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# Greece

## INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN GREECE'S RELIGIOUS ECOSYSTEM

Elizabeth H. Prodromou

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Greece's Unique Significance for Russia's Geostrategy of Weaponizing Traditionalism*

Greece plays a unique role as a crucial geospace for Russian geostrategic ambitions in the twenty-first century.<sup>362</sup> Throughout the Cold War and in the 30 years following it, Russia has had an unwavering focus on maximizing relations with Greece. Greece is a key target because of its role in both NATO and within the global Orthodox ecosystem, making the Kremlin's influence-building goals in Greece twofold and mutually reinforcing. In this regard, Moscow views the weaponization of traditionalism as a geometric influence builder with regional, transnational, and international impacts in Greece and, more broadly, across Eurasia.

The Church of Greece and Mount Athos are the two primary operational spaces in which Russia deploys strategic conservatism through a combination of soft- and sharp-power tools that highlight the need for transatlantic policymakers to understand the linkages between religion and geopolitics. The Church of Greece is a norms entrepreneur in that church leaders understand the social impact and political relevance of Orthodoxy as dependent on the deployment of "moral arguments and strategic constructions to persuade relevant audiences" to define both their interests and their identities.<sup>363</sup>

Furthermore, Orthodoxy's crucial historical role in the establishment of the Greek state makes the Church of Greece a stakeholder in political conversations related to Greek sovereignty and the country's place in the democratic international architecture, specifically NATO. But perhaps more powerfully, Mt. Athos, or "the Holy Mountain," has been the undisputed center of Orthodox Christian spirituality since the tenth-century establishment of the monastic community under Byzantine imperial patronage. The self-governing, legal personality of the Monastic Republic of Mt. Athos is recognized in both the Greek Constitution and European Union law and is part of Greek sovereign territory. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople has ecclesiastical jurisdiction over Mt. Athos, which is comprised of 20 monasteries and approximately 2,000 monks, all affiliated with the world's

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362 The author uses the concept of "geospace" to mean the intersection of the territorial and cultural geographies in which the Russian state and, more specifically, the Russian Orthodox Church (Patriarchate of Moscow) engage for the purposes of promoting, exporting, and consolidating strategic conservatism toward realizing the goals of Russian foreign policy. Consequently, geospace includes material and ideational manifestations with short-, medium-, and long-term chronologies. The concept of geospace as used in this paper captures the features of hybridity of space-time intersections and the ensembles of distinct, yet connected regions of activity that are found in works such as Robert M. Hayden and Timothy D. Walker, "Intersecting Religioscapes: A Comparative Approach to Trajectories of Change, Scale, and Competitive Sharing of Religious Spaces," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 2 (June 2013): 399–426, doi:10.1093/jaarel/lft009; and "The Definition of Geospace," *Economic Times*, July 27, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/definition/geospace>.

363 Kristina Mikulova and Michal Simeka, "Norms Entrepreneurs and Atlanticist Foreign Policy in Central and Eastern Europe: The Missionary Zeal of Recent Converts," *Europe-Asia Studies* 65, no. 6 (August 2018), 1197, doi:10.1080/09668136.2013.813681.

Orthodox Christian patriarchates and autocephalous churches.

Taken as a whole, Russia's influence-building efforts in the Church of Greece and Mt. Athos are force multipliers for Russia's geopolitical and religious ambitions and rest on Greece's unique characteristics in two respects: (1) the historical continuity of the administrative connections of the Church of Greece and Mt. Athos to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople as the leader of the world's Orthodox Christian community; and (2) Greece's strategic importance at NATO and the European Union's external border at the intersection and projection of all forms of power in the European, Asian, and African continents.

### *Orthodoxy as a Soft- and Sharp-Power Tool*

Both the Russian state and the Patriarchate of Moscow understand religion as an invaluable tool of identity in building influence within Greece and for using Greece for their respective state and church geopolitical objectives.<sup>364</sup> For the Russian state, Orthodoxy offers a channel for disruption and division within Western societies, and for the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), Orthodoxy is an instrument for displacing the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the leader of the world's estimated 300 million Orthodox Christians and as the primary interlocutor for Orthodox Christianity in international religious and secular multilateral fora.<sup>365</sup> For these purposes, Orthodoxy is a multidimensional—theological, cultural, political, and economic—tool that can “shape the preferences of others” in ways that are not overtly coercive but instead are co-optive and persuasive.<sup>366</sup> The targeting of the Church of Greece and Mt. Athos amounts to prudent, efficacious use of Orthodox diplomacy as part of “the vanguard of [Russian] foreign policy.”<sup>367</sup> In this context, Greece is understood as a geospace within and from which norms and values and associated policy actions can be deployed.

Consequently, Moscow's messaging to and through the Church of Greece and Mt. Athos is highly symbolic (e.g., Putin's widely mediatized visits to Mt. Athos in 2005 and 2016 were instructive) and designed to persuade decisionmakers (especially hierarchs, but also clergy and key lay actors in civil society) that leaders of Greece's Orthodox institutions should “be more like” Russia in “wanting the

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364 Significant portions of this section were drawn from Elizabeth H. Prodromou, “God, Soft Power, and Geopolitics: Religious Diplomacy in Contemporary International Relations,” Keynote Address at International Conference on Religious Diplomacy, organized by the Foreign Affairs Institute of Greece in Athens, Greece, November 2019.

365 All interviews for this chapter were conducted under conditions of anonymity and non-attribution of sources and ranged from across the Orthodox world. In conversations with the author, clerics and laypersons currently and formally associated with the Moscow Patriarchate emphasize the determinant impact of Putin and Kirill in broadening and deepening the church-state relationship; they emphasized the analytical and practical importance of deconstructing the factions and perspectives inside the institutional space of the ROC, since there are divergent views on the Kirill-Putin relationship as it affects the ROC's legitimacy and social capacity.

366 Joseph S. Nye Jr., “The Benefits of Soft Power,” Harvard Business School, August 2, 2004, <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/the-benefits-of-soft-power>.

367 “Special Series: Confirmation Hearings for Obama Cabinet Picks. Transcript of Clinton's Confirmation Hearing,” NPR, January 13, 2009, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99290981>.

same outcomes.”<sup>368</sup> The outcomes include:

1. Protecting national sovereignty against the threat of transatlantic strategic actions that use NATO and, to a lesser extent, the European Union for achieving Western hegemonic aspirations in Eurasia;
2. Protecting Eastern Christianity’s purity in the face of Western Christian dilution, perfidy, and decadence, a cultural clash centered on the conflict between Orthodox-majority countries’ moral rectitude and the West’s embrace and promotion of Jacobin secularism; and
3. Accepting the Moscow Patriarchate’s claims that the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople complied with U.S. religious-geopolitical machinations, exemplified in the Phanar’s (Ecumenical Patriarchate’s) decision to grant autocephalous (self-governing) status in 2019 to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, as well as in Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s active support for and engagement in the Christian ecumenical movement.<sup>369</sup>

The Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian state have deployed sharp-power tools as sustained mechanisms to augment soft-power initiatives to build influence. This soft-sharp combination involves persuasion, coercion, and targeting allied and oppositional actors of Moscow’s traditional values agenda, both within the Church of Greece and on Mt. Athos.<sup>370</sup>

The use of technology has been central to Russian influence building in Greece, pointing to the at least tacit collaboration between the Russian state and the Moscow Patriarchate, including digital and other media technologies, considered sharp-power tools because they “‘pierce, penetrate, or perforate’ the political and information environments of targeted countries.”<sup>371</sup> The dissemination of a particular brand of Orthodox traditionalism—monopolistically defined by the Moscow Patriarchate as “authentic Orthodoxy”—is being promoted via an intersecting network of digital platforms, reinforced by other media channels and technologies.

