

EEGA in Dialogue: Interview with Tobias Köllner
by Lena Dallywater

Dieser Beitrag ist hervorgegangen aus der Kooperation zwischen dem Leibniz-WissenschaftsCampus „Eastern Europe – Global Area“ (EEGA) und dem eJournal Connections. Die folgenden Interviews und Artikel geben Einblicke in die Forschungen am EEGA-WissenschaftsCampus, die den Entwicklungen im östlichen Europa in ihren globalen Bezügen gewidmet sind.

This item has emerged from the cooperation between Leibniz ScienceCampus „Eastern Europe – Global Area“ (EEGA) and the eJournal Connections. The following interviews and articles offer insights of the research projects at EEGA ScienceCampus, which are devoted to the developments in Eastern Europe in their global dimensions.

Interview with Tobias Köllner

Tobias Köllner received his PhD in social anthropology in 2011 from the University of Leipzig based on his research on Russian entrepreneurs and their relations to morality and Russian Orthodoxy. Prior to that (2006–2009), he was a member of the research group ‘Religion and Morality in European Russia’ at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. In 2013, he received a grant from the German Research Foundation (DFG) for the research project ‘The Interrelationship between Religion and Politics in Contemporary Russia’. At the moment he works at the Witten Institute for Family Business at the Witten/Herdecke University and is a member of the Centre for Research on Transformation at Otto von Guericke University in Magdeburg. He is the author of *Orthodox Religion and Politics in contemporary Eastern Europe: On Multiple Secularism and Entanglements* (Routledge, forthcoming 2018), *On Entangled Authorities: Orthodox Religion and Politics in Contemporary Russia* (Routledge, forthcoming 2019) and *Practising without Belonging? Entrepreneurship, Morality, and Religion in Contemporary Russia* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2012) and has published recently in *Journal of Religion, State and Society*;

Europe-Asia Studies (forthcoming); *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*; *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology and Anthropology Today*.

Which aspect of Eastern Europe in relation to the global history / developments do you study?

I pursue an ethnographic research project on the interrelation between Russian Orthodoxy and politics.¹ The topic is particularly relevant because it offers new insights for the analysis of previous and current developments in the Russian Federation, and beyond. Most authors, however, have emphasized the legitimating role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and tried primarily to show how the ROC and Orthodox activists are supporting the state.² This builds on a research tradition where the ROC is described to be extraordinarily close to the state and suitable for its legitimation. On the one hand, these authors seem to claim continuity to the Soviet times where Richard Pipes characterized the ROC as „servant of the state“.³ For post-socialist Russia, however, this is an open question and has to be shown whereas most authors seem to take this assumption at face value without providing further evidence. On the other hand, the image of the continuing importance of Byzantine legacies seems to dominate the interpretation of the state-church relationship until today. In particular, the idea of a

¹This is a case study drawing on the methodology of ethnographic fieldwork. As field site I have chosen the Vladimir region where I already conducted another fieldwork before. In addition, I visited the city of St Petersburg and compared my findings from Vladimir to the situation there. Nevertheless, it was no ‘multi-sited ethnography’ because I almost exclusively draw on the ethnographic data from the Vladimir region. During the research, I conducted participant observation, 48 semi-structured interviews that have been recorded and a number of conversations without recording. Among my interlocutors were priests, believers, politicians, teachers, journalists, scientists and people working in museums and the planetarium of Vladimir. I am grateful to the German Research Foundation DFG which made this research project possible with its funding (KO 4652/1-1).

²Alicja Curanović, *The Religious Factor in Russia’s Foreign Policy*, London 2012; Anastasia M. Mitrofanova, *The Politicization of Russian Orthodoxy: Actors and Ideas*. Stuttgart 2005; Nikolai Mitrokhin, *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’: sovremennoe sostoyanie i aktual’nye problemy* [The Russian Orthodox Church: Contemporary Condition and Current Problems], Moscow 2004.

³Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime*. London 1974, p. 224.

harmonic interrelation between church and state, called *symphonia*, is put forward.⁴ But here it is important to take into account the changes the concept underwent already in Byzantine times and later on. This is a point which has been aptly described by Cyril Hovorun who notes that even its alleged supporters would hesitate to implement it today when realizing all its consequences.⁵ Here it becomes obvious that the proposed ideal of a harmonious relationship between state and church was neither met in Byzantine times nor afterward. For this reason, *symphonia* is no suitable model for today and the interpretations given lack the necessary evidence and ethnographic depth.

Instead, I have developed the concept of „entangled authorities“, which challenges the widespread picture of an all-powerful state dominating religious groups completely and using them primarily for its own legitimacy. In contrast, the relation between state and church in contemporary Russia is characterized and described as a complex interplay of two powerful institutions characterized by both, cooperation and conflict. Entangled authorities are characterized by a close cooperation between both spheres which is obvious in ideological convergence and institutional as well as personal entanglements between politics and Orthodox religion. Despite close cooperation, however, the outcomes are not determined and quite often lead to unexpected or even unintended consequences, as will become clear from the ethnographic examples. By looking at religious education,⁶ property restitution to religious organizations,⁷ the establishment of

⁴John Anderson, *Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church: Asymmetric Symphonia?*, in: *Journal of International Affairs* 61 (2007) 1, pp. 185–201; Kristen Ghodsee, *Symphonic Secularism: Eastern Orthodoxy, Ethnic Identity and Religious Freedoms in Contemporary Bulgaria*, in: *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 27 (2009) 2, pp. 227–252; John Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church*, Crestwood 1982.

⁵Cyril Hovorun, „Is the Byzantine ‘Symphony’ Possible in Our Days?“, in: *Journal of Church and State* 59 (2016) 2, pp. 280–296.

⁶Tobias Köllner, *Patriotism, Orthodox Religion, and Education: Empirical Findings from contemporary Russia*, in: *Religion, State & Society* 44 (2016) 4, pp. 366–386.

⁷Tobias Köllner, *A Post-Socialist Palimpsest: On the Restitution of Property and the Making of ‘Authentic’ Landscapes in Contemporary Russia*, in: *Europe-Asia Studies* (Forthcoming).

new festive days⁸ and conservative religious groups⁹, my work has shown that on the local level, in particular, the relationship is much more diverse, and outcomes are open and hard to predict.¹⁰

Can you give us an example?

Among others I was concerned with the international dimension of a newly-introduced festive day which carries both, religious and political notions. In 2008, the 8th of July has been introduced and since then is the Day of Family, Love, and Faithfulness (*Den’ sem’i, lyubvi i vernosti*). The festive day (but no public holiday) builds on the Orthodox Saints Peter and Fevroniya originating from Murom in Vladimir region which is celebrated on the same day. In popular Orthodox religiosity both saints are considered to be the protectors of love and have been venerated already before the official introduction of the festive day. On the one hand, the festive day draws on Orthodox saints, religious weddings and religious moral notions. On the other hand, however, it has to be seen in the context of a re-emerging pro-natalist state policy. As in other countries, since the 1960s the fertility rate in the Soviet Union decreased considerably and never recovered. Already the late socialist times have been characterized by discourses around declining fertility rates, the crisis of masculinity and depopulation which led to the introduction of a number of instruments to stimulate fertility.¹¹ After the demise of the Soviet Union, the situation changed significantly in three ways.¹² First, the pro-natalist policy of the Soviet state came

⁸Tobias Köllner, *The Day of Family, Love and Faithfulness: Religion, Politics and the Construction of New Moralities and Identities*, in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (Under review).

⁹Tobias Köllner, *Religious Conservatism in Post-Socialist Russia and its Relation to Politics: Empirical Findings from Ethnographic Fieldwork*, in: *Eastern Europe’s New Conservatives: Varieties and Explanations from Poland to Russia*, ed. by Katharina Bluhm / Mihai Varga, London (forthcoming).

¹⁰For a more extensive discussion see Tobias Köllner, *On Entangled Authorities: Orthodox Religion and Politics in Contemporary Russia*, London (Forthcoming 2019) and Tobias Köllner (ed.), *Orthodox Religion and Politics in Eastern Europe: On Multiple Secularisms and Entanglements*, London (forthcoming 2018).

