



Journalist Fellowship Paper

The role of the Orthodox Church in advancing Putin's war messaging

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June 2023

Trinity Term

Sponsor: Thomson Reuters Foundation

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Introduction



Screengrab shows Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, delivering his New Year's sermon at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow on 31 December 2021

“The coming year – we hope, and we will now pray for it – should be a year of peace. Because any violation of peace (which is the result of people’s cruelty) inflicts enormous damage on human life.”

So said [Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia](#), head of the Russian Orthodox Church, while delivering his New Year’s sermon at the iconic Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow on 31 December 2021.^{1, 2}

Just 55 days later, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Kirill became one of the key advocates for the war, providing moral and ideological justification for what Russian authorities called their “special military operation”.

The Russian Orthodox Church, as an institution, has backed and supported the war in Ukraine: priests blessing soldiers and military equipment, handing out religious

¹ The New Year’s Sermon of Patriarch Kirill, the YouTube Channel of Orthodox TV "Soyuz", December 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZEXIyDIHow>

² While delivering the sermon, Kirill made what might (in hindsight) be considered a Freudian slip: “...peace on our planet,” he said, “is very dangerous...”. We can only hope that he meant to say that peace was precarious, or at risk.

icons to protect Russian land, visiting battlefields, calling on people to pray for victory, and using media resources and sermons to justify the war.

It would have been naive to expect acts of resistance from the head of the Russian Orthodoxy, who just over a decade ago called Putin's era a "[miracle of God](#)".³ However, the extent of the involvement of the Church and its Patriarch in Russia's wartime propaganda machinery has been more flagrant than even the most jaded observer might have predicted.

To catalogue this support, I pored over the text of 58 sermons delivered by Patriarch Kirill between February 2022 and May 2023. These speeches were not only addressed to parishioners in churches but were also broadcast weekly to millions of viewers via state-controlled Channel One's *Word of a Pastor (Slovo pastyrya)*.⁴

I also reviewed other public statements he made in the same period of time, and cross-referenced his rhetoric with statements released by the Kremlin and speeches made by Putin. In this paper, I'll demonstrate how Patriarch Kirill's rhetoric twists facts and distorts biblical references to support the Kremlin's military actions, shifting from prayers for peace to prayers for victory and urging the public to sacrifice for Russia's political goals.

I will outline four rhetorical themes that have emerged in Kirill's statements: downplaying peace, the metaphysical struggle myth, exhortation to sacrifice, and historical victory framing. There are no strict borders between these stages; they appear intertwined throughout February 2022 to May 2023, but we can see how the stress on particular topics shifted depending on political circumstances. I will also explain a crucial concept in the war context – *Russkiy mir* ("Russian world") – and how it has become central to both Russian political and religious messaging.

This analysis will demonstrate that Patriarch Kirill and the Russian Orthodox Church are not confined to the realm of religion but are actively engaged in the political arena. This engagement is, however, more nuanced than commonly

³ Transcript of the meeting of V.V. Putin with Patriarch Kirill and leaders of traditional religious communities in Russia, Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, February 8, 2012

<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/2005767.html>

⁴ The program's page on Channel One Russia official website

<https://www.1tv.com/announce/4013/video>

portrayed: those who seek to cast Patriarch Kirill as “[Putin’s altar boy](#)” fail to see a pattern of collaboration that reinforces the church’s own power and objectives.

One caveat before we begin: there are some exceptions to the church’s official stance. In particular, at the start of the full-scale war, a group of Russian Orthodox priests launched a [petition](#) calling for immediate ceasefire and gathered around 300 signatures.⁵ Today, some Orthodox clergy silently oppose the war, while others try to resist and are persecuted by the state and the church as a result. More on this minority later.

⁵ Orthodox priests’ petition calling for ceasefire the war
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1yOGuXjdfQ1A3BQaEEQr744cwDzmSQ1qePaaBi4z6q3w/viewform?edit_requested=true

How the “Russian world” concept emerged

In May 1993, soon after the collapse of the USSR and the formation of 15 independent states (including Ukraine), a group of clergy, political analysts, historians, and philosophers convened at Danilov Monastery in Moscow.

They discussed the reasons for the crash of “the centuries-old mighty statehood” and possible ways for “the spiritual restoration” of the country. It was the first meeting of the just established [World Russian People’s Council](#), a kind of a think-tank under the patronage of the Russian Orthodox Church.⁶

The declared aim of the organisation was to “unite Russian people regardless of their country of residency and political views”, “who had found themselves under different state flags, often in a disadvantaged and humiliated position”.

In its first [resolution](#), the Council called for attention to be paid to the risks of Russia “losing strategic positions” in the world and to the desire of other countries “to replace the results of World War II with the results of the Cold War”.⁷ Two significant extracts from that statement:

“The apparent and short-sighted desire of certain forces in the world to prevent Russia’s resurgence as a great power pushes the world towards competition for the geopolitical redistribution of the Russian area, undermining the stability and leading to unpredictable competition for spheres of influence and a potential third world war. Russia’s foreign policy strategy should be based on the understanding that the entire territory of the historical Russian state is a zone of vital interests for the Russian people and other peoples of this historical state, but not for third countries.”

“Since many conflicts in the former Soviet Union territory are a result of the denial of the people’s self-determination when the USSR was dissolved, Russia has not only moral but also legal grounds for a principled policy in defending the interests

⁶ The World Russian People’s Council official website <https://vrns.ru/o-vrns.php>

⁷ The resolution of the First World Russian People’s Council <https://vrns.ru/documents/obrashchenie-i-vsemirnogo-russkogo-sobora-o-ponimanii-natsionalnykh-interesov-rossii-i-russkogo-naro/>

of both Russians and other peoples whose rights were violated and who are struggling to make their historical choice.”

Now, 30 years later, we are hearing almost exactly the same narrative not only from clergy or right-wing activists, but from Russian authorities.

The mastermind of the World Russian People’s Council was Patriarch Kirill. At that time, he held positions as the Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad and the Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations.

The Patriarch’s biography bears many similarities to Putin’s. Kirill, whose secular name is Vladimir Mikhailovich Gundyayev, was – like Putin – born in Leningrad (now St Petersburg), but six years earlier, in 1946. His father and grandfather were priests. Both were imprisoned for carrying out church activity that was banned in the Soviet period. [Putin](#) claims he was secretly baptised in 1952, and the priest who conducted the ceremony was likely Kirill’s father.⁸

It’s not the only crossover in their life stories: Putin worked as a KGB foreign intelligence officer and later headed the service; Kirill, according to [Swiss newspapers](#), worked for the KGB under the code name “Mikhailov” in Geneva in the 1970s. Both Putin and Kirill dreamed about restoring the greatness of the country – Putin calls the collapse of the USSR the “[greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century](#)”, while the Russian Patriarch considers the catastrophe to have started from the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.⁹

In the 1990s, as a high-ranking clergyman, Kirill was an active participant and initiator of discussions about Russia’s future and mission. At the [first meeting](#) of the World Russian People’s Council, he said that “Russian ecumene” (read: “Russian land”) was undermined because of “weakening of ideas of Orthodoxy and monarchism” in the 20th century and declared that the “only force that is able to fertilise and realise the Russian national idea, without destroying the universal mission of our people, is the Orthodox Church”.¹⁰

⁸ The Russian News Agency TASS <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/3799082>

⁹ Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, the official website Kremlin.ru, April 25, 2005, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

¹⁰ The World Russian People’s Council official website, the transcript of the first meeting <https://vrns.ru/documents/stenogramma-i-vsemirnogo-russkogo-narodnogo-sobora/>

In later convenings of the World Russian People’s Council (roughly annually), Kirill gave more of his view on Russian politics and ideology, focusing on the ideas of the “Russian civilization”, “traditional values”, and “confrontation with the West”.

