

10

THE RUSSIAN

**ORTHODOX CHURCH AS A GEOPOLITICAL INSTRUMENT OF RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE
BLACK SEA REGION**

**LA IGLESIA ORTODOXA RUSA COMO INSTRUMENTO GEOPOLÍTICO DE LA POLÍTICA EXTERIOR DE RU-
SIA EN EL MAR NEGRO**

Tengiz Pkhaladze¹

E-mail: tengizpkhaladze@mail.ru

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1540-6087>

¹ Georgian Institute of Public Affairs. Georgia.

Suggested citation (APA, seventh edition)

Pkhaladze, T. (2026). The Russian Orthodox Church as a geopolitical instrument of Russia's foreign policy in the Black Sea region. *Revista Transdisciplinaria de Estudios Sociales y Tecnológicos*, 6(1), 84-93.

Submission: 10/10/2025

Acceptance: 19/11/2025

Publication: 01/01/2026

ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the instrumentalization of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) by the Russian state as part of its foreign policy in the Black Sea region. While the Russian Federation is constitutionally secular, the Moscow Patriarchate functions as a de facto strategic partner of the Kremlin, projecting religious soft power and legitimizing geopolitical objectives. Drawing on primary and secondary sources, this study situates the ROC within the evolution of Russian state–church relations from the imperial period to the post-Soviet era. It highlights how the ROC advances the Russkiy mir (“Russian World”) ideology, intervenes in the ecclesiastical affairs of neighboring Orthodox states, and amplifies Kremlin narratives in international fora under the guise of defending religious freedom and traditional values. Case studies from Ukraine and Georgia illustrate the Church’s complicity in legitimizing occupation, undermining canonical order, and disseminating propaganda aligned with hybrid warfare strategies. In the Balkans, the ROC leverages Orthodox “brotherhood” to foster anti-Western sentiment and bolster Russia’s influence. Findings suggest that the ROC has become an indispensable instrument of Russia’s hybrid strategy, with profound implications for the sovereignty of Orthodox-majority states, European security, and the international order.

Keywords:

Russian foreign policy, Russian Orthodox Church, Black Sea Region, Hybrid Warfare, Russkiy Mir, Religious Diplomacy, Orthodoxy, Propaganda, Soft Power.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina críticamente la instrumentalización de la Iglesia Ortodoxa Rusa (IOR) por el Estado ruso como parte de su política exterior en la región del Mar Negro. Aunque la Federación Rusa es constitucionalmente secular, el Patriarcado de Moscú funciona como un socio estratégico de facto del Kremlin, proyectando poder blando religioso y legitimando objetivos geopolíticos. Basándose en fuentes primarias y secundarias, este estudio sitúa a la IOR dentro de la evolución de las relaciones Estado–Iglesia en Rusia, desde el período imperial hasta la era postsoviética. Se destaca cómo la IOR promueve la ideología del Russkiy mir (“Mundo Ruso”), interviene en los asuntos eclesiásticos de los Estados ortodoxos vecinos y amplifica las narrativas del Kremlin en foros internacionales bajo el pretexto de defender la libertad religiosa y los valores tradicionales. Los estudios de caso de Ucrania y Georgia ilustran la complicidad de la Iglesia en la legitimación de ocupaciones, la alteración del orden canónico y la difusión de propaganda alineada con estrategias de guerra híbrida. En los Balcanes, la IOR aprovecha la “hermandad” ortodoxa para fomentar sentimientos antioccidentales y fortalecer la influencia de Rusia. Los hallazgos sugieren que la IOR se ha convertido en un instrumento indispensable de la estrategia híbrida rusa, con profundas implicaciones para la soberanía de los Estados mayoritariamente ortodoxos, la seguridad europea y el orden internacional.

Palabras clave:

Política exterior rusa, Iglesia Ortodoxa Rusa, región del Mar Negro, guerra híbrida, diplomacia religiosa, ortodoxia, poder blando.

INTRODUCTION

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), also known as the Moscow Patriarchate, constitutes one of the most influential religious-political institutions in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region. While the Russian Federation is constitutionally defined as a secular state, in practice the ROC functions as a strategic instrument of Russian foreign policy. The Church operates as a critical component of the Kremlin's hybrid toolkit, simultaneously serving as a channel of soft power, a source of ideological legitimation, and a mechanism of influence over Orthodox populations in neighboring countries. Its capacity to mobilize religious identity allows the Russian state to project authority and shape political attitudes beyond its borders, blurring the lines between spiritual leadership and geopolitical strategy.

The Black Sea region provides a particularly salient context for analyzing these dynamics. With the exception of Turkey, the majority of littoral states—Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Romania—are historically Orthodox, and Orthodoxy remains deeply embedded in their national and cultural identities. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, considered *primus inter pares* within the Orthodox world, resides in Istanbul, highlighting the contested authority within global Orthodoxy. Moscow's aspirations to rival Constantinople's influence underscore the Church's strategic role in advancing Russian interests and shaping transnational religious networks.

