

Alicja Curanović, PhD

University of Warsaw

Guarding the Motherland's Frontiers: the Russian Orthodox Church in the North Caucasus

Abstract

In all European imperial projects religious institutions played a part. It was not any different in the case of the historical expansion of the Russian state and the role the Russian Orthodox Church played in this process. One of the formative experience for the ROC was the Russian colonisation of the Caucasus in the 19th century. Christianisation of the local people was one of the instruments of establishing and preserving Russia's presence in the region. Being a part of a colonial project, the Church approached people as a strategic resource of the empire. Converting locals to Christianity, providing religious service to Russian settlers, erecting new churches and establishing eparchies – all these actions undertaken by the ROC were of strategic importance for the Russian state. This paper aims to establish whether the 'imperial syndrome' (as defined by the Russian scholar Emil Pain) can be traced in the ROC's views (e.g. on identity, ethnicity, territory) and actions. To achieve this goal the author analyses the ROC's activity in the North Caucasus region of the Russian Federation.

Russian state and Church: the imperial syndrome

Investigating the 'imperial' factor is one of the ways to analyse the historic development of the Russian state and Church. Since the conquest of the Khanate of Kazan and the Astrakhan Khanate in the 16th century, Russian monarchs have been pursuing an imperial policy. The form and structure of the empire became for several hundred of years the main structure of the Russian state.¹ The empire provided also the main framework for the self-identification process of the nation which associated with the imperial project the most, i.e. ethnic Russians. The close connection between the empire and Russian national

¹ Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552-1917*, Harvard University Press 1997. David G. Rowley, *Imperial versus national discourse: the case of Russia*, „Nations and Nationalism” 2000, vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 23-42.

identity turns Russians into one of the so called imperial nations along Englishmen or Turks². Hence, for Russians the ethnicity in terms of the relevance of identity markers was only second to the sense of imperial mission or glory. The significance of the ‘empire’ factor shows with the question whether the USSR was a Russian state. I would argue that the Soviet Union was not a Russian state in a sense that it was not organised and governed by ethnic Russians to their benefit. But what allowed ethnic Russians to identify with the Soviet project was its imperial character. The fact that ethnic Russians in the USSR could still consider themselves residents of the leading power provided them with the sense of continuity, which is in turn the main source of ontological security³. Wondering about the nature of the Russian Federation today, I would side with Andrey Makarychev who stated that under current circumstances it is hard to consider the new Russia an empire⁴. It’s more accurate to argue that it is a post-imperial country which, nevertheless, exhibits imperial characteristics, like imperial discourse⁵, or, in more general terms, “imperial syndrome”⁶.

In this paper I intentionally don’t focus on the state but on the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) whose identity, self-perception, narratives and routines have been also shaped by the Russian Empire. In all European imperial projects religious institutions played a part⁷. It was not any different in the case of the historical expansion of the Russian state and the role the Russian Orthodox Church played in this process. In the post-Soviet reality, the ROC finally could act more freely and decide about own matters. At the same time, it faced the necessity to define its identity and role in the public sphere anew. The imperial past, to be more precise, the ROC’s role in public affairs before 1917 has become one of the sources of reference in the Church’s current self-identification process. For obvious reasons (e.g. the primacy of the materialistic ideology and the anti-clerical policies), the ROC tends to consider the Soviet period a rule which disrupted the true Russian tradition. Hence, to a much greater

² Alexei Miller, Alfred J. Rieber, *Imperial Rule*, CEU Press, Budapest-New York 2004, pp. 11-12. Ed. Karen Barkey, Mark von Hagen, „After Empire. Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building. The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires”, Westview Press, Colorado-Oxford 1997.

³ Jennifer Mitzen, *Ontological security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma*, “European Journal of International Relations” 2006, vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 341-370. Ayse Zarakol, *States on ontological security: A historical rethinking*, „Cooperation and Conflict” 2017, vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 48-68.

⁴ Andrey Makarychev, *Imperial Discourse in Post-Imperial Russia: Where Will it Float to?*, w: Noel Parker [ed.], *Empire and International Order*, Ashgate 2013, pp. 113.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Эмиль Пайн, Имперский национализм (Возникновение, эволюция и политические перспективы в России), „Общественные науки и современность”, 2015, No. 2, pp. 54-71.

