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Acknowledgments

The research journey for the *Kremlin Playbook* began nearly seven years ago with a grant from the Smith Richardson Foundation to determine whether Russian economic presence could affect, or outright alter, the transatlantic orientation of a select group of European countries. There was quantifiable impact, but, more importantly, we revealed Russia’s methodology related to this particular form of malign influence. *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe* has become a research and analytical reference point for many policy practitioners and scholars. Although the research was never designed as a series, more consequential research questions organically sprang from the initial report. As we continued to explore this space, we constructed a larger store of knowledge of how Russia’s malign tactics evolve in as many European countries as possible; formulated transatlantic policy countermeasures; and described specific enabling forces related to this malign influence (*Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers*). We began to receive requests from European and U.S. experts to study these malign activities while a few European government officials grew concerned about the public exploration of those ties. This third study was also made possible by support from the Smith Richardson Foundation.

*Kremlin Playbook 3: Keeping the Faith* departs from the first two reports in that the research does not concentrate on the patterns of Russian malign economic influence—though there is an economic dimension. In the first *Kremlin Playbook*, Russian oligarchs Konstantin Malofeev and Vladimir Yakunin appeared economically and politically active in several case study countries. But it was their role as so-called Orthodox oligarchs, their funding of religious charitable and cultural organizations, and their ideational role in supporting Russia as the defender of the faithful that galvanized our interest in understanding Russia’s instrumentalization of faith and traditions. Whether we saved the most interesting research for the last *Kremlin Playbook* is for the reader to decide, but this certainly was the most challenging research. Beware: this is not easy material to consume, and its implications are, at times, overwhelming. But this is exactly why this form of malign influence is so powerful and why so many are attracted to it.

This was a gratitude-filled research journey with many wonderful people to thank who made the entire *Kremlin Playbook* series possible. The reports were controversial research (particularly this one), attracting admirers and adversaries alike, requiring enhanced cyber defenses and legal reviews. CSIS president and CEO Dr. John Hamre never flinched and championed the role that CSIS played in helping the Washington policy community understand the issue and the stakes. I am so grateful for Dr. Hamre’s leadership and generosity of spirit throughout my tenure at CSIS.

The first two *Kremlin Playbooks* were a successful, four-year collaborative research joint venture with the Bulgaria-based think tank the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) under the leadership of Chairman Ognian Shentov, joined by Program Director and Chief Economist Ruslan Stefanov and Martin Vladimirov, director of the CSD Energy and Climate Program. Our CSD colleagues collected and analyzed reams of national economic data to quantify Russia’s economic footprint and produced the quantitative framework for the initial *Kremlin Playbook*. Their conviviality and partnership ensured a strong transatlantic product, and CSD has continued to conduct important research in this space.
New research horizons require openness, unmatched curiosity, and great courage to examine new areas of inquiry. James Mina, the lead CSIS research associate on the first report, and Donatienne Ruy, the lead associate fellow on the second and third playbooks, exemplified all of these qualities as they boldly researched where CSIS had never “gone” before. Through their exhaustive efforts, we uncovered information that surprised us, reinforced our hypotheses, or downright shook us. At times both frustrated and invigorated, we shared long philosophical conversations in my office about what it all meant—memories I will cherish the most. Simply put, I could not imagine taking this journey without my very special wingman and wingwoman for, without them, this body of work would not have been possible.

Because The Kremlin Playbook 3 traveled down a different analytical road, we required new research maps and compasses as well as new partners. One of the animating analytical forces behind the third report was Dima Adamsky’s definitive work, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*. Although the pandemic prevented the study team from meeting in person and created challenges and illness in its own right, our extraordinary country experts—Dr. Marlene Laruelle, Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou, Dr. Majda Ruge, and Tengiz Pkhaladze—became a cohesive unit from which we learned and within which we challenged one another intellectually. It never seemed like work when we convened—it simply became a privilege to receive this group’s collected insights and wisdom. We are also grateful for the insights of Dr. Jeffrey Mankoff.

While the research is the core of the project, it relies on a highly skilled team at CSIS to design compelling graphics, copyedit the text, and in general bring our written word to life. Many thanks to the incredible talents of Sarah Grace, who created and designed the abridged online report; William Taylor, who designed the beautiful graphics that make our work visibly accessible; Jeeah Lee and Katherine Stark, who coordinated an inordinate number of drafts and reviews for the many parts of the report; and Phillip Meylan, who edited those drafts at lightning speed and, as always, with very keen eyes. I also wish to thank my immediate CSIS family in the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program who “kept faith” with me while I juggled multiple initiatives. Donatienne Ruy is particularly grateful to Dejana Saric, our research assistant, for her help on the Bosnia case study and her infinite patience and support throughout the project. Our very special thanks to Aaron Myers for keeping us—and the entire organization—cyber-safe whenever we released our reports.

Before its release in October 2016, I believed the *Kremlin Playbook* would be the most important research I would conduct that year, but I was wrong: it became the most impactful research series of my 12-year tenure at CSIS and a highlight of my professional career. I am so grateful to the countless people who mentored and guided me along the way, culminating in this final project. Enjoy the report and thank you for embarking on this journey with me.

Heather A. Conley
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Preface

“I remember a span of more than half a century when, for all our differences, Americans maintained a bipartisan commitment to the freedom and security of our allies. And together with our allies we kept faith with those on the other side of the walls that divided the oppressed from the free. We were confident they wanted the same things we did—freedom, equal justice, the rule of law, a fair chance to prosper by their own industry and talents. We kept the faith, and we prevailed.”

— John McCain’s farewell letter to the Munich Security Conference¹

“In Russia, our trend is back to Orthodoxy, tradition and Christianity. . . . Europe is dying. The West, in [U.S. president Ronald] Reagan[’s] time . . . helped for this communism smoke to get out from Russia. Now it’s our turn. We have to pray [for] the liberal smoke to get out from Europe and America.”

— Konstantin Malofeev²

“Let me state very strongly for all Americans that to be a part of Putin’s fan club doesn’t make you a conservative. . . . Real conservatives consider Christianity to be something very much (the) opposite [of Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban’s policies].”

— Peter Marki-Zay, Hungarian opposition leader³

“Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: ‘Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.’”


“The struggle of our age is the struggle for the minds, hearts and souls of men. Men are being torn between two opposite ideologies and nations find themselves being wooed in the two camps by all sorts of charming propaganda and deals. The stakes for both have never been higher.”

— Herbert L. Bomberger⁴
Introduction

From a U.S. perspective, the separation of religion from the state is sacrosanct. The drafters of the Constitutional Convention believed that the state should have “no power to influence its citizens toward or away from a religion.” The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights enshrines this protection from state interference with the additional requirement that the individual’s right to freely worship must be protected. In other words, it is in the United States’ historical and cultural DNA that the state cannot influence its citizens regarding their religious or non-religious views and values.

But what if another country, for its own malign purposes, actively sought to influence religious or traditional views? How can the United States and its European allies—in spite of their different historical and cultural traditions regarding religion and identity—protect the religious beliefs, traditions, and values of their citizens from malign influence, particularly when they are obligated to protect the very beliefs that malign actors seek to manipulate? This study aims to protect these beliefs by exposing how Russian malign influence works in this particularly challenging and very personal dimension—a new strategic seam—to ensure citizens do not unwittingly become part of an influence operation.

The instrumentalization of values, traditions, and religious beliefs is a relatively recent and particularly pernicious front of the Kremlin’s influence efforts in Europe and elsewhere. Transatlantic societies are grappling with the speed of societal change stemming from economic shifts, globalization, migration pressures, demographic and generational shifts, pandemic restrictions, and broader shifts in mores, identity, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Societal anxiety and fear related to these rapid shifts—and the subsequent politics and political figures that seek to capitalize on them—have fueled societal divisions around the so-called cultural wars in Western societies.
By now, it is well understood that Russian active measures exploit and amplify existing Western societal divisions, particularly racial and ethnic tensions. But the Kremlin’s use of the Orthodox faith and traditional values is a particularly challenging terrain to navigate with balance and objectivity. The Kremlin embraces and deploys a nationalistic, top-down strategy that transcends typical Russian malign influence operations—some ideologues in its orbit even defend a messianic vision for these actions. Their most extreme theological narrative stems from 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, verses 6–7 in the New Testament of the Bible and speaks to the role of the “katechon” or “the restrainer” who holds back chaos and the Antichrist during the end times. In this modern retelling, Russia’s leader, President Vladimir Putin, is the katechon, and the decadence of the West (as exhibited in the United States and an anti-Russia Europe) is the embodiment of the Antichrist. Subscribers to this theory, particularly in the Russian Orthodox clergy, believe the Antichrist has visited in various forms throughout history (for example, Hitler in World War II). Now, an expansive West embodied by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union, with its secularism and decadence, must again be defeated by the katechon. While the Kremlin itself may not defend such an apocalyptic vision, it can play on these themes when convenient.

There are many within and outside Russia who are inspired by the narrative that only Moscow can truly defend the faithful and protect traditional values against an endless assault of secularism. This narrative reaffirms that Moscow represents the Third Rome—the true successor of the Roman Empire after the fall of Rome and Constantinople was brought about by the heretical beliefs of both, according to this particular Russian narrative. To support this mission and vision, individuals within Russia financially support and propel the effort, often called the “Orthodox oligarchs.” There are also those who seek to apply the vision’s principles—the ideational entrepreneurs—more broadly to Russia’s foreign and security policy. This narrative helps justify, for example, the use of nuclear weapons or the development of a more cohesive national identity as Russian standards of living steadily decline.

There is a supply and demand dimension to this narrative. The Kremlin’s top-down design selectively pulls from Russian history, which it skillfully deploys to reinforce its unique civilizational role as protector of the Orthodox world. But there is also the emergence of a bottom-up demand for Russia to defend traditionalism in some Western societies.

A study of religious beliefs and values as potential avenues of influence is inherently challenging. It easily risks painting people’s legitimately held beliefs as open doors to nefarious intent and actors. Yet the point of this study is not to malign these legitimate beliefs; on the contrary, it aims to separate them from their twisted use and highlight where they create unwitting demand for outside intervention by or connection with like-minded believers—the bottom-up demand.

There are, of course, important nuances of intent, impact, and actions. It is often difficult to assign intent to a given actor, and more difficult yet to measure impact. At times, this analysis will be less about the originating intent and more about the demand signals on the ground. These are limitations this study takes seriously and tries to address at every turn with careful analysis and sourcing.

This report’s case studies demonstrate how Russia’s use of strategic conservatism has had an impact. In France, appeals and receptivity to a traditional values discourse have fostered connections between Russian and French political and intellectual circles. In Georgia, the Russian Orthodox Church has assisted the Kremlin in the Russification of the occupied territories, while some actors in the political sphere have fostered ties with Russian officials, supporting the narrative of the
“decadent West.” In Bosnia, some pro-Russian actors have prevented further moves toward Euro-Atlantic integration and supported Russian foreign policy preferences, claiming Russia as a protector of Serbs and Orthodox believers. And in Greece, the outreach has focused on the religious field through Mount Athos, the Church of Greece, and the role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Russia has pushed anti-Western narratives there through the religious ecosystem to incentivize positive relations between Greece and Russia.

Yet there have been limitations to this impact, which any objective analysis must recognize. Some approaches have been counterproductive; for example, the Moscow Patriarchate’s efforts to unite global Orthodoxy under its leadership have occurred alongside actions that divide the Orthodox world. The emphasis on religion and traditional values has also created vulnerabilities for the Kremlin by making it more difficult for the regime to simultaneously support Orthodox supremacy within Russia for political gain while maintaining the constitutional requirement of a multiethnic, multiconfessional Russian state. Finally, the efforts of some actors of strategic conservatism have missed the mark: the Russian Orthodox Church considers itself the leader of an ongoing moral crusade but is not always viewed as the main norms entrepreneur within Russia.

These impacts, tactics, and limitations will undoubtedly require further examination from the strategic community and from transatlantic policymakers. This report aims to offer an initial framework to grasp these complex dynamics.
Framing the Issues

To frame a complicated issue such as the instrumentalization of religious beliefs, it is vital to clarify the terms this research uses to identify what is legitimate belief and what is strategic use of such belief. Furthermore, in soft-power dynamics, perception is key, and influence is in the eye of the beholder. It is therefore important to differentiate how these concepts are viewed domestically in Russia from how analysts in the West view them.

Terms and Taxonomy

To understand both the top-down design and the bottom-up demand around Russia’s instrumentalization of traditional values and beliefs, the use of accurate terms to describe its core concepts is vital. It is also necessary to separate the legitimate protection of traditions and beliefs from the Kremlin’s deployment of strategic conservatism.

There are two core facets to this concept. Conservatism is a “disposition in politics to preserve what is established”; a “political philosophy based on tradition and social stability, stressing established institutions, and preferring gradual development to abrupt change”; and a “tendency to prefer an existing or traditional situation to change” (e.g., religious conservatism, cultural conservatism).\textsuperscript{10} It is a genuine expression of political and cultural preferences and contains political, cultural, religious, and identity elements.

Strategic conservatism, on the other hand, reflects the idea that these political and cultural preferences can be used by the Kremlin as channels to achieve a range of domestic and foreign policy objectives. (These tools include, but are not limited to, the Russian Orthodox Church, or ROC.) Strategic conservatism overinflates the value of customs and tradition by prioritizing unquestioned
respect for hierarchy (of a regime or religious supremacy) and collective interests over the rights and interests of the individual. Most importantly for the Kremlin, strategic conservatism is defined in opposition to Western ideals of pluralism and liberalism, and in defense of Russian actions and the Putin regime.

Russia’s use of strategic conservatism is both domestically rooted within Russia and exported and customized internationally. Strategic conservatism confers upon Russia a collective and unique political identity that is “instrumentally used by the regime for unifying the society.”11 Accompanied by cultural and religious aspects, conservatism is further instrumentalized to both define and protect Russia’s civilizational specificity, which the Putin regime wields in opposition to non-conservative, liberal, democratic, and radical (as opposed to traditional) polities in the West.12 By offering a “marketable philosophy” that offers “an alternative set of ideas capable of competing internationally with those of the United States,” Russia achieves ideational parity with the West.13

A related concept is traditionalism, defined as “adherence to the doctrines or practices of a tradition” and “the beliefs of those opposed to modernism, liberalism, or radicalism.”14 It is the “upholding or maintenance of tradition, especially so as to resist change [emphasis added].”15 Traditionalism is hierarchical, and typically patriarchal, in that “all moral and religious truth comes from divine revelation passed on by tradition” because “human reason [is] incapable of attaining it.”16 In combination with ideas of strategic conservatism and illiberalism, traditionalism provides a protective framework to shelter from the rapid societal change produced by globalization and pluralism.

At times, traditionalism spurs grievances against immigration, which supposedly negatively changes a country’s culture, demographics, and moral traditions, as well as LGBTQ+ demands for equality. Both must be resisted, as they are viewed as threats to the established (and increasingly authoritarian) order.

Though it has rejected some aspects of globalization, traditionalism as an ideology has sought to benefit from global networks to form a traditionalist “Internationale” across countries, seeking to unite a variety of traditional and reactionary groups and, in some cases, monarchist ideals. Russian monarchist ideals in particular appeal to a time preceding the societal upheavals of the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Russia, when traditional social mores, the ROC, and hierarchy were challenged and ultimately overthrown, thus requiring protection from the threats of modernity and ideas birthed in the West. This loose international grouping, primarily but not exclusively on the far right of the political spectrum, operates in reaction to the perceived rate of rapid change in European societies, which dilutes the traditional patriarchal order and threatens the family structure, according to these actors.

A final and central concept is Global Christian Eastern Orthodoxy. The ROC, a key actor in Russia and this report’s case study countries, wields substantial power over both the political and cultural spheres. The global Orthodox church is divided into 14 independent (or autocephalous) and mutually recognized churches, all united under the principle of primus inter pares (“first among equals”).17 The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, is viewed as Eastern Orthodoxy’s spiritual leader and holds “spiritual and official precedence” as well as “honorary and historical supremacy over the world’s other Orthodox patriarchs.”18
Although these churches have their own unique relationships with political and economic power centers, the ROC has sought to unite the Orthodox world under its authority. Its efforts were substantially set back following the decision by the Ecumenical Patriarchate to grant autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in January 2019 (partly from the Moscow Patriarchate) at the request of the Ukrainian government and some Orthodox parishes in Ukraine. The Kremlin and ROC have intensified their campaign against Bartholomew I and his authority since the 2019 decision. Some other patriarchates have also challenged the current structure along with the Ecumenical Patriarch’s embrace of ecumenism, particularly with the Catholic Church. The resulting power tussle has both negatively impacted the Kremlin’s influence efforts abroad and enlisted them.
Key Terms in Orthodoxy

**Patriarch**: The head of one of the autocephalous Eastern Orthodox churches. Also: “(Gr. ‘in charge of the family’). The highest prelate in the Orthodox Church.”

**Patriarchate**: “The office, jurisdiction, or time in office of a patriarch.” Also “an ecclesiastical jurisdiction governed by a patriarch.”

**Autocephalous**: “(Gr. ‘appointing its own leader’). The status of an Orthodox church which is self-governed and also has the authority to elect or appoint its own leader or head (cephale).”

**Ecclesiastical**: “Whatever deals with or pertains to the Church and its life.”

Russian Views of Traditionalism

The shock and subsequent chaos emanating from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the regime’s brief flirtation with democracy led to a deep-seated economic and personal insecurity among Russian citizens. In turn, this created a yearning for structure and purpose built specifically upon Russian traditions instead of Western ones. The political creation and arrival of Vladimir Putin on Russia’s national political stage became a physical embodiment of this desire for stability.

Over time, the Kremlin crafted a post-Soviet national narrative that selectively drew inspiration from a variety of celebratory and contradictory elements of Russian and Soviet history. This narrative sought to rebuild and protect Russia’s traditions and, most importantly, its future. Elements from the czarist era and the traditions of the ROC were combined with the revival of Stalinism, particularly around the accomplishments and heroic sacrifices of the Great Patriotic War. These old traditions were cast anew and inscribed within a “moral framework” that would dictate domestic order according to certain traditions, some derived from religious teachings (e.g., respect for authority, hierarchy, and putting the collective above the individual).

In this framework, there is an “inherent value to diversity among nations” (“God-given,” according to Putin), and these national distinctions require the establishment of a “multipolar world order based on pluriculturalism”—the idea that diversity among nations is more valuable than diversity within nations, in order to protect national cultural distinctions. In the post–Cold War environment, Moscow has sought multipolarity because it stands in opposition to what appeared for a while as a unipolar international system led by the United States. Religion and its associated traditions reinforce this global outlook.

Russia’s use of morality and the promotion of its civilizational values in many ways mirror the concept of U.S. exceptionalism and its own faith-based origins as a “shining city upon a hill” that is committed to “peace or to the hope that someday all of the people of the world will enjoy lives of decency, lives with a degree of freedom, with a measure of dignity.” But it differs in an important way, as, unlike Russia, the United States has “no dreams of empire . . . [and] seek[s] no manifest destiny.”

Russian traditionalism melds conservative principles together with religious and cultural norms that define and protect Russia’s unique civilizational brand, which it places in opposition to non-conservative, liberal traditions in the West that threaten Russia’s preferred order. Assisting in this effort, some ethnonationalistic figures seek to portray Russia not just as the opposition to the West
but also as a savior of the West from itself, just as the West “saved” Russia from communism—an attempt at mirroring the United States. As Russian “Orthodox oligarch” Konstantin Malofeev noted, “Just as Christians in the West in Ronald Reagan’s time helped us against the evil of communism, we now have to return our debt to Christians who are suffering under totalitarianism in the West. . . . This so-called liberalism, tolerance, and freedom, these are just words, but behind them you can see the totalitarianism.”

Russian traditionalism melds conservative principles together with religious and cultural norms that define and protect Russia’s unique civilizational brand, which it places in opposition to non-conservative, liberal traditions in the West that threaten Russia’s preferred order.

Finally, the defense of traditional values allows the Kremlin to frame Putin’s regime in longer time horizons, placing today’s Russia within the historical arc of the “spiritual and moral foundation of civilization” that has existed for thousands of years. This helps explain why the ROC is such a prominent tool in the defense of “tradition” and the moral order in Russia. As a centuries-old institution, it subscribes to this longer time horizon and benefits from deference to tradition.

Moscow’s use of traditional values is a way for the Russian regime to maintain control internally and prevent the international community from imposing universal liberal values (or promoting them from within), which would threaten the regime’s diminishing legitimacy and challenge the domestic order. Russia argues diversity should be preserved between nations, as it appeals for respect for nations’ historical and cultural uniqueness. This stands in stark contrast to the transatlantic community, which seeks respect for individual rights and aspirations and increasingly focuses on diversity within nations.

In some countries where the West increasingly appears to offer a homogenizing ideology—particularly in places where national identity and faith were suppressed under communism—the Kremlin plays to societal discontent and appeals to faith and tradition as providers of stability, offering a conservative transition into the future. It presents the West’s desire for greater societal diversity as undemocratic and imposed from above, conveniently sidestepping the argument that “appeal to faith, family, and tradition—and above all stability—has ever been the last recourse of dictators. Rather than offering the little guy democratic freedoms, offer him a far lesser power in his subordination of women, family, and minorities.”

Research presented here necessarily reflects the Western point of view on Russia’s actions and moral framework as well as how it can instrumentalize traditional means to serve larger ends. Russian actors or their supporters across the West undoubtedly view this framework through a different lens. These differing views of how the Kremlin sees or uses traditionalism to its advantage must be acknowledged and properly framed to approach this study with analytical humility. The unwitting and witting receptivity to these moral appeals in Europe and the United States thus reinforces the need for a better understanding of how this instrumentalization occurs.
Russia’s Internal Dynamics

The Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church’s (ROC) external traditional and religious appeals have resonance domestically, which serves to strengthen their international application, particularly as it relates to conservatism in Russia, the relationship between the Kremlin and the ROC, the actors of strategic conservatism, and the increasing repression of other religious minorities in Russia.

Conservatism in Russia

For the segment of the Russian population that is concerned with managing change after having experienced the political and economic trauma of the 1990s, conservatism is a tool to help prevent sudden change or control the rate of this change. Conservatism, however, should not be confused as “a philosophy of the status quo. Rather, it is one that endorses change, but change of a certain, gradual sort that is in keeping, as much as possible, with national traditions.”

Russian conservatism is connected to nationalism, as it draws on nationalistic elements when change must be controlled to fit the national context. In this way, it is “an ideology that seeks to ensure that change is in accord with Russia's nature, its history, and its traditions.” Change cannot be allowed to disrupt lives and cultural identities and must occur gradually (rather than quickly or in leaps).

But Russian conservatism goes beyond a control mechanism to include a reverence for customs and tradition, frequently invoking a demand to respect hierarchy and a strong emphasis on collective interests. A majority of Russians believe respecting the country’s institutions and laws is a core element of belonging to the nation (53 percent) and that women have a responsibility toward
society to bear children (59 percent). Lack of respect for other people or the community or individualistic tendencies have been decried as negative aspects of contemporary Russian society.

Therefore, Russian conservatism, as a legitimate set of beliefs, provides a framework for Russian political identity that is then supplemented by cultural and religious traditionalism. Traditionalism, in turn, constitutes a core plank of Russia’s ability to position itself in opposition to liberal and supposedly destabilizing values. In this way, conservatism offers a “political platform” on which traditional cultural and religious appeals can be mounted to promote “strong ideological messages.”

This lends a geopolitical role to conservatism in which the Putin regime places itself in opposition to non-conservative, liberal, and radical (as opposed to traditional) policies and polities in the West.

While Russian conservatism opposes the supposed “homogenization” of Western-imposed global values, it must confront its own contradictions. As noted in Paul Robinson’s *Russian Conservatism*, “The characteristic most often used to justify Russia’s claim to difference is its Orthodox religion, which is said to be a bearer of universal truth,” but at the same time, “Russian conservatives . . . claim that Western claims regarding universal human values are false.” Therein lies the tension between Russian conservatism as a universal ideology and national particularism. This suggests that Russian conservatism’s primary goal is to incentivize a process of regionalization—which provides a buffer zone around Russia—and define a unifying ideology in opposition to the West rather than offering a positive external vision for these traditional values.

The connective tissue of Russian strategic conservatism between domestic needs and international goals can be found in the use of the “traditional family.” In this view, Western liberal values dilute or challenge the concept of the traditional family, making individuals more susceptible to Western manipulation and increasing the risk of Western-sponsored color revolutions in Russia’s near abroad.

Domestically, as the Kremlin seeks to reverse rapid demographic decline, it purports to protect the “family” by offering support to children in the form of maternity leave, childcare allowance, and access to public kindergartens.

Yet herein lies another contradiction: actions of the Russian state and ROC sometimes endanger the family. In 2016, the ROC strenuously opposed legislation that would prevent domestic and family violence. In 2017, the Russian parliament decriminalized battery and slated the offense for administrative fines. When the law on domestic violence was reintroduced in 2019, the ROC again fiercely opposed it alongside Konstantin Malofeev, who used his television empire to criticize it. The law has not yet been passed in the State Duma, but in April 2021, Russia’s Constitutional Court requested the enactment of stronger laws against domestic violence because penalties were deemed insufficient under the current code.

Since President Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012, after encountering some of the largest public protests of his political tenure, the Kremlin has sought to enshrine strategic conservatism into multiple domestic policies with international implications. The protests of 2011 and 2012, alongside the February 2012 Pussy Riot performance of “Punk Prayer” in Moscow’s Christ the Savior Cathedral, highlighted the alliance between the ROC and Putin. It prompted the Kremlin to pass the 2013 Law Protecting Religious Feelings to placate conservative sensibilities (particularly those of the ROC) and curb freedom of speech. Another soft-power initiative, *Russkiy Mir*—a concept meaning “Russian world” created in the 1990s to promote Russian culture and language to maintain ties to ethnic Russians outside of the Russian Federation—was also co-opted into promoting a worldview “constructed
in conscious opposition to the West." In its most extreme version, the Kremlin advocated for Novorossiya, or a "New Russia" policy, following the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russian military incursion in Donbas, which it justified in part by protecting ethnic Russians through military means wherever they lived.

