Political Aspects of the Contemporary Relations Between Russia and the Holy See

(Preliminary version — not to be quoted)

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Introduction

The topic of the present work is “Political' Aspects of the Contemporary Russia-Vatican Relations”, which bear a long and difficult history: before the Revolution of 1917, the main reason for that was the fact that the Russian Empire was officially a Christian Orthodox country. After the Revolution, the ideological contraposition became even stronger due to the fact that the USSR declared atheism as part of its ideology and persecuted all religions while the Vatican, in its turn, negated the communist doctrine to such extent that communists or any all Catholics collaborating in communist organisations would be excommunicated.

The situation changed of course with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and subsequent establishment of diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation (further referred to as: Russia) as its legal successor on the one hand and the Holy See as the international legal subject representing the Roman Catholic Church on the other. Cooperation on many levels began between the two countries2. However, certain problems remain, and we are going to look into them closer.

First, let us give an overview of the existing relations.

The Russia-Vatican Relations In Brief

The mere fact that Russia and Vatican City constitute [territorially] the largest and the smallest country in world respectively already provokes interest in itself but actually, the relationship between the two states, both of great power, scope of activities, wide reach and ambitious goals, has a long-lasting and tedious history and should be looked into in order to understand both current policies of the two countries and their place in the international arena. These relations are of course particularly important in the modern age of “re-evangelisation”, since the Vatican City represents the Roman Catholic Church, the major Christian denomination in the world, while Russia is a predominantly Orthodox country, representing the third most wide-spread Christian denomination in the world and being home to the biggest autocephalous (or ecclesiastically independent) Eastern

1 In the “Political realm” arguments of many other nature are integrated, thus economical, religious and legal points of view will have to be considered.

2 The issue of Vatican’s statehood is explained further.
Orthodox Church community in the world. According to one of the most recent and most comprehensive sociological studies on religions, Christians on the whole constitute 2.2 bln people, or 31.7% of the world population, over a billion of the being Catholic (50.1% of all Christians, 800.6 mln — Protestant (36.7%), and 260 mln — Orthodox (11.9%) (Hackett and Grim 2011, 21). 39% of the latter category reside in Russia, making up more than 70% of the country’s population (Hackett and Grim 2011, 31). Understanding the cultural and religious background behind politics is particularly important in Europe with its estimated 565.5 mln Christians, where the Orthodox actually represent already the second most popular denomination (35.4%) after Catholicism (46.3%) (Hackett and Grim 2011, 48).

Undoubtedly, religions have always played critical role in the development of history and the alignment of political powers. Contemporary European political landscape can in many ways be traced back to the Great Schism of 1054 between the Western and Eastern churches, which marked a great divide in the political goals and strategies of their respective followers in different parts of the continent. Nowadays more of the countries in the world are officially secular (the Holy See excluded of course), yet there still are fundamental differences between countries with historically different religious background in terms of political order, civil society development and the functioning of the state — and, therefore, also on international relations and international politics, particularly within Europe (Curanovic 2012; Chizzoniti 2005; Froese 2004; Cava 2001; White and McAllister 2000).

**State and Theocracy**

In the present work, we will explore the relations between two such political powers as Russia (secular state) and the Vatican (theocracy) and the underlying reasons behind those but first some terminological clarification is needed regarding the meanings, interconnections and use of the concepts: the Vatican, Vatican City, Holy See, Roman Catholic Church.

As explicitly articulated by the Press Office of the Holy See, the actual term ‘Holy See’ defines the supreme Authority of the Church, which is embodied in the Pope, i.e. the Bishop of Rome and head of the College of Bishops, which therefore represent the main government bodies of the Catholic Church. As such, the Holy See is an institution which, according to the international laws and customs, has a juridical personality which permits it to sign treaties and to send and receive diplomatic representatives, as juridical equivalent
of a state. In such quality the Holy See joins both international treaties and international organisations and groups, among them: the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), International Telecommunication Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The Holy See also has permanent observer status in such international organizations as the United Nations General Assembly, the Council of Europe, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The State of Vatican City, in its turn, was established in accordance with the Lateran Treaty between the Holy See and the Kingdom of Italy on 11 February 1929 (ratified on 7 June 1929), meaning that Italy would officially acknowledge the full property rights and exclusive sovereignty of the Vatican.