Alar Kilp and Jerry G. Pankhurst [analysed speeches](#) by Russian patriarchs at the World Russian People’s Council between 1993 and 2022.¹¹ In their paper, titled *The Role of Moscow Patriarchs in the Promotion of the Imperial Culture of Sobornost*, they conclude that “Kirill’s messages have contributed to the restoration of imperial self-identification in Russian culture”.¹²

For Russia’s politicians, power players, and analysts alike, the 1990s was a period of reflection on both the nation’s past and its future development. It was at this time, the concept of *Russkiy mir* (“Russian world”) emerged, originally with blurred meaning and different interpretations. There was one distinct feeling behind this term, though: a resentment about the collapsed empire and desire to recreate a Russia that would be “politically and geographically bigger than the Russian Federation” ([Suslov, 2018](#)).¹³

The term “Russian world” is often attributed to a group of philosophers and political consultants who formed the Moscow Methodological Circle (or *metodologi*). In 1999, one of their leaders, Pyotr Shchedrovitsky, elaborated on this concept in the [article](#) *The Russian World and the Transnationally Russian*.¹⁴

The original meaning of the term was far from Imperialism and Exceptionalism – on the contrary, Shchedrovitsky defined the “Russian world” as a “network of large and

¹¹ Kilp, Alar, and Jerry G. Pankhurst. 2023. The Role of Moscow Patriarchs in the Promotion of the Imperial Culture of Sobornost’: Thematic Analysis of Religious Leaders’ Speeches at the World Russian People’s Council 1993–2022. *Religions* 14: 436. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040436>

¹² “[Sobornost], which has no English equivalent, is a derivative of the Russian sobor, which means both “cathedral” and “[ecclesiastical] council”. When applied to political life, sobornost’ is basically a demand to make decisions and act “all in common”. Biryukov, Nikolai. 1998. Available online: https://nibirukov.mgimo.ru/nb_texts/nb_texts_sobornost_in_russian_philosophical_and_political_tradition.htm (accessed on 11 December 2022).

¹³ Mikhail Suslov (2018) “Russian World” Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of “Spheres of Influence”, *Geopolitics*, 23:2, 330-353, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2017.1407921

¹⁴ Shchedrovitsky P.G. Russian world and transnational Russian / Russian magazine. 1999. http://old.russ.ru/politics/meta/20000302_schedr.html

small communities that think and speak in Russian”. He proposed using the resources of the diaspora to enter the world arena, in particular, the global market.

[Mikhail Suslov](#), a historian and Associate Professor at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies at the University of Copenhagen, who explored this concept, wrote: “The supporting idea was to make sense of the post-imperial debris and to contemplate an alternative Russia, whose identification and borders are different from both imperial and nation-state models.”¹⁵

“To understand the ‘Russian world’s’ historical sediments, morphology, and dynamics,” he wrote, “means to understand today’s prevalent ideology in Russia”.

By the time this concept reached the Kremlin in the 2000s, it had been instrumentalized for political purposes. It was, at first, shorthand for soft power, focusing not on Russian “presence” but Russian “influence” abroad. Later, in the 2010s, the term became what Suslov described as “an irredentist and isolationist project, aligned with the logic of representing Russia as an alternative, non-Western model of modernity”. It was a transformation connected with a conservative turn in Russian ideology coupled with the flaring conflict in Ukraine.

According to Suslov, Patriarch Kirill contributed a lot to this latest iteration of the concept: “He developed it around the year 2009 when he was enthroned and had an extended visit to Ukraine. He used the term ‘Russian world’ with external, secular audiences (e.g., at the Congresses of Compatriots), whereas talking to the internal Church circles he uses another term – ‘Holy Russia’ – but they mean essentially the same [thing].”

Archimandrite [Cyril Hovorun](#), Professor in Ecclesiology of International Relations and Ecumenism at the University College in Stockholm, wrote:

“Owing to the church, the ‘Russian world’ received a metaphysical, eschatological, and messianic spin. It was rendered as a unique treasury of the so-called traditional values and an anti-liberal and anti-globalist stronghold. At this stage of its evolution, the doctrine of the Russian world became even more exclusivist, particularist, and less tolerant to diversity. [...] The Kremlin accepted it as its

¹⁵ Mikhail Suslov (2018) “Russian World” Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of “Spheres of Influence”, *Geopolitics*, 23:2, 330-353, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1407921>

mainstream ideology and started speaking about the ‘Russian world’ using the vocabulary elaborated upon by the church”.¹⁶

Currently, the term “Russian world” is actively used by the Church and the Kremlin alike – the latter, most notably, put it in the new [Russian Foreign Policy Concept](#), which was approved in March 2023.¹⁷ That includes the description of Russia as a “unique country-civilization and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power that brings together the Russian people and other peoples belonging to the cultural and civilizational community of the Russian world”.

It’s essential to understand the political and ideological processes that emerged in Russia to fill the void left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. These seeds of Russian imperialism and nationalism were sown in the 1990s, and their growth was tightly connected with activity of the Russian Orthodox Church.

“In fact, authorities couldn’t find a proper national idea, and The Russian Orthodox Church was [...] a provider of ‘social glue’ that enhanced cohesion in the fragmented post-Soviet society. After long years of exile from this square during the Soviet period, the church seized an opportunity to retake it and place itself to its centre”, [wrote](#) Professor Hovorun.¹⁸

In this context, it becomes clear that any idea that the clergy has been forced into alignment with the Kremlin – or of Kirill as “[Putin’s altar boy](#)” – is oversimplified and even incorrect.¹⁹ Kirill was not dissembling when [he said](#) that he and Putin have

¹⁶ Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun, "Russian Church and Ukrainian War". The Expository Times 2022, Vol. 134(1) 1–10 © The Author(s) 2022 <https://doi.org/10.1177/00145246221119120>

¹⁷ Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept, the official website Kremlin.ru, April 25, 2005, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/

¹⁸ Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun, "Russian Church and Ukrainian War". The Expository Times 2022, Vol. 134(1) 1–10 © The Author(s) 2022 <https://doi.org/10.1177/00145246221119120>

¹⁹ Quote of Pope Francis "Patriarch can’t lower himself to become Putin’s altar boy", Corriere della Sera, May 3, 2022 https://www.corriere.it/cronache/22_maggio_03/pope-francis-putin-e713a1de-cad0-11ec-84d1-341c28840c78.shtml

a “unanimity on very important issues of our time” or [claimed](#) that “the president has never given [...] any orders to the Patriarch”.^{20, 21}

During Putin’s presidency, The Church became more powerful and influential, systematically invading secular life in Russia, in particular, lobbying for initiatives against LGBTQ+ people. The conservative agenda, with its focus on traditional values and Russian exceptionalism, and the ideas of a “Russian world” and “civilisational confrontation”, became a sort of national ideology, to a large extent, due to efforts made by the Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill.

