

POLITICKÉ VEDY / POLITICAL SCIENCES

Journal for Political Sciences, Modern History, International Relations, security studies / Časopis pre politológiu, najnovšie dejiny, medzinárodné vzťahy, bezpečnostné štúdiá

URL of the journal / URL časopisu: <http://www.politickevedy.fpvmv.umb.sk>

Author(s) / Autor(i): Martin Solik – Vladimír Baar
Article / Článok: Religious Component in a State's Foreign Policy. A Case Study of the Russian Orthodox Church / Náboženský prvok v zharaničnej politike štátu: prípadová štúdiá Ruskej pravoslávnej cirkvi
Publisher / Vydavateľ: Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations – MBU Banská Bystrica / Fakulta politických vied a medzinárodných vzťahov – UMB Banská Bystrica
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2020.23.2.157-199>

Recommended form for quotation of the article / Odporúčaná forma citácie článku:

SOLIK, M. – BAAR, V. 2020. Religious Component in a State's Foreign Policy. A Case Study of the Russian Orthodox Church. In *Politické vedy*. [online]. Vol. 23, No. 2, 2020. ISSN 1335 – 2741, pp. 157-199. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2020.23.2.157-199>

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RELIGIOUS COMPONENT IN A STATE'S FOREIGN POLICY. A CASE STUDY OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Martin Solik – Vladimír Baar*

ABSTRACT

The recent “conservative turn” in Russian politics has raised to new levels the role of spiritual and moral values in political discourse. The partnership formed between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state has also affected Russian foreign policy. Although the Church largely plays a subordinate role in this relationship, it is far from being merely the Kremlin's tool. This investigation seeks to shed light on the Church's distinct approach to politics, and show on the basis of what criteria is the co-operative relationship between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church created in Russian conditions and by what means does the Kremlin promote its influence in the Post-Soviet space through the Russian Orthodox Church. In other words, this study shows where it draws the line on cooperation the Russian Orthodox Church with the state. The paper also exposes the role of this Church in the Kremlin foreign policy in the Post-Soviet space and presents specific activities pro-Russian Christian Orthodox Churches under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Post-Soviet space.

Key words: The Russian Orthodox Church, Foreign policy, Post-Soviet territory, Religion, The Russian federation

Introduction

Even in the 21st Century, religion can still play an important role in the society. In many countries, it is used as a source of political legitimation, it acts as an identity-forming factor. In addition, influential religious organizations are firmly entrenched in many societies, in which they act as major players,

* PhDr. Martin Solik, Ph.D is an Assistant Professor and Erasmus+ Departmental Coordinator at the Department of Human Geography and Regional Development, Faculty of Science, University of Ostrava, Chittussiho 10, 702 00 Ostrava, Czech republic, e-mail: martin.solik@osu.cz.

prof. RNDr. Vladimír Baar, CSc. is a Professor at the Department of Human Geography and Regional Development, Faculty of Science, University of Ostrava, Chittussiho 10, 702 00 Ostrava, Czech republic, e-mail: vladimir.baar@osu.cz.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2020.23.2.157-199>

commenting on substantive issues of morality, policy, or culture. Especially in post-socialist countries, the rebirth of religion (after the collapse of the bipolar system of international relations) means especially the recovery of forgotten heritage, historical memory, and the restoration of national identity. Former Soviet republics, particularly the successor state of the Soviet Union (the USSR), the Russian Federation (the RF), represent a good example of such phenomenon.

In the conditions of the newly formed the RF there was a wave of religious revival, which soon began to manifest itself in all areas of Russian society. Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (the ROC) – as the largest religious organization as well as an institution in the RF – has had a major impact on the formation of Russian national identity and its influence in Russian society has been rapidly increasing. The ROC enjoys support from influential Russian politicians and express opinions on fundamental issues of policy or morality substance.

This remarkable connection between Russian secular political elites and religious leaders has its historical roots. Indeed, since the end of the 10th Century, the ROC has been a solid part of Russian history. In the context of the cotemporary preference of rigid national conservatism in the RF, the Russian current state regime also counts with the support of the ROC, especially in the field of moral-spiritual principles. In the spirit of mutual cooperation between the Kremlin and the ROC, *“religion sanctifies the state while the state protects religion.”* (Stier, 2014)

The strength of the ROC lies not only in partaking in national policy making. The largest Christian Orthodox Church in the world has survived the Soviet collapse without a loss of territorial integrity and its influence more or less persisted throughout the Post-Soviet region and even abroad, where it deepens its power by construction and refurbishing of its parishes. It follows that the ROC is not only an ally of the Russian state in national policy, but also in foreign policy. It follows, that apart from the social impact of the ROC, Kremlin uses its transnational nature.

This study deals with a relatively new phenomenon in international relations: the use of religion in foreign policy, which is applied to Russian conditions. In other words, this paper is mainly engaged in the external dimension of politicization of Russian Orthodoxy, focusing on the specific foreign activities of the ROC abroad with the aim of enforcement of Russian influence. It is therefore important to stress that the aim is not to assess the activities of the

ROC from a religious context. Rather, it seeks to point out why this church has become a partner and simultaneously an important tool of the RF foreign policy.

However, these activities of the ROC often become a mechanism of manipulation of the society and people as well as a means of strengthening influence upon other countries (especially in the Post-Soviet space). It is therefore possible to assume that the ROC as an institution is increasingly becoming an important weapon of the Russia's foreign policy that in the hands of the current political leaders of the RF is taking on growing dimensions and dangerous forms.

Following the above-mentioned aim of this study, follow-up research questions was found: On the basis of what criteria is the co-operative relationship between the state and the ROC created in Russian conditions? By what means does the RF promote its influence in the Post-Soviet space through the ROC? Are these activities successful and beneficial for the Kremlin? These research questions endeavour to obtain new empirical information.

This work is based on qualitative approach research through which the phenomenon of religion in foreign policy is analysed in application to the Russian context. A qualitative research method is selected for this paper. Specifically, this is a qualitative method of a single-case study. **M. Kořan** defines the case as a *"specific object, a closed system that has clear limits and its intrinsic logic of functioning and its particular nature."* (Kořan, 2008, p. 33) In this regard, there is one case in this paper: the ROC as an actor for the enforcement of Russia's foreign policy and Russian influence towards the Russian "near" abroad – the Post-Soviet space.

In this work, disciplined interpretive case study is specifically used. This kind of case study follows the theoretical discussions mentioned in the first chapter. Above all, it monitors the role of the ROC in the formulation and performance of foreign policy, but also its role as an institution, thus an actor in the nondemocratic Russian regime. Indeed, the ROC serves as an important legitimizing element of today's regime in Russia. Not only by participating in the internal political process, but also in the country's foreign policy. *"This is, moreover, linked to the fact that many aspects of Russia's current foreign policy can be seen primarily as a legitimizing tool of the regime towards its own citizens."* (Rojek cited in Avanesova, Naxera, 2018, p. 22)

The methodology for the creation of this work consisted of the initial gathering of a sufficient quantity of relevant information sources related to the investigated issues. Sorting and thorough analysis of the gathered information

followed. After a critical evaluation of the studied data, the resulting findings were complemented with own opinions.

The authors attempt to answer the research questions through the study of primary sources, documents, and works (especially official documents and web pages (partly from state documents, but mainly from church documents¹¹) published in the Slovak, Czech, Russian, and English languages and to formulate the conclusion of the work through a method of induction, i.e., the process of formulation of general conclusions from partial findings. Mostly qualitative data are used in the presented study, because most of the sources have the character of scientific texts.

1 The current state of research: Religious factor in international relations and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in foreign dimension. The benefit of this study

In spite of the long-standing claims and convictions of many scientists about secularization of the world and decline in the importance of religion in politics and public life, an opposite trend has been observed in recent decades, the return of religion as an important political factor. This trend was subsequently reflected in the grasping of religion by political science and international relations. (Avanesova, Naxera, 2018)

More precisely, religion started to occur gradually in the research of social sciences especially after the collapse of the bipolar system, when the role of traditional religions started to increase again, but also various radical religious movements and groups began to form. *“However, this trend of increased interest in religion in the research on international relations has significantly evolved in the last years of the 20th Century. The main impetus was the global rise in the political significance of religion during this period, the return of normative theory, and, finally, some interest in the issue of identity that is somewhat related to religion.”* (Kratochvíl, Drulák eds. 2009, p. 188-189)

As **P. Kratochvíl** remarked: *“the study of religion has become a common theme of foreign policy analyses and a fundamental shift in this area have been taking place only after terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.”* (Kratochvíl, 2011, p. 20) However, in this context, analyses have been produced monitoring

¹¹ In this case, mainly articles from the Official Website of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate were used.

rather the Muslim religion, almost exclusively associated with negative connotations such as terrorism, fundamentalism, pursuit of religious regulations in internal law, and the like. On the other hand, analyses that would try to clarify the impact of religious organizations on internal as well as on foreign policy of individual states occur sporadically. (Kratochvíl, 2011)

The fact is, however, that renewed interest in religion in international relations has turned into a considerable number of publications by various researchers. Since September 11, 2001, a number of analyses have been developed. Almost in all of the related publications, it is mentioned that there is a global resurgence/return of religion: **Banchoff** (2008, p. 9-13); **Falk** (2001, p. 2); **Fox** and **Sandler** (2004, p. 12-14); **Haynes** (2007, p. 19); **Johnston** (2003, p. 3); **Petito**, **Hatzopoulos** eds. (2003, p. 1); **Shani** (2009, p. 311); **Thomas** (2005, p. 26-42). Upon discussions on Westphalian legacy **Banchoff** (2008, p. 52-54); **Falk** (2001, p. 6-8); **Fox** and **Sandler** (2004, p. 22, p. 54); **Hanson** (2006, p. 17); **Haynes** (2007, p. 31-34); **Petito** and **Hatzopoulos** (2003, p. 2); **Shani** (2009, p. 308-309); **Thomas** (2005: 25-26); **Wessels** (2009, p. 324, p. 328), changing paradigms of international relations and the rise of faith-based diplomacy more or less get to be the common denominator of all mentioned material.

