

‘The Pen is Mightier than the Sword’

DISCOURSE OVER REPRESSION AS A MEANS OF PREVENTING
RELIGIOUS HATE CRIMES

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NATION-BUILDING IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA: POLICY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper discusses the problem of religious hate crime in Russia, looking at its historical background and government policy to offer a suggestion of measures to help resolve the issue. Considering the failure of the government to address this problem and government policy that has aggravated social tensions this paper suggests that the first step is to change government discourse surrounding religion to promote and create greater equality.

Introduction

There is a current global trend of increasing hostility to religion, general sentiment among citizens has become more negative and the introduction of more repressive measures concerning religion has been on the increase since 2016¹. In Russia there has been ‘an insurgence of extreme nationalism mixed with strong religious traits’ (Article 19 2005:3) this nationalistic sentiment takes the form of discrimination and messages of religious hatred directed mainly against Jewish and Muslim populations (Article 19 2005:12). However, in practise there are many forms of religious violence, in this paper ‘religiously motivated violence’ refers to any act of aggression by religious or non-religious individuals or groups towards other religious or non-religious groups or individuals (Verkhovsky 2018:11). These acts of aggression can range from vandalism to murder. It is important to note that religious violence is rarely motivated purely by religious beliefs and only occurs when combined with other factors such as ethnicity (Oliker 2018:1), social tension, personal pride and movements for political change (*Institute for Economics and Peace* 2015). It is therefore important to highlight from the beginning that religious tensions must be looked at in connection with existing social and political unrest and not as a separate phenomenon. Nonetheless, measures can be taken to alleviate religious tensions and to promote social cohesion. This is particularly important in a country as ethnically and religiously diverse as Russia. The desire to resist ‘aggressive behaviour in matters of religion’ has been described as one of the two key issues face by post-soviet Russia and President Putin himself has acknowledged a need for reform of the current approach to tackling religious issues (Verkhovsky 2014). According to International law, States must ‘take positive measures to create a climate in which human rights are genuinely protected and freedom of expression can thrive, including the dissemination of different points of view’ (Article 19 2005:4). This is currently not the case in Russia and I will argue that this aggravates the problem of interreligious tension and violence.

This paper will look at the link between religious repression and social hostility to religion to show that greater social stability can be encouraged by the reduction of repressive measures and discourse and the promotion of greater understanding and dialogue between different groups. The policy paper will chart the escalation of social unrest on religious grounds before examining the current methods of dealing with these problems highlighting the ambiguities and contradictory messages of the government. The paper will look at several options for resolving these issues including the creation of a specific action plan to combat religious hate crimes, improved religious education and a change in the way the government relates to different religions. This paper will recommend that the first necessary step in combatting religious tension is at the level of government discourse and media representation.

¹<https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/21/global-uptick-in-government-restrictions-on-religion-in-2016/>

Problem Description

Background

In the Russian empire there was a hierarchy of religions closely linked to ethnicity and consequently to geographical location. Ethnic Russians (Orthodox) occupied the central part of Russia whereas minorities were relegated to peripheries of the country². This hierarchy was suppressed but not destroyed during the Soviet empire, industrialisation motivated the mixing of cultures (and therefore religions) as people were encouraged to move into the cities. Russification (and therefore Orthodoxisation³) reinforced minority status and prepared the ground for future tension and conflicts⁴. The post-soviet empire saw a process of desecularisation jointly led by the state and the ROC, this was done by reattaching ethnicity and religion, the ROC claimed the majority of ethnic Russians as orthodox Christians thus establishing the dominance of Orthodoxy. This is called 'ethnodoxy', 'a belief system that rigidly links a group's ethnic identity to its dominant religion and consequently tends to view other religions as potentially or actually harmful to the group's unity and wellbeing and, therefore, seeks protected and privileged status for the groups' dominant faith'⁵. Post-soviet state collaboration promoted Orthodox Christianity to the detriment of smaller and minority religions, in 1997 the ROC pushed the introduction of a law restricting practises of 'foreign' religions⁶. There is a direct correlation between government restrictions and social hostility as shown in Figure 1.