Since the post-Soviet era, Russia's foreign policy has emphasized "privileged interests" in its neighboring regions while resisting Western encroachment. Within this geopolitical framework, the ROC functions as a soft-power instrument, cloaking Moscow's ideological projects in religious legitimacy. Scholars have described this phenomenon as "religious diplomacy" (Stoeckl, 2016; Suslov, 2018), in which theological language, ecclesiastical authority, and moral discourse are mobilized to serve geopolitical ends. By framing political objectives in moral and spiritual terms, the ROC enhances the perceived legitimacy of Russian actions and fosters compliance among Orthodox communities abroad.

This study identifies five core modalities through which the ROC advances Russia's strategic agenda. First, the Church promotes the *Ruskiy mir* ("Russian World") ideology and defends so-called "traditional values," positioning itself as a guardian of cultural and religious identity that aligns with Moscow's broader political narratives. Second, it competes with the Ecumenical Patriarchate for primacy within global Orthodoxy, asserting Moscow's authority as an alternative center of spiritual influence.

Third, the ROC intervenes directly in the religious affairs of neighboring states, particularly Ukraine and Georgia, shaping ecclesiastical decisions to support Russian

political objectives. Fourth, it disseminates anti-Western propaganda and mobilizes para-religious organizations, reinforcing narratives that serve the Kremlin's hybrid warfare strategies. Finally, the Church engages actively in international institutions, amplifying Russian positions under the discourse of religious freedom, cultural preservation, and traditional values.

The analysis is conducted both historically and thematically. Initially, the study situates the ROC within the Russian state system, tracing its evolution from the imperial period through the Soviet era and into post-Soviet consolidation. Subsequent sections explore the Church's role in promoting the *Ruskiy mir* project, its activities in conflict and occupation zones, its influence in the Balkans through narratives of Orthodox brotherhood, its involvement in propaganda and disinformation campaigns, and its participation in international organizations. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of these findings, emphasizing the intersection of religion, soft power, and hybrid warfare, and highlighting the ROC's enduring significance in shaping regional and international politics.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach that integrates perspectives from political science, security studies, and the sociology of religion. The study aims to explore the evolving role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in statecraft, propaganda, and transnational Orthodox networks, situating its activities within historical, political, and social contexts. By combining multiple methods, the research ensures a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the ROC's influence in domestic and international arenas.

Document Analysis formed a central component of the methodology. Policy papers, official statements issued by the ROC, Kremlin foreign policy documents, and records from international organizations were systematically examined. This analysis allowed the researcher to trace the discursive alignment between Church and state, identify recurring themes in official narratives, and highlight instances where religious rhetoric intersected with geopolitical objectives. Special attention was paid to public pronouncements, strategic white papers, and statements during periods of heightened international tension.

Case Studies focused on Ukraine, Georgia, and selected Balkan states. These cases were chosen due to their geopolitical significance and the documented involvement of the ROC in legitimizing Russian intervention, disseminating propaganda, and shaping narratives of Orthodox solidarity. Detailed examination of these cases provided empirical evidence of how the ROC's actions intersect

with political objectives, demonstrating both continuity and adaptation in different regional contexts.

A comparative historical approach was employed to situate findings within broader temporal frameworks. By analyzing the imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras, the study contextualized the ROC's evolving institutional role, strategies, and discursive practices, illustrating how historical legacies inform contemporary religious diplomacy.

Finally, a secondary literature review synthesized scholarly works on religious diplomacy, hybrid warfare, and the politics of Orthodoxy, drawing on key contributions from Stoeckl, Suslov, Payne, and others. This theoretical grounding provided a robust framework for interpreting empirical findings and connecting them to broader debates in international relations and security studies.

Overall, the methodology emphasizes triangulation, correlating multiple sources of evidence to minimize bias, strengthen reliability, and ensure a balanced interpretation of the complex interactions between Church, state, and society.

DEVELOPMENT

Formally, Article 14 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation establishes Russia as a secular state where church and state are separated. In practice, however, the activities of the ROC are increasingly aligned with state objectives, particularly in foreign policy, thus functioning as a strategic instrument of the Kremlin (State Duma of the Russian Federation, 2020). Institutional integration occurs through joint working groups with ministries, expert commissions, and coordinated programs in education, culture, and diplomacy. These mechanisms enable the Church to advance Russian influence in the “near abroad,” where shared Orthodox heritage is leveraged to counter Western penetration (Encyclopedia, 2025; GlobalSecurity.org, 2025).

The close relationship between the Russian state and the ROC is not a post-Soviet invention. In the early eighteenth century, Tsar Peter I abolished the patriarchate and established the Most Holy Synod, overseen by an Ober-Prosecutor as the emperor's representative. The Church was thus embedded in the imperial administrative apparatus until 1917 (Yakunin, 2002).

The Bolshevik period marked a rupture, characterized by repression, church closures, and persecution of clergy. Yet, during World War II, Joseph Stalin recognized the strategic utility of religion. In 1943, he restored the patriarchate, allowed the election of the Patriarch of Moscow, and established the Council for the Affairs of the ROC to monitor ecclesiastical activity. The Church was subordinated to the state but deployed for mobilization and international

influence. Stalin even aspired to elevate Moscow as the “Third Rome,” envisioning an Eighth Ecumenical Council, although this ambition remained unrealized (Krotov.info, 1943; Shkarovskiy, 2013).

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the ROC emerged largely untouched by reform or lustration. Under President Vladimir Putin, the Church assumed expanded roles in identity formation and state policy. The 2000 National Security Concept explicitly recognized “spiritual renewal” and “moral development” as elements of national security (Kremlin.ru, 2000). Scholars, including Van Herpen (2020), have described the ROC as a “Swiss army knife” of statecraft, serving multiple functions ranging from domestic moral legitimation to international soft power projection.

President Putin has underscored the strategic partnership with Patriarch Kirill, formalizing what had long been a de facto alliance. Today, the ROC's charter extends jurisdiction over Orthodox communities in Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Central Asia, the Baltic states, Japan, and beyond. This global reach enables Moscow to compete with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, framing itself as a central authority in world Orthodoxy (World Council of Churches, 2025).

The ROC functions as a soft power instrument in Russian foreign policy by reinforcing cultural and religious bonds in neighboring Orthodox nations. It frames Russia as the defender of “traditional values” and a bulwark against Western liberalism (National Interest, 2020). By projecting moral and spiritual authority, the Church provides the Kremlin with legitimacy in contested regions.

The integration of the ROC into the Russian state system reflects a historical continuum: from Peter I's synodal reforms, through Stalin's wartime instrumentalization, to Putin's contemporary use of the Church for identity politics and foreign policy projection. This fusion of religious authority and state objectives positions the ROC as a unique and indispensable element of Russian strategic power.

The jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate is central to the Kremlin's geopolitical vision of the *Russkiy mir* (“Russian World”). In 2015, Patriarch Kirill declared that equating the *Russian World* solely with the Russian Federation is misleading, as it encompasses Ukraine, Belarus, and other territories historically linked to Russian Orthodoxy. According to Kirill, the *Russian World* emerged from the baptism of the Dnieper, evolving into a shared system of values that constitutes an East Slavic civilization.

However, historical evidence complicates this claim. The baptism of Kievan Rus' in 988 AD occurred under the blessing of Patriarch Photius I of Constantinople, and the Kievan Church remained under Constantinople's jurisdiction until 1686. From this perspective, the origins of Slavic

Christianity belong more to the Byzantine tradition than to a uniquely “Russian” civilizational framework. Furthermore, Christianity—Orthodox or otherwise—cannot be confined to a single nationality; it is a universal faith with transnational ethical principles.

In modern Russia, the ROC promotes a politicized interpretation of Orthodoxy that emphasizes anti-Westernism, rejection of secularism, and opposition to liberal democracy (USIP, 2018). Under President Putin, the *Russkiy mir* has been instrumentalized as a project of Russian messianism, merging Orthodoxy, nationalism, and Eurasianist ideology.

Since 2003, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has institutionalized its cooperation with the ROC through a Working Group for Interaction with the Church. Among its priorities is the promotion of “traditional family values” across the post-Soviet space, framed as a moral alternative to Western liberalism (MID.ru, 2019; MID.ru, 2025). In 2012, President Putin explicitly praised Patriarch Kirill’s foreign-policy role, emphasizing that the ROC is one of the most significant instruments of Russia’s outreach to post-Soviet neighbors. It is of utmost importance for people who live there to feel their unbreakable bond with the Russian Orthodox Church, which means with Russia (Pertsev, 2017).

The *Russkiy mir* project has intensified Moscow’s rivalry with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The historic primacy of Constantinople limits Moscow’s aspirations to dominate global Orthodoxy. This rivalry became acute during the Ukrainian autocephaly process.

In 2018, the Synod of Constantinople annulled Patriarch Dionysius’ 1686 decision granting Moscow the right to consecrate the Metropolitan of Kyiv. In 2019, the Ecumenical Patriarchate issued a Tomos of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), significantly reducing Moscow’s canonical claims (USIP, 2018).

Moscow responded decisively. The ROC severed full communion with Constantinople, and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov denounced the decision as a “provocation” allegedly instigated by the United States. President Putin framed the dispute as political rather than theological. Simultaneously, the Associated Press reported cyberattacks on the Ecumenical Patriarchate traced to Russian hackers (Solarz & Korniiuchuk, 2023).