Katherine Kelaidis, a researcher at the Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies in Cambridge and the author of the book *Holy Russia? Holy war?* [wrote in 2018](#): “There can be little doubt that the Russian Church is now (once again) an active and potentially aggressive arm of the Russian state. The Russian state will act to protect its interests and the Church will act for the interests of the state. In fact, as can be seen in Ukraine, these interests are often deeply intertwined.

“This, in itself, would not be a problem, or of any particular interest for those outside the Orthodox Church, if not for global non-Orthodox alliances into which the Russian patriarch has led his church. These alliances, combined with acts of Russian state aggression, can only be seen as concrete efforts to undermine liberal democracy around the world”.²²

²⁰ Word of Patriarch Kirill after the Liturgy at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on November 20, 2022, Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5978657.html>

²¹ Word of Patriarch Kirill after the Liturgy at the Nikolo-Ugreshsky Monastery on April 18, 2023, Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6020342.html>

²² Katherine Kelaidis, "The potentially explosive Russian Church intrigue revealed by Mueller investigation". Religious Dispatches, August 29, 2018 <https://religiondispatches.org/the-potentially-explosive-russian-church-intrigue-revealed-by-mueller-investigation/>

Rhetorical theme: Downplaying peace

The temple complex of St. Andrew is located in Lyublino, a quiet residential area southeast of Moscow. The same suburb was the location of a September 2015 anti-Putin rally led by [Alexey Navalny](#), the now-imprisoned Russian opposition leader.²³ A quiet suburb is a strange place for a protest, but authorities had prohibited demonstrations in the city centre since the Bolotnaya Square protest of 2012, which caused Putin much embarrassment.

In 2023, Lyublino was the site of another protest: while delivering a benediction distributed weekly to dioceses for use during services Yoann Koval, a priest at St. Andrew's, replaced the word "victory" with "peace" in the [Prayer For Holy Rus'](#).²⁴

Patriarch Kirill originally offered the prayer a few days after the Kremlin [announced](#) the country's military mobilisation in September 2022.²⁵

The text includes the lines:

"Arise, o God, to help Your people and give us victory by Your strength [...] For thou art intercession, and victory, and salvation to those who trust in You [...]"

In retaliation for using the word "peace" instead of "victory", Koval was prohibited from conducting services and later [defrocked](#).²⁶ Officially, he was punished because hadn't obeyed the order of the Church authorities. But the incident reflects a

²³ "Russian court sentences Alexei Navalny to further 19 years in prison". The Guardian, August 4, 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/04/russian-court-extends-alexei-navalny-sentence-in-penal-colony>

²⁴ "Prayer for Holy Rus'". Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, September 25, 2022 <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5962654.html>

²⁵ Decree on the announcement of partial mobilisation in the Russian Federation, the official website Kremlin.ru, September 21, 2022 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69391>

²⁶ Decree No. U-02/121 of August 15, 2023 // to Priest John Koval, Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Eparchy Official Website <http://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-02121-ot-15-avgusta-2023.html>

broader trend: the word “peace”, as well as pacifism in general, has become [undesirable](#) in modern Russia, even among the Orthodox clergy.²⁷

In the early weeks after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill was calling for peace himself. On February 24, 2022, the head of the Moscow Patriarchate issued a [statement](#) urging “the entire fullness of the Russian Orthodox Church to offer a special, fervent prayer for the speedy restoration of peace”.²⁸

Throughout the end of February and the beginning of March 2022, Kirill reiterated his call for peace (without any additional conditions) and made [statements](#) about reducing “the degree of confrontation” between Russians and Ukrainians.²⁹

But while the idea of peace was presented in Kirill’s statements, it would be incorrect to claim that praying for peace was his key message. “It is nice to think that the head of the Russian Orthodox Church is calling for peace, but he is in fact doing nothing beyond the bare minimum and his complicity is encouraging the aggressors in this catastrophe,” Orthodoxy expert Kelaidis [wrote](#) at the time.³⁰

Over time, we can observe how far Kirill has moved from this “bare minimum” and how the idea of peace has gradually been transformed, distorted, and abused by the officials of the Russian Church.

It’s important to notice that since the beginning of the full-scale war, Kirill [aligned](#) his brief calls for peace with other things to pray for, such as “strengthening of the

²⁷ “Orthodox ecclesiastical court to hear case of defrocked pacifist priest. Complaint argues pacifism is ‘heresy’”, Meduza, June 12, 2023 <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/06/12/orthodox-ecclesiastical-court-to-hear-case-of-defrocked-pacifist-priest-complaint-argues-pacifism-is-heresy>

²⁸ Patriarch Kirill’s address to the hierarchs, clergy, monastics, and faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, February 24, 2022 <http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/5903803.html>

²⁹ The transcript of Patriarchal Sermon on March 9, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5907484.html>

³⁰ Katherine Kelaidis, “No, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow is not calling for peace — in fact, he’s Putin’s accomplice”. Religious Dispatches, February 25, 2022 <https://religiondispatches.org/no-patriarch-kirill-of-moscow-is-not-calling-for-peace-in-fact-hes-putins-accomplice/>

fatherland”, “unity of Holy Rus”, “maintaining unity of the Church”, and “unanimity” between Russians and Ukrainians.³¹

He emphasised “the common centuries-old history between Russian and Ukrainian peoples, dating back to the Baptism of Rus” and that “God-given affinity”.

He portrayed the war in Ukraine as the internecine conflict, stated that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people”, the people of “Holy Rus”, who were pushed to fight by external “[dark evil forces](#)”.^{32, 33}

These are similar to Putin’s statements, who expressed that he “[will never give up on the belief that Russians and Ukrainians are one people](#)”, and that Russia is striving to protect itself from “[those who have taken Ukraine hostage and are attempting to use it against our country](#)”.^{34, 35}

Russian authorities have been disputing the concept of Ukrainian statehood for over 15 years. According to *Kommersant* newspaper, in 2008, at the NATO summit in Bucharest, Putin [said](#), “Ukraine is not even a state! One part of its territory is in Eastern Europe, but another part, a significant one, was a gift from us!”³⁶

In his speech after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin [declared](#) that “...we [Russians and Ukrainians] are not simply close neighbours but, as I have said many times already, we are one people. [Kyiv] is the mother of Russian cities.”³⁷

³¹ The transcript of Patriarchal Message on April 25, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5920989.html>

³² The "conflict that takes place within a group, society, or organisation; internal, civil, domestic". OED Online. March 2023. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/Entry/98082?redirectedFrom=internecine> (accessed June 16, 2023).

³³ The transcript of Patriarchal Message on February 27, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5904390.html>

³⁴ The transcript of the Security Council meeting on March 3, 2022. The official website Kremlin.ru <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67903>

³⁵ Address by the President of the Russian Federation on February 24, 2022. The official website Kremlin.ru <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>

³⁶ "NATO Bloc Divided into Blocking Packages". "Kommersant", April 8, 2008 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/877224>

³⁷ Address by the President of the Russian Federation on March 18, 2014. The official website Kremlin.ru <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

In a blog for [LSE Ideas](#), Dr Björn Alexander Düben, Assistant Professor at the School of International and Public Affairs at Jilin University, wrote: “As much as these assumptions may resonate with ordinary Russians, as well as some foreign leaders, a glance into Ukrainian history reveals that they are based on a dangerously distorted reading of the past.”³⁸

In fact, the modern Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian nations have been shaped simultaneously and separately for centuries. “In the mid-thirteenth century their state [Kyivan Rus’], weakened by internal strife, fell victim to Mongol invaders from the East. The Kyivan realm was divided, and in the long run its people developed literary languages and nations of their own,” wrote Serhii Plokhii, a Professor of Ukrainian History and director of Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University.³⁹ In particular, the south-western territories of Kyivan Rus’, including Kyiv, were conquered by Poland and Lithuania in the early 14th century and stayed under their control for around 400 years, leaving a deep cultural imprint.

