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The evolution of the political role of the Russian Orthodox Church (1991-2021)

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Abstract

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991, communism as an ideology and economic model appeared to lose its appeal worldwide. However, the attacks on liberal democracy, individual freedoms and universal human rights promoted by the USSR remained, now from a different actor within the post-Soviet sphere: the Orthodox Church.

This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the Russian Orthodoxy and Politics in the Putin Era. The methodology used is mainly qualitative: using as its main sources various documents by the Russian Federation, the Russian Orthodox Church, and various academic and news articles.

This paper is divided in three main sections: The first section concerns the political role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in promoting the so-called “spiritual renewal of Russia” and “moral development of society” (National Security Concept). To achieve the goals previously referred to, the official statements of the President of Russian Federation and the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church will be scrutinized.

The second section is divided in two subsections. The first subsection will focus on the role of the Russian Orthodox Church as an instrument and as a form of power in the hands of the Russian

government to expand its influence abroad and undermine the values of liberal democracy at the domestic level and abroad. The second subsection will discuss the ROC as a conservative entity that refuses to conform to new realities. It surmises with the thought that for Putin, Patriarch Kirill is rather a government minister than a religious leader. The third subsection will focus on the ROC and its important role in the increasing militarization of Russian society. It endorses the idea that nuclear weapons can serve as a protection of Russia from the Western influence.

The third section will draw an analysis of the *Russkiy Mir* quasi-ideology and its connection to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The relevance of this symbiosis for the Patriarchate of Moscow will be analyzed and the role played by the ROC in the ideological campaign led by Moscow against Kyiv will be reviewed. Finally, the article aims to reflect on the medium to long-term effects of the 2019 schism and the future challenges of the ROC.

1. Historical Background

*“So long as man remains free, he strives for nothing so incessantly
and so painfully as to find*

someone to worship.”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky¹

The Soviet Union considered itself as the vanguard of the worldwide liberation of the proletariat. USSR had a mission to attack the “enemies of the working class,” which were the capitalist countries². In this propaganda³ narrative, religion had no place.⁴

¹ Dostoyevsky, Fyodor in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book V, Pro and Contra, page 72.

² Western block.

³ In the Soviet Union, where propaganda was an essential part of the regime’s activities, existed an agitation and propaganda department in the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

⁴ In the article: “Down with God! How the Soviet Union took on religion”. Available at: Down with God! How the Soviet Union took on religion – in pictures | Art and design | *The Guardian*.

In the aftermath of the October revolution, special propaganda units were formed (as the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment).⁵ In the years that followed, Christian intellectuals were persecuted and sent to labor camps.⁶ Churches and monasteries were destroyed.⁷ Their land and properties were expropriated. Thousands of bishops, monks and the clergy in general were systematically murdered.⁸

Religion was considered a false consciousness. In the words of Marx, it was the “opium of the people” and, in Lenin’s words, “opium for the people.”⁹ According to Van Herpen, “Religion promised heaven in an afterlife and prevented the workers from making the Revolution” that aimed at technologic and scientific progress.¹⁰ Soviet communism¹¹ as a project was deeply invested in viewing its own ideology as genuinely scientific¹², rejecting not proven facts as the religious.

The Soviet intellectuals, campaigning against the Communist rule, found common ground with the religious believers in demanding freedom of speech and freedom of assembly alongside freedom of religion. To open a new Church, if such was possible, was “to hammer one more nail into the coffin of Soviet power” (Alexander Baunov).¹³

The Soviet Union was far from the equal and just society it claimed to be and was based in an economic model that unmasked state-run communism as a failure. In this context, Mikhail Gorbachev’s

⁵ Was established to remove all references to religion from school curriculums.

⁶ Also known as “Gulags”.

⁷ While in Western countries, churches were open and free to visit, in the Soviet Union, they were shuttered and demolished by the Soviet authorities.

⁸ In the article: “Russians Are Getting Sick of Church”. Available at: [Russians Are Getting Sick of Church – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace \(carnegiemoscow.org\)](http://Russians Are Getting Sick of Church – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (carnegiemoscow.org))

⁹ The Political Role of the Russian Orthodox Church | *The National Interest*.

¹⁰ In the article: “Why the Soviet attempt to stamp out religion failed”. Available at: Why the Soviet attempt to stamp out religion failed | Giles Fraser | The Guardian.

¹¹ Many scholars interpreted Stalinism as “political religion” or as a secular religion.

¹² In the article: “Religion, Science, and Political Religion in the Soviet Context”. Available at: RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND POLITICAL RELIGION IN THE SOVIET CONTEXT | Modern Intellectual History | Cambridge Core

¹³ Following the article “Russians Are Getting Sick of Church”.

decision to loosen the Soviet burden on the countries of Eastern Europe created an independent, democratic momentum.¹⁴

The reforms¹⁵ implemented by Mikhail Gorbachev began a slow process of democratization that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Following the May 1990 elections, Gorbachev faced increasing internal political pressures: Boris Yeltsin and the pluralist movement advocated democratization and rapid economic reforms while the hard-liner Communist elite wanted to obstruct Gorbachev's reforms.¹⁶

2. The political role of the Orthodox Church

2.1. Russian State and the Orthodox Church: Traditional Values

On December 25, 1991, the Soviet hammer and sickle flag¹⁷ was lowered for the last time over the Kremlin¹⁸, discarding simultaneously the 74-year-old Communist system and the 500-year-old imperial legacy. Earlier in the day, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned his post as President of the Soviet Union, leaving Boris Yeltsin as President of the newly independent Russian state.

