

Article

The Secularism of Putin's Russia and Patriarch Kirill's Church: The Russian Model of State–Church Relations and Its Social Reception

Marcin Skladanowski ^{1,*} and Cezary Smuniewski ²

¹ Faculty of Theology, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Aleje Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland

² Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw, Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927 Warszawa, Poland

* Correspondence: marcin.skladanowski@kul.pl

Abstract: The Russian Federation is a secular state, and the church is separate from the state. Nonetheless, during Putin's rule, a seemingly desecularising transition has taken place in Russia. This transition can be observed on legal, ideological, and social levels. This article presents the characteristics of a new secular-state model that has developed in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We claim that the evolution of the public role of religion in Russia and the state's attitude towards religion cannot be considered in any way a symptom of the post-secularisation tendencies observed in some Western societies. Desecularisation in Russia takes place only at the verbal level. However, this façade desecularisation conceals a profound secularisation of religious institutions and organisations, understood as their total subordination to state policy objectives and, thus, their becoming elements of the state structure.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church; state–church relations; church and politics; Vladimir Putin; Patriarch Kirill; Russo–Ukrainian war



Citation: Skladanowski, Marcin, and Cezary Smuniewski. 2023. The Secularism of Putin's Russia and Patriarch Kirill's Church: The Russian Model of State–Church Relations and Its Social Reception. *Religions* 14: 119. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010119>

Academic Editors: Joanna Kulska, Anna M. Solarz and Jeffrey Haynes

Received: 30 November 2022

Revised: 7 January 2023

Accepted: 12 January 2023

Published: 14 January 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

According to its constitution, the Russian Federation is a secular state; the church is separate from the state. No ideology can be recognised as a state ideology or imposed as compulsory on all citizens. These norms were not changed by the constitutional reforms carried out upon the initiative of Vladimir Putin in 2020. However, during Putin's rule, especially since 2007—that is, after his confrontational, anti-Western speech at the Munich Security Conference—a seemingly desecularising transition has taken place in Russia. It can be observed at three levels. First, on the legal level, which includes the introduction of specific norms for the protection of the feelings of believers without equal protection of the feelings of non-religious people; a reference to God introduced into the 2020 Constitution; the direct interference of the state in the activities of religious organisations (e.g., the prohibition of Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017 and the law on freedom of conscience and religious organisations of 1997, with amendments introduced especially in 2021 and 2022 which restrict the activities of organisations not subordinated to state authorities). Second, on the ideological level. Here, this alleged desecularisation manifests itself in introducing elements of religious education into the school curriculum, strong references to religion in the political context, and the emphasis on axiological issues in the Russian national security strategy. The third, level is a social level. In this respect, there is an increasing participation of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Russian public life (e.g., the law on the ban of 'gay propaganda,' and the unequivocal support of the ROC for the war against Ukraine). These developments indicate that ideological elements, linked to religion, occupy an increasingly important place in Russian social and political life.

Is it possible to conclude that, despite the constitutional norm, Russia is no longer a secular state? Does the evolution of the public role of religion indicate that Russia has already reached the stage of post-secularism? This article presents the characteristics of a new, non-confrontational secular-state model that has developed in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. We claim that the evolution of the public role of religion in Russia and the state's attitude towards religion cannot be considered in any way a symptom of the post-secularisation tendencies observed in some Western societies. On the contrary, secularism in Russia is developing in a different direction. It is returning, in essential features, to the role of religion (especially Orthodoxy) that authorities assigned to it in public life from the reforms of Peter the Great to the February Revolution of 1917. Indeed, desecularisation in Russia takes place only at the verbal level. This faux desecularisation conceals a profound secularisation of religious institutions and organisations, understood as their total subordination to state policy objectives and, thus, their becoming elements of the state structure.

We make this claim based on the evolution of the legal situation and the place in public life of the ROC. We limit ourselves here to this religious organisation for three reasons. Firstly, it is the largest religious organisation in Russia. Secondly, in the discourse of Russian political elites, Orthodoxy is still portrayed as a vital element of Russian (Slavic) national identity. Thirdly, Russian Orthodoxy is politically involved. In order to verify the thesis of a deep secularisation of Russian public life, albeit expressed differently than in the West, we have used the results of opinion polls. Although we mainly refer to research conducted by the Yuri Levada Analytical Centre (Levada-Centre), which was declared a 'foreign agent' by Russian authorities in 2016, we are aware that, in a quasi-totalitarian society, all opinion polls should be approached with caution.

Part Two of this article outlines the political and social background influencing the interpretation of the phenomenon of secularisation in contemporary Russia. Part Three presents the evolution of the situation of the ROC. In Part Four, we describe the main issues that determine the place of the ROC in Vladimir Putin's policy. Part Five discusses the social reception of the public role of the ROC. Part Six concludes the article.

2. Secularisation in Russia: Its Social and Political Context

Is the modern Russian Federation a secular state? Is Russian society, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, experiencing a process of secularisation? These questions, which are legitimately posed in a Western social and political context, are much more complex to answer with regard to Russia. The reasons for this complexity are twofold. First, it is necessary to understand the secular nature of the state. Second, the very essence of the secularisation processes in Russian social life is problematic.

