Continuity and Change in Orthodox Christianity in Contemporary Russia: Enduring Legacies and New Developments in the Making

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Abstract: Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in two cities of European Russia, this article analyzes continuity and changes in Orthodox Christianity. In so doing, we emphasize property restitution, the renovation of sacred sites, and the importance of religious education in public schools and parishes. Based on that ethnographic material, we address three related research topics. First, we would like to discuss the importance of Orthodox Christianity for contemporary Russia. Second, we aim to show that an understanding of the Russian Orthodox Church as a national church underscores the local and internal differences as well as the complexities of everyday interactions. Finally, we address the notion of postsocialism and discuss its limits and potentials for the analysis of contemporary Russia.

Keywords: Russia; Orthodox Christianity; religion; ethnography; transformation; property; religious education

1. Introduction

In the last three decades, the Russian Orthodox Church, once persecuted and domesticated during the socialist era (Dragadze 1993), re-emerged in the public sphere and is one of the crucial social forces in Russian society today. Examples for this are manifold and include the massive refurbishment or church buildings, the introduction of new festive days with political religious notions, the erection of new monuments, and the introduction of religious education—in various forms—in public schools on a nationwide scale. Therefore, it is the aim of this article to explore the changing roles and facets of Orthodox Christianity in contemporary Russian social life through the lens of sociocultural anthropology. Our analysis is based on fieldwork in Russia, in the cities of Vladimir (Tobias Koellner) and Kaluga (Milena Benovska). 1 The field study in Kaluga (Milena Benovska) took three months: a pilot study was conducted in September 2006, and in 2007, fieldwork lasted for two months, from the end of June until the end of August. The fieldwork was divided into two parishes 2 and intended to explore similar religious practices in different social environments. In addition to daily observations, autobiographical interviews (or life stories) with 32 people were conducted in Kaluga (in Russian, without the help of a translator); some of interlocutors were interviewed two or even three times. The autobiographical method of interviewing, despite its weaknesses, provides insight into how social and personal elements intersect. As a natural cognitive and linguistic form, narratives are a means by which the narrators organize and give meaning to their life experiences (Kvale 2007, p. 38).

The initial fieldwork in Vladimir (Tobias Koellner) took place between August 2006 and August 2007 and included participant observation, interviewing, and an apprenticeship in a local company. This allowed religious practices to be observed at work, in nearby parishes, and in everyday life. Further fieldwork took place in 2008, and between 2013 and...
2016. Altogether, more than 100 interviews were conducted and even more conversational discussions that were not recorded were had.

Our field studies took place in the Central Russian region, but not because they might serve as a “typical case” (this was recognized by anthropologists as irrelevant strategy). Locating our investigations in these cities, which made a significant contribution to the history of Russian Orthodoxy, rather provided us with insight into recent trends in religious life in Russia after its liberalization in 1989.

With the end of socialism and the decline of the associated Marxist–Leninist ideology, new forms of identity construction have become important. Today this is not only, but primarily, Russian Orthodoxy (Zigon 2011). It became an important basis of an identity beyond ethnic boundaries in a multi-ethnic state (Scherrer 2003). As a result, there was an intensified confrontation with one’s own heritage, the politics of memory, and thus also the nation (Pine et al. 2004). This was recognized by the state and, more recently—since the various “color revolutions” surrounding the Russian Federation, there has been an increased emphasis on nation building from above, as Russian elites perceive these developments as a challenge to their own sovereignty (Mitrofanova 2005; Laruelle 2009). While these attempts at nation-building and identity formation were still very diffuse and produced few tangible results in the 1990s (Scherrer 2003, p. 165), this changed fundamentally at the beginning of the 2000s. Attempts for nation building and patriotic education were intensified (Hemment 2015), and the formation of Russian identity was massively linked to Russian Orthodoxy. Although religion had already played a role before, it was only one mode of affiliation among many others and thus could not develop its full relevance (Zigon 2011). Today, however, Orthodox Christianity plays a very central role in identity construction on the individual and collective levels.

Keeping these historical developments in mind, we aim to address our first research question of whether Orthodox Christianity is still a crucial factor in contemporary Russian society. Do we still have a situation that can be described as a “pro-Orthodox consensus” (Kääriäinen and Furman 2000, p. 20; Agadjanian and Rousselet 2011, pp. 17–18), or are we about to witness “the end of pro-Orthodox consensus” (Uzlaner 2019)?

In addition to the first research question about the relevance of Orthodox Christianity in contemporary Russia, we aim to address a next yet interrelated question about the current position of the Russian Orthodox Church. In many different ways, this is about the relationship of church and state and politics and religion: How can we describe the church–state relationships, and do we really witness the emergence of a national church in contemporary Russia (see Stoeckl 2020 and in the introduction to this Special Issue)? To be sure, in the last two decades or so, the situation has changed considerably and after “decade-long failures of the Patriarchate” (Papkova 2011, p. 93), many of the goals have been implemented. Among others, this includes important demands such as the introduction of chaplains in the Russian Army (Richters 2013, pp. 57–74), the restitution of property to religious organizations (Koellner 2018; Kormina 2020), or the introduction of religious education in public schools (Koellner 2016; Ładykowska 2016, 2019; Ozhiganova 2019). Thus, the linkages between Russian identity and Russian Orthodoxy have been fostered, as can be seen in statements by President Vladimir Putin, who called Russian Orthodoxy a “bracket” (skrepa) for the nation (Interfax 2006).