As can be seen from the above-mentioned information, the religious factor in international relations is becoming an increasingly popular subject of research. Unfortunately, this cannot be said about the role of the ROC in the foreign dimension, that is, about the research in this area. The issue of Russian policy in its domestic and foreign dimension is a popular and frequent subject of social science research (also in the conditions of the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic). However, it should be noted that numerous studies omit the element of religion, or more precisely the aspect of Orthodox Christianity (and also the influence of the ROC) in the state's foreign policy.

The benefit of this study is therefore a certain addition of an important actor in Russian foreign policy. In other words, even though articles have recently emerged about the growing importance of religion in international relations, the use of the aspect of religion, or more precisely religious organizations in the foreign policy dimension is very scarcely reflected. That is why this paper offers a concrete example of the use of religious organization as an effective institution which is involved in foreign policy. Thus, paper analyses how selected religious organisation, as well as political groups deriving their inspiration from religion, seek to influence the foreign policy agenda.

What is interesting is the difference of attitudes of academics, researchers and church representatives of the RF, but also other countries to the position of the ROC in Russian foreign policy, or more precisely to the Church-State relations in the context of Russian (foreign) policy. There are two fundamental opinions. For one group of scholars the ROC is always a reliable tool of the state: for example, **Papkova** (2011); **Blitt** (2011). Since there is no distinct ROC foreign policy agenda, it need not be examined separately from the state's own foreign policy agenda. The second group grants the ROC some autonomy, but contends that its freedom of movement is severely constrained: for example, **Curanović** (2012a); **Richters** (2013); **Payne** (2010). Its foreign policy agenda is therefore of some interest, but only as an expression of what has already been decided within state institutions. For both groups the foreign policy agenda of the ROC derives entirely from the Russian state. Apart from this division, however, other opinions on the issue of the Russian Church-State relationship can be encountered.¹² The plurality of attitudes only demonstrates that the topic of the ROC and its impact on Russian foreign policy provides interesting ground for more detailed and extensive research.

As mentioned above, the literature (both books and studies in journals) dealing with the foreign policy aspect of the ROC is not numerous. It is surprising that this phenomenon is not the subject of much research even in the

¹² American professor of Political Science with Russian roots N. Petro argues that the ROC is important partner of the Russian state and believes, that *"the ROC will continue to shape Russia's foreign policy agenda in several ways."* (Petro, 2015). Georgian political researcher and public opinion maker T. Pkhaladze exposes the role of the ROC in the Kremlin foreign policy. *"The ROC as an institute is increasingly becoming an obedient weapon of the Russian concept of 'Soft Power' that in the hands of the current political leaders of RF is taking on growing dimensions and dangerous forms."* (Pkhaladze 2012: 4) On the other hand, V. Alexeev, President of the International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations (IFUOCN) from the RF, who has close ties with the ROC claims, that *"the ROC is not involved in the process of foreign policy of the Russian Federation, and that the state takes interest in the ROC's opinion only in some cases (for example in the issues concerning the Balkans)."* (Alexeev cited in Avanesova, Naxera 2018: 21) A similar opinion is presented by A. Serebrich, who is one of the analysts at the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies: *"Although the ROC does not have the power to influence the decision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the church is an influential actor that can influence public opinion. This is what the state can use to its advantage."* (Serebrich cited in Avanesova, Naxera 2018: 21) Another view of the role of the ROC in the context of Russian foreign policy is offered by R. Lunkin, who is director of the Institute for Religion and Law and Leading Research Fellow at the Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Science in Moscow: *"Any use of the ROC by the State, or their open cooperation in questionable situations of Russian foreign policy only worsens the position of the ROC."* (Lunkin cited in Avanesova, Naxera 2018: 21)

Western environment, or more precisely outside the RF. As an important researcher in this respect, **A. Curanović** can be mentioned in particular (2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2019). Other authors who are interested in this type of research include: **Blitt** (2010); **Payne** (2010); **Papkova** (2011); **Pkhaladze, Kudors** (eds.) (2012); **Lomagin** (2012); **Richters** (2013); **Simons, Westerlund** (2016); **Stoeckl** (2014, 2016); **Antunez** (2017); **Petro** (2018) and partly **van Herpen** (2016). There are even fewer publications from Russian authors written in English or Russian.

The situation in the Czech-Slovak environment is similar. Only a few books have been published. These publications deal for example with the cultural aspect of religiosity: **Putna** (2015); or the context of State-Church relations in the internal dimension of the RF: **Avanesova, Naxera** (2016a, 2016b). More recently however, three publications by Czech and Slovak authors have emerged dealing directly with the foreign aspect of the ROC's activities: **Solik, Baar** (2017, 2019); **Avanesova, Naxera** (2018).

As mentioned by **Kratochvíl**, the issue of the Church's influence on foreign policy can be approached from two angles: On the one hand, it can be examined from the point of view of society as a whole to what extent this society or its political elite considers the Church's involvement in the formulation of foreign policy priorities to be appropriate and desirable. The second level is related to the Church's perspective and its steps towards its active participation in the formulation of foreign policy. In other words, this level examines what procedures are chosen by its leaders in order to contribute to the formulation of a policy. The two positions are always complementary. The Church's strategy of engaging in political life or, more specifically, in formulating the state's foreign policy priorities, is largely dependent on the attitude of the society or representatives of the state power to such efforts of the Church. (Kratochvíl, 2011, p. 21-22)

J. Haynes (2007, 2009), for example, has a similar view in this respect. He stressed that if "state-related religious actors"¹³ get access to formal decision-making structures and processes it does not guarantee their ability significantly to influence either policy formation or execution. "*To have a profound policy*

¹³ This group of religious actors is – as the name itself evokes – closely linked to the administrations of specific sovereign and independent states. According to Haynes, certain state administrations have a mutual relationship with selected religious organizations in order to make their foreign policy more effective. In other words, some religious actors seek to influence foreign policy of a state by promoting certain values, standards and faiths abroad. (Haynes, 2007)

impact, it is necessary in build relations with key players in both society and politics, as well as to foster good relations with influential print and electronic media" (Haynes, 2007, p. 49) influence public opinion or use lobbying techniques. One of the important indicators or ways of measuring the degree of legitimacy and reputation of religious actor in society are undoubtedly public opinion polls. Religious actors' ability to influence foreign policy is also linked to an ability to influence policy in other ways. (Haynes, 2009) Such public support serves as a mandate through which a religious actor can participate in making of internal and foreign policy of a state.

These two approaches and their complementarity offered by **Kratochvíl** are applied to democratic regimes. However, **Avanesova** and **Naxera** argued that *"the same conditions apply to non-democratic regimes."* (Avanesova, Naxera, 2018, p.22) In this case, it is assumed that the RF is an example of a non-democratic regime. At least in comparison with the Western liberal-democratic concept, one cannot speak of Russia as a classical democratic regime.¹⁴

In the context of non-democratic regimes, it is appropriate in this case to take into account the literature on the survival strategies of non-democratic governments and rulers (Whitehead, 2014). Non-democratic regimes are kept in power by a whole set of sophisticated instruments, with repression being only one of them. Earlier research has shown that the principal strategy is to cooperate with institutions that at least appear to be democratic on the outside (Gandhi, Przeworski, 2007). The impact of institutions on the functioning of the regime and its stability is now becoming one of the main topics of the research of non-democratic regimes. (Pepinsky, 2014) Church is not mentioned among these institutions almost at all in the research of current undemocratic regimes, rather to the contrary; it is considered to be an opposition, i.e. democratic actor.

The case of the ROC is different and deserves close attention. The ROC cannot be seen as a democratic opposition to the Russian regime. On the contrary, this church, as an institution, is involved in stabilizing the nondemocratic regime of the RF. In other words, this church functions as a

¹⁴ At least in comparison with the Western liberal-democratic concept, one cannot speak of the RF as a classical democratic regime. Indeed, many Russian officials (such as S. Ivanov, Russia's defence minister in 2001-2007), referring to the "specific" style of Russian democracy ("sovereign" democracy), argue that *"if there is western democracy, there should be an eastern democracy as well"* (Ivanov cited in NewsRu, 2004). Indeed, numerous scientific studies on Russia's "sovereign" democracy – for example, Petrov (2005) or Okara (2007) – concluded that Russia's "sovereign" democracy has a number of elements typical of non-democratic regimes.

stable pillar and an actor of Russian non-democracy (Avanesova, Naxera 2016a) not only in the internal dimension but also in the foreign dimension.

2 The Church-State Relation in Russian conditions

The ROC today is a significant part of Russia's political, cultural, and spiritual identity. Russia, who adopted Christianity in 988 AD, also adopted then-Byzantine's "Symphony" model in religion-government relationship, that was at odds with the evolution of Christianity in the West.¹⁵ This harmony and/or equality centred model believes that both the state and the church was obliged to support one another, prohibited to interfere each other's area of authority nor to carry out actions that might affect each other's independence. In other words, while the church was supporting the political goals of the government, the government served as the protector of the religion.

In fact, the ROC has played a special role in relation to the ruling elites in the history of the Russian state.¹⁶ This was also true in the USSR. Unfortunately, many Russian Orthodox clergymen became allies of the communist atheist repressive regime and instrument of struggle against the ROC and religion itself in the USSR. During this period the ROC was persecuted, tortured, but unfortunately also forced to cooperate with the state communist regime.¹⁷

Today, the situation looks strikingly different. Survey data shows that between 1991 and 2015 the share of Russian adults considering themselves orthodox grew from 37% to 71%. (Pew Research Center, 2017). The situation is similar in other countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. This is perhaps a surprising statement. In spite of the evident and progressive secularization

¹⁵ After the Great Schism (the break of communion between what are now the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Churches) in 1054 In the West, *"the Church first struggled to survive the collapse of the state, then it struggled to preserve its independence from state control, once the latter had been re-established. This march of Western progress, from the Renaissance, to the Reformation, to the Enlightenment, is often equated with the rise of the modern concepts of personal liberty and individual freedoms, while the loss of 'Christendom'—the social and political manifestation of a common Christian social ideal—is usually seen as the price that had to be paid for the emergence of both individual and political freedom."* (Petro, 2018, p. 219)

¹⁶ See for example Curanović 2012b, p. 13-59, or Curanović 2013.