2.1. *The Distinctiveness of the Russian Secularisation Model*

Secularisation in Western approaches is associated with a profound modernisation of social life (Hervieu-Léger and Champion 2008, pp. 191–94). Since the Industrial Revolution, the models of social life have changed profoundly. In the Western intellectual context, since the Enlightenment, this has also been accompanied by an intellectual transformation: the rise of individualism or egalitarianism and the desire to base social and political life on rational principles. Under these conditions, the social impact of religion is diminishing (Bruce 2011, p. 2). This does not mean, however, that secularisation processes necessarily lead to the disappearance of religion. Instead, its role in social life is changing. According to Bruce (2002, p. 3), secularisation manifests itself in '(a) the declining importance of religion for the operation of non-religious roles and institutions such as those of the state and the economy; (b) a decline in the social standing of religious roles and institutions; and (c) a decline in the extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind, and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs'.

In the Western context, this process results from two phenomena: first, the progressive growth of individualism and the reduction of the role of the religious community in shaping the views and lifestyles of the individual (Hervieu-Léger 1999, pp. 164–66). Second, the rise of egalitarianism challenging established and previously unquestioned social hierarchies (Bruce 2002, pp. 10–11). Secularisation in the West thus leads not so much to the disappearance but instead to the privatisation of religion. Religion becomes part of an individual's personal beliefs, which cease to be a factor that shapes social and political structure (Bell 1977, p. 327; Merdjanova 2022). However, this is not a uniform process. As Casanova (1994, p. 43) notes, churches can still play a public role in many cases under new conditions. However, they must recognise the new reality of liberal democracies and the prioritization of individual rights.

For this reason, it is difficult to claim unreservedly that the phenomenon of secularisation, in its Western sense, is inevitable and irreversible. Berger (1999, pp. 2–3) even argues that the 'secularisation theory' is wrong. He sees its origins in the Enlightenment belief that modernisation inevitably leads to the decline of religion, both in social and individual life. However, even the claim that the process of modernisation does not lead to secularisation, understood as the marginalisation of religion, does not contradict the fact that the forms of religiosity and the public presence of religion are changing in a sustained way (Bender 2012, pp. 285–87; Hervieu-Léger and Champion 2008, pp. 218–19).

However, the discussion on the nature of secularisation and the inevitability and irreversibility of this process is essentially conducted in a social and intellectual context shaped by Western Christianity. A simple transfer of observations made in a Western context to the situation of religion in Russia may lead to wrong conclusions. This can be seen, for example, when such renowned scholars as Berger (1999, p. 6) and Bruce (2011, p. 12) write about the revival of Orthodoxy in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union as a phenomenon opposite to secularisation processes in the West. In reality, however, the issue is much more complex. We put forward the thesis that the restoration of the public presence of the ROC and the increase in the number of believers are by no means an expression of desecularisation. On the contrary, it expresses a specific Russian secularisation, which is different from Western secularisation because it has a different basis. The primary basis of Russian secularisation is collectivism. This is a fundamental difference from secularisation in the West, which is inspired by increasing individualism. Collectivism in the Russian political tradition leads to the subordination of all institutions of social life, including religious organisations, to the state. They ultimately become part of the state structure, and their social role is strictly subordinated to political utility.

2.2. *The Basic Model of State–Church Relations in Contemporary Russia*

Theoretically and legally, the church is separated from the state in Russia, and no ideology can become a state ideology imposed on citizens. This is written in the Constitution (Constitution of the Russian Federation (Konstitutsiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii) 2020, Articles 13–14). This legal provision was inherited from the Soviet constitutions. Although it is at odds with the Russian imperial tradition—in which, from the time of Peter the Great until the February Revolution of 1917, the Orthodox Church in Russia was part of the state structure—it does not raise serious questions today. In the course of the constitutional reform in 2020, when a mention of God was introduced into the Constitution (Article 67.1.2), the norm confirming the secular character of the state was not removed or modified. At the same time, many elements of the public functioning of religion testify to its importance to state authorities. One can speak of the political usefulness of the ROC, which is a tool for the implementation of state social policy goals and, under the conditions of the Russo–Ukrainian war, unequivocally supports the war effort and repeats the contents of state propaganda.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, an increase in the importance of religion was observed in Russia, including an increase in the number of people declaring themselves to be believers (Evans and Northmore-Ball 2012). This phenomenon slowed down at

the beginning of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, there is no tendency to retreat from religion in contemporary Russia. In the case of the main religious group in Russia, Orthodoxy, this is also due to identifying as belonging to the ROC with being an ethnic Russian (Slav). Declared religious affiliation sometimes expresses ethnicity more than an attachment to specific religious practices or doctrines (Curanović 2021, p. 48).

Contemporary Russia is not a state where the role of the ROC would be formalised due to the constitutional principle of separation of state and church, and Russian society, especially the Orthodox population, is not characterised by a high frequency of religious practice or attachment to church doctrine. Nevertheless, during Vladimir Putin's time in power, significant changes have occurred in both the state–church relationship and in the religiosity of Russians, which can be interpreted as the result of the internal policy pursued by the authorities (Mitrofanova 2016; Stent 2008). This policy aims to subordinate all social organisations, including religious ones, to the goals set by the state, as well as to eliminate or marginalise those organisations that retain independence from the state (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses). In this way, it is possible today to see a consistent propaganda message reaching Russian citizens from the fully state-controlled media and representatives of social organisations, including the ROC.