Through these actions, the ROC functions as an instrument of Kremlin foreign policy. It legitimizes state ideology, projects soft power in the post-Soviet space, and reinforces the *Russkiy mir* framework that fuses Orthodox faith with national identity and traditional values (Van Herpen, 2013).

Religion is conventionally perceived as a pacifying force and a defender of human dignity. However, in

Russian-occupied regions of Georgia and Ukraine, the ROC has consistently mirrored Kremlin policies, prioritizing geopolitical loyalty over Christian ethics. Its silence regarding cultural destruction, canonical violations, and persecution of clergy demonstrates the subordination of religion to hybrid warfare strategies.

In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, ancient Georgian Orthodox monuments have been subjected to politically motivated “restorations.” The Ilori Church, an 11th-century structure, was whitewashed, Georgian inscriptions erased, and its dome replaced with a Russian-style one (Kavkazsky Uzel, 2010). Similar interventions affected the Likhna and Bedia monasteries, the Mokvi Cathedral, and the New Athos Monastery (Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield, 2014). Georgian NGOs characterized these acts as cultural cleansing, yet the ROC remained silent, thereby legitimizing Russian authorities.

Following the 2008 Russo–Georgian war, Metropolitan Isaiah of Tskhinvali and Nikozi continued his ministry under occupation despite severe restrictions. These violations were documented by the UNHCR (2014); and the U.S. Department of State (2016). Despite doctrinal commitments to Christian unity (Holy Council, 2016), the ROC offered no support, privileging state interests over ecclesiastical solidarity.

The Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church is universally recognized as the canonical authority in Georgia, including by Moscow itself. Nonetheless, the ROC has repeatedly intruded into Abkhazia and South Ossetia, conducting liturgical services without consent. Symbolically, Patriarch Kirill avoids addressing Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II with his full canonical title, undermining Georgian sovereignty.

In Ukraine, the ROC has gone further, cultivating ties with paramilitary groups via its Synodal Committee for Interaction with the Cossacks. Organizations such as the Union of Cossack Organizations of Ukraine and the Luhansk Volunteer Brigade eventually merged into the Russian Orthodox Army (ROA), founded in 2014 and led by Igor Strelkov (Girkin), a GRU officer.

NBC News (2014) documented that members of the ROA invoked Orthodox faith and post-Soviet resentment as motivations for armed struggle. Together with Cossack units, they captured buildings in Sloviansk, attacked Ukrainian border posts, and fought at Krasnoarmiisk, Karlivka, Pisky, Ilovaisk, and Debaltsevo.

Analysts such as Orysia Lutsevych (2016) note that ROC-linked groups represent some of the most politically vocal non-state actors in Eastern Europe, opposing EU and NATO integration while framing the West as morally degraded. When combined with Russian state and military

resources, these networks undermine democratic transitions and civil society resilience.

In conclusion, evidence from Georgia and Ukraine reveals that the ROC actively supports occupation and separatism. Its silence on heritage destruction, its indifference to persecuted clergy, its violation of canonical borders, and its collaboration with armed groups all illustrate its role in Russia's hybrid strategy. Far from being a force for peace, the ROC has functioned as an instrument of cultural domination and political subjugation.

The concept of Orthodox brotherhood, historically employed by Tsarist Russia, has been revived in post-Soviet times as an ideological tool. Moscow invokes a spiritual "Orthodox community" to dissuade regional states from Euro-Atlantic integration, with the ROC acting as a key partner.

In 2020, Metropolitan Onufriy of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine joined protests in Montenegro against a new law on religious freedom. Coordinated with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), the protests were framed as a defense of Orthodoxy but served as resistance to reforms threatening Russian-Serbian influence (Kajosevic, 2020).

This strategy reflects Moscow's reliance on religious narratives in the Balkans, a region where NATO and EU integration challenge Russian interests. Historically, Patriarch Alexy II's 1999 solidarity visit to Belgrade during the NATO intervention exemplifies this role, as did Russia's funding of the Church of Saint Sava in Serbia (Carnegie, 2019).

Putin's pilgrimages to Mount Athos in 2005 and 2016 projected Russia as the modern benefactor of Orthodoxy (Carnegie Endowment, 2019). Similarly, during his 2016 visit to Greece, Putin emphasized shared Orthodox values and highlighted the millennium of Russian presence on Athos (Ekathimerini, 2016). Symbolic acts, such as sitting on the Byzantine throne in Karyes, reinforced Moscow's ambitions, though they triggered unease among Greek and Ecumenical Patriarchal authorities (Carnegie Commentary, 2016).

Russia's rhetoric of brotherhood is often selective. During Patriarch Kirill's 2018 visit to Bulgaria, he criticized the Bulgarian president for crediting non-Russian troops in the liberation from Ottoman rule, framing it as historical revisionism. Such reactions highlight Moscow's insistence on Russian centrality.

