

Russia: 'The Church has an enemy in every home.' It's television.

Helen Haft explains how the Orthodox Church has eroded freedom of the media and lobbied for the 2013 law against offending religious feelings.



Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church has rebranded and transformed itself from an oppressed religious institution into a powerful political force. The Church has constructed a narrative that it possesses a mandate to influence politics and society based on the oft de-contextualized figure, calculated by the [Levada Centre](#), an independent non-governmental polling organisation, that 70% of Russians identify as Orthodox Christians. The weight of the 70% figure is however undermined by the large percentage of Orthodox Christians in the study who do not believe in God (30%) or consider themselves religious (60%). Even if 70% of Russia's population were devout Orthodox Christians, this would not justify Orthodoxy's emergence as a state religion. However, this figure remains important because it has been used to justify the Church's assertion that it is entitled to reclaim its rightful place as Russia's spiritual leader, and gives us insight into the ways that this repeated fiction has facilitated the advancement of the Church's media narrative, leading to ramifications for freedom of speech.

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The Church has long viewed the media as a battleground and has made concerted efforts to establish itself and an Orthodox narrative within it. When I interviewed the former Patriarch Aleksii II's press-secretary, Andrei Kuraev, he described to me the state of public relations back in the 1990s: "there were times when a paper commissioned a text [of the Patriarch], but published it somewhere on the 25th page or so. It's only today that the Patriarch is viewed as a top newsmaker, but then religion was considered marginal." The Church's meticulous attention to detail in this realm means that today's Patriarch, Kirill, has acquired a celebrity status. The Patriarch is pictured daily performing rituals ranging from opening gilded churches to sprinkling holy water on government agencies, or even the Russian Olympic team. These public appearances may seem random or even natural for a religious leader, but they are highly orchestrated. They are only the visible part of a larger apparatus which analyses minor details of image and coordinates media responses so as to construct the perception that Orthodoxy is indispensable to Russian identity, enabling its predominance to be codified into law.



Patriarch Kirill consecrating the new special purpose centre for road traffic safety at the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia in 2013. (Image from the Press Service of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia) Image link: <http://bit.ly/2fpU050>

This theatre is bolstered by a vast array of Orthodox journals, radio stations, TV channels, and

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even film companies. The airwaves have been monopolised with an Orthodox worldview. Even in the secular media, the Church is ever-present. Both the Patriarch and his rumoured successor, the Metropolitan of Volokolamsk, Illarion Alfeev, are TV celebrities. Patriarch Kirill has hosted a show on the widely-viewed federal *Channel 1* since before he was Patriarch, whilst his rumoured successor hosts a pseudo-political talk show on *Rossiya* entitled 'The Church and the World.' This media presence is an integral part of the Church's political aspirations.

The Church has systematically attempted to translate its political views through means of lobbying, media, and legislation against [blasphemy](#). In 2000, The Church's political road map was explicated in a document entitled *The Basis of the Social Concept*. Drafted by the Church's public relations arm, the Department for External Church Relations, it was led by the then future Patriarch Kirill. *The Basis of the Social Concept* outlined the Church's official position on everything from abortion, gay rights and education, to the media and blasphemy.

The Church makes clear its position toward the media in the following paragraph from the document:

"More profound and principled conflicts have been seen to emerge in relations between the Church and the secular mass media. This happens whenever the name of God is blasphemed, other blasphemies are pronounced, the information about Church life is systematically distorted consciously and the Church and her servants are deliberately slandered. In case of such conflicts, the supreme Church authorities (with regard to the national mass media)...after issuing an appropriate warning and at least one attempt to enter into negotiations, may take the following steps: to rupture relations with the mass medium or journalist concerned; to call upon the faithful to boycott the given mass medium; to apply to the governmental bodies help settle the conflict..."