Throughout the transition of Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to Russian Federation, Yeltsin remained in office. His Presidency was characterized by an ideological void. The old ideals and values had disappeared, and new ideals and values had not yet been developed. It was in this tumultuous context that Vladimir Putin emerged¹⁹ in the political arena.

¹⁴ Momentum that led to the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, and then the overthrow of Communist rule throughout Eastern Europe.

¹⁵ To allow elections with a multi-party system and create a presidency for the Soviet Union.

¹⁶ In the site: "Office of the Historian". Available at: Milestones: 1989–1992 – Office of the Historian (state.gov)

¹⁷ The union of the hammer (workers) and the sickle (peasants) represented the victorious and enduring revolutionary alliance.

¹⁸ Thereafter, replaced by the Russian tricolor.

¹⁹ Putin was first elected as the Russian President in 2000 with 53 percent of the votes.

Putin's first activity was to repair the ideological void by reshaping the Foreign Policy to regain Russia's place in world affairs, as he had proclaimed before the Duma²⁰ on August 16, 1999: "Russia has been a great power for centuries and remains so. It has always had and still has legitimate zones of interest (...) We should not drop our guard in this respect, neither should we allow our opinion to be ignored."²¹ That statement turned out to be a policy declaration for years to come.

Vladimir Putin embraced pre-Soviet themes including the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian writers and philosophers.²² Putin's domestic view blends Czarist glories, selected elements of the USSR and a racial-geographic Russia (Kruglov, 2019).²³

Soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia longed to become a part of the Western world and bring about a systemic change unto Western-type liberal democracy and market economy with the help of Western political support and large-scale economic and technological assistance.

By the end of 1992 Russia's economic misfortunes had multiplied and political uncertainties persisted. Western assistance proved to be inadequate to deal with the post-Soviet challenges. In that context, Russian elites failed to recognize the United States leadership.²⁴

The Russian elite expressed the preference for a multi-polar world where Russia, a great power, is one of the influential poles in the

²⁰ As he sought their approval for his prime ministership.

²¹ In the article: "Putin's plan to slowly reclaim Russia's lost empire". Available at: Putin's plan to slowly reclaim Russia's lost empire – *Asia Times*.

²² Most Russian authors are primarily philosophers. The most know Russian fiction writers, such as Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky are also known as philosophers. Russian philosophy emerged during the XIX century with the *Westernizers*, advocating that Russia should follow the Western political and economic models and the *Slavophiles*, insisting on developing Russia as a unique civilization (early founders of Eurasianism). The discussion of Russia's place in the world has since become the most characteristic feature of Russian philosophy.

²³ Following the article: "Putin's plan to slowly reclaim Russia's lost empire".

²⁴ Because it implied disregarding Russia's great-power status and global ambitions.

international system (according to Russia's National Security Concept of December 1997)²⁵.

The National Security Concept of 1997²⁶ stated that Russia would continue to develop constructive partnership with the following states/organizations: the United States of America, the European Union, China, Japan, and India.

The Security Concept²⁷ did not claim Russia's special interests in the former Soviet space, unlike the 1993 Military Doctrine which emphasized Russia's exclusive role as the guarantor of peace and security in the region. Subsequently, Moscow proceeded to follow a more balanced policy towards the West and the East. Due to its unique geopolitical location, Russia could emerge as a bridge between Europe and Asia.

In 1998 Boris Yeltsin appointed Putin as Director of the Federal Security Service (FSS)²⁸. On December 17, 1999, the new National Security Concept²⁹ was approved by the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin.³⁰

Vladimir Putin, who was simultaneously the director of the FSS and the Secretary of the National Security Council of the Russian Federation, had influence on the formulation of the new Security

²⁵ A document that portrays the national interests of the country in terms of the interests of the individual, society, and the state.

²⁶ In the article "Russia's National Security Concepts and Military Doctrines: Continuity and Change. Available at: Russia's National Security Concepts and Military Doctrines: Continuity and Change (columbia.edu)

²⁷ The Security Concept is a document that primarily reflects the direction of Russia's political trajectory aimed at strengthening the country's defense, internal integrity and political stability, modernization of economy and development of industrial potential, as well as strengthening the sovereignty of Russia and thereby its ability to carry out domestic and foreign politics without external pressure.

²⁸ The follow-up organization of the former KGB (*Committee for State Security*).

²⁹ In "National Security Concept of the Russian Federation", Full English Translation from *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, January 18, 2000. Available at: Global Beat: National Security Concept of the Russian Federation (fas.org); (Russian version of the same document: "О Концепции национальной безопасности Российской Федерации". Available at: Указ Президента РФ от 10.01.2000 N 24 "О Концепции национальной безопасности Российской Федерации" (legalacts.ru)).

³⁰ Two weeks later, Yeltsin would abdicate in favor of Putin.

Concept built around completely new ideas. For instance, safeguarding the national security of the Russian Federation should include “the spiritual renewal of Russia”³¹, and that “the state should encourage the (...) spiritual and moral development of society”³².

The conception of the Russian Federation as a distinctive (Eurasian) civilization implied the definition of a distinctive set of values in opposition to the West. In the Russian tradition, Western values are not always synonymous with European ones. In the Russian narrative, the country is occasionally presented as the defender of the old and true (orthodox) European values, which have been gradually eroded in Western societies.