Russia has also exploited church conflicts to consolidate influence. Following Constantinople's recognition of the Ukrainian Church in 2019, the ROC severed ties with Athens and forbade Russian pilgrims from visiting certain dioceses. In 2020, Prime Minister Mishustin's unauthorized visit to Mount Athos was interpreted as defiance of Constantinople's authority.

Diplomatic tensions accompanied these acts. Greece expelled Russian diplomats in 2018 for financing protests against the Prespa Agreement, identifying the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society as a vehicle of Moscow's influence. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has openly accused Patriarch Bartholomew of serving U.S. interests, claiming his mission was to "bury Orthodoxy's influence" (Greek City Times, 2021).

Collectively, these episodes reveal that "Orthodox brotherhood" functions less as a theological principle and more as a political instrument. By invoking shared faith, Moscow fosters alliances, deepens schisms within Orthodoxy, and sustains its presence in regions where its geopolitical influence is otherwise waning.

The activities of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) are closely intertwined with the Kremlin's information operations. These operate through two interconnected mechanisms: (i) promoting, praising, and justifying official Moscow's policies; and (ii) mounting information attacks—through blackmail, disinformation, and demonization—against individuals, states, or ideologies deemed undesirable by the Kremlin. Across Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and the wider Black Sea region, the ROC's conduct illustrates both mechanisms in practice.

Even before the full-scale war, the ROC contributed to Moscow's psychological pressure campaign against Kyiv. In the summer of 2009, Patriarch Kirill conducted a ten-day tour of Ukraine emphasizing "common heritage" and "common destiny," narratives designed to entrench spiritual unity and, by implication, contest Ukrainian sovereignty. In Donetsk, he appeared with Viktor Yanukovich, then opposition leader and later president. Until 2014, numerous clerics of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) held positions in local councils, enabling influence over decision-making—at times obstructing the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church through land-lease denials and construction blocks (U.S. State Department, 2003).

A vivid illustration of ROC-linked disinformation is found in statements by Marchel Mihaescu, a bishop of the Moldovan Orthodox Church under Moscow. During Moldova's EU-related reforms, he labeled biometric passports "satanic" due to a 13-digit number and sought to derail anti-discrimination legislation protecting LGBTQ employees, warning such reforms would sever ties with "Mother Russia." He equated the Church's voice with that of Russian politicians, portraying Russia as guardian of Christian values and Europe as extracting a "price of the soul" for material aid (New York Times, 2016).

Across the region, "patriotic" and "Orthodox" organizations function as vehicles for Kremlin-aligned narratives. In Serbia alone, at least 51 pro-Kremlin associations and

student groups have been identified, including the Russian Association Stjag (uniting Chechen and Afghan war veterans), the Serbian-Russian Society Orthodox Family, the Center for Research of Orthodox Monarchism, and the local branch of the International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations (2010). Their agendas are consistently anti-Western and Eurosceptic, opposing EU integration and sustaining dependence on Russia.

Analogous organizations operate elsewhere, propagating “Orthodox unity” and Russia’s “historic mission” as savior of Orthodoxy. Movements such as “Orthodox Choice,” the “People’s Council of Ukraine,” and the “Union of Russian People” mobilized against Ukrainian autocephaly and the country’s Western course, contributing to pre-2014 destabilization. As noted by *New Eastern Europe*, UOC-MP propaganda helped disseminate the “Russian World” ideology in Donbas, warning of alleged state persecution of Orthodox believers and promoting autocracy alongside personality cults of Patriarch Kirill and President Putin (New Eastern Europe, 2016).

A central theme of ROC-linked messaging is the defense of “traditional values” and “family purity,” used to depict the West as morally corrupt. Affiliates argue that European integration inevitably entails the legalization of same-sex marriage, promotion of homosexuality, and—even by inflammatory insinuation—the legitimization of pedophilia. Metropolitan Ilarion, head of the ROC’s Department for External Church Relations, framed France’s legalization of same-sex marriage and changes to age-of-consent law as precursors to the legalization of pedophilia—conflating conservative ethics with conspiracy-laden disinformation.

Hostile rhetoric has translated into mobilization and violence. On 17 May 2013, during the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia in Tbilisi, a peaceful gathering was attacked by thousands of counter-demonstrators, including Orthodox clerics and activists from the Union of Orthodox Christian Parents. The Council of Europe later documented these events as human-rights violations (Council of Europe, 2014). Comparable incidents recur across Orthodox-majority societies in the region, reflecting how funding networks linked to Kremlin-aligned, church-adjacent groups can foster xenophobia and obstruct liberal reforms.

