

# Church, State and Holy War: Assessing the Role of Religious Organizations in the War in Ukraine

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## *List of Acronyms*

**ATO:** Anti-Terrorist Operation  
**DPR:** Donetsk Peoples' Republic  
**LPR:** Luhansk Peoples' Republic  
**MP:** Moscow Patriarchate  
**ROA:** Russian Orthodox Army  
**ROC:** Russian Orthodox Church  
**UOC-KP:** Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyivan Patriarchate  
**UOC-MP:** Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate

## *Introduction*

The role of religion in post-modern armed conflict has been a frequent subject of analysis for the last two decades. Samuel Huntington, in his iconic work *The Clash of Civilizations*,<sup>1</sup> argued that identity, and with it religion, has become the primary motivator of armed conflict in the twenty-first century, as ideology had been in the twentieth century. Since the end of the Cold War, religion has played a defining role in conflicts across the globe; from the Middle East to the United States, it has become a popular topic of study.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

A great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to how religion interacts with an increasing trend of armed quasi-state and non-state actors engaged in combat and the role of states and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in conducting and reacting to postmodern warfare on their territories. However, while a great deal of attention has been given to the role of Islam in conflicts across the Middle East, less analysis has been done regarding the role of other organized religions in armed conflicts in various parts of the world.

One occurrence worth studying is the role of Orthodox Christianity in conflicts across the post-Soviet space, of which there have been many over the past two decades. Armed conflicts in Moldova, Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine have shaped international relations within the post-Soviet space and the role of Orthodoxy and regional Orthodox groups merit deeper academic study.

In the last two decades, the post-Soviet space has seen a resurgent Russian Federation attempt to return to regional dominance; since his accession to the Russian presidency in 2000, Vladimir Putin has made this the key feature of his foreign policy. A period of Russian re-imperialization is said to be underway, using a unique method that post-Soviet scholars call “soft coercion” to build a network of Kremlin-friendly neighbouring states, with small-scale military incursions into neighbouring countries seen as hostile to Moscow’s interests.<sup>2</sup> This amendment of Joseph Nye’s theory of soft power has been modified to reflect the unique role of “soft coercion” as a tool of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space.<sup>3</sup> The key vehicles of this soft coercion are organizations that are notionally viewed as non-governmental, but in actuality, are heavily influenced by the Kremlin; they promote the idea of a Russian civilizational identity that theoretically holds all Slavic peoples together under a Russian political and cultural umbrella.

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<sup>2</sup> See James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia’s Influence Abroad* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009).

Crucial to this promotion of identity is the advancement of the Orthodox faith; it features heavily in the theory of common identity known as *Russkiy Mir* or “Russian World.” The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Orthodox lay organizations serve as key promoters of Russian World as a core element of the Russian and Slavic civilizational identity. In peacetime, these groups serve the Kremlin’s interests by promoting Russian language, culture, the Orthodox faith, and a theory of civilizational singularity in the post-Soviet space, with the intention of influencing the ruling regimes of other post-Soviet states in Moscow’s favour. When neighbouring regimes are perceived as threatening or moving out of Moscow’s range of influence, the Kremlin employs stealth warfare and creates low-scale armed conflict intended to destabilize the regime in question. This was the case during the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, after the election of pro-Western candidate Mikheil Saakashvili, and in Ukraine in 2014, after the Revolution of Dignity (known in Ukraine simply as “Maidan”), which deposed Kremlin-friendly president Victor Yanukovich.

Over the past few years, Moscow has been fighting a stealth war in Ukraine, intent on destabilizing the new government in Kyiv, which has made reform, democratic transparency, and closer integration with Europe key elements of its platform. Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and veiled attempts at hiding its troops in Donbas have failed to disguise the Kremlin’s role as the instigator of armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine. What Moscow framed as a home-grown civil war in 2014 has now been widely acknowledged worldwide as an invasion led by the Russian government into neighbouring sovereign territory, a violation of international law as well as both a geopolitical and a humanitarian crisis.

Most scholarly analysis of the war in Ukraine thus far has seen the conflict as either a civil war or an interstate conflict. Scholars of international relations have attempted to address the geopolitical consequences of a resurgent Russia against the backdrop of a weakening United States. For example, John Mearsheimer assessed the war in Ukraine from the perspective of a struggle between great powers; in this case, between

Russia and the United States.<sup>4</sup> This macro-level perspective makes the argument that the war in Ukraine is a modern one.

This analysis, though valid, assesses only in part the conflict unfolding in Ukraine. This essay will attempt to look at the war from a different perspective, through the framework of identity promotion via Russian proxy groups. The war in Ukraine is both modern and post-modern; it is modern due to its nature as an inter-state conflict, but at the same time, post-modern because the methods of fighting are not restricted to hard military power. The Russian government's promotion of Pan-Slavic identity is key to understanding both how the war is being fought and why pro-Russian militants backed by Moscow receive so much homegrown support in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Orthodox identity is a distinctly post-modern element of the war in Ukraine, and it serves as an invaluable weapon for the Kremlin.

This essay will examine the role of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), an autonomous church of the Russian Orthodox Church, in the conflict, and argue that it serves as a vital player in the war in Ukraine, both in direct military involvement and support roles. The institution works to legitimize Russia's war against Ukraine and, in doing so, the UOC-MP has become a weaponized institution in the service of the Kremlin, which in turn has weaponized the idea of Russian World to serve Russian state interests in the war. The fundamental argument of this paper is that this institution serves as a backchannel for the Kremlin into Ukraine; it not only legitimizes Moscow's military invasion through the promotion of Russian World, imperial rhetoric, Orthodox fundamentalism, and propaganda, but also actively engages in military activity against the Ukrainian state which has led to large segments of the UOC-MP becoming weaponized.

Orthodox groups involved in the war in Ukraine encompass a wide range of actors, from combatant militant groups with a strong Orthodox connection, such as the Russian Ortho-

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<sup>4</sup> John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, August 20, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.

dox Army (ROA), to the UOC-MP, which in turn have a strong connection to the Kremlin and actively promotes Moscow's war in Ukraine. These organizations are best defined as "proxy groups"<sup>5</sup> because they serve the Russian state agenda despite often having a few degrees of separation from the Kremlin.

Though a wide range of Russian-backed militant groups with a strong Orthodox identity are fighting in Ukraine, the principal local institution whose role in the war merits deeper research is the UOC-MP. This essay will focus solely on the weaponization of the UOC-MP, since it relates strongly to Orthodox identity and is a key institution in post-Soviet Ukraine. While the majority of Orthodox militant groups have been imported from Russia, the UOC-MP's role in the war demands further study precisely because of its status as the unofficial national church of Ukraine. This essay argues that one of Ukraine's key institutions is, in fact, among the most powerful and effective instruments of the Russian war machine in Donbas.

Based on these observations, we shall see that the war in Ukraine is modern because of its inter-state nature, but is also post-modern because of its use of identity promotion as a weapon of war. This tactic has become a crucial weapon to secure the loyalty of local populations and promoting an idea of 'otherness,' an alternate identity that attempts to legitimize the Kremlin's cause in Eastern Ukraine to the West.

This essay comprises four sections. The first will lay out a short history of the connection between the ROC and the UOC-MP, which serves as its proxy in the conflict zone, in order to provide the context needed for deeper analysis of this relationship. The second part will discuss both the material and ideational impacts of the UOC-MP as a Russian state proxy engaged in the war, with its activities ranging from active military involvement to rhetoric promoting the invasion and civilizational unity between Ukraine and Russia. Using this evidence, this paper will then analyze the impact that identity

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<sup>5</sup> Orysia Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2016).

construction and promotion has had on Moscow's military involvement in Ukraine, with a focus on how the idea of Russian World translates into a tangible weapon in the conflict and has, in turn, weaponized the UOC-MP. Finally, this analysis will be presented in a post-Soviet and global context, demonstrating that its impact extends beyond the immediate parameters of the war in Eastern Ukraine.

### *The Russian World ("Russky Mir")*

Before continuing, it is imperative to define the term "Russian World." When discussing this term, this essay refers to the idea of a Pan-Slavic identity with the Russian state at its-core. Orysia Lutsevych defines Russian World as the language of soft power to disguise what in reality is soft coercion; a flexible tool to promote Russian state interests in the post-Soviet space.<sup>6</sup> It is built on the idea that Moscow is the uncontested centre of gravity in the post-Soviet space by grace of its imperial legacy, and Russia stands as a centre of gravity in a multi-polar world, an alternative to the West in terms of identity and power.<sup>7</sup> The idea and rhetoric of Russian World is widely employed by the Kremlin and its proxies; it contains narratives designed and moulded by the Kremlin for the promotion of its interests.