In this way, President Putin underlined the very close relationship between Russian Orthodoxy and the society, history, and culture of the country. In a speech in 2004, he also questioned the separation of church and state, which is actually anchored in the constitution (cited in Simons 2005, p. 7). Later on, President Putin came back to that issue and challenged the secular understanding of the Russian state as such (Knorre 2014, p. 89). As a result, the state is increasingly attempting to encourage an active policy of remembrance, identity making, and nation building. Orthodox Christianity, then, is considered pivotal for Russian identity and as a basis for Russian history and culture. Karpov et al. (2012, p. 639) characterize this as “ethnodoxy”, underscoring the ideological qualities of Russian Orthodoxy: “an ideology that rigidly links a group’s ethnic identities
to its dominant faith”. Although a classification of Orthodox Christianity as an ideology is highly questionable from our perspective, this discussion nevertheless impressively shows the close connection of Russian Orthodoxy to identity issues (Agadjanian 2017; Koellner 2020, p. 134).

At the same time, however, it should be noted that such a generalized and far-reaching equation of Orthodox Christianity with Russian culture, Russian history, and Russian ethnicity is problematic. It neglects the fact that the Russian Federation is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state and thus marginalizes and ignores minorities and the complexities of affiliation with Orthodox Christianity in a postsocialist setting (Pelkmans 2009). For this reason, we also attempt to show the limits of such an understanding in the following text. Despite all efforts to instrumentalize Orthodox Christianity for the state’s purposes, it has so far been demonstrated that such a policy has its limits (Stoeckl 2017). Keeping the complexities of everyday life in mind, we will depict contemporary Russia to have two centers of power: politics and the Russian Orthodox Church (Koellner 2021), and give examples for mutually beneficial relationships and entanglements as well as for competition and conflict.

Our last research question pertains to issues of continuity and change. How are recent developments connected to legacies from the Soviet era, or do we witness the end of post-Soviet religion, which leads us to new questions and challenges us to develop new theoretical concepts beyond notions of postsocialism (Stoeckl and Uzlaner in the introduction to this Special Issue)? In the field of the anthropology of Christianity, questions of continuity and change have been addressed in a more general way and might help us gain a better understanding of developments in contemporary Russia. In their general analysis, anthropologists such as Joel Robbins (2003, 2007) have detected a widespread emphasis on continuity thinking and criticized this. In contemporary Russia, there is a similar emphasis on continuities to the socialist era in academic analysis (Luehrmann 2005) and in everyday discourse despite tremendous changes in all spheres of society. In the economy, the state-organized and centrally planned economy gave way to competition and private entrepreneurship; in the political sphere, we saw the advent of some forms of political competition and electoral legitimization; and in the religious sector, a re-emergence of religion and religious competition can be witnessed. Therefore, we address this topic in our last research question and ask to what extent the category of postsocialism is still relevant and meaningful for the analysis of contemporary Russia.

2. Cooperation, Competition, Conflict and New Forms of Entanglement

In the following, we are going to address the first two research questions and analyze the role of Orthodox Christianity and its relationship to the political sector. For this, we draw on two ethnographic examples from our fieldwork that show recent trends quite nicely: property restitution and the introduction of religious education in public schools. Activists and clergy of Russian Orthodoxy demanded both for some time already but were put off. The implementation of these ideas shows the growing importance of Orthodox Christianity in contemporary Russia. Nevertheless, things are far more complicated and escape simple attributions, as we will show in the following sections.

Moreover, both the restitution of property and the introduction of religious education in public schools are telling examples for the relationship between politics and religion. At first glance, the relationship between politics and the Orthodox religion in contemporary Russia seems to be characterized by strong cooperation and mutually beneficial relationships. Accordingly, some authors tend to describe recent developments to be indicators for a close partnership of the state and the church (Anderson 2007; Ćuranaći 2012, 2019; Laine 2016; Strokan 2016). To be sure, there are a number of examples in that respect, which we will address in the following sections. However, we will also show that at the local level, the relationship is prone for competition, open conflict, and unintended consequences.
2.1. Property Restitution and the Refurbishment of Sacred Sites

At first glance, the restitution of property to religious organizations and the pertaining refurbishment of churches, monasteries, and sacred sites supports the notion of a mutually beneficial cooperation. In this understanding, the reinstallation or erection of churches and monasteries in popular places have been interpreted as a “church-building industry” (Tateo 2020) and as a specific opportunity for establishing and strengthening contacts between political and religious actors (Strokan 2016). In 2010, the position of the Russian Orthodox Church was improved considerably when then President Dmitrii Medvedev signed Law No 327 “On the Restitution of Religious Property in State or Municipal Ownership to Religious Organizations”. This is a clear signal for the growing importance of the Russian Orthodox Church because the law further strengthened the legal position of the church. The law enabled religious organizations to reclaim their property from 1917 that now belongs to the Russian Federation and its subjects such as municipalities and regions. For restitution, an application has to be submitted to the responsible administration with evidence of previous ownership. As a result, thousands of churches have been restituted, refurbished, and reopened in the last three decades. This is a large-scale process that is almost impossible without the state’s support. In the early postsocialist years, however, property restitutions were mainly implemented as case-by-case decisions based on the good relationships between local clergymen and politicians (Koellner 2018, pp. 1088–89). The successful implementation of early property restitutions before the introduction of the law, as in the case of the well-known Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, then, was “the great exception not the norm” (Freeze 2017, p. 3).

