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**Conservative Criticism of Europe in Russian Public Sphere:  
from Orthodox Anti-Westernism to Political Mistrust in Europe**

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**Abstract.** This paper analyses how the Orthodox discourse colonised political discourse. To clarify what role the Russian Orthodox Church played in the creation of conservatism hegemony in Russian politics during 2006-2015, we analyse references to the Orthodox discourse found in the official political speeches, especially in discussions of economic, political, social and cultural issues that dominate the domestic and international agenda. Since national ideology is constructed in opposition to other nations, we restrict our analysis to criticism of Europe only since it is one of the core elements of Russian conservatism. Critical discourse analysis was used as a methodological and theoretical framework for studying materials. As a result, we have identified three dichotomies in the criticism of European values: (1) religion vs secularism, (2) collectivism (sobornost') vs individualism, (3) collective morality vs liberal moral pluralism. Within the period of 2006-2012, the Orthodox discourse has been appropriated in domestic agenda. After 2013, the Russian political discourse featured conservative rhetoric in the evaluation of European modernity through the two dichotomies: secularism vs. Orthodoxy and individualism vs. sobornost'.

**Keywords:** postsecularism; Russian Orthodox Church; conservatism; geopolitics; discourse analysis.

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**Консервативная критика Европы в российской публичной сфере: от православного антизападничества до политического недоверия к Европе**

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**Аннотация.** В статье анализируется «колонизация» политического дискурса православным. Для того, чтобы выяснить, какую роль сыграла Русская Православная Церковь в создании гегемонии консерватизма в российской политике в 2006-2015 годах, мы анализируем ссылки на православный дискурс, встречающийся в официальных политических выступлениях, особенно в контексте обсуждения экономических, политических, социальных и культурных эта линия является одним из основных элементов русского консерватизма. Критический дискурс анализ использовался в качестве методологической и теоретической рамки изучения материалов. В результате мы выявили три дихотомии в критике европейских ценностей: (1) религия и секуляризм, (2) коллективизм (соборность) и индивидуализм, (3) коллективная мораль и либеральный моральный плюрализм. Было установлено, что в период с 2006 по 2012 православная риторика использовалась политиками для обсуждения внутренней политики. После 2013 года в российском политическом дискурсе использовалась консервативная риторика в оценке Европы с помощью двух дихотомий: секуляризм и православие; индивидуализм и соборность.

**Ключевые слова:** постсекулярность; Русская православная церковь; консерватизм; геополитика; дискурс-анализ.

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**Introduction.** After the end of the Cold War, religion started to be increasingly visible both publicly and politically, which attracted much scholarly attention (Beckford, 2012; Habermas, 2006). Political and international relations studies focused on religion as ‘linked’ to ‘civilizational’ and ‘cultural identities’ (Hallward, 2008: 1). The emerging regional centres of power (Brazil, India, South Africa, China, Arab countries, etc.) participate in global norm-making and impose their values, which are often hostile to neoliberal ones (Neuman, 1996). In these cases, religions be-

come an important element of anti-Western criticism and often play the key role in fostering the national identity. Being a part of this trend, Russia questions the neoliberal order by using conservative ideology as a means of cultural and political revolt against the Western domination (Petito, 2016). Given the fact that since the 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has been collaborating with political elites and social groups in ideology construction and national identity building (Mitrofanova and Knox, 2014; Curanovic, 2012), the Russian Orthodox Church has be-

come one of the core conservative ideologues. Penetration of the Orthodox discourse into political debates can be interpreted as a sign of conservatism in politics.

A large body of research focuses primarily on how the state employs Orthodoxy and the ROC to pursue national interests on the domestic and international arena (Curanovic, 2012; Blitt, 2011). However, few studies describe how and which conservative ideas were developed inside the ROC and how they later penetrated the political stage. This paper addresses this lacuna by analysing in what ways the official political discourses recontextualize the discourses of Orthodox conservatism aimed to criticize European policy in the period between 2006 and 2015. As national Russian ideology is constructed through the opposition with other nations (Neuman, 1996), we focus our analysis to the criticism of Europe as one of the core elements of Russian conservatism. Firstly, we consider the key tendencies of the state-ROC institutional rapprochement. We see the development of the ROC-state collaboration and the political context as two intertwined factors that eventually caused the integration of the religious and political discourses. Secondly, we analyse the main points of the criticism of Europe in the Orthodox conservative discourse. Thirdly, we examine how these Orthodox nodal discourses are recontextualized in the official political discourse, for example, in official speeches and institutional practices.

