



DISCUSSION PAPER

The Rising Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian Politics

Aruuke Uran Kyzy

TRT WORLD
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centre

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WRITTEN BY

Aruuke Uran Kzyz

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AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ

İSTANBUL / TURKEY

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PORTLAND HOUSE

4 GREAT PORTLAND STREET NO:4

LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM

TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.

1819 L STREET NW SUITE 700 20036

WASHINGTON DC

www.trtworld.com

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Introduction



On 15 January 2020, at the annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly, President Vladimir Putin proposed a national constitutional referendum.

The referendum aims to reshape the government well beyond the end of Putin's current term. In addition to significantly restructuring executive powers, the proposed amendments also focus on the religious and social foundations of the country. This paper suggests that understanding the rising power of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian politics is of critical importance for the country's domestic and foreign policies. This paper is divided into

four parts. The first section provides a historical background on the re-establishment of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Russia. The second section evaluates the characteristics of religion and politics in today's Russia. The third section sheds light on the institutional structure of the Church inside the state. Lastly, the fourth section analyses how Russia uses the ROC as a means of legitimising its military interventions. This discussion paper suggests that in order to understand the drivers of Russian behaviour in the global arena, it is imperative to look at broader underlying trends of the ROC's influence that are increasingly noticeable beyond the realm of domestic policies.



Russian Orthodox Christians attend the Easter service at the Russian Orthodox Old Believers' Church in Kazan, Russia on April 19, 2020. (Alexey Nasyrov - Anadolu Agency)

Historical Background

Orthodoxy has a long history in Russia, dating back to 988CE when Christianity was adopted as the official religion of Kievan Rus. Impressive churches began to dot the Russian landscape; conforming to the Byzantine pattern of architecture, decoration, and religious

services. Eastern Orthodoxy's tendency to subordinate itself to state interests was rooted in the very early Russian setting. The Russian Orthodox Church throughout Russian Imperial history has exhibited not only political activity but occasionally even military involvement, in-



Orthodox Christmas service, officiated by Russian Patriarch Kirill, held in Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, in Moscow, Russia on January 6, 2020.
(Sefa Karacan - Anadolu Agency)

spired by the Byzantine political theory of 'Symphonia', which promotes close cooperation between church and state. Justinian I (527-565CE) was one of the first who brought this expression to an understanding of 'system of co-reciprocity', or Symphonia, between the church and the state (Papanikolaou, 2003). Justinian made a clear distinction between the imperium and the sacerdotium; the former refers to the emperor and was responsible for "human affairs," whereas the latter refers to the 'divine authority'.

In the fifteenth century, with the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453, the theory developed that Moscow was the 'third Rome', the last true centre of Christianity on earth (Davis, 2002a). During the rule of Tsar Fyodor I, his brother-in-law Boris Godunov, who was effectively running the government, contacted the Ecumenical Patriarch intending to elevate the status of the Moscow Metropolis to a patriarchate. Eventually, after protracted negotiation, the Moscow Patriarchate was established in 1589, thus giving the Russian church a status equal to that of ancient patriarchates of the Christian Empire. For centuries, the doctrine known as Third Romism remained an integral part of the Russian "principle of the ideology" of the state (Sidorov, 2006). The patriarchate lasted in Imperial Russia until 1721 when Peter the Great replaced it with the Holy Governing Synod, a model which was taken after the state-controlled synods of the Lutheran church in Prussia and Sweden, significantly reducing the temporal power of the church (Kalkandzhieva, 2015a). Peter the Great initiated various reforms, known as "the Petrine Reforms", that were designed not only for building a military and naval system, but also to shift its religious practices. One may presume that Peter saw a visible guarantee of societal stability in its transformation of culture and traditions. This resulted in fundamental transformation of church-state relations. Instead of being ruled by a patriarch or metropolitan, the rule of the church came under the control of a committee of the Holy Governing Synod, which was composed of lay bureaucrats appointed by the Emperor (Zhivov, n.d). He governed the church together with a bishop council and, as a result, monasteries became the central institutions of opposition. Furthermore, authorities prohibited monks to keep pen and paper in their cells .

