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The Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on Kremlin Policy in Europe

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Introduction

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Kremlin have maintained remarkable unity since February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine and became an outcast in the Western world. The ROC supported Vladimir Putin's decision to launch the full-scale invasion and provided moral justification for the aggression. The principal argument advanced by both Russian secular and religious authorities is that Ukraine is merely a battleground in Moscow's confrontation with the "collective West," including Europe. They have presented an attack as a defence and justified it on several levels: military — preventing NATO's eastward expansion; geopolitical — preserving Moscow's sphere of influence in the post-Soviet territories; religious — protecting global Orthodoxy; and value-based — resisting Western liberalism, which allegedly threatens traditional Russian spiritual and moral values. The Church is the principal promoter and defender of the latter two narratives, framing the Kremlin's actions not only as pragmatic but also as spiritual and moral.

Some scholars argue that the ROC primarily aligns itself with the state's political agenda rather than acting as an independent generator of political ideas (e.g., Laruelle, 2024; Suslov, 2024). In this essay, however, I contend that the Church possesses greater agency than is often assumed and should be regarded as a full-fledged co-author of contemporary Russian politics. The Moscow Patriarchate began articulating themes of traditionalist conservatism, imperial revival, and anti-Westernism well before these ideas became central to the Kremlin's agenda. While the Russian state in the 1990s and early 2000s generally moved toward liberal democracy and closer cooperation with the United States and Europe, influential segments of the ROC clergy were already invoking the restoration of empire and advancing the concept of the "Russian World" (Russkii Mir).

As Russia's politics became increasingly anti-Western in orientation, the Church's ideas grew ever more relevant to the Kremlin. They gradually migrated from religious and conservative circles into public political discourse and even into official government documents. A reference to God was added to the Russian Constitution in 2020; the term "traditional values" appeared in the National Security Strategy in 2021; and a special Decree No. 809 on their protection was approved in 2022. In the realm of international relations, the concept of the "Russian World" was incorporated into the new version of the Foreign Policy Concept in 2023.

The underlying idea behind these developments is that Russia constitutes a distinct civilisation, set in opposition to the US and Western Europe. Various political actors — communists, nationalists, siloviki, and, of course, Putin himself — have supported the evolution of this worldview over recent decades. Through both its direct and indirect influence on Russian politics, the Church has been one of the major contributors as well.

The ROC regards Europe as part of the so-called "collective West", characterised by its corrupting liberalism and democracy. Within this framework, Russia is portrayed as the antithesis — a civilisation grounded in tradition and morality, which must be protected from Western influence. Nevertheless, there are important nuances within this general line, as Europe itself is not monolithic: it comprises diverse countries and political forces, which the Russian Orthodox Church approaches in varying ways. The ROC is hostile towards Western and part of Central Europe and considers itself a protector of Christian morals and traditions in Eastern Europe.

This essay argues that the ROC has been a key architect of Russia's foreign policy, promoting its anti-Western posture since the early 1990s. It offers new perspectives on the church-state relations in Russia in an international context, shifting the perception of the ROC from a servant to an active agent. Moreover, this work provides insights into the ideological foundation of the Kremlin's policies in Europe, shaped in part by the Moscow Patriarchate. Today, the ROC contributes to the legitimisation of Russia's war in Ukraine, supports Moscow's claims to special prerogatives in the post-Soviet territories, and advances the Kremlin's agenda internationally by aligning itself with conservative forces abroad. This analysis clarifies the actual role of the Russian Orthodox Church as a co-author of the Kremlin's foreign policy, with particular attention to its impact in Europe.

After the Collapse of the USSR: The ROC's Views on the West

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) had adopted anti-Western positions long before its ideas entered mainstream Kremlin discourse. The development of the Church's official worldview began soon after its revival from Soviet oppression in the mid-1980s. Perestroika ("restructuring"), declared by the President of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, liberalised the country's political, economic, social, and religious life. In 1990, shortly before the USSR's collapse, the Supreme Soviet adopted the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious

Organisations, which guaranteed full freedom of belief and prohibited discrimination on the basis of religion. At that point, the ROC began developing not only as a religious but also as a political institution, actively participating in discussions about Russia's role in the new global order.