**Methodology and methods.** The critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used as a methodological framework to examine conservative criticism of Europe as an ideology. We consider criticism of European modernity as an 'interdiscursive event' (Fairclough, 2005) that connects political and religious discourses within the conservative ideology. In this case interdiscursivity means that Orthodox criticism of Europe is recontextualized in the political discourses in a frame of "colonization-appropriation dialectic" (Fairclough, 2005: 65). The conservative ideology fits well into the current political agenda and seen by politicians as the instrument of self-

legitimation (appropriation), and at the same time, the ROC gains to achieve political power for itself (colonization).

In our study, we compare only official political and official religious speeches and texts, which are prepared in advance, and thus do not include the elements of spontaneous non-verbal communication, unlike other types of communication (Gee, 2005). With the view to our goal, we define both discourses as a corpus of written texts, which are "globally coherent ... form a meaning unit, and not only a physical unit of continuous expression" (van Dijk, 1998: 195). Context is crucial for production or interpretation of an utterance. It is necessary to consider international affairs and domestic political contexts in order to understand the process of creating meanings and receivers' interpretation of utterances.

The analysis of interviews, speeches and sermons of the main ROC representatives (Patriarch Alexei, Patriarch Kirill, Metropolitan Illarion (Alfeev), Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin) brings to light the conservative criticism of Europe in the official Orthodox discourse. All materials were taken from the official web-site of the ROC – *patriarchia.ru*. Out of various political discourses we have chosen only the official political discourse as it is presented on the website *kremlin.ru*. Our analysis also included the materials of The State of the Nation Addresses (between 2006 and 2015), Putin and Medvedev's speeches at the Valdai Forum as well as the Concepts of Foreign Policy (2008, 2013). We look at both discourses as structured by the authority of the religious institution (Moscow Patriarchate) or political power while the positions and authorship of subordinated subjects are not important, because they mainly follow and express the dominant ideology.

The fragments of the text containing references to Europe, liberalism, secularism, and conservatism were collected from web-site *patriarchia.ru* and saved in separate files; the same procedure was applied to web-site *kremlin.ru* with the key words 'Europe', 'civilization', 'conservatism', and 'traditional values'. Then we defined and studied the nodal

discourses and the contexts in which they have emerged.

**Research results and discussion.**

*State-ROC institutional rapprochement.*

The Russians had to deal with the fact that their country had lost its superpower status (Smith, 1999) and sought to restore this status in particular through the concept of a special path. Moreover, in the situation of ideological vacuum, the juxtaposition of communist and moral Orthodox agenda allowed the former Soviet citizens to obtain a new clear-defined identity by resorting to conservative rhetoric and supporting the ROC (Agadjanian, 2011). In its turn, the state focused on the role of tradition in the construction of the national identity as an efficient way to consolidate the nation (Dubin, 2004). Analysing the ROC-society-state cooperation, we can point out the three overlapping factors that contributed to the process of penetration of Orthodox conservatism into the public sphere and politics: (1) the ROC's aspired to influence politics and public morality, (2) the state used Orthodoxy and conservative ideology as instruments of self-legitimation and nation building; and (3) the society saw the ROC as the guardian of moral values and Orthodoxy as a bearer of the new national identity.

The development of the ROC-state cooperation went through two stages and resulted in the promotion of conservative values in the public sphere. After the collapse of the USSR and during the early 2000s, the ROC charged itself with the task of guarding the moral foundations of the society and tried to distance itself from politics (Mitrofanova 2014). In 2000, the working group headed by the Metropolitan Kirill developed '*The Bases of the Social Concept of the ROC*'. The document reveals the paradoxical contradiction within the ROC-state relation in this period. Although the Church highlights its separation from the state and politics, it also emphasizes the importance of the nation's moral upbringing in Orthodoxy. Adhering to this dualism, Patriarch Alexey carefully kept the ROC from being involved into politics but supported its

social activities. In line with this policy, in 2006, the ROC started training priests for the Army; in 2012 the mandatory course '*The Bases of Religious Culture and Secular Ethics*' was introduced at Russian schools.

