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The COVID-19 Pandemic Strengthens Church and Political Elite, Weakens Russian Society

By: Kristina Stoeckl

August 19, 2021

Russian Orthodoxy and Nationhood in the Age of COVID-19

With its pre-election repression and repeated waves of COVID-19, 2021 has demonstrated that those in power inside the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church are old. They aren't necessarily old in age—Vladimir Putin stands for his fourth time in office at the age of 68; Patriarch Kirill is 74; and his influential Chairman of External Church Relations Ilarion is only 55—but old in their imagination. The political and ecclesiastical elite of Russia is encapsulated in its own version of post-Soviet history and has no vision for the future. Russian society, meanwhile, is held back by an increasing spiral of repression, which the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated.

The Soviet Union ended in 1991, and since then the term “post-Soviet” has carried two main meanings: It had a temporal meaning, referring to everything after 1991, and an analytical meaning around the notion of *change*. Whatever that change precisely consisted of was determined by the meaning ascribed to “Soviet.” In 2021, one generation after the fall of the Soviet Union, “post-Soviet” as a temporal and analytical marker has lost much of its meaning.

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In the case of Russian Orthodoxy, “post-Soviet” could mean different things depending on how an observer interpreted the Soviet experience. If this interpretation focused on forced secularization, militant atheism, and the repression of religious freedom under communism, the post-Soviet situation of Russian Orthodoxy was that of resurgence. Books like *Religious Revival in Russia* (1994), *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent* (2008), *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy* (2017), and *Suppression, Survival and Revival of Religion in Russia* (2011) convey that idea. The philosophy of history encapsulated in the optimistic

rhetoric of revival, resurgence, and rebirth can be contrasted with a different account, in which “Soviet” stood for the collaboration between the church leadership and the politburo, as well as the rift between a “state” church and a dissident church. Zoe Knox’s book *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism* (2004) fell into this category. But for many Orthodox believers, this was the prevailing view. As the late philosopher [Sergey Horujy](#) once remarked to me: “1991 is the year when Alexander Men’ was murdered. When that happened, I lost my optimism regarding the transition” [1].

In the 30 years since the fall of communism, many roles for the Church inside Russian society were possible. In my article with [Brill Research Perspectives in Religion and Politics](#), I argued that four experiences characterized the Russian Orthodox Church under communism: repression, dissidence, collaboration, and emigration. Different roles of the Russian Orthodox Church during the post-Soviet period can also be identified: Orthodoxy as a thriving faith under conditions of religious freedom; a supporter of democratization and a potential critic of the government; a cooperative partner inside a secular state; and a quasi-state church. The church was all of this at the same time, depending on what phenomenon and which group one decided to focus on. Post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy was characterized by ambivalence and multivocality, projecting different images of itself onto its followers, the Russian state, global Orthodoxy, and international politics.

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By 2021, this situation has changed. The [new martyrs](#) who perished in the Gulag have been canonized, the Soviet period is remembered by the church as an [era of solidarity](#), and the Moscow Patriarchate has just inaugurated a new cathedral of the armed forces to commemorate the World War II victory. The year 1991 is no longer a breaking point for the Russian Orthodox Church, and in terms of church-state relations, we should no longer think of it as a moment of great change. The experience of collaboration that informed church-state relations in the late-Soviet period continues to determine church life today, and the rift between a “state” church and the believers and ordinary priests who desire a different church remains deep. Sophie Kotzer’s *Russian Orthodoxy, Nationalism and the Soviet State during the Gorbachev Years* (2020) brings the similarities between Soviet-era church-state relations and today’s situation into sharp focus. The church—and the state elite—remember 1991 not as the year that brought religious and political freedom but as the year that accelerated Russia’s decline.

The ecclesiastical and political elites in Russia today define themselves primarily against the backdrop of the post-Soviet transition. This transition is interpreted as a phase of disorder and moral decline. The political and ecclesiastical elites share this interpretation and draw all of their self-legitimization from this narrative. Instead of opening up Russian society and moving toward pluralization, as global trends would indicate, they have favored discourse about a return to “traditional

values.” They have also rebuked efforts to attain political and ecclesiastical emancipation and self-determination in Ukraine, the Baltics, and most recently Belarus, operating under the flawed notions of the “Russian world” and “canonical territory.”

