

# "SERBS AND RUSSIANS ARE BROTHERS FOREVER": RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has once again placed the Western Balkans under the spotlight. It has given the EU new impetus to the enlargement process and has reinforced its diplomatic and military presence in the region. Despite polls showing considerable support for EU membership across the region, majorities in Serbia and Bosnia's Republika Srpska continue to consider Russia to be their true ally. The complex political architecture created following the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s has proved fertile ground for Moscow's interference. It has also noticeably stepped up its political and economic influence and mobilized proxy organizations to project its narratives, protect its interests, and slow the region's integration into Western institutions.*

*The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and not of the Berkley Center, Georgetown University, or the United States Institute of Peace.*

# INTRODUCTION

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As Russia's President Vladimir Putin is upping the ante in Ukraine by continuing his aggressive campaign, Moscow is increasingly asserting itself in a region that has been off Western radars for some time—the Balkans. Nested between the Black Sea and the Adriatic Sea, the region's geostrategic location and its proximity to Turkey, the Mediterranean Sea, and North Africa are important to Moscow. It is a crucial gateway for Russian energy transports, the shortest land corridor for trade between Europe and Turkey, and provides access to the warm waters of the Adriatic Sea—a quest which has been a historic driver of Russian diplomatic and military activity in southeastern Europe for the past two centuries. In fact, back in the 1950s, the USSR had even constructed and operated the Pasha Liman<sup>1</sup> naval base in Albania, where attack submarines of the Soviet navy were stationed until Albania's dictator Enver Hoxha broke off ties with Moscow in 1961. As recently as 2013, Russia tried to persuade the Montenegrin government to rent the port of Bar<sup>2</sup> to Russian navy vessels.

Historically unstable and often entangled between rival empires, the Balkans is perhaps the last remaining region of Europe that has not yet been fully integrated into the European Union and NATO structures. As such, it remains highly susceptible<sup>3</sup> to Russian malign influence operations.

However, more important for Russia are the region's significant historical, cultural, and religious connections. Moscow plays the shared cultural and religious ties card among the region's Orthodox Christian populations, which constitute significant percentages in Bosnia and Herzegovina in addition to having majorities in Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Although Russia has had three distinct ruling regimes over the past two centuries—czarist, Soviet, and post-communist—the same imperialistic mentality has survived empires and remains dominant in the halls of the Kremlin. Narratives of pan-Slavism and Orthodoxy are actively propagated by Russian media outlets and public diplomacy officials, along with the lionization of President Vladimir Putin and the Russian military. Serbia—being one of the largest countries in the Western Balkans—has been Russia's closest ally with their relationship resembling a somewhat smaller and feebler version of the Russia-Belarus relationship, which nevertheless involves manipulating identity politics, church relations, and economic interests.

Such religious and cultural links are utilized<sup>4</sup> by the Kremlin as gate-openers for more consequential deals—including in strategic sectors such as energy, banking, and real estate—and hence gradually lead to political and economic dependence. As we will see later in this paper, these links have opened the doors to Gazprom, Sberbank, and Lukoil.

Since the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there is no doubt as to what extent President Vladimir Putin is willing to go in order to instrumentalize Russian-speaking or Slavic populations across the border and utilize the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in order to advance his irredentist aspirations and dreams of empire. This ought to be considered when analyzing the Western Balkans as well.

This is not to say that the United States or European Union is unaware of Russia's intentions in the region. Back in 2017, then U.S. Vice President Mike Pence<sup>5</sup> warned of Russia's operations and covert activities and highlighted America's resolve to support Balkan states at the 2017 Adriatic Charter Summit<sup>6</sup> in Montenegro, saying that<sup>7</sup>:

Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force. And here, in the Western Balkans, Russia has worked to destabilize the region, undermine your democracies, and divide you from each other and from the rest of Europe. Russia's intentions were laid bare over the past year when Moscow-backed agents sought to disrupt Montenegro's elections, attack your parliament and even attempt to assassinate your Prime Minister to dissuade the Montenegrin people

from entering our NATO Alliance. President Trump has called clearly on Russia to “cease its destabilizing activities.” And I can assure you: The United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, or intimidation in this region or beyond. The Western Balkans have the right to decide your own future, and that is your right alone.

Since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Mike Pence’s 2017 warning has gained menacingly new dimensions. Consider this scenario—if Russia defeats Ukraine or manages to establish a frozen conflict east of the Dnipro River, such a victory of sorts would have devastating consequences for the Western Balkans and for the EU as a whole. This is because any Ukrainian defeat or a negotiated settlement that would leave Kyiv with a compromised territorial integrity would consequentially encourage pro-Russian<sup>8</sup> political separatists in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH), Montenegro, North Macedonia, Moldova, and parts of northern Kosovo. Despite the immense human, political, and economic costs, the Kremlin could use a Pyrrhic victory in Ukraine to assert its influence in the post-Yugoslav space, while simultaneously emboldening regional authoritarian leaders in countries such as Serbia and Hungary. In such a situation, the specter of instability or even armed conflict could not be ruled out as pro-NATO and pro-Russian elements would struggle to shape the future trajectories of their countries and societies. All that would have serious repercussions for the rest of Europe since these Western Balkans countries are essentially surrounded by EU and NATO member states.

In contrast, a Ukrainian victory<sup>9</sup>—even though not an assured possibility—would be a paradigm-shifting event for European security on par with events of 1989. The restoration of Ukrainian territorial integrity would mean the collapse of Putinism as a doctrine and an end to Russian territorial claims and dominance aspirations elsewhere in eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia. A Ukrainian victory would most certainly weaken the hands of Bosnia’s pro-Russian secessionist leader Milorad Dodik and Serbia’s strongman President Aleksandar Vučić, major factors of instability in the Western Balkans, while empowering pro-American and pro-European politicians. Ukraine’s victory would also prevent future wars<sup>10</sup> since Russia has used newly conquered territories as staging ground or launching pads for new conflicts. For example, the illegally annexed Crimea was indispensable for Moscow’s military operation in Syria and remains vital for supplying Russian troops in the ongoing invasion of Ukraine. The breakaway entity of Transnistria in Moldova has been home to a few thousand Russian troops since the early 1990s, and its numerous arms depots<sup>11</sup> could be used to supply troops in case of an attack on Odessa. Belarus, de facto under Moscow’s control, has already been used to launch missiles on Kyiv and could serve as a new front in attacking Ukraine from the north.