Taken together, these dynamics show the ROC as a central pillar in the Kremlin’s propaganda architecture. By legitimizing Russian policy, disseminating disinformation, cultivating anti-Western sentiment, and mobilizing para-religious organizations, the Church occupies a dual role—spiritual authority and political instrument. The result is a reshaping of public opinion, distortion of democratic debate, and normalization of xenophobia, with Orthodoxy rhetorically fused to Russian state interests as a tool of information warfare.

International organizations have become key arenas for what analysts term Russia’s “Orthodox diplomacy.” For the ROC, these platforms enable the projection of influence and the amplification of Kremlin positions under the banner of religious advocacy. With active backing from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ROC representatives participate in UN-related forums (e.g., the UN Human Rights Council, UNAOC, UNESCO) and European institutions. Since 2004, the ROC has maintained a permanent representative in Strasbourg and routinely engages the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and the Committee of Representatives of Orthodox Churches to the EU.

At the OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on 1–2 April 2019 in Vienna, Bishop Viktor of Baryshevka (ROC) criticized Ukraine’s law requiring the UOC-MP to rename itself, alleging “systematic unlawful pressure” aimed at forcing clergy into the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) (Mospat.ru, 2019). The intervention mirrored Moscow’s rhetoric, recasting ecclesiastical sovereignty as religious persecution.

A month earlier in Strasbourg, the same bishop met senior Council of Europe officials to describe purported obstacles facing UOC-MP clergy and laity, submitting materials as evidence of rights violations—again advancing the Kremlin narrative of victimhood.

The Russian Federation wields significant influence in the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO), which Moscow leverages across Orthodox-majority countries. Since 2018 the Assembly has been chaired by Sergei Gavrilov, a Communist Party deputy—an arrangement underscoring the instrumental, rather than spiritual, character of the body.

In June 2019, the IAO General Assembly in Tbilisi triggered mass protests (“Gavrilov’s Night”) after Gavrilov took the Georgian parliamentary speaker’s chair during the session. Security forces’ response left roughly 240 injured; the session was disrupted and Gavrilov departed the country (BBC, 2019). The Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service later characterized the IAO as an instrument of Kremlin foreign policy and reported Gavrilov’s links to Russian intelligence (Valisluureamet, 2019).

Across UN-affiliated bodies, European institutions, and specialized Orthodox fora, the ROC positions itself less as an ecumenical partner than as an amplifier of Russian state interests—depicting Ukrainian church reform as persecution, casting Western integration as a civilizational threat, and presenting Russia as Orthodoxy’s defender (Mospat.ru, 2019). This “Orthodox diplomacy” cloaks political messaging in religious language, extending the Kremlin’s narrative reach and legitimizing its geopolitical aims before international audiences.

The Black Sea region remains one of the most volatile theaters of global politics, with overlapping interests of NATO, the European Union, and Russia. While much research has focused on military and economic aspects of Russian foreign policy, the role of religious institutions remains understudied. The ROC's growing influence illustrates how religion can be mobilized as a non-military instrument of power within hybrid warfare. Understanding this phenomenon is critical not only for interpreting Russia's geopolitical behavior but also for developing policy responses that safeguard regional stability, religious autonomy, and European security.

Sergei Chapnin, former editor of the Moscow Patriarchate's official journal, observed that "the Church has become an instrument of the Russian state. It is used to extend and legitimize the interests of the Kremlin" (New York Times, 2016). This statement encapsulates the argument advanced throughout this study: the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has evolved from a spiritual institution into a political implementer of the Kremlin's agenda.

The evidence reviewed across Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and the Balkans demonstrates that the ROC's actions consistently align with state policy. Rather than promoting reconciliation, peace, or spiritual care, the Church has been deeply embedded in the technologies of hybrid warfare—supporting information campaigns, legitimizing occupation, and mobilizing para-religious organizations.

Under President Vladimir Putin, the ROC has been transformed into the spiritual pillar of the "Russian World" (*Russkiy mir*) project. It now functions as an ideological citadel of confrontation with the West, liberal democracy, and universal values. In practice, this has entailed:

1. Justifying and legitimizing Russian occupation of territories.
2. Remaining silent on, or complicit in, the destruction of Christian cultural heritage.
3. Supporting radical nationalist and paramilitary networks.
4. Amplifying anti-Western propaganda and xenophobia.
5. Using international platforms to present Kremlin narratives in religious terms.

Through these activities, the ROC acts as a political force multiplier for the Russian state, cloaking geopolitical strategies in ecclesiastical legitimacy and presenting state policy as the defense of faith.

This convergence of church and state highlights the deliberate fusion of religion and politics in Russia's hybrid strategy. For Black Sea countries, the ROC represents not only a religious actor but also a potential channel of foreign interference. Understanding this phenomenon is therefore essential for national security assessments.

