



8/1/2020

Eurasia Brief

The Russian Orthodox Church's Role in Russian Politics



Asim Siddiq
The Eurasia Center
4927 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20016
www.eurasiacenter.org

*Under the Direction of The President of The Eurasia Center &
The Eurasian Business Coalition, Dr. Gerard Janco*

The Eurasia Business Coalition
2200 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Suite 400E
Washington, DC 20037

The Russian Orthodox Church's Role in Russian Politics

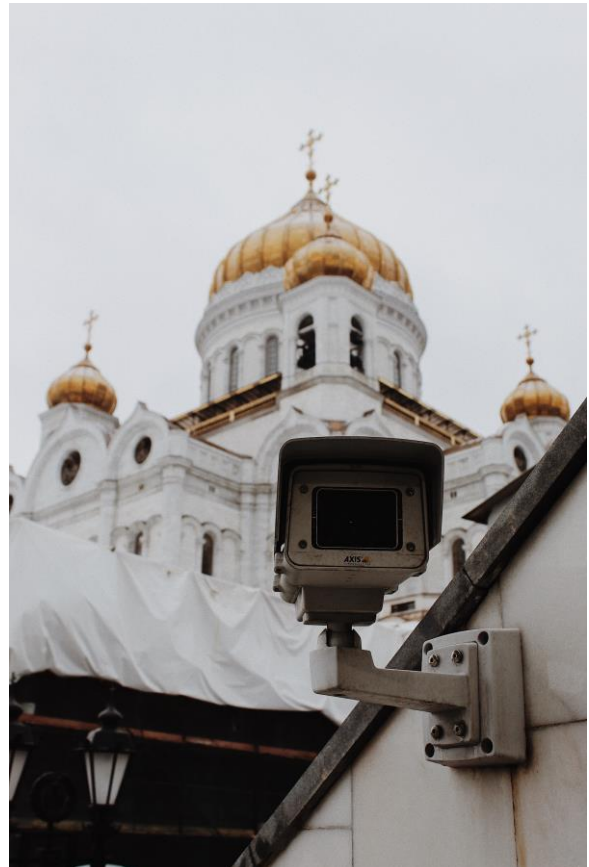
The Eurasia Center's US-Russia Program

Caileigh Murray

August 2020

The history of the Russian Orthodox Church is intertwined with that of Russia. During the first years of the country's existence, it held much sway in the day to day lives of Russian citizens and over political decisions. Countless modernizing rulers in later years then further reduced its power and role, until it was all but eliminated in the Soviet era. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, religion was again allowed to flourish and has become especially popular under President Vladimir Putin. And the longer President Putin remains in power, the stronger the Russian Orthodox Church once again becomes in its influence over Russian politics as he uses it to legitimize his power.

Despite 70 years of official atheism under the Soviet Union, after its fall the Russian Orthodox Church experienced a revival in popularity. However, because of the Soviet legacy, the role of religion in people's lives drastically changed. According to Professor Gregory Freeze, 70 to 80 percent of Russians describe themselves as Russian Orthodox, but only 5 percent attend services once a week. These numbers indicate that Russian Orthodoxy has taken on a cultural role rather than a strictly religious one. With many claiming they believe in its tenets without actually



practicing them, it is clear that the Russian Orthodox Church has taken on a more modern role as a cultural institution built to foster moral values than belief in God. As a result of this phenomenon, many Russians are eager to preserve the role of religion in their culture. Professor Gregory Freeze cites the fact that the church adapted to this new role by focusing on not just the afterlife, but this life on earth as well by offering guidance on current problems. Because its teachings became more relevant, more and more people started returning to religion, and with this, the Russian federal government began to take a more active role in courting the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Russian Orthodox Church's status as a cultural institution began to play an important role in fostering nationalism, which ultimately came to draw the attention of President Vladimir Putin. As Russia came into its own as a nation separate from the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church's views of Russia as a unique and divinely inspired society, according to writer Paul Coyer, aligned with that of the new government's desire to reclaim Russia's reputation as a world power. Because the government shares this view, it can use the church's status as a cultural institution to garner support for its action in pursuit of this policy. With the church's strong and widespread support base, many will extend this support to the government's actions on the world stage. An example of this can be seen in using shared culture and religion to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea. As reported by researchers Alexis Mrachek and Shane McCrum, until its independence in January 2018, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was subject to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate since 1686. These close historical ties indicate that the religious values and beliefs held by the two countries are extremely similar, if not identical. As a result, the Russian government has used these shared beliefs to argue that its annexation of Crimea is not a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, but the rightful accession of an area that is culturally Russian. This indicates

that President Putin uses the Russian Orthodox Church to validate closer ties with and dominance of other majority Orthodox nations.

The Russian Orthodox Church as a result has great influence in Russian domestic politics, and this allows President Putin to use it to legitimize his power. In January, Putin announced several constitutional amendments, including the definition of marriage as between a man and woman and proclaiming the nation's faith in God, according to the BBC. By promoting official Russian Orthodox teachings in Russian politics, President Putin is effectively guaranteeing the Russian Orthodox Church's support of his regime. As Putin continues to contextualize his political decisions



An aerial view of a military cathedral during construction works in April 2020. Denis Voronin/Moscow News Agency/Handout via <https://www.businessinsider.com/russias-massive-cathedral-rumored-made->

in religious beliefs, the Russian Orthodox Church's influence in politics will only grow. Allowing the church's influence only serves to garner support from religious Russians, as seen in its legitimizing powers for President Putin. President Putin has long glorified the

role of Russia's military, both historically and in the present, and the recent opening of a new Russian Orthodox cathedral dedicated to the country's military is no exception. This cathedral made international headlines for different reasons however, as it included several mosaics glorifying Russian military history, as well as President Putin himself as noted by reporter Mia Jankowicz. The manner in which these mosaics show the president implies the Russian Orthodox Church's approval

of him. By displaying his image alongside historic moments in Russia's past and images important to Russian Orthodoxy, the church is essentially stating that Putin ranks as equally important and vital to the country's history and culture. This provides him with both political and cultural legitimacy for Russian Orthodox believers.

Ultimately, it is the Russian Orthodox Church's role as a cultural institution that allows the Putin regime to utilize it as a political tool. The Soviet legacy of atheism meant that the Russian Orthodox Church's

religious teachings took a backseat to its moral beliefs as many Russians state they are members of the church but never actually attend. Its views of Russia as exceptionally unique allow it to be used



as a legitimizing force

both for Putin himself and the country as a whole on

the international stage. As Putin further seeks to legitimize and bolster his political actions, the Russian Orthodox Church will grow as a tool of a political influence rooted in national culture.

Patriarch Kirill leads a consecration of a military cathedral on June 14, 2020. Igor Palkin/Patriarchal Press Service/Handout via Reuters

<https://www.businessinsider.com/russias-massive-cathedral-rumored-made-from-nazi-tanks-pictures-2020-6#patriarch-kirill-the-russian-orthodox->

Works Cited

Coyer, Paul. "(Un)Holy Alliance: Vladimir Putin, The Russian Orthodox Church And Russian Exceptionalism." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 31 May 2015, www.forbes.com/sites/paulcoyer/2015/05/21/unholy-alliance-vladimir-putin-and-the-russian-orthodox-church/#3ff91bf127d5.

Freeze, Gregory L. "Russian Orthodoxy and Politics in the Putin Era." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 9 Feb. 2017, carnegieendowment.org/2017/02/09/russian-orthodoxy-and-politics-in-putin-era-pub-67959.

Jankowicz, Mia. "Russia Just Opened a Massive Cathedral in Honor of Its Armed Forces, with Steps Rumored to Be Made from Melted Nazi Tanks." *Business Insider*, Insider Inc, 28 June 2020, www.businessinsider.com/russias-massive-cathedral-rumored-made-from-nazi-tanks-pictures-2020-6.

Mrachek, Alexis, and Shane McCrum. "How Putin Uses Russian Orthodoxy to Grow His Empire." *The Heritage Foundation*, 22 Feb. 2019, www.heritage.org/europe/commentary/how-putin-uses-russian-orthodoxy-grow-his-empire.

"Russia's Putin Wants Traditional Marriage and God in Constitution." *BBC News*, BBC, 3 Mar. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51719764.



THE EURASIA CENTER