In September 2013, at the Valdai Discussion Club Summit, Putin compared Russia, a country faithful to traditional values, with the Euro-Atlantic States that have abandoned their true moral, highlighting that Western values pose a serious threat to the Russian World: “today Russia’s national identity is experiencing not only objective pressures stemming from globalization, but also the consequences of the national catastrophes of the twentieth century, when we experienced the collapse of our state two different times. The result was a devastating blow to our nation’s cultural and spiritual codes; we were faced with the disruption of traditions and the consonance of history, with the demoralization of society, with a deficit of trust and responsibility.”³³

³¹ Full quote: “The spiritual renewal of society is impossible without the preservation of the role of the Russian language as a factor of spiritual unity of all peoples of the multinational Russian Federation and as the language of inter-state communication of the peoples of countries members of the Commonwealth of Independent States.” Source: *National Security Concept of the Russian Federation 2000*, IV. The Insurance of the National Security of the Russian Federation.

³² Full quote: “The state should encourage the creation of equal conditions for the development and growth of competitiveness of enterprises irrespective of their form of ownership, including the development of private enterprise in all spheres where this would facilitate the growth of social prosperity, the progress of science and education, spiritual and moral development of society, and the protection of the rights of consumers.” Source: *National Security Concept of the Russian Federation 2000*, IV. The Insurance of the National Security of the Russian Federation.

³³ In the article: “[Putin at] Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club [Partial Transcript]”. Available at: TRANSCRIPT: [Putin at] Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club [partial transcript] – Johnson’s Russia List.

According to Vladimir Putin, Russian traditional values should correspond to Russian Orthodox values as the efficiency of Russian modernization depends on the revival of tradition, which is identified with the Orthodox religion. Anchoring Russia's national identity in these religiously conservative values enhances Russia's *bona fides* as the vanguard of an anti-West coalition committed to contesting International Human Rights norms³⁴.

On May 26, 2011, the World Russian People's Council³⁵ issued "The Basic Values: The Fundamentals of National Unity"³⁶, a document created to identify Russian traditional values. There are 17 values present in the Fundamentals of National Unity: faith; justice ("the rightful place of a nation in the international community"); peace; freedom (limited by moral obligations); unity (of different ethnic groups, social classes, political groups); morality; dignity; honesty; patriotism (defined as love for the homeland, nation, culture, respect for history; readiness for self-sacrifice); solidarity; mercy; family; culture and national tradition (characterized as respect for one's own culture and the tradition of others); prosperity (material and spiritual); diligence; self-limitation (resignation from consumption); and devotion (to the homeland and nation). The Russian Federation even has distinguishing holidays to celebrate traditional values. On July 8 Russia celebrates the Day of Family, Love and Fidelity. This holiday was established in 2008 on the initiative of deputies of the State Duma.

Russian traditional values have found their place also in the agenda of the Russian Parliament. The Duma approved a legislation that aimed to protect the sensibilities of the Orthodox believers from information they deem harmful and contradictory to the religious doctrine, for example, the legislation that had been passed in Russia

³⁴ In the article: "The Organization of Islamic Cooperation's (OIC) Response to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Rights: A Challenge to Equality and Nondiscrimination Under International Law", *Transnational Legal and Contemporary Problems* (2019).

³⁵ For more information, visit: "World Russian People's Council: Reviving the Nation" at: World Russian People's Council: Reviving The Nation (gorthodox.com)

³⁶ In the article: "Russian values as the basis of Russian culture". Available in russian at: Русские ценности как основа русской культуры | Я русский (iamruss.ru)

in March of 2012 under the federal law prohibiting propaganda portraying LGBT relations³⁷ as equal to heterosexual ones.

Such initiatives and laws were condemned by Western institutions such as Freedom House, a democracy watchdog, that calls Putin's anti-LGBT rants "state-sponsored homophobia" used to control Russia and reports that "Regulating gender and sexuality remains at the forefront of Russia's domestic and international political agendas"³⁸.

This Russian propaganda law has been found to violate international law principles of freedom of opinion and expression, as well as principles of equal treatment, by the European Court of Human Rights, the Venice Commission and the European Parliament.

Putin's circle alludes to a culture war³⁹ between Russia and the West to negatively frame the intentions of the United States and European Union in Ukraine. This rhetoric was in place at the time when Russia first began aggressively imposing anti-LGBT propaganda laws, in 2013.⁴⁰

According to this, only Russia can prevent the West's effort to impose global "ultra-liberalism." In Putin's words, "efforts are being taken today to (...) destroy the traditional values (...)"⁴¹ The West thus poses a strategic threat to Russia's geopolitical interests⁴².

³⁷ In the article: "March of 2012 under the federal law prohibiting propaganda showing LGBT". In Russia passes law banning gay 'propaganda' | Russia | *The Guardian*.

³⁸ In the article: "Dismantling LGBT + Rights as means of control in Russia". Available at: Dismantling LGBT+ rights as a means of control in Russia | Freedom House.

³⁹ The cultural dichotomy of 'liberal values' and the 'conservative' or 'traditional' values is known as the rhetoric of a "culture war" between the West and Russia. This concept is used by Russian elite to present itself as the guardian of conservative religious values on the international sphere.

⁴⁰ In the article "Briefing on Russian Federal anti-propaganda law". Available at: Briefing_on_Russias_federal_anti-propaganda_law.pdf (humandignitytrust.org)

⁴¹ In the article: "Putin Address to World Russian People's Council". Available at: <http://lilin.ru/events/president/news/59013>.

⁴² The documents (Russian National Security Concepts 1997 and 2000) acknowledged that Russia's position in the international system had become less influential as some states were trying to weaken Russia's position in the political, economic, military, moral and other spheres.

