



# Russian Orthodox Clergy and Laity Challenging Institutional Religious Authority Online

## The Case of *Ahilla.ru*

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**ABSTRACT** With the rise of new computer technologies, scholars of religion and media came to raise questions of how digital communication affects institutional forms of authority. In the digital realm, a number of alternative platforms emerged that empower religious communities to partake in the production of religious narratives outside organized religion. *Ahilla.ru* is a recent example of such an alternative place facilitated by digital technology. Founded by a former Russian Orthodox priest in February 2017, the website is a response to the politics and official rhetoric of Orthodox Church hierarchs who appeared ever more comfortable in conflating religion and politics and presenting themselves as the moral voice of the nation. Since his enthronement in 2009, Patriarch Kirill has centralized and hierarchized the Church, widening the gap between the episcopate and the low-level clergy and laity. Criticism of institutional religious authority that provides space for the articulation of alternative views of Orthodox faith and identity is at the core of *Ahilla.ru*. *Ahilla.ru* merits special attention, as it emerged not *outside* but *within* the Russian Orthodox Church and poses a challenge, via digital media space, to the dominant discourse articulated by Orthodox Church authorities and Russian mainstream media. This article seeks to answer the question of how online communication enhances media non-professionals to reflect upon their experiences within institutional religious settings and makes these experiences—previously unmediated and unknown—part of the media discourse.

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**KEYWORDS** Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, Patriarch Kirill, religious authority, *Ahilla.ru*

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## Introduction

After decades of relentless persecutions and marginalization during the Soviet era, the Russian Orthodox Church has emerged as a powerful public actor and a vigorous social institution (Agadjanian 2014; Burgess 2017). The public re-emergence of Russian Orthodoxy coincided with the global revitalization of traditional religions that, unlike what secularization theories

[1]

assumed for decades, did not lose their relevance but rather reasserted their societal roles and gained wide publicity (see Hoover in this issue; Hjelm 2015). The majority of the Russian population self-identifies as Orthodox, accounting for 73% in 2009 and 68% in 2014 (Simonov 2015, 13). By contrast, in 1989, only 17% adhered to Russian Orthodoxy, while 75% of the population described themselves as atheists (Zorkaia 2009, 65). Given that living religious tradition had been interrupted for decades, if not even largely destroyed, and state atheism had been successfully installed at all levels of the Soviet education system and socialization process, the fact that a majority of the Russian population designates itself as Orthodox appears remarkable. However, while the number of Orthodox adherents in post-Soviet Russia is high, only a few of them attend religious services and participate in Orthodox sacraments. The percentage of churched (*votserkovlennyi*), practicing Orthodox believers ranges from 1% to 13% of the population (Simonov 2015, 18; F.O.M. 2014). High levels of religious identification in post-Soviet Russia co-exist with low levels of participation in religious life.

The existing discrepancy between religious affiliation and practice explains the role media have come to play as sites for the transmission of religious experience and for the negotiation of national identity and shared values. The global media transformation, particularly the advance of social networks and blogs, has a large-scale impact on the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church and its public perception. More and more people turn to media to gain information about Orthodox faith and traditions, to listen to Church leaders, or to follow the news about Church life. In other words, Russian Orthodoxy has become increasingly mediated. [2]

Despite the Orthodox Church's resurgence in post-Soviet Russia, expressed most vividly in the public domain, the impact of media has received little academic attention (Luchenko 2009, 2015; Zhukovskaia 2016; Engström 2016; Khroul 2012; Staehle 2018, 2019). Until recently, Russian Orthodoxy has gone largely unnoticed by Western religious scholars (Valliere 2006, 1; cf. Hahn 2011, 14–16). At the same time, Russian scholars of the contemporary Orthodox Church have barely engaged in the contemporary theory of media and religious change that prompted an intense scholarly debate (Campbell 2013; Hoover 2006; Hjarvard 2013, 2016; Hjelm 2015; Lövheim 2014; Lundby 2014), with the exception of Victor Khroul's investigation (2012) and the collection of essays published in *Digital Orthodoxy* (Suslov, Engström, and Simons 2015). [3]

The Moscow Patriarchate has made extensive use of contemporary media to communicate its views to Russian society (Freeze 2017; Staehle 2018). Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, increased his efforts to reach the unchurched, non-practicing Orthodox population through media and message, particularly by extending the use of online media and social networks. Kirill, himself a widely known media personality, embraced the media sphere in order to define the nation's exceptionalism, to address social problems, and to present the Church as a source of Russian cultural traditions and moral norms. Since his accession to power in 2009, information and communication policy has become an issue of strategic importance for the Russian Orthodox Church (Staehle 2018, 3–4). [4]

With the rhetoric on traditions and public morality, the Moscow Patriarchate not only formulated a value-oriented agenda that helped explain Russia's cultural and political exceptionalism (Agadjanian 2017; Stoeckl 2016; Laruelle 2016). It also provided legitimacy to the new authoritarianism and tightening control of the internet (Staehle 2019). Since Vladimir Putin's return to power in 2012, the Russian Orthodox Church emerged as one of the central supporters of the ideology of traditional, non-liberal values, though it would be wrong to describe the Church as a mere puppet of the Kremlin or to reduce its role to ideology (Freeze 2017). [5]

