Patriot Games: The Russian State, Kosovo and the Resurgence of the Russian Orthodox Church
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Key Terms
Vladimir Putin
Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)
Eastern Orthodoxy
Kosovo
Patriarch Kirill
Yugoslavia
Serbia
Vuk Jeremic
Nationalism
Ethnic conflict
United Nations/United Nations Security Council (UN/UNSC)
North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)
Nikita Khrushchev
Russian Exceptionalism
Sovereignty
Dmitry Medvedev
Pan-Slavism
Soviet Union

Case
"There yet remains but one concluding tale, And then this chronicle of mine is ended—Fulfilled, the duty God ordained to me, A sinner. Not without purpose did the Lord Put me to witness much for many years And educate me in the love of books. One day some indefatigable monk Will find my conscientious, unsigned work; Like me, he will light up his ikon-lamp And, shaking from the scroll the age-old dust, He will transcribe these tales in all their truth."
-Alexander Pushkin

"Religion is the opiate of the masses."
-Karl Marx

As a new day dawns in Moscow, cathedral bells toll from Gorky Park to Red Square. After years of religious repression during the communist rule of Russia, believers can now congregate at the recently reconstructed Russian Orthodox Cathedral of Christ the Savior. They gather under the watchful gaze of gilded icons—an ordinary sight in 2008 that would have been inconceivable 20 years ago when images venerating Stalin were more common than saintly representations.

The service inside the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, however, is no ordinary event. High ranking political officials, clergy, and laypeople alike have gathered to commemorate the 1020th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus when, in 988AD, Prince Vladimir converted the whole of Russia to Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Although the clergy’s message has changed little
since the days of Tsarist rule, the public commemoration of Prince Vladimir’s spiritual and military conquests is charged with contemporary political significance. After an address from Patriarch Alexy, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), Russian President Dmitry Medvedev takes the podium to deliver a seminal message:

The conversion of Prince Vladimir and the whole of Rus to Orthodoxy were of truly historic significance and played a fundamental part in shaping our state’s development. The decision was motivated in large part by the need to unite the divided eastern Slavic tribes and a number of other ethnic groups. A desire for statehood based on a completely new spiritual foundation emerged among them. Finally, the adoption of Christianity did much to help our forefathers become part of the processes taking place in Europe and the world and amounted in essence to a choice of civilization. It changed not only the rules of social conduct and family life but transformed state life in its entirety.¹

Russian Orthodoxy – and the Church itself – has played a key role in the historical development of the Russian state, populist notions of citizenship, and in Russian political culture. Today, ties between the ROC and state leadership are closer than ever – blurring the lines between faith, policy, and nationalism.

Roots and Beliefs of the Russian Orthodox Church

Today, nearly 70 percent of Russians identify as Russian Orthodox, and the church is in the midst of a tremendous revival across the motherland. Old churches are being restored, hundreds of new churches are under construction, and the recent groundswell of popular support is garnering the attention of politicians and religious scholars alike.² According to one Russian scholar and theologian interviewed by the BBC, “the importance of the church in contemporary Russia is socio-cultural, it is an immensely important part of the sense of national and cultural identity.”³

Eastern Orthodoxy and its unique bond with the Russian state can trace its roots to the 10th century AD, when Prince Vladimir I united disparate Byzantine provinces to create the first centrally governed Russian state. In Kievan Rus, Eastern Orthodoxy was adapted from Byzantine traditions and became the national religion. In the centuries that followed, strong leaders and devout believers such as Tsar Ivan IV (also known as Ivan “The Terrible”), Tsar Peter the Great, and Tsarina Catherine the Great continued to expand the Russian empire by the manifest destiny of a holy state with Russian Orthodoxy at its core.

The Russian Orthodox Church, essentially the slightly younger sibling of the more traditional Greek Orthodox, shares almost its entire religious doctrine with the greater umbrella organization of the Orthodox Church. Eastern Orthodoxy — from the Greek “orthos” and “doxa” meaning “true belief” — holds many of the same beliefs as the Roman Catholic Church. However, the core of their distinction lies in the Orthodox Church’s abidance to not only the Bible but also the first 7 ecumenical councils between the 4th and 8th century. They were held largely in Anatolia as a representation of the East’s political autonomy, directly confronting an increasingly Western Roman Catholic Church.⁴

Orthodox teachings include the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the inseparable but distinguishable union of the two natures of Jesus Christ— one divine, the other human.
Among saints, Mary has a special place as the Mother of God. Russian Orthodox services, noted for their pageantry, involve the congregation directly by using only the vernacular form of the liturgy. The liturgy itself includes multiple elaborate systems of symbols meant to convey the content of the faith to believers. Many liturgical forms remain from the earliest days of Orthodoxy. Icons, sacred images often illuminated by candles, adorn the churches as well as the homes of most Orthodox faithful.

