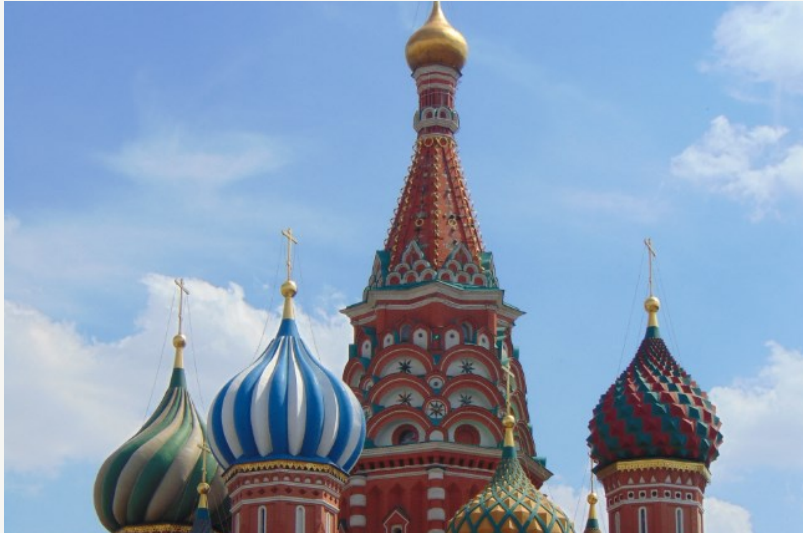


## Russia, Religion and Soft Power



Saint Basil Cathedral, Moscow: [Image Source](#)

### Executive Summary

It is unlikely that Russia has ever understood soft power as it was originally conceptualised by Joseph Nye, but it was when Vladimir Putin began his third presidential term in 2012 that the Kremlin's understanding of soft power markedly expanded to encompass a wide range of foreign policy 'technologies'. It became clear that, for Russia, soft power was about achieving influence by any non-military means. This broad remit made ample space for the inclusion of offensive information operations, reflexive control techniques, and a dizzying mixture of coercion and attraction, which has come to define Russian soft power today. One of Russia's oldest foreign policy tools, the Russian Orthodox Church, was not left out of this gear change. Today religion is both a significant feature of Russia's soft power and a noteworthy asset in Russia's hybrid warfare. This briefing considers how the Russian Orthodox Church, and the so-called 'traditional values' which it promotes, are used by Russia in its soft power/hybrid warfare nexus. After providing some historical context, it considers the nature of Russia's religious soft power in Ukraine - before, during and after the 2014 Russian invasion - and then turns to a discussion of Russia's increasing religious soft power footprint in the Middle East. This briefing demonstrates how, in both contexts, Russia uses religious resources to paint Western liberalism as a threat to traditional/religious values and cultural distinctiveness. By entrenching this idea in target audiences, Russia has been able to market itself as a vital protector of religion, morality, and tradition.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### **Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church**

Orthodox Christianity has provided Russia with a deep sense of exceptionality and mission for much of the state's turbulent history, and over the centuries the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has frequently been used to justify and facilitate Russia's expansionist ambitions. The enforced Atheism of the Communist era can be seen as a historical anomaly in this regard. Today, the ROC is back as a powerful ally to the Kremlin and it was Vladimir Putin who personally oversaw the development of this relationship. This closeness is set to be further consolidated later this year when, as part of President Putin's proposed amendments, a reference to God will likely enter Russia's constitution for the first time since 1917.

Putin's close relationship to the ROC came to the fore most notably around 2012. However, Putin saw the potential for Orthodoxy to provide a backbone to post-Communist Russian identity, and accordingly to inform relations with the outside world, before he became president. For example, it was Putin who personally oversaw Russia's Spiritual Security Concept, whilst he was secretary to the National Security Council under President Yeltsin in 1999. In the following years after his election to the presidency, Putin brought the ROC, closer to the Kremlin. In 2003 a joint Church and Foreign affairs working group was founded which continues to meet today. This relationship was further strengthened when Sergei Lavrov became Foreign Minister in 2004, as he openly advocated for a closer relationship between the Church and the Kremlin, as well as greater use of the ROC for foreign policy purposes.