Attached to this concept is the idea of "brotherly peoples" (*Bratski Narody*), an idealized union of Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and other Slavs, whose common culture and identity transcends national borders and Westphalian ideas of sovereignty and nationhood.<sup>8</sup> The idea of "brotherly peoples" not only rejects the nationhood of non-Russian states in the post-Soviet space,<sup>9</sup> but additionally, the union it proposes is fundamentally unequal and colonial in nature. As James Sherr argues, according to this union, Russians (often called "Great

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<sup>6</sup> Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Bogomolov and Oleksandr Lytvynenko, *A Ghost in the Mirror: Russian Soft Power in Ukraine* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2012), 3.

Russians”) are viewed as culturally and politically superior to Ukrainians (referred to as “Little Russians”) and Belarusians (“White Russians”).<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the idea of “brotherly peoples” refuses to acknowledge the separate nationhood of both Ukraine and Belarus, instead viewing them as integral parts of Moscow’s ethnic and civilizational sphere.<sup>11</sup> Against the backdrop of Russian imperialism, the idea of Russian World and “brotherly peoples” not only clashes with the national histories of states in the post-Soviet space, all of which pre-date national independence from the Soviet Union, but is tied to colonialism at its core.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Russian World denies Ukrainian statehood, and is opposed to the existence of truly independent post-Soviet states. It should come as no surprise then, that the tenets of Russian World carry a strongly anti-Ukrainian and anti-Kyiv prejudice, are right-wing, and are tied to fundamentalist Orthodox beliefs and general anti-Western rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> It is promoted to a population living in an unconsolidated democracy, and thus very susceptible to propaganda through religion, superstition, and fundamentalism.

### ***Part One: Ukraine and the Moscow Patriarchate***

Orthodox Christianity has been experiencing an ongoing revival since the collapse of the USSR; the popularity of the Russian Orthodox Church since 1991 has rendered it a highly influential and powerful institution in the post-Soviet space, arguably the most powerful non-state actor in the region.<sup>14</sup> Since 1991, the number of people identifying as Orthodox has grown exponentially in both Russia and Ukraine, and even

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<sup>10</sup> Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Mykola Riabchuk, “On the ‘Wrong’ and ‘Right’ Ukrainians,” *Aspen Review* 3 (2014), <http://www.aspeninstitute.cz/en/article/3-2014-on-the-wrong-and-right-ukrainians/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Bogomolov and Lytvynenko, *A Ghost in the Mirror*, 4; Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas De Waal, “Spring for the Patriarchs,” *The National Interest*, January 27, 2011.

more so in the last decade.<sup>15</sup> Two-thirds of Russia's citizens now claim to be Russian Orthodox; this number has climbed from roughly half the population in the mid-1990s.<sup>16</sup> In Ukraine, the Orthodox Church has also experienced a renewal, with 71% of people who consider themselves "believers" identifying as Orthodox Christians.<sup>17</sup>

To understand the impact religious revival has had on the post-Soviet space, we must first understand its context in relation to the dominant religious institution in the region, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Based in Moscow, the primate of the ROC, Patriarch Kirill, holds jurisdiction over all Orthodox Christians within the territory of the former USSR, with the exception of Georgia and Armenia, who possess their own national churches; the Georgian Orthodox Church is in communion with the ROC and the other Eastern Orthodox churches, while the Armenian Apostolic Church is not.<sup>18</sup> The ROC holds a great deal of sway and influence over the UOC-MP, which views itself as the national church of Ukraine, despite officially being a branch of the ROC.

Thomas de Waal argues the power vertical is being consolidated across the post-Soviet space. Across the region, most non-state institutions have been increasingly weakened, with the exception of the national churches.<sup>19</sup> Within Russia, the Kremlin has shut down most independent non-governmental organizations, or has taken them over in part or in full.<sup>20</sup> It is widely assumed that there are few truly independent NGOs left in Russia itself.

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<sup>15</sup> Bogomolov and Lytvynenko, *A Ghost in the Mirror*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> De Waal, "Spring for the Patriarchs."

<sup>17</sup> Center for Civil Liberties and International Partnership for Human Rights, "When God Becomes the Weapon: Persecution Based on Religious Beliefs in the Armed Conflict in Eastern Ukraine," (Kyiv: Center for Civil Liberties and International Partnership for Human Rights, 2015), 4, [http://iphonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/when\\_god\\_becomes\\_the\\_weapon\\_may\\_2015](http://iphonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/when_god_becomes_the_weapon_may_2015).

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Gorvett, "Russian Prayers: The Struggle For Orthodox Christianity," *Foreign Affairs* (2016), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/southeastern-europe/2016-07-14/russian-prayers>.

<sup>19</sup> De Waal, "Spring for the Patriarchs."

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



At the same time, Patriarch Kirill enjoys booming levels of popularity; he was recently listed as the seventh most influential figure in the Russian Federation, ahead of the defense and foreign ministers. Many of Kirill's critics have accused him of working for the Kremlin; this includes Patriarch Filaret, head of the rival Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyivan Patriarchate, who went as far as to declare Kirill "part of the Russian government."<sup>21</sup> De Waal further argues that, due to Kirill's influence and role as a moral and spiritual figure for the Russian political elite, he has become an untouchable figure in Russia.<sup>22</sup>

The ROC has had an especially closely-knit relationship with the Kremlin over the last two decades. The two institutions form a symbiotic relationship, the roots of which lie deep in Russian political thought. The concept of a united church and state is reflected in the idea of *symphonia*; a symbiosis between the state and the nation's national church, which in Russia's case is the ROC.<sup>23</sup> Multiple leading figures within the Russian elite have expressed the close ties between the two institutions; Sergei Lavrov, head of the Russian Foreign Ministry, argued that "it is impossible to overestimate the contribution of the Primate of the Church to strengthening the positions

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<sup>21</sup> The UOC-KP split from the UOC-MP in 1992 and claims autocephaly from the Moscow Patriarchate. At present, along with the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (another Orthodox church in Ukraine), the UOC-KP is not recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, but both institutions are openly pursuing such recognition. See Oleksander Sagan, "Orthodoxy in Ukraine: Current State and Problems," in *Traditional Religion and Political Power: Examining the Role of the Church in Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine and Moldova* (London: The Foreign Policy Center, 2015), 17; Andrew Higgins, "Evidence Grows Of Russian Orthodox Clergy's Aiding Ukraine Rebels," *New York Times*, September 6, 2014, [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/world/europe/evidence-grows-of-russian-orthodox-clergys-aiding-ukraine-rebels.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/world/europe/evidence-grows-of-russian-orthodox-clergys-aiding-ukraine-rebels.html?_r=0).

<sup>22</sup> De Waal, "Spring for the Patriarchs."

<sup>23</sup> Nicolai Petro, "Russia's Orthodox Soft Power," in *Interallied Confederation of Reserve Officers Seminar on Russia* (Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs: 2015), [http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles\\_papers\\_reports/727](http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/727).

of our Fatherland in the world,”<sup>24</sup> while Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev argued that *symphonia* with the ROC has helped establish Russia’s historical role as the world’s sole Orthodox power.<sup>25</sup>

While the Kremlin allows the church unprecedented influence and institutional primacy even as most other non-state institutions crumble, the ROC, for its part, provides a moral framework and legitimation for the Russian state and its foreign policy. Kirill has consistently upheld the position of the regime on matters of domestic and foreign policy. On the issue of the war in Ukraine, Kirill’s statements to the press have echoed Putin’s: strongly anti-Western, anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and references to the idea that Orthodox values serve as a legitimation for Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> Kirill also serves as a moral and spiritual mentor for the government; his presence and approval of Kremlin policies demonstrate the moral righteousness and spiritual strength of the Putin regime to the local population, most of which is deeply religious.<sup>27</sup>

The ROC holds canonical jurisdiction over Ukraine;<sup>28</sup> this is a key dimension to understanding its power in the country and its impact on the war in Ukraine’s East. The official branch of the ROC in Ukraine calls itself simply the Ukrainian Orthodox Church; the suffix of “Moscow Patriarchate”<sup>29</sup> is not used by the institution, but is added by other religious groups to distinguish it from the UOC-KP. Despite Ukrainian national independence in 1991, the UOC-MP still falls under the ROC

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<sup>24</sup> Daniel Payne, “Spiritual Security, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Russian Foreign Ministry: Collaboration or Cooptation?” *Journal of Church and State* 52, no. 4 (2010): 1.

<sup>25</sup> Petro, “Russia’s Orthodox Soft Power.”

<sup>26</sup> Gabriela Baczynska and Tom Heneghan, “How the Russian Orthodox Church Answers Putin’s Prayers in Ukraine,” *Reuters*, October 6, 2014. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-church-insight/how-the-russian-orthodox-church-answers-putins-prayers-in-ukraine-idUSKCN0HV0MH20141006>.

