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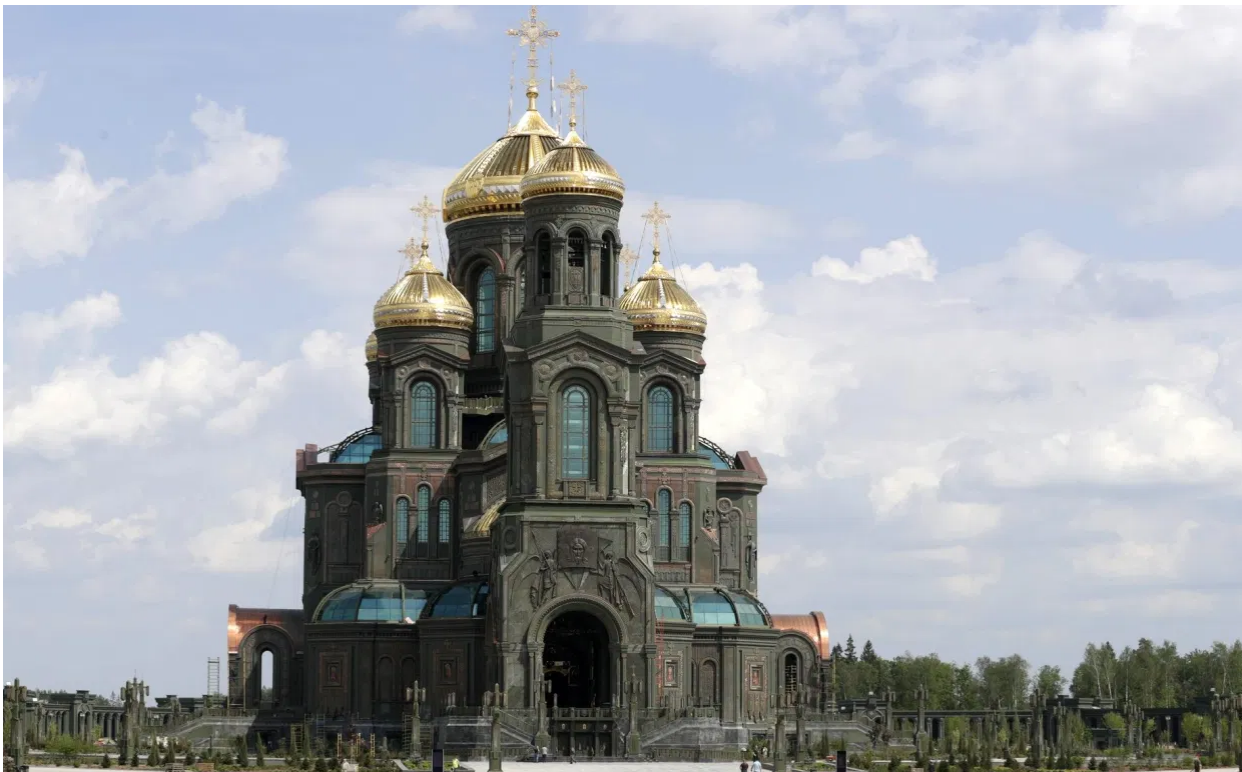
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THE END OF POST-SOVIET RELIGION

RUSSIAN ORTHODOXY AS A NATIONAL CHURCH

by *Kristina Stoeckl* | [ελληνικά](#) | [русский](#)



As of 4 July 2020, the amendment to the Russian Constitution—first proposed by President Vladimir Putin in January, smoothly approved by the State Duma and Constitutional Court in March, and confirmed in a nationwide referendum with 78,56 per cent of votes—has taken effect. As widely reported, the main purpose of the amendment was to secure Putin the possibility of two more terms in office. But what significance does the constitutional amendment of 2020 have for the Russian Orthodox Church?

There are four places in the [amended constitution](#) which are the result of successful lobbying by the Moscow Patriarchate.

First, in the lead-up to the Russian constitutional reform of 2020, Patriarch Kirill **promoted** the idea of putting God in the preamble of the Constitution. Wasn't God already part of the national anthem of the Russian Federation, the Patriarch asked during a liturgical service in Moscow's Christ the Saviour Cathedral? The Russian national anthem uses the melody of the old Soviet anthem, with lyrics from 2000 that include the line "Russia—our holy nation [...] Native land protected by God!" and echo the Russian Orthodox liturgy's "Let us pray to the Lord for our country protected by God." The commission responsible for the constitutional amendments was ready to pick up the suggestion, but not in the preamble, which remained unaltered. Instead, a new paragraph 67–1, comma 2, was inserted, which reads: "The Russian Federation, united by a thousand-year history, preserving the memory of the ancestors who transmitted to us the ideals and *faith in God [веру в Бога]*, as well as the continuity in the development of the Russian state, recognizes the historically established state unity."

Second, Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov, the head of the Patriarchal Commission for Family, Defense of Motherhood and Childhood, **suggested** that the new constitution should make explicit "the special role which *the Russian people [русский народ]* has played in Russian state formation." He did not want to deny that the many different ethnic groups living inside Russia has also played an important role in Russian history, but only the Russian people, he said, was "a state-forming people." The expression *state-forming people [государствообразующий народ]* is now included in the amended constitution. Bishop Savva of Zelenograd (Tutunov) **explained** the concept like this: "For the multinational and multi-religious people of Russia, the Russian people, Russian culture and the Russian language are formative. Without suppressing the characteristics of other nationalities, other peoples, but formative. For the whole variety of cultures and traditions of Russia, Russianness can be likened to the skeleton on which the veins and muscles are built and hold. And without a skeleton, the body turns into an amorphous unorganized, conflicting mass." In the new paragraph 68, the significance of the expression is reduced to that of the Russian language: "The official language of the Russian Federation throughout its territory is *Russian as the language of the state-forming people* that is part of the multinational union of equal peoples of the Russian Federation."

