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Instrumentalizing orthodoxy: The Orthodox Church as an instrument of Russia's foreign policy in the black sea region

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Abstract---This article examines how the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) functions as an instrument of Russia's foreign policy in the Black Sea region. Although Russia is constitutionally secular, the Moscow Patriarchate operates as a strategic partner of the Kremlin, advancing its geopolitical agenda through religious diplomacy, propaganda, and cultural influence. The analysis situates the ROC within the Russian state system and highlights its role in promoting the *Russkiy mir* ("Russian World") ideology, intervening in the religious affairs of neighboring states, and legitimizing Russia's actions in occupied territories. Case studies from Ukraine and Georgia reveal the ROC's silence on cultural destruction, its violation of canonical norms, and its association with paramilitary groups. In the Balkans, appeals to Orthodox "brotherhood" have reinforced Moscow's influence, while para-religious organizations spread anti-Western narratives. The ROC also leverages international organizations to amplify Kremlin rhetoric under the pretext of defending religious freedom. The findings show that the Church has become an integral element of Russia's hybrid strategy, with significant implications for regional and European security.
Keywords---Russian foreign policy; Russian orthodox church; black sea region; hybrid warfare; Russkiy Mir; religious diplomacy; orthodoxy; propaganda; soft power.

Introduction

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), also known as the Moscow Patriarchate, has become one of the most significant religious-political actors in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region. While constitutionally the Russian Federation is a secular state, in practice the ROC functions as a crucial instrument of Russian foreign policy. This article examines how the ROC is mobilized as part of the Kremlin's hybrid toolkit—serving simultaneously as a channel of soft power, a source of ideological legitimation, and a mechanism of influence over Orthodox populations in neighboring states. The Black Sea region provides a particularly salient context for analyzing these dynamics. With the exception of Turkey, most littoral states—Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Romania—are historically Orthodox, and Orthodoxy remains central to their national and cultural identities. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, primus inter pares in the Orthodox world, is also based in this region, residing in the Fener district of Istanbul. The proximity of Constantinople underscores the contested religious authority that characterizes the area, as Moscow seeks to rival and undermine Constantinople's position. Russia's foreign policy in the post-Soviet era has been marked by the assertion of "privileged interests" in neighboring regions and the resistance to Western expansion. In this geopolitical struggle, the ROC serves as a soft-power instrument that advances Moscow's ideological project while cloaking it in religious legitimacy. Scholars have described this phenomenon as "religious diplomacy" (Stoeckl 2016; Suslov 2018), where theological language and ecclesial authority are mobilized for geopolitical purposes. This study explores several key modalities through which the ROC projects influence:

1) The promotion of the Russkiy mir ("Russian World") ideology and the defense of so-called "traditional values."
2) Competition with the Ecumenical Patriarchate for primacy in Orthodoxy.
3) Direct intervention in the religious affairs of third states, notably Ukraine and Georgia.
4) Dissemination of anti-Western propaganda and mobilization of para-religious organizations.
5) Engagement in international institutions, where the ROC amplifies Kremlin narratives under the language of religious freedom and cultural identity.

The analysis proceeds historically and thematically. The next section situates the ROC within the Russian state system, tracing its transformation from the imperial period to the post-Soviet era. Subsequent sections examine the Church's role in the "Russian World" project, its activities in conflict and occupation zones, its influence in the Balkans through narratives of Orthodox brotherhood, its involvement in propaganda and disinformation campaigns, and its participation in international organizations. The conclusion reflects on the implications of these findings for the study of soft power, hybrid warfare, and religion in international relations.

The ROC in the Russian State System

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), also known as the Moscow Patriarchate, occupies a complex and strategically significant position within the Russian state system. Formally, according to Article 14 of the Constitution, the Russian Federation is a secular state in which church and state are separated; however, in practice, the activities of the ROC increasingly align with state objectives, particularly in the sphere of foreign policy, functioning as an instrument of the Kremlin's strategic agenda (Constitution of the Russian Federation, 2020). The integration of the Church into the political system has been gradual but systematic, achieved through mechanisms such as joint working groups with ministries and state agencies, expert commissions, and coordinated programs in education, culture, and international relations. This integration allows the Church to advance state objectives, particularly in the so-called "near abroad," where Russia leverages shared Orthodox Christian heritage to strengthen influence and counter Western cultural and political penetration (Encyclopedia, 2025; GlobalSecurity.org, 2025).