While traditional Russian media rely on the Orthodox notion of the Byzantine symphonia and on the image of popular, vernacular Russian Orthodoxy, and while official Church media have become strictly hierarchical (Staehele 2018, 7–9), digital media offer more diversity of views and opinions. In digitally mediated settings, political Orthodoxy co-exists with official Church narratives and ‘banal’ religious imaginations, religious fundamentalism clashes with liberal Orthodoxy, and atheist worldviews circulate along popular forms of religious observance. This article focuses on the website *Ahilla.ru* and offers insights into the plurality of voices within Orthodox Christianity that cannot be reduced to the official Church. It is a valuable contribution to the study of modern Russian Orthodoxy and its relation with media and authority. [6]

*Ahilla.ru* provides evidence of rising disdain and contempt toward Orthodox authorities and the institutional Church. Founded in January 2017, the website gives voice to those who remained underrepresented in the highly controlled Russian media sphere. *Ahilla.ru* was founded by a former Russian Orthodox priest, Aleksei Pluzhnikov, and his partner Kseniia Volianskaia, who gave the project its name. Pluzhnikov served as a priest at the Saint Paul and Peter parish as well as a senior priest at the Church of the Holy Martyr Metropolitan Seraphim in the Volgograd and Kamyshinsk diocese until 2015. Many articles and comments on *Ahilla.ru* are written by either anonymous or former Russian Orthodox priests and laypeople, though not exclusively. The overwhelming majority of authors are closely associated with the Russian Orthodox Church, which is reflected in their rhetoric and the choice of topics for publication. The website averages over 150,000 monthly visitors and over 340,000 monthly views, as Aleksei Pluzhnikov revealed in an interview<sup>1</sup> with the author of this article. Other existing and publicly available statistics on *Ahilla.ru* tend to exaggerate the website’s outreach. *Ahilla.ru* lags far behind popular Orthodox websites such as Pravoslavie.ru (with over 2 million visitors and over 12 million views per month) and Pravmir.ru (with over 3 million monthly visitors and over 6 million monthly views<sup>2</sup>). As Pluzhnikov said in the interview, the website has gained visibility among churched Orthodox believers but remains of no relevance to the unchurched, non-practicing Orthodox majority that demonstrates little understanding of internal Church issues. The name of the website was inspired by the deacon Akhilla Desnitsyn, one of the main characters of Nikolai Leskov’s novel *The Cathedral Clergy*, a sympathetic portrait of provincial Orthodox clergy, published in 1879. The nineteenth-century short story writer and novelist Leskov, whose grandfather was a rural Russian Orthodox priest and whose mother was a pious Orthodox believer, was well familiar with Church matters and devoted many of his literary works to the Orthodox Church, often satirical and openly critical of Church hierarchy and the state. [7]

Another inspiration for the creation of *Ahilla.ru* was *The Confession of a Former Novice*, a revealing tale by Mariia Kikot’, who fled the secular world and spent seven years living in monasteries before deciding to escape from one of the oldest Russian convents that she later compared to a “sect” (Kikot’ 2017, 41, see also 235–245). The book generated heated online discussions in the Orthodox community and prompted further revelation stories. Referring to *The Confession of a Former Novice*, Pluzhnikov said: “[I]t has become an indicator that it is time to speak openly about the problems of inner-Church life, without looking back at the blessing of the authorities. And the furious reaction to the book [...] is a vivid example of how [8]

1 The interview was conducted on August 1, 2019 via phone.

2 <https://top100.rambler.ru/navi/?theme=1166&range=month> (accessed August 7, 2019).

the book's story touched many on the raw" (Pluzhnikov 2017b).<sup>3</sup> *The Confession of a Former Novice* provided not only the idea for the creation of *Ahilla.ru* but also its most popular genre: confession. *Ahilla.ru* published a series of confessions written by a wide range of authors, including priests, deacons, parishioners, and even priest's wives. Even though the website occupies a niche on the Russian internet, it merits our special attention, as it emerged not from outside but from within the Russian Orthodox Church and poses challenges, via digital media space, to the discourse articulated by Orthodox Church authorities and to mainstream Russian Orthodox identity.

## ***Ahilla.ru* and Its Relationship with Media**

The relationship with media lies at the heart of the creation and legitimacy of *Ahilla.ru*. It has emerged as a non-conformist online platform that seeks to challenge the agenda set by traditional Russian broadcast media and official Church media. In contrast to mainstream media that dominate the Russian public sphere, *Ahilla.ru* positions itself as a marginal project while simultaneously describing the website as a grassroots project facilitated by media non-professionals: Orthodox laypeople and clergy but also Church outsiders. Its aim is to initiate open debates within the Orthodox community and to empower voices marginalized or unheard by the mainstream media. In 2009, Pavel Adel'geim, a remarkable Russian Orthodox priest who fell at fault with local Church authorities, described the internet as the only space where he could articulate his views openly and freely. He once wrote in his LiveJournal blog page: [9]

[I] have no other chance to speak with the God's people, as only via the internet. There is no choice. You either remain silent or use the internet. Church media do not publish me. There is no forum in the Church where a priest or a layperson can openly speak with the God's people. The forum exists only for the bishop. (Adel'geim 2009) [10]

Adel'geim lamented about the lack of discussion in Church media and appealed to the Orthodox community to reject the logic often imposed on Russian Orthodox clergymen and believers alike "not to wash dirty laundry in public," as this, in Adel'geim's view, would mean "I want to sin and do not want to repent" (Adel'geim 2009). [11]

Eight years later, in 2017, this text re-emerged on the pages of *Ahilla.ru*. It largely reflects how *Ahilla.ru* approaches contemporary Russian Orthodoxy and the problems it confronts both in the secular world and in the Church. Explaining the release of *Ahilla.ru*, which many critics attack for its attempts to draw a rather dark picture of Church life without willing to contrast it with positive stories and spiritual experiences, Pluzhnikov said there was no similar project that openly and critically addressed the life of the Russian Orthodox Church. In an interview with the online magazine Colta.ru from February 16, 2017, Pluzhnikov said that the aim of *Ahilla.ru* was "to provide a platform to those who have something to say but there is no place" for people like Father Pavel Adel'geim, provincial priests, and laypeople who are actively involved in parish life and know the Church from their personal experiences (Pluzhnikov 2017b). According to Pluzhnikov, only former Orthodox priests "who had nothing to lose" or anonymous serving priests could write about the "real problems" in the Church (Pluzhnikov 2017b). [12]

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3 All translations are by the author.

