

# The Russian Orthodox Church as a Tool of Russian Foreign Policy: The Case of Latvia

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**Abstract:** *The Russian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate as an institution has been serving as an effective tool of the Russian concept of soft power. Taking this into account, the article is devoted to the study of the role of the Latvian Orthodox Church in the promotion of Russia's soft power through relationships with the Russian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate. Additionally, the author of the article portrays important events of the Orthodox Church in Latvia, which to one degree or another had a political tone. The article also reflects the main conclusions on this issue.*

**Keywords:** Latvia, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Latvian Orthodox Church, politics

## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, Russia has attempted to use the instruments of soft power and its implementation mechanisms to increase Russia's influence in Post - Soviet space. According to Joseph S. Nye, soft power is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments", and it can be developed using relations with allies, economic assistance, and cultural exchanges. In addition, sources of soft power may include particular values that are broadly perceived as belonging to a country's identity [1]. Regarding this, in the case of Russia an important role is attributed to religion and more precisely the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).

The ROC is one of the main tools of Russian soft power [2]. It supports Russia's pursue for regional influence and, since the ROC links Orthodox Christians across Eastern Europe and promotes ideas of common identity, it is an important ally for Russia's political power, including military. For example, as Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin mention in their work, "the Russian Orthodoxy played the role of both a 'back channel' and an informal mediator between Russia, Georgia and Ukraine during the crisis years" [3] or as Dmitry Adamsky argues, "Moscow's diplomatic - military enterprise in Syria has been significantly touched by faith and Church" [4] and "the Russian Orthodox Church became a tool of genuine strategic influence" [5] for the Russia in Syria.

While much research works have been written about the ROC as a soft power tool within Russia and some of the former Soviet Union countries, the situation in Latvia has not been explored enough so far. Given that, the purpose of this paper is to examine the role of the Latvian Orthodox Church (LOC) in the promotion of Russia's soft power through relationships with the ROC; as well as to construct a consistent document on the relevant events of the Orthodox Church in Latvia, which to one degree or another had a political tone.

### The Latvian Orthodox Church and politics in Latvia

The Latvian Orthodox Church (LOC) is semi - autonomous Eastern Orthodox church under the jurisdiction of the

Russian Orthodox Church (the Patriarchate of Moscow) (ROC). According to the data of Ministry of Justice of the year 2019, LOC is the third largest church in Latvia, with approximately 250, 000 members and 129 parishes. [6] As Nils Muiznieks has stated, "Orthodoxy in Latvia is a significant social phenomenon and provides an entry for Russia's soft power into Latvia" [7]. In his study, Muiznieks points out three significant events in Latvia related to the Orthodox Church that will be discussed further.

The first significant event was exhibition of the Tikhvin icon in Riga Nativity of Christ Orthodox Cathedral from June 21 to 23, 2004. The Tikhvin icon is considered as an important symbol of the Orthodoxy and a great holiness to all believers. Latvia was a part of Tikhvin icon history. It was brought to Latvia on its way to the Tikhvin Monastery, where it was 600 years before the Second World War, when the icon was saved from destruction by the Latvian Orthodox Bishop Janis Garklavs taking it with him to the United States [8]. Although this important event was not with a political aspect, the political tone was indirect. Respectively, in organization of this event were involved such important figures in Latvia as Latvian President Vaira Vike - Freiberga, prominent Latvian businessman and Vasilijš Meļniks, advisor on economic relations with the East to several prime ministers. Nevertheless, this exhibition was considered as an important event in warming up Latvian - Russian relations [9].

Some attempts to strengthen relationships with the LOC were made by Patriarch Aleksey II (1929 – 2008). His activities towards Latvia in early 21<sup>st</sup> century were considered by the ruling political forces in Latvia and experts in a positive light [10]. An essential part of Patriarch Aleksey II activities was his visits to the dioceses of the ROC and held meetings with Orthodox believers. Expanding the geography of his visits, from May 27 to 29, 2006 at the invitation of the Latvian President Vaira Vike - Freiberga, Patriarch Aleksey II visited Latvia and it was the first visit of such importance since the establishment of Orthodoxy in Latvia [11]. Regarding this event Nils Muiznieks pointed out, that "the timing was significant, as it came as Latvia tried to move towards closure of the border treaty issue after the tension - filled demarche of Latvian president Vaira Vike - Freiberga to explain Latvian history at the Victory Day

celebration in Moscow in May 2005 and the debacle of the failed border treaty around that time" [12].