Choosing from particular centuries-old things and distorting the whole picture, Russian authorities use historical arguments to justify and rationalise aggression against Ukraine.

When announcing his “special military operation” in February 2022, Putin [stated](#) that “having justice and truth on our side is what makes us truly strong”.⁴⁰ And in September 2022, when signing “accession treaties” formalising Russia’s illegal annexation of four occupied regions in Ukraine (Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk and Donetsk), he [described](#) it as a “historic day, a day of truth and justice”.⁴¹

³⁸ Björn Alexander Düben, “There is no Ukraine”: Fact-Checking the Kremlin’s Version of Ukrainian History, July 1, 2020 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2020/07/01/there-is-no-ukraine-fact-checking-the-kremlins-version-of-ukrainian-history/>

³⁹ Serhii Plokhii, “The Origins of the Slavic Nations. Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus”. October 2006, Cambridge University Press. p. 354

⁴⁰ Address by the President of the Russian Federation on February 24, 2022. The official website Kremlin.ru <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>

⁴¹ Transcription of Putin’s speech in Together Forever concert rally. The official website Kremlin.ru <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69470>

Patriarch Kirill also regularly uses the words “truth”, “justice” and “fairness” in the context of the war and [calls for](#) a “lasting” peace “based on justice”.⁴² Moreover, he used a quote from an iconic Russian crime film, *Brother 2*, about the dark and chaotic 1990s. The main character Danila Bagrov, revered by many Russians despite the fact that he restores justice with guns, said: “Strength is in the truth”. This quote has been used by many in Russia – from politicians to the Ministry of Defence, and even in a sermon by the Patriarch:

“The character of the movie was right, the strength is in the truth, but [...] everyone has their own truth,” said Kirill. “And what does God teach us? That there cannot be two truths. There is only one truth, [...] the truth of God. [...] Today we have indeed entered a phase of very complex international relations, but truth is above all, and one cannot compromise with falsehood. [...] That is precisely why now is the time when everyone needs to strengthen their faith, especially those of us who waver, intellectuals who have one foot in the Church and another outside of it. [...] It is truly important to embrace the faith of our fathers and forefathers as a great force that has preserved and saved our people.”⁴³

For both Putin and Kirill, “truth” and “justice” mean reclaiming land and returning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to Russian political control, aims spoken of using the terms “historical Rus”, “Holy Rus” and “Russian world”. According to their reasoning, restoration of peace is possible only under these conditions. Thus, the Patriarch’s calls for peace are not rooted in the biblical sixth commandment “Thou shalt not kill”, but in political reasoning.

Over half a year after the invasion, he stated as much directly. Following the Kremlin’s decision to declare a military mobilisation in Russia and send more troops to fight with Ukraine in September 2022, Kirill made clear that he was not preaching pacifism and, several weeks later, elaborated on the concept of “justice-based peace” during [a sermon](#) at The Cathedral of the Dormition in the Kremlin:⁴⁴

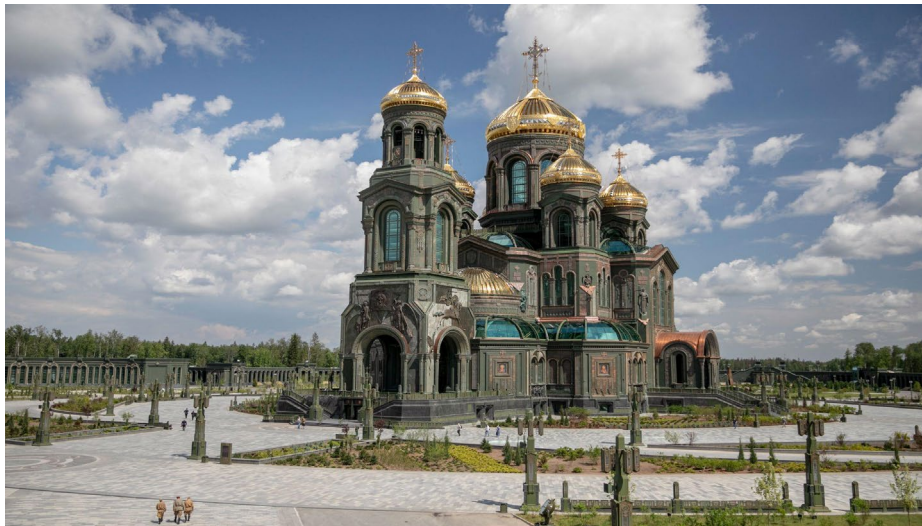
⁴² Transcription of Patriarch Kirill’s talk with Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, March 16, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/5909243.html>

⁴³ Word of Patriarch Kirill at the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Nizhny Novgorod on October 22, 2022, Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5970411.html>

⁴⁴ Patriarchal Sermon in the Dormition Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin on October 18, 2022, Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5968673.html>

“We are so far from what is referred to as ‘pacifism’ in Western language. Pacifism often entails striving for peace under any circumstances and frequently without any conditions. We always say, and this is rooted in our spiritual tradition, there can be no peace without justice. [...] Peace must be strong, and for it to be so, it is necessary that the power of God eradicate all these devilish thoughts from the minds of those who do not strive for the spiritual unity of Holy Rus’.”

In other words, rather frighteningly, the Russian Patriarch suggests that the main condition for peace is a change in the mindset of Ukrainians. At the same time, Kirill [claimed](#) that Russians are peace-loving people who have never initiated aggression, and that the Russian army is “[Christ-loving](#)”.^{45, 46}



*The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, Kubinka, Moscow Oblast.
Photo: Vlad Dokshin/Novaya Gazeta*

During a sermon at The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces (where the diameter of the main dome is 19.45m in reference to the end of WWII, Nazi tanks were melted to make the floor, and mosaics commemorate the country’s role in Syria’s civil war, the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014), Kirill urged the Armed Forces to “recognise the historical importance of the

⁴⁵ The word of Patriarch Kirill in the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces on April 3, 2022, Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5914188.html>

⁴⁶ The word of Patriarch Kirill in the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces on May 8, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5924172.html>

moment”, stressing that Russians are “very peace-loving and long-suffering people” who have no “aspirations for war”.

The sermon was delivered on 3 April 2022, the same day the world was shocked to learn of the [massacre](#) in Bucha.⁴⁷ The small town near Kyiv had been under Russian occupation for about a month. When it was retaken, its streets were littered with corpses of civilians.

⁴⁷ "EU accuses Russian troops of committing atrocities in Ukrainian town Bucha", Reuters, April 3, 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-accuses-russian-troops-committing-atrocities-ukrainian-town-bucha-2022-04-03/>

Rhetorical theme: A metaphysical struggle

Patriarch Kirill has presented three actors in his pro-war narratives: the “sinful” and “devilish” West, the “holy” and “spiritual” Russia, and Ukraine – a victim in the struggle between the two and a weapon used by the West against the “Russian world”. He [portrays](#) the war as a “civilizational conflict”, a part of the “cosmic struggle of good against evil”, upon which the salvation of humanity depends.⁴⁸

He presented this concept in detail during a sermon on March 6, 2022, on Orthodox Forgiveness Sunday, before Great Lent. This day is traditionally dedicated to reflecting upon one’s sins and preparing for a long period of fasting. “We have entered into a struggle that holds not a physical, but a metaphysical significance,” [Kirill told](#) parishioners in The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow.⁴⁹

Those “who claim world power”, he said (referring to the West), impose their “so-called values” on other countries and compel them to undergo a “loyalty test” by holding gay pride parades to join that “happy” world of “excessive consumption and illusory freedom”.