The main goal of *Ahilla.ru* is not to silence existing problems within the Church but to facilitate open discussion and to speak on behalf of low-level Orthodox clerics and laypeople whose voices are not represented in the media sphere. In this context, Pluzhnikov criticized not only mainstream and official Church media but also Church-critical platforms. While in his view, secular media do not know how to write about the Church, and when they do so it usually turns into “nonsense,” Church-critical and anti-Church media do not provide adequate information about Church life either (Pluzhnikov 2017a). By contrast, Orthodox media, either official or independent, are associated with Church authorities by definition. Describing themselves as “Orthodox,” as Pluzhnikov explained in the Manifesto of *Ahilla.ru*, they impose “the power of the system upon themselves and from the start cut off the possibility to criticize this system” (Pluzhnikov 2017a). In his view, this system is largely associated with the spokesperson Vladimir Legoida and the politics of the Synodal Department for the Church’s Relations with Society and Media (Staehe 2018, 4, see also 2017), whose “blessing” Orthodox media require for their work. He further noted:

Some ten years ago, the freedom of speech in Orthodox media was slightly better, there were hopes in some liberal resources but then the nuts have been drawn up, all bold authors were asked to leave upon a recommendation from above, they were marginalized; one can find sincere utterances only in blogs but even then [they are] mostly anonymous. (Pluzhnikov 2017b)

Pluzhnikov, who had ministered an Orthodox parish community from 2003 to 2015, gradually grew disillusioned with Patriarch Kirill’s Church politics and laid much of the blame for “the new silence” within the Church on the prelate, to formulate it in Sergei Chapnin’s words (Chapnin 2015). In his article “Monopoly on the Word of a Pastor” published by *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, Pluzhnikov openly accused Patriarch Kirill for extending control over the spoken and written word in the Church and for domesticating the Orthodox media sphere. The article’s title echoes Patriarch Kirill’s TV program “The Word of a Pastor” aired every Sunday morning by *Pervyi Kanal*, the First Channel (Pluzhnikov 2017c). From these mediated Saturday sermons, Patriarch Kirill is known to millions and millions of people in Russia and abroad. He came to dominate the Russian media sphere, while other voices were either largely marginalized or silenced.

Pluzhnikov described Patriarch Kirill’s enthronement in 2009 as a defining moment in contemporary Church history. While according to Pluzhnikov, there was a booming market of Orthodox periodicals and parish newspapers in the late 1990s, the middle of the 2000s saw a rise of Orthodox internet media and forums. These were “the times when criticism of absolutely everything was possible, when inner-Church discussion was open” (Pluzhnikov 2017c). With Patriarch Kirill’s accession to power, “the times of a dialogue, the times of searching came to an end,” observed the founder of *Ahilla.ru* (Pluzhnikov 2017c). In his view, this tendency only strengthened with the imprisonment of Pussy Riot in 2012. The changes did not remain restricted to the media sphere but affected the Russian Orthodox Church at large (Pluzhnikov 2017b).

Despite his criticism of Orthodox Church authorities and of Patriarch Kirill personally, Pluzhnikov does not reject Russian Orthodoxy as a way to eternal salvation nor does he deprive the Church of its evangelical mission nor does he oppose religious visibility in the public sphere—in contrast to most dissident Orthodox media projects and atheist websites. He rather tends to differentiate between the Church and the church, between the established religion

and popular Orthodoxy (see also Freeze 2015, 7), between reality and the way it is represented by the media. The following section is dedicated to studying how *Ahilla.ru* negotiates religious identity and provides a sense of belonging in the digital realm.

## Negotiating Religious Identity, Constructing a Sense of Belonging

Current studies of religion and media are concerned with the question of how religious identity and community transform in digital media settings (Lövheim 2013; Campbell 2013). Religion has been vital in forming social identity and providing a sense of belonging and moral orientation (Durkheim 1995). Connective media open new ways for the negotiation of religious identities and for social interaction. Computer-mediated communication helps online practitioners generate social links and participate in internet communities that transcend the boundaries of face-to-face interactions and conventional religious settings. However, according to Campbell, “online religious community is not a substitute, but rather a supplement to extend offline relationships and communication in unique and novel ways” (Campbell 2013, 62–63). [18]

Studying online religious practices in the United States, Hoover, Clark, and Rainie have observed that, in digital media, individuals exercise more autonomy in relation to conventional religion and religious authorities (Hoover, Clark, and Rainie 2004, 6). Online communication fosters reflexivity of the self and enhances individuals to reflect upon their religious lives and to share their experiences with others (cf. Hoover 2006, 11). Relocating into the digital environment, religious practices and meanings become individualized and personalized (Lövheim 2013, 50). *Ahilla.ru* is a vivid example of how internet users articulate their individual religious beliefs and practices outside organized religion. [19]