In 1917, following the collapse of the Imperial Tsarist government, the Russian Orthodox Church and the patriarchate was re-established. However, the Bolsheviks never intended to grant the Russian church any

significant role. The new Soviet government soon advocated the separation of church and state and thus nationalised all church-held lands (Kalkandzhieva, 2015b). One of the initial decrees of the new Communist government issued in January 1918 was to declare freedom from 'religious and anti-religious propaganda'. These administrative measures were followed by harsh state-sanctioned persecutions resulting in the wholesale destruction of churches and the execution of many clerics. In 1922 the Russian Orthodox Church was further weakened when the Renovated Church, a reform movement supported by the Soviet government, brought division among clergy and faithful.

As a part of state-sponsored atheism under Communist ideology, by 1939 there was a massive de-Christianisation. Soviet authorities immediately began confiscating church properties and closing religiously affiliated institutions. While thousands of clergy were killed, some were driven into exile or imprisoned in the Gulags. Correspondingly most churches were closed and religious education was forbidden (Goldenstein, 2016a). Soviet officials also began shutting down churches. There were approximately 77,000 Orthodox Churches in 1918, but less than 3,000 were functioning by 1941 (Davis, 2002b). There was ambiguity, too, in the position of the church and its adherents in Soviet society. According to the constitution, the rights of believers to practise were guaranteed and any form of discrimination was considered illegal. However, at the same time, it was a society in which a dominant role was taken by a Communist Party that expected its members to attack any "religious prejudices and other views and morals alien to the socialist way of life" (Kalkandzhieva, 2015c). The position of religious belief in the late communist and early post-communist Russia was, therefore, a complex and contradictory one, as religion could not be disregarded altogether. Today the Russian Orthodox Church is experiencing a revival. In a state seeking a defining ideology, the Russian Orthodox church has filled this void.

Religion and Politics in Today's Russia

This section aims to assess the various points of cooperative overlap and commonality shared by the ROC and Russian government and further examine the practice of mutual reinforcement in foreign policy objectives. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, number of self-described believers in Russia has increased. To this day the Russian Orthodox Church is considered as one of the most comprehensive autocephalous Eastern Orthodox churches in the world. Its number of followers is estimated at more than 90 million. According to the ISSP (International Social Survey Programme, 2014), 61 per cent of Russian adults surveyed in 1991 identified themselves as religiously unaffiliated, while about 31 per cent they were Orthodox Christians. Over the next 17 years, these percentages practically flipped. By 2008, roughly seven-in-ten Russians identified as Orthodox Christians (72%). There is a saying in Russia: "To be Russian is to be Orthodox". It is imperative to view the religious self-identification of Russians as reflecting their perception of Orthodox Christianity and the ROC as symbols of the 'big whole'. Thus it is reflected in the collective 'we' ('the country', 'the nation') whose loss in the new Russia began engaging in a search for symbols of the whole—a national idea, a great-power style—that would buttress their lost authority (Dubin, 2014).

Some experts are speculating that Russia is on the way to restoring the Russian Orthodox Church to a status as the legally preferred (Davidashvili, 2013a). Some suggest that the Russian Orthodox Church, confined to the margins during the long years of Communist rule, has returned to the centre of the country's public life—with the support of the Kremlin (Hill & Gaddy, 2012a). Some experts have described a 'vacuum of values' (Davidashvili, 2013b) left after the demolition of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party, and now The Russian Orthodox Church is filling the void.

Even though constitutionally Russia is considered as a secular state, the relationship between the two is closer than this formal status might imply. In recent years, the Russian Orthodox Church has become part of the culturally and socially conservative coalition of support built by Putin (Freeze, 2017). On 29 December 1999, the official website of the Russian government posted a document under the signature of the then prime minister Vladimir Putin: 'Russia at the Turn of the Millennium', also known as the Millennium Manifesto. Shortly thereafter, Russian President Boris Yeltsin appeared on national television and announced his resignation. A central point of the manifesto was Russia's history,

status, identity, at the core of what Putin called 'Russian idea', a concept publicised by Slavophiles and historically rooted in Russian identity.

For a century and a half, the debate over Russian identity, nation formation and Russia's future has focused primarily on Russia's relation to and interaction with the West. Slavophiles have emphasised the unique character of Russian civilisation based on Slavic Orthodox communitarian traditions. It is posited as being in opposition to an 'alien' Western civilisation, rejecting individualism and Western rationalism. In contrast, the Westernisers argued that Russia should emulate and learn from the rationalism of the West.