The implications extend beyond the region. The ROC's engagement in international organizations and European institutions underscores that "religious diplomacy" is not a benign form of cultural outreach but a vector of geopolitical influence with tangible consequences for sovereignty, democratic governance, and European security as a whole.

Religion has long been viewed as a domain of moral authority and cultural identity. In contemporary Russia, however, Orthodoxy has been instrumentalized into a strategic asset of the Kremlin's hybrid warfare toolkit. The challenge for neighboring states and for Europe lies not only in distinguishing religion from politics but in recognizing how deliberately the two have been fused in Moscow's foreign policy. A sober assessment of "Orthodox diplomacy" is therefore indispensable for crafting adequate responses to Russia's projection of influence through ecclesiastical structures.

This study has relied primarily on documentary sources, secondary literature, and case-study evidence. While this provides a robust qualitative analysis, it does not include quantitative survey data on public perceptions of the ROC or systematic interviews with clerics and policymakers. Future work should triangulate these findings with sociological data to capture the broader reception of ROC narratives among Orthodox populations.

Several areas merit deeper exploration:

1. Comparative analysis of ROC influence across different Orthodox-majority states (e.g., contrasting Moldova, Georgia, and Serbia).
2. Examination of financial networks sustaining ROC-affiliated para-religious organizations.
3. Empirical assessment of ROC influence on electoral behavior and party politics in the Black Sea region.
4. Longitudinal studies of public attitudes toward the ROC before and after major political crises (e.g., the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine).

Findings

The study yields the following core findings:

1. **Institutional Integration:** The ROC operates in symbiosis with the Russian state, serving as a legitimizing arm of Moscow's foreign policy.
2. **Russkiy Mir Ideology:** Through the language of spiritual and cultural unity, the ROC sustains a geopolitical narrative that undermines the sovereignty of neighboring Orthodox nations.
3. **Canonical Violations:** In Ukraine and Georgia, the ROC has disregarded ecclesiastical boundaries, supporting pro-Moscow factions and resisting autocephalous movements.

4. **Propaganda and Disinformation:** The ROC disseminates anti-Western rhetoric and mobilizes para-religious organizations to propagate “traditional values” against liberal democracy.
5. **International Engagement:** By invoking religious freedom, the ROC amplifies Kremlin rhetoric in global institutions, normalizing Moscow’s positions.
6. **Hybrid Function:** Collectively, these activities confirm that the ROC has become a critical node in Russia’s hybrid warfare toolkit.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) functions as a central instrument of Russian statecraft, blurring the boundaries between spiritual authority and geopolitical strategy. Through historical continuity and contemporary institutional integration, the ROC has evolved from a religious institution into a multifaceted tool of the Kremlin’s hybrid warfare apparatus. Evidence from Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and the Balkans indicates that the Church’s activities are consistently aligned with Russian foreign policy objectives, encompassing ideological legitimization, cultural influence, and strategic intervention in neighboring Orthodox-majority states.

First, the ROC’s promotion of the *Ruskiy mir* ideology and defense of “traditional values” serves as a vector for reinforcing Russian national identity and moral authority in contested regions. By framing geopolitical goals in religious and cultural terms, the Church enhances the perceived legitimacy of Russian policies, strengthens anti-Western narratives, and mobilizes local populations to support Moscow’s strategic agenda. This ideological projection is particularly potent in areas with deep historical and religious ties to Russia, where Orthodoxy functions as both a spiritual and cultural anchor.

Second, the ROC’s direct intervention in ecclesiastical affairs across Ukraine, Georgia, and the Balkans underscores its role in undermining canonical autonomy and reinforcing Moscow-aligned religious networks. The Church’s actions, ranging from liturgical presence in disputed territories to collaboration with paramilitary groups, illustrate how religious authority is instrumentalized to support occupation, territorial claims, and political loyalty. Canonical violations and the deliberate sidelining of local Orthodox hierarchies reveal the strategic prioritization of state objectives over ecclesiastical norms.

Third, the ROC functions as a sophisticated vehicle of propaganda and disinformation. Through its para-religious organizations, international statements, and engagement with media, the Church disseminates anti-Western rhetoric, amplifies narratives of civilizational threat, and cultivates xenophobic or conservative social norms. This

function extends to international institutions, where the ROC’s participation in the UN, Council of Europe, and specialized Orthodox forums allows it to legitimize Kremlin positions under the guise of religious advocacy, effectively transforming soft power into a tool of global influence.

Fourth, the study highlights the ROC’s role in the broader hybrid warfare strategy of the Russian Federation. By combining cultural, religious, and informational instruments, the Church contributes to a multi-layered approach that integrates ideological, political, and paramilitary tactics. This hybrid function demonstrates that religious institutions, far from being neutral actors, can serve as force multipliers for state-driven geopolitical objectives, shaping both domestic and international environments in ways that traditional military or economic strategies alone cannot achieve.