*Ahilla.ru* has emerged in response to dominant institutional religious practices and narratives. Religious scholar Mun-Cho Kim has suggested that religious online communities fulfil four major functions: interpretative, interactive, integrative, and instrumental (Kim 2005, 146–47). Following this differentiation, *Ahilla.ru* provides a framework for the critical interpretation of religious practices and narratives (interpretative), enhances interaction among online practitioners and provides a sense of belonging (interactive), generates a community with common interests and shared values (integrative), and enables media non-professionals to produce content and engage in online discussions (instrumental, cf. Kim 2005, 147). [20]

*Ahilla.ru* presents itself not as yet another Orthodox media project that publishes and republishes every available material related to Orthodox religion, but as a community with shared values, and it can be viewed as such. The collective identity of *Ahilla.ru* is built around three major characteristics of its participants: 1) they are, or were until recently, actively engaged in institutional religious contexts, 2) they share a critical stance toward the Russian Orthodox Church and its hierarchy, and 3) they are, with some exceptions, media non-professionals. The authors of *Ahilla.ru* are not representatives of Orthodox dignitaries or heads of synodal departments but rather low-level Orthodox clergymen and laypeople who use the website to reflect on their spiritual lives and to construct identities set apart from the official Orthodox Church and its secular ideology of “spiritual bonds.” *Ahilla.ru* disregards the social status of its participants that, by contrast, plays a crucial role in their offline lives and largely determines social relations in institutional religious contexts. Offline hierarchies are undermined rather than reaffirmed online. In contrast to Patriarchia.ru or Pravmir.ru, there is not a single official Church document, no address, no sermon by an Orthodox hierarch. Church [21]

authorities' names are mentioned extensively on the website, particularly Patriarch Kirill, but they are not referenced as authoritative sources but usually serve as referential points.

As of this writing, a number of authors from different Russian regions has contributed articles to the website, among them Orthodox clerics and their wives, seminarians, monastics, and the faithful, both female and male. One of the anonymous authors of *Ahilla.ru*, who calls himself Fil Osov, which reads as “philosopher” in Russian, presented himself online: [22]

The author of these lines, is a devout Orthodox believer who spent many years working in church structures. I have received both secular and theological education, used to be an administrative staff member of a diocese. I have seen parishes, have taught in seminaries, and have lived in monasteries. (Phil Osov 2017) [23]

Many authors of *Ahilla.ru* describe themselves as practicing Orthodox Christians who regularly go to church and receive communion (thus probably differentiating themselves from “nominal” Orthodox believers) or indicate their belonging to the low-level clergy, while others declared to be agnostics or atheists. Many reflect upon their experiences in the Church and how their lives were influenced by Patriarch Kirill’s enthronement and administrative reforms; others engage in discussions about the Church’s role in political and social life; some contributors, by contrast, avoid political issues and tend to focus on ecclesiastical themes and local diocesan or parish events and their personal experiences. [24]

Providing a communication platform and guaranteeing authors their anonymity, *Ahilla.ru* enables members of the Russian Orthodox community to engage in everyday meaning-making processes of religious practices and narratives. Anonymity allows the authors of the website to be open about their mediated everyday life, without fearing consequences in offline settings. As indicated above, most authors of *Ahilla.ru* are amateur journalists. What matters is not their ability to write good, newsworthy stories about religious issues but their everyday experiences within the Russian Orthodox Church. Their inside knowledge is what makes them contributors to the online portal and what provides them legitimacy and authority in the digital environment. Analyzing the first six months since the creation of *Ahilla.ru*, Pluzhnikov wrote that it “has become a truly people’s project,” emphasizing that it was not media professionals but mostly amateurs who have contributed to the website (Pluzhnikov 2017d). *Ahilla.ru* empowers the formation of alternative spaces for the articulation of religious narratives and meanings: it gives voice to media non-professionals who reflect upon their experiences and make them available to the online community. Thus, *Ahilla.ru* facilitates the formation of new communication genres of self-reflection, self-presentation, and interaction, contributing to the personalization of religious beliefs and practices. [25]

Having analyzed the establishment and development of *Ahilla.ru*, its goals, and its relationship with media, as well as the question of how the website provides a space for negotiating religious identity and facilitates self-reflection of the Orthodox community, I will now turn to the texts that appear on the pages of the project. I have created a sample of 15 articles, written by the Orthodox clergy and, with some exceptions, by the laity. This sample will be analyzed in more depth in the following sections. [26]

## Challenging Orthodox Church Authority

*Ahilla.ru* emerged in response to the politics and official rhetoric of Orthodox Church hierarchs, who appeared ever more comfortable in presenting themselves as the moral voice of [27]

the nation and in portraying Orthodox religion, in accordance with Patriarch Kirill's "Church of the majority concept," as a foundation of Russian statehood and the very essence of Russian national identity. Pluzhnikov was one of the first ones from within the Church to openly criticize the head of the Russian Orthodox Church for deepening politicization, a distorted representation of Orthodox Christianity in the media sphere, and large-scale Church reforms that deprived ordinary clergymen and laypeople of their autonomy and financial independence. The critique of Orthodox Church authority, however, did not remain restricted to Pluzhnikov's voice but constitutes one of the central themes of the website. This section focuses on how the authors of *Ahilla.ru* relate themselves to Orthodox Church hierarchs and seek to challenge their dominant rhetoric.

