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THE IV WORLD COUNCIL OF THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE
(IV Vsemirniy Russkiy Narodniy Sobor):
"The Nation's Health"
Moscow, 05-07 May 1997)

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SUMMARY

This essay consists not only of the Author's eye-witness account of part of the May 1997 forum on public health in Russia, sponsored by the Russian Orthodox Church's "World Council of the Russian People" (WCRP) It also reviews the controversial and still ambiguous nationalist politics that originally brought together ultra-nationalists and ecclesiastics, all too often in a harmony of objectives that still gives pause to other religious denominations and the defenders of political and religious liberties.

Based on extensive interviews conducted by the Author in Moscow between 12 April and 21 May 1997, this essay -- perhaps for the first time -- relates some of the motives and goals behind the Church's subsequent and still dubiously "successful" effort to take full control of WCRP and transform it into a so-called "neutral" instrument of Church policy on current social issues.

Lastly, this essay links the continuing controversy and ambiguity over the forum to two factors which are likely to prevail for some time to come: the one is the also controversial and contradictory leadership of the WCRP's chief architect and patron, Archbishop Kirill, Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, and since 1989, the Director of the Moscow Patriarchate's powerful Department of External Church Relations (second only to the office of the Patriarch himself); the other, the intense factional disputes within the Church over ideology and between personalities.

INTRODUCTION

Under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church, delegates to the World Council of the Russian People (WCRP) gathered on 05 May 1997 at the up-scale hotel and convention hall on the grounds of the Danilovsky Monastery in Moscow to dedicate their fourth consecutive meeting since the Council's founding in 1993 to Russia's national health problems.

Their timing could not have been better. The night before and for several days after, news agencies from around the world reported that Russia was facing "a demographic crisis." With deaths rising and births plummeting, the country's health picture had begun to resemble "that of a Third World country." Poor diet, rampant alcoholism, rising poverty, and the near collapse of a once viable national public health care system were at the core of the disheartening news to an already long-suffering people.
To the several clearly devout participants of the Council, Russians had inflicted the scourge upon themselves by having turned away from Orthodoxy. To others, the crisis lay in allowing the present government to get away with policies that were harmful to the moral and physical health of the nation. A return to religious belief and the need to press the Duma for wide-ranging new legislation promptly emerged as two strategies to which delegates would again and again address themselves over the course of the three-day meeting.

THE POLITICS OF "THE NATION'S HEALTH"

Aleksiy II, the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, opened the inaugural session at 10 o'clock on the morning of May fifth. But, the principal address was delivered a couple of hours later by Archbishop Kirill, the Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, and long-time Director of the Moscow Patriarchate's most important administrative office (second only to that of the Patriarch himself), the Department of External Church Relations.

A robust and handsome figure in elegant episcopal garb crowned by the large, inverted fez-like, white headdress that is the symbol of a metropolitan's rank (shared today by only sixteen of the Church's 160 prelates); energetic and youthful and just turned 50; a long-time supporter of dialogue with other confessions -- Kirill is an absolutely persuasive public speaker.

From the pitch of his deep baritone voice, to the cogency of his argumentation, he held the audience on the edge of their seats as he delivered extemporaneously -- barely glancing at a handful of notes, and only reading from them for a precise statistic -- a wide-ranging exposition of church policy on the issues of the day. If the meeting served for nothing else, it was surely as a showcase for the prowess -- and politics -- of this ecclesiastic, unafraid of controversy and himself the increasingly frequent object of the same.

Not out of character, then, he took aim at the unmistakable protagonists of the Council's concerns: Russia's lawmakers. To their probable preference that the Church keep its nose out of social issues, Kirill responded with a page from the gospel. Just as Christ healed the sick, raised the dead and fed the poor, so too the Church would be derelict in its mission if it separated the care of the soul from that of the body. The two are indivisible, and just as matter is host to the spirit, so does it befit Orthodoxy -- by every right, natural and divine -- to tend to the whole man.

And the Church is compelled to do so today, Kirill suggested, if for no other reason than that the Solons of today's Russia have failed miserably in this task. Moreso, they may have even helped bring on some of today's gravest social crises.

Pornography -- whose inclusion under the rubric, "public health," seemed so indisputably obvious to all the assembled delegates -- was a case in point. Some months before, the Duma had drafted a bill "on the limits of the circulation of products, services and public spectacles of a sexual
character. Under its terms, "pornography" would be legally given a "proper place" in what appears to be the country's ever burgeoning and ever "sophisticated" capitalist marketplace.

Initially, the bill's passage in committee was uneventful. However, once several of the interested parties finally got wind of the exact provisions, all hell literally broke loose. One such provision proved particularly contentious: the right of broadcast networks to air "pornographic" shows and advertising on TV and radio after one o'clock in the morning, even though no such right was accorded print media such as daily newspapers -- to their apparent dismay.

The press then made much of the bill as lobbyists from both sides of the issue took up their cudgels -- the liberals insisting the bill did not go far enough in guaranteeing freedom of expression; the conservatives, that no such law should exist at all, save to prosecute the perpetrators. The exact sequence of events of the fracas that followed is difficult to reconstruct at this moment, but that it also resulted in widening the chasm between the corresponding factions within the Russian Orthodox Church -- respectively, the so-called moderates and the ultra-nationalists -- is a matter of public record.