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368 Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, Issue on “Public Diplomacy in a Changing World” (March 2008): 94–109, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25097996>.

369 Phanar, literally “lighthouse,” is a term used synonymously with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Phanar is the area of Constantinople where the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek Orthodox Christian population were most heavily concentrated after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, located in today’s Istanbul within the *Fatih* (“Conquest”) district of Istanbul, approximately midway up the Gold Horn.

370 “The concept of ‘soft power’ . . . often fails to capture what goes on when autocrats reach abroad. . . . These efforts instead represent the exercise of ‘sharp power,’ which seeks to impair free expression, to compromise and neutralize independent institutions, and to distort the political environment. . . . In the media and technology domains, authoritarians are investing massive resources to attain a leading position in global markets—and in the process they are changing how people around the world perceive facts and engage with technology.” Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, “The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (January 2020), 127–128, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-cutting-edge-of-sharp-power/>. The authors draw extensively from the report by the International Forum for Democratic Studies, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for Democracy, 2017), <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Introduction-Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence.pdf>.

371 Christopher Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018), 12, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/what-is-sharp-power/>.

Empirical evidence suggests that Russia's calculus and its efforts to weaponize traditional values in Greece have so far had limited effect. Nonetheless, the Kremlin and Moscow Patriarchate's decisionmaking on religious soft- and sharp-power initiatives targeted at Greece work on long time horizons, reflecting both an appreciation of history and an authoritarian political culture, which makes it unlikely that there will be any major rupture with the current approach.

The significance of elongated time horizons, with associated features of sacralization of policymaking decisions, was evident in Putin's address to the Munich Security Conference in 2007 and his Annual Presidential Address to Russia's Federal Assembly in 2013 and 2014. In both, he laid out Russia's commitment to following an "independent path in foreign policy" that would include the defense of "traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilization in every nation for thousands of years . . . the values of traditional families . . . [and] religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality."<sup>372</sup>

This chapter focuses on Russia's influence-building efforts in the religious field in Greece, but there is important intersectionality with the business and financial networks tied to Russian oligarchs who are active in developing political-economic ties between Russia and Greece. As will be discussed below, several Russian businessmen are active in religious tourism and other Russo-Greek commercial activities, whose declared support for traditional values has given traction to Russian soft- and sharp-power activities in Greece.

## THE CHURCH OF GREECE AS KEY TO RUSSIA'S "THIRD ROME" NARRATIVE

### *History as Policy Justification for Russian Activity in Greece's Religious Field*

History helps explain why Russian policymakers see Greece as a critical target for maximizing the weaponization of tradition toward geopolitical goals. The religious and geopolitical features of the Third Rome concept (described below) are central to Russia's religious diplomacy efforts in Greece because they explain the pretensions of the Patriarchate of Moscow to supplant the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople as the leader of global Orthodoxy. The concept has become the main justification for the Moscow Patriarchate's use of cultural links, ecclesiastical activities, and media propaganda and misinformation within Greece's religious field.

A review of the dynamics that inform the Kremlin and Moscow Patriarchate's focus on Greece's religious field begins with the ROC's acknowledgment of and respect for the Greek foundations and legacy of the Byzantine, Eastern Roman Empire. The intimate relationship between theology and culture—a hallmark of Byzantine Christendom's Greek culture and Orthodox theology (not to mention the geopolitics of imperial expansion)—was one of the most notable features of the late-tenth-century conversion of Prince Vladimir of Kiev to Eastern Orthodox Christianity from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.<sup>373</sup>

The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople played a pivotal role in the ecclesiastical-

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372 Quoted in Olympiada Usanova, "Russia's 'Traditional Values' and Domestic Violence."

373 Deno John Geanakoplos, *Byzantine East and Latin West: Two Worlds of Christendom in Middle Ages and Renaissance: Studies in Ecclesiastical and Cultural History* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1976); Andrew Louth, *Greek East and Latin West: The Church AD 681-1071* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007); and Philip Sherrard, *The Greek East and the Latin West: A Study in the Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

institutional and cultural-identity evolution of what eventually became the ROC, or Patriarchate of Moscow.<sup>374</sup> It also helps to explain the tensions in the ecclesiastical and cultural dimensions of the Constantinople-Moscow relationship that escalated into rupture of communion by Moscow with Constantinople, when the latter granted the Tomos of Autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in 2019. Where once the Ecumenical Patriarchate was viewed as the wellspring of the organic identity between Orthodox Christianity and Hellenism, the political and ecclesiastical center of power of the Kievan Metropolitanate shifted to Moscow in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. Russian hierarchs (rather than Greek) then governed what became the autocephalous (self-governing) Patriarchate of Moscow in 1686. Concomitantly, the fusion of Orthodoxy and Slavic cultural identity supplanted what was a legacy-respect for the Greek linguistic and cultural roots of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The Kievan-Muscovite church interpreted the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in the mid-fifteenth century (and the subsequent four centuries of Ottoman imperial control over the Greek-speaking and Greek-led patriarchates and churches in Constantinople) as divine punishment for the aborted Constantinople-Rome union of the Council of Florence in 1438–39, feeding the narrative of the Moscow Patriarchate as the Third Rome.<sup>375</sup>

The messianic concept of the Third Rome was consolidated between the late fifteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries, with religious and geopolitical implications.<sup>376</sup> Accordingly, the Patriarchate of Moscow declared itself the inheritor of the Constantinopolitan Byzantine imperial legacy. The conceptual repackaging and twisting of the Byzantine formulation of Constantinople as the New Rome, to the Muscovite formulation of Constantinople as the Second Rome, positioned Moscow as the Third Rome and the center of a new, Orthodox Christian empire, fused with pan-Slavic cultural identity that supplanted the dominance of Hellenism.<sup>377</sup>

Russia has thus viewed the institution of the Ecumenical Patriarchate as captive to a Sunni Islamist regime since the fifteenth-century fall of Constantinople, with this Ottoman captivity continuing under both the Atatürkist and Erdoganist regime paradigms that have defined the modern Turkish state's control over religion. Moscow views the current neo-Ottomanism of the

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374 The two formulations are used interchangeably in this article, given that the patriarch and institutions of the Patriarchate of Moscow are the determinant decisionmakers for the ROC's foreign policy and external affairs.

375 Those patriarchates are Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Cyprus. Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1971). Obelensky's concept of the Byzantine Commonwealth is instructive insofar as it refers to the territorial and cultural boundaries that were part of and connected to the Byzantine Empire as the wellspring of the Orthodox Christian faith and Roman law, and that comprised what eventually became the 14 Old World patriarchates and autocephalous churches that were convened by the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Churches in Crete in 2016.

376 A detailed treatment of the historical nexus between religion and geopolitics embodied in the Third Rome, with focus on Russian diplomacy and foreign and security policy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is provided by Lora Grad, *Russian Policy in the Orthodox East: The Patriarchate of Constantinople (1878-1914)* (Berlin: DeGruyter Open Ltd., 2014).