The close relationship between the Russian state and the Church is not a post-Soviet phenomenon. In the early eighteenth century, Peter I's reforms abolished the patriarchate and established the Most Holy Synod, overseen by a secular Ober-Prosecutor acting as the emperor's representative within the Church. In effect, the Church became an institution embedded within the administrative machinery of the Russian Empire, a structure that persisted until 1917 (Yakunin, 2002). The Bolshevik

period marked a sharp rupture, as the Church suffered repression, with churches destroyed and clergy persecuted. Yet, during World War II, Stalin recognized the strategic utility of religion for mobilizing public support and sustaining morale. In 1943, he restored the patriarchate and oversaw the election of the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, while simultaneously establishing the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church to monitor ecclesiastical activities.

The Church was thus placed under total state control, functioning as a tool for both domestic mobilization and international influence. Stalin even envisioned extending the Patriarch's influence abroad, aspiring to convene an Eighth Ecumenical Council and assert Moscow as the "Third Rome." Although these ambitions were unrealized, the institutional framework created under Stalin proved remarkably resilient, outlasting the Soviet Union itself (Shkarovskiy, 2013; Krotov.info, 1943). After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the ROC emerged as one of the few major institutions to escape lustration or reform. Under President Vladimir Putin, the Church's role expanded significantly, becoming a cornerstone of state-driven identity formation.

The 2000 National Security Concept of Russia explicitly recognized spiritual renewal and moral development as components of national security (Kremlin.ru, 2000). Scholars such as Marcel H. Van Herpen have likened the ROC to a "Swiss army knife" of state policy, serving multiple purposes for the regime, from domestic moral consolidation to international soft power projection (Van Herpen, 2020). As President Putin emphasized, under Patriarch Kirill, cooperation between Church and state has become more extensive, formalizing what had long been a de facto alignment (RIA Novosti, 2012; Patriarchia.ru, 2012). The ROC's current charter extends its jurisdiction over Orthodox communities not only in Russia but also in Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Estonia, Japan, and other countries whose Orthodox faithful voluntarily align with Moscow. This extensive reach allows the ROC to compete with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, positioning Moscow as a central authority in global Orthodoxy, a stance rooted both in canonical interpretation and geopolitical strategy (World Council of Churches, 2025).

The ROC functions as a strategic soft power instrument in Russian foreign policy. Its role in the "near abroad" allows Moscow to reinforce cultural and religious bonds with neighboring Orthodox nations, framing Russia as the protector of traditional values and as a counterweight to Western liberal influence (National Interest, 2020). By projecting moral and spiritual authority abroad, the Church provides the Kremlin with legitimacy and leverage in regions of political and cultural contestation. In sum, the ROC's integration into the Russian state represents a historical continuum from Peter I's reforms, through Soviet instrumentalization, to post-Soviet identity politics and foreign policy projection. Its institutionalized presence enables the Kremlin to

mobilize religion as a tool of statecraft, merging spiritual authority with political and strategic objectives. This alignment demonstrates the unique fusion of religion and state interests in Russia, where the ROC simultaneously reinforces domestic ideology, consolidates national identity, and extends Russia's geopolitical influence.

The ROC and the Kremlin "Russian World" Policy

The jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate is a central component of the Kremlin's concept of the "Russian World" (Russkiy Mir). Patriarch Kirill stated in 2015 that equating the Russian World solely with the Russian Federation is misleading, as it also encompasses Ukraine, Belarus, and all Russian territories. According to him, the Russian World was created through the baptism of the Dnieper and has since developed into a system of shared values, forming what he describes as an East Slavic civilization (Patriarchia.ru, 2015). However, it is important to note that the baptism in 988 AD occurred with the blessing of Patriarch Photius I of Constantinople, and Kievan Rus' remained a canonical territory of the Patriarchate of Constantinople until 1686 (Oxford Reference, 2011).

If the Russian World was indeed created by this historical process, it would be more accurately considered part of the Byzantine World rather than a distinct "East Slavic" civilization. Moreover, Christian values, even within Orthodox Christianity, cannot be uniquely characterized as "Russian," since Christianity is a supranational religion whose ethical principles transcend nationality. In contemporary Russia, the Moscow Patriarchate has actively promoted a version of "Russian Orthodoxy" that has become synonymous with anti-Westernism, including criticism of secularism, rejection of universal human rights, and opposition to liberal democracy (USIP, 2018).

Under Putin, the concept of the Russian World has been instrumentalized as a tool of Russian messianism, reinforced by Orthodox religion, nationalism, and Eurasianist ideology. Political activities of the Moscow Patriarchate are formally supported by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which since 2003 has maintained a Working Group for Interaction with the Church to coordinate foreign policy initiatives.

