

## Ideological Pillow and Strategic Partner: The Russian Orthodox Church and the War

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## WAR AND CHURCH

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### Abstract

On 21 February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin made unmistakably clear what many in the region had feared for months: He would take Ukraine by force of arms. One of the reasons he gave in his speech was that the Ukrainian government was systematically persecuting and oppressing Russian-speaking and Russian Orthodox people. Putin thus appropriated Orthodox believers in Ukraine as part of his narrative of the Russian sphere of influence threatened by the West. Why does religion play such an important role in this war? And why can Orthodoxy not be expected to play a peacemaking role therein?

### The “Russian World” and the Russian Orthodox Church

Russia’s war against Ukraine has a security and economic history, as well as an ideological one in which the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) plays a decisive role. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the ROC was able to redevelop its religious life following decades of state persecution and repression, as well as to grow again into an important voice in society. For its part, the state was interested in cooperation, as the church represented values and a history that could give the people and the state alike a new identity.

Since Vladimir Putin’s first term in office, this close cooperation between political and church leadership has intensified. At the center of this new closeness has been the church’s legitimation of state oppression of social diversity on the basis of a notional struggle against internal and external forces of evil. This has included intensive cooperation with the Russian armed forces, which have been blessed by the church as an effective deterrent to the forces of evil. Civil society, meanwhile, was never accepted by the ROC as an equal partner in shaping society and has come under increasing pressure since 2012.

The cooperation between church and state reached a preliminary climax in 2020, when the ROC succeeded in getting such crucial details as belief in God and the restriction of marriage to a man and a woman incorporated into the new constitution of the Russian Federation. In 2015, the defense of “traditional spiritual values” was included in the National Security Strategy; this remained included in the new version from 2021. At this point, as Kristina Stoeckl has put it, the era of post-Soviet open Russian Orthodoxy ended and the era of

a national and closed church began.<sup>1</sup> However, Ukraine (and Belarus) remained within this closed perception.

It was the current Patriarch, Kirill (Gundaev), formerly the head of the Church’s foreign office from 1989 to 2009, who shaped a huge part of the idea of the so-called “Russian World,” a civilizational space shaped by Russian language, the Russian Orthodox faith, and certain traditional values. This concept was always vague, not least in its geographical dimension. From the Church’s point of view, it was meant to be transnational and to include people all over the world who identified with certain common values. At the same time, it concerned a very concrete territory, namely the countries of Ukraine, Belarus, and the Russian Federation, or the core territory of the historical Rus’.

The baptism of the Rus’, dated in chronicles to the year 988, represents the origin of Orthodox Christianity in this region and is considered by Russian Orthodoxy to be its founding date. This baptism allegedly took place near Kyiv, so to this day the ROC associates its spiritual center with Kyiv. When Ukraine gained political independence in 1991, this spiritual connection posed a problem, as many Orthodox believers also demanded ecclesiastical independence from Moscow. The Moscow Patriarchate, however, could not agree to this independence: the Church would have lost not only a large share of its faithful—today almost one-third of all believers—but also interpretive sovereignty over its founding myth. In 1992, therefore, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, a national church without canonical recognition from any other church in the world, split off from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which belonged to Moscow and remained the largest religious community in the country.

1 Kristina Stoeckl, “The End of Post-Soviet Religion: Russian Orthodoxy as a National Church,” *Public Orthodoxy*, July 20, 2020, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/07/20/the-end-of-post-soviet-religion/>.

## The Question of Ukraine's Place in the "Russian World"

The question of Ukraine's affiliation to the "Russian world" has been an issue in the history of independent Ukraine whenever Ukrainian society has taken steps toward greater European integration. It was also true of the "Revolution of Dignity" in 2013/14, which was interpreted within the ROC as a revolution orchestrated by the liberal West against traditional Ukrainian society. At that time, the UOC was rhetorically presented by the Moscow Patriarchate as the vanguard of the spiritual struggle for the heritage of the Rus' and against the liberal values of the West.

When Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in spring 2014 and supported separatist groups in eastern Ukraine, the ROC made no comment on these events in any way. The UOC found itself in a difficult position: on the one hand, it did not want to contradict the church leadership in Moscow; at the same time, Ukrainian society expected it to take a clear position on Ukrainian sovereignty. The indecisive stance of Metropolitan Onufriy and the clearly pro-Russian position of some bishops produced strong tensions within Ukrainian Orthodoxy in the years that followed.

In autumn 2018, the recognition of an independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) led to an escalation of the ecclesiastical situation. The Patriarchate of Moscow protested against the Ecumenical Patriarch's intervention on "its" territory and broke ecclesiastical communion with those Orthodox churches that recognized this new church. The UOC tried to counter the accusation of being a Russian agent, however: together with the ROC, it launched a campaign about the alleged state persecution of its believers, meticulously documenting violent attacks on churches and certain questionable legislative projects against the church, even though these remained isolated cases that were often due to local vandalism. The UOC increasingly withdrew from the public space and lost its voice in many important social debates, such as the fight against domestic violence or initiatives for an ecumenical peace ethic, even as its very existence became the major weapon of Russian Orthodox propaganda of war.