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As Jeremy W. Lamoreaux and Lincoln Flake noted,<sup>12</sup> the war in Ukraine kicked the symphonia of church-state cooperation in Russia into another gear entirely, with the ROC now a fully assimilated part of the Kremlin’s domestic and foreign policy machine. Though such claims may prove hyperbolic, both the Kremlin and the ROC seem to benefit from the policies and practices of each other.

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill serves as a visible interlocutor between his church and its counterparts across southeastern Europe, including to Orthodox minority groups in non-Christian countries like Albania, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Oligarchs close to the Kremlin and aligned with the ROC have actively

contributed to Russian soft power efforts in the Balkans, providing Moscow with a mask of deniability should an influence operation go awry. The most prominent example is Konstantin Malofeev,<sup>13</sup> whose St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation is the largest Orthodox charity in Russia and appears to be a key conduit for Russia's outreach to conservative Orthodox groups in the Balkans.

The aim of this paper is to dissect Russia's interests and influence in the Western Balkans, with a particular accent on its use of religious and cultural soft power in achieving its foreign policy objectives. This is a region where Moscow has been deploying its narrative of Slavic brotherhood and shared Orthodox Christianity to fortify its relationships<sup>14</sup> with political leaders, churches, right-wing nationalists, and non-governmental organizations.

## BACKGROUND

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The instrumentalization of religion for political aims has a long and rich tradition in Russia. The seventeenth century reforms promoted by Peter the Great led to a de facto transformation of the clergy into civil servants who were educated at public universities and paid salaries by the state. In return they were obliged to take the oath of loyalty to the czar and serve the state. The czar, on the other hand, utilized religious institutions for specific political targets, such as culturally assimilating conquered territories in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The emergence of the atheist Soviet state in 1922 dealt a severe blow<sup>15</sup> to the ROC, as the state confiscated most ecclesiastical property, and barely a few seminaries were left to survive. Other traditional religious institutions such as Islamic *Mufitates* and their religious officials were utilized in the USSR's social and public secularization efforts. Isolation followed as the natural ebb and flow of ideas, travelers, pilgrimages, and books was almost completely brick-walled during the Soviet Union's harshest years. All this changed following the end of the Cold War when a visible religious revival took place. Whether it represented an expression of long-held faith or a genuinely new wave of religious affiliation is difficult to disentangle.

Russia's first post-Soviet president, Boris Yeltsin, rejoined the ROC and called<sup>16</sup> on Russians to "practice patience and humility and strive for spiritual purification." When Vladimir Putin came to power first as prime minister in 1999 and later as president, he deepened and intensified relations between the state and the Orthodox Church. Gradually, President Putin took steps which were positively assessed by church officials—including returning church property nationalized by the USSR, providing funding for the restoration of ruined and neglected church property, giving church officials public respect and visibility at important state events, and instructing the Defense Ministry to build the Cathedral of the Armed Forces<sup>17</sup> in Kubinka as a means of strengthening religious affiliation within army ranks.

Patriarch Kirill has repeatedly hailed Putin's strongman leadership style in his statements, referring to the president as a "miracle of God" and "protector of Christian minorities."<sup>18</sup> Under the patriarch, the church has become a primary purveyor of Putin's nationalist ideas. In sermons broadcast on religious TV channels, the 75-year-old patriarch portrays the war in Ukraine as a holy struggle<sup>19</sup> against the West to preserve what he calls the *Rusky mir*—Russian world—uniting Slavic lands under Moscow's spiritual and political fold. In the worldview the patriarch espouses, religion is not only restricted to the domestic sphere but becomes an important element of foreign policy as well, while President Putin is portrayed as "protector of the faith."<sup>20</sup>

Venerating the president with epithets attributable to medieval monarchs is an obvious, yet distasteful, effort to divine the mandate of the highest office in the country. Thus, Putin effectively co-opted and subsumed the ROC.<sup>21</sup>

Nostalgic for an empire, Putin sees the spiritual unity of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine as being crucial to Russia's earthly power and civilizational continuity. Hence, by accentuating religious rhetoric in speeches dealing with foreign policy, Putin taps into<sup>22</sup> a long and deep-rooted tradition that imagines a greater Russia

extending across present-day Ukraine and Belarus in a combined territory known as Holy Rus. This is his “near abroad” which may also include Russian ethnic minorities living in the Baltics and Central Asia, the first tier in the Kremlin’s interest zones.

Notably, the church has portrayed traditional values as under siege for longer than the Kremlin and without any pretense of diplomatic nicety. In the words of Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev of the Moscow Patriarchate<sup>23</sup>: “It may well be...that the entire Western civilization...is becoming radically anti-Christian and antireligious. In this case there is a need of not only a pan-European but also of a universal common front formed by traditional religious confessions in order to repel the onslaught of militant secularism.”

For example, Putin defended intervening in the Syrian war by claiming<sup>24</sup> Russia would restore Christian communities affected by the fighting. He applied this narrative to the Balkans during his visits<sup>25</sup> to Greece’s famed Mount Athos and more recently to the war in Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> His closest aides have likewise parroted his words. “For us, Orthodoxy is the axis of the Russian world we seek to build,” said Alexander Dugin,<sup>27</sup> one of the Kremlin’s favored ideologues. Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov said<sup>28</sup> the state “maintains the closest ties with the ROC, which is the church most Russians belong to. Our cooperation is one of the long-time traditions of domestic diplomacy. We value the influence Orthodoxy had on the formation of our statehood, the shaping of culture and molding of the consciousness of Russia’s multi-ethnic people. We also commend the role played by the ROC in the life of present-day Russia as one of the consolidating forces of Russian society.”

The church’s foreign policy objectives are multipronged and diverse, yet they share many similarities with the government’s foreign priorities. This is noticeable when the head of the ROC Patriarch Kirill says “the universal nature of the Christian teaching makes us interested in various spheres of the life of society. The Church acts on equal footing as a subject of relations with different states and with international public and political organizations. We defend our values and promote the rights and interests of our congregations.”<sup>29</sup>

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The flagship initiative of such church and state diplomacy is the Russkiy Mir Foundation,<sup>30</sup> established in 2007, which supports projects that promote Russian culture as well as “values and spiritual foundations.” The church is actively concerned about developments outside of Russia and the potential implications these developments may have on the home front. This concern is not limited to the “near abroad” former Soviet bloc states or the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate, but includes the Balkans as well.