Among its priorities is the promotion and protection of traditional family values in the post-Soviet space, reflected in reports published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on this topic (MID.ru, 2025; MID.ru, 2019). In 2012, President Vladimir Putin praised Patriarch Kirill's foreign-policy role in a congratulatory address on the third anniversary of his enthronement: "Surely this is one of the most significant elements of our foreign policy. First of all, I mean our relations with our closest neighbors in a so-called Post-Soviet area. It is of utmost importance for people who live there. It's important to feel their unbreakable bond with the Russian Orthodox Church, which means with Russia" (Ruskline.ru, 2012).

The Russian World project has also generated rivalry with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The historical supremacy of Constantinople in the Orthodox world limits Moscow's ambitions to establish the Russian World as a dominant Orthodox civilizational project. This tension intensified over the issue of Ukrainian church autocephaly. In 2018, the Synod of Constantinople annulled Patriarch Dionysius' 1686 decision transferring the right to consecrate the Metropolitan of Kyiv to the Patriarch of Moscow. In 2019, the Ecumenical Patriarchate granted a Tomos of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, a move that diminished the Moscow Patriarchate's claim to leadership in Eastern Orthodoxy and dealt a severe blow to the Kremlin's Russian World strategy (USIP, 2018; Interfax.ru, 2019; RBC, 2019).

The Russian political and religious response was decisive. The Moscow Patriarchate unilaterally severed full communion with Constantinople. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov described the Ecumenical Patriarchate's decision as a "provocation" allegedly instigated and supported by the United States, while President Putin emphasized that the development had nothing to do with faith, framing it as a project based on "politicking" (Interfax.ru, 2019). In parallel, the Associated Press reported and documented cyber-attacks on the Ecumenical Patriarchate conducted by Russian hackers (AP News, 2019). Through these actions, the Russian Orthodox Church functions as a central instrument of the Kremlin's domestic and international policy. It consolidates ideological influence, projects soft power in the post-Soviet space, and strengthens the political framework of the Russian World, linking national identity with Orthodox religion and traditional values (MID.ru, 2025; Patriarchia.ru, 2015; Van Herpen, 2013).

The ROC and the Russian Occupation

One might expect religion to play a pacifying role in zones of armed conflict. Churches and religious authorities are traditionally understood as defenders of human dignity and mediators in situations of violence. Yet the record of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Ukraine and in the territories of Georgia under Russian occupation demonstrates the opposite. The Moscow Patriarchate has consistently mirrored the Kremlin's policies and at times acted in contradiction to the moral ideals of Christianity. Its silence in the face of cultural destruction, its indifference toward clerical persecution, its violation of canonical norms, and its cooperation with paramilitary groups reveal how religion has been subordinated to geopolitical interests and integrated into Russia's broader hybrid warfare strategy.

In the Russian-occupied regions of Georgia, the destruction and distortion of Orthodox monuments stands as one of the clearest indicators of this politicization of religion. Ancient churches and monasteries, which represent not only sacred sites but also crucial markers of Georgian identity, have been altered under the guise of

"restoration." The Ilori Church, an eleventh-century structure, was whitewashed by the Abkhazian occupation authorities in cooperation with Russian companies, unique Georgian inscriptions were erased, and its Georgian dome was replaced with one in the Russian style (Kavkazsky Uzel, 2010). The Likhna and Bedia monasteries and the Mokvi Cathedral, all dating from the tenth century, are in similarly deplorable condition. The New Athos Monastery, noted for its symbolic and architectural uniqueness, has suffered the same fate. Following its latest "restoration," celebrated by Russian television (NTV, 2009), the monument was stripped of authenticity, its new form reflecting political appropriation rather than preservation. Georgian organizations appealed to international bodies, warning that these interventions amounted to cultural cleansing (Blue Shield, 2014).

The ROC remained silent, providing de facto legitimacy to Russian occupation authorities and failing to defend the integrity of Orthodox heritage. The Moscow Patriarchate has also displayed indifference toward humanitarian crises in which it might have been expected to act. Following the 2008 war, Metropolitan Isaiah of Tskhinvali and Nikozi continued his ministry in occupied territory at great personal risk, despite severe restrictions on his freedom of movement and on his right to celebrate the liturgy. These violations were documented by the UNHCR (2014) and the U.S. Department of State (2016). Yet the ROC, despite its formal statements on Christian unity and its own doctrinal commitments outlined in the "Basic Principles of the Attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church Toward Other Christian Confessions" and the "Code of Russian Values" (Holy Council, 2016), offered no assistance and did not intervene on behalf of its fellow bishop. The absence of even symbolic solidarity suggests that loyalty to Russian state interests outweighed the obligations of Christian communion. The canonical status of Georgia further illustrates this contradiction. The Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church is universally recognized as the sole canonical authority in Georgia, including by the Moscow Patriarchate itself. Nevertheless, the ROC has repeatedly intruded into Abkhazia and South Ossetia, administering services without the Georgian Church's consent. Despite repeated protests from Tbilisi, these violations continue.