⁷ Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1995.

extend and in a much more natural way than the Kremlin the ROC refers to the imperial past as a source of ideas or institutional solutions. It does not mean, however, that the ROC wishes to uncritically re-establish the pre-revolutionary order, but it surely often recalls the times before 1917 as “the good times”.

I would argue that the ROC, alike the state, determines its post-Soviet identity *inter alia* by determining the relation to Russian imperial past. I should emphasise that I don't assume that “empire” *a priori* carries a negative connotation. I tend to approach “empire” as a mode of thinking about the relations between the centre and the peripheries, about territory and ethnicity. The imperial syndrome shows in the way the ROC understands its role in the public sphere and its relation to the state. The analysis of the Church's activity reveals that it's not just about ecclesiastic service but often about national security, or the state's status⁸. The ROC in its modes of perceiving and understanding Russian socio-political reality is state-oriented. And within the imperial framework, it would be accurate to say that the ROC is centre-oriented and acts to secure the interests of the centre in the peripheries. The ROC identifies and acts in accordance with *raison d'etat*.

This inclination of the ROC can be noticed with the notion of ‘spiritual security’ (rus. *dukhovnaya bezopasnost*) used by hierarchs. Patriarch Kirill (Gundyayev) argued that true security and sovereignty comes with spiritual revival.⁹ As Orthodox publicist and consultant of the Moscow Patriarchate Valentin Radaev explains, spiritual security is about the stable spiritual revival of an individual. It is also about preserving the moral values of society - its tradition, original culture, sense of patriotism and humanism.¹⁰ Hence the concept of spiritual security sees moral revival as a foundation of a secure and stable society. True security (individual as well as collective) requires keeping the soul safe from sin. In the ROC's interpretation, the spiritual security of the people is always linked to the security of the state. Hence true security of the state requires keeping the soul of the nation safe from sin.

⁸ See the notion of “spiritual security” in Lucian Leustean, *Eastern Orthodoxy, Geopolitics and the 2016 ‘Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church’*, “Geopolitics” 2018, vol. 23, 1, pp. 201-216.

⁹ ‘Svyateyshi Patriarkh Kirill: “Glavnoye chudo Sergiya Radonezhskogo — on sam”’ (Patriarch Kirill: the Main Miracle of Sergei of Rodonezh – is He Himself), the Moscow Patriarchate, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3693883.html> (accessed on 2 December 2017).

¹⁰ ‘Vklad russkoy pravoslavnay tserkvi v dukhovnyu bezopasnost' strany’ (The ROC's Part in Shaping National Spiritual Security), ‘Perspektivy’, http://www.perspektivy.info/rus/desk/vklad_russkoj_pravoslavnoj_cerkvi_v_duhovnuju_bezopasnost_strany_2007-01-31.htm (accessed on 2 December 2017). See Daniel S. Payne, ‘Spiritual Security, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Russian Foreign Ministry: Collaboration or Cooptation?’, *Journal of Church and State*, 2010, 52 (4), pp. 712-727.

The statist logic of spiritual security is especially clearly seen in its connection to another notion of ‘civilisational (humanitarian) sovereignty’. The World Russian People’s Council (*Vsemirnyy russkiy narodnyy sobor*) (WRPC), one of the most influential actors involved in the process of the conceptualisation and promotion of Orthodox projects)¹¹ defined it as ‘a set of cultural, religious, socio-psychological factors which enable a nation and a state to reproduce its own identity and to avoid a socio-psychological and cultural dependency upon external centres of influence. (...) It is the capacity to defend independence from the impact of soft power, which in the 21st century became the main instrument of the expansion of powers aspiring to global hegemony’.¹²

As the WRPC’s statement shows, spiritual security and civilisational (humanitarian) sovereignty are both manifestations of the securitisation of culture and identity which can be observed in the narrative of the ROC and of Russian state institutions. This tendency to think about spirituality, tradition and identity in terms of security turns all of them into strategic assets of state policies. The notion of spiritual security reveals the ROC’s inclination to think about people and their spirituality in terms of state interests. This tendency is in turn a manifestation of the Church’s *habitus* (in Bourdieu’s sense) which was shaped alongside the expansion of the Russian Empire.