¹⁷ After the collapse of the USSR, the declassified materials of the KGB revealed that many of the leading ROC hierarchs worked with the Soviet regime and the KGB. Among these high Church Hierarchs, there were both ROC patriarchs in the new conditions of the RF. Specifically, Alexei II. (Patriarch of the ROC from July 10, 1990 to December 5, 2008) led the KGB in its archives under the code name "Drozdv" and the current Patriarch of the ROC Kirill (the head of the ROC since February 1, 2009) led under the code name "Mikhailov". (van Herpen, 2016)

trend in Western Europe, a trend of “desecularization”, thus a return to religion and belief, can be observed in the eastern and southeast part of Europe. (Solik, 2018)

On the basis of a recent survey, Orthodox Christianity is the dominant religion, or more precisely the vast majority of people identify themselves with Orthodox Christianity (92% of the country’s population in Moldova, followed by Greece 90 % and Armenia 89 %, Georgia 89 % or Serbia 88 %). (Pew Research Center, 2017) Despite the fact that fewer people identify themselves with Orthodox Christianity in the RF (mainly due to the strong position of Muslim religion and the relatively high number of people in the country – 15% of the population – who do not identify with any religion), it is still 71% of this country’s population.¹⁸ (Pew Research Center, 2017)

In spite of the relatively low church attendance of Eastern Europeans, the Eastern Orthodox Christianity has been experiencing a real boom in this part of Europe. The trend of “desecularization” and a clear return to Orthodox tradition can now be observed in several former Soviet republics. A typical example is Georgia or Armenia. However, there is nowhere in Europe where the “desecularization” trend is clearer than in the RF.

The co-operating and reciprocal relationship between Russian politicians and the ROC in the independent RF dates back to the **Yeltsin** era in the first half of the 1990s. At this time various political groups and factions started to seek support from the ROC, the importance of which rapidly strengthened in the Russian society. These fractions were grouped in different movements, parties or marginal groups, exhibiting elements of “neo-Eurazianism” and “neo-Slavophilia”. (Duleba, 2001) These radical groups can be seen as a part of the Russian vague and anti-Western ideological concept known as “Russian civilizationism“ or “Russian civilizationist vision“, which was formulated in a specific context in Russian conditions. (Solik, Baar, 2019)

The essence of civilizationism is a “*restoration of the great Soviet community orientated against the West,*” (Kurfürst, 2018, p. 316) or more precisely it perceives Russia as a specific civilization, which is definitely not a part of the West. This ideological concept was initially (shortly after the collapse of the

¹⁸ Moreover, in those Eastern and Southeast European countries where Orthodox Christianity is the dominant religion, much of the country’s population consider Orthodoxy for an important aspect of national identity (82 % of Armenians, 81 % Georgians, 78 % Serbs, or 57 % of Russians (Pew Research Center, 2017).

USSR) developed as a common platform of supra-ethnic Russian nationalists and communist “apparatchiks”¹⁹ in the RF. Russian national-conservative and Orthodox-Christian forces have also gradually joined these two groups. (Kurfürst, 2018) It was a reaction of disagreement with the initial pro-Western ideological and foreign policy vector in the RF.²⁰

On the other hand, the ROC also sought a favour of these Russian politicians in order to change the more liberal and pluralist religious laws adopted during President **Gorbachev’s** term. Already at that time, the ROC has openly opposed not only to Western religious confessions, but also Western civilization in general. It means, that Russian radical nationalists, social conservatives, and communists have discovered an ideal ally (in the form of the ROC) to help restore Russia’s superpower anti-Western status.

If during the **Yeltsin** period the ROC had gradually become an organic part of the Russian political or cultural scene and Russian private life of citizens, since the accession of **Putin** to the President of the RF (2000), the cooperation between the state and the ROC has achieved a new enhanced dimension. New Russian president realized the potential of the ROC, which shared his views of Russia’s role in the world, and began to work toward strengthening its role in Russia. Apart from **Putin’s** declared claim to Orthodox Christianity, it is possible to assume that this dimension stemmed from the pragmatism of the new president, through which new Russian president wanted to achieve several goals. In the internal dimension **Putin** planned to use the ROC as an instrument of moral revival, or more precisely as an aspect of spiritual protection against the serious moral troubles that plagued Russian society at that time.²¹

In other words, for **Putin**, it was important – from a pragmatic point of view –

¹⁹ A term apparatchik means: a member of a Communist Party apparat.

²⁰ It is noteworthy that the former career communists and KGB staff officers became Orthodox Christians after the collapse of the USSR. Not only the first Russian president Yeltsin had found God, but equally A. Rutskoy, the Russian vice president, who during the standoff between President Yeltsin and the Duma in the autumn of 1993 supported the KGB-inspired coup against the president. Rutskoy published an article with the title *Without Orthodoxy We Don’t Revive the Fatherland*. (van Herpen, 2016) Even the leader of the communist Duma faction, G. Zyuganov, displayed “a curious mix of Orthodox piety, Russian chauvinism and communist nationalism.” (van Herpen, 2016, p. 132)

²¹ The RF was confronted with a number of economic, psychological and social problems in the late 1990s. These problems have been reflected in exuberant corruption, crime, alcoholism or drug addiction in the Russian society. Russia was not a healthy nation, but a country of rapid demographic decline.

to publicly identify himself with Orthodox Christianity (regardless of his inner beliefs) and gain the support of the ROC on his side. This was achieved in a relatively short time. A religious organization, thus the ROC, has become an “asset” for Russian political leaders, which „*can be used in order to achieve political goals.*“ (Curanović 2012a, p. 7) On the other hand, the ROC accepted this proposed cooperation and expressed its support for the Kremlin. The Church has gained considerable benefits and financial support.²² It is important to note, that Russian civilizationism has become an official solid part of the Kremlin’s ideology in 2012, when **Putin** became president of the RF for the third time. In the context of ideological position, **Putin** has finally moved to the perception of Russia as a specific (Orthodox-Christian) civilization.

Russian civilizationism has also become “*an ideological alternative to soft power of Western values and Russian leadership has approached the tactics of ‘war of values’ with the Western world in the third presidency of Putin. These tactics have been based on the idea that Russia is a morally superior alternative to the Western postmodernism.*” (Kurfürst, 2018, p. 317) Clear evidence of this is, for example, the open fight against the Russian civil sector and LGBT people, as well as the massive promotion of illiberal values abroad. In these activities, the ROC plays a significant role. In addition, there is a noticeable shift from the original defensive proposition of ensuring Russian “spiritual” security to the declaration of an offensive “war of values”.

Cooperation between the state apparatus and the ROC in the RF is possible mainly for two reasons. First, the Kremlin and the ROC have many common features, and therefore cooperation is more effective and smooth. Both actors take extreme authoritarian positions in several aspects: to suppress secular and spiritual dissent; to promote strict control over Russian society (by using various institutions created for that purpose); to seek to maintain power, or more precisely to seek to maintain their dominant position in Russian society in any way; to ignore the Constitutional order of the RF; to have their main common object of interests in the field of foreign policy – the Post-Soviet area, which

²² Correspondingly, the law on returning the churches’ possessions was approved in that period. In the last 18 years, millions of dollars were allocated by state-own enterprises for the restorations of thousands of churches that had been harmed or ruined by the USSR. Since the beginnings of the 90’s, about 25,000 Orthodox churches were either built or restored. Additionally, the ROC gained many rights that widened its role in Russia’s social life. For example, in 2010, Orthodoxy lessons were obligatory for trial purposes in governmental schools throughout Russia’s 19 regions. (Akhiyadov, 2019)

represents the sphere of existential interests for both actors.

This is an important piece of knowledge. Both the Russian state and the ROC, consider the so called “near abroad”²³ a sphere of Russia’s existential interests. Therefore, they perceive the activity of non-Russian actors (regardless of whether those are states or religious organisations) in this part of the world as a direct challenge. What is more, the ROC shares the Kremlin’s criticism of the “unipolar” world; the Pax Americana is viewed by both as a threat to global peace and stabilisation. The ROC is particularly cautious about exaggerated liberalisation of social relations, erosion of the institution of family, moral relativism, which are all associated with “Westernisation” and seen in terms of civilisational pressure performed by the US. (Curanović, 2012a)

Second, the relationship between the state apparatus and the ROC is amplified by common interests. In other words, this rapprochement is designed to achieve common goals in internal and foreign policy. In particular, these goals are: strengthening national identity by supporting a revival of “traditional values”; integrating Russian society by creating a strong sense of community; preventing interethnic and interreligious tensions (Curanović, 2012a). It is possible to say that the patriarch of Moscow, Archbishop **Kirill** (a head of the ROC since February 2009), and Russian President Vladimir Putin have in recent years “cemented an alliance for the pursuit of common values at home and abroad. These shared values can be characterized as openly traditionalist, conservative, anti-Western and anti-globalist.” (Antunez, 2017)

It is important to note that, although the state and the ROC are in the relationship, which is beneficial to both parties, the initiative in this relationship is being developed by the state and not by the church (like at national level). According to reverend **J. Buciora**, who is a clergyman of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada, because of the very strong ties between religious leaders and the government, it is inconceivable for religious leaders to issue any kind of statement about public policy without prior approval from the Kremlin. This is one of the reasons why the ROC, because of its established position in Russian society and its support from the government, remained silent on issues such as the alleged Russian military atrocities in Chechnya.²⁴ (Buciora,

²³ In the political language of the RF and some other Post-Soviet states, the “Near abroad“ refers to the newly independent republics (other than the RF itself) which emerged after the dissolution of the USSR.