With the rise of new computer technologies, scholars of religion and media came to raise questions of how digital communication, with its participatory culture and networking possibilities, affects religious authority. American scholar Heidi Campbell noted: "It is not enough to say that the Internet transforms or challenges traditional authority; rather, researchers must identify what specific form or type of authority is being affected" (Campbell 2007, 1044). Campbell identified four levels of religious authority: hierarchy (recognized religious leaders or community), structures (established religious organization, community practices), ideology (beliefs and ideas), and text (recognized religious teachings or books, Campbell 2007, 1048). Considering the lack of theological discussion among Russian Church critics (which is, admittedly, striking), the fourth category appears marginal and will be omitted, while three other levels of authority are productive in the Russian context. [28]

Before turning to the original texts published on *Ahilla.ru*, let us have a look at the questionnaire of an anonymous priest that has given rise to what is arguably the most prominent genre of the website. The document contains sixteen open questions and can be downloaded from the website. It provides guidance to the Orthodox clergy on what issues to consider when writing about personal experiences in the Church. As we know since Marshall McLuhan, "medium is the message" or, in the words of contemporary media scholar Stig Hjarvard, the medium "can affect both the message and the relationship between sender and recipient" (Hjarvard 2013, 19). To be sure, media play a decisive role in transforming contemporary social reality. However, it is not only media that shape what is being said or written, but also social processes and actors (see Campbell 2010, 50–63). The questionnaire of an anonymous priest is an example of how media can be shaped by social actors and their treatment of digital media technology. Embedded into the architecture of the website, the questionnaire formats the content of future "confessions" in two distinct ways: first, it allows the respondents to remain anonymous and does not call their authenticity into question, as this is the only way, as Pluzhnikov puts it, to produce "sincere" and "true" stories. Second, it explicitly addresses the issue of Church *authority* and provides a framework for reflecting on authority-related themes. The questionnaire delves into three levels of authority, which correspond to the categorization suggested by Campbell, namely: hierarchy (questions about Patriarch Kirill and his policy), structures (questions about social, missionary, and youth work, as well as finances and Church reforms, such as disaggregation of the dioceses), and ideology (the difference between Church and church, between mediated reality and reality outside the media). In the following, we will focus on the question of how *Ahilla.ru* challenges the hierarchy, structures, and ideology of Orthodox Church authority. [29]



## Hierarchy

In the texts of Orthodox clergymen, references to Church hierarchies are abundant. To some, reflecting upon the Moscow Patriarchate and its politics provides the necessary analytical framework and constitutes the main body of the text, while others tend to focus on their ministry and local events, but even then they cannot help but mention Orthodox hierarchs and describe how parish communities are affected by, for instance, tax revenues to the dioceses. The texts are different in tone and stylistics. While some are deliberate and rather balanced, others appear openly critical, while still others do not hide their bitterness and downright hostility toward Church authorities. [30]

The very first and most resonating “Confession of an Anonymous Priest” was published under the title “I Hope For a Revolution in the ROC” (Otets Oleg 2017a). Over the course of six months, the text, with its admittedly provocative title, has attracted attention of over 70,000 readers and prompted heated discussions among internet users. Similarly to this very first confession, other clerics who contributed articles to *Ahilla.ru* envision the necessity of changes within the Church. To some, these changes even appear inevitable. Thus, an Orthodox rural dean opined: “I have a feeling that something is taking shape. One day it will all blow up spectacularly” (Akhilla 2017a). Consider another example: “This soup bubble is bound to break spectacularly” (Otets Pafnutiy 2017). However, even if this rhetoric appears reformatory and revolutionary, the clerics do not see themselves as the driving force behind the changes. They attribute the change not to themselves or to media but to some external events that would lead to the independence of the Church from political and financial elites. The author of the text “Under the Grey Ashes of the System” formulated this as follows: [31]

I hope the Church will become weaker, unhappier, [and] dumber. What is happening now is a great gift to the Church—all these stories with Pussy Riot [and] Sokolovskii, [I think] we ourselves should arrange something like this, but it does not work intentionally. The Church should get weaker and weaker so that the parishes could grow. (Akhilla 2017c) [32]

Most clergymen explain their inability to change the “system” by their dependence on the Church: they either have family and children whom they cannot be put at risk (as they can be defrocked or transferred to another diocese at any time), or they have no other than a clerical qualification, which makes them financially and professionally vulnerable. Some also mention their parishioners, whom they respect and feel responsible for. [33]

When speaking about Church hierarchs, the clerics automatically employ the “us” vs. “them” binary opposition. While clergymen are referred to as ordinary people, as mere mortals, as *the people*, Orthodox authorities—Patriarch Kirill, the Moscow Patriarchate, metropolitans, archbishops, bishops, heads of synodal departments, deans, and people close to them—are laconically described as the “system” (see, e.g., quote below). Church officials are mentioned in different contexts, for instance, in relation to administrative reforms, financial activities of the Church, the relationship between Orthodox dignitaries and low-level clergy, the disempowerment of priests and laypeople, the ideology of current ecclesiastical elites, and the politicization of the Church. Patriarch Kirill is often addressed personally, while bishops and other hierarchs are referred to more generally. No names are mentioned. An anonymous Orthodox priest’s wife has observed in her confession: [34]

As we live in a system, there are often talks about the leadership—PK [Patriarch] [35]

Kirill], the bishops. For me, this whole fuss at the top is a theater performance by bad actors, but my husband is concerned about the Church. I feel sorry for ordinary clergy and parishioners who suffer from the tyranny of the authorities. We ourselves are witnesses of an extreme inefficiency of a bishop; it is painful to see how they get money out of the people for some projects, and nobody reports how the money is being spent. I do not mention the never-ending collections for the ‘adorable’ PK. (Akhilla 2017f)