The link between church and state has intensified in Putin's era and has now become a shared ideological mission in which the ROC asserts itself as 'the definitive expression of Russian nationhood'⁷, this link between the ROC and the Russian state means that those not adhering to the church are excluded from the state. Minority or newer religions have been judged as 'incompatible with the traditions and values of Russia' and are therefore discriminated against (Verkhovsky 2018:13). In the words of Oliker 'the

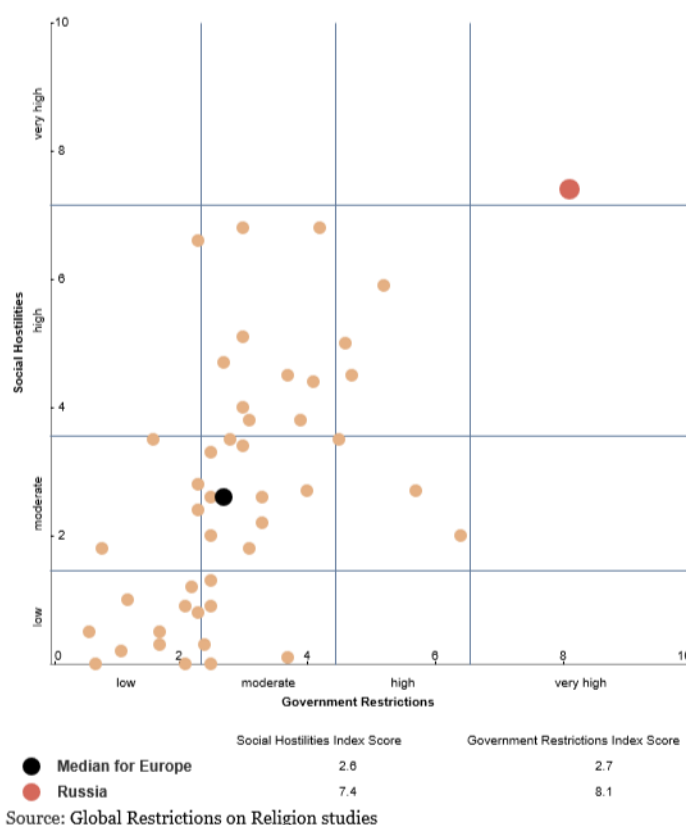


Figure 1 : Russia 2016

² https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301663592_Religious_Education_in_Russia_Inter-Faith_Harmony_or_Neo-Imperial_Toleration

³ even through religion was banned Orthodoxy was part of the dominant culture and therefore its values and traditions were promoted

⁴ *ibid* 2

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulcoyer/2015/05/21/unholy-alliance-vladimir-putin-and-the-russian-orthodox-church/#91c0d927d5b5>

⁷ <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2013/02/02/a-question-of-faith>

language of “tradition”, including as used by the state, is instrumentalized to delegitimize and justify violence against the “non-traditional” (Oliker 2018:2). This discrimination has spread to the political and social spheres; extreme Nationalist parties, such as Rodina, promoting extreme racial and religious stances have increased public support (Article 19 2005:12), discrimination is prevalent in the media which encourages the distrust of Muslims labelling them as ‘Wahhabi’ and equating this term with terrorism (Article 19 2005:12), Russian websites increasingly display messages of religious hatred (Article 19 2005:12), anti-Semitism is on the rise and attacks against Jewish communities have involved ‘direct incitement of hatred against them, anti-Jewish demonstrations, anti-Semitic graffiti, and the defacement of Jewish graves with fascist signs and slogans’ (Article 19 2005:12). The confusion of politically motivated terrorist attacks with religiously motivated ones has created fear and exacerbated the problem.

In December 2015, the question of national security became associated with spiritual-moral values, ‘the “destruction of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values” has been framed as one of the main threats to state and public security’⁸. The rise in social media has also seen a rise in radicalisation and religious hatred (Oliker 2018:6) this has offered a catalyst for religious hatred to grow in strength and intensity. This poses a major threat not only to minority religious groups, but also to society as a whole. According to Jonathon Fox, ‘any challenge to a religious framework is likely to provoke a defensive and often conflictive response from the adherents of that religious framework’⁹. Therefore, to fully protect the interests of all citizens this issue needs to be addressed.

Summary of Problem:

In 2009, the rising of hate crime in Russia caused the U.N. Human Rights Committee to express their concern, calling attention to a ‘failure on the part of the police and judicial authorities to investigate, prosecute and punish hate crimes and racially motivated attacks against ethnic and religious minorities, often qualified merely as „hooliganism,“ with charges and sentences that are not commensurate with the gravity of the acts’

(*Human Rights First 2012*). This is especially concerning considering that the official figures on hate crimes are much lower than the actual number occurring in Russia (*Human Rights First 2012*). Religiously motivated hate crime (although of lesser severity) accounts for a significant number of hate crimes as show in this