377 An infrequently cited, but meticulously researched, detailed account of the origins of the Third Rome concept is found in Dimitri Stremoukhoff, "Moscow the Third Rome: Sources of the Doctrine," *Speculum* 28, no. 1 (January 1953): 84–101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2847182>.



Erdogan regime (an exclusivist, homogenizing version of secular and religious nationalism) as the sharpest expression of the continuation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Ottoman captivity.<sup>378</sup>

The Moscow Patriarchate believes that the intimidation and repression to which the Ecumenical Patriarchate is subject (for example, being targeted by Justice and Development Party ideologues following the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey) renders it ineffectual in autonomous decisionmaking as the leader of world Orthodox Christianity. This supposedly makes Constantinople vulnerable to accept U.S. pressures in exchange for promises of protection against the excesses of the Ankara regime. For example, Kremlin and Moscow Patriarchate officials view the Ecumenical Patriarch's granting of the 2019 Tomos of Autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine as the consequence of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's concession to U.S. pressures in the face of chronic, endemic Turkish government violations of the religious freedom and other civil and political liberties of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Greek Orthodox community of Turkey.

In short, the Moscow Patriarchate's focus on the Church of Greece builds on tropes of Constantinople's overall weakness under Turkish state repression. ROC leaders point to this vulnerability as an explanation for Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's involvement in Christian ecumenical projects that Moscow deems incompatible with traditional Orthodox values and theological correctness. By extension, the Phanar's openness to Western religious and cultural engagement creates greater opportunity for transatlantic geopolitical engagement with the ecumenical movement. Accordingly, the religious field in Greece becomes the *tabula* for the Moscow Patriarchate and the Kremlin to reframe the Russia-Greece relationship as crucial for protecting and promoting the authenticity of Orthodox theology and values. Moscow somewhat cynically celebrates the Church of Greece due to its autocephalous origins, accomplished via a rupture from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and in perpetuating the modern incarnation of Hellenism. Likewise, Moscow congratulates the Church of Greece when its hierarchs and academic theologians stand against what the ROC casts as the Ecumenical Patriarchate's concessions to the threats of theological impurity emanating from Western Christianity. Finally, Russia lauds Greece for standing firm against Western geopolitical servility, despite Greece's membership in NATO since 1952.

## **INFLUENCE BUILDING AND WEDGE ACTIVITY IN GREECE'S RELIGIOUS FIELD**

Russia's church-state collaboration has targeted the Church of Greece as a religious institution, aiming to build a leadership faction committed to traditionalism as a defense against the perceived Western dilution of Orthodoxy. In the words of Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens and All Greece, this has generated "a divisive logic" counterproductive to ecclesiastical cohesion and aimed to amplify Eurasianist-civilizationalist political voices positing that Greece-U.S. bilateral

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378 For a readable summary of the Russian state's religious geopolitics related to territorial ambitions and Orthodox religious claims to primacy within the context of the Eastern Question, see Grad, *Russian Policy in the Orthodox East*. For a treatment of the contemporary Russian church-state position on this same issue, see Alicja Curanovic, "The Guardians of Traditional Values: Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Quest for Legal Status," Transatlantic Academy, *Transatlantic Paper Series* no. 1, 2015, [https://www.academia.edu/12689336/The\\_Guardians\\_of\\_Traditional\\_Values\\_Russia\\_and\\_the\\_Russian\\_Orthodox\\_Church\\_in\\_the\\_Quest\\_for\\_Status](https://www.academia.edu/12689336/The_Guardians_of_Traditional_Values_Russia_and_the_Russian_Orthodox_Church_in_the_Quest_for_Status).

relations represent Western efforts to make Greece a satellite.<sup>379</sup> In both regards, Russian influence activities vis-à-vis the Church of Greece reflect the Moscow Patriarchate's goal of becoming a norm entrepreneur or norm protagonist, an entity whose "normative agency" is purposefully mobilized toward "construct[ing] cognitive frames, often in opposition to rival frames, effectively causing a shift in public perceptions of appropriateness."<sup>380</sup>

### *The Church of Greece and the Holy and Great Council of Crete*

The approach of the Patriarchate of Moscow to the Holy and Great Council (HGC) of the Orthodox Church, convened by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on Crete in 2016, illustrates the reliance on digital platforms to influence theological arguments and ecclesiastical factions in the Church of Greece and in Greek society.<sup>381</sup> Above all, it shows their use to undermine the legitimacy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's primacy of honor and prerogatives of action as the leader of worldwide Orthodox Christianity.

The Crete event has roots as far back as a century, when then-Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III issued a Patriarchal and Synodical Encyclical in 1902 asking for "members of the whole of the Orthodox Church" to prepare for a Holy and Great Council.<sup>382</sup> The drive for a council was revived and revitalized during the 1950s and 1960s. Bartholomew then made the convening of a Pan-Orthodox Council the signature ecclesiastical event of his tenure, which celebrated its 30th year.

What may be seen as a highly specialized event focused on Orthodox theological arcana is more accurately understood in similar terms as the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) for the Roman Catholic Church. By convening the 14 mutually recognized churches constituting the 300 million Eastern Orthodox Christians worldwide, the HGC was intended to promote theological and institutional—ecclesial—unity and vitality, enabling the Eastern Orthodox churches' capacity for internal cohesion and transformational social action, as well as to facilitate positive, concrete progress in ecumenical dialogue and action among the three main Christian trajectories of Eastern, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Christianity.<sup>383</sup>

The ROC pursued a disruptive strategy in approaching the preparatory meetings for the HGC. Indeed, the Ecumenical Patriarchate's ecclesiastical prerogatives represented a rejection of the Moscow Patriarchate's Third Rome pretensions and the Kremlin's associated geopolitical priorities that understood the *Russkiy Mir*, or "Russian World," as intrinsically linked to spiritual security. Participants from the many preparatory meetings for the HGC reported that the Patriarchate of Moscow practiced

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379 "Archbishop of Athens to Russian Orthodox Church: Divisive logic is not useful at all," *Orthodox Times*, July 3, 2021, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/archbishop-of-athens-to-russian-orthodox-church-divisive-logic-is-not-useful-at-all>.

380 Kristina Stoeckl, "The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur," *Religion, State, and Society* 42, no. 2 (2016): 133, doi:10.1080/09637494.2016.1194010.

381 "Holy and Great Council," Holy and Great Council, <https://www.holycouncil.org/>.

382 Job of Telmessos, "The Ecumenical Significance of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church" (lecture, KEK Headquarters, Brussels, May 30, 2016), <https://www.orthodoxcouncil.org/-/the-ecumenical-significance-of-the-holy-and-great-council-of-the-orthodox-church>.

383 For an accessible treatment of the significance of the HGC, see the contributions in the special edition of the *Journal of World Christianity*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2021.



obstructionism on procedural and substantive grounds, using alliance-making strategies on theological grounds with anti-ecumenical, anti-modernist factions in the Church of Greece.<sup>384</sup>

Moscow's spoiler role in the eleventh-hour decision to boycott the Council at Crete came together with three other Orthodox churches for which the religious calculus was integrally connected to Russia's geopolitical engagement in Southeastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Caucasus—the Patriarchates of Bulgaria, Antioch, and Georgia.<sup>385</sup> The chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, stated that the HGC's process and decisions would be illegitimate unless "all 14 of the invited Churches, without exception, participate."<sup>386</sup>

Overall, Moscow's instrumentalization of the council at Crete to promote the ROC as the sole guardian of Eastern Christian authenticity has relied on two themes that blend protection of traditional Orthodox values with defense against transatlantic geopolitical expansionism.