The North Caucasus is the part of Russia where these tendencies in the ROC behaviour can be observed. I argue that a close investigation of the Church’s activity in this region reveals the renewal of practises which are similar to those characteristic for the ROC before 1917. The analysis of the ROC in the North Caucasus provides us with an insight into the Church’s contemporary understanding of Russian identity. After a short historic introduction, I will present the case, i.e. the ROC’s vision of the region, its actions and instruments. My research is based on the analysis of the materials (official statements and interviews of the hierarchs, memo-notes and articles published on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, articles from the Russian press and information sets from the Russian

¹¹ The World Russian People’s Council was established in 1993 at the initiative of Patriarch Aleksy II. It is an international organisation under the ROC’s auspices that seeks to gather together people who are concerned over Russia’s fate. The Council’s sessions are attended by governmental representatives, leaders of public associations, the clergy, science and culture figures, and delegates of Russian communities from the near and far abroad.

¹² ‘Sobornoye slovo XVII Vsemirnogo russkogo narodnogo sobora’ (The Statement of XVI World Russian People’s Council), the Moscow Patriarchate, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3337081.html> (accessed on 2 December 2017).

news agencies) from the time period: 2009 (since the enthronement of patriarch Kirill) - 2018.

The role of the ROC in Russia's imperial project in Caucasus

The acknowledged historians Michael Khodarkovsky or Alexander Etkind agree that it was not so much the expansion to Siberia but the conquest of the Caucasus which played the decisive role in shaping Russia's identity as a specific but nevertheless colonial empire¹³. Also for the ROC, it was one of the formative experiences. In this mountain region Eastern Orthodox Church competed for the soul and minds with another monotheistic religion – Islam. The presence of the adherents of each of these religions was used by the local major powers to claim their special rights for controlling the region. The Russian Empire protected Christians, while Ottoman Porte and Persia took care of Muslims. Under the circumstances, in which religion functioned as a marker of geopolitical influence, Christianisation of the local people was one of the instruments of establishing and preserving Russia's presence. Being a part of an imperial project, the Church approached people as a strategic resource of the empire. Converting locals to Christianity, providing religious service to Russian settlers, erecting new churches and establishing eparchies – all these actions undertaken by the ROC were of strategic importance for the Russian state.

According to the tradition, it was the apostles Andre, Simeon and Bartholomew who brought the Gospel to the banks of the Black and Caspian Seas. Christian communities established first in today's Abkhazia gradually spread to Adygea and North Ossetia-Alania since 4th century on. The event fraught with consequences was the baptism of the Kingdom of Alania in the 10th century¹⁴. The so called first Christianization of the Caucasus came to an end with the Mongol invasion in the second half of the 14th century, which in turn gave an impulse to the Islamization of the region.

¹³ M. Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800*, Indiana University Press 2004. A. Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*, Polity 2011. M. Khodarkovsky, "Not by Word Alone: Missionary Policies and Religious Conversion in Early Modern Russia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 1996, vol. 38, Nr. 2.

¹⁴ T. Mgaloblishvili, *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, Routledge 2016. И.Л. Бабич, Л.Т. Соловьева [ред.], *Христианство на северном Кавказе: история и современность*, УОП ИЭА РАН, Москва 2011.

The second Christianization is connected to the activity of the Russian Orthodox Church. Already in 1602, after the conquest of Khanates in the Volga region, a bishopric was established in Astrakhan which formally covered also the Caucasus¹⁵. In 1744, the Holy Synod launched re-Christianisation of Ossetians who were considered the successors of the medieval Alania. Over a hundred years later the task was still on the agenda, since in 1880 the Association for Rebirth of Christianity in the Caucasus was established¹⁶.