This is not to say that Orthodoxy is an ideological basis of the Kremlin’s foreign policy—it is merely utilized as a soft power tool.

## ENTER THE BALKANS

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the foreign policy priorities of the Russian Federation had to be re-evaluated. It lost its direct land border with the Balkans—Romania and Moldova. The first tier of directly exerted political and economic influence was reduced to the post-Soviet space through the Commonwealth of Independent States. Due to these changes and the serious internal socioeconomic problems of the 1990s, the Balkans became a second-tier area for Russian strategists and diplomats. Post-Soviet Russia secured a small role for itself in the Balkans by using its clout in the United Nations to stand up for Serbia during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and refusing to recognize Kosovo’s independence at the UN Security Council, which helps it maintain leverage over Belgrade even today.

However, since the first invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Western Balkans has emerged as a front<sup>31</sup> in Russia’s geopolitical confrontation with the West. Some argue that this



confrontation is deeply rooted in shared geography, while others say that it is an expression of different political systems, values, and ideologies. Judging by its actions over the past decade, Moscow seems to be wanting to use the Balkans to deflect Western attention away from its activities in its “near abroad”—in Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. For example, a few weeks after Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, Igor Kalabukhov—the Russian ambassador to Bosnia—stated, “If (Bosnia and Herzegovina) decides to be a member of any alliance, that is an internal matter,”<sup>32</sup> further adding, “Our response is a different matter. Ukraine’s example shows what we expect. Should there be any threat, we will respond.”

By bogging down NATO and EU expansion in the Balkans, Moscow hopes to prevent renewed discussion about membership for Georgia, Ukraine, or any other former Soviet state. Existing interethnic relations, deep-rooted nationalism, and bribable oligarchy make the region an obvious target for Russian activities aimed at bogging the region further down.

Aware of the shifting geopolitical balance of power, Moscow’s strategy in the region could be summarized as follows:

- preventing the diplomatic isolation of Russia in Belgrade, Sarajevo, Priština, and Skopje;
- obstructing states that have already joined NATO by playing on internal political crises;
- arguing for major conflicts to be decided by the United Nations (where Moscow has a say), and not by NATO;
- and keeping low-intensity conflicts alive so as to keep the West busy.

The Orthodox Church plays a major role in the predominantly Christian Balkan countries. In fact, these countries marked their independence from the Byzantine Empire with the autocephalous status of the Orthodox Church. Today, the church is consulted on issues ranging from religious education to formation of governments.

Russia is well aware that religion serves as a means of reclaiming lost identity in the post-communist Balkans and regaining forgotten heritage and historical memory, all of which form national identity. During a 2014 visit to Belgrade,<sup>33</sup> Patriarch Kirill praised ties between Orthodox Russia and Serbia saying, “Our churches are bound together to preserve the trust between peoples, which is of a great importance.” His counterpart, Patriarch Irinej of Serbia, replied that Serbs and Russians were “brother nations” with historically close relations and that, “Our hopes have always been in Imperial and present-day Russia, and it [Russia] always comes when we need it most.”

Over the past decade, Moscow has focused on enhancing the status of Orthodoxy in the region and on consolidating its links with local Orthodox churches, mostly by providing financial resources for restoring dilapidated religious buildings and constructing new ones. Kremlin-funded centers that focus on the promotion of Russian religion, culture, and literature have sprung up across the Balkans. An increasing number of cultural events, festivals, and exhibitions commemorating important historical events—organized in cooperation with Russian embassies—have become commonplace. There has also been an increase<sup>34</sup> in the number of pro-Russian non-governmental organizations, associations, and media outlets established which assert the importance of Russia as key security or economic partner of the Balkan countries.

Influence activities directed at the populations of Europe aim to disrupt and create distrust. The divide and rule approach aims to create as many cleavages at as many levels as possible. Russia, as a large power, would then more easily deal with a fragmented Europe. As Dimitar Bechev<sup>35</sup> noted:

This awards Moscow the coveted status of a top-tier power, whose interests and networks spread far and wide across the Old Continent and beyond.

Geir Hågen Karlsen<sup>36</sup> has pointed out three levels of the divide and rule approach. First, at the European level, attacking the alliances: NATO and EU. Second, at the interstate level, creating division and distrust between nations. Finally, at the intrastate level, creating division internally between various groups in individual countries.

The lines between these levels are frequently blurred, and it is obvious that any activity fueling discontent with the EU can and is utilized and amplified to create division between countries or within a country with an EU-friendly government. Russia achieves this by using disinformation campaigns<sup>37</sup> to influence public opinion and democratic decision-making. One technique is to question the credibility of political leaders, equating democratically elected leaders with authoritarian ones, thus reducing openness and trust in democracy and sowing division between population groups or regions.

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Russia also uses minorities and refugees, businesses, and front organizations. Russian propaganda and disinformation operations are extensive, and large and well-resourced media outlets are loyal tools for the Russian government. Local Balkan media channels have been playing the most significant role in amplifying and disseminating<sup>38</sup> the Kremlin's messages to the public, making Russia's involvement even easier. This is often due to these media outlets being plagued by a chronic lack of funds, hence often copy-pasting and republishing free content from *Sputnik*, a Russian state-funded news agency. One research study traced which outlets republished *Sputnik* news<sup>39</sup> and found that the most frequent re-publishers of *Sputnik Serbia* content included local outlets in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, and Kosovo, but also the Republic of Srpska's public broadcaster. In Serbia alone, this Russian disinformation campaign is so strong that a majority of Serbs believe Russia and China to be their country's most important economic partners.<sup>40</sup> In reality, however, Serbia conducts more than two-thirds of its foreign trade with the European Union. EU countries also account for the bulk of foreign investment in Serbia.

## THE ROC IN THE BALKANS

Balkan Orthodox countries constitute a complex landscape of autocephalous churches<sup>41</sup> which view either Moscow or Constantinople as pre-eminent. The Russian Orthodox Church has sought to spread its influence, despite some of these countries being EU or NATO member states. Its efforts are coordinated by the ROC's Department for External Church Relations,<sup>42</sup> working closely with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>43</sup> The department is responsible for the ROC's relations with local Orthodox churches; non-Orthodox churches; Christian associations; non-Christian religious communities; governmental, parliamentary, and public organizations abroad; intergovernmental, religious, and public international organizations.