Kirill, an avowed moderate, could therefore hardly neglect the issue. Moreover, at the end of February, Patriarch Aleksey II had already raised it. On the heels of the biennial Bishops' Council in late February 1997, he lamented the widespread diffusion of "erotic and pornographic materials" throughout the nations of the former Soviet Union; and he called upon the organs of government to take proper legal measures to "defend the people ... from having such sinful images of life imposed on them." He did not play into the hands of the ultra-nationalists, nor did he chastise them, even though one of their leaders, the Orthodox priest, Aleksandr Shargunov (who had supported the presidential candidacy of Communist Party chief, Gennadi Zyuganov, in 1996) had also cooperated with the Duma's communist majority in fashioning this bill. (Only after its "liberal provisions" were supported by some of the very Communist deputies with whom he worked, did Shargunov feel obliged to break off relations with them which he did in early April 1997).

Kirill took the same middle road as the Patriarch: while he unyieldingly argued that pornography should be banned from the airwaves around the clock, he never censured print journalism, and -- to the dismay of those who would have preferred the return to outright state censorship -- he uttered not a word about the bill's other provisions (for example, that which might permit the sale of pornography in designated shops, as is the case in some Scandinavian countries). Nor did he challenge the Duma's sovereign right to resolve the matter by the vote and majority rule.

Three other issues under review by the Duma -- ones that have apparently stirred the public at large, even though none has yet been voted on -- also drew Kirill's fire. They are: the distribution of free contraceptives by government for the sake of "preventing disease;" the future establishment of sexual education programs in public schools; and the unrestricted transmission of "Western culture"
by mass media in the name of freedom of the press and expression, despite the dubious value of such a "culture" that daily undermines the faith, literature and history of the Russian people. 7

Kirill, moreover, took these issues a step further: straight into the government's coffers. If the promotion of such "immorality" by government was not injurious in itself, insulting is its use of tax moneys for such purposes paid by citizens who in their great majority are of Orthodox persuasion. As if testifying before a congressional committee in the United States, where "taxation without representation" may be the one enduringly effective principle of American democracy, the Metropolitan went on to insist that Orthodox values and Christian morality therefore underlie the state's social policy in all the above domains. 8

Nothing more specific was proposed, but by implication nowhere would his injunctions be more applicable than in the realm of public health, the very theme of this IV Council to which Kirill now returned full circle and on which note he ended his tour de force.

In obvious agreement, the approximately 150 participants -- no public list of names and organizations was made available -- set about the task to put government on notice. After the opening day's speeches by academicians, educators, church leaders, and government experts in a variety of fields, delegates regrouped the whole of the following day into three major workshops -- Public Health and Medicine; Social, Economic and Ecological Policies; and related Spiritual, Moral and Cultural Questions.

On the last day of the Council, 07 May, they presented their findings at an all-morning long Plenary Session and did so for the most part unanimously and without controversy. Except for the moment when a couple of seemingly harmless old ladies leapt from the floor, shouting down some final formulation -- these were read aloud; no printed text of the conclusions was then or is yet available. They kept demanding the assemblage act on its sacred duty and denounce the pornography bill -- outright, immediately, and in its entirety -- with all of the Council's force.

The swift intervention of the chair, whose talent at keeping the three day event on course had all along been evident, skillfully checkmated the move and prevented a breach -- without blemishing the procedural democracy that had been the order of the day.

THE POLITICS OF THE "WORLD COUNCIL OF THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE"

This was not the first time the WCRP has devoted its deliberations to major public issues, even though the politics of this current meeting did not end up raising eyebrows just quite as high as had earlier gatherings (and, in fact, went practically unnoticed in the press).

The first and politically most notorious of the four Councils (called then in English-language press releases an "Assembly," from the Russian word, sobor) took place in late May 1993. Officially, its announced aim was: 9
for Russians to proclaim their understanding of their part in world history; plot [sic] ways for stronger unity of the Russian people, better protection of the rights and interests of their compatriots, establishment on Russian soil of civic peace and inter-ethnic accord.

At play at the time was the public's gradual recovery from the initial shock of the Soviet Union's dissolution, and in the air there was a charge of mounting resentment towards Russia's sudden powerlessness as a nation and the unexpected, but looming material hardships that were certain to worsen.

Nowhere was the loss of prestige more acutely felt than in the "Near Abroad," a vast region comprised of several now independent states that had once kowtowed quiescently to the "imperial" rule of the Soviet Union. Independence now brought their "ethnic" nationalists to power, while many of the one-time Russian cultural and political elites were given the boot. Feeling discomfort, they and other "settlers" -- now "down-graded" into mere Russian "ethnics" -- tried to flee to a "homeland" where many had never even lived, no longer had roots, family or possessions, nor where they could even gain entry. Indeed, walls against immigration were swiftly erected around the new Russian Federation out of fear of a migratory deluge that, then unleashed, has yet to be fully stabilized.