The number of churches, seminaries, and monasteries rose along with the number of people who identified themselves as Orthodox — the latter figure increasing from 31% in 1991 to 50% in 2001 (Levada-Center, 2007). Moreover, surveys in the 1990s demonstrated that Russians trusted the Orthodox Church more than any other public institution, including the president, government, army, and media (Levada-Center, 2020). However, Orthodox self-identification should be distinguished from active worship, as relatively few Russians have attended services or celebrated religious holidays (Dubin, 2005). Therefore, this dynamic reflected a cultural rather than religious identity, and according to the most recent surveys, this remains the case (Levada-Center, 2022).

After the collapse of the USSR and communist ideology, the society was searching for a new sense of belonging. The ROC, being kind of custodian of Russian history and culture, contributed to the restoration of a collective sense of national identity (Garrard and Garrard, 2008; Simons, 2009). Thus, it is not surprising that the ROC, with its considerable prestige and broad audience, attracted a wide range of social and political forces. Some invoked the Church to support Russia’s democratic project, while others appealed to it to reinforce anti-democratic platforms and ideologies (Knox, 2004).

The political landscape of the 1990s — an era of pluralism and democracy — was diverse, comprising liberals and reformists, communists and leftists, nationalists and right-wing movements. Despite its dominance, the liberal-democratic bloc around President Boris Yeltsin faced strong opposition from the Communist Party (CPRF), which continued to enjoy significant popular support. The processes taking place within the ROC were similar to those occurring in the Russian political system: there were deep internal divisions, with stark contrasts between liberal priests (e.g. Father Alexander Men) and extreme nationalists (e.g. Metropolitan Ioann of St Petersburg and Ladoga). However, unlike the Russian political scene, where liberal democrats were the leading force, conservatism tended to predominate within the ROC. While collaborating with the democratic authorities — Patriarch Alexy II, for example, supported Boris Yeltsin in the 1996 presidential election — the official Church was more

sympathetic towards conservative and nationalist ideas. Comparing the ROC's approaches to different clerical groups, a historian Zoe Knox (2005) notes that the Moscow Patriarchate silenced some of the most prominent liberal priests but did little to restrain extreme nationalists. For instance, Metropolitan Ioann regularly published articles in nationalist newspapers, frequently referred to The Protocols of the Elders of Zion (one of the most notorious works of modern anti-Semitism) and accused Catholicism and Protestantism of seeking to enslave Russia and deprive it of its Orthodox faith.

There are various reasons why nationalist and illiberal voices predominated within the Russian Orthodox Church. First of all, historically, it is a conservative institution that upholds monarchy over democracy, tradition over progress, and collectivism (sobornost') over individualism — liberal ideas were somewhat alien to the Moscow Patriarchate. Moreover, the ROC sought to restore its pre-revolutionary influence and authority, which became possible specifically through promoting the idea of so-called Russianness — satisfying the needs of both the general public and a wide range of nationalist groups.

An expert in nationalism, Aleksandr Verkhovsky, emphasised that the most conservative wing within the Church, the so-called "Russian Orthodox fundamentalists", contributed significantly to the development of nationalist, xenophobic, and anti-Western tendencies in Russia. This group of clergy "stand for the restoration of autocracy, a state structure on the imperial model, restrictions on the Jews and confessions other than Orthodoxy, the status of state church for the ROC, rejection of the concepts of democracy and human rights (in particular, as far as freedom of conscience is concerned), opposition to any forms of Western influence within the country and struggle against such influence beyond Russia's borders" (Verkhovsky, 2002, p. 334).

The core of the ROC's ideological foundations, developed in the 1990s, was the concept of Russia as an anti-Western civilisation with a global mission to protect traditional values. In many ways, this echoed the Soviet ethos, which contrasted its "high moral code" with Western materialism and consumerism. As historian Alexander Agadjanian points out, "the Soviet moral legacy has been selectively 'sacralised' and subsumed into a longer continuity of Russian Christian history, which has been associated, if only anachronistically, with both the pre-Revolutionary imagined Gemeinschaft (society) and the Soviet collectivistic conservatism" (Agadjanian, 2017, p. 43-44).

