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**CATHOLICS IN RUSSIA AND ORTHODOX IN POLAND:  
COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE STATE-CHURCH RELATIONS**

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## 1. Background<sup>1</sup>

At present time there are fewer than one million Orthodox Christians in Poland, (there are various estimates, with a median of 800,000).<sup>2</sup> This represents a definite minority. According to some polls, 92% of the population of 38 million identify themselves as Roman Catholics<sup>3</sup>.

The Polish Orthodox Church has seven dioceses in Poland, including one diocese providing chaplaincy for the Polish Military Services. The clergy in Poland consists of 8 bishops, approximately 400 priests and 40 deacons. The Polish Orthodox Church has eight monasteries (5 male and 3 female) with over a hundred monks and nuns. Furthermore, the Polish Orthodox Church maintains several dioceses and parishes outside of Poland, in Portugal, Spain, Brazil and Italy.

The Polish Orthodox Church operates the Chair of Orthodox Theology at the University in Białystok and the Section of Orthodox Theology at the Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw, both of which are state operated schools of higher education. Furthermore, the Polish Orthodox Church has its Theological Seminary (for the education of clergymen) in Warsaw; a Post-Licentiate School of Orthodox Iconography in Bielsk Podlaski; and a School of Orthodox Conductors and Choir Directors in Hajnówka. In Poland, religion (of legally recognized organization can be) is taught in public schools at the primary and high school levels; for this reason Orthodox religious instruction is taught by the clergy and Orthodox religion teachers, to Orthodox young people in their schools (in those schools where the number of Orthodox believers is significant)..

The number of Catholic believers in Russia is about 600,000 of citizens or as Russian sociologic centers report number of Catholics is about 1% of total population of the country. Catholic Church in Russia is represented by four dioceses, has one seminary and one

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<sup>1</sup> The general scheme of *institutional structure and description of minority* is used for this analysis in the same categories for both countries – the statistics on number of believers, dioceses, seminaries and other educational institutions, parishes, convents and monasteries, fraternities and monk/nun orders, mass-media, publishing houses lead by minority. The sources for such description could be found in sociological reports and polls, in data gathered and presented by the Orthodox Church in Poland; in register of religious organizations functioning in Russia produced annually by the Ministry of Justice.

<sup>2</sup> According to the information taken from official web-site of The Holy Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church <http://www.orthodox.pl/OrthodoxEng/glowna.htm> and information obtained during expert interviews in June 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Data for 2003 available at [www.Regions.Ru](http://www.Regions.Ru)





preseminary, one all-Russian Catholic newspaper with the circulation of 4.5 thousand copies (which is not sufficient to cover needs of the believers all over the country). Since 1997 when the Federal Law “About freedom of conscience and religious organizations” was passed, the number of Roman-Catholic organizations has increased by 16%<sup>1</sup>. Nowadays in Russia 63% of citizens name themselves Orthodox, 6% - Muslims and only 1% - Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants and Jews<sup>2</sup>.

Contemporary phase of religious situation development in Russia is characterized by the civic peace and tolerance among the religious groups which enjoy certain degree of freedom and several important rights. At the same time, experts point to inequality of the position of different groups – the “youngest” and new groups enjoy fewer opportunities (although this is not directly connected with the Roman Catholic minority). And also this new phase is characterized by a lack of connections among different confessions as they are trying to advance their objectives in the religious activity and in the society at large<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Problems

### 2.1. Description

The discussion of *problems* covers all the various difficulties a minority could face carrying its activity in the current climate and conditions that are often unfavourable. Both Russia and Poland suffer from the same types of problems that remain unresolved until now. The first is the problem of Church property which is rooted in the history of the Church and in the difficulties of the transformation period (in Russia<sup>4</sup>) when according to the normative acts the Catholic Church cannot regain its buildings (e.g. churches to provide public worship there).

