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The following article appeared in the News section of the Wall Street Journal

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BORN AGAIN

Putin and Orthodox Church Cement Power in Russia
As Nationalism Grows, Kremlin Finds Faith;
Forgiving Father Sergei

By ANDREW HIGGINS

CHITA, Russia -- Sergei Taratukhin, a defrocked orthodox priest, fell to his knees before the bishop of this frigid Siberian city 3,000 miles from Moscow. He begged for his clerical robes back and vowed to mend his ways. His sin: siding with a foe of the Kremlin.

Once known as Father Sergei, Mr. Taratukhin served for seven years as the chaplain at Correctional Facility No. 10, a grim penal colony south of here. Among his parishioners was oil baron Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was sent to Siberia in late 2005.⁴

Comment: Omission of Key Facts

⁴ The reporter has left out very serious charges of tax evasion, property theft, and possible involvement in murder leveled against khodorkovsky by prosecutors and, incidentally, journalists.

Booted from the clergy after he declared the jailed billionaire a political prisoner, Mr. Taratukhin decided this summer to recant. State-run television reported his about-face on the local evening news.

Mr. Taratukhin says he has a clear conscience about his previous support for a mogul **who** **crossed President Vladimir Putin**⁴ but now understands the stakes. "Naivete," says the 51-year-old ex-priest, "is sometimes worse than thievery."

Comment: Omission of key facts

Yesterday, Mr. Putin, confirming a plan to stay in power beyond his term as president, said he would become prime minister after the near certain victory of his protege in a March presidential election.

Mr. Taratukhin's repentance reinforces what has become a pillar of Mr. Putin's Russia: an intimate alliance between the Orthodox Church and the Kremlin reminiscent of czarist **days**.¹³ Rigidly hierarchical, intolerant of dissent and wary of competition, both share a vision of Russia's future -- rooted in robust nationalism and at odds with Western-style liberal democracy. In recent months, Orthodox priests have sprinkled holy water on a new Russian surface-to-air-missile system called Triumph and blessed a Dec. 2 parliamentary election condemned by European observers as neither free nor **fair**.⁶ When the Kremlin last week unveiled its plan to keep Mr. Putin in charge after his time as president ends, **effectively**¹ **the head of the church**, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II, went on TV to laud the scheme as a "great blessing for Russia."

Comment: One-sided Perspective

Comment: Ahistorical

Comment: Opinion Presented as News

"The state supports the church, and the church supports the state," says Sergei Kovalyov, a Soviet-era human-rights **activist**.¹⁵ **Three decades ago, he was locked up with Mr. Taratukhin**, the wayward Siberian, at Perm-36, part of the Soviet gulag. Mr. Kovalyov remembers his former prison-mate well: Jailed for anticommunist agitation, he kept getting sent to an isolation cell after a gutsy but foolhardy effort to expose security-service snitches spying on prisoners.

Comment: Lack of Comparative Context [NEW CATEGORY?]

While Mr. Taratukhin and Mr. Kovalyov were in Perm-36, Mr. Putin was starting out in the KGB, which spearheaded the Soviet Union's efforts to suppress religion. Today, Mr. Putin goes to church regularly and wears a cross. He has visited holy places in Jerusalem and a Russian monastery on Mount Athos, a Greek site revered by Orthodox Christians. In May, he helped

⁴ Attempt by Michail Khodorkovsky to buy Duma votes to push his agenda to make oil-revenue tax-exempt is omitted

¹³ The Kremlin also has 'intimate alliance' with the Council of Muftis of Russia (and the Jewish Council of Russia) as it did in czarist days as a way of co-opting church and clergy in the service of values the state seeks to foster.

⁶ This was also practice under Putin's predecessor, Boris Yeltsin.

¹ The use of the term 'effectively' clearly shows that this is the author's interpretation of events. His interpretation is one of many in circulation, and its presentation in lieu of the others is an attempt to shape readers' opinions rather than let them form their own on the basis of facts alone.