The Russian Patriarch argued that Western countries promote sin through their “so-called marches of dignity” and suppress those who “are resisting this demand”. Kirill interpreted this as the imposition of sin, which goes against God’s law, and therefore the imposition of “the denial of God and His truth”.

The LGBTQ+ topic is an important element in the process of demonising the West. It is a narrative used by both religious and secular authorities. For instance, during a meeting with mothers of soldiers to explain the reasons for their sons’ deaths, Putin spoke about defending “our unique civilization” and a “different cultural code” of Western countries. “In many places there, people don’t even know what the word ‘mother’ means,” he [said](#). “It’s just ‘parent number one’ and ‘parent number two’. They measure genders by dozens, some kind of ‘transformators’ [referring

⁴⁸ Word of Patriarch Kirill in the Donskoy Monastery on September 1, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5955921.html>

⁴⁹ Patriarchal Sermon in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on March 6, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html>

transgender people]. I don't even understand what they are talking about." One of mothers nodded, agreeing that "there is a war for our *duhovnost'* [spirituality]".⁵⁰

Even without meaningful reason, Putin inserts into his speeches some metaphorical hints connected with LGBTQ+. In the ceremony formalising Russia's illegal annexation of four occupied regions in Ukraine, in September 2022, he [attempted](#) to wisecrack: "When initiating a sanction *blitzkrieg* against Russia, [the West] believed they would once again be able to reshape the entire world according to their command. However, as it turned out, this rosy prospect (or rainbow prospect) excites far from everyone — only hardcore political masochists and fans of other non-traditional forms of international relations."⁵¹

The main message about the West from Russian secular and religious authorities is "they are different and hostile". Patriarch Kirill has described the West with metaphors, such as "dark evil forces", "external hostile political forces", "malicious forces", and even "civilization of death". On the contrary, he [depicts](#) Russia as a "holy", "blessed", "spiritual", and an "island of freedom".

"We are one among a minority who call evil as evil and good as good and don't allow powerful propaganda forces to mix these terms [...]"⁵²

The head of the Moscow Patriarchate has been preaching Russian Exceptionalism, talking about the "originality" and "soleness" of Russian people. He [claims](#) that "many [countries] are turning against our fatherland" exactly because Russians are different and this fact provokes "feelings of jealousy, envy and resentment".⁵³ He warns of a [desire](#) to eliminate such an attractive alternative to civilizational

⁵⁰ Transcription of Putin's meeting with the mothers of the participants of "special military operation" on November 25, 2022. Official website of the president Kremlin.ru <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69935>

⁵¹ Official website of the president Kremlin.ru, September 30, 2022 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>

⁵² Word of Patriarch Kirill at the Donskoy Monastery, September 1, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5955921.html>

⁵³ Patriarchal sermon at the Church of St. Cyril and Methodius Equal-to-the-Apostles in Kaliningrad, July 3, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5941811.html>

development”.⁵⁴ “As long as our homeland remains this island of freedom, there will be a glimmer of hope for the rest of the world to have the possibility to change the course of history and prevent a global apocalyptic end”, he [said](#) in his speech at the World Russian People’s Council in October 2022.⁵⁵

In another sermon delivered that month, he [said](#):

“Today, our fatherland is undergoing trials connected with the malevolent looks, evil intentions, and ill will turned towards Russia. Some believe that the time has come to do away with Russia. Why? Because Russia represents an alternative view of the world, of God, of humanity. It does not fit within the confines of the programmed system that excludes God from people’s lives, and thus, for many, Russia is like a speck in the eye. What is happening today is not just another military campaign. It gives the impression that many desire to erase Orthodox Russia from the face of the Earth. But let it not be so! Therefore, today, our special prayer is for our authorities, for our armed forces, for our President, for all those who truly determine the outcome of the battle into which we have entered, not by our own will.”⁵⁶

“Holy Russia” (“Holy Rus’”) is an important term in his narratives. It elevates the country to the highest “God-ordained” position. Prof of Russian History and Politics Suslov has [written](#) that this phrase originally encapsulated “the transcendental ideal to follow, and a metaphor, associated with relics, deposited in Russian monasteries and churches”.⁵⁷

However, Kirill understands “holiness” as an eternal quality of Russia and has been promoting this concept since his assumption of office in 2009. According to him, “Holy Russia” (which includes Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus) is held together by common values and cultural foundations, “implanted in the ‘Kyivan font’ by St.

⁵⁴ Patriarchal word at St. George’s Church on May 6, 2023. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6024963.html>

⁵⁵ Report of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the plenary session of the XXIV World Russian People’s Council <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5971182.html>

⁵⁶ Patriarchal Sermon at the Seraphim-Diveyevo monastery on October 23, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5970578.html>

⁵⁷ Mikhail Suslov. “The Utopia of ‘Holy Russia’ in Today’s Geopolitical Imagination of the Russian Orthodox Church: a Case Study of Patriarch Kirill”. PLURAL. History. Culture. Society. Journal of History and Geography Department, „Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University 1-2:81-97. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=514233>

Volodymyr”, Suslov wrote, referring to the baptism at the Dnipro River. He continues:

“Ukrainian lands are sacred in three interconnected ways; they are the spring, the beginning of ‘Holy Russia’, Russian Orthodoxy, statehood, and religious enlightenment; they represent the spiritual centre of ‘Holy Russia’ – although located on its geographical periphery; and last but not least, Ukraine is the place, where asceticism and selfless devotion could be practised.”

Ukraine is [represented](#) in the Church’s narratives as a victim of “mental transforming” and as a weapon of those who are trying to “contain Russia”.⁵⁸ For instance, in [the letter](#) to The World Council of Churches Patriarch Kirill wrote:

“They [western countries] spared no effort or resources, supplying Ukraine with weapons and military instructors. But the most alarming aspect is not weaponry; it is the attempt at ‘re-education’, the mental transformation of Ukrainians and ethnic Russians living there into enemies of Russia.”

According to Kirill’s [statements](#), if Ukrainians reconcile with “gender transitioning” and “western moral relativism”, they will “lose their identity and cease to be a holy land”, and Russia’s “mission” is to prevent this scenario.⁵⁹ In an opening statement delivered to the First Annual Anti-Fascism Congress in August 2022, he said:⁶⁰

“By defending historical truth and protecting our struggling brethren by blood and spirit, our people fulfil a difficult and highly responsible mission: they restore to the world the values from which it tries to abstain in its madness. These immutable values are loyalty to God and traditional moral principles, commitment to the ideals of brotherhood and love, mercy, and noble-mindedness of the soul.”