Any effort to understand Vladimir Putin and his policies must begin with the acknowledgement that he is a man of history. For Putin, history reinforces the relevance of serving the state versus the ephemeral nature of the individual (Hill & Gaddy, 2012b). In the nearly two decades (1990–2008) Alexy II served as Patriarch, he focused mainly on brick-and-mortar re-churching, reacquiring and rebuilding physical churches, with minimal engagement in secular issues. Since Vladimir Putin invited Patriarch Alexy II to bless his accession to the presidency, Orthodox Christianity has increasingly assumed the role of a state religion. However, only after returning to the Kremlin to start his third term in 2012 did Vladimir Putin address these questions in earnest.

Following the economic crisis in 2008 and the public protests in 2011 against election fraud, Putin seems to have calculated that he could not sustain his regime's legitimacy without the support of traditional and religious missions. In this context, some observers viewed his relationship with the church as being based primarily on political expediency to help garner the support for his political agenda (Goldenstein, 2016b). Putin did not invent a new ideology but simply reformulated and popularised the vital and indispensable concept of Russia's 'greatness', that sees Russia as directing the world with 'sacred' aspirations.

Immediately after Alexy's death, the Holy Synod elected Kirill as a new patriarch. While Alexy II confronted the idea of the church becoming the political instrument of the Kremlin, the collaboration between the government and the ROC significantly advanced with the arrival of Patriarch Kirill in 2009. When Kirill was elected Patriarch by the Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, the service was attended by Medve-

dev and Putin. The following day, the Kremlin hosted a reception for the ROC bishops in the Grand Kremlin Palace, where Patriarch Kirill held forth about the Byzantine concept of Symphonia as his vision of the ideal of church-state relations, which was to be reflected in Russia's foreign policy in the subsequent years.

The drastic transformation of Russia's foreign policy in recent years was driven by a specific worldview and dominant ideological conceptions rather than just old-fashioned geopolitical considerations (Zevelev, 2016a). In the course of the next three years, Putin delivered two landmark speeches on Russian identity: in September 2013, a keynote address to the Valdai Club gathering of international Russia specialists; and then in March 2014, a speech to the Federal Assembly and regional heads, outlining the background for welcoming Crimea and Sevastopol as new subjects of the Federation.

Until his 2013 speech at the Valdai Club meeting, Putin did not explicitly articulate what values Russia stood for. It was at this meeting that, for the first time, he laid out his vision of the ROC's mission as an Orthodox power in the international arena. In the speech, he clearly stated (Kremlin, 2013): "Russia has always evolved as a state-civilisation [gosudarstvo i civilizaciya/ государство или цивилизация], reinforced by the Russian people, Russian language, Russian culture, Russian Orthodox Church [русским народом, русским языком, русской культурой, Русской православной церковью] and the country's other traditional religions. It is precisely the state-civilisation model that has shaped our state polity".

This speech is considered to be a moment of re-assertion of Russia's historical identity (Kizenko, 2013) as well as an assertive statement of Russian values, and the spiritual and historical reasons why he believed that Moscow's traditionally rooted influence in the world was bound to grow. That speech opened a series of public statements, as well as off-the-record conversations devoted to the issue of preserving the country's identity within the 'Russian World' circle.

The concept of 'Russkiy Mir' or 'Russian World' became the central political and historical narrative in the government's rhetoric for the last two decades. For the Russian state, it is seen as a soft power tool for expanding Russia's cultural and political influence. At the same time, for the ROC, it is a spiritual concept relating to the task of building a 'Holy Rus' (Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, 2015). The close symphonic relationship between the Kremlin and the

ROC provides Russian foreign policy with a definable moral framework, which is likely to continue to shape the country's policies well into the future, particularly in light of the recently-proposed constitutional amendments.

In a speech during a state visit to Mount Athos in September 2015, Vladimir Putin stated: "For us, the rebirth of Russia is inextricably tied, first of all, with spiritual rebirth and if Russia is the largest Orthodox power [pravoslavnaya dershava], then Greece and Athos are its sources" ("Vladimir Putin: Rossiya", 2015). Two primary forms of identity have proven critical in this context. The initial interpretation (Laruelle, 2016) creates the image of Russia being a reliable and strong independent power, a stronghold for all conservative forces that oppose revolutions, chaos, and liberal ideas imposed on the world by the United States and Europe. While, the second formation is viewed as the existence of a greater Russian World (Carnegie Council, 2015b) which differentiates Russian civilisation from Western civilisation.