On the first day of the visit, Patriarch Aleksey II had the meeting with the Latvian President Vaira Vike - Freiberga, who presented him the Order of the Three Stars [13]. At the same time Patriarch Aleksey II presented the restored First - Class Order of Holy Princess Olga to the President Vaira Vike - Freiberga. Later, they laid together flowers at the Freedom Monument, where hundreds of people had come to watch this meeting [14]. As AndisKudors writes, "Witnesses of the visit said that the Patriarch in talks with Latvian officials expressed great understanding of the Latvian affairs and did not talk about the national minorities or any other controversial political issues" [15]. In its turn the Latvian President Vaira Vike - Freiberga pointed out that both nations, Russians and Latvian, had suffered from totalitarian regimes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and must not forget the crimes committed by these regimes and victims. She added that the role of the ROC in evaluating these processes in Russia is important. The Latvian President also thanked Patriarch Aleksey II for his long and fruitful contribution to the rebirth of THE LOC and pointed out that the Orthodox Church still plays a significant role in Latvian society [16].

On May 29, 2006 Patriarch Aleksey II had the meeting with the Latvian Prime Minister AigarsKalvitis. Patriarch Aleksey II thanked the Latvian government for its constructive cooperation with the Orthodox Church in Latvia. They discussed the issues of religious denominations in Latvia, the role of religion and the church in society, the attitude of people towards the main religions, in which the Orthodox Church also plays an important role, as well as the relations between Latvia and Russia. The Prime Minister Aigars Kalvitis emphasized Latvia's readiness to establish a pragmatic dialogue with Russia and expressed hope that the visit of Patriarch Aleksey II to Latvia could be seen as a signal that Russia could be ready for such a dialogue [17].

Regarding Patriarch Aleksey II visit to Latvia in May 2006, it should be added that this visit was used by Russia's foreign policy implementers as their diplomatic tool. The head of the Russian presidential administration's Department for Inter - Regional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries Modest Kolerov informed that Russia would evaluate the program of Patriarch Aleksey II's visit to Latvia as it would show Latvia's internal intentions and in general what priorities Latvia would set in its relations with Russia [18]. No less important event in strengthening relationships with the LOC during last decade was Latvian President Valdis Zatlers' visit to Russia from 19 to 22 December 2010. Namely, the head of LOC, Metropolitan Alexander, was included in Latvian President Valdis Zatlers' official delegation and during this visit Zatlers invited Head of State of Russia, Dmitri Medvedev, and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill to visit Latvia in 2011[19].

In 2011, the State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, Andris Teikmanis, informed that the visit of Patriarch Kirill to Latvia could be planned for 2012 [20]. In that case, this visit would coincide with the publication of Patriarch Kirill's book "Freedom and Responsibility" in Latvian, however eventually, the possible visit did not take

place [21]. It should be noted here that the publication of Patriarch Kirill's book "Freedom and Responsibility" in Latvian might be considered as one of the Moscow Patriarchate representatives' activities to influence opinions of Russian - speaking minority in Latvia. For example, when presenting this book, Metropolitan Ilarion – Moscow Patriarchate's representative – emphasized that elderly non - citizens in Latvia should be given a Latvian citizenship even if they do not know Latvian language [22]. This fact is important for the reason that on the February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012, a referendum on the Russian language as a second national language of Latvia was held. Against the Russian language as a second official language voted 821, 722 people (74.8%), but for the Russian language as a second official language voted 273, 347 people (24.88%). This meant that there would one official state language in Latvia, namely Latvian [23]. Regarding the language issue and the referendum, the head of the LOC Metropolitan Alexander pointed out that the Russian language in Latvia should be of public importance, people who do not understand Latvian require Russian in order to receive medical or other services [24].