⁵⁸ Message from Patriarch Kirill Acting General Secretary of the World Council of Churches on March 11, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate

<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5907942.html>

⁵⁹ Christmas interview of Patriarch Kirill to the TV channel "Russia 1" on January 7, 2023. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5992951.html>

⁶⁰ Greetings from Patriarch Kirill to the Participants of the Anti-Fascist Congress on August 20, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5951188.html>

Professor of Criminology at University of Tartu, Jüri Saar [summarised](#): “In Ukraine, we see the rhetoric and practice of religious war in its classic form, where Russia is carrying out a globally important mission of reuniting the ancestral Russian lands, which in the long run will allegedly lead the nations of the entire world to the right development tracks. The struggle has obvious eschatological aspects, as only victory or death is possible.”⁶¹

This is why Kirill has been talking about a “responsible” and “faithful” mission, no more or less than the “salvation of humanity”.

⁶¹ Jüri Saar. "The Russian holy war and military statehood", University of Tartu and the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, Tallinn, printed and available online on March 20, 2023 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2023.1.01>

Rhetorical theme: Exhortation to sacrifice

Since the beginning of the full-scale incursion into Ukraine, Kirill has consistently spoken about the importance of sacrificing life for the fatherland. This narrative has strengthened over the course of the war. In April 2022, after a service in The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces and prayers for Russian soldiers, the Patriarch delivered a [sermon](#) calling on them to defend the fatherland “the way that only Russians can defend their country”.⁶²

In his incitements to Russian soldiers to sacrifice themselves, Kirill frequently refers to the Gospel of John 15:13 (Russian Synodal Translation):

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

He skips the context of the previous verse (15:12), which says:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Kirill repeats John 15:13 on a variety of occasions and for various audiences. For instance, right before Victory Day in 2022 (9th of May, marking the victory over Nazi Germany in 1945), he [directed](#) this message to Russian soldiers:

“Remember, brothers, that the fate of freedom, independence, and the sovereignty of our fatherland, depends on how you fulfil your military duty, on your ability to defend the fatherland [...] and to lay down your own soul for your friends”.⁶³

Kirill even used this phrase while speaking to children at an Orthodox Christmas [celebration](#):

“God says that there is no greater love than if someone lays down their soul for their friends. That is the highest manifestation of love is self-sacrifice. [...] [I wish for you]

⁶² The word of Patriarch Kirill at the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces on April 3, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5914188.html>

⁶³ Word of Patriarch Kirill at the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces on May 8, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5924172.html>

to love the motherland so as to serve it, and at the most dangerous moments [...], to stand for its defence.”⁶⁴

Notably, this same religious vocabulary has appeared in Putin’s speeches, which regularly cite John 15:13. In March 2022, during a speech at a concert to mark the anniversary of Crimea’s “reunification” with Russia, he [said](#):

“There is no greater love than if someone were to lay down their soul for their friends. [...] This is a universal value for all peoples and all denominations in Russia, and especially for our people – first and foremost for our people. And the best confirmation of this is how our guys fight, how they act during this military operation: shoulder to shoulder, helping, supporting each other, and if necessary, protecting each other like brothers.”⁶⁵

This self-sacrificial narrative took on a new dimension in September 2022, when the Kremlin announced a mobilisation drive to call up 300,000 citizens to fight in Ukraine.⁶⁶ Delivering his [first sermon](#) since the mobilisation order, Patriarch Kirill quoted John 3:16:

“‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son’. Gave to what? To death! [...] If God, in His Son, gives His human life for the sake of other people, for the sake of the human race, then sacrifice is the highest manifestation of human love for one’s neighbours.”

He then turned his attention to the war in Ukraine and said that Russian soldiers who die there will be cleansed of all their sins:

“If somebody, driven by a sense of duty and the necessity to fulfil an oath, remains faithful to their calling and dies in the performance of this duty, then they undoubtedly are committing an act equivalent to sacrifice. They will have sacrificed

⁶⁴ Word of Patriarch Kirill on Christmas event at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on January 7, 2023. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5993811.html>

⁶⁵ Transcription of Putin’s speech at the concert on March 18, 2022. Official website of the president Kremlin.ru <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68016>

⁶⁶ The address on September 21, 2022. Official website of the president Kremlin.ru <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390>

themselves for others. And therefore, we believe that this sacrifice washes away all the sins that a person has committed.”⁶⁷

This marked a shift in focus to the idea of sacrifice in his sermons. He would regularly tell congregants that sacrifice is “the greatest demonstration of love” and “the greatest value for people”.

In another [sermon](#), delivered a week after the mobilisation, the Patriarch said:

“For sure, the human experience of sacrifice and love cannot reach the same redemptive apex as was revealed on Golgotha. However, the Sacrifice of Christ the Saviour signifies a benchmark, a certain direction of movement”.⁶⁸

In the same sermon, he called on Russians for a “spiritual mobilisation”:

“...defending our entire historical fatherland — both Russia and Ukraine — our warriors sacrifice their health and lives, it’s important that our entire people be capable of making sacrifices in the name of Christ for the sake of all those who are in need, those who silently, but with their very being, ask for help!”

“Kirill replaced the Christian concept of martyrdom with the idea of religious terrorism,” Rev. Cyril Hovorun, an Orthodox priest and professor at University College Stockholm, [told the Associated Press](#). “Martyrs sacrifice their own lives, but religiously motivated terrorists sacrifice their lives and the lives of others.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷Patriarchal sermon at the Alexander Nevsky Skete on September 25, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5962628.html>

⁶⁸ Patriarchal Sermon at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on September 27, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5963304.html>

⁶⁹ "Moscow patriarch: Russian war dead have their sins forgiven", the Associated Press, September 27, 2022 <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-religion-moscow-0d2382ff296b7e253cd30c6bbadeed1d>

Rhetorical theme: Historic victory

The word “victory” in the context of the war first appeared in Kirill’s sermons on September 21, 2022, the day the mobilisation was announced. He [stated](#) that:

“[...] faith makes a person very strong, as it shifts his consciousness away from everyday life, from material concerns to caring for the soul, for eternity. And when this dimension strongly exists in a person, connected to eternity, then he becomes invincible, because he ceases to be afraid of death.”⁷⁰

During the sermon, the Patriarch briefly reiterated his main thesis about historical Rus’, which is going through serious tests:

“We know what danger hangs over the Ukrainian people, that they are being attempted to be reformatted into a state hostile to Rus’, antagonistic towards Russia”.

That echoed Putin’s [statement](#) that day:

“They [the western countries] made total Russophobia their weapon, deliberately nurturing hatred towards Russia for decades, primarily in Ukraine, which they were preparing to become an anti-Russian foothold.”⁷¹

While Putin, in the final part of his speech, threatened to use the nuclear weapon for Russia’s protection, Kirill called on his church to pray for a:

“[...] genuine victory that would come without serious battles and bloodshed, one that would bring to us back spiritual unity, peace, prosperity, and mutual love”.

It was in this same September 2022 period that the Patriarch [offered](#) his Prayer for Holy Rus’, containing a call for victory. (“Arise, o God, to help Your people and give

⁷⁰ Word of Patriarch Kirill at the Zachatievsky Monastery in Moscow on September 21, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5961645.html>

⁷¹ The address of the Russian President on September 21, 2022. Official website of the president Kremlin.ru <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390>

us victory by Your strength.”)⁷² This is the benediction, mentioned earlier, in which a priest replaced the word victory with peace.

