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SOFT, SHARP AND EVIL POWER: THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

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Abstract. This paper examines the enactment of soft/sharp/evil power by the Russian Orthodox Church and its leaders during a month before the major exertion of hard power by the Russian military and one month after the invasion of Ukraine. In the period from January 25 until March 25, 2022, 27 messages of the leading actors in the Church—Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the Department of External Church Relations (DECR)—are closely examined. The results are presented and discussed in four thematic sections: 1) soft power: the religious approach to the Russian World; 2) Sharp power: the territorial expansion of the Church with the help of the Russian state; 3) Evil power: Church leaders on war and peace; 4) Comparison with the messages of Russian political leaders (President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov).

The **soft power** the Russian Church exercises for the benefit of Russian foreign relations is manifest in the strong emphasis on the spiritual unity of Russian and Ukrainian people within the religious narrative of the Russian World. This soft power takes the form of **sharp power** vis-à-vis the Ukrainian invasion and vis-à-vis those, who recognize the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The influence of the Russian Church in support of the Russian government's invasion has also a dimension of **evil power**, that is, power exercised in service to immoral or unethical state actions such as the unwarranted invasion of Ukraine by Russian military forces.

Finally, both religious and political leaders are similar in denying the agency (including autonomous existence) of the nation-state and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, they consider both the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and post-2014 Ukrainian government to be tools of

outside forces (be it the West, the United States, or the Ecumenical Patriarch), and they threaten and attempt to punish everyone who supports those whom they have selected out as targets.

Keywords: soft power; strategic narratives; Russian-Ukrainian conflict, 2014-; Russian invasion of Ukraine, 2022; religion and international relations; war; Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow & All Russia; Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev).

Introduction

We might have once said that the collaboration of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) with the government of the Russian Federation was a matter of mere soft power at work.¹ The soft, moral leadership of the ROC,² we might have said, somehow adds legitimacy to Russian foreign policy as it supports Christians in embattled regions of the Middle East³ or sets out its argument against gay marriage or gay pride parades in Europe.⁴ The Church sought out allies in its battle to “de-secularize” western societies who had gone too far in accepting liberal diversity and had allegedly removed Christian voices from political debates and official policymaking. The ROC joined some conservative evangelical and even Muslim groups in working to increase the influence of “traditional values” in secular societies.⁵ The Russian state articulated “family values” as its understanding of human social relations to be built up in just societies, and the ROC acted as a supportive spokesperson for the moral arguments involved.

The growing repression of religious minorities inside Russia⁶ should have led us to deconstruct and analyze more clearly the unwholesome growth of ROC-RF collaboration in cultural control in Russia and recognize its deleterious implications for the partnership between

¹ Robert C. Blitt, „Religious Soft Power in Russian Foreign Policy: Constitutional Change and the Russian Orthodox Church,“ *University of Tennessee Legal Studies*, Research Paper No. 422, May 1, 2021, https://ir.law.utk.edu/utklaw_facpubs/324/.

² According to Nicolai N. Petro, ‘soft power’ of the Russian Federation is dependent on moral authority provided by the Russian Orthodox Church: “... Russia’s attitude on the Ukrainian crisis is inflexible precisely because it sees itself as occupying the moral high ground in this dispute. A key reason why Western moral criticisms of Russian actions have so little traction among Russians is that the Russian Orthodox Church has regained its traditional pre-eminence as the institution that defines the nation’s moral vision and sense of honor.” Nicolai N. Petro, “Russia’s Orthodox Soft Power”, *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, March 23, 2015, https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/727.

³ Peter Petkoff, “Religious Exceptionalism, Religious Rights, and Public International Law”, in *Changing Nature of Religious Rights under International Law*, eds. Malcolm Evans, Peter Petkoff and Julian Rivers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 225.

⁴ Peter Rutland, and Andrei Kazantsev, “The limits of Russia’s ‘soft power’,” *Journal of Political Power* 9, no. 3 (2016): 405.

⁵ Sener Aktürk (2019) “Five Faces of Russia’ Soft Power: Far Left, Far Right, Orthodox Christian, Russophone, and Ethnoreligious Networks,“ *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 623, November 11, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/five-faces-of-russia-s-soft-power-far-left-far-right-orthodox-christian-russophone-and-ethnoreligious-networks/>.

⁶ Zoe Knox, “Jehovah’s Witnesses as Extremists: The Russian State, Religious Pluralism, and Human Rights,“ *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 46, no. 2 (2019): 128-157.

church and state in foreign affairs. The character—at least in the overt, open spheres—of the ROC was changing, evolving in a very negative direction in regard to fairness, just relations with alternative voices, and human rights. It has been evolving negatively in conjunction with the power concentration of the Putin state.⁷

We and others have noted the specific turn of the ROC in relation to Putin's power in 2011-2012, becoming an unqualified supporter of Putin and his regime.⁸ The 2020 amendments to the Russian Constitution formalized the interdependence of church and state as they name God as undergirding Russian values and emphasize the enforceable normativity of those "traditional family" values, especially ones that reject LGBTQ+ relations.⁹ Most importantly, perhaps, the amendments acknowledge the supposedly unique role of Russia to protect true moral values as articulated by the ROC.

Robert Blitt's excellent description of this church-state relationship describes the role of the ROC in Russian foreign policy as serving "as a spear tip for the soft power advancement" of "the Kremlin's global efforts to challenge democratic values, supplant the international human rights system, and destabilize institutions and societies through misinformation and disinformation campaigns."¹⁰

Joseph S. Nye has emphasized that while the costs of soft power can be lower than the costs of hard power,¹¹ soft power efforts often take time to come to fruition, they are slower, at least, than the hard power of military or police actions: "...[T]he attraction of values and culture may be visible only in the long run,"¹² but, on the other hand, they have significant effects in setting the context for more direct actions. Nye argues that long-term soft power exercised by the U.S. government has had direct consequences on mustering support for

⁷ George Soroka, "International Relations by Proxy? The Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church," *Religions* 13, no. 3 (2022): 208.

⁸ Jerry G. Pankhurst, Alar Kilp, "Religion, the Russian nation and the state: Domestic and international dimensions: An introduction," *Religion, State and Society* 41, no. 3 (2013): 226-243; Rachel L. Schroeder, Vyacheslav Karpov, "The Crimes and Punishments of the 'Enemies of the Church' and the Nature of Russia's Desecularising Regime," *Religion, State and Society* 41, no. 3 (2013): 284-311.

⁹ Robert C. Blitt, "Russia's 2020 Constitutional Amendments and the Entrenchment of the Moscow Patriarchate as a Lever of Foreign Policy Soft Power," *University of Tennessee Legal Studies*, Research Paper No. 423, September 24, 2021, https://ir.law.utk.edu/utklaw_facpubs/209/.

