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French 'laïcité' vs Russian Secularism: Different Manifestations of the Same Idea



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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the secularism politics. It also discusses in detail what this policy is and using the example of the French Republic, the history of the formation of a particular 'French version of secularism', which in French-speaking countries is called 'laïcité'. The paper presents the history of development, formation and formation of such ideas during the last 3 centuries since the 18th century up to now. A large part of the article focuses on the French Republic and the French version of secularism, describing in detail the origins of this policy, its problems and difficulties, as well as its current state which describes the latest phenomena – the adoption of new laws, state ideas and restrictions associated with the policy and, beyond all of this, the paper describes the impact of such measures on relations between different ethnic and religious groups. The Russian Federation is used as a counterexample to the French state. The analysis is made of how Russia pursues its policy towards secularism. Both similarities and differences between two countries are highlighted.

Keywords: *secularism; secular policy; French laïcité; freedom of faith; different beliefs; Russian Federation; modern laws and rules; religious confrontations; tensions; equality and protection; Constitution*

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Французская политика ‘laïcité’ против российского «секуляризма»: разное трактование одной идеи

АННОТАЦИЯ

Данная статья посвящена политике секуляризма. В ней подробно рассказывает о том, что из себя представляет данная политика, а также на примере Французской Республики более подробно рассматривается история формирования особой – «французской версии секуляризма», который во франкоговорящих странах получил особое название ‘laïcité’. В статье представлена история развития, формирования и становления подобных идей на протяжении трех последних веков – с XVIII в. и вплоть до наших дней. Большая часть статьи посвящена Французской Республике и французскому варианту секуляризма, где детально рассказывается о корнях появления этой политики, о проблемах и трудностях, а также в нынешнем состоянии, в котором описаны последние явления – принятие новейших законов, государственные идеи и ограничения, связанные с политикой. И, помимо всего вышесказанного, в этой статье описывается влияние таких мер на отношения между различными этническими и религиозными группами. В качестве контрпримера французскому государству используется Российская Федерация. Проводится анализ того, как Россия проводит свою политику в отношении секуляризма. Выделяются как сходства, так и различия между двумя странами.

Ключевые слова: секуляризм; политика секуляризации; французская политика ‘laïcité’; свобода вероисповедания; разная вера; Российская Федерация; современные законы и правила; религиозные конфронтации; напряженность; равенство и защита; Конституция

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Introduction

Over the last few years, more and more news has been published about religious controversies. The problem is particularly acute in multicultural and multi-confessional France. In the last 5 years, religious conflicts between the Muslim and Christian sections of the population have reached a critical level. Moreover, in the French Republic these conflicts are violent, at times even exacerbated by bloodshed. For the French state, finding a balance between citizens of different ethnic and religious backgrounds is one of the priorities of its modern policy: minimising the harassment of people of different races and faiths; balancing interests and values is at the heart of its current governmental policy. The relevance of this paper stems from this.

The French language even has a political term which emerged at the end of the 18th century

and which serves to characterise the state’s policy of ensuring equality and balance for all citizens in the religion matter. Using the history of the France development as an example, the term ‘laïcité’ will be examined in a detailed way and information will be provided on how it has formed and evolved over the last 3 centuries and what it looks like now and what contradictions it causes.

As another example, another multicultural and multireligious state – the Russian Federation will have been used. Drawing on this example will help to provide a comparative analysis of how states shape their policies and how they try to find that precarious balance between different faiths. Thus, it can be stated that the objective of this paper is to provide information on how two multinational countries regulate their policies on religion on the basis ideas of ‘laïcité’ in France and secularism in Russia.

French laïcité

The origins of ideas of state secularism lie in France. Therefore, a large part of this paper is devoted to describing the formation of this concept, which will allow a clearer understanding of its ideas.

For the first time, the equality of faiths and cultures was mentioned in the Constitution that appeared on 4th October 1958. Article 1 should be taken into account. It states: “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs. It shall be organized on a decentralized basis”.¹

“France shall be secular”. What does it mean and why is it so important nowadays? The word “secular” came from the Latin language and nowadays it has a strong connection with religions. Anything that doesn’t have an explicit reference to religion (either negative or positive), should be considered secular. Doubtlessly, there is no single definition of that concept.

The ideas of French secularism, also this policy is called ‘laïcité’, can be truly called unique. The ideas of secularism in France are based on a synthesis of history and the past. For instance, it would be appropriate to use one person’s opinion. Jean Louis Bianco is a very famous politician and a supporter of the socialist party. In his interview and his article, he stated that on an equal footing with history represents the set of principles and rules [1, p. 250–253].

