



INSIGHTS

Vol. 2, No. 5, March 2024

Religion and Foreign Subversion: The Russian Orthodox Church

This Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) Insights article introduces and builds upon the IWC's new translation of a Russian military article titled "Informational Support for National Security: Information Warfare Strategy." This article, originally published in the 2016 issue of the Russian academic journal "[National Security/nota bene](#)," gives new insights into how Russian scholars and practitioners view information warfare. Written by one of Russia's [most prolific authors](#) on hybrid and information warfare and a member of Russia's Academy of Military Sciences, Alexander Bartosh, the Russian article discusses, among other topics, the role of religious and cultural institutions in information warfare. The translation can be requested [here](#).

From social media networks versus bot accounts, factual reporting and disinformation, online support groups and echo chambers, and grassroots movements and astroturfing, the modern information environment provides numerous tools to reach audiences that can be used for both innocuous and malign intent. However, the state of today's information environment allows messages spread by even traditional sources of influence, including religious institutions and other trusted members of society, to flourish, reaching audiences far beyond what was feasible prior to technological advancement. This has allowed religious institutions to emerge as a powerful force in shaping narratives in the modern information environment, whether it is to build a resilient national identity or as a political tool for foreign influence.

Russia is a prime example of how a modern state actor has weaponized religion as a source of influence in the information environment. The Kremlin's use of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a tool for subversion in foreign countries is well-known and documented, including in its efforts to build access and influence in [Africa](#) and as a political force in the [Balkans](#). But the translated article brings up a topic that is much less understood: the role of the ROC in building social resilience against perceived foreign influence in Russia itself. Moscow has co-opted the ROC to assist its efforts in building and

IWC ANALYSTS:

MADISON URBAN IWC Analyst (Contractor, Valens Global)

ANDREW LIFLYANDCHICK IWC Analyst (Contractor, Valens Global)

GABRIELLE KENNEDY IWC Analyst (Contractor, Valens Global)



IWC MISSION: The IWC serves as the central mechanism for developing the Department of Defense's (DOD) irregular warfare knowledge and advancing the Department's understanding of irregular warfare concepts and doctrine in collaboration with key allies and partners.

buttressing its preferred articulation of the Russian national identity, and to create and enforce a worldview which justifies its aggression. By doing so, Russia has utilized the ROC to inoculate the Russian public from anything it deems as foreign subversion: positioning the church as a bulwark on the frontlines of building cultural resilience against foreign subversion.

This article will begin by briefly examining the evolution of the relationship between the ROC and the Russian government. It will then analyze Bartosh's argument about the central role that the ROC plays in defense against information warfare. Finally, this article will consider how religious and cultural institutions more broadly can play an important role in building societal resilience.

The author of the Russian article, Alexander Bartosh, published *Information in Support of National Security: Information Warfare Strategy* on August 31, 2016, a month after Putin signed the [Yaryova Law](#) into effect, which required government registration and approval of religious organizations and increased government oversight of communication technology in the name of countering terrorism. In the 1990s, Bartosh served as a military diplomat in Russia's permanent mission to NATO, launching his career as a prolific military commentator. In *Information in Support of National Security*, Bartosh examines the role of information warfare in color revolutions and hybrid war, interpreting the history of color revolutions as the result of Western subversion. In light of this history, he positions the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as "the defender of the core values" that constitute the Russian identity, and as such, an instrument of defense against foreign influence attempts.

SOVIET FOUNDATIONS

After decades of the Soviet Communist government's systematic destruction and [persecution](#) of religion, Joseph Stalin recognized that he could instead use the ROC to legitimize his dictatorship and spread the cultural values of the Soviet Union, particularly since religious beliefs [tend](#) to transcend political borders. In September 1943, Stalin [met](#) with three bishops of the ROC and attempted to mold the church into an ally of the Russian state, opening government-approved seminaries to train new religious leaders and exporting the faith to Eastern Europe, later using common religiosity as a [justification](#) for "reunification." Under subsequent leaders, like [Nikita Khrushchev](#), however, the ROC once again suffered persecution internally as the Soviet Union sought to suppress resistance movements that intertwined religious and political justifications, most prominently in Poland and Afghanistan.