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In this respect, strategic conservatism helped fill the post-Soviet ideological vacuum that was evident in survey responses from 2007: "We do not have any ideology in our society. Our parents had it, but we don’t. We are not orthodox, we are not communists, not socialists and we are not fascists. It is not clear what we are." Notably, this was the year Vladimir Putin gave a now-infamous speech at the Munich Security Conference in which he decried the post-Cold War order as based on a destabilizing U.S. unilateralism. The Kremlin’s shift toward more purposeful ideological frames not only filled this vacuum for a population whose past and history mattered for national identification and pride, it also secured the regime’s enduring place in that history.

However, not all Russians bought the religious-traditionalism narrative wholesale. In 2016, two-thirds of people in Russia thought the ROC should not influence government decisions, while 57 percent did not believe government officials should make decisions based on their religious beliefs. A minority of the public supports such an explicit narrative for the state, and younger generations in particular reject this ideology and the influence of the church.

The appeal of this narrative, therefore, is less about religiosity and more about “stabilocracy” and the fear of change as a destructive force, particularly for the elderly population and those whose livelihoods are dependent upon the regime. And while younger generations tend to reject this influence, some among them are satisfied with the regime’s other offerings or have simply stopped caring after an entire life spent under the same ruler—for their grandparents, change is scary; for them, change is impossible.

Despite the success of the regime’s narrative, the deteriorating standards of living in Russia have begun to erode the regime’s popularity and legitimacy in recent years. A need arose to legally codify and bind Russian conservatism to Putin’s political fortunes. In January 2020, Putin recommended a surprise series of amendments to the constitution that legally extended his tenure to 2036 and included explicit language related to conservatism and respect for ancestors who passed on their belief in God (a carefully crafted wording). Marriage was defined strictly as between a man and a woman, and the term “state-forming nation” (as a top-down driven multinational union of people) replaced the concept of “Russkiy.” The introduction of this term of art creates another potential tension in Russian
conservatism: one between a “Russian” conservatism (explicitly tied to ethnic Russians and a fixed identity) and one that tries to be all-encompassing of the over 170 ethnic groups and nationalities constituting the country.53

The Relationship between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church

While Pussy Riot’s 2012 performance may have highlighted and decried the close relationship between the Kremlin and the ROC, it has been a more complex and nuanced relationship than appears on the surface, particularly under Patriarch Kirill’s leadership.

The Russian constitution of 1993 enshrined the formal separation of church and state in Russia, following decades of repression and state control of religion in the Soviet Union. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the church found itself in both an ideological dilemma and a moral vacuum: though it suffered under communism, it shared an affinity for order and the “morally conservative nature of authoritarianism,” as well as a distaste for democracy and pluralism.54 A newly independent Russia returned the church to its old freedoms, and the church’s priority in the 1990s turned to rebuilding churches and institutions and, when possible, limiting competition in the religious marketplace of a nation it saw as fundamentally Orthodox. Conversely, these religious institutions and symbols became useful for the post-Soviet state’s legitimation, great power narrative, and re-creation of a Russian identity.55

This mutually beneficial yet separate relationship with the state continued throughout the early to mid-2000s, during which the ROC solidified its dominance. This was done in part through its support for the Kremlin’s political agenda, which subordinated the individual’s faith-based needs to the needs of the collective (in this case, the Putin regime). It was further solidified by economic gains stemming from the establishment of businesses, religious goods factories, and TV channels tied to the church and its leaders, creating entwined spiritual and commercial interests that the faithful could support.56

The election of Kirill to the Moscow Patriarchate in 2009, followed by the protests of 2011–12 against the regime, transformed the church-state relationship and tied both sides closer together, increasingly subordinating the ROC to the needs of the regime. Whereas the church had supported the regime but protected its own image as a primarily supernatural actor by keeping it separate from the state, Kirill’s tenure transferred this supernatural quality onto Putin. Indeed, Kirill described the latter as a “miracle of God” sent to save Russia and the Orthodox world from the evils of liberal democracy—and, above all, secularism.

Kirill, a long-time “cultural warrior,” fused the church to the government’s agenda with the hope that it would enhance the ROC’s prestige.57 This was a self-interested decision on the part of the ROC; while religious affiliation in Russia is high, it is primarily a cultural identifier rather than a faith-based association. In 2017, 71 percent of Russians identified as Orthodox, but only 6 percent of those reported going to church every week.58 The Russian political elite also drew benefits from close identification with the church; the ROC reinforced cultural order and strengthened national identity, thus making it straightforward to facilitate the economics of ROC property returns.
In essence, an unvirtuous circle of sorts was created, strengthening Russian cultural identity, reinforcing top-down order, and galvanizing economic gains through multiple areas of alignment between the ROC under Kirill and the Kremlin, both domestically and on the international stage. Domestically, their alignment is strengthened by shared opposition to Western liberal thought and its focus on individual rights, which the church sees as militant secularism and believes threatens devotion to the communal good. The Kremlin views liberalism as a direct challenge to its internal control and to Russian sovereignty despite Putin’s view of liberalism’s obsolescence.

The ROC has long purported to protect religious and moral traditions from the “threat” of the push for individual rights; as early as 2004, Metropolitan Hilarion (who heads the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department of External Church Relations) called for a common front of traditional religious confessions against the West’s radical “anti-Christian and anti-religious” turn. This agenda aligns the church with the Kremlin in support of policies that can be interpreted broadly against inconvenient civil society actors and opposition figures.

This alignment was ordained in the 2020 constitutional amendments, weaving these threads together. They placed “faith in God” in the constitution as an entirely new paragraph: “The Russian Federation, united by a thousand-year history, preserving the memory of the ancestors who transmitted to us the ideals and faith in God [веру в Бога], as well as the continuity in the development of the Russian state, recognizes the historically established state unity.” “Faith in God,” alongside the unity and development of the Russian state, naturally led to the extension of Vladimir Putin’s domestic reign possibly until 2036.

**Church and Cultural Center Constructions across Europe**

- **Holy Trinity Cathedral**
  Russian Orthodox Spiritual & Cultural Center
  Paris, France (2016)

- **Church of All Saints**
  Strasbourg, France (2019)

- **Cathedral of the Armed Forces**
  Kubinka (Patriot Park), Russia (2020)

- **Church**
  St. Matrona of Moscow Ministry
  Ritesici, Bosnia & Herzegovina (2018)

- **Church**
  Russian-Serbian Religious & Cultural Center
  Banja Luka, Bosnia & Herzegovina (2018)

- **Church**
  Peski, Volyn Region, Ukraine (2021)

Source: Based on the authors’ research and analysis.
Internationally, in part because the ROC’s canonical territory extends beyond Russia’s current borders, the ROC is an important platform for outreach to all Slavic peoples seen to belong to one Orthodox civilization. The ROC also helps expand the concept of Russia’s compatriot policy through Russkiy Mir (Russian World) to one that links cultural norms to faith-based values, deepening the Kremlin’s influence. The expansion of the compatriot policy to a much larger group (non-Russian Orthodox believers) is hinted at in Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov’s assertion that Russia “will always defend the interests of Orthodox Churches.”

Internationally, the ROC promotes the moral framework of the Kremlin’s foreign policy because it supports an international order that enshrines its sacred mission to “save all national cultures that have been baptized into Christ.” The church’s diplomacy itself reveals this commitment to the Kremlin’s “preferred international order” because it supports outreach to other Orthodox groups, protects sovereignty, and, by extension, shields these communities from Western secularism. For example, the ROC has rejected several European Court of Human Rights rulings that it views as harmful to Russian sovereignty. The ROC is a forceful institution in its own right when it speaks out on international issues in support of the Kremlin’s foreign policy objectives in a way that protects the latter’s avowed principle of non-interference in domestic affairs. This was the case for the Montenegrin church law, in which the government attempted to limit the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church, an occasional amplifier of ROC views.

The ROC also provides a source of historical and cultural imagery for the Kremlin’s interventions abroad through its ties to and calls for protection of religious groups. The ramifications of a “historically established state unity” were made clear in Vladimir Putin’s July 12, 2021, essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.” In it, he described Russians and Ukrainians as “one people – single whole” that is “under the same historical and spiritual space.” Putin had already highlighted Ukraine as the “spiritual source” of the Russian nation through Kievan Rus and the Christian conversion of Vladimir the Great, while Kirill has bemoaned the persecution of Orthodox faithful by the Ukrainian government. In Syria, the ROC supported an intervention that would save Orthodox Christians from the Islamic State.

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**The ROC also provides a source of historical and cultural imagery for the Kremlin’s interventions abroad through its ties to and calls for protection of religious groups.**

The ROC has also invested the Russian military with a higher, greater purpose for its activities, pulling directly from the heroism of the Great Patriotic War (or World War II). In 2011, General-Major Aleksandr Cherkasov, professor at Russia’s Military University, referred to the necessity of Russian soldiers becoming “Christ-loving warriors” and argued “a spiritual basis [was] a necessary condition for victory.” Similarly, Patriarch Kirill noted that the Soviet victory in World War II was “only due to God’s will, the people’s faith, and spiritual cohesion.” The combination of these two symbolic streams—religion and the Russian military—is embodied in the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, completed in June 2020. It is the first church devoted to the Russian military’s heroism in the war, and President Putin reportedly purchased the main cathedral’s icon.
However, tensions do exist between the ROC and the Kremlin, be it in the amended constitution, the goals driving their alignment, or the contradictory impacts of their policies. Structurally, the Russian state hosts multiple religious groups, which makes the government reluctant to elevate one faith as the country’s primary religious body over others. Vladimir Putin himself has repeatedly “referred to Russia as a multi-confessional state . . . [and] was lukewarm about Orthodox-based religious education in schools.” Although the constitutional amendments of 2020 have de facto turned the Moscow Patriarchate into the guardian of Russia’s spiritual identity, the regime recognizes that its explicit prioritization of Orthodoxy over other religious groups could cause problems—though its current needs seem to propel it in this direction.

Importantly, there are also dissenting voices within the ROC that have cautioned against this rapprochement with the Putin regime. During the 2011–12 protests, some ROC bishops raised concerns about irregularities in the elections and supported some of the protests. People such as Sergei Chapnin, former editor of the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, have warned that far from a revival of religiosity and tradition (pre-revolution tradition being lost to many), the ROC presides over a “post-Soviet civil religion [that provides] ideological support for the Russian state.” In Chapnin’s view, even the new constitutional amendments place God in a subordinate position to the state, and recent foreign policy moves related to the Ecumenical Patriarchate (removing mentions of Bartholomew from ROC services and prohibiting joint services with Constantinople-aligned churches) threaten ecumenical unity. The focus on influence and ideological battles means that “As the state became imperial, so did the Church. . . . Pastoral care has been deemphasized in favor of attention to what the Church can do in partnership with the state. The Church now focuses on the construction and restoration of property, and on the acquisition of state funds for this purpose.”

The centralization of the ROC and Moscow Patriarchate under Kirill, mirroring that of the state, has silenced those dissenting voices or stripped them of titles (including Chapnin), but dissent remains on the margins. And while the constitutional amendment prohibiting “false narratives” about Russia’s role in World War II may serve the church’s interest in silencing dissent, it creates another contradiction by preventing it from recognizing and addressing crimes committed by the Soviet regime against the church, including the appropriation of its property.

Furthermore, while some views listed above may align conveniently, the reasons for these sometimes differ. For the Kremlin, the moral framework is a useful and increasingly successful veneer that coats the regime’s hold on power and its international policy choices. But to the ROC, theological considerations are not veneers; they are the core of the church’s mission, though they can be supported by politics (e.g., in Syria).

Russia’s occupation and territorial claims, from Ukraine to Georgia, also place the ROC and Moscow Patriarchate in a difficult position with local parishes, where local faith leaders have tried to avoid taking sides to maintain legitimacy (members of the parish may support different sides of the conflict). The Orthodox Church of Ukraine’s (OCU) autocephaly gained traction in part because of a desire to gain independence from a patriarchate that supported the annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donbas (or at least supported the regime that annexed these territories). Though the Kremlin has supported the ROC’s campaign against the OCU’s autocephaly on the international stage, the costs of supporting the Kremlin’s policies for the ROC became heavier. And as Orthodox worshippers are increasingly divided, this tension threatens the stability of the Orthodox world.
It is also important to note that the ROC is not just a spiritual empire; it is an economic empire. Having established businesses and hotels under generous state tax regimes and developed its own relationships with ministries and oligarchs, the church's material concerns reinforce its dependency on and further subordinate it to the state's authority. For example, the church relies on the Russian government to recover church properties abroad. Between 2013 and 2015, the ROC and its affiliates received presidential grants totaling over RUB 256 million (around $3.5 million) to recover these properties. Although the ROC views itself as a supernatural actor, financial considerations—particularly in the aftermath of Covid-19 and its negative impact on parishes—may make it more earthly, affirming its increasingly secular characteristics and highlighting its internal corruption.

As the Moscow Patriarchate increasingly devotes itself to the Kremlin's conservative and traditional agenda, both at home and abroad, its claim to impartial, spiritual legitimacy is increasingly threatened. Though this may serve the interests of the current leadership on both sides, it has potential negative repercussions on the ROC's relationship with the rest of the Orthodox world and complicates the post-Putin landscape for the Moscow Patriarchate.

**The Actors of Strategic Conservatism**

Russia's strategic conservatism is both fueled and implemented by idea or norms entrepreneurs who take their cues from the Kremlin, act on their own interests, or pursue a combination of both.

First and foremost is the Kremlin, which is both an idea generator and an implementer. Russian president Vladimir Putin is its leading proponent. In the wake of the 2011–12 protests, he had the most to gain domestically from positioning his leadership as “a combination of Soviet nostalgia, yearning for revenge, and historical mysticism based on Byzantine and Orthodox heritage.” Shifting to a black-and-white conservative framework supported his view of power and limited threats to his longevity. As Ukraine sought closer economic ties with the European Union in 2013, his domestic position spawned a larger international vision that relied on historical and religious narratives to justify Russian military engagement.

A select group of Putin's inner circle—those whom Russia expert Tatiana Stanovaya calls the “protectors”—supports this conservative positioning against the West, particularly with the aim to paint the West as decadent and weed out foreign threats to Russian society. The protectors combine conservative ideology with increasingly repressive tactics and are adroit at mobilizing society against perceived threats from the West; in this they have defined their particular brand of “Putinism.” This group is politically ascendant at the present time.

The other central idea generator is the ROC, which relies on a network of affiliated and friendly nongovernmental organizations. Within the church, the patriarch and the institutional organs of the Patriarchate of Moscow are the central decisionmakers for administrative policies and conduct of services, while parishes retain a certain degree of autonomy on other matters. The ROC's diplomatic apparatus supports the Kremlin's messaging while conducting religious activities and uses its relations with other churches and international organizations to amplify these messages. For example, Patriarch Kirill attended the consecration of the Church of All Saints in Strasbourg in 2019, on the margins of which he met with Council of Europe secretary general Thorbjorn Jagland to reportedly discuss Russia's readmission to the organization and the OCU autocephaly question. The ROC also has formal cooperation agreements with entities that focus on compatriot outreach.
A final group of actors is that of Russia’s “Orthodox entrepreneurs.” Two highly visible entrepreneurs are Konstantin Malofeev and Vladimir Yakunin, who support a larger global role for the ROC and flirt with Russian imperial traditions to ensure a robust defense of “traditional values.” They are primarily sponsors of a variety of activities (e.g., international meetings of like-minded cultural or political actors, religious gatherings, and media campaigns), while Aleksandr Dugin, formerly a fringe intellectual who has grown more influential over time, is a leading idea entrepreneur.

All of them embody some form of nostalgia for imperial Russia, the Romanovs, monarchist rule, or Eurasianism (or neo-Eurasianism). The latter concept holds that Russia is a unique, land-based civilization destined to clash with Atlanticists (and by extension liberalism) in the twenty-first century. Interestingly, neo-Eurasianism also emphasizes Russia’s multiethnic and multiconfessional identity—contradicting the idea of a united Orthodox and Slavic world led by Russia, which is pushed by the ROC and other Russian actors. It also calls for the creation of a Russian-led alliance of Eurasian states to challenge the hegemony of the liberal West.

Dugin’s most powerful intellectual contribution has been to enhance the Third Rome narrative. This concept posits that Russia, under the leadership of Putin, is the biblical incarnation of the Third Rome or the restoration of the Third Temple in Jerusalem. As such, he represents a strain of traditionalism that anchors fundamentalist religion to Russian empire building and great power politics. His emphasis on a shared Eurasian identity that transcends national and confessional borders has allowed neo-Eurasianism to inspire political figures in such places as Serbia, Georgia, Turkey, and Kazakhstan. Dugin is also the editorial director of Malofeev’s far-right TV channel Tsargrad TV, which allows him to spread his ideology to a wider audience.

Though reportedly no longer in Putin’s inner circle since 2015, Yakunin uses his Foundation of St. Andrew the First Called as well as his access into monarchist circles in France and elsewhere to shape and influence domestic opinion and views. As the former chairman of Russian Railways, and like Malofeev, he embodies the crossover of economic and cultural-religious influence. He has made inroads into the French émigré community, business circles, and cultural associations.

Malofeev, a self-described “Orthodox businessman,” founded St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation, the largest Russian Orthodox charity. It describes its mission as “the formation of wholesome spiritual-ethical conditions in Russian society, strengthening traditional family values, and the growth and development of the younger generation.” Marshall Capital, also founded by Malofeev, provides the foundation with financial support. Malofeev has also allegedly financed Cossack paramilitary organizations whose self-images are wrapped up in ideas of traditionalism and which have been linked to political violence in several countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine.

Malofeev is both an implementer and supporter of idea generators. He is the deputy head of the World Russian People’s Council, a right-wing organization headed by Patriarch Kirill that covers cultural, religious, and demographic issues. He also leads a conservative think tank, Katehon, the name of which means the “one who keeps humanity from death, extinction, absorption by chaos and a whirlwind of irreversible catastrophes.” The organization is strongly anti-Western and promotes conspiracy theories against pro-Western political figures. Katehon officially supports the “principle of a multipolar world, and . . . a pluricentric worldview defined by an international balance of powers” as well as “the importance of religious and cultural identities in international relations.”
Between Multiconfessional and State Religion: Religious Repression inside Russia

Internationally, both the ROC and the Kremlin have reached out to other Christian denominations and faiths (e.g., particularly conservative Catholicism) to rally them around the defense of traditional values and perceived encroachment of rights (particularly women’s and LGBTQ+ rights) on their belief systems. And though Pope Francis has been maligned for his more liberal theological views, official visits to Rome have continued along with general discourse of protection of Christian faith.

However, the domestic situation highlights a different internal approach to other faiths and tensions between the Kremlin and ROC on whether Russia is a multiconfessional state or unified under Orthodoxy. The Kremlin, fearful of domestic Islamist terrorism and state fragmentation, has incentives not to alienate its Muslim population (an estimated 10 percent of the Russian population) by presenting the Russian nation as an Orthodox constituency. Yet the ROC, which sees Russia as a fundamentally Orthodox nation and civilization, would likely prefer the preeminence of Orthodoxy and the church to be more clearly established.

Within Russia, the state’s calculus around Islam has not prevented the enactment of repressive policies against “non-traditional” religious minorities, particularly Jehovah’s Witnesses, and counter-extremist laws that do target Muslim groups. In 2020, Russia had the third-highest number of criminal blasphemy cases despite having no official state religion; in the North Caucasus, “security forces [act] with impunity, arresting or kidnapping persons suspected of even tangential links to Islamist militancy as well as for secular political opposition.” In occupied Crimea, Muslims and particularly Tatars have been banned from conducting peaceful religious activities and are subject to charges of extremism and separatism, which are allegedly politically motivated.

This reality presents an uncomfortable contradiction for advocates of religious freedom who also support the Kremlin’s approach toward traditionalism and its image as the Third Rome. In spite of the recent constitutional amendments, Russia continues to repress religious constituencies domestically by labeling their activities as “extreme.” The Kremlin’s religious and moral discourse begins to lose currency in light of these infringements on the rights of non-Orthodox religious groups, over which the Moscow Patriarchate has remained silent. The Kremlin’s international outreach to other religious constituencies under a banner of Russian-led conservatism may serve its foreign policy interests, but its domestic policies show its shallow interpretation of “religious freedom.”
Russia’s Strategic Conservatism in Practice

Modus Operandi

Russia’s strategic conservatism operates internationally through two main, multidirectional channels to gain influence or reap political benefits.

The first channel is the Orthodox world and the religious expression of the Third Rome narrative. This serves the Kremlin’s interests to be viewed as the center of pan-Slavic power and authentic inheritor of these empires as well as the Russian Orthodox Church’s (ROC) goal to unite Orthodoxy under its leadership. This concept elevates Russia as the true defender of faith and the ROC as the sole inheritor of Constantinople. Together, the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate reach out to the faithful around the world, fusing positive views of the church with positive narratives about Russia and Vladimir Putin. Through this channel, strategic conservatism creates distrust of other faiths and of secular authorities that are perceived to encroach on Orthodox beliefs—and, by extension, on good relations with Russia and the ROC. It also encourages support for Russia’s military actions abroad, which are cloaked in a defense of the faithful, such as Eastern Christians in Syria or supposedly oppressed ROC parishes in occupied territories in Georgia.

The second channel is the broader traditional values ecosystem and the politico-cultural dimension of the Third Rome concept. Media outlets, nongovernmental organizations, political parties, Russian officials, norms and ideational entrepreneurs, and business leaders are all used to decry the moral decadence of the West and question the authority and legitimacy of a country’s democratic leadership (if this leadership impedes the Kremlin’s interests). The Kremlin’s messages encourage like-minded people to take a stance against moral decay and call into question the decision to be part of the European Union or to ally with the United States. Frequently, Russian information operations equate
Western decadence with the European Union, particularly among some Euroskeptic and anti-American constituencies within Europe.

**Channels of Russian Strategic Conservatism**

**Russia’s Strategic Conservatism**

two channels of influence

**Orthodox World**

religious expression of Third Rome

**Aims**
elevate Russia as the defender of faith
present Russian Orthodox Church as the true inheritor of Eastern Orthodox Christianity
create distrust of other faiths
reduce legitimacy of secular authorities
perceived as encroaching on religious freedom
foster support for Russia’s actions abroad when in “defense of the faithful” (e.g., Syria)

**Aims**
augment the “decadent West” narrative
present Western liberal values as a threat to national identity
question authority or legitimacy of a country’s leadership
doubt the value of EU or NATO membership
reduce potency of criticism for internal policies by advocating non-interference into domestic choices

**Actors**

Russian Orthodox Church
cultural organizations and NGOs
Orthodox entrepreneurs
media channels

**Actors**

Russian Orthodox Church
cultural organizations and NGOs
Orthodox entrepreneurs
media channels
Kremlin and affiliates
political parties

Source: Based on the authors’ research and analysis.

The Kremlin uses the same approach within European countries—including the othering and discrimination that sometimes results from some of these ideas—to break down societal consensus around the liberal democratic order and its interpretation of human and individual rights. In turn, relativizing these rights is a way of reducing the potency of the West’s criticism of repressive internal policies, in Russia or elsewhere, and the treatment of opposition voices and minorities.

**Interaction with Other Channels of Influence**

Strategic conservatism and Orthodoxy supplement other tools and channels of Russian malign influence. Orthodoxy is an influence multiplier through its global reach, and the ROC can be more forward-leaning in
its pronouncements over faith, values, and civilizational battles than official Russian diplomacy, seizing this multiplier effect. Deploying strategic conservatism and traditional values is less about creating or fostering direct business or political ties (which could yield partners within governments or large companies, for example) and more about winning religious hearts and minds, breaking down societal consensus, or building support for some of Russia’s policy priorities within specific constituencies. 98 (The economics and politics of Russia’s strategic conservatism are largely funded by the Russian government, Orthodox oligarchs, and their affiliated companies, which could become more relevant should the material interests of the ROC and some Orthodox entrepreneurs grow more prominent.)

Non-religious organizations such as the Dialogue of Civilizations or the now defunct Institute of Democracy and Cooperation provide a legitimate facade for anti-Western and traditionalist messaging that can be channeled to new constituencies that are otherwise not receptive to Russian posturing, either for historical reasons or for more recent geopolitical developments, as is the case in Georgia and Ukraine. This is sometimes done under the cover of intellectual or cultural exchanges, with publications or cultural organizations pushing a certain line to gain a foothold in those communities.

Other information tools amplify messaging that supports strategic conservatism: propaganda and disinformation networks, including news outlets funded or supported by Russia; cyber and hacking tools, which offer plausible deniability for the Kremlin (e.g., hacking the Ecumenical Patriarchate); and the use of affinity and social networks to gain followership. 99 Social networks such as Russia’s VKontakte (similar to Facebook) have been particularly successful at connecting Orthodox and Greek nationalists in Greece and Russia (sometimes with fascist undertones), along with military glorification in Bosnia’s Republika Srpska. 100

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**In many ways, strategic conservatism as a soft- and sharp-power tool is more pervasive and more insidious than other channels used by the Kremlin to penetrate citizens’ daily lives.**

In 2014, the head of Malofeev’s channel Tsargrad TV allegedly planned a controlled leak into the Polish news ecosystem (through another agent) about a secret meeting between Malofeev and Milorad Dodik, the current Serb member of the Bosnia federated presidency, prior to Bosnian elections that year. This demonstrates a sprawling network of disinformation at play and the ways in which Kremlin affiliates seek to influence a multitude of markets. 101 In Georgia, a Facebook-based coordinated messaging campaign targeted a Georgian opposition politician who was arrested in February 2021. It involved pro-Russian political figures and online messages and sought to undermine the opposition figure and his Western allies with messages that mixed traditional values, religion, and sarcastic humor. Some of those same Facebook-organized affinity groups have specifically rallied people around traditional values and Georgian nationalism. 102

In many ways, strategic conservatism as a soft- and sharp-power tool is more pervasive and more insidious than other channels used by the Kremlin to penetrate citizens’ daily lives. 103
Strategic and Tactical Benefits

Beyond the outcomes associated with the two channels of strategic conservatism explored above, the Kremlin seeks or gains certain benefits from this channel of influence. Deterring pro-Western sentiment, increasing support for Russia’s policy actions (domestically and abroad), and legitimizing the Kremlin’s narratives are the most important benefits to be gleaned. For those EU- and NATO-aspirant countries considered within Russia’s traditional sphere of influence, the Kremlin also gains from undermining or reducing support for EU and NATO membership. In current EU and NATO members, a collateral and longer-term benefit for Russia of a lower level of EU support (and higher support for Russia) can be the lifting of sanctions against Russia in countries that have maintained them since the annexation of Crimea.

Some situations offer more tailored benefits. Influence through strategic conservatism can keep countries such as Georgia (the “near abroad”) within Russia’s sphere of influence, feeding off a kind of imperial nostalgia. In countries where internal cohesion along ethnic or religious lines is already in question, appealing to ideological affinities or common values contributes to undermining a country’s sovereignty or territorial integrity in a way that serves the Kremlin (e.g., in Bosnia, where a disunified country is less likely to go against Russia’s policy priorities and join NATO).

Finally, in specific cases, appeals to a common vision of the Orthodox faith or propaganda related to intra-Orthodox ecclesiastical competition aim to displace or weaken the leadership of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (e.g., in Greece), which serves both the ROC and the Kremlin. In France, appeals to Orthodoxy and traditional values support the French far-right movement (which supports the Kremlin) and undermine the French government’s approach to secularity (laïcité).\textsuperscript{104}
Cross-Cutting Trends

Reuniting the Orthodox World

The Orthodox faith is one of the primary channels through which Russia projects strategic conservatism, as it offers a natural connection with local constituencies. The main institutional actor in this sphere is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) under Patriarch Kirill’s leadership, with a secondary role for “Orthodox entrepreneurs” such as Malofeev and Yakunin.

The two animating strands of faith-based strategic conservatism are the concept of Moscow as the Third Rome and the ROC’s ambitions to reunite global Orthodoxy under its leadership. These strands also serve the Kremlin’s geopolitical ambitions of an international system that turns away from the West and toward Moscow culturally, spiritually, and ideologically.

THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH’S AMBITIONS WITHIN GLOBAL ORTHODOXY

While the ROC acknowledges the Hellenic roots of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the slow shift of the ecclesiastical center of power of the Kievan Metropolitanate toward Moscow between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries created a fusion of Orthodoxy and Slavic cultural identity among Russian hierarchs and associated churches. The Moscow Patriarchate saw the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in the fifteenth century as a turning point that subordinated the Ecumenical Patriarchate to a Sunni Islamist regime and rendered it subject to pressures from Ottoman and, later, Turkish rulers. In this view, this conquest shifted the center of Orthodox Christianity to Moscow, making it the “Third Rome”: first the Western Roman Empire (the First Rome) fell, leading to the Eastern or Byzantine Roman Empire (the Second Rome), and finally to Russia as the last bastion of Orthodox Christianity after the Ottoman conquest. This is both a theological and political concept,
The Kremlin Playbook 3

which serves the Kremlin’s interests in being represented as the true center of pan-Slavic power and inheritor of these empires.

The ROC’s perception of itself as the true inheritor of Orthodox Christianity explains its assertions that it represents “authentic” Orthodoxy as well as its perceived mission of defending Orthodoxy across the world. It offers the Kremlin and others a powerful (and convenient) tool of legitimation for foreign military interventions and a rallying call for followership: in Syria, the protection of Eastern Christians was evoked as a reason for the intervention, and in Ukraine so-called Orthodox foreign fighters, some from Bosnia, reportedly joined the conflict in Donbas.105 Active social media outreach to Orthodox constituencies around the world also creates an opening for messaging and followership around traditional values that serves both the ROC and the Kremlin’s interests.

The fusion of the Kremlin’s foreign policy interests and the ROC’s interests is also reflected in Russia’s occupation of territories in Georgia, where Moscow provides religious and financial assistance to support both ethnic Russian “compatriots” and the Orthodox faithful—despite those territories still being under the Georgian Orthodox Church’s canonical jurisdiction.106 In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russian-sponsored outlets have promoted shared Orthodox, cultural, and historic ties. Most visibly, the Russian Orthodox church in Banja Luka (Bosnia’s second-largest city and the capital of the ethnic Serbian entity Republika Srpska) was dedicated to the Romanovs, tying together faith, Russian protection for Slavic peoples (the Serbs), monarchist ideas, and imperial nostalgia.107 Orthodox pilgrimages regularly take place in Bosnia, honoring fallen soldiers from the 1992–95 war in Bosnia.

The ROC’s claim to “true” Orthodoxy has led to intra-Orthodox competition and rivalries that have been spurred primarily by the Moscow Patriarchate’s ambitions to unite a global Orthodoxy under its leadership. The ROC has received support from or allegedly pressured some of the 14 mutually recognized autocephalous churches to displace the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the primus inter pares (first among equals); the ROC accuses the Ecumenical Patriarchate of being servile to Turkish and, more importantly, Western interests. This competition has also been spurred by aid from the Kremlin and local actors.

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Intra-Orthodox competition and the fight for influence has also taken on an economic nature. The ROC has made a concerted effort to regain church properties and jurisdiction over parishes across the world with help from the Department of Economic Affairs within the Russian presidential administration and, on occasion, the Russian Foreign Ministry. The canonical reconciliation with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) was a key step on this path, reconnecting churches that had been separated throughout the Soviet era and growing the number of parishes under ROC jurisdiction. This effort has unfolded most visibly in France, where the ROC regained control of the
Saint-Nicholas Cathedral in Nice in 2011, the third-largest Orthodox church outside Russia, which had been under the Constantinople Patriarchate’s jurisdiction.\footnote{108}

The competition for influence abroad means the ROC has a stake in, and may try to play a significant role in, multiple church leadership transitions in coming years. The orientation of these churches, either toward Moscow or Constantinople, will either help or hurt the ROC’s influence-building efforts throughout the Orthodox world. This is particularly true for the Georgian Orthodox Church, where some elements are relatively pro-Russian and align with the ROC on some issues but the current leadership remains rhetorically dedicated to Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic orientation and maintains that Georgia has jurisdiction over the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. But perhaps an even greater stake is for the selection of the next primate of the Church of Greece, as the Greek religious ecosystem is a central node of dissemination for religious principles and Orthodox media and has supported the Ecumenical Patriarch.

The ecclesiastical dimension of the intra-church competition manifested itself more openly in 2016 ahead of the Holy and Great Council of Crete. One hundred years in the making, the event sought to gather all 14 mutually recognized churches encompassing the world’s 300 million Orthodox Christian faithful to sanction theological principles and strengthen ecclesial unity and cohesion.\footnote{109} As preparations were underway, some churches, led by the ROC, voiced concern on procedural and theological grounds—but instead of joining the council to debate their position, four churches announced they would boycott the meeting just days before the opening: the ROC, the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and the Church of Antioch.\footnote{110}

The Moscow Patriarchate’s decision to boycott this unified event underscores its competition with the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s leading role. It also contradicts its professed hope for a unified Orthodox world, which is only acceptable under ROC leadership. The ROC has accused Patriarch Bartholomew of pushing modernist principles and ecumenical union (cooperation with other Christian faiths) and has since denounced his “papist ambitions.”\footnote{111} The boycott attempted to engineer a crisis of legitimacy for Patriarch Bartholomew, as Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) pointed out that any decision coming out of the council would be illegitimate unless all churches “without exception” participate.\footnote{112} While the council went ahead successfully in the end, the boycott was a telling indication of what could be a longer campaign to strain unity and trust within the Orthodox world.

A look at the other absent churches also reveals the geopolitical dynamics at play: the Georgian church has long been vocally opposed to the ecumenical movement and has reportedly been an echo chamber for the ROC in such meetings. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church raised some concerns about the council’s theological positions but, more importantly, allegedly received pressure from ROC counterparts not to attend.\footnote{113} Finally, Russia’s involvement in Syria ties directly to the Patriarchate of Antioch’s decision to boycott. The church supports Bashar al-Assad and therefore supports its defender, Russia. The Syrian church is also engaged in a jurisdictional dispute with the Patriarchate of Jerusalem over a diocese located in Qatar. Antioch’s dispute of the diocese likely has to do with Qatar’s military relationship with the United States and its close relationship with Turkey against the Assad regime.\footnote{114}

\textbf{BREAKING POINT: AUTOCEPHALY FOR UKRAINE}

Three years after the Holy and Great Council, the autocephaly (independence) decision for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) came as both the culmination and accelerant of these intra-
Orthodox tensions. The decision itself created a schism and break in communion between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate, with the latter painting the 2016 council as preemptive staging for this decision. The ROC has prohibited joint services between bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate and those of the Constantinople Patriarchate.

Following Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and military incursion in Eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP, a church that is part of the ROC jurisdiction but anchored in Ukraine) repeatedly claimed it was independent from the Kremlin but was seen as an influential voice for Moscow’s interests. The other churches, along with the Ukrainian parliament and with encouragement from former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, began the process to request autocephaly for an independent Ukrainian church with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. In 2019, the Tomos of Autocephaly was officially granted, creating the OCU from the other churches and parts of the UOC-MP, prompting the ROC’s anger at the decision.

The ROC’s actions during the invasion of Ukraine in part justified the distrust from some parishes of their church’s contribution to the conflict. Either by coincidence or through powerful symbolism, a month prior to the arrival of the “little green men” in Crimea in 2014, the Orthodox relic “Gifts of the Magi” was brought from Mount Athos in Greece to Crimea under the patronage of the ROC and Patriarch Kirill. This relic was given to Igor Hirkin, who would later be revealed as Stelkov, a key leader of the Russian separatists in Donbas. Konstantin Malofeev and Duma member Dmitry Sablin also accompanied the relic; Sablin is a leader of Soldiers Brotherhood, an all-Russian veterans organization that has reportedly supported the Russian military in its actions in Chechnya and Syria.

The ROC’s relentless campaign against the recognition of autocephaly has deepened the rift with Constantinople and embroiled other churches. This rift has made the drive for canonical reconciliation and church recuperation more urgent for the ROC, which has put pressure on other churches, such as the Church of Greece, not to recognize the OCU.

The autocephaly decision was a strategic loss for the Kremlin, as evidenced by President Putin’s convening of a Security Council meeting to address it. Foreign Minister Lavrov accused Patriarch Bartholomew of being an instrument of the West and stated that the Russian state was bound to protect the interests of Orthodox believers and like-minded people. Media networks amplified this criticism and tied it to broader accusations of Western influence over the Ecumenical Patriarch. For example, the Union of Orthodox Journalists, founded with the purpose of supporting Metropolitan Onuphry (head of the UOC-MP) and to defend canonical Orthodoxy, disseminates misinformation in several languages (including Georgian) related to the United States and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, with a focus on the autocephalous OCU.

However, not all ROC members supported the decision to break communion. Andrey Kuraev, a theologian and deacon in the ROC, warned that the church was being shortsighted by breaking ties with Constantinople and that few followers would abide by Patriarch Kirill’s decision. Though he was defrocked by the Moscow Episcopal Court for past statements, his framing for the ROC decision is powerful and likely to resonate with many of the Russian Orthodox faithful: “The bishops have quarreled – it is your business. I understand that if you are angry at another person, you should not go
While the autocephaly crisis provides an opportunity for the ROC to pressure the Ecumenical Patriarch, it also poses complex challenges. Ukraine accounts for a third of all Moscow Patriarchate parishes, or around 12,000. The ROC’s political heavy-handedness and its support of Russia’s annexation and occupation of Ukrainian territory led local churches and politicians to request autocephaly. Even today, the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine must walk a fine line so as not to appear beholden to the Kremlin’s interests. Yet in rare moments, it has admitted its partiality. In 2021, in response to a question about Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill noted he did not think in terms of states and peoples but rather in terms of the “flock of the Russian Orthodox Church.” From a weakened position, the ROC must now rely on the Kremlin’s influence tools and Orthodox entrepreneurs’ media networks for messaging against the OCU and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, creating a vicious cycle that keeps it beholden to political power players.

Traditional Values against the “Decadent West”

Across Europe and the post-Soviet space, Russia has benefited from growing debates and tensions around traditional values, broadly understood as conservative norms that are resistant to societal change. These include opposition to same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples, as well as homosexuality in general and support for “traditional” gender roles and a patriarchal system (sometimes including faith elements). This is often accompanied by resistance to a more diverse demographic make-up in the country and the prioritization of the collective over individual rights.

The past decade has been marked by multiple fractures and upheavals: the financial crisis and associated economic downturn, demographic changes, shifting political cleavages and populist and nationalist appeals, increased immigration, and societal changes around LGBTQ+ issues. These fractures have spurred a debate over specific—and competing—visions of society, in which respect for traditional values has been brandished to push back against change. Displaced resentment from the economic crisis and the search for scapegoats also contributed to retrenchment behind these values.

The Kremlin does not engineer these debates, but it accentuates both sides to amplify divisions and weaken societal cohesion. Some Western organizations or movements also share legitimate beliefs and natural ideological connections with Russia, which can be instrumentalized by the Kremlin and its affiliated actors to hide their intentions or ties.
SOCIETAL DEBATES, COHESION, AND WESTERN DECADENCE

One of the most pronounced societal debates that Russia seeks to influence is the view that a “traditional” family and marriage is between a man and a woman, with preference for a patriarchal system that resists gender diversity. These issues intersect with the religious sphere addressed in the previous section, including Orthodox followers but also other faiths, such as Catholicism and Islam. This societal debate was most visible in the protests against same-sex marriage in France in 2012–13 (La Manif pour tous) and in Georgia in 2016 around the demand for a referendum to define marriage in the constitution as between a man and a woman. In a similar pattern, nongovernmental organizations may be mobilized rapidly in targeted countries to encourage public referenda on these “family values,” which can spark demonstrations to sharpen division in society and distract government officials. On occasion, governments have teetered on the brink of collapse, potentially ushering in a future coalition government in greater alignment with the Kremlin’s interests.

Ideological trends in Russia appear to align with some groups in France and Georgia. Russia has been at the vanguard on the development of a “gay propaganda law” in 2013, fostering these ideological ties and casting itself as an example. Some leading figures within the French movement against gay marriage have expressed support for Russia’s brand of conservatism. Malofeev allegedly helped finance La Manif pour tous demonstrations through an associate. (It should be noted that the French La Manif pour tous movement was intent on not singling out LGBTQ+ groups and tried to reach out to secular and other religious groups.) In Georgia, some actors involved in protests against LGBTQ+ marches have appealed to the eternal alliance with “co-religionist” Russia, while individuals involved in pro-Russian organizations (e.g., Georgian March) attempted to trigger a referendum that would amend the definition of civil marriage in the constitution as between a man and a woman.

Be it same-sex marriage or other rights for LGBTQ+ people, the Kremlin and its affiliates regularly underscore that these values and views are being imposed on a given country by the West. If left unchecked, they argue they will become an existential threat to national identity and societal cohesion. In this view, human and individual rights harm the interests of the collective and must be limited by state sovereignty.

Russia has provided a new constitutional roadmap for others to emulate, which in its case includes defining marriage as between a man and a woman, explicitly mentioning belief in God, supporting Russian language and history, and acknowledging the precedence of Russia’s constitution over international law (tying in the sovereignty element). It also pursues these themes at the international level: Russian government officials have used international institutional channels such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations—for example, to rebuff certain resolutions and conferences that support human rights. These efforts have also relied on Russian thought leaders, such as Aleksandr Dugin, and their connections in European intellectual circles.

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cohesion. In this view, human and individual rights harm the interests of the collective and must be limited by state sovereignty.

The corollary to protecting the “traditional” family and a specific view of national identity is a focus on demographic make-up. In the traditionalist view, this means limiting ethnic demographic decline and cultural change (often labeled as “multiculturalism”) seen to be brought about by immigration—particularly from Muslim-majority and non-white countries. The Kremlin has been able to stoke this “demographic panic” across Europe through messaging around migration and national identity, the danger immigrants allegedly represent, and the incompatibility of EU values around multiculturalism with domestic identity.133 There is some irony in Russia’s focus on (mostly Muslim) migrants as threats in these disinformation efforts when the Kremlin and the ROC find common ground with Islamic representatives on family values and have an active religious diplomacy, for example, in France.134 Ideological incongruity surfaces again around women’s issues, where the trope of European women being threatened by “violent migrants” seems at odds with the refusal of some conservative circles to pass legislation against domestic violence.

POPULIST ENTANGLEMENTS

Popular resentment unleashed by globalization has fused with this fear of the “other” in a changing demographic landscape. Populist and nationalist political forces across Europe have harnessed these complex feelings and used the theme of “traditional values” as a broad label to unify these disparate forces and create an effective rallying platform against the “decadent West.”

This is where Russia positions itself as a defender of the traditional order and conservative values—the political and cultural embodiment of the Third Rome. For over a decade, it has pioneered this fusing of “conservative religious ideology with political ideology in mainstream media and governance.”135 In some countries, such as Georgia, it pushes this image through sympathetic voices or media networks.136 In others, such as France or Bosnia, it simply responds to local forces that already laud it as a defender of traditional values or certain ethnic groups.

EUROPEAN AND U.S. NETWORKS: A FEEDBACK LOOP

An increasingly important element of Russia’s role in the defense of traditional values is the amplification of this message and creation of a feedback loop through U.S. and European organizations and norms entrepreneurs. These networks tend to emphasize the “natural family,” the threats of immigration and globalization, culture war narratives, and Brussels’ imposition of liberal values—at times laced with anti-Semitism and conspiracy theories that play up the threat to one’s identity. These ideas are then relayed through a media ecosystem that frequently, but not exclusively, overlaps with right-wing and populist circles.137 Worryingly, these messages dovetail with a critique of liberal democracy (e.g., liberalism is obsolete or fails to defend national identity) and support for state-driven or “illiberal” modes of governance.

One of the long-standing fora for this network integration has been the World Congress of Families (WCF), a project of the International Organization for the Family (IOF). The WCF was
created in 1997 by Russian and American intellectuals and former officials meeting in Russia. The IOF is based in Illinois and seeks to form “an international network fighting against demographic winter” and population decline (supposedly caused by sexual and feminist liberation), a worry shared by all co-founders.\textsuperscript{138} (The Southern Poverty Law Center has classified the WCF as a hate group that aims to marginalize LGBTQ+ groups and limit women’s reproductive rights.) Some experts have deemed it “the primary bridge between sanctioned Kremlin-linked actors and far-right forces in the West, with a particular emphasis on Christian fundamentalists” and “another front for pro-Kremlin subversion overseas.”\textsuperscript{139}

The WCF “convenes major international public events to unite and equip leaders, organizations, and families to affirm, celebrate, and defend the natural family as the only fundamental and sustainable unit of society.”\textsuperscript{140} The WCF’s site selection for its annual meeting across the world points to where it believes it has the most opportunity for growth: Belgrade in 2015, Tbilisi in 2016, Budapest in 2017, and Verona in 2019. These annual meetings reinforce thematic messages related to “natural family” and its endangered status and create linkages among important figures of the conservative movement as well as politicians and religious figures. It is through Russia’s representative to the WCF that Malofeev allegedly funded France’s La Manif pour tous movement, while the Yakunin Foundation partnered with the WCF to organize a meeting in Paris in 2017 to denounce the “gay lobby.”\textsuperscript{141}

The 2017 annual meeting highlighted Budapest’s growing role as convening capital of choice for like-minded groups. Indeed, the Hungarian government has been an early innovator of many of these same thematic approaches related to illiberalism and religious beliefs. In 2021, the fourth Budapest Demographic Summit gathered European populist leaders (including Bosnia’s Milorad Dodik, France’s Marion Maréchal, and French presidential candidate Éric Zemmour), religious representatives, conservative intellectuals, and, most prominently, former U.S. vice president Mike Pence. The conference focused on demographic sustainability within current debates over governmental policies, environmental challenges, and Europe’s survival through a commitment to “family-friendly” values.\textsuperscript{142} Some speakers blamed the West and “liberal global elites” for demographic decline in their region and for presenting the traditional family as outdated.\textsuperscript{143}

These types of summits show there is demand for Russia’s leadership in some European and U.S. conservative and religious circles. Some of these have deemed Russia “the hope for the world” and “the Christian saviors of the world,” and claimed that “[i]n the culture war for the future of mankind, Putin is planting Russia’s flag firmly on the side of traditional Christianity.”\textsuperscript{144} In 2014, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Metropolitan Hilarion visited Evangelical leader Billy Graham, highlighting the history of good relations between the ROC and North American churches. His son, Franklin Graham, traveled to Russia in 2019 and met with Kremlin officials sanctioned by the United States.\textsuperscript{145}

European officials have also spoken in the Russian parliament about traditional values and the fight against homosexuality, among them the head of French organization Alliance Vita, Odile Tequi.\textsuperscript{146} A Russian member of parliament, Sergei Gavrilov, was invited to Tbilisi in 2019 to attend an Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO), a body established by the Greek parliament in 1993 to build relationships between Christian Orthodox lawmakers. There he delivered a speech in Russian from the Georgian speaker’s chair regarding traditional values and Orthodoxy to the Georgian parliament, shocking swaths of the population—Russia being an occupying power in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region—and prompting large and violent public protests, inflaming societal tensions.\textsuperscript{147}
Receptivity to the narrative of a decadent West that threatens the family unit and national identity creates opportunity to sow discord among multiple polities, and increasingly justifies a tilt toward illiberalism to supposedly protect this identity. The Kremlin can mobilize affinity with a variety of European and U.S. cultural and religious affinity groups to infiltrate those circles, some of which are close to economic and political power centers and policymakers. An example of this is the annual opportunity for U.S. officials to mingle with Russian actors (some with ties to the Kremlin) at major religious or cultural events such as the National Prayer Breakfast. At times this has created some incongruous groupings, with U.S. groups that warn against China’s influence praising the likes of Viktor Orban—who has invited Chinese investments in Hungary.

Receptivity to the narrative of a decadent West that threatens the family unit and national identity creates opportunity to sow discord among multiple polities, and increasingly justifies a tilt toward illiberalism to supposedly protect this identity.

Russian narratives have also resonated in France, particularly those that blend together monarchist nostalgia and Orthodox faith. This message speaks to a segment of Russian émigrés and is spread by organizations such as Yakunin’s Dialogue Franco-Russe (he is its honorary president), which was formerly led by Alexandre Troubetskoï. A prominent member of a Russian aristocratic family, Yakunin is also known for glorifying Russia’s czarist militarist past. He exemplifies the type of figure targeted by Malofeev’s monarchist movement, which has played up nostalgia for the Romanovs (this resonates, for example, in parts of Bosnia) and Russia’s imperial glory.

Local Enablers of Strategic Conservatism

In some of the countries studied in this report, local or bottom-up demand for traditional values and Russia’s leadership is more pronounced than Russia’s top-down outreach to local actors. This demand is fostered by political parties, cultural and intellectual circles with ties to politicians, and business actors connected to politics and economic interests. This interplay of local and Russia-driven activity constitutes strategic conservatism’s unvirtuous cycle. Akin to the cycle of malign economic influence described in the first Kremlin Playbook, it provides easy access for the Kremlin’s influence efforts with minimal investment, and both sides can grow each other’s influence within a country.

Some political parties and politicians align themselves with Russia’s views on LGBTQ+ issues, nationalism and sovereignty, and family values and emulate the Kremlin’s legislative and messaging strategy. The French New Right is an example of this; it is an umbrella organization for several small parties, individuals that have ties to Dugin, and more conservative Christian Democrats who praise Russia’s defense of the traditional family. Others have built up the Russian leadership as the only defender of these values and certain religious and ethnic groups. This is particularly visible in Bosnia, where Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik often elevates Russia as the protector of Serbs and Orthodox
Christians—as opposed to the European Union. Dodik is also a vocal opponent of Bosnia’s accession to NATO and of EU-led sanctions against Russia.153 This dynamic is similarly visible in Greece, where former defense minister Panos Kammenos decried the OCU autocephaly decision as triggering the end of Russia’s security guarantees in the Aegean, an odd statement coming from a NATO member.154

The “defender of traditional values” theme has also been used to defend Eastern Christians in the Middle East against the spread of “Islamization.” This has earned plaudits from some French conservative political circles, in particular in support of Russia’s military intervention in Syria and across the region. Several French representatives traveled to Syria in 2015 and 2016, some likely in support of the Assad regime and its perceived contribution to the fight against terrorism.155 A select number of French cultural organizations that orbit these same political circles also amplify Russia’s “civilizational mission” to save Christianity and tradition, and the vision of Russia as the “last white world,” in some more extreme circles.156

A final group of local enablers are business leaders with financial interests in Russia or ties to Russian business interests in their country. These leaders are often connected to conservative or traditionalist circles—though a few have more ambiguous political affinities—and share ideological affinities with the Kremlin. They fund religious communities (including churches and related publications) or connect with Russian cultural and political interests. This pattern is visible in Ivan Savvidis, a Russian-Greek dual citizen who has invested in church construction and pilgrimage tourism in Greece and on Mount Athos.157 Another example is Xavier Moreau, the head of a French consulting company based in Moscow and former Rassemblement National (the largest French far-right party) member who connected French and Russian business interests.158 Moreau served as an “election observer” in a 2018 vote in the unrecognized Donetsk People’s Republic.159

Other business actors operate directly in politics. For example, Levan Vasadze, a conservative Georgian businessman, has ties to Russian business (including with Malofeev and Yakunin), the Georgian Orthodox Church, and pro-Russian organizations. Vasadze specifically entered politics in 2021 to address the “social and ideological crisis” driven, in his view, by closer ties to the European Union.160

There are limits to what local enablers and networks can accomplish. “Values” can be widely defined and may focus on narrowly defined historical moments and nationalism that do not deliver strategic rewards for the Kremlin. Meetings with Russian or ROC officials or trips to Moscow offer symbolism but do not necessarily translate into tangible policy change. Although there may be limited benefit in the short term, the Kremlin always seeks to extend and deepen its in-country networks, affinity groups, and social media platforms, which can be called upon for a variety of issues beyond traditional values.
Impact and Limitations: Keeping the Faith

As this analysis makes clear, influence through strategic conservatism can feed internal divisions within countries. Indeed, it has had some impact in the countries studied for this report that align with some of the Kremlin’s goals.