After his enthronement in February, 2009, Patriarch Kirill consolidated the ROC and put parishes under strict administrative control; he enhanced collaboration between the ROC and secular institutions (state, society, and mass media). In 2011-2012, before and after the presidential election, the ROC used this opportunity to act as a political force, because both opposition leaders and state officials sought the ROC's support (Filatov, 2014; Knorre, 2014). As the ROC chose to stay loyal to the government, it obtained financial and social benefits, strong legal protection; as a result, the visibility of Orthodoxy in the public sphere increased. As a part of this trend, the document '*The Core Values as the Basis of National Identity*', adopted at the XV WRPC meeting in 2011, listed "traditional values" as crucial for the prosperity of Russian society. These values included the following: Orthodoxy and faith, *sobornost'*, morality, family values, patriotism, asceticism and readiness for self-sacrifice, justice, freedom, and mercy (Bazisnye cennosti – osnova obshchenacional'noj identichnosti 2011). This document is a key milestone of the ROC participation in the nation-building process.

*Anti-Westernism in the Orthodox Discourse.*

As the analysis of publications on the web-site of the Moscow Patriarchate from 2006 to 2015 shows, the Orthodox criticism of Europe is based on the dichotomy of traditionalist and post-modern values. There are three dichotomies that correspond to the three main lines of the criticism: (1) religion (Orthodoxy) vs secularism; (2) collectivism (*sobornost'*) vs individualism; and (3) morality vs liberal moral pluralism. Religion, collectivism and morality thus become the nodal discourses within which Europe is judged. The discourse is constructed in a way to demonstrate the weakness of Europe and to highlight the advantages of the Russian historical past; it



emphasizes only the drawbacks of the latter, and the virtues of the former.

The Orthodox conservatives describe religion as a necessary basis for the successful development of any society, Orthodoxy as a carrier of traditions and values is important for the prosperity of Russia and necessary for nation building. Secularism causes most of the European problems. The ‘crisis of civilizational identity’ in Europe happened because Europe had adopted the secular paradigm and rejected Christianity. This is the moral or spiritual crisis, the crisis of the ‘Godless society’, which in the future can lead to the destruction of Europe since Europe, renouncing Christianity, is not immune to external expansion. The official Orthodox discourse recognizes only Christian Europe, which is the desired or ‘imaginary Europe’ of the Soviet intellectuals (Yurchak, 2006). Christians of different denominations should collaborate ‘to save the Europe that we know as a unique and original civilizational region that has equal relations with the other centres in the world’ (Patriarch Kirill, 2010).

The concept of *sobornost’* as the social and spiritual unity of people in the church or/and in a secular community is used to criticize individualism in European society. The essence and at the same time the main drawback of individualism is that a person is instinctively driven by ‘natural and unnatural aspirations and desires’, ‘passions and vices’, which cannot be controlled by the society. Individualism implies that high importance is attached to material goods, comfort and consumerism while spiritual and religious values or ideals are meaningless for individual citizens. According to the ROC, instinctive behaviour, consumerism and inability to commit to spiritual values are incompatible with sustainable development and lead to degradation and disintegration of society. Non-religious individualistic society is opposed to *sobornoe* society, which is moral, religious and stable.

Conservative morality and the concept of traditional values underlie the moral criticism of liberalism. According to the Orthodox conservatives, commitment to traditional

moral values leads to prosperity and sustainable social development. ‘In the public sphere, society and the state should support and encourage morality, acceptable to the majority of citizens’ (Patriarch Alexey, 2007). Traditional values could be preserved and successfully transmitted from generation to generation only by means of tradition. The main argument for visibility of religion in the public sphere is that religion is one of the most effective ways to provide the continuity of tradition and preserve morality in the society.

The main drawback of liberalism is its principle of religious neutrality in the public sphere. Liberalism rejects the Orthodox concept of sin: ‘not God but the man is the measure of absolute truth, the human him- or herself is holy and pure’ (Patriarch Alexey, 2007). According to liberalism, human dignity is the ability to act freely and to realize individual desires. The conservative criticism tends to show that people’s dignity and freedom, the way they are understood by the liberals, in fact mean quite the opposite: the loss of freedom and human dignity. Liberal freedom is freedom given to sinful human nature; it is ‘the freedom of expression of every desire, uncontrollable consumerism, the propaganda of permissiveness and of sexual immorality’ (Obrashchenie Vysshego Cerkovnogo Soveta Russkoj Pravoslavnoj Cerkvi, 2012). Thus, liberal morality produces weak-willed citizens, incapable of self-sacrifice, not taking into account the public good; liberal pluralism lead to moral crisis and degradation of society.