The State of Vatican City and the Holy See, continues its explanations the Holy See Press Office, therefore constitute two sovereign, universally recognized subjects of international public law, and are indissolubly united in the Head of State — the Supreme Pontiff, or the Pope, who possesses full legislative, judicial and executive powers. In periods of “Sede Vacante” (Vacancy of the Apostolic See), these powers belong to the College of Cardinals. The Supreme Pontiff governs the State through the Pontifical Commission for the State of Vatican City (legislative power; composed of cardinals, nominated by him for a 5 year period) and the Governatorate of the State of Vatican City (executive power). The legislative regulations are published in the “Acta Apostolicæ Sedis”, which we will talk more about later.

However, even before becoming a separate state, while the Holy See as the main residence of the Catholic Church, the Vatican was not only an ecclesiastical structure but also already an actor in international and interstate relations, sometimes acting as a mediator in the international arena. Yet the main goal of the Vatican’s foreign policy remained of course the protection of the interests of the Catholic Church, which can be called one of the oldest political institutions in Europe (Gajduk 2002, 43).

Currently the State of Vatican City maintains diplomatic relations with 179 other states and has a possibility to participate in international treaties through the Secretariat of State, yet
the State itself is ultimately represented by the Pope. The Secretariat is presided over by
the Cardinal Secretary of State (or — officially — Secretary of State of His Holiness The
Pope), who is appointed directly by the Pope and whose functions are similar to those of a
prime-minister. The position, originally known as Secretarius Intimus, was first created at
the end of the XVth century by Pope Leo X, who wanted to delegate control over foreign
affairs of the state and international correspondence. Since 1988, the Secretariat of the
State has two sections: the Section for General Affairs and the Section for Relations with
States.

International relations, particularly — relations with the representatives of other
confessions and religions — are among the tasks of two other bodies (dicasteries) of the
Roman Curia, which are the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the
Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, both issuing their respective bulletins.
Interestingly enough, the former is subdivided into two section, one of which deals with the
Eastern Churches (Orthodox Churches and ancient Oriental Churches), while the other —
with the Western Churches and Ecclesial Communities and for the World Council of
Churches.

The possibility of establishing diplomatic relations is bilateral, i.e. the Holy See exercises
both active and passive right of diplomatic representation. The former implies the
appointment of Apostolic Nuncios to foreign countries as plenipotentiary representatives of
the Supreme Pontiff in communication with such respective states and local ecclesiastical
hierarchy. The latter, i.e. the passive right, implies that the Holy See, in its turn, receives
ordinary and permanent missions of the foreign states it has diplomatic relations with, as
well as extraordinary and temporary missions.

At the moment, Russia is one of the countries that maintain full diplomatic relations with
the Vatican, as of November 22, 2009, when the then-president D. Medvedev signed
Presidential Decree N1330 “On the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with the
Vatican”, which resulted in the subsequent exchange of notes and the establishment of a
Russian Embassy in the Vatican and the corresponding Apostolic Nuntiary in Moscow.
Prior to that, in the period between 1990 and 2009, the two countries — the Holy See and,
first, the USSR and subsequently Russia — maintained official relations with their
respective representatives enjoying the “ad personam” diplomatic status.
Shortly before the actual exchange of notes on the establishment of diplomatic relations, Pope Benedict XVI emphasised that the Holy See and Russia had a number of “cultural and social questions of mutual interest”, including but not limited to the value of the family and the contribution believers make to life in Russia”. This happened during the Papal audience to President Dmitry Medvedev, when “the cordial discussions pleasure was expressed on both sides at the cordial relations that currently exist between them”. (“Comunicato Della Sala Stampa Della Santa Sede: Udienza Al Presidente Della Federazione Russa” 2009)

Slightly a year later, upon receiving the credential of a new papal nuncio in Moscow, President Medvedev confirmed that the cooperation between Russia and the Holy See “was marked with a kinship of views on most issues, including moral and legal priorities that are used in international relations” (“Информационный Бюллетень Департамента Информации И Печати МИД РФ. 14 Июля 2011 Г.” 2011, 2). The same nuncio Ivan Jurkovič agreed with this view, stressing the fact that the whole civilisation is in crisis, and that the problems are anthropological rather than political or economic, thus also bringing into focus the importance of the dialogue between the Western and the Eastern Churches as the representatives of Christianity as a major global force (Хруль 2011).

His Russian counterpart Alexander Avdeev also confirmed he existence of such mutual interests and common goals, particularly in the face of the global challenges of the XXI century. The ambassador named such issues as the opposition of the rich “global North” to the poor “global South”, terrorism, poverty, the revival of “aggressive nationalism”, and the expansion of conflict regions around Europe. The ambassador stressed that “these issues worried the Vatican too, and that we spoke nearly the same language on international forums”. (“Александр Авдеев: У России И Ватикана Много Общего В Восприятии Глобальных Угроз” 2013)

However, heads of states and ambassadors only reproduce the official points of view, therefore it is necessary to carefully study existing literature.