The concept that a profound and principled conflict exists between the Church and secular media, that the name of God must be defended, and that the government should arbitrate on these matters, poses a severe threat to free speech. This notion of conflict defines the Church's attitude toward secular media and clearly undermines the importance of plurality and tolerance of alternative views in the political sphere. In 2012, on his talk-show, Metropolitan Illarion stated, "Patriarch Kirill once said that the Church has an enemy in every home, in every apartment, an enemy that works 24 hours a day. This enemy is television." In another interview, Illarion repeated the refrain, followed by the question, "How do we turn this enemy into a friend? That is the enormous task facing our Church..."

TV, public relations and media are central to the Russian Orthodox Church's workings, and the answer to Illarion's question. So what does this apparatus actually look like, who are some of its main actors, and what are the implications for questions of free speech and religion, or as is becoming increasingly relevant in Russia, freedom *from* religion?

Prior to his ascension to the Patriarchy in 2009, Kirill led the aforementioned Department for

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External Church Relations. Since assuming the role of Patriarch, Kirill has made the media a cornerstone of his rule and the Department for External Church Relations is central to this operation. In 2016, Kirill set out to reconstruct this public relations structure, combining two previously separate sub-departments of the Department for External Church Relations. The Department of Information, and the Department on Church-Society Relations were merged to create a new department, The Department on Relations with Society and Mass-Media.

According to the former editor of the Moscow Patriarchy's journal, Sergei Chapnin, who was fired due to conflicting views with the Patriarch:

“The new structure will receive the name ‘the Department on Relations with Society and Mass-Media’... The conjoined ‘and’ should connect equal and equally great subjects. Here the Church is showing that its relationship with mass-media is no less important than its relationship with society. This is absurd, but I am not surprised. Relations with mass-media are the most important instrument to create the ‘virtual image’ of the Church. And for the Church hierarchy, the virtual has become no less significant than reality.”

This structure is responsible for, as the name would suggest, relations with society and formulating the Church's public positions. The head of this department is Vladimir Legoida, the editor of an Orthodox journal *Foma* and an adept navigator of the media. In an interview with one of Legoida's advisors, Yelena Zhosul, she explained to me some of the mechanisms of the department.

Yelena Zhosul, a young and articulate woman, who seems starkly out of place among the older men typical of the Church is the chair of the Department on Journalism and Public Relations at Moscow's Russian Orthodox University. As Zhosul explained, the department was created at the order of Patriarch Kirill, who recognised the need to groom future spokespeople for Orthodoxy and the Church. She described to me some of the mechanisms of the department as follows:

“We accent the fact that we are not preparing Church journalists, or journalists just for Orthodox mass media. We are preparing journalists with an Orthodox worldview, and not just an Orthodox worldview, but with a deep knowledge of Orthodox culture. Our graduates go on to work in disparate places. I would actually say that only a minority of them go on to work in Church mass media, and mostly they find work in secular organisations. They often work on non-religious topics... at the very least they leave our university with a sense of orthodoxy.”

This Journalism and Public Relations Department is a component of the Church's broader attempt to dictate media narratives. As an isolated entity, the university department may seem innocuous. This university programme however acquires new significance in the context of Legoida's work as the head of the Department on Relations with Society and Mass Media, and the Church's general hostility toward secular media, where “television is an enemy”.

When I spoke to her, Zhosul was unapologetically candid in her description of how the Church

directly attempts to influence secular media:

“For years, the Information Department has carried out regular monitoring of the radio-sphere. The monitoring is carried out for internal use...The Patriarch also looks.... He is given a summary of the media-picture of the day. Who wrote what about the Church. And thanks to this monitoring, we see what our partners and friends wrote, what others wrote... We have round-tables for journalists. They come and talk to Legoida...There are also personal meetings between Patriarch Kirill and the directors of the main stations. With Konstantin Ernst, the Director of Channel 1, Oleg Dobrodeev, the Director of the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company. He has meetings with the directors of the largest Russian media-holdings, approximately once or twice a year. It is a completely closed format... This is done so that the Patriarch can relay to the directors of media the main desires, fears, and requests from the Church, so they can be relayed to journalists.”