The mission of re-Christianization is one of the examples of the common enterprise of the Orthodox Church and the Russian empire. This particular “narrative frame” allowed to argue that the Russian Empire in the Caucasus was not conquering lands which were civilizationally alien but, on the contrary, Russia was advancing a “reconquista”. The Caucasus was presented as one of the cradles of Christianity, and Russia - as the only truly successor of Byzantium - simply continued to carry out its mission¹⁷. Russian emperors used these kind of arguments, while competing with the Ottoman Empire. It's remarkable that religion claims were used to legitimate geopolitical influence. Therefore, conversions to Orthodoxy functioned, as Michael Khodorkovsky observed, as specific rites of passage which allowed to join the community of “regular” lieges of the Russian emperors. The non-Christians were additionally taxed, experienced land confiscation and could not hope for climbing the social ladder¹⁸. Orthodox churches, crosses or chapels functioned not only as sites of cult but they marked the presence of Russians, and hence became symbolic markers of the cultural frontiers of the Russian Empire. Where the Russian state, there is also the Russian Church. Competing with Islam has strengthened religion's dimension as a criterion of “othering”. And, as a consequence, it has strengthened fixing a particular ethnicity with a particular religion. Slavs were Christians, and Muslims were, as a principle, non-Slavs. The Caucasian experience has enhanced the tendency in the ROC to fuse evangelisation with geopolitical logic and *raison d'etat*.

¹⁵ М.Гуманов, *Православный Кавказ - утопия или перспектива?*, URL: <https://www.pravda.ru/faith/religions/orthodoxy/24-03-2011/1071329-caucasus-0/> (20.03.2011).

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ A. Jersild, *Faith, Custom and Ritual In the Borderlands: Orthodoxy, Islam and the “Small Peoples” of the Middle Volga and the North Caucasus*, “The Russian Review” 2000, vol. 59, Nr 4, s. 517-519.

¹⁸ M. Khodarkovsky, *Not by Word Alone...*, op. cit., s. 268. M. Khodarkovsky, *Of Christianity, Enlightenment, and Colonialism: Russian in the North Caucasus, 1550-1800*, “The Journal of Modern History” 1999, vol. 71, Nr 2, s. 428.

The ROC's vision of the Northern Caucasus today

Today among the nations living in the Russian North Caucasus only the majority of Ossetians declare they are Orthodox Christians. The North Caucasus Federal *Okrug* is the only one among eight such units, where ethnic Russians are not a majority. According to Marina Dzajnukova, Russians make 27% of the population of this region, including 2% of them living in Ingushetia; 6% - in Dagestan; 25 000 – in Chechnya; 33% - Kabardino-Balkaria, 31% - Karachay-Cherkessia; 65% - Adygea.¹⁹ Significant number of people living in the North Caucasus declare that religion plays an important role in their life: 81% of Chechens, 68% - Ingush people, 42% - Kabardians. At the same time most of them admit that they don't practice religion on regular basis²⁰. Hence, in terms of religiosity expressed in declarations and practices, the North Caucasus shows similarities with the tendencies observed in Russia in general.

Nevertheless, the North Caucasus is the most challenging region of the Russian Federation for the Moscow Patriarchate's activity. This is a result of few factors. First of all, the Soviet period left the few existing sacral sites in a worst shape than in the European part of Russia. Secondly, Orthodoxy is a religion of minority and the persistent outflow of the Slavic population doesn't make the situation better. Thirdly, the activity of Islamic extremists makes the ROC a participant not only of an ideological battle, but a real conflict where clergy is often a target of radicals. Fourthly, the ROC still suffers from the deficit of "human resources", i.e. clergy who would know local languages and understand the complex local socio-cultural reality. Finally, in the region the ROC has to face the growing activity of protestant groups²¹.

The ROC's challenges in the region are mirrored by the problems of the Russian federal authorities. The North Caucasus has been showing the worst economic development

¹⁹ М. И. Дзайнукова, *К вопросу о конфессиональной ситуации на Северном Кавказе в конце ХХ - начале XXI вв.*, в: З. В. Канукова, А. Б. Крылов, А. Г. Кусраев [ред.], *Кавказ спустя 20 лет: geopolитика и проблемы безопасности: тр. междунар. науч. конф.*, Владикавказ 2011, с. 106 - 115.

²⁰ Ирбек И. Дзусов, PhD Paper: *Религиозная ситуация в республиках Северо-Кавказского федерального округа Российской Федерации*, Майкоп 2013, URL: heloveknauka.com/religioznaya-situatsiya-v-respublikah-severo-kavkazskogo-federalnogo-okruga-rossiyskoy-federatsii (24.05.017).