Another important thing is teaching religion at schools. In Russia this point is under the public discussion now and no binding judicial decisions have been reached yet. Moreover, disputes are also being held on the teaching of Basic Orthodox Culture but not other religious

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<sup>1</sup> To comparison: number of Jewish organizations has increased twice, Buddhist organizations – in 21%.

<sup>2</sup> According to WCIOM data, which were gathered as part of the national poll of 1587 persons in 46 regions of Russia in November 2006.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.philosophy.ru/iphras/library/bal/04.html>

<sup>4</sup> Among other obstacles it is worth mentioning the privatization process with cut the way for Catholic Church to obtain her buildings back from other private owners.





tradition<sup>1</sup>. Looking at the Polish experience we can see that this problem has already been solved and this solution is convenient enough although Polish experts recognize its disadvantages<sup>2</sup>.

Other issues are the opportunities to study the Church Teaching and Religion at schools (opportunity for children to study and for the Church – to teach both in secular and church schools); civic, social and cultural activity of minorities (as long as these types of activity are allowed and available for minorities). Relations with the secular media have also been of concern--including the problem of coverage of religious life events in secular, national and non-specialized media. Finally, it is worth noting the significance of relations with the society at large and social attitudes toward the representatives of religious minorities, and the relations between the minorities and the dominant religious confession.

In the Russian case it is worth investigating not only the attitudes between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Russia but also the relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Holy See. In some situations the perception of Russian Catholics depends on the events at the international level. Difficulties in relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Holy See influence the public attitudes toward the Catholic minority in Russia.

## 2.2. Causes

It should be stressed that the position of the minorities in the two countries is quite different, which could be explained by the disparities in the social conditions. The relative success of the Polish experience probably has roots in the independent position of the religious minority in Poland. It must be noted that the Orthodox Church in Poland is autocephalous and does not submit to any other division of the Orthodox Church while the Catholic Church in Russia is a part of the universal Roman Catholic Church.

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<sup>1</sup> The nuncio of the Holy See in Russia Archbishop Antonio Mennini esteems positively this initiative: “it is a very positive trend. Moreover, if the subject is introduced as an option, it guarantees freedom of choice for the students who belong to other Christian confession and other religions”.

<sup>2</sup> Experts note that pupils can learn either religion or ethics in schools. And in practice, lesson of ethic are organized very rare and children sometimes are forced to attend religion lesson. But in the first order the opportunity to organize the lessons for religious minority itself is principle and should be stressed here.





Among the causes of the relatively worse situation of the Roman Catholic minority in Russia, are, among other issues, the historical circumstances in Russia and lack of necessary normative documents. Sometimes difficult conditions for the existence and activities of a minority finally lead to intolerance and absence of pluralism and later to the tension within Russian society. As a result they can provoke social misbalance and instability.

The Polish experience in State-Church relations partly could be used for changing normative acts dealing with the realm of freedom of religion and conscience, reaching additional agreements and making efforts to change gradually mentality and attitudes of Russian society. It is important to take judicial measures to improve the situation. At the same time as some experts (e.g. lawyers and Polish Orthodox clergy<sup>1</sup>) say we can see the problems in the actual Polish experience itself as well and later on we could face difficulties in the transfer of the experience of a minority in Poland to Russian reality.

### **3. Factors influencing the minority position**

#### *3.1. Overview*

The methodological approach used in this paper it could be mentioned that in general in case of comparison of religious minorities' position it deals with two groups of factors of forming, changing and stability of the religious situation:

- I. external factors (they are realized in State policy, government participation, social influence, mass-media coverage and attention to religious sphere). The State and government define the general framework for the existence of different social groups (e.g. religious groups). Social influence could be observed in attitudes, acceptance or exclusion of minority. Finally the media are responsible for public presentation of a minority's life and problems, generally speaking for the representation of its public image.