In 2007, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov remarked that the Church and his ministry “worked hand in hand (...) doing together one big work very necessary for the country.”⁴³ The symbiosis between the Kremlin and the Orthodox Church emerged after 2012, when Putin returned to the Kremlin. The Russian Government began to portray itself as a defender of conservative values from the ‘decadent Western liberalism’. Additionally, Vladimir Putin has pledged that one of the tasks of Russia’s Foreign Policy will be to defend Christianity and Christians.⁴⁴

2.2. The Orthodox Church: A Hybrid Church

The Orthodox Christianity is often portrayed as a highly conservative entity that refuses to conform to new realities. This has led the Church to become a pole for current conservative “identity politics”⁴⁵. Indeed, societies in predominantly Orthodox countries are very secularized.

For the conservative positioning, the Kremlin and the Church have different motives. For the Kremlin, it was an opportunistic political move: an attempt to marginalize liberal constituency in Russia and to build up defenses against an increasingly critical West, by reaching out to anti-liberal fringe groups.

The conservative vision was not fully rooted in traditional values: Russia is not a particularly conservative country, nor a very religious

⁴³ In the article: “The Political Role of the Russian Orthodox Church”. Available at: [The Political Role of the Russian Orthodox Church | *The National Interest*](#).

⁴⁴ Referring to the true Christianity and the Orthodox Christians.

⁴⁵ According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “identity politics” has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination. Source: Identity Politics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

one. According to Brian Grim⁴⁶ “Orthodox Christianity views itself very much as the religion of a geographic territory, rather than as a faith of individual people or congregations,” that suggested the “Orthodox leaders have become major political players, pushing for policies that can discourage the growth of newer faith groups.”⁴⁷

On 27 January 2009, Patriarch Kirill I, or Cyril I (secular name Vladimir Mikhailovich Gundyayev), was elected as Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus by the Russian Orthodox Church Local Council. Patriarch Kirill I is one of the most powerful religious dignitaries in the world, heading a Church that has 36,000 parishes and more than 100 million faithful.

The Patriarch of Moscow inherited a clergy with a kaleidoscopic spectrum of opinions on religious and secular issues. According to *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, the Orthodox community is divided in three main groups: modern liberals, pragmatic traditionalists, and nationalist fundamentalists. The modernist liberals propose to “modernize Orthodoxy” by reforming religious practice, laicizing Church Administration. At the opposite pole are the nationalist fundamentalists, who defend traditional religious practice, episcopal authority, and conservative values. In between the two antinomies are the pragmatic traditionalists, who value the traditional but are willing to change if needed to achieve the overriding goal of ensuring salvation. While Liberals welcome Globalization, the fundamentalists condemn it, and the moderates engage it (critically).⁴⁸

The data from Russia provided support for the post-secularist paradigm that now prevailed among sociologists of religion. Significantly high rates of self-described religiosity accompany abysmally low rates of

⁴⁶ Brian J. Grim, PhD, is president of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation (RFBF) and a leading expert on how faith and business build a better world. He is also the Global Chairman of the Biannual Business & Interfaith Peace Awards and Symposium.

⁴⁷ In the article “The Fate of Religious Freedom in the Former USSR, 25 years after its collapse”. Available at: *The fate of religious freedom in the former USSR, 25 years after its collapse – Deseret News*.

⁴⁸ In the article “Russian Orthodoxy and Politics in the Putin Era”. Available at: *Russian Orthodoxy and Politics in the Putin Era – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

church membership.⁴⁹ According to the study “*Russians Return to Religion, but Not to Church*”⁵⁰ by the Pew Research Center although 70 to 80% profess to be Orthodox, less than 15% attend services more than once a month, only 5% once a week, and a mere 1-2% belong to a parish.

Church attendance among the Orthodox population is much lower than among Catholics.⁵¹ The differing trends in predominantly Orthodox and Catholic countries may reflect political geography. The Orthodox countries in the region are further toward the east, and many were part of the Soviet Union, which prohibit church attendance. The Catholic countries are further toward the west where people enjoyed religious freedom.

According to a Pew survey⁵² conducted in 2017, Church attendance in Orthodox countries in central and Eastern Europe averages 10%.⁵³

The Patriarch of Moscow supports the legitimacy of Putin’s Regime and recognizes the existing State Order⁵⁴, explicitly stipulated in the Foundations of the Social Conceptions of 2000,⁵⁵ which in return allows him to extend his influence on society through the defense of traditional values.

⁴⁹ In the book: DAVIE, Grace, (1994), “Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging”, Oxford, Institute of Contemporary British History.

⁵⁰ In the article: “Russians Return to Religion, But not to Church”. Available at: Russians Return to Religion, But Not to Church | Pew Research Center.

⁵¹ In the article: “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe”. Available at: Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe | Pew Research Center.

⁵² Following the article: “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe”.

⁵³ Church attendance stands at 21% Romania; 17% in Georgia; 12% in Ukraine; 6% in Serbia; 6% in Russia; and 5% in Bulgaria. In Catholic-majority countries in the same region, attendance reaches 25%; it is 45% in Poland and 43% in Ukraine.

⁵⁴ The largest chapter in Foundations of the Social Conceptions of 2000 was “Church and State,” but many other chapters also concerned the “state” (the Russian word, as noun or adjective, appearing 271 times throughout the document).

⁵⁵ The Russian Orthodox Church and Social Doctrine: A Commentary on “Fundamentals of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church”. Available at: The Russian Orthodox Church and Social Doctrine: A Commentary on Fundamentals of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church (georgefox.edu)

The Foundations portrays Kirill's experience and views, providing the Program for his Patriarchate. The 90s deeply reinforced Kirill's skepticism of the West based on the decline of state and society, the destruction of the economy and politics, as well as the downfall of the country, widely shared by his compatriots.

