FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway
https://www.forum18.org/
The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

20 March 2003

RUSSIA: Religion looms as electoral factor

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Nine months before Russia's parliamentary elections, there are already signs that some political figures will seek to use religious leaders and institutions to help boost their popularity. At a 28 February conference devoted to the stance of Russia's so-called traditional religious confessions (Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism) towards December's parliamentary elections and the likely influence of voters' religious convictions on the results, Eurasia party leader Aleksandr Dugin maintained that the number of people responding positively to a clear confessional adherence by political leaders has more than doubled over the past four years. A Federation Council representative argued that if a political candidate is convincingly seen to appear morally upright and in favour of the spiritual values of one of Russia's so-called traditional confessions, that candidate is more likely to receive support from the voting majority who perceive themselves as adhering to that confession, regardless of whether its leadership has given that politician explicit endorsement.

Nine months before Russia's parliamentary elections, there are already signs that some political figures will seek to use religious leaders and institutions to help boost their popularity.

On 28 February, the Eurasia political party and the Kremlin's internal policy department held a conference devoted to the stance of Russia's so-called traditional religious confessions (Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism) towards December's parliamentary elections and the likely influence of voters' religious convictions on the results.

The low level of true religiosity in Russia was acknowledged from the outset. Eurasia leader Aleksandr Dugin commented that the number of actively practising members of traditional confessions was "measly". Over the past four years, however, the number of people responding positively to a clear confessional adherence by political leaders has more than doubled, he maintained. "This indicates a certain detachment of religion, as a world view, from its own ritual practices."

Moscow Patriarchate spokesman Fr Vsevolod Chaplin reiterated the Russian Orthodox Church's official position on participation in elections as stated in its Social Doctrine, according to which it neither participates in electoral campaigns nor supports political parties or individual candidates. Not subject to such constraints, Muslim and Buddhist representatives at the conference voiced their clear support for Eurasia and President Vladimir Putin.

Maintaining that the Orthodox Church genuinely held its neutral position, Dugin nevertheless suggested that it was of little political consequence precisely because voters' confessional adherence was only loosely related to particular religious institutions and practices. If they are active followers of a particular confession, people are "subject to certain dogmas and doctrines," he explained, whereas, "outside there is a certain freedom".

Other conference speakers pointed out a similar discrepancy between the declarations and genuine action of politicians. In Russia, politics is "virtual", commented a Federation Council representative. "It is not about being in or changing the actual situation, but how a politician is seen to appear." Thus, the logic goes, if a political candidate is convincingly seen to appear morally upright and in favour of the spiritual values of one of Russia's so-called traditional confessions, that candidate is more likely to receive support from the voting majority who perceive themselves as adhering to that confession, regardless of whether its leadership has given that politician explicit, official endorsement.

Could this religious-moral factor be successfully enlisted to revitalise the current climate of political disillusionment within Russia? The government representatives and political commentators at Moscow's President Hotel on 28 February appeared to believe so. Effective Politics Foundation president Gleb Pavlovsky, who is widely credited with masterminding Putin's rise to power, maintained that no representative of the traditional confessions "held anything against" the Russian president, and that the Russian Orthodox Church would be "well-disposed to the party of the majority which will form parliament and will not offend us as citizens or believers by its actions". By contrast, he said, the Orthodox Church should "criticise amoral policies" and "prevent actions by politicians which offend religious sensitivities".

Political scientist Sergei Markov similarly sought to coax the Russian Orthodox Church into fulfilling its "prophetic role" by adopting a clear stance towards particular political positions. To this end, the Church should draw up an electoral "code of ethics" for

the political elite, he suggested.

Dugin provided one example of how religious considerations might be used to affect the fortunes of a particular political party. Russian society was now mature enough to demand that the Communist Party clarify its position on the Church, he declared, and Communist leader Gennadi Zyuganov can no longer skate around the issue with slippery statements such as "the USSR put [Yuri] Gagarin into space in order to become closer to God." "If he says a decisive Yes to Orthodoxy, he loses an army of voting pensioners," Dugin maintained. "If he says No, he loses a mass of patriots."

The director of the Moscow-based Sova (Owl) Centre, which monitors religious and social relations as well as national and religious xenophobia in Russia, does not believe a split in the Communist Party between staunchly Marxist and patriotic Orthodox factions is a realistic possibility, however. In an interview with Forum 18 News Service on 15 March, Aleksandr Verkhovsky suggested that, since Pavlovsky and the assistant head of the presidential administration, Vladislav Surkov, would be held responsible if the pro-Kremlin Unified Russia (Yedinaya Rossiya) parliamentary party did not improve its currently poor ratings, they were trying to persuade "anyone they could" to assist. Now that Aleksandr Chuyev (the author of last year's draft law "On Traditional Religious Organisations") was no longer in Unified Russia, thought Verkhovsky, there was little reason for the Moscow Patriarchate to support the party. For that, the Kremlin "would have to interest them with something serious," thought Verkhovsky, but more would become clear only once concrete candidates and policies are proposed in the summer.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY