

POLITICAL ORTHODOXY AS A SOURCE OF SOFT POWER IN RUSSIA AND SERBIA

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Abstract

Balkan states have remained susceptible to Russian influence in the 21st century due to a concurrence of contemporary and historical factors. In Serbia, such factors have contributed to the high favourability of Russia among the general public, despite government leadership attempts to balance between these sentiments and relationships with the West. To best understand these trends, one of the most compelling examples is the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Serbian Orthodox Church in serving as forces to strengthen the shared history of these two nations. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the ROC has served as a vital partner to Putin and to the Russian government in justifying their ideologies, along with the strong transnational presence of the ROC as a soft power. Accordingly, the role of religious institutions as public diplomacy actors is exceedingly important to understand in today's global setting. For states like Serbia, this presents a setup whereby Russian positions may be shared or reinforced through religious channels. It is, therefore, crucial for scholars, political analysts and public policy makers to better understand the link between religion and public diplomacy, and to formulate policies and programmes that specifically consider activities disseminated by religious institutions.

Key words: Serbian Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church, political Orthodoxy, neo-traditionalism, soft power.

ПОЛИТИЧКО ПРАВОСЛАВЉЕ КАО ИЗВОР МЕКЕ МОЋИ У РУСИЈИ И СРБИЈИ

Апстракт

Државе на Балкану и даље су подложне руском утицају у XXI веку, пре свега због преклапања актуелних и историјских чинилаца. Ти фактори су у Србији, у општој популацији, допринели израженој склоности ка Русији, упркос настојањима државног врха да се успостави равнотежа између таквих тенденција и односа са Западом. Да би се ти токови боље разумели, један од најупечатљивијих

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примера је улога Руске православне цркве (РПЦ) и Српске православне цркве у истицању заједничке историје два народа. Након распада Совјетског Савеза, РПЦ има улогу виталног савезника Путина и руске владе у оправдавању њихове идеологије, али и институције меке моћи у међународним односима. У том смислу, ангажман верских институција као актера јавне дипломатије постаје све важнији у разумевању данашњег глобалног поретка. За државе као што је Србија, то представља оквир у којем се руски ставови могу популарисати или ојачати црквеним, верским путем. Стога је кључно за научнике, политичке анализаторе и креаторе јавних политика да јасније разумеју везу између религије и јавне дипломатије, те да што боље формулишу практичне политике и програме који узимају у обзир активности које спроводе верске институције.

Кључне речи: Српска православна црква, Руска православна црква, политичко православље, неотрадиционализам, мека моћ.

INTRODUCTION

Balkan states have remained susceptible to Russian influence in the 21st century due to a concurrence of contemporary and historical factors.¹ In Serbia, such factors have contributed to the high favourability of Russia among the general public, despite government leadership attempts to balance between these sentiments and relationships with the West. To best understand these trends, one of the most compelling examples is the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in serving as forces to strengthen the shared history of these two nations. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the ROC has functioned as a vital partner to Putin and the Russian government in justifying their ideologies, along with the strong transnational presence of the ROC as a soft power (with an ability to influence the domestic population and others through the power of attraction). Accordingly, the role of religious institutions as public diplomacy actors is very important to understand in today's global setting. Those who hold strong religious identities gain information from these networks and have a high degree of trust in that data, given the intimate, prominent role of faith in their lives. For states like Serbia, this presents a setup whereby Russian agendas may be shared or reinforced through religious channels. For example, the patriarchs of these two Churches have openly shared their alignment in the aftermath of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, conversations between Patriarch Kirill and Patriarch Porfirije have firmly placed the SOC as supportive of the ROC and the faithful people in Russia. On the 27th of

¹ This paper is based on my presentation at the international conference *State (In)Stability and Communist Legacy in Central and Southeastern Europe*, Zagreb, Croatia and Online, Libertas International University, 10 November 2023;

April 2022, a conversation took place between the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and the Patriarch of Serbia through remote video communication. The primates of the two Churches exchanged Paschal greetings and cordial acclamations. During a prolonged talk, they discussed the events in Ukraine. Special attention was given to the humanitarian situation in Donbas. Patriarch Kirill thanked the Patriarch of Serbia for the support and solidarity of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), emphasising that “there is the firm belief that in this grave time the Serbian Church is with us”². He specially mentioned the fundraising organised in Serbian churches with the blessing of Patriarch Porfirije for the canonical UOC and her primate, Metropolitan Onufriy. Importance was given in the talk to the situation of the UOC. Patriarch Kirill informed Patriarch Porfirije about the grave situation of the canonical Church. Porfirije said that the events in Ukraine directly touched his heart and the hearts of fellow-bishops and all the Orthodox Serbian people, who also endured hard trials at the end of the 20th century. “We share your feelings and pray for you and ready to do all that is possible to support the Russian Orthodox Church and the faithful people in Russia and in Ukraine”, said Porfirije (DECR, 2022). He also informed Patriarch Kirill about topical events in the church life of the Patriarchate of Serbia. A discussion followed about the situation in the world Orthodoxy and in the sphere of inter-Orthodox relations.

Concerning these ‘Orthodox knots’ between the two Churches, it would be helpful to tackle at least some of the following questions. What are these knots? How many ropes are there to create those knots? How complex is their entanglement? How close are those ties among the Orthodox Churches and believers? What is the real meaning of the ecclesiastical-political mythemes such as *russskiy mir* or *srpski svet*? Is it a unified cultural, spiritual and linguistic space – which, for the Church, if realised, could produce a greater collective unity among Orthodox people? Or is it just a geopolitical trope, a chimera suggesting the existence of a separate world of Russian or Slavic spirituality, the integrity of which was violated by political events? In other words, do these notions have any real substance?

RUSSKIY MIR

Since becoming president in 2000, Vladimir Putin has sought to fortify the relationship between the Russian state and the Orthodox Church to claim a morally superior ideology that is grounded in the valid-

² <https://www.pravmir.com/his-holiness-patriarch-kirill-talks-with-primate-of-serbian-orthodox-church>. Accessed on 6 October 2023;

ity that the ecclesiastical doctrine provides. To that effect, Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev) have worked together closely to create a partnership in which their respective institutions are entangled in a mutually beneficial relationship. Thus, Kirill was able to endorse to Putin the concept of traditional values, the concept of *russskiy mir* (Russian World) – a unified cultural, spiritual and linguistic space – which, for the Church, if realised, would produce a greater collective unity among Orthodox people of the formerly Soviet republics. As Alicja Curanović has aptly put:

Russskiy mir has a subtle mythological aura, it assumes the existence of a separate world of Russian spirituality, the integrity of which was violated by political events, but which will be re-created, and the first step in this direction is overcoming the internal schism of the Russian church.

(Curanović, 2012)

Indeed, traces of *russskiy mir* extend back to the late 15th-century *Legend of The White Cowl*, upon which the 16th century monk Philotheus conceived the theory of Moscow as the third and final Rome. The ‘triumph’ of the Russian state and the Russian Church was further developed by the 19th-century Slavophiles. With passion and persuasiveness, writers such as A. Khomiakov and I. Kireyevsky sought to recover Russia’s true Orthodox identity — an identity that, for them and for their followers, had been overtaken by the Western theologies of Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and the philosophies of socialism, individualism, and capitalism. Thus, Khomiakov employed the term ‘Russian spirit’ (*russskiy dukh*), while Soloviev and Berdiaev referred, in a similar context, to the ‘Russian idea’ (*russskaia ideia*).

In the post-Soviet period, during the late 1990s, Petr Shchedrovitsky and Efim Ostrovsky addressed the concept of ‘Russia’s World’ (*mir Rossii*), describing it “as a peaceful reestablishment of Russia’s identity and its reconnection with its past and its diasporas” (Laruelle, 2015, p. 4). However, in 1999, the term ‘Russian World’ explicitly occurred in its present form in the Shchedrovitsky-Ostrovsky article “Russia: The Country that Does Not Exist: Creating an ‘image’ of Russia today means building a new system of connections between Russians” (Laruelle, 2015, p. 5). Finally, *russskiy mir* was used, for the first time officially, in 2001 by Vladimir Putin in his address to the first World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad. On that occasion, Putin stated the following: “The notion of the Russian World extends far from Russia’s geographical borders and even far from the borders of the Russian ethnicity” (Laruelle, 2015, p. 6). Coined in the late 1990s, the concept of the Russian World was gradually adopted by Russian state agencies, expressing Russia’s policy in the post-Soviet diaspora and the country’s public diplomacy toward the Western world.

Nowadays, against this 'Russian world' stands the 'corrupt West', led by the United States and Western European nations, which has capitulated to 'liberalism', 'globalization', 'Christianophobia', 'homosexual rights' promoted in gay parades, and 'militant secularism'. Over and against the West and those Orthodox who have fallen into schism and error (e.g. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew) stands the Moscow Patriarchate, along with Vladimir Putin, as the true defenders of Orthodox teaching, which they view in terms of traditional morality, a rigorist and inflexible understanding of tradition, and veneration of Holy Russia. Vladimir Storchak, professor at the Department of State-Confessional Relations in Moscow, recognises messianic claims or overtones in all the major trends of Russian social and political thought of the 19th and early 20th centuries, including the *narodniks*, *zapadniki*, anarchists, Bolsheviks, Slavophiles, Russian nationalists, and Eurasianists (Storchak 2005). Accordingly, representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate today point out the historical continuity of Russian statehood in order to emphasise Russia's superior position. For example, Patriarch Kirill contended on several occasions that Russia's current mission was the maintenance of the Holy Rus legacy³. Thus, in the opening address of the 17th World Russian People's Council summit in 2013, Patriarch Kirill stated:

Russia as a country-civilization has something to teach the rest of the world. It is our experience in shaping fair and peaceful relations. There were neither nations-lords nor nations-slaves in [Kievan] Rus. Russia has never been a prison of nations; here there were no nations of the first or second rank. Wasn't precisely this the reason for a strong national resistance toward fascism, which proposed an opposite vision of international order? Apart from this, we as a civilization, have had a great experience in preserving a multipolar order. We have a great tradition of self-limitation, so important in the face of the future prospect of a deficit of resources and an ecological crisis. It is also the idea of traditional values which prevents the destruction of the concept of the family and the relations between women and men established by God⁴.

In this context, it is particularly important to identify what narratives are being spread through Church channels and understand their ultimate goal. Is the ultimate goal to sow discord, to delegitimise the West,

³ Two other prominent clerics, accompanying the Russian Primate, are Vsevolod Chaplin, head of the Synodal Department for Church and Society Relations and Hilarion Alfeyev, head of the Synodal Department of External Relations;

⁴ "Vystuplenie Sviatishogo Patriarkha Kirilla na otkrytii XVII Vsemirnogo russkogo narodnogo sobora", 2013, at <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3334783.html>. Accessed on 6 October 2023;

or to enhance the image of Russia? Current scholarship on a distinctly Russian brand of public diplomacy situates its strategies not as desiring to make people more amenable to Russia but in making the alternative, or the West, appear so immoral and undesirable that people feel compelled to look more favourably upon that which is ‘morally just’. Religion has a major role to play in justifying morality in Russia’s policies, while, at the same time, spreading this message across international borders. Curanović claims that:

According to the ROC’s narrative, history clearly shows that Russia is predestined to be the guardian of global balance, not merely in geopolitical but first and foremost in a moral/ethical sense. Russia’s activity in the international arena plays a part in the eternal clash of the forces of good and evil... The success of the domestic mission conditions the external mission. In order to help (save) other countries, Russia should first secure its own civilizational sovereignty. As presented by the ROC’s narrative, the world balance, the peace, that Russia is predestined to treasure, is above all threatened by the West and the processes triggered by Western policy, specifically globalization, unipolar dominance, aggressive secularism, hyper-individualism and liberalism, and terrorism.

(Curanović, 2018, p. 7)

At any rate, in 2007, the Kremlin established the Russkiy Mir Foundation, a project initially focused on fostering closer political and economic ties with Russian speakers in the formerly Soviet republics (the so-called ‘New Abroad’). As the legal successor to the USSR, recognised as such by the international community, the Russian Federation has sought to establish its foreign relations upon a doctrine proclaiming the entire geopolitical landscape of the former Soviet Union as the crucial domain of its national interest. However, this initial impetus evolved into a political and social worldview that challenged the basic tenets of Western civilization. Hence, the neo-Soviet image of *russkiy mir* was to incorporate: the Russian Federation, and Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Latvia. Curanović adds that “Moreover, Russia in the twenty-first century should be prepared to ‘accept’ new territories, particularly South Ossetia, Abkhazia and all of Moldova” (Curanović, 2012, p. 110). Russia, therefore, claims the right to intervene for the protection of its diaspora, which has clearly been manifested by Moscow’s military intervention in the Donbas and the broader aggression in Ukraine. For Kirill, aspirations to expand the Church’s influence and transform Moscow into a Third Rome invoke the idea of a Manifest Destiny, whereby Orthodoxy is seen as the truest form of Christianity – a notion that can only be expanded with the privileges, access, and support that the Russian government can provide. For the Russian world has a common political centre (Moscow), a common spiritual centre (Kyiv as the mother of all Rus’), a common language

(Russian), a common church (the ROC, Moscow Patriarchate), and a common patriarch (the Patriarch of Moscow), who works in symphony with a common president/national leader (Putin) to govern this Russian world, as well as to uphold a common distinctive spirituality, morality, and culture (Volos Declaration, 2022).

There is, indeed, a common origin, and even a common history, of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians:

But [they] all went very distinct developments as well. A common history in the past does not automatically imply commonalities in the present. The statements from Russia which try to justify Ukraine's belonging to the Russian orbit (and to justify the war when Ukraine does not want to belong to that orbit) are based on a premodern understanding of nationhood and state. But both phenomena, nationhood and state, are *historical*: they arose at one point in history, and they may again disappear. In any case, the primordial understanding in the Russian argumentation, as well as the use of anthropomorphic terms like "fraternal states," cannot match the complex reality of political processes. It is a dilettantish use of history, one seen previously in Putin's infamous article outlining similar points in summer of 2021.

(Bremer, 2022)

Concerning Ukraine, the largest Orthodox body in the country is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which is autonomous (internally self-governing), but falls under the ecclesial authority of the 'mother' ROC. The next largest is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), followed by the much smaller Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. The latter two, however, are not formally recognised by the wider Orthodox world. Interestingly enough, Kirill was not in the audience when Putin announced that Crimea was once again part of Russia. Since then, he has not moved to incorporate the Crimean dioceses of the UOC-MP into the ROC proper. He has also been resolute in characterising the fighting in the Donbas as fratricidal, averring that "in internecine conflicts there can be no winners, there can be no political gains that are worth more than people's lives". The UOC-MP's current head, Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and all Ukraine, occupies an unenviable position as the leader of an internally divided church. Marred by its association with Russia and its refusal to clearly support either Kiev or Moscow, the UOC-MP is losing members to the more nationalist UOC-KP. The official position of the SOC regarding the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine is that the SOC does not recognise the uncanonical 'intrusion' by the Patriarch of Constantinople into the canonical territory of the 'Most Holy Russian Church', given that the Kiev Metropolitanate cannot in any way be identified with the current Ukraine, which is made up of dozens of other dioceses. It was transferred to the

Moscow Patriarchate in 1686, which, in view of the SOC Holy Synod can be concluded on the basis of various documents (The Position, 2019).

As the Russian war in Ukraine continues, the Russian Patriarch plays a major role in interpreting the assault as an issue of ‘salvation’ to protect Ukraine from corrupting Western influences, as it were, calling Putin’s leadership ‘a miracle of God’ (Horowitz, 2022). At the same time, he has characterised the war as “a just defense against liberal conspiracies to infiltrate Ukraine with ‘gay parades’” (Horowitz, 2022). Putin himself vindicated the annexation of Crimea by referring to the concept of *russskiy mir*, with references to Russians as living in a ‘divided nation’ and emphasising the aspiration of historic Russia for the restoration of unity. In his unhindered imperial ambitions, he also pointed out to a ‘broad Russian civilization’, the sphere of Russian interests, that has to be protected from outside forces, particularly the West. As Putin claimed back in 2012:

Our foreign policy [. . .] reflect[s] Russia’s unique role on the world political map as well as its role in the history and development of civilization [. . .] [hence] we intend to be consistent in proceeding from our own interests and goals rather than decisions dictated by someone else.

(Putin, 2012)

It is apparent that the ROC may provide an ideological framework for Putin’s ‘civilizational’ enterprise. Moscow’s emphasis on defending its cultural and spiritual uniqueness are to be best understood within the context of inter-civilizational rivalry and profound ontological insecurity on Kremlin’s side, with regard to international relations. In Russian foreign policy, as argued by Curanović:

The religious factor performs mostly functions of identity-formation (civilizational identity and the vision of the global order: that is, civilizational multi-polarism), community-building (depending on the context, a union of conservative civilizations, a union against American imperialism, a union of those excluded, of Orthodox believers and so on), legitimization (due to its religious tolerance in the role of mediator between civilizations, deeply rooted in its tradition, Russia has special interests in its spiritual space, and a mandate to care for Orthodox believers and so on), and is an instrument of cultural expansion (*russskiy mir*) and diplomacy.

(Curanović, 2012, p. 150)

It is clear that the major contender of the contemporary Russian state is the world of the West, with its value-relativism, individualism, liberalism and ‘hedonism, which are opposed to Orthodox values and its view of the collective good. Hence, Russia’s increasingly vocal claim that it is a defender of religious liberty and the rights of believers around the world, which perfectly corresponds to the ideology and discourse of the

ROC. This, indeed, is a very convenient agenda that unites the Russian state and the Church in their international pursuits. In other words, Kremlin has upheld a position against ‘rampant Western hedonism’, with the goal of formulating a distinctive geopolitical identity for itself, whereas the ROC has benefitted from its increased and unhindered access to political power (Soroka, 2022, p. 21).

The church seems to outwardly enjoy a good deal of influence and prestige over the government, despite the formal separation of church and state protected in the 1993 Constitution. Putin and his entourage, for their part, prefer to reinforce such perceptions. They are frequently photographed attending liturgical services and otherwise paying respect to the Church as a hallmark for national identity. The Russian president, often seen wearing an Orthodox three-bar cross, frequently emphasised how he was secretly baptized by his mother during Soviet times. However, the ROC is not an institution subordinate to the Kremlin and it still represents diverse opinions and perspectives. As a result, the real synergies are not to be sought between the church and the Kremlin, but between a flourishing civil religion, ‘Orthodoxy without Christ’, on the one hand, and Putin’s demagogic (and often inflammatory) rhetoric, on the other.

Ukrainian Orthodox archimandrite Cyril Hovorun claims that the political leadership of Putin’s Russia was initially cautious in employing the rhetoric and dogmas of the post-Soviet civil religion developed within the Russian Church and society. However, during his third term as president of the Russian Federation (2012–2018), Vladimir Putin adopted it as a new ideology of the Russian state. In other words, after becoming a “state religion”, civil religion turned into a political religion (Hovorun 2018, p. 77).

With his doctrine of ‘Eurasianism’ seen as an original Eurasian civilization different from the liberal Western civilization, Alexandr Dugin has become a leading ideologue of this political religion – Russian political Orthodoxy:

Dugin sees Byzantium as a model for such civilization. He explains Byzantium as an eternal principle, or *archē*, of the Russian historical mission. Byzantium, for Dugin, is not only about the past but also about the present and the future of Russia. Dugin preaches Byzantium as an absolute value along with the absolute value of God and of the church. For Dugin, Byzantium was a chiliastic kingdom of Jesus Christ... As with other totalitarian ideologies that emerged in Orthodox contexts, references to Byzantium join Dugin’s call for violence. Indeed, he has repeatedly called for the use of violence to fulfil the Byzantine mission of Russian civilization... Thus, the violent post-Soviet political religion... culminated in the Russian aggression against Ukraine that followed the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity during the winter of 2013–2014.

(Hovorun, 2018, pp. 77-78)

POLITICAL ORTHODOXY AS A SOURCE OF SOFT POWER

When looking at Orthodoxy from the Serbian perspective, not only does 81% of the population in Serbia identify as Orthodox⁵ but they also view their religious and national identity as closely intertwined. This leaves the door open for ROC political missionary activity, particularly given the favourable view many Serbs have towards Russia. Russia opposed the 1999 NATO bombing that sought to end the crisis in Kosovo and has played, in its role as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a huge role in preventing Kosovo from being recognised as an independent state. In the religious domain, Serbian Orthodoxy has remained closely aligned with the ROC, as it is one of the SOC's strongest supporters in the opposition to Kosovo independence – a region that the SOC considers its birthplace.

Serbia is useful for Russia as a stronghold in the soft underbelly of Europe – a secondary front, as it were, considering that Serbia is an EU candidate country. Belgrade's aspirations to EU membership are not contradictory to Russian interests because the appearance of EU structures in Serbia will strengthen the informal pro-Russian 'lobby': Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria and Slovakia.

If it had not been for the outbreak of war in 1992 and 1999, Belgrade would have remained on the margins of the Kremlin's foreign policy, and the Russian–Serbian Orthodox brotherhood would not have seen a 'renaissance' in the public debate. Anti-Western sentiments in Russia and Serbia were instigated by the bombing of Serbia in 1999, evoking especially violent reactions in Russia. The Kremlin and all political groups fiercely protested against NATO's actions. About 90% of Russians thought that the West had no right to attack Yugoslavia. The Moscow patriarchate immediately condemned the NATO operation, which Alexy II recognised as "a sin and a crime against international law", while then Metropolitan Kirill (Gundaev) called it the next crusade against Orthodox believers by the Antichrist. Although in reality the Kremlin could not accomplish much, the ROC's diplomacy was very active. Alexy II came to Belgrade and assured the Serbian nation of Russians' support. Together with Pavle, Patriarch Alexy II held a solemn liturgy, which was an important socio-political event and a symbol of Russian–Serbian brotherhood.

A new test for Russian diplomacy was the 'October Revolution' in 2000, as a result of which Slobodan Milošević was removed from power by the opposition. The ROC was pragmatic throughout this challenging period. During the first visit of President Vojislav Koštunica to Moscow, there was a meeting of the Serbian leader with Alexy II in the presence of

⁵ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/popis-veroispovest-srbija-2022>. Accessed on 6 October 2023;

Patriarch Pavle. A month later, Igor Ivanov and Metropolitan Kirill went to Belgrade for talks on cooperation between the two states. After a clear lessening in the Russian elites' interest in Serbia following the year 2000, the Orthodox churches were the ones to take the initiative in bilateral contacts. Belgrade's strong appreciation of the role that the ROC plays in maintaining good relations between Russia and Serbia can be seen in the statement of the then Foreign Affairs Minister Vuk Jeremić in Moscow, who asserted that a visit to Russia is not complete without talks with the ROC. The activity of the Russian church is important for Serbia mainly in the context of the status of Kosovo. From the outset, the Kremlin has consistently refused to recognise Kosovo's independence, appealing to the necessity of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Serbia, and promising to veto Kosovo's application for membership in the UN. Russia tries to convince Serbia that it is in a position to offer it an alternative model of development to that of the EU.