The Patriarch Kirill has made his mission to bring back a Church that, during the Soviet era, almost disappeared both in Russia and around the globe. Kirill's main challenges include reestablishing Church Governance, recruiting and educating clergy and restoring the network of parishes.

Consequently, the Church established its first official *website* in February 1997 and since then it significantly increased the number of sites.⁵⁶ As recent studies emphasize, these sites constitute "the most important source of information about religion for Russian Orthodox believers" with the major sites recording more audience than the print media. The President's "near abroad"⁵⁷ is only half of the Patriarch's transnational domain.

The first step in the Kremlin's plans to give the Russian Orthodox Church a global reach was to reach the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia.⁵⁸ Putin's proposal for a reconciliation between the two Churches was accepted.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ The leading Orthodox sites are "Pravoslavie i mir" pravmir.ru (translation: "The Orthodoxy and the World"), "Pravoslavie Ru" (translation: "Orthodoxy Russia") pravoslavie.ru, "Azbuka very" (translation: "The alphabet of the faith") azbuka.ru, the official church site "Patriarkhiia Ru" (translation: "Russian Patriarchate") patriarkhia.ru, the charity site Miloserdie Ru (translation: "Mercy Russia") miloserdie.ru, and the extreme-right "Russkaia narodnaia liniia" (translation: "Russian National Line") ruskline.ru. Other sites include the portal for the Moscow Theological Academy (bogoslav.ru) as well as many small sites run by dioceses, parishes, monasteries, and individual clerics.

⁵⁷ Russia's "near abroad" encompasses not only the physical Arctic lands to Russia's north, but under Putin his country also is becoming more politically and militarily active in the entire region. Considering the potential economic benefits and natural resources, this should give the West cause for concern.

⁵⁸ In September 2003 Putin contacted the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), a Church founded by Russian *emigrants*.

⁵⁹ The Act of Canonical Communion was signed in May 2007.

The merge of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia brought one million church members in thirty countries under Moscow's control in the USA alone this included a network of 323 parishes and 20 monasteries.

President Vladimir Putin offers the Patriarch political and financial support. "For Vladimir Putin, religion serves social order and family morality. In exchange, the Church and its Patriarch bring religious discourse to the ideology in place," stated Jean-François Colosimo.⁶⁰

While Putin, professes himself to be religious, he does not necessary views Kirill as a religious guide, "Patriarch Kirill is like a government minister for Putin," according to the analyst Aleksei Makarkin,⁶¹ implying that the President regards the Patriarch a mere political official more than as a religious authority.

Russian Orthodox Church is a Hybrid Church: on one hand it is a religious institution, on the other hand it functions as a State's institution. For instance, in 2015 the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry threw its support behind a so-called Orthodox Financial System developed under the tutelage of the Moscow Patriarchate and resembling the Islamic financial system⁶². Based on Russian law, Orthodox morals and Russian business traditions, the Orthodox Financial System is designed to be resilient to world crises and help reduce Russia's reliance on the Western banking system.

⁶⁰ Historian, orthodox theologian and essayist in *L'Apocalypse russe : Dieu au pays de Dostoievski* (poche LeXio, 2021).

⁶¹ Alexey Makarkin is a political analyst, first vice-president of the Center for Political Technologies.

⁶² In the article: "Orthodox Church Calls for Alternative Financial System in Russia". Available at: Orthodox Church Calls for Alternative Financial System in Russia – *The Moscow Times*.

2.3 Russian Orthodox Church and the Nuclear Missiles

“There is no sin, and there can be no sin on all the earth, which the Lord will not forgive to the truly repentant! Man cannot commit a sin so great as to exhaust the infinite love of God. Can there be a sin which could exceed the love of God?”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky⁶³

For the Patriarch Kirill, the collaboration with the Kremlin is a way to protect the freedom of the Church. According to Father Hovorun⁶⁴ “it seems that under his tenure as the Patriarch, the Church ended up in a situation of captivity.”⁶⁵ Steadily, the line between church and state blurred.

The Church not only supported the Kremlin’s ideological offensive abroad but also played an important role in the increasing militarization of Russian society.⁶⁶ In the past, Patriarch Kirill has described the Kremlin’s military campaign in Syria as a “holy war.”⁶⁷ Such ideas had been fused into a radical ideology described as “Atomic Orthodoxy”⁶⁸ by Yegor Kholmogorov.⁶⁹

⁶³ Dostoyevsky, Fyodor in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book II, An Unfortunate Gathering.

⁶⁴ Father Hovorun is a Professor of Ecclesiology, International Relations, and Ecumenism at University College Stockholm.

⁶⁵ In the article “The Russian Orthodox Leader at the Core of Putin’s Ambitions”. Available at: [The Russian Orthodox Leader at the Core of Putin’s Ambitions – Godfrey Times](#).

⁶⁶ In the article: “Blessed Be the Nukes? Russian Orthodoxy Recommends End to...”. Available at: [Blessed Be the Nukes? Russian Orthodoxy Recommends End to... | News & Reporting | Christianity Today](#).

⁶⁷ In the article: “The Real Reason the Russian Orthodox Church’s Leader Supports Putin’s War”. Available at: [Why Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church Supports Putin in Ukraine \(foreignpolicy.com\)](#)

⁶⁸ In the article: “St. Seraphim of Sarov: Patron Saint of Russia’s Nuclear Arsenal”. Available at: [ST. SERAPHIM OF SAROV: PATRON SAINT OF RUSSIA’S NUCLEAR ARSENAL | ORTHODOXY IN DIALOGUE](#).