¹¹Ekaterina Selezneva, *Struggling for new lives: Family and fertility policies in the Soviet Union and modern Russia*, in: *IOS Working Papers* 355, 2016.

¹²*Ibid.*: p. 22.

to an end. Second, the early post-socialist days witnessed a sharply decreasing fertility rate which was related to widespread insecurity and instability. According to official figures the Russian Federation lost about 2.0 Mio inhabitants in the period from 1991 to 2001 and another 4.4 Mio inhabitants between 2001 and 2011.¹³ Third, migration from rural areas to urban centers, a process which already began in the socialist days, gained momentum and accelerated considerably leaving many hamlets and villages without a young generation.

With reference to these demographic difficulties, the introduction as a festive day was strongly supported by politicians. Among the supporters of the new festive day the wife of then President Dmitrii Medvedev, Svetlana Medvedeva, took an especially prominent position. Currently, she is head of the organizing committee and responsible for the secular events during that day: such as a big festival in Murom with show artists from all over Russia and a fair in the city center. Local politicians have joined and use the opportunity to participate. In addition to the secular events, a religious festive day takes place in and around the Holy Trinity monastery in Murom. During the day, many pilgrims visit the town of Murom and take part in processions or prayers, venerate the relics of Saints Peter and Fevroniya or join the meals provided in the cafeteria of the monastery. Here politicians take part too and use the opportunity for meetings with high-ranking clergymen, which indicates the cooperation between Orthodoxy and politics.

Nevertheless, the secular and the religious events during the Day of Family, Love and Faithfulness are not in congruence. Both events take place in different parts of the town and address different audiences. In addition, the attempts by politicians to promote the popularity of the day by organizing public wedding ceremonies have failed. The festive day takes place during a fasting time where church weddings are not possible. So the Russian Orthodox Church only allows for

¹³Goskomstat: Chislennost' i sostav nazeleniia [Number and composition of the population]. Available at: http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_main/rosstat/ru/statistics/population/demography/#. Last access: April 26, 2018.

wedding promises and conducts the actual wedding ceremonies later. This led to the introduction of an additional festive day in September. This day, however, is hardly known, largely ignored and criticized by clergymen for being an uncanonical invention. For this reason, the festive day and the surrounding discourses show the difficulties and different agendas of political and religious actors towards this festive day quite clearly.

What are these?

To a large extent, the local events in Murom and Russia are used to foster anti-Western sentiments and to reinforce a genuine Russian cultural identity and a moral basis independent from any outside influences. Saints Peter and Fevroniya are understood as anti-Valentine and as a way to emphasize the superiority of Russian cultural and moral values over a degenerated West ('gayropa') which is characterized by sinful homosexuality and a lack of protection for families and their needs. President Putin, for example, in his 2013 state of the nation address announced: „In many countries today, moral and ethical norms are being reconsidered; national traditions, differences in nation and culture are being erased [...] requiring [...] also the mandatory acknowledgement of the equality of good and evil“.¹⁴ These fears and notions of a culture under attack have been confirmed by Patriarch Kirill on several occasions.

What is the global dimension in this happening and how do you analyze it?

Whereas the facts mentioned above seem to point to a particularistic and nationalist worldview there is yet another dimension. Whereas the Cold War was characterized by an antagonism between two economic and political models, the recent confrontation between the 'West' and the Russian Federation includes issues such as cultural and moral values. The Russian Federation perceives its identity and culture to be

¹⁴Damien McElroy, Vladimir Putin claims Russia is moral compass of the world. The Telegraph December 12, 2013. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/10513330/Vladimir-Putin-claims-Russia-is-moral-compass-of-the-world.html>. Last access: August 14, 2017.

in danger.¹⁵ Accordingly, topics such as traditional moral values and protection of family values are used in a global arena by the Russian Federation in cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church. The ROC is a new player in the international arena and so far little analyzed. Until today, most authors have examined the role of Russian Orthodoxy within the Russian Federation and neglected its global impact. If studying the role of Russian Orthodoxy in the international arena at all, an interpretation as an instrument of the Russian state guided by traditional notions of ‘harmonious partnership’ (called *symphonia*) prevails, as has been stated above. Rather exceptionally is the interpretation given by Kristina Stoeckl¹⁶ who demanded „an assessment of the Russian Orthodox Church as a moral agent in the international sphere in its own right“.¹⁷