In geopolitical terms, the ROC's views were reflected in its assertion that Russia should restore its status as a great power and remain positioned between East and West — without following the Western path of development. This idea was vividly expressed at the first meeting of the World Russian People's Council (WRPC), a kind of think tank under the ROC's patronage, in 1993. The organisation declared that "a one-sided orientation toward the Western European development model … does not correspond either to the religious and ethical value system of the Russian people or to the value orientations of other peoples of the Russian Federation." Its final resolution further stated that the country should restore its greatness and preserve the former Soviet territories as its zone of interest, preventing "armed third powers from entering its military-strategic space or allowing parts of this space to join blocs and alliances hostile to it" (World Russian People's Council, 1993).

The Church expressed these views not only in discussions with clergy and conservative philosophers but also in dialogue with state officials and organisations. In 1993, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad (now Patriarch Kirill), then head of the Department for External Church Relations and responsible for the ROC's international agenda, participated for the first time in a meeting of the Council on Foreign Policy of Russia under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. While the Foreign Ministry was considering ways to cooperate with both Eastern and Western Europe, Kirill argued for Moscow's distancing from the region. He declared that "Russia is a fait accompli; it is not merely a state but also a Eurasian space with colossal potential. Therefore, its integration into Europe is impossible without harming both" (Kommersant, 1993).

It is notable that while in the early 1990s the new Russian political authorities were oriented towards the West and democratisation, the ROC promoted the restoration of the empire with the dominance of the Orthodox faith and Russian traditions. The ideal form of government for the Church has been monarchy, with collaboration between secular and religious authorities in so-called "symphonia" (referring to the Byzantine tradition). The Moscow Patriarchate took assertive steps towards close rapprochement with the state, participating in activities and discussions related to the army, domestic and foreign policy, and social and cultural programmes. In 1997, the ROC pushed for a new Law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, which placed Orthodoxy above other religions and highlighted its special role in Russia. President Boris Yeltsin initially rejected the legislation, referring to its contradiction with the Constitution and international human rights conventions, which

regarded all religions and their followers as equal. However, the law was ultimately accepted and confirmed the ROC's distinctive status.

At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church began developing The Bases of the Social Conception, its programme document presenting the Moscow Patriarchate's stance on church–state relations and a variety of other issues, such as war and peace, personal and public morality, culture, and education. To prepare this document, the Church appointed a committee of 26 people drawn from the Russian hierarchy, clergy, and lecturers at theological academies, led by Metropolitan Kirill (now Patriarch Kirill).

The Social Conception, published in 2000, was criticised by different political groups, including the Presidential Administration, for its monarchist slant. While acknowledging various forms of governance, it portrayed the state as a product of declining religiosity: in ancient Israel, divine law required no earthly ruler, but when people questioned God's authority, coercive power structures arose. It is emphasised that God disapproved of this development but accepted it, nevertheless. The Moscow Patriarchate makes an exception only for monarchy, which it accepts as God-given. Commenting on this part of the Social Conception, the researcher of the ROC Katja Richters rightly notes, "since Putin promised to consolidate Russia's democracy rather than to reinstate the monarchy, this passage implied that the Church fundamentally disagreed with his stated aims" (Richters, 2013).

In the Social Conception, there is also a chapter on international relations, with a prominent statement against globalisation. The Church recognised the advantages of this process — such as human communication, the dissemination of information, and effective production and entrepreneurial activity — but warned of its dangers, including the alteration of "traditional ways of organising society and exercising power" and the threat of "spiritual and cultural expansion, fraught with total unification".

As shown in this overview, already in the early stages of post-Soviet Russia, the official ROC promoted the idea of Russia as a conservative state, grounded in Orthodoxy, the Russian nation, and its traditions. For the Moscow Patriarchate, the global West — and Europe in particular — represented opposing concepts such as liberalism, globalisation, and multiculturalism. Sharing this vision with the Kremlin and participating in the work of various state organisations, the ROC has influenced Russia's foreign policy. This impact includes not only value orientations but also policymaking, diplomacy, and involvement in political

processes in other countries through the Russian diaspora and local Orthodox Churches. From today's perspective, it appears that the ROC began testing imperial conservative ideas as early as the 1990s that would later be adopted by the Kremlin and become part of the official political narrative in Putin's Russia in the 2020s.