According to the logic of the conservative discourse, *sobornost’* and traditional moral values will enable Russia to overcome its social and economic crisis; they are the pillars of sustainable development of any society. From this perspective, European modernity, which relies on secularism, individualism and liberalism, is in deep spiritual crisis. The Orthodox intellectuals look at Europe through the lens of the Russian historical and cultural experience; their criticism of Europe is rooted in the Soviet past and in the post-Soviet trauma and stems from the misunderstanding of the logic of European modernism (Stoeckl,

2011). The ROC perceives Russian future through its imperial past; the nineteenth-century concepts of Christian theology and Russian religious philosophy serve as the departure points for the ROC's interpretation of European modernity. Russia's historical isolation in the twentieth century and the 'Iron Curtain' made it difficult for the Orthodox intellectuals to understand the path that Europe took after the Second World War.

*Orthodox conservatism in politics: from Orthodox Anti-Westernism to geopolitical confrontation.*

The Russian political elite pays special attention to 'the identity of Russia and its place in the world after the collapse of the Soviet homeland and the loss of great power status' (Smith, 1999:481). Identity discourse emphasizes Russia's independence on the international arena and explains Russia's confrontation with the West (Bruning, 2012). In particular, politicians elaborate identity discourse by appropriating Orthodox anti-Westernism. In this paragraph we demonstrate how this appropriation unfolds within two periods of the political discourse development:

(1) 2006-2012: the beginning of the period was marked by Vladimir Putin's speech in Munich (May, 2007), continued with the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012) and ended with the anti-Putin opposition rallies in 2011-2012;

(2) 2013-2015: the conflict between Russia and the EU caused by the war in Eastern Ukraine.

The period of 2006-2007 became a turning point in the country's foreign policy, when political leaders for the first time referred to the Orthodox discourse in the national identity discourse. The change coincided with the increasing global geopolitical confrontation caused by the intervention of the EU and US intervention into the domestic policy of the Third World countries: 'the excessive usage of power in international affairs', 'the whole legal system of one state ... has transgressed its national borders in all the spheres: economic, political and humanitari-

an' (Putin, 2007). The other external factors included the confrontation between East and West, the regional destabilization in the Middle East, distrust in the international organizations, global inequality and the lack of justice in international relations.

In a situation of tension of EU-Russian relations, Putin turned to the conservative rhetoric in the domestic agenda in order to stress the uniqueness of the Russian national identity. He turned to the concept that religion (especially Orthodoxy) initially played a core role in the history of Russia: 'Russia has always been a patriarchal country; a very religious country ... The Church has always played a significant role in Russia' (Meeting of the International Discussion Club in Valdai, 2006). Following the official Orthodox discourse, Putin stressed that the ROC is one of the key social institutions that brings strict moral norms into the public sphere; thus, morality could not be separated from religion and spirituality (*dukhvnost'*). According to Putin, morality and religion are the key elements of the nation's civil unity. Both the Orthodox clergy and Putin made references to the Russian history to prove the role of religion in the development of the country.

Between 2007 to 2012, Dmitry Medvedev and Putin emphasized that conservative values were essential for the sovereignty of the country and its international status. In 2010, 'Edinaya Rossiya' ('United Russia'), a political party headed by Putin and Medvedev, asserted that Russian modernization should be based on Orthodox faith (Blitt, 2011). The following concepts of Orthodox discourses were recontextualized: 'traditional values', 'strengthening of the spiritual and moral basis of society' (President's Annual Address to the Federal Assembly 2008, 2012). In political discourses this concepts make the chain of equivalence with the concept of national sovereignty. For example, '*Russia should be a sovereign and influential country. Apart from sustainable development, we should ensure that our national and spiritual identity be preserved and save ourselves as a nation. To be and to remain Russia*'

(President's Annual Address to the Federal Assembly, 2012).

'The Concept of the Russian Foreign Policy of 2008' introduced the idea of civilizational confrontation based on the difference of values (Concept of Foreign Policy, 2008). Discussions about Russia's unique civilizational path implicitly refer to Europe as a threat to the Russian national identity, but in this period politicians did not expand on this idea yet. Moreover, despite the geopolitical confrontation and references to conservative rhetoric, the political discourse presented Europe as the role model: it was declared that Russia had inherited the European standards of social policy, human rights, civil society, and democracy (Putin, 2008; Putin, 2011).