²⁴ It is noteworthy to mention that on March 11, 1999 then Patriarch (head of the ROC) Alexy II Moscow issued a press release in which he called both parties for peace in a very politically correct

undated) The ROC also took a similar stance in the case of the Russian invasion of Georgia (in 2008), the Russian annexation of Crimea and Russian engagement in eastern Ukraine (2014).

On the basis of the above, it can be stated that the Church-State relations have specific and historical roots in Russian conditions dating back to the end of the 10th Century. In fact, during every period of Russian history, the ROC has played an important and cooperative role in its relationship with the ruling elites. This is also the case in the present-day RF. This cooperative and interconnected relationship between the state and the ROC creates ideal conditions for the ROC's participation in the formation of internal and foreign policy.

3 The Russian Orthodox Church as a factor in Russia's foreign policy

3.1 The Russian orthodox church and its transnational potential

In the context of religious instrument in Russia' foreign policy, a transnational potential of the religious organization is also necessary, or more precisely, an ability of the religious organization to promote its influence abroad. The transnational potential of the ROC is enormous. The largest autocephalous²⁵ Orthodox Church in the world has survived the Soviet collapse without a loss of territorial integrity and its influence more or less persisted throughout the Post-Soviet region and even abroad, where it deepens its power by construction and refurbishing of its parishes. The number of believers inclining to this church is estimated at 150 million and pastoral activity is carried out in 60 countries. (Dzidziguri, 2016) In these countries, the ROC relies on an extensive and persistent network of parishes of the ROC. According to the official data of the ROC, in 2016 there are 34,764 parishes of the ROC in the

way. He calls the leadership of Chechnya to oppose criminals and the Russian federal authorities to contribute to the struggle with terrorism. (Buciora, undated)

²⁵ Autocephality is a complete church independence. In other words, autocephality is the right of autonomy for a church; specifically, the right to resolve all internal problems on its own authority and to appoint its own bishops, including the head of the church, without any obligatory expression of dependence on another church. Used especially in Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox and Independent Catholic Churches.

world. It is therefore possible to visit the parish of the ROC for example in Haiti, Uganda, Indonesia, Morocco, or in Cuba. (Russkaya pravoslavnaya..., 2016)

It is necessary to add, that the ROC manages most of its activities abroad through its *Department for External Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate*. This is a major synodal institution of the ROC, founded by the *Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church*²⁶ in 1946, when the development of the Church's external activities made it urgent to establish a special church body for sustaining this essential aspect of church life. (Mospat, 2019a) Current head of the Department is Metropolitan **Hilarion** of Volokolamsk. One of the most important tasks of the institution is to maintain and enhance ecclesiastical relations with Orthodox churches, "non-Orthodox" churches, non-Christian religious communities, as well as with governmental, parliamentary, inter-governmental, religious and public institutions abroad, including public international organizations. (Mospat, 2019a)

Within the transnational potential of the ROC, the concept of the canonical territory of the ROC is also important. Religious and political liberation in the USSR and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR resulted in the creation of fifteen new and independent states. In many of these countries, national and emancipatory tendencies (both political and religious) were apparent even before the collapse of the USSR. There was an evident risk for the ROC, because the local orthodox churches in the Post-Soviet area, which were under the jurisdiction of the ROC at the time of the USSR,²⁷ would have striven for some church independence – a greater degree of church autonomy or even autocephaly, thus a complete church independence in new Post-Soviet conditions.

In response to these threats, the ROC adopted a statement, which declared a clear position: "*Several countries – one patriarchate.*" (Lomagin, 2012, p. 503) This crucial statement and its derived concept of the canonical territory of the ROC argued, that the ROC's boundaries may not coincide with the boundaries

²⁶ The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church serves by Church statute as the supreme administrative governing body of the ROC in the periods between Bishops' Councils.

²⁷ During the USSR the ROC was *jurisdictionally* superior to the Eastern Orthodox Churches that were located in the territory of the USSR. From the late 1940s until the late 1980s the majority of operating Orthodox churches in the USSR (almost two-thirds) were located within the Ukrainian exarchate of the ROC, renamed the Ukrainian Orthodox church in 1990. The subordinate Ukrainian exarchate included dioceses in the territory of today's Ukraine and Belarus. Dioceses of the ROC was also created in Estonia, Latvia, Moldova, or in Soviet Central Asia too. (Lupinin, 2010)

of individual (secular) states and, that the disintegration of the USSR is not a reason to destroy the unity of the ROC. It was officially approved by The Holy Synod of the ROC on October 22, 1991 (thus two months before the official breakdown of the USSR). This act of the ROC essentially created a church or spiritual analogue of the Russian secular concept of Russian “near abroad”. However, this “Church near abroad” emerged a year before the secular version and remained the same after the collapse of the USSR – the ROC refused to accept the new territorial status quo and did not accept the borders of the newly formed successor states in the Post-Soviet space. (Solik, Baar, 2019)

The canonical territory of the ROC is made up of several Orthodox churches with different church statutes according to the degree of their autonomy (the Autonomous Churches, the Self-governing Churches, the Metropolitan Areas, the Exarchates, the Dioceses/the Eparchies²⁸). These Orthodox churches are under the ROC's exclusive church jurisdiction. This opinion is given in an official document of the ROC – *The Statute of the Russian Orthodox Church* from 2000. According to Article 1 (General provisions), subparagraph 3 of this document is written that “*The jurisdiction of the ROC shall include persons of Orthodox confession living on the canonical territory of the ROC in the RF, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, China, Kirghizia, Latvia, Lithuania, Tajikistan, Turkmenia, Uzbekistan, Estonia, Japan and also Orthodox Christians living in other countries.*” (Mospat, 2000)

In 2005 the current head of the ROC **Kirill** (at that time **Kirill** was Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad and the head of the Department for external church relations of the ROC) articulated in a much-abbreviated form the ROC's position on the theory of the canonical territory of the ROC. In his interview **Kirill** defines the concept of the canonical territory of the ROC on three major principles/peculiarities: territorial, ethnic/national, and pastoral. (Buciora, undated) It should be noted, that **Kirill's** arguments, or more precisely ROC's arguments contain a controversial ecclesiological and historical ambiguity in the case of the canonical territory of the ROC. However, a presentation of this ambiguity is not a goal of this work.

²⁸ At the lowest level of this hierarchy is exactly an eparchy, what is a territorial diocese governed by a bishop of one of the Eastern churches, who holds the title of eparch. Each eparchy is divided into parishes in the same manner as a diocese of Western Christendom.

3.2 The Russian orthodox church as a part of Russia's foreign policy strategy

The current State-Church relations (in the context of foreign policy) are manifested in two ways in the RF. First, it is manifested by various committees, commissions or groups relating to religious issues. These bodies fall directly under the Presidential Administration of the RF (the PA of the RF), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the RF (the MFA of the RF) or the State Duma (the lower house of the Federal Assembly of the RF). In practice this means that representatives of the ROC or from influential Orthodox community and MPs of the State Duma of the RF or representatives of the MFA meet at regular intervals to discuss and elaborate or offer concrete recommendations to the MFA of the RF or the PA of the RF as a whole. Second, the ROC in cooperation with the MFA of the RF or the PA of the RF or independently (with the consent of the MFA of the RF or the PA of the RF) carries out specific activities in the international environment and within international organisations.

In the first case, the *Inter-fraction group of deputies for the defence of Christian values* is a typical example. This body, whose main task is to protect traditional (Orthodox-Christian) values and preserve Russian moral identity, was established in the State Duma in 2012 by **S. Gavrilov** (Russian politician from The Communist party of the Russian federation). The group has been established in response to the disturbance of the Pussy Riot, a Russian feminist protest punk rock group in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in February 2012.²⁹ The body includes 44 MPs, 4 Senators of The Federation Council (the upper house of the Federal Assembly of Russia), but also **S. Glazyev**, an advisor to the president of the RF. (Ushakova, 2015) Its work is coordinated by **Gavrilov** and **S. Popov** (Russian politician from the United Russia, the ruling political party of Russia). Regular meetings bring together members of the group with representatives of the ROC at the State Duma RF. They not only discuss, but also promote the provision of humanitarian and financial assistance to "Orthodox brothers" in eastern Ukraine, Crimea, Transnistria, Syria and Serbia, who live in difficult or war-torn conditions. (Solik, 2018)

²⁹ Five members of the band staged a performance inside this significant Russian Orthodox cathedral in Moscow on February 21, 2012. The group's actions were condemned as sacrilegious by the Orthodox clergy and eventually stopped by church security officials. The women said their protest was directed at the Orthodox Church leaders' support for Putin during his election campaign. (Bennets, 2017).

However, the *Working group for cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation* can be considered as the most important cooperation body between the ROC and the state in the context of foreign policy. The roots of this group date back to 2003. In 2003 “then Patriarch of the ROC **Alexy II**³⁰ paid his first official visit to Russia’s MFA and it is from this starting point that the two organizations have been able to develop policies related to defending and deepening Russia’s ‘spiritual’ values and the ROC’s interactions overseas.” (Blitt, 2011, p. 380-381)

The Working group between the ROC and the MFA of the RF was formed in the same year. In May 2003 the first meeting took place at the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department for External Church Relations. Second mutual meeting was held at the MFA of the RF in November 2003. At the second meeting, the document *Rules of Interaction between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation* was also signed. This document sets out the main foreign areas of cooperation between the ROC and the MFA of the RF and contains provisions on the Working group. (Ministerstvo inostrannykh..., 2003)

The importance of the group has increased considerably since **S. Lavrov** has become the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the RF in 2004. **Lavrov** has repeatedly declared his support for this group and highlighted the strong historical ties – dating back to Russian Imperial period – between the ROC and the MFA of the RF.³¹ (Curanović, Leustean, 2015) In general, the ROC – the MFA of the RF working group “meets regularly, and sometimes in smaller subgroups, to discuss a range of issues including the maintenance of cultural and spiritual links with Russians abroad, the upholding of their rights, and preserving the cultural and historic legacy of [the] Fatherland and of the Russian language. In promoting these activities, **Lavrov** has described the ROC as nothing less than a huge mainstay of government actions in this

³⁰ Patriarch Alexy II (secular name A. Ridiger) was the 15th Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus’, the primate of the ROC (1990-2008).