### **Orthodoxy and Russian Soft Power**

Soft power, or the power of attraction, refers to how intangible state assets, such as culture, values, and institutions, can shape the preferences of others. Operationalising soft power resources to attract sympathisers abroad became more of a priority for the Kremlin after the 2004-5 Orange Revolution in Ukraine. This event powerfully demonstrated the pull of Western values and institutions, even in the heart of Russia's traditional sphere of influence. In 2007, The Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, Russia Today and the Russian World Fund were all established, aiming to spread and encourage Russian language, culture and values across the Russian speaking diaspora. The Rossotrudnichestvo (the equivalent of the British Council) was also set up in 2008.

However, the significant Orthodox populations in many post-Soviet states, and their considerable trust in religious authority, made the ROC a particularly promising soft power facilitator. In 2007 the Russkiy Mir foundation was set up to work closely with the ROC and the Kremlin and is today the biggest single Russian cultural outreach NGO. Whilst being set up primarily to promote Russian language, Russkiy Mir's role has become broader and more in line with Russian anti-Western information campaigning. This was not a difficult development given the established anti-Westernism at the top of the ROC.

Since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, his foreign policy has pushed increasingly hard for both tighter integration of the post-Soviet space and greater resistance to Euro-Atlantic security integration. This period has also seen Putin take little heed of internationally recognised borders. The Russian Orthodox Church has been an ally in this apparently neo-imperialist agenda, as it also sees history, rather than consent, as the basis for legitimacy. The Church provides an air of legitimacy to Putin's ambitions, stating that Russia's 'spiritual borders' should be respected internationally. In particular the ROC sees Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova as the spiritual core of Orthodox civilisation and as profoundly and eternally connected to Russia. The ROC also supports Putin's grander ambitions to establish a multipolar world order that is more reflective of Russia's significance - an order within which Russia, and the deeply illiberal ROC, would not be constrained by liberal international norms.

### Religious soft power in Russia's near abroad

For many Orthodox Christians in Russia's near abroad, the head of the ROC is the highest source of spiritual authority, even higher than the Ecumenical Patriarch who is the head of all of Eastern Orthodoxy. Overt displays of friendship between the current head of the ROC, Patriarch Kirill, and Putin have therefore provided a sanctified image of Russian leadership. Kirill even described the Putin era as a 'miracle of God'. As well as these displays of friendship, Putin has overseen the building of a huge number of new Russian Orthodox Churches across Eastern Europe, aiming to consolidate a sense of shared religious heritage with Russia. However, for many Orthodox in the region, religious observance plays little to no part in everyday life, arguably making new churches of limited consequence. Instead, Orthodoxy is more a feature of cultural identity than religious devotion, and many Orthodox see any personal faith they have as something set apart from the Church as an institution.

### Ukraine

Approximately 78% of Ukrainians identify as Orthodox, however, Russian religious soft power outreach was one of many tactics which failed to change Ukraine's pro-Western trajectory in the lead up to the 2013/14 Euromaidan Revolution. Many Ukrainians were resistant to the suggestion of having shared political interests with Russia on the basis of their shared Orthodox faith, due to mistrust of Russia's intentions for Ukrainian sovereignty. This was a sentiment shared by many, regardless of ethnicity, language, or religion. Ukraine was resource-rich, with even the Ukrainian self-governing Church, the Kiev Patriarchate, largely under the thumb of Moscow's religious authority.

However, pro-European factions within the Ukrainian Church were able to emphasise Ukraine's spiritual and cultural distinctiveness from Russia, whilst still acknowledging the historical continuity of Orthodox faith in the region. This provided many Ukrainians with an alternative but coherent spiritual identity discourse which delegitimised Russia's narrative. Russia arguably overlooked the fact that the messages it fed to the Ukrainian population did not fall on a blank canvas but joined other compelling spiritual identity narratives. These narratives reduced the psychological receptivity of many Ukrainians to Russia's messaging by boosting what can perhaps best be described as their ontological security.