Finally, the implications of these findings extend beyond the Black Sea region. The ROC’s activities challenge the sovereignty of neighboring Orthodox-majority states, complicate democratic transitions, and raise important questions regarding the intersection of religion and international security. Understanding the Church’s instrumentalization is essential for policymakers, scholars, and international actors seeking to address hybrid threats, protect cultural and religious heritage, and safeguard regional stability.

The Russian Orthodox Church represents a unique convergence of faith and geopolitics, operating as both a spiritual authority and a strategic instrument of the Russian state. Its integration into Kremlin policy demonstrates how religious institutions can be leveraged to advance national objectives, legitimize occupation and political intervention, and project influence far beyond conventional state mechanisms. Recognizing and analyzing this dual role is indispensable for a comprehensive understanding of Russia’s contemporary foreign policy and the broader dynamics of religion in global politics.

Acknowledgment

The author expresses gratitude to the faculty of the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA) for their academic guidance and to colleagues in political science and religious studies who provided constructive feedback during the development of this research.

REFERENCES

- Carnegie Endowment. (2019). Russia’s game in the Balkans. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/02/russias-game-in-the-balkans?lang=en>
- Ekathimerini. (2016). Greece and Russia: Cooperation for peace and prosperity. <https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/208991/greece-and-russia-cooperation-for-peace-and-prosperity/>

- Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield. (2014). *Appeal to international organisations concerning the protection of cultural heritage in the occupied territories of Georgia*. <http://blueshield.ge/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Appeal-to-international-organisations-24.03.2014-ENG.pdf>
- GlobalSecurity.org. (2025). Privileged interests in Russia. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/privileged-interests.htm>
- Greek City Times. (2021). Lavrov attacks Patriarch Bartholomew. <https://greekcitytimes.com/2021/01/19/lavrov-bartholomew-orthodoxy/>
- Holy Council. (2016). Mission of the Orthodox Church in today's world. <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world>
- International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations. (2010). International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations prize awarding ceremony. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6758>
- Kajosevic, S. (2020). Russian-backed bishop joins Montenegro church protests. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/26/russian-backed-bishop-joins-montenegro-church-protests/>
- Kavkazsky Uzel. (2010). Georgia requests to save Ilori Church in Abkhazia. <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/177930/>
- Kremlin.ru. (2000). National security concept of the Russian Federation. <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/14927>
- Krotov.info. (1943). Council for the affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church. <http://krotov.info/acts/20/1940/19430904.html>
- Lutsevych, O. (2016). *Agents of the Russian World: Proxy groups in the contested neighborhood*. Chatham House.
- National Interest. (2020). The political role of the Russian Orthodox Church. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/political-role-russian-orthodox-church-97647>
- NBC News. (2014). Meet the Russian Orthodox Army. <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/ukraine-crisis/meet-russian-orthodox-army-ukrainian-separatists-shock-troops-n107426>
- New Eastern Europe. (2016). Orthodox radicalism in Eastern Ukraine: Lessons for Belarus. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2016/12/12/orthodox-radicalism-in-eastern-ukraine-lessons-for-belarus/>
- New York Times. (2016). In Expanding Russian Influence, Faith Combines With Firepower. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/14/world/europe/russia-orthodox-church.html>
- Pertsev, A. (2017). *President and patriarch: What Putin wants from the Orthodox Church*. Russian Ideology. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75058>
- Shkarovskiy, S. (2013). The Russian Orthodox Church in Soviet politics. *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, 27, 1–28. Hokkaido University. <http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/publicn/acta/27/01Shkarovskiy.pdf>
- Solarz, A. M., & Kornichuk, I. (2023). The Reactions of Orthodox Churches to Russia's Aggression towards Ukraine in the Light of the Postsecular Approach to IR Studies. *Religions*, 14(4), 515. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040515>
- State Duma of the Russian Federation. (2020). Constitution of the Russian Federation. <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-02.htm>
- Stoeckl, K. (2016). *The Russian Orthodox Church and human rights*. Routledge.
- Suslov, M. (2018). The Russian world: Russia's soft power and geopolitical imagination. *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 19(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2018.1453754>
- U.S. Department of State. (2016). International religious freedom report: Georgia. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2016-report-on-international-religious-freedom/georgia/>
- UNHCR. (2014). Country reports on human rights practices – Georgia. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/559bd56928.html>
- Van Herpen, M. H. (2016). *Putin's propaganda machine. Soft power and Russian Foreign Policy*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- World Council of Churches. (2025). Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). <https://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/russian-orthodox-church-moscow-patriarchate>
- Yakunin, G. (2002). Historical path of Orthodox fundamentalism. *Vehi*. http://vehi.net/politika/yakunin.html#_ftn1

Conflict of Interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions:

Tengiz Pkhaladze: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, supervision, validation, visualization, original draft writing, and writing, review, and editing.