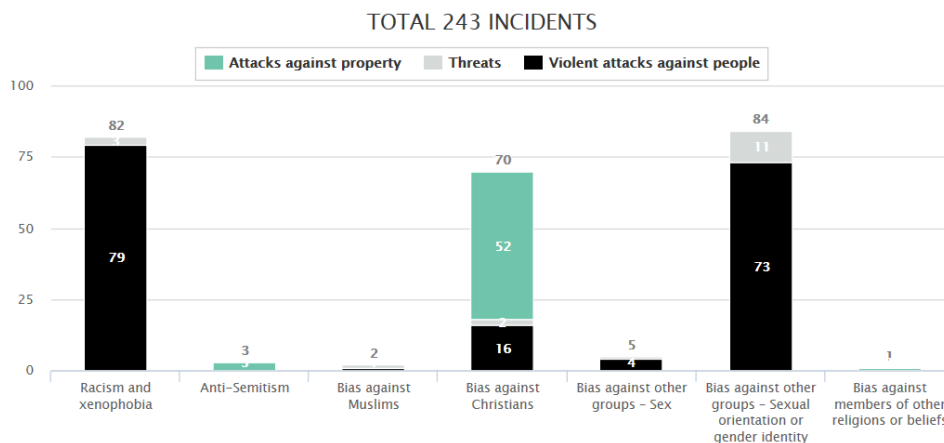


Figure 1 Hate Crime in Russia

Source : <http://hatecrime.osce.org/russian-federation>

graph. As such attacks against religion account for a significant proportion of hate crime and ought to be examined in separation from other bias.

⁸ <https://thehumanist.com/commentary/the-politics-of-religion-in-russia>

⁹ <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/4310/4922>

Evaluation of current policy environment

In 2012 a new school subject “Fundamentals of religious cultures and secular ethics” was introduced offering school children a religious education. The goal of this programme was to promote religious tolerance and interfaith peace¹⁰, however it can be said that the curriculum only serves to promote the dominant religion in Russia functioning more as a citizenship education encouraging patriotism (Blinkova, Vermeer 2016). The course only teaches the four ‘traditional’ religions of Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism and other religions and denominations within religions are not studied in detail. These ‘new’ or ‘non-traditional’ religions are opposed to the ‘traditional’ ones and shown as fundamentally problematic (Oliker 2018:6). Only one textbook out of five defines religious tolerance as ‘acceptance of the right of other faiths to exist freely’¹¹. Religious education in Russia supports the hegemony of the ROC and clearly attributes ethno-territorial divisions to religious ones. The result of this ethnodoxic approach is reduced tolerance to minority faiths and political and social instability. Lisovskaya points out that the ‘vertical of power’ supported by a hierarchy of religions is no longer stable, due to external and internal pressures of globalisation, pro-independence movements and economic and socio-political challenges, ‘if it wishes to preserve itself as a unified political entity—Russia must adopt a much more consistently pluralistic and non-hegemonic model of religious education’¹².

The other way of combating the problem of religious violence is through anti-extremism strategies and laws. These include the 2014 Strategy for Countering Extremism in the Russian Federation Through 2025, the banning of some books and religious materials and the July 2016, “Yarovaya Act”, a raft of laws mainly increasing surveillance in order to fight terrorism. None of these policies deal with the question of religious hate crime as perpetrated against believers instead focusing on extremism and terrorism.

The Strategy is important as it addresses the issue of prevention acknowledging that criminal policy alone is insufficient. But it has been described as vague, ineffectual repressive (Verkhovsky 2018:21), under this plan ‘any system of views based on religion or on its rejection becomes an “extremist ideology”’ and its application is inconsistent (Verkhovsky 2018:23). The preventative element of this policy is not being accomplished and the suppression of ‘radical elements’ can be counterproductive causing hostility towards government forces and even pushing peaceful individuals towards violence, this is most evident in the case of Muslims but is also a much wider issue (Verkhovsky 2018:28).

The process of book banning is also problematic, in theory it should reduce violent extremism by removing access to extremist propagandistic material but in practice it is unfeasible due to the amount of policing necessary and the lack of clarity in the definition of what materials are and are not allowed (the list of banned materials contains more than 1,400 entries (*Human Rights First* 2012)). The ban is misused against individuals and groups of ‘non-traditional’ religious movements (*Human Rights First* 2012) and does not attempt to address the larger issue of the propaganda of violence which is mainly countered by criminal prosecution. Book banning ‘has completely eroded any understanding of the applicability boundaries for the term “extremist,” especially with regard to religious statements’ (Verkhovsky 2018:17), thus creating confusion and misunderstanding the main causes of religious violence and hatred.

¹⁰ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301663592_Religious_Education_in_Russia_Inter-Faith_Harmony_or_Neo-Imperial_Tolerance

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*

The “Yarovaya Act” introduced in 2016 also had the aim of counteracting religious extremism and terrorism. However, the targets under the “Yarovaya Act” seem to be innocuous believers, legislative changes included limitations on evangelical activities. These laws seem to have had no effect on religious extremism but have only weakened the position of the ‘non-traditional’ religions in Russia.

