

Income gap in Russia endangers stability, church forum says: Poverty in a resource-rich country

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Russia has climbed to No. 3 in the world in its number of billionaires, but a Moscow meeting of religious leaders, academics and public officials said the gap between rich and poor threatens the unity of the world's biggest country.

The yearly forum, chaired by Patriarch Alexsy II of the Russian Orthodox Church, addressed the problem of poverty in resource-rich Russia. It also condemned efforts to sow discord in the Russian Orthodox Church as it moves toward reunion with an old breakaway émigré group.

"Right now the words 'wealth' and 'poverty' more and more signify the deep division of the sons and daughters of Russia, which gives rise to glaring moral problems and threatens peace and stability in society," declared a statement released at the March 7 conclusion of the 11th World Russian People's Council.

Both the patriarch and Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, who heads the patriarchate's office of external church relations, spoke of an alarming rich-poor divide in Russia, where billionaires drive Bentleys and spend millions of dollars on a whim, while the poor have annual incomes amounting to the cost of a couple of bottles of wine in a fancy Moscow restaurant.

Forbes magazine recently said that the number of Russian billionaires jumped to 53 in 2007.

Speaking with Vesti-24, a state-run television news channel, Kirill said, "We all know what happens when our fat cats start throwing money around abroad, how they bring shame on Russia." This was an apparent reference to Mikhail Prokhorov, a billionaire arrested in connection with an alleged prostitution ring in Courchevel, a French ski resort favored by rich Russians.

“Conflict between rich and poor has once already given rise to the tragedy of revolution and civil war,” said Kirill, alluding to the overthrow of the Tsarist regime 90 years ago.

The council also appealed for church unity, a reference to strife among Orthodox factions in the former Soviet Union, especially Ukraine. The gathering hinted at efforts to scuttle a May reunion between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, which broke with Moscow after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

A recent essay by Bishop Diomid of Chukotka, a remote Siberian region, has caused a furor. He accuses the Moscow Patriarchate of compromising church purity by its involvement in ecumenical activities such as an international interfaith forum in Moscow in July 2006 that preceded a meeting of Group of Eight leaders in Saint Petersburg. At a press briefing, Patriarch Alexsy said opponents of the Moscow Patriarchate’s reunion with the émigré church had intentionally overblown the bishop’s comments in a campaign to block unity. *-Ecumenical News International*