Within the state apparatus, the Moscow Patriarchate is actively involved in developments outside of Russia and the possible outcomes these developments may have on the home front (Blitt, 2011a). Today, the Patriarch enjoys the ear of Russia's Foreign Ministry and plays a crucial role in both mapping and advancing Russian foreign interests.

Overall the present-day role of Russia's national identity conceptualisation in a historic Christian context and its global foreign policy strategy implications may be summarised as follows. First, Moscow sees modern Russia as a unique great power with missionary objectives. Within this context, Russia's international status in the twenty-first century is determined not only by military might and a traditional balance of power strategy but also by its intangible spiritual and cultural status. Second, the 'West' began to be perceived in Russia as an anti-Russian force that seeks to change Moscow's "unique" (President of Russia, 2014b) and increasingly conservative national identity of Orthodox Christianity. Within this context, the 'West' in the Kremlin's interpretation is also concentrated on NATO and the EU (Zevelev, 2016b). With his anti-Western rhetoric, Putin has reflected the fundamental relationship of Russian state-church exceptionalism that is deeply rooted in its culture, self-identification and history.

A Church Inside the State

In recent years, Church-state cooperation in Russia has blurred constitutional obligations related to the separation of church and state, including in the formulation and execution of its foreign policy. The ROC has obtained advantageous legislation and financial assistance for the maintenance of religious infrastructure. A pervasive notion of 'traditionality' that has been implanted at the apex of Russia's strategic planning can be seen in both the National Security Strategy (which will be discussed in this section), as well as the Foreign Policy Concept (which will be discussed in the upcoming section).

According to a ROMIR survey (private research company), in 2013, the church's approval rating (66 per cent) was even higher than Putin's (63 per cent). Consecutive surveys have repeatedly shown strong support for the limited, but effective, rhetorical role that the Patriarch has assumed (ROMIR, 2013). The ROC has succeeded in entering the reformatories, army and the education system. It was under Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (2008-2012) that a set of religious studies courses were introduced in the public schools, initiatives taken to provide military chaplains in the armed forces, and a law on the return of church property approved (Anderson, 2016). In 2012, a new education law was adopted, which made religious education in Russian public schools compulsory.

Later in 2011, Russia adopted legislation restricting access to abortion, limiting the availability of the procedure across the country. There is growing resistance to both abortion and family planning programmes from the authorities believed to be motivated by an effort to boost Russian fertility rates. Several Russian nationalists have related declining birth rates as 'a plot to smother Russia in its cradle', thus aligning themselves with the Russian Orthodox Church's campaign to reduce funds for family planning programmes (Da Vanzo and Grammich, 2001). The decision was taken by the Working Group composed of seven orthodox church officials who drafted recommendations for the upcoming federal draft law on the health system in Russia (Kishkovsky, 2011). The changes were backed by the Holy Patriarch, who viewed them as representing significant systematic advances to counter abortion and support 'traditional families' (Russian Patriarchy, 2016). This approach has deep roots in Russian 'moral codes' and 'historical values, as it was argued above, and is

reflective of the intellectual legacies of the Slavophiles.

The cooperation between the Kremlin and the ROC was reinforced by public protests surrounding the presidential elections of 2011-2012. The last big rally in 2011 drew as many as 100,000 people to central Moscow in the biggest anti-government demonstration since the Soviet era. Putin was seeking support from spiritual figures for his presidential campaign to win his third term in the office despite the biggest opposition protests of his rule. Patriarch Kirill urged caution emphasising the need to preserve a strong state while warning protesters not to be used by those seeking political power – that the protests were manipulated by a tiny minority, rather than a reflection of real grievances. Patriarch Kirill has even gone so far in his speech as to speak of Putin as being a "miracle of God" (Bryanski, 2012)

A closer look at the Putin's identity formation shows that the Kremlin feels fundamentally insecure and seeks to defend, using all available means, its official national identity narratives. In one of his interviews with the Time Magazine (TIME, 2017) Putin stated: "First and foremost, we should be governed by common sense. But common sense should be based on moral principles first. And it is not possible today to have morality separated from religious values".