<sup>27</sup> Petro, “Russia’s Orthodox Soft Power.”

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Gorvett, “Russian Prayers.”

<sup>29</sup> The term “Moscow Patriarchate” refers to the entire canonical territory under the control of the Patriarch of Moscow; to refer to the Moscow Patriarchate is to refer to its churches collectively.

in the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church.<sup>30</sup> The UOC-KP now distinguishes itself from the UOC-MP by acting as a vocal supporter of the Ukrainian government, especially since Maidan, as well as promoting the unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine, the Ukrainian language, and interfaith dialogue with leaders of other faiths present in contemporary Ukraine.<sup>31</sup> Kirill has unwaveringly fought against the UOC-KP as an institution<sup>32</sup> and has attempted to undermine its standing in the country, as it has been steadily gaining popularity at the expense of the UOC-MP.<sup>33</sup>

Through the UOC-MP, the ROC has access to multiple networks of influence in Ukraine and across the post-Soviet space. The ROC engages with hundreds of non-state groups in Ukraine affiliated with the UOC-MP.<sup>34</sup> Alexander Bogomolov and Oleksandr Lytvynenko<sup>35</sup> argue that the UOC-MP is effectively an extension of the Russian Federation's numerous lay organizations beyond its borders. Here is the transnational element the ROC adds to the Kremlin's foreign policy; through its access to the network of Orthodox organizations in Ukraine, the ROC and the Kremlin are effectively represented officially in Ukraine by the UOC-MP.<sup>36</sup> The UOC-MP, in turn, is a highly respected institution in Ukraine, though its influence has begun to wane since the beginning of the war in 2014.<sup>37</sup>

By virtue of this relationship alone, one should regard the UOC-MP with a high degree of scepticism with regards to the level of autonomy it actually holds as an institution. The UOC-MP is, in effect, connected to the Kremlin by two degrees of separation. In peacetime, this relationship would resolutely reflect the demonstration of the Kremlin's soft coercion in Ukraine through the medium of the church hierarchy. Com-

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Sagan, "Orthodoxy in Ukraine: Current State and Problems," 8.

<sup>32</sup> Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion*, 90.

<sup>33</sup> Maksym Bugriy, "The War and the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 18, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-war-and-the-orthodox-churches-in-ukraine/>.

<sup>34</sup> Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World*, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Bogomolov and Lytvynenko, *A Ghost in the Mirror*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>37</sup> Bugriy, "Orthodox Churches in Ukraine."

bined with the war in Eastern Ukraine, however, this relationship becomes increasingly weaponized and hazardous; the Kremlin can now utilize this channel of influence to support its military incursion into Eastern Ukraine.

***Part Two: The Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate and the War in Donbas***

Within the occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine, two entities have emerged and attempted to establish partial autonomy in the region.<sup>38</sup> The self-styled “Donetsk Peoples’ Republic” (DPR) and “Luhansk Peoples’ Republic” (LPR), though tightly controlled by occupying militant groups, have nonetheless established something of a formal structure, including a pseudo-constitution outlining accepted religious groups within these self-declared entities.<sup>39</sup> Within the DPR, only four religious groups are recognized by the occupying forces: the ROC (and by extension, the UOC-MP), Roman Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism.<sup>40</sup> Less evidence is provided for the recognition of religious entities in the LPR, though reports allege the two occupied territories have similar outlooks.<sup>41</sup> Other Christian denominations and non-Christian faiths have fallen under intense scrutiny; members are often victims of persecution, including intimidation, arrest, torture, abduction, and execution.<sup>42</sup>

Along with Russian Orthodox militant groups, the UOC-MP has been an active participant in the ongoing military conflict in Donbas. Its impact can be seen in its material and spiritual support. Some Orthodox militant groups (for

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<sup>38</sup> When referring to the “occupied territories,” this essay refers to the territory of Ukraine currently under the control of separatist militant groups.

<sup>39</sup> Center for Civil Liberties, “When God Becomes the Weapon,” 7.

<sup>40</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 November 2015 to 15 February 2016,” Ukraine-OHCHR Reports (UNHCR, 2016), 33, [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/Ukraine\\_13th\\_HRMMU\\_Report\\_3March2016](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/Ukraine_13th_HRMMU_Report_3March2016).

<sup>41</sup> Maksym Vasin, “Donbass and Crimea: New Challenges for Religious Freedom; Summary of the Year,” 2, *Religious Information Service Of Ukraine*, 2016. [https://risu.org.ua/en/index/expert\\_thought\\_analytic/58577/](https://risu.org.ua/en/index/expert_thought_analytic/58577/).

<sup>42</sup> Center for Civil Liberties, “When God Becomes the Weapon,” 4.

example, the ROA) function as overt combatants with the goal of acquiring and controlling territory within the conflict zone. By contrast, the UOC-MP plays a much more clandestine role, providing spiritual, material, and rhetorical support to combatants such as the ROA and regular Russian armed forces in the region, but in some cases, also taking a combative role in the war.

### *Collaboration*

Independent reports by human rights organizations have established that militants have utilized church property for combative purposes. Multiple reports have established that militant groups have seized church property of various denominations, in the case of UOC-MP property, often without resistance.<sup>43</sup> Churches, religious centres, and administrative buildings are used as arms and ammunition storage facilities, headquarters for various armed groups, and in some cases, as battle sites, serving as watchtowers or shooting points.<sup>44</sup> Often these church sites become strategically valuable for armed groups because they can serve as clandestine bases.

Large segments of the UOC-MP have actively provided material and spiritual support to militant groups and have been involved in active sabotage against Ukrainian armed forces. In the cases of militant groups seizing church property for military use, they are often invited to do so by local clergy and officials.<sup>45</sup> In Sviatohirsk, Donetsk Oblast, the Holy Mountains Monastery was voluntarily surrendered to occupying militant forces to serve as living quarters at the onset of the fighting.<sup>46</sup> In Sloviansk, UOC-MP priests voluntarily offered the local Orthodox Church compound to shelter combatants, allowing

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<sup>43</sup> Center for Civil Liberties, "When God Becomes the Weapon," 10.

<sup>44</sup> Institute for Religious Freedom, "Chronicle of Terror: Religious Persecution by Pro-Russian Militants in East Ukraine," Report, (Kyiv: Institute for Religious Freedom, Ukraine, 2014), 1, [http://www.irf.in.ua/eng/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=421:1&catid=34:ua&Itemid=61](http://www.irf.in.ua/eng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=421:1&catid=34:ua&Itemid=61).

<sup>45</sup> Center for Civil Liberties, "When God Becomes the Weapon," 10.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

its use as a headquarters.<sup>47</sup> Reports have alleged that in numerous cases, priests voluntarily gave up their churches and administrative buildings for use by occupying forces; often, clergy are instrumental in helping militants occupy a particular village or area by inciting anti-government protests and preventing resistance to militant occupation.<sup>48</sup>

### *Complicity in Torture and Discrimination against Minorities*

Multiple reports have established the widespread presence of war crimes committed by militant groups against military captives and civilians in the occupied territories, including sleep deprivation, beatings, and starvation, with frequent support from clergy of the UOC-MP.<sup>49</sup> One NGO report attests that 86% of captured military personnel and 50% of captured civilians were subjected to torture by various militant groups in the occupied territories.<sup>50</sup> In some cases, UOC-MP priests have participated in human rights abuses alongside Russian Orthodox priests who accompanied militants from Russia.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Yuriy Butusov, “Боевики Московского Патриархата: Участники Захвата Славянска Отрясом “Крым” ФСБ РФ. О Начале Войны на Донбассе в 2014-М.” [Militants of the Moscow Patriarchate: participants takeover Slavic group “Crimea” FSB of the Russian Federation. About the beginning of the war in Donbass in 2014],” *Censor.Net*, 2016, [http://censor.net.ua/resonance/397750/boeviki\\_moskovskogo\\_patriarhata\\_uchastniki\\_zahvata\\_slavyanska\\_otryadom\\_krym\\_fsb\\_rf\\_o\\_nachale\\_voyny](http://censor.net.ua/resonance/397750/boeviki_moskovskogo_patriarhata_uchastniki_zahvata_slavyanska_otryadom_krym_fsb_rf_o_nachale_voyny).

<sup>48</sup> See Dmytriy Timchuk, “Храми УПЦ-МП На Донбасі Служили Складами Зброї для Російських Війск” [Churches of the UOC-MP in Donbas serve as weapons warehouses for Russian troops],” *Apostroph*, 2016, <https://apostrophe.ua/ua/article/society/2016-07-04/hramyi-upts-mp-na-donbasse-slujili-skladami-orujija-dlya-rossijskih-voysk/5939>.