In this new and unimaginable climate of Russia's rejection of its "own flesh and blood," the first Council was convened. Sponsored initially by some of the country's leading politicians and presidential aspirants of the day, the Church readily -- and later some would conclude, "too readily" -- lent its full support. But, that decision can even be said to be understandable. At that very moment, the over-arching issue of the "rights and interests of [Russian] compatriots," especially those in the "Near Abroad," was also of vital concern to the Church. To it, the newly disenfranchised and fearful had already begun to flee in refuge (a "flight" more apparent than real, it turns out), seeing in the Orthodox ecclesiastical establishment, not the last surviving Soviet institution -- as its critics have dubbed it -- but rather as the only one of the "New Russia" that was really willing to take up their cause.

From a political point of view, then, it could easily be seen how the passion of that cause might make firm allies of politicians, refugees, and Orthodox clerics. John Dunlop, the noted Sovietologist at Stanford University, surely caught the spirit of this first gathering, of its stated and unspoken designs to "remake" the Soviet Union, and of the "unholy alliance" it forged between the Church and latter-day imperialists. In a widely read article, he roundly denounced the Russian Orthodox Church "as an 'empire-saving' institution."10

Undetected by many observers, however, was the Church's now admitted (but, at the time hardly well publicized) discomfort with the first Council, its politician-organizers, the dominance of fanatic "empire-savers" among the delegates, and the latter's overwhelming effort to hold the Church
captive to their cause. To the credit of several Church leaders -- some already smarting under recent attacks for the Church's past acquiescence, if not outright complicity, in the political designs of the Soviet state, and others clearly intent on carving out an autonomous space for Russian Orthodoxy in the emergent "new" society -- a plan was soon underway to dissolve a partnership gone amiss and see to it that in the near future the Church would assume sole control of the Council.

That plan was recently recounted in a series of informal conversations in early May 1997 by a well informed staff member of the Moscow Patriarchate and is spelled out here -- perhaps for the very first time. Its goals were three: to disengage the Council from partisan politics, place in commanding positions a new lay and clerical leadership with whom the Patriarchate could work more easily in running such an institution, and last transform future meetings into public forums in which the Church could spell out its stance on issues facing society as a whole.

Easier said than done. The II Council was convened in early February 1995 under the theme: "Through Spiritual Renovation Towards National Revival." It also tried to introduce a church perspective on then current issues.

But, it swiftly met with the first of two obstacles, the ideological ground swell -- which has in no way abetted -- to reestablish the unity of "Great Russians, Little Russians and the White Russians." Indeed, the idea of reuniting Russia, Ukraine and Belarus into some new kind of state or confederation, just as it had at the first Council, returned fully to center stage. To be sure, past and present schemes (such as the still flawed, Spring 1997 "union" of Belarus and Russia which citizens in neither country unreservedly support) smack of old-time, Russocentric, imperialistic pan-Slavism, if not of a wide-spread fantasy in some circles for the piece-meal revival of the Soviet Union itself. Such goals are not likely to "go away" soon. Nor is the Church's penchant for some parts of them about to be abandoned.

Why is that so? From the Church's perspective, these demands also encompass -- even if differently phrased -- the contemporary claim of the Moscow Patriarchate to its continuing authority over all the Orthodox dioceses and parishes in all the newly independent and sovereign states of the "Near Abroad," of the former Soviet Union. It would be well then to explore this issue in some detail.

As is obvious to most observers, this seemingly "universal" claim of authority has really been aimed at Ukraine. Prior to the dissolution of the former USSR, Ukraine contributed more than a third of the Russian Orthodox Church's vocations and revenues, while better than eighty percent of its fifty-five million inhabitants (or approximately 40 million, in comparison to Russia's 60 million) are today nominally Orthodox.

With independence, however, the Moscow Patriarchate's one-time hegemony has been challenged by no less than three other Ukrainian Orthodox claimants, all eminently nationalist, as well as by the phoenix-like Church of the Greek Catholics (whom Orthodox pejoratively call
"Uniates") of Western Ukraine. The intra-Orthodox conflict is beyond the scope of this essay, while the source of Orthodox-Greek Catholic differences is worth mentioning (since they comprise the principal stumbling block, even if not to some far-off, eventual unity between Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy, at least to the recently repeated attempts of the Roman Pontiff to meet with Aleksiy II, the Moscow Patriarch).  

Understandably, at the heart of the resentment and distrust of the approximately five million Greek Catholic believers towards Orthodoxy is the latter's policies following the Red Army's 1946 occupation of the Western provinces (formerly under Polish rule). These fully acquiesced in the Soviet state's banning of the Greek Catholic Church, the confiscation of all its properties and places of worship, and the ready transference of these possessions to the Moscow Patriarchate, the one and only Church granted "legality" under Soviet "law.". 

Since 1991, those sentiments have taken several forms, the most grievous of which in the eyes of the Moscow Patriarchate is the attempt to extend Greek Catholic ecclesiastical jurisdiction beyond its historical birthplace in and around Lwiw into the ethnically Russian provinces lying east of Kiyiw. The Vatican's continuing defense of the right of Greek Catholics to religious freedom -- although probably not to such expansion -- in turn comprises another major source of tension in Catholic-Orthodox relations. 

