

Digital Transformation of the Russian Orthodox Church and Its Impact on Russian Domestic Policies

Maria Kolgushkina

School of Governance and Politics, MGIMO University

Anfisa Grigorenko

School of Governance and Politics, MGIMO University

Abstract

In the century of rapid technological development and rise of digital literacy, even the most conservative and traditional institutions have no choice but to adapt to the challenges of the era. Religious practices, usually associated with inability to accept new developments, are no exception.

The paper examines the nature of digitalization of religious sphere and its connection to political life within Russian Federation. The research specifically targets the development of digital media in Russian Orthodox Church that has been taking place since the fall of Soviet Union. Historically, Orthodoxy has been an important part of Russian state, and even with the persecution of religion in Soviet era religion still played an important role in formation of political and social life of the country. As of now, Russian Federation is a secular state, which, however, doesn't mean that religion fails to contribute to the political aspect of peoples' lives. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the connection between internal political processes of Russian Federation and the digitalization of Russian Orthodox Church, as well as to examine how exactly digital religion functions.

Introduction

The connection between religion, digitalization, and politics is complex and multifaceted. Nowadays, digitalization has a significant impact on the way in which

religious institutions operate and interact with their followers, as well as the way in which political leaders engage with religious communities in the online environment.

Religion and its practices are traditionally seen as conservative or even archaic spheres of people's lives in terms of their approaches. Although, the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic have shown that the usage of modern technologies does not contradict with religious traditions and dogmas. Due to the quarantine measures, religious organizations and structures went online and adopted digital technologies and channels.

According to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, article 14, Russia is a secular state and no religion may be established as an obligatory one. Despite this fact, the influence of the religion on the state as well as on its policies is quite strong. We can tell that at least in the ideological part of the state's policy, which constitutes traditional values in terms of family and moral principles both in the Constitution and the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation. So in this case the Russian Orthodox Church plays the role of a moral beacon for the people, as the Orthodox Christianity is a dominating confession, and a substantive part of Russian citizens consider themselves as confident followers.

Digital religion in Russian Federation - essence, stages of development

Digitalisation of religion, regardless of the country of origin, is a process of transformation of traditional religious practices into digital media with the aim to simplify the spiritual life of believers. Religious organizations adopt digital formats for conveying traditional religious information, as well as for engaging users in spiritual activity via the Internet. Russian Orthodox Church specifically uses various digital channels of mass communication with missionary and educational goals, which, as a result, ensures the information exchange in modern conditions.

Russian Orthodox Church has been implementing certain aspects of digital religion since the fall of Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, digitalization of ROC has seen several stages of development.

The first stage is rapid development of all religious media that took place from 1990 to 1997. In 1997, however, religious movements were divided into traditional - Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist and non-traditional - Catholic, Protestant, Hindu and other. This meant that Orthodox media received massive support from the state, both on national and on regional level. For example, an Orthodox TV channel "Spas" is a federal channel transmitted all over the country and faces no restrictions.

Later in 2009, in order to make Russian Orthodox Church more active in the digital space, Patriarch Kirill announced the establishment of a Synodal Department of Information with an objective to tackle the challenges of technological era and to make ROC more competitive in digital space. This has proven to be a successful decision because since the introduction of the department, digitalization of ROC has gained traction.

In 2020 and 2021 digitalization in Russian Orthodox Church received another stimulus for development. The global pandemic of COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact on religions practices, and believers got a chance to participate in worships digitally at a distance. In the opinion of the Russian Orthodox Church, there is nothing wrong with the usage of technology for spiritual practices, and even the sacrament of confession became possible online. ROC considers self-isolation due to the virus a valid reason for transforming certain traditional routines into digital media.

Overall, Russian Orthodox Church has been successful with implementation of digital media in religious sphere.

What is the connection between politics and digital religion in Russia?

As previously mentioned, there is a strong connection between religion and politics. And with digitalization of religion, this connection becomes even stronger due to wider accessibility and easier management.

Digitalization allows higher regulation of religious sphere, with religious practices becoming more transparent and orderly since it is easier for the state to control mass communication channels and information flows. Religious people in Russia benefit from such control since it stops the spreading of fake messages or harmful practices. By receiving official, state-supported religious messages of Russian Orthodox Church, Russian believers are less likely to be involved in harmful organizations, such as sects or cults.

Russian Orthodox Church also tackles cybercrimes. To prevent the use of the digital space for pedophilia, pro-Orthodox organization called League for a Safe Internet was established in 2011 with support from the Ministry of Communication of the Russian Federation. This organization fights pedophilia and extremism on the internet by exposing criminals and reporting suspicious websites to the authorities. Digitalization of religion in Russia also helps increasing the use of technology among Russian population. By spreading their message online or via mass communication channels, Russian Orthodox Church promotes digital literacy to those who normally wouldn't be interested in technology - such as older generations or residents of remote settlements.

Last but not least, digitalization of religion in Russian Orthodox Church helps raise awareness and promote higher representation of religious groups. By broadcasting their political demands online, religious people in Russia are able to form stronger connections with the authorities, as well as to participate in political life more effectively.

Overall, the process of digitalization of religion helps facilitate the political life of many believers and represent their interests on a larger scale.

Findings

In terms of religion and digitalization, technology has enabled Russian Orthodox Church to reach a wider audience and connect with their followers in new and innovative ways. This has allowed for greater accessibility and inclusivity within the community, as well as the ability to reach individuals who may not have been able to attend in-person services.

At the same time, digitalization has also presented challenges for it, such as the need to navigate issues related to online privacy, cybersecurity, and the spread of fakes and misinformation.

Finally, the connection between religion, digitalization, and politics is complex and constantly evolving. As technology continues to advance, it will be important for ROC and political leaders to navigate the opportunities and challenges presented by digitalization in a way that promotes ethical and responsible engagement.

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