Symbolically, Patriarch Kirill refuses to address Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II with his full canonical title, a title respected by the Ecumenical Patriarch and other Orthodox leaders. This omission functions as a political gesture, subtly undermining Georgian ecclesiastical sovereignty and normalizing Moscow's interference. In Ukraine the ROC has gone beyond silence and symbolic gestures to direct collaboration with armed groups. Through its Synodal Committee for Interaction with the Cossacks, it cultivated relationships with paramilitary organizations such as the Union of Cossack Organizations of Ukraine, the Khartsyzsk Camp of Ukrainian Cossacks, the New Azov Stanitsa of Don Cossacks, the Luhansk Precinct of the Don Cossacks, and the Luhansk Volunteer Brigade named after General Denikin (skvk.org; kazachiyvir.ru). Many of

these groups were eventually absorbed into the Russian Orthodox Army (ROA), founded in 2014. Its leader, Igor Strelkov (Girkin), a GRU officer, became "Minister of Defense" of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (Southfront, 2014). As NBC News (2014) reported, members of the ROA described themselves as motivated by Orthodox faith and by a sense of lost honor after the Soviet collapse. Together with Russian Cossacks, they seized administrative buildings in Sloviansk, attacked Ukrainian border posts, and fought in major battles at Krasnoarmiisk, Karlivka, Pisky, Ilovaisk, and Debaltsevo, establishing illegal checkpoints across the Donbas (NBC, 2014; Stopterror.in.ua, 2015). The integration of Orthodox organizations into paramilitary networks highlights the extent to which the ROC functions as a facilitator of hybrid warfare. As Orysia Lutsevych of Chatham House has argued, ROC-linked groups are among the most politically vocal non-state actors in the region, consistently opposing EU and NATO membership and condemning the West for its "moral degradation" (Lutsevych, 2016).

When combined with the resources of the Russian state and security apparatus, these networks can significantly damage democratic transitions and weaken civil societies. The events in Crimea and Donbas reveal that the ROC is not a passive institution swept into conflict but an active participant in legitimizing and sustaining separatist structures. The evidence from Georgia and Ukraine demonstrates that the Moscow Patriarchate has subordinated its religious mission to the Kremlin's geopolitical objectives. Its silence on the destruction of sacred sites, its failure to support persecuted clergy, its violation of canonical boundaries, and its collaboration with armed groups all testify to the ROC's role in Russia's hybrid strategy. Far from acting as a force for peace, the ROC has functioned as an instrument of occupation and cultural domination, raising profound questions about the use of religion in international conflict and the long-term consequences for the Orthodox world.

Orthodox "Brotherhood"

Since Tsarist times, the Russian Empire has promoted the idea of Orthodox brotherhood to justify its foreign policy campaigns. This concept, which stresses shared culture, religion, and Slavic identity, has been revived and repurposed in the post-Soviet era as an ideological tool for Moscow's foreign policy. To this day, Russian narratives invoke the language of a spiritual "Orthodox community" in order to dissuade countries in the region from pursuing European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has been an active participant in this process, aligning its actions with the Kremlin's strategic interests. In 2020, Metropolitan Onufriy, a hierarch of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine, joined protests in Montenegro against a newly adopted law on religious freedom. The protests, led by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), were presented as a defense of Orthodoxy, yet in reality functioned as a mobilization against reforms that threatened Serbian and Russian influence in the Balkans (Balkan Insight, 2020). The

ROC's engagement in such protests underlines its commitment to acting as a political actor rather than a purely religious institution.

