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RUSSIA: "The Kremlin's failure to uphold its own constitutional commitment to religious freedom"

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This is the first of two abridged extracts from a book by Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18's Russia and Belarus Correspondent, "Believing in Russia - Religious Policy after Communism" (Routledge, 2013). The book presents a comprehensive overview of religious policy in Russia since the end of the communist regime, exposing many of the ambiguities and uncertainties about the position of religion in Russian life and revealing how religious freedom in Russia has, contrary to the widely held view, a long tradition. The book argues that continuing failure to resolve the question of whether Russia is to be an Orthodox country with religious minorities or a multi-confessional state is destabilising the nation. More details on the book are available from <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415490023/>.

The Russian Orthodox Church asserts itself as the definitive expression of Russian nationhood. Alternative worldviews are marginalised. The gravest consequence of this antagonism is its exacerbation of separatist tendencies among Russian Muslims, who seek to establish Islam locally in opposition to Patriarchate hegemony nationally. Far from its mystical vision, the Orthodox-centred model of Russian identity is thus failing to consolidate the modern Russian nation.

Chechnya's bald imposition of Islamic norms in defiance of Russia's 1993 Constitution goes unchecked by Moscow. Regional disparity is now acute: in June 2008 the Koranic verse "There is no god but Allah" adorned the mountainside opposite Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov's palace. The same month, it was forcibly removed from the outer wall of a mosque in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk. The Kremlin's failure to uphold its own constitutional commitment to religious freedom means there is no firm barrier against further decline.

The erosion of religious freedom is not due to deliberate federal preference for the Russian Orthodox Church. Rather, it is the symptom of a disinterested Kremlin absenting itself from the religious policy sphere. Few top officials yearn for Orthodox Christianity's restoration to the status of national ideology as under the tsars. The driving impulses of today's Russian rulers are the pursuit and retention of personal wealth and influence, and it is these that determine the areas in which President Vladimir Putin's "power vertical" (vertikal' vlasti) operates. Since religious freedom (among other human rights and public concerns) is not one of them, it is left unregulated to the extent that it does not encroach upon the strategic interests of the elite.

That this human right has not deteriorated further in Russia is due to a scattering of lawyers and civil society activists such as those behind the Moscow-based SOVA Center, and benign state officials such as government adviser Andrei Sebestov. Yet as unrelenting calls for oppression of non-establishment faiths snowball, the situation is nearing breaking point. In 2011 the presence in a Siberian courtroom of senior human rights official Mikhail Odintsov was crucial to the collapse of criminal proceedings against Jehovah's Witness Aleksandr Kalistratov. But this is hardly a tenable nationwide strategy as similar cases mushroom: Odintsov cannot intervene personally everywhere.

Putin is famed for muscular rhetoric on a strong state and dictatorship of the law. But the Kremlin's fundamental indifference to religious freedom allows junior officials to pursue an Orthodox-centred religious policy in defiance of the federal standard. Their allies in the Moscow Patriarchate have taken advantage of this situation by concentrating initial lobbying efforts for exclusive privilege at regional level. This has garnered sufficient momentum to effect formal policy change at federal level, most notably the 1997 federal law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations and special access to the armed forces and state schools in 2009.

Putin has occasionally moved to check Patriarchate initiatives. Yet as popular resentment over the gulf between the lifestyles of the rich and powerful and ordinary citizens rises, the Kremlin is growing ever more reliant upon cynical identification with national values in order to protect the elite. While so far substantially untapped, alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church against perceived spiritual enemies is one of the few remaining mechanisms for bolstering popularity to which it has recourse.

That is a dangerous strategy. On a dim Saturday afternoon in December 2010, thousands of young Russians gave Nazi salutes just yards from the Kremlin's walls. Their grievances centred upon ethnicity: rumours were sweeping Moscow that North Caucasians

suspected of murdering a Slav soccer fan had bribed their way out of police detention. Ethnicity's entrenched association with faith in Russia moved Putin [then Prime Minister] to address sharpening ethno-religious polarisation days later when discussing the impromptu rally during his annual televised call-in show:

"A person from the Caucasus should not be afraid to walk the streets of Moscow, and our citizens of Slavic ethnicity should not be afraid to live in the republics of the North Caucasus .. from the outset – I stress, from the outset – Russia formed as a multiconfessional and multiethnic state."

Yet Putin's further comments illustrated the bankruptcy of the Russian state's approach to religion more than a generation after perestroika. Their inadequacy also points to the elite's alarming alienation from the ordinary populace. First he fumbled for the tired Soviet rhetoric of the "traditional religion" paradigm, referring – in an apparent attempt to deflect resentment towards a familiar Western foe – to a claim by unspecified "theorists of Christianity" that Orthodoxy "is in many ways even closer to Islam than to Catholics". Then, grasping for a model of interreligious harmony, he cited the ostensibly "truly brotherly" relations between Russian Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish and "other traditional" faith leaders. Even if taken to be genuinely brotherly, such leaders are hardly authorities for the nation's rising generation, let alone those prone to engage in ethno-religious violence.

Putin's pleas had no mitigating effect: by late 2011 the public mood in Russia had turned dangerously chameleon. An independent poll by the Levada-Centre that May found just over half of respondents indifferent as to whether Chechnya remained inside the Russian Federation; Russian ultranationalists at this time began concerted lobbying for the exclusion of the entire North Caucasus. A similar June poll recorded 45 per cent of ethnic Russians (and 36 per cent of non-ethnic Russians) supporting the use of violence should their people (narod) or faith be treated "unjustly". Many in the broad opposition movement that crystallized in late 2011 who identify with charismatic political activist Aleksei Navalny share these sentiments.

Putin's appeals to Russia's multiconfessional and multiethnic identity thus come woefully late. Back in 2001 the Council of Muftis of Russia had urged that, as there was no longer a part of Russia where Muslims did not live, it was vitally important they "feel any part of this country to be their homeland". Subsequent warnings to Putin over prosecutions of innocent Muslims on the pretext of combating religious extremism and "Wahhabism" likewise went unheeded. For Russia's ruling elite is oblivious to religious freedom concerns.

(End of first of two extracts from "Believing in Russia - Religious Policy after Communism". The second and final extract can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1764. The Economist's review of the book is available here <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21571111-new-look-religion-post-1991-russia-question-faith>.)

- Geraldine Fagan is Forum 18's Russia and Belarus Correspondent, and author of "Believing in Russia - Religious Policy after Communism" <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415490023/> (Routledge, 2013). This comprehensive overview of Russian religious policy argues that continuing failure to resolve the question of whether Russia is to be an Orthodox country with religious minorities or a multi-confessional state is destabilising the nation.

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of religious freedom in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724.

An analysis of the way that the Russian authorities have used the Pussy Riot case to intensify restrictions on freedom of religion or belief is at F18News 15 October 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1754.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>.

Geraldine Fagan, contributed this comment to Forum 18 News Service. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily

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