These principles and rules are not only about to have or not to have beliefs. They also cover the ideas of freedom and government. The first pillar – freedom – laïcité provides to everyone the rights of being free and independent in consciousness questions, self-expression, religion and faith. The second one is about the neutrality of the state – the state is not under the rules of any of religions opinions and laws. The French secularism guarantees are about these two main pillars. All people of the French Republic – all men and women are citizens with equal rights and duties. To believe or not to believe in God is an individual choice [2, p. 130].

As it was already mentioned, French secularism has its roots in the past and history. The process of establishment and development of the ideas of laïcité consists of 3 main phases. The first one is about the historical background – from the 18 to 20th century. The second one is about the main changes which happened in 2005 and 2011. The last phase is about new tendencies and challenges that the French model of secularism faced in 2019 and 2020. It would be better if we examine each of these steps separately.

The initial ideas of secularism began to take shape by the 18th century especially after the French Revolution of 1789. Enlighteners were the first group of people who started shifting the audience attention away from secular questions. They didn’t necessarily deny the ideas and importance of faith, they tried to express the existence of other important things. Nevertheless, the 18th can be surely called the breaking point of the development of the ideas of the modern understanding of secularism.²

After the brand new concept of ideas proposed by people who started to search and find the meaning and the value not only in faith and God, there was stagnation [3]. The process of developing the French laïcité stopped in the 19th. Certainly, there was an explanation for such a long-term deterrence. During that century and especially after the 1862 the freedom of faith was strongly controlled by Catholic clergy. There was no freedom, the Catholic clergy was so rich and wealthy at that time. There was no chance to shift the attention away from the faith. Catholicism was in the hearts and minds of every citizen in France. Tight control by Catholic clergy was the main explanation for the stagnation in the development of secular ideas.³

The church authority was firmly in place until the next 20th century. Only in 1905 people realized that it had been no longer possible living under the rule of the powerful Catholic clergy. The French felt that they had needed a change and freedom in self-expression. That is why the law concerning the separation of the

¹ The French Constitution 1958. 23.07.2008. URL: https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/sites/default/files/as/root/bank_mm/anglais/constiution_anglais_oct2009.pdf.

² The local.france. What does laïcité (secularism) mean in France? 23.11.2020. URL: <https://www.thelocal.fr/20201123/explained-what-does-lacite-secularism-really-mean-in-france>.

³ Histoire de la laïcité: la loi de 1905 en bref. URL: <https://www.lumni.fr/article/la-loi-de-1905-en-bref>.

Catholic church and state was finally signed on 9th of December, 1905. The government no longer supported the church in all endeavours. It was the final step to the forming of secularism in France. This law which was proposed firstly by Emiles Combes and then by Aristide Briand had finally finished the violent confrontation during ages.⁴ The idea of the project was about the church and government separation. The driving force of that law was a confrontation among “cléricaux” and “anticléricaux” – people who supported the Catholics church and people who refused the existence of all religion (atheists), respectively.⁵

The last meaningful event which should be mentioned at that phase was the Constitution in 1958. The paragraph which covers the idea of secularism and freedom was added to the French Constitution on 4th of October. It means that ideas have come a long way from the ideas of the enlighteners to the country’s most important piece of legislation – the Constitution. The law about freedom of religion finally became not only the reality but also an important part of French life. The phase of formation and establishment was finished.

The second stage connected with secularism relates to the 21st century. This stage can be characterized as a stage of analysis and as a stage of improvements. Belonging to the phrase experts generally refer to two significant events – the year 2005 and 11th of April, 2011 [4, p. 300–310].

The year 2005 was an illustrative one for describing the ideas of secularism. It was the 100-year anniversary from the moment of separation of the Catholic clergy and state. For that moment the Council of State (Le Conseil d’Etat) made the report which was called “one century of secularism”. The French original version was “un siècle de laïcité”.⁶ The main idea of the report was to express and show what happened during 100 years after the law 1905, which is also called

the bedrock of French secularism. The results of that research were unexpected: the idea of French laïcité had a negative impact and brought a lot of problems. These problems were related to the moral ideas and values of citizens – the loss of hold by the religion of society, the loss of values. One more important fact that was found was the increasing incomprehension and tensions of the people with different faiths.

Continuing the point of view, the law which was adopted in the previous 2004, was so controversial and caused a lot of disputes. Abroad, it got known as “the French headscarf ban”. This new law banned the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols or garb in state schools. The society received the law differently: for someone, it was a step towards equality of faith in society, for Muslims – a step towards disrespecting and oppressing their faith.

Another law also can be used as an example of incomprehension and tensions of people of different faith. The law of 11th of April, 2011 was proposed by Sarkozy and political parties. The main idea of it was made illegal to hide the face in public spaces. Few thousands of women who wear the niqab and the burqa were affected by this act.⁷ This innovation also looks controversial [5, p. 630].