Strategic Conservatism’s Impact across Case Studies

Key

- **High Impact to Marginal Impact**: Shows, out of the strategic aims and impacts listed in the report, where there has been more “return on investment” for Russia’s strategy.
- **Locally driven to Russia-driven**: Shows whether there is local demand for Russian influence or intervention, or whether Russia applies influence through conservatism from outside with little domestic demand for it.

Source: Based on the authors’ research and analysis.
In France, with support from the Russian state, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has reappropriated several churches and achieved a certain degree of canonical reconciliation, deepening its outreach to Orthodox constituencies there. Appeals and receptivity to a traditional values discourse have fostered connections between Russian and French political (primarily right-wing) and intellectual circles, along with the business community. The view among some of these French groups that Russia is a defender of tradition and Christians has delivered support for the Kremlin’s interventions abroad, particularly in Syria and, to some extent, Ukraine—as evidenced by visits from French officials to Crimea.

In Georgia, in part due to the complex situation of the occupied territories, the Georgian Orthodox Church has not recognized the Orthodox Church of Ukraine’s (OCU) autocephaly, a situation Moscow wishes to maintain. The ROC has also assisted in the Russification of these occupied territories through services and the transformation of churches. The 2016 referendum attempt around same-sex marriage in particular provided an opportunity, in connection with domestic implementers of strategic conservativism, to make the Georgian authorities appear weak and unable to protect traditional values. This strengthened some of these domestic implementers and put into question the country’s Western orientation. Linkages through organizations such as the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy (IAO) and supportive business interests have strengthened connections with Georgian political circles and other actors of strategic conservativism in Georgia, who urge closer ties with Moscow and distance from a decadent West.

In Bosnia, the view of Russia as a defender of Serbs and Orthodox believers (in Republika Srpska), revitalized since the 1990s, has yielded growing support for Russian foreign policy preferences. It has also contributed to the subsequent institutional gridlock that prevents Bosnia from moving toward the Euro-Atlantic community and made the country more beholden to Moscow and Belgrade. After the annexation and invasion of Ukraine, the Bosnian government refused to support sanctions against Russia at the insistence of Republika Srpska’s leadership. Common Orthodox identity has also lent added legitimacy to political contacts and supported the glorification of paramilitary cooperation, both during the war in the 1990s and currently in Ukraine (Republika Srpska has been a recruitment ground for foreign fighters).

In Greece, the ROC’s outreach, supported by online and media propaganda, has fostered divisions within the Church of Greece and on Mount Athos regarding the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s authority. The Church of Greece is an influence multiplier for Russia in Greece, as a powerful voice of authority within Greek public opinion and a stakeholder in the political sphere. Through the church, the Holy and Great Council, and online networks, Russia has been able to push anti-Western narratives, supported by appeals to fears regarding Turkey’s aggressive behavior (reinforcing the “Russia as protector” narrative). Finally, pilgrimages and visits to Mount Athos have provided quasi-messianic legitimation for Vladimir Putin and reinforced the appearance of positive Russian-Greek relations—almost making them a religious imperative.

The Limits of Strategic Conservatism

However, some strategies and tools related to strategic conservatism have shown certain limitations.

First, some approaches appear paradoxical or counterproductive. While the Moscow Patriarchate has ambitions to (re)unite global Orthodoxy under its leadership, it has taken steps that break down ecclesiastical and theological unity through its decision to break communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the boycott of the Holy and Great Council, and the fostering of divisions within some other
national churches. For its part, the Kremlin has appealed to both imperial and Soviet nostalgia or imagery to reinforce national identity and create a sense of historical continuity, but these eras are sharply at odds with each other and entailed markedly different treatments of the Orthodox church. Despite this, Patriarch Kirill has encouraged the merger of these symbols, frequently with a militaristic flair, most visibly in the new Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Patriot Park outside Moscow.\textsuperscript{161}

Abroad, appeals to traditional values, existential threats to national identity, or religious connection have at times become so overt as to make the Kremlin’s local partners persona non grata. The clearer the link to their association with Moscow, the greater the limitation on what local partners can deliver on a broader national or European scale, or even in relation to the United States (though these groups or individuals can continue to sow division internally).

Second, the emphasis on religion and traditional values has created vulnerabilities for the Kremlin both internally and abroad, with some events even backfiring. It has become increasingly difficult for the Russian government to balance support for a dominant religion (i.e., Orthodoxy) for political gain on the one hand and the appearance (and rules) of a multiethnic, multiconfessional, and secular state on the other. Associating with Russian religious figures and other public figures who declare citizens of other faiths as not “truly Russian” may become a liability for the regime and create internal divisions.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shone a bright light on some of these tensions between the Kremlin and the ROC. While there have been genuinely difficult international debates regarding allowing worshippers to continue exercising their faith despite public health restrictions, some ROC leaders directly challenged the Russian government’s measures. Some priests denounced stay-at-home orders as the “work of the devil” and threatened damnation for those following the restrictions, while others insisted ringing church bells was the best way to fight the virus.\textsuperscript{162} The financial impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the ROC and its parishes may increase its reliance on state resources and thus make it more dependent on government patronage.\textsuperscript{163} Similar dynamics have unfolded in Georgia.\textsuperscript{164}

The fallout from events surrounding the speech of a Russian Duma official to the Georgian parliament, also called “Gavrilov’s night,” was a powerful example of Russian strategic conservatism—including how it can backfire for the Kremlin. It caused unrest and deepened societal divisions in Georgia, but the extraordinary attention given to this event heightened awareness of Russia’s use of faith to divide society and may have diminished this particular tool’s effectiveness in the future.

In some of the most receptive countries, opposition forces have also begun to develop responses to these influence efforts. In November 2021, Hungary’s leading opposition figure Peter Marki-Zay addressed the international appeal of Russian strategic conservatism: “Let me state very strongly for all Americans that to be a part of Putin’s fan club doesn’t make you a conservative. . . . Real conservatives consider Christianity to be something very much (the) opposite of the policies defended by
Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban.” It is a particularly powerful statement in a country where the incumbent has adopted strategic conservatism as a shield against criticism in Russia’s mold and has frequently railed against the European Union and its perceived decadence and loss of morality.

Finally, the efforts of some actors of strategic conservatism have missed the mark or shown some limitations. For all its claims of leading a moral crusade, the ROC is not necessarily viewed as the principal norms entrepreneur at home: in survey data, it ranks only fourth in institutions the public “fully or rather” trust regarding moral and ethical authority (behind the armed forces, the presidency, and organizations defending the rights of women). Orthodoxy remains a largely cultural label for many in Russia; while this may explain the ROC’s push for followers abroad, it also means the local demand and acclaim for Russia as a “moral” or “religious” leader in some countries is based on a distorted picture and false assumptions.

Beyond the church, the grand assumptions of those who champion strategic conservatism have fallen short. For example, Alexander Dugin incorrectly predicted that Milorad Dodik’s election in 2014 would trigger Republika Srpska’s unification with Serbia and a reorientation toward Russia in other Orthodox countries, though Bosnia’s institutional architecture is fraying at the seams under pressure from Dodik and the support he receives from Belgrade and the Serbian Orthodox Church.

**Keeping the Faith**

In spite of limitations, the goals and potential impact of the Kremlin’s instrumentalization of faith and values are cause for serious concern. It is essential that the West keep and protect the faith in the face of Russia’s use of strategic conservatism. Those seeds were planted domestically in Russia for ideational and repressive purposes, but they brought with them the risk (or hope, for the Kremlin) of a more significant and divisive harvest abroad.

The tools and messaging of strategic conservatism are pervasive and powerful for citizens who are experiencing a crisis of confidence in their own democracy, profoundly questioning the merits of globalization, and searching for an authentic identity in less disruptive times. However, strategic conservatism enhances neither the dignity of the individual nor one’s economic prosperity or sense of security. It only provides a false faith that seeks a conflictual and divided earthly kingdom. Against this perverse vision of beliefs and values, these citizens should always be reminded of and inspired by Timothy, chapter 4, verse 7 of the Bible, to “fight the good fight . . . and to keep the faith.”
France plays a key role in Russia’s outreach in Europe. The bilateral relationship is rooted in history. While the two countries have confronted each other on several occasions—the Holy Alliance after the Napoleonic conquests, the Crimean War of 1853–56, and France’s participation in the intervention during the Russian Civil War—they have also found themselves on the same side of both World Wars. In the postwar period, Gaullist France was relatively close to the Soviet Union, in which it saw a counterweight to U.S. domination; de Gaulle himself always believed in the existence of an “eternal Russia” under its Communist appearance.169 More recently, French president Emmanuel Macron has been calling for a “reset” of the relationship with Russia. Although Macron has denounced Russian media propaganda and supported the sanctions related to Crimea’s annexation, Donbas insurgency, and Navalny’s poisoning against Moscow, and despite competition in Syria and in parts of Africa, Paris continues to consider Russia a legitimate partner to be engaged with rather than isolated.170 For instance, the year 2021 has been declared the year of French-Russian decentralized cooperation.171

The bilateral relationship is also shaped by fruitful economic cooperation. In 2019, French exports to Russia amounted to $6.52 billion, with Russian exports to France totaling $4.65 billion.172 Both countries are large trading partners for each other, primarily in the agri-food, financial, and banking sectors, as well as in the distribution, energy, and automobile sectors.173 France has powerful firms working in Russia and lobbying for good relations—and, if possible, the lifting of sanctions.
France also enjoys a privileged cultural status on Russia's soft-power radar. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of Russian émigrés in France during the interwar period, and their presence since, has made the country particularly receptive to Russian cultural narratives. A newly erected (2016) Orthodox cathedral—the largest in Europe—in the center of Paris, a few blocks from the Eiffel Tower, can be seen by anyone cruising on the Seine River. This Russian symbol in the heart of the capital epitomizes Russia's cultural outreach in France and the place moral conservatism occupies therein. This moral conservatism means a commitment to values presented as traditional in their view of the moral order, both in relation to family structures (heterosexuality, but also refusal of medically assisted procedures for procreation) and to national structures (a homogenous nation based on the rejection of immigration to varying degrees).

There are several channels through which Russia's moral conservatism attempts to establish communication with French audiences. Moving from more to less culturally specific, these include (1) the activism of both the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the so-called Orthodox oligarchs, (2) the shared values with conservative Catholics, (3) Russia's promotion of its Islamic identity, and (4) the wider deployment of conservative values to attract segments of the right-wing political spectrum. This dialogue between Russia's moral conservatism actors and their French counterparts relies on a well-balanced relationship that is driven at least equally, if not more, by French demand than by Russian outreach. In a few cases, this moral conservatism borders on strategic conservatism, where Russia instrumentalizes this cultural and conservative relationship to its benefit, rather than responding to domestic demand.

ORTHODOXY: RUSSIA'S FLAGSHIP OF MORAL CONSERVATISM

Orthodoxy plays a central role in the reassertion of the Russian state both at home, through the promotion of patriotism, and abroad, by assisting the majority of Russia's foreign policy endeavors (with some caveats on issues related to Ukraine). But Orthodoxy is more than just the ROC and its administrative embodiment, the Moscow Patriarchate; it can take a more ideological form—namely so-called political orthodoxy—in which religion is purely instrumental. In France, Russian Orthodoxy's presence is embodied both by the Moscow Patriarchate, which is mostly busy regaining the loyalty of émigré parishes, and by Orthodox businessmen and their foundations.

Regaining Loyalty (and Properties): The Moscow Patriarchate's Fights

Like every church, the Moscow Patriarchate is both a spiritual and a temporal power: it seeks both to achieve religious goals and to assert its material security. The canonical reconciliation of 2007 between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) performed multiple functions: for the ROC, it has (almost) brought an end to a 70-year-long schism and reaffirmed the unity of the ROC as a body of Christ over everything Russian; for the Russian state, the reconciliation was seen as a confirmation of the end of the Soviet period and a reaffirmation of Russia's millennium-long historical continuity—a central narrative for the regime's nationhood.174

The need to bring Russian churches around the world back under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate has intensified since October 2018, when the latter unilaterally severed links with the Patriarchate of Constantinople after it decided to grant autocephaly to the Eastern Orthodox Church in Ukraine.175 This modern schism between two patriarchates has unleashed a new level of geopolitical competition inside the Orthodox realm, putting pressure on local communities and
other patriarchates to take sides. For Moscow, it has thus become crucial to secure the loyalty of key symbolic churches in France and prevent them from remaining with or rallying behind Constantinople.

The 2007 canonical reconciliation also brought to light material issues related to church property rights. Several church buildings erected in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are architectural treasures that Russia wishes to regain.176 The Department of Economic Affairs within the presidential administration, led by Vladimir Kozhin, a member of President Vladimir Putin’s inner circle, has been the key institution in charge of Russia’s real estate abroad.177 As early as 2001, the ROC called for the reacquisition of Orthodox churches worldwide, insisting on their historical and material value:

One has to notice that in Western Europe the Russian Church, based on the solid support of the state, has created real architectural chefs d’œuvre. . . . Unfortunately, a large part of our property abroad has left the jurisdiction of Russia and ROC. Today the Church cooperates actively with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to bypass the consequences of the criminal folly of the state atheism period. One of the central goals of our cooperation today is the re-establishment of historical justice with the goal of returning these architectural and artistic treasures, built by Russian masters and on the nation’s money, to the Homeland.178

Today, the ROC is still fighting to regain jurisdiction over some Russian churches on French territory. ROCOR’s Diocese of Geneva and Western Europe, which includes parishes in Lyon and Meudon, among others, and the Diocese of Chersonése have declared their allegiance to the Moscow Patriarchate. After several years of legal battles, the Moscow Patriarchate also won the famous Saint-Nicholas Cathedral in Nice in 2011, the third-largest Orthodox church outside Russia behind the new one in Paris and the Mount Athos Russian monasteries. The cathedral had previously been under the Constantinople Patriarchate’s umbrella.179 The Moscow Patriarchate can also claim the Church of the Three Doctors in Paris: its legal status has not yet been resolved, but the parish has been loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate since its creation in 1930.180

However, Russia lost the legal battle over Nice’s second Orthodox church, Saint Nicholas and Saint Alexandra: following several years of judicial back-and-forth after Russia claimed it in 2014, French courts eventually decided in 2021 that the church would remain property of the French state.181 To insulate itself from the pressures of the Moscow Patriarchate, the parish—largely populated by Moldovans and Georgians, French citizens or emigrants—chose to move from Constantinople to the Romanian Patriarchate (the ROC does not compete with other patriarchates identified with a nation-state).182

The ROC may also decide not to claim property rights if it can secure the religious loyalty of the parish. The two parishes of Saint Michael Archangel in Cannes and Saint Alexander Nevsky in Paris decided in 2019, by a vote of their respective parishes, to leave the Constantinople Patriarchate to join Moscow—admittedly at the insistence of the latter but also because the community yearned to mend the schism born of the Bolshevik revolution.183 Yet their buildings are classified as historical monuments and remain the inalienable property of members of the parish. The Biarritz parish, meanwhile, has refused to change its allegiance and remains loyal to Constantinople. Although a group of its believers tried in 2004 to join the Moscow Patriarchate, creating tensions within the community, the case was dismissed by French courts.184
The key battle for the ROC in France has been the construction of the new Paris-based Holy Trinity Cathedral, which also contains a Russian school and a Russian spiritual and cultural center. The project was launched in 2008 during discussions between Putin and then-president Nicolas Sarkozy. Funded entirely by Russia, the project was challenged several times by French authorities under former president François Hollande, which were hesitant about what they interpreted as a political project showcasing Russia’s influence in Europe: the first architectural proposal was too exuberant and did not respect French norms, and there were fears of the new place hosting tapping devices. To secure the plot of land on Quai Branly, Moscow organized an intense lobbying effort involving key powerbrokers such as Orthodox businessmen Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev; Prince Alexandre Troubetskoï, then-chair of the French-Russian Dialogue Association; and future bishop Tikhon (Shevkunov), rumored to be close to Putin. The cathedral was eventually inaugurated in the fall of 2016 in the presence of Patriarch Kirill; Putin, unwelcome given Franco-Russian tensions over the Syrian crisis, was absent.

Despite France not being a majority-Orthodox country, the ROC is quite active there, primarily due to the émigré legacy and the combination of religious loyalty, property rights, and cultural heritage. Yet the ROC itself does not actively promote moral conservatism on the French scene: it has not, for instance, been vocal in domestic French debates on gay marriage. Instead, it serves primarily as a paradiplomacy tool for Moscow, contributing to Russia’s cultural prestige and its legitimacy in regaining real estate abroad.

ORTHODOX OLIGARCHS AND THE TRADITIONAL VALUES CARD

While the ROC in France is focused on managing intra-Orthodox competition, the language of moral conservatism is deployed by two Orthodox oligarchs, Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev. Both share the same outreach focus: promoting Russia’s interests in France by using the Russian diaspora and the issue of conservative values as a gateway to the French political class and French corporations.

Their respective foundations, Saint Andrew and Saint Basil, both sponsor Russian émigré associations in France. To rally émigré circles behind the Putin regime, Yakunin organized a cruise for Russian émigrés in 2010 that reversed the journey of White exiles at the end of the Civil War, from the Mediterranean back to the Black Sea. While those most loyal to the Romanovs refused to participate, instead demanding property restitution and the removal of Lenin from the Red Square Mausoleum, many others supported this symbolic rapprochement with the Kremlin. A few years later, at the peak of the Ukraine crisis, one of Malofeev’s closest allies, Paris-based prince Dmitri Shakhovskoï, launched the “Russian Bridge” initiative, a petition of solidarity with Russia aimed at defending Moscow’s position in the conflict. It gathered the signatures of more than 100 descendants of the Russian aristocracy, including the Tolstoys, the Pushkins, and the Sheremetievs.

Yet each oligarch has a specific niche: Yakunin targets a more official segment of French-Russian relations and has focused on a key bilateral association, the Franco-Russian Dialogue (see below), and connections with big French firms. Malofeev works almost exclusively at the far-right level, regularly funding meetings to connect the European and Russian far right with one another and with monarchist circles. He hopes to launch a new far-right International (a worldwide group dedicated to these ideals) and refurbish the monarchist ideal. These two strategies are not necessarily in tension and sometimes overlap in their networking, but they remain dissociated, as Yakunin tends to target more mainstream figures while Malofeev specializes in more marginal ones.
Contrary to the ROC, these two Orthodox oligarchs and their foundations openly promote a moral conservatism agenda that emphasizes a political interpretation of so-called traditional values. They use that agenda as leverage for advancing Russia’s economic and strategic interests: networking with big French corporations and their CEOs (Yakunin has been more successful at this than Malofeev) and getting public political support for Russia’s international stances (here, both have succeeded). Through his former personal assistant Alexey Komov, Russia’s representative to the World Congress of Family, Malofeev allegedly financed the big anti-gay marriage movement La Manif pour tous (one of its leaders denies this claim) and tried (but failed) to launch several French-speaking Catholic fundamentalist websites.

**SPEAKING TO CATHOLICS: AN ECUMENICAL CONSERVATISM**

Beyond this Orthodox realm, Russia has also developed contacts with some French Catholic circles. This rapprochement is mostly the result of internal factors that are currently changing the space available for the expression of religious beliefs in French politics. Historically, the French state has been built on a strong secular line of *laïcité*, understood as confining religious identity strictly to private life and separating the church from the state. This ban of religion from the public space is currently being challenged by a trifold phenomenon: (1) the emergence of Islam in the public space (Islam is not mentioned in the *laïcité* law of 1905); (2) the crafting of a new, vocal, “identitarian Christianism”—a reference to France’s Catholic roots as a cultural, non-religious component of identity—as an answer to Islam; and (3) changes in public opinion, with younger generations more favorable to public expressions of religious belonging.

**The Anti-Gay-Marriage Movement**

The consolidation of a more visible political Catholicism on the French political scene has helped Russia find new interlocutors that are sensitive to a traditional values agenda, particularly around social and family issues. Moscow’s warmer relationship with the Vatican in recent years, as well as Orthodox officials’ regular visits to Pope Francis, have helped put Russia on the radar of many Catholics worldwide.

Several leading figures of the French anti-gay-marriage movement *La Manif pour tous*, chaired by Ludovine de La Rochère, have expressed their support for Russia’s moral conservatism. Yet they have also clashed with their Russian counterpart, the Nastoiashchaia Sem’ia (Real Family) association. First, *La Manif pour tous* did not want to present LGBTQ+ people as the main enemies, while the Russian team did; second, *La Manif pour tous* has tried to present itself as pluri-religious in order to attract secular citizens, as well as Jewish and Muslim communities, who oppose gay marriage, whereas the Russian groups defending the so-called traditional family heavily reference Christianity.

One of the more notable pro-Russian groups in France was the ultra-Catholic movement Dies Irae, which shut down around 2015. Its leader, Fabrice Sorlin, a Front National (FN, now Rassemblement National, or RN) candidate in the 2007 parliamentary elections, founded the France-Europe-Russia Association and now lives in Russia. The pro-life association Alliance Vita is also known for its defense of Russia as the savior of Christian values. The association was founded by former minister Christine Boutin—who played a key role in shaping the anti-gay-marriage movement and was hosted very regularly at Narochnitsskaya’s Institute for Democracy and Cooperation (see below)—and is now led by Odile Tequi, who spoke at an anti-gay-marriage session of the Russian Duma in 2013. Both Boutin and Tequi have thanked Russia for its fight against the normalization of homosexuality.
The rapprochement between some segments of the French Catholic scene and Russia also relies on current geopolitical tensions in the Middle East and the issue of protecting Eastern Christians, particularly in Syria. Like Russia, France has historically positioned itself as a protector of Eastern Christians. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) *SOS Chrétiens d’Orient* has become the go-between for these trilateral networks, uniting the French far right and fundamentalist Catholics, pro-Assad groups, and Russia. (Chrétiens d’Orient has no ties to Oeuvre d’Orient, the historical NGO in charge of links with Eastern Christians, created in the nineteenth century.) Created in 2013, the Catholic NGO insists on France’s civilizational mission to defend Christianity against its enemies and claims to carry out humanitarian activities in Syria and Iraq, and to a lesser extent in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Armenia. Founded and led by Charles de Meyer (now parliamentary assistant to Thierry Mariani, see below) and Benjamin Blanchard, two figures close to far-right member of parliament (MP) Jacques Bompard, the NGO has succeeded in bringing together the diverse ideological family of the French far right: current and former National Rally members, fundamentalist Catholics, and more radical groups such as Oeuvre francaise, Jeunesses nationalistes, and Génération identitaire.¹⁹⁶

Flush with a budget of €7 million (approximately $8.2 million) in donations every year, *SOS Chrétiens d’Orient* does not hide its support for Bashar al-Assad, portraying the president as Christians’ last hope, the only one who can resist Islamization. The NGO has worked with local charity foundations, including one led by First Lady Asma al-Assad, and has reportedly supported the largest pro-Assad militia network, the National Defense Forces (NDF), collecting funds for villages under the control of two NDF warlords accused of war crimes.¹⁹⁷ It has sent tens of volunteers to the Syrian theater and served as the main intermediary for several groups of French MPs that visited Damascus, organizing meetings with the Syrian Orthodox patriarch, the Greek Orthodox patriarch, the Vatican representative, and Bashar al-Assad himself.¹⁹⁸ Thanks to its connections inside the military, the association had enough lobbying power to secure in 2017 the title of “partner of the National Defense,” a label assigned by the French Ministry of Defense that allows an organization to engage in close cooperation with the military and defense industries.¹⁹⁹

The NGO’s links with Russia are multilayered. First, Chrétiens d’Orient was introduced to the Syrian leadership through Frédéric Chatillon. Fined in a lower court for concealing the National Front’s misuse of public money, Chatillon is a successful businessman whose public relations firm Riwal has been in charge of promoting the Syrian regime’s image in France.²⁰⁰ A former leader of the far-right student union GUD, Chatillon has worked with different far-right groups. He is a close adviser of Marine Le Pen and used his contacts in Moscow to help secure Russian funding for her 2017 presidential campaign.²⁰¹ Second, several Chrétiens d’Orient volunteers reportedly fought in Donbas for secession before engaging with the peshmergas in Iraq.²⁰²

Among the French MPs who have traveled to Syria and benefited from the NGO’s support is Thierry Mariani, co-president of the Franco-Russian Dialogue, who organized a trip to Crimea in 2015. Of the 10 French MPs who went to Crimea in 2015, half went to Syria in 2015–2016.²⁰³ Many of these figures are part of the so-called La Droite populaire (those members of the Républicains who are close to the RN on the issue of immigration and national identity), which explains this overlap between pro-Russian and pro-Syrian affinities. But this overlap is a broader trend across political families: one-third of the members of the France-Syria friendship group in the French National Assembly are also members of the France-Russia friendship group, and this overlap rises to one-half in French Senate groups.²⁰⁴
French Converts to Orthodoxy
Several converts to Orthodoxy have likewise become intermediaries between France and Russia in the name of shared moral conservative values. One example is Jean-François Colosimo, a famous publishing house director who was formerly director of both the National Center for Books and CNRS (the French Academy of Sciences) publishing house, the state agency in charge of supporting the book industry, and of the Catholic (Dominican) publishing house Éditions du Cerf. Since converting to Orthodoxy in 1980, he has contributed to the rise of a new wave of young conservative public intellectuals, such as Eugénie Bastié or Mathieu Bock-Côté. He is close to several political figures who either represent the hardline far right, such as Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, or are Républicains who lean toward the National Rally, such as former Sarkozy adviser Patrick Buisson, also close to Marion. He also has ties to the leading French far-right newspaper Valeurs actuelles, which published two controversial open letters from retired and active members of the military lambasting a supposed disrespect for tradition and growth of the Islamist dogma in France. Another prestigious publishing house, Les Éditions des Syrtes, plays a role in promoting Russia among French cultural circles; its head, Serge de Pahlen, is a member of Malofeev’s Foundation Board.

