



Head of Russia's MFA Sergey Lavrov's interview towards DECR chairman Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk's 55th birthday



The minister of the foreign affairs of the Russian Federation's interview with Rossiya 24 TV channel.

- Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk will soon mark his fifty-fifth birthday. He is often described as your church 'counterpart'. Do you think the Russian Orthodox Church needs her own MFA these days?

- The designation 'Department for External Church Relations' speaks that Metropolitan Hilarion is engaged in contacts with his numerous counterparts. The canonical territories of the Russian Orthodox Church are much larger than those of Russia. For instance, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church enjoys a broad autonomy. Even contacts with her demand skills of dealing with external partners.

This post is manifested in relations with Local Orthodox Churches and other Christian Churches (including the Vatican, with which His Eminence Hilarion maintains regular contacts), as well as with non-Christian religions. We not just welcome such dialogue but also actively support it. There is quite a number of inter-state and inter-government mechanisms called to promote the dialogue of civilizations.

There is even a special structure in the UN - the UN Alliance of Civilizations headed by the former minister of foreign affairs of Spain. It is engaged in organizing contacts for promoting inter-confessional and inter-ethnic accord. In these efforts, the Russian Orthodox Church has something to offer. She is one of the most active parties in this field of inter-civilization and inter-confessional accord.

There is another example of interaction between secular and ecclesial representatives - the World Conference on Inter-Faith and Inter-Ethnic Dialogue held every two years by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the UN Secretary-General. The next one is to be held in May 2022 in Sankt-Petersburg. We will actively cooperate with the Russian Orthodox Church to ensure the right approach to defining the agenda and for this forum to be used to the maximum for promoting the values reflecting Orthodox ideals so much in demand today.

- Metropolitan Hilarion is a man of many talents - a composer of music, writer of books, confessor of people, celebrant of the Liturgy, active administer of services. How would you assess him as precisely 'a minister of foreign affairs'?

- As a very talented man. A talented person is talented in everything - not only in a hobby but also in his primary work. I believe, Metropolitan Hilarion has properly continued the cause of his predecessor at the post of head of the Department for External Church Relations.

We have been in close cooperation for many years. There is a longstanding Working Group for Cooperation between the MFA of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. Ministry State-Secretary E. S. Ivanov participates in it from our side. Periodically, we hold meetings with Metropolitan Hilarion and His Holiness Patriarch Kirill.

We have many joint projects. The most topical one is the adoption of concrete steps for protecting Christians, especially in the Middle East and North Africa. Together with the Department for External Church Relations we have held not for one year a special forum for supporting Christians on the sidelines of the OSCE and the UN Human Rights Council events. Participating in it are partners from the Vatican - the Holy See, the ministers of foreign affairs of Armenia, Hungary, Belarus, Lebanon and other countries who see a threat for the further normal, peaceful and safe life of Christians in the Middle East. Hundreds of thousands of them have fled after 'democracy' began to be implanted there. First in Iraq, then in Lebanon and Syria. The Christian population has suffered the most from the Syrian conflict. The Syrian Arab Republic is one of the cradles of Christianity.

It is necessary to raise our voice not just to draw the attention of the world community to this problem, but also to take concrete measures to put an end to the persecution of Christians. It is extremely important. But here is the attitude of our colleagues in the West to this problem... In spite of the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population is Christians, it is for the seventh year now that we have failed to adopt a document in the OSCE that would raise the voice of the world community in defense of Christians and Muslims in Europe - a declaration against Islamophobia and Christianophobia. We proposed it long ago when the Declaration against Antisemitism was adopted. We pointed to the need to be consistent and prevent any phobia in response to people's religious beliefs. So far the 'enlightened' West has hampered this initiative. However, I am sure that together with the Russian Orthodox Church, with the Department for External Church Relations, with His Eminence Hilarion, we will succeed in getting results.

- I asked whether he has many enviers. He answered they are many. And what about the Russian Orthodox Church? He said she had enough of them. He began speaking about Ukraine, the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In this sense, one can compare how pressure is put on you and on him. What do you think, is it hard for him to be at this post in our days in

the context of the Ukrainian schism?

- On the surface, it is presented as a movement for each Orthodox people to have a right to choose. We are well aware how 'the Orthodox Church of Ukraine' (OCU) was created. It is not just an initiative of the Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople - it is directly dictated by the USA. Deep down they do not hide it. The special envoy for the freedom of faith appointed by the US previous administration did things opposite to his mandate: he undermined the freedom of faith imposing organizational parameters (speaking in the bureaucratic language) to various Local Churches, destroying the unity of the Orthodox Christians of Russia and Ukraine, creating there a schismatic church (as a matter of fact) deprived of civil rights, destroying the unity of the Church of Antioch, seeking to tear Lebanese Orthodox Christians away from it. The same happens with regard to the canonical territory of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

We have a clear understanding of the fact that the actions of Constantinople, which are directly manipulated from Washington, have nothing to do with the ideals of Orthodoxy, with the traditions on the basis of which the interaction of Local Churches has always been organized. It is grossly violated today. It is pressure in the sense that it requires efforts to oppose the completely unacceptable actions of this kind. We fully support the Russian Orthodox Church.

We have many joint projects for working with compatriots. The parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church in other countries take pastoral care of the immense number of parishioners. It is an additional opportunity for supporting those who wish to preserve relations with their Motherland compared with what we do along secular lines through our embassies. Consulates, Russian cultural centres abroad that, among other things, help them to preserve ties with the Russian Orthodox Church.

- What personal impression does Metropolitan Hilarion make as a personality, if you had an opportunity to talk with him not at official events?

- He is an erudite, a well-brought-up person, very even-tempered. An important quality for the work at this post is not to show your emotions. I am sure that in many situations he is overfilled with emotions. I very much like him as an interlocutor, clever, thinking, always understanding a situation in such a way that an approach to it can be certainly found, or a way out of it, which would meet the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church. We seek to act the same way in our secular diplomatic field. I think we can call each other friends.