## The Russian Orthodox Church and the War Against Ukraine

In light of the invasion that began on 24 February, the Moscow Patriarchate's campaign documenting state persecution of Orthodox Christians in Ukraine appears to be a carefully orchestrated prelude to war. As early as 2018/19, the political leadership in Moscow signaled at a Russian Security Council meeting that a threat to

Orthodox believers of the Moscow Patriarchate could provide the basis for Russian intervention in Ukraine. The ROC intensified its global struggle to defend persecuted Christians and positioned itself in international and ecumenical bodies as the only reliable partner of these persecuted churches. Russia's military intervention in Syria was praised and supported by the ROC as a "holy struggle;" Russia's activities on the African continent, especially since January 2022, also follow this logic. Remarkably, when making public statements, ROC representatives frequently discuss violent attacks by Ukrainian actors on UOC churches while avoiding commenting on the destruction perpetrated by the Russian army.

As specious as the religious element of Putin's justification of the war appears, it primarily secures and underlines the ROC's support for this war. The Church's arguments mirror the political arguments: both claim Ukraine as "their" territory and ignore any developments of sovereignty; both frame the war as a defense of their "own" people and values against external threats; both claim to bring peace to Ukraine by liberating it from alien and dangerous influences. Most remarkably, both use the language of their declared enemies—such as human rights rhetoric, the right to sovereignty, and the defense of human lives—thus playing on popular uncertainty and preventing any meaningful dialogue about the real situation.

The ROC's involvement in Putin's warmongering ideology makes it impossible to count on it as part of a peaceful solution. Not only is it not protecting its own believers in Ukraine, but it is also waging a war against those among its own faithful in Russia who speak out publicly against the war and are repressed by the state. The intimidation and open legal persecution of priests; pressure on hierarchs; the demotion of the famous head of the External Office of the ROC, Metropolitan Hilarion, to a bishop of Budapest and Vienna; and the Patriarch's open support in his sermons for Vladimir Putin make clear that no dissent from the official position will be tolerated.

Hopes that the Moscow Patriarch would come out against the war died in Western churches, and in Ukraine, by no later than the second week of the war. As the horrific pictures of destroyed homes, devastated urban infrastructure, millions of refugees, and people in air-raid shelters spread worldwide, the Moscow Patriarch remained silent. Pictures of the destroyed cities and churches are still missing from the online homepages of the church today, after eight months of war and the destruction of over 300 places of worship. The clear words of the church leadership in Kyiv condemning the Russian war as "Cain's murder"<sup>2</sup> and

2 <https://news.church.ua/2022/02/24/video-zvernennya-blazhennishogo-mitropolita-onufriya-ukrajinkoji-pastvi/>

calling on the Russian state and church to stop the aggression, as well as their prayers for peace, remain untranslated. Finally, with the beginning of Orthodox Lent on 6 March, Patriarch Kirill began a series of sermons openly presenting Russia's war as a defense of Ukraine against provocations from the West. In his sermons, the UOC is painted as "suffering for its own faith." The fighting in Ukraine is described as an apocalyptic, metaphysical struggle for Ukraine between good and evil forces of the world. Patriarch Kirill thus employs the rhetoric of the culture wars, which also enjoys great sympathy among ultra-conservative actors in Western Europe and the US. Most recently, in September 2022, Patriarch Kirill described the death of Russian soldiers in the war as "sacrifice,"<sup>3</sup> assuming the arguments of holy war deployed by crusaders and jihad terrorists.

Ukrainians met the Patriarch's silence—and, later, his open support for the war—with bewilderment. Metropolitan Onufriy, known for his political restraint and closeness to Moscow, condemned the war. Whereas the Patriarch instrumentalized the image of brothers to justify the war, his Ukrainian bishops used it to call for an immediate end to the senseless killing. The Patriarch's failure to provide pastoral support to his own Church is tantamount to a refusal to take responsibility for it. Numerous bishops and priests responded by suspending the naming of the Patriarch in the liturgy. In May 2022, the UOC proclaimed at a council that it was "fully independent from Moscow" and deleted all connections to Moscow from its statutes. Patriarch Kirill accused these priests of cowardice and disloyalty; the

decision of the council is widely ignored. However, several eparchies in the occupied territories were officially transferred to the ROC, underlining that the canonicity of the UOC is an open question.

### Outlook

The tensions between the two Orthodox churches in Ukraine and the mutual mistrust and accusations of recent years carry huge potential for escalation. Provocations around UOC churches, isolated accusations of harboring Russian soldiers in monasteries, the reported collaboration of UOC hierarchs in the occupied and later liberated territories in the East, and unlawful bans on UOC activities show that the situation around churches in this war is extremely fragile. This fragility extends to the international context. The ROC sows unrest in other parts of the world: in Africa with the development of parallel church structures; in North America through far-right conservative actors; and in the ecumenical global community by causing cleavages within churches along political lines, as happened at the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in early September. To date, the fact that one of the largest Christian churches in the world uncompromisingly acts as an instrument of war against its own believers and misuses prayer for peace for this purpose has produced theological paralysis. Although Patriarch Kirill's real influence on Putin and the warmongering military and political elites is low, the effect of religious legitimation on social mobilization and public willingness to sacrifice is immense.

#### *About the Author*

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3 <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5962628.html>