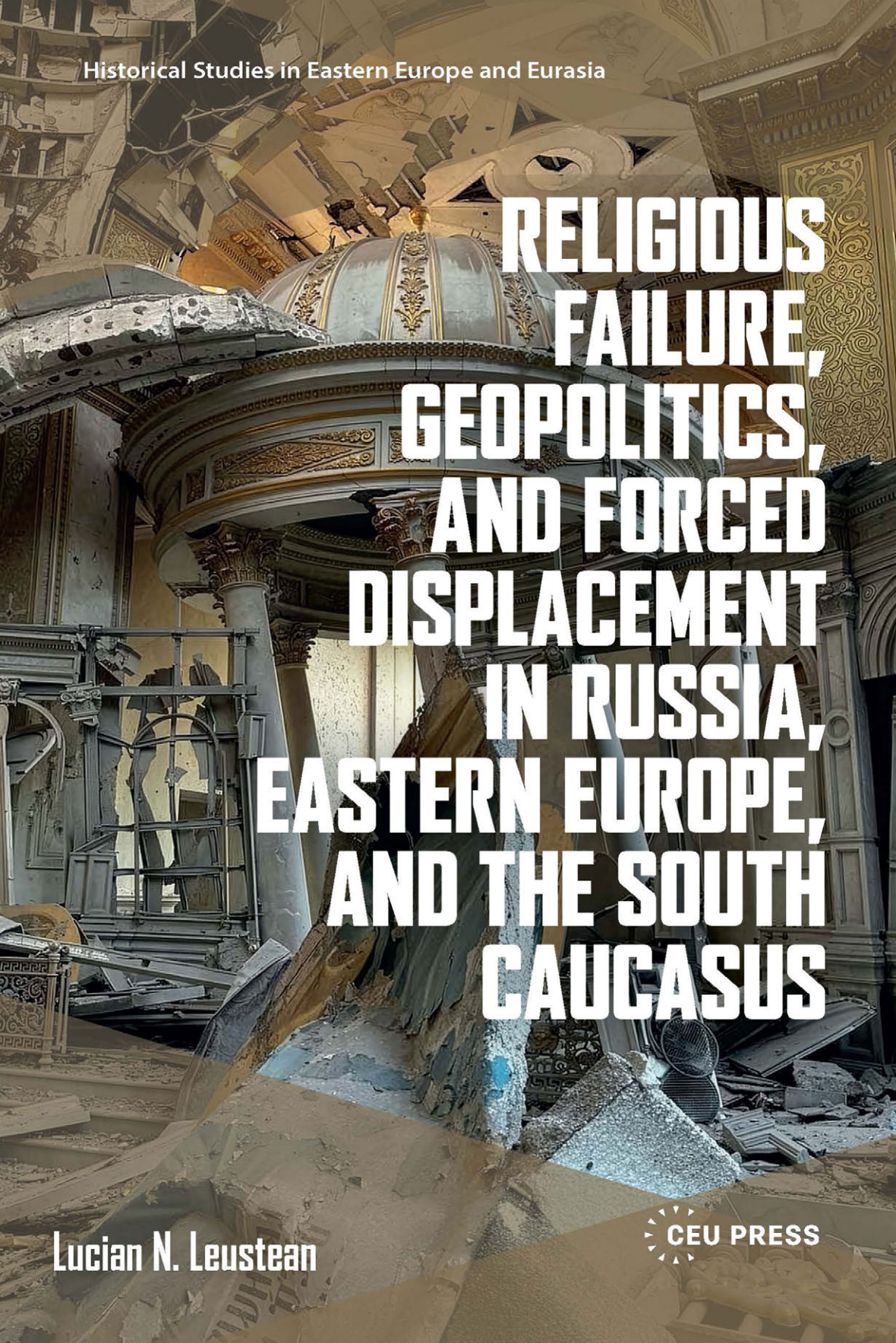




Historical Studies in Eastern Europe and Eurasia

RELIGIOUS FAILURE, GEOPOLITICS, AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT IN RUSSIA, EASTERN EUROPE, AND THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Lucian N. Leustean

 CEU PRESS

Religious Failure, Geopolitics, and Forced Displacement in Russia,
Eastern Europe, and the South Caucasus

Historical Studies in Eastern Europe and Eurasia

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To the people of Ukraine

*To the next generation of students of Eastern Christianity,
politics, and society*

Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.
(Matthew 22:39, *King James Version*)

Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.
(Matthew 25:40, *King James Version*)

For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.
(Luke 12:48, *King James Version*)

And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.
(John 21:17, *King James Version*)

It is strange people should be so greedy, when they are alone in the world.
(Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 1847)

It is possible to love someone dear to you with human love, but an enemy can only be loved by divine love.
(Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1867)

If women, children, and old people would be murdered a hundred miles from here, wouldn't you run to help? Then why do you stop this decision of your heart when the distance is five thousand miles instead of a hundred?
(Raphael Lemkin, in a talk at Duke University in 1941, quoted in *Totally Unofficial: The Autobiography of Raphael Lemkin*, edited by Donna-Lee Frieze, Yale University Press, 2013)

Crime in the name of religion is the greatest crime against religion. All torture and massacres provoke horror and shame, but nothing provokes it more than the criminal and inhuman treatment of women and young girls and even children, and we condemn such horrors. We propose the alternative to hatred, destruction, pogroms and inhumanity, an alternative worthy of men and of our faith in God: it is peace, justice, the dignity of the human being, tolerance and reconciliation, love for mankind for all time and eternity.

(Patriarch Pavle (Stojčević), The Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church; Al-Hajj Jakub Efendi Selimoski, Rais Ulema of Sarajevo; The Most Reverend Vinko Puljić, Archbishop and Metropolitan of Sarajevo; Rabbi Arthur Schneier, President, Appeal of Conscience Foundation, *Berne Declaration*, 1992)

We reiterate that the war in the former Yugoslavia is a not a religious war and that appeals and exploitation of religious symbols to further the cause of aggressive nationalism are a betrayal of the universality of religious faith. We emphasize the imperative of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion of every minority. We call for an end to the confiscation, desecration, and destruction of houses of worship and of holy and sacred places of whatever religious tradition. We totally abhor and condemn ethnic cleansing and the rape and murder of women and children. We demand the removal of obstacles that prevent humanitarian assistance for reaching those who are suffering.

(Rabbi Arthur Schneier, President, Appeal of Conscience Foundation; Mehmet Nuri Yilmaz, President of the Office of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Turkey; Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew; Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, President, Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace and President of the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*, *Bosphorus Declaration*, 1994)

Has any one of us wept for these persons who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who were looking for a means of supporting their families? We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion—"suffering with" others: the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!

(Pope Francis, *Homily: Visit to Lampedusa*, 2013)

Europe today faces one of its most serious humanitarian crises since the end of the Second World War [...] Together we will do our part towards giving migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers a humane reception in Europe [...] Our meeting today is meant to help bring courage and hope to those seeking refuge and to all those who welcome and assist them.

(Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Ieronymos II of Athens and All Greece, *Joint Declaration*, 2016)

On 27 March 2024, under the chairmanship of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, the Decree of the XXV World Russian People's Council 'The Present and Future of the Russian World' (Moscow, November 27–28, 2023) was approved [...] The World Russian People's Council is the largest Russian public forum, and according to its Statutes, the head of the Council is the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, under whose presidency the annual Council meetings are held [...] [T]he World Council of Churches cannot reconcile the statement that 'the special military operation [in Ukraine] is a Holy War' with what we have heard directly from Patriarch Kirill himself, nor with relevant WCC governing body policy pronouncements, nor indeed with the biblical calling for Christians to be peacemakers in the midst of conflict.

(Reverend Professor Dr. Jerry Pillay, General Secretary, *World Council of Churches Statement*, 2024)

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Abbreviations

ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency
ART	Armenia Round Table Foundation
CRA	Council for Religious Affairs
CROCA	Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EU	European Union
IDPs	internally displaced persons
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OCU	Orthodox Church of Ukraine
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
ROCOR	Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia
UAOC	Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church
UGCC	Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UOC-KP	Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate
UOC-MP	Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate
WCC	World Council of Churches

Acknowledgments

This book has been over a decade in the making. Russia's 2014 takeover of Crimea and the Donbas region, the 2015 influx of refugees and displaced populations from North Africa and the Middle East into Europe, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have all dramatically shaped religion-state relations and international politics.

I shall explain in more detail why it took so long to finalize this study. In 2010 and 2014, I coordinated two editorial projects, *Eastern Christianity and the Cold War, 1945–91* and *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, which have shaped my understanding of the individual case studies included in this book. I am grateful to all the contributors to these projects for their insights into national churches. When I wrote the introduction to the 2014 volume, little did we anticipate the monumental changes that would bring Eastern Orthodox churches to the forefront of international affairs. In 2014–2015, I held a senior fellowship at the Transatlantic Academy of the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Washington, DC. That year, three scholars from the United States and three from Europe collaborated on issues related to religion and foreign policy, engaging with academic and policy communities on both sides of the Atlantic. Initially, I intended to expand my research on the role of religious communities in the making of the European Union; however, Russia's invasion of Crimea and the unprecedented displacement of large numbers of Ukrainians brought renewed urgency to the study of Eastern Orthodoxy. I presented the Byzantine concept of *symphonia* in the contemporary Eastern Christian world, along with the politicization of Orthodoxy, to scholarly and policy audiences more familiar with secularization processes and the separation of religion and state. Initial ideas from my chapter, "Eastern Christianity and the Liberal International Order," published in the 2015 *Transatlantic Academy Report*, have been expanded in this monograph to address events that have unfolded since then. I am deeply grateful to my colleagues and the staff at the German Marshall Fund of the United States for their stimulating and incisive feedback at events and workshops held in Austin, Brussels, Bucharest, London, Oxford, Paris, Toronto, and Washington, DC. I also wish to acknowledge the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on the several articles that have been expanded in this monograph: Lucian N. Leustean, "When States Fail: The Politics of Orthodox Churches, Forced Displacement and Humanitarian Structures in Serbia

and Ukraine,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 2 (2021): 1923–1945; Lucian N. Leustean, “Orthodox Conservatism and the Refugee Crisis in Bulgaria and Moldova,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 54, nos. 1–2 (2021): 83–101; and Lucian N. Leustean, “Eastern Orthodoxy, Geopolitics and the 2016 ‘Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church,’” *Geopolitics* 23, no. 1 (2018): 201–16.

Research on religion and forced displacement was supported by two British Academy projects that I coordinated between 2018 and 2021 and facilitated the conduct of interviews with clergy, state officials, civil society practitioners, and academics in Armenia, Bulgaria, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Serbia, and Ukraine. I am grateful to all interviewees, as well as to the participants of the three workshops I organized in Belgrade (2018), Kyiv (2018), and Yerevan (2019). Between data collection and continuing my writing, I presented the research findings to academic audiences during several fellowships: a fellowship in residence at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Amsterdam (2018–2019); a senior fellowship with the “Orthodoxy and Human Rights Scholars Project” at Fordham University, New York (2019–2023); and an invitational fellowship at the University of Tokyo, awarded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (2023). In 2023, I received the Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel Research Award from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, which enabled me to be based at the University of Erfurt and engage with German academics. I am extremely grateful to Professor Vasilios N. Makrides for his outstanding scholarship on Orthodox Christianity, society, and culture, and for warmly welcoming my research stay in Erfurt, where I finalized this monograph.

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I am grateful to the editors of the “Historical Studies in Eastern Europe and Eurasia” series, as well as to Linda Kunos, senior commissioning editor, and her professional team for their masterful work at Central European University Press.

I dedicate this book to two groups of people. First, as explored throughout this analysis, my thoughts are with the people of Ukraine, who have endured the largest forced displacement in Europe since the Second World War. Second, my hope is that, after reading this book, the next generation of students of Eastern Christianity, society, and politics will come to understand the Eastern Christian world from a different angle. For this reason, I begin the text with twelve brief quotations: four from the New Testament, one from Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), one from Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1867), one from Raphael Lemkin’s 1941 address at Duke University, and five from declarations issued by religious leaders after the end of the Cold War period, condemning violence in the name of religion. The quotations have been selected to highlight the enduring tension between the sacred and the profane, and to offer a better understanding of the ways in which these two realms affect forced displacement, conflict, political action, and both lived and institutional religion.

On a final note, as a student of Orthodox theology, law, and international relations in Romania during the 1990s, I witnessed firsthand the adaptation and survival of religious communities under the atheist communist regime, as well as the profound religious transformations brought about by democratic change. Studying the intricacies of dogma, spirituality, faith, legal systems, and politics alongside my peers, we came to agree that Eastern Christianity offers one of the most fascinating journeys into religious thought. At the same time, many of us lamented the ways in which religious

ideals and democratization processes were implemented in practice. The Religious Failure Index, included in this monograph, is intended to raise awareness of the ways in which religion is politicized, both nationally and geopolitically, and how politicization can lead to failure, affecting not only congregations but also wider populations in need, ultimately hindering social progress in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states.

Lastly, but by no means least, Deborah, Clara, and Maia have always been close to me, even when physically distant, throughout the years of research and writing this book. Thank you.

December 2025

Introduction

Abstract: The chapter provides an overview of the relationship between Orthodox Christianity, the concept of *symphonia*, social ethos, methodological approaches, and the structure of the book. It examines the dual role of Orthodox churches, some of which have supported forcibly displaced populations, while others have condemned the arrival of refugees and migrants.

Keywords: Eastern Christianity; Symphonia; Social Ethos; Bulgaria; Greece; Ukraine.

In 2015, 1.3 million migrants and asylum seekers entered the European Union, the largest number of people since the fall of the Iron Curtain.¹ More than half a million people embarked on inflatable dinghies and small boats and crossed the 12-kilometer stretch between Turkey and the Greek island of Lesbos.² Arriving on the island, many walked up to 15 hours to reach the town of Kalloni, where a temporary shelter was provided by a volunteer organization, Agkalia (Embrace), led by Father Efstratios Dimou (known locally as Papa Stratis).³ Despite suffering from lung cancer and constantly carrying an oxygen tank to help his breathing, Father Dimou, a 57-year-old Orthodox priest who served on the island for 35 years, showed extreme resilience in mobilizing the local community. In July 2015, in an

1 “Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 Million in 2015,” Pew Research Center, August 2, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/>.

2 Joel Hernandez, “Refugee Flows to Lesbos: Evolution of a Humanitarian Response,” Migration Policy Institute, January 29, 2016, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugee-flows-lesvos-evolution-humanitarian-response>.

3 Nicolas Niarchos, “An Island of Refugees,” *The New Yorker*, September 16, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/an-island-of-refugees>.

interview, he described the challenges faced by the refugees arriving on the island:

Every day between one and two hundred people come to Kalloni [...] The local people tell them to come to us for help. We give them food, water, milk for the babies, shoes, clothes. They can stay here too: we have blankets, mattresses on the floor [...] I have seen small children with blisters on their feet and pregnant women holding their bellies and crying in pain [...] These people are not migrants, they do not choose to come here. They are children of war, fleeing bullets. They are life-seekers, they search for life, hope and the chance to live another day [...] One day we found a baby asleep in his mother's arms at the beach. We wanted to give him milk but didn't have a bottle and he couldn't drink from a glass. It was in the middle of the night, so we woke up all the pharmacies in town until we found a bottle.⁴

He lamented the lack of financial support from the Greek government and the European Union. He pointed out that,

State services are virtually non-existent so volunteers are stepping in. We are doing as much as we can, but there are so many arrivals.⁵ [...] When you see a man washed up on the beach one morning at Lesbos, a child or a mother crying, you will never ask if they are Christians or not, to give them food. Our life is very short, extremely short. So let's fulfil it by doing good deeds.⁶

Father Dimou died in September that year, with his words reflecting the complexity of the challenges faced by thousands of refugees landing on the Greek shores. In January 2016, the Council of Europe publicly announced that Father Dimou's legacy continued and that Agkalia was able to provide support to a large number of people, with figures estimating around "17,000 refugees and migrants." In recognition of its exceptional work, the Council of Europe awarded Agkalia the 2016 Raoul Wallenberg Prize for "outstanding

4 William Spindler, "A Good Samaritan in Greece," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), July 6, 2015, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/good-samaritan-greece>.

5 Michele Kambas, "Volunteers Fill Aid Void in Greek 'Crisis within a Crisis,'" Reuters, August 16, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-volunteers-idUSKCN0QL0IH20150816>.

6 UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, "A Good Samaritan in Greece," July 14, 2015, YouTube video, 2:36, <https://youtu.be/SaKoHS21Ya4>.

achievements in providing frontline assistance to thousands of refugees irrespective of their origin and religion.”⁷

The direct involvement of religious communities in engaging with forcibly displaced populations was even more potent during Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine, which started on February 24, 2022. Archpriest Georgy Lobanov, the Orthodox priest in Kyinka village, ten kilometers from Chernihiv in northern Ukraine, recalled the human destruction that began in the first days of the war, as follows:

On February 28, the first shelling of Kyinka took place. And numerous messages appeared in our village Telegram channel: a doctor is needed for such-and-such on the street, a person’s leg was torn off; a doctor is needed on another street—someone without an arm; someone is bleeding [...] Then we understood the horror of what was happening. After the shelling, people simply spent the night in the field, under the wind, in the cold, because it was dangerous to stay in the houses, and there was nowhere else to go. So our Bishop Ambrose gave me the blessing to go there, take people, and place them in the Trinity Cathedral of Chernihiv. We and several other priests took out almost 80 people, including a five-day-old baby. I called many others in Kyinka at that time, but there was no connection, and many were sitting in basements. So we took everyone we could [...] ⁸

A similar activity was evident in Irpin, a suburb of Kyiv. Archpriest Myroslav Latynyk of the local Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church recalled the fierce fighting between Russian and Ukrainian troops at the start of the February 2022 invasion. His decision to act quickly and mobilize the community, sheltering parishioners in the basement of the local church, saved lives. In his own words, he recalled the events as follows:

7 “Greek Association ‘Agkalia’ Awarded the Raoul Wallenberg Prize of the Council of Europe,” Council of Europe, December 22, 2015, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-rule-of-law/-/urgent-humanitarian-assistance-in-the-mediterranean-the-greek-association-agkalia-awarded-the-raoul-wallenberg-prize-of-the-council-of-europe>.

8 Ірина Doroshenko, “Розстріляний Христос на Чернігівщині: Як я зрозумів, що це насправді війна від лукавого” [Christ shot in Chernihiv Oblast: How I understood that this is actually a war from the evil one], dialogtut.online, November 7, 2022, <https://www.dialogtut.org/rozstrilyanyj-hrystos-na-chernigivshhyni-yak-ya-zrozumiv-shho-cze-naspravdi-vijna-vid-lukavogo/>.

On the morning of February 24, when Russian missiles began to bombard our cities, I still could not believe that this was real [...] Helicopters were flying in the sky, and then explosions and gunshots were heard [...] At that time, I received text messages asking for prayer, because a fierce battle for the airfield was going on in Gostomel [...] Shells hit the churchyard, shattered windows and iron doors, and destroyed the fence [...] In the basement of the Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, where my family and several families of parishioners hid for several days, we could hear how loudly the cannons were firing. It became even more terrifying when the enemy fired rockets. I fell to my knees in the church and prayed [...] And with me were both adults and children [...] We did not leave the church for several days. And we had a small child who needed baby food and diapers, and older children, who needed bread. The shops were closed and firing from various types of weapons was heard all around [...] One of our parishioners wrote to me: "What do you need?" I wrote back: "Bread, baby food, diapers." Because how can you explain to children who haven't eaten bread for two days that there is no bread?! Soon he brought bread, because the store where he worked baked it, and another parishioner brought baby food and diapers. To do this, she had to go to the other side of the city to a store and a pharmacy, where Russian troops were already present. Then there was no communication, and we could not contact anyone.⁹

Hiding in the basement, Archpriest Latynyk was able to initiate contact with Pastor Vasyl Ostryi of Irpin Bible Church, who guided him through the rescue operation; the Evangelical community provided a generator and organized transport, enabling over 3,500 people to reach safety. Crossing interfaith boundaries was instrumental in the local population being able to cross the destroyed bridge over the Irpin River, the only route connecting the bombed city to Kyiv.¹⁰ Photographs of the Irpin Bridge with hundreds of people hiding underneath made headlines. On March 9, 2022, clear evidence that religious communities were key to emergency evacuation was offered by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which published a photograph of an

9 Lyubov Puzych, "Сокальчанин священник Мирослав Латинник з Ірпінія про події у місті під час окупації" [Sokal priest Myroslav Latynnyk from Irypin about the events in the city during the occupation], *Golos z-nad Bugu*, June 14, 2022, <https://golosznadbugu.com/interviu/sokalchany-n-sviashchennyk-myroslav-latynnyk-z-irypinia-pro-podii-u-misti-pid-chas-okupatsii.html>.

10 EuropeanMission, "Ukraine Update: Vasyl Ostryi, Irpin Bible Church," August 17, 2022, YouTube video, 8:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUyCJ-TeWaY>.

Orthodox military chaplain under the bridge offering Holy Communion to the hurried faithful.¹¹ The emotional examples demonstrated the active role of religious communities in providing welfare and direct support to those affected by state violence by transporting people to safety and bravely crossing enemy lines to ensure basic needs were fulfilled.¹²

What do the events in Kalloni, Kyinka, and Irpin have in common? What stood out in the Greek and Ukrainian examples was the potent role of religious communities in taking over state functions. In Greece, Agkalia provided support to people in need before organized state authorities offered material aid, while in Ukraine, religious communities crossed faith boundaries and developed their own routes to safety at times when state governance did not exist.

While the three examples demonstrated that, at times of crisis, religious institutions played a positive role, there were other cases that did not meet this narrative. In 2015, in contrast to religious mobilization on the island of Lesbos, the arrival of thousands of refugees in neighboring Bulgaria was publicly presented in a different light. Most refugees did not seek asylum and register with local authorities and instead transited the country, moving towards Hungary and Serbia. On September 25, 2015, the Holy Synod, the highest authority of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, condemned the arrival of refugees, stating that

We have seen during the last months a tide of crowding people from the broken Middle East states and Northern Africa who are looking to find refuge in the European countries. And this crowding has turned nearly into a true invasion [...] We consider that the Bulgarian government must concentrate its foreign-policy resources upon, as we mentioned above, the cessation of wars rather than just manifesting solidarity with the consequences of their endless continuation.¹³

The characterization of refugees arriving in the country as a “tide of crowding people” embarking on “a true invasion,” coupled with public criticism of

11 “Families Risk Their Lives to Flee Fierce Fighting in Ukraine,” UNICEF, April 8, 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/stories/families-risk-lives-to-flee-fierce-fighting-in-Ukraine>.

12 Lina Molokotos-Liederman, Anders Bäckström, and Grace Davie, eds., *Religion and Welfare in Europe: Gendered and Minority Perspectives* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2017).

13 For the difference between the official English translation and the original Bulgarian text, see Daniela Kalkandjieva, “The Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Refugee Crisis,” in *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2019), 229–50.

the government's migration policy, was unprecedented. Not only was the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's statement in contradiction to one of the main Christian tenets of faith, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:39), but it also showed that the religious leadership exerted political pressure in shaping government policy on migration, thus affecting the ways in which people in need were treated by state authorities.

Similar examples, positive and negative, are present in many other countries. What stands out in these transnational cases is that religious institutions hold authority not only as an expression of "lived religion" but also due to their societal and political power that enables emergency mobilization. At times of crisis, when state institutions falter or fail to support people in need, the religious leadership is able to mobilize the faithful on two levels, either ensuring their material survival or drawing a dividing line between the local congregation and "the other." Religious communities can thus play a dual role, either supporting or failing to provide support to people in need.

This book examines the ways in which religious communities have addressed forced displacement in response to violence, reconciliation, and state structures in Russia, Eastern Europe, and the South Caucasus. It investigates a wide range of religious institutions among Christian (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant), Jewish, and Muslim communities in Armenia, Bulgaria, Greece, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine. It tackles the main challenges posed by forced displacement and religion-state relations in light of the post-1992 breakup of Yugoslavia, the post-2011 Syrian crisis, Russia's 2014 takeover of Crimea, and Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It does not detail every single humanitarian initiative of religious communities in these countries. Instead, it examines the main patterns of faith-based humanitarianism during critical periods by analyzing the official stance of religious leaders and state officials in relation to examples of grassroots religious engagement with people in need. This large geographical area is united by three factors: first, in most of these countries, the predominant religious confession is Eastern Christianity (with its two Orthodox and Oriental branches); second, the legacy of the communist period has presented religious communities with a novel position in religion-state relations, shaping national identity and advancing their own views of social cohesion; and, third, the emergence of transnational human security networks aimed at bringing together religious and political values to promote geopolitical ambitions.

The book focuses on the predominant religious confession in the region, Eastern Christianity, one of the least studied and largely misunderstood

world religions.¹⁴ The origins of Eastern Christianity date back to the first divisions in the Christian world, notably the separation of the Armenian Church from the Christian communion after the 451 Council of Chalcedon, the 1054 split between East and West, which led to the Orthodox and Catholic branches of Christianity, the 1453 fall of Constantinople under Ottoman rule, and the rise of national Orthodox churches together with state-building processes in nineteenth-century Eastern and Southeastern Europe.¹⁵ The book investigates the social adaptation of Eastern Christian churches and the changing nature of religion-state relations in relation to state-building mechanisms. From this perspective, the development of social welfare programs by Eastern Orthodox and Oriental churches has benefited not only local communities but has also ensured an advantageous position for the relevant political leadership. The intrinsic continuity between the communist and post-communist periods has endured in the appointment of church personnel, with many hierarchs continuing to provide religious legitimization despite social upheaval and political transformations.¹⁶

14 For an introduction to Orthodox theology and religious practices, see Ulrich M. Schmid, *Russische Religionsphilosophen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 2003); Aristotle Papanikolaou and Elizabeth Prodromou, eds., *Thinking Through Faith: New Perspectives from Orthodox Christian Scholars* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008); Scott Mark Kenworthy, *The Heart of Russia: Trinity-Sergius, Monasticism, and Society after 1825* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Augustine Casiday, ed., *The Orthodox Christian World* (London: Routledge, 2012); Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Thomas Fitzgerald, Cyril Hovorun, Aikaterini Pekridou, Nikolaos Asproulis, Dietrich Werner, and Guy Liagre, eds., *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Resources for Theological Education* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013); Paul L. Gavriluyk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Cyril Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018); Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, and Randall A. Poole, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Scott M. Kenworthy and Alexander S. Agadjanian, *Understanding World Christianity: Russia* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021); Cyril Hovorun, *Eastern Christianity in Its Texts* (London: T&T Clark, 2022).

15 Elizabeth Prodromou, "The Ambivalent Orthodox," *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 2 (2004): 62–75; Vasilios N. Makrides, "Orthodox Christianity, Modernity and Postmodernity: Overview, Analysis and Assessment," *Religion, State & Society* 40, nos. 3–4 (2012): 248–85; Lucian N. Leustean, ed., *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2014); Maria Hämmerli and Jean-François Mayer, eds., *Orthodox Identities in Western Europe: Migration, Settlement and Innovation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014).

16 Daniel Chirot, *Social Change in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977); Scott L. Montgomery and Daniel Chirot, *The Shape of the New: Four Big Ideas and How They Made the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Daniel Chirot, *You Say You Want a Revolution?: Radical Idealism and Its Tragic Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Jocelyne Cesari, *We God's People: Christianity, Islam and Hinduism in the World of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); John Heathershaw, *Security*

Orthodox Christianity, *Symphonia*, and Social Ethos

In November 2005, in a lecture on the future of European church-state relations held at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (Archontonis) referred to Byzantine Emperor Justinian's (527–565) concept of *symphonia* as described in his *Sixth Novel*. Bartholomew pointed out that Justinian's *symphonia* “offers us a paradigm for the relationship between the state and religion that is still valid today [...] it is our hope that there will exist between religion and the state a *symphonia* of active collaboration.” A few years later, in February 2009, in the presence of political leaders who attended his enthronement, Patriarch Kirill (Gundyayev) of the Moscow Patriarchate made a similar reference. Archbishop Hilarion (Alfeyev), the representative of the Russian Orthodox Church to the European Union at the time, provided more details on the patriarch's words by stating that “in contemporary Russia, in contrast to Byzantium, the Church is separated from the state, and this is the guarantee that under *symphonia* there will not be a conductor in the person of the head of state or any governmental bureaucrat.”¹⁷

In which ways does *symphonia* relate to political power as evidenced in the statements issued by Bartholomew and Kirill? The Byzantine concept of *symphonia* (συμφωνία) or the “system of co-reciprocity” (Σύστημα συναλληλίας) asserts the necessity of developing close relations between the church and the state. The Byzantine Empire presented itself as “a universal Christian society, administrated by the Emperor and spiritually guided by the Church,”¹⁸ with the empire enacting the final political expression of Christ's kingdom on earth. Justinian's *Sixth Novel* stated that, “There are two major gifts which God has given unto men of His supernal clemency, the priesthood and the imperial authority [...] Nothing is of greater concern for the emperors as the dignity of the priesthood, so that priests may in their turn pray to God for them.”¹⁹ *Symphonia* argues that religious and

after Christendom: Global Politics and Political Theology for Apocalyptic Times (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024).

17 Lucian N. Leustean, “The Politics of Orthodox Churches in the European Union,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 18, nos. 2–3 (2018): 146–57.

18 John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 283; John Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982); J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

19 Petros Vassiliadis, “Orthodox Christianity,” in *God's Rule: The Politics of World Religions*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 99.

political rulers ought to cooperate in order to ensure the welfare of their subjects. The fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 led to the Orthodox faithful splitting between the Muslim world and independent churches. Following the concept of *symphonia*, two centuries later, in 1619, Tsar Mikhail of the Romanov dynasty (1613–1645) ruled the Russian empire together with his father, Filaret, who was elevated to the rank of patriarch (1619–1633). The ascendant trajectory of the Moscow Patriarchate went hand in hand with imperial politics. The church supported *symphonia* by claiming to be the protector of the Orthodox faithful outside the Muslim world and by playing a direct role in the nation-building process in nineteenth-century Southeastern Europe.²⁰

In contrast to predominantly secular religion-state relations in Western Europe, *symphonia* raises two major challenging points. First, the boundary between religious and political realms is unclear. What is the religious and what is the political in Eastern Christianity? The Eastern Orthodox world provides several cases of leaders holding both religious and political offices concurrently, for instance, Makarios III, the archbishop of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus (1950–1977) and the first president of the Republic of Cyprus (1960–1977), and Miron Cristea, patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church (1925–1939) and prime minister of Romania (1938–1939). Second, the body of the “church” has a different interpretation from the Western concept of religion-state relations. The Orthodox Church is not only an ecclesiastical organization within the state but is also intertwined with the state on *national* lines, transcending the *hic et nunc* of political disputes. Religious leaders are in charge of the salvation of the “nation” rather than the “individual.” This communitarian view of the church has had a long-term impact on the political engagement of Orthodox churches during nation-state building processes.²¹ In the twentieth century, Eastern European regimes

20 John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Steve Runciman, *Byzantine Civilisation* (London: Edward Arnold, 1933); A. A. Vasilev, *History of the Byzantine Empire* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980); Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012); Mihai-D. Grigore and Vasilios N. Makrides, eds., *Orthodoxy in the Agora: Orthodox Christian Political Theologies Across History* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2024); Sebastian Rimestad and Emil Hilton Saggau, eds., *Fault Lines in the Orthodox World: Geopolitics, Theology, and Diplomacy in Light of the War in Ukraine* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2025).

21 Paschalis M. Kitromilides, “‘Imagined Communities’ and the Origins of the National Question in the Balkans,” *European History Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1989): 149–92; Paschalis M. Kitromilides, *An Orthodox Commonwealth: Symbolic Legacies and Cultural Encounters in Southeastern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Lucian N. Leustean, ed., *Orthodox Christianity and Nationalism in*

developed national communism in which churches had an active role to play, for example in Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia, while the contemporary political engagement of the Russian Orthodox Church closely followed this model of religion-state relations.

While *symphonia* remains a potent concept for the Eastern Christian world, Bartholomew's and Kirill's statements differed in their applicability. For the Ecumenical Patriarch, *symphonia* has a European dimension by ensuring that the state works rigorously with religious communities for their preservation. His remarks denote the delicate situation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, a small minority in Turkey that retains great influence in the West. For the Russian Orthodox Church, *symphonia* focuses on the ruler and encourages close relations between religious and political structures.

In Orthodox Christianity, the idea of the "church" confined to the limits of religious structures signifies a modern understanding of the term "religion"; in Byzantium, the "church" was universal, working together with the empire, imposing authority at home and in foreign lands, and striving for the salvation of the faithful in the material and spiritual worlds. Religious heresy, therefore, was equivalent to state dissent, with those who disobeyed the church persecuted or expelled to the geographical limits of the "civilized" world. Despite the 1453 fall of Constantinople, *symphonia* has remained a potent concept in the Eastern Christian world. After Prince Vladimir's (978–1015) conversion to Orthodox Christianity (at Chersonesus in Crimea) in 988, the Russian Empire encouraged the use of the symphonic concept, as evidenced by the tsar-son ruling together with the patriarch-father at the start of the Romanov dynasty in the early seventeenth century. Today, *symphonia* is interpreted as a concept marked by ambivalence and ambiguity, fundamentally opposed to the secular model of religion-state relations.²²

After the end of the Cold War, Eastern Orthodoxy has appeared regularly in the mass media. In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington reinforced the Western imaginary of Eastern Christian churches. To the question "Where does Europe end?" Huntington

Nineteenth-Century Southeastern Europe (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Paschalis M. Kitromilides, *Religion and Politics in the Orthodox World: The Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Challenges of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2018).

22 James W. Cunningham, "The Russian Patriarchate and the Attempt to Recover Symphonia," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 26, no. 4 (1992): 267–92; Nikolas K. Gvosdev, *An Examination of Church-State Relations in the Byzantine and Russian Empires with an Emphasis on Ideology and Models of Interaction* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 2001); Mikhail Antonov, "Church-State Symphonia: Its Historical Development and Its Applications by the Russian Orthodox Church," *Journal of Law and Religion* 35, no. 3 (2020): 474–93.

responded, “Europe ends where Western Christianity ends and Islam and Orthodoxy begin.”²³ He argued that the concept of the individual, the promotion of human rights, and the holding of free elections were alien concepts to the Eastern Orthodox world. These assumptions were based on Russia’s trajectory after the fall of communism, when the state began to expand its political influence through religious values. Huntington observed that, together with five other former Soviet states (Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia), Russia was building an “Orthodox bloc,” which challenged the construction of a secular European Union. He also placed Bulgaria and Romania in the same “Orthodox space,” foreseeing that, due to the predominant Orthodox culture in both countries, the enlargement of the European Union was unlikely to include them.