3. The Evolution of the Legal Situation of the Russian Orthodox Church

The specificity of Russian secularism is influenced by the historically shaped complexity of the state's relationship with the Orthodox Church as the largest religious community.

3.1. The Development of Russian Secularism

Russian secularism, in its apparent distinctiveness from Western secularism, originated in the ecclesiastical policy of Peter the Great, who, after the death of Patriarch Adrian in 1700, prevented the election of a new Patriarch of Moscow and subordinated the Orthodox Church to himself (Belinskiy 2022). In the so-called 'synodal period', until the February Revolution of 1917, the Church in Russia was part of the state structure. The Church was supervised by the Most Holy Synod, headed by a state official, the Chief Procurator. The Orthodox Church became a tool for the implementation of state policy, especially during the nineteenth-century expansion of Russia's influence to the West, following the collapse of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late eighteenth century and the end of the Napoleonic Wars. The formula of Sergey Uvarov (1786–1855), the Minister of Education of the Russian Empire, 'Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality [narodnost']' became the ideological basis of nineteenth-century Russian conservatism (Cannady and Kubicek 2014, p. 3; Cherepanova 2010; Gayda 2021; Pain 2016, p. 49; Pomper 2012) and the inspiration for the russification of today's Belarus and Ukraine, combined with the denial of their cultural and ethnic distinctiveness.

The subordination of the Church to the state was abolished de facto in Russia by the election of the new Patriarch Tikhon (Vasilij Bellavin, 1865–1925) in November 1917. Nevertheless, it was not until the Bolshevik government that the formal separation of church and state was introduced. In Soviet Russia and later in the Soviet Union, constitutional norms theoretically guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion for all citizens. In practice, however, throughout the Soviet period, the official state ideology was fiercely anti-religious. In particular, the possibility for young people to engage in church life was restricted. In addition, the authorities sought to impede access to religious literature, including the Bible (Froese 2004, pp. 40–41; Trepanier 2010, p. 140). There were, however, significant changes in the intensity of state atheism. Anti-religiosity, combined with repression of the Church, characterised the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s (Knox 2005, pp. 45–47), with a brief resurgence during Nikita Khrushchev's era. In contrast, a relative tolerance of the Church characterised Stalin's rule from 1943, when the so-called 'Sergian Church', fully accepting the Soviet political order, was established, and that of Leonid Brezhnev (Marchenko 2010). In addition, the 1980s were a period of relative religious tolerance in the Soviet Union, accompanied by a decline of communist ideology.

When looking at the overall situation of Orthodoxy in the Soviet Union, it is essential to note one element that is crucial to understanding both historical and contemporary Russian secularism. The formal secularisation of state and social life from the mid-1940s onwards was not accompanied in the Soviet Union by a desire to abolish the Church, but, in fact, to return to the pre-revolutionary situation. From 1943, when the Orthodox hierarchy was restored on Stalin's orders and headed by the new Patriarch Sergiy (Ivan Stragorodskiy, 1867–1944), the ROC became an organisation fully controlled by the state and had more importance in its politics than was officially declared. This importance was also expressed in the administrative supervision by the state. While the Council for Religious Cults under the Council of Ministers of the USSR controlled other religious organisations, a separate Council for the Russian Orthodox Church was established, exercising functions quite similar to the imperial office of the Chief Procurator (Marchenko 2010, pp. 83–84). At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church accepted this shape of state–church relations so that cases of political dissidence among the clergy were few and insignificant. For this reason, the ROC did not influence the political changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

3.2. The Formation of the Model of State–Church Relations in Post-Soviet Russia

The pro-democratic aspirations evident at the end of the Soviet Union did not significantly affect the situation of the ROC, which, since the deal with Stalin, had accepted a *modus vivendi* in its relations with the formally atheist state. This state, moreover, became less and less explicitly anti-religious in its last period of existence. This was evidenced by the Communist Party's approval of a wide-ranging celebration of the millennium of the baptism of the Rus' in 1988 (Ponomarev 2017, pp. 132–34). In the final period of the Soviet Union, both the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic adopted acts guaranteeing freedom of conscience and religion (Fagan 2013, pp. 56–57; Hämmerli 2017, p. 48). The Constitution of the Russian Federation, adopted in 1993, retained the provision on the separation of state and church. It also guaranteed ideological plurality and equality and prohibited the introduction of any binding state ideology.

The 1990s were a period of intensive revival of the ROC. This manifested itself both as an increase in the number of believers and the recovery of temples and monasteries confiscated by the Soviet state, and in the rebuilding of demolished temples and the construction of new ones. A symbol of this revival was the reopening of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, originally inaugurated in 1883 and demolished in 1931 on Stalin's order (Knox 2003, p. 586).

The Yeltsin era—which, despite all its weaknesses, can be described as an attempt to democratise Russia—led to the development of a new model of secularism that had not previously existed in Russia. The Russian state was formally secular, but devoid of anti-religious ideology (Knox 2005, pp. 185–86). It guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion for all citizens. The church was formally separated from the state; however, at the same time, it did not face any difficulties restricting its activities. However, secularism understood in this way is an exception rather than a regularity in Russian history.