Sources Overview
Since the present research is dedicated to the relations between Russia and the Vatican in the post-Soviet period, we will mainly focus on the literature published in the same period, i.e. after 1991. Still, it is important to mention that there is also a huge body of literature in various languages that published before 1991 and dedicated to the relations between the USSR and the Holy See, particularly to:

a. the impact and consequences of the II Vatican Council,

b. and the development and implementation of the papal Ostpolitik (i.e. policy directed towards the communist bloc countries situated in Eastern Europe).

Most of it was of course produced outside Eastern Europe.

The post-1991 body of literature can be analysed basing on two approaches:

a. a chronological one, i.e. following the development of research themes and focuses chosen by the researchers,

b. a comparative one (Russian research vs “views from the outside”).

First, let us turn to the former.

The opening of the archives in the 1990s and the decrease of mutual hostility and suspicion gave birth to a new wave of research on the period of the Ostpolitik, particularly in the countries with a strong background in Catholic studies such as Italy, France, Spain. The authors of that period (for instance, Del Rio and Giacomelli 1991; Riccardi 1992; Melloni 1997; Bernstein and Politi 1997; Luxmoore and Babiuch 1998; Casaroli and Casula 2000) were trying to deeper understand the Ostpolitik and its impact on Eastern European countries, particularly the role of Pope John Paul II personally in the development of anti-Soviet sentiment and national liberation movements there. Another important topic of these research is of course also the involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church in implementing the Soviet policy towards the Holy See, especially after the Pact of Metz (otherwise known as the Vatican-Moscow Agreement) that shortly preceded the II Vatical Council in 1962.³

This trend continued in the 2000s as well (for example, Saxer 2002; Levillain and d'Encausse 2003; Dunn 2004; undefined author 2006; Tauran 2006; Madiran 2006; undefined author 2006).

³ The Pact was signed as a result of a meeting between Cardinal Eugene Tisserant, representing Pope John XXIII, and Metropolitan Nikodim, who spoke in the name of the Russian Orthodox Church. It was agreed that Communism would not be condemned by the II Vatican Council, that being a condition for the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church to be able to attend the Council as observers.
undefined author and undefined author 2006; Barberini 2007). However, the accent shifted from the Soviet Union to the broader aspects of Ostpolitik (which included such predominantly Catholic countries of the communist bloc as Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, former Czechoslovakia). This may be interpreted in the view that “Old Europe” is still trying to understand the past of the European Countries and to find better ways to further integrate them into the modern European community through developing stable democracy (e.g., Froese and Pfaff 2001; Froese 2004; Chizzoniti 2005; Ruggenini, Dreon, and Grollo 2012).

The most recent research, however, is finally shifting to studying the post-Soviet political processes, and the interaction between the Vatican and modern Russia is more and more often viewing through the prism of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is becoming a factor of such relations absolutely not to be omitted or neglected. In fact, as the mere titles of such research suggest, the Orthodox Church has become a powerful actor of Russia’s domestic political scene, and Catholic-Russian relations are incorporated in the picture that is dominated by the Orthodox Church (Knox 2009; Fagan 2012; Ruggenini, Dreon, and Grollo 2012; Curanovic 2012; Richters 2013).

When referring to the contemporary relations between Russia and the Vatican, these scholars primarily focus on the problematic issues encountered by the Catholic Church in Russia and the response of the Russian authorities to such issues (e.g. property restitution, acceptance of foreign Catholic clergy).

Now, it is interesting to turn to research produced in Russia, which is less numerous than that abroad yet more diverse in quality. Like their foreign colleagues, Russian scholars too often consider the Catholic Church, its position in Russia and its relations with Russia through the prism of Orthodoxy, yet their conclusions tend to be different.

Actually, the literature produced in Russia and talking about the post-Soviet period can be divided into two categories:

a. research authored by the people who are working or have worked as civil servants, particularly in diplomatic service;

b. research by members of the academic community.
Those representing the first category (Карлов 2004; Уранов 2011)\(^4\) (Богомазов 2012) primarily talk about the long and tough history between the two countries and how it developed in a close partner relationship with the fall of the Soviet Union. They emphasise the common goals shared by the two countries in the context of globalisation and global challenges. Since the Holy See is an officially neutral state, it is able to cooperate with other countries in peace-making all over the world, providing aid, mediation functions, etc.

