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STRENGTHENING THE MORAL FOUNDATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Sergei Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia

On December 29, 2010, the Russian Foreign Ministry's Collegium and Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill met in the Ministry's Reception House on Spiridonovka to discuss inter-civilizational and inter-cultural cooperation in the context of the great and increasing role of religion in international relations.

Foreign Minister of Russia Sergei Lavrov and Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, addressed the meeting.

Your Holiness,
Esteemed guests,
Dear friends,

We have agreed to meet here in this format to discuss the role of religion as a factor in international relations and its impact on the realization of our foreign policy. I am sincerely grateful to the Holy Patriarch for his personal participation in our meeting.

The tradition of cooperation between Russia's diplomatic service and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) goes back centuries. In recent history, following the breakup of the Soviet Union, when the state did not have an effective way of staying in touch with those who had ended up abroad virtually overnight, the Russian Orthodox Church assumed the role as a link and the custodian of spiritual and cultural values, providing a lifeline to our compatriots abroad.

Today we have a very broad field for interaction: Objectively, the interests of the Russian Church harmoniously complement the Russian Foreign Ministry's work with our compatriots abroad and our peacekeeping efforts in the CIS and other regions, facilitating the invigoration of interstate ties. A good case in point are the steps that the ROC leadership took in promoting an atmosphere of empathy with the Polish people following

the Smolensk air disaster. This effectively helped bring our countries closer to historical reconciliation.

Together, we oppose any manifestations of racism, xenophobia, and intolerance, as well as any attempts to divide the world along religious, ethnic, or cultural lines. We have a common understanding of the importance of interreligious, intercultural dialogue. The Foreign Ministry's priorities include the promotion of the initiative to establish a consultative religious council under the aegis of the UN, as well as the launch of a full-fledged mechanism for religious "dialogue" at UNESCO, where some progress has been made, although things are moving very slowly.

We can also take similar steps at the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and other international and regional organizations. We have possibilities for working together along these lines: These include the time-proven mechanism of the working group for interaction between the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the ROC, including thematic, issue-specific subgroups within the framework of this mechanism. The benefits of such interaction are obvious.

I would like to assure you, Your Holiness, that the Foreign Ministry will continue to provide the Russian Orthodox Church every assistance in strengthening its positions abroad and restoring its property rights to land plots and churches that historically belonged to Russia, as well as render legal, consular, and information support on all matters of interest to you.

Needless to say, the religious factor in global politics is a complex, diverse subject requiring an especially well balanced approach.

Addressing a meeting with Russian ambassadors on July 12, 2010, President D.A. Medvedev singled out the need for a thorough, analytical approach toward forecasting global development trends, a fresh view, the abandonment of stereotypes, and the need for the effective use of civil society resources, including our traditional faiths, above all, the Russian Orthodox Church.

The global financial and economic crisis has shown graphically the inconsistency of the ideas of liberal capitalism that have brought about the consumer society of excessive consumption. The crisis has demonstrated the impossibility of entering the path of sustainable development on the basis of these liberal capitalism ideas. This point was made back in the 1960s by Pitirim Sorokin, who warned that this consumerist socio-cultural model is doomed.

Today there is a growing realization that disregard for man's moral nature, values and norms constituting the spiritual foundation of human solidarity can lead to catastrophic consequences. The sheer nature of global threats, common to all states, requires a joint, collective response with reliance on enduring moral principles.

We regard the consolidation of the moral basis of international relations as part of big time politics. Furthermore, the new polycentric international system will without doubt represent the entire diversity and richness of the cultural-civilizational picture of the world, and I am sure that interreligious dialogue will play a special role there. It is also evident that Europe will be hard put to find a common language with other civilizations if it forgets about its Christian roots, the foundations of its identity. I believe it is here, amid this anguish in the Europeans' minds and souls that an important place is emerging for our country, for our policy on the practical level.

The lessons of Victory over Nazism retain their universal relevance, showing that disregard for moral values common to entire humanity leads man and society to disaster. The Nazi ideology largely evolved under the influence of works by such philosophers as Friedrich Nietzsche with his ideas of God/Man. Not so long ago, Francis Fukuyama noted in one of his works that “acknowledgment of the death of God is a bomb that blows up ... values like compassion and the equality of human dignity.” He describes this ideology as a dead end from which Western philosophy has still not emerged.

Unfortunately, the ideas of Messianism, faith in one’s own exclusiveness and the universality of one’s own values, moreover, secular cultural values, are still very much alive and, to a very large degree, characteristic of the U.S. and Western approaches in general. We are convinced that these approaches will have to be scrapped, and the longer this goes on, the more painful the adaptation to new reality.

At the same time, of course, we have to deal with the effects of globalization that has destroyed the rigid barriers between nations and intensified the importance of ethno-confessional identity. We can observe this both within states, including in Russia, and on the international arena. This underscores the need to strengthen interreligious, intercultural dialogue, putting this task into the category of national and global security issues.

The most important task for Russia in this context is to avoid joining one of the sides in the “showdown” between the West and the Islamic world. We are duty bound to maintain our balanced, conciliatory role that is based on the extensive experience of our own centuries-old coexistence and cooperation with more than 150 peoples and ethnicities and over 50 faiths. Above all, of course, our main faiths, first of all, the ROC as a church that has always striven to unite other religious movements.

In 2008, the Council of Europe adopted the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue that we had initiated, and on that basis we proposed a series of discussions at the Council of Europe on the issue of European identity and the fundamental values of modern European society. We would be interested to see politicians, philosophers, scholars and religious figures participate in such discussions. Such dialogue is long overdue, not least in light of the notorious ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in the Lautsi vs. Italy case that objectively does not help interreligious peace and accord in Europe as he who forgets his religious and moral roots is unlikely to respect the faiths of other civilizations.

We promote interreligious dialogue. On Russia’s initiative, the Russia-Islamic World Strategic Vision Group and the World Public Forum “Dialogue of Civilizations” were created. We value our close interaction with the Russian Orthodox Church within this framework.

The topic that we are discussing today is highly relevant and one of its practical aspects is the preparation of specialists on world religions. At present the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and the Diplomatic Academy have only limited possibilities for giving undergraduate and graduate students knowledge on religious subjects and the role of religion in world politics. If we could agree with the ROC to consider the preparation of a series of lectures on the role of religion in world politics that would be a very good practical result from the present meeting, expanding the forms of our cooperation.

I would also like to thank you, Your Holiness, for the constant attention that you give to our ambassadors. You receive them before they leave for the host country, and this is a precious opportunity for them to hear your assessment of the spiritual component of international relations, including with regard to specific countries where our diplomats are assigned to work.

I would like to reiterate our interest in developing interaction with the Russian Orthodox Church and our readiness to help you in all of your undertakings.