Orthodoxy and the Anti-Western Turn in Russian Foreign Policy

The close rapprochement between the Church and the state in Russia began with Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000, accelerating after the enthronement of Patriarch Kirill in 2009. The Kremlin's dissatisfaction with the monarchist overtones in the ROC's Social Concept did not hinder this process; moreover, as authoritarian tendencies in Russia deepened, the idea of indefinite one-man rule ceased to seem inappropriate. From the very beginning of his presidency, Vladimir Putin consistently demonstrated his alignment with the Church. Symbolically, immediately following his first inauguration on 7 May 2000, Putin visited the Annunciation Cathedral, where Patriarch Alexy II conducted a ceremonial prayer and offered his blessing to the new president (Kremlin, 2000). By contrast, at Boris Yeltsin's 1996 inauguration, the Patriarch participated only in the secular ceremony.

While in the early 2000s Vladimir Putin pursued a balancing act — domestically by co-opting liberals and internationally by maintaining strong ties with the West based on shared interests — the ROC's conservative narratives continued to grow stronger. At that time, both Patriarch Alexy II and Metropolitan Kirill intensified their criticism of the liberal concept of human rights and actively promoted the idea of Russia as an original civilisation. They argued that secular liberal humanism elevated the earthly interests of sinners above religious and moral values, whereas the world order must be multipolar at the level of cultural and civilisational values (Kilp and Pankhurst, 2023). Simultaneously, the ROC became increasingly involved in state affairs. It signed cooperation agreements with various ministries and agencies, including the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Health. The Church initiated the introduction of a new school subject, Fundamentals of Religious Culture, restored the institution of military chaplaincy, and promoted legislation establishing criminal liability for offending the feelings of believers and for LGBTQ+ propaganda among minors.

In addition to its conservative initiatives in domestic policy, the Russian Orthodox Church began close cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). They created a joint

working group to coordinate efforts in foreign policy and humanitarian cooperation, to protect the rights of Christians overseas, and to support compatriots abroad, especially in former Soviet states. Their interactions expanded within the Russkiy Mir Foundation, created in 2007 by a decree of Vladimir Putin to promote the Russian language and culture, but in fact serving as a tool of soft power. It is also worth noting that in 2007 the Moscow Patriarchate was reunited with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), which had been established abroad in the early 1920s and had never accepted the Soviet-era dissolution of the Russian Empire. This reconciliation further oriented the ROC toward more monarchist and imperial views, while expanding its geographical reach through ROCOR communities in the United States and across many European countries.

The Kremlin began turning to the conservative ideas promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church in the late 2000s, in parallel with its increasingly anti-Western orientation in foreign policy. This shift followed the accession of the Baltic states to the European Union and NATO, as well as a wave of “colour revolutions” in several countries, including Georgia and Ukraine. As these states politically distanced themselves from Moscow, their religious institutions similarly sought independence from the ROC, which had long served as a bridge between Russia and the former Soviet republics. In Estonia, for example, the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople began operating alongside the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate as early as the 1990s. During the same period, an independent ecclesiastical structure also emerged in Ukraine — the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate. Both the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate attempted to resist these developments, but with only limited success.

These processes of separation intensified alongside the broader wave of democratisation and revolutionary movements across the former USSR. For Moscow, this trend came as a profound shock, as it had never ceased to regard the post-Soviet republics as part of its own sphere of influence — the so-called “near abroad”. Vladimir Putin articulated his dissatisfaction with these changes at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, where he openly criticised the unipolar world order and U.S. hegemony.

In opposition to the Western political model, the Kremlin adopted and developed the ROC’s concept of the so-called "Russian World", which is “politically and geographically bigger than the Russian Federation” (Suslov, 2018). Officially, this term is defined as encompassing “the

Russian people and other peoples belonging to the cultural and civilisational community", while Russia is described as a "unique country-civilisation and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power" (The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2023). The ROC adds that the foundation of this civilisation consists of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and, additionally, Moldova — countries united by the Orthodox faith, Russian language, and culture (Patriarch Kirill, 2009).