4. The Russian Orthodox Church in Putin's Policy

In many areas of social and political life in Russia, Putin's rule has led to a gradual retreat from the democratic changes that characterised the 1990s. In Russia's domestic and foreign policies, as well as in the information and ideological spheres, a return to many practices of the Soviet and imperial periods can be observed. This also applies to state–church relations and the Russian model of secularism. This model consists of a strong restriction of the role of the Church to those spheres of presence in public life that are useful to the state authorities. It is also expressed in the strict subordination of the rhetoric of church representatives to the requirements of the authorities and the comprehensive support provided by the Church to the authorities. As in the synodal period, the ROC has become a *de facto* element of the state structure, and its public activity has been increasingly

focused on the implementation of state policy. In return, it encounters support from the authorities in matters of its public presence.

Both issues are worth noting here: first, the manifestations of the authorities' support for the Church's public presence; and second, the reduction of the Church's rhetoric of supporting the authorities' policies.

Regarding the first issue, the Putin era has seen a significant increase in the presence of the ROC in public life (Cannady and Kubicek 2014, p. 6). This has manifested itself in legal changes that often derive from the constitutional principle of the separation of state and church and the ideological neutrality of the state (Papkova 2011, p. 200). Perhaps the most significant consequence for the role of the ROC in Russian public life is the regulation introduced in Article 148 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, which protects religious worship. The original version of this article, from 1996, was very general. It prohibited obstructing the activities of religious organisations and interfering with religious worship. However, in 2013, following the blasphemous provocation of the Pussy Riot group at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, this article was significantly amended by introducing the concept of insulting the feelings of believers (Bernstein 2013, p. 223; Stoeckl 2014, pp. 100–1). In contrast, no regulations provide equal protection for those expressing non-religious views. This makes it impossible to speak of equality between religious and non-religious people in terms of public expression (Skladanowski 2022).

Since 2006, the teaching of the basics of Orthodox culture has been introduced gradually into public schools. Military chaplains in the Russian army and chaplains in public schools were established. In 2015, theology was recognised as an academic discipline. Although the ROC is not funded directly from state or regional budgets, as a social organisation, it is the largest beneficiary of the state grant system that supports social, educational and charitable activities (Knox 2003; Mitrokhin 2006, pp. 278–79; Richters 2013, pp. 46–58; Stoeckl 2014, p. 101).

State support for the various activities of the ROC is met with the subordination of church rhetoric to state policy objectives. However, this has only been evident since 2009, when Metropolitan Kirill (Vladimir Gundyayev) became Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus'. While during the Russo–Georgian war in 2008, the ROC, led by Patriarch Aleksiy II, did not take a pro-war attitude but positioned itself as a mediator in the conflict between the two Orthodox nations, Church's rhetoric since 2009 has had a different orientation. Patriarch Kirill has unequivocally supported the armed conflicts instigated by Vladimir Putin. He supported the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 (Kirill 2014), although he refrained from open support for the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol (Mitrofanova 2016, p. 109). Following Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Kirill repeatedly spoke in support of the war, called for obedience to the president, and encouraged the fight, promising eternal life in heaven for Russian soldiers who died in Ukraine.

In addition to the most extreme expressions of outright support for Russian military aggression in Syria and Ukraine, the Patriarch and other representatives of the ROC have repeatedly supported the domestic policies of the authorities (Adamsky 2019, pp. 176–79). As recently as 2021, before the Russo–Ukrainian war and when the last independent mass media were being closed down, Kirill claimed that Russia was the leader of the free world (TASS 2021). Metropolitan Tikhon of Pskov (Georgiy Shevkunov), who is considered the most influential bishop of the ROC and has personal ties to Putin, argued that no one in Russia could replace Putin (Kashevarova 2021).

There is unequivocal support from the ROC for the cultural policy of the state authorities. Since 2009, the Church has been involved in the dissemination of the idea of the 'Rus' world' (*Russkiy mir*), which was intended to promote Russian culture, language, and values (Kantyka 2022; Surzhko Harned 2022; Mitrofanova 2016, pp. 110–11). The ROC has become a tool in Russian foreign policy to promote so-called traditional values as part of an anti-Western cultural policy (Evans 2008; Engström 2014; Curanović 2021; Soroka 2022). In line with the rhetoric of the authorities, omnipresent in the media since

the beginning of the Russo–Ukrainian conflict in 2014, representatives of the Church speak out against the influence of Western culture on Russian society. In particular, they reject the Western understanding of the subservient role of the state towards its citizens and call on Russians to submit fully to the authorities and serve the state unconditionally (Stoeckl 2017, pp. 18–19). The ROC, echoing Putin’s statements, also attacks the West, accusing liberal democratic societies of moral decline (Stent 2008, p. 1090; Soroka 2022). The issue of equality for non-heteronormative people in society is met with particularly harsh attacks by the Church, which also relates to discriminatory laws against the LGBTQ+ community adopted in 2013 and extended in 2022 (Human Rights Watch 2022).