The Balkans, gradually integrating into NATO and the European Union, have become politically significant for Russia, whose influence is steadily diminishing in the region. Moscow therefore relies heavily on patriotic rhetoric, historical narratives, and Orthodox solidarity, often in cooperation with the SOC, to retain its foothold. This strategy has deep historical roots. During the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999, Patriarch Alexy II traveled to Belgrade to express solidarity with Serbia, situating the ROC as a defender of Orthodox brotherhood in the face of Western power. Russia also contributed to the completion of the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade, the largest Orthodox cathedral in Serbia, further embedding itself as a protector and patron of Slavic Orthodoxy (Carnegie, 2019). The Moscow Patriarchate continues to support Orthodox communities in Kosovo and frequently hosts Serbian political leaders during visits to Russia, reinforcing these symbolic ties. As Maxim Samorukov has argued, these ties between the ROC and the SOC were strengthened following Constantinople's decision to grant independence to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a move that placed Moscow and Constantinople into direct rivalry. The SOC, facing similar challenges from Montenegrin and Macedonian churches, threw its weight behind Moscow. In response, the ROC and Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs jointly issued appeals urging Serbs not to give up their religious shrines in Montenegro (Carnegie, 2019).

By such appeals, Moscow exacerbates existing social and political cleavages in a region already marked by fragility. Paul Stronski and Annie Himes observe that Russia emphasizes "Slavic brotherhood and shared Orthodox Christianity" to solidify relations with leaders, churches, and social groups across Bosnia, Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Putin's highly publicized pilgrimages to Mount Athos in 2005 and 2016 served as global displays of Russia's claim to be the modern benefactor of Orthodoxy. Mount Athos, home to twenty monasteries and a center of Orthodox mysticism, has become a symbolic stage for Moscow's outreach. These pilgrimages illustrated Russia's effort to present itself as the patron of modern-day Orthodoxy and to sway Orthodox publics and elites in its favor (Carnegie Endowment, 2019). Yet the idea of "Slavic and Orthodox brotherhood" as envisioned by Russia is selective. Moscow embraces this brotherhood only insofar as it positions Russia as the primary defender of Orthodoxy. When other countries are celebrated for their role, Russian authorities react with suspicion. A striking example occurred in March 2018 when Patriarch Kirill visited Bulgaria to commemorate the anniversary of Bulgaria's liberation from the Ottoman Empire.

During the commemorations, the Bulgarian president expressed gratitude not only to Russian soldiers but also to Romanian, Ukrainian, Belarussian, Finnish, Polish, and

Lithuanian troops. Kirill sharply criticized this acknowledgment, regarding it as historical revisionism and a diminishment of Russia's primary role in liberation (The Globe Post, 2018). Such incidents highlight the tension between Moscow's rhetoric of Orthodox solidarity and its insistence on Russian centrality. In the same year, Putin's state visit to Greece provided further evidence of the strategic use of Orthodoxy. Ahead of his visit, Putin published an article in the newspaper Kathimerini, emphasizing that Russian–Greek cooperation "rests on a rock-solid base of common civilizational values, the Orthodox culture, and a genuine mutual affection" (Ekathimerini, 2016). He specifically underlined that his visit coincided with the one-thousand-year anniversary of Russian monastic presence on Mount Athos, which began with the founding of St. Panteleimon Monastery.

During the pilgrimage, Putin was even permitted to sit upon the Byzantine throne inside the Cathedral of the Dormition in Karyes—a privilege traditionally reserved for patriarchs and emperors. This act angered the Ecumenical Patriarch, whose jurisdiction extends over Mount Athos, and sparked unease among Greek observers. As Alexander Baunov noted, Greeks viewed the visit with ambivalence, recalling that in the early twentieth century Russian monks and donations nearly transformed Athos into a colony of the Romanov Empire. Behind declarations of Orthodox unity, political tensions resurfaced, reflecting divergent national trajectories despite shared faith (Carnegie Commentary, 2016). The role of Orthodoxy in Russian foreign policy was equally evident in the case of North Macedonia. When the Prespa Agreement was reached in 2018, resolving the decades-long name dispute and opening the path for North Macedonia's accession to NATO, Moscow responded with a wave of hybrid interference. Greece expelled two Russian diplomats for allegedly financing rallies against the agreement and for attempting to bribe opponents of the deal. Reports identified the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, an organization promoting Russian religious influence, as among the actors seeking to amplify Moscow's presence in Greece, particularly within the Orthodox community of Mount Athos (The Guardian, 2018). These interventions have had direct ecclesiastical consequences. In 2019, when the Church of Greece recognized the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the ROC responded by severing full communion with Athens and instructing its faithful not to pray for the Archbishop of Greece.