A good illustration of the cooperation between the patriarchy and state structures comes from 2013 when a group of Duma deputies proposed changing the text of the 1993 Constitution. Elena Mizulina, a member of the Russian State Duma committee on family, women's, and children's affairs, suggested an amendment to the constitutional preamble that would speak of the significance of Orthodoxy in the development of Russian history. This proposal was based on an appeal from several public organisations that stated that "Orthodoxy is the national idea of Russia, its special civilisational code, and the essence of its spiritual sovereignty. Orthodoxy is the basis of Russian identity. Furthermore, just as the governmental sovereignty of the Russian Federation if confirmed by legislation, we urge that its spiritual sovereignty be confirmed by recognising in the Russian constitution the special role of Orthodoxy" while stressing that this in no way infringes the rights of minorities (Interfax Religion, 2013). Patriarch Kirill was further invited to address the Duma parliament, where he used the opportunity to defend traditional values (The Russian Orthodox Church, 2015).

Radical and dramatic shifts in Russian policy has been often interpreted as a part of Putin's strategy to preserve his regime (Zevelev, 2016c). Vladimir Putin's high popularity ratings are neither transient nor personal. They reflect the popularity of his social and political agenda, which are popular precisely because they have the blessing of the Russian Orthodox Church. To gain further support from the Christian population, Putin centred his policy on the foundation of the ideological content of 'tsennosti', that of moral values (Laruelle, 2016). By morality, the Kremlin implies respect for 'traditional' Christian values such as the heterosexual family (non-recognition of LGBT rights); an emphasis on having children as a basis for individual life but also for the country's demographic health; maintaining a healthy lifestyle (the fight against alcoholism); respect for the elderly and the hierarchy. Since 2012 the frequency of the term 'morality' ('nравstvennost') and the adjective 'spiritual' ('dukhovnyi') in Putin's speeches has increased (Sharafutdinova, 2014).

Similar rhetoric was also aimed at bringing attention of Christian supporters to specific initiatives of state authorities that are viewed as attempts to defend the ROC against public criticism and to strengthen the position of the church. This was concretised when the members of the band Pussy Riot, feminist protest group performed a "punk prayer" in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. This performance was filmed as a music video and posted on the internet. The collective's lyrical themes included feminism, LGBT rights, and opposition to Putin. Several weeks after the cathedral stunt, two of its members were jailed and later freed from prison under pressure from Amnesty International. The adoption of a law establishing criminal liability for "insulting the feelings of believers", which entered into force on 1 July 2013, has been interpreted as an attempt to defend the ROC within the country. Work on this legislative act, which has had broad resonance in Russian society, started immediately after the Pussy Riot scandal. The Russian court approved the conviction, whose position was supported by the leadership of the ROC. It was Church officials and supporters of the ROC who most actively championed the establishment of such criminal liability.

The establishment of broadly harmonious and mutually supportive relations between Church and State in Russia has significant implications for Russian politics. On 15 January 2020, at the annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin proposed a national constitutional referendum, which aims to re-

structure the distribution of power between the presidential and legislative branches of government. In addition to significantly restructuring executive powers, the amendments will also focus on the religious and social foundations of the country. Putin also proposed an amendment on "historical truth" to protect "the great achievement of the people in their defence of the Fatherland" (BBC News, 2020). Forced to postpone the traditional May 9 Victory Day [Defence of the Fatherland] celebrations due to the coronavirus pandemic, Putin rescheduled the parade, marking 75 years since the Nazi defeat. On June 24, 2020, Russia staged its Grand World War II Parade ahead of constitutional reform on July 1. In his two decades of rule, Putin has harnessed the legacy of the Soviet victory to expand and increase patriotic sentiment and support for his government. Another proposal was introduced regarding the concept of marriage. Vice Speaker Pyotr Tolstoy said that the amendments include a constitutional measure defining marriage as a traditional act and a union between a man and a woman ("Putin proposes enshrining God", 2020).

One of the proposed constitutional amendments is to include the word 'God' in Russia's legal document, which emphasises Russians' "faith in God". Addressing the Inter-Religious Council, Patriarch Kirill said that acknowledging the value of faith in God would solidify the "historical and spiritual continuity of the country's peoples", besides offering tribute to millions persecuted for their religious beliefs under Soviet rule (Luxmoore, 2020). According to Putin, religion has been passed on to "us from our ancestors", and this should not be implying any rejection of secular governance or freedom of conscience (Duma, 2020). "They are necessary and, I believe, will be useful for Russia, for society and our people, because they are aimed at strengthening our sovereignty, our traditions and our values", Putin further added ("Speech at State Duma plenary session", 2020). This brief overview of the critical policy regulations that have guided Russia's domestic policy demonstrates how Orthodox traditions are used as a domestic legitimisation strategy to shape Putin's popularity.