But, the Rome-Moscow gambit should not side-track us from unequivocally framing the central issue: Ukraine stands as an incontrovertible metaphor for the likely reduction of Russian Orthodoxy's influence in the "Near Abroad" and its eventual dissipation -- in the middle run -- as "nationally autonomous" Orthodox churches press for recognition. Moreover such canonical recognition lies outside Moscow's jurisdiction. In point of fact, it pertains exclusively to the Ecumenical Patriarchate (of Constantinople-Istanbul), historically held as the "first among equals" throughout the Orthodox world and who can initiate the process of consensus that leads to autonomy. Such an option was, in fact, exercised in early 1996 in the most celebrated case in point: Constantinople endorsed the autonomy of the Estonian Orthodox Church (which since the Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1940, had also -- as in the case of post-1946 Western Ukraine - come under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate). That measure led to an unprecedented and still fully unmended breach between the Ecumenical and Moscow Patriarchates -- a story well-told elsewhere. The implications of this post cold-war, "bi-polar" Orthodox world, its potential impact on the continuing shrinking of Moscow's jurisdiction -- and hence of the Patriarchate's efforts to champion the "reunification of all Orthodox Slavs" -- is self-evident. 

Returning again to the II Council, its convocation had also to contend with the second of two obstacles (alluded to earlier): the persistence of organizational divisiveness. The Church's intended house cleaning of the Council had only been partial. True, some of the new and trusted leadership was now in place, most notably in the person of Valeriy Nikolaevich Ganichev, Chairman of the
Russian Union of Writers, and the eloquent and skillful parliamentarian whose management of the Plenary Session of the IV Council was already noted.

But the politicians who had had a hand in it from the beginning still held sway. One, in particular, kept pressing Church leaders to turn the "All-World Russian Assembly", as it was then called, into a political party (that could promote her own ambitions). When they refused, she went off in a huff and held a couple of rump sessions on her own "without the Church's blessing."

Only sometime after the second meeting, did the Church finally succeed in taking over the forum and its administration, lock, stock and barrel. No small reason for that final victory was the discovery of a "disinterested" and wealthy sponsor (who apparently also intended to enter politics with the Church's backing) who helped foot the bill. But neither he nor Church authorities succeeded in retaining control of the event's original name. This had been legally registered by the now defeated faction, while the victors were obliged against their hopes to adopt the current, similar, but slightly more cumbersome name of the World Council of the Russian People.

The way was now clear for the Church's leaders to call the shots without interference; in a sense, to live down having been outfoxed by the politicians and ultra-nationalists at the first two meetings. This they attempted to do at the III World Council of the Russian People, convened just eleven months later and virtually on the eve of Russia's 1996 presidential elections. In fact, the Council became a paramount venue for electioneering. Save for two, every candidate (from Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin to hopefuls Vladimir Zhirnovsky and Gennadi Zyganov) and every party attended, rose in turn to the podium, addressed the Council's theme, "Russia and Russians on the Threshold of the 21st Century," and laid one or more encomiums upon the Church calling upon it -- not surprisingly -- to restore "the historical unity of the three fraternal peoples -- Russia, Ukraine and Belarus -- whose spiritual tradition has emerged from the single baptismal font of Kiev."

Kirill, however, was once again quick to dispel the suspicion of the Church's involvement in partisan politics. Did not the array of parties in attendance at this III Council demonstrate ultimate proof of impartiality? Still, in his opening address, the Metropolitan felt the need to reiterate that the Council would never support one or another politician or party, but rather serve solely as "a spiritual, deliberative, and rallying center for the discussion of matters affecting the entire nation." One delegate reiterated that viewpoint, noting that "leaders of various political parties" were no longer "afraid of speaking in a gathering bearing the name of the 'Russian Assembly,'" as they had been in 1993 when the Council's partisanship and ultra-nationalist ideological bent were so much in evidence.

Would the ecclesiastical "spin doctors" win out? Even a year after this meeting had ended, one of the Patriarchate's organizers insisted that the III Council was not partisan and the Church had had no intention of supporting any single candidate. In the end, however, the Patriarchate in fact
supported Boris Yeltsin’s presidential bid without reservation. And, as if trying to counter a lingering distrust of the Church’s outright and over-riding political ambitions, he further protested that this entire effort (i.e., taking over the Council) in order to free the Patriarchate from partisan forces had for that reason even been well documented in church publications. "Alas," he regretted, "journalists and scholars continued to repeat old findings instead of staking out new data."

But, can it really be argued that Kirill had successfully transformed the Council into a genuinely "neutral" vehicle for rallying intellectuals and lobbying government? That is clearly open to debate: on the last day of 1997’s IV Council, Gennadi Zyganov, then recently reelected General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, addressed the delegates!

Unlike at the III Council, he was the only politician to do so. Were others invited? Or, if they were, but had refused to come or didn’t show, why so? Or, is it that moderate politicians are still "afraid of speaking in a gathering bearing the name of the 'Russian Assembly,'" contrary to the view expressed at the III Council? None of these questions received clear-cut answers.