Taken collectively, the presence of historical and contemporary religious alignments and a common Slavic identity connect Serbia and Russia in ways that lead Serbia to be sympathetic to Russian attempts at defaming Western powers. In relations with Serbia, the Kremlin uses the religious factor mostly to legitimise Russia's interests by emphasising its traditionally close ties with Serbia and its special role in the Balkans. Being the vanguards of Orthodox Slavdom, they were the least subjected to Westernisation and 'saved', as it were, their own tradition, Slavic identity and sense of belonging to Orthodox civilization. The idea of Slavic solidarity, used ideologically by Belgrade, meets with a positive response from Moscow. Appealing to the solidarity of Slavs, the Kremlin can play the role of Serbia's patron in international relations and advocate for its interests. According to this view, Serbia, when subjected to 'civilizational aggression', can count only on Russia's support. This includes Russian support in completing the interior of the St Sava Temple, various donations, artistic assistance, etc.

Therefore,

Despised by some and admired by others, Russian soft power in Serbia appears to be ubiquitous and overshadows Moscow's other ties to the Balkan country, including energy cooperation and shared opposition to Kosovo's independence. Capitalizing on the historical grudge that many Serbs hold against the West, Russia enjoys enormous respect and popularity in Serbian society.

(Samorukov and Vuksanovic, 2023)

Up until mid-2022,

The Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine had changed surprisingly little in the attitudes of Serbs toward Russia. Serbia still remains a global pro-Russian outlier, even compared to Western-skeptic coun-

tries in the developing world. As many as 63 percent of polled Serbs held the West responsible for the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war: significantly more than in all other polled countries... The BCSP poll revealed that 51 percent of Serbs believed Russia to be Serbia's most important international partner, while 66 percent called Russia the country's 'greatest friend'.

(Samorukov and Vuksanovic, 2023)

Scholars have often underestimated the soft-power potential of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Instrumentalised for political purposes, supported by an identitarian populism, the ROC has served in the post-Soviet period as a crucial mnemonic agent of the public memory production. Hence the ROC represents a critical civil society actor (post-Soviet civil religion), with its brand of neo-traditionalism finding a ready market among certain societies abroad, such as Serbia. Both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the ROC adhere to the Slavophile⁶ view of nation as a communal organism, fostering thus an 'organic' idea of society resembling the peasant commune. For example, the famous Orthodox theologian Nikolaj Velimirović regarded Serbian society as a 'people's organism' encompassing the church, the state (the monarchy), and state institutions such as the armed forces and the education system, with the SOC as the centre of that organism. The increasing involvement of the SOC in the sphere of education, culture and 'people's defence' is founded on this ideology of one of the SOC's leading theologians – who was later canonised as a saint. Views of this kind are often heard at Orthodox-national youth gatherings and in the rhetoric of SOC elders. To give just one more example: in an interview given on the eve of Christmas 2002, the late Serbian Primate, Patriarch Pavle, asked:

Are the [political – M.V.] parties sufficiently mature for social relations to be organic, like in a body where every organ performs its own function with which it is tasked for the overall benefit of the organism? And the organism as a whole has no other interest than the good of each of its organs . . . the Church has always favoured such organic relationship in society.

(Daily *Danas*, 5–7 January 2002)

The SOC and the ROC are equally authoritarian and distrustful of liberal individualism promoted by Western thought. They are also highly conservative in their social values and antagonistic towards non-traditional religious groups and denominations. In the early 1990s, the ROC's response

⁶ The Slavophiles were a small Moskow group of intellectuals from the mid-19th century who were loyal to the Russian autocratic regime, although their views on the character of the nation and the state differed from the official state positions;

to the possible alteration of Russia's religious landscape was characteristic of its view that religious and cultural reform endangered the country's identity and strength. Religious populism is an 'identitarian' populism, whereby 'Orthodox values' are accommodated to the ethno-national ideals and mythologies of the Serbian and Russian people. In that respect, both the Church and the government share analogous interpretation of Russian history and tradition. The country's history is cherished by both the religious and the secular authorities, who give special emphasis to its rich cultural and spiritual traditions and military accomplishments. Finally, their perception of the West and international community, expressed in their respective foreign relations, is very similar.

All in all, the Orthodox Church has become a significant centre of political and social power, dependent on the two autocratic regimes. Both governments contribute to such a hybridisation in the public sphere and, thus, infringe the separation between church and state. I tend to call this religious-political syncretism political Orthodoxy⁷. Political orthodoxy rejects, for example, secular values and a democratic political culture, becoming, thus, anti-European. This is apparent not only from the speeches and public proclamations of members of nationalist political parties and para-clerical organisations, but also from statements of the church hierarchy contributing, in their own right, to this form of religious populism. In the years following the demise of the Milošević regime, the Serbian government oriented itself politically towards European integration, while the SOC has maintained a conservative position. For example, the SOC was very critical of the European Constitution draft of 2004, whose preamble did not explicitly mention Christianity as the basis of European civilization and culture. In debates concerning the EU constitution, there were arguments that Europe unnecessarily and easily renounced its parent in favour of laicism that did not bring good to anyone. According to this opinion, Europe flies away, as it were, from itself into a forthcoming 'peril'.