Liturgical services are often sung in Old Church Slavonic. Priests pray with their backs to the congregation to face the altar, which is central to every Orthodox Church, as it is believed to be in the kingdom of heaven. Icons are also a central part of the Orthodox faith, serving not only as images of the saints but also as the embodiment of the Holy Spirit. Russian Orthodox believers often hang classical Russian Orthodox icons—most popularly of Russian Orthodox saints, Mother Mary and Jesus Christ—in the far right corner or the room so that they are visible upon entering a home. These symbols of religious veneration often differ from those in Roman Catholic Church or other branches of Christianity—their local origins and official designation easily allowing them to be synonymous with nationalist symbols. Eastern Orthodoxy also differs in some significant structural aspects, compared to the centrally governed Roman Catholic Church. Besides various differing regulations on celibacy of Bishops, a much greater emphasis on monasticism and other regulatory distinctions, Orthodoxy has a unique style of governance.

Not counting a small number of separate autonomous churches, the Eastern Orthodox Church—headed by Jesus rather than a singular Pope, is comprised of 15 “autocephalous” churches” divided by age and precedence. A Bishop or “Metropolitan” and Holy Synod who have almost complete autonomy in the leadership of their region’s Orthodox Church govern these churches. In nine of these regions the leading Bishop is named the Patriarch—a life-long position—as is the case for the Church of Russia. The Patriarch of Moscow is housed in Церковь Двенадцати Апостолов or the Church of the Twelve Apostles—located in the Kremlin, mere meters from the heart of Russian governance.

The Russian Orthodox Church and Russian policy regarding Kosovo

Orthodox values have become intertwined with Russian national mythology. Specifically, Russian exceptionalism—the belief that Russia is a unique, holy empire with divine providence—is supported by Orthodox adherents who believe Russia to be the only state in which traditional Orthodox beliefs has been preserved intact since the time of the Byzantine Empire. Russia’s leaders not only guide the development of the Russian state but also have assumed the spiritual imperative to shape the moral life of the Russian polis.

This idea of Russian exceptionalism has also influenced the Pan-Slavic movement. Throughout Russian history, an internal debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers has characterized Russian politics and foreign policy. The Russian Orthodox Church has become a part of the Pan-Slavic movement, promoting Slavic heritage, culture and generally opposing policies that would subordinate Slavic culture and peoples to Western ideas. The views of the Orthodox Church have inclined Russian policymakers to support other Slavic peoples with whom Russia shares an apparent cultural, historical, and religious bond.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought instability and chaos to the former Soviet Satellite states on its border, including the former republic of Yugoslavia. Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence and were recognized by Russia and other international powers in 1992. Ethnic conflict between Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Turks in Bosnia-
Herzegovina led to genocide of Muslims from 1992-1994. Amid the turmoil of ethnic and nationalist conflict in Yugoslavia, violence broke out in the region of Kosovo beginning in 1998. The territory of Kosovo has been a topic of dispute between Albanians and Serbs for centuries. Along with all of Serbia, Kosovo fell under the rule of the Ottoman Empire during the 1400's. During this time, many ethnic Serbs migrated northward toward Bosnia while Albanian Muslims moved into Kosovo. Kosovo remained a part of Albania from the time of the Ottoman Empire until 1912 when Serbia regained control over the region. “For Kosovo’s Serbs, the arrival of the Serbian Army was a liberation. For Albanians, by now the majority population, it was nothing short of an occupation.”

Ethnic and religious differences fueled the conflict further. During the Partition of Yugoslavia following WWII, Kosovo was granted the status of an autonomous Serbian territory. In 1989 Yugoslavian president Slobodan Milosevic stripped Kosovo of its autonomy. During the 1990s, Albanian rebels fighting for Kosovo’s independence clashed with Serbian Security Forces. Although Russia did not officially provide military support for the Serbian government, Russia strongly opposed NATO involvement in 1999, which led to an agreement between the Serbian and Yugoslavian governments to transfer control over Kosovo to the United Nations. Between 1999 and Kosovo’s eventual declaration of independence in 2008 – mostly under the leadership of Vladimir Putin – Russia strongly opposed Kosovo’s independence.