Some researchers, such as Engström (2014), speak of the politicisation of the ROC, especially after the 2012 presidential elections. In Curanović’s (2021, p. 50) view, one can see some signs of cooperation between the state and the ROC, in which both benefit from each other. However, in our opinion, their explanations—however justified—are insufficient. The brief overview of the areas of cooperation between the state and the ROC in Putin’s Russia reveals the essence of Russian secularism, which is a return to the secularism introduced by Peter the Great. It does not consist of a fight against the public presence of the Church but rather in the control of its activity and its total subordination to government policy. It is no coincidence that, in the rhetoric of Patriarch Kirill and other representatives of the ROC, there is no trace of criticism of the state authorities. On the contrary, clergy who formulate such criticism face punishment. On issues of a social and political nature, the ROC does not preach any doctrine independent of state policy priorities. In this way, as in the synodal period, the Church becomes one of the tools of state policy, ceasing to be an autonomous participant in social life.

5. The Social Reception of the Public Role of the Russian Orthodox Church

A thesis of the Church’s dependence on and subordination to state policy is crucial for understanding the essence of contemporary Russian secularism and its fundamental distinctiveness from secularism in the West. In our opinion, the way to verify this thesis is to establish the social reception of the role played by the ROC in contemporary Russia. Do the Church and the Patriarch of Moscow enjoy authority in a society that is predominantly made up of Orthodox believers? Is the Church an institution of public trust? Are Russians guided in their lives by its teaching? Is the Church understood as a social institution independent of the state, especially when it comes to the content that its representatives publicly preach? To answer these questions, we analysed public opinion surveys. Most of them were conducted after 2014, that is, after the beginning of the Russo–Ukrainian conflict and the open involvement of the ROC in supporting the confrontational, anti-Western, and anti-Ukrainian policies of the state authorities.

The analysis of the available research results allows several insights relevant to state–church relations in contemporary Russia. These concern two main issues: the reliability of Russians’ declarations of their religious affiliation and the role of the Church in Russian public life.

5.1. Religious Affiliation

The ROC is the leading religious organisation in the Russian Federation. However, it is related to a common idea that Orthodoxy is an essential element of Russian (Slavic) national identity (Levada-Tsentr 2022d).

The numbers of people who declare their belonging to the ROC vary depending on the research centre and the methodology adopted. In 1991, only 37% of Russians considered themselves Orthodox. According to data from the Foundation for Public Opinion (FOM), between 1997 and 2014, the number of Russians who considered themselves Orthodox increased significantly, from 52 per cent to 68 per cent of the population (FOM 2014). In 2017, according to the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, there were 79 per cent of Orthodox Christians and 4 per cent of Muslims in Russia. According to the Pew Research Centre, 71 per cent of Russians declared themselves Orthodox and 10 per

cent Muslims. In August 2019, according to the All-Russian Centre for Public Opinion Research (VTsIOM), 63 per cent of Russians considered themselves Orthodox (of which young people aged 18 to 24 were the least likely to declare membership of the Orthodox Church—23 per cent) (VTsIOM 2019). Finally, according to the 2020 survey (Levada-Tsentr 2020b), 68 per cent of Russians considered themselves Orthodox and 7 per cent Muslims. In contrast, 22 per cent of the respondents declared themselves non-religious or atheist. Depending on the survey methodology adopted, it is generally believed that between 60 and 80 per cent of Russians are Orthodox. Most of them identify with the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, although there are also minority religious groups that refer to Orthodoxy. All studies, regardless of methodology, note, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a substantial decline in the number of people declaring themselves to be atheists in Russia (Mchedlova 2012).

However, when it comes to religiosity, only half of Russians consider themselves religious or somewhat religious. This value has increased since 2014, when such opinions were expressed by 35 per cent of the respondents (Levada-Tsentr 2022d). Religion plays an important or rather important role in the lives of 40 per cent of Russians. However, it is not important for 35 per cent of the respondents and plays no role in the lives of 24 per cent (Levada-Tsentr 2020b).

The 2014 survey (FOM 2014) on the changes in the religiosity of Russians between 2000 and 2014 indicated that a significant number of those who declared Orthodoxy performed little or no religious practice. When declaring Orthodoxy, the respondents stated that they practically never took communion (2000—64 per cent, 2014—61 per cent) or observed fasts (2000—80 per cent, 2014—79 per cent), and that they rarely attended church services: twice a year, once a year, or less often (2000—67 per cent; 2014—63 per cent).

The state of religious practice is confirmed by data regularly presented by the Ministry of Interior of the Russian Federation. On Christmas Day, 7 January 2018, about 2.5 million people (1.75 per cent of the population) attended the Christmas All-Night Vigil, the most important Orthodox festive service (Sova-Tsentr 2018). In 2020, 2.3 million people attended Christmas services. In recent years, this figure has not changed significantly: approximately 2–3 million people, or 1.4–2 per cent of the population, attend Christmas services. Slightly higher figures appear in the reports on Easter practices. This is due to the fact that, in addition to participation in religious services, other public forms of religious practice are taken into account during this period, especially the blessing of food and visiting cemeteries. According to the Ministry of Interior, approximately 4.5 million people (3 per cent of the population) participated in religious practices during Easter in 2018 and 4.3 million people in 2019.

