

## Russia's war on Ukraine: The religious dimension

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 drew attention to the close relationship between Vladimir Putin's regime and the Russian Orthodox Church. The latter has strongly backed Putin's war and has long provided theological and ideological justifications for his domestic and international actions. The Church's overtly political approach has contributed to deep divisions within the wider Orthodox world, including a formal split with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and significant tensions with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

### The role of religion in Putin's regime

One unexpected consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), which had ruthlessly oppressed religion, was a huge resurgence in church membership, religious belief and practice in many of the successor states. A recent [Pew Forum survey](#) found that 71 % of Russians identified as Orthodox, along with 78 % of Ukrainians, 73 % of Belarusians and 92 % of Moldovans. A newly confident Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) viewed itself as a repository of Russian national identity, and Moscow as the 'third Rome' with primacy over the Orthodox Churches in those countries and beyond. At home, Putin has passed laws [targeting 'non-traditional' religious minorities](#) with fines, detention and criminal charges.

The ROC quickly aligned itself with the Putin regime, a process accelerated since the election of Kirill as 'Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia' in 2009. Claiming [canonical jurisdiction](#) over much of the former USSR territory, the current 'Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church' permanent membership includes, inter alia, metropolitans (bishops) of 'All Ukraine', 'All Belarus', 'All Moldova', Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The key doctrine elaborated by the Church, in tandem with the regime, over the past decades is the [Russkiy Mir](#) or 'Russian world', (however 'mir' also [translates](#) as peace). This ideology envisages a quasi-messianic role for Russia in saving Christian civilisation from the decadent West through the spreading of Russian language, culture and values, by re-dominating countries formerly within the USSR, and exerting influence throughout the wider Orthodox and Western world. In 2007, Putin established the [Russkiy Mir Foundation](#), which de facto spreads this ideology around the world, working in close cooperation with the ROC.

Thus, various experts have suggested that Russia's war on Ukraine has a [religious dimension](#), and that Putin's desire to conquer Kyiv is part of a '[spiritual quest](#)'. Putin himself laid out his Greater Russia vision in a long article in July 2021, entitled '[On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians](#)'. In it, he claims that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians are the same people whose 'common baptismal font' is Kyiv with the conversion to Christianity of Prince Volodymyr (Vladimir in Russian) in 988. The narrative makes clear that Russia's enemies are located to the west. These, especially at the end of the 16th century, were 'Polonising and Latinising' Russian lands and 'ousting Orthodoxy'. Putin compares the creation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to those past events, clearly omitting the Ukrainian perspective. For Putin, Ukrainian identity or statehood have 'no historical basis' and are a geo-political tool to weaken Russia. The current Ukrainian leadership are characterised as 'radicals and neo-Nazis', and Putin leaves no doubt that his intention is to create 'a single large nation, a triune nation'.

### Division within eastern Orthodox Christianity

Long before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the close alignment between the ROC and the Putin regime had contributed to splits within [Orthodoxy](#). The ROC [suspended](#) its own membership of the Conference of European Churches in 2008. Ever since Ukrainian independence in 1991, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church had been seeking autonomy, culminating in the recognition of its independent status by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I in 2019, a goal on which former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko was [personally engaged](#). Already, in 2016, when the Ecumenical Patriarch attempted to hold the first global [Council of the Orthodox Church](#) in Crete, it was boycotted by the ROC, but also by the Bulgarian and Georgian Orthodox Churches, both under strong Moscow influence.



The [invasion has accelerated these divisions](#). Within Ukraine, a significant part of the church had remained faithful to Moscow, as a filial entitled the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Nevertheless, its leader, [Metropolitan Onufriy](#), has appealed to Putin for an 'immediate end to the fratricidal war', referring unambiguously to Russia's 'military action against Ukraine'. Russia's war has also been condemned by the [Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew](#), as well as leaders of the Orthodox Churches of Romania, Greece, and even Georgia, which had aligned itself with Moscow in the past. Another initiative was taken by a group of Orthodox theologians, who issued a '[Declaration on the Russian World \(Russkii Mir\) Teaching](#)', condemning the 'fundamentalist, totalitarian' character of the doctrine promoted by the ROC under Kirill, which had ultimately led to 'Putin's unconscionable and horrendously destructive invasion of Ukraine'. Divisions have also emerged within Russia itself; on 2 March a group of [233 ROC priests](#) launched an appeal for peace, urging Russian soldiers be brought home, and stating that Ukrainians should be allowed to decide their own destiny.

### Peace initiatives of religious actors

While Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been described by some as a [21st century 'religious war'](#), the EU has increasingly engaged with [religious actors](#) in pursuing its foreign policy goals, including tapping into their potential for conflict resolution and peace-building. In the current context of a split within Orthodoxy, some quiet religious diplomacy by Western Christian church leaders has taken place. Notably, Russian Patriarch Kirill took part in two distinct on-line meetings on 16 March, with the [Archbishop of Canterbury](#), head of the worldwide Anglican Church, and with [Pope Francis](#), head of the Roman Catholic Church.

The [Pope's Nuncio \(ambassador\) to Ukraine](#) – a Lithuanian archbishop who previously served at the nunciature in Moscow – has remained in place in Kyiv and continues to liaise with Ukrainian political and church authorities. On 8 March he received a letter from the Mayor of Kyiv, Vitaliy Klitschko, [inviting Pope Francis to visit the city](#), as a means of 'paving the path to peace in our city, country and beyond'. While the Pope has not ruled out such a visit, given the view of Patriarch Kirill that Ukraine is part of his 'canonical territory', it could be counter-productive. Francis and Kirill have only met once, in Havana in 2016, so an alternative démarche could be a meeting on 'neutral ground'. Vatican insiders have speculated that one possibility would be [Jerusalem](#), as Francis could stop off on his forthcoming [visit to Lebanon](#), which he announced on 21 March.

In parallel to contacts at the highest level, there have been exchanges between the Russian Orthodox and Catholic Churches at the level of their respective international and EU affairs arms. The Commission of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of the EU ([COMECE](#)) called upon Patriarch Kirill to 'appeal to Russian authorities to immediately stop the hostilities against the Ukrainian people', stressing his influence among Russian people. However, in his reply, [Metropolitan Hilarion](#), Chair of the ROC's Department for External Church Relations, posited the war as a crisis 'between the West and Russia', referred to the 'long-suffering land of Ukraine' and reiterated their view that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is part of the Moscow Patriarchate. All these positions align closely with the official narrative of the Kremlin. Hilarion also suggested that COMECE should work with the EU 'in order to prevent further escalation', an indication of where the ROC considers fault for the war lies.

Meanwhile, the World Council of Churches (WCC), of which the Russian Orthodox Church has been a member since 1961, [wrote to Kirill on 2 March](#) asking for his mediation 'so that the war can be stopped'. The (Romanian Orthodox) Acting General-Secretary of the WCC called on the Patriarch of Moscow to 'raise up your voice on behalf of the suffering brothers and sisters, most of whom are also faithful members of our Orthodox Church'. In his [response on 10 March](#), Kirill again used Kremlin rhetoric, viewing the war as a confrontation 'between the West and Russia', stating that Western 'political forces' had conspired to use Ukraine to 'make brotherly peoples enemies', and that all Western efforts to integrate Ukraine were founded upon a 'geopolitical strategy aimed at weakening Russia'.

The reply also laid the blame on the Ecumenical Patriarch for the schism in Orthodoxy, by recognising an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church in 2019. This could limit the scope of Bartholomew to mediate towards a peaceful solution, a potential role suggested by [European Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas](#) following his [exchange](#) with the Ecumenical Patriarch on 19 March.