¹⁵ There are several advanced democracies in Europe that have established state churches – Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Greece and the United Kingdom – or provide certain advantages for some religions over others. In the Netherlands, Catholic- and Calvinist-dominated districts are afforded cultural autonomy for religious education, and the German state administers a voluntary tax, which if opted out of deprives the tax payer of the guarantee that he or she can have a baptism, wedding, or funeral ceremony held in church.

brokered the end of a schism between the Russian church and a rival outfit set up by anti-communist exiles after the 1917 Revolution. "Orthodoxy has always had a special role in shaping our statehood, our culture, our morals," Mr. Putin told bearded, black-robed priests at a meeting in the Kremlin before this month's parliamentary **election**.¹³

Comment: One-sided Perspective

Two-thirds of Russians now count themselves as Orthodox, roughly double the level when the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991. Opinion polls suggest most identify with the church out of nationalism. **In a recent survey, only 4% said they look to Orthodoxy as a source of moral values**.¹⁰

Comment: Unidentified source

Today's intimacy between church and state revives in many ways a relationship that existed before the Revolution of 1917, when a czarist-rallying cry was "Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationhood."

Russia today has no czar and its constitution mandates a division between church and state. But Mr. Putin has increasingly assumed a czar-like status, hailed by the patriarch and other supporters as a "national leader" endowed with an almost mystical right to rule **indefinitely**.¹¹ The alliance also has roots in Russia's Soviet past, when the KGB hounded dissident clerics and favored those loyal to the state. It recruited many churchmen as agents or informers. Among the agents, say people who have reviewed KGB archives, was the current patriarch, Alexy II. Asked about the accusations against the church and the patriarch, Vsevolod Chaplin, a senior priest in the church's Moscow headquarters, said there were no "specially planted KGB workers" within the church. This, he said, is a "myth." He added that contact with Soviet authorities was "not immoral" if it didn't harm individuals or the church. A church commission looked into the question of KGB collaboration but didn't make its findings public.

Comment: Sensational Context

Mr. Kovalyov, the Soviet-era dissident, says: "Our patriarch and our president have the same background. They are from the same firm -- the KGB." Russia embraced Christianity just over a millennium ago and belongs to the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which split from the Western church in the 11th century and posits the ideal of "symphonia," or cooperation between church and state.

Occasional attempts by Russian churchmen to defy state authority have been crushed. When the 16th-century head of the Moscow church, Philip, criticized the abuses of Ivan the Terrible, he was taken before a kangaroo court, convicted of sorcery and ordered to repent. He refused. The czar had him murdered. Peter the Great in the 18th century placed the church under state control because he viewed it as an obstacle to modernization, and also his power. Communism later enshrined atheism as Russia's state creed. Thousands of priests were murdered or sent to the gulag.

¹³ Putin has also told the Muslim world that Russia is a part of it.

¹⁰ Unidentified source

¹¹ Putin's decision to step down as president at the end of his second term as mandated by the Russian Constitution hardly fits into the czarist model or this sensationalist context of 'national leader' proposed by some but still rejected by Putin, no less references to some nationally-supported "mystical right to rule indefinitely."

As the Soviet Union was imploding in 1990, democratic reformers around President Boris Yeltsin faced a "very serious and painful" decision, says Sergei Stankevich, at the time a senior Yeltsin adviser and head of a policy group responsible for religion. The issue, he says, was what to do with a priesthood compromised by links to the KGB.

"It was not just one or two people. The whole church was under control," he says. "We knew it for sure because we looked at the archives," which use code names to describe priests' involvement in numerous operations. These ranged from campaigns to muzzle dissident clergy to KGB-orchestrated efforts to counter criticism from foreign churchmen of Soviet religious repression.