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<sup>1</sup> Information was obtained by the author during the interviews with the rector of Orthodox seminary in Warsaw Fr. Jerzy Tofiluk and Dr Paweł Borecki representing the faculty of law of Warsaw University





- II. internal factors (connected with religion itself, religious feeling and so-called “religiosity” on two levels – personal (religious self-identification including ethnical aspect and institution) and institutional (denomination structure, confessional activity, work of religious institutions and organizations etc). These include the real-life circumstances of religious life and practical activity established under the strong influence of the factors from the first group

It may be suggested that generally the first group of factors is more important – in the social sense – in forming of religious situation and solving of existing problems. And internal side of religious situation often could be the result, the consequence of social situation and climate.

The issue will be analyzed in the following manner. Firstly, the normative documents will be analyzed as the most formal, reliable and stable source of information. These documents also define institutional regulation of existence and activity of different communities. The paper looks at some international reports, which are valuable as they can present independent or quasi-independent approach and data (and as we dare supposing) show that the level of freedom of conscience in Russia is insufficient<sup>1</sup>. Further, inquiry is made into the sociological data about the role and the position of religious minorities in Russia, the data about the social climate and the attitudes within society<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the comparative analysis relies on several search categories and sources: a) state normative documents and acts; b) international reports and all kinds of “independent” data about the religious situation; c) analysis of participants (either internal or external); d) structure of minorities (institutional level description and statistics); e) problem identification.

### *3.2. Legal Framework*

The state normative documents and acts relevant for this study are the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (art. 25, 53), the Constitution of the Russian Federation (art. 19, 28, 29), the

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<sup>1</sup> It is possible to mention here American reports on this topic where it could be read that there is the lack of freedom of conscience in some countries of the world.

<sup>2</sup> For instance in surveys and press-releases of WCIOM company it could be found the data about the number of adepts, the readiness to express and to defend the faith, the attitudes to the believers of different religions and denominations etc. The example of wording of questions could be seen in press-release № 601, 19.12.2006





Act on the Relations between the State and Polish Orthodox Church, the Federal Law of Russian Federation # 125 “About freedom on conscience and about religious institutions”, the Civic Code of the Russian Federation, and the Polish Act on the guarantees of freedom of religion.

The Constitution of the Republic of Poland (art. 25) defines the principle of respect for autonomy of the Church:

“Public authorities in the Republic of Poland shall be impartial in matters of personal conviction, whether religious or philosophical, or in relation to outlooks on life, and shall ensure their freedom of expression within public life. < ...> The relationship between the State and churches and other religious organizations shall be based on the principle of respect for their autonomy and the mutual independence of each in its own sphere, as well as on the principle of cooperation for the individual and the common good”.

It also recognizes freedom of religion (art. 53):

“Freedom of conscience and religion shall be ensured to everyone. <...> Freedom of religion shall include the freedom to profess or to accept a religion by personal choice as well as to manifest such religion, either individually or collectively, publicly or privately, by worshipping, praying, participating in ceremonies, performing of rites or teaching”.

The right of religious organization to teach religion at school is affirmed as well:

“The religion of a church or other legally recognized religious organization may be taught in schools, but other peoples' freedom of religion and conscience shall not be infringed thereby”.

Another article appears crucial for ensuring the real exercise of rights of a religious minority: “The relations between the Republic of Poland and other churches and religious organizations shall be determined by statutes adopted pursuant to agreements concluded between their appropriate representatives and the Council of Ministers”. However, the relations between the Polish state and respectively the Roman Catholic Church and other religious bodies are





regulated differently. The relations between the Republic of Poland and the Roman Catholic Church are defined by a concordat, an international treaty concluded with the Holy See in 1993. Most churches and denominational associations act based on an entry in the register, pursuant to the freedom of conscience and denomination act. The status of fourteen other churches and denominational organisations is not regulated by separate agreements, but by individual acts. These acts were adopted prior to the entry into force of the new Constitution (1997).

The relations between the Polish state and the Orthodox Church are regulated by a special act.<sup>1</sup> The document is a single regulation, covering the relationship of Orthodox believers and organizations as representatives of the religious minority with the state powers. It describes principal terms in the State-Church relations, defines the structure of the Orthodox Church in Poland, sense and activity of parishes, dioceses, monasteries, existence of the Orthodox seminary, schools of iconography, Orthodox Metropolitan and diocesan centers of charity, activity of congregations, fraternities of Orthodox youth and church communities.