<sup>49</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 February to 15 March 2016,” Ukraine-OHCHR Reports (UNHCR, 2016), 28, [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/Ukraine\\_14th\\_HRMMU\\_Report](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/Ukraine_14th_HRMMU_Report).

<sup>50</sup> I.L. Bielousov, A.O. Korynevych, O.A. Martynenko, O.V. Matviychuk, O.M. Pavlichenko, Y.V. Romensky, and S.P. Shvets, “Surviving Hell: Testimonies of Victims on Places of Illegal Detention in Donbas,” (Kyiv: “TsP Komprint” Ltd, 2015), 55, [http://www.hfhr.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/SURVIVING-HELL\\_eng\\_web](http://www.hfhr.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/SURVIVING-HELL_eng_web).

<sup>51</sup> Center for Civil Liberties, “When God Becomes the Weapon,” 10.

According to one report, a priest assisted militants in setting up a torture chamber in the basement of his church in Sloviansk.<sup>52</sup>

Multiple reports have established the use of torture, imprisonment, abduction, and often the killing of members of religious minorities, both clergy and laypersons, conducted by occupying forces, usually with the complicity of priests from the UOC-MP.<sup>53</sup> UOC-KP priests and laypeople have been the primary targets of these armed religious groups;<sup>54</sup> however, the recent abduction and murder of several members and clergy of an Evangelical Church near Donetsk has established that discrimination against religious minorities is widespread; to identify as a member of a divergent religion in the occupied territories is becoming increasingly dangerous.<sup>55</sup>

In the DPR, for example, religion is viewed as being intimately tied to political opinions; according to this rationale, any member of a UOC-KP parish is automatically accused of being pro-Ukrainian and an enemy of the militant occupation.<sup>56</sup> Other Christian religious groups, such as the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic and Protestant groups, are similarly targeted as members of a perceived “heretical fifth column” and are experiencing an increase in repression by occupying militant forces.<sup>57</sup>

Militant use of “execution lists” as tools of intimidation have widely been reported in the occupied territories. In many cases, clergy and laypersons of other religious denominations are listed publicly on these lists and threatened with execution if they do not leave the territory immediately or cease to practice their faith.<sup>58</sup> Militant groups accompanied by clergy from the ROC or UOC-MP often occupy non-Orthodox religious buildings, seizing them for military purposes and repurposing

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> UNHCR, “Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 November 2015 to 15 February 2016;” UNHCR, “Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 February to 15 March 2016;” Vasin, “Donbass and Crimea,” 7; Center for Civil Liberties, “When God Becomes the Weapon.”

<sup>54</sup> Center for Civil Liberties, “When God Becomes the Weapon,” 15.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>57</sup> Higgins, “Evidence Grows.”

<sup>58</sup> Center for Civil Liberties, “When God Becomes the Weapon,” 15.

them as Orthodox churches with support from local UOC-MP clergy.<sup>59</sup> One case in Horlivka illustrates this practice:

On September 27, DPR combatants forced their way into the Seventh Day Adventist church during mass in Horlivka. They ordered a halt to the ceremony and told the congregation to leave. When some of the believers had the courage to question the combatants' authority, they were told to mind their own business and that "this is Orthodox land and there is no place for sects." The pastor, Serhiy Litovchenko, was taken to an unknown location. He was held captive by the DPR forces for 20 days.<sup>60</sup>

Many religious groups not part of the Moscow Patriarchate have been forced to practice their faith clandestinely for fear of further persecution.<sup>61</sup> Many non-Orthodox religious buildings have been seized by militant groups, who, after banning parishioners from practicing there, often use them as sights for combat, as was the case of the Kind News Protestant Church in Sloviansk:

They finally took over completely and an Orthodox priest, who later appeared in videos shot by the so-called DPR forces, came to the church and declared that from that point on, the church shall be Orthodox.... On June 8, they brought artillery equipment NONA-C onto church territory and shelled Ukrainian forces' positions, all the while accompanied by the prayers and chanting of the Orthodox priest.<sup>62</sup>

The use of torture by militants and local MP Orthodox clergy against religious minorities, including members of the UOC-KP, has developed distinctly religious undertones. In

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<sup>59</sup> Higgins, "Evidence Grows."

<sup>60</sup> Center for Civil Liberties, "When God Becomes the Weapon," 18.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Center for Civil Liberties, "When God Becomes the Weapon," 17. See also Vasin, "Donbass and Crimea," 1.



addition to widespread discrimination, threats and other human rights abuses, militant groups and the UOC-MP have actively engaged in torture against pro-Ukrainian combatants and civilians alike, especially of religious minorities.<sup>63</sup> The case of a captured Ukrainian Greco-Catholic priest illustrates the religious nature of torture in the DPR; individuals are subject to attempted conversion, beatings, and mock executions:

The priest was denied the medicine necessary to treat his diabetes, which resulted in serious health complications. He was also denied sufficient water and grave dehydration drove him to drink from the toilet. His ration of food for the day consisted only of bread, which the gunmen knew was deadly for a diabetic.... As in the cases of several other priests, the fighters staged a mock execution by firing squad.... He was taken outside three times, put up against the wall and told to say his last prayer.... Father Tykhon was also subject to demagogical “conversations,” during which a man, well-versed in religion and bible studies, lectured him on the righteousness of the separatist cause, the truth of Orthodoxy and the heretical nature of all other religions.<sup>64</sup>

In many cases, UOC-MP priests have themselves participated in military roles. Priests have served as chaplains to militant leaders, providing useful intelligence and information about local conditions.<sup>65</sup> Reports have established multiple cases of clergy participating in torture with religious connotations perpetrated by Russian Orthodox militant groups, such as the ROA.<sup>66</sup>

One particularly disturbing case illustrates the weaponized nature of the UOC-MP, and the covert involvement of segments of its clergy in combat in Eastern Ukraine. In several confirmed cases, a priest received information about the loca-

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<sup>63</sup> Bielousov et. al., “Surviving Hell,” 68.

<sup>64</sup> Center for Civil Liberties, “When God Becomes the Weapon,” 14.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

tion of Ukrainian forces and proceeded to pass the coordinates on to militants in the area, who subsequently attacked Ukrainian positions. A case of a UOC-MP priest passing on the locations of Ukrainian troops in the village of Makiyivka near Donetsk in January of 2015 is now being investigated by the Prosecutor's Office of Kyiv.<sup>67</sup> Priests are now playing a key role in espionage and infiltration; they serve to identify troop locations, and in some cases, perform acts of sabotage themselves.<sup>68</sup> This is only one instance of the increasing weaponization of the ROC and UOC-MP.

### *Preaching Russian World*

Beyond providing material aid and often playing a direct role in the conflict with armed groups, many UOC-MP clergy play a vital part in providing spiritual support for militant occupation, by providing moral legitimation for the militant cause. This reinforces the militant groups and ensures the complacency of the deeply religious local population.<sup>69</sup> Through prayer, sermons and activism, many local UOC-MP clergy legitimize militant occupation and uphold Russian World as an ideology, using their role in the community as spiritual leaders to promote Russian foreign policy to their parishioners.

One key way of conveying this support is through the blessing of military items. Priests in the occupied zones often bless weapons, ammunition, and combatants themselves, with the accompanying rhetoric of destroying not only the chief "enemy of Orthodoxy" (being the UOC-KP) but also other religious groups in the region.<sup>70</sup> The rhetoric of the priests conducting these blessings is distinctly political, and encapsulates

<sup>67</sup> Прес-служба прокуратури міста Києва [Press Service of the Prosecutor's Office of Kyiv], "За Сприяння Прокуратури Відносно Священника, який Корегував Вогонь Терористів «ДНР», Розпочато Спеціальне Розслідування [The Prosecutor's Office opens special investigation regarding the priest who guided the fire of terrorist group "DPR"]," (Kyiv, 2016), [https://www.kyiv.gp.gov.ua/ua/news.html?\\_m=publications&\\_c=view&\\_t=rec&id=1908](https://www.kyiv.gp.gov.ua/ua/news.html?_m=publications&_c=view&_t=rec&id=1908).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Center for Civil Liberties, "When God Becomes the Weapon," 3.

<sup>70</sup> Higgins, "Evidence Grows;" Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World*, 34.

the overlapping ideas of holy war, Russian World, and the religious supremacy of the ROC.