The first theme concerns the polarity between "virtuous, pure traditionalists" versus "debased, corrupt modernists," promoted by the Moscow Patriarchate's depiction of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew as a modernizing religious leader whose "papist inclinations and ambitions" were "implanted gradually at Crete and through the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue."<sup>387</sup> Drawing on historical events that resonated with conservative hierarchical factions and segments of the Greek public who had opposed the visit of Pope John Paul II to Athens in 2001 (framed as a "heretic pope" and two-horned monster), Moscow's self-defined purists presented the HGC as evidence of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's willingness to be taken in by the Pope's apology for the historical injustices, "painful memories and deep wounds which still cause suffering to the spirit of the Greek people," caused by Latin Christians' "disastrous sack of the imperial city of

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384 Anonymous. This point about the persuasive and coercive tactics of the Moscow Patriarchate vis-à-vis Church of Greece leaders and the Greek jurisdictional pale of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (extending to other parts of the world) has been a consistent theme reiterated in many author conversations with hierarchs, clerics, and academics from 2010 through 2021. All individuals spoke on condition of full anonymity.

385 Following an extraordinary session of the Holy Synod of the ROC on June 13, the Patriarchate of Moscow announced three days before the convening of the HGC on June 16 that the ROC would be absent from the Crete event. See Sergei Chapnin, "Russia's No-Show at Pan-Orthodox Council Reveals Hopeless Lack of Unity," Carnegie Moscow Center, June 29, 2016, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/63954>. A readable synopsis of the intersection of geopolitical and ecclesiastical considerations of the Patriarchates of Bulgaria, Antioch, and Georgia is found in Paul Gavrilyuk, "Council Meets Despite Absence of Four Patriarchates under the Sway of Russia," *America Magazine*, July 7, 2016, <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/historic-orthodox-council-meets-despite-absence-four-churches>.

386 "Pan-Orthodox Council Will Not Be Legitimate if Held without Some Churches – Metropolitan Hilarion" Interfax, June 13, 2016, <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=13018>.

387 "Metropolitan Hilarion: Constantinople's Papist Claims Are Groundless," Russian Orthodox Church Department for External Church Relations, n.d., <https://mospat.ru/en/news/60714>.

Constantinople, the bastion of Christianity.”<sup>388</sup> This theme thus plays on tradition and its interplay with historical trauma.

This theme’s resonance was on full display in the acrimonious debate about the HGC text on the permissibility of Orthodox churches referring to other Christian bodies and confessions as churches. A sizable faction within the Church of Greece delegation subscribed to the extensive denunciations of heterodoxy voiced by well-known conservative Greek theologian Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, conforming to the Moscow Patriarchate’s narrative that ecumenism degrades traditional Orthodox values.<sup>389</sup> Indeed, several Church of Greece hierarchs elected to withhold their signatures from the final version of that text.<sup>390</sup>

Nonetheless, there was an impressive multi-vocality and diversity characterizing the global communion of the Eastern Orthodox autocephalous churches and patriarchates.<sup>391</sup> Indeed, the encyclical of the HGC was endorsed by all 10 church delegations—progressives, traditionalists, and fundamentalists—with the text’s cautions that “the explosions of fundamentalism within religious communities threaten to create the [errant] view that fundamentalism belongs to the essence of the phenomenon of religion [but the] truth, however, is that *fundamentalism . . . constitutes an expression of morbid religiosity*.”<sup>392</sup>

The Moscow Patriarchate’s criticism of the HGC as an international platform for an assault on Orthodox traditionalism was articulated on Moscow-funded or Moscow-sympathetic websites with readerships associated with the Church of Greece and the Ecumenical Patriarchate through a steady flow of theological documents, op-eds, and blog posts. Additionally, the Moscow Patriarchate’s views were circulated in a spate of academic conferences and publications in Europe and the United States, especially those directed at a Greek Orthodox readership. The same arguments were circulated by monasteries on Mt. Athos with known sympathies toward Russia’s arguments about “authentic”

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388 Alessandra Stanley, “Pope Visits Greece Today on a Tough Mission of Reconciliation,” *New York Times*, May 4, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/04/world/pope-visits-greece-today-on-a-tough-mission-of-reconciliation.html>; Andrew Holt, “Apology for the Fourth Crusade,” Andrew Holt, Ph.D., May 26, 2016, <https://apholt.com/2016/05/26/apology-for-the-fourth-crusade>; see also “Patriarch Accepts Pope’s Apology,” *In Communion: Website of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship*, October 24, 2004, <https://incommunion.org/2004/10/24/news-issue-33>.

389 “Movement or tendency toward worldwide Christian unity or cooperation. The term, of recent origin, emphasizes what is viewed as the universality of the Christian faith and unity among churches.” See “Ecumenism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ecumenism>.

390 There is by now a large literature on the preparations, event, and outcome of the Holy and Great Council at Crete. For a readable summary accessible to the non-specialist on the debates about the use of “Church,” see Brandon Gallagher, “The Orthodox Moment: The Holy and Great Council in Crete and Orthodoxy’s Encounter with the West: On Learning to Love the Church,” *Sobornost* 39, no. 2 (2017), [https://eclass.uoa.gr/modules/document/file.php/THEOL312/Gallagher%2C%20The\\_Orthodox\\_Moment\\_The\\_Holy\\_and\\_Great.pdf](https://eclass.uoa.gr/modules/document/file.php/THEOL312/Gallagher%2C%20The_Orthodox_Moment_The_Holy_and_Great.pdf).

391 The author was one of five special consultants on the office Delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate present throughout the entire proceedings of the Holy and Great Council. See “Delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the Holy and Great Council,” Ecumenical Patriarchate Press Office, <https://www.orthodoxcouncil.org/-/delegation-ep>.

392 “Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church,” Holy and Great Council, 2016, <https://www.holocouncil.org/-/encyclical-holy-council>.

