

# Foreign activity of the Russian orthodox church as a weapon of the hybrid war against Ukraine

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Received: August 15, 2020 | Revised: September 15, 2020 | Accepted: September 30, 2020

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4062360

## Abstract

The article is concerned with the study of the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as an instrument for implementing the policy of the Russian Federation in a hybrid war against Ukraine. The main purpose of the research is to determine how Moscow uses in its hybrid technologies and capabilities of the Russian Orthodox Church to achieve its political goals on the global level. The historical analysis of the international activities of the ROC became the basis of the study. Particular attention in the article is devoted to the activities of the Department of External Church Relations (DECR) of the Moscow Patriarchate, which was created under Stalin in 1946 and received a new impulse under Putin. In this context, the speech goes about the fact that the Department of External Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate was and remains the shadow body of the special services of the Russian Federation, which work under religious cover on the global level.

**Key words:** Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society, Tomos, Ecumenical Patriarchate, local Orthodox Churches, Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

## Introduction

Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine undoubtedly has a religious front, as the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has supported Russian aggression, recognizing the legitimacy of the annexation of Crimea, and has assisted to the development military actions in eastern Ukraine. The historical tradition of Moscow Orthodoxy is to cooperate with the top state leadership, either with the Moscow tsars, or with the Russian emperors, or with the current ruling elite proved its vitality. Even in Soviet times, the few branches of the Orthodox Church that the Kremlin did not ban acted in accordance with the course set by the political leadership of the USSR. Therefore, it is not surprise that the current ROC after receiving the Kremlin's order,

began to actively develop and promote outside Russia Federation an aggressive geopolitical project "Russian Peace", which does not foresee the existence of independent Ukraine. When the leadership of the Russian General Staff began to plan a military aggression against our state, the hierarchs of the Moscow Patriarchate started preparing to open their front. It should be noted that this was done a long time before the annexation of Crimea and before the start of the undeclared war in Donbas region.

In fact, the Russian government purposefully conducted a policy of involving the structures of the Moscow Patriarchate in the implementation of its domestic and foreign policies which has anti-Ukrainian character.

## Material and methods

Active anti-Ukrainian activity of the leadership of the ROC has become an actual subject for researchers in the sphere of theology O. Sagan, S. Zdioruk, D. Gorevy, M. Cherenkov

[2-8] and scientists who studied the role of the ROC in context of threats to the national security of Ukraine V. Gorbulin, P. Kovalchuk, O. Sagan, V. Yablonsky and other scientists. However, at

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the present time, some issues concerning the content and direction of activity of foreign structures of the ROC of the geopolitical project of the “Russian world” remain unexplored.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the content and main activities of the foreign structures of the ROC, which under the cover of Orthodox ideology support Russian aggression in Ukraine.

The methodological basis of the study was materials and documents that reveal the direction of the ROC's activities in relation to

Ukraine. In this context, it was possible to identify the main technologies and manipulations that the ROC used to increase the influence of the Russian Federation to Ukraine. The use of historical and political science analysis made it possible to establish a connection between the state, special services and the church in the Russian Federation. The analysis of the process of the ROC's opposition to the receipt of the Tomos by Ukraine was considered on the global level.

## **Results and discussion**

The main role in the foreign activity of the ROC is played by a special body – the Department of External Church Relations (DECR) of the Moscow Patriarchate (MP). This department was established in the days of J. Stalin, in 1946. Apparently, at that time it was one of the official organizations through which the Soviet leadership tried to spread its influence to other countries. As the sphere of authority of the DECR went beyond the USSR, it became clear that DECR is shadow body of the Soviet secret service, which operated under religious cover. A new stage in the activities of the DECR began when Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia in 2000. The scale of the department's tasks gradually increased, and its spheres of influence expanded significantly. The only thing that has remained unchanged since establishment of the DECR is its close ties with the secret services for fulfillment of any tasks set by the Kremlin.

It is significant that in 2009 the former head of the DECR, Metropolitan Kirill (V. Gundyayev), became the Moscow Patriarch. After that, the department was reorganized into several new structures. In particular, the Department of Church-Society Interaction (DCSI) was established on its basis and infamous Archpriest V. Chaplin, one of the most odious leaders of the Kremlin ideology, appointed its head. Soon, under the supervision of DECR pseudo-public organizations such as the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods, the Union of Orthodox Citizens, and the Association of Orthodox Experts began their activities in Russia. Later, according to the initiative of Patriarch Kirill, a new Information department of the ROC was

formed on the basis of the Communication service of the DECR, which was headed by V. Legoida, a person who is also known for his far from Orthodox chauvinistic rhetoric. The newly created Information department began to work as a church analogue of Russian propaganda media, such as informational service D. Kiselyov's *Rossiya Segodnya* [3].

