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Poll Suggests Russia Is Europe's Most Pious Nation

By Alexandra Odynova

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Former first lady Lyudmila Putina, center, and first lady Svetlana Medvedeva leaving an Easter service in the Christ the Savior Cathedral on April 24. **Alexander Zemlianichenko**

Russians are the most pious nation in Europe, most atheists are male, and Orthodox Christians outnumber Muslims overwhelmingly, according to two recent polls.

The surveys, however, also indicate that the country's leading religious denomination, the Russian Orthodox Church, may be seriously overestimating its membership, and avoided the tricky question about whether belief translates into active worship — which earlier polls indicate it does not.

A record 82 percent of respondents acknowledged that they believe in God, according to a poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation and an obscure religious research group called Sreda.

But only 50 percent said they belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church, said the poll, which was released this week by Interfax. The church usually puts the figure around 70 percent.

A further 27 percent called themselves believers not affiliated with any particular religion. This option was particularly popular among young people and residents of the Urals Federal District, while the Northwest Federal District led in the number of "Orthodox believers not affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church." The area is a traditional stronghold of the church's leading rival movement, the Old Believers.

Atheists accounted for another 13 percent of the populace. The highest concentration of nonbelievers was found among workers and the poor who "do not even have money for food," and 68 percent of atheists were men, the poll said, without elaborating. By sharp contrast, impoverished countries in Africa, South America and Asia are known for having more believers than well-off countries in Europe and North America.

A meager 4 percent of Russians called themselves Muslims — fewer than the 5 percent who declined to participate in the poll, the report said. The number of adherents of other faiths fell below the poll's margin of error of 3.6 percentage points.

The survey covered 1,500 respondents in 44 of Russia's 83 regions and was conducted this spring.

The poll, which was limited to Russia, contrasts with the findings of a similar survey by global research company Ipsos conducted last month among 23 of the world's most populous nations.

The Ipsos poll also indicated that Russia is the most religious nation in Europe but showed only 56 percent believed in "God or a Supreme Being," compared with 51 percent in Poland, 50 percent in Italy and 18 percent in Sweden. Another 10 percent of Russians subscribed to some form of paganism, saying they "definitely believe in many gods or supreme beings."

Moscow Patriarchate officials were unavailable to comment on the Sreda poll this week. A spokeswoman for the Public Opinion Foundation was not aware of the poll, which she said was likely a closed survey ordered by a private company.

Little is known about the Sreda group, but the prominent web site Pravmir.ru said it was "an independent research organization" formed this year to study "the spiritual life of Russians, modern Orthodox Christianity and its social dynamics."

Sreda, which has no web site, can only be reached by e-mail. A statement provided Thursday by the group’s spokeswoman, Alina Dushka, said it was “an independent research organization” formed this year to study “the spiritual life of Russians, modern Orthodox Christianity and its social dynamics.” It provided no information on the group’s sources of funding or relations with any religious groups, including the Russian Orthodox Church.

Sreda's sole other survey available online was released last month when the group, also working with the Public Opinion Foundation, polled Russians on their views on resurrection. The survey found that only 26 percent believe that they will be resurrected after death — an odd contrast to the 82 percent of people who said they believed in God in the subsequent

poll.

The relatively low figure of 50 percent of Russians viewing themselves as Orthodox Christians may be linked to a certain "disappointment" in the official church, said Alexander Soldatov, a religion expert with Portal-credo.ru, an independent think tank.

"This disappointment is also reflected online in forums and blogs," Soldatov said by telephone.

His sentiment echoes an article published last month in Russky Reporter magazine that said believers are increasingly alienated by the politics of the Russian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Kirill, who took office in 2009.

The church leadership is losing support due to its attempts to build a "power vertical" similar to the one constructed by the Kremlin, said the magazine, which cited interviews with numerous priests, members of the laity and church critics in various regions. Senior church officials cited by the magazine denied any negative shift in mood.

In any case, the findings of this week's Sreda poll reflect the "real state of things" regarding religion in the country, Soldatov said.

Belief in God is mostly "spontaneous," like a "random slogan" that has little impact on everyday life, he said.

A similar poll by state-run VTsIOM put the number of Orthodox Christians in the country at 75 percent last year. But it indicated that only 4 percent of them observed religious rituals daily, while 32 percent ignored prayers, Christmas and Easter services and all other rituals.

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