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Robert C. Blitt

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GEOPOLITICS OF RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER POLICY BRIEF #5

RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY: CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE AND THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

By Robert C. Blitt

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Kremlin continues to deepen its reliance on the Russian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (ROC) as a lever of soft power in Russian foreign policy. Constitutional amendments ratified in July 2020 suggest that this church-state partnership is poised to grow stronger in the coming years. Recognizing that the ROC's international undertakings function to echo Kremlin objectives, policymakers should consider scrutinizing church activities and interactions with civil society and government interlocutors, with an eye toward identifying and minimizing opportunities for Kremlin influence and interference.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The ROC has served as a steadfast soft power echo for Russian foreign policy interests during the Putin era, particularly as the Kremlin seeks to project an outsized vision of the “Russian world” beyond its national borders.
- Constitutional amendments ratified in July 2020 are likely to bolster Kremlin foreign policy priorities in key areas: sovereignty and noninterference, the falsification of history, the rights of compatriots, and traditional values.
- The ROC is poised to play an enlarged role in promoting these foreign policy objectives by conducting international outreach and advocacy, marshalling like-minded constituencies, exporting traditional values worldwide, and reinforcing key Kremlin narratives.



This brief is a product of the Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project, a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs.

The conclusions and recommendations of this Berkley Center publication are solely those of its author(s) and do not reflect the views of the center, its leadership, or its other scholars.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2020, President Putin surprised Russians and the world by proposing a sweeping set of constitutional reforms. Despite an emphasis on domestic policy and the welfare state, the push for amendments signaled a distinct preoccupation with Russia's international standing. Putin's proposed reforms began by asserting that "Our nation's sovereignty must be unconditional...Russia has returned to international politics as a country whose opinion cannot be ignored."¹ Propelled by this outward-facing orientation, Putin's first suggested amendments sought to curb the domestic impact of any decisions taken by international bodies regarding Russia's international obligations.

Putin's traditional allies were quick to embrace his invitation to propose further amendments. Among others, Patriarch Kirill, head of the ROC, suggested believers should "pray and work so God would be mentioned in our foundational law."² President Putin answered these prayers by endorsing Kirill's proposal and bundling it into the list of revised amendments delivered to the State Duma in March 2020.³ Within a matter of days—and with virtually no opposition—Putin's package of amendments secured the approval of various government bodies. In July 2020, citizens overwhelmingly endorsed the amendments in a public vote,⁴ thus blessing the largest overhaul of the Russian constitution since its original ratification in 1993.

The approved constitutional amendments cover wide ground, ranging from social and welfare benefits to reorganization of the state's political power structure. But lost in this torrent of reform are certain key amendments that also harbor significant implications for Russian foreign policy.

FOREIGN POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE 2020 CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS

Central among the constitutional amendments with potential implications for Russian

foreign policy are provisions that entrench: a muscular vision of state sovereignty, a state-sanctioned historical truth, the obligation to protect Russian compatriot rights abroad, and traditional values as a core component of Russian national identity.

Boosting State Sovereignty

Russia's Constitutional Court is now authorized to render unenforceable any international ruling against Russia—including from the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)—where it deems the decision to be contrary to Russia's constitution and public order.⁵ In addition, by requiring that Russia "tak[e] measures to...prevent interference in the internal affairs of the state,"⁶ the constitution now provides fresh cover for the Kremlin's global promotion of multipolarity.

Prohibiting Falsification

Another amendment prohibits the spread of information questioning Russia's official narrative regarding WWII. This prohibition has clear outward-facing implications for the projection of Russian power and civilization on the international stage. As Putin has cautioned, tarnishing Russia's historical reputation is nothing less than "a threat to the fundamental principles of the world order."⁷ This newly constitutionalized imperative to combat falsification augurs a raft of international challenges, including condoning crimes committed under the Soviet occupation and amplifying the Kremlin's ongoing disinformation campaigns.⁸

Supporting Compatriot Rights

An additional amendment expanding government support to "compatriots living abroad in the exercise of their rights"⁹ can also be linked to Russia's projection of power abroad. The definitional fluidity attached to the term "compatriots" strengthens the case for a larger "Russian world" (*Russkiy mir*) outside of Russia proper that demands active Kremlin protection. This framing in turn amplifies

Kremlin opportunities for expanding its political influence and intelligence-gathering abroad.¹⁰