### *Serbia: Russia's Closest Ally*

Though Moscow's position towards Yugoslavia in the 1990s had been ambivalent, confused, and indignant—while its stance towards the 2005 Serbian anti-Milosevic revolution was divided and hesitant—all this has changed under President Vladimir Putin. Orthodox Christianity among both Serbs and Russians has always been closely linked to the creation of the state,<sup>44</sup> and it has often played a strong integrative role in the preservation of national identity during turbulent times and upheavals. The post-

communist revitalization of religion in Serbia was carried out through the politicization of religion by reaffirming old ethnic and confessional patterns with the aim of homogenizing Serbian identity, including cross-border relations with Serbs living in Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. Such sacralization of national identity has not only strengthened the power of political elites but also reinstated the lost<sup>45</sup> public presence of religious elites. With support from Moscow, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) began buttressing the pro-Russian, conservative bloc in Serbia while simultaneously belittling the country's relations with the EU and openly speaking out against NATO membership.

Religion and politics mix so much so that it is difficult to disentangle the religious from the political. For example, in 2013 in the presence of Russian Ambassador Alexander Chepurin, Serbian Patriarch Irinej said, "We are geographically and spiritually in Europe, but if our entry into the European community of nations means that we should relinquish our being and soul, our Kosovo and Metohija, then let it be far from us. We should tie our small boat to the big Russian boat sailing into the future."<sup>46</sup> Sharing the same privileged status in their home countries and a symphonic relationship with "secular" state authorities, the SOC and the ROC have much in common. Because of Russia's adamant and continued support for Belgrade, the highest decoration of the SOC—the Order of Saint Sava of the First Degree—was awarded to President Putin in March 2011<sup>47</sup> as a token of "deep gratitude" for love towards the SOC and "invaluable support" to preserve Kosovo and Metohija within Serbia.

President Putin's second visit to Serbia in 2014 was followed by a visit of Patriarch Kirill, head of the ROC. During his three-day visit to Serbia, the patriarch spoke about the historical ties binding Russia and Serbia going back to the time when Saint Sava took monastic vows in the Russian monastery on Mount Athos, but also touching upon more recent issues: "In more recent times—when you were bombed—we were also with the Serbian people with our hearts, and we are now together going through what the Serbian population in Kosovo and Metohija is experiencing."<sup>48</sup> In return, Serbian Patriarch Irinej pointed to the unbreakable bond between the two entities: "We are two brotherly peoples, with the same blood and religion. Our relations have always been brotherly. Our hopes have always been directed to Russia, both imperial and contemporary Russia, and she would always come when we needed it most."<sup>49</sup>

An example of how the ROC and the SOC are linked to pro-Kremlin oligarchs is illustrated in the following example: when the Holy Fire<sup>50</sup> from Christ's tomb in Jerusalem was planned to be transferred to Belgrade in 2014, it was coordinated between the patriarchates of Jerusalem, Moscow, and Belgrade. The transfer of the Holy Fire on a special flight was organized by the St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation, belonging to the Kremlin-linked oligarch Konstantin Malofeev—who has major business and political interests in the Balkans. From Belgrade, the Holy Fire was transferred by the SOC to fellow Orthodox churches in other parts of Serbia, but also in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Montenegro. It was a clear attempt at national homogenization and an emphasis that the church is the one that unites all lands populated by Orthodox Serbs, and it irresistibly resembled<sup>51</sup> the 1989 transfer and public display of Prince Lazar's relics throughout Yugoslavia just before the country's breakup.

A favorite ideological authority among Serbia's far-right is Alexander Dugin, who in addressing the audience at Belgrade's Law School in 2008 said, "Serbia is in the forefront of Eurasian, Eastern Orthodox and continental principle...Keys to Russian politics are in Serbia."<sup>52</sup> Political figures and organizations in Belgrade exhibiting anti-Westernism seem to enjoy knee-jerk support in Moscow. This leads even smaller opposition groups in Serbia to emphasize their relations with Russia to the point of identification. Nenad Popović, the president of the Serbian People's Party, appealed to Russian President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill to help Serbia protect the spiritual and historical heritage of the SOC in Kosovo. The analogy used in this appeal is indicative: "Just as the Russian people are now endangered on their historical soil, in Ukraine, the Serbian people are endangered in the territory that has been the center of their spirituality for centuries."<sup>53</sup> Another example is the far-right nationalistic party Dveri ("Doors").



In its election program, the Dveri movement calls for halting<sup>54</sup> the “disastrous path to the EU” and points to the significance of turning to Russia and Eurasian integration. Explaining that “our reckoning with Russia is better and more honest than that with the European Union,” the authors of the program elaborate in the following way: “Not only because the Russians have never bombed us and because we are close spiritually, historically, and culturally, but because common sense tells us that Russia is in Serbia’s best interest!” During one of his visits to Moscow, Boško Obradović, president of the Dveri movement, pointed out that “Serbia is Russia’s western border”<sup>55</sup> and it is therefore necessary to increase Russia’s presence in the Balkans.

Thus, the followers of another far-right group Srbski Obraz participated in the cross procession<sup>56</sup> for the “suffering Russian people in Ukraine” which took place in Belgrade on May 11, 2014, while the Fatherland Alliance, Obraz, and Naši staged a protest<sup>57</sup> in front of the EU delegation in Belgrade under the slogan “Stop the Killing of Russian Children in Donetsk, Lugansk and Slavyansk.” When Russia began its 2022 aggression against Ukraine, the very same organizations and the SOC staged demonstrations in support<sup>58</sup> of Russia.

### *Kosovo: Keeping Serbia Checkmated*

In the center of Mitrovica, there are statues honoring Serbian Prince Lazar, fabled in Serbian mythology, and Grigory Scherbina, a Russian envoy to the region allegedly killed by a Muslim soldier in 1903. An inscription on the envoy’s statue reads: “A drop of brotherly Russian blood joins the stream of Serbian blood that has been flowing for centuries.”<sup>59</sup> History looms large across Kosovo, particularly in the celebration or denunciation of more contemporary geopolitical relations. Russia has limited means to extend its influence in Kosovo because of its refusal to recognize Kosovo’s independence. In fact, a day after Priština’s declaration of independence, Russia initiated a meeting of the UN Security Council and announced that it would block any attempts to admit Kosovo to the United Nations.

Nevertheless, it plays its trump card well. Russia’s permanent position on the UN’s Security Council is a key tool used to defend Serbia’s interests. For example, by keeping Kosovo as an issue of contention, Russia wishes to drive a wedge<sup>60</sup> within the EU and tie Serbia more closely to Moscow. Additionally, with Belgrade’s push for the creation of the Union of Serb Municipalities in northern Kosovo and with the idea of territorial swaps, Moscow helps maintain lasting instability in the region.

The ROC has never shied away from publicizing its political views, and Patriarch Kirill has been particularly vocal in expressing his opposition to Kosovo’s independence: “...We belong to a single world and we share the same spiritual values and moral tradition, which links our peoples very strongly. We care for what is happening in the life of the Serbian people. Therefore, we take the Serbs’ grief over the loss of Kosovo close to our hearts.”<sup>61</sup>

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When Kosovo was attempting to join UNESCO, the ROC vehemently opposed it and urged President Putin to prevent Kosovo’s membership, claiming that Kosovo’s membership in UNESCO would be a “total threat to the Orthodox shrines.”<sup>62</sup> Through a special arrangement with UNESCO, Russia donated \$2 million in 2010<sup>63</sup> for restoring Orthodox facilities included in the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Russia’s fierce opposition to Kosovo’s membership in UNESCO was motivated by religious arguments as well. In the first years of his mandate,<sup>64</sup> Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill called on the West to help preserve the security of Serbs and “their sanctities in Kosovo and Metohija” and to treat Orthodox Christian religious sites as their own. He said that Serbs living in Kosovo and Metohija had become

“hostages of a big geopolitical game”<sup>65</sup> and double standards and lies. On numerous occasions, Patriarch Kirill repeated<sup>66</sup> that the ROC was in concurrence with the SOC on political issues.

Though more of a symbolic move, it resonated well with Kosovar Serbs. On the other hand, authorities in Priština find it impossible to control Serb religious institutions in Kosovo due to the autonomy they were granted. Serbian Patriarch Irinej told Serbian media in 2017 that “we hope Russia will help us preserve everything that was ours,”<sup>67</sup> referring to churches and coreligionists in northern Kosovo. Last, but not least, the pro-Russian media presence in Serbia is an important element in disseminating the official Serbian government line and Russian disinformation among Kosovar Serbs.

### *North Macedonia*

Russian tactics in North Macedonia have proven to be not only nimble, but highly opportunistic<sup>68</sup> and easily adaptable to the rapidly evolving political situation. The Kremlin has been counteracting Western backing of northern Macedonia for years by exploiting the main bone of contention in the country’s foreign policy: its main dispute with Greece. Until the Prespa Agreement was signed, Greece obstinately vetoed Macedonia’s integration with both NATO and the EU, demanding the country’s government change its name. Once Macedonia changed its name to North Macedonia and joined NATO, Bulgaria took on the task of blocking North Macedonia’s EU accession over language and identity issues. The Kremlin condemned the name change as an imposition by the West and insisted that it be renegotiated in the UN Security Council (where it holds veto power). Protests against the name-change referendum in 2018<sup>69</sup> were organized by Hristijansko Bratstvo (Christian Brotherhood), an explicitly pro-Russian NGO in the country, which was also a key organizer of another demonstration in April 2018 against the expulsion of a Russian diplomat from Skopje following the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal.

An example of an institution of Russian soft power influence is the Russian Center for Studying Russian Language, Literature, and Culture within the St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. Founded by the pro-Russian VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) government in January 2016,<sup>70</sup> it is financed by the Russian embassy and was officially opened by Russia’s then-Ambassador to Skopje, Oleg Shcherbak. Along with China, Turkey, and Italy, Russia is the fourth country to have its own specialized cultural center within the biggest public university in the country. The center focuses mainly on organizing language classes for students that are completely free of charge. It engages in a series of other activities,<sup>71</sup> including organizing fairs for university education in Russia and conducting training for Russian-language teachers in Macedonia. The Russian government has also provided full scholarships at Russian universities to at least 40 Macedonian students in the 2019-2020 academic year. President Vladimir Putin famously expressed Russia’s gratitude to his (then) Macedonian counterpart Gjorgje Ivanov for the fact that “our Cyrillic alphabet came from Macedonia.”<sup>72</sup> President Ivanov was even awarded an honorary doctorate by Moscow State University in 2014.

Russian influence has also penetrated sports. Russian businessman Sergei Samsonenko became a household name in North Macedonia after investing in soccer and handball clubs (most notably Vardar). Samsonenko also developed close ties with the VMRO-DPMNE government and even appeared in party campaigns, but he left the country soon after the change of government in June 2017. This is not by accident—the fans of Vardar are notorious for organizing and participating in nationalist, highly politicized demonstrations. They were among the main recipients of secret funds from Russian businessman Ivan Savidis to protest against Macedonia’s name deal with Greece. U.S. intelligence says Savidis, a Greek-Russian billionaire<sup>73</sup> and former member of the Russian Duma who also owns a professional Greek soccer team, was working as Russia’s conduit to undermine an agreement between Greece and Macedonia. Maxim Samorukov notes that in an attempt to thwart the agreement, Russia cozied up to Macedonian radical nationalists, and the Kremlin was widely accused<sup>74</sup> of providing financial and media support to these parties.

In 2022, the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) received its tomos<sup>75</sup> of autocephaly from the SOC with broader internal autonomy. The Serbian Orthodox Church, which has close ties with other Orthodox churches, had blocked recognition of the MOC ever since it unilaterally declared “autocephaly,” or ecclesiastical independence, in the 1960s. Beginning in 2017, it launched a concerted effort to resolve its status, and in 2022 the Serbian Bishops’ Council announced the Macedonian church’s autocephalous status.<sup>76</sup>

### *Montenegro: The Kremlin's Meddling in a NATO Member State*

One of the main channels of Russian influence in the cultural and religious spheres of Montenegro is through the SOC in Montenegro. Though seated in Serbia, it exists parallel to the Montenegrin Orthodox Church whose autonomy and authority it does not recognize. It owns 66 monasteries<sup>77</sup> in Montenegro, most of them dating back to the Middle Ages, as well as dozens of churches and real estate. On the other hand, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church does not have canonical recognition and has operated as a nongovernmental organization since 1993. A public opinion poll published in March 2018 revealed that the SOC was the most trusted institution in the country, with 62.3% of Montenegrins reporting a high or mostly high confidence in the SOC.<sup>78</sup>