Nor, in my opinion, was it at all clear to most of the delegates that Zyganov "was not an official participant in the Council," as one of the organizers assured me, or that he had spoken during a break in the meeting, and so his otherwise platitudinous address "wasn’t even part of the official program." What could not fail to be most clear to most of the delegates, however, was that Zyganov’s party holds the majority in the Duma and its support is crucial to the Church on a variety of issues (from state funding of ecclesiastical properties to religious education in public schools).

Must we conclude then that despite endless declarations of partisan neutrality, the Russian Orthodox Church is in fact busy forging an alliance with the political heirs to its one-time oppressors and persecutors? Or, is it that this alliance is no more conclusive than another one symbolically cemented anew the day after the IV Council ended -- with none other than Boris Yeltsin, who had been the Patriarch’s much publicized personal choice for president in 1996?

On 08 May 1997, the foundation stone was laid for a new chapel in the heart of Moscow to be erected on the very spot (on the once again fashionable Old Arbat Street) where an old church, destroyed by the Communists, was rededicated to the memory of Orthodoxy’s first saints, Boris and Gleb. In attendance was the Patriarch, President Boris Yeltsin, and the latter’s grandson, Gleb.

THE POLITICS OF METROPOLITAN KIRILL:

The readiness to placate two extremes at once may arguably be an admissible short-term expedient: after all, for an institution that claims to represent all Russians at home and abroad and is avowedly striving to create its own institutional autonomy vis-a-vis the political system and state (to which it had been behoven since the time of Peter the Great), partisanship may indeed be a liability.

But, this ambiguity sidesteps the real political differences between political forces. Moreover, it strikes many critics of the Russian Orthodox Church both at home and abroad as an outright
abrogation of moral choice. They fear, further, that such evasion has become all too symptomatic -- if not the quintessentially defining feature -- of the Church’s current policy as a whole.

Perhaps no one in the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy more fully personifies that ambiguity than Metropolitan Kirill. Certainly, in ecumenical circles in West Europe, this one-time champion of church reform and ecumenical ties is increasingly seen in some quarters as contradictory, in others as frankly unreliable.\(^{24}\) When in private conversation, most agree, “he’s his old self.” But in public declarations, he has stripped ecumenism down to its barest bones, and in matters of cooperation rarely delivers on his promises; as a result, Kirill has cast his trustworthiness in doubt.

The perception is no less true in Orthodox church circles in Moscow. There, according to several well-informed Orthodox theologians sympathetic to the Metropolitan,\(^ {25}\) Kirill’s so-called attempt at fair-handedness is seen as having “unbalanced” the most extreme conservative wing of the Church, their word to describe that minority’s acquisition of far greater leverage over the entire ecclesiastical institution than at any other time since 1991. Other examples abound, but their consequence can be summed up in the remark of one lay Orthodox ecumenist (who is no friend of the liberal clergy): Kirill “has simply caved in” to the “most reactionary, truly aggressive, circles in the Church.”\(^ {26}\)

Even Patriarch Aleksiy II, considered by many as the conciliator and peacemaker, the ultimate “balance wheel” of an organization rife with divisions and hostilities, sometimes seems to be losing the upper hand. Recently, he received a private letter from the Russian Orthodox Bishop of Sourozh (Great Britain), Anthony Bloom. In it, the aging and respected prelate dealt with a number of issues. But, when this letter was unexpectedly publicized in Radonezh, an official newspaper of the Patriarchate, but increasingly a mouthpiece for the extreme conservative faction, only Bishop Bloom’s criticisms of the ecumenical movement appeared in print.

As a result, not only was his letter distorted, but so too his more nuanced views. Moreover, its appearance on the eve of the February 1997 biannual Bishops’ Council -- which then barely went on to agree to continue the Church’s ties to the ecumenical movement -- gave credence to the widespread suspicion that the omissions were indeed meant to influence the prelates against ecumenism. Ultimately, it took the BBC’s Russian-language Religious News Service to set the matter straight by broadcasting the letter’s entire contents. Even so, in this case as in several others, the Patriarch sometimes “gives the impression of being hamstrung” or, as the theologian then glossed his remark, “unable to lend his weight to more moderate forces and too weak to resist the conservatives openly.”

That Kirill, himself a moderate, has “backed down” to rightists leaves his own motives, in the absence of any clear-cut public explanation, open to speculation. Depending on whom you talk to, they range from the most selfish to the most selfless. "Ambition," of course, never fails to appear at
the top of a critic's lexicon. But, in the Metropolitan's case, it is hard not to imagine that a prelate of such extraordinary talents would not also nurture the legitimate hope of using them to the good of the people and Church to which he has devoted his entire adult life. In this respect, some suggest the 1996 appointment of a confrere to the vacant Metropolitan Archbishopric of Saint Petersburg and Lagoda, second in prestige only to the Patriarchate itself, was a deep personal disappointment -- but perhaps also a spur to winning over the majority of his fellow bishops for the future.