Enshrining Traditional Values

The traditional values-centric amendments serve to reinforce the Kremlin's civilizational identity-building project and its related multipolarity campaign. Anchoring Russia's national identity in these religiously steeped conservative values burnishes Russia's bona fides as the vanguard of an anti-West coalition committed to contesting international human rights norms.¹¹

According to this narrative, only Russia can thwart the West's effort to impose global "ultra-liberalism." In Putin's words, "efforts are being taken today to...destroy the traditional values..."¹² And this "clash of civilizations" poses a strategic threat to Russia's geopolitical interests: "[P]romoting...LGBT [rights] and spreading the ideas of radical feminism... dilute[e] the values of family and marriage... [such a] society...is a perfect target for so-called coloured revolutions."¹³

CEMENTING THE ROC'S ROLE AS FAVORED SOFT POWER TOOL

The ROC has long rallied around advancing the now constitutionally enshrined vision outlined above. In embracing this mission, it has fortified the Kremlin's campaign against the perceived civilizational threat posed by the West's "mindless multiculturalism"¹⁴ and peddled a vision of Russia "predestined to be the guardian of global balance, not merely in geopolitical but...in a moral/ethical sense."¹⁵

ROC Advocacy of Noninterference, Sovereignty, and Multipolarity

ROC diplomacy attests to an enduring commitment to the Kremlin's preferred international order. In 1999, then Metropolitan Kirill lamented "new forms of confrontation in which...interference in the life of nations have been realized through

political and economic actions."¹⁶ Kirill further asserted that: "Orthodoxy in international politics [could facilitate] the building up of a multipolar world."¹⁷ Nearly a quarter century later, the church's framing of noninterference has led it to reject decisions emerging from the ECtHR and other human rights bodies as being alien and harmful to Russian sovereignty.¹⁸ The ROC's contemporary devotion to multipolarity remains equally undiminished, with one church leader recently speculating that the COVID-19 pandemic could help bring about "the real emergence of a multipolar world."¹⁹

Most tellingly, however, the ROC's wholesale embrace of Kremlin policy surrounding sovereignty and noninterference is revealed in the occasions when both actors appear willing to jettison principle in the name of *realpolitik*. Consider the Kremlin's interventionist stance regarding Montenegro's recently enacted Law on Freedom of Religion or Beliefs.²⁰ To validate its abandonment of non-interference, Russia's Foreign Ministry proffered impressive verbal gymnastics: "We are categorically against any interference in internal affairs. [But this law]...could affect the interests of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro...[Therefore], it goes beyond national boundaries and concerns the unity and cohesion of the Orthodox World."²¹

In this instance, Kremlin intervention cloaked in ostensible concern for the Orthodox world coincidentally seeks to diminish Western influence and advance Russia's push for multipolarity. This decidedly secular motive has not deterred the ROC from reiterating the Kremlin's temporal concerns and fueling the tension in Montenegro. In fact, the church has dutifully mobilized its various channels to echo Kremlin attacks on the new religious freedom law and the Montenegrin government more generally.

From Patriarch Kirill's perspective, events in Montenegro are akin to a "Ukrainian scenario" that encroaches "on canonical Orthodoxy."²² As such, the matter is exempted from the

niceties of noninterference. Revealingly, the patriarch's invocation of a "Ukraine scenario" ties back to the Kremlin's larger concern over Montenegro's political alignment to the West. In the church's words: "The current authorities of Montenegro do not conceal that they are active supporters of eurointegration and isolation from Serbia and for this reason they seek to discredit [our] common historical spiritual and cultural heritage."²³ The prospect of a loss of Russian influence within this tiny country augurs so deep a blow to the Kremlin that the patriarch has gone as far as to insinuate that Montenegrin officials have subjected Orthodox faithful to torture.²⁴

The ROC's eagerness to intervene in Montenegro's internal affairs directly serves Kremlin foreign policy by fueling Montenegrin political and social instability. On a still more sinister note, it also sows the seeds for potentially more egregious intervention from Moscow. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's declaration that Russia "will always defend the interests of Orthodox Churches,"²⁵ coupled with the freshly minted constitutional imperative to protect "compatriot" rights, leaves open the possibility of expanding the Kremlin's compatriot umbrella to include non-Russian ROC-aligned believers.

The case of Montenegro signals that, like the Kremlin, the ROC will vociferously defend sovereignty to shield Russia and its allies from international scrutiny, but quickly discard the norm in the service of Russia's foreign interests. The Kremlin's decision to intervene in Syria provides another case in point. The church's deafening silence in the face of credible reporting of war crimes linked to Russian military operations²⁶ in that country betrays the full extent of its unflinching support for the Kremlin's selective grasp of international norms.