Political Implications of the State-Church Cooperation

Russia has consistently portrayed itself as a great power (Hill & Gaddy, 2013). The idea, which is designed to consolidate the nation, rally it around the Kremlin, and neutralise growing inter-ethnic tensions, can be described as a mixture of patriotism, nationalism, great-power sentiment, and anti-Western rhetoric (Jarzyńska, 2014a). Putin is counting on the fact that the Russian people have absorbed and spiritually justified the idea that expansion, anti-Western stance and the great-power sentiment. Orthodoxy is considered as a central element in the uniqueness of Russian civilisation and the superiority of Russian culture. The authorities envision Orthodox Christianity as the element that ensures the continuity of Russian statehood and provides a basis for the renewal of Russian identity, which was seen as in crisis since the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Jarzyńska, 2014b). To be a good (and popular) leader in their eyes means to be a spiritual leader pursuing a messianic foreign policy.

This sheds light on why Moscow's actions concerning Ukraine were unpredictable for many Western leaders and experts: they had not delved into Russian domestic identity discourses, which was considered to be increasingly isolated from Western 'liberal' trends (Mearsheimer, 2014). With the Ukrainian conflict in 2014, the profound values gap between Russia and the West was even more apparent in the discourse of Putin's "strategic mindset". Russia sees itself as defending not only vital strategic interests in Ukraine but also its core values of 'morality', such as cultural loyalty and spiritual freedom. It may seem strange to many in the West, but Russia's attitude on the Ukrainian crisis is inflexible precisely because it sees itself as occupying the moral high ground in the dispute. Within this context, Dmitry Peskov, the current Presidential Press secretary, commented on the situation in Crimea by stating Vladimir Putin is a guarantor of security for the 'Russian World' (Coalson, 2014).

As the Patriarch actively promotes the concept of the Russian world, it extends its reach to Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova so that region would be dominated by the Moscow Patriarchate. It should be noted that the strategic efforts of the ROC to strengthen its positions in the region that it regards as the canonical territory of Orthodox Christianity correspond to the efforts of the secular

authorities in the Kremlin to strengthen Russia's cultural, political, and economic presence in the post-Soviet space.

The Crimean takeover was justified in the Kremlin by use of nationalist rhetoric of "defender of ethnic Russians abroad" (Kolstø, 2016). In his 'Crimea speech' on 18 March 2014, Putin clearly stated: "We have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continues today" (President of Russia, 2014). In order to understand the reason behind the speech, it is enough to know the history of Crimea, emphasising the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and history that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. In his speech, Putin recalled the ancient Chersonesos where Prince Vladimir was baptised. Andrew Wilson (2014), a leading Ukraine specialist in his book *Ukraine Crisis: What it means for the West*, admits that Putin "rode the tiger of the Russian nationalism which had been unleashed".

Another example of closer ties came with the attitude of the Orthodox Church regarding the Russian intervention in Syria, which is undoubtedly also one of the cases that holds potential to legitimise the war for its domestic Christian population. Initially, the decision to intervene in Syria was mainly motivated by the geopolitical benefits Moscow believed would result. However, it also turned into an opportunity for Putin to present himself as a traditional Russian leader to justify the war for its domestic audience as well as gain support from the international sphere, such as the Western right-wing and American evangelicals. The culture he embodies must, by its visionary mission, take up its obligation to lead human history toward the protection of the Christian nation in the Middle East. Vsevolod Chaplin, formerly head of the Russian Orthodox Church's public affairs department, was quoted as saying that "the fight with terrorism is a holy battle, and today our country is perhaps the most active force in the world fighting it" (Comford, 2015).

According to a national survey conducted in the first year of Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war, 68% of respondents were following the developments in Syria ("How many Russians", 2016). Of that total, 62% believed that Moscow should not remain neutral in the

conflict. Accordingly, 56% of respondents blamed not the Assad regime or the Syrian rebels in the prolonged and bloody conflict, but the US and its allies, while sixty-six per cent supported Putin's decision to begin air raids in the region. About a month later, Putin's approval rating reached an all-time high of nearly 90 per cent due primarily to his military moves in Syria. Today however, the Syrian war is barely present in political debates and news flows in Moscow. The central focus began to dissipate with the explosion of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though the virus arrived in Russia after it had entered European states, the Russian leadership found itself badly unprepared. According to some experts (Baev, 2020), Putin's decision-making will further be enriched by a unique blend of ambitions, idiosyncrasies, and fears regarding the legitimisation of his Syria intervention.