In the final phase, the author would like to provide information regarding the current situation of French policy called ‘laïcité’. Nowadays, the challenges which relate to the ideas of freedom of faith and belief take different shapes. The main difficulties concern the Muslims practices. The government try to be neutral with their laws and policy. But these laws seem like discrimination against French Muslims. Relations between people of different faiths become more challenging year in France. Tensions among the Islamic part of the French population are so high – after the last speech of president Macron concerning the “Islamist separatism”, there were the terrorist attacks with knives, the killings, hostility, boycotts across the country.

Faith-based hostility reached a peak in France in this decade. Most of the tensions were

⁴ The law of 1905 provided by Emiles Combes and Aristide Briand. URL: <https://museeprotestant.org/en/notice/the-law-of-1905/>.

⁵ Le conseil de l’État. «Un siècle de laïcité» – Rapport public 2004. 30.11.2003. URL: <https://www.conseil-etat.fr/ressources/etudes-publications/rapports-etudes/etudes-annuelles/un-siecle-de-laicite-rapport-public-2004>.

⁶ The Council of State. “Un siècle de laïcité”. URL: <https://www.conseil-etat.fr/ressources/etudes-publications/rapports-etudes/etudes-annuelles/un-siecle-de-laicite-rapport-public-2004>.

⁷ Ministry of France. Secularism. URL: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/coming-to-france/france-facts/secularism-and-religious-freedom-in-france-63815/article/secularism-and-religious-freedom-in-france>.

raised by right-wing movements hostile and by extremist groups. Their attacks are a reaction to disagreement or harassment. There were several faith-based assaults that have led to the killing of people. In January 2015, the shooting of journalists at Charlie Hebdo and the murder of Jewish hostages at a supermarket. In November the same year, 130 people were killed in a spate of attacks including at the Bataclan concert hall in Paris. Different kinds of attacks have taken place many times since then. Not a long time ago, in October 2020, there were the murder of Patty and the murders of 3 Christian worshippers in Nice [6]. These events were prompted by President Macron's speech regarding Islam. It is worth noting that this is not the first time that Macron has spoken categorically about religious topics causing controversy, protests and even aggressive attacks.

The idea of *laïcité* is not even longer connected with freedom of faith. Nowadays, it acts as a touchstone for how French people can live together. These debates are not about the secular state, they transformed into understanding and forming of the frameworks of rights and responsibilities [7, p. 70].

Russian secularism

The Russian Federation has a similar policy to France on the issue of secularism. Governments of both countries try to protect different cultural minorities and establish equality and freedom of religion. These two countries follow the same ideas but use different tools in the matter of achieving the goal. The usage of tools brings completely opposite results. That is why in comparison with France, the Russian Federation seems like the best option as a counterexample.

Despite the different instruments in the regulation of that policy and the different historical backgrounds of the secularism ideas formation, it is noteworthy that France and Russia have much more in common than this may seem at first glance. And it would be logical to say a couple of things at the beginning concerning the similarities between these two states. It will be a short introduction and transition point in the story of Russian secularism.

Russia and France are multicultural countries. They are inhabited by people of different cultures,

faiths, languages and traditions. As well as for the France Republic or Russian Federation or for any state the task of equality is of paramount importance. To maintain the balance among different faiths and ethnic groups, to avoid public tensions are the main challenges for a multicultural country.

To provide the most reliable answer, it should use the main document of the country – the Constitution of the Russian Federation. The same was done in the last chapter where a document of the highest legal authority in France was used. The Russian Constitution was confirmed with the establishment of the Russian Federation in 1993. However, in 2020 it was improved and edited. One of the most important articles – the article number 14.1 describes the attitude to the belief that had not been corrected. It retained the original interpretation: “the Russian Federation is a secular state. No religion can be established as a state or compulsory”.⁸ Thus, it can be concluded that secularism, just as in France is prescribed at the highest legislative level – in the Constitution. But before examining the current situation, it is required to look at Russian history.

Throughout Russian history, the state was ruled by a tsar. A man who was sent by God to do his will on earth. However, his right hand always was the Orthodox clergy. Initially, the clergy did two things: they prayed and gave advice. Nonetheless, from decade to decade, their power and might grew – a tsar gave pitches free of charge, the clergy didn't pay any taxes. The wealth of the Russian Orthodox Church has accumulated over the centuries. There is even a time period in Russian history when the state was not ruled by a tsar or a high-ranking person but by the Orthodox clergy and its patriarchs. The power of the monarch was put on the back burner.