Another convert of note is Christophe Levalois, who was the longtime deacon of an Orthodox church in Paris before returning to civilian life in 2020 and is the editor of the French Orthodox website Orthodoxie.com. Levalois was a member of the French New Right movement Groupement de recherche sur la civilisation européenne (GRECE) and has presented himself as a perennialist—the philosophical-religious movement inspired by René Guénon and Julius Evola, to which Alexander Dugin also belongs.

Russia’s calls for moral conservatism have been well received among French Catholic conservatives and those close to or part of the far right. Yet it seems clear that the agendas of local actors are the primary drivers of this connection rather than it being initiated by Russia. They choose to make use of Russia’s posture because it consolidates their own outreach strategy. This is reinforced by the fact that Alexander Dugin, the infamous Eurasianist geopolitician, has lost a large part of his contacts with the French far right, which now relies more on Renaud Camus’s “theory” of “Great Replacement” than on Russian references.

SPEAKING TO FRENCH MUSLIMS: RUSSIA’S UNKNOWN ISLAMIC DIPLOMACY IN EUROPE
One tends to forget that Russia has developed a strong and multifaceted Islamic diplomacy to speak to the Muslim world. This cultural and religious diplomacy, inaugurated in the 1990s by the Republic of Tatarstan as a way to secure its own voice (Tatarstan still has an office in Paris today), has now been recentralized by the regime. Today, Russia’s Islamic diplomacy is embodied by the two central institutions representing Russian Islam, the Moscow- and Ufa-based Spiritual Administrations of Muslims of the Russian Federation as well as, more informally, by figures such as the infamous Chechen head of state, Ramzan Kadyrov.

Spiritual Boards Diplomacy
In Europe, Russia tends to dispatch only respectable figures and institutions to represent Islam. For instance, Russia organized in December 2018 the 14th International Muslim Forum in Paris, which brought together Russian representatives from both Spiritual Administrations of Muslims, the Secretariat of the International Muslim Forum, the Council of Muslim Cult—France’s main official
Islamic body—and several other French and European Islamic institutions. At that event, both Council of Muftis chief mufti Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin and president of the European Muslim Forum Abdul-Wahed Niyazov (a Russian convert now living in Europe) presented Russia as an example of “moderate” and “traditional” Islam to follow. Damir Mukhetdinov, head of the Centre for Islamic Studies at St. Petersburg University and first deputy chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims, insisted on the existence of a distinctively Russian Islamic theology that marries the traditions of the European enlightenment and the Islamic world.  

The broad storyline presented at the forum was that the Russian theological school would have particular value for Muslim minorities in secular countries where integration processes are still nascent. The forum was also an opportunity for Russia to brand itself as one of the most Muslim-friendly countries in Europe and seek to attract European and Middle Eastern investors to its rapidly developing halal business sector.

Kadyrov’s Radical Claims

Outside of this official Islamic diplomacy, the contribution of Ramzan Kadyrov to Russia’s Islamic diplomacy is notable. More than unwelcome in Europe, Kadyrov limits himself to contacts in the Middle East, mostly Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Libya. Yet his statements are broadly circulated among the Chechen diaspora globally. France hosts a relatively important Chechen community (between 15,000 and 20,000 people) that consists mainly of political refugees who have fled the Chechen conflicts and the violence of the Kadyrov regime. The community is nonetheless penetrated by the Chechen security services, and some segments of it have radicalized.

Kadyrov’s inflammatory declarations—followed by those of the chief mufti of the Spiritual Board of Chechen Muslims—against France’s secularist tradition and his condoning of violence against any representation of the Prophet may thus speak to some French Muslims—and not only Russian-speaking ones. For instance, two well-known Chechen mixed martial arts (MMA) fighters, Zelim Imadaev and Albert Duraev, who are extremely popular on social media, applauded the murder of French teacher Samuel Paty in the fall of 2020. MMA champion Khabib Nurmagomedov, also from the North Caucasus, did not openly celebrate it but expressed his hate for President Macron, stating “May God Disfigure the Face of this Creature.”

However, this radical Islamic conservatism should not be considered a full part of Russia’s portfolio of moral conservatism. First, Russian authorities are very careful to avoid embracing many of Kadyrov’s declarations on Islam and even condemn some of them. Both Spiritual Administrations also regularly disavow the Chechen leader’s declarations on Islam. It would thus be a stretch to consider Kadyrov’s posture an integral and coordinated part of Russia’s foreign policy agenda. Second, there is no proven record of European Muslims—in this case French Muslims—who sympathize with Kadyrov’s stance on secularism becoming more supportive of Russia itself. It is therefore unclear whether Russia’s moral conservatism agenda and soft power benefit at all from radical Islamism of Russian origin.

REACHING OUT TO FRENCH POLITICAL FIGURES

Russia’s moral conservatism agenda also entails outreach to the right-wing political class. This includes fringe far-right movements, the RN, and the so-called Droite populaire. Here, moral conservatism emphasizes not only the Christian roots of French culture but also the need to protect France from multiculturalism and immigration, tying it to classic nationalist topics such as opposing the European
Union and promoting a Barres-style patriotism (a “blood and soil” ideology), which may also speak to secular segments of French public opinion. Moral conservatism also appears to be intimately linked with economic interests: business and conservative ethics are entangled to such a point that it is difficult to identify which one dominates.

This is the case, for instance, of the main bilateral association, Dialogue Franco-Russe. It plays a central lobbying role in promoting Russia among the French political class and businesses and has incorporated the moral conservatism narrative. It was long led by Alexandre Troubetskoï (2004 to 2017); a representative of the prestigious Russian émigré aristocratic family, he is a member of a religious association calling for reconciling the ROCOR and ROC and is the president of the Imperial Guard, another association that celebrates the czarist militarist past. Troubetskoï has been very close to both Yakunin and Malofeev: Yakunin is now Dialogue francorusse’s honorary president, while Troubetskoï has founded his own association, the French-Russian Alliance, and is now a member of Malofeev’s monarchist movement in Russia.

Another example of how these networks coalesce around moral conservatism is the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation (IDC), which existed in Paris from 2007 to 2018. The “think tank” served as a platform for Russian authorities to rally as many French political figures as possible around Moscow. It succeeded in attracting several important figures from the Républicains, as well as some far-right personalities and several “sovereignist” experts and politicians. The IDC’s president prior to closure, Nataliya Narochnitskaya, is one of the main Russian Christian Orthodox publicists: she systematically upholds the Moscow Patriarchate and affirms the existence of a specific Orthodox civilization rooted in the predominance of ethnic Russians and characterized primarily by its anti-Western stance. This made her the perfect figure to carry the banner of Russia’s moral conservatism. The debates organized by the IDC combined promotion of Russia’s strategic narratives on the international order; a discourse on the decadence of the West and the dangers of the multicultural, cosmopolitan, and leftist globalist elites; and calls for an alliance between Catholic and Orthodox believers based on Europe’s Christian identity—a topic that gained importance with the Syrian crisis.

The Fringe Far Right

To the right of the National Rally (RN) coexist myriad small movements that have either seceded from the RN or have always been in conflict with it and demonstrate strong support for Russia. The vast majority were formed intellectually by the New Right, embodied in France by GRECE. This fringe far-right admiration for Russia is rooted in the belief that Russia is the last white world, able to rescue white civilization from the disaster of multiculturalism and oppose U.S. unilateralism.

This fringe umbrella includes representatives of the so-called revolutionary conservatives, such as Christian Bouchet, a former FN figure and longtime friend of Alexander Dugin; Alain Soral, a far-right writer who often traveled to Russia and was among the “observers” of the Crimea referendum; Jean-Yves Le Gallou and Yvan Blot (who passed away in 2018), both former members of FN and GRECE as well as regular contributors to Sputnik.fr; and Renaud Camus, who coined the fashionable theory of the “Great Replacement,” which claims that a global elite is colluding against Europe’s white population to replace them with non-European peoples, and who has celebrated Putin’s defense of Europe’s Christian identity.

A more “sovereignist” pro-Russian subgroup includes Philippe de Villiers of Mouvement Pour la France and Nicolas Dupont-Aignan of Debout la République. Both present themselves as fervent defenders of France’s
historical mission in the world, insisting on the need to fight for Christian values and a traditional values agenda. De Villiers, known for his monarchist orientations, worked closely with Malofeev for a few months in 2014 with the hope of building “Vendéan-style” historical parks in Crimea and in Moscow, before distancing himself. Dupont-Aignan has less direct personal connections to Russia.

The small Christian Democrat Party also hosts several figures known for their pro-Russian stances. This is the case of its chair, the former Yvelines deputy Jean-Frédéric Poisson, who met with Metropolitan Hilarion and congratulated Putin on his 2018 reelection. He commended in particular the Russian president’s support for the traditional family, arguing that after being “destroyed by communism,” the traditional family was now under threat in the West due to “market forces.” Another Christian Democrat is Xavier Moreau: a former student at Saint-Cyr (France’s foremost military academy), former paratrooper, former FN member, and head of the Moscow-based consulting company Sokol, he played a central role in establishing contacts between French business circles close to the FN and the Russian business world.

**The National Rally**

The RN has been Moscow’s most vocal supporter on the French political stage. The party’s founding father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, became acquainted with Soviet painter and Russian nationalist Ilya Glazunov as early as 1968. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Le Pen met important Russian political figures on several occasions. These included Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Sergey Baburin, Eduard Limonov, and Aleksandr Dugin, who were also in close contact with representatives of the French New Right.

Though Marine Le Pen, who became party leader in 2011, disagrees with her father on many issues, she has maintained and amplified this Russophile streak. She has called for an “advanced strategic alliance” with Russia, embodied by a continental European axis running from Paris through Berlin to Moscow. According to her, “Mr. Putin is a patriot. He is attached to the sovereignty of his people. He is aware that we defend common values. These are the values of European civilization.”

Marine Le Pen has visited Russia several times, even being received by Putin in March 2017 ahead of the French presidential elections. The darling of Russian TV, she has also been praised in a number of books published in Russian in recent years.

Several other RN figures have likewise been linked to Russia. Marine Le Pen’s niece, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, who promotes hardline far-right positions, attended Malofeev’s famous “Holy Alliance” meeting in Vienna in June 2014. Famous lawyer and RN deputy Gilbert Collard has visited Russia several times; another RN deputy and former European MP, Jean-Luc Schaffhauser, has reportedly been in charge of negotiating the Russian loan to Le Pen’s party; Aymeric Chauprade, a former RN deputy who left it in 2015 to form his own movement, has been in close contact with Malofeev; and Gaëtan Dussausaye, leader of the RN youth movement and a member of RN’s central bureau, is close to the Pushkin Circle, one of the French pro-Russian discussion groups.

**The Républicains**

Among Les Républicains (LR)—a center-right to right-wing political party—several figures have also expressed their support for Russia’s moral conservatism. The highest profile is François Fillon, a 2017 presidential candidate. Known for his Gaullist position and Euroscepticism, as well as his admiration for Thatcherism, Fillon embodies the revival of political Catholicism. An unabashed Catholic, he publicly supported La Manif pour tous, made harsh statements on Islam in France, and stated that family was at the heart of his political project—all gestures that won him the support of the very active
Catholic movement Sens commun. Fillon has also consistently positioned himself close to Russia, defending the annexation of Crimea, asking for sanctions to be lifted, and calling for an alliance with Russia. Fillon’s consultancy, 2F Conseil, was allegedly paid to organize a meeting between Putin, the Total CEO, and a Lebanese businessman. Fillon’s foreign policy advisers include former secretary of state Jean de Boishue (a Russia specialist of Russian aristocratic origin and convert to Orthodoxy) and Igor Mitrofanoff (who is of Russian origin); both are known for their pro-Kremlin stance.

The Russophile faction of LR was long led by Thierry Mariani, vice president of the French-Russian Parliamentary Friendship Group, of which he has been a member since 1993. A former minister of transportation, he has since left LR for the RN. Mariani has a long-standing interest in Russia and began to learn Russian while in high school in the 1970s. In 2010, he founded La Droite populaire within the Union pour un mouvement populaire (LR’s predecessor); it favored a broad conservative coalition that would include the National Front, tougher immigration and asylum policies, and a narrower definition of French identity. When he was an MP for French expatriates (he lost the election in 2017), his district included Russia, which allowed him to travel there very often and cultivate links with the French expatriate community in Russia, especially in business circles. Mariani has also been secretary of the Parliamentary Group for Eastern Christians and has been therefore closely connected to SOS Chrétiens d’Orient.

Several members of the board of the Dialogue francorusse are both politically active in the field of conservative values and engaged in economic cooperation with Russia. This is the case, for instance, of Michèle Assouline, former deputy mayor of the 16th arrondissement in Paris and a specialist in investments for Total and FinaElf who likes to play the Sarah Palin-style “working mom” on social media, and Jean-Pierre Thomas, former LR treasurer and former adviser to Nicolas Sarkozy. The former French president’s inner circles included several pro-Russian figures, among them former minister of family affairs Nadine Morano, who created the parliamentary group “For a new dialogue with Russia,” and former minister for European affairs Pierre Lellouche, who is known for voting in favor of lifting sanctions against Russia and defending the annexation of Crimea. The late Union Populaire Républicaine likewise hosts pro-Russian figures; its president, François Asselineau, who is general inspector at the Finance Ministry, was part of the delegation to Crimea and is vocally pro-Russian, anti-EU, and anti-U.S.

The pro-Russian stance of LR is based, in part, on the party’s deep connections with French big business present in Russia, mostly in the defense industry (e.g., Thales, Dassault, and Alstom), the energy sector (e.g., Total, Areva, and Gaz de France), the food and wholesale industry (e.g., Danone, Leroy-Merlin, Auchan, Yves Rocher, and Bonduelle), the transport industry (e.g., Vinci and Renault), and the banking system (e.g., Société Générale). Many of these big industrial groups’ CEOs have close connections to the Kremlin’s inner circle and have served as intermediaries for Russian interests and worldviews. They include the late former Dassault CEO and former LR mayor Serge Dassault, a vocal supporter of moral conservatism, and Alain Dinin, CEO of Nexity (one of the largest French rental agencies), who helped Russia secure the land for the new Orthodox cathedral in Paris.

**CONCLUSION**

Russia operationalizes moral conservatism to promote its direct strategic interests—for instance, lifting sanctions and legitimizing its actions in Syria—as well as to gain indirect advantage by criticizing European and transatlantic institutions. Yet this overview shows Russia mostly takes advantage of
existing opportunities it can leverage rather than trying to conquer new audiences from scratch. If Russia enjoys obvious strategic benefits from promoting moral conservatism, in the French case the demand side is at least as important—if not more so—than the supply side. For many constituencies on the French political scene, Russia is a currency in their own fight for relevance. Instrumentalization is thus both mutual and relatively equal.
Russia’s historical role in the Balkans resonates to this day. While there were recurrent tensions between Belgrade and Moscow in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Russia is perceived as a protector of Orthodox Christians and Serbs. In addition, the reality of Russia’s policies vis-à-vis Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia) since the late 1990s has placed Russia firmly on the side of the Republika Srpska (RS), the country’s largely homogenous ethnic Serb entity, carved out during the Bosnian War. In many ways, Moscow sided with Slobodan Milosevic’s Serbia as well as Bosnian Serb leaders between 1992 and 1995, including by opposing the lifting of the UN arms embargo, which would have allowed the Bosnian army to defend its territory. Per media estimates, around 500 Russian volunteers fought alongside Bosnian Serb paramilitary units in the war.\(^{230}\)

In the aftermath of the war, Russia recognized Bosnia’s independence in 1992, sent a delegation to the Dayton Peace Accords conference, and contributed troops to the NATO-led peacekeeping operation. However, since Vladimir Putin’s ascension to the Russian presidency, Moscow has consistently supported Banja Luka (the capital of RS) and Belgrade in policies and discourse that have undermined Bosnia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 2020, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov visited Bosnia and met with Milorad Dodik, the Bosnian Serb member of the country’s tripartite presidency. The meeting took place in East Sarajevo, outside the presidency’s offices of the city’s capital, and without any insignia of Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the meeting, Lavrov reiterated Russia’s calls for the closure of the Office of High Representative (OHR), the UN-mandated institution tasked with the implementation of the civilian aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement. He also stressed Moscow’s opposition to constitutional reforms in Bosnia that would eliminate decisionmaking bottlenecks and make the country more functional—one of the conditions for Bosnia’s European integration path.\(^{231}\)

The meeting symbolized the gist of Russia’s policy on Bosnia, defined largely by opposition to the objective of making Bosnia a functional federal state. While Russia officially recognizes Bosnia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, in practice it works to keep the central government dysfunctional, divided, and incapable of forming any coherent foreign policy that would be undesirable for Moscow. First and foremost, such obstruction includes blocking Bosnia’s NATO accession aspirations and preventing foreign policy alignment with the European Union on Russia, whether in regard to the annexation of Crimea or the occupation of Eastern Ukraine.\(^{232}\) Russia’s foreign policy aims in Bosnia are thus focused on an anti-NATO narrative and preventing accession while fostering a view of Russia as the only true ally for Serbs and Orthodox Christians in the Balkans.

Russia pursues its goals in Bosnia via a two-pronged approach. One is by lending support to the local ethno-nationalist proxies whose goals overlap with those of Russia. Working through local proxies
has traditionally entailed lending political support to the political leadership of RS, which has spent the last 15 years obstructing Bosnian state institutions and calling for secession.

The key conduit in this regard is the Bosnian Serb member of the Bosnian presidency, Milorad Dodik, who has been the most vocal opponent of Bosnia’s NATO course and EU-led sanctions against Russia. Russia’s interests are served by the Bosnian Serb leadership’s use of ethnic and entity veto mechanisms provided for by the Dayton constitution to block decisions that are unfavorable to Russia, including the fulfillment of Bosnia’s NATO aspirations. This is exemplified by the repeated failure of the presidency of Bosnia to gather consensus on UN General Assembly resolutions calling on the Russian Federation to withdraw its military forces from Crimea and to end its temporary occupation of Ukrainian territory. Milorad Dodik has also been a staunch opponent of NATO membership, in line with the official position of the Russian government, whose embassy in Bosnia recently explicitly stated that Russia would have to react politically and militarily if any moves were made toward NATO accession.

The Croat nationalist party Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and its leader, Dragan Covic, also act as indirect proxies for Russia. Though the HDZ formally supports Bosnia’s NATO accession path, it opposes the constitutional changes needed to streamline the voting procedures and allow Bosnia to move forward with EU and NATO accession.

The second channel of political influence is the opposition to EU and U.S. policy in multilateral forums such as the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the Peace Implementation Council in Bosnia. The latter oversees the implementation of the civilian aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement and has—in theory—the power to sanction local obstructionists; U.S. and EU policy, implemented through the OHR, aims to render the country’s central government and its decisionmaking mechanisms more functional. However, when such initiatives are put forward, Russia usually opposes them. The latest example of such opposition is the appointment of the German high representative Christian Schmidt. Russia was strongly opposed to this initiative, rejecting the appointment and deeming it illegal and illegitimate because it circumvented the vote on the UNSC; in fact, Russia has sought to close the OHR altogether. Yet the reason Germany decided to circumvent the UNSC is because of the expectation that Russia would have used its veto to block the appointment. On the UNSC, Russia can play a role by exercising its veto on the yearly extension of the EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia; it can also use Bosnia as a negotiating token with the European Union and the United States on other issues.

In practice, opportunism dominates the relationship between the political leadership of Russia and RS. Both sides reap political benefits from this relationship: Milorad Dodik shapes Bosnia’s foreign policy according to Russia’s interests, and Russia supports the political goals of RS on the UNSC—pressing for the closure of the OHR, vetoing the UNSC resolution on the Srebrenica genocide, and threatening the non-extension of the EUFOR and NATO missions.

Public opinion in RS reflects these political alignments. The three main Bosnian ethno-religious groups—Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats—differ substantially in their attitudes toward Russia as well as the United States and the European Union. A 2017 opinion poll found that 89 percent of Bosnian Serbs have a positive opinion of Russia’s role in the country, compared to 43 percent among Croats and only 29 percent among Bosniaks, a group that has the highest degree of identification with a multinational sovereign Bosnian state.
In the same opinion poll, 47 percent of Bosnian Serb respondents saw Russia as the number one ally, compared to 0 percent of Bosniak respondents and only 2 percent of Bosnian Croats. The opinions of Bosnian Serbs are closely aligned with public opinion in Serbia: 80 percent of respondents in Serbia believe that a strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West. In Bosnia, this belief is shared by 55 percent of respondents, higher than the 30 percent share of Orthodox Christians in the total population of Bosnia.

**THE KREMLIN’S EXPLOITATION OF CHRISTIAN ORTHODOX IDENTITY POLITICS THROUGH THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH**

As is the case with the Kremlin's political interests and activities, Russia's use of conservative Orthodoxy to further its goals in Bosnia and the region relies on the work of local Orthodox entrepreneurs. This is first and foremost the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which has its seat in Belgrade. A survey from 2017 suggests a strong association between religion and national identity in Serbia: 78 percent of those surveyed said that being Orthodox Christian is very or somewhat important to their national identity, or more precisely to being "truly" Serbian. This identification has translated into the SOC's involvement in matters of foreign policy for Belgrade, which claims the role of benefactor of the Serbian Orthodox population living outside of Serbia. Furthermore, the 2011 Strategy of the Serbian Government assigned the SOC a central role in preserving and strengthening ties between Serbia and ethnic Serbs living elsewhere in the Western Balkans. Such interest in the rights of the local Serbian population has often translated into political meddling by Belgrade in these countries' domestic affairs, as most potently seen in Montenegro's last elections, but also on matters affecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Kosovo.

In fact, Serbian Orthodox symbolism has accompanied a number of political conflicts in countries in the Western Balkans that host an Orthodox Serb minority. Russia was involved in several recent political incidents, most visibly when the Serbian government sent a Russian-donated train carrying the slogan “Kosovo is Serbia,” painted and decorated with Christian Orthodox symbols, to Kosovo. This generated a standoff at the Kosovo-Serbia border, capturing international headlines. During Lavrov's visit to Bosnia for the Dayton Peace Agreement anniversary, a reportedly stolen, 300-year-old Ukrainian Orthodox icon was gifted to Lavrov by Milorad Dodik. This triggered another international scandal and a subsequent Interpol investigation into the path of the stolen icon from the Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine to the highest political office in Bosnia.

More generally, the recently deceased head of the SOC, Patriarch Irinej, was said to have had good relations with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Furthermore, there are points of overlap between the interests of the ROC and SOC, as both have dealt with the challenges of breakaway Orthodox churches in the post-Yugoslav and post-Soviet era. While the ROC has grappled with the breakaway Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), the SOC is party to jurisdiction disputes with the breakaway churches in Montenegro and, to a lesser degree, North Macedonia. It is therefore unsurprising that the SOC aligned itself with the ROC against the decision by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople to grant autocephaly to the OCU.

In the above disputes (and recent tensions between the SOC and other Balkan countries), the policy of governments and churches are closely intertwined, as both the SOC and ROC have an important political role to play in the foreign policy of their respective governments. The ROC has often been described as a tool in the hands of the Kremlin, used as a manifestation of Russian soft power in
the rest of the Orthodox world. Comparatively speaking, the SOC is said to have retained a higher degree of independence from the government in Belgrade, though it remains an important political actor courted by the government and often acts as its extended arm for the purposes of political legitimization.\(^\text{251}\) The SOC also vocally opposed Montenegro's NATO accession and played a highly political role in Montenegro's last elections, where it swayed the election outcome toward a coalition of pro-Belgrade parties.\(^\text{252}\)

In domestic politics, the close relationship between the SOC and the government in Serbia during Patriarch Irinej's term was visible in his public support of Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic and his policies. The SOC awarded President Vucic its highest decoration, the Order of Saint Sava first grade.

Patriarch Irinej's overt political role was expressed in his criticism of anti-government protests in Serbia, which were organized in response to growing concentration of power by Vucic's party and the repression of political and civil opposition, freedom of speech, and the media.\(^\text{253}\) For its part, the government tolerated the SOC's defiance of Covid-19 distancing and lockdown rules, which took place in spite of the SOC issuing a formal decree to respect the government lockdown rules.\(^\text{254}\) Patriarch Irinej and Montenegro's highest-ranking priest within the SOC, Metropolitan Amfilohije—who both died of Covid-19—contributed to the spread of the virus by encouraging large religious gatherings, downplaying the risks, and not wearing masks in public.\(^\text{255}\) They reportedly described large religious gatherings as God's vaccine.\(^\text{256}\) The protests in Cetinje in September 2021 around the choice of location for the inauguration of the new metropolitan have demonstrated how political the SOC is perceived to be by the majority of the Montenegrin population.\(^\text{257}\)

The relationship between the SOC and the government is similar in RS. The RS government's tolerance of the SOC's violation of laws is most strikingly illustrated by its protracted failure to enforce the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights and remove a Serbian Orthodox church that was illegally constructed in the private backyard of Fata Orlovic, a Bosniak returnee to RS.\(^\text{258}\) (In June 2021, the church was finally dismantled after a 20-year legal battle.\(^\text{259}\)) Finally, unlike in Montenegro and North Macedonia, the Orthodox constituency in RS has made no attempt at autocephaly; that constituency is part of the SOC and is fully aligned with the politics of Belgrade.

When it comes to Russia, the new patriarch, Porfirije Peric, was a disciple of Episcope Irinej Bulovic, known for his close relationship to Russia. Episcope Bulovic was reportedly the Russian favorite in the process of selection of the new patriarch of the SOC. Given the overlap of interests between the two churches and between the governments in Moscow and Belgrade in military, political, and economic realms, one could expect the close relationship between the SOC and the governments in Banja Luka, Belgrade, and Moscow to continue.