The intersection of Poland's Catholic and national identity is widely recognized as contributing to the fall of the Soviet Union. Under the leadership of Pope John Paul II, known as "the Polish Pope," the Vatican backed Lech Walesa's Solidarity movement in the 1980s, [blessing the movement publicly](#) and perhaps even [providing it with covert funding](#). Through a network of churches and local religious leaders, the Roman Catholic Church also provided an additional avenue to [expand Solidarity's outreach into rural Poland](#), expanding its base of support beyond its traditional allies of the urban trade unions. As British historian Timothy Garton Ash [stated](#), "without the Polish Pope, no Solidarity revolution in Poland in 1980; without Solidarity, no dramatic change in Soviet policy towards eastern Europe under Gorbachev; without that change, no velvet revolutions in 1989." The Roman Catholic Church's public and private support of Solidarity expanded Solidarity's base of support within Poland, elevated its international profile, and provided moral justification for resistance. The Polish Catholic identity was deeper and more powerful than the identity that the Soviet Union imposed, and ultimately contributed to the Soviet Union's downfall.

In Afghanistan, the atheistic communist ideology of the Soviet Union also clashed with the religious Afghan society in the late 1970s and 1980s, partially leading to the formation of the mujahideen. As in Poland, religious ties provided bases of support to the Afghan resistance throughout the country and [international support](#) from other Muslim countries that increased funding and fighters, despite many

[points of friction](#). The Soviets [sunk](#) billions of dollars and significant manpower into their decade in Afghanistan, [contributing](#) to the broader economic struggles and public discontent that led to fall of the Soviet Union.

In both Poland and Afghanistan, religion provided a rallying point internally and connected the resistance to global movements that delivered critical material support and led to painful defeats for occupying Soviet forces. Seeing the power of religious backing in mobilizing people and the converse danger of religious dissent throughout Soviet history, Russian President Vladimir Putin has sought an unsteady political-religious alliance with the ROC.

MODERN RUSSIAN CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS

When Putin first took power in Russia, he consolidated his hold not only through [savvy dealing with the oligarchs and military generals](#) but also by using religion as a means to signal the legitimacy of his rule. In his autobiography, Putin tells of his Christian [mother secretly baptizing him](#) as an infant and later getting his baptismal cross blessed in Israel. Following his [inauguration](#), the then-Patriarch of the ROC, Alexy II, prayed over him and presented him with historic relics while Putin thanked the church for maintaining the Russian value system amid turmoil. That said, despite the nod to religiosity, the state [did not push forward the major policy initiatives](#) desired by the ROC, such as banning abortion, and the relationship appeared to be somewhat superficial. However, ever since the current Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill, became the head of the ROC in February 2009, a pragmatic but generally mutually supportive relationship between the ROC and state has grown.

Amid the festivities around his enthronement, Kirill pronounced a desire for a symbiotic relationship between church and state. The patriarch is reportedly a [former KGB agent](#) and former head of the ROC's foreign relations department. Then-President Dmitry [Medvedev](#) called Kirill's ascent "an event that opens a new chapter in the development of Orthodox religion in our country, and which, hopefully, creates new conditions for a fully-fledged and solidarity dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state." Kirill also announced his desire for a "[harmonious and interdependent relationship](#) with the state akin to the Byzantine era where the divide between the [sacred-secular](#) was about partitioning institutional authority while maintaining a unified goal ([symphonia](#)). In this conceptualization, the ROC propagates the Kremlin's message at home and abroad while helping build a Russian national identity based on traditional values. The repetition of the messages by both church and state combines political and religious authority to reinforce the legitimacy of both institutions. Thus, the Church provides the moral and religious legitimacy needed to justify the Kremlin's policies in the eyes of the Russian public. Through this distorted perception, Patriarch Kirill has painted the invasion of a sovereign country as a "[holy war](#)," while the sins of Russian soldiers committing atrocities are, in his words, "[washed away](#)."

This relationship began to flesh out in new ways during the presidency of Medvedev and after the [rigged re-election](#) of Putin in 2011. Amid [critiques](#) of the electoral system in Russia, Putin began to portray himself more prominently as the defender of traditional values to bolster his legitimacy claims, dovetailing neatly with many of the church's preferred conservative policies. As the relationship between Putin and Kirill grew, early signals of this turn were a legislative crackdown on in 2013, ambiguously [banning](#) "propaganda about nontraditional sexual relationships," and imprisoning members of [Pussy Riot](#), a feminist protest band that released a song satirizing the relationship between the Kremlin and the ROC. While these legislative decisions did not necessarily contradict the beliefs of the Russian populous, particularly given historic repression and vilification of the LGBTQ community under [communism](#), Kirill [provided](#) additional spiritual justification amid [international censure](#). Furthermore, this rise in religious and social conservatism provided the Kremlin an opportunity to portray the liberal West as decadent and licentious. The ROC became a prominent means for affirming these policy shifts to reinforce the regime's popularity domestically.