The word “victory” became prevalent in Kirill’s public speeches after mobilisation. He called on people to pray for “victory for our warriors where military actions are taking place” in [October 2022](#) and “for victory over all adversaries, both external and internal” during the sermon in [November 2022](#).^{73,74}

Similarly, the word “victory” has appeared in Putin’s speeches since September 2022. For instance, during a concert after the annexation of four Ukrainian regions, he [said](#): “We have truth on our side, and in truth, there is strength, which means victory! Victory will be ours!”⁷⁵ Later, during the meeting with workers of the military Obukhov Plant, he [repeated](#) this phrase “Victory will be ours!” which reiterates the address to the Soviet people on June 22, 1941, when Nazi Germany invaded the USSR.⁷⁶

Invoking World War II in the context of the war in Ukraine is one of the key elements of Russia’s military propaganda. The Kremlin and state media organisations are trying to portray the current war as a continuation of the fight against fascism and develop the myth about neo-Nazism in Ukraine.

Speaking about Russia’s victory, Patriarch Kirill also refers to the historical events, such as World War II or the Patriotic War of 1812. However, he more often appeals to more distant historical events, such as the Battle of Kulikovo between Russian forces and the Golden Horde in 1380, which is regarded as the beginning of the end of the Mongol occupation and the birth of modern Russia. He uses this history to

⁷² Prayer for Holy Rus’ on September 25, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5962654.html>

⁷³ Patriarchal Sermon at the Diveevo Monastery on October 23, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5970578.html>

⁷⁴ Word of Patriarch Kirill at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on November 20, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5978657.html>

⁷⁵ Putin’s speech at the concert “People’s Choice. Together forever” on September 30, 2022. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69470>

⁷⁶ Visit to the Obukhov plant on January 18, 2023. Official website of the Russian president Kremlin.ru <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70368>

reiterate Russia's strength, the special role of the Orthodoxy, and to draw parallels with the current war.

The focus of his sermons has completely shifted from the situation in Ukraine to the idea of unity unto victory against forces aiming to destroy Russia. He speaks of the need for support for Russian authorities and military forces for the victory, with constant mentions of Putin.

Between September 2022 and April 2023, he [called](#) on the church to pray for the president at least nine times. During his sermon on 12 September 2022 he said:

“Our special prayer is for the head of our state, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, who bears a special responsibility, as well as for all military leaders and those in power.”⁷⁷

Later, in March 2023, he [declared](#):

“We need to pray very earnestly for our fatherland, for our President, for our people, for those who are defending the spiritual values of Holy Rus' with weapons in their hands.”⁷⁸

And a notable [sermon](#) Kirill delivered on 19 January 2023, includes the declaration:

“We believe that God will not abandon the Russian land, will not abandon our authorities, our Orthodox President, and our military”.⁷⁹

During this speech, he also said that “any desire to destroy Russia would mean the end of the world”, echoing Putin's [statement](#) in 2018 related to the nuclear threat: “Why do we need a world if Russia is not there?”.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Word of Patriarch Kirill at the Danilov Monastery on September 12, 2022. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5958411.html>

⁷⁸ Patriarchal Sermon at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on March 2, 2023. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6007765.html>

⁷⁹ Sermon by Patriarch Kirill at the Epiphany Cathedral in Moscow on January 19, 2023. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5997552.html>

⁸⁰ “Why do we need such a world if there is no Russia there?” Putin - about a global catastrophe after a nuclear. Meduza, March 7, 2018 <https://meduza.io/news/2018/03/07/zachem-nam-takoy-mir-esli-tam-ne-budet-rossii-putin-o-globalnoy-katastrofe-posle-yadernogo-udara>

The Russian patriarch not only calls for prayers for victory but also urges people to take action. In January 2023, he [said](#) the Russian Orthodox Church should do more to help the military:

“If we say that the Church is with our people, then every congregation should help those who are in the line of fire. We need to mobilise our parishioners to collect things and food. Look for opportunities, collect money, send parcels, if possible, go yourself, support service members.”⁸¹

The Church itself has not limited its involvement to sermons: military clergy visit battlefields to bless soldiers and military equipment, and there are even [cases](#) where priests participate in battles.⁸²

The role of the Church is increasingly connected with mobilising society, hence an emphasis on rhetoric that recalls historic battles and victories.

On May 6, 2023, three days before Victory Day in Russia, Patriarch Kirill delivered a sermon in memory of St. George the Victorious. He emphasised that the victory against Nazi Germany happened thanks to prayers to this saint, which he called “the greatest miracle of the Holy Great Martyr and Victorious George”.⁸³

He linked those events to the current situation, highlighting that “once again the enemy takes up arms against Holy Rus”. Kirill stated civilians and the Armed Forces should not “exclude prayer and worship from their inner life. Victory will be with us if we do so.” He then [blessed](#) the “All-Russian Prayer for Victory”, a five-month procession of the ark with the relics of the Great Martyr George the Victorious across the country.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Patriarch Kirill’s address on January 20, 2023. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5997886.html>

⁸² “If the priest took up arms, it says nothing”, Russian media outlet “Liudi Baikala” (People of Baikal), September 4, 2023. <https://baikal-journal.ru/2023/09/04/esli-svyashhennik-vzval-v-ruki-oruzhie-eto-ni-o-chyom-ne-govorit/>

⁸³ Patriarchal word on the day of memory of the Great Martyr. George the Victorious on May 6, 2023. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6024963.html>

⁸⁴ Patriarchal Greetings to the Participants in Bringing the Ark with the Relics of the Great Martyr George the Victorious on May 6, 2023. Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6024098.html>

Does it matter?

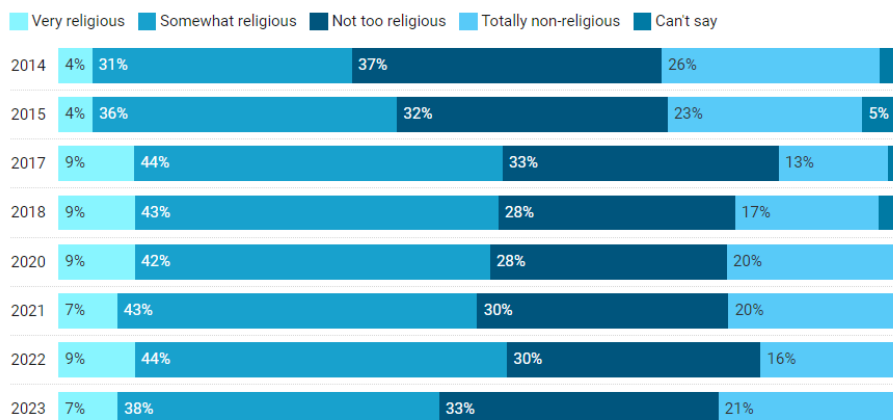
It's difficult to quantify the real impact and effectiveness of the Orthodox Church in Russia's military propaganda, or to identify what Russian citizens really think about the war and the Kremlin's politics. The trustworthiness of polls conducted in an authoritarian regime may be questionable.

Nevertheless, commenting on this point, [Denis Volkov](#), who leads the independent research institution Levada Center, believes these concerns are “largely ungrounded” and “analysis of the situation and forecasts based on regular sociological research have shown their effectiveness”.⁸⁵

According to a [survey](#) conducted by his organisation, 72% of Russians consider themselves Orthodox, and 83% are baptised.⁸⁶ Notably, the number of people who identify themselves as “very religious” or “somewhat religious” has grown from 35% in 2014 to 45% in 2023, while those who consider themselves as “not too religious” or “totally non-religious” has declined from 63% to 54% over the past nine years.

How religious are you?