¹⁰ Blitt, "Religious Soft Power in Russian Foreign Policy," 6-7.

¹¹ According to Nye: "If you can get others to be attracted, to want what you want, it costs you much less in carrots and sticks." Joseph S. Nye (2004) 'Soft power: The means to success in world politics', *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*. Available at: <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20040413-soft-power-the-means-to-success-in-world-politics>.

¹² Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power after Ukraine," *Jordan Times*, May 08, 2022, <https://www.jordantimes.com/opinion/joseph-s-nye/soft-power-after-ukraine>.

Ukraine in the present war, and that president Volodymyr Zelensky's demeanor and courage provide significant soft power for Ukraine bolstering international support.

In this sense, then, we can assess the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church and its Patriarch, Kirill, as wielding significant soft power that set the stage for the mounting of military hostilities by Russia against Ukraine. By setting out a strong anti-western cultural argument, they gave the Russian Foreign Ministry and Defense Ministry foundational themes to justify the Russian invasion. And if the Russian case is seen as essentially acted out by Vladimir Putin as autocrat or dictator, then the closeness of Kirill and Putin signifies the interlocking of church and state that Blitt affirms.¹³

If we can say that soft power is typically exercised in "normal" international relations to shape forms of "normal" foreign relations, when, on the other hand, it becomes the support structure for military invasion, we should rename it something not as benign as "soft" power. Considering the growing threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine in early February 2022, Peter Mandaville of the United States Institute of Peace proffers the notion of "sharp power" as a descriptor: "Sharp power—as distinct from either the positive allure of soft power or the use of military force often associated with hard power—refers to the use of information, communication, and technology tools to disseminate ideas and messages likely to sow discord and tension in target societies."¹⁴ The ROC's and Kirill's arguments justifying the inclusion of Ukraine in "Russkii mir" ("Russian World") have undergirded Putin's arguments that Ukraine is not a nation or a country separate from Russia and therefore is subject to Russian intervention and, presumably, incorporation.¹⁵

Through Putin's novel historical account, accepted without qualification by Kirill, the invasion of Ukraine is said to be putting down an internal rebellion and re-incorporating the rebel regions into the mother country. Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus all grew from the root stock of the Christian conversion of Rus' by the Grand Prince Vladimir in A.D. 988 and were properly included in the Russian Empire and the successor Soviet Union; they should be joined

¹³ Tobias Koellner analytically describes the pattern of "entangled authorities" as involving three nexuses: personal, ideological, and institutional entanglements. All three fit the Russian situation we are discussing here. See "Introduction," in *Orthodox Religion and Politics in Contemporary Eastern Europe: On Multiple Secularisms and Entanglements*, ed. Tobias Koellner (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 7-10.

¹⁴ Peter Mandaville, "How Putin Turned Religion's 'Sharp Power' Against Ukraine," *United States Institute of Peace*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/02/how-putin-turned-religions-sharp-power-against-ukraine>.

¹⁵ "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67828>; "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67843>.

together again, and if need be, that can be done by force. Here the ROC's soft power has transmuted into sharp power as Mandaville describes it.

As a description of the ROC's role in the current war in Ukraine, sharp power like soft power may not be adequate. The issue is a deeply moral question with dimensions of meaning in historical Christian ethics and teaching. The Russian Orthodox Church, in fact, has articulated a doctrine of war that Kirill could use to build a peculiar justification for the Russian invasion. Kirill, himself, before he was elected Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia in 2009, is the principal writer of this doctrine, which is included in the 2000 document called *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*.¹⁶ It might be compared to the Catholic doctrine of Just War,¹⁷ but, while the Just War doctrine affects universal human societies, the ROC doctrine allows for engagement of the Russian Church in defense of Russianness, Russian national identity, and national sovereignty, that is, the very issues that enliven the constitutional amendments passed by Putin's initiative in 2020. While the *Basis* points to the supposed moral superiority of Russian culture and civilization, at least in a defined global region, western conceptions of the church's role in foreign affairs stress universalized and generalized human welfare as the object.¹⁸

The growing condemnation of the ROC's role in support of the Ukraine invasion and, in particular of the Patriarch's moral silence about it, is tellingly contradictory to the concluding paragraph of chapter VIII "War and peace" of Patriarch Kirill's foundational *The Basis of the Social Concept* document:

The Russian Orthodox Church seeks to carry out her peace service both on national and international scale, trying to help resolve various contradictions and bring nations, ethnic groups, governments and political forces to harmony. To this end, she makes appeals to the powers that be and other influential sections of society and takes efforts to organise negotiations between hostile parties and to give aid to those who suffer.

¹⁶ "The Basis of the Social Concept," *The Russian Orthodox Church, Department for External Church Relations*, <https://old.mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/>. In chapter VIII, war is recognized as evil, but "the Church does not prohibit her children from participating in hostilities if at stake is the security of their neighbours and the restoration of trampled justice." Additionally, the Church supports defensive war, the Church has a special concern for the military and aims to bring the military back to the established Orthodox traditions of service to the fatherland. (Although the Russian title of this document has a plural "Оснoвы" ["Bases" or "Basics" or "Foundations"] in its title, the official ROC English translation renders it in the singular, a form that we use here.)

¹⁷ The criteria for Catholic Just War Theory belong to two categories: *jus ad bellum* (just cause, competent authority, right intention, last resort, proportionality, probability of success) and *jus in bello* (due proportion; non-combatant immunity from direct intentional attack by armed forces). William V. O'Brien, "Just-War Doctrine in a Nuclear Context," *Theological Studies* 44, no. 2 (June 1983): 191-220.

¹⁸ This does not, in the Just War ideals, exclude the need to guard social boundaries and identities, but not as the objects themselves of defense, but as the defense in some form of the greater human values through boundaries and identities.

The Church also opposes the propaganda of war and violence, as well as various manifestations of hatred capable of provoking fratricidal clashes.¹⁹

Other than general calls for peace, Kirill has made no attempts to speak “to the powers that be” to end the war, to appeal to Putin to end the invasion, or to “organize negotiations between hostile parties.”²⁰ The Church appears to be involved in some programs of aid to combatants, their families and refugees, but wholly on the side of the Russian forces where there are forced extractions, population transfers, and related violations of human rights about which there are no contrary countering arguments from the ROC Patriarch. Most directly for purposes of this article, we note that the ROC’s vision of *Russkii mir* and protection of the fatherland are, indeed, being manipulated into justifications for “manifestations of hatred” carried out in the warfare itself entailing “fratricidal clashes” between Russians and Ukrainians.