A particularly striking example of the cooperation of politics and Russian Orthodoxy in relation to church construction can be found at the Army’s Christ Resurrection Cathedral in the “Patriot” military theme park near Moscow (Kolov 2021). The cathedral, the third largest church of the present-day Russian Orthodox Church, is simultaneously dedicated to the resurrection of Christ and to the victory of the Soviet Union over Hitler’s Germany. The church was consecrated in 2020 and commemorates the 75th anniversary of the victory over Hitler’s Germany. It incorporates icons of Orthodox Christianity as well as symbols of the Soviet Union, such as the hammer, sickle, and Soviet star. In this way, it combines socialist and religious symbols and illustrations. Particularly controversial are the representations, which were meant to contain the images of President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu or flags with the image of Josef Stalin. This led to protests and discussions and therefore these representations were not put up. In particular, a depiction of Stalin, whose persecutions almost wiped out the Russian Orthodox Church, would have been questionable. However, here, too, we see a change within Orthodox Christianity in Russia, where Stalin is increasingly revered as a strong leader who sustained the strength of the country (Vujačić 2009). Another symbolic element in the church is German war equipment from World War II, which was melted and used for the construction. In conclusion, it is fair to say that this cathedral, with its fusion of religious, communist and military symbolism, is exceptional, even for contemporary Russia, and that it combines the symbolism of the nation with military power, communism, and Orthodox Christianity in a special way (see also Sperling 2009 on other examples). This example also relates to notions of postsocialism because the symbolism of the church is hard to grasp without any reference to the socialist era and its ideologies and practices.

Following property restitutions and the renovation of sacred sites, the landscape became saturated with religious symbols, religious architecture, and the creation of sacred places. In this way, the landscape underwent a process of “re-signification” (Verdery 1999, 39f.; Tateo 2020, p. 2) or a so-called “palimpsest” (Koellner 2018, p. 1084; Park 1994), where a new meaning is inscribed. Both understandings pertain to the last of our research questions and emphasize the legacies of the socialist era (as the monument of Karl Marx in Kaluga, along many others) with its meanings engraved in the memorial sites, monuments, and socialist architecture of today (see Figure 1). In contemporary Russia, however, the landscape is clearly marked by religious symbolism and religious architecture. In this
way, the old socialist (sometimes even the pre-socialist) landscape, remains but is often complemented and arranged by a peculiar coexistence with newly introduced religious symbols and architecture.

Figure 1. The monument of Karl Marx in the city center of Kaluga still exists. 2007. Photo by Milena Benovska.

The resignification through new religious symbols and architecture connects to recent discussions on the materiality of religion (Csordas 1990; Morgan 2010; Vásquez 2011), which have been able to show that religious symbols and religious places play a central role in the mediation of religion: “the practice of making visible the invisible [and] materializing the sacred” (Orsi 2012, p. 147). It is through this materiality of the religious that access is established with an “understanding of religion as a practice of mediation [... where] practices, objects and other forms through which religion becomes manifest in the world [... are] necessary forms through which the ‘beyond’ becomes accessible” (Meyer 2014, p. 337). In this way, meaning and entities that are otherwise difficult to grasp such as religious
understandings, the nation, or otherwise abstract notions are translated. This makes it particularly valuable in contemporary Russia.

Whereas the case described above seems to indicate a strong cooperation or an instrumentalization of Orthodox Christianity, this case only describes one side. In a number of cases and at the local level in particular, property restitution has caused considerable problems, irritation, and conflict. In particular, this pertains to cases when well-known museums were involved or when popular playgrounds and sites for recreation were involved (Koellner 2018; Kormina 2020). A very open conflict took place during fieldwork in Bogoliubovo, where a monastery of all-Russian fame is located. Bogoliubovo is a small town near Vladimir and has slightly less than 5000 inhabitants and has great historical importance. Although most of the buildings comprising the monastery were returned to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1991, a museum remained within the encircled compound of the monastery. Based on the release of the new law, the monastery started yet another attempt to retrieve this building too. This caused serious trouble with the museum and the local administration because the museum is also state property. At the time of writing, there has been no solution: whereas the monastery demands the unrestricted religious use of all of the buildings that historically belonged to the monastery, the museum administration wants to keep the last part of the former palace of Prince Andrei Bogoliubskii as a museum and stresses its historic importance. Facing such a serious threat for their work, the employees of the museum have reacted quite harshly, as the example of Aleksei indicates: “Maybe . . . but this is my point of view. The Church to this day is behaving very aggressively (ves’ma agressivno sebia vedet). Yes, aggressively. We have such an extraordinary region with a lot of old monuments. Nevertheless, the Church is constantly bringing forward new demands to use buildings for services. . . . And Alisa Ivanovna, our former president [of the museum], shares this view. Not long ago I met her in a very angry state. She said: ‘Indeed, they are such aggressors (Ved’ oni takie agressory!)’ and declared: ‘Only over my dead body [Tol’ko cherez moi trup!’]. This aggressive position was taken up some time ago. . . . Recently, the Church doesn’t want to refurbish them [the church buildings] but asks for renovated ones. Despite the fact that the museum has already spent a lot of time and money, their own and from the state, on renovating them and on everything else. The situation is very difficult [situatsiia slozhnaia] . . . We have no money to maintain the buildings, and to build new ones is absolutely illusory [eto voobshche nereal’no].”

Although Alisa Ivanovna Aksenova retired some years ago, she is still very active and well known as the former president of the Museum of Vladimir and Suzdal’. Moreover, she is a museum worker of federal importance because in 2014 she received the “Hero of Labor of the Russian Federation” award, one of the highest honours in the Russian Federation. Despite being acknowledged for her work and having a good standing in the region, her position and that of the museum came under attack by the Russian Orthodox Church. As a result, she was able to keep some former church buildings as museums, but in many cases, she was unable to do so. This shows quite eloquently that in a number of cases, property restitution is not accompanied by mutually beneficial and cooperative relationships between local politicians and religious institutions but instead includes competition and conflict. As a result, the attempts to inscribe a new meaning to the landscape based on religious symbols and religious architecture receives serious drawbacks and leads to unintended results. One reason for this might be that contradictory agendas do exist at various levels within the state administration or the Russian Orthodox Church (for a similar interpretation of the church as a multi-vocal institution, see Papkova 2011; Richters 2013; Stoeckl 2014).