On the other side, there is a whole number of contemporary authors who focus on the domestic Russian matters that involve the Catholic Church as well. They argue that Catholicism is a threat to the Russian society and Russian identity. (For example, Овсиенко 2009; Безбородов 2009; М. А. Краснов 2009; П. Краснов 2009; Артюшкин 2011; Церпицкая 2012; Митрофанова 2012; Козьякова 2013) Among the main accusations against the Vatican are the allegedly strong proselytism of the post-Soviet period, introduced by foreign (i.e. quasi “enemy”) clergy, and their involvement in the local political life that the official Vatican either turns a blind eye to or even inspires (П. Краснов 2009).

Some of them admit, however, that at certain moments the two Churches are forced to working closer together against global challenges since together they represent “Universal Christianity” (Церпицкая 2012), thus opening a chance for peaceful cooperation between the two civilisations.

Coverage of the Russia-Vatican Relations in the Media
When it comes to the media coverage of the Russia-Vatican relations, the variety of matters covered and points of view presented seems to be broader (which is of course partially due to the fact that scholar cannot respond to the newly arising issues as fast as the media). Therefore, it is hugely important to study this material as well.

We will appeal to the materials published both in the officially (such as “Rossiyskaya Gazeta” in Russia and “Acta Apostolicae Sedis”, the official bulletin of the Holy See, as well as “L’Osservatore Romano”, “Agenzia Fides”; bulletins of relevant governmental agencies etc.) and independent media.

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\(^{4}\) As well as at least one of their successors (Anonymous:jsaFhVI6), who hasn’t yet, however, produced his works on the topic.
Major “Contact Points” between Russia and the Vatican
The relations between Russia and the Vatican are not limited only to the issues of the post-Soviet countries but also include external territories that concern both actors. Oftentimes the position of the Russian Federation is based on the existing domestic consensus based on Russian values and beliefs and is developed in cooperation with such a socially important actor as the Russian Orthodox Church, whose opinion is not just voiced but taken into account due to the work of the regular Working Group on the Cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, established in 2003. However, as noted already by the first Soviet (then Russian) ambassador in the Holy See Yuri Karlov (Карлов 2004), the ecumenic relations were causing probably the major hindrances for the diplomatic mission, and had to be addressed with great caution.

Proselytism
One of the discrepancies between the two churches that significantly affect diplomatic relations between Russia and the Holy See is the issue of proselytism. Despite the fact that religious leaders acknowledge the improvement of the inter-church dialogue in the 2000s with the accession to the papal throne of Pope Benedict XVI (Митрополит Волоколамский 2010; Magister 2009) (under whom the full diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Russia were finally established), Catholic priests have been encountering bureaucratic and administrative problems (and even physical violence) in Russia throughout the decade, much to the discontent of the Vatican officials. For example, the Vatican expressed serious doubt about the quality of the investigation of the murder of two Jesuits in Moscow in 2008 (“EUROPE/RUSSIA - Disappointment for Outcome of Trial for Two Jesuits Murdered in Moscow in October 2008” 2009) and concern about the demolition of the buildings that belonged to Catholic charities in 2011 (“EUROPE/RUSSIA — a Statue of Mother Teresa Has Been Inaugurated in Moscow, but Her Sisters Are Homeless” 2011). According to the leaders of the Russian church, the problem is rooted primarily in the “different understanding of proselytism” by the two sides (ibid.).

First of all, the Catholic theological tradition does not recognised such a phenomenon as “canonical territory”, which allows them to proselytise freely and even open Catholic orphanages, though the number of converts and Catholics on the whole in Russia remains
rather small (Митрофанова 2012, 1). A more elaborate explanation was given by Metropolitan Hilarion on the one side and Cardinal Walter Casper, ex-President and current President Emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, who discussed the question at the end of the 1990s. In the view of the latter, most of the population in Russia was “unchurched”, with 20% being atheist or belonging to other religions and only 3-5% regularly going to [Orthodox] church, which opened an opportunity for the Catholic church to work with these people that had not made any decision about religion. From the Russian point of view, however, the structures of the Vatican, including numerous monastic orders, were accused of treating Russia as an open field for missionary activities. The Russian side interpreted this approach as inadmissible claiming that the same 60-70% of “unchurched” population that the Catholic church was aiming at would still identify themselves with Orthodoxy through their roots and family background. In the time of his rule, Partiarch Alexis II actually called the Roman proselytism of the 1990s “offensive” and said that “the Roman papacy had no right to make [Russia] a land of conquest” (Magister 2003a; Magister 2003b), therefore making it solely a task of the Russian church to involve such people into the congregation and re-introduce them to their own heritage.

