

# ORTHODOX GEOPOLITICS

HOW RUSSIA USES RELIGION FOR ITS FOREIGN POLICY AND HOW TO REACT



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National and Kapodistrian University of Athens



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## About the author

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# Orthodox Geopolitics

## How Russia Uses Religion For Its Foreign Policy And How To React

With its continuous disregard of international order and subversion tactics against both its neighboring states and other states in Europe and other regions of the world, Russia has risen to become the revisionist state par excellence on a global level. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is an outright violation of international law and fundamental principles of international order, and the most serious challenge to European and global order and security since 1945 [1]. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine is a clear manifestation of Russian revisionism in its purest form and a crime of aggression according to international criminal law [2].

Russia's aggressive reach and infiltration across the globe is not only military or diplomatic but entails the spiritual realm as well. Russia attempts to dominate the religious networks of Orthodox Christianity by undermining the established order of ecclesiastical structures and jurisdiction. For a long period, there has been a fierce undercover war inside Orthodox Christianity between Russian and Greek-centered religious soft power, extending from Ukraine to Africa that has largely gone unnoticed in Western security circles; this is not some irrelevant theological dispute over jurisdiction or dogma, but carries international diplomatic and geopolitical implications intricately tied to Western interests.

## The Orthodox Church and Russia's Attempt to Dominate

The Greek Orthodox Church includes four out of five ancient Patriarchates of Christianity distinguished as senior or ancient, after the 1054 Schism with Rome which created the two branches of Western and Eastern Church. These are the Ecumenical Patriarchate of

Constantinople (modern Istanbul), the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Patriarchate of Antioch (residing in Damascus), and the Patriarchate of Alexandria in Egypt. Among these, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is the mother church and the epicenter of Orthodox faith worldwide.

Although the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople is not a figure analogous to the Head of the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope, he is the spiritual leader of nearly 300 million Eastern Orthodox Christians. The Russian Orthodox Church, having been established centuries after the ancient Patriarchates, ranks fifth in the Eastern Orthodox order of precedence, below the four ancient patriarchates of the Greek Orthodox Church.

Russians accepted the Christian faith in 988 by Greek apostles sent by the Byzantine Empire, a state based on Hellenic culture and a Greek-speaking population [3]. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, Moscow attempted to obtain a hegemonic presence in Eastern Orthodox Christianity and declared itself the "Third Rome" (the second one being Constantinople) [4].

Thus, Russia appropriated Byzantine orthodox heritage and attempted to appear as the legitimate representative and guardian of Orthodox affiliations. The Moscow Patriarchate itself gained its status in the 16th century by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. During the Soviet era, the Russian state continued to use the Russian Orthodox Church as one of its soft power agencies to project geopolitical influence within the Orthodox communities both in Eastern Europe and in other regions. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Orthodox Christianity supplanted the Marxist credo as the main ideological current of Russia and its geopolitical planning, and the Russian Orthodox Church became an effective agent of state propaganda [5].

Today, Russia wishes to impose its own Moscow Patriarchate as the dominant institution among Orthodox Christians replacing the predominance of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and of Greek Orthodox networks that are dominant in Africa and Israel. Russian influence is already strong in Serbia, Georgia, and Syria among the Patriarchate of Antioch. The Russian Orthodox Church is a state instrument of Kremlin's propaganda and misinformation tactics that threaten to engulf the Orthodox world of 300 million faithful and project Russia's geopolitical aims [6].

After the Ecumenical Patriarchate accepted the request by Ukrainians to establish their own autocephalous church distinct from the Moscow Patriarchate, Russia's subversion

tactics escalated. The Orthodox Church in Ukraine had fallen under the Moscow Patriarchate's jurisdiction in 1686. After Ukrainian political independence was established in the late 20th century, the corresponding spiritual independence of the Ukrainian Church is a necessary prerequisite to face Russian aggressiveness against Ukrainian sovereignty which has culminated in Russia controlling Crimea and indirectly the seceded parts in Eastern Ukraine since 2014 and invading the rest of Ukrainian territory in 2022.

In October 2018 the Russian Orthodox Church unilaterally severed communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, an action repeated in October 2019 against the Church of Greece following the latter's recognition of the Ukrainian autocephaly and increased its pressure and misinformation campaign. Additionally, on 8 November 2019, the Russian Orthodox Church announced that Patriarch Kirill would stop commemorating the Patriarch of Alexandria and all Africa after the latter and his Church recognized the Ukrainian Church that same day [7].



*Fig. 1: Russian President Putin and Patriarch Kirill*

## **Disruptive moves of Russia in Africa**

In the context of its religious imperialism and revisionism, Russia is attempting in the last years to create an additional front against the established order of Orthodox faith in Africa, renewing its attempt to control Orthodox networks, and project state influence. This is a project reminiscent of Cold War infiltration of Soviet influence, only now, instead of Marxist dialectics, Moscow promotes its own version of Orthodox religiosity.