Nevertheless, substantial financial resources are necessary for the refurbishment of temples and monastic buildings, which are provided neither by the state nor by the church alone. Here, well-off businesspeople play a crucial role. As it has been shown before, such donations are guided by a mixture of different motivations (Koellner 2012). On the one hand, attention has been drawn to the fact that businesspeople face a certain pressure by the state administration to show responsibility and to donate substantially to construction.
projects. In such cases, businesspeople donate because they want to lift the state’s pressure of themselves or because they have their own political ambitions and use donations as an opportunity for establishing connections at the regional or national level. On the other, however, donations by businesspeople can also be related to notions of penance and do not necessarily have to be connected to political pressure or one’s own political ambitions (Koellner 2013). Based on Koellner’s observations in Vladimir, the construction of such churches was said to be “built with gold”. In opposition, yet an alternative discourse was established that emphasized hard labor and participation in the construction work. These churches were said to be “built with tears” such as the one on Figure 2 (see Koellner 2012, pp. 117–40).

Figure 2. A church “built with tears” by the parish community in a village close to the city of Vladimir. 2007. Photo by Tobias Koellner.
The observations from Kaluga clearly support the distinction introduced by Koellner; at the same time, they show the real complexity and conflicts that accompany the renewal of old and the construction of new churches at the local level (see also Tocheva 2017, pp. 43–55). The two parishes, in which Benovska carried out her field study, are home to two church buildings with very different histories. The church “St. Martyr John the Warrior” is newly built and is located at the very end of the populated urban area in the Kaluga district Silikatnyj. The official narrative of the church history says that the parish was established in 1990 and that the land for the construction of the church building was given to the parish in 1991. Construction by the parish community began in 1994 and was not completed until 2005. Due to financial difficulties, there was a break during construction: in 1996, all work was suspended and was only resumed in 1999. In 2005, the first liturgy was held in the newly built temple. Work on the further construction of the church: water supply and the construction of iconostasis, an external fence, the acquisition of church utensils, etc. continued after 2005.5

What is not mentioned in this story is that another building was originally built for the purpose of a parish church. The priest and the parishioners were reluctant to talk about it because the building has structural problems, and it was necessary to start the construction of a second church building—the current church, “St. Martyr John the Warrior”. In the first building, however, church services were held during the construction of today’s temple. It still exists today, near the church “St. Martyr John the Warrior” and is called the House of Prayer; it has hosted Sunday school since 2000.

This narrative provides evidence for both the initial support from the local state institutions—the provision of land for construction, and to the difficulties afterwards: the interruption of the construction for three years and the construction work that lasted for eleven years and the need to start the construction of the second building from the scratch because the first one turned out to be problematic. The initial professional qualifications of the priest—a civil engineer—is beneficial here. According to the priest himself, and according to the parishioners, too, there is no element of the building that has not been touched by his hands. Despite initial state support, this temple to a large extent is one that was “built with tears”.

The Shroud of the Holy Mother on the Moat or Pokrova na rvu [The Shroud on the Moat], as it is most often called, has been recognized as an architectural monument of culture since the early 1990s (Morozova 1993, p. 157). It is located in the historical center of the city. As a wooden building, it was built earlier than 1626, and after a fire in the eighteenth century, it was rebuilt in its present form as a stone building; it is the oldest of the church buildings in the city (Malinin [1912] 1992, p. 100). The name “Pokrova Presviatoj Bogorodicy chto na rvu” has its explanation in the historic urban topography of Kaluga in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the city was surrounded by a wooden fortification. The place where the church was built was part of the castle moat on which the temple was named (Malinin [1912] 1992). This historical parish ceased to exist during the Soviet period. The temple was revoked by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1930 and was used as an incubation station for broiler hen breeding until 1994. At that time, the building was returned to the Church, and the temple was reconsecrated in 1998.6

The return of the temple building in 1994 put an end to the controversy taking place in the local community over the fate of the church building. Some people in the city used to believe that the historic building should be transformed into a concert hall (Morozova 1993, p. 157). The awarding of the title “architectural monument of culture” to the temple building was mostly likely an attempt to prevent its return to the Russian Orthodox Church, which was part of the contrast in opinions in the city at that time.

However, the temple building has been in very poor condition and has lacked state support, as when it was handed over to the Russian Orthodox Church, it was an initial and one-time act. This marked the beginning of the long and hard process of its reconstruction and renovation,7 which had been carried out by the parish itself, with the support of the Kaluga Metropolitan Kliment.8
When the restoration of the church building began, it went through an unusual procedure. Around the building, which had been poorly maintained over the years, a significant amount of soil had accumulated during the time in which it had been used as an incubator station for broiler breeding (1930–1994), which was about a meter deep. In order to reach the foundation of the building, the sediment had to be cleared—literally excavated. This period of the restoration work is similar a materialized metaphor from post-socialism era—the marks of the past socialism are reminiscent of the complexities of “longue durée”.

During Milena Benovska’s field research in 2007, the temple building was fully functional, but it was still under renovation—thirteen years after its restitution. Each step to restore the building has been completed at the cost and struggle of the parish (led by the priest—the rector of the parish) to find funds, building materials, and a qualified labor force. The parish used to receive various donations from different citizens every day: donations ranged from building materials to potatoes and dill for the parish kitchen and to the golden crosses on the church domes, and of course, the voluntary work of the parishioners themselves.