The ROC as Guard Dog for Kremlin Truth

Over a decade ago, Russia's Foreign Ministry and the ROC pledged to continue "joint efforts to combat the falsification of history."²⁷

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov renewed this vow in 2020, proclaiming that "the diplomatic service will continue to do its best to counter attempts to falsify history [through] close cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church."²⁸

With falsification rendered constitutionally anathema, the church is poised to continue consecrating the Kremlin's international push to brand as fascist any critic of Soviet glory. As part of this effort, the church advocates within the compatriot community abroad to nurture a shared vision of historical memory.²⁹

The church also wields the Kremlin's historical narrative as a carrot and stick, both to build potential alliances and to exert pressure on less cooperative foreign governments. For example, the church recently lauded Croatian officials for restoring a memorial to Soviet soldiers, calling it "one of these profoundly symbolic actions which help preserve historical memory."³⁰ In contrast, Patriarch Kirill directed a six-minute long harangue at the Bulgarian president for remarks Kirill deemed "outrages" of historical revisionism that depreciated the primary role of Russian state power and sacrifice.³¹

Through actions like these, the church energetically reinforces the Kremlin's view that Russia's reputation is sacrosanct, and that any perceived slight against it—including the "criminal war on monuments"³²—is tantamount to the glorification of Nazism. In this context, as with the compatriot policy discussed below, the church can act without the diplomatic fetters that might otherwise bind Russia's Foreign Ministry. Thus, Patriarch Kirill's remarks in Bulgaria "aggressively push[ed] the Russian nationalist agenda...in a way that even the Russian Foreign Ministry avoids when dealing with what it considers 'friendly' nations."³³

The church's readiness to echo the Kremlin's party line on the international stage extends beyond Russia's WWII legacy. According to Sergei Lavrov, Russia "had accumulated great

experience in ensuring the co-existence of people of various creeds” and “protect[ing] true religious values.”³⁴ This statement expunges a checkered history of state-sanctioned religious persecution and ongoing discrimination for the purpose of holding Russia out as an export-ready civilizational alternative to the West.

The church has embraced this disingenuous narrative unreservedly. In a speech delivered at the 2011 International Ecumenical Peace Convocation, Metropolitan Hilarion set aside Russia’s role in the production and dissemination of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and the forcible expulsion of Muslim Tatars from Crimea to boast: “In Russia there have been no religious wars or religious confrontations in our history. People in our country have been able to find a language of mutual understanding...despite their differences in faith.”³⁵

The ROC as Global Nexus for Cultivating Compatriots

Foreign Minister Lavrov has also lauded the church’s cooperation “helping the Russian diaspora and protecting the rights of Russians who have found themselves far away from the Homeland.”³⁶ The church’s global network and deep involvement with other compatriot-focused organizations confirms its pivotal role in echoing Kremlin messaging to this constituency. For example, the World Russian People’s Council (WRPC), essentially a church-directed NGO, functions as a linchpin compatriot-networking organization that advocates Russian interests abroad, including through UN lobbying. Similarly, the church maintains formal cooperation agreements with a range of governmental organizations engaged in compatriot outreach and efforts to augment international support for Russian policy, including the Federal Agency for Compatriots Abroad and the Russkiy Mir Foundation.³⁷

Tapping into the ROC’s religious and cultural terroir provides the Kremlin with

two significant advantages: First, the church promotes Kremlin messages without the baggage attached to more overtly state-backed outlets such as RT and Sputnik. Second, given the global breadth of church diplomacy, the Kremlin can access more diverse constituencies that transcend the narrow realm of compatriots. With the ROC operating as convenor of compatriots, other clergy, and foreign government officials,³⁸ the Kremlin gains a seemingly neutral channel for actively informing and influencing global opinion on Russia.