The Russian side used different measures to block the development of the Catholic church in Russia: for example, the construction of a new cathedral has been blocked in Pskov, reported Rev. Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz (Kishkovsky 2002), and in 2002 alone five foreign Catholic priests lost their visas (making it 7 altogether in the period of 2001–2004 only (Fagan 2004)). The solution through diplomacy means, i.e. the stripping of visas, was probably one of the easiest and most obvious for the anti-Catholic forces in Russia due to lack of local priesthood. (Fagan continues (ibid.) that foreign clergy are important for the Catholic Church in Russia because “only two Catholic parishes and no seminaries were allowed to function in Soviet times”, therefore most of the Catholic priests being educated abroad and later assigned to the country by the Vatican. Many of them, however, still complained about having visa and other bureaucratic problems with the Russian authorities.)

2002 became a difficult year in the Russian-Vatican relations due to the decision of the Pope to re-structure the Vatican’s apostolic administrations by creating four dioceses in Russia and a very critical perception of this news (“Сообщение МИД РФ От 12 Февраля 2002 Г. О Решении Иоанна Павла II Учредить В России Католические Епархии”
The Orthodox hierarchs were closed to breaking up the relations with Rome then (Richters 2013, 133). As the Russian party acknowledged, the Holy See had every right to re-organise its structure in accordance with the canonic norms of the Vatican, yet such an undertaking in Russia should have been done after consultations with the Russian side, particularly with the Orthodox church, in order to avoid further tension in both ecclesiastical and diplomatic relations. While the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was phrased in a very mild way, not everyone in Russia was that diplomatic. Scholar Alexei Yudin, for example, when talking about the conflict quotes (Юдин 2009, 161, 172-173) numerous Russian politicians and intellectual leaders who accused the Holy See of trying to make Russia “one of its Catholic provinces” (thus misinterpreting church terminology) and aiming to de-stabilise and split up the country, preparing it to become a victim of a unipolar world.

At the same time, the Catholics in Russia were having difficulties obtaining permissions for the construction of new churches, those being effectively blocked particularly after 2002. Another highly sensitive administrative and economic issue that concerns the representatives of the Vatican in Russia is that of property restitution (Dunn:2004uj pp.77,, 79, 82, 197). All the religious organisations were stripped of their property at the beginning of the Soviet era but when the de-sovietisation, de-nationalisation and restoration of property came at the beginning of the 1990s, it turned out that many of the surviving buildings that had belonged to the Catholic church before the Revolution of 1917 came into possession of the Russian Orthodox Church. Despite the 2010 law on the restoration to religious organisations of the property seized by the state in Soviet times, which opened the decision-making processes not only for the federal but also regional and municipal authorities, the decisions still seem to favour the Russian Orthodox Church (Kishkovsky 2010). For example, shortly after the adoption of the law in Kalinigrad region only (which is home to a significant amount of Russia’s Catholics due to its geographical enclave position between Poland and Lithuania) the regional legislature agreed to “transfer more than a dozen former Catholic and Lutheran churches, cathedrals and castles to the Russian Orthodox Church, which says Orthodox believers there are underserved” (ibid.).

The only type of property that was returned to the Catholic church smoothly were the building that had during the Revolution been transferred to the French Republic and therefore remained under its diplomatic protection.
**Russian Domestic Politics**
Another matter of the political dimension in the relations between Russia and the Vatican takes root in the latter’s theological recognition of the opportunity “to freely comment on internal politics and policies of a state without endorsing any party or candidate” (Dunn 2004), relying on the papal encyclicals “Gaudiem et Spes” and “Centesimo Anno” (Cava 2001). In the Russian tradition, with the Russian church being effectively dependant on the state for nearly 300 years, such frivolity seemed unacceptable.

**Eastern Catholic (Uniate) Churches**
The problem of re-evangelisation and bringing the people “back to faith” was of course even more radical in the Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the harsh competition between the Orthodox and the Uniats (Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church), who historically were particularly important in the West Ukraine and played a significant role in the Ukrainian national liberation movement aimed against the Russian influence domestic political situation and the dominance of pro-Russian interests. During the Soviet times, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was treated as highly suspicious and finally banned (thus forced underground), to be restored after the meeting between John Paul II and the Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachyov in 1990. The Orthodox Church, which is officially “the Church of All Russia”, treats the territory of Russia itself, Ukraine and Belarus as its historical jurisdiction, with its “cradle” being in Kiev. Russian political leaders, similarly, treat this territory as their sphere of influence and interest.