A significant portion of UOC-MP priests in the occupied territories refuse to pray for the Ukrainian state or Ukrainian troops, openly praying for the opposing militant groups.<sup>71</sup> Many UOC-MP priests steadfastly refuse to conduct funerals for Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) troops, while actively participating in funeral services for militant combatants.<sup>72</sup> This is common both in the conflict zone and throughout Ukraine. As ATO soldiers killed in combat are returned to their homes for burial, the Orthodox priests conducting the burial services are almost exclusively UOC-KP.<sup>73</sup> The UOC-MP as an institution has publicly refused to bury Ukrainian soldiers as they claim it would violate their claim to neutrality in the conflict.<sup>74</sup> The leadership of the UOC-MP does not comment on or acknowledge the role of its priests in the occupied zones. In addition, priests in the occupied territories who do attempt to conduct burial services for pro-Ukrainian troops, both from ATO and volunteer battalions, have received death threats and, in many cases, have been killed.<sup>75</sup> In some cases, even priests conducting funeral services for civilians killed by militant shelling have received death threats or have been forced to flee.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Bugriy, "Orthodox Churches in Ukraine;" "UOC-MP Priest Consecrated a Flag of LNR Troops Allegedly on Episcopal Blessing," Religious Information Services of Ukraine, November 28, 2014, [https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all\\_news/community/faith\\_and\\_weapon/58343/](https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/community/faith_and_weapon/58343/).

<sup>72</sup> Ukrainian armed forces in Donbas are currently engaged in what the state is calling an "anti-terrorist operation" (ATO), since war has not formally been declared in the region. Volunteer battalions are also fighting alongside ATO. See, for example, Tadeusz Olszański, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church's Stance on the Revolution and War," *Centre for Eastern Studies* 151 (2014), [https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary\\_151.pdf](https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary_151.pdf).

<sup>73</sup> Religious Information Service of Ukraine, "They Perform Their Function: Expert Explains why UOC (MP) Refuses to Serve Burial Services for ATO Soldiers," July 4, 2016, [http://risu.org.ua/en/index/all\\_news/community/religion\\_and\\_policy/63873/](http://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/community/religion_and_policy/63873/).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Center for Civil Liberties, "When God Becomes the Weapon," 5.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 15.

UOC-MP priests in the occupied territories and the conflict zone have delivered sermons that are anti-Ukrainian in rhetoric and almost exclusively pro-Russian and supportive of Russian foreign policy.<sup>77</sup> Local clergy often preach against Ukrainian national unity, ethnic Ukrainians, and the Ukrainian language, instead widely promoting the concept of Russian World as the only morally valid political future for Ukraine, praising the ethnic, cultural, and spiritual superiority of the Russian state.<sup>78</sup> The impression of an Orthodox holy war is widely promoted in these sermons, as well as the need to destroy “non-canonical, heretical elements” either pretending to be Orthodox (as in the case of the UOC-KP) or for existing as a religious minority.<sup>79</sup>

It has been illustrated that the UOC-MP as an institution has a material and spiritual impact on the conflict and has given it a distinctly religious dimension. The use of rhetoric to emphasize the concept of holy war and Russian World as justification for the occupying forces, combined with the active involvement of UOC-MP clergy in combat, their support for militant groups, and promotion of the militant cause, have all weaponized the UOC-MP and turned it into a combatant.

Overtly active military groups, such as the ROA and other religiously-oriented Russian battalions, use religion as a legitimation tool for their cause. Religious organizations, like the UOC-MP and the ROC, have been weaponized through their support for the active militant groups, and often by their direct participation in combat or aid. The behavior of individual clergy, as well as the passive response of UOC-MP hierarchs

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<sup>77</sup> Religious Information Service of Ukraine, “UOC-MP Metropolitan Blesses a Priest to Provide Spiritual Guidance for DPR Fighters,” October 6, 2015, [https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all\\_news/community/religion\\_and\\_policy/61309/](https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/community/religion_and_policy/61309/).

<sup>78</sup> Religious Information Service of Ukraine, “Metropolitan Pavlo (Lebid) of Vyshgorod and Chernobyl, UOC (MP): Ukrainians are Simply Ungrateful Russians,” December 21, 2015, [https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all\\_news/community/religion\\_and\\_policy/61986/](https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/community/religion_and_policy/61986/); Religious Information Service “UOC (MP) Priest Complained to Separatists of Being Forced to Live Under Ukrainian Occupation,” November 19, 2015, [https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all\\_news/community/religion\\_and\\_policy/61732/](https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/community/religion_and_policy/61732/).

<sup>79</sup> Higgins, “Evidence Grows.”

to the violence in Eastern Ukraine, has made it an actor in the conflict, though perhaps in a more nuanced way than the overtly active military groups. The MP thus serves a military purpose for militant groups occupying territory in the conflict zone; they provide both material and spiritual support, and represent a vital component of the pro-Russian occupation, a support network of influential local leaders who promote the goals of militants on the ground and by extension, Russian foreign policy in the region, while maintaining the appearance of neutrality and civilian status.

### ***Part Three: Coercion by Common Identity – Russian World***

One of the most commonly referenced theories when assessing the nature of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space is Joseph Nye's theory of soft power. Nye defines power as "the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants"<sup>80</sup> and distinguishes soft power from hard power, with the former being used to co-opt, rather than coerce.<sup>81</sup> Nye highlights the importance of institutions, values and culture in the promotion of soft power.<sup>82</sup> However, one of the underlying limits of the theory of soft power is Nye's unwillingness to consider how the use of soft power may vary between regions and regime types. While he considers the use of soft-power by democratic states, Nye does not deeply analyze its use by authoritarian regimes to advance their influence in a given region.<sup>83</sup>

Numerous scholars have built upon Nye's theory of soft power, and many have analyzed its applicability to Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. James Sherr revisits Nye's theory, but argues that in the post-Soviet space, Russian use of soft power is significantly more aggressive than its democratic counterparts, and is more likely to resemble a kind of "soft coercion" aimed at forcefully promoting Russian interests and ensuring post-Soviet states operate in a way that is

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<sup>80</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, 21.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

friendly to Moscow.<sup>84</sup> In promoting its own brand of soft coercion, Sherr argues that Russia is not only promoting its interests in the post-Soviet neighbourhood; it has become a values centre countering the West, and manages to project its influence outwards.<sup>85</sup>

Orysia Lutsevych builds on both Nye and Sherr's arguments by illustrating how Russia projects its soft coercion, mainly through the use of networked proxy groups, many of whom are based in neighbouring post-Soviet states or come from Russia itself.<sup>86</sup> She defines Russian soft-power as a "state-directed exercise aimed at exploiting a target country's vulnerabilities."<sup>87</sup> Lutsevych paints a picture of a vast and complex network of interconnected proxy groups working to promote Russian state interests and influence in neighbouring states.<sup>88</sup> An essential part of this network includes religious organizations, most of whom trace their hierarchical authority to Moscow, including the ROC and Russian Orthodox organizations funded by various oligarchs linked to the Kremlin.<sup>89</sup> Through these groups, she argues, Moscow is able to promote itself, through the lens of Russian World, as a centre of geopolitical and cultural power.<sup>90</sup>

Lutsevych's argument that Russian World has become both a tool of geopolitics and soft coercion is vividly apparent in the war in Eastern Ukraine. In this example, Russian World, as well as the main non-military institution in Ukraine that promotes it, the UOC-MP, has been weaponized. The UOC-MP's promotion of Russian World, as well as providing material and spiritual support for militants in Eastern Ukraine, has rendered it not only an instrument of Russian foreign policy, but an instrument of the Russian military in the war. The UOC-MP is no longer being used for soft coercion; it is now being used as a means of combat and a means to legitimize the

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<sup>84</sup> Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion*, 2.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World*.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-26.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

war in Ukraine to the local population. The UOC-MP's promotion of Russian World as an ideology and a means of identity linking the local population to the Russian state both ensures the passivity and, in many cases, the active support of the local population, and legitimizes the Russian *causus belli* in Eastern Ukraine to the international community.

Alongside other proxy groups, the UOC-MP plays an integral role in promoting the Kremlin's war in Ukraine. It actively supports militant groups, such as the ROA, and takes varied roles in their organization as chaplains – by opening or giving up church property for militant use, by taking an active role in local administration in areas occupied by militants, by participating in interrogations and torture, by serving as a liaison between militants and the local population, and using their privileged position in Ukrainian society to legitimize the Russian cause.

This leads one to ask: at what point does a religious institution cease to be a religious-civilian institution and become a military instrument? At what point does a church in Eastern Ukraine effectively become a battle site? Arguably, the transition is not so fluid. The UOC-MP has been weaponized; but it does not abandon its religious characteristics, for it is these religious characteristics that render it such a crucial tool of Russian state military strategy. It is precisely its religious character, its prominence in Ukrainian local society, and its prestige amongst the local population that makes it so powerful and unique. The Kremlin can send scores of militant groups, battalions, and regular Russian armed forces to the region, however, large segments of the UOC-MP play a crucial role in propagating its interests and ensuring that the local population accepts these groups, supports them and promotes their occupation of Ukrainian territory. Without the UOC-MP's lynchpin role, the Russian state would have a much more difficult time pacifying the local population.