The “system” is often opposed to the parish communities and Orthodox believers: “I try to shield my community from the system. They understand that, they know that. I tell them that there is church as a community and there is administration, bureaucracy” (Akhilla 2017c). As in previous comments, the difference between Church and church is emphasized in a number of texts. The word “Church” is used synonymously to the word “system.” While “Church” stands for the administration, “church” with a lowercase letter stands for parishes and ordinary Orthodox Christians, though in the following example, it is the other way around. Church with a capital “C” is deliberately applied to Orthodox parish communities: “Bishops naïvely think that *they*, the hierarchs, are the church. But no, *we* are the Church” (Akhilla 2017e, italics added). The differentiation between the Church administration, or the “system,” on the one hand, and Orthodox parish communities, on the other, has emerged as a powerful argumentation strategy to denounce the authority of Orthodox hierarchs. While Church officials are portrayed as the administrative body of the Church, yet a very powerful one, they are not the ones who comprise the parish. It is not “them” but “us,” ordinary priests and believers, who constitute the Church. A similar logic is employed by Dimitrii Terekhin, an Orthodox cleric in the Diocese of Nizhnii Novgorod and Arzamas, one of the few non-anonymous authors of *Ahilla.ru*. He juxtaposed “the current Church system” to the “Church of Christ” that, in his view, do not represent the same reality (Terekhin 2017). A comparison between the Church as the body of Christ and ecclesiastical hierarchies who may be fallacious and even sinful is often employed on the pages of *Ahilla.ru*. Moreover, all kinds of Church problems are usually attributed to the religious leadership, while priesthood and parishioners are seen in a more positive light.

Described in political and financial rather than theological terms, religious leadership is deprived of its sacred functions and knowledge and put into a merely secular context. Congruent with this logic, Patriarch Kirill is described as “a boss, an administrator” but not as a “spiritual father of the Russian nation” (Akhilla 2017a), as a “powerful ruler coined by the previous Soviet Church system” (Otets Pafnutiy 2017), “His Majesty,” “head commissioner for collecting revenues in the ROC” (Akhilla 2017d), and as “prosecutor” One Orthodox priest has noted that “[w]e have been waiting for a prophet but have received a prosecutor instead” (Akhilla 2017e). In a similar vein, archbishops and bishops are referred to as “local princelings to whom no one is authority,” “feudal lords immune from prosecution” (Otets Oleg 2017a), and “little feudal princelings and patriarchs” (Akhilla 2017c). As demonstrated in the examples discussed above, Orthodox clerics demonstrate a highly critical stance toward Church officials. They recognize their authority based on their *status* rather than on their *spiritual* and *moral qualities*. Patriarch Kirill is most prominently described as an effective manager or an administrator. To some clerics, he is an eloquent preacher, though others denounce the prelate’s eloquence as demagoguery. Patriarch Kirill’s ministry and spiritual guidance are put into question. One author of *Ahilla.ru* wrote:

[36]

[37]

[...] to make people follow the prelate and his initiative, he himself should follow his words and appeals. And to do so, one should give up the Federal Security Service, the glut of wealth, come down from the Moscow throne and get somewhat closer to the people. In order to do so, while visiting dioceses, one should meet not only with governors and sponsors but also with ordinary clergy and common people. (Akhilla 2017a)

[38]

## Structures

Patriarch Kirill's administrative Church reforms and their consequences for low-level clergy and parishioners constitute the main referential framework. The Russian Orthodox Church, its governance, and its administrative structures have been largely reordered under Patriarch Kirill. The disaggregation of the dioceses led to the creation of new bishoprics, dioceses, and parishes. The number of metropolitans and bishops skyrocketed within a few years. The decision-making processes was concentrated in the hands of the Church administration and episcopate, whereas low-level clergy and parishioners were subjugated to authorities. Moreover, the episcopate extended its control over parish property and finances. The proclaimed extension of missionary, social, and youth work provides further referential points in the articles of *Ahilla.ru* at question, as will be demonstrated below.

[39]

The way Orthodox clerics frame their criticism of existing structures of traditional Church authority and describe how their life has changed since Patriarch Kirill's accession to power can be schematically reduced to three major themes: "feudalism,"<sup>4</sup> formalization, and fiction. Feudalism, a form of rule that dominated in medieval Europe in which the monarchy distributed lands and peasantry to the nobility in exchange for military protection, has re-emerged in the context of contemporary Russian Orthodox diocesan life and, in the view of the Orthodox clerics whose texts we analyze, serves as a discursive tool to characterize current relations between the episcopacy and clergy. In medieval times, peasants were obliged to live on their lord's land and give him homage as well as a share of their production for military protection. The authors of *Ahilla.ru* draw an analogy between the lives of ordinary clergy and laity and the lives of medieval peasants: powerless and deprived of any rights. According to the anonymous Orthodox cleric who calls himself "Father Pafnutii," priests live in a situation of "permanent uncertainty": "[Y]ou can be transferred anywhere and as many times as needed, or they can throw you out of the priesthood if you come into conflict with the 'general line of the party'" (Otets Pafnutiy 2017). Other clerics address growing inequality and financial stratification among the clergy that largely depends on where the parish community is located: in a prosperous big city or a poor rural area. By contrast, high Orthodox dignitaries are exposed to criticism for their "feudal" way of life and for lavish displays of wealth and power, as will be demonstrated in the examples below. While the episcopate could extend its power and control over finances under Patriarch Kirill, ordinary clergy and laity became largely dependent on Church authorities and were deprived of their autonomy. As one priest concluded: "An archbishop in the ROC is indisputable and immune from prosecution as long as he does not disregard the patriarch" (Otets Oleg 2017a). Referring to Patriarch Kirill, the cleric continued:

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4 The term "feudalism" is not a metaphor introduced by the author of this paper but a term actually used by a number of *Ahilla.ru*'s authors to denounce Orthodox hierarchs and the system they created. Moreover, one confession was even entitled "Dukes, Counts, and Barons—Feudalism within the ROC" (Belous 2017).