We are arguing that the **soft power** the Russian Church exercises for the benefit of Russian foreign relations takes the form of **sharp power** vis-à-vis the Ukrainian invasion. Ironically, with the moral consciences of the world awakened, many major observers, including important voices among Russian Orthodox and other Eastern Orthodox confessions, have come to see the influence of the Russian Church in support of the Russian government’s invasion as the exercise of **evil power**, that is, power exercised in service to immoral or unethical state actions such as the unwarranted invasion of Ukraine by Russian military forces.²¹

The European Union has planned to sanction Patriarch Kirill for blessing Russian soldiers fighting for the Russian World and Holy Russia in his sermons,²² the Ukrainian Parliament has prepared legislation banning the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine,²³ scholars and activists have called to prosecute Patriarch Kirill in the International Criminal Court.²⁴ Patriarch Kirill has been charged with ‘ethno-phyletic ecclesial heresy’ that connects Orthodoxy with the concept of ‘Russkii Mir’ by more than a thousand Orthodox theologians

¹⁹ “The Basis of the Social Concept,” chapter VIII “War and peace,” <https://old.mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/viii/>.

²⁰ Ina Merjanova has pointed out that Patriarch Kirill has rebuffed major world Christian leaders who have sought out his voice in conciliatory peace efforts. “Russia’s war in Ukraine and the limits of religious diplomacy,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42, no. 4: ix-xi.

²¹ See, for example, Paul Gavriluk, “The Moral Defeat of the Russian World: Putin, Kirill, and the Tribunal of History,” *Public Orthodoxy*, May 13, 2022, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/05/13/moral-defeat-of-russian-world/>.

²² Andrew Rettman, May 4, 2022, *EUobserver*, “EU adds head of Russian Orthodox church to oil sanction,” <https://euobserver.com/ukraine/154880>.

²³ “OCU speaker explains the importance of banning the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine,” *RISU*, April 8, 2022, https://risu.ua/en/ocu-speaker-explains-why-it-is-important-to-ban-the-moscow-patriarchate-in-ukraine_n128166.

²⁴ Willy Fautré, Patricia Duval, „RUSSIA: Patriarch Kirill should be prosecuted by the ICC, according to a NGO,” *HRWF*, April 21, 2022, <https://bit.ly/386J8V4>.

from around the world.²⁵ Irrespective, whether the criticism is secular or theological, the main problem with the ‘*Russkii Mir*’ narrative and ideology is that it endorses Russian imperialism and has served as an excuse for Russia’s unprovoked invasion into Ukrainian territory.²⁶

This paper is an attempt to closely examine the enactment of soft/sharp/evil power by the Russian Orthodox Church and its leaders during the period immediately before the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and during the first thirty days of the invasion. This is the period immediately before and after the major exertion of **hard power** by the Russian military. Taking this 30 days before (from January 25 until February 23) – 30 days after the invasion (from February 24 until March 25) as the period for close examination, we search out the ways in which ROC and Russian state actions intercalate and mutually support each other. Given the nature of soft/sharp power as discussed above, we recognize that it may be working out its foundation for influence over a fairly long period of time. Certainly, the elaboration of the ROC’s position regarding the privileges and supremacy of Russian culture and social control went on for many years before the Ukraine invasion, and we must take that phase into account as given. We have described the major dimensions in that evolution elsewhere.²⁷ Here we need to acknowledge that the ROC account of *Russkii mir* and its setting in a very special culture and civilization can best be seen as a cultural adaptation to lost empire and revanchist angst. Invading Ukraine, then, can be interpreted as a step in the effort to reestablish or create anew the Russian Empire and/or the Soviet Union, the loss of which has been experienced very dramatically by Russians and demands broad based cultural and national adaptation. That adaptation has so far not been accomplished; Putin and the current leadership of the Russian Federation want to adapt by returning to the old imperial form, but much of the world, especially Western Europe, reject returning to the empire and, thus, reject Russia’s invasion as immoral, criminal, and horrific.

²⁵ Paul B. Mojzes, "Destructive Russian Orthodox Powerplay," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42, no. 3 (2022): article 2; Mark Elliott, "Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine: What’s Religion Got to Do with It?" *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42, no. 2 (2022): article 6. See also Vyacheslav Karpov, "Open Letter to Metropolitan Tikhon", *Orthodoxy in Dialogue*, March 31, 2022, <https://orthodoxyindialogue.com/2022/03/31/open-letter-to-metropolitan-tikhon-by-vyacheslav-karpov-phd/#more-20615>.

²⁶ "Ukrainian activists demand that the „Russian World“ ideologists led by Patriarch Kirill are sanctioned," *RISU*, April 7, 2022, https://risu.ua/en/ukrainian-activists-demand-that-the-russian-world-ideologists-led-by-patriarch-kirill-are-sanctioned_n128121.

²⁷ Jerry G. Pankhurst, Alar Kilp, "Kirill and the 21st Century Russian Orthodox Church," in *Liberals, Conservatives, and Mavericks: On Christian Churches of Eastern Europe Since 1980 (A Festschrift for Sabrina P. Ramet)*, eds. Frank Cibulka, and Zachary T. Irwin (Budapest: Central European University Press, forthcoming, 2022).

Method

We try to capture here the empirical relationship that demonstrates the soft/sharp/hard/evil power processes connected with the Ukraine invasion by closely examining the statements of the leading actors in the Russian Orthodox Church--Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), head of the Department of External Church Relations (DECR). DECR is the primary agency of the church for articulating its stance on international issues, and it carries out much of the foreign activities of the church on behalf of the Patriarchate.

The selection strategy was to include messages (sermons, interviews, addresses, press releases of meetings), where Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion addressed topics related to geopolitical or intra-Orthodox conflict in Ukraine during the period thirty days before February 24 (the day of the invasion) and thirty days after February 24. The selection included 13 messages by Patriarch Kirill (three were delivered before February 24 and ten since February 24) and 15 messages by Metropolitan Hilarion (ten messages before and five messages since February 24). In the last section of the analysis, we compare messages of church leaders with the main messages delivered by political leaders (President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov) during the same period.

Messages and statements of Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion were derived from official websites of the Moscow Patriarchate (<http://www.patriarchia.ru/>) and the *Department for External Church Relations* of ROC (<http://www.mospat.ru/en>), and from the homepage of Metropolitan Hilarion (<https://hilarion.ru/en/>).²⁸

Messages of Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion

We present the results of the study in four thematic sections: 1) Soft power: religious approach to the Russian World; 2) Sharp power: territorial expansion of the Church with the help of the Russian state; 3) Evil power: Church leaders on War and Peace; 4) Comparison of messages: religious (Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion) and political leaders (President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov).