The SOC has a reputation for being involved in political activities and financially supporting far-right nationalist parties in the country. It is frequently involved in anti-NATO and anti-EU rallies and protests and often promotes the Kremlin’s trajectory on a variety of political and social issues. For example, the SOC was heavily involved in pushing for the rejection of Montenegro’s NATO membership and still vociferously expresses its opposition to anything deemed “Western.” Although the SOC was not directly associated with the 2016 failed coup d’état in Podgorica on the eve of Montenegro’s NATO accession, it did host an overnight meeting of the coup’s leadership at the Ostrog monastery just before the elections. The coup itself also involved two Russian nationals: Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Popov.<sup>79</sup>

*Unsurprisingly, the harshest reactions to the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities have come from the Serbian government and church, as well as from the ROC and government.*

One of the most controversial issues involving Montenegro, Serbia, and Russia was the enacting of the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities passed<sup>80</sup> by the Parliament of Montenegro on December 2019. It upturned politics in the country, incited violence in the parliaments of Montenegro<sup>81</sup> and Serbia,<sup>82</sup> and ignited a series of protests organized by the SOC throughout Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia’s Republika Srpska. Unsurprisingly, the harshest reactions to the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities have come from the Serbian government and church, as well as from the ROC and government. In response, Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vučić asked Russia in June “to protect the Orthodox Church, considering everything that is happening in Montenegro and the entire region”<sup>83</sup> and accused the Montenegrin Orthodox Church of wanting to gain religious monopoly in the country. President Putin was quick to respond. In 2020, Russia liaised through the ROC to manipulate the pliant SOC, sow ethnic discord among Montenegro’s ethnic Serb population, and promote pro-Russian policies. Following the Kremlin’s lead, the SOC leveraged its influence in Montenegro through mass protests and active political participation,<sup>84</sup> thereby heavily influencing the selection of Montenegro’s pro-Serbian and pro-Russian Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić.

More recently, Patriarch Kirill described the 2021 protests in Montenegro as akin to a “Ukrainian scenario” that encroaches “on canonical Orthodoxy.”<sup>85</sup> Revealingly, the patriarch’s invocation of a “Ukraine

scenario” ties back to the Kremlin’s larger concern over Montenegro’s political alignment to the West. In the Russian Orthodox Church’s words: “The current authorities of Montenegro do not conceal that they are active supporters of euro integration and isolation from Serbia and for this reason they seek to discredit [our] common historical spiritual and cultural heritage.”

The SOC and Metropolitan Amfilohije are the fiercest opponents of NATO and fervent advocates of closer ties with Moscow. Amfilohije famously said, “What is NATO that bombarded us, then snatched our Kosovo and Metohija, and today wage a civil war in Ukraine, thus continuing what Hitler started?”<sup>86</sup> During his meeting with Serbian Justice Minister Nikola Selaković in Moscow, Patriarch Kirill expressed his “concern over the situation in Montenegro and its path to NATO. (...) We see that the people object to NATO membership and that their protests are thwarted.”<sup>87</sup> The president of the defense committee of the Russian Senate, Victor Ozerov, was much less reserved in his observations, referring to Montenegro’s membership in NATO as a threat to Russian security.<sup>88</sup>

Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov expressed his support<sup>89</sup> to the SOC in Montenegro and pointed out that “only by strengthening the unity of the Orthodox people can the position of the ROC in Ukraine and the SOC in Montenegro be strengthened.” The Holy Synod of the ROC called on all local churches to support the canonical SOC in Montenegro, against the Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

There is a clear parallel in the attitudes of the SOC and the ROC to the Orthodox churches of Montenegro and Ukraine. Both the SOC and ROC deny the existence of a Montenegrin or Ukrainian identity,<sup>90</sup> and therefore the Montenegrin or Ukrainian nation and state. The role of these narratives is to justify Serbian nationalism and the process of Russian re-imperialization.<sup>91</sup> The ROC’s eagerness to intervene in Montenegro’s internal affairs directly serves Kremlin foreign policy by fueling Montenegrin political and social instability. On a more sinister note, it also sows the seeds for potentially more egregious intervention from Moscow.

Maria Zakharova, the Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman, accused<sup>92</sup> the United States of having “an obvious intention to bring a schism into the Orthodox world, to destroy the integrity of the spiritual space in the Balkans,” and of dividing the Montenegrin population. A small glimpse at the headlines reveals the dramatic tone many Russian publications take in describing these events: “Atheist president pushes Montenegro towards a Ukrainian-style schism;”<sup>93</sup> “The last vestiges of unity between the southern Slavs are being destroyed;”<sup>94</sup> “An open war against Orthodoxy around the world;”<sup>95</sup> “The USA uses the mafia to wipe out canonical Orthodoxy in Montenegro.”<sup>96</sup>

### *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Playing the Spoiler Role*

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH) has a post-war political system that is fiendishly complex and bureaucratic.<sup>97</sup> The country is starkly divided among Catholic Croats, Muslim Bosniaks, and Orthodox Christian Serbs, with each ethnic group having its president in the country’s tripartite presidency. Administratively, the country is divided into two political entities: one inhabited by Bosnian Serbs (Republic of Srpska), the other shared by the country’s majority Bosniak Muslims and minority Bosnian Croats (Federation). The Federation is further divided into ten Swiss-style cantons. When not dysfunctional on its own, such a convoluted political composition—relying mostly on consensus in decision-making—makes it ideally suited for malign foreign interference. Corrupt governance and unresolved disputes flawlessly amplify Russian efforts to craft mayhem in the country. An unstable Bosnia will, in turn, keep the region unstable because of strong transnational links with kin-states in the region.

In order to understand why BIH is so prone to malign influence, it is necessary to bear in mind that Bosniak Muslims and Croats are, according to opinion polls, pro-NATO oriented while Bosnian Serbs gravitate towards Russia. According to a 2022 IRI Western Balkans opinion poll,<sup>98</sup> NATO accession is



supported by 69% of Bosniaks and 77% of Croats, but only 8% of Serbs, setting overall support to 51%. Views of the United States are very positive among the country's Muslim populations especially. The IRI poll's ethnic breakdown reveals that a staggering 80% of Bosniak Muslims have a favorable opinion of the United States, compared with only 36% of Serbs and 59% of Croats. By contrast, 89% of Bosnian Serbs had a favorable opinion of Russia. A key Russian ally in the country is the hardline politician Milorad Dodik, former president of the Republic of Srpska entity. Not only has he met Russian President Vladimir Putin nearly more than a dozen times over the past years, but he has defied Bosnian state institutions and demonstrated that his political influence can paralyze the country's pro-Western path. Blacklisted by the U.S. State Department, Moscow's rhetorical support is of paramount importance to Dodik.