Russian sociologists believe that while belonging to Orthodoxy remains an essential element of Russian (Slavic) national identity, the ethical teaching of the Church is not universally accepted in Russia (Levada-Tsentr 2018). For this reason, the moral conservatism of Putin's statements, also present in the anti-Western rhetoric of the ROC, is by no means endorsed by the majority of Russians. For example, according to a 2022 survey, half of Russians do not consider marriage to be a condition for two people to live together, and more than half of the respondents in the younger and middle-age groups (25–39 and 40–54 years old) consider informal unions to be the norm (Levada-Tsentr 2022b).

Russian society is, at the level of declared affiliation, quite religious when compared to many Western societies. However, at the same time, the church does not play a major role in shaping the social attitudes and value systems of Russians. Therefore, data on the religiosity of Russians should be approached with caution. The religious affiliation declared by the respondents often does not correspond to the ecclesiastical affiliation criteria. For example, according to data published 2019 (VTsIOM 2019), of those declaring Orthodoxy, 12 per cent were not baptised. Of this group, in turn, only 19 per cent declared their willingness to be baptised. Among the 'Orthodox unbaptised', 29 per cent of the respondents declared a lack of religious faith, 20 per cent a lack of willingness to be baptised, and 14 per cent did not see the point of baptism.

5.2. *The Presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Public Life*

The presence of the ROC in public life is significant. However, the Church is by no means the leader of social trust. During the years of Putin's rule, social trust in the ROC has fluctuated between 38 and 54 per cent, peaking in 2010 and 2014 (Levada-Tsentr 2022a). In surveys conducted in 2022—that is, during the ongoing war against Ukraine—the leaders of public support are government representatives and state institutions (Levada-Tsentr 2022c). As far as social institutions are concerned, the ROC ranks high in terms of trust (51 per cent). Nevertheless, it is significant that it ranks lower than not only by the president (80 per cent), but also by the army (77 per cent), the special services (61 per cent), and the government (55 per cent).

The Russians accept the presence of the ROC in public life. Nevertheless, this presence has a clearly defined niche. With regard to the influence of the Church and religious organisations on state policy, 29 per cent of Russians believe it plays too large part in public life (in 2014, 23 per cent of the respondents thought so). In turn, 44 per cent of the respondents think its presence in public life is appropriate (in 2014, 42 per cent) and 17 per cent believe it is too small. What is interesting, however, is what role Russians see for the Church in public life. First and foremost, it should uphold morality in social life (46 per cent), help the poor (41 per cent), preserve cultural traditions (39 per cent), meet the spiritual needs of the faithful (39 per cent), and carry out charitable activities (31 per cent). According to 21 per cent of the respondents, the ROC should not interfere in public life (in 2013, 11 per cent). In contrast, 18 per cent of the respondents believe that the Church ought to promote social, political and national understanding and reconciliation. According to 17 per cent of Russians, the ROC should support the development of religious art and literature. The Russians also accept, to some extent, a limited presence of religious teaching in schools. According to 56 per cent of the respondents, teaching religious history or the basics of religious morality should be allowed. At the same time, 31 per cent of respondents are against any presence of religion at school (Levada-Tsentr 2022d).

The results of public opinion polls indicate that the ROC plays a certain role in Russian public life. Nevertheless, this role is significantly smaller than that of federal and regional authorities, special services, and mass media (Levada-Tsentr 2020a). Supporting the public presence of the Church is associated with attributing to it very limited competences and tasks in public life. In state cultural policy, the ROC plays a role as one of the elements of national identity and is used in the confrontation with Western values and models (Hämmerli 2017, p. 49). However, this makes social support for the Church coupled with support for the authorities and dependent on the perceived external threats (Levada-Tsentr 2016). When such threats are commonly felt, the role of the ROC can be limited in favour of other channels of the state's ideological pressure on society. Under the conditions of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the worldview of Russians is mainly shaped by the state-controlled mass media (Levada-Tsentr 2022e).

6. Conclusions

In his more than twenty years of almost unlimited power, Putin has sought to gain complete control over Russian social life. He has not only led to the elimination of any real political opposition and independent mass media—the ROC also has an important place in his power system. Nevertheless, when analysing the evolution of state-church relations in Russia after 2000, it cannot be said that the Church has gained any significant influence in public life. It has not become an autonomous participant in Russian social life or a source of social values and attitudes, autonomous from the ideological policy of the authorities. In no way does the ROC oppose the state authorities or criticise their policies. Instead, the Church shows them full and ideologically committed support on major political issues. This is evidenced by the unconditional support from Patriarch Kirill for Russian aggression against Ukraine. Thus, under conditions of war, the construction of Putin's political system, in which unified anti-Western, xenophobic, and nationalist propaganda plays an important role, achieves its fulfilment.

Putin's model of shaping state–church relations is not new in Russia. On the contrary, it can be argued that, at least since the political reforms of Peter the Great, it has been something permanent, despite the political changes taking place in Russia. During both the imperial and Soviet periods, the Church had no political aspirations, nor did it show any criticism of the authorities. Instead, it was controlled by state administration structures. In post-Soviet Russia, in formal terms, the ROC retains its independence. However, especially since Kirill assumed the office of Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus', the Church has fully adapted its rhetoric to the policy of the authorities.