*The UOC-MP: Institutional Weakness?*

There are several impediments to the validity of this analysis. Firstly, it can be argued that one cannot equate the actions of a few priests in Eastern Ukraine with the complicity and open rebellion against the Ukrainian state of the entire UOC-MP as an institution. Several scholars present this claim by arguing that the UOC-MP is a deeply fractured organization, with little tangible control over some parishes and indeed whole swathes of Ukrainian Orthodox faithful and that these divisions have existed since the collapse of the Soviet Union and have only deepened since then.

Nicholas Denysenko presents the UOC-MP as an institution fractured by the collapse of the Soviet Union, whose deep divisions were evident well before the outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>91</sup> He highlights the UOC-MP's fractures against the backdrop of a broader "schism" across Orthodox communities in Ukraine that emerged out of the 1992 split within the Church, which resulted in the creation of the UOC-KP led by Patriarch Filaret.<sup>92</sup> Denysenko argues that there was in fact a deep negative reaction within the UOC-MP against the ROC's embrace of Russian World as a concept, with widespread condemnation beginning with Metropolitan Volodymyr, former head of the UOC-MP (and predecessor to the current head, Metropolitan Onuphrius) who argued for political neutrality in Church governance.<sup>93</sup>

Denysenko notes the divisions of opinion over the role of political Orthodoxy in the Church's governance and the position of various factions within the UOC-MP on autocephaly as a concept to be pursued for the Ukrainian Church.<sup>94</sup> He divides the Orthodox community into three distinct categories: the autocephalist movement, which generally holds a pro-democratic and pro-global agenda; a sectarian group, which main-

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<sup>91</sup> Nicholas Denysenko, "Fractured Orthodoxy in Ukraine and Politics: The Impact of Patriarch Kyrill's 'Russian World'," *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 54, no. 1–2 (2013): 33.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*



tains a pro-Russian, anti-autocephalist, and anti-Western position; and a third group, who advocate for the neutrality of the Church and the rejection of political agendas.<sup>95</sup> He underscores the role of Metropolitan Volodymyr in condemning “political Orthodoxy” as it relates to the ROC’s promotion of Russian World as a concept, and places him in this third category.<sup>96</sup>

Indeed, the leading message from the UOC-MP since the beginning of the war in Ukraine has appeared to embrace Volodymyr’s call for political neutrality. Officially, the UOC-MP’s stance on the conflict is one of neutrality; calling for peace and the cessation of violence on all sides.<sup>97</sup> Metropolitan Onuphrius regularly celebrates Divine Liturgies for “all the Orthodox peoples invoking the blessing of God, prosperity, and peace” and for the “unity of our Holy Orthodox Church.”<sup>98</sup> The Church hierarchy continues to engage with the Ukrainian public and fulfil its role as the national Church while avoiding discussions of culpability for the war in Eastern Ukraine.

Denysenko’s analysis highlights the fractures within the UOC-MP before the onset of Euromaidan and the war in Eastern Ukraine. Maksym Bugriy continues this argument by underscoring the increasing tendency of certain factions within the UOC-MP to push back against the authority of the ROC and questioning the complicity of others in the UOC-MP in the Russian invasion.<sup>99</sup> In many cases, individual parishes within the UOC-MP have openly denounced the institution’s weaponization. In a recent letter to Patriarch Kirill, a UOC-MP parish in Ternopil protested the ROC’s position on the war in Ukraine and the reduced amount of independence from the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Oleg Sukhov, “Patriarch Filaret: Moscow Church Does Not Serve Needs of People,” *Kyiv Post*, October 2, 2014, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/content/war-against-ukraine/patriarch-filaret-moscow-church-does-not-serve-needs-of-people-366758.html> (accessed March 13, 2018).

<sup>98</sup> Religious Information Service of Ukraine, “UOC Primate Prays for Peace with Diplomats of Foreign Countries,” February 26, 2018, [https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all\\_news/ukraine\\_and\\_world/international\\_relations/70220/](https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/ukraine_and_world/international_relations/70220/). (accessed March 13, 2018).

<sup>99</sup> Bugriy, “Orthodox Churches in Ukraine.”

ROC given to the UOC-MP.<sup>100</sup> Numerous priests and parishes in the UOC-MP throughout Ukraine have denounced the actions of complicit UOC-MP and ROC priests in Donbas, appealing to the church leadership to denounce their activities and in some cases, choosing to abandon the MP completely, joining the UOC-KP under Filaret.<sup>101</sup>

Another counterargument claims that the collaboration of segments of the UOC-MP with militant groups in the conflict zone is both sporadic and from the bottom-up; the UOC-MP hierarchy in Kyiv neither condones this activity nor actively encourages it; rather, individual priests have taken it upon themselves to collaborate with militant groups.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, there is little evidence of a clear, top-down instruction to collaborate and promote the militant cause.<sup>103</sup> The collaboration of segments of the UOC-MP appears to be initiated from the bottom-up, sporadic and disorganized, though evidence has revealed that individual priests often receive blessings for their activities from regional bishops.<sup>104</sup>

It should also be noted that recently, segments of the UOC-MP have also made an effort to engage more with the Ukrainian Armed Forces through the celebration of Divine Liturgies and the blessing of service members in the conflict zone. This was recently seen in March of 2018, as UOC-MP priests blessed ATO service members after Divine Liturgy.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Релігія в Україні [Religion in Ukraine], “Ми, Священики УПЦ, Опинилися між Горем Свого Народу і Ворожою Позицією Патріархії. Тернопільська Громада УПЦ написала відкрите звернення Митрополиту Онуфрію” [“We Priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are caught between the grief of our people and the hostile attitude of the patriarchate.” Ternopil UOC congregation wrote an open letter to Metropolitan Onufrius], January, 28 2015, [https://www.religion.in.ua/news/ukrainian\\_news/28129-mi-svyashheniki-upc-opinilisya-mizh-gorem-svogo-narodu-i-vorozhoyu-poziciyeyu-patriarxiyi-ternopilska-gromada-upc-napisala-vidkrite-zvernennya-mitropolitu-onufriyu.html](https://www.religion.in.ua/news/ukrainian_news/28129-mi-svyashheniki-upc-opinilisya-mizh-gorem-svogo-narodu-i-vorozhoyu-poziciyeyu-patriarxiyi-ternopilska-gromada-upc-napisala-vidkrite-zvernennya-mitropolitu-onufriyu.html).

<sup>101</sup> Bugriy, “Orthodox Churches in Ukraine.”

<sup>102</sup> Higgins, “Evidence Grows.”

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Religious Information Service of Ukraine, “UOC-MP Priest Consecrated a Flag of LNR Troops Allegedly on Episcopal Blessing.”

<sup>105</sup> Ukrainian Orthodox Church, “Священики УПЦ звершили молебень для військових, які відправилися у зону бойових дій на схід України

This may come as the result of increased pressure on the UOC-MP to voice support for the Ukrainian war effort, from lay-people or segments of the Church that are threatening to break away due to the Church's ambivalence to the war.

These counterarguments acknowledge a fundamental fact about the war in Ukraine: the conflict is becoming increasingly chaotic and blurred. However, this does not absolve the UOC-MP of complicity in the war. Whether or not collaboration with the Russian state extends into the highest reaches of the Church hierarchy in Kyiv, the fact remains that this hierarchy is doing little to nothing to rein in the UOC-MP priests that are engaging in the conflict in the East. Furthermore, it does little to promote the Ukrainian state throughout the country, as would be expected of a religious institution claiming the mantle of "national church."

From the top-down, the UOC-MP has steadfastly refused to explicitly denounce the militant cause and the nature of the war as a Kremlin-directed invasion, instead framing the conflict as a civil war,<sup>106</sup> and in many cases, calling on the Ukrainian state to abandon its defence of sovereign territory.<sup>107</sup> Most recently, the UOC-MP has expressed support for a series of controversial new laws aiming at the reintegration of the Donbas region under a special status and more decentralized governance. Steadfast refusal by the UOC-MP to perform funerals for Ukrainian troops, both ATO and volunteers, indicates its unwillingness to support the Ukrainian cause by any means.<sup>108</sup> UOC-MP priests who are actively switching

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[Priests of the UOC held a prayer service for military personnel who departed for the conflict zone in Eastern Ukraine]," March 12, 2018, <http://news.church.ua/2018/03/12/svyashheniki-upc-zvershili-moleben-dlya-vijskovix-yaki-vidpravilisya-v-zonu-bojovix-dij-na-sxid-ukrajini/> (accessed March 13, 2018).

<sup>106</sup> Ukrainian Orthodox Church, "Address of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church on the Occasion of the Anniversary Events on the Maidan, held on 18–21 February 2014," February 11, 2015, <http://news.church.ua/2015/02/11/zvernennya-blazhennishogo-onufriya-mitropolita-kijivskogo-i-vsijeji-ukrajini-predstoyatelya-ukrajinskoji-pravoslavnoji-cerkvi-z-nagodi-vidznachennya-richnici-podij-na-kijivskomu-majdani-shhr-vidbul/>.