As % of respondents



Levada Center Survey of “Religious beliefs”, published in June 2023, shows more than 50% of respondents describe themselves as very or somewhat religious in 2022 vs 45% in 2023.

⁸⁵ Denis Volkov, "Are meaningful public opinion polls possible in today's Russia?". April 24, 2023.

Levada Center official website <https://www.levada.ru/en/2023/04/24/are-meaningful-public-opinion-polls-possible-in-today-s-russia/>

⁸⁶ The survey "Religious beliefs", the Levada Center, conducted April 20-26, 2023

<https://www.levada.ru/en/2023/06/02/religious-beliefs/>

Another [survey](#) from the Levada Center found that the number of people who said the Church and religious organisations are trustworthy has increased from 38% in 2000 to 51% in 2022.⁸⁷

How trustworthy do you find...?

As % of respondents, August 2022, 1612 respondents

Very trustworthy not so trustworthy not trustworthy at all can't say



Levada Center Survey “Trust in public institutions”, published in August 2022, finds 51% of respondents think the Church is “trustworthy”

It is worth noting that trust in both institutions was recorded at its [highest point](#) – 54% – in 2014, after the Russian annexation of Crimea.

In the following years, the level of trust in the Church declined, dropping to 40% in 2021, and was restored in 2022, after the beginning of the full-scale war against Ukraine. The level of trust in the president and the parliament [jumped](#) during those periods as well.

“The August [2022] measurement recorded a significant increase in confidence in all state and public institutions compared to last year. Similar sharp sentiment changes were observed in 2014. The president, the army, the state security agencies, the government and the church enjoy the greatest trust today,” according to the conclusion of the Levada Center [survey](#).⁸⁸

It would appear that the same political factors impact the results of polls about Russian state institutions and the Orthodox Church. Actually, the Moscow Patriarchate and Kremlin have never been closer – Patriarch Kirill proudly refers to

⁸⁷ The survey "Trust in public institutions", the Levada Center, conducted August 25-31, 2022 <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/10/06/trust-in-public-institutions-2/>

⁸⁸ The survey "Trust in public institutions", the Levada Center, August 25-31, 2022 <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/10/06/trust-in-public-institutions-2/>

it as a “[symphony](#)”.⁸⁹ Together, they are shaping a new Russian ideology, based on the ideas of a civilisational confrontation and exceptionalism.

There are three intertwined factors to take into consideration when trying to understand why the Russian Orthodox Church is so actively involved in Russia’s military propaganda. Firstly, the Church is in a period of restoration after decades in exile during the Soviet period when religion was banned. Secondly, Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, is a symbolic and sacred place for Orthodoxy because it is regarded as the birthplace of Eastern Slavic Christianity following the baptism of Prince Volodymyr the Great in 988 AD.⁹⁰

Thirdly, Moscow's Patriarchate has been losing influence in Ukraine and trying unsuccessfully to claw back that power. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church – as well as Latvian, Estonian, Moldovan, and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia – is an autonomous church within the Russian Orthodox Church. After the full-scale invasion, it refused to obey Patriarch Kirill.

Earlier, in 2018, part of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy established the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine. For these reasons, Patriarch Kirill regards Putin’s war for the “Russian world” as a battle for “Holy Russia”. Two terms for one idea: the restoration of an empire.

⁸⁹ Word of Patriarch Kirill after the Liturgy at the Nikolo-Ugreshsky Monastery on April 18, 2023, Official website of the Moscow Patriarchate <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6020342.html>

⁹⁰ The baptism of St. Volodymyr, also known as the Baptism of Rus', is a pivotal event in Russian history. It occurred in 988 AD when Volodymyr the Great, ruler of Kyivan Rus', embraced Christianity and ordered the mass baptism of his people in the Dnieper River. This event marked the official adoption of Christianity as the state religion and laid the foundation for Orthodox Christianity in the region. It led to the spread of Byzantine culture and influence in Kyivan Rus', shaping the religious, cultural, and political identity of the Russian people for centuries to come.

Conclusion

The support of Vladimir Putin by Patriarch Kirill should not come as a surprise to anyone; they have been allies for many years. However, this unity has become much more pronounced since the beginning of the full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022.

In analysing Kirill's sermons and statements between February 2022 and May 2023, I have identified their interconnection with political events and military decisions of Russia's authorities. This not only reveals the Church's participation in the war, but also its deep and consistent involvement in the pro-war propaganda campaign.

There are four observable stages in the Patriarch's pro-war narratives over the course of 15 months. There are no strict boundaries between all these periods; they are more or less intertwined, but it's clear how the focus of sermons shifted as the war continued.

On the day of the invasion, when Russian authorities were expecting to capture Kyiv in several days, Kirill called for peace and a reduction in the level of cruelty.

In stage two, when it became clear that the war would drag on and Russia was facing defeat, the Patriarch provided society with a narrative about a "metaphysical" struggle against the "cosmic evil" embodied by the West.

Serving the Kremlin's announcement of mobilisation in stage three, the Patriarch offered the idea that dying for the fatherland "washes away all sins".

Finally, in stage four, he started calling on people to pray for victory and the Russian president.

Both biblical and Russian historical references were used by the Church to support the military propaganda campaign. Some of these themes have been adopted by secular authorities, including the presidency. For example, since the full-scale war with Ukraine, Putin has often invoked John 15:13.

In exploring Patriarch Kirill's public statements, it becomes evident that his role in the propaganda machinery is not simple that of "Putin's altar boy". Instead, he is a steady ally of the Kremlin, aiming to strengthen his own influence and power. The Russian Orthodoxy, and the Patriarch personally, have contributed significantly to

the development of an imperial mindset and the idea of Russian Exceptionalism, which led to the war against Ukraine.

Certainly, the involvement of the Church in Russia’s military propaganda extends beyond Kirill’s public speeches and sermons broadcast on state television. There are many other religious participants in this campaign, including other church sermons, media resources such as the TV Channel “Spas” established by the Moscow Patriarchate, and conversations between priests and parishioners.

It is difficult to weigh the real impact of these actions on Russian society, but it is evident that the Orthodox Church is investing significant effort and resources to justify a war against Ukraine.

Of course, it is not unprecedented for religious institutions to serve the interests of authorities: the Catholic Church supported Mussolini in Italy, the Dutch Reformed Church backed Apartheid in South Africa, and Buddhist monks incited violence against the Rohingya in Myanmar.

These examples underscore the complex relationships between religious institutions and political power, highlighting the potential for collaboration, complicity, or manipulation to serve various interests.

The role of journalists, in all of these instances, is to collect and analyse evidence so that these institutions can be called to account.

Afterword

In June 2023, the priest Yoann Koval, who was defrocked by the Russian Orthodox Church for replacing the word “victory” with “peace” in the prayer, was [restored](#) to his holy rank by the Constantinople Patriarchate.⁹¹ He has since begun serving in the Orthodox Church in Turkey.

⁹¹ Communiqué on the work of the Holy and Sacred Synod (June 28, 2023). Official website of The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople <https://ec-patr.org/ανακοινωθέν-για-τις-εργασίες-της-αγία-12/>

Editor's note

This paper was updated on 7 February 2024 to include a missing footnote on page 17. The footnote includes a link to the sermon in which Kirill used the phrase "[Christ-loving army](#)" at the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces on May 8, 2022.

Reflecting on the First and Second World Wars he said: "Russia exhausted itself, Russia sacrificed itself in order to help others. That is why we call our army Christ-loving..."