On February 18, 2008 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that the United States recognized Kosovo as an independent state, falling in line with other European powers including France and Britain. However, Russia, in part due to domestic pressure stemming from the Orthodox Church, still supported Serbia in its position that the territory of Kosovo belongs to Serbia. On March 11, 2008 addressing the UN security council, Serbian Foreign minister Vuk Jeremic appealed to the Western powers who had already recognized Kosovo’s independence to reconsider, saying that their position destabilizes the international system by “legitimizing unilateral secession by a provincial or other non-State actor.” Jeremic promised that Serbia would not use force or economic embargo but that Serbia would assert its sovereign rights. By appealing to the UN International Court, Serbian nationalists challenged the legitimacy of Kosovo’s independence. The appeal illustrates the Serbian hope that, as Jeremic stated, “Kosovo shall remain a part of Serbia forever.”

Although Russia remains a staunchly secular state, the traditions and beliefs of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) exert significant influence over the foreign and domestic policy decisions of the Russian government. “The constitution of the Russian federation officially separates ROC from the state. However, practically, referring to old historic traditions ROC remains a de facto state institution, strongly supported by the Russian government and generating a vice versa support for the government.” The ROC has never shied away from publicizing its political views, and current Patriarch Kirill has been especially vocal in expressing his solidarity with the Serbian people and his opposition to Kosovo’s independence:

We know that the Serbian government has filed a lawsuit with the UN International Court, contesting Kosovo’s independence as illegal. I have familiarized myself with the Russian Foreign Ministry's reaction on it and I agree with this position...We belong to a single world and we share the same spiritual values and moral tradition, which links our peoples very strongly. We care for what is happening in the life of the Serbian people. Therefore, we take the Serbs' grief over the loss of Kosovo close to our hearts.
The pervading influence of Russian Orthodoxy has played a key role in Russia’s continuous support for the Serbs throughout the Kosovo conflict. Because “Kirill adheres strongly to nationalist ideas on Russia’s role in the world and supports the concept of “Russian Civilization” which is naturally opposed to the West,” the ROC has been especially critical of Western institutions such as NATO and the UN. The ROC has provided a foundation of domestic support for a strong national Russian agenda reflected in Russian foreign policies.

**Continued significance of the Russian Orthodox Church in defining Russian Policy**

Long past the days of Nikita Khrushchev’s persecution of the Church, Vladimir Putin has become a staunch supporter of sweeping domestic changes that have enhanced the growing power of the Orthodox Church. For example, the Moscow City Court and Prosecutor General’s office now have Orthodox chapels on their grounds, Orthodox clergy members are the only religious representatives allowed to give ecclesiastic council to the Russian military, and Russian Orthodox Culture classes have been introduced in public schools. Although clergy members are not allowed to run for political office, politicians who aspire to hold prominent positions in the state often find that they must meet with the approval of local priests and clergy before leadership roles are offered them.

To many Russian Orthodox, spiritual life has become deeply intertwined with a traditional formulation of Russian nationalism and the Church’s values seem to have much in common with Putin’s party line., “I think it’s very natural that the church is expressing its point of view on different aspects of the life of the country and the life of the world, be it politics or economy or the system of the society,” church spokesperson Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin said. The Church has clearly articulated its position regarding the Kosovo conflict, which coincides with the policies still maintained by Russian politicians today.

Even when Putin stepped down from the presidency in 2008 and was peacefully succeeded by Medvedev, the values and policies of the Russian state remained closely tied to Orthodox doctrine. In closing his speech to the Orthodox adherents on the anniversary of the Baptism of Rus, President Medvedev said,

“I want to highlight in particular the fact that in resolving these sorts of issues the Russian Orthodox Church has built up unique experience in its relations with the state. This is the result of our affirmation of the principles of religious freedom in our country and the result too of the revival of all Russia’s traditional faiths. The celebration of the 1000th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus in 1988 was a symbolic event for country, and the two decades that followed have seen Orthodoxy flourish.”

While it is uncertain whether the political aims of Russia’s leadership will continue to be in line with the goals of the Russian Orthodox Church, it is undeniable that these two congruent forces will play a seminal role in Russia’s future domestic and foreign policy choices.

**Vladimir Putin and the ROC**

Vladimir Putin, the strongman leader of a resurgent Russia wielding its significant foreign policy clout throughout the world is no stranger to the Orthodox Church. Although born in a secular Soviet Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) in 1952, Putin’s factory worker mother was a devout Russian Orthodox and even baptized him in St. Petersburg:
I was baptized here...in secret from my father...And then much later, when my parents passed away, my Mothers funeral was held here, and then my fathers a little over a year later. So there is much in my life that is associated with the Church.