Nevertheless, there were significant donations by well-off people. The appearance of a generous large donor is rather an exception and is therefore perceived by believers in the parish as a “miracle”. The narrative of the miraculous appearance of a sponsor who donated the five massive golden crosses for the five domes of the temple is evidence of this. The story comes from an event that took place in 1994, when the priest took responsibility for the project but did not know where to begin his efforts to restore the building. When the priest was praying (in another one of the city’s temples) to ask for God’s support for the restoration of the temple, an unknown man spoke behind him: “I can give you a donation for the restoration of the temple: what do you need?” [Ja Vam mogu dati' darenie na vosstanovlenie hrama—chto Vam nuzhno?] Father A. was confused (“he is shy”) and replied that he did not know because the whole temple was in a miserable condition. However, the man came up again the next day. By then, Father A. had determined that the restoration should begin with the crosses because the crosses had been removed from the building a long time ago.

Unlike in Vladimir (Koellner 2012), according to the Kaluga believers, there was only one popular wealthy businessman who was making regular donations for the benefit of the Russian Orthodox Church. It was not this man who donated the golden crosses, though. The will of the benefactor who donated the crosses was for him to remain anonymous. Another donation with a more significant material value was the construction materials donated to the church of “The Moat of the Mother of God” [Pokrova na rvu] in 2005; thanks to this donor, a trapeznaja11 was built—which served to be the center of parish life along with the temple.

To summarize the observations from Kaluga: state support for the restitution of church property seems to be a triumph for the Russian Orthodox Church from a “top-down” perspective. However, the “bottom-up” local perspective shows a much more complex and contradictory picture of the collision of the interests between different local social groups; conflicts, but also the mobilization of believers, and the struggle to gain access to insufficient material resources. This is one of the engines that drive social action in the context of Orthodox religious life. Without the active efforts of local religious communities, “top-down” support would have no effect. This is one of the key findings that characterizes the relationship between politics and religion in contemporary Russia.

2.2. Religious Education in Public Schools and in Parishes

Education is a second cultural domain in which the Russian Orthodox Church aims to improve its influence in present-day Russian society. Religious education is an important example of this. The most significant aspect here is the introduction of religious education in state schools. This is a highly relevant topic because many authors particularly emphasize the importance of religious education for the interpretation of the interrelation between
politics and religion (see for example Asad 2003, p. 201). While there has been a long and heated debate in Russian society and media since the end of the 1990s both for and against the introduction of the subject Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture [Osnovy pravoslavnoi kul'tury] and its compatibility with the secular nature of the Russian state, its introduction with a governmental decision makes this discussion immaterial. Religious education in state schools was finally established in Russia in 2012 for all students in the fourth grade following a 2009 Presidential Directive by then President Dmitrii Medvedev. Previous attempts had already been made in almost half of the regions in Russia. The teaching of religion was introduced on a nation-wide scale as a non-evangelical subject giving students and their parents the opportunity to choose from six modules reflecting their individual worldviews. The modules that were offered included teaching the fundamentals of the four so-called “traditional” religions of the Russian Federation (Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism) as well as the Fundamentals of World Religions and the Fundamentals of Secular Ethics.

For a number of Russians, Orthodox Christianity took on an “integrating function” to compensate for the lack of official state ideology after the demise of socialism to quite a large extent and is closely related to notions of postsocialism, which we address in research question three (Lisovskaya and Karpov 2020; Ozhiganova 2019; Scherrer 2003, pp. 14–15, p. 45). For this, it is important to note that the textbooks for all six modules include an identical first chapter and last chapter, which are titled “Russia—Our home country” and “Love and respect for the native country” (Willems 2010). Moreover, continuities to the socialist era were emphasized and the concept of vospitanie has begun to receive increasing amounts of attention once again. Vospitanie translates as upbringing, character formation, or social training and includes many more elements than the transmission of knowledge (Glanzer 2005, p. 207). Thus, vospitanie focuses on creating particular convictions, virtues, and personalities and aims to form the entire personality of an individual. In this way, vospitanie was and continues to be understood as a way to both form the character of pupils and to guide their conduct and behavior. Even today, vospitanie is evaluated positively and is understood as a major component and goal of education.

In addition to the notion of vospitanie, some continuities regarding the emphasis of patriotism in education exist. Attempts have been made to foster patriotic education since 1993 (Laruelle 2009, p. 23). However, President Vladimir Putin only began emphasizing this idea in 2001, when he started to stress the importance of patriotic education (Scherrer 2003, 16f.; Sperling 2009, p. 232). Soon, patriotic education became widespread in schools and youth summer camps (Hemment 2015, p. 7). In particular, after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, patriotic education was further sustained and gained even more importance (Gel’mann 2017, p. 16). For this, a new “Strategy for the development until 2025” was released for the educational sector in 2015, which further accentuates “patriotic and war-patriotic upbringing” (patrioticheskoe i voenno-patrioticheskoe vospitanie) in schools and other educational facilities (Kommersant 2015). To a large extent, religion is important for implementing this strategy in practice.

Religious actors, however, had other aims for religious education in mind and emphasized the evangelical mission of the church. Nevertheless, they did not oppose the emphasis on patriotism and quite often realized that this was also their intention. Moreover, religious actors had a stronger influence on the actual implementation of religious education. In many schools, for example, teachers invited priests or monks as speakers and organized tours to monasteries to pray although this is strictly prohibited (Koellner 2016, pp. 373, 381). Indeed, some priests and Orthodox activists aspire to integrate prayers and other religious practices into the religious education being taught in state schools. Through these means, these groups intend to establish a new moral code in Russia that is based on Orthodoxy. One example of this perspective is Father Vladimir, a priest in the city of Vladimir who also heads an Orthodox school and has a degree in pedagogy. In his view, the moral education and vospitanie of children are very important and are useful mechanisms for evangelization. He describes his view as follows: “We are talking about the necessity to educate people
not in the university but already from the cradle (спеленок). There is no doubt! For this reason, the Church has established this school [the Orthodox high school] and offers the school course [FOC—Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture]. But the course as such is no guarantee that the children will become members of the Church. Quite the contrary! I tell you that this won’t be the case. It rather disturbs [the evangelization process] and the child won’t become a member of the Church. Because they understand FOC similar to other subjects, like literature. For me this is an abstract example, like if I read something about astronauts doing something on Mars. […] But then I don’t identify with the way of life [in the church]. Does this have any influence on me? Maybe. But probably not!”