Orthodoxy and traditional values.<sup>393</sup> Digital platforms such as Orthodox News Agency: International Agency for Church News, Romfea: 24 Hour Agency for Church News and Pemptousia: Website of Mt. Athos, share a focus on Greece's religious and social field.<sup>394</sup>

The influential impact of Moscow's message is visible in its recurrence in the statements by Church of Greece hierarchs known for their hyper-conservatism and declared commitments to traditionalism. To wit, Metropolitan Seraphim of Piraeus warned Greeks and all Orthodox Christians in March 2021, on the widely observed religious holiday of the Sunday of Orthodoxy, of their duty to reject the "heresy of ecumenism" and the "decay and erosion of the Orthodox mind" perpetrated in "conferences, meetings, [and] dialogues," with "the texts of the Council of Crete legitimizing the heresy of ecumenism."<sup>395</sup>

The second theme that the ROC projected into the Greek religious ecosystem regarding the HGC has been the issue of autocephaly and the proper mode of deciding on the establishment of self-governing churches. The topic of autocephaly had long been part of the pre-conciliar, preparatory meetings for Crete, but the contentious nature of autocephaly as a potentially divisive issue also explains its omission from the final agenda for the HGC in 2016.<sup>396</sup> The Moscow Patriarchate has used a full-court media, ecclesiastical, and political blitzkrieg to portray Crete as the backroom planning session for the Phanar's decision, a mere three years later, to grant autocephalous status to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The ROC and the Kremlin have marched in lockstep in their respective messaging about the Crete event being part of a U.S. master plan imposed on Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to carry out a religious maneuver designed to advance U.S. foreign and security ambitions for dominance in Eurasia. Many among the Greek monastic communities on Mt. Athos and around Greece had made accusations that the "CIA was leading the Holy and Great Council at Crete."<sup>397</sup> Moreover, the Athonite community provided an especially fertile target for Metropolitan Alfeyev's formulation of the Ukraine decision as a U.S. foreign policy strategy of divide and rule, by which "what had already happened on the political level happened on the church level as well, and the person who implemented this American plan was Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople. His dependence on America is quite obvious and common knowledge; as a matter of fact, nobody hides it."<sup>398</sup>

Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov also explicitly linked the interests of the Russian state and its foreign policy interests with the security of the ROC, noting that the United States had used "the Patriarch of Constantinople, an absolutely dependent instrument," to "interfere in the affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church and its sisters in the Orthodox world," explaining that "the state is already

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393 Author interviews with anonymous sources.

394 Orthodoxia News Agency, <https://orthodoxianewsagency.gr>; ROMFEA, <https://www.romfea.gr/>; and Pemptousia, <https://pemptousia.com>.

395 "Metropolitan Seraphim of Piraeus: Stop Fruitless Dialogue with Heretics," *Orthodox Christianity*, March 19, 2021, <https://orthochristian.com/138112.html>.

396 See Gallaher, "The Orthodox Moment," for a discussion of the evolution in the agenda of the HGC, as well as for a review of key bibliographical sources on the council.

397 "Is the CIA Leading the Synod of Crete," *Aktines*, May 29, 2016, <https://aktines.blogspot.com/2016/05/cia.html#more>.

398 John Chryssavgis, "Alfeyev & Lavrov: A Glimpse into Church-State Relations in Russia," *Commonweal*, June 25, 2021, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/alfeyev-lavrov>.



obliged to protect the interests of its fellow believers and like-minded people.”<sup>399</sup>

The mainstreaming of the Russian narrative themes about the HGC and associated Ukraine decision into the Greek religious ecosystem and broader national media suggests a goal of influence building to shape popular discourse and complicate the decisionmaking calculus of religious leaders in Greece. References to Moscow’s coercive and persuasive pressures were expressed in debates within the Church of Greece regarding the eventual decision to recognize the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. In an Extraordinary Session of the Synod of the Hierarchy of the Church of Greece, multiple hierarchs reported on the efforts of “blackmail by Metropolitan Alfeyev of Volokolamsk, intimidation by the Moscow Patriarchate, and the political movement of Pan-slavism [sic], once started by Stalin and now active by other [religious] means.”<sup>400</sup>

The impact of Moscow’s religious influence activities in Greece’s political space was evident in the claims of Panos Kammenos, leader of the right-wing, nationalist Independent Greeks (ANEL) party during its coalition with the left-wing Syriza party that governed Greece from 2015 to 2019. Kammenos condemned the Church of Greece hierarchy as “criminals who succumbed to pressure from the Phanar and some American circles” because of their vote to recognize the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, warning that those hierarchs responsible for the Church of Greece vote would be fully responsible “for the termination of guarantees by Russia for the territorial integrity of Greece’s Aegean islands” in the face of Turkey’s threats to Greece’s territorial integrity.<sup>401</sup>

### **Mount Athos**

As a norm entrepreneur seeking to dominate global Orthodox positions on traditional values, Moscow has focused on Mt. Athos as a crucial influence-building space since the end of the Cold War. This focus has become systematic and intensive since 1999 under Putin’s political leadership, amplified since Kirill’s elevation in 2009 as Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia.<sup>402</sup> Mt. Athos is best understood as a force multiplier for Russia’s efforts to weaponize tradition through framing and shaping culture wars, summed up in Putin’s observation on his 2016 visit to Mt. Athos that the Holy Mountain is “associated with the strengthening of the moral foundations of society.”<sup>403</sup>

The Patriarchate of Moscow’s activities for achieving hegemony on Mt. Athos also involve the Third Rome concept. The Holy Mountain presents an opportunity for Moscow to use the traditional values

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399 Ibid.

400 “Heated Debate between Hierarchs of Church of Greece on Ukrainian Autocephaly Issue,” *Orthodox Times*, October 12, 2019, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/heated-debate-between-hierarchs-of-church-of-greece-on-ukrainian-autocephaly-issue>.

401 Yuri Zoria, “Greece threatened with Russia lifting ‘guarantees of non-occupation’ for recognizing Ukrainian Church,” Euromaidan Press, December 19, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20191219172704/http://euromaidanpress.com/2019/12/19/greece-threatened-with-russia-lifting-guarantees-of-non-occupation-for-recognizing-ukrainian-church>.

402 Kirill’s experience at the intersection of religion and foreign policy was developed during his tenure as director of the ROC’s Department of External Church Relations, beginning at the critical conjuncture of 1989 and the end of the Cold War.

403 “1823 – Putin on Athos: the Protaton throne,” Athos – Agion Oros, June 1, 2016, <https://athosweblog.com/2016/06/01/1823-putin-and-the-protaton-throne>.

agenda to influence both the Greek religious ecosystem and global Orthodox communities, especially those under the direct jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (e.g., the Greek Orthodox churches in the United States, Australia, and Western Europe). Overall, the particularities of the administrative structure of the religious field encompassing the Church of Greece and Mt. Athos make Greece a unique, key target for the synergies between Moscow's Third Rome ambitions and the Russian state's great power ambitions.<sup>404</sup>

Mt. Athos' male-only monastic space is a closed ecosystem where disinformation and misinformation can be carefully curated, disseminated, and recycled, both through digital connectivity and interpersonal connections. Moreover, Mt. Athos' particular territorial, legal-administrative, and ecclesiastical parameters offer influence-building opportunities directly inside the territory of the Greek state. This is done via the predominantly Greek-speaking monasteries with direct linkages to the Church of Greece, via Greek pilgrims from all segments of the political class and civil society who travel to Mt. Athos, and through transnational dissemination into Greek religious and cultural diaspora spaces in Cyprus and the Middle East, Western Europe, and, significantly, the United States. Because Mt. Athos falls under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the monastic space is ripe for the dissemination of the Moscow Patriarchate's accusations that Constantinople is guilty of the theological "deviations" of ecumenism and modernism (recycling Moscow's claims against the HGC) and of fomenting disunity through the Ukraine decision.

Finally, the local particularities of Mt. Athos—which hosts thousands of male pilgrims annually from around the global Orthodox world, sits on the easternmost promontory of Greece's Chalcidice (Halkidiki Peninsula), and is integrated into the local economy—explain the intersection of the theological-digital-economic-financial leverage that the Russian church-state partnership aims to gain as a traditional values norm entrepreneur on Mt. Athos.