²⁸ Although both authors know Russian, where the websites provided English translations, they are used here; where no English text was provided on the website, translation from Russian was carried out with the help of Microsoft Translator in Microsoft Word.

1) Soft power: religious approach to the Russian World

Patriarch Kirill articulated narratives of the Russian World strongly *after* February 24, but not in the 30-day period before. During and after February 24, the following elements (**in bold**) of the “Russian world” ideology were prominent and regularly present in his messages:

- **ROC unites Russians and Ukrainians spiritually as one flock, one church, one faith and one people**²⁹ as the single people of the **one Holy Russia**.³⁰ Ukraine and Russia are so strongly connected that Patriarch Kirill refers to both with the term Russia: “Russia is one country, one people, but this people turned out to be very strong, and its neighbors, frightened by its power, began to do everything to divide this people, to convince the parts of this people that you are not one people at all.”³¹ Because the enemies attempt to divide this one people, the main aim of the Church is “to preserve unity, despite any external pressures and any efforts of forces alien to the Church, to destroy the spiritual unity of our peoples.”³²
- The spiritual unity and unity of (Russian and Ukrainian) people emerged out of the **shared Kiev Baptismal Font**³³ and results in **common historical destiny**,³⁴ in spiritual unity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples,³⁵ in **common values**, ideals, and Christian conscience.³⁶

Metropolitan Hilarion expresses the same narrative:

- “Ukrainians and Russians “are **fraternal peoples** ... born in one **baptismal font** of the Holy Equal-to-the-Apostles Prince Vladimir ... This is a **unity** that nothing can ever destroy.”³⁷ He argues that in the First World War Russia “... lost not only part of the **Russian lands**, but **lost Russia** as such. A new totalitarian state was formed in the vastness of Russia, and from that **old, great Russia, from that Holy Russia**

²⁹ “Address of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill to Archpastors, Pastors, Monks and All Faithful Children of the Russian Orthodox Church,” February 24, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5903795.html>; “Patriarch Kirill urged believers to pray for peace and unity of the Church,” February 27, 2022, <https://mospat.ru/ru/news/89032/>.

³⁰ “Word of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill in the 2nd Week of the Great Lent after the Liturgy in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior,” March 20, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5909901.html>.

³¹ “Patriarchal sermon on Wednesday of the first week of Great Lent after the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior,” March 9, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5907484.html>.

³² “Patriarchal sermon on the Week of the Triumph of Orthodoxy after the Liturgy in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior,” March 13, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5908325.html>.

³³ “Address of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill”; “Patriarchal sermon on Wednesday of the first week.”

³⁴ “Word of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill.”

³⁵ “Speech by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the meeting of the Supreme Church Council on March 18, 2022,” March 18, 2022, <https://mospat.ru/ru/news/89086/>.

³⁶ “Patriarchal sermon on Wednesday of the first week,” “Word of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill.”

³⁷ “Metropolitan Hilarion: The unity that began from the common baptismal font of St. Vladimir cannot be destroyed,” March 14, 2022, <https://hilarion.ru/social/mitropolit-ilarion-nachavsheesya-ot-obshchey-kreshchalnoy-kupeli-svyatogo-vladimira-edinstvo-nevozmo.html>.

that lived for many centuries, nothing remained, except, of course, the **Russian Orthodox Church**. Only she managed during all these decades of persecution and oppression to preserve the memory of **Holy Russia**.”³⁸ Hilarion warned that the way the Americans have intervened in the Middle East, Iraq and Libya is well remembered and “I would very much not like to see anything like this happen again in **our historical space**.”³⁹ For Hilarion, the territory of Ukraine is Russian land, Russian historical space, and part of historic Holy Russia.

However, Hilarion adds an important comment that this unity of peoples is spiritual, not political:

The Ukrainian people want to stay with the Russian people. And this is not a political issue, but a church one. It should never be confused with politics, because political relations between Russia and Ukraine can be anything, but the will of the church people is to maintain unity.⁴⁰

It is important to highlight that the ‘soft power’ appeal of the narrative of ‘spiritual unity’ of Ukrainians and Russians is strongest, when it is perceived to be an un-political and self-evident fact of history, identity, and culture. Therefore, when Metropolitan Hilarion argues that the Russian World is not a political issue, he is not trying to undermine the soft power of Russian World, because the latter will be more persuasive if considered to be fact beyond politics and above any current conflict.

Discussion of findings related to the Russian World. Kirill and Putin have had different takes on the Russian World. When the *Russkii Mir* Foundation was established in 2007 by presidential decree, it was intended to promote the soft power of the Russian Federation among perceived compatriots in the ‘near abroad,’ but had mostly secular aims to promote the Russian language, culture, and education system abroad.⁴¹ Correspondingly, the main governmental agency for reaching out to ethnic Russians and Russophone groups outside of Russia is *Russotrudnichestvo* (The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States,

³⁸ “Metropolitan Hilarion: the figure of Rasputin was extremely controversial,” March 21, 2022, <https://hilarion.ru/social/mitropolit-ilarion-figura-rasputina-by-la-chrezvychayno-protivorechivoy.html>

³⁹ “Metropolitan Hilarion: The Church prays that the conflict between Russia and the West will be resolved peacefully,” February 20, 2022, <https://hilarion.ru/social/mitropolit-ilarion-tserkov-molitsya-chtoby-konflikt-rossii-i-zapada-reshilsya-mirnym-putem.html>.

⁴⁰ “Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk's interview to Orthodoxie.com,” February 26, 2022, <https://hilarion.ru/social/intervyu-mitropolita-volokolamskogo-ilariona-izdaniyu-orthodoxie-com.html>.

⁴¹ Alexander Sergunin, Leonid Karabshkin, “Understanding Russia’s Soft Power Strategy,” *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (November 2015): 349, 355.

Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation), established in 2008 and operating now in about 80 countries around the world.⁴²

In parallel, the ROC created an international organization, Day of Baptism of Rus (*Den Khreshchenia Rusi*), which was intended “to promote the union of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia as one Holy Rus.”⁴³ Naturally, the *religious* narrative of the Russian World was defined and expressed by Patriarch Kirill, who on November 3, 2009, opened the III Assembly of the Russian World with a speech, where he said: “The core of the Russian world today is Russia, Ukraine, Belarus”; the “countries of historical Russia” are Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and Moldova; these peoples are spiritually one; they “belong to one unique civilizational space,” have the same saints, holy places and Russian language as the communication element of the Russian world and “only a cohesive Russian world can become a strong subject of global international politics.”⁴⁴

Thus, from the beginning of his patriarchy, Kirill has emphasized spiritual bonds stemming from the cradle of Kievan Rus and common baptism into Orthodox Christianity, which unite peoples living in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus (at times Kirill has also added Moldova).⁴⁵ For years, this *religious* narrative of the Russian World existed quite autonomously from the secular one, although it did not contradict the latter.