The official authority of DECR is to provide inter-church ties, charitable work, and pastoral support for Orthodox Russians around the world with the traditional demagogic rhetoric of Russian Orthodoxy. In fact, the activities of the ROC's foreign ministry have nothing to do with Christian values, as they are conditioned by the Kremlin's harsh aggressive policy.

DECR secretly cooperates with special services and openly – with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

In 2004, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation I. Ivanov assessed the cooperation between the church and the state in the international arena as follows: “Gathering the” Russian world “is a common business of the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church” [1]. In such way, the foreign policy of the ROC is no different from the official activities of the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Church external activity has certain advantages over official diplomacy. Religion is a sphere of subtle matter, which has no clearly defined boundaries between spirituality and politics, between the heavenly and the earthly, behind religious phraseology it is possible to hide any, sometimes opposite, thoughts and intentions.

Well-known that religious rhetoric does not appeal to the norms of international law, but to the general norms of Christian ideology, and therefore the church is more veiled. It is also necessary to take into account the specifics of the perception of believers of the instructions and information messages that they receive from church representatives. Religious faith is a unique phenomenon, because believers are accustomed to accept the words of the clergy without needs for proof or arguments. And in general, religious people trust in everything that as they think has a spiritual origin. Exactly such method “spiritual fathers” of the ROC often skillfully use to pervert facts in their propaganda.

It should be noted that the Russian Church has extensive experience in foreign activities. The most tried and tested technologies are follows:

- personal contacts of ROC leaders with representatives of other churches, government officials, businessmen and influential people;

- search and selection of pro-Russian agents of influence;

- creation of religious and public foreign organizations of the ROC, which promote the ideas of the “Russian world”;

- the use of Orthodox monasteries on the territory of foreign states (for example, Mount Athos in Greece);

- financial support and staffing “Russian Orthodox Brotherhood”;

- building of temples on the territories of other countries and support of parishes of the ROC;

- creation and financing of “Orthodox” foreign media working in the interests of Russia.

Analyzing the activity of the ROC in Ukraine during the last decade, first of all with the participation of DECR, it is possible to single out certain stages of anti-Ukrainian propaganda, accompanied by powerful information campaigns. At the first stage (2009–2013), the main actions of the ROC were directed to ideological brainwashing of Ukrainian society within the framework of the all-Russian geopolitical project “Land Collection” with the help of the Customs Union, EurAsEC, ZUBR, and Holy Russia etc.

The activity of the Russian Orthodox integrators noticeably intensified when Viktor Yanukovich came to power as President of

Ukraine. Exactly in that time with initiatives DECR MP and participation of the Ukrainian orthodox church (UOC) MP, in Ukraine were created such aggressive church organizations as Union of Orthodox Citizens of Ukraine “United Fatherland”, Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods of Ukraine, All-Ukrainian Orthodox Brotherhood of Alexander Nevsky, All-Ukrainian Public Association “Orthodox Choice” and others, which in fact became the megaphone of the ideology of the “Russian world”.

With mediation of the “ROC Foreign Ministry” abovementioned church organizations carried out subversive anti-Ukrainian activities directed for:

- spreading Russophile ideology;

- discrediting the European integration course of Ukraine;

- opposition to granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church;

- compromising Ukrainians and spreading intolerance of dissent.

The demonstration of the anti-Ukrainian essence of these quasi-church organizations was the Orthodox-monarchical procession organized by them in July 2012 with demanding the deprivation of the independence of the UOC Moscow Patriarchate and the restoration of the Ukrainian exarchate of the ROC times of the USSR [5].

The Revolution of dignity thwarted the plans of the Kremlin hierarchs. Russia responded to Ukraine with war, and at this stage the ROC not only supported Russian aggression during its hot phase, but also assumed the functions of its ideological justification, cynically using its inherent traditional pseudo-Orthodox rhetoric.

At the present stage, the ROC supports a hybrid war against Ukraine and concentrates its activities on foreign relations. At the beginning of 2018, the leaders of the ROC began to make efforts to prevent the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and since this issue was to be decided by the hierarchs of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the MP intensified its external activities. It is clear that preventing Ukrainian autocephaly was a strategic task of the Kremlin. In April 2018, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church visited the residence of the Albanian Orthodox Church, where, under the pretext of

discussing the interaction of Orthodox churches, he discussed with Ukrainian church leaders the issue of Ukrainian autocephaly. There is no doubt that the Ukrainian issue was also very significant during his June meeting with Greek Foreign Minister N. Kodzias. At the same time, Metropolitan Hilarion (head of the “Church Foreign Ministry”) visited almost all local Orthodox churches: on May 6 he met with the Patriarch of Alexandria, on May 8 with the Archbishop of Cyprus, and on May 9 with the Patriarchs of Jerusalem and Antioch. Returning to Moscow, on May 15, 2018, Hilarion had a meeting with the Greek Ambassador to Russia A. Friganas, with whom he discussed issues covering the sphere of mutual interests. A working trip to Romania took place on May 18, and the next day to Poland. On June 1, Hilarion met in Moscow with the Ambassador of Bulgaria, and on June 4, 2018, he visited the Georgian Patriarch Elijah. With a certain mission, Patriarch Kirill sent Bishop Anthony on a business trip abroad. On May 18, he visited the Primate of the Czech and Slovak Churches, Metropolitan Rostislav, and on June 13, the Bulgarian Patriarch Neophyte.