At stake, Kirill's supporters adamantly insist, is not a bid to succeed Aleksiy II. But, in December, 1996 the religion writer for Moskovskiy Komsomolets shared his "feeling" with readers that the Metropolitan may indeed have his eye on the post. To that end, the journalist queried, had not Kirill mounted an up-to-date press office in his Department (the Patriarch himself has none), his own bank, and a weekly Saturday morning TV program, "Words of the Pastor," aired over a national network, expressly for that purpose? 27

Not true, retort his friends; those measures serve solely to help him set a surer direction for the Church at this very difficult time. Look at his accomplishments, they protest: restructuring the WCRP as an independent, non-partisan platform for the public discussion of the Church's social policy; giving greater cohesiveness to the Church's internal workings by drafting almost single-handedly its new canons (internal by-laws) in the early 1990's, the final documents of the Bishops' Councils in 1994 and 1997, and the establishment and chairing of a new commission since early 1997 to write the "social doctrine" of the Church. Finally, he may be alone among the hierarchs in truly championing the Church's economic independence: as Kirill recently remarked, real freedom and autonomy from both the state and economy needs "a sound financial basis -- independent of banks and commercial structures" -- especially in an era when what counts "is not the position that a person holds, but how thick his billfold is." 28

Kirill's continuing insistence that the Church put its unity and autonomy over and against all else may explain why he seems willing to sacrifice objectives he once held dear. None greater may be his call for Church reform. Long-time advocate of convening a Local Bishops Council (called Pomestniy Sobor in Russian, and canonically superior to the biennial Bishops' Council, or Archiereyskiy Sobor), in this instance, the first since 1917 that would treat of real and much needed changes, 29 he is now unlikely to insist on it (acknowledges another keen Orthodox observer privately). 30

"Whom could he marshal to the task?," this same analyst rhetorically mused. Of the most articulate, potential allies from among the clergy, almost all -- under relentless pressure from ultra-conservative bishops and priests -- have either been publicly reprimanded by the Patriarchate or removed from key Church positions. 31 Their influence is now marginal -- in sharp contrast "to just three years ago, when I believed," he continued. "Church reform was not only around the corner, but that its exponents were thoroughly prepared to carry it off. Indeed, Kirill was then the spearhead
and patron of that effort." At best, the upcoming Local Council, actively being prepared (by an archbishop, hand-picked by the Patriarch) to coincide with the onset of the Millennium, 12 "will end up rubber-stamping a heap of pro-forma declarations. There will be no reforms in our lifetime," he sadly concluded.

Today, moreover, Kirill himself "is also seriously compromised by the recent scandals," my interlocutor added. He was referring to revelations made in September 1996 that the Church had been illegally importing wine and other spirits under the guise of "humanitarian aid," trafficking in millions of tons of duty free cigarettes, petitioning the President of Russia for a deal to trade in imported chicken legs from the United States and tax-exempt exports of oil to Germany (by a company in which the Church owns forty percent of the shares and of their return on two billion dollars a year in sales), and finally investing in banks and other commercial enterprises in privileged conditions.33 (The latter were sometimes actually stipulated by law as "compensation" for Soviet policies against religion and specifically intended to allow the Church to obtain income for the repair and restoration of its properties as well as for the upkeep of its personnel).

But the air of "scandal" thickened and by the following month the Patriarch intervened publicly. However, his detailed explanation of how the moneys earned from the acknowledged sale of goods and services originally earmarked for humanitarian aid was "added to the Church's general budget, and to another reserved expressly for repairing churches and monasteries, for reestablishing religious life in general, and for charitable purposes" rang quite frankly like a confession of wrongdoing. He may even have had that in mind on 12 December 1996: at the meeting of all the clergy of the Moscow archdiocese, the Patriarch declared that when it came to the Church's faults it was preferable for it to do penance than indulge in "self-criticism."34

Not only has the Church's moral authority to speak out impartially apparently been discredited, but Kirill, his Smolensk archdiocese, and the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations over which he has presided since November 1989 were also seriously implicated. His denial of any involvement in "commercial activities linked to tobacco, alcohol or any other product subject to taxation" did not stop the Patriarch from establishing a special commission to investigate the charges.35 To date, its promised report has yet to be made public.36

Meanwhile, no amount of talent, political savvy, and impeccable connections to the highest echelons of government and business has managed to spare the Metropolitan from his critics and challengers, past and present.37 Just as a one-time ally had been among the first to blow the whistle on the "tobacco and alcohol" scandal,38 so too is one or another fellow confere, or so it is rumored, eager to see him morally and politically debilitated as they prepare their own way up the ladder of high church office.39

If that is true, they would obviously do so at their own risk should they fail to take the measure of the man. Kirill will not easily yield his place or be badgered into abandoning his duties
when there is so much to be done to keep the ship of faith on course and where the dearth of leaders of his capacity, experience and promise is felt throughout the Church. Moreover, more than most other hierarchs — as his performance at the IV World Council of the Russian People proved — he indeed leads the vanguard in trying to spell out a social and world vision for the Church that can spiritually and pastorally speak to the needs of Russians, Orthodox or not, in this new “time of troubles.”

That he will do so under the continuing sign of controversy and ambiguity seems highly likely. But, in that case, Kirill should be seen as neither outside, nor above, nor as falling short of his Church, but rather as its very incarnation, as standing at its very center. Indeed, to this entire generation of clergy and laity on whom the current transition has fallen, controversy and ambiguity — with possibly even more disconcerting and destructive consequences than those that have already occurred — are inseparable companions to the future.