The Russian language issue was the topic of concern of the ROC also when the patriarch of the ROC Kirill accepted the leader of political party "Harmony Centre" Nils Usakovs in Moscow in the autumn of 2012. At this meeting, Patriarch Kirill thanked Nils Usakovs for his stance on the language issue, since Usakovs supported Russian as the state language in Latvia in the referendum of 2012 and called to vote in favor of this option. This meeting and discussed topic gave evidence for the use of the authority of the ROC to influence the views of the LOC, as the LOC is still under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate of ROC [25].

Returning to the proposed visit of Patriarch Kirill to Latvia in 2012, eventually, it did not take place and later was expected in May 2014. But because of the events in Crimea and Ukraine related to Russian politics, in the spring 2014 president Andris Berzins postponed Patriarch Kirill's visit to autumn that year. The attitude of the Moscow Orthodox Church towards the events in Crimea and Ukraine was ambiguous. On the one hand, Patriarch Kirill avoided from complicating relations with the Orthodox churches located in Ukraine, but on the other hand – he could not oppose Putin either. As to postponed visit of the Russian Orthodox leader in Latvia to the autumn 2014, nevertheless later it was announced that it would not be planned in the near future [26] and so far it has not happened.

## 2. Conclusion

Though Russia's presence and influence in Latvia are present in various ways and sectors, it is difficult to determine HOW strong instrument of Russian "soft power" in Latvia is the LOC. On the one hand Orthodoxy in Latvia might be a tool for Russia's soft power towards Latvia. But on the other hand, the LOC still keeps ambiguous position. Though it is under the jurisdiction of ROC, it is semi - autonomous entity from Eastern Orthodox Church.

As some data shows, attitude of the LOC towards Russian compatriot policy is more cautious. The head of the LOC Metropolitan Alexander also was reluctant regarding

interfering in political issues and communicating to public authorities on matters that affect Latvia's compatriot policy and interests of Russian - speaking community. No doubt, he expressed his concerns about the language issue and status of the Russian language in future, nevertheless, his attitude was more diplomatic. Another example is position regarding the events in Ukraine in 2014. Here the LOC took neutral position and avoided to comment the ongoing events. Theologian and research assistant at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Latvia Nikita Andrejevs stressed, that "Most church leaders make comments. There has been no reaction from the Latvian [Orthodox] Church. This is the case, because is Patriarchate of Moscow. The LOC tries to take such a quiet, neutral position and do not emphasize its connection with Moscow" [27].

Regarding activities of the ROC regarding relationships with the LOC in Latvia, some was considered in a positive way, such as the exhibition of the Tikhvin icon in 2004 and visit of Patriarch Aleksey II to Latvia in 2006. Later on, in 2010s attitude changed in many respects due to the political events in Ukraine and Crimea. The cancelled visit of Patriarch Kirill is a good evidence for that. Maris Cepuritis, a foreign policy expert and lecturer at Riga Stradins University, explained to a newspaper, "If the patriarch came to Latvia as a religious leader to conduct a service, there would probably be no obstacles to his visit. However, he planned to appear, among other things, as a political leader - one of the events on the agenda was a meeting with the President, the Speaker of the Saeima and the Prime Minister. And that changes the situation" [28].

The head of Latvian State Security Service Normunds Mezviets expressed his concerns that Russia could use the LOC as one of its levers to influence the Russian - speaking people. In one of the 2015 interviews, he said that "Recently, we have witnessed that the LOC becomes more active, develops cooperation with children and young people trying to attract the younger generation to Orthodoxy, and actively works with Latvians as well. So, of course, the Orthodox Church is active" [29].

It is problematic to define the present impact of Russia's public diplomacy and soft power in Latvia and possible future Russia's influence through the activities of the LOC. The current LOC Metropolitan Alexander avoids public confrontation on issues related to Russian politics and involvement of the Orthodox Church in it. The fact that in October 2019 Ministry of Justice officially recognized the Latvian Autonomous Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople by registering it as a legal entity is also of serious importance. As well as the amendments to the Orthodox Church Law adopted in 2019, which stipulate that the head, metropolitans, and bishops of the LOC must be citizens of Latvia who have lived in Latvia for the last 10 years. Such changes in the law are associated with national security risks. Therefore, it remains an open question how situation might change in the future.

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