The **third** idea promoted by the Moscow Patriarchate was brought into the debate by Konstantin Malofeev, the head of the conservative Basil the Great Foundation and, since 2018, vice-president of the right-wing World Russian People's Council. He **said** that the constitution should define marriage as being between a man and a woman, in order to create a barrier to the legalization of same-sex marriages. He was immediately **echoed** favorably the press-speaker of the Moscow Patriarchate, Vladimir Legoida, who added a **fourth** item to the Church's constitutional wish list, namely that also "traditional family values" should be enshrined in the constitution. Both of these additions found their way into the amended constitution. Paragraph 72, comma 1 now includes the "defense of the institution of marriage as *a union of man and woman*" [*брака как союза мужчины и женщины*], and paragraph 114, comma 1 mentions the "preservation of *traditional family values*" [*сохранения традиционных семейных ценностей*] among the goals of the Russian Federation.

The Church officials were, in short, successful in having their priorities reflected in the Russian constitution of 2020. But what are the ideas and strategic goals behind these priorities? What is

their significance? I argue that the four items promoted by the Moscow Patriarchate all point in one and the same direction: Russian Orthodoxy is becoming a national church. If this is true, then for the Russian Orthodox Church, the constitutional process of 2020 signals the end of an era: the era of post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy.

In the last thirty years since the fall of communism, many roles for the Church inside Russian society were thinkable. In a forthcoming article with [Brill Research Perspectives in Religion and Politics](#), I argue that four experiences characterized the Russian Orthodox Church during communism: repression, dissidence, collaboration, and emigration. Against this multifold experiences, different roles for the Russian Orthodox Church during the post-Communist transition were thinkable. The Church had the potential to be *everything*: a thriving faith under conditions of religious freedom, a supporter of democratization and a potential critic of the government, a cooperation partner inside a secular state, a quasi-state church. And, in fact, the Church was all of this, depending on what phenomenon one decided to focus on. Post-soviet Russian Orthodoxy was characterized by ambivalence and multivocality, oscillating between freedom and control, nationalism and transnationalism, projecting different images of itself to believers, the Russian state, global Orthodoxy, and international politics.

The most significant development of the last thirty years was the Moscow Patriarchate's global agenda. The years before Kirill's inauguration in 2009 were characterized by a slow process of modernization and opening up of the Russian Orthodox Church to global affairs. Kirill, it must be remembered, entered the office with the reputation of a modernizer. Under his leadership, the Department of External Church Relations opened a representation in Brussels, whose first website in the 1990s (now discontinued, but still available online) had the almost programmatic sounding internet address "orthodoxeurope.org." The Moscow Patriarchate became a transnational [moral norm entrepreneur](#), issuing statements on judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, establishing ties with Christian right groups in the West, and collaborating regularly with the Russian Foreign Service. The last two amendments on traditional family values must be interpreted in the context of this global agenda, which is aimed mostly at other Christian denominations and at politics and seeks to establish the Russian Orthodox Church as the main defender of Christian traditionalism in the global culture wars.

For a large part of the post-Soviet period, the Moscow Patriarchate has cultivated a transnational self-understanding, projecting the image of Russian Orthodoxy as a transnational church with a wide reach of canonical jurisdictions and cultural and linguistic ties to people beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, including Belarus, Ukraine, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Moldova and other parts of the world. The *Russian World* [*russskiy mir*] was first of all a civilizational concept, and as such the exact opposite to the idea of a nation state. Behind the *Russian World* as a religious and cultural concept stood the idea that the Russian Orthodox Church could exist in different countries and different political realities. But this idea started to crumble when Russia annexed the Crimea in 2014 and war broke out in Eastern Ukraine. The response of the Patriarch to these events was ambivalent. Ukraine could have become the case in point that the Russian Orthodox Church was ready and able to operate in different, even inimical political realities, but instead it only proved the failure of this idea. With the conflict in Ukraine and the breaking away

of a part of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine from the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate in 2018, the transnational project of the Russian Orthodox Church has largely failed.

The Church's role in the constitutional amendment of 2020 is the result of this process. The amendment about Russians as the "state-forming people" conveys an ethno-linguistic nationalism, which stands in contrast to the transnational strategy of the Moscow Patriarchate of the last two decades. Kirill motivated the inclusion of "God" in the constitution with a reference to Russia's national anthem, and the clauses on traditional family values must be read against the background of the state's interest to affirm national legal sovereignty against international human rights standards. The constitutional amendments which the Church lobbied for confirm the Russian Orthodox Church as Russia's national church. Among the many different roles which Russian Orthodoxy played and could have played inside Russian society during the post-Soviet period, this is the one that prevailed. The course of the Moscow Patriarchate, at least for the near and mid-term future, seems decided: the Russian Orthodox Church will be a national church.

The inauguration of the monumental Church of the Armed Forces on the outskirts of Moscow in June 2020 symbolizes this passage. The military cathedral commemorates the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany. The initial plan for the church interior included a fresco of Putin and other leading politicians to commemorate the annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula in 2014, but controversial reporting led to its removal. Maybe it is too early to judge, but I want to suggest that the Constitution 2020, concomitant with the erection of the Church of the Armed Forces, signal the end of the tension-ridden, ambivalent and ultimately *open* era of post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy and the re-definition—and closure—of the Russian Orthodox Church as a national church.

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