process of liquidating the museum. Mass demonstrations for and against the return of the cathedral, involving thousands of people, ensued.[21] The fate of the cathedral has yet to be decided. The case of Saint Isaac's Cathedral is probably the most famous recent example, but similar conflicts are taking place around a museum on the Solovetsky Islands (Soldatov 2016) and the Museum of Chersonesus in the Crimea.[22]

This is not simply a conflict over property. Rather, it is a much more serious question over who will control museums and which version of history will be promoted. For this reason, such conflicts have become a matter of great public concern and have engaged many people who are not directly connected to one or another particular museum.

The freedom of expression vs religious feelings

As mentioned above, one of the first conflicts around religion centred on art. 'Ostorozhno, Religiia!' ('Beware, Religion!') (2003) and 'Zapretnoye Isskustvo' ('Forbidden Art') (2006) were just a prelude to a whole chain of similar conflicts. As argued above, the Pussy Riot case was a turning point. After this affair, which resulted not only in the imprisonment of Pussy Riot members but also in the enactment of a special law aimed at punishing those who offend the feelings of religious believers, conflicts of this type have become an ordinary reality of Russian society.

To a certain extent, this is a sign that the religious situation in Russia is beginning to resemble Western patterns more closely. Agadjanian (2006: 177f.) notes:

> Russia faces a common, if not a global, quandary: a conflict between the freedom of speech and cultural (ethnic, religious) feelings … [as] the conflict between individual freedom and collective cultural 'feelings' became a subject of ongoing litigation in national and international courts.

What makes the Russian situation less common, at least as compared with Western countries, is the number of such conflicts in a relatively short time span, as well as the intensity of these confrontations. Below, I assess the most noteworthy cases.

On 26 January 2015, Tikhon, the Archbishop of Novosibirsk and Berdsk, sent an official letter to the prosecutor of the Novosibirsk region of the Russian Federation. In the letter, the archbishop expressed his indignation at a performance in the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theatre, where the theatre director Timofey Kuliabin staged a provocative interpretation of Wagner's Tannhäuser, featuring Christ indulging in carnal pleasures in Venera's grotto. According to the archbishop, such a performance offended believers and hurt their feelings.[23] As a result, the head of the theatre was soon replaced with a new Orthodox director, who immediately cancelled the performance.[24]

On 14 August 2015, a group of Orthodox radicals smashed some works by Soviet sculptor Vadim Sidur at an exhibition in Moscow called 'Sculptures that we don't see'.[25] Sidur's works were severely damaged. The perpetrators explained this act of violence by stating that these works offended believers.

Alexei Uchitel' directed the movie 'Matilda' (released in October 2017), which is devoted to the love affair of the future Tsar Nicholas II and Polish ballet dancer Matylda Krzesin´ska. Since the Russian Orthodox Church has canonised Tsar Nicholas II, a group of Orthodox activists, supported by some deputies in the Russian Duma, launched a campaign to prevent this film from being shown in Russian cinemas. Natalia Poklonskaia, a Duma deputy, has even threatened that those who watch this film would be banned from taking holy

communion.[26] In August 2017, an obscure extremist group called 'Christian State – Holy Rus' sent letters to film distributors threatening to burn cinemas that would show 'Matilda'.[27] On 4 September 2017, a man then attempted to set a large cinema in Ekaterinburg on fire by ramming its entrance with a car full of gas balloons and exploding his vehicle. The media calls this man simply 'a Matilda opponent'.[28]

The famous Russian film director Kirill Serebrennikov, whose previous works have explored the question of religious fanaticism,[29] was planning to stage the ballet Nureyev (2017) at the Bolshoi Theatre. This ballet is about the well-known Soviet dancer Rudolf Nureyev. In his adaptation of the ballet, Serebrennikov concentrated on the homosexual aspect of Nureyev's life, which led to the delay of its premier.[30] On 22 August 2017, Russian authorities arrested Serebrennikov under suspicion of embezzling government funds through a theatre production company he led called Studio Seven. The underlying reason for this persecution is not clear, but in public opinion, this case is often presented as the punishment of a freethinking artist for his assault on 'traditional values'.[31]

It would not be fair to interpret all of these conflicts as the Russian Orthodox Church standing against artists or against the freedom of expression. In most cases, official representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church have either abstained from taking a position or have tried to be very moderate in their public statements. But in all cases, groups representing at least part of the Orthodox community have initiated the conflicts and have tried to bring them to the desired outcome of limiting artists' activity. Similarly, there is always an opposing group – with fewer and fewer resources – which tries to prevent censorship and to defend the freedom of artistic expression.