Moreover, as religiously motivated terrorist entities, such as [al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula](#) and the Islamic State ([ISIS](#)), began [leveraging social media](#) in new ways for recruitment and propagation of their own messages globally, Russia utilized this trend to crack down on information technology. The result was the [Yaryova Law](#), which increased government oversight of content on the internet and private messaging while also going a step further to control religious organization and practice. In particular, the law cracked down on missionary activities, limiting the ability of non-Kremlin approved religious messages to reach the Russian people and further removing any religious challenges to the ROC's authority.

However, there are limits to the symbiosis between church and state. For example, during the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, the ROC found itself in a [challenging](#) position, having to balance internal disagreement between bishops in Ukraine and in Russia about how to handle the crisis. These conflicts would ultimately result in the schism through which the Ukrainian churches declared [independence](#) from the ROC, forming the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2019. However, after the Russian invasion in 2022, Kirill became a vocal supporter of the war effort.

In his [speech](#) advocating for recognizing the Donbas People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic as sovereign states three days before the invasion, Putin based his argument for unity on the Orthodox religion, noting that "the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians." He further [cites](#) "the destruction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate" (or UOC, the Ukrainian churches that did not declare independence from the ROC in 2019) as evidence of the need to take action. Days after the invasion, Kirill would also [state](#) in a sermon that Russia "entered into a struggle that has not a physical, but a metaphysical significance" and further [proclaimed](#) "[a]ll of our people today must wake up, wake up, understand that a special time has come, on which the historical fate of our people may depend."

Kyiv is central to the story of Orthodoxy in the region as Christianity was introduced by [Prince Vladimir of Kyiv](#), a figure claimed by both Ukrainians and Russians, during the late 10th-century. Kirill would later go on to assure Russians that "[n]o trace will be left of schismatics [OCU] because they are doing the devil's evil bidding, eroding Orthodoxy in Kiev's lands" in response to the Ukrainian [crackdown](#) on the UOC. Perhaps most tellingly, in the middle of an unpopular mobilization effort in September 2022, Kirill explicitly offered both religious justification and incentives for soldiers fighting for their country [arguing](#) "if a person dies in the performance of this duty...this sacrifice washes away all the sins that a person has committed."

THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH'S ROLE IN COUNTERING FOREIGN SUBVERSION

It is in this context that Bartosh writes his article outlining the role of information warfare and foreign subversion in color revolutions and hybrid warfare, and the role the ROC plays in societal resiliency. According to Bartosh, the goals of Western information operations is "replacing national values and national interests with a set of false interests and values or completely destroying them." Bartosh cites U.S. operations in Iraq, Syria, and Latin America as prime examples of Western information warfare. Perhaps most critically from the Russian perspective, Bartosh echoes Putin's narrative that the [United States orchestrated](#) the overthrow of former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich in 2014.

In light of these subversive actions from foreign powers, Bartosh argues that the ROC plays a pivotal role in the battle for national identity. He categorizes the church as "the defender of the core values that form the foundation of our national identity," a means of building cultural resiliency. As such, he situates the ROC squarely at the center of discussions about subversion and information. However,

while the ROC appears to be nominally part of the Russian identity, its ability to sway public opinion, and therefore build any sort of resilience to subversion, is questionable.

Polling data indicates that the relationship between the ROC and the Kremlin has somewhat successfully contributed to the modern conceptualization of Russian identity, as evidenced by the number of people who claim Russian Orthodoxy as part of their national heritage, even if its ability to serve as a credible tool for communicating values and shaping behavior is less clear. After the fall of the Soviet Union, even as church attendance has stayed [incredibly low](#), the number of people identifying as Russian Orthodox has drastically increased. This misalignment between religious identification and religious practice is perhaps, in part, explained by state-sanctioned-Orthodoxy's role in the new Russian identity. A Pew Research poll conducted in [2015 to 2016](#) found that 57 percent of Russians saw Orthodoxy as being “very or somewhat important to truly be a national of their country.” However, a May 2021 [study](#) from the University of Oslo found that when asked about specific practices where the church diverges from the state, for example, on abortion, pre-marital sex, or divorce, there is [no clear difference](#) between self-declared Orthodox believers and non-Orthodox Russians. For example, contrary to the ROC's teaching but in line with the state's position, 44 percent of those self-identifying as Russian Orthodox said that abortion could be justified, only five percentage points lower than those who did not identify as Russian Orthodox. Similar trends exist with beliefs on pre-marital sex and divorce with only two percentage points separating the Russian Orthodox and non-Russian Orthodox on beliefs contrary to the ROC' teaching. This indicates that the ROC's “authority” on contentious social issues is symbolic at best and either subordinate to the Kremlin or simply to popular opinion. Orthodoxy might be part of the Russian cultural identity, but that it is only able to impact belief or motivate behavior when its positions are also endorsed by the state.