Therefore, the resurrection and revival of the Uniate church in Ukraine in the 1990s, with the help from the Vatican, was again treated as a threat of Catholic expansion and even a “new crusade” at the expense of the Orthodox Church (Magister 2003c), carried out with “lies” and “deception” (Magister 2003a). In the middle of the 2000s, the then-Partiarch Alexis II has actually accused Ukrainian Catholics of ingratitude for the Russian Orthodox Church due to the victimisation of Orthodox believers in the country in the 1990s, violence against Orthodox clergy and forced takeover of hundreds of Orthodox churches, mostly in the West of the country (“О Встрече Святейшего Патриарха Московского И Всей Руси Алексия II С Кардиналом В.Каспером” 2004). Moreover, “the Orthodox patriarch of Moscow was infuriated at the idea of the Ukrainian Greek rite Catholic Church setting up a "rival" patriarch in Kiev” (Magister 2004). The cooling in the relations between Russia and the Ukraine, as well as between the two churches, peaked in 2004 when 150 members of the Ukrainian Parliament (including future president Victor Yushchenko and future prime-
minister Julia Timoshenko) appealed to the Pope asking to grant patriarchy status to the
Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, thus clearly highlighting the issue in the political angle.

For the secular Russian authorities, the resurrection of the Uniate church in the Western
Ukraine inevitably means the strengthening of Ukrainian nationalism, which is strongly
related to anti-Russian sentiments as well. Ukrainian nationalist movement (represented
by the All-Ukrainian Union “Svoboda”, which occupies nearly 10% in the Ukrainian
Parliament) also promotes the initiatives against integration with the organisations where
Russia is clearly the only or one of the main leaders, such as the Commonwealth of
Independent Countries, Eurasian Economic Union, or Tax Union, thus clearly working
against Russia’s economic interests in the region. (Гулевич 2013) Despite the fact that in
2010 the more pro-Western Ukrainian president Victor Yushchenko, who was largely
supported by the Catholics, was succeeded by the more conservative and pro-Russian
president Victor Yanukovich, the electoral support of “Svoboda” party and, therefore, anti-
Russian sentiments in the Ukrainian has only been growing since mid-2000s. Still, the
expansion of the Vatican’s activities in the Ukraine fits well in the policy of the West with
the eastwards expansion of the NATO and the European Union (Козьякова 2013, 70).

The consolidation of the Vatican in Belarus is of lesser concern for Russia than in the
Ukraine but still attracts attention in Russia, who entered into a union state with the
Republic of Belarus and has never denied it being its partner and sphere of interest, in
spite of not always supporting Belorussian president Alexander Lukashenko. The number
of Uniate and Latin Catholic parishes in Belarus is significantly smaller than in the Ukraine
and primarily consists of the ethnic Poles, thus being treated as a religion of an ethnic
minority that cannot be too harmful. The Catholic church in Belarus is maintaining balance
between the rather pro-Russian leaders and the opposition. Though the Belorussian
opposition, the national liberation movement in particular, is rather inclined towards
Western Christianity, the authorities also who prepared a Cooperation Agreement
between the republic and the Holy See and organised a meeting between president
Lukashenko and Pope Benedict XVI in 2009. The former assured his Russian partners of
continuously working towards mutual interests and even suggested Belarus as a platform
for a meeting between the Pope and the Russian Patriarch as a potential ground softening
for the long-anticipated papal visit to Russia but the idea was not treated too
enthusiastically by the Russian side. (Митрофанова 2012, 5-6) It was presidents Mikhail
Gorbachyov and Boris Yeltsin who ever sent out an invitation to the Pope (John Paul II
then) to visit Russia but in the later period, neither presidents Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev nor the Moscow Patriarchy extended such an invitation, which still makes such a visit impossible.

Since strategically Ukraine has historically always been seen by Russia as its sphere of influence, and one of the ways of tying Ukrainians —culturally and economically — to Russia is through common Orthodoxy, the hold of the Vatican and its position on disputed churches is detrimental to the relations between all the three countries.

**Positive Examples of Cooperation between Russian and the Vatican**

Probably the most recent example of such an issue important for both Russia and the Vatican is the situation in Syria, where the ongoing civil war since early 2011 has, besides other atrocities, led to the persecutions and murders of Christians, who comprised at least slightly over 5% of the population (Hackett and Grim 2011). Even though most of the Syrian Christians belong to the Orthodox tradition, both the Catholic and the Russian Orthodox churches have been voicing their preoccupation with the ongoing persecution.