The monastic environment of Mt. Athos showcases the comparative advantages of the church vis-à-vis the state in the collaboration between the Russian state and the Moscow Patriarchate over traditional values. The ROC has become a necessary legitimization mechanism for Putin's claims of historical continuity from Kievan Rus to twenty-first-century Russia.<sup>405</sup> His pilgrimages to Mt. Athos constitute performative sanctification of Russian state nationalism and promotion of the Moscow Patriarchate's claims to protect traditional Orthodox values and spirituality. The images and semiotics of the two visits illuminate the autonomous leverage of the Moscow Patriarchate in the church-state relationship, as televised images of the 2016 visit showed president and patriarch side by side, trading on Patriarch Kirill's characterization of Putin as a "miracle of God."<sup>406</sup>

Putin's two pilgrimages to Mt. Athos, in 2005 and 2016, were intensely mediatized in Greek news media as well as on Church of Greece and Athonite digital platforms. Russian news agencies contributed to the media echo chamber for the visits by providing low-cost and free digital content to

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404 Charalambos K. Papastathis, "Greece: A Faithful Orthodox State. The Orthodox Church in the Hellenic Republic," 2014, <https://original.religlaw.org/content/blurb/files/Greece%202014%20FINAL.pdf>.

405 Eppie Parker, "Russia, Religion and Soft Power," Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research, Issue 20, June 2020, 2.

406 Max Seddon, "Putin and the Patriarchs," *Financial Times*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/a41ed014-c38b-11e9-a8e9-296ca66511c9>.

Greek news sources.<sup>407</sup> Putin's recognition of Mt. Athos as a locus for operationalizing the multiplier effects of hybrid warfare—by combining soft (e.g., religious ideas and traditional values tropes) and sharp (e.g., digital platforms and cyber tools) modes of power—has deep roots. It dates back to his oversight of the development of Russia's spiritual security concept and its operational expression in the *Russkiy Mir*, his support for the state-financed construction of Russian Orthodox religious sites, and his investment in a personal relationship with Patriarch Kirill.<sup>408</sup>

The overt geopolitical connotations of Putin's Mt. Athos visits turned on the message that, through the monastic communities of the Holy Mountain, Russia-Greece relations “could only get stronger.”<sup>409</sup> Putin's remarks drove home the messages of Moscow's Eurasianist foreign policy camp about Russian cultural exceptionalism and defense against Western cultural atomism and materialism, tying the protection of traditional values on Mt. Athos to the same project in Greece more broadly.<sup>410</sup> According to Putin, “the Orthodox faith is the common basis for the relations of the peoples of Greece and Russia . . . and Russian monks on Mount Athos are an indestructible bond between the two countries, and Pontic Greeks who live in Russia have contributed to development of relations.”<sup>411</sup>

Experts in the Athonite community have highlighted monasteries that are Russian- and Bulgarian-speaking and, therefore, sympathetic to Russian influence and pan-Slavic interests (St. Panteleimon and Zografou, respectively).<sup>412</sup> In Greek-speaking monasteries, the strategic target of Russian influence operations has been Vatopedi and, secondarily, the monastery of Simonopetra. The Moscow Patriarchate's approach to these two large, well-funded monastic communities is based on the high-profile and religious-business linkages of their respective abbots (the Elder Ephraim and the Elder Elijah), along with the fact that Vatopedi and Simonopetra are major religious pilgrimage destinations for visitors from Greece and the international Orthodox Christian world.

Both charismatic abbots are viewed as useful influencers for pro-Moscow theological positions because of their connections to Church of Greece hierarchs and upwardly mobile priests within the church power structure, their active digital and other media platforms with Greek and transnational audiences, and their ability to influence the local Greek economy connected to pilgrimages to Mt. Athos. Notably, Abbot Ephraim's visits to Russia with Athonite icons from Vatopedi Monastery for religious viewing tours have made him a well-known figure in the Russian church-state arena.<sup>413</sup> Indeed, both Patriarch Kirill and the

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407 This is a general tactic used by Russia to assert itself in southeastern Europe in general, including the target space of Greece. See Annie Himes, “Russia's Game in the Balkans,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 6, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235>.

408 Parker, “Russia, Religion and Soft Power.”

409 “Vladimir Putin Visits Mount Athos, All Male Orthodox Enclave,” BBC News, May 28, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36405480>.

410 Nadezhda Arbatova, “Three Faces of Russia's Neo-Eurasianism,” *Survival* 61, no. 6 (November 2019): 7–24, doi: 10.1080/00396338.2019.1688562.

411 “Overview of Putin's Pilgrimage to Athos,” Katehon, May 29, 2016, <https://katehon.com/en/news/overview-putins-pilgrimage-athos>.

412 Author interview with anonymous sources from the Church of Greece and academics in Greek universities.

413 “Abbot Ephraim of Vatopedi meets with President Putin,” Serbian Orthodox Church, October 31, 2017, [http://www.spc.rs/eng/abbot\\_ephraim\\_vatopedi\\_meets\\_president\\_putin](http://www.spc.rs/eng/abbot_ephraim_vatopedi_meets_president_putin).



Russian Foreign Ministry pleaded with the Athens government for Ephraim's swift release from Greece's Korydallos prison in 2011–12, following his arrest on charges of embezzlement and fraud in land swaps between Vatopedi Monastery and the Greek state—a corruption scandal that contributed to the fall of the conservative government of then prime minister Costas Karamanlis.<sup>414</sup>

Some of the aforementioned digital platforms (e.g., Orthodoxia News Agency) are directly linked to Vatopedi Monastery and to the promotion of Abbot Ephraim's traditionalist, highly personalized Orthodox theology that resonates with the Moscow Patriarchate's notions of authentic Orthodox values and practices.<sup>415</sup> More generally, a plethora of digital platforms, such as Romfea: 24 Hour Agency for Church News and Katehon, report regularly about and into Mt. Athos and on Greece's broader religious ecosystem, offering a diversity of multilingual programming (e.g., English, Greek, Russian, French, and German) that tends to reiterate the main thematic messages discussed in the preceding section of this paper.<sup>416</sup> All manner of support for Athonite digital platforms—from content to financing—aims to generate Russia-Greek theological convergence, and geopolitical consequence, along the traditional values project. This is consistent with Patriarch Kirill's view that information warfare is key to norm entrepreneurship. Indeed, Kirill established the Synodal Information Department of the ROC immediately following his accession and also advanced church-state cooperation on information strategy through the Department of Journalism at the Moscow State Institute for International Relations (MGIMO, which is the elite training university of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs).<sup>417</sup>

### *Economic and Personal Ties in the Religious Sphere*

Russia's digital and media information strategies related to Mt. Athos also point to the complex intersection with the economic dimensions of Russia's religious soft-power efforts. Russian oligarchs with lucrative investments in Greece have ties to the Moscow Patriarchate and the Kremlin; their significance for Russia's persuasive and coercive activities related to religious conservatism and traditional values extends to Mt. Athos and the Church of Greece and, more broadly, to Greece's local economies.

The Athonite space offers two of the most well-known cases of Russia's use of a combined theological-digital-economic strategy to advance influence building. Konstantin Malofeev is president of the

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414 "Karamanlis over Troubled Waters after Vatopedi Scandal and Financial Crisis," Greek News, October 27, 2008, <https://www.greeknewsonline.com/karamanlis-over-troubled-waters-after-vatopedi-scandal-financial-crisis/>; and "Land Sweep Scandal Threatens Greek Leader," *New York Times*, October 26, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/26/world/europe/26iht-greece.1.17248485>.