<sup>107</sup> Sagan, "Orthodoxy in Ukraine: Current State and Problems," 19.

<sup>108</sup> Religious Information Service of Ukraine, "They Perform Their Function."

allegiances to the UOC-KP, rather than absolving the Moscow Patriarchate of complicity, demonstrate that many of its own clergy doubt the validity of its position on the conflict and rather than attempting to reform it, choose to abandon the UOC-MP in a show of solidarity with the Ukrainian cause. Thus, even if the decision to become complicit in militant activity in Eastern Ukraine does not come from the top of the UOC-MP hierarchy, the organization as a whole is jeopardizing its position as an institution in Ukraine.

The UOC-MP may be deeply fractured and its hierarchy unable to reconcile these divisions to produce one coherent policy towards the war, yet it has made no secret of its continued support for the leadership of the ROC and, through that institution, its connection to the Kremlin. Metropolitan Onufrius's refusal to stand when the Verkhovna Rada honoured fallen Ukrainian servicemen in 2014 is a telling example of this.<sup>109</sup> As a spiritual leader, he sends a strong message not only to the clergy, but also Orthodox laypeople of his position on the conflict.

Passivity from the top and complicity at the bottom renders the organization complicit, both in the eyes of Ukrainian authorities and the populace, which grows increasingly frustrated with the UOC-MP's stance.<sup>110</sup> The UOC-MP's complicity in the war is made clearer when one assesses the church's role in legitimizing the Russian cause in Ukraine; this activity has been witnessed at all levels of the church hierarchy and is widespread in UOC-MP parishes across Ukraine.

When discussing what he refers to as "Russian reimperialization" currently taking place, Marcel van Herpen distinguishes three trajectories of reimperialization: Orthodoxy, Pan-

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<sup>109</sup> Сергій Грабовський [Serhiy Hrabovskyi], "Кому прислужує верхівка київської філії «сталінського патріархату»?" [Who does the hierarchy of the Kyivan affiliate of the 'Stalinist Patriarchate' serve?], *День [Day]*, May 12, 2015, <http://day.kyiv.ua/uk/blog/polityka/komu-prysluzhuye-verhivkakyivskoyi-filiyi-stalinskogo-patriarhatu> (accessed March 13, 2018).

<sup>110</sup> Vladimir Ryzhkov, "Russian Orthodox Church Facing Ukraine Split," *The Moscow Times*, June 15, 2015, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russian-orthodox-church-facing-ukraine-split-47389>.

Slavism, and Communism.<sup>111</sup> However, it can be argued that it is impossible to separate Orthodoxy and Pan-Slavism as imperial trajectories; they are fused together through the ideology of Russian World. Orthodoxy is an essential component of Russian World, and when combined with Pan-Slavism, defines this primary identification in the post-Soviet space; an Orthodox and Slavic identity with Moscow at its core.<sup>112</sup> The concept of Russian World is both an ethno-cultural argument and a civilizational one; it emphasizes ethnic and cultural unity in Eastern Europe, and, in terms of a civilizational argument, emphasizes a Russian core as an alternative centre to Europe, thus creating a dilemma of identity for most post-Soviet countries.<sup>113</sup>

The idea of Russian World is used to justify an aggressive and invasive Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space, especially when Moscow is faced with dissent from neighbouring states. It is at once colonial and anti-national; it opposes the idea of Ukrainians as a separate people and nation-state,<sup>114</sup> but does not transcend Russian nationalism.<sup>115</sup> Instead, it maintains the primacy of Russian nationalism as culturally and politically superior, not only discounting the idea of a separate Ukrainian nation but framing the Ukrainian people as inferior Russians, at the periphery of an empire.<sup>116</sup> It upholds the idea that the fall of the USSR has fractured Russian civilization into illegitimate, artificial nation states that must be reunited to the historical core as the entire post-Soviet space is considered by Russian World ideologues to be “Russian lands.”<sup>117</sup> For this reason, aggressive Russian foreign policy in the region, annexations, and violations of sovereignty are re-

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<sup>111</sup> Marcel van Herpen, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 33.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>114</sup> Riabchuk, “On the ‘Wrong’ and ‘Right’ Ukrainians.”

<sup>115</sup> van Herpen, *Putin's Wars*, 39.

<sup>116</sup> Riabchuk, “On the ‘Wrong’ and ‘Right’ Ukrainians.”

<sup>117</sup> van Herpen, *Putin's Wars*, 50; Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World*, 24.

peatedly seen as “the gathering of Russian lands,”<sup>118</sup> and justified as righting historical wrongs.<sup>119</sup>

Russian World is reflected in identity politics throughout the post-Soviet space, but perhaps most significantly in the Donbas region. As Oliver Schmidtke and Serhy Yekelchuk argue, historically the region has been one of the least integrated into independent Ukraine; it is the most susceptible to colonial discourse and pro-Russian propaganda.<sup>120</sup> Despite many Western scholars arguing that Ukraine is divided ethno-linguistically between east and west, the reality is much more nuanced.<sup>121</sup> In reality, Ukraine is not so much divided along a binary ethnic line, but rather, according to specific values.<sup>122</sup> Moscow has taken advantage of Donbas’s isolation and frequent hostility to Kyiv’s central authority. This, in turn, has generated a policy of aggressive Russian nationalism in the region, aided strongly by the local Orthodox Church. Local populations are thus highly receptive to Russian propaganda and the ideology of Russian World; the UOC-MP, as a central institution in the region, heavily promotes this idea, to the Kremlin’s benefit.

The UOC-MP precedes the conflict as a proxy group of the ROC and by extension, of the Kremlin. Its role in the war, however, has transformed it into a weapon of the Kremlin to be used within and against the Ukrainian state. This is highly problematic for Ukraine, as the presence and influence of the UOC-MP is widespread throughout Ukraine and it continually attempts to frame itself as the national church of Ukraine. Even prior to the war, the UOC-MP’s constant promotion of Russian World attempted to undermine the idea of a separate Ukrainian nation; the *raison d’être* of the modern Ukrainian state. Due to this stance, the UOC-MP fails to fully achieve its goal of being known as Ukraine’s national church; instead, it

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>120</sup> Oliver Schmidtke and Serhy Yekelchuk, *Europe’s Last Frontier? Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine Between Russia and the European Union* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 106.

<sup>121</sup> Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World*, 37.

<sup>122</sup> Riabchuk, “On the ‘Wrong’ and ‘Right’ Ukrainians.”

serves as the ROC's representative in Ukraine, dependent on Moscow for leadership and direction. Upon the outbreak of the war in Eastern Ukraine, persistent promotion of Russian World as a justification for Russian military intervention in Ukraine, as well as providing spiritual and material support for militants, has transformed the UOC-MP into a weapon to be used against the state in which it resides.

The idea of Russian World as a legitimizer for armed intervention into Ukraine can also be explained through a term religious scholar Daniel Payne calls "spiritual security," reflected in broader understandings of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space.<sup>123</sup> Payne defines this as the need to protect the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy of Russia, reflected in Putin's national security strategy, which proposes protecting Russian spiritual security abroad as well as at home.<sup>124</sup> In effect, Orthodoxy for the Russian state has become a matter of national security.<sup>125</sup>

The ROC strongly promotes the notion of spiritual security as a method of soft coercion, connecting the interests not just of Orthodox Russians abroad, but of all individuals of the Orthodox faith, to the interests of the Russian state.<sup>126</sup> Both the Russian state and church promote this idea through the fear that other faiths and secularism in the region will undermine the traditional primacy of the ROC and the role of Orthodoxy as a defining characteristic of Russia's uniqueness as a civilization.<sup>127</sup> Thus, Russian state security is tied to safeguarding Orthodox believers abroad, especially in the post-Soviet space, of which Ukraine is a crucial part.

The concept of spiritual security, reflected in Russian World, serves as a legitimizer for the war in Ukraine for multiple reasons. Patriarch Kirill often refers to the war in Eastern Ukraine as a "religious war" precisely because, alongside geopolitical lines, the war reflects a battle for religious primacy in

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<sup>123</sup> Payne, "Spiritual Security."

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

the region.<sup>128</sup> On one hand, Kyiv is increasingly viewed by Moscow as an alternative centre of pro-European influence, reflecting democratic values, multiculturalism and religious tolerance, and thus threatening Moscow's sense of spiritual security.<sup>129</sup> In this scenario, Kyiv could well become a stronghold of flourishing democracy, secularism and independent policymaking and an alternative leader in the post-Soviet space. On the other hand, Moscow considers itself under threat by a rival Orthodox sect, the Kyivan Patriarchate. Though still unrecognized by Constantinople and other Orthodox jurisdictions and viewed by many in the post-Soviet space as illegitimate, the UOC-KP is growing in popularity, and some expect that it will achieve recognition by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the near future.