Contrastingly, religious soft power resources were much more successful in achieving effect when used in a targeted and limited manner alongside Russia's military activity in Crimea and the Donbass. Religious soft power was significant in the pre-conflict shaping phase, especially in the Donbass, as it increased psychological receptivity to Russian interference well before any hard power was used. Specifically, Russia used Orthodox religious history and values to emphasise its target demographic's separateness from the existing national fabric in Ukraine - largely through highly targeted information output. Russia also entrenched an image of itself as protector of the faithful and defender of morality against the decadent and aggressively liberal West.

Religious legitimisation ultimately made it easier for Moscow to arrange the transfer of power to pro-Russian forces. At a practical level, Orthodox priests from both Russia and the local area were used in Crimea to negotiate the surrender of Ukrainian military units. These priests were aware of many Ukrainian soldiers' displeasure at the idea of killing Russians and therefore emphasised that surrender was the only way to avoid Orthodox brothers slaughtering one another. Priests were also used in both Crimea and the Donbass as chaplains in detachments of pro-Russian separatists. These priests publicly blessed troops and weapons, exploiting the significant trust which both combatants and much of the local population had in religious authority.

### Soft Power Post-Ukraine

The overt use of the ROC as part of Russia's illegal war in Ukraine has, unsurprisingly, further weakened Russia's religious soft power. This was most visibly demonstrated in the granting of autocephaly (independence) to the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine in January 2019. In the post Ukraine context, one could suggest that Russia's religious soft power is as weak as it has ever been in its near abroad, especially as other regional churches affiliated with the ROC hope to follow Ukraine's lead and gain autocephaly. Indeed, many lost trust in the independence and moral righteousness of the ROC some time ago. However, Russia is adapting to the environment of increased suspicion by putting more resources into plausibly deniable influence operations and more emphasis on shared values rather than shared religious heritage.

Orthodox identification often translates into belief in traditional and conservative family values, providing another avenue for Russian influence. Accordingly, Putin has emphasised that Russia is a traditional and conservative country and, perhaps most importantly, has made clear his commitment to protecting Christians and their traditional values beyond Russia's borders. Instructively, research by the Pew Research Centre has found that in Central and Eastern Europe those who agree that conflict exists between Western values and the traditional values of their own country are more likely than others to say a strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West. Convincing target populations that their values and norms are under threat from liberalism has therefore become a key part of making Russia more attractive. Building on Mark Galeotti's concept of Coercive Diplomacy, this can be described as Coercive Value Diplomacy, and is a key feature of Russian religious soft power today.

Through co-opting and financing political groups and religious institutions which promote traditionalism and anti-Westernism, Russia can also make itself more attractive indirectly. In the Western Balkans for example, certain elements of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), a close ally of the ROC, have been used to spread fear and mistrust of the West and its secular values, and to promote Russia as a necessary protector. Increasingly, religious soft power blends into information warfare and reflexive control, making amenable proxies, in whom target populations trust, significant. Such activities, as well as making Russia more attractive, also serve the dual purpose of destabilising target states and making their integration into Western security frameworks harder. For example, problematising NATO accession, as was the clear aim in the case of Montenegro.

### Russia's increasing Religious soft power footprint in the Middle East

Russia's religious soft power ambitions extend far beyond its near abroad and form part of a global vision of a morally relativistic and multipolar world order. In the Middle East, Russia has complex and increasing ambitions, but broadly aims to consolidate regional allegiances and weaken the dominance of Western actors. Russia sees Muslim majority countries as natural allies in its confrontation with the West and makes use of being both in the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (as an Observer Nation with a Muslim minority) and a member of the "International Strategic Vision Group: Russia and the Islamic World".