One of those allowed to view the archives was Gleb Yakunin, a dissident Orthodox priest who spent five years in a Soviet prison, part of it in Perm-37, a labor camp near the one where Mr. Taratukhin and Mr. Kovalyov were held. Later elected to parliament, Mr. Yakunin says he had always suspected large-scale collaboration. But seeing documentary proof "left a shocking impression." The church was "practically a subsidiary, a sister company of the KGB," says Mr. Yakunin, who was given access to the archives while serving on a parliamentary investigative committee.

Mr. Stankevich, a churchgoing Orthodox Christian, says he shared Mr. Yakunin's dismay but opposed calls for a "revolutionary cleansing." This, he says, would have delayed for decades any hope of a Christian revival. The decision carried a price: The church, he says, stayed "too close to power."

To send a signal that religion was back, in the early 1990s the new authorities shut down a Red Square public toilet on the site of a demolished church, and built a chapel in its place. Mr. Yeltsin appeared there holding a votive candle. The new enthusiasm for faith spread beyond Moscow and, in 1993, reached Mr. Taratukhin in Siberia. He quit his job as a tram driver and became a priest. He says he first embraced religion while doing time at Perm-36 for "anti-Soviet activities." His career as a cleric got off to a rocky start. Assigned to work under an elderly priest in Chita, he found his boss an "atheist and a drunk." Mr. Taratukhin went back to driving trams. Four years later, after the Chita priest died, he rejoined and got sent to work as a priest in Krasnokamensk, the site of Correctional Facility No. 10.

Religion was also catching on in Russia's security services. In 1995, Viktor Voitenko, a KGB general-colonel, moved to Chita to head the force guarding the frontier with China and Mongolia, run by the FSB, successor to the KGB.

He took his underlings to what was then the city's only church to celebrate "Frontier Guard Day" and got to know the bishop. They started talking, recalls Mr. Voitenko, about rebuilding a cathedral blown up by the Bolsheviks in the 1930s.

As the church expanded its influence, many of the democratic campaigners who had paved the way for its revival fell from favor. Mr. Stankevich, Mr. Yeltsin's adviser, fled to Poland fearing arrest.

Mr. Yakunin, the dissident priest, was defrocked after he refused to give up his seat in parliament and kept calling for KGB priests to repent. In Chita, Mr. Voitenko, the KGB border officer, stood for parliament and defeated the incumbent, a veteran anticommunist democracy activist. The shift in political winds coincided with a surge of often religious-tinged nationalism.¹⁵

Comment: Lack of Comparative Context

Moscow's Donskoy Monastery moved a tank and rocket launcher into its grounds to remind worshippers of the church's role against Hitler's Germany. The church also lobbied parliament hard to restrict rival Christian groups. "Russia is entirely different [from America]," says Metropolitan Kirill, a senior churchman who led the push. There is no place for "the ideas of the free market in religious life."

On the eve of the new millennium, President Yeltsin resigned and handed power to Mr. Putin. Alexy II blessed a Kremlin ceremony transferring a briefcase containing Russia's secret nuclear codes.

The link between security and faith was symbolically cemented in 2001 with the reconstruction of Sophia the Divine Wisdom, a dilapidated and long disused church at the Lubyanka headquarters of the FSB security service. Six time zones away in Chita, construction began on the new cathedral promoted by Mr. Voitenko, the former KGB man. City authorities donated land. Businessmen, leaned on by officials, and the state railway donated \$5 million.¹³ South of Chita in Krasnokamensk, Mr. Taratukhin was slowly expanding his congregation. His salary was small, he says, but he loved the work and earned money on the side doing blessings. "I was living quietly and peacefully," he says. "Then they brought Khodorkovsky."

Comment: One-Sided Context

Mr. Khodorkovsky, convicted of fraud and tax evasion, turned up at the labor camp in fall 2005 after what his defenders deride as a politically motivated show trial in Moscow. Unsettled by the arrival of such a high-profile inmate -- and the accompanying media attention -- prison administrators asked Mr. Taratukhin to protect their offices with a blessing. He refused, saying he couldn't "sanctify sin."