The frequent use of rhetoric by the Kremlin and the ROC, framing Kyiv as being controlled by a fascist junta, extends into propaganda, portraying all religious groups other than the UOC-MP as illegitimate, a heretical fifth column which exists to destroy "legitimate" Orthodoxy.<sup>130</sup> The ROC and the UOC-MP ultimately not only see Russians and Ukrainians as one ethnic people; they see them as one spiritual people, in a space where the only legitimate religion is Russian Orthodoxy. Thus, the battle for Ukraine is also perceived as a battle for "legitimate Orthodoxy."

The UOC-MP, in its support for the Russian cause in the war, has been serving both the Kremlin's interests and its own, as a branch of the ROC safeguarding its position in a post-Maidan Ukraine, a country that is becoming increasingly multi-religious.<sup>131</sup> The UOC-MP has a deep fear of losing its primacy as the national religious institution, but its chances of being tied to the state in the same vein as the ROC are slim; similarly, the Moscow Patriarchate fears losing its influence in

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<sup>128</sup> Higgins, "Evidence Grows."

<sup>129</sup> Payne, "Spiritual Security," 8.

<sup>130</sup> Higgins, "Evidence Grows."

<sup>131</sup> Adam Hug, "Introduction: The Shifting Balance between Church and State," in *Traditional Religion and Political Power: Examining the Role of the Church in Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine and Moldova* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2015), 8.



Ukraine, not just as a Russian proxy, but as an institution promoting Orthodoxy as the primary religion in Ukraine. By contrast, the UOC-KP has not only survived without the recognition of Constantinople,<sup>132</sup> it has forged essential ties with other religious groups in Ukraine and has opened an active interfaith dialogue that increasingly portrays the UOC-KP as more flexible, tolerant and supportive of the Ukrainian people than the UOC-MP.<sup>133</sup> This, combined with the role the UOC-KP played during the Maidan Revolution in support of popular resistance to the Yanukovich regime, has strengthened the UOC-KP's legitimacy and influence in Ukraine.<sup>134</sup>

The ROC and UOC-MP are right to fear the rising influence of the UOC-KP; multiple parishes have changed allegiances to the unrecognized church in the last few years.<sup>135</sup> If recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the UOC-KP will likely grow to outnumber the UOC-MP in terms of believers and make a rival claim on the ROC's canonical territory in Ukraine, limiting its influence in the country.<sup>136</sup> It is easy to predict that with the UOC-KP's recognition, the entire MP, both the UOC-MP and the ROC, will become a significantly less effective weapon for the Kremlin to use in Ukraine, both as a tool of soft coercion and an instrument in the war in Eastern Ukraine. Both Russian spiritual security, to which Russian state influence is fundamentally tied, and also the religious hierarchical status quo in Ukraine is at stake. The UOC-MP is seeking not only to expand the ROC's influence but also maintain its own, in a rapidly changing post-Maidan Ukraine.

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<sup>132</sup> Bugriy, "Orthodox Churches in Ukraine."

<sup>133</sup> Hug, "Introduction: The Shifting Balance Between Church and State," 8.

<sup>134</sup> Sagan, "Orthodoxy in Ukraine: Current State and Problems," 18.

<sup>135</sup> Bugriy, "Orthodox Churches in Ukraine."

<sup>136</sup> Catherine Wanner, "'Fraternal' Nations and Challenges to Sovereignty in Ukraine: The Politics of Linguistic and Religious Ties," *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 3 (August 2014): 433.

#### *Part Four: Civilizational Context*

Throughout his regime, Putin has maintained Russia is a civilization unto itself.<sup>137</sup> In so doing, he claims civilizational possession over most of traditionally Orthodox Eastern Europe, often in opposition to the national histories of post-Soviet states, as well as to the EU, which has maintained the rhetoric that these states are “rejoining Europe.”<sup>138</sup> The Russian state, as Orthodox cultures have often done in the past, defines itself in opposition to the West:<sup>139</sup> it is authoritarian, insular, and deeply conservative, with a strong relationship between church and state.<sup>140</sup> Currently, we are seeing an increasing struggle over which civilization can lay claim to the modern nation-states of Eastern Europe, which have spent periods of history as both part of the West and part of the Russian sphere. We can expect increased Russian hostility towards post-Soviet states attempting to distance themselves from Moscow, even if simply motivated by pragmatic national interest.

The idea of Russian “otherness” is demonstrating itself in an increasingly multipolar world, and Russia has aggressively laid its claim as an alternative to the West at a time when the latter’s primacy is in jeopardy. Yet the war in Ukraine has demonstrated that the Russian Orthodox civilization may also be in jeopardy. Moscow’s choice to take such an aggressive response to Ukraine’s Maidan has demonstrated a profound fear of losing Ukraine, an integral part of Orthodox civilization and the Russian World without which, arguably, it cannot exist. Maintaining control over Ukraine is imperative for the Kremlin if it wants its claims to civilizational power to survive. The independence of Ukraine, *de jure* and *de facto*, demonstrates to other post-Soviet states beholden to Moscow that they are not fated to remain in such a position; instead they can choose the direction they wish to take. The loss of Ukraine for Russian Orthodox civilization will weaken Moscow’s claims to civilizational primacy; the ancient city of Kyiv is the capital

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>138</sup> Bogomolov and Lytvynenko, “A Ghost in the Mirror,” 2.

<sup>139</sup> van Herpen, *Putin’s Wars*, 55.

<sup>140</sup> Gorvett, “Russian Prayers.”

of modern Ukraine, not Russia, and the former can use this to promote its own national history and claims to uniqueness.

Ultimately, Ukraine's Maidan struck a serious blow for Moscow's vision of Orthodox civilization, because it called the primacy of its core into doubt; Kyiv appears to be breaking free from Moscow's control and is actively working to strengthen its independence by eliminating corruption through reform, limiting the influence of Moscow's proxy groups, and promoting an alternative narrative of a civic, multi-ethnic and multi-faith country that exists by virtue of its defiance to the assumed Orthodox core. In addition, Ukraine's own legacy as the successor to an ancient Orthodox state and the importance of Kyiv as the capital of that ancient civilization could motivate Ukraine to pursue its own narrative as an alternative centre within Orthodox civilization but with an increased Western outlook, ultimately weakening Moscow's civilizational power.

### *Conclusion*

The UOC-MP has played a unique role as a Russian proxy in the war in Eastern Ukraine. Its impact is often complex, multifaceted, and difficult to trace; however, this essay maintains that it has served as a vessel for the weaponized ideology of Russian World, and in itself, has become a weapon of the Kremlin. This has been demonstrated both by assessing the role of UOC-MP clergy in their provision of material and spiritual support for militants in the region, the church's role in legitimizing the Russian cause, and its role in promoting Russian claims to civilizational uniqueness.

Despite its decisive and often successful role, the UOC-MP runs the risk of losing influence and authority in Ukraine because of the position it has taken. By refusing to pray for Ukraine in the war, undermining Ukrainian sovereignty, and by working against the state and promoting identity increasingly at odds with the majority of the population, and certainly at odds with the principles fought for at Maidan, the UOC-MP has found itself growing deeply unpopular and losing the allegiance of scores of Orthodox believers. In the interest of religious freedom, the state cannot and will not ban the UOC-MP

outright as a threat to national security, but the institution will likely come under increased surveillance by the state and under heavy criticism and opposition by the population.

It may be too early to predict the outcome of the war in Ukraine, but a weakening Kremlin-backed church in Ukraine, as well as the hoped-for recognition of the KP by Constantinople and other Orthodox churches, is already causing a widespread shift in parishes joining the UOC-KP. The UOC-MP may crumble in the coming decades from the bottom-up, and the Kremlin will then lose a vital backchannel of influence into Ukraine. Further publication of the behaviour of UOC-MP priests, particularly their complicity in war crimes, may also reduce the institution's popularity in Ukraine, as well as in Moscow, which has demonstrated that it is anxious to distance itself from the more radical militant groups accused of committing atrocities in Donbas.

Ultimately, the Moscow Patriarchate has allowed itself to be turned into a weapon in Russia's war in Ukraine. It has been extremely effective in ensuring the complicity of the local population and promoting the Russian state's cause in Ukraine and abroad, as well as adding a layer of ambiguity to the conflict that makes it difficult to tell who is supporting the militants and how they operate. Understanding the Moscow Patriarchate's role in the conflict can ultimately help Ukrainian forces and Ukraine eliminate an integral part of the Russian war machine, and may turn the tide of the war in its favour and eventually return peace to the region.