The SOC today is probably the second most important power centre in Serbia (after the government), in numerous cases acting as an advisor and confidant, especially with regard to the Kosovo problem. In such a political context, the SOC began increasingly offering a new ideological framework for state institutions such as the army and the education system, filling – at its own initiative, but also with the support of the state – the ideological void created after the fall of communism. The process of desecularisation in Serbia resembled, to a greater degree, the return of the Holy in Russia. This entailed the new role of the Church in education, public media, the Army, and public life in general. New favourable laws

⁷ Originally, I employed the term political Orthodoxy (*političko pravoslavlje*) in Vukomanović 2013. This term resembles another notion that has already been used for decades in relation to Islamic religion, and that is – political Islam;

on religious freedom were passed in both countries. It is interesting that, for decades, Patriarch Kirill has cultivated deep ties to the Russian Armed Forces. In 1992, only a few weeks after the collapse of the USSR, he gave a speech in front of 5,000 high-ranking officers of the former Red Army, in which he suggested that Orthodoxy could inspire patriotism and fill the ideological void of Marxism-Leninism. This affiliation with the armed forces is, however, overwhelmingly cultural rather than faith-driven.

It would be too simplistic, though, to view the Orthodox Church in Russia and Serbia as simply an extension of the state, just as it is naive to assume that it has much power to achieve political objectives over the state's 'crown'. The truth falls in between, with Putin's and Vučić's governments leaning on the church to provide it a veneer of historical and cultural legitimacy, and the church relying on the government to uphold its position as a moral arbiter for society. But unlike the Serbian case, which is more particularistic and focused on the preservation of a nation, the Russian version of political Orthodoxy is more universalistic and occupied with supporting the empire. The Russian political religion is, therefore, imperial and imperialist in its character (Hovorun, 2018, p. 67).

The character of the current Serbian political imaginary was perhaps suitably expressed by Aleksandar Vulin, the former Serbian Minister of Internal Affairs (now the head of the Security Information Agency), when he claimed, obviously under Russian influence⁸, that:

The creation of the Serbian World (*srpski svet*) is an unstoppable process. It is important that all Serbs, no matter where they live, be uniform and that they decide together on all matters of national interest in Belgrade, the capital of all Serbs... Serbian World means that Serbs are united as a political nation, that they decide together on all the most important national issues, that they are always here for their Serbia, as much as Serbia is with them wherever they live... And whoever thinks that Serbs are not, and that there is no Serbian World, that it should not be, had better come over and look at us, to see our beautiful children and realize that they are gravely mistaken; for there are Serbs, and there is the Serbian World

(*Al Jazeera*, 25 June 2022)⁹

⁸ Vulin is otherwise known for his frequent visits to Russia and his cooperation with the Russian Federation Secretary of the Council for National Security Nikolai Patrushev. Russia and Serbia secretly established the „Working Group for Fighting Color Revolutions“, whose goal is to prevent mass demonstrations and closely monitor opposition activists, NGOs and independent journalists. Based upon Russian instructions of May 2020, Serbia started its public persecution of journalists and NGO activists, allegedly suspected of money laundering and terrorist activities (<https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vulin-i-patrusev-srbija-i-rusija-zajedno-protiv-obojenih-revolucija/>);

⁹ <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2022/6/25/vulin-stvaranje-srpskog-sveta-proces-koji-se-ne-moze-zaustaviti>. Accessed on 6 October 2023.

Although the SOC has managed to establish very solid relations with the Serbian state since 2000, it still has weak contact with civil society, unlike the Roman Catholic Church in Poland before the fall of communism (Vukomanović, 2014, p. 136). There exists in Serbia today, even among younger people, a certain reluctance to accept political and social pluralism – an outcome of the Enlightenment – and to embrace instead an archaic and monistic model of nation and state. It is no accident that, in this context, the SOC's populist enmity targets Serbian educators, or pro-pluralism and pro-Europe 'new ideologues', independent intellectuals and NGO activists. According to such an ecclesiastical view, the patriarchal, quasi-democratic model of *sabornost* should have replaced the authoritarian socialist political model. The revival of the 19th-century Russian Slavophile principles of *sobornost* and *narodnichestvo* was, in fact, a consequence of abandoning the modern pluralistic model of society.

