

## TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION AT RUSSIAN AND ESTONIAN SCHOOLS

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Russia is one of the most multicultural and multiethnic countries due to its biggest territory. With the increasing immigration, multiculturalism becomes even more articulated. So does the level of religiosity amongst the population. Between 1991 and 2008, the share of Russian population that does not identify with any religion dropped from 61% to 18 % and the number of people who identify themselves as Orthodox Christians rose from 31 % to 72 % correspondingly<sup>1</sup>.

Though such a picture of 'religious renaissance' seems ambiguous for the reasons that people's return to religion does not necessarily mean the increase of their participation in a church life, still the share of people who believe in God rose from 38 % in 1991 to 56 % in 2008<sup>2</sup>.

The Constitution of 1993 provides freedom of religion and states the secular character of the country<sup>3</sup>. The same goes for public education which secular nature is formulated in the Federal Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations of 1997. However, the same Federal Law recognizes a special role of the ROC in 'the history of Russia, the formation and development of its spirituality and culture'<sup>4</sup> and also Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Judaist and other religions' heritage in Russian history. Thus, the notion of 'traditional' religions was introduced, which implies the special relations between the state and such 'traditional' religions.

Leaders of the ROC have actively lobbied the introduction of the school subject devoted to the history and teaching of Orthodoxy since the collapse of communism. This initiative led to heated debates among representatives of other confessions, politicians and civil

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center (2014). Russians Return to Religion, But Not to Church, available online at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/02/10/russians-return-to-religion-but-not-to-church/> (accessed 01.02.2015).

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center (2014). Russians Return to Religion, But Not to Church, available online at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/02/10/russians-return-to-religion-but-not-to-church/> (accessed 01.02.2015).

<sup>3</sup> Article 14.

<sup>4</sup> Federal Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, preamble.

society activists, scientists, and fed the serious concerns of parents<sup>1</sup>. To put an end to a great range of different regional programs about ethics and religious teachings, which were spread all over the country, on September 1<sup>st</sup> 2012 it became a national requirement in Russia that 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year pupils learn Fundamentals of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics. The subject consists of six modules and allows children and/or their parents to choose one of them: Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture, Fundamentals of Buddhist Culture, Fundamentals of Islamic Culture, Fundamentals of Judaic Culture, Fundamentals of World Religious Cultures or Secular Ethics.

The interesting thing of first time running of FRCSE was that parents of two-thirds of children chose secular modules (Secular Ethics and Fundamentals of World Religions) despite the expectations of the ROC. In its turn, FOC according to BBC Russia were chosen only by 32 %<sup>2</sup>. The choice of modules across the country, of course, differs from region to region.

Estonian case of RE is very interesting even within the general picture of European countries for many reasons. First, Estonia is probably one of the most secularized countries in Europe. Second, RE in the non-confessional form of teaching about world religions was introduced in Estonia right after the declaration of independence in 1920 what made Estonia one of the first countries with the secular RE. Third, Estonia is a country with the long antireligious political tradition as well as Russia being the main heir of the USSR.

Estonia as a member-state of the EU follows the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (2008), which complement The Council of Europe Recommendations on RE.

According to the Estonian Constitution of 1992, there is no state church, 'everyone may freely belong to churches and religious societies'<sup>3</sup>. Besides, the Constitution does not give preferences to any religion regardless its contribution to national and state development.

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<sup>1</sup> Smirnova, M. (2014) Freedom of Conscience and the Right to Education in Russia – a Secular Country of Cultural and Religious Diversity in: Russo, C.J. (Ed.) International Perspectives on Education, Religion and Law, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> BBC Russia (2013) Курсы православия в школах: церковь недовольна цифрами, available online at: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2013/01/130124\\_patriarch\\_culture\\_courses.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2013/01/130124_patriarch_culture_courses.shtml) (accessed 01.03.2014).

<sup>3</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Estonia § 40.

However, it does not forbid the cooperation with religious institutions in the sphere of education, which are indeed actively involved in the process of syllabus developments, teaching-learning resources etc<sup>1</sup>. As it is everywhere in Europe, Christianity as the fundamental part of the European identity warrants more space on the timetable of RE than other world religions. However, the emphasis on Christianity and a strong support of RE by the Estonian Council of Churches became a cause of a negative attitude of Estonian society towards RE.

The status of RE classes in Estonia and Russia is very different. It is an obligatory subject in the former and an optional in the latter. The reason of a voluntary character of RE in Estonia is the strong disagreement within the society towards the status of RE.

Some Estonian schools found the way to solve the problem of religious illiteracy through the introduction of compulsory subjects about religions with different names such as 'History of Culture' etc. In such cases, schools do not have to follow the principle of voluntary learning and these courses could be compulsory with no parent's permissions needed<sup>2</sup>.