²¹ Олег Краснов, Эмма Марзоева, Тимур Исаев, Луиза Оразаева, *500 лет борьбы за души: протестанты выигрывают у РПЦ на Кавказе*, URL: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/311834.idoc> (31.10.3017).

for years, accompanied by the highest unemployment rate, endemic corruption, and last but not least, security threats linked to the dormant separatism. Especially the security concern puts the Kremlin and the ROC in the same boat. Preventing the process of de-Slavisation and de-Russification of the North Caucasus is perceived by both the state and the Church as the absolute priority. As a result, the ROC acts in the region as a representative of a particular ethnic group and not merely as a religious organisation. By the local elites the ROC is perceived as the representative of the federal government. This situation shows similarities to the Church's activity in the Caucasus in the times of the Russian Empire. The legacy of this historic period can be observed in the way the ROC defines its goals in the region.

It's striking that while taking today about the ROC's role in the Caucasus, the hierarchs talk again about re-Christianization of the region. As the bishop of Pyatigorsk and Cherkessia Theofilakt argued "while remembering the Kiev baptism, we should always remember the Caucasian baptism, in which participated almost all Caucasian nations; we should remember about the ancient Christian tradition, which can be traced in local customs, languages, or culture to this day"²². Bishop insisted that Christianity should be treated as an indigenous religion of the Caucasus of over a millennium long history²³. Symbolically the "Alania" was added to the title of bishop residing in Vladikavkaz. Archbishop of Vladikavkaz and Alania, Zosima, stressed the need to make the North Caucasus a part of the Russian pilgrimage routes²⁴. Bishop of Vladikavkaz and Alania, Leonid, emphasised that among over 100 nations living in Russia only ethnic Russians and Alanians received Christianity directly from Byzantium²⁵. This is a telling remark for it refers implicit to the tradition of presenting Russia as a true successor of the Byzantine legacy.

There are three more contexts in which the North Caucasus appears today in the ROC's narrative. First, it's the territory sanctified with the blood of the new Russian martyrs from the time of the two Chechen wars (1994-1996, 1999-2009). Although for political reasons the ROC tries to keep low profile on this issue, the figures of the priest Anatoly

²² Православные священники на Северном Кавказе решили изучать основы ислама, URL: <http://www.blagovest-info.ru/index.php?ss=2&s=3&id=70088> (13.10.2016).

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Архиепископ Владикавказский и Аланский Зосима: Православие в Осетии имеет глубочайшие корни, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3430676.html> (11.12.2013).

²⁵ Интервью епископа Владикавказского и Аланского Леонида корреспонденту ТАСС, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4616137.html> (16.09.2016).

Chistousov, Igor Rozin and the soldier Yevgenij Rodionov are popular among believers. In July 2018 the metropolitan of Krasnoyarsk and Achinsk Panteleimon blessed the new Church dedicated to Ylya Muromets in commemoration of soldiers “who died while reintroducing the constitutional order in the North Caucasus”. Interestingly enough, the construction of the site in Krasnoyarsk was financed from the donations of the employees of the Federal Service of Security²⁶.

In contrast to the first context, the second and third don't rise controversies but rather seek a way to reconcile the conflicting narratives about the North Caucasus. One is connected to the conservative turn and shows the Caucasus as this region of Russia where the traditional values are hold the most dearest among the people. The Caucasus is presented as a repository of tradition²⁷. The third context appears in the narrative which shows the conquest of the Caucasus in the 19th century as a clash of two patriotisms: the imperial one and the local one. Both were noble, however, in accordance to the laws of historic development, Russians took over in order to bring civilisation, technological development and modernity. An example of this narrative offers the speech delivered by . At the ceremony of consecration of the Akhulgo historic complex dedicated to the Caucasian wars of the 19th century the bishop said: “Today we are celebrating the opening a commemorative site dedicated to those who died fighting bravely for their Homeland. The brotherly blood was shed back then for they did not know that the next generations would build a common state and would be united with common goals and love for their common Homeland [...]. We need this kind of patriotism today”²⁸. Bishop Varlaam, while delivering service in Shelkovsk (Chechenya) said also: “Our grand-grand fathers and grand fathers fought shoulder to shoulder to save their Homeland regardless differences in faith or ethnicity – they were all brothers. We are still brothers today – and nobody can put us apart”²⁹.

²⁶ В Красноярске освящен храм, построенный в память о военнослужащих, погибших при восстановлении конституционного порядка на Северном Кавказе, URL: <http://eparchia.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5243976.html> (27.07.2018).