During the Ukrainian conflict, in 2013-2015, the EU-Russian relations were in a deep crisis similar to the Cold War situation. Therefore, in 2013-2014 the Kremlin started to resort to conservative Orthodox ideology in the domestic and international agenda more intensively. In discourse of national identity, there were following references to the official Orthodox discourse in order to highlight special path of Russian civilization: the ideas were expressed that traditional religions are a universal key to the welfare of society; that religion has to be visible in the public sphere; and that Orthodoxy, traditional values and morality are crucial for the Russian civilization. Putin contrasted Russian readiness for self-sacrifice, collectivism, patriotism, with European individualism (Question-and-Answer Session with Vladimir Putin, 2014).

In 2013, Putin for the first time use conservative discourse about religion to criticize openly European modernity. Firstly, he referred to 'Europe's abandonment of its Christian roots' and Orthodox criticism of the secularism, which leads to 'degradation, primitivism, a severe demographic and moral crisis' (Meeting of the International Discussion Club Valdai 2013). The Concept of Foreign Policy of 2013 also underlines the importance of religious, spiritual and moral factors in international relations (Concept of Foreign Policy, 2013). In 2015, Putin stressed that the con-

frontation between Russia and Europe is essentially a civilizational conflict (Meeting of the International Discussion Club Valdai, 2015).

In May, 2013, at the meeting with Patriarch Kirill, Sergey Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, pointed out the increasing importance of civilizational identity as a factor of international relations, mentioned 'militant secularism', which does not recognize religious values, and stressed the role of Orthodoxy in the national development (Lavrov, 2013). At the meeting with the members of the Russian International Affairs Council on June, 4 2014, Lavrov said that Europe, which lost its Christian roots, does not recognize 'the new Russia coming back to its traditional values rooted in Orthodoxy' (Lavrov, 2104).

Our analysis has shown that there are few examples of recontextualization of Orthodox discourses in politics; political discourses remains secular and is mainly constituted by political and socio-economic issues. Since 2007, politicians have been recontextualized Orthodox conservative ideas to speak of the domestic agenda, in discourses of national identity, and national sovereignty. For instance, presence of Orthodoxy in the public sphere, adherence to traditional values, and morality were supposed to help Russia reclaim its status of the superpower. The discourses of national identity, and national sovereignty have become the ground for the emergence of discourse of anti-European criticism, when political context changed after the Ukrainian crisis of 2013. Conservative rhetoric appeared in the evaluation of Europe through the two narratives, built on dichotomy, borrowed from the Orthodox discourse: secularism – Orthodoxy, individualism – *sobornost'*.

**Conclusion.** After Patriarch Kirill's enthronization in 2009 and the rallies of 2011-2012, the ROC obtained significant political power and strengthened its collaboration with the state and society. Metropolitan Kirill adopted a policy targeted at close collaboration of the state and the Church, which involved the penetration of Orthodox conserva-

tism into the political discourse. In the Orthodox conservative discourse, the anti-Western criticism is constituted by the three dichotomies: religion – secularism; individualism – collectivism; collective morality – liberal moral pluralism. Until 2012, the conservative rhetoric had prevailed in the domestic policy and had been mainly used to define the Russian national identity. Later it was turned into a means to reclaim Russia's status of a superpower on the international arena. In 2013 – 2015, when the Cold War tension between Russia and the EU escalated, the official political discourse referred to the Orthodox criticism of European modernity by reproducing the 'religion – secularism', 'individualism – collectivism' dichotomies. Politicians pointed out the role of the Orthodox values as the core of the Russian national identity and referred to them to present the EU-Russian conflict as a conflict of civilizations.

References to Orthodox conservatism do not prevail in the official political discourse, which has a secular nature. We assume that conservative ideology is deeply embedded into Russian politics not on discursive level but on the level of social practices. Russian politicians distinguish between words and actions and, therefore, use soft power such as religious diplomacy and public institutions ('*Russkii Mir*') to promote Orthodox conservatism. This can be a subject for further studies.

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**Конфликты интересов: у автора нет конфликта интересов для декларации.**

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