Allowed behind bars to talk with Mr. Khodorkovsky, the priest took a shine to the billionaire, whose father is Jewish and whose mother is Orthodox Christian. In interviews with foreign and Russian journalists staking out the prison camp, Mr. Taratukhin declared Mr. Khodorkovsky a "victim of political games." "I thought: What is there to be afraid of?" he recalls. Soon, he got called to Chita by his superior, Bishop Yevstafy, who said he had read his remarks on the Internet and heard about his refusal to bless the camp. The bishop re-assigned the wayward cleric

¹⁵ This is a common phenomenon around the globe and includes various religions. For example, Russia's very own Chechen and North Caucasus nationalists were as much as Islamic as they were ethno-nationalist. Hence, radical nationalism in the region quickly morphed into radical Islam in the form of jihadi terrorism; an issue entirely ignored by Western reporting on Russia.

¹³ Federal and regional authorities routinely fund the construction, expansion, and repair of mosques and synagogues as well as churches.

to a remote parish hundreds of miles away and told him to mind his tongue. Mr. Taratukhin kept talking. He complained that he'd been sent into "political exile" and noted that Mr. Khodorkovsky, a big church donor before his arrest, had once been friendly with the patriarch, Alexy II.

The bishop, furious, signed an order defrocking him. The patriarch's office in Moscow says Mr. Taratukhin got booted for "political activity and slandering the church leadership," and his fate is in the hands of the bishop of Chita. Bishop Yevstafy, who **cruises**¹² around Chita in a chauffeur-driven Toyota Land Cruiser with tinted windows, declined to be interviewed.

Comment: Jaundiced Terminology

Mr. Taratukhin, convinced he had done nothing wrong, hooked up with human-rights campaigners and Mr. Yakunin, the Moscow priest defrocked a decade earlier, to see if they could help. Mr. Yakunin issued a statement denouncing the Siberian priest's expulsion.

Broke, Mr. Taratukhin took a job in a factory making construction materials. His health gave out and he quit. Mr. Khodorkovsky's supporters sent him some cash but this quickly ran out. In May, Mr. Taratukhin went to see Bishop Yevstafy and told him he wanted to repent. He then publicly recanted during a Sunday service in the new cathedral. The bishop mumbled a prayer. Old ladies wept.

Marina Savvateeva, the head of the Khodorkovsky support committee, learned of his U-turn on TV. She was disappointed, she says, but sympathetic because "power in Russia is very vindictive." Mr. Voitenko, Chita's member of parliament, scoffs at Mr. Khodorkovsky's allies as sell-outs driven by money, not principal. He won re-election this month on the United Russia ticket headed by Mr. Putin. His office displays a picture of Mr. Putin and an icon of the Virgin Mary. Priests who dabble in politics, he says, are "very dangerous."

Mr. Taratukhin didn't vote in the election and wants nothing more to do with politics. Clergy, he says, shouldn't rock the **boat**.⁴ He still hasn't got back his clerical robes, but his penitence has brought a partial reprieve: He recently got a job supervising garbage collection, snow removal and other menial tasks at Chita's new cathedral.

Comment: Omission of Key Facts

He earns under \$200 a month and barely has enough money for food. He thinks his phone is bugged and worries the church will never fully forgive him. He tries to look on the bright side. "This is not 1937," he says, referring to the year in which Stalin's Great Terror reached its peak. "I'm not in prison. I haven't been **shot**."¹¹

Comment: Sensational Context

¹² "Cruises" constitutes 'Jaundiced Terminology' as it is an attempt to discredit the bishop for driving in a Mercedes.

⁴ There is no quote from Mr. Taratukhin as to why he decided to recant. There are direct quotes used when remarks are condemnatory of the Putin regime.

¹¹ Sensational Context in this case is the attempt to associate the Putin era with the peak of the Great Terror in 1937.