The Constitution of the Russian Federation does not give such opportunities to minorities although it recognizes freedom of religion (art. 19):

“The State shall guarantee the equality of rights and freedoms of man and citizen, regardless of sex, race, nationality, language, origin, property and official status, place of residence, religion, convictions, membership of public associations, and also of other circumstances. All forms of limitations of human rights on social, racial, national, linguistic or religious grounds shall be banned”.

And also in art. 28:

“Everyone shall be guaranteed the freedom of conscience, the freedom of religion, including the right to profess individually or together with others any religion or to profess no religion at all, to freely choose, possess and disseminate religious and other views and act according to them”.

According to the Constitution propaganda of religious hatred is prohibited:

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<sup>1</sup> The Act on the Relations between the State and Polish Orthodox Church.



“Propaganda or agitation instigating social, racial, national or religious hatred and strife shall not be allowed. The propaganda of social, racial, national, religious or linguistic supremacy shall be banned”.

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently stressed that comfortable relations had been established between confessions in Russia and there were grounds to believe that this state of affairs would continue. "One should point out that Russia has a unique experience of co-existence of various religions and interaction" he said. But not all experts agree with this point of view. Former representative for human rights in Russian Federation O. Mironov underlined that he always distinguished between the *de jure* and *de facto* equality of religions. “From the legislative point of view all religious communities are equal but reality shows that Orthodoxy has clear primacy<sup>1</sup>.

Polish experts say that the regulations contained in the document that otherwise appears to be much better than the Russian legal frameworks – the Act between Church and State – sometimes remains just on paper. Rector of the Orthodox seminary Fr. Jerzy Tofiluk considers the religious minority lives according to the rules and feels itself free but within allowed limits<sup>2</sup>. So it is possible to suggest that the situation in Poland is not ideal and if someone tries to compare the two practices it is possible to conclude that they are quite similar.

However, from the formal-normative point of view, the position and opportunities of religious minority in Poland look much better than in Russia. A number of international reports have suggested problems in this regard in Russia.<sup>3</sup> The 2007 Report on international religious freedom published by the U.S. Department of State, ranks Russia among the countries "where religious freedom is of significant interest". The Information and Press Department at the Russian Foreign Ministry responded:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://portal-credo.ru/site/print.php?act=news&id=26479>

<sup>2</sup> Interview was made in Warsaw 18 June, 2007. Under the *limits* here it is possible to understand the prescribed by legal norms frameworks of acting and functioning.

<sup>3</sup> One could cite the “Policy focus: Russia” published by US Commission on International Religious Freedom; the reports by UN bodies (Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination), and the Council of Europe documents.





“Together with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and others, Russia was once again ranked among the states ‘where religious freedom is of significant interest’. This is explained through the references to the 1997 law on the freedom of conscience and religious organizations, which allegedly hinder the development of non-traditional confessions in Russia. Dubious facts and open allegations prove this thesis,”.

As it was stressed by the representatives of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate “the basic rights of all religious organizations are equal, all the groups have opportunity to practice the religion”.

### *3.3. Stakeholders*

In the development of the state-church relations there are several groups of interest. Their position depends, however, on the concrete circumstances. Clearly the religious minorities and the State are the main actors in both the Russian and Polish cases. In the Polish case the important actors are the Orthodox Church in Poland, the State and (indirectly) the Polish Ecumenical Council. Other actors include the Roman Catholic Church, the Polish public at large and the mass-media.