³¹ Cementing the ROC and the MFA of the RF partnership in the form of the permanent Working group struck Lavrov as natural, since such a move reflected “an age-old tradition of Russian domestic diplomacy”. (Blitt, 2011, p. 381) The instrumentalisation of religion for political aims has a long and rich tradition in Russia. Its roots go back to the 18th century. “As a result of reforms by Peter the Great, the clergy was de facto transformed into civil servants educated at public universities and paid salaries by the state. In return they were obliged to serve Russia. The clergy would take the oath of loyalty to the tsar and religious institutions were assigned specific targets, for example, cultural assimilation of conquered territories.” (Curanović, 2013)

sector.” (Blitt, 2011, p. 381) The meetings serve as strategy sessions that address the planning of the Patriarch’s international travels and evaluate the ROC’s activities in international organizations, as well as developments in its inter-religious relations, including with the Vatican. (Mospat, 2009)

The link between the MFA of the RF and ROC has been deepening since the creation of this Working group. **Lavrov** openly admits that the ROC is “*an essential partner in coping with global challenge...Ongoing financial and economic crises revealed the malaise of liberalism. Self-restraint and responsibility are two moral principles that are in need today. Just and harmonic system of international relations should be based upon the highest moral law above all.*” (Lavrov cited in Lomagin 2012, p. 507) **Lavrov** said in 2011. The MFA of the RF fully agreed with the ROC position that militant secularism and moral relativism are the basis for the so-called ad hoc approach to international relations that comprises the politics of double standards. In this situation, the RF regards strengthening the moral foundations of international relations as an essential part of its policy. That is why the MFA of the RF is going to further strengthen its cooperation with the ROC, inter alia within the framework of a special Working group. (Lomagin, 2012)

One of the specific projects coming out of the ROC – the MFA of the RF working group is the *Days of Russian Spiritual Culture*. This program, part of a large-scale cultural and educational project *Days of Russia* PR initiative launched by the Russian government, is operated with support from Russia’s MFA, the Ministry of Culture of the RF, and the ROC, among others. To date, the program has been a traveling roadshow of sorts, held in over a dozen states including Serbia, Germany, Greece, Croatia, Cuba, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Chile. (Blitt, 2011)

Within the RF the ROC cooperates with state structures, and inside the Universal Orthodox Church the ROC has a well thought out policy that coincides in many respects with the goals of the Russian Foreign Ministry. Moreover, Kremlin views the ROC as a reserve diplomatic channel. In 2007, the Kremlin established the Russky Mir (Russian World) Foundation, embarking on a concerted soft-power campaign to promote Russian language and culture beyond the country’s borders. For many analysts the term Russky Mir, exemplifies an expansionist and messianic Russian foreign policy, the intersection of the interests of the Russian state and the ROC. The project initially focused on promoting closer political and economic ties with Russian

speakers in the former Soviet republics, but it soon came to incorporate a worldview constructed in opposition to the West.³² (Antunez, 2017)

4 Specific activities of the ROC abroad as support of Russia's foreign policy

4.1 Negotiation and conflict resolution activities of the ROC

In the foreign policy context, the ROC has been carrying out many remarkable activities. An important part of the policy of ROC abroad is dedicated to peace-building processes especially in the Post-Soviet space and in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. In this respect, the ROC substituted the activities of secular diplomatic and political authorities of the RF to a large extent. One of the first major negotiating activities of the ROC (then the head of the ROC **Alexy II**) was engagement in the Kosovo War (1998-1999) at the end of the **Yeltsin** period. (Curanović, 2012b)

The ROC was active even during NATO operations on Serbian targets. On April 20, 1999, Patriarch **Alexy II** arrived in Belgrade and assured the Serbian nation that it had a full support of the Russian people. Serbian Patriarch **Pavle** served a solemn Mass together with **Alexy II**, which represented an important socio-political event and a symbol of Russian-Serbian "brotherhood". (Solik, 2018) During this visit, the Patriarch of the ROC attempted to mediate between the two warring parties, he met with **S. Milosevic** as well as with **I. Rugova**, but ultimately, he failed to reach the official tripartite meeting. In addition, the ROC and negotiated with other religious confessions. It was in fact – through Metropolitan **Kirill** – engaged in informal activities of Christian *International Liaison Group*, which was founded on May 18, 1999 in Vienna in order to achieve peace in Yugoslavia. However, even this initiative did not produce any significant measurable effect. This, however, changed nothing on the fact that the ROC actively organized humanitarian aid and firmly stood up to defend the

³² Although there is clearly a great deal of overlap between the religious and political uses of the Russky Mir concept, there are some differences. As used by the state, Russky Mir is typically a political or a cultural idea. In both senses it is used by groups working for the Russian government to strengthen the country's domestic stability, restore Russia's status as a world power, and increase her influence in neighbouring states. As used by the Church, Russky Mir is a religious concept. It is essential for reversing the secularization of society throughout the former Soviet Union; a task Patriarch Kirill has termed the "second Christianization" of Rus. (Antunez, 2017)

government in Belgrade on the international stage, for example by emphasizing the issue of destruction of Orthodox churches in Kosovo in the UN. (Curanović, 2012b)

The ROC has been involved also in the South Caucasus for a long time. A specific case is the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Through negotiations the ROC has been engaged in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where this Church reached a considerable success in this respect. The roots of this diplomatic engagement dating back to the first half of the 1990s. In November 1993, the then Patriarch of the ROC **Alexy II** managed to convince the main representatives of the Armenian and Azerbaijani spiritual life to hold a meeting. Specifically, it was the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians (the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church) **Vazgen I** (in office 1955-1994) and an important religious (Muslim) representative of Azerbaijan, Islamic Sheikh **A. Pashazade**,³³ who met in Moscow, Danilov monastery.³⁴ (Interfax, 1993)

In May 2001, **Alexy II** and **A. Pashazade** signed a joint declaration in which they urged politicians of the South Caucasus to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by peaceful means and announced new negotiations between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Caucasus religious orders in Azerbaijan. In this case it is necessary to clarify that negotiation activities of the ROC also brought some positives to the secular Russian diplomacy. The successor of **Vazgen I** and **Karakin I** (1994-1999), **Karekin II** (since 1999 in office) indeed asked Russian **V. Putin** to increase the activity of the RF to resolve the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which ensured that the Kremlin could not be accused of voluntary interference in the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. (Curanović, 2012b) This is an important and planned goal of the Kremlin in the future in this area and the ROC has helped to achieve this goal.

In the “frozen” conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh the RF acts purely pragmatically. While there is this conflict, Armenians will turn to the RF (and deepen their dependency) when their safety is threatened. Clearly, this includes also a military assistance, which guarantees Moscow its military presence in the South Caucasus. If the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh was solved and a guarantee of a lasting peace created, the Russian

³³ A. Pashazade is a Muslim sheikh, an important Caucasian mufti (Islamic Sunni cleric) and the Chairman of the Religious Council of the Caucasus in Azerbaijan.

³⁴ Danilov monastery is a walled monastery on the right bank of the Moskva River in Moscow. Since 1983, it has functioned as the headquarters of the ROC and the official residence of the Patriarch of Moscow and all the Rus'.

presence would cease to have meaning for Armenians and that is something Moscow cannot allow. Consequently, by implementing the principle of “divide and rule” the RF maintains its presence in the South Caucasus. (Ondrejcsák, 2014)

In the context of diplomatic engagement of the ROC held an important meeting under the auspices of the ROC in November 2003. There were four-party talks between the spiritual leaders of Russia (**Alexy II**), Armenia (**Karekin II**), Azerbaijan (**A. Pashazade**) and also Georgia (**Ilija II**). According to the participants of this meeting *“an importance of such meetings is significant. It lies in particular in the fact, that the efforts of religious leaders have been able to prevent escalating territorial dispute into interreligious conflict. As a result, there is no blood shedding in Nagorno-Karabakh today and concrete steps are being taken to find missing persons and to return prisoners of war.”* (Safonov, 2016, p. 159)

The second tripartite meeting was held in April 2010 in Baku in the presence of the new head of the ROC Patriarch **Kirill** (Curanović, 2012b). At this meeting, Patriarch **Kirill** stated that seen the regulation in this conflict can be seen: *“I think that Nagorno Karabakh conflict regulation has registered a notable progress, and Azerbaijani and Armenian Presidents **Aliyev** and **Sargsyan**, as well as the religious leaders of the two countries have greatly contributed to that.”* According to him, *“the religious leaders are not political figures, but they can contribute to consolidation of peace with their prayers and calls.”* (Kirill cited in Armenpress, 2010). Tripartite talks in Baku were held with strong contribution specifically of Patriarch Kirill, who played a major role in efforts to reach a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Patriarch **Kirill** has been actively participating in other regular meetings with spiritual leaders from Armenia and Azerbaijan (last in November 2019 with **A. Pashazade** and **Karekin II**. at a tripartite meeting in Baku). (Mospat, 2019b) For this activity Kirill received the highest state award of the Republic of Armenia – the Order of St. **M. Mashtoz**³⁵ by Armenian president **S. Sargsian** at the residence of the head of the state in Yerevan in 2011. On this occasion **Sargsian** said: *“It is not fortuitous that the present peacemaking meeting takes place in Armenia because His Holiness is a co-founder of the CIS Interreligious*

³⁵ M. Mashtoz was an early medieval Armenian linguist, composer, theologian, statesman and hymnologist. He is best known for inventing the Armenian alphabet.