The changes in the situation of the ROC during Putin's rule are not at all evidence of the desecularisation taking place in Russia. Nor, despite some similarities, do they resemble the politicisation of religion seen in the United States and Latin American countries. They are not a simple evolution of the Orthodox concept of 'symphony' understood as harmonious cooperation between state and church. The ROC undoubtedly plays a significant role in the political system shaped in Putin's Russia. However, Russian society does not regard it as autonomous from the state. In its social functioning, the Church has been reduced to participating in the implementation of state ideological policy. This is the essence of Russian imperial secularism, which Putin has renewed and developed.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.S.; Methodology, M.S.; Writing—original draft, M.S. and C.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the National Science Centre (Poland) grant number 2021/43/B/HS1/00254.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Adamsky, Dmitry. 2019. *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Belinskiy, Nikita. 2022. Pochemu Petr I lishil Rossiyu patriarshestva. *Nauchnoye Obrazovaniye* 4: 32–37.
- Bell, Daniel. 1977. The Return of the Sacred? *British Journal of Sociology* 28: 419–49. [CrossRef]
- Bender, Courtney. 2012. Practicing Religions. In *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*. Edited by Robert A. Orsi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 273–95.
- Berger, Peter L. 1999. The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview. In *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Edited by Peter L. Berger. Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 1–18.
- Bernstein, Anya. 2013. An Inadvertent Sacrifice: Body Politics and Sovereign Power in the Pussy Riot Affair. *Critical Inquiry* 40: 220–41. [CrossRef]
- Bruce, Steve. 2002. *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Bruce, Steve. 2011. Secularization. In *Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cannady, Sean, and Paul Kubicek. 2014. Nationalism and legitimation for authoritarianism: A comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin. *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5: 1–9. [CrossRef]
- Casanova, José. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cherepanova, Rozaliya. 2010. Discourse on a Russian 'Sonderweg': European models in Russian disguise. *Studies in East European Thought* 62: 315–29. [CrossRef]
- Constitution of the Russian Federation (Konstitutsiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii). 2020. Available online: <http://duma.gov.ru/legislative/documents/constitution/> (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Curanović, Alicja. 2021. Domestic Lobbyists and Conservatism in Russian Foreign Policy. In *Russia's Foreign Policy: The Internal-International Link*. Edited by Aldo Ferrari and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti. Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing, pp. 37–64.
- Engström, Maria. 2014. Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy. *Contemporary Security Policy* 35: 356–79. [CrossRef]
- Evans, Alfred B., Jr. 2008. Putin's Legacy and Russia's Identity. *Europe–Asia Studies* 60: 899–912. [CrossRef]
- Evans, Geoffrey, and Ksenia Northmore-Ball. 2012. The Limits of Secularization? The Resurgence of Orthodoxy in Post-Soviet Russia. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51: 795–808. [CrossRef]
- Fagan, Geraldine. 2013. *Believing in Russia: Religious Policy after Communism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- FOM. 2014. Votserkovlennost' Pravoslavnykh. Available online: <https://fom.ru/TSennosti/11587> (accessed on 15 November 2022).