President Vladimir Putin adopted the *religious* approach to the Russian World in 2013. Until a speech delivered at the Valdai Club meeting in 2013, Putin had not explicitly named the values Russia was standing for. At this meeting he laid out his vision of Russia as an Orthodox power in the world.⁴⁶ Having adopted the key elements of the religious conceptualization of the Russian World, Putin repeated key elements of the *religious* view of Russian World (in **bold**) in an address delivered in Kiev on the occasion of the 1025th baptism of Rus in 2013⁴⁷:

“As I have already said and as it appears on your agenda and in the main theses, you have gathered here—the importance of Ukraine's civilizational choice. I must immediately make a reservation that this is not just a civilizational choice of Ukraine.

⁴² Olga S. Kulkova, “Russian ‘Soft Power’ in the North-East Africa,” *Politics and Religion* 15, no. 1 (2021): 106.

⁴³ Orysia Lutsevych, “Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood,” Chatham House, April 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2016/04/agents-russian-world-proxy-groups-contested-neighbourhood>, 25.

⁴⁴ The Presentation of Patriarch Kirill at the opening ceremony of the Third Assembly of the Russian World, Internet Journal of the Russian Orthodox Church, November 3, 2009, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/print/928446.html>.

⁴⁵ Petro, “Russia’s Orthodox Soft Power.”

⁴⁶ Petro, “Russia’s Orthodox Soft Power.”

⁴⁷ Vladimir Putin’s speech at the conference “Orthodox-Slavic Values—the Basis of Ukraine's Civilizational Choice,” Kiev, July 27, 2013, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/18961>.

After all, in the place where we are, as I said today, on the **Dnieper font**, on the **Kiev font**, a choice was made for **all of Holy Russia**. A choice was made here for all of us. Our ancestors, who lived in these territories, made this choice for all our people. "For all our people"—I say this, meaning that, of course, we understand today's realities, there are Ukrainian people, Belarusian and other peoples, and we respect all this heritage, but at the heart of it are, of course, our **common spiritual values**, which make us **a single people**. ... The **baptism of Rus** became the great event that determined the spiritual and cultural development of Russia and Ukraine for centuries. We have no right to forget this **brotherhood**, we are obliged to preserve the traditions of our ancestors. Together they built a unique system of **Orthodox values** and strengthened their faith."

It is important to notice that the *political* leader delivers a message, which includes basically all the main component parts of the religious narrative of the spiritual unity of Russia and Ukraine. It is true that Putin adopted the religious narrative of *Russkii Mir* years later than Patriarch Kirill, wherefore the contents of this narrative were articulated first by Kirill and were adopted years later by Putin.⁴⁸ But in 2013, when the Day of Baptism of Rus was celebrated in Ukraine by the support of Patriarch Kirill and campaign slogans such as 'Unity for Slavic Peoples' and 'Holy Rus is Indivisible',⁴⁹ and the same discourse was adopted by President Putin, the religious narrative of the Russian World became a true source of soft power for the Russian state. Although "people who may love the Slavic Orthodox Christian heritage may not want to be linked to the politics of Vladimir Putin"⁵⁰—particularly since annexation of Crimea in 2014—it is the seemingly un-political emphasis on the spiritual unity, on the common baptism of Rus and on the common task to build a Holy Rus⁵¹ which still has the soft power potential.

2) Sharp power: territorial expansion of the Church with the help of the Russian state

We recognized sharp power (promoting discord and tension in target societies) in the way Metropolitan Hilarion, in particular, but also Patriarch Kirill handled the inter-Orthodox affairs related to the recognition of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in January 2019, when the *tomos* of autocephaly was granted to the Church.

Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion do not recognize this decision of the Ecumenical Patriarch, consider the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) to be a church

⁴⁸ Nadieszda Kizenko, "Russia's Soft Power: A Matter for Church and State," *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, September 10, 2015, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20150910-russias-soft-power-a-matter-for-church-and-state>.

⁴⁹ Lutsevych, "Agents of the Russian World," 25.

⁵⁰ Kizenko, "Russia's Soft Power."

⁵¹ Petro, "Russia's Orthodox Soft Power."

schism,⁵² are ready to cease contacts with any Orthodox Church which recognizes the autocephaly of OCU, *and* consider it also legitimate to ‘invade’ the territory of an Orthodox Church, which does not consider the Russian Orthodox Church as the only canonical Orthodox Church in the territory of Ukraine.

According to Patriarch Kirill, the Orthodox ‘schism’ is caused by the Ecumenical Patriarch (Bartholomew): “... the church schism committed in 2018 by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, which dealt a blow to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.”⁵³ Thereafter, the conflict expands to all other (leaders of) Orthodox Churches, who recognize OCU as canonical.

Metropolitan Hilarion explains: “... a division arose in the family of Orthodox Churches, when, as a result of the actions of the Patriarch of Constantinople, a group of Churches was formed that recognized the Ukrainian schism.”⁵⁴

In this dimension, the main target in February and March 2022 is the patriarch of Alexandria. In his reply to the Patriarch of Alexandria (March 5, 2022), Patriarch Kirill is unambiguous in his message:

Having announced their [schismatics in Ukraine] recognition, and then having entered into Eucharistic communion with them, you following them have strayed into schism and, according to the severity of the above canons, are subject to equal excommunication with them.⁵⁵

Patriarch Kirill says that “many clerics of the Church of Alexandria,” who supposedly are not willing to recognize OCU, are seeking canonical protection from the Russian Orthodox Church.⁵⁶ As a result, the ROC has created the Patriarchal Exarchate in Africa, which in Hilarion’s words gives “canonical asylum to African clergy who did not want to follow the Patriarch of Alexandria in recognizing and legitimizing the Ukrainian schism.”⁵⁷ Additionally,

⁵² According to Hilarion, only schismatics go to ‘self-consecrated’ Orthodox Church of Ukraine for whom the Patriarch of Constantinople had announced autocephaly. “Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk’s interview.”

⁵³ “His Holiness Patriarch Kirill sent a message to the Acting Secretary General of the WCC in connection with the events in Ukraine,” March 10, 2022, <https://mospat.ru/ru/news/89069/>.