The SOC plays a major role since it controls parishes in BIH, in addition to Montenegro, Croatia, and parts of Kosovo. Because the SOC is heavily influenced by the ROC, Moscow's political and religious influence trickles down<sup>99</sup> and cascades through Belgrade. So strong has this influence been that while much of the world stood in solidarity with Ukrainians in March 2022, tens of thousands of citizens in Serbia and in the autonomous Republic of Srpska organized mass rallies in support of Russia and Putin. Russian-friendly media outlets in the region amplified the impact of these rallies with enthusiastic reporting and lionizing of the Russian military. Among those marching were Serb members of the notorious Kremlin-backed bikers' club Night Wolves, ultranationalist groups such as Srbska Čast (Serbian Honor), members of pro-Kremlin NGO Sveti Georgije (St. Gregory), and members of the ultra-nationalist Ravna Gora Chetnik movement. For example, in his capacity as a member of the country's tripartite presidency, Milorad Dodik met members of the Night Wolves and Srbska Čast numerous times. Finally, there are Russian oligarchs with close ties to the ROC and the Kremlin who can provide Moscow with a useful mask of deniability, should things go awry. The most prominent example is Konstantin Malofeev, who is strongly linked with Milorad Dodik.

*Because the SOC is heavily influenced by the ROC, Moscow's political and religious influence trickles down and cascades through Belgrade.*

The construction of a Russian-Serbian religious and cultural center in the Republic of Srpska's de facto capital Banja Luka has contributed to strengthening Moscow's ties with and its influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The idea for establishing such a center initially came from the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov himself. The cultural center<sup>100</sup> includes a Russian Orthodox Church dedicated to the Romanov dynasty, and during the groundbreaking ceremony, Russia's Ambassador in BIH said the construction of the center bore witness to the spiritual and cultural intimacy of the Russian and Serbian peoples.<sup>101</sup>

Security experts and analysts confirm that Russia plays a major role in fueling frustrations among Bosnian Serbs towards the Bosnian government while simultaneously promoting closer religious, political, and cultural relations with neighboring Serbia, thereby adding fire to already existing secessionist aspirations. It also fuels the thesis about Bosniaks being an "artificial nation" while promoting the "Russification of the Serbian nation" by accentuating the alleged superiority of the Eastern Orthodox civilization, its Byzantine heritage, and Slavic culture. As part of this engagement, the ROC assiduously throws its weight behind the SOC in building up a moral-ideological baseline which intends to legitimize the anti-Western war which the Kremlin is currently waging.

Finally, there is Russian disinformation disseminated in the Balkan languages by *Sputnik Srbija*<sup>102</sup> and *Russia Beyond the Headlines*<sup>103</sup> which is able to reach audiences across the region due to language similarities, free-to-use content, and an accessible writing style that make it easy for local media to republish content. A narrative that is frequently reiterated is that the East honors traditional values, especially those connected with Slavichood and the Orthodox Church, in opposition to the "corrupted and degraded West."



# UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA'S RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER IN THE BALKANS

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Before understanding Russian's church-state influence in the Balkans, it is important to understand the wider context of ROC's power and influence within Russia itself. Religious pluralism was never a tenuous proposition in the post-Soviet Russian church-state model, and neither czarist nor communist eras were particularly encouraging antecedents. Continuity with Russia's illiberal past returned with Vladimir Putin, and his early years became known as a time of managed pluralism in which diversity was allowed in political parties, the media, labor unions, civil society, business associations, and other domains as long as activity remained within regime-imposed boundaries. Following the previous decade of disorder, the public was more than willing to go along. However, this managed pluralism quickly shifted toward authoritarianism and increasing state control.

During this period of managed pluralism, the ROC began amassing vast amounts of wealth.<sup>104</sup> Owing to President Putin's state restitution policy, the church regained much of its property that had been confiscated by the Soviets. The government went one step further and allowed the ROC to run its own businesses, which over time became a very lucrative source of income. The ROC also entered the media landscape and since 2007 has run its own TV channel, *Spas (Savior)*, which reaches more than 100 million Orthodox believers.<sup>105</sup> The channel fiercely lashes out at Western liberal values, claiming they are at odds with Orthodoxy. Additional funding flowed quickly through lavish donations from Russian oligarchs keen on having the ROC's (and Kremlin's) blessings. Hence, church coffers filled exuberantly.

The cozy state-church bondage reached its apogee when the Moscow Patriarchate was granted residence within the Kremlin walls.<sup>106</sup> Such a move was a restoration of historical justice of sorts, since it was the Bolsheviks who, back in 1917 after overthrowing the monarchy, forced out the Orthodox primateship from its traditional seat in the Kremlin.

The Kremlin's international interventionism is cloaked in ostensible concern for the Orthodox world and its Slavic brethren. Coincidentally or not, it also seeks to diminish Western influence in areas it is geopolitically interested in. In other words, a decidedly secular motive has not deterred the ROC from reiterating the Kremlin's temporal concerns. The church has dutifully mobilized its channels to echo the Kremlin's narrative, including its historical narrative often utilized as a carrot and stick in building potential alliances and exerting pressure on less cooperative foreign governments.

For example, the church recently lauded Croatian officials for restoring a memorial to Soviet soldiers, calling it "one of these profoundly symbolic actions which help preserve historical memory."<sup>107</sup> In contrast, back in 2018 Patriarch Kirill directed a six-minute rant<sup>108</sup> at the Bulgarian president for remarks he deemed "outrages" of historical revisionism that depreciated the primary role of Russian sacrifice during the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish war which paved the way for Bulgarian independence. The speech that the Bulgarian president delivered—acknowledging the gratitude of Bulgarians<sup>109</sup> to Romanian, Ukrainian, Belarussian, Russian, Finnish, Polish, and Lithuanian soldiers who fought and sacrificed their lives in the course of the war—was perceived by Patriarch Kirill as historical revisionism and depreciation of the primary role of Russian sacrifice.