Of that, we can be absolutely certain.
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1. "Birth, Death Rates Paint Grim Health Picture," The Moscow Times, 06 May 1997. The BBC had reported this same story on their evening broadcast of 04 May 1997.

2. Paul Goble, "Analysis From Washington: Demography And Destiny," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 07 May 1997, notes the following observation made by the Presidential Commission on Women, Family and Demography which prepared and presented the report: "The report concluded that this precipitous decline in population could have serious national security consequences if it led some of Russia’s neighbors, such as China, to advance territorial claims against depopulated regions within the Russian Federation.

3. "The report concluded that this precipitous decline in population could have serious national security consequences if it led some of Russia’s neighbors, such as China, to advance territorial claims against depopulated regions within the Russian Federation.

The bill is called in Russian, "Ob ogranicheniyakh oborota produktsii, uslug i zrelishchnych meropriyatiy seksual’nogo charaktera." Apparently, among the initiators of this bill are well-known actors and directors and several deputies, according to "Syn O. Aleksandra Menya Vystupil c Zakonoproektom Protiv Rasprostraneniya Pornografii," Blagovest-Info 62 (26 November-02 December 1996); Blagovest-Info is a Moscow-based, English language, on-line religious information service, independent of, but close to the Roman Catholic Church (its e-mail address is: stpaul@glasnet.ru).

4. An account alluding to this chasm is contained in "Shargunov Prekratil Podderzhat’ Zyuganova," Blagovest-Info, 80 (08-14 April 1997).

For a discussion of internal divisions within the Church, see Ralph Della Cava, "Reviving Orthodoxy: An Overview of the Four Facations in the Russian Orthodox Church," Cahiers du Monde Russe, (Paris: Winter-Spring, 1997). Pp. 51; and the forthcoming "The Russian Orthodox Church & The Ecumenical Movement: Considerations on Continuing Relations (Spring 1997)," Pp. 22.


6. "Shargunov Prekratil Podderzhat’ Zyuganova," Blagovest-Info, 80 (08-14 April 1997); Shargunov heads the committee "For the Moral Rebirth of the Fatherland;" in April and May 1996, Patriarch Alekisy II took question with Shargunov’s position and publicly endorsed Boris Yeltsin’s ultimately successful bid for the presidency on the grounds that it was impossible to support an institution that had persecuted the Church.6.22.

7. According to Viktoria Mitlyng, "Russia Prepares for Sex Education," The Moscow Times, 13 May 1997, sex education classes have yet to become wide-spread and that "while the Education Ministry is [only currently] drafting a
plan for a school course, widespread disagreement about what constitutes sex education and fierce resistance to any such teachings from the Orthodox Church have hampered any progress."

The article also noted that the only sex education program in actual operation was a non-profit undertaking sponsored by the Moscow-based Youth Center of the Russian Family Planning Association which works with about 100 teenagers a year.

On public hostility to such programs, see "They Stopped Short of Beating Each Other on the Subject of Masturbation," Komsomolskaya Pravda, 21 May 1997; English translation by Orthonews, a US-based, Orthodox Church in America, on-line religious news service at e-mail address:news@holy-trinity.org.

For a view of Orthodox efforts to promote pro-life positions, see "Orthodox Public Severely Criticizes State Policy in Sex Education and Birth Control," Metaphrasis, 1(68), (March 1997); Metaphrasis is a Moscow-based, English language, on-line "Religious Information Service," independent of, but close to the Russian Orthodox Church (its e-mail address is: mf@glasnet.ru).

On the spread of AIDS and of drug addiction, see Angela Charlton, "Odessa Confronts the Face of AIDS," The Moscow Times, 05 Mat 1997, 20.

8. One observer found this argument funny, since "these days, no one in Russia ever pays taxes."


11. My account primarily follows the series of conversations held in Moscow on 07, 09, and 11 May 1997. At this writing, I have still been unable to confirm this account independently and as thoroughly as I would like, nor could I subsequently confirm my rendering of events in the present text with my informant or anyone else. Consequently, I take sole responsibility for its precision or lack thereof.

12. See the interesting analysis of the head of the Moscow Center for Strategic Studies, Andrei Piontkovsky, "How Belarus Was Lost," The Moscow Times, 22 May 1997, in which the author concludes: "Russia did not and will not receive anything in exchange other than political and economic obligations...".

13. The role of Ukraine within the Moscow Patriarchate just prior to the dissolution of the USSR (1989-1990) is sensitively described by the American Greek Orthodox Deacon, Anthony Ugolnik, "Burdened with History - Soviet Churches & The Search for Authenticity," Commonweal (21 December 1990), 751-756.


15. Despite press reports of an upcoming meeting between the two and the Ecumenical Patriarch at the forthcoming meeting of "Reconciliation," to be held in Graz, Austria in June 1997 and sponsored by Europe's Catholic and Evangelical church conferences, no such confirmation could be obtained from the Moscow Patriarchate's Chancellery, according to the letter from Frank Brown, a free-lance writer on religious matters, to the Author on 19 May 1997.