- Froese, Paul. 2004. Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43: 35–50. [CrossRef]
- Gayda, Fedor. 2021. 'Pravoslaviye' v triade S. S. Uvarova. Vestnik PSTGU. Seriya II: Istoria. *Istoriya Russkoy Pravoslavnoy Tserkvi* 100: 32–46.
- Hämmerli, Capodistrias. 2017. Post-Communist Orthodox Countries and Secularization: The Lautsi Case and the Fracture of Europe. In *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine*. Edited by George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou. New York: Fordham University, pp. 31–58.
- Hervieu-Léger, Danièle. 1999. *Le pèlerin et le converti: La religion en mouvement*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Hervieu-Léger, Danièle, and Françoise Champion. 2008. *Vers un nouveau christianisme? Introduction à la sociologie du christianisme occidental*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf.
- Human Rights Watch. 2022. Russia: Expanded 'Gay Propaganda' Ban Progresses Toward Law. Available online: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/25/russia-expanded-gay-propaganda-ban-progresses-toward-law> (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Kantyka, Przemysław. 2022. By What Authority? Primatiality and Synodality in Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy: In Quest for Better Solutions. *Religions* 13: 1179. [CrossRef]
- Kashevarova, Anastasiya. 2021. Mitropolit Tikhon: Perestavaya byt' gosudarstvennikom, russkiy chelovek stanovitsya razrushitelem. Available online: <https://dailystorm.ru/vlast/mitropolit-tihon-perestavaya-byt-gosudarstvennikom-russkiy-chelovek- stanovitsya-razrushitelem> (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Kirill. 2014. Svyateyskiy Patriarkh Kirill prizval Predstoyateley Pomestnykh Tserkvey vozvysit' golos v zashchitu pravoslavnykh khristian vostoka Ukrainy. Available online: <https://mospat.ru/ru/news/51174/> (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Knox, Zoe. 2003. The Symphonic Ideal: The Moscow Patriarchate's Post-Soviet Leadership. *Europe-Asia Studies* 55: 575–96. [CrossRef]
- Knox, Zoe. 2005. *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Levada-Tsentr. 2016. Odobreniye roli RPTs v gosudarstve vyroslo do rekordnogo urovnya. Available online: <https://www.levada.ru/2016/02/19/odobrenie-rol-rpts-v-gosudarstve-vyroslo-do-rekordnogo-urovnya/> (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Levada-Tsentr. 2018. Rossiyanе chuvstvuyut, chto vkhodyat v tret'yu mirovuyu. Available online: <https://www.levada.ru/2018/04/16/rossiyane-chuvstvuyut-cto-vkhodyat-v-tretyu-mirovuyu/> (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Levada-Tsentr. 2020a. Rol' institutov. Available online: <https://www.levada.ru/2020/02/20/rol-institutov-3/> (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Levada-Tsentr. 2020b. Velikiy post i religioznost'. Available online: <https://www.levada.ru/2020/03/03/velikiy-post-i-religioznost/> (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Levada-Tsentr. 2022a. Doveriye obshchestvennym institutam. Available online: https://www.levada.ru/2022/09/20/doverie-obshchestvennym-institutam-2/?utm_source=mailpoet&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter-post-title_81 (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Levada-Tsentr. 2022b. Normativnyye vzglyady na brak, detey i semeynyye roli. Available online: https://www.levada.ru/2022/11/17/normativnyye-vzglyady-na-brak-detey-i-semeynyye-rol-i/?utm_source=mailpoet&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter-post-title_81 (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Levada-Tsentr. 2022c. Odobreniye institutov i reytingi politikov. Available online: https://www.levada.ru/2022/10/26/odobrenie-institutov-i-reytingi-politikov/?utm_source=mailpoet&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter-post-title_81 (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Levada-Tsentr. 2022d. Tserkov' i gosudarstvo. Available online: <https://www.levada.ru/2022/01/19/tserkov-i-gosudarstvo-3/> (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Levada-Tsentr. 2022e. Vospriyatiye novostnoy informatsii sredi rossiyan. Available online: https://www.levada.ru/2022/08/16/vospriyatie-novostnoj-informatsii-sredi-rossiyan-otnoshenie-k-presledovaniyu-v-internete/?utm_source=mailpoet&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter-post-title_81 (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Marchenko, Aleksiy. 2010. *Religioznaya politika sovetskogo gosudarstva v gody pravleniya N. S. Khrushcheva i yeye vliyaniye na tserkovnuyu zhizn' v SSSR*. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Krutitskogo podvor'ya.
- Mchedlova, Mariya. 2012. Religioznost' rossiyskikh grazhdan i 'russkaya mechta'. Available online: <https://www.ras.ru/FStorage/Download.aspx?id=eedfad7a-e0a7-49f2-8ce3-4bb5d223d727> (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Merdjanova, Ina. 2022. The Orthodox Church, Neosecularisation, and the Rise of Anti-Gender Politics in Bulgaria. *Religions* 13: 359. [CrossRef]
- Mitrofanova, Anastasia. 2016. Russian ethnic nationalism and religion today. In *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*. Edited by Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 104–31.
- Mitrokhin, Nikolay. 2006. *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov': Sovremennoye sostoyaniye i aktual'nyye problemy*. Moskva: Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye.
- Pain, Emil. 2016. The imperial syndrome and its influence on Russian nationalism. In *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*. Edited by Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 46–74.
- Papkova, Irina. 2011. *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pomper, Philip. 2012. The Evolution of the Russian Tradition of State Power. *History and Theory* 51: 60–88. [CrossRef]

- Ponomariov, Alexander. 2017. *The Visible Religion. The Russian Orthodox Church and Her Relations with State and Society in Post-Soviet Canon Law (1992–2015)*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Richters, Katja. 2013. *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Skladanowski, Marcin. 2022. Pokémon in the Church: The Case of Ruslan Sokolovskiy and the Limits of Religious Performance in Contemporary Russia. In *Demystifying the Sacred: Blasphemy and Violence from the French Revolution to Today*. Edited by Eveline G. Bouwers and David Nash. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, pp. 171–94. [CrossRef]
- Soroka, George. 2022. International Relations by Proxy? The Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church. *Religions* 13: 208. [CrossRef]
- Sova-Tsentr. 2018. Statisticheskiye dannyye o posetivshikh rozhdestvenskiye bogosluzheniya v 2018 godu. Available online: <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/discussions/how-many/2018/01/d38601/> (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Stent, Angela E. 2008. Restoration and Revolution in Putin's Foreign Policy. *Europe-Asia Studies* 60: 1089–106. [CrossRef]
- Stoeckl, Kristina. 2014. *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Stoeckl, Kristina. 2017. Moral Argument in the Human Rights Debate of the Russian Orthodox Church. In *Christianity, Democracy and the Shadow of Constantine*. Edited by George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou. New York: Fordham University, pp. 11–30.
- Surzhko Harned, Lena. 2022. Russian World and Ukrainian Autocephaly: Religious Narratives in Anti-Colonial Nationalism of Ukraine. *Religions* 13: 349. [CrossRef]
- TASS. 2021. Patriarkh Kirill nazval Rossiyu liderom svobodnogo mira. Available online: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/12978613> (accessed on 15 November 2022).
- Trepanier, Lee. 2010. *Political Symbols in Russian History: Church, State, and the Quest for Order and Justice*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- VTsIOM. 2019. Pravoslavnaya vera i tainstvo kreshcheniya. Available online: <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/pravoslavnaya-vera-i-tainstvo-kreshheniya> (accessed on 15 November 2022).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.