Whereas Father Vladimir demands a clearly evangelical subject in state schools, others among the laity are more critical and fear a clericalization of education. This view was also voiced by Leonid, a 50-year-old deputy principal of a state school in Vladimir who met regularly with Koellner during his fieldwork and who kept him updated about how religious education in his school and in others was practiced. Despite the Presidential directive, there were no classes on religion or secular ethics in Leonid’s school. Therefore, we also present his views and his explanations of his understanding of the FOC course: “They wanted to introduce [FOC] for everyone. Afterwards, the public voiced criticism, and they wanted to introduce it as an optional subject. Now everything has collapsed (заглохло). Thank God! Certainly, it is necessary to study religion, but there is no need to impose (навязывать) it on someone else. And if you study religion, you should study all confessions. You should know what Islam is, what Christianity is, all the branches of Christianity and Islam, and so on. This means all these things one should know. Then, of course, it is interesting.”

Many people consider (at etic and emic levels) that religious education in state schools is a challenge to the secularism of the Russian state. It is only one aspect (though the most visible one) of the ambitious educational program of the Russian Orthodox Church. Sunday schools are also an important part of this program. They were allowed and re-opened in the Soviet period immediately after the celebrations of the Millennium of Baptism of Russia in 1988 (Powell 1991, p. 328; Walters 1994, pp. 98–99; Tsypin 2012, pp. 547–63). Since then, re-establishing the old and the establishing of new parishes has been accompanied by the simultaneous foundation of Sunday schools. In the Kaluga diocese, Sunday schools have been opened simultaneously with the consecration of the temples (restored old or newly built). The principal of the Sunday school at the “Shroud of the Holy Mother on the Moat” in Kaluga testified: “How were the Sunday schools opened? This was with an arch pastoral blessing. That is, it was ubiquitous: a Sunday school was mandatory at every church. And when the temple was consecrated in the spring of 1998, in the fall, we started working at December.”

The same Sunday school had a reputation of being the best in Kaluga. Along with the religious education, several secular disciplines have been taught there: History of Russia, Geography, and kraevedenie [local historical knowledge] (see also Benovska-Sabkova 2009; Benovska 2021). Some of the Sunday school teachers at the same church teach children on a voluntary basis; others do the same for a fee: depending on the negotiations with the priest or with the head of the diocese. The teachers being treated different was certainly source of certain dissatisfaction and tensions for some of these Sunday school teachers, which became clear from an interview with another teacher. The story reveals the religious devotion due to which the interlocutor perceived teaching as a mission. “Before I went to Sunday school, I addressed the Kaluga Mother of God. I lit a candle, I prayed. […] I used to teach on [the discipline] of the history of native land [kraevedenie].” “Treating this effort as a voluntary activity changed the focus, and it was perceived as a sign of underestimation; the teacher gave up this engagement. “I taught on voluntary basis, for free. They paid me nothing”.
After all, this Sunday school has become a “victim” of its own success. Due to its large expansion, it has been transformed into a sort of Orthodox Scout formation (Squad of the Young Scouts of St. Andrew the Apostle (the First-Called) since 2009 and presently involves about 300 children of different ages (see Figure 3 for one of the initiatives of the Sunday school). The insufficient premises in the parish to secure normal conditions for educational processes also contribute to this.

Figure 3. Easter Missionary expedition, 2007: alumni of the Sunday school at the parish “The Shroud of the Holy Mother on the Moat” in Kaluga under guidance of the priest. The group is underway to conduct the first Orthodox Liturgy in a distant re-opened village church after sixty years of its closure. 2007. Photo courtesy by the parish.

How successfully a Sunday school functions, depends largely on the resources that are available to the parish: teaching staff, access to premises, etc. The church “St. Martyr John the Warrior” has a separate building in which Sunday classes are held (the building originally intended for a temple). On the other hand, this parish has less human resources, i.e., teachers. Therefore, the local, “bottom-up” perspective shows that the establishment and operation of (actually new) Sunday schools goes through difficulties that are comparable to the difficulties that are faced during the restitution and restoration/construction of temple buildings.

To summarize, we can say that our observations clearly show that religious education is important and strengthens the position of the Russian Orthodox Church. However, one also should keep in mind that it includes very heterogeneous visions and practices. Here, we argue that the introduction of religious education in state schools is neither the re-introduction of the Law of God subject from pre-Soviet times nor the successful introduction of a new state ideology that has replaced Soviet ideology. Nevertheless, religious education plays a crucial role in contemporary Russian society but remains a field of conflicting understandings and aims. This includes the political actors who are involved and the Russian Orthodox Church, where we see cooperation for the implementation of joint initiatives, competition for scarce resources, and conflicts when serious problems arise or when laws are circumvented. We suggest interpreting this as new forms of entanglement that have arisen in the last three decades and that include the ideological aspects (notions of vospitanie or patriotism), personal entanglements based on continuous interaction, and institutional entanglements that are visible in the emergence of new
initiatives, commissions, or in the introduction of religious education as such (see also Koellner 2021).