Since the late 1990s, the meaning of the term "Russian world" has undergone a significant transformation — much like Russian policy itself. Initially, it referred to a community of people living abroad and speaking Russian; the idea was to preserve their ties with Russia and Russian culture, including through the involvement of the ROC. However, by the 2010s, the term "Russian world" had come to denote a geopolitical imperial project centred in Moscow — a pole positioned as an alternative to the West. Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun, Professor of Ecclesiology, International Relations, and Ecumenism at University College Stockholm, points out that the ROC added to the concept "metaphysical, eschatological, and messianic spin": "It was rendered as a unique treasury of the so-called traditional values and an anti-liberal and anti-globalist stronghold. At this stage of its evolution, the doctrine of the Russian world became even more exclusivist, particularist, and less tolerant to diversity. At the same time, it became widely popular among the ordinary Russians. The mainstream Russian media began propagating it across all strata of the Russian society. The Kremlin accepted it as its mainstream ideology and started speaking about the Russian world using the vocabulary elaborated upon by the church" (Hovorun, 2022).

Within this paradigm, the West is positioned as Russia's principal Other — a core element shaping the entire language of the state. Historian and political scientist Marlene Laruelle aptly observes that this approach "has evolved from learning from the West during the Yeltsin era, to competing with the West during the early Putin period, diverging from the West during the late Putin period, and now quite literally fighting against the West" (Laruelle, 2024, p.13).

Initially, this ideological construct was not cohesive, consisting of multiple (and sometimes contradictory) repertoires and intellectual genealogies. However, over time it became more consistent and monolithic, with the same ideas appearing in political discourse, official documents, and state symbols (Snegovaya and McGlynn, 2024). The ideas of the "Russian World", traditional values, and confrontation with the West have gradually expanded and become institutionalised. In 2020, amendments were introduced into the Constitution

reflecting ideas of the state's greatness, its millennia-long history, the need to protect "historical truth", and the importance of faith in God as passed down by the ancestors (Article 67.1). Moreover, the Constitution defines the family as a union between a man and a woman (Article 72), thereby affirming traditional values (Constitution of the Russian Federation, 1993). These ideological principles are also present in the 2021 National Security Strategy, the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, and Presidential Decree No. 809 on state policy for the preservation and strengthening of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values.

It is important to note that there are differences in the Kremlin's approach towards various members of the "collective West". It considers the United States "the main inspirer, organiser, and executor of the aggressive anti-Russian policy of the collective West", while Europe is seen merely as a follower of American dominance, with limited sovereignty. According to the Foreign Policy Concept, Moscow views most European states as pursuing an aggressive policy towards Russia — creating threats to its security and sovereignty, seeking unilateral economic advantages, undermining domestic political stability, and eroding traditional Russian spiritual and moral values. Russia calls on Europe to reject its anti-Russian course and to develop a new model of coexistence based on geographical proximity and shared cultural, humanitarian, and economic ties (The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2023). According to the interpretation of the Russian Orthodox Church, Europe — once the centre of spirituality — has strayed from Christian morality, fallen into sin, and is urged to repent.

There are three main, overlapping ways in which the ROC participates in international affairs: legitimisation of the Kremlin's anti-Western policy; assertion of Russia's special rights in the post-Soviet space through the argument of protecting Orthodoxy and Russian-speaking populations; and mobilisation of ideological allies — conservative and right-wing forces across the United States and Europe.

The Legitimisation of the Kremlin's Policy

The ROC provides moral and ideological justification for Russia's foreign policy, supporting political decisions with spiritual and religious interpretations both domestically and abroad. For instance, numerous anti-Western statements have been made by the Church's clergy in the context of the war in Ukraine. Soon after the full-scale invasion, Patriarch Kirill offered his

interpretation of the conflict, saying that it had “not a physical, but a metaphysical significance” (Patriarch Kirill, 2022a). He described it as a “civilisational conflict”, part of the “cosmic struggle of good against evil”, upon which the salvation of humanity depends (Patriarch Kirill, 2022b). Kirill argued that Western countries promote sin through their “so-called marches of dignity”, referring to gay pride parades. According to him, if Ukrainians accept “gender transitioning” and “Western moral relativism”, they will “lose their identity and cease to be a holy land”, and Russia’s “mission” is to prevent this outcome.