*Council*³⁶ and takes an active part in the bilateral religious talks, in which I also participate modestly, on the solution of the Karabakh problem. Though the meeting was short, it was very good and useful.” (Mospat 2011)

In practice, this means that the ROC is invited to peace-making meetings by secular and spiritual leaders from conflict areas in the Post-Soviet territory. The active involvement of the ROC in these “frozen” conflicts (including the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh), more precisely its involvement in peace-building process allows for the permanent presence of the RF in these important (geopolitical) areas. Moreover, the ROC participates in a false positive image of the Russian regime not only in Russian society itself, but also abroad. As a result of these “peace-building” activities of the ROC, the Russian State is seen as a “guarantor of peace” and as a “state striving for peace among nations”. The ROC thus legitimizes the current Russian regime and its (foreign) political activities within Russian society, but also abroad.

4.2 Various activities of the ROC in the Post-Soviet region

Different actions of the ROC in the Post-Soviet region are generally seen as some of the most important foreign-policy and diplomatic activities of the ROC. It should be noted that these actions have pursued both spiritual and secular aims and have been rapidly intensified after **Kirill** became Patriarch of the ROC on 1 February 2009. At this time **Kirill** was a greatly experienced Christian Orthodox hierarch, not only in the domestic dimension, but he also had experiences in foreign and diplomatic service.³⁷ **Kirill** has made a large number of official visits all over the world in his position.

Among the fundamental priorities of the ROC there is integration of the Russian diaspora and strengthening of Russian influence in the Russian Post-Soviet “near abroad” especially through the cultivation of cultural ties of Russia, Belarus and the Ukraine, which is an important element for maintaining the

³⁶ *The Interreligious Council in the Commonwealth of the Independent States* is a public organization founded by traditional religious organizations in the CIS. The decision to establish it was made by the Second Interreligious Peace Forum of the CIS in March 2004.

³⁷ On 13 November 1989, Kirill was appointed chairman of the Department for external church relations and permanent member of the Holy Synod. Kirill attended many international secular and church conferences where he defended the interests of the USSR and later (after the collapse of the USSR) the RF. Besides native (Russian) language), he speaks English, French and German. In addition, it should be noted that especially since 2002 Kirill stood in for Alexy II, then Patriarch of the ROC in many – especially in foreign – affairs due to Patriarch’s deteriorating health condition. (Solik, Baar, 2017)

Russian cultural space in Eurasia. (Curanović, 2012b) In the context of the integration of the Russian diaspora it is necessary to note, that the ROC relies on an extensive and persistent network of parishes of the ROC. These parishes represent an effective tool for consolidating a large Russian diaspora not only in the Post-Soviet space but around the world. Thanks to the Orthodox myth – circulated by leading hierarchs not only within the ROC but also within the Orthodox (subordinate) churches in the canonical territory of the ROC – declaring that *“baptism equals orthodoxy what necessarily results in religiosity and display of unconditional loyalty to the Church,”* (Munteanu, 2015, p. 59) the ROC is indeed effective and successful in reconciling and manipulating public opinion (especially) in the Post-Soviet region.

The nearly 20-million strong Russian diaspora on Post-Soviet territory is distinguished by above-average religiosity (and with a decidedly greater attendance at religious practices than in Russia) and great attachment to the ROC, which is treated as a substitute institution for the homeland. In these states, where other Orthodox churches exist outside the structures of the Moscow patriarchate, belonging to the ROC is also a manifestation of patriotism. (Curanović, 2012b) A Russian journalist and political commentator, **K. von Eggert**, also agrees that the ability of Russian Orthodox parishes to serve as centres for Russian diaspora and its connection with Russia are the main strengths of the Moscow Patriarchate’s impact outreach: *“In the authoritarian Turkmenistan, for example, they are the only channel of connection with the Russian culture and language for almost 100,000 Russian-speaking citizens,”* (von Eggert cited in Zolotov, 2014)

The ROC and its jurisdictionally subordinate Churches in the Post-Soviet space with co-operation with the Russian diaspora, pro-Russian oriented populations and various fundamentalist Christian Orthodox religious groups promote Russian influence, culture and language and fight against Western values, specifically against the “external Western enemy.” It is precisely the struggle against the Western values (including Western integration projects and Western-oriented politicians) in the Post-Soviet states as one of the principal tactical goals of the ROC in cooperation with its jurisdictionally subordinated churches and with Russian political leadership. This ROC’s support for radical conservative and anti-Western attitudes is only a reflection of Kremlin’s internal policy in the spirit of Russian civilizationism. Secular Kremlin elites (including

Putin³⁸ himself) and leading hierarchs of the ROC (including Kirill³⁹ himself) consider explicitly Western values as a symbol of “moral decadence.” (Meotti, 2016)

As already mentioned, this Russian “missionistic” fight against “Western enemy” is part of civilizationism”. It follows from the above that, “**Putin’s Russia is fast becoming a very puritan place. Ever since returning to the presidency in 2012, Putin has pursued an increasingly religious-conservative ideology both at home and abroad, defining Russia as a moral fortress against sexual licence and decadence, porn and gay rights.**” (Meotti 2016) However, the acceptance of this “illiberal” and socio-conservative model was gradual and developed from a long-term perspective. **Putin’s** definitive approval of this ideology is a combination of internal and external pressures on the state since the collapse of the USSR. It should be simultaneously noted, that the ROC – as an influential and largest religious organization in the RF – has assisted to the Russian political elites in creating and incorporating a radical conservative-traditionalist agenda not only into the Russian society, but also abroad (especially in the Post-Soviet space). The result of this campaign is to strengthen Russia’s image as a “guardian of traditional values” and as an alternative to the decadent and morally declining West.

In the Post-Soviet space, there are moral, traditional, ultra-conservative and “anti-Western” values sophisticatedly promoted especially by the ROC, particularly through Orthodox literature, the Internet and a large number of Orthodox TV channels owned and co-owned by the ROC. These channels have a stable reach in this space. Such channels include for example: Spas TV,

³⁸ During the annual Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly in December 2013 Russian president said: “(Western) destruction of traditional values from above not only leads to negative consequences for society, but is also essentially anti-democratic, since it is carried out on the basis of abstract, speculative ideas, contrary to the will of the majority, which does not accept the changes occurring or the proposed revision of values. We know that there are more and more people in the world who support our position on defending traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilisation in every nation for thousands of years: the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life.” (Putin, 2013)

³⁹ Patriarch of the ROC Kirill also quite often talks publicly about Western moral decline. In 2016, Kirill described the “catastrophe” of the West’s departure from Christian moral values: “We know what enormous efforts are being made today to prevent primarily the Christians from authentic understanding of the Divine moral law. And we know what catastrophe is taking place in Western Europe and generally across the rich American-European world... Many Christians in the West are forgetting their roots, re-considering the foundations of morality, justify the sin not only within their community, but also support the sinful laws which justify the sin.” (Kirill cited in Mihailova 2016)

Soyuz TV or Tsargrad TV. (Hug, 2015) For example, the influential national and Orthodox channel Tsargrad TV is substantially financially supported by powerful Russian oligarch **K. Malofeev**, who has close ties to the Kremlin. *“Malofeev is the chairman of the Board of Directors of the media group Tsargrad and he is a zealous Russian Orthodox Christian and mainly a strong advocate of the Russian monarchy before 1917. He is also called an ‘Orthodox oligarch.’”* (Solik, Baar, 2019, p. 30)

In the context of promoting moral and traditionalist values, it should be noted that the ROC conducts a persistent campaign especially against the LGBT community and homosexuality in general. In the RF, homosexuality is regarded as a product of the “Western propaganda” and it is undesirable in the country.⁴⁰ (Solik, 2018)

Patriarch **Kirill** has often spoken out against homosexuality as a symbol of Western decadence. In 2013, he depicted attitudes toward homosexuality in Western Europe as *“dangerous apocalyptic symptom”* and highlighted the necessity to *“ensure that sin is never sanctioned in Russia by state law because that would mean that the nation has embarked on a path of self-destruction.”* (Sleptcov, 2017, p. 155) According to **Kirill**, laws supporting homosexuals are contrary to morality. He is deeply convinced that these legal norms are not viable and embody a gap between freedom and moral responsibility, between law and moral principles. (Ria Novosti, 2017) This patriarch’s radical position naturally defends the whole ROC, which encourages resistance to this minority in the Russian society, but also abroad (through its jurisdictional Churches in its canonical territory). In many former Soviet states such as Moldova, Ukraine or Belarus, the ROC is thus a political actor. This Church uses this role to influence legislative processes concerning LGBT rights and the role of religion in society, for instance.

Homosexuality has turned into a new external enemy of the church (and the state), by association, of the Russian people. In this respect, a dangerous trend has been taking place in the Post-Soviet space. A new radical and extremist

⁴⁰ In the RF, a homophobic *“gay propaganda law”*, or the *“anti-gay law”* has been adopted. This federal homophobic law is officially called the *“Law for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values”* was unanimously approved by the State Duma on 11 June 2013 (with just one MP abstaining – I. Ponomarev) and was signed into law by President V. Putin on 30 June 2013. The 2013 law exacerbated the hostility the LGBT community in the RF has long suffered, and also stifled access to LGBT-inclusive education and support services, with harmful consequences for children. (Vnesenie Izmenenij, 2013)

group of Orthodox Christian clergymen have appeared not only within the ROC, but also in several Churches (in the independent states of the Post-Soviet space), which are jurisdictionally subordinated under the ROC. These clergymen and Orthodox Christian activists call for a closer relationship with the ROC (and Russia of course) and openly and radically oppose the EU and various (secular and religious) minorities.

