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Speaker: Kristina Stoeckl, Assistant Professor and principal investigator of the project Postsecular Conflicts at the Department of Sociology, University of Innsbruck, Austria

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Russia's Foreign Policy of Traditional Values: The Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Shaping Russia's Policies Abroad

Globalizing the Culture Wars: Religion in International Relations Series

Dr Kristina Stoeckl offers her audience a fresh take on the relationship between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), examining closely the interplay between Russian foreign policy and traditional values of the church. Russia remains a key transnational actor and thus it is imperative to understand the religious and conservative forces that in part drive Russia's actions.

Dr Stoeckl refers the audience to her colleagues Curanovic and Leustean, proponents of the customary view that the ROC is very much the instrument of the Kremlin. Dr Stoeckl, instead, takes a constructivist approach and explains that the situation may be a less black and white than her colleagues suggest. Her thesis asks what the church wants and what the state wants, and finds that their agendas do not always align.

The modern relationship between the ROC and the Russian state has its roots in Stalinist Russia. Evidence of KGB involvement with leading ROC officials is just one indicator of the depth of this relationship. The church re-emerged into a position of relative privilege in 1943, with the election of a new Patriarch, out of a position of absolute weakness. Given the state's involvement with this revival of the ROC, it proved easy for the state to tune the ROC to its foreign policy needs. The outcome of this was a very active ROC from the 1950s to the 1980s, actively participating in and organising conferences such as the Christian Peace Conference, the World Council of Churches and (perhaps slightly more surprisingly) a conference on the neutron bomb. Church activity ran the gamut, making it not implausible to consider it an instrument of the Kremlin.

Yet, the picture is more complicated, particularly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Dr Stoeckl explains that looking at the ROC as an entrepreneur of norms, promoting conservative values, yields further insights. In this case, norms are of reactive nature: the ROC's proposed traditional values react to progressive, liberal human rights, as manifested in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The theological argument the church originally adopted was that human rights are part of the foreign, hostile universe of the Western Enlightenment – a real clash of civilisations. However, in 2008 the ROC seemingly reverted its stance and published a document on human rights. Dr Stoeckl points out that what the ROC really focuses on is Article 29 of the Universal Declaration, interpreting it as a limitation clause which prevents human rights from contradicting duties to communities and to morality. This clause is invoked time and time again by the church to limit anything perceived as too liberal to align with orthodox morality, such as LGBTQ and abortion rights. What we see, thus,

from 2008 onwards is the ROC purporting that it is a promoter of human rights, but a different type of human rights, one based on conservative morality.

Dr Stoeckl brings two case studies to the audience's attention; the ROC's attempts to enter UNHCR debates on human rights by sending representatives to workshops in Geneva, and the ROC's work with transnational NGOs. Dr Stoeckl sees the ROC's work with NGOs as a relatively successful approach by which it has managed to promote its orthodox values and align them with other conservative groups outside of Russia.

Thus, the ROC itself is extending its arm to drive conservative ideology, promoting traditional values, especially traditional family values, presenting itself as the bulwark against radical liberal rights. Yet, politics is never far from the picture. However much the ROC may seek to promote its orthodox values, there is little question that the state too takes an active interest and helps facilitate ROC activity, particularly with the ROC's agenda towards the UN and NGOs. Putin being described by Russian news outlets as the last leader of Christianity and, by extension, of traditional morals, is just one example of the state both facilitating and being facilitated by the ROC agenda.

In conclusion, the state and ROC alliance is one that requires continued scrutiny. It is an alliance that is not without its ambiguities and cracks. The cancellation of the World Christian Religious Freedom Summit, scheduled to take place in Moscow in 2016, is one indicator that the ROC and the state, Putin and the Patriarch, do not always see eye-to-eye, as both are vying to maintain their powerful position inside their institutions and in the face of the other.