²⁷ В Ставрополе завершил работу IV форум Всемирного русского народного собора, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4285787.html> (3.12.2015).

²⁸ Епископ Махачкалинский Варлаам принял участие в открытии мемориального комплекса «Ахульго» в Дагестане, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4785825.html> (23.01.2017).

²⁹ В станице Шелковской (Чеченская Республика) торжественно открыт новый храм святой великомученицы Варвары, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5272340.html> (23.09.2018).

The ROC's instruments in the Northern Caucasus

Aiming at rebuilding its position in the region, the ROC disposes over several instruments to achieve this goal. Firstly, it's the establishing of the ecclesiastical administration which happened in 2011/2012. As a result, today there are five bishoprics: Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk, Pyatigorsk and Cherkessia, Vladikavkaz and Alania, Makhachkala and Grozny, or Maykop and Adygea. Additionally, in 2018 a regional representation of the Interfaith Council of Russia was established, with two centres in Pyatigorsk and Kazan³⁰. The main centres of the evangelisation of the ROC are located in Stavropol and Vladikavkaz. It's worth noting that the centres are often a revival of the institutions dating back to the Russian Empire, like the Alexander's Seminar in Ordon (originally erected in 1887) or the seminar in Vladikavkaz (originally erected in 1887)³¹.

Second way to enhance the ROC's position is to keep good relations with the local elites. Not only the local clergy but also patriarch Kirill meets regularly with the presidents of the North Caucasian republics. At the same time, local politicians do make goodwill gestures and support the ROC's initiatives.³² It's important to note that while approaching the local elites the ROC does not shy away to act as the representative of all ethnic Russians. On 14 December 2012, during one such meetings with the leaders of the North Caucasian republics patriarch Kirill said: "I know that sometimes our Caucasian brothers consider ethnic Russians weaklings. But it's not about weakness. It is shaped by Orthodoxy sensitivity towards others. Due to this sensitivity we are all able to live together peacefully; had the nation-state builder turned to be hard hearted, all nations would crash against it and there would be no common life [...]. The openness and sensitivity of ethnic Russians is mistakenly taken for weakness. For it's precisely the openness which allows other nations to feel at home and not being

³⁰ Резолюция заседания Межрелигиозного совета России от 27 марта 2018 года, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5169601.html> (28.03.2018).

³¹ Очаг христианства на Северном Кавказе. Беседа с протоиереем Артемием Пономаренко, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3138359.html> (1.08.2013).

³² В станице Наурской (Чеченская Республика) совершено великое освящение нового православного храма, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4828205.html> (6.03.2017). Епископ Махачкалинский Варлаам принял участие в межрегиональной конференции «От Терека до Дона» в Грозном, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4196299.html> (13.08.2015).

discriminated". Thanks to this feature of the Russian character an empire appeared"³³. Hence, patriarch named ethnic Russians a special nation - the nation which has created the state. Furthermore, this is a nation which plays a role of a host providing space to other nations. Finally, ethnic Russians are the ones who have build not any state, but an empire.

The third way to strengthen the ROC's presence is by renovating old and building new cult sites. It's important to emphasise that many hierarchs see the ROC as the institution which had the biggest impact on keeping the Russian, or broader, Slavic population in the region. Bishop of Makhachkala and Grozny made it clear that the very presence of the Russian Orthodox Church – its sacral sites - equals to the presence of Russians³⁴. One cannot but notice the similarity of this logic to the motives behind the ROC's activity in the region in the 19th century. Moreover, the presence of ethnic Russians in the region is perceived as one of most important factors providing stability and security. Ethnic Russians and representing them the ROC are the vanguard of the centre in the peripheries. The people and the Church are strategic resources of the federal centre. In the resolution adopted by the Stavropol Forum of World Russian People's Council (rus. *Всемирный русский народный собор*) we can find a following sentence: "the Russian presence in the Caucasus is a factor of stabilisation, economic development, civilization; the outflow of Slavic people from the region may contribute to separatism"³⁵. What's more, the ROC pays attention not only to spreading faith but also promoting Russian language and culture. Patriarch Kirill, while speaking at the Russian Language Association (rus. *Общество русской словесности*), talked about the necessity to improve the quality of teaching Russian in the North Caucasus. He said: "The low quality of teaching Russian language does not only discriminate the graduates of the regional high schools, when it comes to entering universities. It also lowers the status of Russian language which plays the key role in integrating Russian nation (rus.