415 For a series of articles on the imprisonment of Elder Ephraim, see "Abbot Ephraim," Belle News, <https://bellenews.com/tag/abbot-ephraim/>. For coverage of the calls by the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Foreign Ministry for the release of Ephraim from prison, see "Patriarch Kirill calls for Greece to free Abbot Ephraim from Vatopedi Monastery," *La Stampa*, January 10, 2012, <https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2012/01/10/news/patriarch-kirill-calls-for-greece-to-free-abbot-ephraim-from-vatopedi-monastery-1.36505267>.

416 See ROMFEA, <https://www.romfea.gr/>; and Katehon, <https://katehon.com/en>.

417 For a review of the emerging literature on the digital information and media strategies of the ROC, see Hanna Staehle, "Seeking New Language: Patriarch Kirill's Media Strategy," *Religion, State & Society* 46, no. 4 (2018), doi:10.1080/09637494.2018.1510213.

supervisory board of the think tank Katehon, an umbrella entity that “defend[s] the principle of a multipolar world . . . and stress[es] the importance of religious and cultural identities in international relations.”<sup>418</sup> In addition to regular geopolitical features by Russian Eurasianist Alexandr Dugin, arguing along civilizational lines positioning Russia as a defender against an expansionist West, Katehon provides a space for critics of the Ecumenical Patriarch for his commitment to Christian ecumenical relations and the heresy of supporting papal hegemony—the same message expressed by Church of Greece hierarchs at the HGC in 2016.<sup>419</sup> Malofeev has been a regular visitor to and investor in Mt. Athos, although his annual pilgrimages to the Holy Mountain have been interrupted since he was added to EU and U.S. sanctions lists.<sup>420</sup>

The second case is that of tobacco-tourism-construction billionaire Ivan Savvidis, a former member of parliament in Putin’s United Russia Party. He established the Charitable Foundation of Ivan Savvidis in 2000, and its website identifies one of its major areas of activity as “the financial support of traditional religious communities, including church-building and reconstruction of religious sites, organization of pilgrimage trips, as well as funding to Orthodox educational institutions.”<sup>421</sup> Savvidis has been a regular visitor to Mt. Athos and has used his numerous business activities, including investments in Greek media companies, hotels, and sports teams, to develop multiple points of digital and economic leverage to advance Russia’s traditional values plank.

Both Malofeev and Savvidis have invested in key sectors of Greece’s economy, as well as in targeted investments in the religious field economies (e.g., church and religious site construction and repair, pilgrimage tourism, hotels, digital and print media, and sports).<sup>422</sup> All of these generate leverage in Greece’s local economies and, by extension, constitute a soft-power tool for reinforcing Russia’s messaging that links religion and traditional values, nation and Orthodox identity, and territorial security. Malofeev and Savvidis are paradigmatic of a broader cohort of Russian oligarchs with ties to the Moscow Patriarchate or the Kremlin who have invested an estimated \$200 million in

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418 Justin Salhani, “The Russian Billionaire Carrying Out Putin’s Will Across Europe,” ThinkProgress, January 4, 2017, <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/putins-man-in-europe-a4fe6bb48d76>; and “About Us,” Katehon, <https://katehon.com/en/about-us>.

419 Dmitry Skortsov, “The Proper Way to Deprive Bartholomew of Honor,” Katehon, December 16, 2019, <https://katehon.com/en/article/proper-way-deprive-bartholomew-honor>.

420 Shaun Walker, “Ukraine-Russia tensions reach Greece’s holy Mount Athos,” *The Guardian*, December 14, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/14/ukraine-russia-tensions-reach-greeces-holy-mountain-athos>.

421 See “Activity,” Ivan Savvidi, <http://ivansavvidis.gr/en/activity/charity/>.

422 Giorgos Christides, “Greece gets investment from Russia with love,” BBC News, October 26, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20031296>; Walker, “Ukraine-Russia tensions”; Maksym Bugriy, “Hot Issue – Konstantin Malofeev: Fringe Christian orthodox Financier of the Donbas Separatists,” Jamestown Foundation, August 8, 2014, <https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-konstantin-malofeev-fringe-christian-orthodox-financier-of-the-donbas-separatists>; Kassandra, “The defeat of a Russian oligarch by a Greek ship-owner,” *New Europe*, June 4, 2017, <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/defeat-russian-oligarch-greek-ship-owner/>; and “Greek-Russian tycoon intervenes in politics,” *Kathimerini*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/218081/greek-russian-tycoon-intervenes-in-politics>.

reconstruction and restoration of monasteries on Mt. Athos since the start of this millennium.<sup>423</sup> Furthermore, while fulsome data on Russia's economic and digital footprint on Mt. Athos is difficult to obtain, monastics and pilgrims report "five-star hotel" upgrades in the slew of (pro-)Russian monasteries (e.g., St. Pateleimon, Zografou, and St. Paul), with St. Panteleimon "outfitted with 500 new rooms and an assemblage of satellite systems" reported to have been financed by Savvidis.<sup>424</sup>

Orthodox hierarchs, clerics, and public intellectuals identify Russian oligarchs' financial resources as a key factor facilitating the digital, sharp-power projection of traditionalism and fundamentalism by the Moscow Patriarchate into Greece's religious ecosystem.<sup>425</sup> Church of Greece and Ecumenical Patriarchate hierarchs have also spoken openly about Russian efforts to bribe, coerce, and intimidate opponents of Russia's traditionalist ideological agenda. Furthermore, Russia's use of hybrid tools to wage war for religious influence against the Ecumenical Patriarchate is taken as a serious threat by the Phanar, as well as by the U.S. diplomatic and intelligence communities. Credible evidence emerged that the Fancy Bear hacking entity, allegedly affiliated with Russian military intelligence, carried out targeted hacking activities against senior hierarchs of the Phanar, and data mining experts suggest that, in the wake of the Moscow-Constantinople rupture consequent to the Ukrainian autocephaly decision, Russia-associated cyber actors remain committed to compromising the Ecumenical Patriarchate through malign cyber operations.<sup>426</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It is important to recognize that the lack of robust longitudinal data creates challenges in measuring the impact of Russia's efforts to influence Greece's religious field and, by extension, the Kremlin's (in) ability to disrupt Greece's democratic political orientation and Euro-Atlantic geopolitical commitments.

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423 "Orthodoxy's schism is straining the loyalty of Russia's religious billionaires," Daily Ringtone, October 19, 2018, <https://medium.com/@thebell.io/orthodoxys-schism-is-straining-the-loyalty-of-russia-s-religious-billionaires-c336dc719cc4>.

424 Alexander Clapp, "The New Greek Oligarchy," *American Interest*, January 5, 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/01/05/new-greek-oligarchy>.

