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Prospects Improve for Mixing Politics and Faith

By Alexander Bratersky

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Patriarch Kirill meeting Vladimir Putin on Wednesday. The church has long kept a wary distance from politics. **Yana Lapikova**

A Soviet-era dissident and a star of 1990s politics, Viktor Aksyuchits, made his name as the founding father of the Christian Democratic Movement — an effort to forge a potent alliance of religion and politics that collapsed when he landed on the wrong side of the 1993 effort to oust Boris Yeltsin.

The 62-year-old Aksyuchits and his brand of Christian party politics may now be ready for a comeback, invigorated by the promise of easier registration rules for new political parties that has surfaced in the wake of the recent wave of anti-government protests.

The newly charged political atmosphere has reached all the way to the highest levels of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has been anxious to facilitate contacts with various political groups and politicians from Aksyuchits to protest movement leader Alexei Navalny.

In January, the Orthodox Church broached the subject of its role in politics when senior religious official Vsevolod Chaplin said on his blog that the church is "positive" about forging a position and is seeking contact with all kinds of groups that share its values.

"In Russia, a Christian party is not only a possibility — it already exists. It only needs to be legalized," Aksyuchits said during a recent round-table discussion in Moscow, on the issue of creating religious-based parties.

He was referring to the Party of the People's Majority — a new political force he said is ready to register as an official party following a recent amendment signed by President Dmitry Medvedev in December. The new rules, which go into effect in 2013, will recognize parties that collect just 500 signatures compared to the 50,000 required today.

While current Russian law prohibits the creation of religious-based parties, Chaplin — who organized the Moscow round table — said it can easily be sidestepped.

"Nothing prohibits creating an Orthodox or Christian party, as long as it is not formally mentioned in the name," said Chaplin, who heads the church department dealing with relations with the government.

A veteran politician, Aksyuchits has followed that advice to the letter. The program platform for his newly created — but not yet registered — Party of the People's Majority states that it is based on Christian beliefs, but can include nonbelievers who share its conservative positions.

Experts say the establishment of religious-based parties can carry risks.

"Moving in the direction of religious parties often can carry with it nationalistic tones," said John Farina, a professor of religious studies at George Mason University, via e-mail from the United States. "The danger is that religion then becomes mainly a way to divide people rather than a means of social capital."

Sitting next to Aksyuchits at the round table, Chaplin stressed that while the Orthodox Church remains the most powerful nonpolitical institution in the country, it will continue to keep its distance from Christian political organizations.

But he admitted that he recently facilitated contacts with emerging political leaders, such as Navalny, a leading figure in the protest movement, but who has been criticized for his nationalist positions, particularly for his role in the far-right Russian March rally in November.

"I think it is wrong to describe him as some mad führer. He is a smart and intelligent man," Chaplin said of Navalny.

Nationalist politicians have looked to establish a relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church dating back to the 1990s, but church officials have avoided direct contacts with groups they have considered marginal.

But it hasn't stopped some church officials from blessing radical nationalist organizations privately. In the mid-1990s many nationalist politicians had ties with late St. Petersburg Metropolitan Ioann who endorsed nationalist and anti-Semitic views.

Roman Lunkin, a religious expert with the Europe Institute, said the majority of parties that would emerge supporting Christian values also pursue a "conservative" traditionalist agenda.

"They might proclaim opposition to the ruling authorities and bureaucracy but will also resist westernization — a path Russian society is going toward," Lunkin said.

He added, however, that he thought it was wise of the church to encourage public discussion, regarding the political participation of churchgoers.

The idea of creating religious-based parties did not receive such a warm response from representatives of Jewish and Islamic groups who took part in a round table hosted late last week by RIA-Novosti.

"I don't support the creation of a Jewish religious party. We don't need another Bund," said Rabbi Zinovy Kogan, referring to the Jewish Socialist party, which fought the tsarist government in the early 20th century.

A deputy head of the Council of Russian Muftis, Farid Asadullin, was even more resistant, calling the creation of such a party a "provocative step."

Other Muslim leaders, notably outspoken Islamic figure Geidar Jemal, agreed, saying Muslim groups are "struggling to create an Islamic party."

Lunkin said that although no parties could universally represent all Muslims, Christians or Jews, many such parties might emerge when party registration laws are eased.

In the end, he suspects the Russian Orthodox Church will work with different Christian groups, rather than create its own or back any single party.

"Most of our politicians proclaim themselves as Orthodox believers and Orthodox believers are among those who protest and among those who support the government," Lunkin said.

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