**WORKING THROUGH LOCAL PROXIES: THE USE OF STRATEGIC CONSERVATISM**

In line with the aforementioned alignment of religion and politics, Moscow's employment of strategic conservatism in Bosnia is borne out of a triangular connection between the interests of the political leadership in Moscow, Belgrade, and Banja Luka. This involves an overlap between the Kremlin's foreign policy interests, the political agenda of Bosnian Serb politicians obstructing Bosnia's institutions and the country's NATO and EU path, and the political interference by the Serbian government via the SOC in countries that host Serbian Orthodox minorities.
In RS, Russia has thus landed on fertile ground in which political and religious activities overlap. Very little additional investment is needed to exercise influence beyond providing backing for local entrepreneurs and leveraging such entities for the Kremlin’s political goals.

Bosnia’s recent history and contemporary politics are strongly shaped by political claims based on Orthodox religious identity. The political claims and military campaigns pursued by the government in Belgrade and the Bosnian Serb leadership during the war (1992–95), which sought to carve out an ethnically “clean” territory and incorporate it into greater Serbia, were legitimized by these actors as the political right of Bosnia’s Christian Orthodox population to remain in a single state. The SOC played an important political role during the war, most strongly illustrated by the so-called Patriarch’s Paper, the document forming and authorizing a joint Yugoslav-RS negotiation delegation at peace talks in Dayton, Ohio.\(^{260}\) The document was signed jointly by the patriarch of the SOC, former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, and two indicted (and later convicted) war criminals—Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic.\(^{261}\) In his memoir *To End the War*, Richard Holbrooke recalls the signature of Patriarch Pavle at the bottom of the document and the Eastern Orthodox cross as a crowning stamp approving the delegation; the two members who were convicted for war crimes, Karadzic and Mladic, were later excluded on the insistence of the U.S. government.

In the post-conflict period, Serb-Orthodox identity has regularly been used by the Bosnian Serb political leadership to legitimize their contemporary autonomist or secessionist goals. For instance, in Bosnia, the SOC supports and legitimizes those political actors who promote the idea of pan-Serbian unity, obstruct Bosnia’s sovereignty, and make threats of dissolution. A case in point is the attendance of Patriarch Irinej at the “National Day” of RS, which had been pronounced unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2015.\(^{262}\) Despite the decision of the highest court in Bosnia, Milorad Dodik, then president of the RS, held a referendum for instituting a “state” holiday for RS in 2016, and has since threatened to hold a separate referendum for RS to secede from Bosnia. As a result of these actions, the U.S. government placed Milorad Dodik on its sanctions list. In the context of war-time crimes and secessionist goals, Patriarch Irinej’s statements about RS being a “nation-state of Serbs” and God’s creation to ensure the unity and survival of Serbs have provided legitimization to the continued secessionist agenda of the RS leadership.\(^{263}\)

**THE KREMLIN’S INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF PAN-SLAVIC ORTHODOX TIES TO BACK UP ITS ANTI-NATO AGENDA**

While the politicization of conservative Orthodoxy in Bosnia’s Serb-dominated entity is primarily homemade, the use of conservative Orthodox identity in Russian-owned media further legitimizes the overlapping political goals of Moscow and its local proxies.

Russian media outlets in Serbian language, such as Sputnik, were launched following the Russian occupation of Crimea. They amplify the mantra of shared Orthodox ties to promote pro-Kremlin narratives and the image of Russia as a true ally of Balkan Orthodox Christians against the NATO threat.\(^{264}\) Numerous news agencies in RS and Serbia borrow Sputnik’s articles and their anti-Western narratives and carry them as original reporting.\(^{265}\) The messages promoted by Sputnik in Serbian-language sites and subsequently Serbian news sources reinforce the political agenda of the RS leadership. This includes, for example, denial of the Srebrenica genocide and relativization of war crimes committed by convicted political and military leaders from the RS; antagonistic reporting on
The construction of this church in Banja Luka illustrates the eagerness of local political elites in RS to cozy up to Russia, and the minimal investment needed by Russia to establish its political and religious presence in this part of Bosnia. The church, dedicated to the Romanov dynasty, along with a Russian cultural center, is set to be built on a surface of 6,500 square meters (about 70,000 square feet) in the center of the city. Both the church and the cultural center are reportedly fully funded by the budget of RS, including from funds donated by Serbia, but with no financial investment from Russia. Furthermore, according to local media, the church construction plans were in violation of urban regulations in Banja Luka due to its oversized proportions. Reportedly, the government dealt with this problem by changing the existing urban planning regulations, demonstrating a willingness to go the extra mile to accommodate Moscow.

A smaller Russian monastery, St. Matrona of Moscow, was built in the village of Ritešići in RS 10 years ago at the initiative of local NGO Serbian-Russian Friendship and Unity of Orthodox Peoples.

Besides being instrumentalized by media, this shared Orthodox identity serves as a legitimizing basis for existing political ties and foreign policy interests and unfolds as a parallel process. The engagement of ROC and SOC dignitaries on the margins of the political process is one instrument of such legitimization. Meetings between Russian officials and Serb political figures often have a religious dimension and are followed by meetings with Orthodox church leaders. For instance, Patriarch Kirill’s second official visit to Serbia followed Russian president Vladimir Putin’s visit to Serbia for celebrations marking the 70th anniversary of the Red Army’s liberation of Belgrade.

During his visit to Belgrade in 2011, Putin was awarded the SOC’s highest distinction for, in the words of the SOC itself, “his active love towards the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian people, particularly shown in a brave and persistent protection of the faithful people, churches, monasteries in Kosovo and Metohija, as well as the preservation of the integrity of the Republic of Serbia.” Putin also visited the Orthodox cathedral Sveti Sava in Belgrade in January 2019 to inaugurate the new mosaics funded by Rossotrudnichestvo, Russia’s international development agency. Russia’s contribution reportedly amounted to €10 million (around $11.6 million).

INFORMAL CONNECTIONS THROUGH PAN-SLAVIC NGOS AND RUSSIAN-SERB PARAMILITARY GROUPS

In Bosnia, a wider overlap between Orthodox symbolism, politics, and a clandestine sector was brought to the fore when Milorad Dodik gifted Sergei Lavrov a stolen Ukrainian icon during Lavrov’s visit to Bosnia in December 2020. The Ukrainian government later claimed the icon was a part of its cultural heritage from Luhansk, an area held by Russian-backed separatists. In what emerged as a major international scandal, an Interpol investigation was launched into the origins of the icon’s presence in Bosnia and the icon was returned to Bosnia’s embassy in Moscow. The absence of a reaction by the SOC regarding the stolen icon is notable and indicative of a transactional relationship between the church and the RS government; had it been a stolen SOC icon, the church would likely have been outraged.
The case also highlighted the role of the fringe militant groups that commute between RS and Russia under the guise of Orthodox cultural associations. This network includes Serbian and Russian volunteers in Donbas and Night Wolves—a Russian motorcycle club—who travel mostly undisturbed between Banja Luka and Donbas, either as combatants in Russian operations in Ukraine or for the purpose of participating in yearly Orthodox pilgrimages in RS.

Beyond this case, informal channels of Russian influence in RS are often exercised via nongovernmental entrepreneurs connected to the Kremlin. The deployment of over 100 uniformed Cossacks for intimidation purposes in Banja Luka on election day in October 2014 was widely seen as the Kremlin’s political support for Milorad Dodik, whose electoral win was anything but certain. The group was accompanied by Konstantin Malofeev, sanctioned by the European Union and known as a Kremlin operative who allegedly initiated and funded Russia’s operations in Ukraine. After winning the RS elections, Milorad Dodik awarded Malofeev and two other men close to the Kremlin the so-called Orders of Njegos, First Degree, for contribution to the “formation of the Republika Srpska.”

Various other nongovernmental groups have been deployed to boost Slavic Orthodox ties and glorify paramilitary cooperation in Bosnia in the 1990s and present-day Ukraine while deepening local cleavages and vulnerabilities to destabilize Bosnia. For instance, regular pilgrimages of Russian and local paramilitary groups take place to honor fallen Russian combatants who participated in the Bosnian War. Per media estimates, around 500 Russian foreign fighters participated in the war on the side of the RS army, some actively taking part in ethnic cleansing campaigns against the non-Serb, mostly Bosniak population.

The societal and political consequences of such pilgrimages are predictably destabilizing, as the gatherings are perceived as a provocation and legitimization of ethnic cleansing and rape campaigns by the surviving victims or family members of those who lost their lives.

Visegrad, a city described by the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) as the location of “one of the most comprehensive and ruthless campaigns of ethnic cleansing in the Bosnian conflict,” is a site of such yearly Orthodox pilgrimages organized to honor fallen Russian combatants. Two monuments to Russian volunteers were built in Visegrad, and every year Russian volunteers as well as combatants currently fighting in Donbas gather to pay tribute to the fallen. Representatives of the SOC also attend this pilgrimage, along with RS government representatives and representatives of various local and Russian Orthodox NGOs. Around 3,000 Bosniaks, including many women and children, were killed by Serb forces in and around Visegrad.

Igor Girkin, who played a leading role in the separatist movement in the initial stages of the so-called Russian Spring in 2014 in Eastern Ukraine, was reportedly one of the Visegrad volunteers. His case points to the entanglement between the Russian and Serb paramilitary groups, evidence of the pan-Slavic brotherhood ties which draw on shared Orthodox identity. The so-called Russian Orthodox NGOs that regularly appear in RS, such as the Union of Volunteers of Donbas, therefore, seem to serve the Kremlin’s goals of having a presence on the ground, which can in turn serve as a tool of recruitment of Orthodox foreign fighters for Russia’s military efforts in Ukraine.

For their part, combatants from RS and Serbia have traveled eastward to join Russian fighters in Eastern Ukraine. Their travel reportedly takes place without restrictions on regular flights from Banja Luka, via Belgrade and Moscow, to the occupied areas in Ukraine. And while the Bosnian
prosecutors’ office has processed a number of cases of foreign fighters departing to fight with the Islamic State in Syria, not a single verdict was issued for 11 combatants whom local authorities have said fought in Ukraine. Only one case was brought to court, and it was quickly abandoned due to lack of evidence.

Notably, while the Islamic Community in Bosnia cooperates with the authorities in criminal procedures and deradicalization programs, the SOC plays no such role in regard to the foreign fighters returning from Ukraine, who seem to enjoy complete impunity in the RS. As a result, not a single sentence has been brought against foreign fighters who have returned to RS from Eastern Ukraine. The SOC has not officially condemned or discouraged such departures.

CONCLUSION
In essence, the use of “strategic conservatism” for the Kremlin’s pursuit of political goals in Bosnia builds on the considerable overlap between the Kremlin’s interests and those of its proxies in Banja Luka and Belgrade. Both Banja Luka and Moscow openly define their agenda in Bosnia in opposition to the policy objectives of “Western powers” on the Peace Implementation Council, specifically regarding the mandate of the OHR as well as the EU and NATO military presence. Here, Russia’s goal seems to be to undermine the Western “state-building” agenda and retain its political influence in Bosnia rather than commit any significant investments in the cultural, social, religious, or economic realms. Local demand for Russia’s political and rhetorical support is significant, while only minimal investment from the Kremlin is required.

The pursuit of strategic conservatism in Bosnia is defined less in opposition to Western liberal values (whether social norms or lifestyle choices such as sexual orientation). Instead, it builds on the existing narrative of alleged Serb Orthodox historic victimhood in the region and elevates Russia’s role as their protector. Finally, while the Kremlin’s political support to the Bosnian Serb leadership remains crucial, the SOC is a powerful actor in its own right when it comes to shaping discourse and influencing public opinion. The Kremlin’s use of Orthodoxy and religious connections is therefore an added—almost “bonus”—element rather than the main driving force of strategic conservatism in Bosnia.
Georgia

“BROTHERS” IN FAITH

Tengiz Pkhaladze

Bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia have long been complicated, oscillating between independence and subordination. There is a fundamental incompatibility between Georgia and Russia today, between the former’s democratic aspirations and the latter’s politics of “spheres of influence” and strategic conservatism. In addition, the complex interaction between the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) drives some core dynamics in the bilateral relationship. This is reinforced by the close integration of the GOC within Georgian politics.

Located on the edge of Europe, surrounded by assertive empires, Georgia has had to fight for its statehood and its religion for centuries. In 1783, Heraclius II, the King of Georgian principality Kartli and Kakheti, concluded the Treaty of Georgievsk with Russian empress Catherine II, which turned Georgia into a Russian protectorate. Georgia would not pursue its own foreign policy without Russia’s prior consent and would participate in all military operations conducted by the Russian Empire; in return, the kingdom would maintain its statehood and was guaranteed military-political patronage. This protectorate would be short-lived: in 1801, Russian emperor Paul I abolished the Kartli and Kakheti Kingdom and annexed it (as well as other principalities such as Imereti, Guria, Samegrelo, and Abkhazia). A century later, in May 1918, Georgia regained its statehood for a mere three years; in 1921, Bolshevik Russia invaded Georgia and abolished its statehood again, only to be regained after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries were broken in 2008 after Moscow invaded and recognized the self-proclaimed independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia (hereafter Tskhinvali Region). Today, 20 percent of Georgia’s territory is illegally occupied by Russia, and Russian forces continue installation of barbed wire fences in those territories while intensifying military presence on Georgian soil.

At the same time, the two countries have intensified cooperation on trade, economic, infrastructure, and cultural issues. Russian companies such as Inter RAO, Lukoil, VTB, and Beeline own a considerable share of Georgia’s energy sector, information technologies, media, communications, and banking. In 2012, when the Georgian Dream political coalition of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili (who made his fortune in Russia) won the parliamentary elections, the new government announced a normalization process with Russia. This contributed to strengthening economic ties. Today, Georgia’s economy depends on Russia for tourism, foreign trade, and remittances; Georgian exports to Russia have risen to $500 million in 2019, of which Russia accounted for 13.2 percent.

Nevertheless, expectations that economic cooperation would lead to political reconciliation have not been realized. As a NATO-aspirant country with an association agreement with the European Union, Georgia has slowly stepped away from Russia’s political orbit. This is reflected in popular opinion as well: in spite of the Russian occupation, economic pressure, and information attacks, a majority of the Georgian population still supports integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. Throughout the past decade, this figure has rarely been under 70 percent, most often ranging between 70 and 80 percent.
ORTHODOXY IN GEORGIA: POWER AND INFLUENCE

The Kremlin has used a range of hybrid tactics to retain its influence, using various points of leverage. Chief among them is religious affiliation, pitting Orthodoxy and “traditional values” against liberal democracy. Indeed, an overwhelming majority of Georgia’s population is Christian Orthodox: out of over 3.7 million people (not including occupied territories), 83.4 percent belong to the Orthodox church (the Russian minority in Georgia represents 0.7 percent of the population). Ever since Georgia adopted Christianity as an official religion in 326 AC, it has been one of the key determinants of Georgian statehood and identity. The cycle of brief independence and prolonged periods of subordination between Georgia and Russia has played out within the GOC as well, oscillating between autocephaly (or independence) from and domination by the ROC—its “Brother in Faith.” After almost a hundred years of subordination, including the prohibition of religious services in Georgian and the closure of more than 800 churches, the GOC declared autocephaly in March 1917, a year before the state’s independence. It was again suppressed under early Soviet rule, but after Stalin restored the patriarchate of Russia, the new patriarch of Moscow boosted his own legitimacy by restoring the Patriarchate of Georgia and recognizing its autocephaly in 1943. This act transferred all parishes, churches, and monasteries located on the territory of Georgia to the jurisdiction of the GOC, meaning the ROC no longer possesses any official property in Georgia.

Because of this history, the GOC holds a special status in the country. Constitutionally, it enjoys special privileges such as tax exemption, annual budgetary support (on average 25 million per year, or approximately $7.3 million), the exemption of clerics from mandatory military service, and immunity for patriarchs. The state ensures chaplaincy within the defense forces as well as in penitentiary facilities, and the state and the GOC can implement joint programs in the education system.

The GOC also remains one of the major property owners in Georgia: dozens of commercial and noncommercial organizations have been created with the participation of the patriarchate. Reports on the GOC expenses and financial activities are not public, and the state audit service is not allowed to inspect its finances. This is in spite of the GOC receiving numerous gifts and donations from various donors of different reputation and citizenship, including businessmen operating in Russia.

The history of the GOC, its current role, and its privileges have bestowed upon it a central role in the country’s socio-political life. Although its public support has decreased in recent years (75 percent deemed its performance “good” in 2015), it remains quite high (50 percent in 2019) and, importantly, higher than any other state institution besides the army. Such credibility makes the GOC a valuable target of influence, whereby gaining its support is advantageous for any internal or external actor. In Georgia, gaining control over the GOC means control over the shaping of public opinion and political decisions. As a powerful actor in the Georgian political system, it is no surprise the GOC has attracted Russia’s interest in the context of its pursuit of “strategic revanchism” and politics of “spheres of influence.”

This pursuit has involved a quest for influence within the Orthodox world, most recently exemplified by the declaration of autocephaly by the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2018 (granted by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople). The ROC fiercely opposed this move and launched another front in the propaganda battle, into which the GOC has been drawn.

In 2019, the chairman of the ROC’s Department of External Church Relations,
Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), directed a veiled threat at the GOC. When asked what consequences the GOC’s potential recognition of the OCU would carry for the status of the Georgian Patriarchate in the occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, he noted many high-ranking hierarchs were well aware of the threat the GOC may face in case of recognition. The Georgian Patriarchate considered it a direct threat—and a bold one given that Russian churches located on the territory of Georgia are under jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Georgia—although it has not yet recognized the OCU’s autocephaly.

At the same time as Ukrainian autocephaly was coming into play, a cascade of scandals surfaced within the GOC amid leadership struggles. Different groups struggling for power reportedly used kompromat—compromising material—to blackmail one another and accused each other of being pro-Russian. No one was spared, including the patriarch himself and Metropolitan Archbishop Shio (Mujiri), whom the patriarch had appointed Locum Tenens (interim leader). This war of kompromat has further escalated as the struggle for power within the GOC enters a critical transition phase (Patriarch Ilia II is 88 years old and frail), and Russia has a clear stake in whomever succeeds Ilia II.

ROC INROADS INTO THE OCCUPIED REGIONS OF ABKHAZIA AND TSKHINVALI

The Kremlin’s “spheres of influence” push is most visible in the occupied territories Russia invaded in 2008. Despite the ROC’s official recognition of the GOC’s canonical authority over the occupied regions, it has taken steps to slowly inch out the latter and impose its own influence, in furtherance of the Kremlin’s objectives.

As a result of conflict in the 1990s and the 2008 invasion, which compounded the first conflict’s population displacement, more than 400,000 people (combining internally displaced people and refugees) were expelled from the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali or displaced, including clerics. Despite a break in diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia, relations between the GOC and ROC remained cordial. Notably, then-patriarch Alexy II of Russia did not support the Ossetian and Abkhazian Orthodox Churches in their desire to secede from the GOC. Indeed, there were some limits to the pronouncements the ROC could make without risking a secession of its own: should the Patriarchate of Russia create a precedent for change in canonical territory, it would draw the ire of the Orthodox world, in which the principle of territorial allegiance is of the utmost importance. This decision would also cast doubt upon the Moscow Patriarchate’s authority over the territories of other countries (e.g., Belarus and Moldova).

Nevertheless, in 2008, the then-head of the ROC’s Foreign Relations Kirill (now patriarch of Russia) stated that while the ROC considered the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali as canonical territory of the GOC, both sides should look for a “transitional model” given the GOC’s inability to carry out its activities there. Kirill’s statement was a de facto recognition of the restriction of the GOC’s canonical rights in the occupied regions.

Since his enthronement, Patriarch Kirill has actively pursued this political line, and ROC activities in the occupied regions have taken place in three main domains: ecclesiastical-religious, political, and cultural-humanitarian.

Ecclesiastical-Religious Dimension

Many Georgian clerics left Abkhazia following the conflict. Since then, Besarian Aplia, who has supported separatists and has faced criminal allegations in the past, has been elevated to headship
of the eparchy and awarded twice by the Russian Patriarchate. In 2009, he announced the independence of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church, which de facto implemented Kirill’s “transitional model.” In spite of the Holy Synod of the GOC making Patriarch Ilia II the Metropolitan of Tskhumi-Abkhazia and Bichvinta, representatives of the ROC never address him with this title. Furthermore, the ROC has subordinated the Tskhinvali Region to the Vladikavkaz eparchy. ROC clerics have repeatedly visited the territories and jointly administered divine service.

The GOC has protested these moves numerous times, but the ROC has unabashedly pursued its policy, which is in full alignment with the Kremlin's other activities in the occupied territories. Its goal is to substitute the GOC with the ROC; SPAS, the Russian Orthodox TV channel, even announced a competition to select the best architectural design for a new Russian church in the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali that will provide divine service for Russian army garrisons deployed there.

Political Dimension

The Moscow Patriarchate and Russian officials often use the same wording in their correspondence and meetings with separatist leaders, suggesting the patriarchate closely follows the Kremlin’s policy when it comes to the occupied regions. The ROC and its patriarch are in regular communication with the so-called Abkhazian and South Ossetian presidents. The head of the GOC has publicly condemned Kirill’s actions as “regrettable and absolutely incomprehensible,” accusing him of supporting and recognizing separatist regimes established by force.

In one instance, in 2008, Bishop Theophanes of Stavropol and Vladikavkaz (hierarch until 2011) hosted then-foreign minister of France Bernard Kouchner on a visit to the Tskhinvali Region during the August War. The bishop asserted that Russian armed forces interdicted a genocide perpetrated by Georgians against the Ossetian people, a line often used by the Kremlin or its affiliates to distract from attacks against Georgians in the region and their displacement. The hierarchs that followed Theophanes also made political statements about the situation in the region, criticizing Georgia, NATO, and the West in line with Moscow’s official accounts.

Cultural-Humanitarian Dimension

Russia has carried out a Russification campaign in the occupied territories through the imposition of the Russian language, information campaigns, the Kremlin's compatriot policy, and other cultural-humanitarian activities. Indeed, “humanitarian cooperation” and “unified cultural space” were mentioned in the Agreements of Strategic Cooperation and Integration concluded between Moscow and the occupied territories in 2014. The goal appears to be alienating those living in the territories from the rest of Georgia; religion and the institution of the church play a specific role in this process.

Some of these efforts have erased Georgian presence and Georgia’s Christian heritage in the occupied territories. These actions and their motivations are reminiscent of the policy the ROC has conducted toward Georgia since 1801. As a result of the “refurbishment” carried out by the Abkhazian occupation forces and some Russian companies, churches dating back a thousand years were whitewashed, historical Georgian inscriptions were removed, and a Georgian dome was replaced by a Russian dome.

The ROC has tolerated this breakdown in humanitarian principles and respect for religious sites, showcasing some ideological incongruities in its position. Ethnic Georgians in the occupied territories have faced harsh conditions, cut off from healthcare access and, in the worst cases, have
faced acts of ethnic cleansing. The Metropolitan Isaiah of Tskhinvali and Nikozi has seen his right to administer divine service and right of movement increasingly restricted. Christian values and communion between the ROC and GOC should have prompted the ROC to support the Georgian archbishop’s right to administer religious services, yet those have been restricted in his own canonical territory, while the ROC has remained silent.

**OTHER LEVERAGE POINTS: TRADITIONAL VALUES AND PROXIES OF INFLUENCE**

**NGOs and Foundations**

Russian soft power in Georgia has ramped up since 2008 along with information operations through the ROC and such organizations as Russkiy Mir ("Russian World") and the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund (hereafter Gorchakov Fund). Officially, the ROC does not have the right to perform any activity on the territory of Georgia. However, since 2009 the GOC has allowed the ROC to administer divine service for Russian-speaking parishes through a representative in Georgia, who relays the ROC’s position on a variety of issues. The ROC’s official activities in Georgia are limited to this, but it helps further the Kremlin’s political interests in informal ways through the Orthodox connection. With its support and funding, other organizations and foundations, as well as self-proclaimed patriotic organizations and individuals claiming to be defenders of “tradition,” have become more active. And, as in other countries across Europe, referenda have been used to drive societal division over “traditional values” issues that rally both conservative and pro-Russian groups.

Extremist organizations and pro-Russian political and civic groups currently operating in Georgia have indeed sought to affiliate with the GOC and manipulate public opinion using the slogan “defending faith” through the use of referenda to either create or heighten internal divisions. In 2016, an initiative group comprising representatives of the Georgian March (see below) and other radical organizations collected more than 200,000 signatures to request a referendum to amend the constitution and define civil marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman. Then-president Giorgi Margvelashvili refused to hold the vote for two reasons. First, by law a referendum should be held on the entire territory of Georgia; holding one with 20 percent of the country under occupation, with no easy way of organizing it in those areas, would represent an act of territorial concession to Russia. (The last referendum in Georgia was held in 2003, well before the Russian invasion of the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali.) Second, Georgian legislation already regulates the issue of marriage, defining family as a relationship between a man and a woman. This was akin to pushing on an open door, reinforcing the optics of a calculated campaign that could in turn strengthen legal arguments for Russia’s occupation of the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. Indeed, it is surprising that the referendum’s backers—who spent significant resources on public campaigns and signature collection and complied closely with all legislative procedures (suggesting professional lawyers were involved)—did not know this issue was already addressed in the law. Through a large media campaign, they also suggested the government of Georgia was unable to defend national values—implying others could in its stead, such as Russia.

Over the president’s objections, the Georgian Dream-led government—which at the time was preparing for elections and courting support from the GOC—supported including the marriage issue in the constitution. This highlighted, once again, the GOC’s central political role. Finally, in 2017, the Georgian parliament approved amendments to the constitution without a
referendum, and marriage was defined as “a union between a woman and a man for the purpose of creating a family.” Though nothing has changed from a legal perspective, the groups involved in the campaign were able to showcase their support for and defense of Georgian traditions and identity. They also forced a public debate over contentious and potentially divisive issues.