3. Continuity and Change: To What Extent Is the Notion of Postsocialism Still Valid?

So far, we have tried to show that the local perspective reveals the true complexity of the relationship between politics and Orthodox Christianity through the prism of the restitution of church property and religious education. To the extent that these two areas of religious life are marked by the sign of the strong pursuit of continuity with the past, it is appropriate to address the issue of continuity and change (see also Rock 2014 for a general assessment). We address the relevance of the socialist era for contemporary Russia and the notion of postsocialism here within. Although we tend to agree that the notion of postsocialism has diminishing explanatory power, it is nevertheless worth it to discuss that issue. In the introduction to this volume, Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitrii Uzlaner asked whether the post-Soviet transition is indeed “over” and if new tools and understandings are needed for our analysis of contemporary Russia (see also Stoeckl 2020).

To be sure, the discussions about postsocialism and its applicability have influenced a whole generation of scholars, and this article is probably not the right place to discuss this extensively. Nevertheless, that issue needs to be addressed because thirty years after the end of the Soviet Union, the scholarship on that topic still is heterogeneous and deserves clarification.

In 2002, Chris Hann (2002, p. 10, italics in original) noted that “The everyday moral communities of socialism have been undermined but not replaced”. Later, Gerald Creed put the notion of postsocialism under critical scrutiny, stating that “Over the last few years, scholars have begun to question whether ‘postsocialism’ is still a useful analytical or descriptive category for the countries of Eastern Europe. [. . .] In line with postcolonialism, postsocialism is not just the situation of former socialist countries, it is the condition of the world in the aftermath of a global cold war.” Creed then argues “for the importance of post-socialism as an analytical category by critiquing its continuing and limiting orthodoxies” (Creed 2011, pp. 7–8).

Nevertheless, the remembrance of socialism with its ideals, ideologies, and practices (Hann 2002) (arguably) pertains to ever smaller parts of respective societies, and we increasingly witness different developments in the countries that formerly belonged to the socialist bloc (Humphrey 2002, p. 12). Therefore, some authors have suggested saying “goodbye, postsocialism” (Müller 2019). Undeniably, even its proponents have witnessed considerable problems when they noted a “withering” of postsocialism (Verdery 2002), which have depicted themselves as a lack of theoretical progress because “the term brought no theoretical advance” (Hann 2006, p. 5) or an “unreflective overuse” (Donahoe and Habeck 2011, p. 1). Therefore, it is quite tempting to abandon this term and to apply new concepts for a more fruitful analysis of recent developments.

However, we also have to keep in mind that alternative concepts are not available in a ready-to-use form. Moreover, the material presented above draws a more complicated picture. To large extent, the above shows that the remembrance of socialism with its related ideals, ideologies, and practices still serves as a “basic point of reference in the ‘lived history’” (Hann 2006, p. 1) for many Russians. Throughout the text, we have provided examples for this when referring to the persistence of notions of vospitanie in education and the pertaining legacies in the re-signification/palimpsest of the landscape where symbols of the socialist era remain integrated in the new urban landscapes, while being saturated with religious symbols, which are first and foremost represented by the newly built or renovated ecclesiastical buildings.
In this context, it is worth mentioning an event that took place in Vladimir in 2013. Students, under the guidance of their teachers in the Orthodox gymnasium decorated the walls and the ceiling of the auditorium (see Figure 4). The topic of the project was “heaven”, and so the students, together with their teachers, were expressing their associations with that topic. Neither for the teachers nor for the students was it strange to connect images of stars in heaven with the heroes of the socialist era: Yurii Gagarin (the first man in space) and Sergei Korolev (the leading engineer of the Soviet space program) together with religious symbols such as the Trinity icon or the Vladimir Mother of God. This amalgam is only comprehensible when acknowledging the remaining importance of notions from the socialist era.

![Figure 4. The ceiling of the Orthodox gymnasium in Vladimir decorated during the project “heaven”. 2013. Photo by Tobias Koellner.](image)

It is in this way that we suggest that notions and understandings from the socialist era are omnipresent: they are transferred to the next generation. Through this transfer, they might change their meaning and take new forms. This is indicated, for example, by the growing relevance of ideas of the nation: the “patriotic turn” in Putin-era Russian society. To be sure, the nation was important even during the socialist era (Verdery 1999) but took on a new meaning in contemporary Russia. Nevertheless, we suggest keeping such processes in mind and connecting them to the legacy of the socialist era. In so doing, however, we increasingly have to look for new concepts that replace the notion of postsocialism but that also allow continuity and change to be addressed both simultaneously and adequately. Here, the notion of entanglement as advanced by Koellner (2021) might provide some new impulses because he draws attention to personal, ideological, and institutional entanglements that can take on specific forms in the described setting.

4. Conclusions

The first topic that we addressed in this article was the relevance of Orthodox Christianity in contemporary Russia. For this, we provided ample evidence of how religion has returned to the public sphere and, more importantly, how it has become rooted in the everyday lives of many people although they might have very different personal feelings and associations with religion as such. In particular, we have drawn on the introduction of
religious education and the restitution of property for supporting our claims. We have also shown the continuing relevance of Orthodox Christianity for very different generations. Therefore, it seems warranted to describe Orthodox Christianity as a crucial social force that allows for many associations and interpretations to be made, as has been suggested by Steinberg and Wanner (2008, p. 3): “religion, in many forms, is and has been a powerful force shaping how people explain suffering, form values, craft identities, and imagine change”.