The ancient Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa is facing disruptive moves by the Russian Orthodox Church in a coordinated effort to supplant Greek Orthodox networks with Russian-affiliated ones. In late December 2021, the Russian ecclesiastical authorities in an unprecedented move decided to fund schismatic ecclesiastical structures by creating an African Exarchate [8]. The decision to establish an African Exarchate was made in Moscow, at a Synod meeting, reminiscent of Russian/Soviet bureaucratic decision mechanisms and interventionism. The Russian Church accepted 102 clerics from eight African countries under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, the second largest in the world after the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Moscow Synod decreed that Archbishop Leonid of Yerevan and Armenia should now be “Metropolitan Klinsky and Patriarchal Exarch for Africa” with instructions to administer the Metropolis of North Africa and to temporarily administrate the Exarchate of South Africa.

Reacting, the Patriarchate of Alexandria, in a strongly worded statement expressed its sorrow concerning Russian moves against its jurisdiction, and interestingly stressed its historical Greek cultural identity: “The ancient Patriarchate of Alexandria expresses deep sorrow for the synodal decision of the Russian Patriarchate to establish an Exarchate within the normal limits of the jurisdiction of the Ancient Church of Alexandria. [...] The Patriarchate of Alexandria will continue to perform its pastoral duty towards its flock



entrusted under the Lord, subject to the spiritual legacies of the great Greek Fathers of the Church” [9].



*Fig.2: His Beatitude Patriarch Theodoros II of Alexandria and All Africa*

Subordination of the African Orthodox Christian communities to an African Exarchate controlled by the Moscow Patriarchate equals to subordination to Russian geopolitical planning and infiltration in many African states. Russian influence with the establishment of an African Exarchate is a disruptive move to be understood in a greater macro-historical context. Russia aspires to repeat the scenario of the takeover of the Patriarchate of Antioch and establish itself as the guarantying presence for the Orthodox communities of Africa. Russia’s religious project accompanies the increased presence of Wagner mercenaries in Africa, not only in Islamic-populated states, such as Libya and Mali, but also

in states with Christian majorities, such as the Central African Republic, in a new kind of military-missionary expansionism that manifests itself in the context of great-power competition in Africa [10].

The historical legacy of Greek soft power in Orthodox Christianity is essential in halting Russian diplomatic expansionism, this time unfolding under the guise of a religious pretext. Greece, a NATO and EU member that has upgraded its ties to the United States, is an Orthodox country carrying considerable cultural capital that forms a valuable intermediary to Orthodox populations in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Africa. Greece has excellent relations and constantly supports the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey, which is under combined Russian and Turkish geopolitical and political pressure [11].

In the Middle East, Greece actively supports the Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Alexandria in their humanitarian and cultural work, procuring many clerics of Greek origin. At the same time, Greece is reaching out to the Orthodox population of conflict-ridden Lebanon attempting to draw them away from entrenched Russian influence and reorient them towards the legitimate sphere of the Ecumenical Patriarchate [12].

## **How to React to Russian Religious Expansionism**

To win hearts and minds against Russian religious expansionism and geopolitical aspirations in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and now Africa, the West needs to form a coherent, long-term strategy that shall enable the preservation of the historical identity of Orthodox networks and prevent their transformation into spheres of Russian state influence and power projection abroad.

First, on an institutional policy level, the Western powers have to support the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey, the spiritual center of Orthodox Christianity. As long as the Ecumenical Patriarchate retains its dominant position in the context of the 300-million orthodox Christianity, the Russian Orthodox Church face an insurmountable obstacle in its expansionist aspirations. The Patriarchate itself needs to deepen its ties with all Orthodox Churches, especially with the ones in Georgia, Serbia, and Bulgaria –all three long under Russian influence- and promote education of the clergy with seminars based on the rich history of Greek theology.

Second, an effective reaction to Russian religious expansionism is based on support of the independence and ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria in Egypt and the greater nexus of Greek Orthodox networks. The Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa is an ancient institution with a jurisdiction extending to the whole continent of Africa. Vis-à-vis the unjustified incursions of the Russian Orthodox Church that aims to gain a foothold in Africa, the unity of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Africa under the leadership of the Patriarchate is fundamental for the preservation of its historical role and social mission. Its integrity and the maintenance of its influence throughout Africa without any external interference is completely in line with the foreign policy priorities of both the Western states and its host state, Egypt [13].

A successful deterrence of Russia's use of soft power through religion relies on active and coordinated promotion of its only credible equivalent, Greek Orthodox religious soft power. The latter coincides with the established leading networks of Orthodox Christianity for centuries, thus maintaining its influence and moral standing.

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