

THE CANDLE OF THE 'RUSSIAN WORLD' IS BURNING OUT

The Kremlin uses the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as an outpost of its struggle against Ukraine and the West.

The Russian special services are trying at all costs to preserve the structures of the ROC as a tried-and-tested cover in foreign countries.

Russian terror in Ukraine irreversibly damages the position and international influence of the ROC.

In our 2019 public threat assessment, we said that in the event of Russian aggression, the Russian Orthodox Church, one of the Kremlin's long-standing tools of influence, would not show solidarity with the victim of the attack but would side with the Kremlin. The support of the ROC leadership for Russia's military activities in Ukraine clearly demonstrates this in word and deed. In his increasingly crude anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western appeals, Patriarch Kirill (secular name Vladimir Gundyayev) expresses the church and state leaders' understanding of the "symphony" of the church and the state. In what follows, we will look at how the Kremlin and the Russian special services continue to use the networks of the ROC, which seeks to establish itself as the only orthodox church in the former territories of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.

Since the 1990s, the Russian special services have been using the more radical pro-Kremlin clergy and church members with links to Soviet and Russian special services to undermine Ukraine's statehood. In line with Russia's divisive policy and following in the footsteps of tsarist Russification policy, the Moscow Patriarchate, which established itself in Ukraine in the 17th century (and in Estonia and Latvia in the 18th century) in the wake of a Russian invasion, seeks to present itself as the "mother church" of Ukrainians. It claims to have the exclusive right to unite Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians into a single "trinity", a great superpower family led by

Moscow, while disparaging the choices Ukrainians make for themselves. In tandem with other Russian propaganda channels, branches of the ROC spread anti-Ukraine propaganda in both sermons and propaganda publications in 2022, right before Russia's full-scale invasion. For example, in January, when the Kremlin needed anti-Ukraine hysteria to create a suitable backdrop for the upcoming military attack, the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (EOC-MP) published a special issue of its magazine *Pravoslavnyi Sobesednik* that contained slander and false claims against Ukraine and Estonia.

Clergy members recruited by or collaborating with the Russian special services have been tasked with gathering information about the moods in Ukraine, key individuals, and the location and composition of Ukrainian military units. For example, the Russian special services were particularly interested in the information collected by the ROC army chaplains, in violation of the seal of confession, about the health and morale of Ukrainian soldiers. By now, Ukraine has blocked the access of the ROC clergy to the Armed Forces of Ukraine.



ROC's public support for the war in Ukraine accelerates the disintegration of its remaining network in Ukraine.

Source: Alexey Pavlishak / Reuters

While planning military operations against Ukraine, the ROC clergy working with the Russian special services and the trustees of Russian extremists in ROC congregations provided logistical support to Russia. For example, they prepared accommodation and weapons caches for Russian units and stored propaganda materials in congregation houses and convents.

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Simultaneously with the Russian attack, ROC representatives curated by the Russian special services were activated. They incited anti-Ukrainian sentiments and supported the occupants near the frontline and in Russian-controlled areas. In Ukrainian-controlled territory, pro-Russian clergy often engaged in “silent resistance”, cautiously justifying Russia’s motives among their congregations and ambiguously passing judgement on the “fratricidal war”.

ROC helped formalise the annexation of Ukrainian territory. While in 2014, Kirill, then also the patriarch of the Ukrainians, preferred to keep a low profile during the annexation of Crimea, fearing damage to the position of the Ukrainian branch of the ROC (estimated at 50 per cent of ROC congregations) after the full-scale invasion in 2022, the ROC leadership helped prepare and even anticipated the formal annexation of four regions of Ukraine by Russia. In June 2022, the Holy Synod of the Moscow Patriarchate decided to separate the territories of Crimea, Donetsk and Horlivka from its formally independent Ukrainian branch (without asking for these regions’ consent) and subordinate them directly to the Moscow Patriarchate. ROC representatives participated in the ceremony to declare the territories usurped from Ukraine as part of Russia in the Kremlin on 30 September 2022. The ROC can apply a similar divide-and-rule policy elsewhere if Russian aggression creates favourable conditions for this.

Russia’s large-scale terror in Ukraine, which also destroys the ROC’s Ukrainian congregations and church buildings, accelerates the disintegration of the remaining ROC network in Ukraine. Disagreements between the Putin-worshipping ROC establishment and its foreign branches have intensified. Russia’s war against Kyiv, the cradle of Eastern Slavic Orthodoxy, with the help of Iranian drones and Kadyrovites preaching “Russian Jihad”, is also causing increasing resentment among the ROC congregations in Russia, where hundreds of courageous clergy have publicly expressed their opposition on ethical grounds. All this puts the leaders of the ROC branches, especially those in the West, in a difficult situation: they need to remain obedient to their spiritual leader, the Kremlin puppet Patriarch Kirill, while also maintaining normal relations with the host country, which disapproves of the Russian leadership.

The leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate and its curators in the Russian government structures are aware of the ROC’s difficulties abroad, especially since the Kremlin itself is undermining the position of the leaders of the ROC and its branches. Maintaining the position of the ROC in foreign countries is crucial to the long-term interests of the Russian special services, which is why the leaders of the ROC branches have been given the liberty to pretend to be a loyal local religious organisation and, if necessary, even criticise the positions of the Kremlin or ROC leadership, or simply criticise the war without clearly pointing out who is responsible. In this way, Russia seeks to create the impression that the local ROC branches are independent, diverting attention away from the fact that they are curated by Russia, which has become a pariah state.

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Russia's aggression and the use of the ROC as a weapon against Ukraine have strengthened the international community's perception that the ROC foreign branches' independence is merely an illusion unless they completely separate themselves from the ROC. The security threat posed by the symbiosis of the Russian special services and the ROC has already called into question the future of the ROC in Latvia, where the Orthodox Church is moving towards independence, and in Lithuania.

However, Russia is trying to prevent the disintegration of the ROC's international network at all costs. In June 2022, Metropolitan Hilarion (Grigory Alfeyev), the head of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, or the "foreign minister of the ROC", was retired, accused of numerous failures, especially his inability to prevent the independence and strengthening of the autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Metropolitan Anthony (Anton Sevryuk), a former private secretary to Patriarch Kirill, who has experience in influence operations against the West, was appointed as the new head of the department, which has a tradition of operating as a cover for Soviet and Russian special services. Anthony's task is to save what he can of the ROC's damaged reputation in the international arena, where he tries to continue to promote the Russian regime of terror and the ROC as a bastion of "traditional values". However, it is increasingly difficult to find "useful idiots" in the West who would want to cooperate with the ROC or line up to defend it. Like other instruments of Russia's influence operations, the ROC is on the brink of an inevitably deepening crisis.