From the Russian side, it was voiced, for example, by Hilarion Alfeyev, the Metropolitan of Volokolamsk, who is also the chairman of the Department of External Church Relations and a permanent member of the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Moscow. According to Hilarion Alfeyev, the current war is masking the real goal of the targeted eradication of Christianity as the struggle for democratic transformations, which endangers Christianity in its canonical territory with ages of history. (“Pontifical Diplomats for the New Evangelization” 2012; Митрополит Волоколамский 2013) A similar position on this international matter is expressed by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and representatives of the Russian Parliament, particularly by the members of the Inter-Fractional Working Group for the Defense of Christian Values, who at the end of April 2013 issued a declaration manifesting their dudgeon with the understatement of the persecution of Christians in Syria and their appeal to the international community to stop the war and save the Christian community, which is being tragically expelled from the country. (“Заявление Депутатов Государственной Думы ФС РФ — Членов Межфракционной Группы В Защиту Христианских Ценностей О Трагическом Положении Христиан В Сирии” 2013; “Русская Церковь И МИД РФ Определили Приоритетные Направления Сотрудничества” 2013) Russian parliamentarians acknowledged the fact that the Muslim population of the country was sufferings from the war as well but supported the position of
the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in its condemnation of the US and other foreign military landings in Syria, and appealed to the UN and other international organisations to pay more attention to the worsened positions of Christians in the Middle East.

As a result of the concerns raised both by the representatives of the Russian Federation and the Holy See (who has observer status with the Council of Europe) and despite much intervention on behalf of “the leftist and ultra-liberal deputies” (as put by Hegumen Philipp Ryabykh, Representative of the Russian Orthodox Church by the Council of Europe (“ПАСЕ Приняла Резолюцию В Защиту Религиозных Общин От Насилия” 2013)), at the end of April 2013 the Parliamentary Assembly issued Resolution 1928 (2013) “Safeguarding human rights in relation to religion and belief and protecting religious communities from violence”. In the resolution, the Assembly “condemns any instances of negative stereotyping of persons based on religion as well as the advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence”, particularly in the context of the Middle East (“Safeguarding Human Rights in Relation to Religion and Belief and Protecting Religious Communities From Violence” 2013), where most of the countries are recognised by the Council of Europe as eligible to request a “Partner for Democracy” status, Syria included.

The Holy See continuously has been raising its concerns with the situation as well, so that both the newly elected Pope Francis and the penultimate Pope Benedict XVI had numerous opportunities to do so. For example, during the General Audience that followed his first Easter of Pope Francis, he made an appeal “the end of the tragedy that the Syrian population was living through” (“An End to Violence in Syria” 2013). Even before that, at the beginning of April, Pope Francis made the same emphasis during his first audience with Secretary-General of the United Nations Mr Ban Ki-moon, when the two discussed “situations of conflict and serious humanitarian emergency, especially in Syria” (“Holy See and United Nations Join Forces for Peace and for the Common Good” 2013).

The same sentiments were expressed throughout the previous time by Pope Benedict XVI, who also appealed for peace in Syria, expressing “particular concern” for the situation in the country, which resulted in the unsuccessful initiative of sending a Delegation of Synod Fathers to Damascus. (“Peace in Syria Before It Is Too Late” 2012) Despite his general attitude to the “Arab Spring” being positive because, “at least in its original intention, it sought to promote democracy and cooperation” (“Under the Sign of Brotherhood and
Dialogue” 2012), Pope Benedict XVI continued to underline — especially during his apostolic visit to Lebanon in September 2012 — the need for peace in the Middle East (XVI 2012) and appealed to the international community and to the Arab countries to find “workable solutions respecting the dignity, the rights and the religion of every human person” (“The Silence of Arms, Peace in Hearts” 2012).

The peace and the position of the Christians in the Middle East as a point of common concern was also confirmed by the newly appointed ambassador of the Russian Federation to the Holy See Alexander Avdeev (“Защита Традиционных Нравственных Ценностей — Это Общее Поле, На Котором Мы Должны Взаимодействовать С Римско-Католической Церковью” 2013). In the same interview he also stressed that in his mission as the ambassador, he will keep on the traditions of intense interconnection and cooperation between the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, working together to protect the interests of Russia.