Russia extends its religious soft power outreach to the region in two ways. Firstly, through emphasis on Russia's moral alignment with many Islamic societies, in terms of holding conservative and traditionalist values. Emphasising value alignment is pragmatic given that Muslim public opinion, especially in the Arab world, is often critical of Western interference and promotion of rights-based democracy. Russia and the ROC promote an alternative global vision, one of cultural exceptionalism, and this idea finds traction in populations traumatised by both a perceived erosion of cultural distinctiveness and the aftermath of failed attempts at externally enforced democracy. Russia weaponizes the values which Western governments usually consider assets, for example, promoting the idea that dialogue on human rights is being unfairly monopolised by Western liberal interpretations and has found that this narrative has traction.

The Moscow Patriarchate is also active in the United Nations Council for Human Rights and one result of this was a draft resolution on traditional values, which is described as “[p]romoting human rights and fundamental freedoms through a better understanding of traditional values of humankind.” Whilst this draft resolution was heavily criticised for the vagueness of such terms as ‘traditional values’, (which, it was noted, can at times threaten even the most basic human rights), it was supported by multiple Islamic leaders. This further added to Russia’s religious soft power in the Muslim world.

The second significant strand of religious soft power outreach in the Middle East is interfaith dialogue, something which Alicja Curanović suggests the ROC has, for years, been successfully building up a reputation for. For example, having the ROC sitting on numerous committees and councils for Islamic cooperation furthers an image of Russia as a serious and capable mediator in the region. Furthermore, Russia has used its mission to protect Syrian Christians as part of its narrative to justify its involvement in the ongoing conflict. Interfaith dialogue with Islamic leaders also consolidates the strategic relationship Russia has with Iran. Particularly notable is the activity of the Islam-Orthodoxy Commission, which facilitates this relationship. On top of this, the suggestion that harmony between Islam and Christianity has already been achieved within Russia, whether accurate or not, also has significant soft power potential. Whilst it is true that Islam is one of the religions the Kremlin deems to be traditional, and therefore welcome in Russia, the state continues to struggle with Islamic extremism.

It may be hard to envision Russia as a reconciler, mediator, and protector, but the attractiveness of this image should not be underestimated in a region where many observers see the West as having badly failed to mediate religious, tribal and sectarian divisions, with deadly consequences.

## Conclusion

Whilst Russia clearly has the raw resources for traditional religious soft power in its near abroad, it struggles with turning potential into effect. Instead, Russian soft power consistently has an element of coercion and threat, something not only completely at odds with Nye’s original definition, but a feature which undermines the very influence Russia hopes to achieve. However, religious soft power achieves far greater effect when used as part of destabilisation and political influence operations and as a handmaiden to hard power. In fact, the use of religious institutions and values has become a significant feature of Russian Hybrid Warfare against the West, as was seen in Ukraine. However, the post Ukraine context means that Russia faces new soft power challenges. In a context of increasing suspicion, Russia relies on increasing psychological receptivity through plausibly deniable means, prior to more overt cultural or religious outreach.

The new soft power picture that is emerging is one adapted to suit the needs of an increasingly assertive Russia in a globally networked world. [Russia exploits this dense and nodular interconnectivity, drawing together diffuse and diverse populations with overlapping grievances](#), well beyond its traditional sphere of influence. It is crucial therefore that observers are not blinkered by geography or history and instead understand religious soft power in the context of Putin’s broader 21<sup>st</sup> Century grand strategy. Looking ahead, Russia will continue to promote an alternative value universe to that of the West, and the weaponization of traditionalism and religious sanctioning of illiberalism will likely play a key part in this endeavour. Russia is proving that the fight for narrative dominance can be as important as the actual fight. With illiberal narratives gaining greater legitimacy, the West must find, empower, and embolden alternative voices in strategically significant informational battlespaces. Challenging religious authority is complicated, but achieving information advantage is vital.

**For Further Reading:**

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