The broader cultural sphere

Thus far, I have only discussed those aspects of cultural life that are directly related to religion. But in order to get a fuller picture, it is necessary to take a broader look at what is taking place within Russian culture in general. A content analysis of the most popular groups on Vkontakte (the largest social media site in Russia with 97 million users),[32] including MDK or Lepra, as well as the most popular vloggers on YouTube would reveal much in terms of cultural changes around the pro-Orthodox consensus.[33] Additional cultural phenomena that would require further research include the musical group 'Leningrad', youth culture with rap battles (tens of millions watch these battles on YouTube, which basically means that every young man in Russia is involved), and public opinion leaders. In the absence of such an

analysis, however, I will draw the reader's attention to just one case that can tell a lot about what is taking place in Russia.

Ruslan Sokolovsky, a popular YouTube vlogger, was given a suspended sentence of 3.5 years in May 2017 for insulting the feelings of believers, on the basis of the new legal norms that were enacted in the wake of the Pussy Riot case.[34] According to the judge, Sokolovsky made several videos earlier in 2017 that insulted believers. In public opinion, however, this is a case of a vlogger who was arrested merely for catching a Pokemon while playing 'Pokemon Go' in a church. Rather than analyse this case at length, since it is only one of numerous recent cases involving conflict around religion, I will focus on one peculiar detail of this case: motives of the blogger.

When Judge Ekaterina Shoponiak asked Sokolovsky during the trial why he decided to make videos with a clear anticlerical and antireligious message, he was very forthright:

QUESTION: Why did you decide to touch on the issue of religion?
SOKOLOVSKY: Because everybody today brings it up. Because there are many believers online, and there is ongoing social conflict. This is a hotly debated issue.
QUESTION: But for what purpose did you choose such a hotly debated topic?
SOKOLOVSKY: Because it is interesting to me and to [other] people.
QUESTION: Because you get views with this?
SOKOLOVSKY: Yes.
QUESTION: Views in order to get fame and money?
SOKOLOVSKY: Yes to both.
QUESTION: Did you have other motives?
SOKOLOVSKY: No, I didn't have other motives.
QUESTION: What other hot social topics are [debated on the internet]?
SOKOLOVSKY: Too many to mention. The political situation in the country and the way Mentos reacts with Coca-Cola — this gets millions of views.[35]

In these excerpts Sokolovsky utters with striking frankness the essential intuition that seems to drive bloggers and public opinion leaders to talk about religion. They do so not only to express their views (atheistic or not), but also to receive attention, fame, money and millions of views – and all this by way of an issue that is at the centre of social conflict, is as heated as the political situation and attracts as many viewers as videos that show the chemical reaction that occurs when Mentos sweets are thrown into a bottle of Coca- Cola. This strongly confirms my thesis that profound cultural changes are taking place with respect to religion. Religion is becoming a site of constant struggle, tension, and spectacle.

The reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church

My argument concerning the end of the pro-Orthodox consensus can also be illustrated from another angle – the way the Russian Orthodox Church continues to react to these new cultural trends and developments. Again, the turning point was the Pussy Riot case, which has become

the model for further (re)action. Soon after the 'punk-prayer', Patriarch Kirill began to talk about an 'information war' against the Church.[36] As Ilia Yablokov (2014: 628) writes:

> From April 2012 onwards, the narrative of a war against the Orthodox Church has dominated the speeches of pro-Kremlin intellectuals and Church representatives, who interpreted public criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church as part of the conspiracy of the West against the Russian nation.

But this was not just the Church's narrative, it was also the political regime's new ideological manoeuvre: 'The confrontational division of Russian society into "the people" and "the conspiring Other" closely connected with the West promoted an image of a loyal majority of Russian citizens who opposed a tiny minority backed by the powerful West' (Yablokov 2014: 633). This was the beginning of a new quality of Church–State relations, which I interpret as an attempt to extend the pro-Orthodox consensus to the macro-level.

This info-wars interpretation, which came on the heels of Pussy Riot's 'punk prayer', has become a model for the reaction to all further cultural developments described above. The logic is as follows:

> Something is happening, but this is not a problem between the Church and 'the people', rather it is a problem of a small minority of enemies who are inspired by the West and who are attacking not just the Church but the core of Russian national identity and culture.

This logic has inspired several restrictive legal initiatives including those against the offence of believers' feelings, against 'homosexual propaganda', and against foreign (and domestic) missionaries, to name a few. Such ideological manoeuvres could be seen as a desperate attempt to increase the cohesion of the 'Orthodox majority' in order to explain away the growing internal antagonism and to conceal evident cracks in the once-solid pro-Orthodox consensus.

