

# Russia's war on Ukraine: The Kremlin's use of religion as a foreign policy instrument

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia experienced a window of religious pluralism in the Yeltsin era, allowing western Christian missionaries to operate freely. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) resented this encroachment into its canonical territory and, when Vladimir Putin took office in 1999, worked closely with him to consolidate its power. Putin valued such close collaboration as a way to exert control over society, eliminate alternative sources of moral authority at home, and extend Russian influence abroad.

## The Home Front: Consolidating Russian Orthodox Church dominance

Already in January 2000, Putin's first [National Security Concept](#) as acting Russian President promoted 'strengthening of society's moral values, traditions of patriotism' as part of what he called 'spiritual' national interests. During his first two terms, [Putin facilitated the ascendancy of the ROC](#) through laws returning properties seized in the Soviet era and introducing religious education in public schools, as well as tax breaks and financial advantages. In return, the ROC used its influence and resources to push [Putin's vision of Orthodox Christian national identity](#) and gave unwavering support for a strong, militarised state, particularly after the election of Kirill as 'Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia' in 2009. By 2016, Putin had promulgated the 'Yarovaya Law' severely [curtailing the activities of non-traditional churches](#), part of wider Kremlin propaganda efforts portraying the West as decadent and bereft of Christian values and what has been described as the '[ethnisation of religion](#)'. Kirill has proved a vital figure in ensuring [support in Russian society for Putin's invasion](#). This contrasts with his [more neutral position](#) following the annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas in 2014 as he sought to balance his alliance with the Kremlin and his desire for ROC control of the Ukrainian church. As of May 2022, the [European Commission proposed adding Kirill to the list of individuals under sanctions](#) in the Putin regime, the EU External Action Service describing him as 'one of the most prominent supporters of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine'.

## The Eastern Campaign: Exercising influence over Orthodox churches

In partnership with the ROC, the Kremlin has sought to spread its influence in predominantly Orthodox countries in eastern Europe, including a number of EU Member States, constituting a complex [landscape of autocephalous \(self-governing\) churches](#) which view either Moscow or Constantinople as pre-eminent. These efforts are coordinated by the [ROC's Department for External Church Relations](#) under Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, [working closely with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#). The Department is responsible for 'relations of the Russian Orthodox Church with Local Orthodox Churches, non-Orthodox churches and Christian associations, non-Christian religious communities, governmental, parliamentary, public organizations abroad, inter-governmental, religious and public international organizations'.

A [February 2021 hearing](#) of the [European Parliament's Special Committee](#) on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE) highlighted how Russia builds links within EU near-neighbourhood countries, through ROC activities stressing religious affinity and shared goals, such as defending persecuted Christians in the Middle East, or preventing the 'islamisation' of Europe. Other analysts have identified a '[highly nation-specific approach](#)' to Kremlin propaganda, combining narratives of Orthodox affinity with pan-Slavic brotherhood, defence of ethnic/linguistic minorities, or preservation of Europe's Christian values, depending on the national context.

The EU country with the largest [number of Orthodox believers](#) – 18.7 million – is Romania, followed by Greece and Bulgaria. In the EU's near neighbourhood, among countries which aspire to EU membership, Ukraine is by far the most populous, with almost 35 million Orthodox Christians, followed by Serbia, Georgia and Moldova. A 2017 Pew Forum survey reveals a majority of Romanians support the view that 'a strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West'. The Orthodox vs. Western values – '[freedom vs. morality](#)' – narrative was used in the [2018 referendum to ban same-sex marriage](#), strongly supported by the

Romanian church but which failed to reach the required threshold. According to [some authors](#), many Orthodox websites within the EU covering such 'culture battles' portray Putin as a defender of Orthodox values. However, the Romanian Orthodox Church is not particularly close to the ROC, and there is [evidence that Romanians clearly distinguish](#) between shared Orthodox values and strategic interests, viewing Russia as the biggest threat. In Bulgaria, a key figure seeking to push the country closer to Russia through Orthodox networks was Putin associate and [Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev](#), founder of the [St Basil the Great Charitable Foundation](#). Malofeev promotes the 'Orthodoxy vs. the Decadent West' narrative through his Tsargrad TV channel, which portrays the EU as an imposer of [satanist-globalist ideologies](#) aimed at eliminating Christian values, and his [Katheon 'think tank'](#). However, Malofeev – who has been on the EU sanctions list since 2014 – was ultimately [banned from entering Bulgaria](#) for 10 years in 2010 for his involvement in corruption of Bulgarian politicians in an effort to influence that country's foreign policy.