⁶⁹ In the article: “Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy”. Available at: [Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy | Center for Strategic and International Studies \(csis.org\)](#)

While Churches in the West⁷⁰ emphasize the need to promote peace and are in favor of nuclear disarmament, the Russian Orthodox Church support the development of new strategic weapons.⁷¹

The *dictum* of the Russian Strategic Missile Forces: “After us, silence”⁷² alludes to the end of the World that corresponds with the apocalyptic view of the Orthodox Church, for which to defend Holy Russia and its traditional values⁷³ all means are permitted.

Nuclear weapons⁷⁴ were perceived as necessary to preserve “Orthodox civilization” as “only nuclear weapons protect Russia from enslavement by the West” (Chaplin, 2019).⁷⁵ Nuclear missiles even have its own patron, Saint Seraphim.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ In the article: “Russian Orthodox Church Considers Ending Blessings From Nuclear Weapons”. Available at: Russian Orthodox Church Considers Ending Blessings For Nuclear Weapons – *Eurasia Review*.

⁷¹ In the article: “How the Russian Church Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb Orthodoxy’s Influence on Moscow’s Nuclear Complex”. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2019-06-14/how-russian-church-learned-stop-worrying-and-love-bomb>

⁷² Original in Russian: “после нас тишина” (posle nas tishena).

⁷³ In the article: “Weapons in the Hand of God: The Russian Orthodox Church and Russia’s Nuclear Weapons Establishment”. Available at: Weapons in the Hand of God: The Russian Orthodox Church and Russia’s Nuclear Weapons Establishment – Nuclear Network (csis.org)

⁷⁴ During the Syrian war, Russian orthodox priests have sanctified S-400 surface-to-air missiles, nuclear submarines, tanks, and fighter jets.

⁷⁵ Vsevolod Chaplin, an influential priest and former spokesman for the Patriarch, told the *Vzglyad newspaper* that nuclear weapons were the country’s “guardian angels” and necessary to preserve “Orthodox civilization. Source: “Russian Orthodox Church considers a ban on blessing weapons of mass destruction”.

⁷⁶ Whose remains were discovered in 1991 in a disused monastery in Sarov, a small town in central Russia that was home to key nuclear facilities in the Soviet era.

3. Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) and its effects on the Orthodox Church

3.1 Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox Churches – Analysis

“The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man.”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky⁷⁷

In recent years, Patriarch Kirill aspired to expand his Church’s influence, pursuing an ideology consistent with the idea of Moscow being a “Third Rome,” a reference to a 15th-century concept of Manifest Destiny for the Orthodox Church, in which Putin’s Russia would become the spiritual center of the true Church after Rome and Constantinople.

It was the Orthodox monk Philotheus who called Moscow the *Third Rome* for the first time. In 1523-1524 he wrote letters to the Grand Duke of Moscow urging him to fight against heresies. In the monk’s view, the Duchy of Moscow, remained the last bastion of the true faith: “All the Christian Kingdoms have come to an end and have converged in the single Kingdom of our sovereign (...) Two Romes fell, a third stands, and there will not be a fourth one,”⁷⁸ Philotheus wrote in one of the epistles.⁷⁹

Third Rome is a grand project that merges neatly with Putin’s mystically tinged imperialism of a “*Russkiy Mir*.” The political concept *Russkiy Mir*⁸⁰ political concept gained importance in the 2000s, after Vladimir Putin started using it in his public speeches, making an appeal to the “compatriots” abroad.⁸¹ With *Russkiy Mir* Putin’s Russia attempts

⁷⁷ Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Chapter IV, The Confession of a Passionate Heart – in Anecdote.

⁷⁸ In the article: “Three Romes: A Stark Warning”. Available at: Three Romes: A Stark Warning (orthodoxengland.org.uk)

⁷⁹ In the article: “Why do Russians call Moscow the Third Rome?” Available at: Why do Russians call Moscow the Third Rome? – Russia Beyond (rbth.com)

⁸⁰ Traditional Values were followed by the concept of the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*)

⁸¹ In the article “Russia and Ukraine: “One People” as Putin Claims? Available at: Russia and Ukraine: ‘One People’ as Putin Claims? | Royal United Services Institute (rusi.org)

to establish itself as a civilization-forming state and as a leading geopolitical actor.⁸²

In Patriarch Kirill's words "*Russkiy Mir* is a community based on the Orthodox faith and the Russian culture and language, as well as a common historical memory and a model of socio-economic development." In other words, *Russkiy Mir*⁸³ is Russia's sphere of cultural influence whose borders correspond to the post-Soviet territory.⁸⁴

It is a worldview that holds the Kremlin to be the defender of Russia's Christian civilization, and therefore justified in seeking to dominate the countries of the former Soviet Union and Russian empire. According to the Rev. Cyril Hovorun,⁸⁵ these ideas emerged in the aftermath of communism's collapse, when the Russian state sought to fill an ideological void while the long-persecuted Russian Orthodox Church asserted itself in a newly open public square.

The most relevant consequence of the USSR collapse was the splitting of the core of the ancient Russian State and the emergence for the first time in modern history, of independent Ukrainian and Belarusian states. The process of Russo-Ukrainian separation has been particularly painful for the Russian elite. The Kremlin finds intolerable that a Ukrainian state, whose sovereignty it immediately recognized in 1991, could have a government seeking integration into NATO and the European Union and actively promote the "nationalization" of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

⁸² In the article: *Russkiy Mir*: "Russian World". Available at: *Russkiy Mir*: "Russian World"; | DGAP.