It was an exceptional period in history. Nevertheless, the Orthodox faith has served and continues serving as both consolation and guidance for the Russian people. It makes them believe and pray, work and suffer. Before the formation of the Soviet Union this belief was the only and predominant one.

⁸ New text of the Constitution of the Russian Federation as amended in 2020. 03.07.2020. URL: <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48953>.

The period of the Soviet Union, 1922–1991 is also called a period of atheism [8, p. 5–9]. The USSR was ruled by ordinary people: handymen, peasants. The ideology of the importance of work and unity was hammered into everyone's head. God, the church, the cultural heritage – all were abandoned until the forming of the Russian Federation and the Constitution, 1993.

Due to this federal document, it can be stated that in Russia, there is no compulsory or a defined belief. Everyone feels free to choose God and faith. And the law protects their option. Before that, there were few paragraphs about the history of faith in Russia. But what is happening now? Nowadays, the Russian Federation is a multi-ethnic state. All of these social groups have their traditions, cultural aspects, faiths and Gods. According to various sources, there are more than 70 religious' denominations on the territory of Russia.⁹ Among them, the most popular and powerful are Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism. There are subspecies and sub-types that depart from these religious movements.

Today, the west part of Russia is Orthodox – 66% of whole population believe in Jesus Christ. The south of the country believes in Allah and Buddha – this part of the country is represented by faiths such as Islam (9%) and Buddhism (2%). Judaism is in the East (1%). Catholicism (5%) and Protestantism (2%) in the north-east part of the Russian Federation. It would be unfair to say that Russia is fully Orthodox country. Undoubtedly, the traditional Christian faith in the Russian Federation has a big role to play. However, the adoption of one of those faiths as the national and as the most important, would be unfair to other parts of citizens who believe in other Gods. This adoption can be recognized as harassment or oppression of the minority. In the modern state that is impossible and that is why the government of Russia follows the same tendency as the French one.

For its part, the government provides a chance to choose your faith and God. There is no imposing or propaganda. Believe in whoever you want but your faith shouldn't harm or disturb

others. In the Russian Federation people live in peace, regardless of faith and tradition. The government doesn't try to disturb the balance by introducing new laws concerning the beliefs.

The phenomenon of Russian secularism lies in two unusual components. In spite of its history and a close connection to the Orthodox faith, the Russian government does not prohibit or harass other faiths. No doubt, the majority of the population is Orthodox. But all faiths are respected. The second component of the phenomenon of Russian secularism is connected with tools that the government uses to control the relations. Maintaining a balance is about inactivity. No new laws concerning faith and religious people. People have the right to freedom of religion, as long as they do not harm those around them.

Conclusion

This study focuses on the history of the formation of secularism and the current state of this governmental policy. Due to two examples – the France Republic and the Russia Federation. It was shown that secularism can take different forms and attitudes among citizens. In France, it works as the deterrent mechanism which tries to organize and provide stability among two main religions – Catholicism and Islam. The strict governmental laws and rules which are implemented in order to bring equality of religion and rights, still cause conflicts and contradictions. The ideas of Russian secularism are aimed at creating a sustainable engagement of citizens of different faiths, and the methods used to achieve the goal are more peaceful and less controversial. Telling the truth, faith-based problems and disagreements are now prevalent in France. It is a result of both the French *laïcité* and current religion confrontations.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that the ideas of secularism could not be implemented in each country. This government policy covers mostly multi-cultural countries where there are several mainstreams of faith.

For example, speaking about small countries such as Poland, there is no necessity to establish the secularism policy because there is only one faith – Catholicism. The majority of the people are Catholics. The same situation is in Czech, Hungary, Croatia.

⁹ Religious in Russia. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Russia/Religion>.

However, the thing changes so much if we are talking about big and multi-cultural countries such as the Russia Federation, the France Republic or, for instance, the USA, Great Britain. Today, these countries are represented by different citizens with roots from all over the world – they have different cultural backgrounds and beliefs. That fact can't provide the establishment of one faith. With the process of globalization most of the big countries lost their unique cultural features, the boundaries have faded, the cultures have mixed. All faiths, ideas, worldviews, moral values become equal. What does it mean? What this means is that people no longer feel oppressed by one religion or group of people as

they did in France. In addition, a third person appears to regulate the relations of people of different races, ideas, and values – the state. But the role of the state is not merely to contemplate. It is a remnant of the past. The modern state role is much broader – control, regulation, stability. Based on this, there is one simple truth that the governments are independent, the belief is a personal choice. Today, the main purpose of modern leaders of states is to protect the cultural and religious interaction and to control the freedom of human beings. Race, background, faith – no longer a classifier among people. The world has entered a new stage, a stage of equality, respect and independence.

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