The nominally autocephalous [Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia](#) came increasingly under ROC control during the Putin era, leading to scandals in 2012 which revealed the [extent of Russian infiltration](#). Even if the number of Orthodox believers across Czechia and Slovakia is less than 100 000, the Church has been active in seeking to shape public opinion and remains within the ecclesiastic orbit of the Moscow Patriarchate. In this sense, it forms part of a wider network of Kremlin-driven cultural and religious foundations and organisations such as the All-Slavic Union and the Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots, as well as Putin's chief ideological vehicle, the Russkiy Mir Foundation.

While the Orthodox Churches of Romania and Bulgaria are autocephalous, and can more easily distance themselves from the ROC, in other EU countries minority Orthodox Churches are directly under Moscow and face a more delicate balancing act. One case in point is the [Latvian Orthodox Church](#), which formally remains under the Russian church, unlike its [Estonian counterpart](#), which split with Moscow in recent years. The Latvian Church leader, Metropolitan Alexander, has tried to maintain that unity while [condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine](#): 'We Russians in Latvia are not responsible for what other governments do'. Meanwhile, Patriarch Kirill grants this amount of leeway in order to avoid yet another church in the former Soviet sphere following a Western trajectory. Meanwhile, Greece and Cyprus are considered by [some observers](#) as vulnerable to Russian influence through both geography and shared cultural and religious histories. Russia has sought to leverage shared religious heritage with mixed results, in part due to the broader [struggle for hegemony within Orthodoxy](#) between the Patriarchates of Moscow and Constantinople, the latter based in Istanbul and strongly supported by Greece and Cyprus. Putin and Patriarch Kirill have visited Greek Orthodoxy's holiest site at Mount Athos on various occasions, [transmitting messages of 'Orthodox values'](#). When Greek Prime Minister [Alexis Tsipras visited Putin in Moscow](#) in 2015, he also [met with Kirill](#). Konstantin Malofeev has cultivated ultra-Orthodox political forces which ultimately failed to make an impact. The Cypriot Orthodox Church resisted ROC pressure and [in 2020 recognised the independence](#) of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

## The Western Campaign: Building a network of influence in Christian groups

In EU countries with no significant Orthodox presence, the Kremlin strategy has been to infiltrate Western Christian associations and link them to Orthodox 'allies' to fight for a common cause to preserve 'European civilisation' in what have been termed ['conservative Christian alliances'](#). The agenda of this 'new ecumenical cooperation' is about 'traditional values', the 'traditional family', the 'sanctity of life' and 'religious liberty'. A key NGO coordinating such links is the [World Congress of Families](#), closely [linked to the ROC](#) since its creation in 1995. Its congresses are eclectic gatherings of European Christian organisations, Orthodox prelates, US Evangelicals and European political figures such as Italy's Matteo Salvini and Hungary's Viktor Orban; the most recent were held in Hungary (2017), Moldova (2018) and Italy (2019). Alliances were thus also built with political parties and leaders on the right who endorse strong 'Christian values' narratives, as in the case of Salvini and Orban, as well as Ataka in Bulgaria, or where it fits better with the local context of 'defending Europe against Islam', such as with [Austria's Freedom Party](#). Another 'new ecumenism' organisation is the [Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute](#) headed by [Putin associate Vladimir Yakunin](#), former head of Russian Railways. Yakunin's [World Public Forum](#) conferences in Greece brought together Orthodox Church leaders with Western organisations and European politicians on the left such as Austria's [Alfred Gusenbauer](#) and Germany's [Martin Schulz](#).