Putin has encouraged the church to build a relationship with the armed forces and it is now common for Orthodox priests to sprinkle Russian spacecraft and missiles with holy water just before lift-off (Luhn, 2019). The ROC has even held a religious service in honour of the nation's stockpile of nuclear weapons (Bennets, 2015). In April 2020, Russia has built its first Armed Forces cathedral, symbolising the growing military-church ties in Russia (The Moscow Times, 2020). One of the mosaics from the cathedral's walls shows Putin and Russian Defence Minister Shoigu flanked by prominent politicians including State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin and Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matviyenko as well as security officials like FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov and the head of the Army's General Staff Valery Gerasimov. The Crimean annexation is also celebrated with one mosaic depicting a group of women with a sign behind them that reads "our Crimea".

Most of the ROC's activities abroad are conducted through its department of external church relations (DECR), which is tasked with the complete responsibility of "maintaining the Church's relations with local orthodox Churches, non-orthodox Churches, Christian organisations and non-Christian religious communities, as well as governmental, parliamentary, inter-governmental, religious and public bodies abroad and international public organisations" (Blitt, 2011b). In practice, the DECR also operates as a de-facto foreign ministry that



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov meets with Patriarch Moran Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, The Supreme Head of Universal Syriac Orthodox Church at the Russian Foreign Ministry building in Moscow, Russia. (Sefa Karacan - Anadolu Agency)

interacts with ambassadors and engages with the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), among other international organisations. The church's foreign policy objectives are multi-pronged and divergent, yet they share many similarities with the government of Russia's foreign policy priorities.

With some 70 per cent of Russians identifying as Orthodox Christians, the Kremlin has relied on the church to bolster public support for the Syrian war effort. The Orthodox Church's Patriarch Kirill praised Russia's decision to "protect the Syrian people from the woes brought on by the tyranny of terrorists" ("Patriarch Kirill Praises", 2016). Among the arguments is that by fighting against ISIS and other Islamic extremist groups in Syria, the Russians are working to save Christians from persecution. The Patriarch said: "Besides solving some issues linked to stabilising the situation, preventing military threats and preventing the takeover of power by terrorists, there was a fundamental idea in Russia's participation - to protect the Christian minority. Thanks to Russia's participation, the genocide of Christians was thwarted" ("Russia helped to protect Christians in Syria", 2018). This has to be one of the most ironic of all historical twists that Vladimir Putin, a former KGB foreign intelligence officer, is now being deemed the great defender of the Christian faith. Thus, the Kremlin uses its loyal national church as an instrument for creating a positive image of Russia abroad and for lobbying on behalf of Russian interests. Supporting one another, today they constitute a socio-political regime—and not only in the imaginary space of collective consciousness but also in the real action or inaction of one and all.

Conclusion

With the end of the Cold War and as a consequence of the failure to be included in the European and transatlantic security architecture, Moscow began to look for a place in the international system by relying on domestic discourses and 'big ideas' emanating from within the country, as well as through reinterpreting Russian history in isolation from what are viewed as Western paradigms. The key here is that Russia's missionary role is assumed, regardless of the nature of the political regime—be it tsarist, Soviet, or post-Soviet. This has created a dangerous dynamic in relations not only between the West and Russia but also Russia and its citizens.

Since 1990, Russian Orthodox Church has been central to the formation of Russian identity following the collapse of USSR and the ideological vacuum that ensued. Exhibiting deep-rooted anti-western sentiment, the politics of the ROC overlaps with that of the Kremlin, which has struggled to find a place in the international system. This was done through reliance on domestic discourses and as well as through a reinterpretation Russian history in isolation from world processes. With the referendum on the constitutional amendments set for 1 July 2020, Russia will further consolidate this relationship, giving it more legitimacy.



Then Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (L), Svetlana (2nd L) and Russia's President Vladimir Putin (2nd R) attend Orthodox Easter service at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, Russia on April 07, 2018. The Russian Orthodox Church celebrates feasts according to the Julian calendar. (Nataliy Zembocka - Anadolu Agency)

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