Throughout the last two decades, Huntington’s “fault lines” have haunted the academic and public policy communities.²⁴ The post-1992 conflict in the former Yugoslavia, which linked Serbian Orthodoxy to political nationalism, became synonymous with violence, ethnic cleansing, and forced displacement. By contrast, the 2013 Euromaidan protests in Kyiv saw an attempt to alleviate conflict, with members of the clergy placing themselves between demonstrators and the police. Ukraine had three Orthodox churches competing for national status and a government strongly endorsing an independent church outside Moscow’s jurisdiction. Following Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, the cradle of Russian Orthodoxy, non-Orthodox communities encountered difficulties registering with the newly established authorities. Ukrainian clergymen were forced to leave the occupied territories, while the Muslim Tatar community faced persecution.

The direct engagement of religious communities with forced displacement has taken a dramatic turn with the 2015 arrival of refugees from North Africa and the Middle East in Europe. The unprecedented number of displaced people crossing the Aegean Sea, making their journey through the predominantly Orthodox countries of Southeastern Europe, led to a re-evaluation of the topic of social ethos in the Eastern Orthodox world. After four years of scholarly debates, in spring 2020, the Ecumenical Patriarchate endorsed the publication of a social doctrine, *For the Life of the World: Towards a*

23 Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

24 Victoria Clark, *Why Angels Fall: A Portrait of Orthodox Europe from Byzantium to Kosovo* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000); Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church.²⁵ Issued at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the document primarily reflected a Western perspective on engaging with forcibly displaced populations, rather than presenting a unified stance across all Orthodox structures. However, it demonstrated that not all churches followed the concept of *symphonia* as a means of cooperating closely with political power. On the contrary, the document encouraged church and lay leaders and the faithful to embrace migrants and refugees “as nothing less than a divine call to love, justice, service, mercy, and inexhaustible generosity.”²⁶

Methodological Approaches and Book Structure

From an institutional perspective, Eastern Orthodox Christianity is a fellowship of fourteen Orthodox churches mainly situated in Eastern Europe, Eurasia, North Africa, and the Middle East, with a worldwide membership of around 300 million, namely: 1. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, Istanbul, Turkey; 2. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria, Egypt; 3. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, Syria; 4. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Israel; 5. The Russian Orthodox Church; 6. The Serbian Orthodox Church; 7. The Romanian Orthodox Church; 8. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church; 9. The Georgian Orthodox Church; 10. The Orthodox Church of Cyprus; 11. The Orthodox Church of Greece; 12. The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania; 13. The Polish Orthodox Church; and 14. The Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands and Slovakia.²⁷ In addition, Eastern Orthodoxy brings together several autonomous churches which are under the jurisdiction of autocephalous churches (such as those in Estonia, Finland, and Japan). New Orthodox churches have emerged in the diaspora (Australia, Canada, and the United States), while competing Orthodox structures have declared autonomy or independence in Southeastern Europe

25 David Bentley Hart and John Chryssavgis, eds., *For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2020). <https://www.goarch.org/documents/32058/5149465/For+the+Life+of+World.pdf>.

26 Hart and Chryssavgis, 89.

27 For a typology of Orthodox and Oriental churches, see Lucian N. Leustean, ed., *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2014); Dareg Zabarah, “Autocephaly: A Delayed Transition from Empire to National State?,” *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 33 (2013): 47–65; Marie-Hélène Blanchet, Frédéric Gabriel, and Laurent Tatarenko, eds., *Autocéphalies: L'exercice de l'indépendance dans les Églises slaves orientales (IXe–XXIe siècle)* (Rome: Publications de l'École française de Rome, 2021).

and the countries of the former Soviet Union and the communist bloc (such as in North Macedonia, Montenegro, Belarus, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine). The process of international ecclesiastical recognition has been most challenging in Ukraine, with three structures (until 2018; two churches thereafter) competing for national and international support. In 2019, the Ecumenical Patriarchate issued a *thomos* of recognition for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, with two ecclesiastical blocs emerging, one recognizing the new church structure while the other, under Moscow's leadership, condemned the church's independence.

The book examines the dynamics between widely recognized Orthodox churches and religious structures which aim to become full members of the Eastern Orthodox communion. It addresses the unique features of humanitarian intervention in the Eastern Orthodox world and contends that state authorities are unable to tackle humanitarian challenges on their own without considering the religious dynamics of their country. As a general rule, the unclear boundaries between religious and political authority in the Eastern Christian world have caused religious communities to become key societal actors taking over state functions. The failure of state authorities to provide direct support to vulnerable populations has been compensated by the social mobilization of religious communities. Not every single case of state failure has led to a societal surge of religious mobilization, however.²⁸ There have been many cases of silence and inactivity from religious communities, and each country should be examined individually. Religious communities remain the primary source of authority for forcibly displaced populations, while secular state institutions often lack the resources, public trust, and concrete mechanisms needed to support those affected by violence.

The fact that religious institutions often assume state functions in times of crisis may initially seem unsurprising. Religious communities have long fed the poor, cared for the wounded, and provided comfort during times of upheaval;²⁹ however, in the context of the Eastern Christian world, where churches have historically played a central role in nation-building, religious

28 Jeffrey Herbst, "Let Them Fail: State Failure in Theory and Practice: Implications for Policy," in *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 302–18.

29 Ron E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Ron E. Hassner, *Religion on the Battlefield* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Elizabeth Prodromou and Nathanael Symeonides, "Orthodox Christianity and Humanitarianism: An Introduction to Thought and Practice, Past and Present," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2016): 1–8.

institutions have been instrumental in shaping the concept of the “other.” For example, in Bulgaria, in 2017, Father Paolo Cortese, a Catholic priest who welcomed a Syrian refugee family into his parish, was forced to leave Bulgaria after facing death threats.³⁰ In the Republic of Moldova, the Muslim community was permitted to open a mosque only on the outskirts of the capital, Chişinău, in an industrial area, and without any visible religious symbols that would identify it as a place of worship. In Ukraine, senior clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate have consistently portrayed Russia’s occupation of Crimea and the Donbas region as a civil war while refusing to engage with their counterparts. In Georgia, while the church received substantial donations from oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili for the construction of churches, including the Sameba Cathedral in Tbilisi,³¹ church leadership promptly denied media reports suggesting it was willing to provide shelter for homeless people in the capital. In Armenia, the leadership of the Armenian Apostolic Church has frequently claimed that the minority Catholic Church provided aid exclusively to Catholic believers, despite numerous public programs demonstrating otherwise. Additionally, in response to the arrival of Indian and Iranian citizens following visa liberalization, church leaders have suggested that these individuals should undergo baptism in order to help preserve Armenian society.

These examples reveal that, in times of crisis, the distribution of aid by the predominant Eastern Christian community is often shaped by the ways in which church leaders conceptualize the concept of the “nation” rather than the “individual.” The Catholic priest in Bulgaria and the Syrian refugees were forced to leave because they were not considered Bulgarian; Muslims in Chişinău were confined to the outskirts because they were not seen as Moldovan; believers outside Moscow’s jurisdiction were deemed not truly Ukrainian Orthodox; the homeless in Georgia were not regarded as genuine members of the church; and Armenian Catholics, along with Indian and Iranian migrants, were not fully accepted as part of Armenian society. Who receives aid and support in the Eastern Christian world relates first and foremost to the nation and the state-building process, and as a result, religious communities become susceptible to politicization by state authorities and increasingly vulnerable to institutional failure.

30 Mariya Cheresheva, “Catholic Priest Attacked for Hosting Refugees Quits Bulgaria,” *Balkan Insight*, March 10, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/03/10/catholic-priest-leaves-bulgaria-over-threats-for-sheltering-refugees-03-10-2017/>.

31 Cheresheva, 2017.

The book argues that religious failure is central to understanding the ways in which Eastern Christian churches relate to the social realm and political power in the contemporary world. It examines religion-state relations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with a particular focus on the post-Cold War period. The analysis of individual cases of religion-state relations and forced displacement ends nearly two years into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine; more specifically, it concludes at the time of the Russian President Vladimir Putin's inauguration for his fifth term in May 2024.

The book draws on 70 interviews conducted across six countries in the region: Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine. The interviewees were selected to reach a balance between the most important state and religious organizations and included officials from the following three categories, namely: 1) religious communities (clergy and lay people) working on humanitarian issues with migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people; 2) governmental and civil society organizations which developed small and large-scale humanitarian initiatives; and, 3) academics based in national universities and academies of sciences in each country. The interviews took place in person during fieldwork in 2018 and 2019. All interviewees received the same set of questions in advance, with each meeting following a semi-structured approach lasting between 30 minutes and one hour. The project underwent strict ethical procedures, with all interviewees confirming their oral consent on the condition of full anonymity. The interviews were conducted in English and, where necessary, with the assistance of a translator. Between 2019 and 2024, during the COVID-19 pandemic and the period following Russia's 2022 military invasion of Ukraine, data was collected by examining the activities of the organizations approached during face-to-face interviews and by analyzing material available on the internet and secondary sources.

During my visits to the region, engagement with a wide range of religious organizations revealed two predominant patterns. First, several officials from religious organizations in Serbia, Ukraine, and Armenia followed up on our discussions with additional research visits, aiming to demonstrate their outreach efforts among refugee communities. Arranging interviews in Serbia relied extensively on local contacts. My arrival in Belgrade occurred a few days after the Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Lavrov, joined by Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, attended the inauguration of a

lavishly decorated mosaic dome in the Saint Sava Cathedral.³² In Serbia, the representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church was extremely helpful in securing the documentation necessary from the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration to visit the Principovac Reception Center near the Serbian-Croatian border. In Kyiv, the Department of External Church Relations of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate arranged meetings with clergy involved in humanitarian support in the Donbas region, one of whom was personally involved in the exchange of war prisoners in December 2017. In Armenia, with the support of local networks, interviews took place in the Tavush region near the Azerbaijan border, which hosted a significant number of refugee villages.

Second, while most participants responded positively to the project, two churches were notable exceptions, namely the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Metropolitanate of Chişinău and All Moldova (under Moscow's jurisdiction), which refused to meet to discuss their humanitarian activities. The statement issued by the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church reflected not only the stance of the dominant church but also influenced other religious organizations, some of which, despite implementing humanitarian programs for refugees, chose not to publicize their efforts.

In Bulgaria, what was striking was that not only the Orthodox community but also official representatives of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim organizations refused to meet, indicating widespread concern about discussing a sensitive topic. The lack of response was mitigated through interviews with grassroots organizations directly involved in supporting refugees, including volunteers working in Sofia and state-run camps throughout the country, despite the absence of engagement with officials or senior leadership of the predominant Orthodox churches in Bulgaria and Moldova.

The book argues that the politicization of religious discourse towards migrants and refugees explains the reluctance of senior clergy across the countries under focus to discuss the social and humanitarian work of their churches. That this was the case, particularly in Bulgaria, was evident when Pope Francis traveled to Sofia in May 2019 with a message encouraging both religious and political authorities to engage positively with refugees. Photographs of Pope Francis praying alone in St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral,

32 "Lavrov Unveils Russian Mosaic for Serbia's Church of St. Sava," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 23, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/lavrov-unveils-russian-mosaic-mukhin-serbia-st-sava-temple-orthodox-church-vucic-dacic/29058032.html>.

with no Orthodox clergy joining him, made headlines around the world.³³ The photographs were a reminder that his message was not embraced by all religious communities. In the Republic of Moldova, although senior clergy from the largest Orthodox church under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church refused to meet, the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia, a minority Orthodox community under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church, was happy to share its experiences of humanitarian mobilization, in particular the challenges to religion-state relations in the context of significant Moldovan emigration to Western Europe.

In addition to primary data from religious and state institutions in six countries affected by violence and resettlement (Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine), the book engages with secondary data from neighboring predominantly Orthodox countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states, namely Belarus, Greece, North Macedonia, Romania, and Russia. The book explores not only the specificities of religion-state relations but, more crucially, key issues emerging across the region and highlights areas where religious communities have either supported or failed to engage with humanitarian issues. It reveals that religious and secular courts, monastic settlements, pilgrimage sites, and educational establishments have had an impact on how religious bodies engage with conflict, transitory environments, settlement, and tolerance.

The book does not offer a theological treatise on Orthodox humanitarianism. Instead, it introduces a novel theoretical framework for understanding the conditions under which religious and state failure occur by focusing on the interplay between religious institutions, geopolitics, and forced displacement.

The book is divided into six chapters.

The first chapter provides an overview of the theoretical concepts of “religion,” “migration,” and “forced displacement.” It introduces a Religious Failure Index, offering a faith-based policy framework that explores the ways in which the concept of “state failure” may be replicated at the religious level. Religious institutions are not detached from social and political spheres and are prone to failure in a comparable manner to state institutions. The duality between state and religious engagement (and failure) explains the ways in which material and spiritual support reach forcibly displaced populations. Rather than following the model of secular societies, where

33 “Thousands Turn out to See Pope Francis as He Begins Visit to Bulgaria,” *The Sofia Globe*, May 5, 2019, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2019/05/05/thousands-turn-out-to-see-pope-francis-as-he-begins-visit-to-bulgaria/>.

political authority is centered on state structures, the Eastern Orthodox world shows that religious communities play a vital role in shaping the ways in which human security is delivered at the grassroots level. What differentiates state failure from religious failure is the advancement of geopolitics by religious structures. Orthodox churches function as diplomatic actors, conveying political messages that serve their institutional interests and, most importantly, enhance geopolitical influence.

The second chapter discusses the role played by the Russian Orthodox Church in advancing geopolitics, authority, and exceptionalism. It provides an overview of the ways in which the Russian Orthodox Church developed alongside the main patterns of religion-state relations in the Eastern Orthodox world from the end of the Second World War until today. It addresses the politicization of religion after the fall of the Iron Curtain and examines the social and political engagement of religious communities with state authorities, focusing on the competition between Eastern Orthodox churches for financial resources, state recognition, and international influence. It tackles key areas which demonstrate Russia's exceptionalism in international affairs, namely the idea of an Orthodox civilization and the Russian world, Orthodox mobilization in the European Union, the advancement of the concept of "spiritual security" in opposition to "human security," interfaith relations in the Middle East and Africa, and the impact of holding the 2016 Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church. It analyzes the ways in which the Moscow Patriarchate has responded to Russia's 2014 and 2022 military invasions of Ukraine and its strategy of dealing with the arrival of a large number of forcibly displaced populations from occupied territories.

The third chapter provides an overview of the ways in which Orthodox churches in Ukraine emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Ukrainian state-building process after the fall of communism led to the emergence of three competing Ukrainian churches, the largest of which remained under Moscow's jurisdiction. After Russia's 2014 takeover of Crimea, an independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine began to acquire national support, leading to the Ecumenical Patriarchate's official recognition as an autocephalous church in 2019. The rise of the national Orthodox Church of Ukraine was possible not only due to the active involvement of political institutions, particularly the presidency, but also through broad social mobilization during the war. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine launched innovative humanitarian projects connected to the war effort, fostering links between society and political organizations. The process of receiving autocephaly was thus connected to its development of humanitarian structures, which largely benefited the internally displaced population.

The fourth chapter investigates the entrepreneurial response to humanitarianism in the Orthodox Church in Serbia, focusing on its engagement with the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2015 and Ukrainian refugees in 2022. The 2015 refugee crisis was an opportunity to implement a social model for the Orthodox Church. If during the communist period, the authority of the Serbian Orthodox Church was challenged by state control and association with political nationalism, the refugee crisis provided an opportunity to situate the religious sphere closer to society. The religious leadership of the Serbian Church stood out in the volatile landscape of the Balkan region by issuing an official statement in support of displaced populations, while also acting at the grassroots level as a mediator between refugees and state authorities. The 2015 entrepreneurial engagement with the displaced population was short-lived and did not continue with the 2022 arrival of Russian émigrés and Ukrainian refugees. The chapter examines the humanitarian response of the Serbian Orthodox Church and state interference in religious matters.

The fifth chapter investigates the concept of religious failure in relation to forced displacement in Bulgaria and the Republic of Moldova. In 2015, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's declaration that the arrival of refugees in the country was a "true invasion" was paralleled by a similar argument in the Republic of Moldova during the 2016 presidential elections. The largest Orthodox church in Moldova endorsed fake news claiming that 30,000 Syrians were about to arrive in the country, playing an overt political role in electoral debates and directly shaping the country's alignment between Russia and the European Union. In both countries, churches held significant influence on political outcomes, with the Bulgarian Church being characterized as a "state within a state" while the Orthodox Church in Moldova positioned itself between Romanian nationalism and Russian geopolitics.

The sixth chapter investigates religious mobilization and ethnic identity in shaping Georgian and Armenian politics and civil society. It provides examples of state failure and religious failure in relation to forcibly displaced populations after the post-1994 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. In 2017, Georgia and Armenia stood out as among the most religious countries in Europe, with 99 percent of the population in Georgia and 89 percent in Armenia reporting a belief in God. Despite the exceptionally high number of people declaring themselves religious in both countries, Catholic minorities have been more active in supporting forcibly displaced populations than their Orthodox and Oriental counterparts.

The Conclusion addresses the hypothetical question of the conditions under which Eastern Christianity, as a world religion in its institutionalized forms, could be perceived as an instance of “failed religion.” It offers a policy blueprint for engaging with Orthodox structures to prevent religious failure, while also presenting several points for reflection on the future of Eastern Christian churches, politics, and society in the twenty-first century.

1. Religious Failure, Geopolitics, and Forced Displacement in the Eastern Christian World

Abstract: The chapter provides an overview of the theoretical concepts of “religion,” “migration,” and “forced displacement.” It advances a Religious Failure Index, offering a faith-based policy framework to explore the ways in which the concept of “state failure” is replicated at the religious level.

Keywords: Religion; Migration; Forced Displacement; State Failure; Eastern Christianity.

In March 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was rapidly spreading across the world, Patriarch Daniel (Ciobotea) of the Romanian Orthodox Church issued an official statement. He urged the population to follow closely the government’s instructions while, at the same time, expressing his own belief that the church was uniquely positioned to support the health authorities. He described the church in an unusual way, linking the social and divine realms as follows:

The church is not only an institution of public utility but also a community of living faith, merciful love, and holy hope, virtues that must be manifested especially in times of great trials. In this context, the church makes a parental appeal to all its believers to trust the authorities and respect the measures established by them.¹

1 “Patriarhia Română face apel către toți credincioșii să aibă încredere în autorități și să respecte măsurile instituite de acestea” [The Romanian Patriarchate appeals to all believers to trust the authorities and respect the measures instituted by them], *adevarul.ro*, March 16, 2020,

The distinction between viewing the church as “an institution of public utility” and comprehending it as “a community of living faith” had two important aspects. The church operated between two realms: first, as a public institution actively engaged in addressing worldly crises and, second, as a community rooted in faith and tradition. In many cases, religious leaders regard their role as confined to spiritual matters, and Patriarch Daniel’s words showed a different dimension of the church’s social work. By releasing statements that encouraged both the faithful and society at large during a major crisis, the church demonstrated that it was not just a spiritual place but also a tangible, accountable organization working in the name of “public utility.” Had religious leaders refrained from issuing such statements, it would have signaled a denial of the dangers posed by the pandemic. The response represented an acknowledgment that the crisis affected the faithful and that religious leadership had a responsibility to act. In essence, the core message of Patriarch Daniel’s statement was that church leaders were aware that by not responding to a major crisis, they would have failed the spiritual and material responsibility entrusted to them by the “community of living faith.”

What are the primary conditions under which religious communities fail to mobilize? The response of the Romanian Orthodox Church reflected not only its societal influence but also its authority in ensuring that governmental measures were implemented. In Romania, described by a 2018 Pew Research Survey as the most religious country in Eastern Europe, Patriarch Daniel’s statement was nothing less than a recognition that the church’s guidance was critical in addressing the health crisis. His response was an endorsement of the paradigm shift in religion-state relations that had taken place after the fall of communism. While under the Iron Curtain, religious communities had primarily focused on navigating daily activities and public discourse for survival and adapting to atheist persecution; after 1989, a wave of religious resurgence and social activism emerged as the general trend. In the early decades of the post-communist period, churches adapted to the new political landscape by advancing nationalist narratives and linking the mythical past with contemporary political affairs. Religious leaders positioned themselves as “guardians of their nations” and as mediators between the secular and sacred realms, acquiring societal power that transcended political divisions.

The notion that religious communities function as “institutions of public utility” underscores the capacity of religious leaders to engage directly

with national and local authorities, challenging state authority. During periods of crisis, when religious leaders issue official statements that either support or oppose national measures that affect the faithful, such as those related to health, migration, and welfare, state authorities are compelled to respond. The humanitarian interplay between religious communities and state institutions takes place within the legal framework of religion-state relations and reflects several comparable trends.

The first decade of the post-communist period was characterized by a resurgence in religious affiliation and a notable increase in religious authority, often at the expense of state governance. Second, and most significantly, religious communities transitioned from a *modus vivendi* with state institutions to a more proactive stance of social activism. Societal crises have shown that religious institutions can be creative in organizing their own humanitarian networks independent of state control. In Romania, in a negotiation process that began in 1995 and evolved through a series of impromptu protocols, culminating in a formal legal framework in 2007, the government and the Orthodox Church decreed a joint commitment on social initiatives, including support for the elderly, social assistance, and more broadly, aid for marginalized populations.² As a result, the Orthodox Church has received substantial state funding to implement projects that engage the faithful both in the country and in the diaspora.

A similar pattern emerged in Ukraine following Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas region, with competing Orthodox churches developing their own charitable networks to reach populations in need. Gradually, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which proved most effective in developing humanitarian programs, became the most trusted religious institution in the country and began receiving direct governmental support. In 2018, the church declared itself a national institution representing the entire country, despite having been a minority religious community just a decade earlier.

The Romanian and Ukrainian examples of religious communities engaging positively with populations in need should be understood within a larger international context. While humanitarian mobilization has undoubtedly reached many people in need, Orthodox churches have become susceptible to politicization by state authorities. Benefiting from a privileged position

2 "Protocol de colaborare în domeniul incluziunii sociale între Guvernul României și Patriarhia Română" [Collaboration protocol in the field of social inclusion between Romanian Government and Romanian Patriarchate], Romanian Patriarchate, October 2, 2007, https://patriarhia.ro/images/pdf/SocialFilantropic/PROTOCOL_incluziune.pdf.

within religion-state relations, many churches have operated beyond the direct control of the state. In many cases, religious leaders not only challenged government measures, as seen in Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, and Serbia, but also offered their own theological interpretations of the ways in which secular authorities should respond to humanitarian crises. One of the most controversial instances occurred in the spring of 2020, when the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece declared that Holy Communion could overcome any medical illness, urging the faithful to prioritize religious doctrines rather than follow scientific guidance. Other Orthodox churches in the region adopted a similar stance.

Challenges to state governance have been visible not only through public criticism by religious leaders but also through their silence during unfolding crises. A striking example took place in November 2015, when a nightclub fire in Bucharest claimed 64 lives due to the negligence and failure of Romanian medical authorities to respond effectively. The Romanian Orthodox Church hierarchy remained silent in the aftermath, prompting mass protests that criticized both the church leadership and the government. Ultimately, the public outcry contributed to political resignations. As these examples show, in times of societal crisis, religious communities acting as “institutions of public utility” may either support populations in need or fall short in their social responsibilities. The most dramatic examples of this duality took place during the unprecedented humanitarian challenges posed by the 2011 Syrian crisis, Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Why Religion, Migration, and Forced Displacement?

In an interview with *The Financial Times* in June 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that “liberalism has become obsolete,” sparking a flurry of criticism among his Western counterparts.³ While the ideological foundation of the international system remains contested, Putin’s statement reflected a major divergence in the ways in which Eastern and Western societies are constructed and governed. Emerging from decades of atheist communism, Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states have cultivated close ties with political authorities. The process of

3 Lionel Barber, Henry Foy, and Alex Barker, “Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism Has ‘Become Obsolete,’” *Financial Times*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.

secularization, which has become the norm in Western Europe, contrasts with the revival of Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe. Over the past two decades, Orthodoxy has regularly been presented in the scholarly literature as being associated with rising authoritarianism, social conservatism, and a diminishing space for political opposition.⁴

Forced displacement has been particularly poignant, echoing refugee crises throughout European history and shaping both Eastern and Western identities.⁵ From the arrival of the first refugees in Greece to the steady flow

4 John Anderson, *Conservative Christian Politics in Russia and the United States: Dreaming of Christian Nations* (London: Routledge, 2015); Michael Angold, ed., *Eastern Christianity: The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Robert C. Blitt, "Russia's Orthodox Foreign Policy: The Growing Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Shaping Russia's Policies Abroad," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law* 33, no. 2 (2011): 363–460; Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer, eds., *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016); Zoe Knox, "The Symphonic Ideal: The Moscow Patriarchate's Post-Soviet Leadership," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 4 (2003): 575–96; Jeremy W. Lamoreaux and Lincoln Flake, *The Russian Orthodox Church, the Kremlin, and Religious (Il)liberalism in Russia* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Communications 2018); Christopher Marsh, "Eastern Orthodoxy and the Fusion of National and Spiritual Security," in *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Security*, ed. Chris Seiple, Dennis R. Hoover, and Pauletta Otis (London: Routledge, 2013), 22–32; Jørdar Østbø, "Securitizing 'Spiritual-Moral Values' in Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2017): 200–216; Irina Papkova, *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Daniel Payne, "Spiritual Security, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Russian Foreign Ministry: Collaboration or Cooptation?," *Journal of Church and State* 52, no. 4 (2010): 712–27; Pedro Ramet, ed., *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988); Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nihil Obstat: Religion, Politics and Social Change in East-Central Europe and Russia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Sabrina P. Ramet, "The Way We Were—And Should Be Again? European Orthodox Churches and the 'Idyllic Past,'" in *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, ed. Timothy A. Byrnes and Peter J. Katzenstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 148–75; Sabrina P. Ramet, ed., *Orthodox Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe: Nationalism, Conservatism, and Intolerance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2019); Katja Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia* (London: Routledge, 2013); Frank Cibulka and Zachary T. Irwin, eds., *Liberals, Conservatives, and Mavericks: On Christian Churches of Eastern Europe since 1980 (A Festschrift for Sabrina P. Ramet)* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2024).

5 Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Roger Zetter, "Labelling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 4, no. 1 (1991): 39–62; James C. Hathaway, "Forced Migration Studies: Could We Agree Just to 'Date'?", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 3 (2007): 349–69; Alexander Betts, *Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Elizabeth Cullen Dunn, *No Path Home: Humanitarian Camps and the Grief of Displacement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Elena Fiddian-Qasmieh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Kelly M. Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

of migrants along the Balkan route through Bulgaria and Serbia, forcibly displaced populations have encountered the dominant cultures and religious traditions of the countries they transited.⁶ In 2016, Archbishop Ieronymos II (Liapis) of Greece traveled with Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the island of Lesbos, where they jointly encouraged the faithful and civil society organizations to support the newly arrived refugees.⁷ Similarly, in Serbia, the Holy Synod, the highest authority of the Orthodox Church, issued a statement encouraging openness towards those transiting the country. These examples remained isolated. In 2015, at the height of the European refugee crisis, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church issued a rare and controversial statement condemning the government's policy on migration and declaring that the arrival of people represented a "true invasion."⁸ A year later, during the 2016 presidential election debates in the Republic of Moldova, the issue of migration shifted the balance between

6 James A. Beckford, ed., *Migration and Religion*, 2 vols. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016); Drew Christiansen, "Movement, Asylum, Borders: Christian Perspectives," *International Migration Review* 30, no. 1 (1996): 7–17; Elizabeth Ferris, "Faith and Humanitarianism: It's Complicated," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 3 (2011): 606–25; Elena Fiddian-Qasmieh, "Introduction: Faith-Based Humanitarianism in Contexts of Forced Displacement," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 3 (2011): 429–39; David Hollenbach SJ, "Religion and Forced Migration," in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmieh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 447–59; David Hollenbach SJ, *Humanity in Crisis: Ethical and Religious Response to Refugees* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019); Giuseppe Giordan and Siniša Zrinščak, "One Pope, Two Churches: Refugees, Human Rights and Religion in Croatia and Italy," *Social Compass* 65, no. 1 (2018): 62–78; Xabier Itçaina and Flora Burchianti, "Between Hospitality and Competition: The Catholic Church and Immigration in Spain," in *Religious Actors in the Public Sphere: Means, Objectives, and Effects*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes and Anja Hennig (London: Routledge, 2011), 57–76; Majbritt Lyck-Bowen and Mark Owen, "A Multi-Religious Response to the Migrant Crisis in Europe: A Preliminary Examination of Potential Benefits of Multi-Religious Cooperation on the Integration of Migrants," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 1 (2019): 21–41; Susanna Snyder, *Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church* (London: Routledge, 2016); Miltiadis Vantsos and Marina Kiroudi, "An Orthodox View of Philanthropy and Church Diaconia," *Christian Bioethics* 13, no. 3 (2007): 251–68; Peter Walker, Dyan Mazurana, Amy Warren, George Scarlett, and Henry Louis, "The Role of Spirituality in Humanitarian Crisis Survival and Recovery," in *Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism*, ed. Michael Barnett and Janice Gross Stein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 115–39.

7 "Joint declaration: we call upon political leaders to employ every means to ensure that individuals and communities remain in their homelands and enjoy the fundamental right to live in peace and security, 16.04.2016," Holy See Press Office, April 16, 2016, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/04/16/160416b.html>.

8 Daniela Kalkandjieva, "The Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Refugee Crisis," in *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2019), 79–98.

candidates when the Orthodox Church, under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, endorsed fake news that 30,000 Syrians were about to enter the country. No other Orthodox church in Eastern Europe issued such strongly worded statements against refugees, positions that starkly contradicted the Christian precept, “Love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:39).

What happens when religious communities and political authorities fail to support forcibly displaced populations? At first glance, the association of “religious authorities” and “political authorities” together in the same question may appear controversial. Typically, in the early stages of conflict, state authorities are the first to provide guidance to affected populations; however, in the predominantly Orthodox countries of Eastern Europe and former Soviet states, religious communities often play a central role in shaping societal responses to external threats. The actions and rhetoric of both religious and political officials, and the associated institutions they represent, influence social engagement. The mobilization is multifaceted, ranging from informal consultation among clergy and local officials in small villages to public declarations by hierarchs and politicians demonizing the perceived enemies, foreign troops, or refugees fleeing conflict and seeking shelter. An overview of the lexicon surrounding “religion,” “migration,” and “forced displacement” provides valuable insights into the ways in which individuals and institutions navigate the boundaries between the sacred and the profane.

In *Migration and Religion*, James A. Beckford highlighted the complexity of defining the interdependence between the two terms. He noted that while “spirituality” and “faith” shared overlapping characteristics, the concept of “religion” was distinct:

the term “religion” is hotly contested, but it refers here to the wide range of emotions, actions, relationships, organizations, artefacts, roles, values, symbols and beliefs that are associated with faith in powers, beings and levels of reality transcending the purely human.⁹

Beckford went further in his analysis and indicated that the term “migration” is equally subject to contradictory interpretations and was most widely associated with concepts such as “diaspora,” “asylum-seeking,” and “internally displaced people.” While it had certain similarities with phenomena like “nomadism, transhumance or pilgrimage,” Beckford emphasized that

9 James A. Beckford, introduction to *Migration and Religion*, ed. James A. Beckford, vol. 1 (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016), xiv.

“migration” stands out as “both a reversible process and an outcome that can vary from temporary to permanent, from voluntary to forced, and from individual to collective on a massive scale.”¹⁰ He argued that the interplay between religion and migration can be explored through a wide array of methods and approaches, including historical analysis, transnational religious settings, practices and identities, strategies and resources, policy frameworks, organizational structures, cultural norms, and religious discourses. What these methods and approaches had in common is that both religion and migration manifest in multiple forms across different geographical and temporal contexts.

The academic literature on migration has largely focused on either legal interpretations or psychological investigations of trauma, vulnerability, and social care. The legal framework of the interplay between religion and migration, particularly the protection of the freedom of religion and belief across the world, has undergone increased systematization. Since the end of the Second World War, a significant body of legal instruments has emerged to safeguard these rights, including Article 18¹¹ of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 4¹² and Article 33¹³ of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 12¹⁴ of the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant

10 Beckford, introduction, xiv.

11 Article 18 (1): “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice [...]” United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

12 Article 4: “The Contracting State shall accord to refugees within their territories treatment at least as favourable as that accorded to their nationals with respect to freedom to practise their religion and freedom as regards the religious education of their children,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), <https://www.unhcr.org/media/1951-refugee-convention-and-1967-protocol-relating-status-refugees>.

13 Article 33: “No Contracting State shall expel or return (‘refouler’) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), <https://www.unhcr.org/media/1951-refugee-convention-and-1967-protocol-relating-status-refugees>.

14 Article 12 (1): “Migrant workers and members of their families shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of their choice and freedom either individually or in community with others and in public or private to manifest their religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching,” United Nations, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-protection-rights-all-migrant-workers>.

Workers and Members of their Families, and the 2011 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 65/211.¹⁵

In recent decades, a new theoretical discipline has emerged to emphasize inclusivity across policy engagement, global governance, and humanitarian practices, advancing the conceptual significance of the term “forced” in “forced migration” and “forced displacement.” An increasing body of scholarship has expanded the nexus between forced migration (displacement) and the social sciences, emphasizing either the experiences of external observers, such as policymakers, researchers, and aid workers, or the lived experiences of displaced individuals themselves.¹⁶

Forced migration and displacement are intimately linked with geopolitics, moving the focus of analysis toward the institutional dimensions of everyday politics and religion. At both individual and community levels, forced displacement represents one of the most profound and challenging experiences. It is not merely a physical journey but also a process of material and religious adaptation to unfamiliar encounters. Throughout history, people have moved across territories, physically and religiously, establishing new homes and engaging with diverse populations. It is the adaptability of both displaced populations and the cultural settings they encounter that places forced displacement as a fundamental aspect of human experience.¹⁷

In summarizing scholarly debates, Elżbieta M. Goździak and Izabella Main noted that,

15 “Recognizes with concern the situation of persons in vulnerable situations, including persons deprived of their liberty, refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons, children, persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and migrants, as regards their ability to freely exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief,” United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 21 December 2010*, A/RES/65/211.

16 B. S. Chimni, “The Reform of the International Refugee Regime: A Dialogic Approach,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14, no. 2 (2001): 151–61; B. S. Chimni, “The Birth of a ‘Discipline’: From Refugee to Forced Migration Studies,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 22, no. 1 (2009): 11–29; Alice Bloch and Georgia Donà, eds., *Forced Migration: Current Issues and Debates* (London: Routledge, 2019); Karen O’Reilly, “Migration Theories: A Critical Overview,” in *Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies*, ed. Anna Triandafyllidou, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 25–33; Mervyn Frost, “Thinking Ethically about Refugees: A Case for the Transformation of Global Governance,” in *Refugees and Forced Displacement: International Security, Human Vulnerability, and the State*, ed. Edward Newman and Joanne van Selms (New York: United Nations University Press, 2003), 109–30; Alexander Betts, “Global Governance and Forced Migration,” in *Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies*, ed. Anna Triandafyllidou, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 312–19.

17 Alexander Betts and Gil Loescher, eds., *Refugees in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); “Datasets on Europe on Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Yearly Overviews,” International Organization for Migration, <https://migration.iom.int>.