The Synod published a list of dioceses that Russian pilgrims were forbidden to visit, deepening the schism within global Orthodoxy (Patriarchia.ru, 2019). In 2020, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin undertook an unsanctioned visit to Mount Athos, disregarding the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarch, whose jurisdiction encompasses the entirety of the monastic republic (TRT Russian, 2020). This act of defiance was interpreted as a direct challenge to Constantinople and to established Orthodox protocols. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been equally blunt. Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, sharply criticized Patriarch Bartholomew of

Constantinople for granting independence to the Ukrainian Church, attributing his decision to U.S. political influence. Lavrov claimed that Bartholomew's mission was designed "to bury the influence of Orthodoxy in the modern world" (Greek City Times, 2021). Such statements reveal the extent to which Moscow merges theological disputes with geopolitical narratives, framing Orthodoxy itself as a battleground in its contest with the West. Taken together, these episodes demonstrate how the concept of Orthodox brotherhood functions less as a genuine theological principle and more as a political instrument. Through pilgrimages, appeals to shared history, manipulation of church conflicts, and the cooptation of Orthodox institutions, Moscow deploys the language of brotherhood to reinforce its influence in the Balkans and beyond. Yet the selective and often coercive use of this rhetoric undermines the very unity it claims to defend, sowing division within Orthodoxy while advancing the Kremlin's strategic objectives.

Propaganda, Anti-Westernism and Xenophobia

The activities of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) are closely intertwined with the Kremlin's propaganda machine. This propaganda operates through two interconnected mechanisms: first, by promoting, praising, and justifying the policies of official Moscow; and second, by launching information attacks against actors considered undesirable by the Kremlin—be they individuals, countries, or ideologies—using blackmail, disinformation, and demonization. The ROC's activities across Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and the wider Black Sea region provide ample evidence of both mechanisms in action. Even before the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the ROC played a significant role in the psychological pressure campaign waged by Moscow against Kyiv. In the summer of 2009, Patriarch Kirill undertook a ten-day tour of Ukraine, repeatedly stressing the "common heritage" and "common destiny" of Russia and Ukraine. His rhetoric sought to entrench the idea of spiritual unity in order to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty. During this visit he was accompanied in Donetsk by Viktor Yanukovych, then leader of the opposition Party of the Regions, who would later become Ukraine's president.

Until 2014, many clerics of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) held positions in local councils, which enabled them to influence political decision-making. In some cases, this influence was used against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, including obstructing land leases and blocking new church construction (U.S. State Department, 2003). Disinformation and anti-Western campaigns represent the second and more aggressive component of ROC-linked propaganda. A vivid example can be found in the activities of Marchel Mihaescu, bishop of the Moldovan Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate. During Moldova's reform process to meet the European Union's requirements for visa-free travel, Mihaescu told his parishioners that the newly introduced biometric passports—required for travel to the EU—were

"satanic" because they contained a 13-digit number. He further attempted to block anti-discrimination legislation aimed at protecting LGBTQ individuals in the workplace, warning that such reforms would bring divine punishment and sever Moldova's ties with "Mother Russia." In interviews, Mihaescu openly equated the voice of the Church with that of Russian politicians, declaring Russia the guardian of Christian values while portraying Europe as demanding Moldovans "pay with their souls" in exchange for material assistance (New York Times, 2016).

Beyond individual clerics, numerous "patriotic" and "Orthodox" organizations have emerged across the Black Sea region, functioning as vehicles for Kremlin-aligned propaganda. Many of these groups are directly or indirectly connected to Moscow's ideologists and the ROC. According to research by the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS), Serbia alone hosts at least 51 pro-Kremlin associations and student organizations (CEAS, 2016). Among them are the Russian Association Stjag—an Orthodox-nationalist group that unites veterans of the Chechen and Afghan wars—the Serbian-Russian Society Orthodox Family, the Center for Research of Orthodox Monarchism, and the local branch of the International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations, established in 1995 with the blessing of the Patriarch of Moscow.

The agendas of these organizations are consistently anti-Western and Eurosceptic, seeking to halt Serbia's European integration and to sustain its dependence on Russia. Analogous organizations operate in other states of the region. Para-religious unions propagate the idea of "Orthodox unity" and Russia's "historic mission" as the savior of Orthodoxy. Their rhetoric frames EU and NATO integration as projects designed to erase national values, discredit Orthodoxy, normalize "nontraditional sexual relations," corrupt youth, and provoke confrontation with Russia. Movements such as "Orthodox Choice," the "People's Council of Ukraine," and the "Union of Russian People" mobilized against the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the country's Western course. Their activities significantly contributed to the political destabilization of Ukraine prior to 2014, laying the groundwork for Russian aggression. As New Eastern Europe observes, the propaganda of the UOC-MP played an important role in spreading the ideology of the "Russian World" across the Donbas. In their sermons, clergy warned congregants of alleged persecution of Orthodox believers by the Ukrainian state and urged them to defend the Russian World. ROC-affiliated media simultaneously promoted the idea of autocracy, as well as personality cults surrounding Patriarch Kirill and President Vladimir Putin (New Eastern Europe, 2016).