⁵⁴ “Inter-Orthodox consultations on the model of the Amman Conference are necessary, Metropolitan Hilarion is sure,” February 12, 2022, <https://hilarion.ru/social/mezhpravoslavnye-konsultatsii-po-obraztsu-ammanskogo-soveshchaniya-neobkhodimy-uveren-mitropolit-ila.html>.

⁵⁵ “Reply of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill to His Beatitude Patriarch Theodore of Alexandria,” March 5, 2022, <https://mospat.ru/ru/news/89045/>.

⁵⁶ “Reply of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill.”

⁵⁷ “Metropolitan Hilarion: The Russian Church is forced to create its own parishes on the African continent,” February 7, 2022, <https://hilarion.ru/social/mitropolit-ilarion-russkaya-tserkov-vynuzhdena-sozdavat-svoiprikhody-na-afrikanskom-kontinente.html>. Metropolitan Hilarion: “... we were approached by priests from Africa, who said: we do not want to follow our Patriarch in recognizing the schism, we are against recognizing the Ukrainian schism—give us canonical asylum.” “Metropolitan Hilarion: The Russian Church cherishes divine service in the form in which it inherited it from its ancestors,” February 21, 2022,

the ROC has been forced to “create our own parishes for our Russian-speaking believers – parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church”⁵⁸ in the territory which used to be canonical for the Patriarchate of Alexandria.

The sharp power principle can be recognized in the explanation offered by Hilarion: “... in the Orthodox Church the choice before the clergy and believers is very simple: are you with the canonical Church or with schismatics? African priests are now faced with this forced choice.”⁵⁹

The core reason why the ROC has been forced to take such measures in Africa, where the Greek Orthodox Church of Alexandria accounts for about 6 million Orthodox Christians (mainly in Egypt, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania)⁶⁰ and where already in December 2019 the Holy Synod of the ROC had declared that all its African parishes will be shifted from the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Alexandria’s jurisdiction under direct subordination to Patriarch Kirill,⁶¹ was the creation of an exarchate by the Ecumenical Patriarch on the canonical territory of the ROC:

If anyone has a question as to why we created an exarchate in Africa, let them address that question to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Why did he create an exarchate in Ukraine? ... He created an exarchate in Ukraine, on our canonical territory, and then signed the ‘tomos of autocephaly’ ... either everyone will live by the same rules, or each Church will set its own rules.⁶²

Metropolitan Hilarion considers “the invasion of Ukraine by the Patriarchate of Constantinople” one of “the most acute and dangerous challenges for the Russian Orthodox Church in recent decades,”⁶³ the Patriarchates of Constantinople and Alexandria to be the main actors responsible for the conflict, and “an intense struggle for church unity” the sole solution for the ROC.⁶⁴ He frames the invasion of the ROC into the canonical territory of the Patriarchate of Alexandria as a benevolent response to the request of persecuted Christians in

<https://hilarion.ru/social/mitropolit-ilarion-russkaya-tserkov-dorozhit-bogosluzheniem-v-tom-vide-v-kakom-unasledovala-ego-ot-p.html>.

⁵⁸ “Metropolitan Hilarion: The Russian Church is forced to create.”

⁵⁹ “Metropolitan Hilarion: propaganda of an unnatural way of life is a great tragedy of Western society,” February 8, 2022, <https://hilarion.ru/social/mitropolit-ilarion-propaganda-protivoestestvennogo-obraza-zhizni-eto-bolshaya-tragediya-zapadnogo-ob.html>.

⁶⁰ Kulkova, „Russian ‘Soft Power’ in the North-East Africa,” 118.

⁶¹ Kulkova, „Russian ‘Soft Power’ in the North-East Africa,” 119.

⁶² “Metropolitan Hilarion: The Russian Church cherishes divine service.”

⁶³ “His Holiness Patriarch Kirill’s Contribution to strengthening inter-Orthodox unity against the backdrop of the invasion of Ukraine by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, Report by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk at the conference ‘Bishop in the Life of the Church: Theology, History, Law’” at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy on March 14, 2022,” March 15, 2022, <http://mospat.ru/ru/news/89080/>.

⁶⁴ “His Holiness Patriarch Kirill’s Contribution.”

Africa, the Middle East and other parts of the world who need to be protected by the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church.⁶⁵

Discussion. The relationship between the Russian Foreign Ministry and DECR of the ROC has been mutually supportive for years—the Moscow Patriarchate has acted as a soft diplomatic power in areas which the Russian state could not have pursued.⁶⁶ In the Middle East and Africa, Russia’s ‘hard diplomatic power’ has pursued agendas directly relevant for missionary expansion of the ROC and acted “almost as a Russian protectorate of Christian minorities worldwide.”⁶⁷ Correspondingly, the promotion of Russian Orthodoxy is part of the agenda of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs not only because of close collaboration between the Russian state and the ROC, but also because protection of traditional spirituality and combating alien forms of spirituality are an integral part of Russian National Security Doctrines.⁶⁸

3) Evil power: Church leaders on War and Peace

During 30 days before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill did not address at all the situation in Ukraine and the escalation of the military threat between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, European Union, NATO, and the West. On January 27, 2022, both Patriarch Kirill and President Putin commemorated the 78th anniversary of the end of the 900-day Leningrad siege.⁶⁹ On February 23, on the occasion of the Day of the Defender of the Fatherland, Kirill praised the bravery of soldiers, who are ready for self-sacrifice, loyal to the Fatherland, and ready to defend the sacred borders of the land.⁷⁰ Thus, Patriarch Kirill participated in routine events of the Russian civil religion (where symbols of the Soviet Union and the victory in WWII are sacred objects of both secular and religious worship). One day before the start of the military invasion of Ukraine, he praised and blessed the military probably

⁶⁵ “The President of Russia presented Metropolitan Hilarion with the Order of Alexander Nevsky,” February 2, 2022, <https://hilarion.ru/social/prezident-rossii-vruchil-mitropolitu-ilarionu-orden-aleksandra-nevskogo.html>; “Metropolitan Hilarion: Russian Church will continue efforts to support persecuted Christians in Africa,” February 4, 2022, <https://hilarion.ru/social/mitropolit-ilarion-russkaya-tserkov-prodolzhit-usiliya-podderzhke-presleduemykh-khristian-afriki.html>; “Persecution of Christians in Africa was discussed at a press conference in Moscow,” February 4, 2022, <https://hilarion.ru/social/o-gonimiyakh-na-khristian-afriki-rasskazali-na-press-konferentsii-v-moskve.html>.

⁶⁶ Petkoff, “Religious Exceptionalism,” 225.

⁶⁷ Petkoff, “Religious Exceptionalism,” 225-226.

⁶⁸ Petkoff, “Religious Exceptionalism,” 225.