At the same time, the Kremlin opposed Ukrainian autocephaly in the political sphere. During his official visit to Turkey, Russian President Vladimir Putin planned to meet with the Ecumenical Patriarch, but the meeting did not take place and they spoke by phone. And at the end of May 2018, there was information that Russia will reduce the price for Turkey by almost 1 billion US dollars (and for gas already supplied). Religious analysts consider this action as a veiled bribe by the Kremlin to the Turkish government, which should guarantee that Ukraine would not be given a Tomos on autocephaly. The fact is that under Turkish law, the Ecumenical Patriarch is considered a government official and, to some extent, subordinate to the central government.

On May 7, 2018, Russian Ambassador to Greece A. Maslov met with the head of the Hellenic Orthodox Church Jerome. As we know from authoritative sources that the topic of the meeting was Ukrainian autocephaly. A month later, on June 8, the chairman of the profile committee of the State Duma of Russia S. Gavrilov went to Greece. The deputy took part in a meeting

of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, despite the fact that he personally has nothing to do with this church. With his participation, the issue of all-Orthodox unity and prevention of the “Ukrainian scenario” of intra-church schism in Orthodoxy was discussed. The final stage of the Moscow plan to counter the receipt of the Tomos by Ukraine was scheduled visit of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church Kirill to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on August 31, 2018, but the visit was not crowned with success. Bartholomew did not make concessions to the Moscow Patriarch.

The establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine due to the Tomos was perceived by the Kremlin as a defeat that needs revenge. The mechanism of such a rematch has already been launched: the ROC has set priorities, and the head of the MPC Hilarion has been given one last chance to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the process curators. The purpose of the defined tasks remains unchanged – it is the struggle against Ukraine by means of religious rhetoric. Only tactical approaches can be adjusted. The main tasks for ROC activity defined as follows:

- maintain positions in Ukraine, counting on the support of the UOC MP;

- promote the reformatting of the Ukrainian government in accordance with the interests of the Kremlin through presidential and parliamentary elections;

- prevent the recognition of the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine by other local Orthodox churches;

- compromise the person of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew for the sake of the external isolation of the church he heads.

Solving these problems involves intensifying the external activities of the MP, primarily with the help of their agents of influence in countries where there are local Orthodox churches.

Moscow assigns a special role to public and religious organizations operating under the auspices of the ROC in other countries, which are a kind of springboard for lobbying its interests. It is clear that their activities have a fairly wide range, but its anti-Ukrainian component has now gained unprecedented scope. In this context, the most active organization is the International Union of Russian Orthodoxy called the Imperial Orthodox

Palestinian Society (IPPT), established in the late nineteenth century. Its statutory task is to assist the ROC in developing ties with the countries of the Middle East and the Mediterranean region. Intensification of IPPT activities began with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in Russia. Since 2007, the organization has been headed by S. Stepashin, the former head of counterintelligence, and then the FSB, the former Minister of Justice, Interior and Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. Honorary members of the IPPT include celebrities, including the president of the Transneft concern, retired FSB General M. Tokarev, ROC Patriarch Kirill, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, former and current mayor of Moscow, businessman Sergei Mikhailov, who was once considered leader of one of the largest criminal groups in the country, and others [3].

Representatives of the Palestinian Society work everywhere: in Abkhazia, Bulgaria, Greece, Estonia, Latvia, Germany, Serbia, Syria, Montenegro and Ukraine (in the occupied territories of Donbass). In February 2019, a branch of IPPT was opened in London. The object of special attention and efforts of the ROC (as well as IPPT) was Greece, a country that is considered a stronghold of world Orthodoxy. In Greece, there are two Orthodox churches – Hellenic and Constantinople, between which there are some contradictions. These contradictions (between Athens and Fanar) Moscow are trying to exploit for its benefit. Opposing the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, they count on the support of the monasteries of Mount Athos, which are also influenced by the active work of another “charitable” organization – the Russian Athos Society (RAS). Herewith ROC does not spare financial injections into the Orthodox environment. The chairman of the board of trustees of the RAS is the former governor of St. Petersburg G. Poltavchenko, the executive director is the top manager of Gazprom M. Gilerovych, the members of the society are deputies, businessmen, and representatives of special services. According to official reports, more than 30 infrastructure projects have been implemented on the Holy Mountain through the efforts of the RAS.