⁸³ According to the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation established by President Putin in 2007, *Russkiy Mir* refers to a community of ethnic Russians and citizens of the Russian Federation of non-Russian ethnic origin, the Russian diaspora, Russian speaking foreigners, and all the people who express concern about Russia's future.

⁸⁴ The post-Soviet states, also known as the former Soviet Republics and in Russia as the near abroad are the 15 sovereign states that were Union Republics of the Soviet Union; that emerged and re-emerged from the Soviet Union following its dissolution in 1991.

⁸⁵ a Ukrainian-born theologian and former adviser to Patriarch Kirill. For more information: Dr. Cyril Hovorun – Sankt Ignatios.

During the Sunday sermon that was delivered at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow,⁸⁶ Kirill⁸⁷ highlighted: “May the Lord preserve the Russian land⁸⁸ (...) A land which now includes Russia and Ukraine and Belarus and other tribes and peoples.”

The Patriarch publicly praised the virtues of “the Russian world.”⁸⁹ He declared that: “Russia belongs to a civilization that is wider than the Russian Federation. We call this civilization the Russian world. This is not the world of the Russian Federation, nor Russian empire. The Russian world starts at the Kiev baptismal font. Russian, Ukrainians, Belarusians belong to it.”

Ukraine is an “overwhelmingly” Orthodox Christian nation, with 78% identifying as Orthodox compared with 71% in Russia, according to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey.⁹⁰ The “Gate of Europe”⁹¹ has 35 million Orthodox Christians, the third-largest Orthodox population in the world, after Russia and Ethiopia.

Additionally, Orthodox Christianity is closely tied to Ukraine’s national and political life. Half of all Ukrainians (51%) say it is at least somewhat important for someone to be Orthodox to be truly Ukrainian. The same is true for Russia, where 57% declare being Orthodox is important to being truly Russian. In both countries, about half say religious leaders have at least some influence in political matters, although most Ukrainians (61%) and roughly half of Russians (52%) would prefer if this were not the case.

Attitudes in Ukraine towards Russia’s political and religious leadership are also divided between the eastern and western parts of the country. Eastern Ukrainians have more positive attitudes towards Russia than

⁸⁶ On February 27, 2022.

⁸⁷ In the article: “Kirill, the extremely political Russian Orthodox Patriarch”. Available at: Kirill, the extremely political Russian Orthodox patriarch (la-croix.com)

⁸⁸ Rus’ was a medieval state, considered the ancestor of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

⁸⁹ “*Russkii mir*” is the concept used by the Russian media and political class to justify Russian political, military, and ecclesiastical activity in Ukraine.

⁹⁰ In the article: “Ukrainian, Russian Church split reflects political importance of Orthodox Christianity”. Available at: Ukrainian, Russian church split reflects political importance of Orthodox Christianity | Pew Research Center.

⁹¹ Book title by Serhii Plokhii, referring to the Ukraine.

do western Ukrainians. For example, the same 2015 survey found that over half of those living in the east (55%) say Russia has an obligation to protect Orthodox Christians living outside its borders. In western Ukraine, meanwhile, a majority (58%) disagree with this view.

The Patriarch of Moscow also receives higher support in eastern Ukraine than in western Ukraine. Western Ukrainians are more likely to look to their own national Patriarch as the highest authority of the Orthodox Church.⁹²

During Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, "Russian insurgents imagined themselves as participants in a broader 'Russian World' and their war as a defense of Orthodox values against the advance of the corrupt European West."⁹³ When it came to the escalation of hostilities in Ukraine from 2014 onwards, Patriarch Kirill attempted neutrality.

On 18 March 2014, gathered in the Kremlin, Putin and Crimean politicians signed the treaty on the "Accession of Crimea" to the Russian Federation.⁹⁴ Russian political, military, and business representants was present. Yet Kirill was nowhere to be found.

It became clear that the Russian Orthodox Church would not be able to stand on both sides of a conflict that pitted its followers in Ukraine against its followers in Russia. Kirill offered neither the Kremlin nor Ukrainian believers the support they expected. As a result, he lost the trust of both.

As the war in Ukraine progressed throughout 2014, the Patriarch Kirill, endorsing Putin's line of argument, declared that an "internal political crisis" in Ukraine was threatening its territorial integrity⁹⁵

⁹² *In the survey: "Ukrainian, Russian church split reflects political importance of Orthodox Christianity". Available at: Ukrainian, Russian church split reflects political importance of Orthodox Christianity | Pew Research Center.*

⁹³ *In "The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine" (Serheii Plokyh), Chapter 27, The Price of Freedom.*

⁹⁴ *In "Agreement on the accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation". Available at: Agreement on the accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation signed President of Russia (kremlin.ru)*

⁹⁵ *In "Russian Orthodox Church signs from Putin hymn sheet on Ukraine". Available at: Russian Orthodox Church sings from Putin hymn sheet on Ukraine | Reuters.*

and that “[the Russian intervention is] the peacemaking mission that should guarantee Crimean⁹⁶ citizens the right to self-determination”⁹⁷.

The context has changed since January 6th, 2019, when Metropolitan of Kyiv, Epiphanius I, received *tomos* from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. This document granted autocephalous status⁹⁸ on Orthodox Church of Ukraine. For Ukrainians, autocephaly was a sign of their country moving towards greater independence from Russia, now in matters clerical as well as politically.⁹⁹

This ended 332 years of Russian religious tutelage over the Ukrainian faithful. It was a decision the Patriarchate of Moscow saw as an unbearable affront since Ukraine is considered the historical cradle of Russian Orthodoxy. With the schism, Russian Orthodox Church is set to gradually lose territory, believers, and a huge amount of symbolic power.