425 For a more general treatment of this issues, see: Evan Gershkovich, "At Russia's Inaugural Africa Summit, Moscow Sells Sovereignty," *Moscow Times*, October 26, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/26/russias-inaugural-africa-summit-moscow-sells-sovereignty-a67916>; "Двуглавый орел» и православные тролли: как медиаимперия бизнесмена Малофеева пытается захватить интернет" ["Two-headed eagle' and Orthodox trolls: How the media empire of businessman Malofeev is trying to take over the internet], Open Media, November 15, 2019, <https://openmedia.io/infometer/dvuglavyj-orel-i-pravoslavnye-trolli-kak-mediaimperiya-biznesmena-malofeeva-pytaetsya-zaxvatit-internet/>; and "Russian Billionaire Moves to Launch Orthodox 'Troll Farm' – Reports," *Moscow Times*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/18/russian-billionaire-moves-to-launch-orthodox-troll-farm-reports-a68210>. Author interviews with public intellectuals, hierarchs, and clerics associated with Mt. Athos and the Church of Greece, as well as the Ecumenical Patriarchate, repeatedly pointed to the linkages between Moscow Patriarchate digital strategies and Russian oligarchs' economic investments in Greece as crucial persuasive and coercive leverage wielded by the Church of Russia in projecting traditional values discourse into Greece's religious field and geopolitical conversations.

426 For a summary of Russia's cyber operations targeting the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Church of Greece affiliates, see Raphael Satter, "Ungodly espionage: Russian hackers targeted Orthodox clergy," AP News, August 27, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-kiev-international-news-bartholomew-i-moscow-26815e0d06d348f4b85350e96b78f6a8>.



A significant complicating factor is the demonstrated hesitation of actors in Greece's religious field to openly critique the Moscow Patriarchate. These are due to concerns over retribution through economic assets used either to penetrate or weaken Church of Greece parishes and metropolises, sympathetic oligarchs who aim to reshape local economies toward a pro-Russian orientation, and digital disinformation that brings reputational damage to Church of Greece, Greek Athonite, and Ecumenical Patriarchate hierarchs.

The available empirical evidence does suggest that Russia's moral conservatism and traditional values platform in Greece has been marked by breadth of scope, rather than depth of impact measured in religious and socio-political change. Despite the long-standing popular view among a significant stratum of the Greek citizenry, actively promoted by Russian foreign policymakers, that common identity bonds of Eastern Orthodox Christianity make for organic cooperation between Greece and Russia, the fact is that "bilateral relations [between the two countries] have never attained a strategic level."<sup>427</sup>

This was exemplified by the limited popular criticism of the Greek state's decision in 2018 to expel two Russian diplomats on grounds of a threat to national security. Then foreign minister Nikos Kotzias of Greece's left-leaning Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance) government warned that Moscow had attempted to sabotage the Prespa Agreement, which resolved a long-standing diplomatic dispute between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (thereby paving the way for North Macedonia's NATO membership).<sup>428</sup> Greek media provided intensive coverage of reports that Russian diplomats had worked to "extract and circulate information, and to bribe Greek state operatives" and to influence Church of Greece hierarchs in northern Greece to provoke popular objections to the Prespa Agreement.<sup>429</sup>

Public opinion has supported the consensus across the political spectrum that has seen a significant upgrade in U.S.-Greece bilateral relations over the last decade. Similarly, at the four-decade anniversary mark of Greece's accession to the then European Community, the intense Euroskepticism among Greek citizens—stoked by EU actions and attitudes toward Greece during the economic crisis of the 2010s—has not shaken popular commitment to the liberal values at the heart of the European project.

The limits of Russia's Orthodox diplomacy are also evident in attitudes and norms in Greek civil society that diverge from the Patriarchate of Moscow's efforts to conflate cultural patriarchy and Orthodox conservatism. These aim to advance a particularist human rights agenda that pits putative

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427 Constantinos Filis, "Orthodox Myths: Greece's Pragmatic Approach Towards Russia," European Council on Foreign Relations, October 29, 2018, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_orthodox\\_myths\\_greeces\\_pragmatic\\_approach\\_towards\\_russia/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_orthodox_myths_greeces_pragmatic_approach_towards_russia/).

428 Cristina Maza, "Russia Is Sabotaging NATO's Expansion by Undermining Historic Diplomatic Deal," *Newsweek*, July 23, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-sabotaging-natos-expansion-undermining-historic-diplomatic-deal-greek-1037502>.

429 Vassilis Nedos, "Greece Decides to Expel Russian Diplomats," *Kathimerini*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/230551/greece-decides-to-expel-russian-diplomats>. U.S. intelligence revealed digital and telephonic intercepts showing that Russian-Greek businessman Ivan Savvidis had bankrolled anti-Prespa Agreement protests by Greek citizens associated with his Thessaloniki-based soccer team. See Saska Cvetkovska, "Russian Businessman Behind Unrest in Macedonia," OCCRP, July 16, 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/8329-russian-businessman-behind-unrest-in-macedonia>.

notions of Orthodox exceptionalism against the universality of human rights. Instructive in this regard is the widespread societal support for Athens' ratification in October 2018 of the Istanbul Convention, a step differentiating Greece from both Russia, which has not signed the convention, and Turkey, which withdrew from it in 2021.<sup>430</sup>

Putin and the Moscow Patriarchate's efforts have also been unsuccessful in changing the discourse and popular sentiment of support in Greece for the Phanar, partly due to the daily cycle of Greek and international coverage of the Turkish state's reported threats to the survival of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and small Greek Orthodox community of Turkey. The muted reaction of the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate to Turkey reverting the Hagia Sophia to the status of an active mosque provided clarity for the Greek state and public alike that Russia's pretensions to protect traditional Orthodox values and populations is mostly rhetorical in this case.<sup>431</sup>

Paradoxically, the demonstrated increase in Greece's geostrategic value for Euro-Atlantic goals of stabilizing the Eastern Mediterranean and maximizing transatlantic security objectives in Eurasia is likely to intensify Kremlin and Moscow Patriarchate policies to sustain malign activities in Greece's religious field.<sup>432</sup> Moscow will undoubtedly continue to present high-profile U.S. statements regarding the Ukraine autocephaly decision as evidence of U.S. interference in global Orthodoxy, a narrative that has created enormous disruptive opportunities within the context of aggravated Orthodox disunity since 2019. Moscow's weaponization of traditional values in Greece's religious field is likely to intensify, again, by provoking traditionalist-versus-ecumenist factionalism in the unfolding leadership successions in both the Church of Greece and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The forthcoming period of major transition in these Orthodox ecclesiastical environments may also affect institutional dynamics in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Alexandria and the Church of Cyprus. Within this context, should Russia-Turkey bilateral efforts expand toward the shared goal of rendering supine the Ecumenical Patriarchate, decisionmakers in the Church of Greece and Mt. Athos will be forced to choose sides in what will be perceived as a zero-sum religious competition with geopolitical implications for Greece's security.

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430 "The Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on Violence Against Women," Council of Europe, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/text-of-the-convention>.

431 Russia's Foreign Ministry simply noted that the "decision to change the status of St. Sophia Cathedral in Istanbul is Turkey's own internal affair." See Maxim A. Suchkov, "Why Did Moscow Call Ankara's Hagia Sophia Decision 'Turkey's Internal Affair'?", MEI Publications, July 14, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/why-did-moscow-call-ankaras-hagia-sophia-decision-turkeys-internal-affair>.

432 George Pagoulatos and Katerina Sokou, "US-Greece relations in the Biden Era: Why the Road to Rebuilding the Transatlantic Alliance runs through Athens," Atlantic Council, February 19, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/us-greece-relations-in-the-biden-era-why-the-road-to-rebuilding-the-transatlantic-alliance-runs-through-athens/>.