The Russians spent more than \$ 200 million to

support the Athos monasteries. An illustrative example is related to the St. Panteleimon Monastery of Mount Athos, which until 2016 was dominated by people from Ukraine. Unofficially, he was even called Ukrainian. But after the death of the Ukrainian abbot, the “Orthodox Brotherhood” quickly displaced the Ukrainian monks. At this time, St. Panteleimon Monastery is considered the main stronghold of Russian Orthodoxy, it is called – Russian, on its territory is strictly prohibited to allow pilgrims of PCU.

Russian interference in the domestic policy of states is traditionally accompanied by information support. Today, a large number of media outlets have appeared in Greece glorifying Russia and ruthlessly criticizing Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople. One such media outlet is the well-known Greek church internet portal Romfeya, headed by E. Polygenis, rightly considered an agent of Russian influence in Greek Orthodoxy.

At the end of 2018, the activities of a small Orthodox community at the Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Istanbul, where the residence of the Patriarchate of Constantinople is located, noticeably intensified. The leadership of the community secretly maintains relations with the representatives of the self-proclaimed and unrecognized by other churches Turkish Orthodox Church, established in the 1920s, to oppose the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Thus, we can assume that the ROC is intensifying its activities aimed for discrediting the Patriarch of Constantinople as revenge for giving him a Tomos to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Recently, the leadership of the ROC has been trying to subjugate foreign branches of Russian Orthodoxy, which still retain some autonomy. Most likely, this is why, in December 2018, the leadership of the Russian Church created a patriarchal exarchate in Western Europe. Metropolitan Ioan of Korsun and Western Europe, who has considerable experience as a secret member of the Russian secret services, was appointed head of the exarchate. According to military experts the task of the new metropolitan is to ensure the entry of numerous parishes of Russian Orthodox churches (parishes, church communities, hermitages) in Belgium, Great Britain, Denmark, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands,

Norway, France, Germany, Sweden. In addition, the hierarchs of the ROC plan pastoral activities of the exarchate in Liechtenstein, Luxembourg and Monaco, despite the lack of Orthodox parishes there. It is a question of preparation of such religious bridgeheads for distribution of the Russian influence.

It should be noted that under the guise of Orthodox rhetoric, real estate and property are being bought, ghostly projects are being financed, local elites are being involved in business, the right people are being bribed, and a Russian network of Russian secret services is being set up.

However, the Kremlin does not always succeed in realizing its plans in full, including on the external religious front. For example, as a result of the intensification of Russian intelligence activities, the Greek authorities were forced to take precautionary measures. In July 2018, Greece expelled two Russian diplomats and banned two more from entering the country. The reasons for such an unprecedented decision for Greece were Russian interference in the country's foreign

affairs, attempts to influence civil servants, metropolitans of the Hellenic Orthodox Church, and the clergy of Mount Athos, which posed a threat to national security. As a result, Greece has suspended the issuance of entry permits to Russian priests. After the ROC severed Eucharistic relations with Constantinople, Russian priests lost the opportunity to serve in the temples of Mount Athos, and Russian pilgrims lost the opportunity to receive communion and confession. In August 2018, the Synod of the Greek Church abolished the former autonomy of its monasteries and subordinated them to the metropolitans of the regions where they are located. It is predicted that in the near future the Greek branch of IPPT will begin to curtail its activities [4].

There is now a trend of governments in many countries beginning to assess the real activities of "Orthodox diplomats" from Russia, although this is unlikely to stop the Kremlin's unconditional external expansion in the near future. Therefore, Ukraine needs to be ready for new challenges, in particular on the Russian religious front.

## **Conclusions**

In nowadays ROC's foreign activities directed for strengthening Russia's geopolitical influence with the help of Russian Orthodox communities, and public religious organizations hosted in various countries. The ROC leadership is one of the main preachers of the Kremlin's aggressive foreign policy in Ukraine.

The main activities of the foreign structures of the ROC directed against Ukraine. In war against Ukraine, Russia can use such hybrid technologies as follows:

resistance to the recognition of the autocephaly of the PCU with the involvement of local Orthodox communities;

formation with the help of foreign society of the ROC negative attitude local population to the leadership of Ukraine and the clergy of the PCU;

conducting through its own agency in other countries activities aimed for discrediting the policy of the leadership of Ukraine in the religious sphere;

use of the religious factor for destabilizing internal situation in Ukraine.

### **Prospects for further research**

A perspective area for further research is analysis of the relationship between religious organizations of the ROC and the Russian secret services in the context of its foreign activities.

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