Religion and forced migration are inextricably connected. Religion operates in compelling, competing, and contradictory ways as it shapes the experiences of forced migrants.¹⁸

The experience of forced migrants is determined not only by the populations they encounter but also by the politicization of the key concepts of “religion” and “migration.” Following the 2015 refugee crisis, the arrival of Syrian refugees in Hungary was framed by Viktor Orbán’s government as a veritable Muslim invasion, with considerable financial resources allocated to endorse this vision, including the construction of a 100-mile-long border fence along Hungary’s southern frontier with Serbia and Croatia.¹⁹ Similar rhetoric emerged in neighboring Poland, where far-right Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) political leaders stated that Syrian refugees were directly challenging European Christianity.²⁰ Both types of political arguments were built on the perception of Islam as the “other” and a distinction between “good” and “bad” refugees that would alter the social and political landscape of European societies.²¹

Peggy Levitt argued that religion influences migration at two interconnected levels. First, as a belief system, it has shaped interiority and individual religious practices. Second, religious institutions have played a key role in structuring transnational practices that are carried over into new geographical and cultural settings.²² The dichotomy between individual spirituality and institutional authority brings to light powerful contrasts that accompany migrants across geographies of displacement. On one hand, religious practices associated with ceremonies, festivals, and communal gatherings originating at the point of departure in the migrant’s journey take new forms. Religious ceremonies performed before displacement continue to

18 Elżbieta M. Goździak and Izabella Main, “What’s God Got to Do with It? Debating Religion and Forced Migration Entanglements,” in *Debating Religion and Forced Migration Entanglements*, ed. Elżbieta M. Goździak and Izabella Main (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2023), 3.

19 Elżbieta M. Goździak, “Contesting Flexible Solidarity: Secular and Religious Support for Refugees in Hungary,” in *Debating Religion and Forced Migration Entanglements*, ed. Elżbieta M. Goździak and Izabella Main (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2023), 21–44.

20 Agnieszka Bielewska and Nir Cohen, “Thou Shalt Not Deport? Religious Ethical Discourse and the Politics of Asylum in Poland and Israel,” in *Debating Religion and Forced Migration Entanglements*, ed. Elżbieta M. Goździak and Izabella Main (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2023), 45–66.

21 Luca Mavelli and Erin Wilson, eds., *The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

22 Peggy Levitt, “You Know, Abraham Was Really the First Immigrant: Religion and Transnational Migration,” *International Migration Review* 37, no. 3 (2003): 847–73.

play an important place in shaping interiority and interpretation of the world. On the other hand, the authority and legitimacy of religious ceremonies are challenged by the lived experiences of migrants during their journeys. The extent to which transnational religious organizations continue to influence social participation among forcibly displaced populations remains an open and debatable question.

As Elżbieta M. Goździak demonstrated in her study of Albanian refugees from Kosovo in 1999, many humanitarian programs failed to gain the trust and engagement of displaced populations, largely due to the exclusion of transnational religious identities.²³ In the displaced environment, the duality between religious interiority and institutional legitimacy is reshaped by new social realities. Humanitarian organizations that focus solely on providing material relief often overlook the enduring influence of religious frameworks on long-term adaptation and resilience. Religion thus becomes a transitory space that connects the homeland with the geographies of survival and adaptation.

In his examination of religious actors in South Africa, James R. Cochrane pointed out that religion stands out during health crises by addressing “questions of meaning, trust, agency, and purpose.”²⁴ It is the link between personal interiority and institutional structures that is frequently neglected by formal religious institutions. As a result, the very concepts of “meaning, trust, agency, and purpose” risk losing their relevance for both humanitarian actors and the communities they serve.

Taking into account the dichotomy between forced displacement as perceived at local, state, and geopolitical levels and emphasizing the social work carried out by institutions of “public utility” and secular organizations, rather than focusing solely on spirituality, emotions, personal experience, and the lived dimensions of communitarian faith, this book advances the following definition:

Religion is a social system in relation to the otherworldly, providing individual meaning, mobilization, and support to populations in need.

The definition highlights three key elements. First, as “a social system,” religion engages with enduring doctrines, practices, and traditions that

23 Elżbieta M. Goździak, “Spiritual Emergency Room: The Role of Spirituality and Religion in the Resettlement of Kosovar Albanians,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 2 (2002): 136–52.

24 James R. Cochrane, “Religion in the Health of Migrant Communities: Asset or Deficit?,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32, no. 4 (2006): 715–36.

collectively enhance structure and coherence. Second, “individual meaning” refers to the personal expression of faith and behavior. Third, “mobilization and support to populations in need” represents the social function of religion that brings together individuals acting as a group, often through institutions, or large segments of the population to provide aid and solidarity. The interplay among these three features shows that religion, both at the personal and institutional levels, not only offers support and resilience in times of crisis but can also fail in its social engagement in ways comparable to secular institutions and, more widely, to state systems.

Failed Religion and Collapsed Religion

The assertion that religion can fail is contentious. For faith-based leaders, religion never fails. It is the embodiment of history, tradition, theological and metaphysical thought, and a direct relationship with the sacred. In monotheistic world religions, theological perspectives maintain that the societal or physical vulnerability of a community does not necessarily mean that religion disappears or fails, primarily because it encompasses the living, the dead, and the unborn, forming a continuum that transcends temporal existence. Religion, therefore, is only considered prone to failure when the entire community of the faithful is physically eradicated over time. In the history of Christianity, the suppression of heresy, whether through the banishment of dissident believers to the outskirts of the Roman Empire or the physical destruction of entire communities, has often been interpreted as the failure of unorthodox beliefs to withstand the test of time. While this is not the space to delve into theological debates surrounding heresy or the implications of banning a particular religious community, it is worth noting that the idea of religion as a connector of the dead and the unborn within an ethnic or national framework has been explored within the theoretical analysis of ethno-symbolic nationalism.²⁵

Although the concept of religious failure may suggest a defeatist approach, specifically, the idea that a religion is approaching catastrophe or disaster, international relations theory on state failure offers valuable insights. Following the 1648 Peace of Westphalia and the emergence of the modern state system, numerous state entities have failed. As Jeffrey Herbst has observed,

25 Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1998); John Hutchinson, *Nations as Zones of Conflict* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005).

"There is nothing novel about the phenomenon of state failure."²⁶ In his *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, Robert I. Rotberg put forward the classic definition of state failure as follows:

Nation-states fail when they are consumed by internal violence and cease delivering positive political goods to their inhabitants. Their governments lose credibility, and the continuing nature of the particular nation-state itself becomes questionable and illegitimate in the hearts and minds of its citizens.²⁷

Robert H. Bates expanded the concept of state failure further by indicating that it is "far more likely [to take place] in intermediate democracies than in full democracies or aristocracies."²⁸ What differentiates failed states from stable ones is not only political turmoil and uncertainty over economic resources but, most critically, the "militarization of civic society."²⁹ In this context, religion plays a dual role. First, when religious institutions are directly involved in militarization, whether through ideological support, recruitment, or legitimization of violence, the turmoil of the state and political failure extends into the religious sphere. Second, as a powerful identity marker, religion shapes the ethnic and cultural composition of the state. When religious and ethnic identities align with political divisions and conflict lines, they can exacerbate tensions and deepen the roots of state failure. Thus, the militarization of society, when coupled with religious fragmentation, ultimately contributes to state failure.

As Bates pointed out, intermediate democracies have a higher proportion of states falling into political disorder. His analysis of post-Cold War African states showed that during the transition to democracy, political elites mismanaged resources and appropriated public revenues, leading to corruption and societal discontent. In an effort to defend resources, local leaders formed militias, and state authority gradually collapsed.³⁰ In Bates's view, "The origins of political disorder lie in conflicts whose own origins are, to a great degree, internal to the nation-state: regional

26 Herbst, 302.; Paul D. Miller, *Armed State Building: Confronting State Failure, 1898–2012* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

27 Robert I. Rotberg, "The Failure and Collapse of Nation-States: Breakdown, Prevention, and Repair," in *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

28 Robert H. Bates, "State Failure," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 1–12.

29 Bates, "State Failure."

30 Bates, "State Failure."

inequality, conflicting partisan preferences, religious differences, and so on.”³¹ State failure is inevitably linked to the ways in which states are formed. Religion, as an embedded societal structure, determines the ways in which state institutions engage with their citizens. Religion *per se* is not the main cause of political disorder; however, when combined with inequality, the misappropriation of resources, and ethnic tensions, it can lead to a state’s collapse and failure.

Robert I. Rotberg distinguished four categories of states along the path to failure, namely “weak,” “failing,” “failed,” and “collapsed,” with each category characterized by the progressive erosion or absence of institutions and mechanisms necessary for effective governance and control that enable the state to function. Drawing a parallel to the religious sphere, a similar typology can be proposed, divided between two primary forms of institutional breakdown, namely “failed religion” and “collapsed religion.”

The concept of “failed religion” represents the culmination of a social system’s dissolution in response to external and internal threats, resulting in the disappearance of beliefs and religious institutional structures from the public sphere. In such cases, religion is altered to the extent that religious institutional structures are replaced by alternative modes of existence. For example, in the twentieth century under communist regimes, imposing atheism as the dominant ideology and religious persecution advanced the concept of failed religion. Between 1967 and 1990, Albania declared itself the world’s first atheist state, officially eradicating all forms of religious expression. In this context, religion was portrayed in state propaganda as having failed both institutionally and individually. Similarly, in the Soviet Union, churches were closed, clergy were persecuted, and religious symbols were destroyed. In Moscow, in 1931, at Stalin’s order, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was demolished, and, in its place, in 1958, the world’s largest swimming pool was erected. Throughout the communist bloc, religious failure was not only induced by external repression but also driven by internal betrayal. In many cases, clergy who were imprisoned were coerced into turning against their fellow clergymen, suppressing dissent, and collaborating with state authorities. A number of collaborating clergy, once raised in the senior echelons of religious authority, crossed the religious-secular divide, denounced opposition, and were even integrated into state security structures. In doing so, they contributed to the erosion of religious legitimacy and the institutional collapse of religion under totalitarian regimes.

31 Robert H. Bates, *When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late Century Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

The concept of “collapsed religion” refers to the condition in which, due to the material absence of religious structures and communities, the societal revival of a particular religious community becomes no longer viable. Historically, the rise and fall of world empires have provided examples of the disappearance of religious institutional structures. The institutionalized religions of ancient empires (the Hittite religion, the Olympian religion, the cult of Mithra, the cult of Dionysus, the cult of Isis and Osiris, and Mayan religion) ceased to exist alongside the dissolution of their secular governance. Similarly, the Roman Empire enforced religious uniformity by banning heresy beyond its borders to maintain coherence and control.³² From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Christianity was banned in Japan, and the faithful were forced to practice their faith underground. In the twentieth century, the notion of “collapsed religion” was mainly visible among exiled clergy in Western Europe. For those who fled regime changes, the religious structures of their homelands had disintegrated and lost their authority. In response, by establishing new religious structures abroad outside the jurisdictional realm of traditional centers of ecclesiastical power, the clergy attempted to provide a link between the period before and after regime change, in their view, a time when religion was not tainted and fully collapsed. For example, Estonian and Latvian Orthodox clergy, along with many Greek Catholic communities in the West, became the sole representatives of their traditions abroad, as their religious communities in the East were either absorbed into other ecclesiastical structures or dissolved entirely. In such moments of collapse, religious leaders often interpreted the loss not as an institutional failure but as the unfolding of divine will, an otherworldly authority to which obedience was due.

One of the key questions surrounding the concepts of “failed religion” and “collapsed religion” is the extent to which a religion adapts to, or even returns in a different form in, the public sphere. The post-communist landscape of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states provides valuable insight. As this book argues, when states fail to support populations in need, religious communities often step in to assume roles traditionally held by the state.

32 Robert I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250*, 2nd edition. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007); Richard Gordon, “Mithraism and Roman Society: Social Factors in the Explanation of Religious Change in the Roman Empire,” in *Render unto Caesar: The Religious Sphere in World Politics*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet and Donald W. Treadgold (Washington, DC: American University Press, 1995), 95–130; Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

However, when religion also fails, the demise of both state and religious structures becomes not only inevitable but also accelerated.

Religious failure and state failure share three common areas, presented in hierarchical order:

1. Religion fundamentally challenges and clashes with state authority, encouraging and gradually leading to both religious and state failure. Religious failure occurs when state structures fully suppress the religious realm (for example, in communist Albania).
2. Religion exists at the private level, institutionally underground and hidden from the public sphere due to oppression and organized violence. In such cases, state failure becomes imminent, while religious failure unfolds more gradually. When persecution and conflict subside, the religion that emerges is often transformed to such an extent that it no longer fully represents the original religious organization (for instance, the Greek Catholic communities in Eastern Europe that resurfaced after the fall of communism).
3. Religious institutions and state structures fail to coordinate or provide sympathy, comfort, and support to populations in need. Discrimination on religious grounds, condemnation of the “other,” whether internally (e.g., internally displaced people) or externally (e.g., migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers), and the refusal to support vulnerable populations (such as the elderly, marginalized, and deprived communities) all contribute to the advancement of both religious failure and state failure.

As figure 1 shows, religious failure and state failure are closely intertwined. The three areas, “private/public,” “institutional authority,” and “forced displacement,” serve as foundational elements in the narrative and rationale of both religious and state structures.

That forced displacement plays such a key role, mediating between religious failure and state failure, may seem unexpected. Forced displacement is a central component in the narrative of the ways in which humanitarian initiatives affect large segments of society. In *The Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, Michael Barnett identified two types of humanitarian action, namely emergency and alchemical. Emergency humanitarianism is promoted by agencies that “largely focus on keeping people alive,” such as Médecins Sans Frontières, while alchemical humanitarianism deals with “the root causes of suffering” and is endorsed by faith-based organizations,

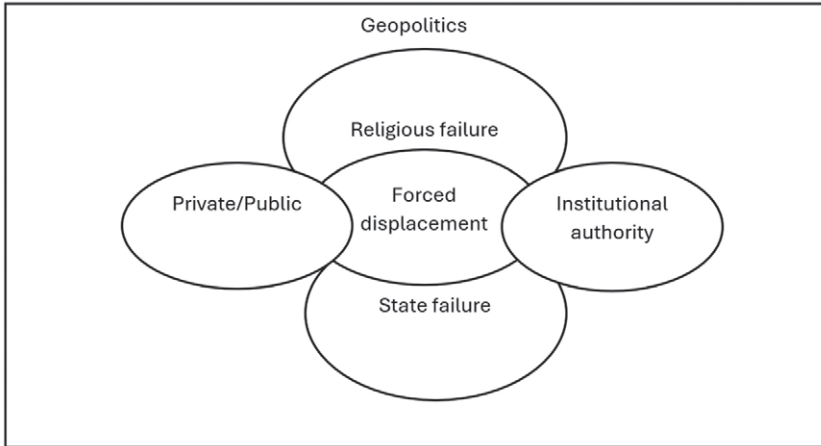


Figure 1. The interplay between religious failure, state failure, forced displacement, and geopolitics.

such as Oxfam, Catholic Relief Services, and CARE International.³³ Barnett's typology aligns with the Western model of religion-state relations; however, many *ad hoc* faith-based organizations in post-communist countries do not fit neatly into these categories. In predominantly Orthodox societies, characterized by close relations between religious institutions and state structures, with both diffusing authority and shaping the narrative of engaging with the "other," humanitarianism assumes a distinctly geopolitical form. What placed the Eastern Christian world apart from the West is the emergence of geopolitical humanitarianism, in which religion, state, power, and forced displacement are deeply interconnected. In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states, geopolitical humanitarianism embraces religion at its core and fosters strong social and political mobilization in support of populations in need.³⁴

33 Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

34 Lucian N. Leustean, ed., *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World* (London: Routledge, 2019); Lucian N. Leustean, ed., *Religion and Forced Displacement in the Eastern Orthodox World* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2020); Elizabeth H. Prodromou and Nathanael Symeonides, "Orthodox Christianity and Humanitarianism: An Introduction to Thought and Practice, Past and Present," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2016): 1–8; Elizabeth Prodromou, *Policy Brief: Religion and Migration in the Mediterranean and Europe: Human Mobility and Pluralizing Identities* (Medford, MA: Henry J. Leir Institute, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, 2018).

Geopolitical humanitarianism functions as an identity marker, distinguishing populations along ethnic and national lines, drawing upon religious and social networks, and reinterpreting ethnic and national mythologies by positioning historical religious figures as patrons of contemporary humanitarian organizations. Geopolitical humanitarianism becomes a strategic tool of communication for political leaders, influencing public opinion and reinforcing national narratives. As Gertjan Dijkink observed, geopolitics and religion shape each other, forming what he terms “religeopolitical codes.” These codes serve as powerful “incentives for mobilisation, [as] for the masses religion means an escape from the harsh reality of daily life, the promise of peace rather than war.”³⁵

Geopolitical humanitarianism offers a deeper lens through which to understand the concepts of “religion as geopolitics” and “religious geopolitics.”³⁶ As Tristan Sturm argued, religion itself can be seen as “a form of geopolitics. Both [“religion” and “geopolitics”] derive from and form a set of myths and ‘truths’ about the world, for which one must have faith.”³⁷ In the Eastern Christian world, this dynamic is vividly illustrated, from the blessing of Russian missile rockets and military trucks entering Ukraine to the conferal of religious honors and insignia upon state officials. In such settings, geopolitics constructed on religious foundations becomes an integral part of the social and political structures, reinforcing not only state authority but also contributing to religious failure, as religious institutions become entangled in nationalistic and militaristic agendas, compromising their spiritual and humanitarian activities.

Studies in geopolitics have traditionally marginalized the role of religion, often overlooking the significance of religious mobilization.³⁸ Although an increasing body of scholarship has sought to “bring back religion into international relations,” the interplay between religion, forced displacement, and geopolitics introduces a novel and pressing agenda for international relations theory.³⁹

35 Gertjan Dijkink, “When Geopolitics and Religion Fuse: A Historical Perspective,” *Geopolitics* 11, no. 2 (2011): 206.

36 Tristan Sturm, “The Future of Religious Geopolitics: Towards a Research and Theory Agenda,” *Area* 45, no. 2 (2013): 134–40.

37 Sturm, 139.

38 Gearóid Ó Tuathail, “Introduction: Thinking Critically about Geopolitics,” in *The Geopolitics Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby, and Paul Routledge (London: Routledge, 2006), 1–14.

39 Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos, eds., *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

In advancing geopolitics at both regional and global levels, religion increasingly becomes a component of human security, supporting and legitimizing state governance. For example, following the end of the Cold War, Russia introduced the concept of “spiritual security,” which gradually evolved into a distinctively religious framework. In 2018, during a visit to Belgrade, Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the Department of External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church, asserted that Serbia faced a choice between aligning with Russia and adopting the immigration policies of the European Union. The European Union was presented as an ideological entity that was leading to nothing less than the “suicide” of its own societies. The unusual discourse showed that Russian authorities aimed to influence the political trajectories of other predominantly Orthodox countries by promoting a geopolitical narrative rooted in spiritual security. It also reflected a strategic use of rising religious fundamentalism in Eastern European societies to advance Russia’s geopolitical interests.⁴⁰

From a theoretical perspective, the relationship between religious failure and state failure lies at the intersection of the English school and the Copenhagen school of international relations, both of which emphasize historical context, the international society of states, and human security. Attempting to separate religious failure from state failure risks obscuring the root causes of what makes and leads an entity to fail. In the Eastern Christian world, where religious failure and state failure are deeply intertwined with geopolitics, a comparative analysis of these failures, embedded in the socio-political and religious history of key actors, offers unique insights into underlying motivations, policy outcomes, and governance structures.

The Religious Failure Index: A Policy Measurement Toolkit in the Eastern Christian World

The Religious Failure Index provides a policy typology of religion-state relations by examining the ways in which faith-based institutions are prone to fail in their social engagement, both with their own faithful and with populations in need. It is not intended as a framework for debating moral or

40 François Thual, *Géopolitique de l'Orthodoxie* (Paris: Dunod, 1993); Jonathan Fox, *A World Survey of Religion and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou, eds., *Orthodox Constructions of the West* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); Davor Džalto and George E. Demacopoulos, eds., *Orthodoxy and Fundamentalism: Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Lexington Books and Fortress Academic, 2022).

theological arguments, nor is it a scholarly tool designed to exert political pressure. It is not a prescriptive policy formula that, when put into practice, guarantees the prevention of institutional failure, nor is it tailored to any specific world religion or historical period. The main aim of the index is to raise awareness of complex social and political intricacies that have the potential to lead to religious failure. As the interconnectedness between religious and state institutions deepens globally, it becomes increasingly important to consider the ways in which key indicators, used by both secular and religious structures, mutually influence one another. Ultimately, religious failure is an institutional phenomenon that can be addressed by identifying and responding to areas of concern shared by both the state and religious communities.

In their societal engagement with the faithful, the mobilization patterns of religious institutions are comparable to those of their secular counterparts. Fluctuating between providing societal support to populations in need, advancing their own religious values, or slowly losing societal influence, religious institutions are ultimately the product of their *hic et nunc* (here and now) engagement with organized society and state structures. The concept of religious failure is thus inherently contextual, linked to geographical locations at a specific point in time, and should be understood as part of a dynamic socio-political process rather than as a static or inevitable outcome. Due to their unique position at the intersection of the sacred and the profane, religious institutions do not align with conventional international indices of state failure, which are widely used in academic and public policy literature. Instead, the Religious Failure Index serves as a complementary tool, drawing on and enhancing insights from four indices related to state failure, namely, the Human Development Index by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism of the World Bank Group, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s Fragile States Report, and the Fragile States Index issued by the Fund for Peace.

As table 1 shows, the Religious Failure Index includes ten indicators divided among 1) social indicators; 2) securitization and legal indicators; 3) economic indicators; and 4) geopolitical indicators.

Table 1. The Religious Failure Index.

The Religious Failure Index	
I. Social indicators	1. Religious demography 2. Religious grievances
II. Securitization and legal indicators	3. Religious legitimacy 4. Religious elites 5. Religious jurisdiction and diaspora 6. Religious freedom
III. Economic indicators	7. Financial support 8. Religious welfare services
IV. Geopolitical indicators	9. Refugees and IDPs 10. Religious Nationalism

What sets the Religious Failure Index apart from other indices focused on state failure or fragility, such as those emphasizing social, economic, military, and political dimensions, is its prioritization of securitization and legal indicators, which are ranked immediately after social indicators. While most state failure indices place economic indicators at their core, often shaped by social conditions, the Religious Failure Index positions economic factors third in importance, reflecting the operational realities of faith-based organizations, which are less driven by economic imperatives than by social and moral missions. Most notably, the Religious Failure Index introduces a distinctive category of geopolitical indicators, which is absent or underdeveloped in conventional state fragility frameworks. This category includes two defining elements of the international system in the twenty-first century, namely refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) and religious nationalism. The two indicators reflect the growing interconnection between religion and global displacement crises, offering a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which religious institutions both influence and are affected by geopolitical dynamics.

I. Social indicators

1. Religious demography

The first category of social indicators comprises two factors, religious demography and religious grievances. Religious demographic outreach is supported by population censuses and serves to validate the social presence of the faithful. A distinction should be made between states that regularly conduct censuses to justify support for a particular religion and those that refrain from including religious affiliation in their population surveys. Religious demography is more difficult to quantify than state-imposed

demographic pressures. In several countries, despite the lack of publicly endorsed data on religious demographics, religious institutions operate within a societal balance that takes into account not only a specific number of believers but also fluctuations over time, spanning centuries and even millennia. For example, in the Christian world, the concept of the “church” is viewed through the lens of tradition and the historical presence or disappearance of a large number of believers. The concept of the “Christian church” implies that a religious community can endure regardless of the degree of persecution it faces over time, evolving to a position where a religious institution continues to exist despite holding only a handful of believers. For this reason, religious grievances, authority, and legitimacy are closely tied to patterns of population movements, even when the number of believers is minimal. In Eastern Orthodoxy, for example, the Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople comprises only a few thousand people, yet its authority extends across the entire Eastern Orthodox world. Religious demography decoupled from other indicators remains only a subject of sociological investigation, rather than a practical tool for understanding the influence exerted by religious institutions in a given territory.

As shown in table 2, during the Cold War period, despite religious persecution and state-imposed atheism, Orthodox churches retained considerable societal influence. By 1989, in Romania and Serbia, the number of clergy was even slightly higher than at the end of the Second World War, reflecting the advancement of national communism and the continued preservation of religious authority.

Table 2. Eastern Orthodoxy (population and congregations, 1945–1990).*

Country	Population ~ 1945	Population ~ 1990	Congregations ~ 1945	Congregations ~ 1990
Albania	1,115,350	3,138,100	450 clergy (1950)	0 clergy (1968)
Belarus	<i>See Russia/Soviet Union</i>	10,190,000	967 churches (1958)	900 churches (1995)
Bulgaria	7,029,349 (1946)	8,487,317 (1992)	3,024 clergy	900 priests (1989)
Czechoslovakia	14,151,970 (0.5 percent Orthodox in 1950)	15,592,086 (0.4 percent Orthodox in 1991)	259 churches (1950)	143 churches (1987)
Estonia	<i>See Russia/Soviet Union</i>	1,565,662 (1989)	123 churches (1958)	52 churches (1995)
Finland	68,000 Orthodox out of 4,030,000 total population (1950)	56,000 Orthodox out of 4,999,000 total population (1990)	33 churches (1945)	120 churches (1990)

Country	Population ~ 1945	Population ~ 1990	Congregations ~ 1945	Congregations ~ 1990
Georgia	4,044,000 (1959)	5,400,800 (1989)	29 churches (1945)	200 churches (1980)
Greece	7,632,801 (1950)	10,264,156 (1991)	7,150 clergy (1946)	9,682 clergy (1988)
Latvia	<i>See Russia/Soviet Union</i>	2,663,000	123 churches (1958)	100 churches (1995)
Lithuania	<i>See Russia/Soviet Union</i>	3,674,802 (1989)	55 churches (1958)	45 churches (1990)
Macedonia	1,152,986 (1948)	2,033,964 (1991)	200 clergy	560 clergy
Moldova	<i>See Russia/Soviet Union</i>	4,364,000	546 churches (1958)	190 churches (1995)
Romania	14,872,624 (1948)	22,810,035 (1992)	8,279 churches; 8,257 clergy (1930)	9,000 parishes; 9,000 clergy; 12,300 churches (1989)
Russia/ Soviet Union	162 million total population in the Soviet Union (1937)	73,670,000 Orthodox (49.7 percent) out of 148,292,000 total population in Russia (1990)	73 dioceses, 74 bishops in office; about 20,000 clergy; about 18,000 churches; 67 monasteries and convents; about 10,000 monks and nuns (1945)	70 dioceses; 70 bishops in office; 8,100 clergy; 9,374 churches; 35 monasteries and convents (1989)
Serbia	6,973,000 (1948)	9,038,000 (1991)	22 bishops; 1,860 clergy; 2,643 churches and chapels; 129 monasteries (1953)	25 bishops; 2,000 clergy; 3,000 churches and chapels; 194 monasteries (1986)

* Data from individual chapters in Lucian N. Leustean, ed., *Eastern Christianity and the Cold War, 1945-91* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Two decades later, as indicated in table 3, Eastern Christianity, as a world religion, was estimated to include between 262 and 319 million people in 2014, including not only churches in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states but also those spread across a wide geographical area where religious boundaries are in constant flux. Autonomous churches become autocephalous, religious missions extend the influence of national churches beyond traditional centers of power, and persecuted churches reshape conventional religion-state relations. Membership in the clergy signifies not only ecclesiastical leadership but also participation in a distinct social structure. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawehedo Church, for example, has

one of the largest numbers of clergy in the Christian world, while many Eastern Christian churches in Syria, China, and India do not disclose their membership figures due to local religious and political restrictions.

Table 3. Eastern Christianity in numbers, 2014 (approximate numbers; n/a = data not available).*

Eastern Christian Churches Worldwide	Church membership	Clergy
The Ecumenical Patriarchate (data for all jurisdictions)	5,255,000	n/a
The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch	542,000	n/a
The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem	39,000	n/a
The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria	10,000	n/a
The Russian Orthodox Church	App. 107,210,100 to 164.100,000	33,174
The Serbian Orthodox Church	8,500,000	2,000
The Romanian Orthodox Church	18,800,000	14,530
The Bulgarian Orthodox Church	5,758,301	1,280
The Georgian Orthodox Church	3,835,013	1,000
The Orthodox Church of Cyprus	553,635	707
The Orthodox Church of Greece	10,744,390	8,515
The Polish Orthodox Church	509,500	284
The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania	190,483	149
The Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia	75,605	187
Eastern churches in America (data for all jurisdictions)	1,043,800	n/a
The Church of the Sinai	800	n/a
The Finnish Orthodox Church (Ecumenical Patriarchate)	58,000	43
The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (Ecumenical Patriarchate)	27,000	31
The Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate	4,092,045	9,922
The Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate	5,593,713	3,088
The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church	375,417	730
The Latvian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)	285,039	88
The Estonian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)	200,000	39
Orthodox churches in Moldova	3,383,332	n/a
The Macedonian Orthodox Church	1,310,184	850
The Belarusian Orthodox Church	4,618,137	1,485
The Orthodox Church in Lithuania	125,189	47
Orthodox faithful in China	13,000	n/a
The Orthodox Church in Japan	30,000	n/a

Eastern Christian Churches Worldwide	Church membership	Clergy
Eastern churches in Australia (data for all jurisdictions)	583,986	n/a
The Armenian Apostolic Church	11,030,400	500
The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawehedo Church	32,138,126	190,000
The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church	3,128,000	15,000
The Syrian Orthodox Church	500,000	n/a
The Coptic Orthodox Church	5,000,000	n/a
Syrian churches in India	8,000,000	n/a
The Assyrian Church of the East	400,000	n/a
Eastern Catholic churches	17,539,432	n/a
Other Eastern churches	1,000,000	n/a
Eastern Christianity	262-319 million	

* Data has been collected from individual chapters in Lucian N. Leustean, ed., *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2014); David B. Barrett, George Thomas Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *Encyclopaedia of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Ronald G. Roberson, "The Eastern Christian Churches," *Annuario Pontificio*, 2007, published on the Website of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA), <https://cnewa.org/eastern-christian-churches/orthodox-church/>. If unofficial church figures are included, such as around 164.1 million for the Russian Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Eastern Christianity counts over 319 million people.

2. *Religious grievances*

Religious grievances accumulated over time have a direct impact on societal structures. Interfaith tensions, religious distrust following ethnic lines, and a one-sided view of religious exceptionalism at the expense of other faith-based communities add weight to the ways in which religious institutions engage with one another. National censuses provide not just a snapshot into religious demography but also insights into underlying religious grievances. Shifts in religious demographics can easily spark interfaith tensions, particularly when they are perceived as resulting from increased proselytism or a decline in societal support for certain communities.

The social and political structure of the Eastern Christian world has historically shown that churches emerged as integral components of nation-building processes. During the Cold War period, amid severe religious persecutions in Eastern Europe, communist authorities viewed the Eastern Catholic churches and the Roman Catholic Church, rather than the Orthodox, as the primary religious challengers to political authority. Eastern Catholic churches were officially banned and incorporated into the structure of Orthodox churches. Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, democratic regimes enabled previously persecuted churches to gain official recognition, which in turn led to strained relations between Catholic and

Orthodox communities, in particular in relation to church property, legal disputes over spiritual authority, and the number of adherents.

At the inter-Orthodox level, the religious authority of key actors has become a controversial issue with political ramifications. The Ecumenical Patriarchate's recognition of the independence of the Estonian Orthodox Church in exile and the Orthodox Church in Ukraine diminished the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate in the region. Since 2018, the two patriarchates have not been in official communion, a rift that has polarized other Orthodox churches. Furthermore, the Russian Orthodox Church's interactions with foreign counterparts have revealed blurred lines between clerical activities and security services abroad. Russian clergy have repeatedly accused the Ecumenical Patriarchate of receiving support from American religious and political institutions and of actively acting against the interests of the Russian state. Tensions between the two patriarchates are expected to persist in the coming years, with no solution in sight, reflecting the geopolitical rivalries among global powers.

II. Securitization and legal indicators

3. *Religious legitimacy*

The second category, securitization and legal indicators, comprises four indicators, namely religious legitimacy, religious elites, religious jurisdiction and diaspora, and religious freedom. In religious contexts, securitization and legal frameworks are closely intertwined due to their shared engagement with state structures in projecting power.

Religious legitimacy and state support go hand in hand. Legitimacy is constructed by secular and religious elites, who advance interpretations of religious tenets aligned with the identity and interests of their nation-state. When legitimacy decreases, as mistrust in religious norms and values grows, state authorities embrace the religious community eager to assume a prominent societal role. For instance, in the early years following the communist takeover of predominantly Orthodox countries in Eastern Europe, the legitimacy of the Greek Catholic churches, seen as closely aligned with Rome and Western Europe, was called into question with churches being abolished and integrated into the structures of Orthodox churches. As a result, the religious legitimacy once held by Greek Catholic leaders was publicly dismissed by communist authorities as obsolete, while mechanisms of dissent suppression and institutional control intensified.

4. *Religious elites*

The composition and the appointing mechanism of religious elites play a crucial role in shaping religion-state relations and can directly contribute to religious failure. Factionalized religious elites pose significant challenges to the everyday functioning of institutional religion. When religious elites compete for societal and political power, state authorities often gain the upper hand in asserting control. Rivalry among religious leaders for hierarchical positions, especially when supported by state institutions, ultimately contributes to religious failure. In such cases, state institutions are able to appoint a candidate who aligns with secular leadership strategies rather than serving the interests of the religious community. The fractionalization of religious elites becomes particularly pronounced during periods when religious values lose societal relevance and social norms dominate. For example, in Bulgaria, public acknowledgment of collaboration between religious leaders and communist authorities during the communist era, coupled with the failure to implement a lustration process after 1989, led to the fragmentation of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, resulting in the formation of a parallel church structure titled the Alternative Synod. Divisions among Bulgarian religious elites persisted until 2015, when the Alternative Synod was reunited with the mainstream church following mediation and pressure from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and state authorities.

5. *Religious jurisdiction and diaspora*

Religious jurisdiction and diaspora reflect not only the interests of religious communities in administering the faithful beyond national borders but also those of state institutions in maintaining the allegiance and identity of citizens abroad. Defining lines of religious authority outside traditional state control has often been controversial. Religious institutions rely on legal principles (such as canon law in the Christian tradition), historical customs, and doctrinal norms to assert faith-based territorial boundaries, with religious jurisdiction playing a particularly important role in the recognition of other religious institutions. The implications are not only domestic and financial but also extend to establishing religious links between newly formed communities and international affairs. For example, the international recognition of the national Orthodox Church of Ukraine by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2019, and subsequently by other Orthodox churches in the region, stood in direct opposition to the geopolitical interests of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian state. Similarly, the establishment of new Orthodox parishes in Western Europe in response to population movements in the European Union has intensified religious

competition, while in Canada and the United States, Orthodox communities remain largely fragmented between the jurisdictions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and those of the Moscow Patriarchate.