Typical feature is the Moldovan Orthodox Church (the MOC), which is a self-governing Church under the ROC. Its canonical territory is Moldova. The MOC is one of the most vocal opponents of the LGBT community. The MOC's pressure campaign against this community is coordinated by the ROC and it is (in many cases) supported by influential Moldovan political forces (especially the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova) including the current president **I. Dodon** (the former leader of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova). They demand "*stopping the alleged 'homosexual propaganda' in the country.*" (Sliusarenco, Foltea, 2018)

In particular, this offensive campaign has intensified since May 2012, when the law, which bans discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment, was adopted by the Moldavian Parliament.⁴¹ A great wave of dissatisfaction with this law was expressed by clergymen of the MOC. Moreover, the ROC also expressed its dissatisfaction with the law. As mentioned in a statement of the Holy Synod of the ROC, the Church "*protests against the legalization of evil and the declaration of sinful behavior as ordinary activity.*" (Sliusarenco, Foltea, 2018) It calls on Moldovan authorities to resist "*attempts of propaganda of sexual perversion and to take steps to amend the law in order to comply with the will of the majority of Moldovan citizens.*" (Sliusarenco, Foltea 2018)

The above-mentioned group of radical Orthodox Christian clergymen and activists in Moldova includes mainly **G. Valuta**, leader of the association "Pro-

⁴¹ This adopted law was related to the then political climate and a pro-Western course of Moldova (including the promotion of human rights and civil liberties) in this period. This course was set after the parliamentary elections in Moldova in 2010. In the election, The Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova, Democratic Party of Moldova and the Liberal Party formed the Alliance for European Integration in a coalition against the pro-Russian Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova. The Alliance supported integration of Moldova into the EU. Unfortunately, Moldova's pro-Western vector was disrupted after the 2014 parliamentary elections. In these elections, the pro-Russian parties were successful (The Party of Socialists won the election and The Party of Communists *finished in third place*). In addition, the country has found itself in chaos after these elections, due to value and ideological contradictions and corruption cases.

Ortodoxia”, Christian Orthodox association “Fericiata Maica Matrona”, priest **A. Cibric**, famous for his anti-Semitic initiatives, the Bishop of Bălți and Fălești⁴² regions **Marchel**. On 30 September 2012, in a TV interview Bishop **Marchel** stated: “*The equality law, which has widely opened – I’d say, creating for them, in a sense, conditions of Eden – the gates of the paradise for homosexuals, shall do little to stop them – it should not allow them employment in educational, health care or in public catering. Just imagine if a homosexual – 92% of them have HIV, are sick of AIDS – is employed at the blood transfusion centre. It is a disaster.*” (Bishop Marchel cited in Munteanu, 2015, p. 63)

In the struggle against the West and, on the contrary, the strengthening of pro-Russian influence in the Post-Soviet states, the sophisticated activities of the ROC are important. These campaigns are to provoke resistance to Western institutions and, on the contrary, evoke positive attitudes towards the RF and its initiated project of the Eurasian Economic Union (the EEU). Typical example is also Moldova. In August 2009, four Moldovan political parties agreed to create a governing coalition called the Alliance for European Integration. The Liberal Democratic Party, Liberal Party, Democratic Party, and Our Moldova committed themselves to achieving European integration and promoting a balanced, consistent and responsible foreign policy. (Rettman, 2011) A majority of the Moldovan people (65%) held positive views about the EU at that time, and were therefore supportive of this new coalition. (Montesano, Togt, Zweers, 2016) In their attempt to block Russia’s influence in the region, the ruling coalition made deals with the EU to prepare for the *Moldova-European Union Association Agreement*.

As soon as the European integration process started in Moldova and the mentioned association agreement between Moldova and EU was signed and approved by the European Parliament on November 2014,⁴³ the MOC in the cooperation with the ROC launched a vigorous anti-EU offensive and agitation in the Moldovan society. As **Calus** notices “*the MOC has played a role in instigating the fear of the EU.*” (Calus, 2016, p. 70) The various “edifying” activities of the ROC and the MOC, but also other factors such as corruption,

⁴² Bălți and Fălești is one of the five eparchies of the MOC, which are subordinated to the ROC.

⁴³ The European Parliament approved the EU-Moldova Association Agreement on 13th November 2014. This agreement included the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area – *DCFTA* too. This agreement should form the basis for strengthening political cooperation and economic integration between the EU and Moldova and ensuring mutual free market access. Moldova ratified the Association Agreement on July 2, 2014. (Európsky parlament: Spravodajstvo, 2014)

anti-European propaganda spread by Russian media and the pro-Russian EEU have caused a widespread distrust of the EU and NATO in the Moldovan society. Recent opinion polls clearly confirm this fact.

For example, the socio-political poll made by the Public Opinion Fund (FOP) at the demand of Poliexpert conducted during 26 May – 5 June 2017 with the participation of 1,798 people in 110 localities of Moldova reveals that 57% of respondents think, that Moldova should be closer to Russia and only 43% of respondents think it should be closer to Europe and the West. In addition, about 67% of Moldovans hold positive views of the RF, 56% – the EU, Romania – 44%, Ukraine – 39% and the U.S. – 38%. 48% of the respondents said they would vote for Moldova to join the EEU. Only 40% of Moldovans would vote for joining the EU. Some 65% of Moldovans would vote against joining NATO, while 21% of respondents would vote for joining the military alliance. 38.5% of Moldovan citizens trust strongly pro-Russian president **I. Dodon** the most, followed by **M. Sandu** (17.3%). Other politicians like **P. Filip** could not get more than 3.7% of people's trust. (Vlas, 2017)

Similar situation is in Belarus. There is a dominant religious institution in this country – the Belarusian Orthodox Church (the BOC), which is also subordinate to the ROC. The BOC is an exarchate, it means that this Church is de facto a province of the ROC.⁴⁴ The declared autonomy of the BOC is only pro-formative and resembles the political autonomy of Russian pseudo-federalism. Through this Church, the ROC also promotes Russian culture and language within the Belarusian society and destroys and negates the national consciousness of Belarus. Ultimately, this means that the ROC helps to push Belarus deeper into the secular Russian sphere of influence.

The influence of the ROC in Belarus is enormous. In the BOC at the level of activities with young people militaristic, pro-Russian, pro-Soviet tendencies are

⁴⁴ The Belarusian Orthodox Church (the BOC) is the official name of the Belarusian Exarchate. Exarchate is an organisational territorial unit in the eastern Christian Churches. The BOC is the largest religious organization in Belarus, uniting the predominant majority of its Eastern Orthodox Christians. It represents the union of Russian orthodox eparchies on the territory of Belarus, it means, that is jurisdictionally under the ROC. The BOC gained a certain degree of independence in internal matters (its own local synod), but only within the limits indicated by the ROC (the Holy Synod of the ROC decides, for example, on administrative territorial division, construction of new monasteries and theological schools, names directors of schools, approves all reports from the sessions of the local synod of the BOC and also appoint the head of the BOC without the consent of the Belarusian bishops). (Curanović 2012b) It is thus clear that the BOC has an extremely weak position in the Orthodox world.

growing. It concerns functioning of a number of military-Patriotic clubs throughout Belarus, where patriotism has a clear Eastern vector (Slavic, pro-Russian, pro-Soviet), the ideological and military training is carried out among troubled and violent youth. Although this activity is targeting and touches on a certain social segment, its public visibility is increasing. Especially, since the Russian annexation of Crimea, the BOC has been organising military-patriotic clubs. In 2016, one of the oldest Belarusian oppositional weekly newspapers called "Nasha Niva" revealed at least five such orthodox-military-patriotic clubs in Hrodna region alone (the most Catholic area in Belarus). The daily activities of these clubs include religious classes, patriotic lessons, and martial arts. On their web-pages, two such clubs invited Belarusians *"to protect Russians in the former territory of Ukraine."* (Rudnik, 2017)

Russian symbols have become an important part of patriotic clubs and Christian Orthodox events. One Vitsebsk club organised a trip to Russia for youngsters which included training with former military officer **A. Milchiakov**, who fought in Donbass. At Orthodox festivals and the annual Orthodox ball, Russian flags and people in military clothes are commonplace. In 2015, the oppositional organisation "Malady Front" drew up a list of 100 pro-Russian organisations in Belarus. Among them are many pro-Russian Orthodox military clubs with names like "Holy Rus", "Russian world", "Russian national unity". "The Russian Public Movement for the Spiritual Development of the People for the State and Spiritual Revival of Holy Rus" also promotes clearly pro-Russian ideas. Since 2014, the increasing activity of these organisations and clubs has become more visible and dangerous for Belarusian sovereignty. (Rudnik, 2017)

In addition, the BOC in cooperation with the ROC also organizes various spectacular cultural orthodox events and festivals for the broader classes of the Belarusian population. In 2015, the BOC organised a large Orthodox festival based on the "Stalin Line". The venue and the agenda had an ideological, pro-Russian, and military character. *"During the event many young participants were dressed in military uniforms, the entertainment included many items with military and Russian-patriotic elements. Even in such a neutral mass event, like a ball of Orthodox youth, people related to military service or service in bodies of internal affairs, cadets took part."* (Vasilevich, 2016)

In the context of a sophisticated enforcement of Russian interest and influence, one of the fundamental features of the ROC is its ambition to openly interfere in internal (secular) affairs of sovereign independent states. It should be noted that the ROC is in many cases very successful in this respect. This is

due to its jurisdictionally subordinated churches in the Post-Soviet space. A typical example is Belarus too. The ROC have maintained above-standard relations with Belarusian leading political representatives essentially since the breakup of the USSR, or more precisely since the president **A. Lukashenko** came to power in 1994.

This long-term Belarusian president with dictatorial inclinations was disappointed with the break-up of the USSR. Unlike Belarusian democratic activists in the early 1990s, who tended to outline a westward strategy for independent Belarusian development, **Lukashenko** has taken route of reintegration with the RF. The political turn which occurred after the presidential elections of 1994 resulted in a significant change in the ideological orientation of the state policy and the status of the Orthodox Church in Belarus. The regime established in 1994 paradoxically presented itself as a *“revolutionary government seeking retrogressive solutions to Belarusian problems.”*⁴⁵ (Bekus, 2016, p. 90)

From the beginning he called for a tightening of cooperation among the former republics, reintegration of the Post-Soviet space, including joining of Belarus and Russia into one political organism. While in other states, especially Ukraine, the elites were declaring their sympathies for Western ideals and aspiring to emancipate themselves from the Russian influence, the leader of Belarus was speaking of Slavic brotherhood and Orthodox unity more ardently than Russian decision-makers. The ROC perceived in **Lukashenko's** “anti-national” policy as a guarantee for maintaining the integrity of its own canonical territory.