Such blatant comments clearly indicate that the church is exempted from the niceties of noninterference. Hence, the ROC can act without the diplomatic fetters that might otherwise bind Russia's foreign ministry, while energetically reinforcing the Kremlin's view of Russia's reputation being sacrosanct.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's declaration that Russia "will always defend the interests of Orthodox Churches,"<sup>110</sup> coupled with the constitutional imperative to protect "compatriot" rights, leaves open the possibility of expanding the Kremlin's compatriot umbrella to include non-Russian ROC-aligned believers.

The Kremlin's narrative of protecting pan-Slavic tradition and an Orthodox Christian values-centric society serves to reinforce Russia's civilizational identity-building project and its related multipolarity campaign. By anchoring its national identity in such religiously steeped conservative values, Russia burnishes its image as the vanguard of an anti-West coalition committed to contesting international human rights norms.

In Putin's words, "efforts are being taken today to...destroy traditional values..."<sup>111</sup> and this "clash of civilizations" poses a strategic threat to Russia's geopolitical interests: "[P]romoting...LGBT [rights] and spreading the ideas of radical feminism... dilute[e] the values of family and marriage.... [such a] society... is a perfect target for so called coloured revolutions."<sup>112</sup> According to this narrative, only Russia can thwart the West's effort to impose global "ultra-liberalism."

## CONCLUSION

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In many central and eastern European countries, religion and national identity are closely entwined. According to a Pew Research Center opinion poll carried out in 2017, religion has reasserted itself as an important part of individual and national identity in many central and eastern European countries. Parallel to that, many Orthodox Christians—and not only Russian Orthodox Christians—express pro-Russia views. According to the same study, 66% of respondents in east European and Balkan countries agree that "A strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West."<sup>113</sup> Most of these countries see Russia as an important buffer against the influence of the West, and many say Russia has a special obligation to protect not only ethnic Russians, but also Orthodox Christians in other countries.

Orthodox Christians are more likely to invest religious authority in the patriarch of Moscow than in the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, even though the latter is traditionally known as the "first among equals" among Eastern Orthodox leaders.

Political leaders of post-Soviet Russia searched for a new unifying national identity, and Orthodoxy provided an appealing means to galvanize the masses around a shared ideology, set of beliefs, and history. The ROC, for its part, has been quick to embrace the government's invitation into the realm of foreign policy as a means of boosting its international status and influence, as well as further entrenching its domestic agenda. It promotes and amplifies the Kremlin's messaging without the baggage attached to more overtly state-backed outlets such as *RT* and *Sputnik*. In exchange for this privilege, it willingly opened up its churches and missions abroad as an ostensibly neutral, yet consistent, proponent of the government's interests. This relationship suffocated whatever remained of the short-lived church autonomy and once again subordinated the ROC to the Kremlin's political diktats. It staunchly opposes any perceived encroachments on traditional values while simultaneously promoting the Kremlin's international leadership as the most effective guardian of these values. Then, given the global breadth of church diplomacy, the Kremlin can access more diverse constituencies that transcend the narrow realm of compatriots.

*The outcome of this ongoing arrangement has symbiotic results: abroad, the government benefits from the ROC's efforts as a willing partner in reinforcing Russia's "spiritual security," which in turn boosts the channels available to it for the projection of Russian power abroad.*

The outcome of this ongoing arrangement has symbiotic results: abroad, the government benefits from the ROC's efforts as a willing partner in reinforcing Russia's "spiritual security," which in turn boosts the channels available to it for the projection of Russian power abroad. On the home front, the government ensures that religious groups, or "sects," deemed by the ROC to constitute a threat are sufficiently repressed. Finally, the ROC's development of the theological concept of just war has primarily served

for the spiritual legitimization of the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives and the homogenization of the population. It has been invoked whenever Russia was painted as an aggressor on the international stage to ensure a presumption of innocence and just cause among its populations. It even allows for a defensive gloss (a defensive expansionism of sorts<sup>114</sup>) to burnish Russia's campaigns of conquest, such as its 2014 annexation of Crimea or 2022 annexations of Donetsk and Luhansk. This feeds a national narrative of a cultural-civilizational identity that can be used as the groundwork for a variety of expansionist-imperialist projects.

As for the Balkans, there is no doubt that the region lies well beyond what Russia considers its privileged sphere of geopolitical interest. In economic, social, and purely geographical terms, Western Balkan states gravitate towards the West. Rather than pulling them into its own orbit—too costly a geopolitical stratagem for a nation whose GDP is comparable to that of Spain—Russia is looking for leverage in the region. Its only option is to act in an obstructionist manner and undermine EU and NATO efforts by instrumentalizing the Balkans' own vulnerabilities. This can be achieved either through fueling disputes deeply entrenched in nationalism, abetting pervasive corruption and state capture by local elites, or contributing to citizens' distrust in public institutions.

In return, these malign influence operations provide a bargaining chip in Russia's strategic competition with Western powers. From Moscow's perspective, projecting power in the Balkans is tantamount to giving the West a taste of its own medicine. If the Europeans and the Americans are meddling in its backyard—Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, or any other part of its near abroad—Russia is entitled to do the same in theirs.

Finally, the ebbing and flowing of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union over recent centuries have left millions of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers outside the borders of today's Russian Federation. Putin's presidential decrees have paved the way for "passportization," Moscow's distribution of Russian passports to Russian minorities living outside of Russia's borders. This process aims to protect ethnic Russians and interests while raising the possibility of passportization being extended to include non-Russian Orthodox believers, such as Serbians. If defending Russian civilization includes the protection of Orthodoxy—and the definitional fluidity of compatriots<sup>115</sup> can flex to include individuals with religious, historical, or cultural links to Russia—it may not be too great a leap to suggest that Moscow might seek to render Orthodoxy a basis for passportization in the Balkans, and perhaps to justify further interventions in the name of Orthodoxy.

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## *About the Author*

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The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project represents a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs. Through a global comparison of varying motivations, strategies, and practices associated with the deployment of religious soft power, project research aims to reveal patterns, trends, and outcomes that will enhance our understanding of religion's role in contemporary geopolitics. This working paper arises from a partnership between the project and the United States Institute of Peace focused on understanding how the geopolitics of religion shapes peace and conflict dynamics in particular regional and country settings.

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