Numerous other cases could add even more detail to our picture. Such cases might include the imposition of religious education at schools and universities (Köllner 2016)[37] and the situation in Ukraine in which Orthodox unity is breaking up as part of the Orthodox flock in Ukraine has become alienated from the Russian Orthodox Church as a result of the ongoing conflict over Eastern Ukraine. Each case considered separately would not allow us to make such far-reaching conclusions, but when we put all of these cases together, we begin to see a new cultural backdrop that seems to be incompatible with the vision of the pro-Orthodox consensus as described by scholars in the first decade of 2000s. In that sense, Karpov (2013: 276) was right when he predicted the growth of critical reactions to Russia's 'desecularisation from above', especially when he foresaw 'an increasingly critical stance towards the ROC-MP [Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church] and other

official religious groups among younger, urban, well-to-do and educated Russians' who, he suggested, would be 'increasingly repulsed by the nationalistic, undemocratic and repressive ethos of official religion'.

Concluding remarks

The concept of a pro-Orthodox consensus was developed on the basis of opinion polls. It would be safest to proclaim the final end of this consensus only once opinion polls were to show significant changes in people's attitudes. This has yet to happen; according to opinion polls, the pro-Orthodox consensus still exists, at least partially. For example, the Levada Centre (2017), one of Russia's leading pollsters, recently reported:

> Orthodoxy remains the dominant confession in Russia. The absolute majority of Russians – 92 to 93 percent of respondents – regard Orthodox believers with respect and benevolence, which means that not only they themselves [Orthodox believers] but also people of other faiths or atheists share a positive attitude towards them.

The only aspect in which this pro-Orthodox consensus is changing is in the attitude towards the idea that the Church should influence state decisions. The number of people who disapprove of this idea is increasing – from 27 per cent in 2005 to 36 per cent in 2017, whereas the number of those who approve is decreasing – from 16 per cent in 2005 to just 6 per cent in 2017. The same trend is evident in the way these individuals evaluate the influence the Church has on state politics in Russia. The number of those who think that this influence is excessive is increasing, whereas the number of people holding the opposite view is decreasing (Levada Centre 2017). In light of these figures, I can therefore conclude that my argument about the end of the pro-Orthodox consensus is only partly supported by opinion polls results.

Thus, despite the fact that opinion polls only partially support my argument, a closer look at the level of cultural trends and developments reveals quite significant changes. The Russian Orthodox Church has become the source of nearly endless conflict. The negativity associated with Orthodoxy, and with religion in general (in the sense of the spiritual dimension of life), is rising to the extent that almost every rumour, every accusation – even those that are unfair – is 'hyped' in order to attract extensive public attention. This is true at least within the media that are not controlled by either the Church or the state. In official propaganda, however, this negativity is interpreted as an 'information war' and even a global conspiracy against the Church.

Throughout this chapter, I have avoided any discussion of sociological numbers or the demographic substrate behind this end of the pro-Orthodox consensus. I am not claiming that

antireligious sentiment is the new mainstream. I do not know definitively which social groups are no longer part of the pro-Orthodox consensus. Nor am I certain that the trends I have described will not eventually be violently eradicated and suppressed by the state (perhaps at the request of the Church) as elements of foreign aggression against the Russian nation. Rather, my thesis is much more modest – that Russian Orthodoxy and religion in general are no longer factors of national consensus. From now on, it will be a factor of national conflict, just another cleavage that runs along Russia's national community. This is a paradox not anticipated by the scholars who began to talk about the pro-Orthodox consensus. As the Russian Orthodox Church has become more and more integrated into the state, it has become a key ideological element of Russia's 'conservative turn' and has received legal and material benefits. Yet, this macro-level success has coincided with the Church's failure to maintain a popular consensus at the meso-level, the very level at which its positions have thus far been perceived as strong and seemingly unshakable.

This chapter began with a reference to the classical research by Lipset and Rokkan. From their point of view, we can interpret the end of the pro-Orthodox consensus as the normalisation of the religious situation in Russia to a situation of political cleavage between the religious and the secular. Thus, the pro-Orthodox consensus was a peculiar post-atheist phenomenon that could not last long. The conflict over the Church and religion is a sign that Russia is returning to the standard situation of the Western nations, which are deeply divided over religion. Yet Furman and Kaarianen (2007a: 7–11), who introduced the concept of the pro-Orthodox consensus, offer an alternative interpretation: they talk about pendulum swings in Russia's societal reaction to religion from total acceptance to total denial and back again. From this perspective, we may be witnessing a new swing of the pendulum from hegemonic religiosity back to its no-less-hegemonic denial. So, is this a normalisation or a new swing of the Russian pendulum? Let us leave this as an open question that requires ongoing analysis.[38]

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[2] This translation differs slightly from the one provided in the article's English abstract.