³³ Патриарх Кирилл просит Кавказ не путать мягкость и открытость русских со слабостью, URL: <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/orthodoxy/?act=news&div=49291> (14.12.2012).

³⁴ А. Приймак, РПЦ берется окормлять Кавказ, URL: http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2016-12-21/3_412_caucasus.html (21.12.2016).

³⁵ Резолюция II Ставропольского форума Всемирного русского народного собора, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3457519.html> (22.12.2013).

российской нации) and is one of the main components of the cultural code of our country".³⁶

Considering the strategic role of the ROC, it should not come as a surprise that the number and scope of Orthodox Christian initiatives in the region is on the rise, while the number of the adherents is dropping. For few years already the local clergy have been organising the solemn processions attended not only by the believers but also by representatives of the local elites³⁷. The ROC spares no effort to bring the holy relics to the believers in the North Caucasus³⁸. The process of rebuilding and erecting new churches³⁹ fits the framework of a broader initiative which assumes building several churches dedicated the Alexander Nevsky at the frontiers of the Russian Federation⁴⁰. The project makes an excellent case where religion and religious sites are used, just like in the times of the Russian Empire, to mark the symbolic cultural frontiers of Russia. Among other initiatives promoting Orthodoxy in the North Caucasus, we could mention also such events like public celebration of the Baptism of Jesus (Jordan fest)⁴¹, the series of the Saint Ignatius Lectures in Stavropol

³⁶ Выступление Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на заседании Президиума Общества русской словесности, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5168955.html> (21.03.2018).

³⁷ Крестный ход с особо почитаемой на Кавказе Моздокской иконой Божией Матери состоялся в Прохладном, URL: <http://eparchia.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5189716.html> (4.05.2018). В Дагестане впервые в новейшей истории состоялся крестный ход, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4235611.html> (3.10.2015).

Впервые за сто лет в древнейшем городе России состоялся крестный ход, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4643519.html> (17.10.2016). В Кизляре в День города состоялся крестный ход и открытие православного центра, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4629339.html> (3.10.2016).

³⁸ В Махачкалу принесена икона святого праведного Иоанна Русского с частицей мощей, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5217050.html> (7.06.2018). В республиках Северного Кавказа побывала читимая икона преподобного Сергия Радонежского с частицей мощей, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3688323.html> (14.07.2014). Мощи Крестителя Руси доставляют на Северный Кавказ, URL: <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/orthodoxy/?act=news&div=59361> (7.07.2015).

³⁹ In September 2018 a new church in Cossack Shelkovskaya stanitsa attended by Ramzan Kadyrov. В станице Шелковской (Чеченская Республика) торжественно открыт новый храм святой великомученицы Варвары, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5272340.html> (23.09.2018). Впервые за шесть десятилетий совершено освящение православного храма в Ингушетии, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2528555.html> (15.10.2012). The new church in Nalchik was consecrated personally by patriarch Kirill as a commemoration of the 460th anniversary of Kabardino-Balkaria joining the Russian Empire. Глава РПЦ Патриарх Кирилл впервые посетил Северный Кавказ, URL: <http://www.stav.kp.ru/online/news/2392788/> (20.05.2017).

⁴⁰ В рамках программы «Александр Невский» на крайнем юге России заложен храм в честь святого благоверного великого князя, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3889984.html> (24.12.2014).

⁴¹ В праздник Крещения Господня епископ Махачкалинский Варлаам совершил чин великого освящения вод Каспия, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4347575.html> (19.01.2016). A different kind of event, yet telling – a public blessing of the mineral waters in Kislovodsk. В Кисловодске освятили все минеральные источники, URL: <http://www.blagovest-info.ru/index.php?ss=2&s=3&id=73440> (5.06.2017).

(since 1999⁴²), the Saint George Lectures (since 2011 in Vladikavkaz⁴³), and the Christmas Lectures (since 2015 in Makhachkala). Also the annual Stavropol Forum of the World Russian People's Council (in 2018, VI took place⁴⁴), Media Forum "Blessed Caucasus" (since 2014⁴⁵), or International Interfaith Youth Forum in Dagestan organised in cooperation with other traditional religions (since 2014⁴⁶). In order to activate Orthodox believers the ROC awards grants, which have resulted *inter alia* in establishing the radio station "Viera", organising the "Day of the Orthodox Book" in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria⁴⁷, or preparing the exhibition "Blessed Caucasus" in Yessentuki⁴⁸. Perhaps the biggest single event organised by the ROC will be the celebration of the 1100 anniversary of the baptism of medieval Alania, which is to take place in 2022⁴⁹.