16. Whether these are now on their way to an eventual resolution is difficult to say. But they were the subject of the bi-annual, bilateral talks held between the Vatican and the Moscow Patriarchate recently held in Bari, Italy on 07-08 May 1997 and, by all accounts, hold out much promise. See the official communiqué, distributed by the Moscow Patriarchate on 12 May, entitled "Bilateral Conversations Between Delegations of the Holy See and the Patriarchate of Moscow Focus on Inter-Church Relations in Ukraine," available from the Patriarchate's on-line web page, http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/newsen09.htm.

17. See the especially complete account by Patrick Henry, "Holy War," The Moscow Times, 13 April 1996. Another potential area of conflict is in Moldova where many of the Rumanian-speaking Orthodox prefer
eventual reunion with the Rumanian Patriarchate in Bucharest; such a course has many implications for the eventual secession of the predominately Russian-Orthodox majority who occupy the one-time "Trans-Dnieper Republic."

18. The Patriarchate formally disavows any resolutions of those meetings as its own.

19. The original name in Russia was "Vsemirniy Russkiy Sobor," in contrast to its present name, "Vsemirniy Russkiy Narodniy Sobor."

20. Cited in Metaphrasis (Moscow), No. 19 (17-23 December 1995); only two presidential candidates did not appear, Grigory Yavlinsky and Egor Gaidar.


22. See Larry E. Uzzell, "Advisor Admits Zyganov Will Lose Orthodox Vote," Keston News Service, 05 June 1996; (Keston News Service is an on-line religious information agency whose e-mail address is: keston_institute@cin.co.uk).


24. The Author spent a good part of February and March conducting interviews in West Europe. That research cannot be discussed here, but rather in several subsequent essays.

25. My informants prefer anonymity. But I have recorded their remarks verbatim.

26. This source too has requested anonymity.


29. Pomestniy Sobors must be called to elect the Patriarch; the last for that purpose was held in June 1990 at which Aleksiy II, the former Metropolitan of St. Petersburg and Ladoga, was elected Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. The last one to deal with church reforms began in 1917, but their implementation was cut short by the Bolshevik Revolution. Unlike an Archierevskiy Sobor, the Pomestniy Sobor consists of not only bishops, but priests and laity who are elected at the parish and diocesan levels.

30. Once again, I have been asked to guard the anonymity of my informant, but have cited his comments verbatim.

31. Those reprimanded at one time or another are Fathers Aleksandr Borisov, Grigory Chistyakov, Grigory Kotchetkov, and Veacheslav Polosin; those removed from positions of importance include Father Ioann Svridov and Igumen Innokenti Pavlov. All are considered liberals and ecumenists.


33. The case is well documented by Orthodox and other religious news services; see "Members of Certain Departments in Moscow Patriarchate Deal in Tobacco and Liquor," Metaphrasis, 40 (61), (4-10 October 1996); Maksim Bobrov, "Tabachno-Alkogol'naya Istoria: Patriarch Prinimaet Mery...." Blagovest-Info, 56 (15-21 October 1996), 14; and "Moscou: la presse russe reproche à des responsables de l'Eglise d'être impliquées dans des activités commerciales," SOP, 214 (janvier 1997), 10-11.
34. The denial was issued on 11 October 1997 in a press release of the Department of External Church Relations, entitled "Ob otnoshenii komercheskim operatsiyam s tabakom i alkogolem." For the address of the Patriarch, see *Patriarch Aleksiy II: Neobchidmo Pokyanie, a Ne Samobichevanie," Blagovest-Info, 65 (17-27 December, 1996), 1.

35. La presse russe reproche à des responsables de l'Eglise d'être impliqués dans des activités co. *SOP, 214 (janvier 1997), 10-11; Kirill's denial, quoted here, was originally carried by the ENI, an Orthodox news agency.

36. The promised discussion, scheduled for the October 1996 meeting of the Holy Synod, the interim governing agency of the Moscow Patriarchate consisting of the Patriarch, five permanent Metropolitans, and seven rotating bishops never took place, according to *Metaphrasis, 41 (62), (11-17 October 1996).

37. At Metropolitan Kirill's fiftieth birthday celebration, held at Moscow's Danilovskiy Monastery on 21 November 1996, many high government figures including President Boris Yeltsin's Chief of Administration, A. Chubais, and leaders of the legislature were on hand to wish him well.

38. On the role of Fr. Gleb Yakunin, who was formally excommunicated by the Bishops' Council held in February 1997 and who prior to that brought civil suit in defense of the Church of Scientology and other "religious minorities" against Aleksandr Dvorkin, an ordained deacon and the Director of the Church-related St. Irineas Center, engaged in "anti-prosyletism" campaigns, see again Maksim Bobrov, "Tabachno-Alkogol'naya Istoria: Patriarch Prinimaet Mery....," Blagovest-Info, 56 (15-21 October 1996), 14; and "Yakunin Protiv Dvorkin," Blagovest-Info, 62 (26 November-02 December 1996), 28 November 1996, 6.

39. Some see as imminent a one-third reduction in the size of the staff and budget of Kirill's Department of External Church Relations; others see prelates close to the Patriarch as being groomed for future high ecclesiastical office.

40. For a spirited defense of Kirill, see the biographical sketch by the well informed writer on religion, Yakov Kratov, "Tri ipotasi odnogo Mitropolita," Itogi, 17 December 1997, 55-57