Other organizations supporting the Kremlin’s line have been active in this space as well, the most potent example being the Gorchakov Fund. It assists in implementing Russian foreign policy goals, for example, through “provid[ing] assistance in creating a favorable public opinion of Russia abroad.” In 2013, the fund opened the Yevgeny Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center, which offers courses on Russian language and culture. Its head is Dimitry Lortkipanidze, who is known for his anti-Western political activity: he is one of the leaders of the ultranationalist “Georgian March,” which started as a civic organization but later turned into a political party and ran in the 2020 parliamentary elections.

Estonian Foreign Intelligence deems the party a threat to internal cohesion:

The Georgian March . . . plays a major role in [propaganda to promote so-called traditional values in Georgia]. Its mission is to resist the values supposedly imposed on Georgian society by the West, allegedly threatening the very existence of the Georgian people and society. . . . It is aimed at rattling public support for joining the European Union and NATO . . . as well as creating internal tensions and escalating conflict within Georgian society. Among the leaders of the Georgian March are several individuals with ties to Russia and its influence activities.

**Pro-Russian and Anti-Western Clerics**

The GOC is not a monolith; it is not rare to see some bishops publicly deviate from the patriarchate’s or the patriarch’s official position. The GOC has welcomed the ROC’s position on some cultural issues, but not on political ones such as the status of the regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. The Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia officially supports Georgia’s Western integration, but that is not the case for other hierarchs. In 2014, ahead of the signing of the association agreement between Georgia and the European Union, Ilia II reaffirmed his long-standing support for Georgia’s future EU accession and promised the GOC would work to achieve this objective. On the opposite side, Archpriest Tadeoz Saralidze once stated during a sermon that he sees Georgia’s future only with Russia. He considers Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic, to be a devoted son of Chechnya and believes Russian flags should fly together with Georgian flags in all the eparchies of Georgia.

These pronouncements can seem paradoxical, presenting Russia as a savior in spite of its abolition of GOC autocephaly and Georgian statehood in the past. The focus is instead on a decadent West that will pervert Georgian values. Ioane (Gamrekeli), the metropolitan bishop of Kutaisi and Gaenati, published an extensive article after his ascent to metropolitan addressing foreign policy and Georgia’s Western orientation. In it he affirmed that “being with Russia is an issue of divine providence for Georgia and we should not oppose it” and warned there are attempts to draw Georgia away from its path of natural development. In his view, European values that contradict Christianity are imposed upon the Georgian nation, for example, “nontraditional sexual orientation”—a narrative common in Russia and other “traditional” constituencies.

**LGBTQ+ Discrimination, “Family Values,” and Populism**

The GOC as a whole has long adopted a negative attitude toward the LGBTQ+ community on religious grounds, an attitude shared to some degree by other monotheist faiths. Yet in the case of Metropolitan
Ioane, his article addressed these issues not in the context of religious teachings but in the light of politics. The piece closely matches the Russian narrative of European and Western forces imposing “nontraditional sexual relations” and LGBTQ+ propaganda onto other countries.

Before its adoption in 2014, the GOC categorically opposed the law on the elimination of all forms of discrimination, which defined direct and indirect forms of discrimination and established basic legal mechanisms against such discrimination. It played an important role in harmonizing Georgian legislation with EU requirements, which contributed to the visa liberalization process for Georgia. Nevertheless, the GOC viewed the law as the legalization of a “deadly sin” due to its inclusion of “gender identity” and “sexual orientation” in the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination. Various radical groups joined with representatives of the GOC to oppose the law in spite of its rewards, with some clerics reportedly warning Georgian Dream lawmakers of consequences for going against the patriarch’s will. They harnessed religious feelings against the legislation by claiming Georgia was being compelled to change its identity and abandon its traditions.

Beyond this general positioning, some clerics have been much more extreme in their views than the patriarchate, mixing homophobia with xenophobia and anti-Semitism. In 2013, on the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, thousands of people, led by priests, surged through police cordons and attacked a group of peaceful anti-homophobia demonstrators. Some of these clerics were members of the Orthodox Parents’ Union, a radical organization that had been involved in prior violent events. One of its leaders, the Archpriest David Isakadze, had been convicted several times in his secular life. There are many such examples, with the same messages appearing repeatedly, that the West wants to demoralize Georgia, that Georgians of different faiths are not Georgians of full value, and that Georgia should not accept migrants (particularly from non-Christian countries). Anti-Semitic statements and appeals to an eternal alliance with “co-religionist Russia” are often mixed in.

In July 2021, organizers of the Tbilisi Pride march were forced to cancel the parade after violent protesters—among them Orthodox priests—stormed the headquarters of LGBTQ+ activists. Local authorities had failed to provide adequate security for Pride marchers, and a TV cameraman covering the anti-Pride protests was attacked; Lekso Lashkarava later succumbed to his injuries. The violence, coupled with the perception that the government did not do enough to protect activists and journalists, further inflamed political tensions and has led to calls for Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili to step down. These demands were reinforced by the fact that Gharibashvili had argued the march should not have been planned in the first place and concerns over the government’s approach to freedom of the press.

Another key issue of concern for conservative groups and the GOC has been the protection of the family. Demography is a topical issue in Georgia given its small population and drives some narratives around existential threats to the Georgian way of life. Population growth has been on a downward trend in Georgia and is estimated to decline by 12 percent by 2050. This reality makes it easier to manipulate public worries around the “protection of family purity” (rather than confront the drivers of these demographic trends) and use it as an instrument of anti-Western politics.

In 2016, the 10th conference of the World Congress of Families (WCF) was organized in Tbilisi, entitled “Civilization at the Crossroads: The Natural Family as a Bulwark of Freedom and Human Values.” The patriarchate blessed the meeting, and many clerics actively participated in it (former U.S. president George W. Bush also sent a letter of support to the gathering). Some of the key
messages pointed to U.S. foreign policy as supporting homosexuality in the world, accused the West of exporting all kinds of perversion and misfortune, and lamented immoral and perverted lifestyles being imposed on Russia, Georgia, and other Orthodox countries.\textsuperscript{345}

\textbf{International Organizations}

International organizations also represent an important platform for Russia’s “Orthodox Diplomacy.” The ROC actively cooperates with UN agencies and the Council of Europe, while its representatives participate in the meetings of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as well as in the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches at the European Union.\textsuperscript{246} Russia also has a leading role in the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO).\textsuperscript{347} Sergei Gavrilov, a Russian member of parliament, has been chairman of the assembly since 2018, a strange ideological position given his membership in the Russian Communist Party.\textsuperscript{348} He is also the coordinator of the Interfractional Group for the Defense of Christian Values in the State Duma of the Russian Federation.\textsuperscript{349}

Gavrilov is at the center of a public row that set off changes from which Georgia is still reeling today. In 2019, the IAO General Assembly took place in Tbilisi on the initiative of some Georgian members of parliament who aimed to score political points by appealing to Orthodox constituencies. However, the visit of a Russian delegation (Russia continues to illegally occupy over 20 percent of Georgian territory) and the optics of Gavrilov sitting on the Georgian parliament speaker’s chair sparked intense public protests, today known as “Gavrilov’s night.”\textsuperscript{350} Initially peaceful protests turned violent that evening as police resorted to tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse demonstrations, resulting in hundreds of injuries and arrests and provoking calls for the government’s resignation.

Although the session was ultimately cut short and Gavrilov left Georgia, blaming the protests on “fake news” over his past involvement in armed conflicts, the incident had lasting repercussions.\textsuperscript{351} For one, it served to highlight broader public apprehension about the ruling Georgian Dream party’s backsliding on democracy and its perceived closeness to Russia. These concerns were only amplified when Georgian Dream chair Bidzina Ivanishvili appointed then-interior minister Giorgi Gakharia as the new prime minister—in spite of calls for Gakharia’s dismissal in light of excessive police force on June 20 and degraded public trust in government. Several opposition parties also seized on the moment to demand changes to Georgia’s mixed electoral system that would give more weight to proportional representation, setting up months of negotiations mediated by Western diplomats. The event also led to a downturn in relations with Russia—President Vladimir Putin temporarily prohibited Russian airlines from flying to Georgia—which remains a contentious issue. In many ways, “Gavrilov’s night” was a test of resilience for Georgian society that produced positive changes. However, the incident illustrated how the IAO remains an instrument of foreign policy influence for the Kremlin.\textsuperscript{352}

Some individuals are also involved in spreading “pro-family” messages and supporting closer ties with Russia. Levan Vasadze, a Georgian businessman and conservative activist who helped host the 2016 WCF conference, is a major donor to the GOC.\textsuperscript{353} He is known for his pro-Russian, xenophobic, and homophobic statements and allegedly patronizes organizations that present themselves as “defenders of traditions.”\textsuperscript{354} Vasadze’s business activities (primarily insurance and private equity) are closely connected to Russia;\textsuperscript{355} he has ties with Konstantin Malofeev, Vladimir Yakunin, and others in the Kremlin’s inner circle.\textsuperscript{356} Vasadze is a friend of Alexander Dugin’s and can be viewed as a domestic implementer of Russia’s strategic conservatism.\textsuperscript{357} In 2021, he announced his intention to enter politics to address a “political, economic, cultural, social and ideological crisis,” partly driven by the
recent EU-mediated agreement between the government and the opposition. To do so, he founded a public movement called "Unity, Essence, Hope" (abbreviated in Georgian as ERI), which means "nation." It remains to be seen how much public support his movement will garner, but its political and religious orientation is clear.

CONCLUSION
The Georgian case shows how the "Brother in Faith" slogan is merely a political instrument for the Kremlin; when necessary or useful, various tactics—from the occupation of a coreligionist country to the destruction of Christian cultural heritage—have been used. The ROC has participated in this strategy, disrespecting other Orthodox churches’ autocephaly and encroaching on their canonical territory. In this way, it has mirrored the Kremlin’s violation of other countries’ sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In 2005, Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union “the largest geopolitical disaster of the century.” In 2011, Patriarch Kirill called it “the collapse of historical Russia.” Both the Kremlin and the ROC share this nostalgia for a former empire and consider Russia’s “near abroad” (which includes Georgia) a sphere of privileged interests, with both working together to enhance Russian influence there. Orthodoxy has become an integral, often covert tool of the Kremlin’s foreign policy and its soft power.

From its actions in occupied territories to its ties to conservative groups in Georgia and support for cultural associations, Russia’s “Orthodox foreign policy” should be reviewed through the prism of strategic conservatism. Such issues have become a question of national security for Georgia and should be addressed within this context, incorporating Russia’s psychological and information operations. Alarms should be set off in the face of attempts to instrumentalize faith as a political tool, including by some domestic actors, and as a leverage point to keep nations within the Kremlin’s sphere of influence.
Greece

INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN GREECE’S RELIGIOUS ECOSYSTEM
Elizabeth H. Prodromou

INTRODUCTION

Greece’s Unique Significance for Russia’s Geostrategy of Weaponizing Traditionalism

Greece plays a unique role as a crucial geospace for Russian geostrategic ambitions in the twenty-first century. Throughout the Cold War and in the 30 years following it, Russia has had an unwavering focus on maximizing relations with Greece. Greece is a key target because of its role in both NATO and within the global Orthodox ecosystem, making the Kremlin’s influence-building goals in Greece twofold and mutually reinforcing. In this regard, Moscow views the weaponization of traditionalism as a geometric influence builder with regional, transnational, and international impacts in Greece and, more broadly, across Eurasia.

The Church of Greece and Mount Athos are the two primary operational spaces in which Russia deploys strategic conservatism through a combination of soft- and sharp-power tools that highlight the need for transatlantic policymakers to understand the linkages between religion and geopolitics. The Church of Greece is a norms entrepreneur in that church leaders understand the social impact and political relevance of Orthodoxy as dependent on the deployment of “moral arguments and strategic constructions to persuade relevant audiences” to define both their interests and their identities.

Furthermore, Orthodoxy’s crucial historical role in the establishment of the Greek state makes the Church of Greece a stakeholder in political conversations related to Greek sovereignty and the country’s place in the democratic international architecture, specifically NATO. But perhaps more powerfully, Mt. Athos, or “the Holy Mountain,” has been the undisputed center of Orthodox Christian spirituality since the tenth-century establishment of the monastic community under Byzantine imperial patronage. The self-governing, legal personality of the Monastic Republic of Mt. Athos is recognized in both the Greek Constitution and European Union law and is part of Greek sovereign territory. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople has ecclesiastical jurisdiction over Mt. Athos, which is comprised of 20 monasteries and approximately 2,000 monks, all affiliated with the world’s Orthodox Christian patriarchates and autocephalous churches.

Taken as a whole, Russia’s influence-building efforts in the Church of Greece and Mt. Athos are force multipliers for Russia’s geopolitical and religious ambitions and rest on Greece’s unique characteristics in two respects: (1) the historical continuity of the administrative connections of the Church of Greece and Mt. Athos to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople as the leader of the world’s Orthodox Christian community; and (2) Greece’s strategic importance at NATO and the European Union’s external border at the intersection and projection of all forms of power in the European, Asian, and African continents.

Orthodoxy as a Soft- and Sharp-Power Tool
Both the Russian state and the Patriarchate of Moscow understand religion as an invaluable tool of identity in building influence within Greece and for using Greece for their respective state and church geopolitical objectives. For the Russian state, Orthodoxy offers a channel for disruption and division within Western societies, and for the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC),
Orthodoxy is an instrument for displacing the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the leader of the world’s estimated 300 million Orthodox Christians and as the primary interlocutor for Orthodox Christianity in international religious and secular multilateral fora. Orthodoxy is a multidimensional—theological, cultural, political, and economic—tool that can “shape the preferences of others” in ways that are not overtly coercive but instead are co-optive and persuasive. The targeting of the Church of Greece and Mt. Athos amounts to prudent, efficacious use of Orthodox diplomacy as part of “the vanguard of [Russian] foreign policy.” In this context, Greece is understood as a geospace within and from which norms and values and associated policy actions can be deployed.

Consequently, Moscow’s messaging to and through the Church of Greece and Mt. Athos is highly symbolic (e.g., Putin’s widely mediated visits to Mt. Athos in 2005 and 2016 were instructive) and designed to persuade decisionmakers (especially hierarchs, but also clergy and key lay actors in civil society) that leaders of Greece’s Orthodox institutions should “be more like” Russia in “wanting the same outcomes.”

1. Protecting national sovereignty against the threat of transatlantic strategic actions that use NATO and, to a lesser extent, the European Union for achieving Western hegemonic aspirations in Eurasia;
2. Protecting Eastern Christianity’s purity in the face of Western Christian dilution, perfidy, and decadence, a cultural clash centered on the conflict between Orthodox-majority countries’ moral rectitude and the West’s embrace and promotion of Jacobin secularism; and
3. Accepting the Moscow Patriarchate’s claims that the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople complied with U.S. religious-geopolitical machinations, exemplified in the Phanar’s (Ecumenical Patriarchate’s) decision to grant autocephalous (self-governing) status in 2019 to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, as well as in Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s active support for and engagement in the Christian ecumenical movement.

The Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian state have deployed sharp-power tools as sustained mechanisms to augment soft-power initiatives to build influence. This soft-sharp combination involves persuasion, coercion, and targeting allied and oppositional actors of Moscow’s traditional values agenda, both within the Church of Greece and on Mt. Athos.

The use of technology has been central to Russian influence building in Greece, pointing to the at least tacit collaboration between the Russian state and the Moscow Patriarchate, including digital and other media technologies, considered sharp-power tools because they “pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments of targeted countries.” The dissemination of a particular brand of Orthodox traditionalism—monopolistically defined by the Moscow Patriarchate as “authentic Orthodoxy”—is being promoted via an intersecting network of digital platforms, reinforced by other media channels and technologies.

Empirical evidence suggests that Russia’s calculus and its efforts to weaponize traditional values in Greece have so far had limited effect. Nonetheless, the Kremlin and Moscow Patriarchate’s decisionmaking on religious soft- and sharp-power initiatives targeted at Greece work on long time horizons, reflecting both an appreciation of history and an authoritarian political culture, which makes it unlikely that there will be any major rupture with the current approach.
The significance of elongated time horizons, with associated features of sacralization of policymaking decisions, was evident in Putin’s address to the Munich Security Conference in 2007 and his Annual Presidential Address to Russia’s Federal Assembly in 2013 and 2014. In both, he laid out Russia’s commitment to following an “independent path in foreign policy” that would include the defense of “traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilization in every nation for thousands of years...[and] religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality.”

This chapter focuses on Russia’s influence-building efforts in the religious field in Greece, but there is important intersectionality with the business and financial networks tied to Russian oligarchs who are active in developing political-economic ties between Russia and Greece. As will be discussed below, several Russian businessmen are active in religious tourism and other Russo-Greek commercial activities, whose declared support for traditional values has given traction to Russian soft-and sharp-power activities in Greece.

THE CHURCH OF GREECE AS KEY TO RUSSIA’S “THIRD ROME” NARRATIVE

History as Policy Justification for Russian Activity in Greece’s Religious Field

History helps explain why Russian policymakers see Greece as a critical target for maximizing the weaponization of tradition toward geopolitical goals. The religious and geopolitical features of the Third Rome concept (described below) are central to Russia’s religious diplomacy efforts in Greece because they explain the pretensions of the Patriarchate of Moscow to supplant the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople as the leader of global Orthodoxy. The concept has become the main justification for the Moscow Patriarchate’s use of cultural links, ecclesiastical activities, and media propaganda and misinformation within Greece’s religious field.

A review of the dynamics that inform the Kremlin and Moscow Patriarchate’s focus on Greece’s religious field begins with the ROC’s acknowledgment of and respect for the Greek foundations and legacy of the Byzantine, Eastern Roman Empire. The intimate relationship between theology and culture—a hallmark of Byzantine Christendom’s Greek culture and Orthodox theology (not to mention the geopolitics of imperial expansion)—was one of the most notable features of the late-tenth-century conversion of Prince Vladimir of Kiev to Eastern Orthodox Christianity from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate played a pivotal role in the ecclesiastical-institutional and cultural-identity evolution of what eventually became the ROC, or Patriarchate of Moscow. It also helps to explain the tensions in the ecclesiastical and cultural dimensions of the Constantinople-Moscow relationship that escalated into rupture of communion by Moscow with Constantinople, when the latter granted the Tomos of Autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in 2019. Where once the Ecumenical Patriarchate was viewed as the wellspring of the organic identity between Orthodox Christianity and Hellenism, the political and ecclesiastical center of power of the Kievan Metropolitanate shifted to Moscow in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. Russian hierarchs (rather than Greek) then governed what became the autocephalous (self-governing) Patriarchate of Moscow in 1686. Concomitantly, the fusion of Orthodoxy and Slavic cultural identity supplanted what was a legacy-respect for the Greek linguistic and cultural roots of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The Kievan-Muscovite church interpreted the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in the mid-fifteenth century (and the subsequent four centuries of Ottoman imperial control over the Greek-speaking and...
Greek-led patriarchates and churches in Constantinople) as divine punishment for the aborted Constantinople-Rome union of the Council of Florence in 1438–39, feeding the narrative of the Moscow Patriarchate as the Third Rome.375

The messianic concept of the Third Rome was consolidated between the late fifteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries, with religious and geopolitical implications.376 Accordingly, the Patriarchate of Moscow declared itself the inheritor of the Constantinopolitan Byzantine imperial legacy. The conceptual repackaging and twisting of the Byzantine formulation of Constantinople as the New Rome, to the Muscovite formulation of Constantinople as the Second Rome, positioned Moscow as the Third Rome and the center of a new, Orthodox Christian empire, fused with pan-Slavic cultural identity that supplanted the dominance of Hellenism.377

Russia has thus viewed the institution of the Ecumenical Patriarchate as captive to a Sunni Islamist regime since the fifteenth-century fall of Constantinople, with this Ottoman captivity continuing under both the Ataturkist and Erdoganist regime paradigms that have defined the modern Turkish state’s control over religion. Moscow views the current neo-Ottomanism of the Erdogan regime (an exclusivist, homogenizing version of secular and religious nationalism) as the sharpest expression of the continuation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s Ottoman captivity.378

The Moscow Patriarchate believes that the intimidation and repression to which the Ecumenical Patriarchate is subject (for example, being targeted by Justice and Development Party ideologues following the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey) renders it ineffectual in autonomous decisionmaking as the leader of world Orthodox Christianity. This supposedly makes Constantinople vulnerable to accept U.S. pressures in exchange for promises of protection against the excesses of the Ankara regime. For example, Kremlin and Moscow Patriarchate officials view the Ecumenical Patriarch’s granting of the 2019 Tomos of Autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine as the consequence of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s concession to U.S. pressures in the face of chronic, endemic Turkish government violations of the religious freedom and other civil and political liberties of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Greek Orthodox community of Turkey.

In short, the Moscow Patriarchate’s focus on the Church of Greece builds on tropes of Constantinople’s overall weakness under Turkish state repression. ROC leaders point to this vulnerability as an explanation for Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s involvement in Christian ecumenical projects that Moscow deems incompatible with traditional Orthodox values and theological correctness. By extension, the Phanar’s openness to Western religious and cultural engagement creates greater opportunity for transatlantic geopolitical engagement with the ecumenical movement. Accordingly, the religious field in Greece becomes the tabula for the Moscow Patriarchate and the Kremlin to reframe the Russia-Greece relationship as crucial for protecting and promoting the authenticity of Orthodox theology and values. Moscow somewhat cynically celebrates the Church of Greece due to its autocephalous origins, accomplished via a rupture from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and in perpetuating the modern incarnation of Hellenism. Likewise, Moscow congratulates the Church of Greece when its hierarchs and academic theologians stand against what the ROC casts as the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s concessions to the threats of theological impurity emanating from Western Christianity. Finally, Russia lauds Greece for standing firm against Western geopolitical servility, despite Greece’s membership in NATO since 1952.
INFLUENCE BUILDING AND WEDGE ACTIVITY IN GREECE’S RELIGIOUS FIELD

Russia’s church-state collaboration has targeted the Church of Greece as a religious institution, aiming to build a leadership faction committed to traditionalism as a defense against the perceived Western dilution of Orthodoxy. In the words of Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens and All Greece, this has generated “a divisive logic” counterproductive to ecclesiastical cohesion and aimed to amplify Eurasianist-civilizationalist political voices positing that Greece-U.S. bilateral relations represent Western efforts to make Greece a satellite. In both regards, Russian influence activities vis-à-vis the Church of Greece reflect the Moscow Patriarchate’s goal of becoming a norm entrepreneur or norm protagonist, an entity whose “normative agency” is purposefully mobilized toward “construct[ing] cognitive frames, often in opposition to rival frames, effectively causing a shift in public perceptions of appropriateness.”

The Church of Greece and the Holy and Great Council of Crete

The approach of the Patriarchate of Moscow to the Holy and Great Council (HGC) of the Orthodox Church, convened by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on Crete in 2016, illustrates the reliance on digital platforms to influence theological arguments and ecclesiastical factions in the Church of Greece and in Greek society. Above all, it shows their use to undermine the legitimacy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s primacy of honor and prerogatives of action as the leader of worldwide Orthodox Christianity.

The Crete event has roots as far back as a century, when then-Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III issued a Patriarchal and Synodical Encyclical in 1902 asking for “members of the whole of the Orthodox Church” to prepare for a Holy and Great Council. The drive for a council was revived and revitalized during the 1950s and 1960s. Bartholomew then made the convening of a Pan-Orthodox Council the signature ecclesiastical event of his tenure, which celebrated its 30th year.

What may be seen as a highly specialized event focused on Orthodox theological arcana is more accurately understood in similar terms as the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) for the Roman Catholic Church. By convening the 14 mutually recognized churches constituting the 300 million Eastern Orthodox Christians worldwide, the HGC was intended to promote theological and institutional—ecclesial—unity and vitality, enabling the Eastern Orthodox churches’ capacity for internal cohesion and transformational social action, as well as to facilitate positive, concrete progress in ecumenical dialogue and action among the three main Christian trajectories of Eastern, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Christianity.

The ROC pursued a disruptive strategy in approaching the preparatory meetings for the HGC. Indeed, the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s ecclesiastical prerogatives represented a rejection of the Moscow Patriarchate’s Third Rome pretensions and the Kremlin’s associated geopolitical priorities that understood the Russkiy Mir, or “Russian World,” as intrinsically linked to spiritual security. Participants from the many preparatory meetings for the HGC reported that the Patriarchate of Moscow practiced obstructionism on procedural and substantive grounds, using alliance-making strategies on theological grounds with anti-ecumenical, anti-modernist factions in the Church of Greece.

Moscow’s spoiler role in the eleventh-hour decision to boycott the Council at Crete came together with three other Orthodox churches for which the religious calculus was integrally connected to Russia’s geopolitical engagement in Southeastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Caucasus—the
Patriarchates of Bulgaria, Antioch, and Georgia. The chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, stated that the HGC’s process and decisions would be illegitimate unless “all 14 of the invited Churches, without exception, participate.”

Overall, Moscow’s instrumentalization of the council at Crete to promote the ROC as the sole guardian of Eastern Christian authenticity has relied on two themes that blend protection of traditional Orthodox values with defense against transatlantic geopolitical expansionism.

The first theme concerns the polarity between “virtuous, pure traditionalists” versus “debased, corrupt modernists,” promoted by the Moscow Patriarchate’s depiction of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew as a modernizing religious leader whose “papist inclinations and ambitions” were “implanted gradually at Crete and through the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue.” Drawing on historical events that resonated with conservative hierarchical factions and segments of the Greek public who had opposed the visit of Pope John Paul II to Athens in 2001 (framed as a “heretic pope” and two-horned monster), Moscow’s self-defined purists presented the HGC as evidence of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s willingness to be taken in by the Pope’s apology for the historical injustices, “painful memories and deep wounds which still cause suffering to the spirit of the Greek people,” caused by Latin Christians’ “disastrous sack of the imperial city of Constantinople, the bastion of Christianity.” This theme thus plays on tradition and its interplay with historical trauma.