The onset of a constitutional obligation to protect compatriot rights and interests also raises the possibility of passportization being extended to include to non-Russian Orthodox believers.³⁹ If defending Russian civilization includes the protection of Orthodoxy, and the definitional fluidity of compatriots can flex to include “individuals who make the free choice of a spiritual, cultural, and legal link to the Russian Federation,”⁴⁰ it may not be too great a leap to suggest that Moscow might seek to render Orthodoxy a basis for passportization to justify further foreign interventions in the name of Christian communities expressing affinity and support for Russia.⁴¹

On a less extreme level, church outreach to other Orthodox “compatriots” hints at regions and countries where the Kremlin may seek to expand its influence using Orthodox ties as a bridgehead.⁴² From this perspective, the constitutional amendment on compatriots may signal additional fuel for Russian messianism and the Kremlin’s framing of the country and its civilization as the last bulwark against a godless world overrun by the corrupting influence of the ultra-liberal West.⁴³

The ROC’s Crown Jewel: Spreading Traditional Values Everywhere

If the constitutional amendments discussed above merely infer an enlarged role for the ROC as a chief soft power exporter of the Kremlin’s foreign policy priorities, the

amendments entrenching traditional values render this role inescapable. At least in part directly attributable to the ROC's lobbying,⁴⁴ the traditional values amendments enshrine the church's function as guardian of Russia's spiritual and moral identity.

Infusing these values with newfound constitutional status reinforces the likelihood that they will be disseminated globally to oppose Western "ultra-liberalism" and shore up the Kremlin's campaign for greater international influence. Notably, the church has portrayed traditional values as under siege for longer than the Kremlin, and without any pretense of diplomatic nicety: "It may well be...that the entire Western civilization...is becoming radically anti-Christian and anti-religious. In this case there is a need of not only a pan-European but also of a universal common front formed by traditional religious confessions in order to repel the onslaught of militant secularism."⁴⁵

To help strengthen Russia's global position, the church has reached out to a range of religious constituencies and courted conservative activists, compatriots, simpatico foreign governments, and political operatives. Through these efforts, the ROC staunchly opposes any perceived encroachments on traditional values while simultaneously promoting the Kremlin's international leadership as the most effective guardian of these values.

For example, the church's engagement with other "fraternal" churches often seeks to undercut Western institutions from within. In one visit to Bulgaria—an EU member state—Patriarch Kirill used a meeting with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to urge Bulgarians to reject the EU for imposing "behaviours believed to be sinful by Christians and ethically unnatural."⁴⁶ The ROC similarly invokes traditional values to build common ground with other non-Orthodox religious faiths. As one human rights organization concluded, this "unholy alliance" unifies "traditionalist actors from Catholic,

evangelical, Mormon...and Muslim faith backgrounds" to "[attempt] to revert feminist and sexual rights gains at the international level."⁴⁷

The 2016 Havana Declaration, signed by the ROC and the Vatican, exhibits this latter type of outreach, while illustrating the ROC's use of traditional values to validate Kremlin foreign policy. Among other things, the declaration laments secularization; calls attention to endangered Christian communities in the Middle East; and offers up generic pleas for peace in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere.⁴⁸ But it painstakingly avoids any direct criticism of Russia. Instead, the declaration promotes a view of the ROC and Kremlin as neutral peacemakers committed to protecting endangered Christians, and positions the Vatican as condoning Russia's foreign adventurism.

The church's ability to invoke traditional values as a vehicle for garnering support for Russian policy is similarly reflected in its outreach to conservative civil society groups, leaders from across Europe, and "their comrades from the American heartland."⁴⁹ For example, C-Fam, a U.S.-based "pro-family" NGO, has fawned over the ROC's rejection of a UNICEF brief calling for the elimination of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.⁵⁰ Elsewhere, the International Organization of the Family has sought to boost ROC and Kremlin policies, accepting Kremlin-connected Orthodox oligarch funding,⁵¹ endorsing "a very prominent role [for Russia]...on a global scale,"⁵² and celebrating Russia as "the Christian saviors of the world."⁵³

CONCLUSIONS

The amendments discussed above provide constitutional cover for reenergizing the Kremlin's global efforts to challenge democratic values, supplant the international human rights system, and destabilize institutions and societies through misinformation and

disinformation campaigns. Given the ROC's longstanding willingness to serve as a spear tip for the soft power advancement of these efforts, the constitutional amendments are likely to usher in an even tighter era of church-state integration. Policymakers should take note of the ROC's burgeoning foreign policy role and make necessary adjustments to account for the church's increasing proximity to the Kremlin and its ongoing influence campaigns unfolding among governmental and non-governmental interlocutors alike.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project represents a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs. Through a global comparison of varying motivations, strategies, and practices associated with the deployment of religious soft power, project research aims to reveal patterns, trends, and outcomes that will enhance our understanding of religion's role in contemporary geopolitics.

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About the Author



Robert C. Blitt is a professor of law at the University of Tennessee College of Law. His research interests include issues related to the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.