[3] In a conversation with Putin, Patriarch Kirill called Putin's rule 'God's Miracle', see http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2005767.html. The patriarch also said 'Orthodox people do not know how to participate in demonstrations […] We do not hear their voices; they pray in the silence of monasteries, in cells, at home. But they worry with all their heart about what is happening today to our people. They make clear historical parallels between the dissoluteness (besputstvo) and forgetfulness (bespamiatstvo) of the pre-revolutionary years and the mess, swaying and destruction of the country in the 1990s', see http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2012/02/110802_russia_patriarch_rallies.

[4] The real second name of the Patriarch Kirill.

[5] See http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/12442.html and https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/what-pussy-riots-punk-prayer-really-said/264562/.

[6] These tendencies were visible earlier, but from 2012 on, there has been a qualitative shift in issues such as Church restitution, religious education, and bans of certain religious minorities (e.g., the Jehovah's Witnesses). Geraldine Fagan (2011) provides a detailed analysis of how, preceding this qualitative shift, Russia had already begun moving from total religious freedom to the gradual limitation of freedoms and a privileged status for the Russian Orthodox Church (and some other traditional religions).

[7] This refers to a story of a woman living in an apartment belonging to Patriarch Kirill (likely his distant relative), who had a conflict with her neighbour who was making a repair. The dust from this repair reached Kirill's apartment. The woman in Kirill's apartment claimed that the dust caused nearly one million dollars

damage and tried to take possession of the neighbour's apartment as compensation, see http://www.rosbalt.ru/moscow/2012/03/22/960327.html.

[8] The most famous of such stories involve Father Gleb Grozovsky, as well as Deacon Andrei Kuraev's exposé on the Kazan seminary in 2013, see diak-kuraev.livejournal.com.

[9] See http://politsovet.ru/49100-top-10-skandalov-s-uchastiem-rpc.html.

[10] See http://www.pravoslavie.ru/58456.html.

[11] See http://www.pravoslavie.ru/58456.html.

[12] See https://russian.rt.com/article/148812.

[13] See his YouTube vlog: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCE0LAd6n6Ew9-PmIZ6VzMAA.

[14] See http://rascerkovlenie.ru/.

[15] See http://www.colta.ru/articles/media/13974.

[16] See http://ahilla.ru/76-2/.

[17] See http://ahilla.ru/manifest-ahilly/.

[18] See http://ahilla.ru/ya-nadeyus-na-revolyutsiyu-v-rpts/.

[19] See http://pravoslav-ru.livejournal.com/4996912.html.

[20] See http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/evictions-trials-russian-churchclaims-property-170822103042061.html.

[21] See https://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2017/02/13_e_10523465.shtml#page2.

[22] See https://lenta.ru/articles/2017/01/25/hersones/.

[23] https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/02/26/tangezerdoc/.

[24] https://iz.ru/news/584779.

[25] http://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/08/2015/55ce15bb9a79474f19c056c8http://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/08/2015/55ce15bb9a79474f19c056c8.

[26] See http://www.rbc.ru/society/21/06/2017/594a43609a794777237c25d7.

[27] See https://www.znak.com/2017-08-26/pravoslavnye_aktivisty_vnov_ugrozhayut_podzhech_kinoteatry_iz_za_prokata_matildy.

[28] Ekaterinburg is the location where Tsar Nicholas II and his family were killed by Bolsheviks in 1918. See also http://ria56.ru/posts/5424584582458245.htm.

[29] He directed the movie 'The Pupil' (2016), which portrayed the danger of religious fanaticism through the story of a schoolboy who becomes a religious fanatic and begins to terrorise his entire school.

[30] See https://meduza.io/feature/2017/07/10/mozhet-vyzvat-nepriyatie-pochemu-bolshoy-teatr-sorval-premieru-nureeva-baleta-o-velikom-russkom-tantsovschike-i-otkrytom-gee. The premier happened in December 2017.

[31] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSsSfOuhvDY.

[32] Statistics about VKontakte [https://vk.com/page-47200925_44240810].

[33] MDK's site (https://vk.com/mudakoff) has 8.3 million users, and the Lepra ('Leprosy') site (https://vk.com/public30022666) is also quite popular.

[34] Sokolovsky's sentence was reduced to 2.25 years of probation in July 2017, at which time he was also absurdly put on Russia's federal 'terrorist and extremist' list, see https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3294094.

[35] See https://zona.media/article/2017/27/04/pokemon_sokolovsky.

[36] See http://www.pravoslavie.ru/58456.html and also http://izvestia.ru/news/520710.

[37] This would also include the case of state-supported theology programmes in universities.