6. *Religious freedom*

Religious freedom operates at both individual and institutional levels. States are the ultimate arbiters of religious norms and legal values, shaping the structure and function of religious institutions. At the same time, religious institutions act as a barometer for assessing the ways in which state legislation aligns with the principles of freedom of religion and belief. When a one-sided version of religious freedom is promoted, excluding the participation of other religious communities, religious institutions become focused exclusively on the sacred realm, detached from social realities, and ultimately subject to the influence of political authorities. As Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke demonstrated, both states and religious communities actively participate in advocating for religious freedom, and restrictions often lead to increased organized violence and persecution.⁴¹ Following Russia's occupation of Crimea and the Donbas region, Protestant and Muslim communities faced difficulty registering with the new authorities, while, similarly, in Belarus and Russia, minority religious communities frequently faced harassment and discrimination.

III. Economic indicators

7. *Financial support*

Economic indicators are twofold, namely, the financial support a religious institution receives from both the faithful and the state budget and the structure of its economic welfare services. Religious institutions benefit from varying degrees of financial provision. In many cases, national legislation stipulates that state funding is allocated only to officially recognized religious communities. Some religious institutions are fully supported by the state, which may cover clergy salaries and the construction of places of worship. In contrast, other religious groups, often perceived as outsiders challenging the religious *status quo*, face additional financial burdens related to registration and operation. At the same time, religious institutions generate revenues from their faithful through regular donations or religious taxes. The establishment of economic structures enhances a religious institution's

41 Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

societal standing, not only during periods of religious renewal but also in times of persecution. For example, during the Cold War period, religious institutions behind the Iron Curtain were permitted to operate workshops, projecting an image of religious freedom abroad, allowing them to benefit from limited financial resources while maintaining a degree of institutional resilience.

When Western leaders visited communist Romania, the workshops established around monastic centers were showcased as successful examples of religious communities adapting to socialist realities. Notably, after the fall of communism, religious institutions that had held a privileged position within the legal system of religion-state relations advanced their own economic standing by receiving tax-exempt donations and gaining access to state financial resources. The transition from a centralized market economy to a competitive one also reshaped the operational models of religious institutions. In former communist countries, faith-based organizations developed their own economic programs, ranging from small-scale charitable initiatives to large educational establishments. These efforts not only capitalized on the evolving economic landscape but also had a lasting impact on societal progress.

8. *Religious welfare services*

Religious welfare services emerge from the integration of societal, legal, and economic indicators and represent a distinctive means of advancing moral values. Humanitarian programs are at the heart of the social services provided by religious institutions, showcasing their outreach, impact, and influence within local communities. Competition for funding, the identification of welfare needs, and the public administration of services are all mechanisms through which religion-state relations evolve over time. In many cases, religious welfare services receive support from state authorities and directly serve political agendas. Support becomes particularly relevant during times of military conflict, when welfare programs are subsidized by opposing parties. For example, in both Russia and Ukraine, Orthodox churches have been actively engaged in providing support to frontline populations, reflecting the strategic use of religious institutions.

IV. **Geopolitical indicators**

9. *Refugees and IDPs*

The fourth category of geopolitical indicators concerns the interplay between refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and religious nationalism.

Forcibly displaced populations place significant pressure on both religious and secular structures at any given time. As evidenced by the personal experiences of displaced individuals, the extent to which they are welcomed or excluded in the new environment carries religious and secular ramifications. Migration patterns are thus closely linked to other indicators, such as demographic shifts and the establishment of diasporic communities.

Religious institutions maintain direct contact with the faithful across borders and adapt to migration challenges by organizing support for those in need. As with other world religions, migration and forced displacement have been integral to the historical development of Eastern Christianity. As societal entities, Eastern Christian churches have evolved through the missionary activities of ecclesiastical centers of power, the intervention of state authorities, and the merging of religious jurisdictions. Following the 2011 Arab Spring and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the arrival of refugees and IDPs in predominantly Eastern Orthodox countries has been both a challenge and an opportunity for religious communities. A key societal norm in these contexts is the perception of churches as social and political institutions that "defend the nation," a concept holding secular and spiritual overtones. Refugees and IDPs have tested this notion, being portrayed either as threats to the Orthodox national identity or as vulnerable faith communities deserving national solidarity and protection. In Bulgaria, for example, the church hierarchy condemned the arrival of refugees, framing it as the defense against a so-called "Muslim invasion." In the Republic of Moldova, religious and state authorities invoked a mythical past under Saint Stephen the Great (1457–1504) to oppose the settlement of Syrian refugees and to encourage support for pro-Russian "Orthodox candidates" in parliamentary and presidential elections.

The most dramatic instance of religious mobilization in response to IDPs occurred in Ukraine following Russia's takeover of Crimea in 2014. The tumultuous ecclesiastical boundaries between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) gave rise to four key humanitarian themes in the discourse of religious leaders from both churches.

First, the public perception regarding the ways in which churches engaged with humanitarian programs was important. Due to fears of proselytism and longstanding Orthodox-Catholic disputes, the UOC-MP declined to participate in joint humanitarian programs with the Greek Catholic Church and Caritas Ukraine, and instead, the UOC-MP hierarchs presented themselves as the primary defenders of Ukrainian Orthodoxy, claiming that the conflict in Donbas was nothing less than civil war. In contrast,

the UOC-KP condemned Russia as a military aggressor and promoted a different military narrative, which enabled a direct link between the church's social work and the defense and construction of the Ukrainian nation-state building. Second, defining IDPs as belonging exclusively to one Orthodox denomination proved problematic. After 2014, Ukrainian Orthodox churches became torn by the population movement between Crimea and Donbas and the western region. The UOC-KP recognized that its limited humanitarian resources hindered its engagement with the faithful and began fostering ecumenical programs supported by the Greek Catholic Church and Caritas Ukraine. Meanwhile, the UOC-MP refused to collaborate with the UOC-KP on humanitarian efforts, citing its "schismatic" status. Most importantly, with the population movement, lower- and higher-level UOC-KP clergy suddenly found themselves as IDPs as well. The UOC-KP Metropolitan of Donetsk and Mariupol, Serhiy (Horobtsov), was forced to relocate his church's headquarters to the Ukrainian-controlled Mariupol while maintaining contact with the faithful behind military lines, thus officially becoming an IDP. Third, on a personal level, being an IDP initially elicited sympathy and support from ordinary Ukrainians. However, over time, public attitudes shifted, and people gradually began to distrust IDPs, viewing them as a societal burden, while simultaneously, IDPs started to criticize the government for the prolonged war. Fourth, Orthodox churches retained the allegiance and support of the faithful behind military lines. Engaging in humanitarian work in Donbas required maintaining direct ties with the population and territories affected by violence and conflict. When referring to military demarcation, clergy from both churches used the term "grey zone" (сіра зона) (*sira zona*) rather than the term used by mass media or government sources, "buffer zone" (буферна зона) (*buferna zona*), endorsing the idea that the area was contested not only militarily but also religiously.

Religious humanitarian support continued following Russia's 2022 invasion, expanding both in Ukraine and Western Europe. With large segments of the Ukrainian population either under Russia's control or displaced, the Moscow Patriarchate established its own humanitarian structures, paralleling military advances on the battlefields and the occupation of Ukrainian territory.

Distrust between the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU, which replaced UOC-KP) and UOC-MP persisted, with each church maintaining its own humanitarian network. OCU military chaplains continued their work on the battlefield and provided spiritual support to troops engaged in combat, establishing a psychological helpline. The initiative was particularly

sensitive. Prior to 2018, a significant number of soldiers died by suicide, though official figures were not publicly released by state authorities. In 2018, Chief Military Prosecutor Anatoliy Matios reported that 554 soldiers had taken their lives that year; however, it was widely believed that the actual number of cases was more than double. Father Sergiy Dmitriev, head of the OCU's Department of Social Service and Charity and a military chaplain himself, emphasized the importance of compassion for the families of those who died by suicide while serving. In a departure from Orthodox practice, which traditionally forbade clergy from conducting burials in sacred ground or offering prayers, Father Dmitriev encouraged his fellow clergymen to recognize the exceptional circumstances, advising, "Go there and pray and say a few good words. Read the Lord's Prayer. The family will not know whether it is the full burial service or not."⁴²

The innovative approach of the OCU clergy in engaging with the military proved effective and significantly shaped the church's societal mission. In the early months of the military campaign, the OCU emerged as one of the most vocal religious institutions condemning Russia's invasion while at the same time encouraging public support for national defense. The conflict also presented a potential opportunity for the OCU and the UOC-MP to unify into one ecclesiastical body; however, contradictory messages and acrimony between church leaders prevailed.⁴³ As a result, tensions between the two churches prevented the realization of joint humanitarian initiatives, while the OCU's Department of Social Service and Charity gained recognition as the most trusted Orthodox humanitarian organization operating on the frontline.

In 2022, a sociological survey carried out by the Razumkov Center, with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation Representation in Ukraine, revealed a strong correlation between humanitarian engagement and the OCU's initiatives. When asked, "What are the primary tasks for religious associations during the war?" the majority of respondents aligned their answers with OCU's humanitarian initiatives—namely, 54 percent identified with "the provision of psychological assistance," and 45.5 percent cited

42 Joel Gunter, "How suicide became the hidden toll of the war in Ukraine," *BBC*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60318298>.

43 Tetiana Kalenychenko and Denys Brylov, "Ukrainian Religious Actors and Organizations after Russia's Invasion: The Struggle for Peace," Berkley Center, September 13, 2022, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/ukrainian-religious-actors-and-organizations-after-russia-s-invasion-the-struggle-for-peace>.

“assistance to the Armed Forces of Ukraine.”⁴⁴ The scale of public involvement was striking: 74 percent reported providing material assistance to IDPs, 73 percent supported military personnel, 59 percent offered shelter to displaced individuals, 41 percent distributed humanitarian aid from abroad, and 28 percent helped establish bomb shelters on the premises of religious institutions. As a whole, Ukrainian society was changing, with 59 percent of the population holding a positive view of the church’s role, a significant increase from just 40 percent only two years earlier.

10. *Religious Nationalism*

Religious nationalism, as a geopolitical indicator, is inherently multifaceted. It bridges the past and the present by underscoring the enduring role of religion in the construction of the modern state and its position in the international system of states. Religious figures drawn from national mythology, along with political references to religious histories, have enabled state authorities to advance geopolitical agendas. For example, Russia’s canonization of Tsar Nicholas II (1894–1917) and his family in 2000 coincided with a growing alignment between church and state in promoting the geopolitical concept of the traditional family, which has become a cornerstone of Russia’s foreign policy and resonated with far-right political movements globally. The ideological doctrine of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationalism,” originally formulated in the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century, has found renewed support under President Vladimir Putin, with the state and the Russian Orthodox Church directly pursuing and displaying geopolitical ambitions.

Religious nationalism can take on a militarized form, characterized by the direct control of religious institutions and the infusion of religious ideology into the structures and operations of state security institutions. Not only is the state able to control the appointment of religious leaders, who act as facilitators of state interests, but the entire society becomes militarized, a process actively supported by religious institutions. Political control over religious institutions manifests itself in various ways, including the employment of clergy in state security services, the deployment of chaplains to the front lines, and the blessing of troops and military equipment in the name of religious nationalism. In contemporary Russia, the militarization

44 “Війна і Церква: Церковно-релігійна ситуація в Україні 2022р. (листопад 2022р.)” [War and the Church: Church and religious situation in Ukraine in 2022. (November 2022)], Razumkov Tsentr, February 16, 2023, <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/viina-i-tserkva-tserkovnoreligiina-sytuatsiia-v-ukraini-2022r-lystopad-2022r>.

of religion has become a persistent feature of public life, with Orthodox clergy playing a prominent role in youth programs across the country and promoting narratives that glorify the defense of the motherland and the Orthodox faith.

Religious nationalism is not solely an inward-facing state process; it is also prone to externalization. The external dimension can manifest through direct intervention, such as when a religious community from one geographical area occupies the places of worship of another, or through diplomatic pressure exerted via international channels. One of the most dramatic outcomes of such intervention is the phenomenon of “collapsed religion,” wherein an external religious institution entirely supplants existing structures. For example, following Russia’s occupation of Crimea and the Donbas region, religious communities not sanctioned by the state faced severe repression. Their assets were confiscated, and their activities were banned, including communities such as Jehovah’s Witnesses communities, various Protestant and neo-Protestant groups, and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. At the same time, senior hierarchs of the Moscow Patriarchate acted as unofficial diplomatic envoys, advancing state interests through their interactions with both religious and secular institutions abroad.

2. Russia's Orthodox Exceptionalism, Geopolitics, and Forced Displacement

Abstract: The chapter discusses the role played by the Russian Orthodox Church in advancing geopolitics, authority, and exceptionalism. It examines the main patterns of religion-state relations in the Eastern Orthodox world from the end of the Second World War until today and focuses on the following areas of investigation: the idea of an Orthodox civilization and the “Russian world,” the Orthodox mobilization in the European Union, the advancement of the concept of “spiritual security,” interfaith relations in the Middle East and Africa, the impact of the 2016 Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church, and the response of the Moscow Patriarchate to Russia's 2014 and 2022 military invasion of Ukraine in dealing with the arrival of forcibly displaced populations.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church; Security; War; Diplomacy; Cold War; Forced Displacement.

On October 1, 1939, in his first wartime broadcast, Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, delivered what would become an inspirational speech to rally the British nation in anticipation of a long war. After assessing the hostilities in Europe and condemning the military occupation of Poland by Germany and the Soviet Union, he presented his view of Russian history and geopolitical ambitions as follows: “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.”¹ Two ideas are particularly poignant in Churchill's quote, “Russia as an enigma” and

¹ “Winston Churchill's First Wartime Broadcast, 1 October 1939,” *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/anniversaries/october/winston-churchills-first-wartime-broadcast>.

“Russian national interest,” and the association of these two concepts has remained potent since then.

In 2012, while *The New York Times* reported that E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* ranked number one for the entire year, spending 28 weeks at the top of the US bestseller list,² a completely different book held the top spot in Russia, *Everyday Saints and Other Stories*, an autobiography by Russian Archimandrite Tikhon (Shevkunov). Published in 2011, the book won the Book of the Year award in Moscow and the Russian Internet Award, while by 2019, it had sold over three million copies in Russia and had been translated into 17 languages. The book recounted miracles that occurred within the Russian Orthodox Church, referencing real events and notable religious and political figures, including President Boris Yeltsin (1931–2007) and Marshal Georgy Zhukov (1896–1974), the top Soviet military commander during the Second World War. Although President Vladimir Putin was not mentioned in the book, unofficial accounts have claimed that Father Tikhon was his spiritual advisor (*dukhovnik*). In a 2001 interview, Father Tikhon did not confirm these rumors but instead shared his thoughts on Putin's personal faith, emphasizing that “he really is an Orthodox Christian, not just nominally, but a person who makes confession, takes communion, and understands his responsibility before God for the high service entrusted to him and for his immortal soul.”³

The two comparative snapshots, from 1939 and 2012, share one significant element in common, namely, that in the West, Russia continues to be viewed as an “enigma,” where the interplay between Orthodoxy and politics remains deeply embedded in national imagination and societal mobilization.

The Moscow Patriarchate

The Christianization of Kyivan Rus' dates back to the end of the first millennium. In 988, Prince Vladimir the Great (978–1015) sent a diplomatic mission to the Byzantine Empire, which led to the baptism of his family and the population. The local church established its headquarters in Kyiv, and the Orthodox Metropolitanate remained under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate until 1686. In 1299, under pressure from the

2 “Combined Print & E-Book Fiction,” *The New York Times*, November 18, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2012/11/18/combined-print-and-e-book-fiction/>.

3 Charles Clover, “Putin and the Monk,” *Financial Times*, January 25, 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/f2fcb3e-65be-11e2-a3db-00144feab49a>.

Mongols, Metropolitan Maximus (1283–1305) relocated the Church's residence to Vladimir; a few decades later, in 1325, his successor, Metropolitan Peter (1308–1326), moved the headquarters to Moscow. During efforts to unify the Catholic and Orthodox churches at the Council of Florence (1438–1449), several Orthodox hierarchs signed the union documents. Across the Orthodox East, upon returning to their territories, many of the signatories were accused of apostasy and subsequently lost their positions. Metropolitan Isidore of Kyiv (1437–1441) was deposed, and in protest against the Ecumenical Patriarchate, a local synod appointed Jonah of Moscow (1448–1461).

In 1448, in an attempt to expand ecclesiastical authority, Jonah separated his church from the Metropolis of Kyiv and All Rus', declared independence (autocephaly), and established the Metropolis of Moscow and All Russia. It took until 1589 for Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremias II (1572–1579; 1580–1584; 1587–1595) to formally recognize Russian autocephaly by elevating the Moscow church to the rank of a patriarchate, and Metropolitan Job of Moscow (1587–1605) was then granted the title of Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus'. Between 1652 and 1666, a major schism occurred within the church over liturgical reforms initiated by Patriarch Nikon of Moscow (1652–1666), leading to a split, with dissenters forming a group known as the Old Believers (or Old Ritualists). The patriarchate continued uninterrupted until the reign of Tsar Peter the Great (1682–1725), and, in 1721, instead of appointing a new patriarch, Peter established the Holy and Supreme Synod, headed by a lay chief procurator (*Ober-Prokuror*), a member of the tsar's cabinet who assumed control over religious affairs.

Running the church remained in the hands of state officials until the 1917 Russian Revolution, when the abdication of the tsar allowed a local council, composed of more than half lay members, to restore the patriarchate.⁴ The first patriarch, Tikhon (Bellavin) (1917–1925), sought to secure the church's independence in its dealings with the Bolshevik-controlled government during the Russian Civil War. Following the proclamation of the Soviet

4 Gregory L. Freeze, "Subversive Piety: Religion and the Political Crisis in Late Imperial Russia," *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 2 (1996): 308–50; Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Simon Dixon, "The Russian Orthodox Church in Imperial Russia, 1721–1917," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 5, *Eastern Christianity*, ed. Michael Angold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 325–47; Hyacinthe Destivelle, *The Moscow Council (1917–1918): The Creation of the Conciliar Institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church*, ed. Michael Plekon and Vitaly Permiakov, trans. Jerry Ryan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015); Simon Dixon, "Orthodoxy and Revolution: The Restoration of the Russian Patriarchate in 1917," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 28 (2018): 149–74; Nadieszda Kizenko, *Good for the Souls: A History of Confession in the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Union in December 1922, the regime implemented a systematic policy of religious persecution and the removal of religion from public life. After Tikhon's death in 1925, the communist authorities refused to recognize a new patriarch, with Metropolitan Sergius (Stragorodsky) (1925–1943) serving as *locum tenens* (acting patriarch). His leadership and cooperation with the atheist Soviet authorities were challenged by Russian Orthodox hierarchs abroad, who established the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), which operated primarily in Western Europe.

The 1941 attack by Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union marked a significant shift in religion-state relations, as Soviet leaders sought to involve the church in the war effort. Despite widespread religious persecution during the interwar period, the Russian Orthodox Church gained a renewed role in state policy. The 1937 census revealed that attachment to religious institutions remained strong, and the Orthodox hierarchy's anti-German nationalist stance contributed to public resistance and, ultimately, to both military and political mobilization.

On September 5, 1943, Joseph Stalin held an audience with the remaining Orthodox hierarchs in Moscow, Metropolitans Sergius (Stragorodsky), Aleksii (Simansky), and Nikolay (Yarushevich), and granted permission for the church to convene a synod and appoint a new patriarch. Just days later, Metropolitan Sergius was elevated to the rank of patriarch, and the church became actively involved in disseminating propagandistic messages in defense of the country. The patriarchate was allowed to reopen several churches, and religious practices experienced a significant revival. According to Soviet estimates, between 20 and 27 million civilians and military personnel perished during the Second World War, with some scholars placing the figure as high as 42 million—the highest death toll among all belligerent countries.⁵ The legacy of the immense human loss has continued to shape public memory and political ideology for generations.

Orthodoxy and the Cold War: Adaptation and Survival

The most significant shift in Soviet religion-state relations was the internationalization of the Moscow Patriarchate, which enabled the Soviet Union to exert influence in the wider Orthodox world. In Eastern Europe, communist regimes installed by Moscow encountered societies where religious traditions remained deeply rooted. By fostering ecclesiastical ties

5 Leonid Bershidsky, "A Message to Putin from 42 Million Dead," *Bloomberg*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-05-10/a-message-to-putin-from-42-million-dead>.

with Orthodox counterparts throughout the region, Moscow extended its reach not only through military and political means but also by reshaping religious structures. In April 1945, the Soviet church sent delegations to Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, followed by missions to Romania in May 1945 and to Belgrade in 1946, while that same year, Patriarch Aleksii I visited the ancient Orthodox patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria, expanding Russian influence in the Middle East. Furthermore, in response to growing dissent, Russian Orthodox clergy courted diaspora communities in France, Britain, and the United States.

External church relations were facilitated by the newly established Department of External Church Affairs in 1946, initially headed by Metropolitan Nikolay (Yarushevich) (1892–1961), holding the largest staff within the patriarchate and acting as direct liaison between the church and state institutions. The privileged status of the Russian Orthodox Church came at the expense of other religious communities in the Soviet Union. The Orthodox churches of Latvia, Estonia, and Georgia were brought under Russian jurisdiction, while the Polish Orthodox Church was granted autocephalous status, severing its previous ties to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The pattern of granting autocephaly extended to Czechoslovakia, which had a small Orthodox minority, and in 1953, it expanded further with the recognition of the Bulgarian Orthodox Patriarchate.

The appointment of Orthodox hierarchs in Eastern Europe often followed mandatory visits to Moscow. Metropolitan Timothy (Jerzy Szretter) of the Polish Orthodox Church (1938–1961) visited Moscow in July 1948 and was appointed head of his church in November of that year. Metropolitan Justinian (Marina) of Romania (1948–1977) visited in October 1946 and became patriarch in May 1948, while Bishop Paisi (Vodica) from Albania (1949–1966) visited in January 1948 and was named head of the Albanian Orthodox Church in August 1949. The pattern of extending religious influence abroad was closely tied to strategies of religious persecution and political control in the Soviet Union's satellite states in Eastern Europe.

Between 1945 and 1950, the Greek Catholic churches across Eastern Europe were systematically disbanded, with their communities forcibly incorporated into Orthodox structures. Ukrainian Greek Catholic clergy were exiled, imprisoned, or deported to forced labor camps in Siberia. All seven Romanian Greek Catholic bishops died either in prison or under house arrest. In Czechoslovakia, Slovak Greek Catholic clergy signed a declaration requesting unification with the Moscow Patriarchate, and the bishops were subsequently imprisoned. In parallel, in July 1948, the Moscow Patriarchate convened a Pan-Orthodox conference in Moscow to commemorate the 500th

anniversary of Russian autocephaly, aiming “to unite Orthodox churches into one spiritual nation” and attended by hierarchs from the “people’s democracies.”⁶ After the exposition of theological presentations carefully orchestrated by Soviet authorities, the conference issued an “Appeal to All Christians,” portraying Orthodoxy as the only faith aligned with peace and progress under the new political order, while condemning the Roman Catholic Church and the West as irreconcilably separated from the East.

In the Soviet Union, the appointment of religious leaders was closely monitored and controlled by state security officials. Beginning in 1943, Orthodox clergy, from the highest ranks to local parish priests, were vetted and confirmed by the Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs (CROCA), headed by Colonel Georgii G. Karpov. Other religious communities were overseen by the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, established in 1944 and headed by Colonel Ivan Vasilyevich Polyansky. In 1965, the two bodies were merged into a single institution and renamed the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), under the leadership of Colonel Karpov. In his description of the qualities sought by state authorities in religious appointments, Karpov summarized state policy as follows: “The council is not interested in having diocesan bishops in the USSR who would be energetic and theologically educated men. A certain number of cultured and theologically educated hierarchs is necessary; however, for the church’s work abroad and to represent the church [to foreigners].”⁷

The anti-religious campaign intensified significantly in the late 1950s under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev (1953–1964), with more than 5,000 churches and chapels, nearly half of all religious sites in the country, being closed, to the extent that in 1965, only 7,873 churches remained open. The patriarchate was forced to shut down five of its eight theological seminaries, and the number of functioning monasteries dropped from 63 in 1959 to just 18 in 1965.⁸ Public religious expressions, such as pilgrimages and the tolling of church bells, were banned, and children were prohibited from attending religious services. Religious persecution extended across the Eastern Bloc, affecting various faith communities. In Ukraine, over 80 percent of the clergy were imprisoned, while in Latvia and Lithuania, 30 percent faced similar fates. Religious persecution behind the Iron Curtain was downplayed by

6 For a discussion of the 1948 Pan-Orthodox Conference, see Daniela Kalkandjieva, *The Russian Orthodox Church, 1917–1948: From Decline to Resurrection* (London: Routledge, 2015), 20.

7 Tatiana A. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*, ed. and trans. Edward E. Roslof (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 116.

8 Chumachenko, 187–88.

the church leaders of three Orthodox churches, the Russian, Romanian, and Bulgarian, which became members of the World Council of Churches (WCC) with headquarters in Geneva in 1961. In addition, in the late 1950s, in opposition to the establishment of the Western-based Conference of European Churches, the Orthodox and Protestant churches behind the Iron Curtain established a propagandistic Christian Peace Conference in Prague, which aligned with the political agendas of their respective governments and condemned the nuclear arms race.

In December 1965, two Russian Orthodox priests, Father Nikolai Eshliman and Father Gleb Yakunin, sent letters criticizing the church hierarchy for the closure of churches and the lack of formal condemnation of religious persecution. A *samizdat* ("self-published") underground press started to circulate behind the Iron Curtain and gained international attention. In 1972, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote a "Lenten Letter" to Patriarch Pimen (Izvekov) (1971–1990), which was published in *The New York Times* and reached a global audience, voicing the growing frustration among intellectuals over the church's failure to oppose the Soviet regime, stating that "The Russian Church has its indignant opinion on every evil in distant Asia or Africa, yet on internal ills, it has none, ever. Why are the messages which we receive from the church hierarchy traditionally tranquil?"⁹

The 1975 Helsinki Accords, signed by 35 countries, marked a significant turning point in easing Cold War tensions. The Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States not only affirmed the political *status quo* between East and West but, more importantly, included a commitment to the "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief" as one of its core principles. The declaration indirectly supported religious dissent, and *samizdat* literature intensified behind the Iron Curtain. In 1979, Father Gleb Yakunin was arrested for sending letters to religious leaders in Western Europe, in which he documented the persecution of Christians in the Soviet Union. He was released in 1987 during Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms and was allowed to resume his clerical duties.

Between May and June 1988, the Soviet Union celebrated the 1000th Anniversary of the Christianization of Rus', an event that began as a church initiative but ultimately signaled a shift in state policy. By the end of that year, between 800 and 4,000 parishes had been reopened, and the country experienced a religious revival marked by the establishment

9 Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, "A Lenten Letter," translated by Ludmilla Thorne, *The New York Times*, April 9, 1972, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/04/09/archives/a-lenten-letter.html>.

of new monasteries and theological institutes.¹⁰ As communist regimes across Eastern Europe began to collapse, a historic meeting took place on December 1, 1989, in Rome, where Pope John Paul II (1978-2005) welcomed Mikhail Gorbachev, general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. During the meeting, Gorbachev acknowledged the sweeping religious transformations occurring across the Soviet bloc, stating that:

We are undergoing major changes in the spiritual sphere. We would like to achieve our goals by democratic means. However, considering the events of the past years I see that democratic measures alone are not sufficient. We also need ethics. Democracy can bring evil as well as good. It is what it is. It is very important to us to establish a moral society with such eternal universal human truths as goodness, charity, and mutual help. In light of the changes taking place we believe that it is necessary to respect the internal world of our religious citizens. We especially feel this way about our Orthodox population because so much has been destroyed. The majority of believers in our country—including the Orthodox, Muslims, and Catholics—support *perestroika*. In the near future the USSR Supreme Soviet will pass the freedom of conscience law. We are interested in having different religions contribute to the renewal and humanization of our society.¹¹

On December 25, 1991, the Soviet emblem atop the Kremlin was replaced by the Russian flag, symbolizing the official dissolution of the Soviet Union. Boris Yeltsin became the first president of an independent Russia, which retained the largest share of the former Soviet population. If in 1990, the Soviet Union had a population of approximately 288.6 million, the 2021 census showed that Russia's population stood at 147.2 million, with significant numbers of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers residing across the former Soviet republics.¹² In 2003, 69 percent of the Russian population identified as religious, with 59 percent as Orthodox Christian.¹³

10 Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

11 "Transcript of Gorbachev-John Paul II Meeting, Vatican City, December 1, 1989," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/28344-document-24-transcript-gorbachev-john-paul-ii-meeting-vatican-city-december-1-1989>.

12 "Rosstat Presented Preliminary Figures on the Population in the Regions of the Country According to the All-Russian Population Census," Federal State Statistics Service, May 30, 2022, <https://eng.rosstat.gov.ru/folder/13901/document/168696>.

13 "69 Percent of Russians Say They Profess a Religion," *Pravda.ru*, April 28, 2003, <https://english.pravda.ru/news/russia/49046-n/>.

The relatively peaceful transition from the Soviet Union to independent states had a prominent religious dimension.¹⁴ In August 1991, Patriarch Aleksii II (Ridiger) (1990–2008) publicly condemned the coup attempt against Mikhail Gorbachev by communist hardliners and issued appeals for a peaceful transfer of power.¹⁵ The patriarch's remarks were especially poignant, given the close association between religious and political violence in the region. Just months earlier, in September 1990, Father Aleksandr Men, one of Russia's most charismatic theologians, who published extensively on church renewal, reconciliation, diversity, the social role of the church, and key Orthodox teachings, was brutally murdered by an unknown assailant. The public reaction to his ideas revealed not only the challenges ahead for religion-state relations but also the deep divisions within the church itself, split between ultraconservative and liberal factions.¹⁶

In October 1990, the Act "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" granted legal recognition to the Russian Orthodox Church, allowing it to own property, provide religious education, and establish welfare and social programs. The act also abolished the Religious Affairs Council and emphasized the legal separation between church and state and remained in effect until 1997, when it was replaced by the "Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations." At the time, Russia had a population of 142 million, with around 100 million identifying as Orthodox Christians; however, only about 5 percent of them attended religious services regularly. Islam was the second-largest religious affiliation, with estimates ranging from 10 to 23 million adherents. The Catholic population was estimated at around 600,000, while the Jewish population ranged between 250,000 and

14 John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Irina Paert, *Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010); Greg Simons and David Westerlund, eds., *Religion, Politics and Nation-Building in Post-Communist Countries* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); Milena Benovska, *Orthodox Revivalism in Russia: Driving Forces and Moral Quests* (London: Routledge, 2020); Sophie Kotzer, *Russian Orthodoxy, Nationalism and the Soviet State during the Gorbachev Years, 1985–1991* (London: Routledge, 2020); Barbara Martin and Nadezhda Beliakova, eds., *Religious Life in the Late Soviet Union: From Survival to Revival (1960s–1980s)* (London: Routledge, 2024)..

15 Carol Garrard and John Garrard, *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent: Faith and Power in the New Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Leslie L. McGann, "The Russian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Aleksii II and the Russian State: An Unholy Alliance?," *Demokratizatsiya* 7, no. 1 (1999): 12–27.

16 Michael Bourdeaux, ed., *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995); Jane Ellis, *The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History* (London: Croom Helm, 1986; reprinted, London: Routledge, 1990); Jane Ellis, *The Russian Orthodox Church: Triumphalism and Defensiveness* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).

one million. The 1997 law introduced distinctions between three categories: religious organizations (such as church institutions), religious associations (recognized confessions), and religious groups (informal gatherings without legal status, such as Bible study groups), and was criticized by the international community for restricting legal recognition to only the major, historically established religious communities in Russia. Religious associations were not eligible for legal status until they had operated for at least 15 years, directly impacting newer or minority groups, particularly Evangelical churches.¹⁷

In 2000, the Moscow Patriarchate issued “The Basis of the Social Concept,” which aimed to provide new direction for the church’s social activities and foster dialogue with society at large. The document was controversial and marked a departure from European secularism, stating in its section on church-state relations that theocracy was preferable to democracy, as follows:

III. 7. The form and methods of government is conditioned in many ways by the spiritual and moral condition of society. Aware of this, the Church accepts the people’s choice or does not resist it at least. [...] Any change in the form of government to that more religiously rooted, introduced without spiritualizing society itself, will inevitably degenerate into falsehood and hypocrisy and make this form weak and valueless in the eyes of the people. However, one cannot altogether exclude the possibility of such a spiritual revival of society as to make natural a religiously higher form of government.¹⁸

The 2000 document signaled that the Orthodox Church had assumed a central role in religion-state relations while also continuing to expand its international ecclesiastical contacts and geopolitical influence. In the years that followed, beginning with Vladimir Putin’s first presidential term in May 2000, the Orthodox Church was positioned at the heart of Russia’s national security strategy, serving as a guardian of Russian ethnic identity

17 Perry L. Glanzer, *The Quest for Russia’s Soul: Evangelicals and Moral Education in Post-Communist Russia* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2002); Alexander Ponomarev, *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, 2017); Zoe Knox and Anastasia Mitrofanova, “The Russian Orthodox Church,” in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2014), 38–66.

18 The Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, “The Basis of the Social Concept,” 2000, <https://mospatusa.com/files/THE-BASIS-OF-THE-SOCIAL-CONCEPT.pdf>.

and traditional values in the Eastern Orthodox world and beyond. Russia's advancement of its geopolitical agenda intertwined religion and political power through a gradual process shaped by political transformations unfolding in former communist countries.¹⁹

Orthodoxy, Geopolitics, and Society in the New Millennium

The transitional periods following the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe and the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union saw churches across the region actively engaging with political regimes.²⁰ References to "religion" were incorporated into national constitutions, not only in Russia but also in Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania, while formerly persecuted churches, such as the Greek Catholic churches in Romania and Ukraine, were officially recognized. New places of worship were constructed, including the rebuilding of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, which had been demolished on Stalin's orders in 1931. Religious and political leaders frequently appeared together in public displays of national unity, and in some cases, Orthodox clergy even became members of national parliaments, as in Belarus and Romania.²¹

19 Zoe Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism* (London: Routledge, 2005); Gilles Favarel-Garrigues and Kathy Rousselet, eds., *La Russie contemporaine* (Paris: Fayard, 2010); Irina Papkova, *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Christopher Marsh, *Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival* (New York and London: Continuum, 2011); Kathy Rousselet, "L'autorité religieuse en contexte post-soviétique," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 162 (2013): 15–36; Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, eds., *Russia before and after Crimea: Nationalism and Identity, 2010–2017* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019); Tobias Köllner, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Russia: Beyond the Binary of Power and Authority* (London: Routledge, 2020); Paul Valliere and Randall A. Poole, eds., *Law and the Christian Tradition in Modern Russia* (London: Routledge, 2022); Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, *Moralist International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022); Robert Collins, *Global Tensions in the Russian Orthodox Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2022); Pål Kolstø, *Strategic Uses of Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: Interest and Identity in Russia and the Post-Soviet Space* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

20 Lucian N. Leustean, "Eastern Christianity and the Liberal International Order," in *Faith, Freedom and Foreign Policy: Challenges for the Transatlantic Community*, by Michael Barnett, Clifford Bob, Nora Fisher Onar, Anne Jenichen, Michael Leigh, and Lucian N. Leustean (Washington, DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2015), 168–90.