The Pew Research Center survey entitled “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe” reveals a strong association between religion and national identity – the idea that being Orthodox is important to one’s national identity is supported by 70% of people in Orthodox-majority countries. This overlapping of church and nation means that the church retains soft power.¹⁰⁰ But it also explains the importance of establishing the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, as a function of “becoming” a nation-state.

The Moscow Patriarchate portrayed the Ecumenical Patriarchate as a “Western” institution due to its vast international network

⁹⁶ In “Crimea’s Separation from Ukraine: An Analysis of the Right to Self-Determination and (Remedial) Secession in International Law”. Available at: [Crimea’s Separation from Ukraine: An Analysis of the Right to Self-Determination and \(Remedial\) Secession in International Law | SpringerLink](#).

⁹⁷ In “Is the Russian Orthodox Church serving God or Putin?” Available at: [Is the Russian Orthodox Church serving God or Putin? | DW Learn German](#).

⁹⁸ Autocephaly means “property of being self-headed” is the status of a hierarchical Christian church whose head bishop does not report to any higher-ranking bishop. The term is primarily used in Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches.

⁹⁹ In “Ukrainian Orthodox Church, worldwide, is another front in Putin’s war”. Available at: [Ukrainian Orthodox Church, worldwide, is another front in Putin’s war – CSMonitor.com](#)

¹⁰⁰ The ability to co-opt rather than coerce (contrast hard power).

and ecumenical position regarding other Christian denominations. According to the expert Ksenia Luchenko¹⁰¹ “They associate Bartholomew I of Constantinople¹⁰² with the US – via the Greek diaspora in the US” (Luchenko, 2019).¹⁰³ Russian politicians also believe that the West instigated the Maidan protests in Kyiv¹⁰⁴ and other post-Soviet “color” revolutions have likely only reinforced this position¹⁰⁵.

Putin has openly accused the United States and Constantinople of working together to support the Ukrainian government to move towards Church independence. Paradoxically, with the election of Volodymyr Zelensky, a declared Jew, the Autocephalous Church of Ukraine may receive less open support from national politicians, which can be an opportunity for the Church to dissociate itself more successfully from various domestic political players.

4. Conclusion:

Russian exceptionalism is rooted in the isolation of an Orthodox country and its belief that Russia possesses the gift of a true (orthodox) religious faith. It has been strengthened by Russia’s successful defense of its state sovereignty. During his years in office, Vladimir Putin has transformed Russia back into a great power with global ambitions. One of his key tools in that transformation was the Russian Orthodox Church.

Many have written about the Orthodox Church in post-Soviet politics, generally emphasizing the resurgence not only of religiosity but of institutional power.

¹⁰¹ Ksenia Luchenko is a journalist specializing in church affairs. For more information: Ksenia Luchenko – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

¹⁰² is the 270th and current archbishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch since 2 November 1991.

¹⁰³ 100 years on, Orthodox Church split over executed tsar’s remains.

¹⁰⁴ In the article: “Russia accuses West of plotting ‘provocations’ in Ukraine”. Available at: Russia accuses West of plotting ‘provocations’ in Ukraine | *The Independent*.

¹⁰⁵ In the article: “Russia and the “Color Revolution”. Available at: Russia and the “Color Revolution” | Center for Strategic and International Studies (csis.org)

Putin's use of traditional Christianity is calculated for political effect, taking into consideration religious trends in the region. Orthodox Christianity has notably enjoyed a revival in Eastern Europe in the last two decades. In Russia's regional neighboring states more than 70% of people identify as Orthodox.¹⁰⁶

In predominantly Orthodox societies, the Church is traditionally regarded as the bearer of national consciousness more so than the State. So far, the Russian Church under Kirill's Patriarchate has been the most influential promoter of traditional values.

The promotion of traditional values emerged in the aftermath of communism's collapse when the Russian state sought to fill an ideological void while the long-persecuted Russian Orthodox Church asserted itself in a newly open public square.

The Russian Orthodox Church considers religious faith the foundation of traditional values and defends that the European Union is imposing secular values on Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church has taken an active role in forging the ideology that braced up Putin's geopolitical ambitions.

However, the traditional thesis that portrays the Church as the compliant servant of the State is no more applicable to post-Soviet Russia than it was to imperial Russia. Rhetorically, the Patriarch and the President share common ideas and values,¹⁰⁷ most notably regarding patriotism, but each side serves the interests of their respective institutions.

Although operating on a cooperative basis, the Church is not a mere tool of state policy. Like all institutions, the Orthodox Church has its own interests, agenda, and sensitivities that it wants to protect. These do not always coincide with those of the State.

The ecclesiastical conflict caused by the split of the Ukrainian and Russian Orthodox Churches is part of a wider history of political

¹⁰⁶ according to Pew Research results (2017).

¹⁰⁷ Traditional values defined by the Russian Orthodox Church and by Putin's Government are a blend of freedom, unity, patriotism, family, and a sense of devotion.

tensions between Russia's geopolitical ambitions in the region and Ukraine's resistance to them.

In conclusion, the Russian Orthodox Church is not a mere political tool used by Putin's government. A long history of cooperation, overlapping sets of values, and shared resentment at the political and ecclesiastical loss of Ukraine, meaning that Putin and Kirill have the opportunity to strengthen the bilateral cooperation even more.

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