Another major component of ROC-linked propaganda is its emphasis on defending so-called "traditional values" and "family purity." These themes are consistently deployed to depict the West as morally corrupt. The ROC and its affiliates claim that a path

toward European integration equates to the legalization of same-sex marriage, the promotion of homosexuality, and even the legitimization of pedophilia. For example, Metropolitan Ilarion, head of the ROC's Department for External Church Relations, argued in interviews that France's decision to reduce the age of consent and legalize same-sex marriage was only the first step toward the eventual legalization of pedophilia. Such statements conflate conservative religious teaching with conspiracy-laden disinformation about Western societies (Patriarchia.ru, 2017).

The Church's hostile rhetoric toward LGBTQ people, while consistent with conservative religious attitudes, has been radicalized into an instrument of political mobilization. On 17 May 2013, during the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, a peaceful gathering of LGBTQ activists in Tbilisi was violently attacked by thousands of counter-demonstrators. Among them were Orthodox clerics who broke through police lines, as well as activists from the Union of Orthodox Christian Parents, a group known for its aggressive campaigns and radicalism. The Council of Europe later documented the events as a violation of human rights (Council of Europe, 2014). Incidents of this kind are not unique to Georgia but occur across Orthodox-majority societies in the Black Sea region. Their recurrence demonstrates how Kremlin-linked funding networks, often funneled through church-related organizations, facilitate a climate of xenophobia and mobilize hostility against liberal reforms. Taken together, these examples reveal how the Russian Orthodox Church serves as a central pillar in the Kremlin's propaganda architecture. By glorifying Russian policy, spreading disinformation, fostering anti-Western sentiment, and mobilizing para-religious organizations, the ROC plays a dual role as both spiritual authority and political instrument. The consequences of this role extend beyond church-state relations: they shape public opinion, distort democratic debate, and fuel xenophobia across the region. The ROC's invocation of Orthodoxy as synonymous with Russian state interests transforms faith into a weapon of information warfare, deepening societal divides and legitimizing authoritarianism.

The ROC in International Organizations

International organizations have become an important arena for what analysts call Russia's "Orthodox diplomacy." For the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), these platforms are essential for consolidating its efforts to project influence abroad and amplify the Kremlin's positions under the guise of religious advocacy. As in other domains, the Church benefits from the active support of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ensuring that ecclesiastical voices are harmonized with state interests. The ROC is particularly active within the United Nations system, where it participates in forums such as the UN Human Rights Council, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), and UNESCO. It also maintains a presence in European institutions, having kept a permanent representative in Strasbourg since 2004, and regularly participates in the work of the Council of Europe, the

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Committee of Representatives of Orthodox Churches to the European Union (Patriarchia.ru, 2017; Orthodoxru.eu). These engagements provide the Moscow Patriarchate with opportunities to use international institutions as amplifiers of Russia's foreign policy priorities. Concrete examples illustrate this pattern. On 1–2 April 2019, the OSCE convened a Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting in Vienna on the principles of tolerance and non-discrimination, including the promotion of freedom of religion or belief.

At this event, Bishop Viktor of Baryshevka, a representative of the ROC, sharply criticized the Ukrainian parliament for passing legislation to rename the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC-MP). He accused the Ukrainian government of engaging in "systematic unlawful pressure" on clergy of the canonical Church with the intention of forcing them to join another jurisdiction—the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, recognized by Constantinople as autocephalous in 2019 (Mospat.ru, 2019). The intervention echoed Moscow's rhetoric, reframing Ukraine's church reform as religious persecution rather than as an act of ecclesiastical sovereignty. A month earlier, in February 2019, the same bishop traveled to Strasbourg for meetings with high-level Council of Europe officials. There, he complained of "difficulties encountered by the clergy and laity of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in liturgical celebrations and confession of the faith" and submitted materials purportedly documenting violations against the UOC-MP. His appeal to international officials was framed as a defense of religious freedom but, in practice, was another attempt to export the Kremlin's narrative of victimhood and delegitimize Ukraine's efforts to establish an independent national church (Patriarchia.ru, 2019).