Moreover, Orthodox Christianity has taken on highly symbolic values in the eyes of millions of people in Russia and has become a part of the political projects of the Russian elites in many ways. We addressed this in detail as we analyzed the relationship between politics and Orthodox Christianity. We provided evidence for cooperation and mutually beneficial relationships. Nevertheless, there are also serious conflicts between the political and the religious sphere, as the examples on property restitution indicate. These conflicts largely seem to have had only limited consequences for the overall positive evaluation of the church in society. For this reason, we think that it is premature to diagnose the “end of a pro-Orthodox consensus”, at least outside the big cities such as Moscow or St Petersburg and in the regions where Orthodox Christianity forms the majority religion.

For this reason, we took up the question whether the Russian Orthodox Church can be described as a national church (Stoeckl 2020). Based on our material, we tend to view such perceptions rather critical. Instead, our aim is to show the complexities within organizations such as the church and within state institutions and a further need to access them “in its own right” (Stoeckl 2016, p. 132). Property restitution and religious education served as evidence for this. Here, the aims of the state were not fulfilled because of serious conflicts between the representatives of the church and state institutions, such as museum employees, emerged. In these cases, and despite a general agreement to property restitution, there was considerable irritation and sometimes open conflict. Moreover, religious education largely seems to have failed to fulfill the ideological purposes that the state might have had in mind. Instead, religious and political actors on the local level have been able to implement their own agenda, as is visible when pupils are included in prayers at schools or during visits to sacred sites. Therefore, we argue that the political support for Orthodoxy by the ruling Russian elite does not mean that the Russian Orthodox Church has been transformed into a “national church”. The concept of a “national church” would not be able to explain, for example, the particularities in the everyday life of Orthodox believers. We rather emphasize cooperation, competition, and conflict as important outcomes of the interaction between religious and political actors. Therefore, we think that the notion of entanglement (Koellner 2021) is better able to grasp the complexities of the relationship between politics and religion in contemporary Russia.

Finally, the question of the theoretical and analytical value of the concept of postsocialism was important to us. Here, we took a middle position because we agree with many of the critiques voiced in recent decades. To be sure, thirty years have passed since the end of the Soviet Union, and today, most people in the Russian Federation have increasingly different associations with socialism. On the other hand, however, for many Russians, important understandings, evaluations, and practices of the socialist era continue to be important today. To conclude, we have to stress that there is no single and coherent perception of the socialist era and its relevance for today. The analytical value of the concept in itself seems to be questionable, and no one would be satisfied with any definition because it is impossible to grasp the increasing diversity of opinions. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the images of the socialist era, however transformed and adjusted, remains important and influences everyday practices and worldviews even today. However, we also need new concepts to gain a more adequate description of reality in contemporary Russia. Among others, post-secularism (Farnakisz 2018; Rosati and Stoeckl 2012), re-enchantment (Isnart and Testa 2020), and entanglement (Koellner 2021) have been suggested for this. It is now time to apply and test these concepts and see how they are able to enhance our understanding of continuity and change in Orthodox Christianity in contemporary Russia.
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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study based on a longer oral explanation about the aims of the study.

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Notes

1 See more on our field studies and research methods in Koellner (2012, 2021); Benovska (2021, pp. 10–24). All interlocutors gave informed consent and all names given here are fictitious.

2 The Shroud of the Holy Mother on the Moat [Pokrova presvitoj Bogorodicy, čto na rvu] and Church St. Martyr John the Warrior [Hram sviatogo velikomučenika Ioanna Voina]—see Benovska (2021, pp. 15–16).


4 Personal communication with Aleksei, Vladimir, 29 April 2014.


6 See http://drevo-info.ru/articles/4966.html, accessed on 23 July 2018. A source of more detailed information about the history of the temple building and the parish was given [to M. Benovska] during so called “temple excursion” held on 8 July 2007. This is an event that is held periodically for visitors to learn about the history of the temple. It was led by the conductor of the church choir, who was then also the director of the Sunday School.

7 The Internet site of the parish is quite informative concerning process of renovation over the years, including photographs showing it: http://kaluga-pokrov.cerkov.ru/voskresnaya-shkola/, accessed on 23 July 2018.

8 The head of the Kaluga diocese (since 1990), Metropolitan Kliment (Kapalin) is among the most influential and ambitious hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church. In the period 2003–2009, he was one of the eight permanent members of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church and was holding the post of Manager of the Affairs of the Moscow Patriarchate. Long before the death of Patriarch Alexii II, the Kaluga Metropolitan was regarded by local citizens as one of the contenders for a future head of the Russian Orthodox Church (Mitrokhin 2004, pp. 193, 202). Shortly after the death of Patriarch Alexii II (5 December 2008), in January 2009, Metropolitan Kliment was identified as one of three candidates in the election of a new Russian patriarch: eventually he remained the second choice to the now-Patriarch Kirill (see Papkova 2013, pp. 250–51; Bodin 2014, pp. 56–57).

9 Interview with Nina Victorovna, 21 September 2006, Kaluga.

10 The narrative was recorded in two overlapping versions: during so called “temple excursion” held on 8 July 2007, by Ekaterina Viacheslavovna, a teacher/religious activist; and during the formal interview with the Rector, Father A. B., a priest and writer, 5 July 2007, Kaluga. Here, we refer to the story of Ekaterina Viacheslavovna.

11 Literally: “dining room in monastic environment”.


14 Personal communication with Father Vladimir, Vladimir, 28 February 2014.

15 Personal communication with Leonid, Vladimir, 31 October 2013.
Interview with Ekaterina Viacheslavovna, a teacher and religious activist, 12 July 2007, Kaluga.

Interview with Ekaterina Vasilievna, 17 July 2007, Kaluga.

See the Internet site of the church: http://kaluga-pokrov.cerkov.ru/voskresnaya-shkol/, accessed on 20 August 2018.

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