21 For Russia's role in predominantly Orthodox countries, see also John Anderson, "The Treatment of Religious Minorities in South-Eastern Europe: Greece and Bulgaria Compared," *Religion, State and Society* 30, no. 1 (2002): 9–31; Thomas Bremer ed., *Religion and the Conceptual*

The fall of communism brought major transformations in religion-state relations across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states. The reemergence of previously persecuted churches into the public sphere coincided with a more assertive political engagement by traditional Orthodox churches, with religious leaders actively participating in their countries' democratization processes. For example, in the Republic of Macedonia, Archbishop Mihail (Metodij Gogov) (1993–1999) was proposed as a presidential candidate, although he declined the nomination. In Romania, many Orthodox clergy joined newly established political parties and became involved in electoral disputes. Some secured seats in Parliament, and in 2000, an Orthodox priest was appointed minister of agriculture. In Poland, during the 1993 elections, the Polish Orthodox Church formed an Orthodox Electoral Committee

Boundary in Central and Eastern Europe: Encounters of Faiths (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008); Christine Chaillot, *The Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011); Karin Hyldal Christensen, *The Making of the New Martyrs of Russia: Soviet Repression in Orthodox Memory* (London: Routledge, 2017); Kristen Ghodsee, "Symphonic Secularism: Eastern Orthodoxy, Ethnic Identity and Religious Freedoms in Contemporary Bulgaria," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 27, no. 2 (2009): 227–52; Lucian N. Leustean, ed., *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2014); Vasilios N. Makrides, "Orthodox Anti-Westernism Today: A Hindrance to European Integration?," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 9, no. 3 (2009): 209–24; Ines Angeli Murzaku, ed., *Quo Vadis Eastern Europe? Religion, State and Society after Communism* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2009); Ines Angeli Murzaku, ed., *Monasticism in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Republics* (London: Routledge, 2018); Daniel P. Payne, "Nationalism and the Local Church: The Source of Ecclesiastical Conflict in the Orthodox Commonwealth," *Nationalities Papers* 35, no. 5 (2007): 831–52; Peter Petkoff, "Church-State Relations under the Bulgarian Denominations Act 2002: Religious Pluralism and Established Church and the Impact of Other Models of Law on Religion," *Religion, State and Society* 33, no. 4 (2005): 315–37; C. Riis, *Religion, Politics, and Historiography in Bulgaria* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2002); Cristian Romocea, *Church and State: Religion, Nationalism and State Identification in Post-communist Romania* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); Victor Roudometof, *Nationalism, Globalization, and Orthodoxy: The Social Origins of Ethnic Conflict in the Balkans* (Westport: Praeger, 2001); Victor Roudometof and Vasilios N. Makrides, eds., *Orthodox Christianity in 21st Century Greece: The Role of Religion in Culture, Ethnicity and Politics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Vasilios N. Makrides, "Orthodox Christianity, Modernity and Postmodernity: Overview, Analysis and Assessment," *Religion, State & Society* 40, nos. 3–4 (2012): 248–85; Kathy Rousselet, "La religion au service de l'État russe," *Études* 5 (2018): 83–94; Maria Schnitter and Daniela Kalkandjieva, "Teaching Religion in Bulgarian Schools: Historical Experience and Post-Atheist Developments," in *Religious Education and the Challenge of Pluralism*, ed. Adam B. Seligman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 70–95; Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu, *Church, State, and Democracy in Expanding Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu, *Religion and Politics in Post-Communist Romania* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Mark D. Steinberg and Catherine Wanner, eds., *Religion, Morality, and Community in Post-Soviet Societies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008); Miklós Tomka, *Expanding Religion: Religious Revival in Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).

to support candidates untainted by communist affiliations. Similarly, in Belarus, following the 1990 declaration of independence, Metropolitan Philaret (Vakhromeyev) (1978–2021) and three Orthodox priests became members of the new Parliament. Debates on Orthodox involvement in politics reached countries not previously under communism, such as in 1994, when a “European Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy” was established in Athens, bringing together members of parliaments across the region.

Domestic religious changes were also influenced by international pressures. The legacy of the Cold War resurfaced as hierarchs who had lived in exile returned to their home countries, often denouncing existing religious leaders and claiming to be the true preservers of the Orthodox faith, affecting, in particular, religious dynamics in Estonia and Ukraine, where competing Orthodox churches competed for recognition, leading to divisions among the faithful.²² Prolonged disputes and unclear jurisdictional boundaries persisted well into the post-communist period, and even two decades after the fall of communism, Ukraine remained notably fragmented, with three separate Orthodox churches, each claiming to represent authentic Ukrainian religious identity.

The division among Orthodox churches took on a distinctly political character in the case of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. In the early 1990s, Bulgaria saw the emergence of a rival body, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church-Alternative Synod, whose leaders challenged the legitimacy of the existing hierarchy due to its ties with the former communist regime. The schism deeply polarized both the Bulgarian elite and the faithful, with one side claiming to represent a revived and purified religious institution and the other asserting continuity and canonical legitimacy. The unresolved tensions between the two Bulgarian churches became one of the most significant challenges facing the post-1989 Orthodox world. The fragmentation of a national church could have easily become a major trend across the region, as many Orthodox churches had maintained close relations with communist authorities. A similar situation briefly unfolded in Romania, where Patriarch Teoctist (Arăpașu) (1986–2007) resigned in December 1989 amid public pressure, only to be reinstated in April 1990 with the backing of the new government. Similarly, following the breakup of Yugoslavia, Serbia faced growing demands for autocephaly from the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the establishment of a separate Montenegrin Orthodox Church, further

22 See in particular Sebastian Rimestad, *The Challenges of Modernity to the Orthodox Church in Estonia and Latvia (1917–1940)* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012).

highlighting the complex interplay between national identity, politics, and ecclesiastical authority in the post-communist Orthodox landscape.

The changing nature of the main autocephalous Orthodox churches in Eastern Christianity has led to increasingly convoluted religious structures. For example, the Ecumenical Patriarchate played a key role in supporting religious revival in Albania, where it established its own archdiocese, and in Estonia, where it backed the return of the Estonian church in exile. In 1996, Archbishop Johannes (Rinne) of Karelia and All Finland (1987–2001) was appointed *locum tenens* of the Estonian church until a permanent leader could be selected. The involvement of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Finnish Orthodox Church conflicted with the interests of the local Estonian Orthodox Church, which had been placed under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate after the Second World War. As a result, Estonia had two parallel Orthodox jurisdictions, the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church under the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

In 1998, the Ecumenical Patriarchate's reissuance of the *tomos* recognizing the autocephaly of the Czech and Slovak church complicated matters, as the Moscow Patriarchate viewed these actions as a direct threat to its longstanding relationships with Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe. At the same time, the recognition of the autocephaly or autonomy of smaller Orthodox churches in the region was carried out with the active support of local political leaders. For example, in the Republic of Moldova, Orthodox communities became divided between the Metropolitanate of Chișinău (under Moscow's jurisdiction) and the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia (under the Romanian Orthodox Church), with President Petru Lucinschi (1997–2001) proposing that the Ecumenical Patriarchate recognize an autonomous Moldovan church to unite these communities. In 2002, in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, President Boris Trajkovski (1999–2004) stated that the autocephaly of the local Orthodox church was inextricably linked to international recognition of the state. In Albania, the revival of the Orthodox Church was achieved in 1991 after prolonged negotiations between the Albanian and Greek prime ministers, with the latter representing the position of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Archbishop Anastasios (Janullatos) (1992–2025), a professor at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, was appointed as the hierarch of the Albanian church and had to overcome concerns from the local community, who claimed that their church could only be led by a native Albanian.

The issue of autocephaly and autonomy extended beyond Eastern Europe.²³ In 1990, the Ecumenical Patriarchate recognized the autonomy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada, and in 1995, it extended recognition to the Ukrainian Orthodox churches of the United States, South America, Western Europe, and Australia. At the same time, the question of autocephaly for the Orthodox Church in America, which had existed since the 1970s in the United States and was recognized by several Orthodox churches but not by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, continued to provoke tension between Constantinople and Moscow.

Furthermore, in 2000, in an unprecedented move, the Free Serbian Orthodox Church, which had been established in Australia as a response by Serbian migrant communities to political developments in Yugoslavia, agreed to reunify with the Serbian Orthodox Church. Similarly, in 2007, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), which had maintained a significant following in both the United States and Western Europe since the 1917 Russian Revolution, reunited with the Moscow Patriarchate; however, several Russian communities did not recognize the 2007 reunification and chose to remain independent.

Changes in the international arena have become evident through the establishment of numerous Orthodox missions in regions where the church traditionally had little or no presence. For example, the Moscow Patriarchate opened a small parish in North Korea, while the Ecumenical Patriarchate established a metropolitanate in South Korea. In 2007, the Moscow Patriarchate declared that Orthodox believers in China fell under its jurisdiction; one year later, the Ecumenical Patriarchate issued a similar statement, placing them under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitanate of Hong Kong.

A distinctly separatist voice within the Orthodox commonwealth has emerged from religious leaders in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria—three former Soviet regions seeking statehood and grappling with uncertain religious affiliations. The 1992–1993 Abkhazian War led to the emergence of a small Abkhazian Orthodox Church, which claimed autonomous status, positioning itself between the authority of the Georgian and Russian Orthodox churches. Similarly, in 1992, Orthodox communities in South Ossetia rejected the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church and, after a brief period under the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia,

23 Kathy Rousselet, "L'autocéphalie revisitée: les quêtes d'indépendance ecclésiastique dans les espaces soviétique et post-soviétique," in *Autocéphalies: L'exercice de l'indépendance dans les Églises slaves orientales (IXe–XXIe siècle)*, ed. Marie-Hélène Blanchet, Frédéric Gabriel, and Laurent Tatarenko (Rome: Publications de l'École française de Rome, 2021), 495–520.

became affiliated with the Holy Synod in Resistance, a Greek Old Calendarist church. At the same time, Orthodox communities in Transnistria, caught between competing Moldovan churches, appealed to the Moscow Patriarchate, which in 1998 established a canonical bishopric in the region.²⁴ The tumultuous structural changes faced by Orthodox Christianity in Europe were mirrored by its Oriental counterparts. The Arab Revolutions across the Middle East not only raised questions about the role of Eastern Christian churches in the region but also heightened tensions between Christian and Muslim communities.

At the start of the new millennium, the geopolitical engagement of Russian Orthodoxy became evident in five key areas, namely the promotion of a distinct Orthodox civilization and the concept of a “Russian World” (Русский мир, *Russkiy mir*) as a counterpoint to the liberal West; the mobilization of Orthodox actors in relations with European institutions in Brussels and Strasbourg; the incorporation of the Russian Orthodox Church’s perspectives into national security strategies; the holding of the 2016 Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church; and the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Middle East and Africa.

The Orthodox Civilization and the Russian World

The idea of a distinctly Orthodox civilization has emerged in the discourse of many Orthodox churches, with the strongest support initially appearing in Russia and subsequently echoed by other communities. In Russia, both the state and the church have portrayed Orthodoxy as a unique civilization. In a manner reminiscent of its interventionist role in the emerging Orthodox states of nineteenth-century Southeastern Europe, Russia has supported Orthodox faithful affected by modern conflicts, whether military, as evident in Syria and Ukraine, or societal, such as the widespread secularization of the European Union. In the latter case, the construction of Russian churches in Rome (on a hill opposite Saint Peter’s Basilica) and Paris (a contested project overlooking the Seine near the Eiffel Tower) has served not only as a symbolic display of Russian influence but also as a reinforcement of the idea that Orthodox civilization offers an alternative to a secularized West.

Examples of Russian rhetoric framing Orthodoxy as a distinct civilization include President Vladimir Putin’s 2012 proposal to involve the Russian Orthodox Church in the Eurasian Union integration project; statements by Patriarchs Aleksii II and Kirill emphasizing the uniqueness of Orthodoxy and

24 Kimitaka Matsuzato, “Inter-Orthodox Relations and Transborder Nationalities in and around Unrecognised Abkhazia and Transnistria,” *Religion, State and Society* 37, no. 3 (2009): 239–62.

the concept of an “Orthodox democracy”; references to Orthodox civilization by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov; the Moscow Patriarchate’s proposal for a “multi-polar civilizational order” in which religion would play a central role, an idea that emerged during debates over including references to “God” and “religion” in the preamble of the European Constitution; and Patriarch Aleksii II’s 2007 address to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in which he reinforced the notion of an “Orthodox tradition” within European Christianity.²⁵

The idea of a separate Orthodox civilization was not limited to countries with Orthodox populations. In 2004, following President Vladimir Putin’s visit to Cuba, the Castro regime built an Orthodox church as a tribute to “the help given to them by the Soviet Union.” Five years later, in 2009, Raúl Castro met with Patriarch Kirill in Moscow, signaling a strengthening of religious and political ties between Cuba and Russia. Additionally, the Russian Foreign Ministry has supported the Orthodox Church’s engagement with supranational institutions. In 2005, both the church and the state endorsed the establishment of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, and four years later, in 2009, the Russian Orthodox Church became directly involved in creating a consultative United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) group on Peace and Dialogue of Cultures, with Patriarch Kirill chairing the group’s inaugural debates in Moscow.²⁶

Russia’s geopolitical interests have closely followed religious and political lines, as demonstrated by its attempt to mediate the Serbian-Albanian conflict in Kosovo. Although Patriarch Aleksii II’s 1999 visit to Serbia, during which he met with President Slobodan Milošević and Ibrahim Rugova, the leader of the Kosovo Albanians, was ultimately unsuccessful, the Russian and Serbian Orthodox churches have since tightened their relations. Similar meetings between church and state authorities have occurred during times of religious and political conflict in other predominantly Orthodox countries, including the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Cyprus, North Macedonia, and Montenegro.

The engagement of Orthodoxy as a distinct civilization extended beyond political discourse, with the term “spiritual space” (духовное пространство, *dukhovnoye prostranstvo*) appearing in numerous Russian

25 Alicja Curanović, *The Religious Factor in Russia’s Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2012), 136–45.

26 Curanović, *The Religious Factor in Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 136–45.

foreign policy documents.²⁷ As a result, the Orthodox civilization came to be viewed as a strategic entity, one that must be defended, as in Ukraine and Transnistria, and nurtured where it exists as small communities within other civilizations, such as in the West, China, India, and Japan. Moreover, the concept of a unique civilization has had implications for the rise of populism and far-right movements.²⁸ Western sanctions against Russia have prompted politicians to appeal to domestic support by portraying Orthodoxy as fundamentally incompatible with the West, with anti-Western sentiment building on the notion of a distinct Orthodox civilization perceived to be under threat from the United States and a secularized European Union.²⁹ Following Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in 2022, references to Orthodox civilization, the protection of the "Russian World," and traditional values were frequently invoked by a wide range of political and religious leaders, as explored in greater depth in the sections that follow.

27 Curanović, *The Religious Factor in Russia's Foreign Policy*, 248. For contrasting views, see Alicja Curanović, *The Guardians of Traditional Values: Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Quest for Status* (Washington, DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2015); Denis Zhuravlev, "Orthodox Identity as Traditionalism: Construction of Political Meaning in the Current Public Discourse of the Russian Orthodox Church," *Russian Politics & Law* 55, nos. 4–5 (2017): 354–75; Alicja Curanović, "Russia's Mission in the World: The Perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church," *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 4 (2019): 253–67; Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner, eds., *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Alfons Brüning and Evert van der Zweerde, eds., *Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012); Lisa Harms, "The Russian Orthodox Church's Transnational Judicial Activism: Capitalising on Global Conservative Networks?," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 1, no. 1 (2022): 101–34; Sergei A. Mudrov, "Church and State in a Time of Crisis: The Belarusian Orthodox Church's Response to the 2020 Elections and Political Protests," *Europe-Asia Studies* 75, no. 6 (2023): 925–46.

28 Anastasia Mitrofanova, *The Politicization of Russian Orthodoxy: Actors and Ideas* (Stuttgart: ibid-Verlag, 2005); Mikhail Suslov, "Holy Rus': The Geopolitical Imagination in the Contemporary Russian Orthodox Church," *Russian Politics & Law* 52, no. 3 (2014): 67–86; Nadia Marcouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy, eds., *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (London: Hurst, 2016); Kathy Rousselet, "Russian Orthodox Imaginaries and Their Family Resemblance to Populism," *Journal of Religion in Europe* 16, no. 2 (2023): 172–98; Bojidar Kolov, "Ecclesiastical Populism in Contemporary Russia? 'The People' in the Political Discourse of the Orthodox Church," *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 25, no. 2 (2024): 192–217.

29 Alfons Brüning, "The Empire and the Desert: Eastern Orthodox Theologians about Church and Civilization," in *The Law of God: Exploring God and Civilization*, ed. Pieter Vos and Onno Zijlstra (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 84–104; Victor Roudometof, *Globalization and Orthodox Christianity: The Transformation of a Religious Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2013); Kristina Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 2014).

Orthodoxy and the European Union

After the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, European Commission president Jacques Delors's call to search for "the heart and soul" of the European Union resonated among European institutions. An initiative, "A Soul for Europe: Ethics and Spirituality," was launched by the European Parliament in the 1990s and early 2000s, while the European Commission engaged in dialogue with a wide range of "churches, religions, and communities of conviction," resulting in many churches establishing offices in Brussels and Strasbourg.³⁰ In 1994, the Ecumenical Patriarchate opened the Liaison Office of the Orthodox Church to the European Union, a title that implied it represented the entire Orthodox commonwealth in its relations with European institutions. In the following years, other churches established their own representations, such as the Orthodox Church of Greece in 1998, the Russian Orthodox Church in 2002, and both the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Cyprus in 2007. Additionally, the Serbian Orthodox Church appointed a representative to work with the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches.

In 2010, Orthodox leaders from these offices decided to establish the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Union, aiming to coordinate a pan-Orthodox response to the political evolution of the European Union. Until that point, the offices of Orthodox churches had primarily engaged in dialogue with European institutions through the Conference of European Churches. The decision to form their own committee outside of this framework signaled not only growing tensions with their ecumenical counterparts but also had wider implications for the dialogue between Orthodox churches and European institutions, specifically, the promotion of a distinct Orthodox civilization with its own religious and political values.³¹

The enlargement of the European Union to include the predominantly Orthodox countries of Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Romania was generally

30 Bérangère Massignon, "Les représentations orthodoxes auprès de l'Union européenne: entre concurrence inter-orthodoxe et dynamiques d'européanisation," *Balkanologie: Revue d'études pluridisciplinaires* 9, nos. 1–2 (2005): 265–87.

31 Jonathan Sutton and Wil van den Bercken, eds., *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003); Lucian N. Leustean, "The Politics of Orthodox Churches in the European Union," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 18, nos. 2–3 (2018): 146–57; Alena Alshanskaya, *Der Europa-Diskurs der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche (1996–2011)* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016); Georgios E. Trantas, *Being and Belonging: A Comparative Examination of the Greek and Cypriot Orthodox Churches' Attitudes to "Europeanisation" in Early 21st Century* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2018).

viewed positively by their respective Orthodox churches.³² However, an increasing number of church leaders have expressed dissatisfaction with the EU's bureaucratic apparatus, at times drawing parallels between the European Union and the former Soviet Union. Paradoxically, the EU appeared to reinforce national boundaries rather than promote an integrative model of religion-state relations. For example, while secularization remained the dominant trend across most EU member states, in Romania, the Orthodox Church has been constructing the People's Salvation Cathedral, a massive national project in Bucharest. Meanwhile, in Greece, the church has retained significant political influence, with government officials still being sworn in before the Archbishop of Athens.

Perhaps most significantly, events in Ukraine have revealed that Orthodox churches remain divided not only on theological grounds but also in terms of political values.³³ The conflict in Ukraine has taken on an ideological dimension, with numerous religious and political leaders expressing support for "European" as opposed to "Eurasian" values. Eurasianism, which places Orthodox Christianity, tradition, and nationalism at its core, has been identified by several scholars as a key influence on decision-making within the Kremlin, positioning itself in opposition to the values of the European Union and fueling ultra-nationalist movements across Europe, as evidenced by cross-party connections between Russia, Hungary, Greece, and France. From this perspective, Russia's invasion of Ukraine represented a fundamental challenge to the international state system. Aleksandr Dugin, one of the leading theorists of Eurasianism, has actively promoted the dissolution of the nation-state and the creation of a transnational Eurasian empire stretching from Vladivostok to Lisbon (or Dublin), an entity explicitly opposed to secular Western Europe.³⁴

While political values within the European Union remain under scrutiny, the EU enlargement process has heightened awareness of the diversity among

32 Greece became the tenth country to join the European Communities, the EU's predecessor, in 1981. Cyprus joined the EU in 2004 and Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. Among "candidate countries" negotiating EU membership or waiting to start are an additional three predominantly Orthodox countries: North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

33 Elizabeth A. Clark and Dmytro Vovk, eds., *Religion during the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2019).

34 "Eurasia and Religious Ultra-Nationalism: Beyond Hard-Line," *The Economist*, September 5, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2014/09/eurasia-and-religious-ultra-nationalism>; and "Russian Nationalist's Vision for Austria," *The Local Austria*, January 30, 2015, <http://www.thelocal.at/20150130/russian-nationalists-vision-for-austria>. See also Dmitry Shlapentokh, "Dugin, Eurasianism, and Central Asia," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 143–56.

Eastern Christian churches. Eastern Christianity is no longer confined to its traditional centers of religious authority but now includes a wide array of religious bodies in the diaspora. Through engagement with European institutions, smaller Eastern Christian churches have found support at both the European and national levels, with the concept of freedom of religion and belief being addressed within a wider international context.

Russian Orthodoxy between "Human Security" and "Spiritual Security"

In international relations theory, the relationship between religion and security has been widely contested, with religion often regarded as a "national security enigma."³⁵ The theory of security, also known as securitization theory, shifts the focus away from offensive and defensive realism (which emphasizes threats, control, and military capabilities) toward the study and implementation of discourses.³⁶ Religion plays a role not only in societal cohesion but also in shaping actors' preferences, building international alliances, conducting diplomacy, and influencing the nature of international society.³⁷ It projects a societal security dimension and functions as a transnational security framework that supports authority, mobilization, and geopolitical ambitions.³⁸ Religion is directly linked to the concept of "sustainable security," which emphasizes the development of strategies to address various insecurities. Chris Seiple, Dennis R. Hoover, and Pauletta Otis argued that "sustainable security [is] defined not merely as the absence of imminent threats to physical safety but also as the presence of the conditions (socio-economic, political, psychological, and spiritual) necessary for

35 Robert M. Bosco, *Securing the Sacred: Religion, National Security, and the Western State* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

36 Amitav Acharya, "Human Security, Identity Politics and Global Governance: From Freedom from Fear to Fear of Freedoms," in *Civil Society, Religion and Global Governance: Paradigms of Power and Persuasion*, ed. Helen James (London: Routledge, 2007), 25–32; Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998); Carsten Bagge Lausten and Ole Wæver, "In Defense of Religion: Sacred Referent Objects for Securitization," in *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile*, ed. Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 147–80.

37 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

38 Peter J. Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

long-term stability and well-being.”³⁹ Religion, therefore, is one of the key factors in security, closely connected to other global issues such as climate change, resource competition, economic and cultural marginalization, and military technology.⁴⁰

While most international relations scholars have focused on the securitization of Islam, particularly in the context of the post-1979 Iranian Revolution and the events of 9/11, there is virtually no research on the securitization of Eastern Orthodoxy.⁴¹ The religious and political structure of Eastern Orthodoxy enables a unique form of geopolitics which takes into account the security and insecurities of not only local religious actors but, more importantly, also state authorities.⁴² Across the Eastern Orthodox world, the fall of the Iron Curtain was followed by a strengthening of ties between religious and political leadership. Churches in both former communist and non-communist countries benefited not only from state recognition and close cooperation with political authorities but also from significant property restitution and financial support. In Greece, for example, the church retained its extensive property holdings in 2014, despite public protests suggesting that revenue from property sales could help alleviate the economic crisis. The scale of financial transformation was also evident in Bulgaria, where, by 2016, the church had officially become the second-largest landowner after the state.

The most dynamic interplay between Orthodoxy and security has been evident in Russia, where the church has been described by Marcel H. Van Herpen as “the Kremlin’s secret weapon.”⁴³ As Christopher Marsh argued, the Orthodoxy-security nexus was particularly evident in the following cases:

1. Assigning protector-saints to the Strategic Rocket Forces and individual tank battalions; 2. Using religious symbols in official and unofficial

39 Chris Seiple, Dennis R. Hoover, and Pauletta Otis, Introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Security*, ed. Chris Seiple, Dennis R. Hoover, and Pauletta Otis (London: Routledge, 2013), 2–3.

40 Clark B. Lombardi and J. K. Wellman Jr., eds., *Religion and Human Security: A Global Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

41 Jocelyne Cesari, “The Securitization of Islam in Europe,” *Challenge Research Paper* 14 (2009): 1–14; Monica Duffy Toft, *Securing the Peace: The Durable Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Stuart Croft, *Securitizing Islam: Identity and the Search for Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

42 Gertjan Dijkink, “When Geopolitics and Religion Fuse: A Historical Perspective,” *Geopolitics* 11, no. 2 (2006): 192–208.

43 Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin’s Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

military/security capacities; 3. Constructing chapels on the premises of Russian governmental agencies; 4. Involving the Patriarch in the inaugural ceremonies of presidents Yeltsin, Putin and Medvedev.⁴⁴

Most importantly, the Russian Orthodox Church has had access to draft legislation prepared for the Duma, as well as legal provisions related to the state-building process. The church and the Russian Foreign Ministry collaborate on a range of issues, from appointing clergy abroad to handling judicial cases and organizing joint events.⁴⁵ Marsh's examples, all of which are at the national level, can be complemented by several developments with geopolitical and international implications, such as: 1. The consecration of the Saint George Chapel at the Khmeimim Syrian airbase in September 2016; 2. The emergence of a paramilitary group known as the "Russian Orthodox Army" during the conflict in eastern Ukraine (although it uses this terminology, the paramilitary group is not officially supported by the Moscow Patriarchate); 3. The blessing of tanks and military vehicles by Russian clergy as they crossed into Crimea and the Donbas region; 4. The promotion of "traditional values" and "Russian World" ideology in the development of the Eurasian Economic Union; 5. The construction of Orthodox centers in the West to advance religion-state relations, such as the inauguration of the Russian Cultural and Spiritual Center in Paris in 2016; 6. High-profile visits by senior clergy as part of cultural and political diplomacy, including Patriarch Kirill's trips not only to Britain, France, and Italy but also to Latin America and, for the first time in 2016, to Russia's scientific station on King George Island (Waterloo Island) in Antarctica; 7. The use of Saint Seraphim of Sarov (1754–1833)'s relics in Russia's space program, symbolizing the uniqueness of Orthodox spirituality and projecting Russia's image as a global religious and military superpower.

A close link between religion and security has been consistently present in Russian government documents. The 2015 Russian Federation National Security Strategy, approved by Presidential Edict No. 683 on December 31, included unusual terminology concerning religion and security. The document identified eight "threats to state and public security," namely:

44 Christopher Marsh, "Eastern Orthodoxy and the Fusion of National and Spiritual Security," in *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Security*, ed. Chris Seiple, Dennis R. Hoover, and Pauletta Otis (London: Routledge, 2013), 22–32.

45 John Anderson, "Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church: Asymmetric Symphonia?," *Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 1 (2007): 185–201.

1. intelligence and other activity by special services and organizations of foreign states; 2. the activities of terrorist and extremist organizations [...];
3. the activities of radical public associations and groups using nationalist and religious extremist ideology [...] -- including through inciting "color revolutions" -- and destroying traditional Russian religious and moral values [...]; 4. the activities of criminal organizations and groups [...]; 5. the use of information and communication technologies; 6. criminal offenses [...]; 7. corruption; and, 8. natural disasters [...].

The order and hierarchy of these security threats were particularly striking. In particular, in third place, activities related to religion were ranked alongside efforts to prevent "color revolutions," placing them above threats such as "criminal organizations" and "corruption." The document went further to outline the "long-term national strategic interests" of the Russian Federation. In this section, issues related to religious and spiritual values were given greater prominence than topics such as the "national economy" and "consolidating the Russian Federation's status as a leading world power"; however, according to the order of priorities, religion was considered less important than "strengthening the country's defense" (ranked first), "political and social stability," and "raising living standards."⁴⁶

In the 2015 Russian Federation National Security Strategy, the term "church" was entirely absent; however, the word "spiritual" was used twelve times while the word "religion/religious" was used nine times. A similar pattern was evident in Ukraine's 2003 Law on National Security, where "spiritual/spirituality" appeared four times, "churches" once, and "religion/religious" four times. In contrast, Serbia's 2009 National Security Strategy omitted the word "spiritual" entirely but included "church/churches" four times and "religion/religious" twenty-two times. The 2007 National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia used "spiritual" five times, omitted religion altogether, and included a specific reference to "support the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural activities of the Armenian Apostolic Church." Meanwhile, Romania's 2015 National Security Strategy made no mention of spirituality or church and used "religious" only three times. Across all of these documents, none provide explicit definitions of the terms "spiritual"

46 The English version of the 2015 "Russian Federation's National Security Strategy" is available at <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>. The Russian text of the 2015 Strategy is available at <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391>.

or “religion,” leaving their meanings open to interpretation and shaped by national context.

The 2015 Russian Federation National Security Strategy made a clear connection between “spiritual values” and their national significance. The subchapter titled “Russia and the Modern World” stated that

Traditional Russian spiritual and moral values are being revived. A proper attitude toward Russia's history is being shaped in the rising generation. We are seeing the consolidation of civil society around the common values that shape the foundations of statehood such as Russia's freedom and independence, humanism, interethnic peace and accord, the unity of the cultures of the Russian Federation's multi-ethnic people, respect for family and faith traditions, and patriotism.

On July 2, 2021, President Vladimir Putin signed an updated version of Russia's National Security Strategy, replacing the 2015 document. The 2021 strategy went further in expanding the role of religious actors. Although the word “religion” appeared only once, the document included 23 references to the word “spiritual.” It emphasized that “Strengthening traditional Russian spiritual and moral values and preserving the cultural and historical heritage of the Russian people” was one of the country's key national interests, ranking even above “maintaining strategic stability, strengthening peace and security, and reinforcing the legal foundations of international relations.”⁴⁷

The strategy explicitly stated that “Russian spiritual and moral ideals and cultural and historical values, the talent of the people are the basis of statehood and are the foundation for the further development of the country.” In a section on the “Protection of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, culture and historical memory,” it provided a lengthy description of the ways in which Russian policymakers interpreted the concept of “spiritual values.” First, it asserted that “humanity faces the threat of losing traditional spiritual and moral guidelines and stable moral principles” (Article 84). As a result of this erosion, “Basic moral and cultural norms, religious foundations, the institution of marriage, and family values are increasingly being subjected to increasingly destructive influence” around the world (Article 85). Second, the strategy claimed that “Traditional Russian spiritual, moral and cultural-historical values are under active attack by the US and its allies” (Article 87) and that “The “Westernization”

47 The Russian text of the 2021 Strategy is available at <http://scrf.gov.ru/security/docs/document133/>.

of culture increases the threat of the Russian Federation losing its cultural sovereignty" (Article 88). To protect its spiritual values, the strategy outlined 14 measures which ranged from strengthening "civil identity, inter-ethnic and inter-confessional harmony" to its version of "protection of historical truth, preservation of historical memory" and "increasing Russia's role in the global humanitarian, cultural, scientific, and educational space." (Article 93).

The extensive use of the term "spiritual values" highlights the significant role attributed by the Russian elite to the intersection of religion and security. While other countries have used similar terminology in their national security strategies, the concept of spiritual security in post-Cold War Russia has taken on a wider meaning. It encompasses not only the protection of the modern state-building process, state institutions, and church-state relations, but, more importantly, it advances Russia's image in international affairs, asserting its status as a global superpower.

The concept of "spiritual security" dates back to 1992 and the introduction of Russian national security legislation. Initially, the term was used to emphasize "spiritual values" as a counterpoint to the Soviet Union's atheist approach to security. It was only during Putin's leadership that the concept took on a new meaning and was consistently framed in contrast to traditional models of religion-state relations and the management of religious diversity in Western Europe.⁴⁸ In the West, religion and politics have typically been separated; however, this has not been the case in Eastern Orthodoxy. Because Eastern Orthodoxy is organized into autocephalous (independent) ecclesiastical units aligned with sovereign nation-states, churches remain involved not only in human and social security but also play a role in international security, building alliances, conveying diplomatic messages, and projecting state power.

In the Eastern Orthodox world, transnational boundaries are often blurred, involving both religious and state interests and promoting a thin line between "human" and "spiritual" forms of security. For example, in 2015, the Patriarchate of Antioch, despite the war in Syria, engaged in a dispute concerning an Orthodox community in Qatar. In 2013, the Romanian Orthodox Church severed relations with its counterpart in Jerusalem over a property dispute, and with direct support from the Romanian government,

48 Marat Shterin, "Friends and Foes of the 'Russian World': The Post-Soviet State's Management of Religious Diversity," in *The Politics and Practice of Religious Diversity: National Contexts, Global Issues*, ed. Andrew Dawson (London: Routledge, 2016), 29–48; 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): 128–57.

ecclesiastical relations were eventually restored. Tensions have been ongoing between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate over the recognition of new Orthodox churches and disputes over church property in both Eastern and Western Europe. In 2003, Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov visited the Cathedral of the Dormition of the Mother of God in Budapest, the oldest Orthodox church in Hungary, at a time when its ownership was contested. In 2004, a Hungarian court confirmed Moscow's jurisdiction over the cathedral, rather than that of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Other examples of the intersection between Orthodoxy and security include the Serbian and Montenegrin Orthodox churches' condemnation of Montenegro's intention to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Regular meetings between senior clergy from the Serbian and Russian churches have not only protested military actions in the former Yugoslavia but also addressed religious disputes involving the Serbian community in North Macedonia. In 2015, following Metropolitan Hilarion's visit to Skopje, where he met with both religious leaders and state officials, Archbishop Jovan (Vraniškovski) of Ohrid, head of a local church who had sought closer ties with the Belgrade Patriarchate rather than a national Macedonian church, was released from prison and relocated to Russia instead of Serbia.