⁶⁹ “Patriarchal sermon on the day of the feast of the Epiphany after the Liturgy in the Alexander Nevsky Skete,” January 27, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5892693.html>; “Vladimir Putin laid a wreath at the Motherland monument at the Piskarevskoye Memorial Cemetery in St Petersburg,” January 27, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67645>.

⁷⁰ “On the Day of the Defender of the Fatherland, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Kremlin Wall,” February 23, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5903402.html>.

in the same way he has done on the occasion of the Day of the Defender of the Fatherland annually.

The messages of Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion on the theme “war and peace” were delivered primarily *after* the start of the military invasion, consist of several parts, and emphasize that peace is possible *only* when the unity of Ukrainian and Russian peoples is restored. We identified seven aspects of the “war and peace” theme delivered by Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion after the invasion began.

First, when Metropolitan Hilarion argued on January 31, 2022, that war is not a method of conflict resolution,⁷¹ he was not deviating from the content of *The Basis of the Social Concept*, which says in section VIII.1 that “war is evil.” On March 9, 2022, when the ‘military operation’ of the Russian Federation had been implemented for about two weeks, Patriarch Kirill said that “any war between Orthodox brothers belonging to the one Church is a devil's work, not God's.”⁷² For Kirill, “brother should not raise his hand against the brother.”⁷³ Thus, the first line is to emphasize that “there cannot be any war between spiritual brothers.” Accordingly, Patriarch Kirill says: “The Church cannot carry any signal other than peacemaking, because everywhere our flock is on both sides of the barricades.”⁷⁴

Second, peace is neither un-conditional (Patriarch Kirill and the ROC are not pacifists) nor not achieved until there exists division (most importantly in politics, but for the ROC also in the realm of inter-Orthodox relations). When divisions end, unity of (brotherly) peoples is possible and that kind of unity is the goal:

I believe that this God-given community will help to overcome the divisions and contradictions that have arisen that have led to the current conflict. I call on the fullness of the Russian Orthodox Church to offer a sincere, fervent prayer for the speedy restoration of peace.⁷⁵ ... Today, too, we need unity – unity with our brothers and sisters in Ukraine. ... We must pray for the restoration of peace, for the restoration of good fraternal relations between our peoples.⁷⁶

Third, the most obvious solution would be for the Ukrainian army to surrender and stop defending their country against the unprovoked military aggression by the Russian Federation. On February 24, President Putin urged the Ukrainian army “to lay down arms and go

⁷¹ “Metropolitan Hilarion: war is not a method of solving accumulated political problems,” January 31, 2022, <https://hilarion.ru/social/mitropolit-ilarion-voyna-eto-ne-metod-resheniya-nakopivshikhsya-politicheskikh-problem.html>.

⁷² “Patriarchal sermon on Wednesday of the first week.”

⁷³ “Word of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill.”

⁷⁴ “Speech by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill.”

⁷⁵ “Address of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill.”

⁷⁶ “Patriarch Kirill urged believers to pray.”

home.” For Putin, the war was caused by the Neo-Nazi political regime. For Kirill, the fight between brotherly peoples had been caused by “some religious organizations,”⁷⁷ due to “the form of propaganda that has massively descended on Ukraine and has been spread by the enemies of both Russia and Ukraine.”⁷⁸

Fourth, it is argued that the war has been caused by the enemies of Russia, who want to contain and weaken Russia by making fraternal peoples – Russians and Ukrainians – enemies. The enemies of Russia were “pumping Ukraine with weapons” and re-educating Ukrainians and Russians living in Ukraine “into enemies of Russia.”⁷⁹ The people of Russia and Ukraine cannot cause the fight, because they have come out of the single Kiev baptismal font and “are connected by a common historical destiny.”⁸⁰

Fifth, Patriarch Kirill attributes the responsibility for the conflict also to the West and NATO. The West has not kept its promise to respect Russia’s security and dignity, NATO has enlarged and seeks to weaken Russia, and “Russophobia is spreading at an unprecedented pace in the Western world.”⁸¹

Sixth, the duty of the Church is also to bless the army and to contribute to the military victory of the national army. Patriarch Kirill presents the historic example of Saint Sergius, who in the 14th century blessed Dimitry Donskoy in the fight against the Tatar-Mongol army. Thanks to this blessing Donskoy was victorious.⁸²

Seventh, on several occasions Patriarch Kirill frames the conflict as an ‘internecine strife’ (*междоусобная брань*), as an internal warfare,⁸³ that takes place in “our common historical Fatherland,”⁸⁴ in the “Russian land... that now includes Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and other tribes and peoples,”⁸⁵ in “our Russian land, which now includes Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and our Church.”⁸⁶

Discussion. These ‘seven faces’ of the ‘war and peace’ message were delivered almost exclusively by Patriarch Kirill (Metropolitan Hilarion was more busy with themes related to the inter-Orthodox affairs), but should not be assumed to be highly innovative in this regard. All ‘seven dimensions’ can be found also in *The Basis of the Concept* document published

⁷⁷ “Patriarchal sermon on Wednesday of the first week.”

⁷⁸ “Patriarchal sermon on Wednesday of the first week.”

⁷⁹ “His Holiness Patriarch Kirill sent a message.”

⁸⁰ “His Holiness Patriarch Kirill sent a message.”

⁸¹ “His Holiness Patriarch Kirill sent a message.”

⁸² “Word of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill.”

⁸³ “Patriarch Kirill urged believers to pray”; “Patriarchal sermon on Wednesday of the first week.”

⁸⁴ “Patriarch Kirill urged believers to pray.”

⁸⁵ “Patriarch Kirill urged believers to pray.”

⁸⁶ “Patriarchal sermon on the Week of the Triumph.”

more than two decades earlier: Sergius of Radonezh blessing the Russian troops headed by Prince Dimitry Donskoy before the battle is given in section II, 2; in principle the Church does not take sides in inter-ethnic conflicts, unless “one of the sides commit evident aggression or injustice” (II, 4), patriotic Orthodox Christians should defend their fatherland against the enemy (II, 3) and etc.

4) Comparison of messages: religious and political leaders

Finally, it deserves mentioning that the messages of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and President Vladimir Putin from the same periods included words and narratives not present and not articulated by religious leaders.

The three main ideological lines in two speeches of President Vladimir Putin (delivered in February 21 and February 24)⁸⁷--‘Ukraine as a Bolshevik Creation’ (historic line), ‘genocide of Russians’ (ethnic line) and ‘denazification’ (political line)⁸⁸--were either totally missing in the messages of Kirill and Hilarion (who did not talk at all about Banderites or Neo-nazis) or were expressed in softer language (both Kirill and Hilarion attributed blame for conflict escalation to actors other than the Russian Federation, but they did not use terms like ‘genocide,’ ‘militarization,’ ‘nuclear weapons’).