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The convergence between Russia’s ecclesiastical and political elites around the narrative of post-Soviet decline—and its remedy, traditional-values-plus-nationalism—became apparent in last year’s debate around the amendment of the Russian Constitution. The main purpose of the amendment was to secure Putin the possibility of two more terms in office. But the constitutional reform also underscored the current predominant self-image of the Russian Orthodox Church, one centered around the idea of traditional values and nationhood.

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. The late Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov, former 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.” And finally, Konstantin Malofeev, head of the conservative Basil the Great Foundation and vice president of the right-wing World Russian People’s Council, [said](#) that the constitution should define marriage as being between a man and a woman. The strategies of the Moscow Patriarchate during this recent period of constitutional reform characterized Russian Orthodoxy as a [national church](#) and guardian of traditional values as it eliminated the ambivalence and multivocality that had characterized the church during the post-Soviet period. In short, the constitutional amendment consolidated the elite’s narrative of post-Soviet decline and traditional-values-plus-nationalism as a vital remedy.

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But to what extent do ordinary Russians support this narrative? [Twenty percent](#) of Russians today were born after 1992. By 2032, nearly half of all Russians will have no direct experience of communism and the “troubled 90s.” Many Russians don’t think of the last three decades as a time from which they have to be saved by a return to traditional values and by laws against foreign agents, but as years in which the free exchange of ideas, travel, a free internet, and uncensored art and popular culture were just normal. This normalcy started to crumble back in 2012, when the first laws against foreign-funded

NGOs, religious freedom, and “gay propaganda” were passed. During the following years, Russians joked about the excessive zeal of Orthodox fundamentalists protesting against movies and Pokémon Go players in churches. But today, there is much less ground for jokes.

The protests against the government in support of Alexei Navalny drew large popular support that required massive government repression to quash. In March, the Russian government passed a law that severely [hinders free academic exchange](#). The list could be lengthened, but everything points in the direction of an ecclesiastical and political elite that is determined to shape Russia in the vision of its own perception of the recent past, using repressive means to ban alternate interpretations of the post-Soviet period. This is why Navalny’s work of revealing the corruption of the post-Soviet decades is so threatening to them—and why contemporary art, ecological protests, or simply academic research are also targeted. They all stand for alternate experiences and interpretations of the post-Soviet period, for a pluralism of responses to a changing social, political, and economic reality. However, a “pluralism of responses” is precisely what the ecclesiastical and political elites don’t want.

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This is where the COVID-19 pandemic comes in again. The pandemic and the global measures against the spread of the virus, including extensive travel bans, have not weakened the position of the elites inside Russia. Pandemic-related controversies may have revealed some cracks in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but overall the church-state interlocking around traditional-values-plus-nationalism has not been touched. The COVID-19 pandemic is not the reason for the traditional-values-plus-nationalism interlocking of church and state, which became evident in the constitutional amendment and which we see on full display in the current run-up to the elections. This interlocking was already in the making before. If anything, the pandemic has helped the elites consolidate their narrow and backward-looking view of the post-Soviet period.

However, the measures against the spread of the pandemic have weakened those—civil society, academics, businessmen, ordinary citizens—who were used to freely traveling abroad and communicating beyond Russia’s borders. In the age of COVID-19, borders have hardened, and we have learned that digital communication cannot replace real personal exchange. Lockdowns, bans on assembly, and closed borders have made it much harder for ordinary Russians to live and share their alternate visions of their country’s past, present, and future. They have also made it easier for the ecclesiastical and political elites to repress such visions.

1. Alexander Men’ (1935–1991) was a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church with a reputation as a critic of the Soviet regime. He was very active in religious education and became a popular voice of Orthodox Christianity in the late

perestroika period. He ran a radio program and attracted large audiences to his sermons and speeches. His parish outside Moscow was a meeting point for religious dissidents from the capital. Conservative Orthodox church circles were critical of Men' for his ecumenism and his openness toward the laity inside the church, and Russian nationalists resented his Jewish origins. He was assassinated in 1991 under circumstances that were never clarified.

About the Author



Kristina Stoeckl

Kristina Stoeckl is assistant professor at the Department of Sociology at the University of Innsbruck and principal investigator of the project "Postsecular Conflicts." Her publications include, among others, "The Legacy of Pitirim Sorokin in the Transnational Alliances of Moral Conservatives" in the *Journal of Classical Sociology* (2017, with Dmitry Uzlaner) and *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights* (2014).

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