The 2016 Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church

In March 2014, the heads of the Eastern Orthodox churches met in Istanbul under the leadership of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the *primus inter pares* of the Eastern Orthodox world, and announced plans to convene the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church in 2016. The announcement was unexpected, as preparations for the synod had been underway since the 1920s, while the post-communist period was marked by jurisdictional tensions among Orthodox churches, particularly between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church. The very presence of the Russian patriarch in Istanbul in 2014, meeting with his counterparts, was surprising and signaled a potential effort to ease longstanding disputes. The synod was viewed as a successor to the Seventh Ecumenical Council of the Eastern Orthodox Church, also known as the Second Council of Nicaea, which last convened over a millennium ago, in 787.⁴⁹

49 Vasilios N. Makrides, "Le concile panorthodoxe de 2016: Quelques réflexions sur les défis auxquels le monde orthodoxe doit faire face," *Istina* 62 (2017): 5–26; Lucian N. Leustean, "Eastern Orthodoxy, Geopolitics and the 2016 'Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church,'" *Geopolitics* 23, no. 1 (2018): 201–16; Vasilios N. Makrides and Sebastian Rimestad, eds., *The Pan-Orthodox*

The 2016 synod took place amid significant religious and political tensions within the Eastern Orthodox world, particularly concerning structures of influence and authority. Most importantly, the decision to convene the synod was announced in March 2014, coinciding with Russia's annexation of Crimea and Orthodox churches publicly refraining from condemning the takeover. The synod was originally scheduled to be held at the Church of Saint Irene in Istanbul, near Topkapi Palace, the site of the Second Ecumenical Council (First Council of Constantinople) in 381.⁵⁰ However, following the downing of a Russian military plane by Turkey in November 2015, which escalated political tensions between the two countries, the location was changed to the Orthodox Academy of Crete—an unusual setting without particular historical symbolism for the history of Eastern Orthodoxy but largely chosen to accommodate the Russian clergy.

Discussions aimed at finalizing the synod's agenda revealed a growing polarization among the Orthodox churches, reflecting the geopolitical interests of the major religious actors. Ukraine, home to three Orthodox churches at the time, was frequently part of the “unwritten” agenda of both the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church, the two dominant players in the Orthodox world. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's call for a unified national Ukrainian Orthodox Church, independent of the Moscow Patriarchate, was not officially supported by the Ecumenical Patriarchate—the only body with the authority to grant autocephaly within the Orthodox communion. The divisions among Orthodox factions became especially visible in 2015, when the Bulgarian Orthodox Church sent a letter to President Poroshenko condemning what it described as discrimination against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate. The letter broke with diplomatic protocol, as church leaders are expected to express their positions through diplomatic channels within their own countries, rather than by directly addressing foreign heads of state. By sending the letter, the Bulgarian church acted as an international political actor with its own geopolitical agenda, effectively endorsing the “spiritual security” model promoted by Moscow.

The agreed-upon topics for discussion at the synod closely reflected the ways in which states engaged with the concept of security. Initially,

Council of 2016: A New Era for the Orthodox Church? Interdisciplinary Perspectives (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2021).

50 “The Holy Great Synod of the Orthodox Church Will Meet in 2016 at Constantinople (Istanbul),” *Basilica.ro*, March 9, 2014, <http://basilica.ro/en/the-holy-great-synod-of-the-orthodox-church-will-meet-in-2016-at-constantinople-istanbul/>.

the synod was due to address ten themes, which had been agreed upon at the First Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference held at Chambésy, Switzerland, between November 2 and 8, 1976, namely: 1. "Orthodox Diaspora"; 2. "Autocephaly and its manner of proclamation"; 3. "Autonomy and its manner of proclamation"; 4. "the Holy Diptychs"; 5. "the matter of the Calendar and the common celebration of Easter"; 6. "Impediments of marriage"; 7. "Adaptation of ecclesiastical regulations on Fasting"; 8. "Relations of the Orthodox Churches to the rest of the Christian world"; 9. "Orthodoxy and the ecumenical movement"; and 10. "Contribution of the local Orthodox Churches to the prevailing of the Christian ideals of peace, liberty, fraternity, and love among peoples as well as the removal of racial discrimination."⁵¹ The agenda was later revised at the Synaxis of Primates, held again in Chambésy from January 21 to 28, 2016, which decided that each church would be represented by 24 bishops and six advisors, and that only six topics would be discussed, namely:

- (1) The Mission of the Orthodox Church in the Contemporary World, (2) The Orthodox Diaspora, (3) Autonomy and its Manner of Proclamation, (4) The Sacrament of Marriage and its Impediments, (5) The Significance of Fasting and its Application Today, and (6) Relations between the Orthodox Church and the Rest of the Christian World.⁵²

The order in which the topics were listed was significant, as it emphasized the three most controversial issues directly tied to security, namely, the mission of the Church, the diaspora, and autonomy.

Ukraine appeared to be central to the final agenda. At the Chambésy meeting in January 2016, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow was accompanied by Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovsky) of Kyiv, head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under Moscow's jurisdiction, an act that placed direct pressure on other church leaders to recognize his authority in Ukraine. In the weeks leading up to the official opening of the synod, several churches aligned themselves into a distinct bloc. On June 1, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church issued a synodical decision stating it would not attend the synod due to "thematic and organizational changes."⁵³ The Bulgarian objections to

51 "The Preparation of the Holy and Great Council: A Summary," Ecuemical Patriarchate Press Office, <https://www.orthodoxcouncil.org/preparation-of-a-council-a-history.html>.

52 The full text is available at <https://oca.org/news/headline-news/synaxis-of-primates-issues-communique-concerning-council>.

53 C. Leviev-Sawyer, "Bulgarian Orthodox Church Withdraws from Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete," *The Sofia Globe*, June 1, 2016, <http://sofiaglobe.com/2016/06/01/>

“thematic changes” were rooted in discussions from April 2016, during which the possibility of referring to non-Orthodox Christian communities as “churches” was condemned.⁵⁴ In practice, this meant denying other Christian communities the title of “church,” a stance that reinforced Orthodox anti-Western sentiment and supported the uniqueness of the “spiritual security” model promoted by Russia. On June 6, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch in Damascus announced it would also refrain from attending the synod, citing unresolved jurisdictional disputes with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and its refusal to sign communiqués from certain inter-Orthodox meetings.⁵⁵ On June 10, the Georgian Orthodox Church declared that, due to the absence of the Bulgarian and Antiochian patriarchates, it too would not participate in the synod.⁵⁶

As a result, on June 13, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church issued a statement acknowledging the withdrawal of the three churches and announced that it would also follow the same course. It criticized the Ecumenical Patriarchate for proceeding with the synod despite their absence. In the following weeks, the Serbian and Romanian Orthodox churches wavered between aligning with the Moscow and Ecumenical Patriarchates but ultimately agreed, at the last minute, to send representatives to Crete. Support for continuing with the synod was particularly strong among lay communities, with an open letter in favor of the gathering receiving over 1,300 signatures from academic scholars.⁵⁷

The decision by the four churches to withdraw from the synod, despite having participated in the preparatory process over the preceding years, was deeply intertwined with geopolitical concerns, particularly the religious situation in Ukraine.⁵⁸ Political overtones became explicit just five days before

bulgarian-orthodox-church-withdraws-from-pan-orthodox-council-in-crete/.

54 “Bulgarian Orthodox Church: Besides the Orthodox Church ‘there are no other churches, only heresies and schisms,’” *The Sofia Globe*, April 22, 2016, <http://sofiaglobe.com/2016/04/22/bulgarian-orthodox-church-besides-the-orthodox-church-there-are-no-other-churches-only-heresies-and-schisms/>. See also Peter De Mey, “Parallel Agendas of Vatican II and Crete I? A Close Look at ‘Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World,’” in *The Pan-Orthodox Council of 2016: A New Era for the Orthodox Church? Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Vasilios N. Makrides and Sebastian Rimestad (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2021), 201–18.

55 The statement is available at <http://www.antiochian-orthodox.co.uk/events/statement-of-the-secretariat-of-the-antiochian-holy-synod-on-the-6th-of-june-2016/>.

56 The 2016 statement was available at <http://patriarchate.ge/geo/the-decree-of-the-holy/>.

57 John Chrysavgis and Paul L. Gavriluk, “The Pan-Orthodox Council Must and Will Proceed,” *FirstThings.com*, June 16, 2016, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/06/the-pan-orthodox-council-must-and-will-proceed>.

58 “On the Situation Caused by the Refusal of Several Orthodox Churches to Participate in the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church,” Department for External Church Relations of

the synod's official opening, when 245 members of the Ukrainian Parliament passed a resolution urging the Ecumenical Patriarchate to approve the establishment of an independent national church in Ukraine, outside the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate.⁵⁹ The synod ultimately chose not to address the Ukrainian request, and none of its official documents referenced international ecclesiastical disputes. The Ukrainian Parliament's resolution was unprecedented and demonstrated the determination of Ukrainian political leaders to secure ecclesiastical independence, timing their appeal to coincide with the synod for maximum impact. Had the Russian Church participated in the synod, it likely would have influenced the discourse around "spiritual security," as church hierarchs, facing global media attention, would have been compelled to address publicly the religious divisions and military conflict in Ukraine.

Furthermore, the absence of Russian hierarchs suggested that the meeting between Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis at Havana Airport in Cuba, just a few months earlier in February 2016, was a more strategically significant event than the synod. By meeting the Pope, the Kremlin projected an alternative image of itself. The soft power generated by the patriarch-pope encounter offered tangible geopolitical advantages, particularly in relation to efforts to ease Western sanctions against Russia.⁶⁰ The decision to withdraw from the synod was portrayed by international media as a "national" issue, concerning only the four churches involved. The national framing mirrored wider developments in Europe at the time, such as the unexpected outcome of the Brexit referendum.⁶¹ Religious solidarity in Bulgaria, Syria, and Georgia reflected the far-reaching influence of Moscow's geopolitical strategy, while the actions of the Russian Orthodox Church demonstrated that "spiritual

the Moscow Patriarchate, June 13, 2016, <https://mospat.ru/en/2016/06/13/news132897/>.

59 Erasmus, "As Orthodox Leaders Gather in Crete, Ukraine Calls for an Independent Church," *The Economist*, June 16, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2016/06/orthodoxy-and-ukraine>.

60 Evangelos Sotiropoulos, "Analyzing the Holy and Great Council," *HuffPost*, March 14, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/evangelos-sotiropoulos/analyzing-the-holy-and-gr_b_9442122.html.

61 Maria Hämmerli, "Orthodox Diaspora? A Sociological and Theological Problematisation of a Stock Phrase," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 10, nos. 2–3 (2010): 97–115; Victor Roudometof, "Orthodox Christianity as a Transnational Religion: Theoretical, Historical and Comparative Considerations," *Religion, State and Society* 43, no. 3 (2015): 211–27; Lucian N. Leustean, "Brexit and the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church: The Return of Nationalism," *Public Orthodoxy*, June 29, 2016, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2016/06/29/brexit-and-the-holy-and-great-synod-of-the-orthodox-church-the-return-of-nationalism/>.

security” had become a tool for mobilizing religious actors abroad in support of Russia’s geopolitical interests.⁶²

Following the meeting in Crete, the Synod issued eight documents published in Greek, English, Russian, and French, namely: 1. “Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church”; 2. “Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church”; 3. “The Importance of Fasting and Its Observance Today”; 4. “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World”; 5. “Autonomy and the Means by Which it is Proclaimed”; 6. “The Orthodox Diaspora”; 7. “The Sacrament of Marriage and its Impediments”; and 8. “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World.”⁶³

The 2016 Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church demonstrated the deep interconnections between Eastern Orthodoxy, security, and geopolitics. Religious competition in Ukraine, shifting religious demographics in the Middle East, and the emergence of powerful, financially independent churches in Eastern Europe following the fall of the Iron Curtain have all had lasting impacts on religious dynamics. In close cooperation with state authorities, Orthodox churches have increasingly acted as providers of security, whether at the societal or political level, advancing their own geopolitical agendas while often aligning with the strategic interests of their national governments.

Russian Orthodoxy in the Middle East and Africa

The Middle East has been the setting for some of the most dramatic episodes involving the persecution and survival of Eastern Christian churches. While the majority of the region’s population is Muslim, the Middle East brings together a diverse religious and ethnic composition involving several ancient Christian traditions, including large autocephalous non-Chalcedonian churches (the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church), Eastern Catholic churches (such as the Coptic Catholic Church, the Maronite Catholic Church, the Chaldean Catholic Church, and the Melkite Greek Catholic Church), and a distinct church, the Assyrian Church of the East (and its faction, the Ancient Assyrian Church of the East), one of the world’s

62 Natalia Morozova, “Geopolitics, Eurasianism and Russian Foreign Policy under Putin,” *Geopolitics* 14, no. 4 (2009): 667–86; Dmitrii Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes: Resurrections of a Russian Orthodox Geopolitical Metaphor,” *Geopolitics* 11, no. 2 (2006): 317–47; Jonathan Gorvett, “Russian Prayers: The Struggle for Orthodox Christianity,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 14, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/southeastern-europe/2016-07-14/russian-prayers>.

63 The documents are available on the Official Website of the 2016 Synod at <https://www.holycouncil.org/>.

oldest churches, which dates back to the fourth century. Additionally, three ancient autocephalous patriarchates, the Greek Orthodox patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, maintain a direct connection to the wider Orthodox commonwealth.

Political instability in the region has affected not only the daily life of churches but also their very structures, to the point where the future existence of Christianity in the Middle East has been called into question.⁶⁴ Large-scale displacement resulting from the wars in Iraq and Syria has dramatically altered the region's demographic landscape. In 2014 and 2015, the advance of the so-called Islamic State led to the relocation of approximately 120,000 Christians to the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. In 2014 alone, out of an estimated 1.5 million Christians in Iraq, around 1 million fled the country, leading one senior clergyman to characterize the gravity of the situation by stating that "Every Christian wants to leave."⁶⁵

The redrawing of religious boundaries amid persecution, kidnappings, and extreme violence prompted responses from political regimes, as evident in Egypt's 2015 military action against Libya following the execution of Coptic Christians by jihadists affiliated with the Islamic State.⁶⁶ Religious violence has affected not only ordinary believers but also high-ranking clergy. In April 2013, Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, archbishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Aleppo, and Metropolitan Boulos Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch in Aleppo were abducted while traveling to negotiate the release of two kidnapped priests from their dioceses. A decade later, their fate remained uncertain, although a Syrian report suggested that both were likely killed in December 2016.⁶⁷ In 2023, the Middle East Council of Churches declared April 22, the day of their abduction, as "the Ecumenical

64 Greg Botelho, "Amid Killings and Kidnappings, Can Christianity Survive in the Middle East?," *CNN*, February 27, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/27/middleeast/christianity-middle-east/>.

65 Alissa Scheller and Antonia Blumberg, "How Christianity is Disappearing in the Middle East in One Chart," *HuffPost*, May 23, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/23/chart-christianity-middle-east_n_5378582.html; and Antonia Blumberg, "Vicar of Baghdad Claims 'Every Christian Wants to Leave' Iraq as ISIS approaches capital city," *HuffPost*, September 30, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/30/vicar-of-baghdad-christians-isis_n_5906508.html.

66 Jethro Mullen, "Egyptian Warplanes Bomb ISIS Targets in Libya after Killings of Christians," *CNN*, February 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/16/middleeast/isis-libya-egypt/>.

67 Madoc Cairns, "Aleppo Bishops 'Murdered in 2016' Says Report," *Ankawa.com*, January 22, 2020, <https://en.ankawa.com/aleppo-bishops-murdered-in-2016-says-report/>.

Day for the Abducted and the Forcibly Absented,” reflecting the continued prayers and hopes of local communities for their safe return.⁶⁸

International condemnation has done little to slow or reverse the pace of religious change in the Middle East. Nonetheless, there have been notable efforts to promote interreligious dialogue and peace. In June 2014, the Invocation for Peace brought together Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis with Israeli president Shimon Peres and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas at the Vatican.⁶⁹ Later that year, in September 2014, a vigil for peace was held outside Westminster Abbey, led by Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, alongside Imam Ibrahim Mogra, Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner, and Ayatollah Sayyid Fadhel Hosseini Al-Milani, symbolizing a rare and powerful moment of unity among religious leaders from different faiths.

Western expectations that the Arab Spring would foster the development of a liberal international order in the Middle East have significantly influenced religion-state relations. Military and political interventions in the region have reshaped not only national borders but also the structures and stability of Eastern Christian churches, whose presence remains uncertain and subject to rapid change. Moreover, the Russian Orthodox Church's support for the Greek Orthodox patriarchates has underscored the complexity of religious and geopolitical actors involved in the region.

Close ties between Russian Orthodox clergy, religious leaders, and government officials in the Middle East have been a consistent feature, not only during the Cold War but, more significantly, in Russia's efforts to gain international recognition and expand its geopolitical influence.⁷⁰ In 2020, during a visit to Israel, President Vladimir Putin met with Patriarch Theophilos III (Giannopoulos) of the Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem, applying pressure on Israeli officials to transfer ownership of the Alexander Courtyard (also known as the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity) in the Russian Compound in Jerusalem. Located in the Old City near the Church of the Holy

68 “On the 10th Yearly Commemoration of the Kidnapping of Archbishops of Aleppo Metropolitans Paul Yazigi and John Ibrahim,” The Middle East Council of Churches, April 24, 2023, <https://www.mecc.org/mecc/2023/4/14/ctidei5kbnhew58ispbvwhk3mkcyg4>.

69 “Remarks by Pope Francis, Shimon Peres, Mahmoud Abbas, from Yesterday's Invocation for Peace,” *Catholic World Report*, June 9, 2014, http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/3178/remarks_by_pope_francis_shimon_peres_mahmoud_abbas_from_yesterdays_invocation_for_peace.aspx and “Archbishop Joins Multi-Faith Peace Vigil for Iraq,” *Crosswinds*, September 18, 2014, <https://www.crosswinds.org.uk/en/pa-pray/regions/british-isles/item/2768-archbishop-joins-multi-faith-peace-vigil-for-iraq>.

70 Harry J. Psomiades, “Soviet Russia and the Orthodox Church in the Middle East,” *Middle East Journal* 11, no. 4 (1957): 371–81.

Sepulchre, the Alexander Courtyard holds not only religious significance but also diplomatic implications. As a result of Putin's visit, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to the transfer, recognizing the Russian Federation as the rightful successor to the Russian Empire's property assets.⁷¹ The decision followed intense lobbying by the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, an organization with offices in both Russia and the Middle East, led by Sergei Stepashin, former director of Russia's Federal Security Service (1994–1995) and prime minister in 1999. In 2022, following Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, an Israeli judge ruled that the Alexander Courtyard was a "holy site" and therefore outside the court's jurisdiction, indicating that only the government had the authority to determine its ownership.⁷²

The dispute over land ownership highlighted the ability of Russian clergy and state authorities to engage with a wide spectrum of religious and political leaders who influence public opinion in the Middle East. In 2011, President Dmitry Medvedev visited the Russian Museum in Jericho, where a street was named in his honor as "a new symbol of friendship between our people."⁷³ The following year, Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian National Authority, was awarded the Patriarch Aleksii II Prize during a public ceremony at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. The events underscored Russia's claim to be one of the few countries with access to key political figures across the Middle East, including all Palestinian factions, contrasting with the United States, which maintained contact primarily through official diplomatic channels.⁷⁴

Russia's use of religious networks in the Middle East helped project an image of defending the rights of religious minorities and persecuted Christians, cultivating a favorable perception of its political regime.⁷⁵ The strategy of combining religious and political influence extended beyond the

71 Lahav Harkov, "Putin to Meet with Naama Issachar's Mother in Jerusalem," *The Jerusalem Post*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/putin-to-meet-yaffa-issachar-on-thursday-during-his-visit-in-israel-614976>.

72 "Amid Ukraine Invasion, Jerusalem Court Nixes Transfer of Old City Property to Russia," *The Times of Israel*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/amid-ukraine-invasion-jerusalem-court-nixes-transfer-of-old-city-property-to-russia/>.

73 "Street in Jericho to be Named after Medvedev," January 20, 2012, *RT*, <https://www.rt.com/russia/medvedev-abbas-street-jericho-287/>.

74 Dr. Adnan Abu Amer, "Russia is Using Religion to Strengthen Its Influence among Palestinians," *Middle East Monitor*, February 1, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200201-russia-is-using-religion-to-strengthen-its-influence-among-palestinians/>.

75 Leonid Issaev and Serafim Yuriev, "The Christian Dimension of Russia's Middle East Policy," *Al Sharq Strategic Research*, March 2, 2017, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2017/03/02/the-christian-dimension-of-russias-middle-east-policy/>.

Middle East, with the African continent becoming a key focus during Putin's presidency. While Chinese and American business interests gained traction across many African states, Russia offered military support to autocratic governments while also courting marginalized religious communities. In December 2021, the Moscow Patriarchate established a Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, aiming to unite religious communities under the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria that opposed Ukrainian autocephaly. By early 2022, the exarchate had attracted over 150 clergy across twelve countries, a move that underscored the role of religion in advancing Russia's influence in Africa. Religious expansion served both as a counternarrative to the spiritual authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and as an opportunity to establish ecclesiastical structures alongside commercial ventures.⁷⁶

Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine and Forced Displacement

The Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox Churches

On February 23, 2022, the day before President Vladimir Putin ordered the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, Russia observed Defender of the Fatherland Day, and Patriarch Kirill, accompanied by five bishops, clergy, monks, and abbesses from various monasteries near Moscow, led a ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Alexander Garden, near the Kremlin walls. The ceremony served as a powerful fusion of religious symbolism and military power, with the gathering singing the national anthem, followed by the clergy chanting "Eternal Memory." The ceremony concluded with a march by the 154th Preobrazhensky Independent Commandant's Regiment, the official honor guard of the Russian Armed Forces stationed in Moscow. At the end, Patriarch Kirill gave a brief speech divided into two parts. First, he addressed the military, praising the sacrifices made by soldiers in defense of the nation, stating that "we live in peacetime, but we know that threats arise even in peacetime. Unfortunately, there are threats at the present moment, too; everyone is familiar with what is happening on the borders of our Fatherland." Second, he turned to the congregation and described a different kind of war as follows:

The warriors I have just addressed are defending the Fatherland with physical force, with force of arms, or at least preparing themselves to

76 Elisabeth Braw, "Russia is Waging Spiritual War in Africa," *Foreign Policy*, March 12, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/12/russia-africa-religion-orthodox-church-influence/>.

defend their country in this way at a difficult moment in history. *And you and I are defending our people on a very difficult invisible front [my italics...]* This is what the church does, and if we nurture our people in love for each other, in love for the Fatherland, in love for their native land, then we will be fulfilling a very important mission, including ensuring the security of our beloved Fatherland.⁷⁷

Patriarch Kirill's words proved symbolic. Just hours later, as Russian military forces advanced into Ukraine, the Russian Orthodox Church became actively involved in supporting the army, while at home, it rallied around what it described as "the difficult invisible front." In a televised address, President Vladimir Putin claimed that Russian forces were operating in Ukraine to "demilitarize" and "de-Nazify" the country, asserting that the conflict was both necessary and inevitable. He appealed directly to the military, stating that

I am certain that devoted soldiers and officers of Russia's Armed Forces will perform their duty with professionalism and courage [...] I hope that all parliamentary parties and civil society take a consolidated, patriotic position. At the end of the day, the future of Russia is in the hands of its multi-ethnic people, as has always been the case in our history. This means that the decisions that I made will be executed, that we will achieve the goals we have set, and reliably guarantee the security of our Motherland. I believe in your support and the invincible force rooted in the love for our Fatherland.⁷⁸

From a religious perspective, the most significant impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine was the alienation of Ukrainian dioceses. Ukraine had 53 dioceses under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, forming the largest Orthodox community outside Russia's borders, and military resistance was soon followed by religious disobedience. In the weeks that followed, Ukrainian clergy refused to mention Patriarch Kirill in celebrating the liturgy, with observers claiming that the invasion marked nothing less than the disintegration of the Russian Orthodox Church. Metropolitan Evlogii

77 "В День защитника Отечества Святейший Патриарх Кирилл возложил венок к могиле Неизвестного солдата у Кремлевской стены" [On Defender of the Fatherland Day, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier near the Kremlin Wall], Moscow Patriarchate, February 23, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5903402.html>.

78 "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Office of the President of Russia, February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

(Gutchenko) of Sumy and Akhtyrka, along with his clergy, submitted a petition to Kyiv demanding that the entire church cease commemorating the patriarch in their prayers. In response, the Synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate issued an appeal to Patriarch Kirill, urging him to “call on the leadership of the Russian Federation to immediately cease hostilities.” Kirill did not respond directly, and instead, on February 27, he called for a “prayer for peace on Russian soil.” Meanwhile, Metropolitan Hilarion, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, dismissed calls for Ukrainian ecclesiastical independence as unfounded, stating that “the Ukrainian Orthodox Church does not want this. The Ukrainian people want to stay with the Russian people. And this is not a political issue but an ecclesiastical one.”⁷⁹

The close ties between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Kremlin were on full display on March 6, 2022, when Patriarch Kirill delivered a sermon at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, framing the Russian invasion as a spiritual mission and claiming the war was nothing less than the restoration of “human civilization.”⁸⁰ He emphasized the civilizational nature of the conflict by asserting that Russian troops were actually fighting against the West, which he accused of trying to impose “gay parades” on the “Russian world.” The concept of the “Russian World” was thus not merely an ideological platform aligning the country’s geopolitical interests but also embodied a distinct religious dimension, promoting a close association between Orthodoxy and Russian identity. Kirill’s sermon drew widespread condemnation from religious leaders and academics around the globe. One week later, more than 1,500 scholars signed an open letter protesting the religious underpinnings of the “Russian World” concept, noting that Orthodox churches had condemned ethno-phyletism—the fusion of Orthodoxy and ethnicity—as early as the late nineteenth century.⁸¹

79 Milena Faustova, “Процесс распада Московского патриархата, возможно, уже запущен” [The process of disintegration of the Moscow Patriarchate may have already begun], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 2, 2022, https://www.ng.ru/faith/2022-03-02/1_8383_patriarchy.html.

80 “Патриаршая проповедь в Неделю сыропустную после Литургии в Храме Христа Спасителя” [Patriarchal sermon on Forgiveness Sunday after the liturgy in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior], Moscow Patriarchate, March 6, 2021, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html>.

81 “A Declaration on the ‘Russian World’ (*Russkiy mir*) Teaching,” Public Orthodoxy, March 13, 2022, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>. See also Marietta van der Tol, Sophia Johnson, Petr Kratochvíl, and Zoran Grozdanov, eds., *The Many Faces of Christianity: The “Russian World” in Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2025).

On March 14, 2022, the Inter-Council Presence of the Russian Orthodox Church—an advisory body under Patriarch Kirill's leadership that develops guidelines for bishops and clergy—issued a draft document titled “Orthodox Understanding of the Causes of Extremism and Terrorism.” Although Ukraine was not mentioned explicitly, the text indirectly portrayed the political authorities in the neighboring country as supporting terrorist activities. After outlining the church's perspective on violence as reflected in sacred texts, the document concluded with a general endorsement of religious education and the faithful's involvement in government-supported initiatives as follows: “The church strives to spread peace and harmony in society through spiritual and religious enlightenment and education, as well as through interaction with public organizations and government agencies in the prevention of extremism and terrorism.”⁸²

Letters of condemnation and public appeals from Western religious leaders had little effect on the Russian leadership. Patriarch Kirill responded only after Archpriest Ioan Sauca, acting general secretary of the World Council of Churches, sent a letter to Moscow on March 2. Sauca explained that he was writing on behalf of church leaders around the world who had asked him “to approach Your Holiness to mediate so that the war can be stopped and the great suffering ended.” On March 10, Kirill replied, refusing to refer to the conflict as a true “war” and instead offering an alternative interpretation of the military actions. He acknowledged that “these days, millions of Christians all over the world in their prayers and thoughts turn to the dramatic developments in Ukraine.” He emphasized the religious dimension of the conflict and placed blame on the West, stating that “as you know, this conflict did not start today. It is my firm belief that its initiators are not the peoples of Russia and Ukraine, who came from one Kievan baptismal font, are united by common faith, common saints and prayers, and share a common historical fate. The origins of the confrontation lie in the relationships between the West and Russia.”⁸³ The politicization of religion drew criticism from Western clergy, who instead highlighted the human tragedy behind the conflict. On April 12, under the leadership of former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, British religious leaders representing Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu

82 “Проект документа Православное осмысление причин экстремизма и терроризма” [Draft document “Orthodox understanding of the causes of extremism and terrorism”], Moscow Patriarchate, March 14, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5908502.html>.

83 “Response by H.H. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow to Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca (English translation),” World Council of Churches, March 10, 2022, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/response-by-hh-patriarch-kirill-of-moscow-to-rev-prof-dr-ioan-sauca-english-translation>.

communities traveled to Chernivtsi, close to the Romanian-Ukrainian border, to support Ukrainian refugees and express solidarity with local communities.⁸⁴

The narrative that Russia was fighting the collective West rather than Ukrainian forces remained a persistent theme in church discourse, and religious activities increasingly focused on promoting traditional conservative values in opposition to those of the liberal West. When the European Union leadership announced sanctions against Russian politicians and oligarchs supporting the war, Lithuanian foreign minister Gabrielius Landsbergis and former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko called for Patriarch Kirill to be added to the sanctions list. Alongside appeals for Ukrainian dioceses to become independent from Moscow's jurisdiction, Lithuanian officials questioned the spiritual legitimacy of Orthodox parishes in their country remaining under the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church.⁸⁵ In the months that followed, Poroshenko continued his criticism of the Russian church hierarchy, targeting Patriarch Kirill in particular. In July 2022, after visiting the front lines, he documented the destruction of churches and issued a strong appeal for Kirill's prosecution: "Upon your blessing, this is being done in Ukraine with churches, temples, which are the House of God, places where people pray to the Lord [...] And that is why I firmly believe that your clique should be sanctioned all over the world. You must bear responsibility; before you bear it before God, you must be prosecuted here on earth."⁸⁶

On May 27, 2022, Metropolitan Onufriy, head of the Holy Synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), declared the "complete autonomy and independence" of his church from the Russian Orthodox Church.⁸⁷ Despite including words stating "autonomy," the

84 Patrick Hudson, "Rowan Williams Joins Delegation to Ukraine," *The Tablet*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/15273/rowan-williams-joins-delegation-to-ukraine>.

85 Artem Gorovenko, "Порошенко закликав запровадити санкції проти РПЦ та її очільника" [Poroshenko called for sanctions against the Russian Orthodox Church and its leaders], *RBC-Ukraine*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.rbc.ua/ukr/news/poroshenko-prizval-vvesti-sanktsii-protiv-1650988280.html>.

86 "It is with Your Blessing that the Churches are Destroyed,"—Poroshenko Addresses Kirill in a Ruined Church," Religious Information Service of Ukraine, July 13, 2022, https://risu.ua/en/it-is-with-your-blessing-that-the-churches-are-being-destroyed---poroshenko-addresses-kirill-in-a-ruined-church_n130851.

87 "Постанова Собору Української Православної Церкви від 27 травня 2022 року" [Resolution of the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church dated May 27, 2022], Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), May 27, 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/05/27/postanova-soboru-ukrajinskoji-pravoslavnoi-cerkvi-vid-27-travnya-2022-roku/#2024-05-13>.

declaration remained ambiguous, and the Moscow Patriarchate dismissed it as mere political interference in religious affairs. Patriarch Kirill emphasized that the UOC-MP had already enjoyed “autonomy” and “self-governing rights” within the Russian Orthodox Church since the early 1990s. As part of its ecclesiastical structure, he argued, only the Moscow Patriarchate had the authority to grant full autocephaly. The Russian Orthodox Church continued to view the UOC-MP as an integral part of the Russian religious community, not as a separate entity seeking independence. Ecclesiastical uncertainty was further complicated by the UOC-MP hierarchy’s refusal to recognize the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which had been granted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2019. The UOC-MP rejected any association with the OCU, denouncing it as nothing more than a heretical structure.

Tensions between Moscow, the OCU, and the UOC-MP continued to escalate. On July 27, 2022, Metropolitan Epiphaniy (Dumenko), head of the OCU, sent a letter on behalf of his Holy Synod to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, requesting a pan-Orthodox review of Patriarch Kirill’s concept of the “Russian World” and calling for him to be “deprived of the patriarchal throne.”⁸⁸ Although the Ecumenical Patriarchate refrained from acting on the request, by requesting such a drastic and unusual measure, the Ukrainian hierarchs aimed to increase pressure on other Orthodox churches to condemn Russia’s invasion.

In response to the UOC-MP’s declaration and in an effort to solidify its religious authority, on June 7, the Moscow Patriarchate officially placed the Ukrainian dioceses in Crimea under its direct jurisdiction, territories that had previously remained under Kyiv’s control.⁸⁹ The decision signaled that the Moscow Patriarchate considered the occupied regions to be under its permanent ecclesiastical authority. Furthermore, to dispel uncertainty over the official church’s stance on Ukraine, the Holy Synod

88 “Лист щодо притягнення Російського патріарха Кирила до канонічної відповідальності і позбавлення його Патріаршого престолу” [Letter regarding bringing Russian Patriarch Kirill to canonical responsibility and depriving him of the Patriarchal throne], Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), July 27, 2022, <https://www.pomisna.info/uk/vsi-novyny/lyst-shhodo-prytyagnennya-rosijskogo-patriarha-kyryla-do-kanonichnoyi-vidpovidalnosti-i-pozbavlennya-jogo-patriarshogo-prestolu/>.

89 “Симферопольская, Джанкойская и Феодосийская епархии приняты в подчинение Патриарха и Синода Русской Православной Церкви и вошли в состав учрежденной Крымской митрополии” [Simferopol, Dzhankoy, and Feodosia dioceses were accepted under the authority of the Patriarch and the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church and became part of the established Crimean Metropolis], Moscow Patriarchate, June 7, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5934581.html>.

removed Metropolitan Hilarion, chairman of the Department of External Church Relations, from his position and reassigned him as Metropolitan of Budapest and Hungary.⁹⁰ He was replaced by Metropolitan Anthony (Sevryuk) of Volokolamsk, primate of the Patriarchal Exarchate in Western Europe, a figure with extensive pastoral experience, particularly in Italy. His international connections were evident on August 5, when he met with Pope Francis in Rome to convey the Russian Orthodox Church's position that, in his view, the UOC-MP remained an inseparable part of the Moscow Patriarchate and was facing religious and political persecution in Ukraine.⁹¹ In the following months, Metropolitan Anthony became the outspoken representative of the Moscow Patriarchate to international institutions. On January 18, 2023, he participated remotely in a meeting of the United Nations Security Council, aiming to draw attention to what he described as "the unlawful actions of the Ukrainian state authorities with regard to the largest confession of the country."⁹²

As Russia prepared to formally annex the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions, amounting to nearly 15 percent of Ukrainian territory by the end of September, the Moscow Patriarchate intensified its militarization of religious discourse. On September 26, Patriarch Kirill offered a heightened spiritual justification for the conflict, declaring that Russian "soldiers dying in Ukraine would be cleansed of their sins."⁹³ His statement drew immediate condemnation from Western religious leaders. On October 17, Father Ioan Sauca, acting general secretary of the World Council of Churches and a representative of the wider ecumenical movement, traveled to Moscow to meet with Patriarch Kirill, persuading him to issue a declaration stating that "the war cannot be holy."⁹⁴ However, the declaration

90 "Назначены новые председатель Отдела внешних церковных связей и ректор Общецерковной аспирантуры и докторантуры" [A new Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations and Rector of the All-Church Postgraduate and Doctoral Studies have been appointed], Moscow Patriarchate, June 7, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5934584.html>.