However, a young Putin largely remained unreligious as he rose through the ranks of the still communist KGB despite his mother’s efforts. Even once coming to power in a new democratic Russia, Putin noted, “I would prefer not to develop on that subject in detail. I think such things are sacred for everybody. Everybody’s belief is not to be shown off, it is inside a man’s heart.”

He did however wear an orthodox “aluminum made cross, a very simple thing” his mother gave him. After a fire at his dacha (summer house) in 1996 that he barely made it out of alive, he tried to find his treasured mothers cross, and after he discovered it amongst the ashy remains of the house he declared “that was a surprise...I always now keep it with me.”

Putin’s rise has corresponded with increased ties to the church, supported on all kinds of issues by the Patriarchs Aleksy II and currently Kirill I. After being named TIME Person of the Year in 2007, he said in the write-up:

First and foremost we should be governed by common sense. But common sense should be based on moral principles first. And it is not possible today to have morality separated from religious values.

He further has proposed compulsory religion and ethics classes for Russian children as well as attending a number of major ROC events. The two forces have worked closely in a number of public issues. In 2012 the ROC and Patriarch Kirill condemned the anti-Putin music group Pussy Riot as blasphemous and inspired by Satan himself after they sang “Mother of God, Blessed Virgin, drive out Putin.” The government then went to the aid of the ROC, committing the band members to two years of hard labor on charges of “belittling the spiritual foundations of the state.”

In even more recent times Putin has found support for his war in Syria from the Orthodox base. By the end of 2015 Patriarch Kirill has repeatedly given his full blessing both to Putin and to Russia’s “holy war” to protect Syrians against their godless attackers,

Russia took a responsible decision to use military forces to protect the Syrian people from the woes brought on by the tyranny of terrorism. The fight against terrorism is a holy struggle and today our country is perhaps the most active force in the world to combat terrorism.

It would appear Putin is only strengthening his ties with the Russian Orthodox Church as his country bunkers down for tough times ahead as oil prices crash, terrorism increases and the costs of foreign wars rises.

O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance. Grant victory to the Orthodox Christians over their adversaries; and by virtue of Thy Cross preserve Thy habitation.

- Eastern Orthodox Troparion to the Cross


4 This is not to be confused with the Oriental Orthodox Church


7 As of 2009, Kirill I is the “Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus’”, succeeding the lengthy term of Alexy II who served from 1990-2008

8 Within and surrounding the Kremlin “Кремль” (the center of Russian Parliament “Дума,” the President’s residence and most other official government buildings) there are a number of other significant testaments to the power of the Russian Orthodox Church, including the iconic St. Basil’s Cathedral (Собор Василия Блаженного – Cathedral of Vasily the Blessed)


13 As of 2009, Kirill I is the “Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus’”, succeeding the lengthy term of Alexy II who served from 1990-2008


16 “Speech at Christ the Savior Cathedral Marking the start of celebrations of the 1020th Anniversary of the Baptism of Rus.” President of Russia. 29 June 2008.

Appendix 1
Study Questions
1. How did the Russian Orthodox Church separate from Eastern Orthodoxy? What are some of the differences?
2. How has Russian Orthodoxy worked to unite the Russian people? What is its relationship with Pan-Slavism? With nationalism?
3. How would you characterize the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Patriarch and the secular leadership of government? How have Putin/Medvedev and Kirill/Alexy II embodied or changed this relationship?
4. How has “Russian exceptionalism” impacted or been impacted by Russian Orthodoxy?
5. How did the fall of the Soviet Union relate to the eruption of violence in Yugoslavia?
6. What did NATO do in Kosovo and what was the Russian reaction? How has this legacy continued into the 21st century?
7. Who is Vuk Jeremic and what has been the position of Serbia in relation to both Russia and the West?
8. How has the role of the ROC evolved from the Soviet Union to today?
9. How has Putin’s personal life impacted his relationship with the ROC and Russian Orthodoxy personally and professionally?
10. How have Russian Orthodoxy and the infrastructures of the ROC shaped Russian foreign policy? How representative is the ROC of dominant domestic Russian opinion today?
11. Going forward how do you see the ROC’s relationship with Russian governance and Russian foreign policy evolving? Have recent experiences in Syria provided any insights here?