There are a number of serious implications contained in Zhosul’s statement. Firstly, these meetings, particularly the Patriarch’s meetings with Ernst and Dobrodeev, suggest that the Church is pressuring secular media to report its “desires and requests.” Zhosul argued that Legoida’s work is educational, for example in elucidating Orthodox doctrine or positions to journalists who are not well-versed in the matter. But the department’s scope is far more extensive. The threat to media freedom by the Church’s media-monitoring, coupled with the Church’s attitude toward secular media as the source of one of the most “profound conflicts” cannot be overstated. The Church’s media-monitoring is even more chilling when viewed in conjunction with an [anti-blasphemy law](#) introduced in 2013, which provides legal recourse for claims of offended religious feelings.

Many priests and representatives of Orthodox media lament the attitude of the more liberal Russian media’s attitude toward Orthodoxy. Zhosul admitted to me that:

“We have a list of mass media outlets that we understand we should not expect anything friendly from. These outlets position themselves as the political opposition. Without practically any exceptions in the mass media, if a channel is positioned in opposition to the political regime, then it is also critical of the Church... Because in the eyes of these outlets, the Church is an ideological part of the Russian government’s system.”

The Church therefore essentially has a blacklist of media that it is hostile to, the importance of which is strengthened by anti-blasphemy laws, adding to the pressures that news outlets already face from the government. This raises serious questions about how free is speech and religious expression in Russia.

The Church dominates the media, and due to the relative void of criticism, creates the impression that its prominence is natural. The virtual image the Church projects of itself is one of an authority with a mandate to rule. It has concocted a world in which there is a war against Orthodoxy and

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Christianity. During the [Pussy Riot trial](#) for example, images of vandalised icons flooded the airways and Pussy Riot's performance was deemed "a threat to all religious believers". When I was interviewed by a Russian Orthodox radio station, I was asked whether "it is true, as shown on Russian TV, that Christians are persecuted in the West."



Pussy Riot, the Russian feminist protest and punk rock group, performing in Red Square in 2012. (Photo by Denis Bochkarev under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License) Image link: <http://bit.ly/2uotMlm>

It was exactly this type of rhetoric which created the conditions necessary for the 2013 anti-blasphemy law. Since its passage, the law has been applied largely at the expense of atheists who exercised freedom of speech. In one [case](#), a user of the social networking site Vkontakte wrote that "God does not exist, and the Bible is a collection of Jewish fairytales", and in another, a young blogger was prosecuted for videos he posted of himself playing Pokémon Go in a cathedral, and for "denying the existence of God."

The anti-blasphemy law and its subsequent applications sow an atmosphere of self-censorship within society, and have led to the emergence of what are termed "Orthodox activists." These self-proclaimed defenders of faith frequently call for the law's application, or engage in vigilante justice

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such as destroying museum exhibitions that offend their feelings. Orthodox society in turn often calls for the banning and censorship of films. Regarding a 2017 film depicting Tsar Nikolai II's affair with a ballerina, Matilda, the former head of the Church Department on Relations with Society, Vsevolod Chaplin stated that if the film is released "Russia will die, and that would be just in God's eyes. It would not be evil, but for good, because through this, God would be showing people his insistence and punishment for what is forbidden." The film is viewed by many as a character assassination of the last Tsar, who the Church canonised in 2000. Though the film is set to be released as scheduled, the film's director has been faced with harassment, government reviews into extremism and violations of blasphemy laws. This government-supported religious scrutiny has contributed to an environment wherein art is under threat, and even the most subtle criticisms of Orthodoxy increasingly not tolerated.

The Church's threats against blasphemers and slanderers were largely empty before the codification of the anti-blasphemy law of 2013. With each application of the law, Orthodoxy becomes further cemented into society, non-Orthodox religions and atheists imperilled, and freedom of expression corroded. The bullying of secular media and society by many within the official Church hierarchy, and by individual believers who take it upon themselves to defend perceived attacks against their faith, has facilitated the marriage between Orthodoxy and secular law.

In sum, while the Russian Orthodox Church does not actually possess a mandate to rule in Russia, media and public relations campaigns have served to transform the illusory virtual image of Orthodoxy into a lived reality.

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Published on: August 9, 2017