Such cases are illustrative of a broader pattern in which the ROC leverages international institutions not to promote ecumenical dialogue or protect universal rights, but to amplify Russian state interests under the cover of religious advocacy. The ROC's involvement in inter-parliamentary and inter-church organizations provides another vector for influence. The Russian Federation plays a leading role in the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO), an institution that Moscow has used to promote its agenda across Orthodox-majority countries. Since 2018, the Assembly has been chaired by Sergei Gavrilov, a member of Russia's Communist Party. The paradox of a communist politician leading a religiously-oriented international body is striking, but the arrangement underscores the instrumental character of the institution: Orthodoxy here serves political purposes rather than spiritual ones. In June 2019, the IAO's General Assembly was convened in Tbilisi at the initiative of several Georgian populist parliamentarians. The event quickly sparked outrage when Gavrilov took the chair of the Georgian parliament while presiding over the session. The spectacle of a Russian MP, representing the occupying power in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, addressing Georgians from the parliamentary speaker's seat triggered

mass demonstrations later known as "Gavrilov's Night." The protests escalated into one of the largest public mobilizations in Georgia in years, with security forces responding violently to demonstrators, injuring around 240 citizens. The government accused the opposition of attempting to storm parliament, while the public viewed the episode as a humiliating concession to Moscow. Ultimately, the IAO session was disrupted, and Gavrilov fled the country (BBC, 2019). The incident illustrated both the domestic volatility of Russian-linked religious diplomacy and the extent to which Moscow uses such organizations to advance influence.

According to the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy functions as an instrument of Kremlin foreign policy, with Gavrilov himself reportedly linked to Russian intelligence services (Valisluureamet, 2019). Far from being a neutral religious forum, the Assembly operates as an extension of Moscow's geopolitical toolbox, blending ecclesiastical symbolism with political subversion. Taken together, these cases show how the ROC positions itself within international organizations not as an ecumenical partner but as an echo chamber for Russian state interests. Whether in UN-affiliated institutions, European human rights bodies, or specialized Orthodox assemblies, the ROC consistently reiterates Moscow's narratives—depicting Ukraine's church reform as persecution, framing Western integration as a threat to tradition, and presenting Russia as the defender of Orthodoxy. This strategy, sometimes termed "Orthodox diplomacy," is less about interreligious dialogue and more about legitimizing Russian power. By mobilizing ecclesiastical representatives in global forums, the Kremlin gains another voice that reinforces its rhetoric, cloaking political arguments in the language of faith.

Conclusion

Sergei Chapnin, the former editor of the official journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, has stated bluntly that "the Church has become an instrument of the Russian state. It is used to extend and legitimize the interests of the Kremlin" (New York Times, 2016). His observation reflects a reality vividly demonstrated throughout the evidence presented in this study. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) today functions less as a spiritual community and more as an implementer of the Kremlin's political order. While countless examples could be cited, the cases reviewed here are sufficient to illustrate the true character and goals of the Moscow Patriarchate's activities in the Black Sea region. It is a disturbing development that the Church and Orthodoxy—traditionally associated with peace, reconciliation, and spiritual care—have become deeply integrated into the technologies of hybrid warfare. This fusion enables the Russian Federation to deploy "religious diplomacy" as an effective instrument in conducting influence operations and covert activities against neighboring states. By manipulating faith and ecclesiastical structures, Moscow can weaken the sovereignty of Black Sea countries and undermine their national security.

Under Vladimir Putin, the ROC has been transformed into the spiritual foundation of the political project of the "Russian World" (Russkiy Mir). It now serves as an ideological citadel for Russia's confrontation with the West, liberal democracy, and universal values. The Church's activities in the Black Sea region are consistent with Kremlin policy, demonstrating a willingness to depart from Christian principles and solidarity when these contradict Moscow's interests.

The ROC has repeatedly turned a blind eye to, or even justified, the oppression of populations, the occupation of territories, and the devastation of Christian cultural heritage. In doing so, it has become complicit in promoting radicalism, violence, and confrontation, often through organizations and individuals affiliated with the Church itself. The cases described in this article are not isolated precedents but elements of a unified policy pursued by the Kremlin with the involvement of the Moscow Patriarchate. The ROC acts as a political force multiplier for the Russian state, lending spiritual legitimacy to its projects while serving as a conduit for propaganda, influence operations, and soft power. This convergence of church and state demonstrates how religion has been instrumentalized as a strategic asset in Russia's hybrid warfare toolkit. For the countries of the Black Sea region, these challenges require systematic study and integration into national security assessments. The question is not merely where religion ends and politics begins, but rather how the two have been deliberately fused in contemporary Russia. Understanding this fusion is essential for assessing the broader implications for European security as a whole. The phenomenon of Russian "religious diplomacy" must therefore be recognized not as a benign cultural outreach, but as a vector of geopolitical influence with tangible consequences for the sovereignty and democratic futures of neighboring states.

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