In the Russian side the Catholic Church in Russia and the State are the key actors. The Catholic minority in Russia nowadays quite often has difficulties to exercise its rights and opportunities to be fully active, to be an equal part of society, to achieve its goals in internal religious and spiritual life and in the rest of society as well. The State is represented by organizations, institutions and leaders involved in the process of governing the country. These include the Presidential Council for relations with religious organizations, the Governmental Commission on the problems of religious associations, the Committee on the problems of social associations and religious organizations of the State Duma. Although the number of formally existing inter-religious and state-religious institutions in Russian Federation is bigger than in Poland, their real power is not great. They participate in discussions, different meetings dealing





with the position and the conditions of existence and activities of religious organizations and believers, and sometimes take part in discussions of socially important problems.<sup>1</sup>

Non-state actors include the Russian Orthodox Church, the public at large and the mass-media. The Russian public has at times been intolerant and generally has not demonstrated enough social solidarity with the Roman Catholic minority. A few years ago the situation was worse than it is now but even today this it could provoke social separation and instability<sup>2</sup>, non-democratic development and misbalanced social processes which are noted in some reports (look further).

It is possible to speak about another level of participants who should be taken into account as well – so-called “external” participants and viewers who do not play the direct role in State-Church relations but indirectly could influence the religious situation and search raising problems. There are the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and public opinion researching centers – CBOS (Public Opinion Research Center (Poland)), WCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) and Levada-Center in Russia.

#### 4. Conclusions

Polish experience in some ways bears similarities to the Russian one. There are similar social conditions. There are also religious minority groups with rich and difficult history and the problems could be analyzed using the similar categories.. Describing the similarities and differences between the minorities under investigation could serve to find better normative solutions of the minority’s problems.

Nonetheless, despite sharing similar problems and difficult history<sup>3</sup> both Churches have different conditions for further development. In-depth comparative analysis of religious

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<sup>1</sup> Commission for the problems of religious associations at the Government of Russian Federation is the coordinative body dealing with the questions of interrelations between the State and religious groups. It formulates recommendations for the Government in certain sphere, makes the proposals for state financial and other supports of such organizations, makes analysis of federal and local law in freedom of conscience.

<sup>2</sup> It is more evident not in the relations between different Christian confessions or Christians and “society” but in the relationship between Muslims and “society”.

<sup>3</sup> Difficulties for both Churches had place at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> cent. Key point in contemporary history for Polish Orthodox Church is 1989 and for the Catholic Church in Russia is 1991 – the year of restoration of Catholic structures in Russian Federation.





minorities' structures in both countries leads to the conclusion that taking in account number of followers and all other factors nevertheless Polish Orthodox minority has better organized and developed infrastructure so it could work easier and more effectively for given number of believers. The Polish experience suggests that new specific documents describing the positions should be developed for individual denominations. A special agreement (paralleling the framework used in Poland) and the activity of Ecumenical Council can be considered in improving the problem of the Roman Catholic minority in Russia.

Still, real obstacles remain in this sphere in Russia. They are connected with the different position of the state and the majority religion. Currently, the Russian state loses its prestige and symbolic social capital because it is often criticized for non-democratic practices.<sup>1</sup> Its stance could diminish the respect from the European or other partners (the problem of conscience and religious freedom is quite popular and discussed widely in the West). It should be remembered, however, that the current conditions give other benefits to the Russian government-- power within the country and control over the society.

The Russian Orthodox Church now is in privileged position because in many situations other religious communities do not have equal rights and full representation in social life. The current model of relations between the government and the churches reinforces this unequal position – the Russian Orthodox Church was the only representative of the religious community<sup>2</sup> in the official consultations on the spiritual foundations for social development (to formulating so-called “Russian doctrine”).

It seems that the experience of Poland could be considered while drafting additional agreements between the State and religious minority in Russia which could give Catholics (and other minorities) additional rights and opportunities to express their faith, to keep traditions and to regulate relations and activity within rest Russian society. Partly this experience could be used as well in public debates and discussions dealing with the position of religious groups in Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> It seems possible to use the verb “to lose” because the perception of Russia in the international level is changing in time and the level this symbolic capital is decreasing.

<sup>2</sup> The Church as it could be expected was presented only by dominating Russian Orthodox Church. Thus once again the State eliminated other confessions and religions from social activity and decision-making process involving only Orthodox Church in social discussion.