In recent years, the ROC’s rhetoric has become increasingly hostile towards the West. In 2024, Patriarch Kirill claimed that an “anti-Christian neo-Nazi ideology is being revived and imposed” in Europe, and that this situation prompts Russia “to seek ways of de-Nazification, and also to promote the strengthening of the Russian World” (RIA Novosti, 2024). He considers Russians to be Europeans, but of a different kind — those who reject “the devilish false values that are being imposed today on Western people and that they are absorbing as a new norm of human relations” (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 2024). The ROC frames Russia’s aggression and expansion as an act of defence — even a moral mission to save another, “true” Europe from spiritual decay and sin.

The fusion of religious, geopolitical, and militaristic narratives became particularly pronounced from 2022 onward. However, the process of intertwining the Church, Kremlin, and Army in Russia began much earlier. This issue is examined in detail by Professor Dmitry Adamsky in his book “Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy”. He argues that Russian ideology and geopolitics rest on two main pillars — Orthodoxy and nuclear weapons (Adamsky, 2019). A kind of physical embodiment of this fusion is the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces near Moscow, built in a militaristic style and using melted-down trophy weapons from the Second World War.

The Assertion of Russia’s Rights in the former Soviet States

The Russian Orthodox Church remains one of the few Moscow-centred institutions that continues to operate across the post-Soviet area. It considers sixteen countries as its canonical territories, most of which are former Soviet republics, including those in Europe — Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. In these countries, the ROC plays not only a religious but also a political role, promoting the Russian agenda and worldview.

The process of separating local churches from the Moscow Patriarchate began in the 1990s and accelerated with the war in Ukraine, leading some of these countries to establish their own Orthodox churches — parallel jurisdictions independent of the ROC. However, as researcher of the ROC Ksenia Luchenko notes, both post-Soviet patriarchs, Alexy and Kirill, "ignored the new political reality as far as possible. For them, the entire 'canonical territory' of the ROC remained a unified Orthodox space and area of canonical responsibility, and any attempts to change that were extremely unwelcome" (Luchenko, 2023).

Currently, the most complex situation concerns the Church in Ukraine, developing alongside the ongoing war.There are two Orthodox bodies in the country: the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). In 2019, the former gained independence (autocephaly) from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, while the latter remained under the Moscow Patriarchate. After the 2022 invasion, the UOC also declared independence from the ROC but has failed to formalise the process under canon law. In 2024, the Ukrainian parliament passed a law prohibiting the activities of religious organisations whose centre is in Russia; this was followed by a government investigation into the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, with its centuries-old ties to Moscow. The authorities have initiated criminal proceedings against numerous UOC clerics, accusing them of collaborating with Russia.

Following these developments, the Kremlin and the ROC strengthened their argument about protecting Orthodox believers in Ukraine as justification for the war. For example, at an Easter reception at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in May 2025, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that "Russia will not abandon the Orthodox people of Ukraine" and will ensure that "canonical Orthodoxy regains its central place in the spiritual life of the people of the Ukrainian lands." At the same time, Patriarch Kirill spoke about the persecution of Moscow Patriarchate churches in Moldova and the Baltic states and requested the protection of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, claiming that this persecution "was initiated by anti-Russian forces in Western countries" (Patriarchia.ru, 2025).

Discourses about the defence of Orthodoxy and traditional values are used by the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church to exert influence over domestic affairs in post-Soviet countries, as well as in a number of Eastern European states.

The Mobilisation of Ideological Allies

The Russian Orthodox Church acts as a conduit for the Kremlin's policy not only in the former Soviet republics but also across Europe, engaging with local churches as well as various conservative political actors and organisations. To mobilise its ideological allies, the ROC promotes the notion of defending Christianity and "traditional values" from the existential threat allegedly posed by neo-colonial Western "diktats" and cultural norms.

Firstly, the Moscow Patriarchate instrumentalises its ties with other Orthodox Churches in countries such as Moldova, Serbia, Georgia, and Bulgaria to advance pro-Russian agendas. One recent example is the 2024–2025 parliamentary election campaign in Moldova (Reuters, 2025). Journalists discovered that Russia had recruited Orthodox priests of the Moldovan Church of the Moscow Patriarchate to create Telegram channels, agitate their congregations against the country's integration into the European Union, and promote so-called traditional values.