CONCLUSION

The absence of a strong civil society and dysfunctionality of liberal democracy are the principal conditions that nurture religious conservatism and neo-traditionalism. In such a socio-political setting, individuals and human rights are not adequately acknowledged. Instead, individuals and their rights are reduced to ethno-national dimensions of society. Thus, the populists and authoritarians 'hijack' not only religion but also the public sphere in general, by misusing the confessional self-identification and dissatisfaction of citizens for their own populist agendas and goals. In the context of the Western Balkans, in which religious institutions are expected to enrich the civic and pluralistic landscape, the civil society does not thrive, because religious leaders and their institutions are in many cases co-opted by the ruling political authorities. This condition also hinders the development of a democratic political culture. Therefore, in order to build a strong democratic culture and system and avoid the advance of religious populism, societies in the Western Balkans need to develop a strong rational, critical, democratic and civic culture.

When politicians capture Orthodoxy by side-lining its theology and by strongly re-affirming ethno-national identity, the Orthodox hierarchy and believers themselves cannot remain silent. To be sure, secularists could easily adhere to this trend and use it to further their cause of removing religion from the public sphere, but the most efficient response to this 'identitarian' trend is theologically informed, profound, sophisticated 'confessional' politics. Politicians themselves may indeed frequent their churches, but that does not mean that they have any profound spiritual or theological attachment to Orthodox Christianity. Those politicians are apparently interested in 'Orthodox values', but such an axiology is often accommodated to the ethno-national ideals and mythologies. As a rule, the

use of religion by neo-traditionalists, conservatives and authoritarians is very selective: religious imagery and commitments are installed primarily to demonstrate who is *in*, and who is *out*, of the people's *sabor*. They also favour external manifestations of their faith over personal and relational ones. Religion is, accordingly, deprived of personal, spiritual aspects and understood primarily in territorial, ethnic, or political terms. On the other hand, there are many Orthodox 'identitarians' who know, or care, very little about the teachings and practices of their own denomination.

It is, therefore, crucial for scholars and political analysts to better understand the link between religion and public diplomacy, and to formulate policies and programmes that specifically consider activities performed by religious institutions. For example, what kinds of narratives are being distributed to the Serbian public through Orthodox channels and Russian media outlets, and how are these messages being echoed or reinterpreted by Serbian networks? How does religion influence Russia's overall public diplomacy framework in Serbia? How to inform the public about the less-known aspects of the social and political dimensions related to the role of religion? What is the accountability of the media in monitoring inter-church relations in the Western Balkans?

While there is a slight variation in doctrines and manifestations between different branches of Orthodoxy, and even within national Churches themselves, the dominant strand of religious thought present in Serbia leans towards ideological alignment with the ROC, on the one hand, and the theological and academic influence of Greek theologians, on the other. The high percentage of confessional self-identification of the Serbian population with Orthodox Christianity intensifies the effects of information distributed by the SOC, causing its impact to be more intimately held by the Serbian public. As a result of that, Orthodoxy does serve as an important component of Russia's public diplomacy strategy in the Western Balkans, and Serbia in particular.

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ПОЛИТИЧКО ПРАВОСЛАВЉЕ КАО ИЗВОР МЕКЕ МОЋИ У РУСИЈИ И СРБИЈИ

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Резиме

Научници су често потцењивали потенцијал меке моћи нелибералне Русије чије су политичке, као и културне вредности, све пријемчивије популистички настројеном и конзервативном бирачком телу у либералним демократијама широм света. У том контексту, Руска православна црква представља кључног актера цивилног друштва чији (нео)традиционализам налази погодно тржиште у иностранству. И Српска и Руска православна црква виде друштво као некакав организам заједнице. Они су скептични у погледу индивидуализма који промовише либерална мисао. Оне су, исто тако, конзервативне у погледу друштвених вредности и изузетно осетљиве на било какво угрожавање властитог религијског поља од стране нематичних религијских група и заједница. Религијски по-

пулизам је „идентитетски“ популизам, при чему су „православне вредности“ прилагођене етно-националним идеалима и митологијама народа у Србији и Русији. Религија бива инструментализована у политичке сврхе уз помоћ тог идентитетског популизма, при чему црква има улогу кључног актера у производњи и очувању националног памћења. У случају Русије и Србије, Православна црква је снажан центар политичке моћи који зависи од два аутократска режима. Обе владе доприносе таквој хибридизацији у јавној сфери, а аутор овог текста тај религијско-политички синкретизам назива политичким православљем.

У односима са Србијом, Кремљ највише користи верски чинилац како би легитимисао интересе Русије путем истицања традиционално блиских веза са Србијом и њеном посебном улогом на Балкану. Као предводници православног словенства (славизма), Срби су, у тој визури, најмање подлегли „западњаштву“ и тако очували властиту традицију, словенски идентитет и осећај припадности православној цивилизацији. Идеја словенске солидарности, коју Београд идеолошки усваја и примењује, наилази на позитиван пријем у Москви. Апелујући на солидарност Словена, Кремљ може имати улогу покровитеља Србије у међународним односима, заступајући њене интересе. Према том гледишту, Србија може рачунати само на руску помоћ када се суочи са било каквим „цивилизацијским ударом“.