As FRCSE is a compulsory class in Russian schools, it is taught upon the national syllabus. In Estonia, there exist just general guidelines on teaching of RE what in fact makes the organization of such classes even more complicated giving schools freedom in elaborating its own syllabuses. Moreover, RE classes are only possible with a minimum of 15 students who are interested in the subject<sup>3</sup>. Today RE is taught in approximately in 60 schools out of more than 600<sup>4</sup>. In P. Valk's words, RE in Estonia is a 'marginal optional subject available only to a small number of pupils'<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Valk, P. (2007) Religious Education in Estonia in Jackson, R., Miedema, S., Weisse, W., Willaime, J-P. (Ed.) Religion and Education in Europe: Developments, Contexts and Debates. p. 167.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act of 1999 (2010) in Schihalejev, O. From Indifference to Dialogue? Estonian Young People, the School and Religious Diversity, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> Valk, P. (2007) Religious Education in Estonia in Jackson, R., Miedema, S., Weisse, W., Willaime, J-P. (Ed.) Religion and Education in Europe: Developments, Contexts and Debates, p. 169.

<sup>5</sup> Valk, P. (2010) Using Contextual Approach for Preparation of the Syllabus for Inter-religious Learning in Engebretson, K., de Souza, M., Durka, G., Gearon, L. (Eds.) International Handbook of Inter-religious Education, p. 537.

All the reasons mentioned above make it very hard to get the entire picture of RE in Estonia. So hard that even the Ministry of Education and Research has no entire picture of the spread of RE throughout the country.

As far as teachers of RE are concerned, Estonia and Russia are very different. Most of the FRCSE teachers in Russia are teachers of primary school with no special education in religions. Estonian RE teachers have to be educated both in theology and in pedagogy. Most of the high institutions able to prepare teachers specializing in RE are confessional ones. Thus, majority of RE teachers have a church as their main employer and combine either their work at school with being employed at church or they teach as well other subjects such as philosophy or history.

RE arises criticism in every society and Russia and Estonia are not the exceptions. While Russia has successfully established compulsory RE, Estonian strong opposition to RE represented by the Estonian native faith group and famous writers, columnists and artists<sup>1</sup> does not allow RE classes become obligatory.

Neither Russian nor Estonian scenario with RE criticism is unique. What is clear is that both Estonia and Russia recognize the importance of teaching about religions and see school as a platform where mutual respect towards different cultures and national traditions of both major and minor ethnic groups could be promoted. Moreover, both countries recognize the vital importance of religions to be taught from the secular point of view.

At the same time, there are many dangers that RE has already faced and could face in the future. The situation in Estonia regarding the status of RE is complicated. Though Estonia follows the general European principles towards teaching about religions, very few Estonian schools provide RE classes. Moreover, with no national syllabus on RE and schools freedom in elaborating its own syllabuses, there is a great danger that RE will differ extremely from school to school.

As for Russia, dividing RE into modules turned out to be unrealistic in providing all schools with all six options. And even if it is possible, there is another great problem when children learn about only one religion, which was chosen for them, and they do not even hear on FRCSE classes about other religions of their Homeland unless each

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<sup>1</sup> Schihalejev, O. (2010) From Indifference to Dialogue? Estonian Young People, the School and Religious Diversity, p. 59.

module is extended with the information about other religious cultures. Unfortunately, such adjustments are still not brought into life. One more hot issue concerns the use of religion for ideological purposes. The great danger here is to substitute development of tolerance and understanding of religious cultures and those who represent them for nurturance of patriotism where the main focus is no longer on pupils as individuals but on the state itself.

## **КОНФЕССИОНАЛЬНО ОРИЕНТИРОВАННЫЙ ТИП РЕЛИГИОВЕДЧЕСКОГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ В РОССИЙСКОЙ ШКОЛЕ**

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Сегодня значимое место в ряду образовательных проблем во многих странах мира занимает проблема «религия и образование». Взаимоотношения институтов образования и религии в современном (модерном) обществе представляются чрезвычайно сложными: отчасти в силу того, что они длительное время развивались автономно и независимо друг от друга, отчасти же потому, что в ходе модернизации существенно усложнилась сама структура социальных отношений. По этой причине сейчас, как никогда ранее, актуальным представляется переосмысление стереотипных представлений и о самих институциональных сторонах взаимодействия, и о ситуации, в которой оно происходит. Следует отметить, что вопрос взаимоотношений образования и религии на рубеже XX и XXI в. предельно резко обозначился в постсоветской России, чему способствовал радикальный характер предшествовавшей секуляризации образовательной сферы и общества в целом.

Образование представляет одну из важнейших рефлексивных подсистем социума, осуществляющую в процессе выполнения своей определяющей функции – формирования социального субъекта – перманентный контроль «конгруэнтности реальных и идеалов общества» (С. А. Шаронова)<sup>1</sup>. Общая предметная рефлексия религии в образовании состоит в том, чтобы «расста-

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<sup>1</sup> Шаронова, С. А. Социология образования: учеб. пособие / С. А. Шаронова. – М.: Изд-во ПСТГУ, 2011. – С. 85–86.