Failure of current approach:

In summary the measures adopted by the state do not address the roots of the problem but seek to punish rather than prevent, those measures that are shown as preventative are ineffective due to a lack of clarity. Incomplete religious education does not allow students to understand other religious view points and aggravates the situation by reinforcing ethnic divisions. General misunderstanding of religion and the assimilation of religion and terrorism have encouraged religious hatred. Measures target terrorism and extremism in certain religious communities creating stigma and largely ignoring the problem of religiously motivated violence directed at believers by representatives of the ultra-right (Verkhovsky 2018:33). The current programme of repression of religious minorities gives a mandate to the people to express their religion-based insecurities in the form of violence (physical and verbal) and discrimination against religious minorities. This in turn forces non-violent believers into violence perpetuating the cycle of associations between religion and terrorism creating an atmosphere of fear and mistrust. General government policy seems to promote the principle of ‘divide and rule’ exploiting religious divisions for political aims, this is not sustainable and will only create instability.

Policy Options

i. Government Action Plan

The first means of addressing the problem is through launching a Hate Crime Action plan similar to that of the United Kingdom. This would involve improved police recording of hate crime, providing specific data on all strands of hate crimes (religious, ethnic, sexual, disability, identity) in terms of religious hate crimes this would involve recording the faith of victims to increase understanding of the problem. It is necessary to amend ambiguous legislation allowing a consistent and effective legal response to hate crime. The government should coordinate its efforts with charities and religious organisations to allow a faster response to issues, encourage victims to report crimes and to offer safe places of worship for believers. In order to fully respond to the problem of hate crime in the age of technology the threat of online crime should also be addressed¹³. This action plan should be implemented upon the understanding of the equality before the law of all religious communities (Human Rights First 2012). This is a necessary step in order to counter religious hate crime as a separate offense, however this does not fully respond to the underlying problem and causes of religious hatred.

ii. Education

The next possible approach would be through education, in a press release heads of European human rights institutions stressed the importance of education in countering hate

¹³ <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2018/10/16/home-office-response-to-hate-crime-statistics-released-today/>

speech¹⁴. Religious education in Russia is clearly insufficient in providing children with a broad understanding of different religious cultures and instilling respect and tolerance. The religious curriculum needs to cover all main religions in Russia in equal depth and to allow for the divergence of opinions that naturally arise amongst believers of the same faith. Improving media literacy is also hugely important allowing young people to critically assess views shared via media platforms helping them to confront hate speech which can in turn lead to violence and hate crime¹⁵. This is an important course of action but can only be taken in the context of wider reforms, the current level of biased language used in religious textbook, media and by the state for example the naming of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' religions is not conducive to an open learning environment.

iii. Discourse

Therefore, in order to tackle the wider climate of religious intolerance in Russia the first step that needs to be made is at a discourse level. The polarised language of 'traditional' religions creates an understanding that all other religions espouse extreme views and are as such a danger to society. Clear divisions need to be made between religion and politics particularly in the case of terrorism and, in order to be effective, legislation needs to observe these nuances. The connection between ethnicity and religion needs to be broken down as this is a major factor in religious discrimination, separating the two also makes it easier to fight ethnic discrimination. Current government policy takes a more repressive approach to tackling religious violence, this approach does not solve any of the problems and encourages further intolerance. Therefore, the government needs to be the first to officially recognise the equality of all religions and protect religious freedom thereby promoting tolerance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Hate crime is not a new problem, the persecution of ethnic, religious and national minorities has been a feature throughout Russian (and world) history (*Human Rights First* 2012). But the problem is worsening and, in order for Russia to maintain social stability, needs to be dealt with as a matter of urgency. Religious hatred is a deeply ingrained issue that has its roots in insecurity over identity. As such, a deeper understanding of the issue is required, one which tackles the root of religious violence primarily its portrayal as linked with ethnicity. A governmental action plan and improved religious education are important steps in the fight against this problem however in the current social climate in Russia would be ineffective. The key to long lasting change in perceptions of religious difference lies in the way they are defined. The state cannot promote tolerance of all religious beliefs and represent all of its citizens if the government itself displays a bias towards a particular religion to the exclusion of others. Therefore, this paper recommends readdressing the problem of polarised discourse particularly in the media and government as a priority. This should be followed up by a plan to deal with the immediate problem of ambiguity in prosecution and the lack of statistical information about religious hate crime allowing for a more efficient approach. The long-term solution to bring about increased religious tolerance is education, the government needs to develop a universal course of religious studies encompassing all major religious groups in Russia and promoting equality and tolerance among them.

¹⁴ https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-ecri-odihr_press_release.pdf

¹⁵ *ibid*

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