The European authorities are aware of this problem — in 2025, the EU Parliament condemned the use of the Orthodox religion for geopolitical purposes. In a special resolution on Russian disinformation, it denounced the use of the Moscow Patriarchate as an instrument of influence and control over Orthodox populations in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Serbia, Bulgaria, and other countries (European Parliament, 2025).

Secondly, the ROC engages with a range of non-ecclesiastical actors — conservative organisations and right-wing politicians and parties. These include right-wing parties such as Lega Nord in Italy and Rassemblement National in France, as well as conservative organisations like the World Congress of Families (WCF), the latter of which has maintained links with Russia since its formation in the mid-1990s (Stoeckl, 2020).

The ideological common ground between the ROC and numerous Western conservative movements lies in a shared critique of secularism, multiculturalism, same-sex marriage, abortion, and sex education in schools. Russia has sought to gain international status as a global conservative leader, and its mobilisation of ideological allies has been supported by the ROC and a variety of organisations linked to the state. For instance, the Russkiy Mir Foundation and the St Basil the Great Foundation (founded by ultra-conservative businessman Konstantin Malofeev) have sponsored conferences, exhibitions, and educational

programmes throughout Europe, presenting them as initiatives of cultural or spiritual dialogue. In reality, these platforms often served as vehicles for disseminating narratives favourable to Russia's geopolitical interests (Moss, 2017). This ideological convergence carries significant implications for Russia's foreign policy — by fostering sympathetic voices within European societies, the Kremlin and the ROC seek to weaken Western unity and reinforce Russia's self-appointed image as the guardian of Christian civilisation.

It is difficult to assess the overall effectiveness of these activities of the ROC — all the more so because, since the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the Moscow Patriarchate's opportunities in Europe have significantly diminished. Nevertheless, all the examples mentioned above demonstrate the notable involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia's foreign policy, both as an ideologue and as a promoter of the "Russian World" concept abroad.

Conclusion

The Russian Orthodox Church has served both as a co-architect of and a tool for Russia's foreign policy. Informed by nationalist and imperial narratives, the ROC developed the concept of the "Russian World" and helped elevate it to a central pillar of state ideology, presenting itself as the authentic guardian of Christian values.

The notion that the ROC is merely an instrument of Kremlin policy is not entirely accurate. The Moscow Patriarchate has taken nationalist and imperial positions since the early 1990s. Even then, the Church began promoting the idea of the "Russian World" and its traditional values as an antithesis to the West. The Church quickly gained popularity and public trust in a society that, following the collapse of the USSR and communist ideology, found itself in a kind of ideological vacuum. The turn of people towards the ROC was not driven by a surge of religiosity, but rather by a search for national identity. Historically linked to the state and serving as a guardian of Russian culture and traditions, the Church played a role in restoring this identity.

By the early 2000s, the ROC had become a notable political actor, and cooperation with it became advantageous for the authorities themselves. The Moscow Patriarchate began working with various state institutions and promoting conservative initiatives such as the

teaching of religion in schools, the criminalisation of offending believers' feelings, and restrictions on LGBT rights. From the mid-2000s onwards, active cooperation began between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the ROC increasingly engaged as an instrument of Russia's soft power abroad.

The ROC influences foreign affairs in several ways: it legitimises the Kremlin's anti-Western policy, justifies Russia's claims to post-Soviet territories, and helps advance anti-liberal ideas in Europe and the United States through collaboration with various religious organisations and right-wing movements. The defence of Orthodoxy and spirituality has become one of the arguments in Russia's war against Ukraine. The ROC portrays this conflict as a clash of civilisations with a metaphysical meaning. These statements are not merely messianic rhetoric but have become institutionalised elements of Russian legislation. Ideas of Russia as a distinct civilisation, of traditional values, and of confrontation with the West are embedded in official documents — in particular, in the Foreign Policy Concept.

Studying the close relationship between Church and state is essential for understanding contemporary Russian politics and assessing its possible future trajectories. It is evident that Moscow's confrontation with liberal part of Europe will continue. At the same time, the growth of conservative and right-wing sentiment in the Western world opens new opportunities for Russia to promote its policies and forge new alliances. The ROC, with its infrastructure of Orthodox parishes in various countries and its ties to conservative organisations, may become an even more sought-after instrument in the Kremlin's foreign policy.

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