Besides the situation in Syria and other countries that experienced the “Arab Spring”, where the persecution of Christians is primarily determined by the internal confrontation between the old governments and the opposition, between Muslims belonging to different movements and presenting different political views, both the Catholic and the Russian churches feel that the positions of Christianity and “Christian values” are under threat in the modern world, and this position is shared by the Russian state. According to Metropolitan Hilarion, mass persecutions of Christians are caused by the fact that Europe is rejecting its Christian identity (“В Москве Открылась Конференция, Посвященная Проблеме Дискриминации И Преследования Христиан В Различных Регионах Мира” 2011). He blames the Europeans for forgetting the New Testament and turning to the standards of a “post-Christian civilisation”, that has lost its value from the point of view of traditional societies. This, Metropolitan Hilarion believes, has led the Muslims to extrapolate all the dissatisfaction that they have with the policies of the US and other “consumption societies” upon all the Christians. At the same time, continues the chairman of the Department of External Church Relations, the issue of christianophobia is being suppressed in European and international political organisations, due to extreme understanding of political correctness by politicians.

Similar concerns were expressed by the Russian and Catholic sides when discussing the situation in Poland and the Polish-Russian relations that have been tense ever since the
The relations were originally burdened by the antagonism between the two churches and particularly by the role of the Catholic church in the development of the Polish national liberation movement, which probably peaked after the end of the Second World War with the election of the Polish cardinal as Pope John Paul II. In the post-Soviet era, however, the two Churches seem to be working together with the aim of restoring peace between the two countries. It was, for example, a church initiative to sign a letter of reconciliation between the Russian and the Polish nations that was aimed at improving the relations between two countries and fighting the “militant secularism” and the “revision of traditional values” that are taking place in Europe, according to Metropolitan Hilarion (“Митрополит Волоколамский Иларион: Россияне И Поляки Должны Двигаться Навстречу Друг Другу Как Христиане И Родственники” 2012; Magister 2012). Poland, with its strong emphasis on Catholicism, is perceived in Russia as a stronghold of Christian values in Europe, as opposed to the mainstream human rights movement that promote, among other things, the rights of sexual minorities which are perceived very critically both within the Catholic church on the whole and Russia. To the present day, for example, Russia remains the only European Christian country that incorporates such a wording as “homosexual propaganda” in its legislation, with related restrictive laws already being in force in 12 Russian regions and similar legislative initiatives being discussed in at least another 7 regions (nearly all of the 19 being predominantly Christian regions).

Despite the internal historically predetermined disaccord between the Russian and the Catholic civilisations, both disagree with the modern understanding of values and rights and oppose the proposed universalism of human rights, which is seen as an anti-Christian liberal standard: i.e., where the real earthly life is considered to be important (more important than the after-life), together with personal rights and liberty (in contrast to the religious moral requirements and values). (Митрополит Смоленский и Калининградский 2004; Митрополит Волоколамский 2010; Magister 2010; moynihan 2009) Instead of the propagation of the “liberal values”, the defenders of “traditional values” are looking forward to a dialogue between liberal secular humanism and cultural & religious traditions because “liberal values” are seen by them as a result of the development of Protestant thought, with Protestantism itself emerging as an attempt for a liberal interpretation of Christianity. In other words, the Catholic church questions the “liberal values” because they seem to emerge from a force that originally challenged Catholicism, and Russia criticises them because of their political unsuitability to the current
conservative political system, while at the same time referring to the traditional values that are to be associated with the Russian Orthodox Church.

Conclusions
The above-mentioned positive examples (which, however, mostly concentrate on values and ethics) are probably a counterbalance for the problematic issues between the two countries. As we have described, there tend to harsh reactions from both sides (in terms of diplomatic, political and physical means) when it comes to rather down-to-earth, practical matters that require the involvement of two state parties (sometimes — three parties, like Ukraine or Poland).

From the point of view of values, Russia and the Holy See share rather conservative views — defined by their past and by respective religious tradition. But the more specific, long-standing differences between the two branches of Christianity lead to often antagonistic positions on the very territory of their juxtaposition, i.e. primarily in Russia and Ukraine. Bearing in mind the ever increasing de-secularisation of Russia (e.g., the introduction of voluntary-compulsory Christian studies at public schools in some regions, introduction of criminal persecution for mockery of religious beliefs, introduction of new religious holidays celebrating Orthodox saints in order to counterweight Western holidays such as St Valentine’s, etc.), one is inclined to believe that Russian-Vatican relations will continue to be difficult unless there is a) either strong political will to ameliorate them, despite the opinion of the Russian Orthodox Church, b) or the two churches review their own relations, thus helping improve the diplomatic relations as well.

References


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