91 A. C. Wimmer, "Ahead of Trip to Kazakhstan, Pope Francis Meets with Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Anthony," *Catholic World Report*, August 5, 2022, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2022/08/05/ahead-of-trip-to-kazakhstan-pope-francis-meets-with-russian-orthodox-metropolitan-anthony/>.

92 "DECR Chairman Spoke at a Meeting of the UN Security Council," Russian Orthodox Church, January 18, 2023, <https://mospat.ru/en/news/89955/>.

93 "Orthodox Church Leader Says Russian Soldiers Dying in Ukraine Will Be Cleansed of Sin," September 26, 2022, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/orthodox-church-leader-says-russian-soldiers-dying-ukraine-will-be-cleansed-sin-2022-09-26/>.

94 "His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, WCC Acting General Secretary Meet in Moscow, Agreeing That War Cannot Be Holy," World Council of Churches, October 19, 2022, <https://www.oikoumene.org>.

was short-lived. Less than two years later, in March 2024, Kirill issued an even more strongly worded statement, claiming that Russia was indeed fighting a “holy war” against Ukraine and the West.

International pressure to involve religious communities in efforts to alleviate the conflict came not only from ecumenical organizations in Geneva but also from Catholic and Anglican circles. Between October 23 and 25, 2022, under the theme “Cry for Peace,” the Sant’Egidio Community organized an international gathering of religious leaders representing all major world religions in Rome, during which Pope Francis declared a day of prayer for Ukraine.⁹⁵ One month later, on November 30, the archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the Right Reverend Dr. Robert Innes, the Anglican bishop in Europe, visited Kyiv to show support for refugees and displaced persons.⁹⁶ On December 25, in his *Urbi et Orbi* message, Pope Francis condemned the war, stating that “Our time is experiencing a grave famine of peace.”⁹⁷ On January 9, 2023, in his address to members of the diplomatic corps, he again referred to Ukraine, citing the 1965 pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, which declared that “every act of war directed [at] the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and humanity which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation.”⁹⁸ A few weeks later, on January 25, Pope Francis welcomed a delegation from the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, representing Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities, and, for the first time, met with Metropolitan Epiphaniy of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Metropolitan Onufriy of the Ukrainian

org/news/his-holiness-patriarch-kirill-wcc-acting-general-secretary-meet-in-moscow-agreeing-that-war-cannot-be-holy.

95 “Il Grido della Pace: dal 23 al 25 ottobre a Roma, l’Incontro Internazionale di Dialogo e Preghiera per la pace nello spirito di Assisi” [The cry of peace: An international meeting of dialogue and prayer for peace in the spirit of Assisi will take place in Rome from October 23 to 25], Community of Sant’Egidio, October 23, 2022, <https://www.santegidio.org/pageID/30284/langID/it/itemID/50037/Il-Grido-della-Pace-dal-23-al-25-ottobre-a-Roma-l-Incontro-Internazionale-di-Dialogo-e-Preghiera-per-la-pace-nello-spirito-di-Assisi.html>.

96 “Archbishop of Canterbury Begins Visit to Ukraine,” *Episcopal News Service*, November 30, 2022, <https://episcopalnewsservice.org/2022/11/30/archbishop-of-canterbury-begins-visit-to-ukraine/>.

97 “‘Urbi et Orbi’ Message of His Holiness Pope Francis,” The Holy See, December 25, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/20221225-urbi-et-orbi-natale.html>.

98 “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See,” The Holy See, January 9, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/january/documents/20230109-corpo-diplomatico.html>.

Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate declined to attend, instead sending lower-ranking clergy to represent his church.⁹⁹

The active involvement of Catholic prelates was driven by two main reasons that influenced the course of the war. The first factor was the unpredictability of the conflict, which was increasingly regarded as escalating beyond Ukrainian territory. On August 21, 2022, Darya Dugina, the daughter of ultranationalist philosopher Alexander Dugin, was killed in a car bombing in Moscow.¹⁰⁰ It remains unclear whether Dugin himself was the intended target, as he was widely perceived as influential in shaping Kremlin ideology, particularly the notion of Russia defending Orthodox values and leading a Eurasian empire stretching from Dublin to Vladivostok, a concept taught in Russian military academies. The second factor was the ideological shift within Russia. On November 9, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree titled “On Approving the Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values,” which assigned a more prominent ideological role to Orthodox mobilization.¹⁰¹ In response, Ukraine began taking steps to monitor and restrict the activities of UOC-MP hierarchs. On November 23, Ukrainian security services conducted raids on Orthodox monasteries affiliated with the UOC-MP,¹⁰² and on December 28, the government revoked the citizenship of 13 UOC-MP clergy members.¹⁰³

On December 1, 2022, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced five legal measures aimed at ensuring Ukraine’s “spiritual independence” from

99 “Папа Римський уперше зустрівся з керівниками основних українських церков: Онуфрій не поїхав” [The Pope met for the first time with the leaders of the main Ukrainian churches: Onuphrius did not go], LB.ua, January 25, 2023, https://lb.ua/world/2023/01/25/543712_papa_rimskiy_upershe_zustrivsyia_z.html.

100 Andrew Roth and Martin Farrer, “Daughter of Putin Ally Alexander Dugin Killed by Car Bomb in Moscow,” *The Guardian*, August 21, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/21/daughter-of-putin-ally-alexander-dugin-killed-in-car-bomb-in-moscow-reports>.

101 “Указ об утверждении Основ государственной политики по сохранению и укреплению традиционных российских духовно-нравственных ценностей” [Decree on approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values], Office of the President of Russia, November 9, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/69810>.

102 Julian Borger and Lorenzo Tondo, “Russian-backed Kyiv Monastery Raided over Suspected Subversion,” November 23, 2022, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/23/russian-backed-kyiv-monastery-subject-to-ongoing-investigation-says-ukrainian-official>.

103 Chris King, “President Zelenskyy Signs Decree Suspending Citizenship of 13 Canonical UOC Priests,” *Euro Weekly News*, February 14, 2023, <https://euroweeklynews.com/2023/01/08/president-zelenskyy-signs-decree-suspending-citizenship-of-13-canonical-uoc-priests/>.

Russia.¹⁰⁴ The most important measure was that “The National Security and Defense Council instructed the Government to submit to the Verkhovna Rada a draft law on making it impossible for religious organizations affiliated with centers of influence in the Russian Federation to operate in Ukraine.”¹⁰⁵ In a symbolic step toward religious independence, on December 25, several parishes under the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) celebrated Christmas according to the Western calendar. The Holy Synod of the OCU decreed that the new date should be adopted due to the “need to implement calendar changes in the near future.” Metropolitan Epiphaniy, head of the OCU, and Metropolitan Svyatoslav (Shevchuk), primate of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, agreed to meet and discuss calendar reforms across the country.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, on January 7, 2023, for the first time, Metropolitan Epiphaniy celebrated Orthodox Christmas at the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, one of Ukraine’s most significant religious sites. The Lavra was divided into two sections: the Upper Lavra, which was transferred to the OCU, and the Lower Lavra, which remained under the jurisdiction of the UOC-MP.¹⁰⁷

Religious measures began to influence the military narrative. On January 5, 2023, an appeal for a “ceasefire” appeared on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate,¹⁰⁸ and just a few hours later, President Vladimir Putin issued a similar statement.¹⁰⁹ Ukrainian political authorities swiftly rejected both as examples of “hypocrisy.”¹¹⁰ In response, and to reinforce the justification for continuing the war, on January 27, the State Service

104 “We Will Guarantee Spiritual Independence to Ukraine: Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy,” Office of the President of Ukraine, December 11, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/mi-garantuyemo-ukrayini-duhovnu-nezalezhnist-zvernennya-prez-79577>.

105 “We Will Guarantee Spiritual Independence to Ukraine.”

106 Evhen Kizilov, “ПЦУ дозволила різдвяні богослужіння 25 грудня” [OCU allowed Christmas services on December 25], *Ukrainska Pravda*, October 18, 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/10/18/7372478/>.

107 “Orthodox Church of Ukraine Holds Church Service at Kyiv Pechersk Lavra for the First Time,” *Kyiv Independent*, January 7, 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/orthodox-church-of-ukraine-holds-church-service-at-kyiv-pechersk-lavra-for-the-first-time/>.

108 “His Holiness Patriarch Kirill Calls for Christmas Truce,” Russian Orthodox Church, January 5, 2023, <https://mospat.ru/en/news/89919/>.

109 “Указания Президента Российской Федерации Вооружённым Силам Российской Федерации” [Instructions of the President of the Russian Federation to the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation], Office of the President of Russia, January 5, 2023, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70330/print>.

110 Pjotr Sauer, “Ukraine Rejects Putin’s 36-hour Ceasefire for Orthodox Christmas,” *The Guardian*, January 5, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/05/putin-orders-36-hour-truce-in-ukraine-for-orthodox-christmas>.

of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience published a map documenting the destruction or damage of 307 religious buildings since the start of Russia's invasion in February 2022.¹¹¹ The buildings belonged to all major religious denominations in Ukraine, with the largest number affiliated with the UOC-MP. While most of the damaged sites were located in Russian-controlled territories, churches across the country continued to be either direct military targets or collateral damage from ballistic missile strikes. The most dramatic incident occurred on July 23, 2023, when the Transfiguration Cathedral in Odesa was severely damaged. Both sides blamed each other. Ukraine claimed the attack was a deliberate attempt to destroy Ukrainian Orthodoxy, while Russia asserted that the damage was caused by Ukrainian air defense systems.¹¹²

In response to President Zelenskyy's goal of achieving spiritual independence, on January 19, 2023, the Council of Ministers introduced Draft Bill No. 8371, which aimed to ban religious organizations affiliated with Russia.¹¹³ The bill was adopted by the Ukrainian Parliament on October 19, 2023, with 267 votes—well above the minimum of 226 required to pass legislation. The church was instructed to change its name to reflect the absence of canonical ties with Moscow;¹¹⁴ however, in practice, Parliament's decision had limited effect and drew criticism regarding the state of religious freedom.¹¹⁵ As Metropolitan Oleksandr (Drabynko) of Pereyaslav and Vishneve, who previously served under the UOC-MP before joining the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2019, pointed out, political measures alone were not able to alter ecclesiastical realities, and that “according to canon

111 “11 Months of Russia's Full-Scale Attack: 307 Religious Sites Ruined in Ukraine,” State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of Conscience, January 27, 2023, <https://dess.gov.ua/ussia-ruined-at-least-307-religious-sites-eng/>.

112 James Waterhouse and George Wright, “Ukraine War: Russian Strikes on Odesa Damage Orthodox Cathedral,” *BBC News*, July 23, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-66281027>.

113 “Проект Закону про внесення змін до деяких законів України щодо діяльності в Україні релігійних організацій” [Draft Law on Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine Regarding Activities of Religious Organizations in Ukraine], Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, January 19, 2023, <https://itd.rada.gov.ua/billInfo/Bills/Card/41219>.

114 “Ukrainian Parliament Votes to Ban Orthodox Church over Alleged Links with Russia,” *The Guardian*, October 20, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/20/ukrainian-parliament-votes-to-ban-orthodox-church-over-alleged-links-with-russia>.

115 Elena Davlikanova, “Ukraine's Quest for Freedom of Religion,” Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), December 20, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/ukraines-quest-for-freedom-of-religion/>; “Ukraine's Church-State Relationship May Be Changed Significantly: Interview with Dmytro Vovk,” *Talk About: Law and Religion* (blog), April 26, 2024, <https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2024/04/26/interview-with-dmytro-vovk/>.

law, the UOC is part of the Moscow Patriarchate and is perceived as such by other local churches.”¹¹⁶

On March 27–28, 2024, the World Russian People's Council, an international public forum chaired by Patriarch Kirill and held at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, issued its strongest endorsement yet of the concept of the “Russian world.” The document adopted by the council stated that:

The special military operation [SVO] is a new stage in the national liberation struggle of the Russian people against the criminal Kyiv regime and the collective West behind it, waged on the lands of Southwestern Rus' since 2014. During the SVO, the Russian people, with arms in hand, defend their lives, freedom, statehood, civilizational, religious, national, and cultural identity, as well as the right to live on their own land within the borders of a single Russian state. From a spiritual and moral point of view, a special military operation is a Holy War, in which Russia and its people, defending the single spiritual space of Holy Rus', fulfill the mission of “Holding,” protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism.¹¹⁷

The document asserted that Ukrainians were not a distinct nation but rather were historically known as “Little Russians,” who, along with Belarusians and Russians, constituted a single, unified ethnicity:

Russia should return to the doctrine of the trinity of the Russian people, which has existed for more than three centuries, according to which the Russian people consist of Great Russians, Little Russians, and Belarusians, who are branches (sub-ethnicities) of one people, and the concept “Russian” covers all the Eastern Slavs—the descendants of historical Rus'.¹¹⁸

The portrayal of the conflict in Ukraine as a “holy war” was strongly condemned by Western religious leaders and international organizations,¹¹⁹ who

116 “Metropolitan Oleksandr (Drabynko) on the Status of UOC (MP): “This is Part of Moscow Patriarchate,”” January 9, 2024, Spiritual Front of Ukraine, <https://df.news/en/2024/01/09/metropolitan-oleksandr-drabynko-on-the-status-of-uoc-mp-this-is-part-of-moscow-patriarchate/>.

117 “Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора Настоящее и будущее Русского мира” [Order of the XXV World Russian People's Council: “The Present and Future of the Russian World”], Moscow Patriarchate, March 27, 2024, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html>.

118 “Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора.”

119 “WCC ‘Cannot Reconcile’ World Russian People's Council Decree Describing Ukraine Conflict as ‘Holy War,’” World Council of Churches, April 18, 2024, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/>

accused Russian officials of promoting religious nationalism, militarizing religion, and offering a distorted theological justification for the invasion.¹²⁰

In response, on August 20, 2024, with 265 votes in favor, the Verkhovna Rada adopted the law titled “On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Field of Religious Organizations” (Bill No. 8371), which prohibited the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine. The law raised concerns regarding the legal framework under which the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate operated and, more broadly, about the potential for violence related to property transfers. Since then, Ukrainian political leaders have consistently dismissed criticism from both Russia and the West, emphasizing that the law did not signify the dissolution of the UOC-MP nor was it a violation of the freedom of religion and belief.¹²¹ Nevertheless, incidents of violence and the forced closure of churches have persisted.

Religion and Forced Displacement

If between Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian population remained relatively detached from the arrival of forcibly displaced people, the experience of dramatic military losses and the inclusion of new territories gave renewed momentum to the church’s discourse. One of the most pressing challenges to the authority of church leadership was the potential emergence of new ecclesiastical structures abroad, formed by Russian citizens who had left the country. Following the religious persecution that began after the 1917 Russian Revolution, between 3 and 5 million Russians emigrated to the West and established independent ecclesiastical jurisdictions, most notably the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) and the Archdiocese of Russian Orthodox Churches in Western Europe, based in Paris. ROCOR

wcc-cannot-reconcile-world-russian-peoples-council-decree-describing-ukraine-conflict-as-holy-war.

120 Cynthia McCormick Hibbert, “What Does it Mean That the Russian Orthodox Church is Calling Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine a ‘Holy War’?,” *Northeastern Global News*, April 3, 2024, <https://news.northeastern.edu/2024/04/03/russian-orthodox-church-ukraine-holy-war/>; Katarzyna Chawryło, “A Holy War: The Russian Orthodox Church Blesses the War against the West,” Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), April 12, 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-04-12/a-holy-war-russian-orthodox-church-blesses-war-against-west>.

121 “Comment by the MFA on the UN’s False Accusations about the Alleged Restrictions on Freedom of Religion in Ukraine,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, January 2, 2025, <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/komentar-mzs-shchodo-nepravdivih-zvinuvachen-oon-v-nibito-obmezheni-ukrayinoyu-religijnih-svobod>.

reunited with the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007, followed by the Archdiocese of Paris in 2019.¹²²

The arrival of Russian emigrants intersected with post-Soviet religious structures already established under the Moscow Patriarchate. In 2011, the Moscow Patriarchate created the Central Asian Metropolitan District, which included 46 parishes in Kyrgyzstan, 6 in Tajikistan, and 35 in Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan had the largest Orthodox presence in the region, with ten dioceses and 355 churches in 2016, all organized under its own Russian metropolitanate. In the Republic of Armenia, the Moscow Patriarchate established the Yerevan-Armenian Diocese in October 2021, comprising eight churches. Initially led by Metropolitan Leonid (Gorbachev), leadership of the diocese changed quickly when he was reassigned just two months later to head the Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa. In Mongolia, the patriarchate maintained a minimal presence, with only one cathedral in Ulaanbaatar and a church in Erdenet. In Turkey, most Orthodox faithful traditionally fell under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate; however, following the 2019 break in relations between the Moscow and Ecumenical patriarchates, the Moscow Patriarchate began encouraging Russian faithful to attend its own churches. That same year, it helped establish the Society of Russian-speaking Orthodox Christians in Antalya, Alanya, and Belek, where various clergy began conducting services. In Belek, Father Gregory Ivanchoglo led a small community of about 60 members from various post-Soviet nationalities who attended the liturgy in the spa resort town.¹²³

In response to the large influx of Russian citizens, local churches did not officially engage in providing humanitarian support, and instead, individual priests took the initiative to organize their communities to assist the newly arrived faithful. In October 2022, Vasily Telekhov, secretary of the Dushanbe Diocese in Tajikistan, noted that his community received full support from the Synodal Department for Charity and Social Service of the Russian Orthodox Church, offering weekly charity meals for all parishioners. He observed that, despite the arrival of new believers, attendance remained largely unchanged, suggesting that those in need were more likely to seek help from employment centers rather than turn to the local church for material aid. Unlike the interwar period, when Russian

122 Ciprian Burlăcioiu, "Migration und Diasporabildung in der östlichen Orthodoxie des 20. Jahrhunderts: Zwei Fallbeispiele: Das Ökumenische Patriarchat in Konstantinopel und die russische Orthodoxie," in *Migration and Diaspora Formation: New Perspectives on a Global History of Christianity*, ed. Ciprian Burlăcioiu (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 273–92.

123 "Liturgy Celebrated for Russian Community in Turkish Belek," Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, June 30, 2019, <https://mospat.ru/en/news/46244/>.

émigrés organized independent ecclesiastical structures that challenged Moscow's religious authority, recent waves of refugees maintained contact with relatives back home and showed little interest in forming autonomous religious jurisdictions.¹²⁴

While churches in post-Soviet states generally refrained from publicly promoting humanitarian assistance for newly arrived Russian refugees, the Moscow Patriarchate actively showcased a broad network of support for displaced populations from the Donbas region and other occupied territories. In contrast to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which developed humanitarian structures under pressure from the Donbas war, the Russian Orthodox Church benefited from decades of state-supported welfare and charitable initiatives. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Orthodox infrastructure expanded rapidly and continued to grow significantly after the 2022 invasion. For example, between 2009 and 2017, the Moscow Patriarchate established 49 shelters for pregnant women;¹²⁵ by 2024, that number had increased to 86.¹²⁶ In the same year, the Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Service of the Russian Orthodox Church counted “more than 4,500 church social institutions, projects, and initiatives,” “over 900 sisterhoods of mercy,” “265 humanitarian aid centers,” “more than 400 projects to help people with disabilities,” “245 church projects to help drug addicts, including 49 rehabilitation centers, 19 resocialization centers, 5 motivational centers, 15 outpatient programs, 68 counselling centers, and 89 help and support groups for addicts and their relatives,” “more than 600 Orthodox organizations and projects that help alcohol addicts and their relatives,” and “103 shelters for the homeless and 23 charity buses.”¹²⁷ The extensive outreach aimed to position the church as a powerful social force capable of supporting state authorities both domestically and abroad. In all military conflicts involving Russian forces, including the First and Second Chechen Wars (1994–1996; 1999–2009), the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, and Russia's post-2014 occupation of Crimea and the Donbas, the

124 Milena Faustova, “Релокация маленькой русской веры” [Relocation of a small Russian faith], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, October 18, 2022, https://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2022-10-18/9_10_538_relocation.html.

125 Alicja Curanović, “The Russian Orthodox Church, Human Security, Migration and Refugees: Concepts, Strategies and Actions,” in *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2020), 66–105.

126 “Статистика социального служения Русской Православной Церкви” [Statistics of social service of the Russian Orthodox Church], Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Ministry of the Russian Orthodox Church, 2024, <https://www.diaconia.ru/statistic>.

127 “Статистика социального служения.”

Moscow Patriarchate refrained from issuing statements condemning the violence or using the term “war.” Instead, it framed the arrival of refugees and displaced persons as the return of ethnic Russians who could be seamlessly integrated into society.

In 2014, at the start of the Donbas conflict, the Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Service of the Russian Orthodox Church encouraged the faithful to donate humanitarian aid for displaced populations. Within just three weeks, the church collected over 128 million rubles (approximately 1.3 million euros),¹²⁸ sent more than 102 tons of food, and opened a dedicated telephone line for refugees. By December 2014, approximately 514,000 people had become internally displaced within Ukraine, while 233,000 sought refuge in Russia.¹²⁹ The Russian Orthodox Church focused its efforts primarily on the latter group, maintaining contact with Ukrainian dioceses through its jurisdictional ties with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate. Initially, refugees were housed in temporary camps organized by the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations, from which they were later relocated to other regions with government support. In addition to providing material aid, the church played a role in establishing charitable services throughout the relocation process. A small group of clergy—13 priests—received training to offer psychological and pastoral care to displaced persons. Tent chapels were set up in Donetsk, as well as in the Russian border cities of Novoshakhtinsk and Gukovo, and in the village of Chernikovo. The Rostov Diocese, located near the border, was particularly active; in October 2014 alone, it provided food and clothing to over 1,700 families.¹³⁰

The church assisted state authorities in relocating people across Russian dioceses, with refugees finding shelter in church-run facilities and private homes. In July 2014, for example, around 300 Ukrainian refugees were

128 “За последние три недели Синодальный отдел по благотворительности передал 102 тонны продуктов мирным жителям Украины” [Over the past three weeks, the Synodal Department for Charity has donated 102 tons of food to civilians in Ukraine], Moscow Patriarchate, June 18, 2015, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4124444.html>.

129 “Ukraine Conflict Uproots Hundreds of Thousands,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), December 5, 2014, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/ukraine-conflict-uproots-hundreds-thousands>.

130 “Церковь собрала свыше 56 миллионов рублей на помощь беженцам” [The Church has raised over 56 million rubles to help refugees], Maikop and Adygea Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, November 20, 2014, <https://adygeya-orthodoxia.ru/news/novosti-czerkvi/vrezki-dlya-novostejczerkvi/okazanie-russkoj-pravoslavnoj-czerkovy-pomoshhi-bezhencam-pribivshim-na-territoriyu-rossii-iz-yugo-vostochnyix-regionov-ukrainyi/czerkov-sobrala-svyshie-56-millionov-rublej-na-pomoshh-bezhencam.html>.

transported by bus from Kramatorsk to Russia with financial support from the Saint Basil the Great Charitable Foundation, chaired by Russian billionaire Konstantin Malofeev.¹³¹ Upon arrival in the Leningrad region, 116 individuals were housed in a school affiliated with the Holy Transfiguration Valaam Monastery, while, in September 2014, more than 1,500 people in Moscow received assistance from local churches.¹³² Although the overall number of Ukrainian refugees in Russia who received direct support from the church remained relatively small, the Donbas conflict demonstrated the church's capacity to mobilize the faithful and coordinate closely with state authorities.

Refugee figures provided by national and international institutions presented a contrasting picture. In 2019, data collected by the Federal State Statistics Service over the previous five years indicated that 969,978 Ukrainian refugees had moved to Russia. In 2016, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, an intergovernmental military alliance, estimated the number at 1.5 million. In contrast, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe reported 524,000 refugees in 2015, while the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated in 2017 that there were 427,240 internally displaced persons.¹³³ The discrepancies reflected not only the differing methodologies and political contexts of state institutions in Russia and abroad but also the ways in which church institutions framed appeals for humanitarian aid.

One church publication, for example, claimed that between April and October 2014, 730,000 Ukrainians, including 45,000 children, relocated from the Donbas region to Russia.¹³⁴ The complexity of identifying reliable data was underscored in July 2014, when local officials reported that 17,010 people, including 7,239 children, were being housed in 245 temporary accommodation centers along the Russian-Ukrainian border. Ilya Sharkov, press secretary of the Shakhty Diocese, described the religious response in vivid terms: "The border between Ukraine and Russia runs through the

131 Natalya Mihailova, "Monks of the Valaam Monastery Shelter 116 Refugees from Eastern Ukraine in Valaam Metochion," *Orthodox Christianity and the World*, July 5, 2014, <https://www.pravmir.com/monks-valaam-monastery-shelter-116-refugees-eastern-ukraine-valaam-metochion/>.

132 "Беженцы: Что сделала для них Церковь?" [Refugees: What did the Church do for them?], *Foma.ru*, October 15, 2014, <https://foma.ru/bezhentsyi-chto-sdelala-dlya-nih-tserkov.html>.

133 Roman Lunkin, "My Strength Is Made Perfect in Weakness": Russian Orthodoxy and Forced Displacement," in *Religion and Forced Displacement in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia*, ed. Victoria Hudson and Lucian N. Leustean (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 209–46.

134 "Беженцы: Что сделала для них Церковь?"

territory of our deaneries, literally through people's gardens. For example, in the Chortkovsky district, the summer kitchen is in Ukraine, while the house is on Russian territory. There is no border as such, and sometimes we organize joint services with several Russian and Ukrainian parishes."¹³⁵ In his view, the church's response to the movement of forcibly displaced people was largely driven by the failure of state authorities to address the crisis adequately.¹³⁶

In addition to the institutional aid provided by the Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Service of the Russian Orthodox Church, chaired by Bishop Panteleimon (Shatov), one of the most active religious humanitarian organizations was the Orthodox "Mercy" service. The NGO, also led by Bishop Panteleimon, developed its own humanitarian infrastructure, primarily aimed at supporting people in need in Moscow and other regions in Russia. Between 2014 and 2015, more than 21,000 people received assistance from the "Mercy" service in the Novokosino district of Moscow.¹³⁷ Humanitarian mobilization continued, and by 2024, with financial backing from both the faithful and government bodies, the organization was providing aid to approximately 30,000 people annually.¹³⁸

In 2015, the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate partnered with the American organization "Samaritan's Purse," founded by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, to distribute humanitarian aid in Russia's Belgorod and Rostov regions.¹³⁹ The collaboration resulted in the delivery of 68,420 aid packages and 10,000 children's gifts to individuals regardless of religious affiliation. In an interview, Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, defended the church's cooperation with an American Evangelical organization as an example of interfaith collaboration, stating, "In helping victims of a political conflict, the Church remains outside politics. An integral part of the peace service is a special prayer for peace and overcoming

¹³⁵ "Вынужденным переселенцам из Украины оказывают помощь в Церкви" [The Church provides assistance to forced migrants from Ukraine], Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Ministry of the Russian Orthodox Church, July 1, 2014, <https://diaconia.ru/n/vynuzhdennym-pereselenczam-iz-ukrainy-okazyvayut-pomoshh-v-cerkvi/>.

¹³⁶ "Вынужденным переселенцам из Украины."

¹³⁷ Lunkin, "My Strength Is Made Perfect in Weakness," 209–46.

¹³⁸ "Православная служба помощи 'Милосердие'" [Orthodox Relief Service "Mercy"], "Mercy" Orthodox Relief Service, 2024, <https://miloserdie.help/about/>.

¹³⁹ "Department for External Church Relations and Samaritan's Purse Humanitarian Organization Provide Aid to Refugees from Ukraine," Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, 2015, <https://mospat.ru/en/news/50470/>.

the internal strife in Ukraine.”¹⁴⁰ The unusual partnership between the Moscow Patriarchate and an American charity reflected the geopolitical strategy of the Russian Orthodox Church. Samaritan’s Purse and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association promoted a conservative form of Evangelical Christianity that aligned closely with the Russian Orthodox Church’s emphasis on traditional values. Its leader, Franklin Graham, has publicly stated that “Satan was behind campaigns for same-sex marriage,” echoing rhetoric similar to that used by Russian religious authorities.¹⁴¹

The impact of religious humanitarian work in the Donbas region extended to the international stage. In the following years, the Russian Orthodox Church expanded its humanitarian infrastructure not only within Russia but also abroad, engaging directly with Catholic and Protestant organizations on social and charitable initiatives. In April 2016, a joint delegation from the Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church traveled to Lebanon and Syria, where they visited refugee camps and met with both religious and state officials. The delegation agreed to strengthen collaboration and compile a list of destroyed religious sites in the region.¹⁴² In 2017, Patriarch Kirill stated that Russia’s military support for Bashar al-Assad’s regime had helped prevent the destruction of Christian religious sites and the expulsion of Syria’s Christian minority.¹⁴³ The primary area of cooperation between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Catholic Church in Syria focused on rebuilding churches and monasteries and providing aid to children in the city of Homs.¹⁴⁴ In the long term, Russia’s religious influence in Syria aligned with its larger soft power strategy in the Middle East, as evident in the Syrian government’s decision to introduce Russian as an elective language in schools. Moreover, the reconstruction of religious sites was supported

140 “Assistance to Displaced Persons from South-East of Ukraine in Russia with the Support of ‘Samaritan’s Purse’ and the Billy Graham Association (2015),” Russia Round Table, January 8, 2016, <https://www.catgallery.ru/rondtb/en/act/okazanie-pomoshhi-vynuzhdennym-pereselentsam-s-yugo-vostoka-ukrainy-v-rossii-pri-podderzhke-organizatsii-suma-samaryanina-i-assotsiatsii-billi-grema-2015.html>.

141 Tim Wyatt, “Billy Graham Evangelistic Association Accused of Spending \$50 million in ‘Dark Money,’” *The Church Times*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/20-november/news/world/billy-graham-evangelistic-association-accused-of-spending-50-million-in-dark-money>.

142 “Moscow Patriarchate and Roman Catholic Church Launch Joint Project in Support of Syrian Christians,” Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, 2016, <https://mospat.ru/en/news/49616/>.

143 “Russia Helped to Protect Christians in Syria, Patriarch Kirill Says,” TASS, January 7, 2018, <https://tass.com/society/984135>.

144 “Catholics Join Forces with Russian Orthodox to Rebuild Churches in Syria,” *Orthodox Christianity*, April 29, 2016, <https://orthochristian.com/g2980.html>.

not only by Russian state and church funds but also by the involvement of private security forces linked to the Wagner Group, headed by Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, which also protected Russian oil interests in the region.¹⁴⁵

Drawing on its prior experience with military conflicts, the Russian Orthodox Church was well-positioned to deliver humanitarian aid on an unprecedented scale following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. On November 9, 2022, President Vladimir Putin signed the decree "Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values," which elevated the defense of "traditional values" to a central pillar of state policy. The decree provided new impetus for the church's involvement in supporting frontline efforts, reinforcing its role as both a spiritual and social force within the state.¹⁴⁶

In January 2023, state media reported that five clergymen had died in the war, including Archpriest Mikhail Vasiliev, rector of the patriarchal monastery at the headquarters of the Strategic Missile Forces in Vlasikha, Moscow Region. Vasiliev had extensive military pastoral experience, having served in Bosnia, Chechnya, and Syria, and was well known for his spiritual support of Russian paratroopers. President Vladimir Putin posthumously awarded him the Hero of the Russian Federation medal.¹⁴⁷ The Russian Orthodox Church was portrayed as actively supporting displaced populations and military personnel; for example, Archpriest Dmitry Krotkov, head of the diocesan department for work with the armed forces in Crimea, frequently traveled to the conflict zone and described his efforts as follows: "We've

145 Ishtar Al Shami, "How Religion and Money Shape Russian Soft Power in Syria," Fikra Forum, May 26, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-religion-and-money-shape-russian-soft-power-syria> and Lina Khatib, "What's Behind Russia's Humanitarian Intervention in Syria?," *Middle East Eye*, December 3, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/whats-behind-russias-humanitarian-intervention-syria>.

146 The decree defined traditional values as "moral guidelines that shape the worldview of Russian citizens, passed down from generation to generation, underlying the all-Russian civil identity and the country's unified cultural space, strengthening civil unity, and finding their unique, distinctive manifestation in the spiritual, historical, and cultural development of the multinational people of Russia." "Указ об утверждении Основ государственной политики по сохранению и укреплению традиционных российских духовно-нравственных ценностей" [Decree on the Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values], Office of the President of Russia, November 9, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/69810>.

147 AFP, "Putin Gives Highest Medal to 'Warrior Priest' Killed in Ukraine," *The Moscow Times*, November 9, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/11/08/putin-gives-highest-medal-to-warrior-priest-killed-in-ukraine-a79321>.

been doing this since August 2014. Over eight years, more than 30 visits, we have transferred over 200 tons of cargo [...] Since last March, we've been here around 60 times." Similarly, Archpriest Svyatoslav Churkanov, a military chaplain providing spiritual support to the Russian National Guard, spoke not only of the harsh realities of life in a conflict zone but also emphasized the ideological dimension of the war, stating that "the war is taking place on a spiritual, mental level."¹⁴⁸

The decree established a direct connection between the concept of traditional values and the coordinated efforts of religious and state institutions in supporting forcibly displaced Ukrainians. One clear example of the intersection between religion and displacement emerged in March 2023 at a roundtable hosted by St. Petersburg University titled "Traditional Religions of Russia in the Spiritual Paradigm of National Security." The event brought together representatives from all major religious communities in Russia, with participants reporting that over 5,000 tons of aid had been sent from the Leningrad region alone to those in need on the front lines. At the national level, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation introduced a new academic module on the history of religion in Russia, while the Ministry of Education implemented a curriculum module titled "Fundamentals of the Spiritual and Moral Culture of the Peoples of Russia" for students in grades 4 through 9.¹⁴⁹ The developments exemplified that the country's religious transformations were in alignment with the state's promotion of traditional values.

On April 18, 2023, with Orthodox Easter approaching, President Putin visited the headquarters of the Dnepr group of military troops in Kherson and the Vostok National Guard group in Luhansk for the first time. During both visits, after meeting with high-ranking military officials, he presented icons in recognition of their sacrifices and to offer spiritual support. At the Dnepr headquarters, he gave the military a replica of an icon of special national significance, the Icon of the Savior, Image Not Made by Hands, and noted that the original icon was housed in the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Patriot Park, Odintsovsky District, Moscow. He reminded the audience that the icon has long been believed to protect

¹⁴⁸ Maria Marikyan, "Нам остается только одно: Что делают священники на фронте" ["There's only one thing left for us." What do priests do at the front], RIA Novosti, January 17, 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230117/svyaschenniki-1845212826.html>.

¹⁴⁹ "Rector of St Petersburg University: 'All Russian Laws Must Be Harmonised with the Spiritual Values Outlined by our President,'" St. Petersburg State University, March 16, 2023, <https://english.spbu.ru/news-events/news/rector-st-petersburg-university-all-russian-laws-must-be-harmonised-spiritual>.