The “Slavic spirit” and enthusiasm for integration declared by the Belarusian “Orthodox atheist”⁴⁶ president convinced the ROC to lend him its support. This support corresponded with the resistance of the ROC against the collapse of the USSR, which could have disrupted the unity of the canonical territory of the ROC and endangered its dominant religion position in the Post-Soviet space.

⁴⁵ The list of “retrospective solutions” included not only a return to a repressive political system, a conservative state ideology and authoritarian rule, but also the way in which the community of Belarusians was perceived, i.e. as an integral part of Russian cultural civilization (including Orthodox Unity). (Bekus, 2016)

⁴⁶ President Lukashenko follows a hard line of socialism, part of which is necessarily also atheism. This awkward mutual relation between “Soviet atheism” and Orthodoxy was best expressed by Lukashenko himself when he stated that he is an “Orthodox atheist”. (Solik, Fil'akovský, Baar 2017, p. 145)

Therefore, the ROC put a lot of hope in the Union of Russia and Belarus. On 2 April 1996, the then Patriarch of the ROC **Alexy II** personally blessed the act signed by the presidents announcing the union of the two states.⁴⁷ Even after the slowing of the integration, the hierarchs of the ROC often and eagerly met with **Lukashenko** in Moscow or Minsk and awarded each other with the highest spiritual and state honours for activities strengthening and integrating “brother nations”.⁴⁸ (Curanović, 2012b)

It is therefore understandable, that the **Lukashenko** regime maintains close relations with the BOC, which is subject to the ROC. This church and the regime in Belarus also agree on the issue of national Belarusian identity. The BOC holds the “Soviet version” which is officially promoted by the Government of Belarus. The BOC follows the line of highlighting the ancient roots of the Russian-Belarusian friendship or even brotherhood and promotes the use of the Russian language in which all orthodox religious ceremonies are held in Belarus. (Solik, Fiřakovský, Baar, 2017) The BOC is also the only religious organisation which is seen to be meeting the president at various events. In a typical display of combining religion and politics, the highest representatives of the BOC prayed for **Lukashenko** two days before the presidential election of 2015. (Vasilevich, 2016)

This relationship between the state and the BOC was greatly reinforced in June 2003, when a very important document was signed, called the *Agreement on cooperation between the Republic of Belarus and the Belarusian Orthodox Church*. The document was signed by the then Prime Minister of the Republic of Belarus **G. Novitsky** and by then the Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus and Metropolitan **Philaret (Vakhromeyev)**, the then head of the BOC. **Philaret** described this agreement between the state and the church as “*a new milestone in the relations of the state, church and society in Belarus,*” (Tlačová kancelária...2003) adding that “*in recent years, the process of a new birth of*

⁴⁷ The Union State, also referred to as the Union State of Russia and Belarus is a supranational union consisting of the RF and the Republic of Belarus.

⁴⁸ The harmony of the relations between the ROC and Belarus has been emphasized on different occasions: for example, in 2004 Alexy II was honoured by Lukashenko with the Medal of Friendship of Nations “*for enriching the national culture and spiritual and intellectual development of the brotherhood of the Russian and Belarusian nations*”. In May 2005, in turn, the president of Belarus received a reward “*for his contribution to the strengthening of the brotherhood of nations*”, on the occasion of which the hierarchs of the ROC reassured Lukashenko of their support for the integration of the “two states of common Slavic roots and one Orthodox Church.” (Curanović, 2012b, p. 153)

religion and free development of the Orthodox Church has been taking place in the country." (Tlačová kancelária..., 2003) This agreement, which has seven articles, arose due to the influential lobbying of the ROC and it symbolizes significant importance. It demonstrates the success of the Russian religious soft power. The agreement officially adjusted not only the statute of the BOC, which is jurisdictionally subordinate to the ROC, but established the conditions of very close cooperation between the ROC and the Belarusian state authorities.

In Article 1 of this document, it is written, that the state recognizes that *"the Church is one of the most important social institutions whose historical experience, spiritual potential and centuries old cultural heritage had in the past and still have a significant impact on the formation of the spiritual, cultural and national traditions of the Belarusian people...Cooperation with the Church is an important factor in social stability, civil unity and inter-confessional peace in the territory of Belarus."* (Belorusskaya pravoslavnaya tserkov, 2003) The most important part of the agreement is undoubtedly Article 3, which defines the BOC and the state cooperation in key areas of the Belarusian society. *"The State and Church recognise that the priority directions of their cooperation are public morals, upbringing and education, culture and creative activity, protection, restoration and development of historic and cultural heritage, public health, social security, mercy and charity, support of the institution of the family, motherhood and childhood, care of persons in places of imprisonment, instruction, social and psychological work with military service personnel, protection of environment."* (Belorusskaya pravoslavnaya tserkov, 2003)

The agreement between the BOC and the state created a fertile ground for adoption of various programs of cooperation between Church and state institutions. While, before 2003, only two programmes of cooperation were signed between the Church and the state, between 2003 and 2011 the BOC signed twelve such agreements of cooperation with the Ministries of Internal Affairs, Education, Defence, Health, Information, Culture Extraordinary Situations, Natural Resources, Sport and Tourism and Work and Social Protection, as well as with the state-controlled media corporation and the National Academy of Sciences. (Bekus, 2016)

Both parties have made a commitment to take joint programs among the relevant state administration bodies, other state bodies and the BOC in order to coordinate a productive cooperation. It was doubtlessly a great success of the ROC, which has achieved a huge influence through the subordinate BOC. The ROC can therefore openly influence public opinion in the Belarusian society and

push Belarus sophisticatedly into the Russian sphere of influence. In other words, *“through this church, Russian language and culture is promoted within the Belarusian society and the national consciousness of Belarusians is being gradually destroyed. Any efforts for higher ecclesiastical independence are strongly rejected.”* (Solik, Fiřakovský, Baar, 2017, p. 147)

Above mentioned agreement is naturally presented by the ROC as an ideal and exemplary model of functional cooperation between the state and the Orthodox Church for all The Commonwealth of Independent States – CIS countries too. In addition to the cooperation with state institutions, the BOC also benefits from financial support from the state. A number of buildings confiscated by Communist authorities were returned back to the BOC, although often in a very bad condition. (Solik, Fiřakovský, Baar, 2017) Moreover, the cooperation between the BOC and the state was further acknowledged by other documents. In 2015, for example, an agreement was signed between the BOC and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus, concerning school trips for students to the holy places of pilgrimage. These school trips aim to commemorate the importance and richness of the Orthodox cultural heritage of “Holy Russia” in Belarus. (Rudnik, 2017)

Conclusion

Although instrumentalization of religion for political purposes abroad is not a specific case of the RF and is a universal phenomenon, the case of the RF requires a special attention from several primary reasons. The study has shown that the ROC has the potential to conduct effective diplomacy and foreign policy and enforce its influence both on its own and in cooperation with the state. These assumptions are confirmed in particular: 1. by a continuous and long-term (in historical context) Russian tradition of the use of the religious power elite to promote its image and interests abroad. This tradition – which has survived to the present day – dates back to the early 18th Century, when it began to be used as an aspect of the Russian Orthodox Imperial power to achieve its goals beyond the borders of the Russian Empire. 2. The ROC has a transnational potential, it operates almost throughout the territory of the former USSR and “its” canonical territory has a sophisticated organizational structure, including the Department for External Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, which acts as the “ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs”. It also receives ambassadors, organizes business trips of the church officials around the world,

but also cooperates with international organizations. Its activities abroad are in many cases coordinated directly by the Kremlin, that is by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 3. Many experts agree precisely on the fact that the main force of the ROC abroad lies in its ability to consolidate the Russian diaspora.

Diplomatic or foreign policy mandate was awarded to the ROC directly by the Russian political leadership during the 1990s (several attempts to negotiation and peace-making activities in areas of crisis). However, only since the advent of **V. Putin** and **D. Medvedev** has the alliance of the Russian state and the ROC received a new institutional and formal dimension. The status of the ROC in the RF was defined, along with specific tasks and objectives that must be met. The role of the ROC was codified in national strategic documents of the RF and the Kremlin has gradually taken practical steps to incorporate the views and opinions of the ROC in official foreign policy and diplomatic activities of the RF. Russian Foreign Minister **S. Lavrov** commented on the cooperation of the Russian state and the ROC in foreign area saying: *“The tradition of cooperation between national diplomacy and the ROC goes back to ancient times. We are still working hand in hand, helping the Russian diaspora and protecting the Russians who found themselves far away from their homeland. The Church, in fact, deals with the same problems as diplomacy.”* (Blitt, 2011, p. 457)

The paper has argued that the Church-State relationship is based on an anti-Western ideological platform called “Russian Civilization” and the resulting consensus. This relationship is based on mutual benefits, but the position of the Russian Church in the relationship is subordinate. In this contribution, various activities are pointed out of the ROC, which have been carried out independently or in cooperation with subordinate Orthodox churches in the canonical territory of the ROC or Orthodox religious groups. In the context of the Russian Post-Soviet “near abroad”, the primary role of religious soft power in foreign policy of the RF is: 1. Prevent the penetration of Western culture – liberal democracy, globalization trends and the Western notion of human rights. In other words, the main task of the ROC is to try to block Western influence in the Post-Soviet region in general. 2. Promote and strengthen Russian influence through official government projects and initiatives abroad such as the EEU. These are cultural events, pastoral activities, support for expatriates, organizing conferences, concerts, workshops. In this way, it effectively substitutes the MFA of the RF and presents the RF in a good light.

If influential statesmen and politicians in the U.S. and Western Europe fail to understand this important and sophisticated religious dimension of the Russia's foreign policy, then they will not fully understand the rationale of **V. Putin** and his administration in promoting Russianness and Russian values around the (not only) Post-soviet space. It is necessary not to ignore the Russian religious dimension of foreign policy, but to accept it, to point out its imperial and coercive dimensions and actively offer an appropriate (democratic and pro-Western) alternative in this region.

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