He has driven the power of bishops to a total absurdity, having made them feudal lords immune from prosecution, he has almost entirely thrown laypeople out of every sphere where one could make at least some decisions in the Church, he alienated the intelligentsia from the Church, he deprived ordinary priesthood of any opportunity to take the initiative, he turned sermons into a rally speech. (Otets Oleg 2017a) [41]

Financial dependence of parish communities is a recurrent theme of how administrative reforms of the Church affected parish community life. While parish collections decreased by nearly half, as one cleric observed, tax revenue collections by the diocese substantially increased. “Revenues are calculated in such a way that the parish can barely meet its ends” (Akhilla 2017c, see also 2017a). Another cleric commented that bishops evaluate priests’ ministry in relation to the amount of parish donations (Otets Pafnutiy 2017). [42]

“Business project,” “power vertical,” “atmosphere of fear,” and “system of freedom suppression” are other instances of how Orthodox clergy express their non-conformist views and seek to denounce traditional religious organization and its leadership. The analogy between Orthodox dignitaries and medieval feudal lords has been employed by a number of clerics, as in the following example: [43]

By way of comparison to feudalism, Patriarch has turned counts into dukes and has created hundreds of counties for them and the barons (deans). Of course, all this escort demands money and wants to live according to its ‘status.’ A Metropolitan of a regional center is flying higher than he used to as an archbishop of the very same city. And he wants more expensive robes, more representative cars, more personal clergy for solemn services. But the bishops also try to keep up with them. (Belous 2017) [44]

Another effect of administrative reforms and the growing bureaucratization of ecclesiastical structures is the formalization of Church life. As mentioned above, the reforms were, among other things, aimed at professionalizing and extending missionary work, social service, and work with young people, yet in fact, these aims remained unfulfilled wishes, fiction, as Orthodox clerics opine on the pages of *Ahilla.ru*. While nothing had changed, the number of meetings and formal reports increased dramatically. There are numerous instances illustrating a growing disparity between the proclaimed goals and their realization, between mediated reality and reality outside media attention, between how the Church administration perceives parish life and what, in fact, it looks like. To manage the ever growing number of requested reports, as an author critically observed, a priest should either “hire a whole secretariat or drop ministry or spend days doing paper work” (Akhilla 2017a). Another Orthodox cleric ironically concluded: [45]

[...] everyone has been catechized and taken social care of, in general schools, we have educated, prayed for, and fasted for everyone, young people in great amounts would not leave priests and elderly women enter the church bothering them with questions of how to help and where to do voluntary work. All this on paper, of course. (Akhilla 2017d) [46]

This distorted reality is not hidden from Orthodox Church authorities. They are well aware of the impossibility to achieve proclaimed goals and to implement decisions of the Bishops’ [47]

Synod and other administrative Church bodies. However, the episcopate pretends to be following the provisions (see Belous 2017). As a result, endless reports and mass meetings aimed at reinforcing the Church's power in the media sphere substitute parish life and social work. To conclude, as the authors of *Ahilla.ru* discuss the relationship between the episcopate and the clergy as a new form of feudalism, the ministry has become largely a formality, while parish life and social work turned into fiction.

## Ideology

“The Church system today cannot exist without state support, just as the state cannot exist without oil,” with these words “Father Pafnutii,” one of the regular contributors to *Ahilla.ru*, describes the Church's excessive dependence on Russian political elites and the core element defining its current ideology (Otets Pafnutiy 2017). “The Church is not with the people but with state authorities,” proclaimed yet another Orthodox critic, referring to Pussy Riot and how Patriarch Kirill fiercely condemned their “scandalous” performance in the Christ the Savior Cathedral without showing Christian mercy and forgiveness (Otets Oleg 2017a). Discussing the Russian Orthodox Church's ideology, its views, and its values, the non-conformist authors leave their “comfort zone” and focus not only on Church-internal problems but provide a more general outlook. In their view, the Church has become deeply integrated into the system of Vladimir Putin's authoritative rule, losing much of its freedom, financial autonomy, and sovereignty in making decisions. The Church's alliance with the state has ramifications not only for Orthodox believers but also for society at large, as Church authorities help legitimize and shape the current authoritarian political regime:

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There is no truth in the patriotic or imperial rhetoric propagated by the Church. Patriotism, the greatness of the state are different forms of the very same ideology and its only goal is to manipulate as many masses of the people as possible. In this regard, the Church and the state have absolutely similar interests. The state supports the Church with its ideology of “spiritual bonds,” while the Church supports the state with its totally wretched economy and low level of life of the population and with totally insane ambitions. (Otets Oleg 2017b)

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In order to demonstrate their power and influence, particularly toward Russian political elites, and to maintain their privileged status in Russian society, Orthodox hierarchs, as the authors of *Ahilla.ru* contented, rely on Patriarch Kirill's “Church of the majority” concept. It is rooted in the understanding that Russian Orthodoxy is not merely a religious institution but an integrative force of Russian society and a cornerstone of the state, of the very existence of the Russian nation. This perception of Russian Orthodoxy, put forward by Patriarch Kirill and supported by Russian state authorities, provides a relevant referential framework for marginal discourses empowered by *Ahilla.ru*. While the Church experiences declining congregations, and the number of practicing believers remains relatively small, religious symbols and narratives permeate Russian political and social life. “Powerful Orthodoxy” is how one of the dissenting Orthodox priests refers to this phenomenon. “As 75-80% of the population are baptized,” he explains, “we have the right to demand some privilege and concessions. Though everyone knows that, in fact, there are only 2 to 3% of the population who go to church, and 1 to 1,5% who receive communion—we, Orthodox Christians, are almost non-existent as a social force” (Akhilla 2017b). “The Church,” the author continues, “does not have real influence. The whole story with Saint Isaac's Cathedral has shown that ROC cannot control the

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situation [and] is unable to mobilize large numbers of people. He soberly concludes with the words: “I really want the ROC to be cut off from state resources” (Akhilla 2017b). This opinion is not an isolated example but is repeated in a number of anonymous and non-anonymous confessions and articles published by *Ahilla.ru*.