For my analysis, I will draw on the concept of norm entrepreneurship / norm protagonism as used by Kristina Stoeckl¹⁸ in her research on the role of the ROC in the human rights debate. In the beginning, the Church rejected the concept of human rights completely. In the 2000s, however, the attitude changed considerably and led to the formulation of a concept on human rights of the Russian Orthodox Church.¹⁹ Similarly, I would like to emphasize the role of the ROC as norm protagonist in the context of so-called traditional family values. Here I point to attempts by the ROC – with the support of Russian diplomacy – to set the agenda at meetings of the World Family Congress and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR).

Two resolutions of the UNCHR in 2014 and 2015 might serve as examples here. Both emphasize that „the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society

¹⁵See also Sarah Pagung, *Die Mär vom bösen Westen*, in: *Berliner Republik* 02/2017.

¹⁶Kristina Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur*, in: *Religion, State and Society* 44 (2016) 2, pp. 132–151.

¹⁷*Ibid.*: p. 132.

¹⁸Kristina Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights*, London 2014.

¹⁹*Russian Orthodox Church: The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching in Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights*. Moscow 2008. Available at: <https://mospat.ru/ru/documents/dignity-freedom-rights/>, last access: August 14, 2017.

and the state“. The 2015 resolution, backed by a newly-established ‘Group of Friends of the Family’ at the UNCHR was initiated by Egypt. In the end, 29 states supported the initiative including Russia, China, and many Islamic countries (14 against, and 4 abstentions). The coordination of the activity, however, fell to the Russian Federation who took a leading position and in this way challenged the liberal position of other states, including many from the European Union. The crucial point is the understanding of the family that is non-inclusive and favors a traditional concept which might be used to oppose rights for LGBT couples, single parents and other forms of families. This provides a severe challenge for liberal states because sensitive topics such as LGBT rights are missing altogether in the resolution but seem to be on a hidden agenda. Second, the liberal states are caught in a dilemma how to react to such a resolution. On the one hand, they are trying to support and protect family issues considerably but on the other, they do not want to discriminate non-traditional forms of families. Due to these difficulties, the Russian Federation gained some initiative in the international arena and was able to increase international recognition, to restore parts of its status and to justify restrictive policies within the Russian Federation, as visible in the ban on gay propaganda.

Despite a growing popularity of the Day of Family, Love and Faithfulness in the Russian Federation, it has to be stated clearly that it has limited success only. In the national arena, some of my interlocutors criticize the festive day as invention or the secularity at the festival where various show artists performed without any reference to the Orthodox roots of the day.²⁰ One of the key problems is the multivocality within the ROC and Russian Orthodoxy. According to social analysis, Russian Orthodoxy is divided into at least three different factions with different attitudes.²¹ For this reason, the understanding

²⁰Among the participating artists were Dima Bilan, Larisa Dolina, Lev Leshchenko, Nadezhda Babkina and many others.

²¹Irina Papkova, *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics*, New York 2011; Aleksandr Verkhovskii, *Politicheskoe pravoslavie: Russkie pravoslavnye natsionalisty i fundamentalisty, 1995–2001gg.* [Political Orthodoxy: Russian Orthodox Nationalists

of what 'traditional moral values' are and how they could be promoted best is quite diverse. In particular the fundamentalist faction within the ROC demands a more conservative interpretation and strict measures against homosexuality. This conservative position is also one of the reasons why the success in the international arena is limited. One example is the pan-orthodox council in 2016 where the leadership of the ROC intended to take a leading position among the Orthodox Churches. Due to internal pressures from the fundamentalist faction, however, it did not take part and missed the opportunity to exert any influence on decisions taken there.²² For these reasons, the success of the traditional moral values campaign is considered to be limited in the national as well as in the international arena.

and Fundamentalists, 1995–2001], Moscow 2003.

²²Kristina Stoeckl, Russland als Verteidiger traditioneller Werte? Eine Idee und ihre Grenzen, in: Russland-Analysen 335 (2017).