For example, both Putin and Lavrov blame the West for supporting the Neo-Nazi regime in Ukraine since 2014: “... the leading NATO countries are supporting the far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine, those who will never forgive the people of Crimea and Sevastopol for freely making a choice to reunite with Russia;”⁸⁹ “The fact that they are now trying to prop up an overtly neo-Nazi, Banderite regime in Kiev is also a manifestation of genocide ...”⁹⁰

It seems that the ‘correct reading’ of the role of the Soviet Union and of the cries of those who fought against the Soviet Union during the Second World War (including the promotion of narratives of the rise of neo-fascism in the former Soviet sphere of influence in

⁸⁷ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67828>; “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67843>.

⁸⁸ Marlene Laruelle and Ivan Grek (2022) „Decoding Putin’s Speeches: the Three ideological lines of Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine“, *Russia Matters*, February 25, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/decoding-putins-speeches-three-ideological-lines-russias-military-intervention-ukraine>.

⁸⁹ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67843>.

⁹⁰ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to questions at Security Council meeting, Moscow,” February 21, 2022, https://mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1799823/.

Europe⁹¹) are tackled in the Russian propaganda machine by secular (including educational and scientific) organizations and not mainly by the Russian Orthodox Church.

As mentioned above, the main themes of religious leaders focused on the ‘unity’ of Russian and Ukrainian peoples and of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine. Anti-Western discourse was of secondary importance but was present also.

In five sermons delivered during 30 days before February 24, 2022, Kirill tackled the theme of liberal Western values once. On February 1, he delivered a sermon, which included a discussion over the revival of pagan anthropocentrism in the 15th century West, during the so-called Renaissance period, at the time when Orthodox Byzantium lost the positions it once had.⁹² The implicit message was about the West having lost its Christian focus, while Christian values have been preserved in Orthodox Russia.

Ten days before the start of the Russian invasion into Ukraine, Hilarion praised the courage of Finnish Member of Parliament, former Minister of the Interior of Finland, Päivi Räsänen, who had been sued in court for having quoted the Bible (parts of Scripture that deal with homosexuality), explained why the Russian Orthodox Church supports Räsänen, and condemned the political correctness that operates in the European Union and contradicts biblical teaching.⁹³

Similar recognition of politicians in the West, who are perceived as not conforming to Western normative values was exemplified by Patriarch Kirill’s congratulation of Katalin Novak on her election as President of Hungary on March 12, 2022. He expressed gratefulness to the Hungarian authorities for their attention to the spiritual needs of Orthodox believers in Hungary and added: “Today, when the ideas of moral relativism are becoming more widespread, the efforts of politicians defending the Christian identity of European culture are especially in demand.”⁹⁴

In his letter to the acting Secretary General of the World Council of Churches (March 10, 2022), Kirill repeated the main lines of the message of Russian political leaders. He argued that the origins of the current conflict were in the three decades of confrontation between the

⁹¹ Lutsevych, “Agents of the Russian World,” 17, 18.

⁹² “Sermon by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill after the Liturgy in the Alexander Nevsky Skete on the thirteenth anniversary of the enthronement of His Holiness,” February 1, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5892693.html>.

⁹³ “Metropolitan Hilarion: the council decision on the Yekaterinburg remains will become mandatory for the entire Church,” February 15, 2022, <https://hilarion.ru/social/mitropolit-ilarion-sobornoe-reshenie-po-ekaterinburgskim-ostankam-stanet-obyazatelnyy-dlya-vsey-tser.html>.

⁹⁴ “Congratulations of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill Katalin Novak on her election as President of Hungary,” March 12, 2022, <https://mospat.ru/ru/news/89072/>.

West and Russia, that the main trigger has been NATO's enlargement and militarization of Ukraine, that Western governments have not recognized the suffering of peoples in the Donbas and instead, have escalated the conflict in order to weaken Russia.⁹⁵

His particular 'contribution' to the anti-Western discourse was present in his sermon on March 6, where he claimed that the real war is taking place over the issue of Gay Parades—"those who claim world powers" require from all peoples who want "to enter the club of ... 'free' countries, ... to hold a Gay Pride parade."⁹⁶ According to Kirill, people in Donbass reject such values and requirements.

Discussion. The leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church contribute uniquely to Russian military aggression by laying a strong emphasis on the spiritual unity of Russian and Ukrainian people within the religious narrative of the Russian World. In comparison to political leaders, they engage more passionately with inter-Orthodox relations and expansion of the ROC into canonical territories of the Patriarch of Alexandria in Africa. Unlike the secular leaders, they do not deal with narratives that question the historic origin of the Ukrainian nation-state, deny the legitimacy of post-Maidan Ukrainian government, or attempt to justify the military invasion with Neo-Nazism. However, both religious and secular leaders justify the military invasion and reject Western values. There is also a strong similarity in the way both deny the agency (autonomous existence) of the nation-state and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and how they consider both the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and post-2014 Ukrainian government to be a tool of outside forces (be it the West, the United States, or the Ecumenical Patriarch).

In Conclusion

We have described here the narrative of leaders only, but we must acknowledge that the leaders' public statements have important consequences. They stimulate variants among the relevant publics and may serve as a basis for exaggeration and expansion in the personal narratives of less elevated people especially when under the extreme stress of war. Reports of inhumane treatment of combatants and non-combatants caught in the crossfire of battles and even crimes against humanity committed on the battlefields are built upon the narratives of the leadership we have discussed.⁹⁷ The human suffering of people in the midst of war cannot be

⁹⁵ "His Holiness Patriarch Kirill sent a message."

⁹⁶ "Patriarchal Sermon in Cheesefare Week after the Liturgy in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior," March 6, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html>.

⁹⁷ In examining the conditions of the Russia-Ukraine conflict already in 2018, Catherine Wanner clearly argues that even when a public, like the Russian population, is largely secular and religiously non-observant, the "ambient

understood without considering the direct or indirect advocacy for war, even for extremely cruel war built on religious and nationalist passions, by leaders like those we have considered here. The narrative of leaders justifies the “othering” of the objects of their narrative, and other humans become enemies who must be hated, attacked and killed, their achievements denigrated, and their cultures destroyed. Advocating unjustified war is bad enough on its own. The sober evaluation of the multiplicative consequences of misbegotten sharp power stances that open the door to evil power positions should scandalize us all.

faith” of Orthodoxy can have very strong effects on common people. Catherine Wanner, “Public religions after socialism: redefining norms of difference.” *Religion, State and Society* 46, no. 2 (2018): 88-95.