This theme’s resonance was on full display in the acrimonious debate about the HGC text on the permissibility of Orthodox churches referring to other Christian bodies and confessions as churches. A sizable faction within the Church of Greece delegation subscribed to the extensive denunciations of heterodoxy voiced by well-known conservative Greek theologian Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, conforming to the Moscow Patriarchate’s narrative that ecumenism degrades traditional Orthodox values. Indeed, several Church of Greece hierarchs elected to withhold their signatures from the final version of that text.

Nonetheless, there was an impressive multi-vocality and diversity characterizing the global communion of the Eastern Orthodox autocephalous churches and patriarchates. Indeed, the encyclical of the HGC was endorsed by all 10 church delegations—progressives, traditionalists, and fundamentalists—with the text’s cautions that “the explosions of fundamentalism within religious communities threaten to create the [errant] view that fundamentalism belongs to the essence of the phenomenon of religion [but the] truth, however, is that fundamentalism . . . constitutes an expression of morbid religiosity.”

The Moscow Patriarchate’s criticism of the HGC as an international platform for an assault on Orthodox traditionalism was articulated on Moscow-funded or Moscow-sympathetic websites with readerships associated with the Church of Greece and the Ecumenical Patriarchate through a steady flow of theological documents, op-eds, and blog posts. Additionally, the Moscow Patriarchate’s views were circulated in a spate of academic conferences and publications in Europe and the United States, especially those directed at a Greek Orthodox readership. The same arguments were circulated by monasteries on Mt. Athos with known sympathies toward Russia’s arguments about “authentic” Orthodoxy and traditional values. Digital platforms such as Orthodox News Agency: International Agency for Church News, Romfea: 24 Hour Agency for Church News and Pemptousia: Website of Mt. Athos, share a focus on Greece’s religious and social field.
The influential impact of Moscow’s message is visible in its recurrence in the statements by Church of Greece hierarchs known for their hyper-conservatism and declared commitments to traditionalism. To wit, Metropolitan Seraphim of Piraeus warned Greeks and all Orthodox Christians in March 2021, on the widely observed religious holiday of the Sunday of Orthodoxy, of their duty to reject the “heresy of ecumenism” and the “decay and erosion of the Orthodox mind” perpetrated in “conferences, meetings, [and] dialogues,” with “the texts of the Council of Crete legitimizing the heresy of ecumenism.”

The second theme that the ROC projected into the Greek religious ecosystem regarding the HGC has been the issue of autocephaly and the proper mode of deciding on the establishment of self-governing churches. The topic of autocephaly had long been part of the pre-conciliar, preparatory meetings for Crete, but the contentious nature of autocephaly as a potentially divisive issue also explains its omission from the final agenda for the HGC in 2016. The Moscow Patriarchate has used a full-court media, ecclesiastical, and political blitzkrieg to portray Crete as the backroom planning session for the Phanar’s decision, a mere three years later, to grant autocephalous status to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The ROC and the Kremlin have marched in lockstep in their respective messaging about the Crete event being part of a U.S. master plan imposed on Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to carry out a religious maneuver designed to advance U.S. foreign and security ambitions for dominance in Eurasia. Many among the Greek monastic communities on Mt. Athos and around Greece had made accusations that the “CIA was leading the Holy and Great Council at Crete.” Moreover, the Athonite community provided an especially fertile target for Metropolitan Alfeyev’s formulation of the Ukraine decision as a U.S. foreign policy strategy of divide and rule, by which “what had already happened on the political level happened on the church level as well, and the person who implemented this American plan was Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople. His dependence on America is quite obvious and common knowledge; as a matter of fact, nobody hides it.”

Russia’s foreign minister Sergei Lavrov also explicitly linked the interests of the Russian state and its foreign policy interests with the security of the ROC, noting that the United States had used “the Patriarch of Constantinople, an absolutely dependent instrument,” to “interfere in the affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church and its sisters in the Orthodox world,” explaining that “the state is already obliged to protect the interests of its fellow believers and like-minded people.”

The mainstreaming of the Russian narrative themes about the HGC and associated Ukraine decision into the Greek religious ecosystem and broader national media suggests a goal of influence building to shape popular discourse and complicate the decisionmaking calculus of religious leaders in Greece. References to Moscow’s coercive and persuasive pressures were expressed in debates within the Church of Greece regarding the eventual decision to recognize the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. In an Extraordinary Session of the Synod of the Hierarchy of the Church of Greece, multiple hierarchs reported on the efforts of “blackmail by Metropolitan Alfeyev of Volokolamsk, intimidation by the Moscow Patriarchate, and the political movement of Pan-slavism [sic], once started by Stalin and now active by other [religious] means.”

The impact of Moscow’s religious influence activities in Greece’s political space was evident in the claims of Panos Kammenos, leader of the right-wing, nationalist Independent Greeks (ANEL) party during its coalition with the left-wing Syriza party that governed Greece from 2015 to 2019. Kammenos condemned the Church of Greece hierarchy as “criminals who succumbed to pressure from the Phanar and some American circles” because of their vote to recognize the autocephaly of the
Orthodox Church of Ukraine, warning that those hierarchs responsible for the Church of Greece vote would be fully responsible “for the termination of guarantees by Russia for the territorial integrity of Greece’s Aegean islands” in the face of Turkey’s threats to Greece’s territorial integrity. 401

Mount Athos
As a norm entrepreneur seeking to dominate global Orthodox positions on traditional values, Moscow has focused on Mt. Athos as a crucial influence-building space since the end of the Cold War. This focus has become systematic and intensive since 1999 under Putin’s political leadership, amplified since Kirill’s elevation in 2009 as Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. 402 Mt. Athos is best understood as a force multiplier for Russia’s efforts to weaponize tradition through framing and shaping culture wars, summed up in Putin’s observation on his 2016 visit to Mt. Athos that the Holy Mountain is “associated with the strengthening of the moral foundations of society.” 403

The Patriarchate of Moscow’s activities for achieving hegemony on Mt. Athos also involve the Third Rome concept. The Holy Mountain presents an opportunity for Moscow to use the traditional values agenda to influence both the Greek religious ecosystem and global Orthodox communities, especially those under the direct jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (e.g., the Greek Orthodox churches in the United States, Australia, and Western Europe). Overall, the particularities of the administrative structure of the religious field encompassing the Church of Greece and Mt. Athos make Greece a unique, key target for the synergies between Moscow’s Third Rome ambitions and the Russian state’s great power ambitions. 404

Mt. Athos’ male-only monastic space is a closed ecosystem where disinformation and misinformation can be carefully curated, disseminated, and recycled, both through digital connectivity and interpersonal connections. Moreover, Mt. Athos’ particular territorial, legal-administrative, and ecclesiastical parameters offer influence-building opportunities directly inside the territory of the Greek state. This is done via the predominantly Greek-speaking monasteries with direct linkages to the Church of Greece, via Greek pilgrims from all segments of the political class and civil society who travel to Mt. Athos, and through transnational dissemination into Greek religious and cultural diaspora spaces in Cyprus and the Middle East, Western Europe, and, significantly, the United States. Because Mt. Athos falls under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the monastic space is ripe for the dissemination of the Moscow Patriarchate’s accusations that Constantinople is guilty of the theological “deviations” of ecumenism and modernism (recycling Moscow’s claims against the HGC) and of fomenting disunity through the Ukraine decision.

Finally, the local particularities of Mt. Athos—which hosts thousands of male pilgrims annually from around the global Orthodox world, sits on the easternmost promontory of Greece’s Chalcidice (Halkidiki Peninsula), and is integrated into the local economy—explain the intersection of the theological-digital-economic-financial leverage that the Russian church-state partnership aims to gain as a traditional values norm entrepreneur on Mt. Athos.

The monastic environment of Mt. Athos showcases the comparative advantages of the church vis-à-vis the state in the collaboration between the Russian state and the Moscow Patriarchate over traditional values. The ROC has become a necessary legitimation mechanism for Putin’s claims of historical continuity from Kievan Rus to twenty-first-century Russia. 405 His pilgrimages to Mt. Athos constitute performative sanctification of Russian state nationalism and promotion of the Moscow Patriarchate’s
claims to protect traditional Orthodox values and spirituality. The images and semiotics of the two visits illuminate the autonomous leverage of the Moscow Patriarchate in the church-state relationship, as televised images of the 2016 visit showed president and patriarch side by side, trading on Patriarch Kirill’s characterization of Putin as a “miracle of God.”

Putin’s two pilgrimages to Mt Athos, in 2005 and 2016, were intensely mediatized in Greek news media as well as on Church of Greece and Athonite digital platforms. Russian news agencies contributed to the media echo chamber for the visits by providing low-cost and free digital content to Greek news sources. Putin’s recognition of Mt. Athos as a locus for operationalizing the multiplier effects of hybrid warfare—by combining soft (e.g., religious ideas and traditional values tropes) and sharp (e.g., digital platforms and cyber tools) modes of power—has deep roots. It dates back to his oversight of the development of Russia’s spiritual security concept and its operational expression in the Russkiy Mir, his support for the state-financed construction of Russian Orthodox religious sites, and his investment in a personal relationship with Patriarch Kirill.

The overt geopolitical connotations of Putin’s Mt. Athos visits turned on the message that, through the monastic communities of the Holy Mountain, Russia-Greece relations “could only get stronger.” Putin’s remarks drove home the messages of Moscow’s Eurasianist foreign policy camp about Russian cultural exceptionalism and defense against Western cultural atomism and materialism, tying the protection of traditional values on Mt. Athos to the same project in Greece more broadly. According to Putin, “the Orthodox faith is the common basis for the relations of the peoples of Greece and Russia . . . and Russian monks on Mount Athos are an indestructible bond between the two countries, and Pontic Greeks who live in Russia have contributed to development of relations.”

Experts in the Athonite community have highlighted monasteries that are Russian- and Bulgarian-speaking and, therefore, sympathetic to Russian influence and pan-Slavic interests (St. Panteleimon and Zografou, respectively). In Greek-speaking monasteries, the strategic target of Russian influence operations has been Vatopedi and, secondarily, the monastery of Simonopetra. The Moscow Patriarchate’s approach to these two large, well-funded monastic communities is based on the high-profile and religious-business linkages of their respective abbots (the Elder Ephraim and the Elder Elijah), along with the fact that Vatopedi and Simonopetra are major religious pilgrimage destinations for visitors from Greece and the international Orthodox Christian world.

Both charismatic abbots are viewed as useful influencers for pro-Moscow theological positions because of their connections to Church of Greece hierarchs and upwardly mobile priests within the church power structure, their active digital and other media platforms with Greek and transnational audiences, and their ability to influence the local Greek economy connected to pilgrimages to Mt. Athos. Notably, Abbot Ephraim’s visits to Russia with Athonite icons from Vatopedi Monastery for religious viewing tours have made him a well-known figure in the Russian church-state arena. Indeed, both Patriarch Kirill and the Russian Foreign Ministry pleaded with the Athens government for Ephraim’s swift release from Greece’s Korydallos prison in 2011–12, following his arrest on charges of embezzlement and fraud in land swaps between Vatopedi Monastery and the Greek state—a corruption scandal that contributed to the fall of the conservative government of then prime minister Costas Karamanlis.

Some of the aforementioned digital platforms (e.g., Orthodoxia News Agency) are directly linked to Vatopedi Monastery and to the promotion of Abbot Ephraim’s traditionalist, highly personalized Orthodox theology that resonates with the Moscow Patriarchate’s notions of authentic Orthodox
values and practices. More generally, a plethora of digital platforms, such as Romfea: 24 Hour Agency for Church News and Katehon, report regularly about and into Mt. Athos and on Greece’s broader religious ecosystem, offering a diversity of multilingual programming (e.g., English, Greek, Russian, French, and German) that tends to reiterate the main thematic messages discussed in the preceding section of this paper. All manner of support for Athonite digital platforms—from content to financing—aims to generate Russia-Greek theological convergence, and geopolitical consequence, along the traditional values project. This is consistent with Patriarch Kirill’s view that information warfare is key to norm entrepreneurship. Indeed, Kirill established the Synodal Information Department of the ROC immediately following his accession and also advanced church-state cooperation on information strategy through the Department of Journalism at the Moscow State Institute for International Relations (MGIMO, which is the elite training university of Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Economic and Personal Ties in the Religious Sphere

Russia’s digital and media information strategies related to Mt. Athos also point to the complex intersection with the economic dimensions of Russia’s religious soft-power efforts. Russian oligarchs with lucrative investments in Greece have ties to the Moscow Patriarchate and the Kremlin; their significance for Russia’s persuasive and coercive activities related to religious conservativism and traditional values extends to Mt. Athos and the Church of Greece and, more broadly, to Greece’s local economies.

The Athonite space offers two of the most well-known cases of Russia’s use of a combined theological-digital-economic strategy to advance influence building. Konstantin Malofeev is president of the supervisory board of the think tank Katehon, an umbrella entity that “defend[s] the principle of a multipolar world . . . and stress[es] the importance of religious and cultural identities in international relations.” In addition to regular geopolitical features by Russian Eurasianist Alexandr Dugin, arguing along civilizational lines positioning Russia as a defender against an expansionist West, Katehon provides a space for critics of the Ecumenical Patriarch for his commitment to Christian ecumenical relations and the heresy of supporting papal hegemony—the same message expressed by Church of Greece hierarchs at the HGC in 2016. Malofeev has been a regular visitor to and investor in Mt. Athos, although his annual pilgrimages to the Holy Mountain have been interrupted since he was added to EU and U.S. sanctions lists.

The second case is that of tobacco-tourism-construction billionaire Ivan Savvidis, a former member of parliament in Putin’s United Russia Party. He established the Charitable Foundation of Ivan Savvidis in 2000, and its website identifies one of its major areas of activity as “the financial support of traditional religious communities, including church-building and reconstruction of religious sites, organization of pilgrimage trips, as well as funding to Orthodox educational institutions.” Savvidis has been a regular visitor to Mt. Athos and has used his numerous business activities, including investments in Greek media companies, hotels, and sports teams, to develop multiple points of digital and economic leverage to advance Russia’s traditional values plank.

Both Malofeev and Savvidis have invested in key sectors of Greece’s economy, as well as in targeted investments in the religious field economies (e.g., church and religious site construction and repair, pilgrimage tourism, hotels, digital and print media, and sports). All of these generate leverage in Greece’s local economies and, by extension, constitute a soft-power tool for reinforcing Russia’s
messaging that links religion and traditional values, nation and Orthodox identity, and territorial security. Malofeev and Savvidis are paradigmatic of a broader cohort of Russian oligarchs with ties to the Moscow Patriarchate or the Kremlin who have invested an estimated $200 million in reconstruction and restoration of monasteries on Mt. Athos since the start of this millennium. Furthermore, while fulsome data on Russia’s economic and digital footprint on Mt. Athos is difficult to obtain, monastics and pilgrims report “five-star hotel” upgrades in the slew of (pro-)Russian monasteries (e.g., St. Pateleimon, Zografou, and St. Paul), with St. Panteleimon “outfitted with 500 new rooms and an assemblage of satellite systems” reported to have been financed by Savvidis.

Orthodox hierarchs, clerics, and public intellectuals identify Russian oligarchs’ financial resources as a key factor facilitating the digital, sharp-power projection of traditionalism and fundamentalism by the Moscow Patriarchate into Greece’s religious ecosystem. Church of Greece and Ecumenical Patriarchate hierarchs have also spoken openly about Russian efforts to bribe, coerce, and intimidate opponents of Russia’s traditionalist ideological agenda. Furthermore, Russia’s use of hybrid tools to wage war for religious influence against the Ecumenical Patriarchate is taken as a serious threat by the Phanar, as well as by the U.S. diplomatic and intelligence communities. Credible evidence emerged that the Fancy Bear hacking entity, allegedly affiliated with Russian military intelligence, carried out targeted hacking activities against senior hierarchs of the Phanar, and data mining experts suggest that, in the wake of the Moscow-Constantinople rupture consequent to the Ukrainian autocephaly decision, Russia-associated cyber actors remain committed to compromising the Ecumenical Patriarchate through malign cyber operations.

**CONCLUSION**

It is important to recognize that the lack of robust longitudinal data creates challenges in measuring the impact of Russia’s efforts to influence Greece’s religious field and, by extension, the Kremlin’s (in)ability to disrupt Greece’s democratic political orientation and Euro-Atlantic geopolitical commitments. A significant complicating factor is the demonstrated hesitation of actors in Greece’s religious field to openly critique the Moscow Patriarchate. These are due to concerns over retribution through economic assets used either to penetrate or weaken Church of Greece parishes and metropolises, sympathetic oligarchs who aim to reshape local economies toward a pro-Russian orientation, and digital disinformation that brings reputational damage to Church of Greece, Greek Athonite, and Ecumenical Patriarchate hierarchs.

The available empirical evidence does suggest that Russia’s moral conservativism and traditional values platform in Greece has been marked by breadth of scope, rather than depth of impact measured in religious and socio-political change. Despite the long-standing popular view among a significant stratum of the Greek citizenry, actively promoted by Russian foreign policymakers, that common identity bonds of Eastern Orthodox Christianity make for organic cooperation between Greece and Russia, the fact is that “bilateral relations [between the two countries] have never attained a strategic level.”

This was exemplified by the limited popular criticism of the Greek state’s decision in 2018 to expel two Russian diplomats on grounds of a threat to national security. Then foreign minister Nikos Kotzias of Greece’s left-leaning Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance) government warned that Moscow had attempted to sabotage the Prespa Agreement, which resolved a long-standing diplomatic dispute between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (thereby paving the way for North Macedonia’s NATO membership). Greek media
provided intensive coverage of reports that Russian diplomats had worked to “extract and circulate information, and to bribe Greek state operatives” and to influence Church of Greece hierarchs in northern Greece to provoke popular objections to the Prespa Agreement.\textsuperscript{429}

Public opinion has supported the consensus across the political spectrum that has seen a significant upgrade in U.S.-Greece bilateral relations over the last decade. Similarly, at the four-decade anniversary mark of Greece’s accession to the then European Community, the intense Euroskepticism among Greek citizens—stoked by EU actions and attitudes toward Greece during the economic crisis of the 2010s—has not shaken popular commitment to the liberal values at the heart of the European project.

The limits of Russia’s Orthodox diplomacy are also evident in attitudes and norms in Greek civil society that diverge from the Patriarchate of Moscow’s efforts to conflate cultural patriarchy and Orthodox conservatism. These aim to advance a particularist human rights agenda that pits putative notions of Orthodox exceptionalism against the universality of human rights. Instructive in this regard is the widespread societal support for Athens’ ratification in October 2018 of the Istanbul Convention, a step differentiating Greece from both Russia, which has not signed the convention, and Turkey, which withdrew from it in 2021.\textsuperscript{430}

Putin and the Moscow Patriarchate’s efforts have also been unsuccessful in changing the discourse and popular sentiment of support in Greece for the Phanar, partly due to the daily cycle of Greek and international coverage of the Turkish state’s reported threats to the survival of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and small Greek Orthodox community of Turkey. The muted reaction of the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate to Turkey reverting the Hagia Sophia to the status of an active mosque provided clarity for the Greek state and public alike that Russia’s pretensions to protect traditional Orthodox values and populations is mostly rhetorical in this case.\textsuperscript{431}

Paradoxically, the demonstrated increase in Greece’s geostrategic value for Euro-Atlantic goals of stabilizing the Eastern Mediterranean and maximizing transatlantic security objectives in Eurasia is likely to intensify Kremlin and Moscow Patriarchate policies to sustain malign activities in Greece’s religious field.\textsuperscript{432} Moscow will undoubtedly continue to present high-profile U.S. statements regarding the Ukraine autocephaly decision as evidence of U.S. interference in global Orthodoxy, a narrative that has created enormous disruptive opportunities within the context of aggravated Orthodox disunity since 2019. Moscow’s weaponization of traditional values in Greece’s religious field is likely to intensify, again, by provoking traditionalist-versus-ecumenist factionalism in the unfolding leadership successions in both the Church of Greece and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The forthcoming period of major transition in these Orthodox ecclesiastical environments may also affect institutional dynamics in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Alexandria and the Church of Cyprus. Within this context, should Russia-Turkey bilateral efforts expand toward the shared goal of rendering supine the Ecumenical Patriarchate, decisionmakers in the Church of Greece and Mt. Athos will be forced to choose sides in what will be perceived as a zero-sum religious competition with geopolitical implications for Greece’s security.
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Endnotes


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6 “And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way.” Thessalonians 2:6–7 (New King James Version).


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“A Dictionary of Orthodox Terminology - Part 2 (I-Z).”


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Matthew Luxmoore, “A Cathedral For Russia’s Armed Forces Has Clergy Wary Of Merging Militarism With


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121 See: Union of Orthodox Journalists, https://spzh.news/en. For example, in November 2020 the site reported that then-U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo and the Ecumenical Patriarch had threatened the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia with recognition of the autocephaly of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church if the Georgian Orthodox Church did not recognize the independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. See Konstantin Shemliuk, “State Dept-Phanar alliance attacks: Will Georgia and Jerusalem withstand?,” Union of Orthodox Journalists, November 22, 2020, https://spzh.news/en/zashhita-very/75957-alyvans-gosdepa-i-fanara-atakujet-vystojat-li-v-gruzii-i-ijerusalime.


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241 At the same time, 64 percent of Bosniaks and 56 percent of Bosnian Croats have a mostly or somewhat positive view the role of the United States, while only 26 percent of Bosnian Serbs hold this view. Finally, the majority of Bosniaks (65 percent) and Croats (59 percent) strongly support EU accession, contrasted to only 18 percent of Serbs who strongly support the EU integration. See “Bosnia and Herzegovina: Attitudes on Violent Extremism and Foreign Influence,” Center for Insights in Survey Research, February 2017, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_bosnia_poll_february_2017.pdf.


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362 The author uses the concept of “geospace” to mean the intersection of the territorial and cultural geographies in which the Russian state and, more specifically, the Russian Orthodox Church (Patriarchate of Moscow) engage for the purposes of promoting, exporting, and consolidating strategic conservatism toward realizing the goals of Russian foreign policy. Consequently, geospace includes material and ideational manifestations with short-, medium-, and long-term chronologies. The concept of geospace as used in this paper captures the features of hybridity of space-time intersections and the ensembles of distinct, yet connected regions of activity that are found in works such as Robert M. Hayden and Timothy D. Walker, “Intersecting


365 All interviews for this chapter were conducted under conditions of anonymity and non-attribution of sources and ranged from across the Orthodox world. In conversations with the author, clerics and laypersons currently and formally associated with the Moscow Patriarchate emphasize the determinant impact of Putin and Kirill in broadening and deepening the church-state relationship; they emphasized the analytical and practical importance of deconstructing the factions and perspectives inside the institutional space of the ROC, since there are divergent views on the Kirill-Putin relationship as it affects the ROC's legitimacy and social capacity.


369 Phanar, literally “lighthouse,” is a term used synonymously with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Phanar is the area of Constantinople where the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek Orthodox Christian population were most heavily concentrated after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, located in today's Istanbul within the Fatih (“Conquest”) district of Istanbul, approximately midway up the Gold Horn.


372 Quoted in Olympiada Usanova, “Russia’s ‘Traditional Values’ and Domestic Violence.”

373 Deno John Geanakoplos, *Byzantine East and Latin West: Two Worlds of Christendom in Middle Ages and*

374 The two formulations are used interchangeably in this article, given that the patriarch and institutions of the Patriarchate of Moscow are the determinant decisionmakers for the ROC’s foreign policy and external affairs.

375 Those patriarchates are Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Cyprus. Dimitri Obolensky, The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453 (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1971). Obelensky’s concept of the Byzantine Commonwealth is instructive insofar as it refers to the territorial and cultural boundaries that were part of and connected to the Byzantine Empire as the wellspring of the Orthodox Christian faith and Roman law, and that comprised what eventually became the 14 Old World patriarchates and autocephalous churches that were convened by the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Churches in Crete in 2016.

376 A detailed treatment of the historical nexus between religion and geopolitics embodied in the Third Rome, with focus on Russian diplomacy and foreign and security policy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is provided by Lora Grad, Russian Policy in the Orthodox East: The Patriarchate of Constantinople (1878-1914) (Berlin: DeGruyter Open Ltd., 2014).


378 For a readable summary of the Russian state’s religious geopolitics related to territorial ambitions and Orthodox religious claims to primacy within the context of the Eastern Question, see Grad, Russian Policy in the Orthodox East. For a treatment of the contemporary Russian church-state position on this same issue, see Alicja Curanovic, “The Guardians of Traditional Values: Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Quest for Legal Status,” Transatlantic Academy, Transatlantic Paper Series no. 1, 2015, https://www.academia.edu/12689336/The_Guardians_of_Traditional_Values_Russia_and_the_Russian_Orthodox_Church_in_the_Quest_for_Status.


383 For an accessible treatment of the significance of the HGC, see the contributions in the special edition of the Journal of World Christianity, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2021.

384 Anonymous. This point about the persuasive and coercive tactics of the Moscow Patriarchate vis-à-vis Church leaders and the Greek jurisdictional pale of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (extending to other parts of the world) has been a consistent theme reiterated in many author conversations with hierarchs, clerics, and academics from 2010 through 2021. All individuals spoke on condition of full anonymity.

385 Following an extraordinary session of the Holy Synod of the ROC on June 13, the Patriarchate of Moscow


393 Author interviews with anonymous sources.


396 See Gallaher, “The Orthodox Moment,” for a discussion of the evolution in the agenda of the HGC, as well as for a review of key bibliographical sources on the council.


Ibid.


Kirill’s experience at the intersection of religion and foreign policy was developed during his tenure as director of the ROC’s Department of External Church Relations, beginning at the critical conjuncture of 1989 and the end of the Cold War.


This is a general tactic used by Russia to assert itself in southeastern Europe in general, including the target space of Greece. See Annie Himes, “Russia’s Game in the Balkans,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 6, 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235.

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