Conclusions

The analysis of the ROC's rhetoric and actions in the North Caucasus reveals the revival of patterns which bear a significant resemblance to the practices characteristic for the ROC in the 19th century. Although being a religious organisation of minority in the region, the ROC sees itself as a representative not only of all ethnic Russians, but also as one of the guardians of Russian civilisation. Taking this position strengthens the tendency to equate Orthodox Christianity with Russianness and, furthermore, both turn into the main pillars of the Russian Federation, which after all, is a multiethnic and mulireligious state. Furthermore,

⁴² Сборник документов «Юго-Восточный Русский Церковный Собор 1919 года» был представлен на прошедших в Ставрополе международных Свято-Игнатиевских чтениях, URL: <http://eparchia.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5194643.html> (13.05.2018).

⁴³ Во Владикавказской епархии намечен комплекс мер по расширению участия Церкви в деле сохранения и развития национальной культуры, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4710478.html> (9.12.2016).

⁴⁴ Председатель Синодального отдела по социальному служению принял участие в работе секции «Милосердие и благотворительность на Кавказе» Ставропольского форума ВРНС, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5322906.html> (14.12.2018).

⁴⁵ Председатель Синодального отдела по взаимоотношениям Церкви с обществом и СМИ провел встречу с руководителями профильных отделов епархий Северо-Кавказского федерального округа, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5299596.html> (9.11.2018).

⁴⁶ В Дагестане прошел V Международный межрелигиозный молодежный форум, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5279060.html> (8.10.2018).

⁴⁷ Впервые православное радио получило право на вещание на территории Ставропольского края, URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4280742.html> (25.11.2015).

⁴⁸ В Ессентуках проходят выставки «Радость Слова» и «Благословенный Кавказ», URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5269336.html> (17.09.2018).

⁴⁹ В соответствии с указом Президента В.В. Путина в 2022 году в России отметят 1100-летие Крещения Алании, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5052823.html> (1.11.2018).

the ROC understands its duties not only as ecclesiastical ones, but also as supplementing the presence of the Russian state. The cult sites are more than just places where people go to pray, but they are markers of the civilisational presence. They are to remind the non-Christian population of the North Caucasus about the federal centre. It's important to emphasise that it's not just the ROC which aspires to this kind of position. The local elites do recognise the ROC's title to act in this particular capacity. However, the increase of the ROC's visibility could be one of the reasons for the fact that the extremists started to target not only the muftis but also Orthodox clergy. The attacks on the Church first in Kyzlar (18th February 2018)⁵⁰, then in Grozny (on 19th May 2018)⁵¹, may suggest it.

What's more the ROC's presence in the North Caucasus does not end within the borders of the Russian Federation. And although it's not in the scope of this paper, it's worth noting that the ROC plays important, although mostly in an informal way, part in providing religious service to the Orthodox believers of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Officially, the ROC recognises both quasi-states as belonging to the canonical territory of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, priests of the ROC are present in both regions. In 2016, in Tshinvali (the capitol of South Ossetia) the foundations were laid for the ROC's church of (of course!) Alexander Nevsky⁵². This example shows that the ROC is capable of projecting Russia's power even beyond its borders. Is it just remnants of the imperial practices which will eventually disappear or are they to become a firm component of the ROC's identity in the 21st century, the time will show.

⁵⁰ Кизлярская трагедия нас сплотила, URL: <http://eparchia.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5169305.html> (29.03.2018).

⁵¹ Архиепископ Махачкалинский и Грозненский Варлаам: «Страдания за Христа — это часть нашей веры», URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5208655.html> (23.05.2018).

⁵² Строительство храма в Цхинвале — «удар по православию в Южной Осетии?», URL: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2015/06/01/stroitelstvo-hrama-v-chinvale-udar-po-pravoslaviyu-v-yuzhnay-osetii> (23.05.2017).