As such, Bartosh's claim that the ROC is central to the protection of the Russian identity is likely overblown, an ideal that is not borne out in practice. This perhaps also explains Putin's hesitancy to throw full weight behind ROC preferred policies on matters like abortion. Despite [citing](#) “traditional values,” which he says “includes the upbringing of children in the sense that a child is God's gift to all,” as the first means of overcoming declining birth rates, he stops short of advocating for an abortion ban. It is likely that Putin believes discontent from the ROC is less of a threat, and more easily managed, than from Russian population, giving him leeway to pick and choose when he draws on its authority.

Perhaps the truest way to conceptualize the role of the ROC in countering perceived foreign subversion of the Russian identity is as an attempt to deter internal resistance. While it struggles to galvanize support for the Russian state on its own, the ROC does provide a controlled outlet for religious people and provides the Kremlin a semblance of moral legitimacy—the University of Oslo's May 2021 found that 61 percent of the surveyed population indicated that they “fully trust” or “rather trust” the ROC, falling only behind the military (72 percent) and the president (68 percent) in trustworthiness on moral or ethical matters—mitigating the prospect of religiously-inspired internal resistance.

Instead of acting as a defender against foreign subversion, as suggested by Bartosh, the ROC, and the public trust it wields, has become a means to defend the ruling regime from its own population's criticisms. This helps support the Kremlin's stance that dissent or resistance are not generated domestically but rather are a result of foreign interference. Given this official stance, Bartosh's choice to define the end goal of information warfare as “disrupting their ability to resist aggression” could be a case of mirror-imaging, a reflection of the Kremlin's domestic religious policy.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS IN RESILIENCY & RESISTANCE

Putin's attempt to walk a tenuous line between embracing religion while depriving it of its power to challenge the state is ultimately reflective of a [broader question](#) about the role of religion in the formation of resilience. In a time of growing concerns about foreign subversion and operations in the

information environment that seek to undermine national cohesion and wedge space between the fault lines of common identity, governments approach religion differently. Some center around religion as a fundamental element of their national heritage and cultural identity (e.g., the Tibetan government-in-exile). Others espouse pluralism to promote religious freedom, creating space for a multitude of beliefs and expressions to co-exist and building bridges across faith communities to increase trust and resilience (e.g., the United States). At the most extreme, some attempt to stamp out religion entirely or severely restrict its expression (e.g., the Chinese Communist Party). Others anchor national identity in it as the ultimate truth (e.g., Saudi Arabia), or pragmatically co-opt it without ascribing it utmost authority (e.g., Russia as discussed here).

The Kremlin's quasi-control over the ROC allows Russia to utilize the church as both an offensive and defensive information tool. On the one hand, Russia uses the ROC to disseminate emotionally and culturally charged narratives to target sympathetic audiences around the world. On the other hand, Russia leverages the same institution internally to anchor and build its preferred national identity and uphold the state in an attempt to shield the Russian public from what it deems to be foreign interference. Russia's use of the ROC has demonstrated its willingness to gain an advantage in the information sphere by any means necessary, even weaponizing religious institutions as a political tool. Yet, these same institutions might also be a part of the solution. In a powerful move, many Orthodox leaders around the world have stood against the Moscow patriarchate and its support of the Russian invasion, including Orthodox churches in other Eastern European states where the disunion in the church could cause further geopolitical divisions.

In any case, religion remains a significant part of culture and society, often leaving behind lasting influence and legacy even if religion is not an active practice within societies. As a result, conversations around how to build and maintain whole-of-society resiliency should consider including religious institutions, as important levers of culture.



The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, or the Irregular Warfare Center.