The Church’s involvement in politics and the conflation of the Orthodox mission with Russian authoritarian rule provides clerical critics the background for questioning the authority of Russian Orthodox leadership. The politicization of Russian Orthodoxy facilitates the emergence of non-mainstream discourses that seek to undermine the Church system as illegitimate and distorted. In this context, they challenge both the rhetoric concerning “spiritual bonds” that became shorthand for the Orthodox leadership’s official ideology as well as Patriarch Kirill’s “Church of the majority” logic. “Discrepancy” is what Sergei Zubarev, author of *Ahilla.ru*, calls the mismatch between reality and the way it is constructed and perceived by Church authorities (Zubarev 2017). “And when discrepancy between words and deeds reaches a critical point, society cannot keep silent” (Zubarev 2017). Another cleric of the Russian Orthodox Church holds a similar view: “Lies and hypocrisy are the basis of contemporary Church system. [...]. [Yet] from the ambo, they teach how to forgive [people], how not to judge, not to gossip, how to love one’s neighbor” (Akhilla 2017b). Recalling how the Orthodox Church and its leadership are perceived in social media and blogs, a rural dean, an author of an anonymous confession, concludes:

The Patriarchate has discredited itself and the entire Russian Church for many years to come, you won’t be able to wash it off. All these scandalous stories about money, Pussy Riot, nano-dust, Patriarch’s watch, [and] discrepancy between words and deeds. The fight for Saint Isaac’s Cathedral, belated responses to criticism, dishonest answers to questions, hypocrisy. (Akhilla 2017a)

The clerics attack Orthodox authorities not only on political and social but also on religious grounds. While some criticize ecclesiastical dignitaries for secularizing the Orthodox faith and for conflating it with politics, others condemn the hierarchs for their “monopoly on Christ” (Zinov’eva 2017). Still others contest the authority of Church officials for reducing Orthodox faith to ritualism, where there is allegedly no place for Christ (cf. Akhilla 2017d).

## Conclusions

The Moscow Patriarchate’s attempt to control the media sphere has proven successful in official and a number of Orthodox media. However, the attempts to monopolize the media sphere at large provoke resistance and Church criticism. In the mediated public sphere, the Russian Orthodox Church loses its privileged position. Projects like *Ahilla.ru* use the digital media sphere not only to articulate their alternative views of Russian Orthodoxy but also to challenge the rhetoric put forward by the Church hierarchy. The online media sphere turns into a battlefield between various interpretations of Russian Orthodoxy.

*Ahilla.ru* emerged as a clerical project that responds to Patriarch Kirill’s administrative reforms and the “new silence” at the core of the Orthodox Church’s media policy. In contrast to “banal religion” and other online forms of Church criticism that are occasional and emerge in reaction to information causes, to events that happen here and now, *Ahilla.ru* creates content itself. The authors of *Ahilla.ru*, including the editor-in-chief and creator of the portal, contend that contemporary mediated Orthodoxy is a falsified version of the Orthodox faith and how

it is lived by Orthodox Christians. In their view, Russian Orthodoxy is largely distorted in the public sphere, distorted by Church hierarchs' ideological rhetoric, by people who came to be associated with the voice of the Russian Orthodox Church. Uniting dissenting clergy and laity, the website positions itself as an alternative space that facilitates open and "sincere" discussion about Church problems and empowers non-media professionals such as priests, seminarians, and laypeople to partake in the media discourse by sharing their personal experiences and opinions. In this regard, confessions of anonymous priests have emerged as a powerful genre that enhances critical thinking about the Church and its leadership. Criticism of institutional religious authority at the level of hierarchy, structures, and ideology has become one of the core elements of Church criticism facilitated by *Ahilla.ru*. While Orthodox hierarchs are blamed for much of the Church's current problems, clergy and laity are depicted more positively. Juxtaposing official Orthodoxy with the orthodoxy of the people, the contributors to *Ahilla.ru* employ an argumentation strategy that helps them undermine Orthodox Church hierarchs and their politics, on the one hand, and legitimize the Orthodox faith and Orthodox believers, on the other.

Patriarch Kirill's wide-ranging institutional reforms contributed to the centralization and hierarchicalization of the Russian Orthodox Church and widened the existing gap between the episcopate and the low-level clergy. While the Church administration and episcopate strikingly reasserted their power and extended their control over finances and parish property since Patriarch Kirill's accession to power, Orthodox clergy and laity were subjugated to the prelates and were rendered powerless. As American historian Gregory Freeze has argued, a deep-seated conflict "between the Church and church, between official and popular Orthodoxy" became apparent in post-Soviet Russia (Freeze 2015, 7). The increasing cooperation between the Moscow Patriarchate and Russian state authorities, and the legitimation of Vladimir Putin's authoritarian turn, further damaged the moral authority of the Orthodox Church. Growing politicization, commercialization, and instrumentalization of the Russian Orthodox Church for ideological ends provoke criticism in atheist, secular, and increasingly in religious circles.

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