Russian military forces and once belonged to Pyotr Vannovsky, “one of the most successful defense ministers of the Russian Empire,” who played a key role in developing the modern Russian Army.¹⁵⁰

The support of the Russian Orthodox Church during times of political crisis was evident during the short-lived Wagner mutiny. On June 23, 2023, paramilitary troops led by Yevgeny Prigozhin crossed from Ukraine into Russia, seized control of Rostov, and advanced toward Moscow in what was described as a “march for justice.” The Wagner rebellion posed a serious challenge to the regime and to President Putin’s leadership. Following a televised address in which Putin condemned the march and declared that its organizers would be “brought to justice,”¹⁵¹ church officials rallied around the president. The most vocal supporters were Patriarch Kirill, who released a public appeal urging those “who, having taken up arms in their hands, are ready to direct them against their brethren, to think again,” and Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov), a well-known religious intellectual and author.¹⁵² In an appeal titled “Self-Destruction of Russia,” posted on the Pskov Diocese’s website and quickly reproduced by state media, Tikhon called on the public to support the political leadership. He emphasized that all leaders required obedience, as they represented the will of God: “In unity with those whom God’s Providence has put to rule Russia, no matter how this person is called in history: grand duke, tsar, emperor, or chairman of the State Defense Committee and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the USSR [...] Today, President Vladimir Putin bears this burden, cross, and responsibility.”¹⁵³

The Wagner mutiny, the defense of traditional values, and the use of religious symbolism highlighted not only the military challenges faced by

150 “Путин посетил штабы группировок ‘Днепр’ и ‘Восток’ в зоне спецоперации” [Putin visited the headquarters of the “Dnestr” and “Vostok” groups in the Special Operation Zone], RIA Novosti, April 18, 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230418/putin-1865970077.html> and “Icon Replicas Putin Gifted to Military Bought from Private US Collection–Kremlin,” TASS, April 18, 2023, <https://tass.com/society/1606131>.

151 James Gregory & Sarah Rainsford, “Vladimir Putin Says Wagner Mutiny Leaders Will Be ‘Brought to Justice,’” *BBC News*, June 27, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-66024526>.

152 “Обращение Святейшего Патриарха Московского и всея Руси Кирилла” [Address of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus’], Moscow Patriarchate, June 24, 2023, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6037974.html>.

153 “Митрополит Псковский и Порховский Тихон” [Metropolitan Tikhon of Pskov and Porkhov], VK, June 24, 2023, https://vk.com/mitropoliya_pskov?w=wall-107743832_7755 and “Митрополит Тихон призвал сплотиться вокруг Путина” [Metropolitan Tikhon calls for unity around Putin], RIA Novosti, June 24, 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230624/mitropolit-1880194802.html>.

Russian forces but also the profound impact of forced displacement. On March 17, 2023, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for President Vladimir Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, commissioner for children's rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation, both of whom were sought for the "war crime of unlawful deportation [...] transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation."¹⁵⁴ The Orthodox Church played a direct role in the transfer of children through its humanitarian networks. Lvova-Belova, who oversaw the relocation of Ukrainian children, had previously served as head of the Department for Work with Disabled People in the Penza Diocese and was known for founding charitable religious organizations for orphans and individuals with disabilities. She was married to an Orthodox priest, with whom she had five biological children and adopted 17 others. In a speech delivered in the fall of 2022, she described how she brought 30 children from basements in Mariupol, who initially held negative views of Russia. After placing them with foster families in Russia, she claimed that "none of the children wanted to go back; they all said, 'We are very happy here.'"¹⁵⁵

With experience working alongside state institutions that supported orphans across Russia, Lvova-Belova oversaw a national program for the relocation of Ukrainian children to Russian territory. By February 2023, at least 6,000 Ukrainian children had been placed in 43 re-education facilities in Russia, from which they were later adopted or placed in the care of families and orphanages.¹⁵⁶ On July 9, 2024, the Children of War initiative of the Ukrainian National Information Bureau reported that 19,546 children had been deported or forcibly displaced, 559 were confirmed dead, 1,961 were missing, and only 388 had returned.¹⁵⁷ The extent to which Lvova-Belova's

¹⁵⁴ "Situation in Ukraine: ICC Judges Issue Arrest Warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova," International Criminal Court, March 17, 2023, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and->

¹⁵⁵ Elena Romanova, "Who is Maria Lvova-Belova, the Children's Rights Advocate Accused of War Crimes Alongside Putin?," *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, April 6, 2023, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/04/06/who-is-maria-lvova-belova-the-childrens-rights-advocate-accused-of-war-crimes-alongside-putin-en>.

¹⁵⁶ Kaveh Khoshnoos, Nathaniel Raymond, and Caitlin Howarth, "Russia's Systematic Program for the Re-education and Adoption of Ukrainian Children," Yale School of Medicine, February 14, 2023, <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/russias-systematic-program-for-the-re-education-and-adoption-of-ukraines-children/>.

¹⁵⁷ "Children of War Initiative," State Portal for Missing and Displaced Children, July 9, 2024, <https://childrenofwar.gov.ua/en/> and "Ukrainian Children Deported to Russia: Plenary Debate,"

work was embedded within both state and religious structures became especially clear in November 2023, when she chaired the “Youth Section” panel of the World Russian People’s Council. Established in 1993 and led by Patriarch Kirill, the council served as an international forum bringing together religious and government officials to address the key challenges of Russia’s social and political transformation. The “Youth Section” panel was held at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, one of Moscow’s largest universities, with the stated goal of identifying “students as future promising leaders and managers for federal and regional legislative and executive authorities, the very elite for whom traditional Russian values are important, and who truly love Russia and are ready to do a lot of good for our people.”¹⁵⁸

In November 2023, the Moscow Patriarchate published its annual report, detailing an extensive list of humanitarian programs. The church emerged as one of the largest aid providers and played a direct role in reconstruction efforts. Since August 2023, when the Holy Synod established the Patriarchal Humanitarian Mission to deliver material and spiritual support in occupied territories, the Russian Orthodox Church opened aid centers in Belgorod, Voronezh, Rostov-on-Don, Yekaterinburg, Kazan, Rybinsk, and Simferopol. The charitable departments of the Simferopol, Rostov-on-Don, Kazan, and Yekaterinburg dioceses were among the most active, ensuring that over 3,330 tons of humanitarian aid reached the Donbas region. According to the report, the church enabled more than 1,200 volunteers to serve in hospitals located in Donetsk, Gorlovka, Luhansk, Mariupol, Makeyevka, and Novoazovsk. The volunteers received medical training in cities near the conflict zone and at the Central Clinical Hospital of Saint Alexis in Moscow, which was operated by the church, and provided medical care to over 18,000 people. In addition to medical assistance, the church encouraged volunteers to travel to Mariupol to help rebuild destroyed private homes. Between May and December 2023, the church facilitated the travel of 639 volunteers from across the country to Mariupol, where they repaired 180 homes for the elderly, people with disabilities, and single mothers.¹⁵⁹

European Parliament, March 11–14, 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/agenda/briefing/2024-03-11/12/ukrainian-children-deported-to-russia-plenary-debate>.

158 “Соборная сила: 27–28 ноября состоится юбилейный XXV Всемирный Русский Народный Собор” [Council power: The XXV jubilee of the World Russian People’s Council will take place on November 27–28], World Russian People’s Council, November 24, 2023, <https://vrns.ru/news/sobornaya-sila-27-28-noyabrya-sostoitsya-yubileynyy-xxv-vsemirnyy-russkiy-narodnyy-sobor/>.

159 “Итоги социального служения Церкви в 2023 году” [Results of the Church’s social service in 2023], Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Ministry of the Russian Orthodox Church,

Volunteers worked in groups of three to five and were recruited by the church, which covered all associated costs.¹⁶⁰ Although their numbers remained relatively small, their activities were prominently featured in the media, particularly on the Moscow Patriarchate's Telegram channel, and received national coverage, helping to bolster public support for the war and the reconstruction effort.¹⁶¹ One participant summarized the program as follows:

And I understand that people in new houses will remember for a long time how the old ones were destroyed. It is faster to repair a facade than to repair a soul. Thus, tomorrow new volunteers will arrive from Moscow, Siberia, the Urals, and even the Far East—to feed, clothe, and heal; to ‘repair’ the lives and souls of other people.¹⁶²

On June 28, 2022, the Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Service established the Center for Issues of Family Placement of Children and Church Guardianship of Children, aimed at “coordinating the work of church institutions for children and collaborating with specialized Orthodox projects.”¹⁶³ A report from summer 2022 indicated that local dioceses “provided special care for the children of Donbass,” listing the places organizing “summer holidays [...] pilgrimages [...] excursions [...] festive events, and master classes.”¹⁶⁴ In many cases, dioceses framed their efforts as general care and recreational training without emphasizing the children’s nationality. For example, in April 2024, 49 Russian children from the Belgorod region were sent to Ulyanovsk, a city over 800 kilometers

November 23, 2023, <https://www.diaconia.ru/itogi-socialnogo-sluzheniya-cerkvi-v-2023-godu>.

160 “Восстанавливать дома в Мариуполе помогают сотни волонтеров от Русской Православной Церкви” [Hundreds of volunteers from the Russian Orthodox Church are helping to restore houses in Mariupol], Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Ministry of the Russian Orthodox Church, April 4, 2023, <https://www.diaconia.ru/vosstanavlivat-doma-v-mariupole-pomogayut-sotni-volonterov-ot-russkoj-pravoslavnoj-cerkvi>.

161 “Восстанавливать дома в Мариуполе помогают сотни волонтеров от Русской православной церкви” [Hundreds of volunteers from the Russian Orthodox Church are helping to restore houses in Mariupol], *Pervy Kanal*, April 4, 2023, https://www.itv.ru/news/2023-04-04/450365-vosstanavlivat_doma_v_mariupole_pomogayut_sotni_volonterov_ot_russkoy_ppravoslavnoy_tserkvi.

162 “The Synodal Department for Charity of the Russian Orthodox Church,” *Telegram Channel*, June 28, 2024, https://t.me/s/church_charity.

163 “ЖУРНАЛЫ Священного Синода от 13 октября 2022 года” [JOURNALS of the Holy Synod of October 13, 2022], Moscow Patriarchate, October 13, 2022, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5966901.html>.

164 “ЖУРНАЛЫ Священного Синода.”

from Moscow, where they were hosted in two sanatoriums. The children had been affected by the war near the border, and the church ensured that their education continued during their stay.¹⁶⁵ In November 2023, the synodal department organized “an online forum of Orthodox foster families,” where Bishop Panteleimon and Alexandra Arakelova, head of the Center for Family Placement of Children and Church Guardianship of Children, shared their experiences. The church was actively involved in identifying adoptive parents, with training provided at two church-run institutions, namely the Family Placement Center at the Martha and Mary Convent in Moscow and the Tenderness Orthodox School for Adoptive Parents in St. Petersburg.¹⁶⁶ Church representatives worked closely with state authorities in all aspects of implementing social programs. At the 11th General Church Congress on Social Service in November 2023, the panel “Assistance of the Church to Orphans and Children in Difficult Life Situations” was moderated by Bishop Panteleimon, with participants including Alexandra Arakelova, who presented the work of the Moscow Patriarchate; Larisa Falkovskaya, director of the Department of State Policy for the Protection of Children's Rights at the Russian Ministry of Education; and representatives from four civil society organizations with religious affiliations.¹⁶⁷

In February 2024, a report summarizing the humanitarian work of the Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Service stated that 56,519 people had contacted the Belgorod diocese since March 2022, and 54,120 had sought support from the Moscow diocese. The report claimed that Ukrainian refugees were hosted in “62 church institutions in Russia, Germany, Great Britain, and Ukraine.”¹⁶⁸ The inclusion of institutions in other countries was

165 “Симбирская епархия передала гуманитарную помощь эвакуированным из Белгородской области детям” [Simbirsk diocese delivered humanitarian aid to children evacuated from Belgorod region], Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Ministry of the Russian Orthodox Church, April 9, 2024, <https://www.diaconia.ru/simbirskaya-eparkhiya-peredala-gumanitarnuyu-pomoshh-evakuirovannym-iz-belgorodskoj-oblasti-detyam>.

166 “Состоялся первый Всероссийский онлайн-форум православных приемных семей” [The first All-Russian online forum of Orthodox foster families took place], Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Ministry of the Russian Orthodox Church, November 23, 2023, <https://www.diaconia.ru/sostoyalsya-pervyy-vserossijskij-onlajnforum-pravoslavnykh-priemnykh-semej>.

167 “XI Общецерковный съезд по социальному служению” [The 11th General Church Congress on Social Service], Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Ministry of the Russian Orthodox Church, November 12, 2023, <https://congress.diaconia.ru/#rec649889251>.

168 “В гуманитарных центрах Ростовской епархии беженцы получают одежду: Информационная сводка о помощи беженцам (от 13 февраля 2024 года)” [Refugees to receive clothing in humanitarian centers of Rostov diocese: Information summary on assistance to refugees (dated February 13, 2024)], Moscow Patriarchate, February 14, 2024, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6102948.html>.

propagandistic and reflected the church's outreach rather than a significant refugee presence; for example, the websites of churches and monasteries affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate in Germany and Great Britain made no mention of hosting refugees. On the contrary, many Russian clergy in Western Europe openly condemned the war and distanced themselves from the politicization of religious discourse coming from Moscow. Issuing open letters in protest of state and religious policies remained one of the few public acts of defiance available to dissenters under authoritarian rule. At the start of the war in February 2022, 293 Russian clergy, most of them based abroad, signed an appeal for "a call for reconciliation and an immediate ceasefire."¹⁶⁹ A similar act of protest occurred in February 2024, when more than 800 priests and church members signed an open letter demanding that authorities release the body of murdered political prisoner Aleksey Navalny for burial by his family.¹⁷⁰

On December 14, 2023, during his first Direct Line call-in show since the start of the war, President Putin responded to carefully orchestrated questions from the audience. Highlighting the importance of the Orthodox Church's social work, he quoted words attributed to German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck as follows: "Wars are not won by generals, but by schoolteachers and parish priests." Putin defended the war by asserting that "very many people in the world believe we are doing everything right, that we are defending our national interests without encroaching on anyone else's. A huge number of people support the defense of traditional values."¹⁷¹ Putin's remarks reflected an unease among state officials regarding the increasingly prominent role of religious institutions. In October 2023, at the opening of the "Digoria" forum for young political scientists, Sergey Kiriyeenko, first deputy chief of staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia, presented the same image and declared that Russia would win not only the military conflict in Ukraine but also the economic war imposed by the West. In his

169 "Orthodox Clerics Call For Stop To War In Ukraine In Rare Challenge To Russian Government," March 1, 2022, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-orthodox-clerics-stop-war-ukraine/31730667.html> and "Обращение священнослужителей Русской Православной Церкви с призывом к примирению и прекращению войны" [Appeal of the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church for reconciliation and an end to the War], <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1yOGuXjdFQ1A3BQaEEQR744cwDzmSQiqePaaBi4z6q3w/>.

170 "Russian Priests Sign Open Letter Calling for Navalny's Body to Be Released to Family," *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, February 22, 2024, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/02/22/russian-priests-sign-open-letter-calling-for-navalnys-body-to-be-released-to-family-en-news>.

171 "Putin Holds First Direct Line since Start of War," *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, December 14, 2023, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/12/14/first-direct-line-live-call-in-show-with-putin-since-start-of-war-gets-underway>.

view, “the longest, the most difficult, the most protracted will be the war of meanings, the information-psychological and ideological war.”¹⁷² From this perspective, the government's support for the humanitarian work of the Russian Orthodox Church has mirrored the use of religious discourse during the Cold War period. It underscored the Russian leadership's objective to secure victory in what it perceived as an unfolding “information-psychological and ideological war,” one expected to last for many years to come.

172 “РФ победит в военном конфликте, но идеологическая война будет идти дольше—Кириенко” [Russia will win the military conflict, but the ideological war will last longer—Kiriyenko], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, October 7, 2023, <https://www.ng.ru/news/771121.html>.

3. Autocephaly, War, Humanitarian Structures, and Forced Displacement in Ukraine

Abstract: The chapter provides an overview of the ways in which Orthodox churches in Ukraine emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It examines the Ukrainian state-building process after the fall of communism, the national and international recognition of an independent national church, the development of humanitarian structures, and religious engagement in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Keywords: Ukraine; Orthodox Churches; War; Humanitarianism; Forced Displacement

On December 1, 1991, a national referendum, endorsed by 84 percent of the population, resulted in an overwhelming majority of around 90 percent voting in favor of Ukrainian independence. Just a few weeks later, on December 25, Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Soviet Union, resigned. Gorbachev had served as general secretary of the Communist Party since 1985 and as president of the Soviet Union since 1990, and his resignation officially marked the dissolution of the Soviet Union.¹

¹ For contemporary history and politics in Ukraine, see Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Paul D'Anieri, ed., *Orange Revolution and Aftermath: Mobilization, Apathy, and the State in Ukraine* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: The Story of How a People Became a Nation*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022); Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (London: Allen Lane, 2015); Serhy Yekelchyyk, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Nicolai N. Petro, ed., *Ukraine in Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Gwendolyn Sasse, *The Crimea*

Political turmoil was mirrored by Orthodox mobilization. Ukraine held a central role in the ecclesiastical structure of the Moscow Patriarchate, accounting for 58 percent of all Orthodox parishes across the Soviet Union. After the Second World War, the independent Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) was banned, leaving the Russian Orthodox Church as the only officially recognized Orthodox institution in the Soviet state. During the Cold War, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the United States, based in New Jersey and led by Metropolitan Mstyslav (Skrypnyk), ministered to the Ukrainian diaspora. In June 1990, a synod of Ukrainian clergy elected Metropolitan Mstyslav as patriarch in a ceremony held at one of Ukraine's most revered religious sites, Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv. In response, Patriarch Aleksii II of the Russian Orthodox Church introduced a unique model of ecclesiastical self-governance for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in October 1990. The newly autonomous body was known as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church; however, to distinguish it from other Orthodox entities, scholars and policymakers often referred to it as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). The Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church appointed Metropolitan Filaret (Denysenko) as Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Ukraine, placing him in charge of the autonomous church.

The instability of Orthodox structures in Ukraine persisted into 1991. Metropolitan Filaret, head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), declared that Ukrainian state independence required a complete separation from the Moscow Patriarchate. His nationalist stance met resistance from Orthodox bishops in eastern Ukraine, who convened in Kharkiv in 1992 and appointed Metropolitan Volodymyr (Sabodan) as their new spiritual leader. Filaret, backed by the Ukrainian government, rejected Volodymyr's appointment. In the years that followed, he reached out to UAOC hierarchs, advocated for national unity, and repeatedly appealed to the Ecumenical Patriarchate for ecclesiastical recognition of his independent church. Ecclesiastical disputes and ambiguous jurisdictional boundaries remained the predominant trend in the following years, with three competing Orthodox churches emerging: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), led by Metropolitan Volodymyr (Sabodan); the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), initially under Patriarch Volodymyr (Romaniuk) and later Patriarch Filaret

(Denysenko) (after 1995); and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), led by Patriarch (Mstyslav) and succeeded by Patriarch Dymytrii (Yarema) in 1993.²

From the beginning of Ukrainian statehood, Orthodox divisions became deeply embedded in the national consciousness and political imagination. Religious structures mirrored political tensions, with eastern Ukraine remaining closely aligned with Russian ecclesiastical jurisdiction, while western Ukraine was more religiously diverse, home to a significant population of Ukrainian Greek Catholic faithful. In a comparable manner to other Eastern European countries, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) played a crucial role in preserving national identity, particularly during the state-building processes in the nineteenth century. The UGCC's influence, combined with ecclesiastical competition among Orthodox churches and religious revival following the collapse of the Soviet atheist regime, positioned Ukraine at a cultural and geopolitical crossroads between the liberal West, represented by the European Union, and the traditional East, under the influence of neighboring Russia.³

2 For religion in Ukraine, see Geoffrey A. Hosking, ed., *Church, Nation and State in Russia and Ukraine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1991); Olga Bertelsen, ed., *Revolution and War in Contemporary Ukraine: The Challenge of Change* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2016); Crimean Human Rights Group, *Freedom of Religion and Beliefs in Crimea: Analytical Review on Situation Regarding Freedom of Religion and Beliefs in Occupied Crimea (April 2014–January 2018)*, Kyiv, 2018, https://crimeahrg.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Religion_EN.pdf; Nicholas E. Denysenko, "Chaos in Ukraine: The Churches and the Search for Leadership," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 14, no. 3 (2014): 242–59; Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer, eds., *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016); Roman Lunkin, "The Ukrainian Revolution and Christian Churches," in "A Theme Issue on the Impact of the Ukrainian Crisis on the Church and Christian Ministry," special issue, *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 22, no. 3 (2014): 1–5; Serhii Plokhyy and Frank E. Sysyn, *Religion and Nation in Modern Ukraine* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2003); Rob van der Laarse, Mykhailo N. Cherenkov, Vitaliy V. Proshak, and Tetiana Mykhalchuk, eds., *Religion, State, Society, and Identity in Transition: Ukraine* (Oisterwijk, The Netherlands: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2015); Catherine Wanner, ed., "Religion and Political Crisis in Ukraine," special issue, *Euxeinos* 17 (2015).

3 Ammon Cheskin, "Russian Soft Power in Ukraine: A Structural Perspective," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 50 (2017): 277–87; Catherine Wanner, ed., *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Catherine Wanner, *Everyday Religiosity and the Politics of Belonging in Ukraine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022); Mark D. Steinberg and Catherine Wanner, eds., *Religion, Morality, and Community in Post-Soviet Societies* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).

Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephaly between Moscow and Constantinople⁴

The Russian Orthodox Church's decision to grant self-governing rights to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in October 1990 did little to suppress demands for full ecclesiastical independence, and in the following decades, Ukrainian Orthodoxy was marked by a delicate balance between pro-Russian and pro-Constantinople factions. Initially, Ukraine's political elites refrained from taking an official stance on religious independence; however, the 2004 Orange Revolution, which brought the pro-European President Viktor Yushchenko to power, marked a shift in policy by fostering closer ties between religious and state actors. Between 2009 and 2011, Patriarch Filaret and Metropolitan Volodymyr were encouraged by state authorities to negotiate toward the creation of a unified Ukrainian Church. Although talks ultimately failed, a more overtly pro-Russian approach emerged following the 2010 election of President Viktor Yanukovich. Under Yanukovich, the government intervened in religious affairs, halting the limited progress that had been made. As Metropolitan Volodymyr's health declined, the administration restricted access to his close advisors—those most likely to continue negotiations—and instead promoted the narrative that Ukrainian Orthodoxy was inseparably tied to Moscow, while bishops advocating for autocephaly were urged to join the dominant Church aligned with the Moscow Patriarchate.

The Ukrainian government's stance on its ecclesiastical ties with Moscow shifted dramatically during the 2013 Euromaidan demonstrations. In November and December 2013, the Yanukovich administration's violent dispersal of peaceful protesters elevated the UOC-KP as a symbolic alternative to both religious and, indirectly, political power structures. One of its key religious landmarks in Kyiv, Saint Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery, rang its bells in support of the civic protests and opened its doors to shelter wounded demonstrators. Media coverage of Orthodox and Greek Catholic clergy physically placing themselves between protesters and police portrayed a new form of Orthodoxy—liberal, pro-European,

4 For religion, politics, and society within the framework of Ukrainian autocephaly, see Lucian N. Leustean and Vsevolod Samokhvalov, "The Ukrainian National Church, Religious Diplomacy, and the Conflict in Donbas," *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2019): 199–224; Denys Shestopalets, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, the State and the Russian-Ukrainian Crisis, 2014–2018," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 20, no. 1 (2019): 42–63; Tymofii Brik, "When Church Competition Matters? Intra-Doctrinal Competition in Ukraine, 1992–2012," *Sociology of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2019): 45–82.

and in direct contrast to traditional state-aligned religious authority. The death of Metropolitan Volodymyr on July 5, 2014, marked a turning point, as his church, under Moscow's jurisdiction, distanced itself further from earlier efforts at national reconciliation, and leadership passed to a group of hierarchs with strong ties to eastern and southern Ukraine who favored continued alignment with Moscow. The political shift following the ousting of Yanukovych was mirrored in church affairs. Newly elected President Petro Poroshenko, who took office in June 2014, supported Metropolitan Symeon (Shostatsky) of Vinnytsia and Mohyliv-Podilskyi as a potential leader of a unified, independent Ukrainian Church.⁵ However, the Holy Synod instead elected Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovsky) of Chernivtsi and Bukovina, who prioritized spiritual matters over autocephaly and maintained close ties with the Moscow Patriarchate.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and its military support for separatist forces in Donbas in March 2014 had a profound impact on Ukrainian Orthodox churches. As demonstrated during the Maidan Revolution, the UOC-KP emerged as the leading Orthodox institution advocating for national unity and state independence. In contrast, UOC-MP maintained allegiance to the Moscow Patriarchate and promoted the concept of the "Russian world," with its hierarchs framing the conflict as a civil war and an internal Ukrainian matter. Following the occupation of Crimea, Orthodox parishes under Kyiv's jurisdiction were no longer permitted to operate freely, and in June and July 2014, Metropolitan Onufriy appealed to Patriarch Kirill to preserve religious continuity in the region by registering Orthodox communities with Russia's Ministry of Justice. While the move formally indicated that the UOC-MP remained the spiritual administrator, in practice, the Russian Orthodox Church assumed control over the appointment of clergy and the financial assets of local Orthodox communities, effectively bypassing Kyiv's authority.⁶

5 Anastasiya Odintsova, "Один проти всіх: Що відомо про єдиного митрополита, який не підтримав розрив УПЦ МП з Константинополем" [One against all: What is known about the only Metropolitan who did not support the break of the UOC MP with Constantinople], *The New Voice of Ukraine*, November 15, 2018, <https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/events/odin-proti-vsikh-shcho-vidomo-pro-jedinij-mitropolita-ne-pidtrimali-rozriv-upts-mp-z-konstantinopolem-2507031.html>.

6 Yuri Alexandrov, "Церковная аннексия Крыма: УПЦ Московского патриархата отдала свои крымские епархии и их имущество РПЦ" [Church annexation of the Crimea: UOC of the Moscow Patriarchate gave its Crimean dioceses and their property to the Russian Orthodox Church], *Krym.Realii*, May 9, 2015, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/26889260.html>.

The shifting balance of religious influence in Crimea and Donbas continued in the months following the 2014 annexation,⁷ and the Kyiv Patriarchate gradually withdrew its clergy from the occupied territories. By autumn 2014, Metropolitan Serhiy (Horobtsov) of Donetsk and Mariupol had joined the ranks of internally displaced persons, relocating to Mariupol. In contrast, the UOC-MP maintained its presence in the separatist-controlled areas, supporting clergy who remained, while local hierarchs—such as Metropolitan Illarion (Roman Shukalo) of Donetsk, Metropolitan Mitrofan (Yurchuk) of Luhansk and Alchevsk, and Metropolitan Panteleimon (Povorozniuk) of Rovenky and Sverdlovsk (Luhansk region)—publicly endorsed the new political authorities. In December 2017, Patriarch Kirill met in Moscow with Alexander Zakharchenko and Leonid Pasechnik, leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics; as a result, the UOC-MP clergy became part of a negotiated settlement which led to an exchange of prisoners with Ukraine. The separatist authorities released 306 prisoners in exchange for 74 people freed by Kyiv.⁸ Religious symbolism favoring Moscow was also evident in the conflict. A paramilitary group named the Russian Orthodox Army, though officially unaffiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate, used Orthodox imagery in its operations, including religious icons on its flags and paraphernalia.⁹

While the UOC-MP maintained its allegiance to Moscow, the UOC-KP steadily gained public support. By February 2017, despite being numerically smaller than the UOC-MP, the UOC-KP was trusted by 56.7 percent of the population and increasingly seen as a symbol of a unified Ukrainian identity.¹⁰

The shift in public sentiment prompted President Petro Poroshenko and his administration to adopt a more assertive stance in favor of religious independence, claiming that, as with other Eastern European independence

7 Hiroaki Kuromiya, "The War in the Donbas in Historical Perspective," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 46, no. 3 (2019): 245–62; Thomas Bremer, Alfons Brünig, and Nadieszda Kizenko, eds., *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations? The Conflict in Ukraine as Expression of a Fault Line in World Orthodoxy* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2022).

8 "Patriarch Kirill Meets with Zakharchenko, Pasechnik and Medvedchuk," Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, December 25, 2017, <https://mospat.ru/en/news/47826/>.

9 Shaun Walker and Alec Luhn, "Ukraine Separatists Vow to Fight On as President Unveils Ceasefire Plan," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/18/ukraine-president-ceasefire-plan-vladimir-putin>.

10 Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, "Довіра соціальним інституціям" [Trust in social institutions], press release, February 1, 2017, <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=678>.

movements, a politically sovereign state required a religiously independent, predominant Orthodox Church to reinforce national identity. Ukrainian Orthodoxy became a contentious issue during the Holy and Great Council (also known as the Pan-Orthodox Council) held in Crete from June 19 to 26, 2016, which brought together hierarchs from the majority of internationally recognized Orthodox churches.¹¹ Adding pressure to the discussions, the Ukrainian Parliament passed a resolution, approved by 245 votes, urging the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople to grant autocephaly to the Kyiv Patriarchate.¹² The resolution argued that the Ecumenical Patriarchate had the authority to revoke the jurisdiction granted to the Moscow Patriarchate over Ukrainian territory in 1686 and could issue a *tomos* of autocephaly to a unified Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Despite the mounting pressure, the Ecumenical Patriarchate refrained from addressing the Ukrainian request during the council, choosing instead to focus on condemning the violence in the Donbas region.

Political mobilization toward achieving autocephaly intensified in the months that followed. A striking example was a large banner reading “Freedom is our Religion” displayed on a building overlooking Independence Square in Kyiv, symbolizing the fusion of national and religious identity. In April 2018, President Petro Poroshenko met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, appealing for his support in securing the release of Ukrainian prisoners held in Russian-controlled territories. That same month, the Ukrainian Parliament passed a second resolution, this time with a majority of 268 votes, reaffirming its demand for religious independence. In May 2018, Patriarch Filaret addressed the European Parliament, reiterating his call for peace and emphasizing the personal toll of the conflict. Reflecting on his own experience, he emphasized that “the war is now there in Donbas, which is my homeland. My native village is occupied by Russia. I know how valuable peace is.”¹³

11 Lucian N. Leustean, “Eastern Orthodoxy, Geopolitics and the 2016 ‘Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church,’” *Geopolitics* 23, no. 1 (2018): 201–16. The website of The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church is available at <https://holycouncil.org/>.

12 “Про Звернення Верховної Ради України до Його Всесвятості Варфоломія, Архієпископа Константинополя і Нового Риму, Вселенського Патріарха щодо надання автокефалії Православній Церкві в Україні” [On the Appeal of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to His Holiness Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople and New Rome, Ecumenical Patriarch, to bestow autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Ukraine], Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, June 19, 2016, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1422-19#Text>.

13 “Доповідь Святійшого Патріарха Філарета на конференції у Європейському парламенті” [Report of His Holiness Patriarch Filaret at a conference in the European Parliament], *Glavcom.ua*, May 4, 2018, <https://glavcom.ua/columns/filaret/dopovid-svyatiyshogo-patriarha-filareta-na-konferenciji-u-jevropeyskomu-parlamenti-494685.html>.



Photo 1. Banner reading “Freedom is our religion” overlooking Independence Square (*Maidan Nezalezhnosti*), Kyiv, Ukraine, 2018. Copyright: Lucian N. Leustean.

Russia's opposition to Ukraine's request for autocephaly unfolded through both religious and political channels. In Ukraine, the Opposition Bloc, a political party established in 2014, publicly denounced state support for autocephaly. In May 2018, Ukrainian oligarch Vadym Novynskyi, a vocal critic of Ukraine's pro-European orientation, alongside Archbishop Antonyi (Pakanych), chancellor of the UOC-MP, and Nikolay Danilevich, deputy head of the UOC-MP's Department for Foreign Relations, traveled to Warsaw, where they met with Archbishop Sawa (Hrycuniak), head of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church, though the meeting yielded few tangible results.¹⁴ In June 2018, Novynskyi, joined by several high-ranking UOC-MP hierarchs—Metropolitan Agafangel (Savvin) of Odessa and Izmail, Metropolitan Theodore (Gayun) of Kamianets-Podilsky and Horodok, Metropolitan Mitrofan (Yurchuk) of Luhansk and Alchevsk, and

14 Larisa Kononenko, “Заступник глави АП Павленко вказав на неточність цитування позиції Польської церкви з боку УПЦ (МП)” [Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Pavlenko pointed out some misrepresentation of statements of the Polish Orthodox Church], *Censor.NET*, May 19, 2018, https://censor.net/ua/news/3066985/zastupnyk_glavy_ap_pavlenko_vkazav_na_netochnist_tsytuvannya_pozytsiyi_polskoyi_tserkvy_z_boku_upts.

Metropolitan Antony (Pakanych) of Boryspol and Brovary—met hierarchs at the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul, denouncing what they described as state interference in religious matters.¹⁵ Moreover, Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), head of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, embarked on visiting his counterparts in Nicosia, Cyprus (Archbishop Chrysostomos); Cairo, Egypt (Patriarch Theodoros); Jerusalem, Israel (Patriarch Theofilos); Beirut, Lebanon (Patriarch Ioannis); Bucharest, Romania (Patriarch Daniel); and Warsaw, Poland (Metropolitan Sawa), condemning the requested Ukrainian autocephaly. Russian political figures also joined the effort. In June 2018, Sergey Gavrillov, head of the Russian Parliament's Committee for the Development of Civil Society and Religious Communities, even attended a session of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece in Athens in an attempt to influence the debate directly.

Ukraine responded to Russia's pressure with a broad campaign of religious and political diplomacy aimed at securing international support for autocephaly. In the months that followed, Ukrainian officials traveled extensively to predominantly Orthodox countries to engage with religious leaders and advocate for ecclesiastical independence. Among the key figures involved were Andriy Parubiy, speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament, who visited Tbilisi and Jerusalem; Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin, who met with Patriarch Theophilos III in Jerusalem; former presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma, who held talks with Metropolitan Rastislav (Gont) of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia; and Rostyslav Pavlenko, deputy head of the presidential administration, who met with Patriarch Neophyte (Dimitrov) of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.¹⁶

In a final attempt to prevent the granting of autocephaly to the Ukrainian church, Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion met with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on August 28 and 29, 2018. The closed-door meetings in Istanbul failed to sway the Ecumenical Patriarchate's position, and on October 11, 2018, Metropolitan Emmanuel (Adamakis) of France delivered the official statement from the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which announced the following decisions:

15 "Αντιπροσωπεία της υπό το Πατριαρχείο Μόσχας Ουκρανικής Ορθόδοξης Εκκλησίας στο Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο" [A delegation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate visits the Ecumenical Patriarchate], *Fos Fanariou*, June 23, 2018, https://fanarion.blogspot.com/2018/06/blog-post_23.html?m=1.

16 Dmytro Horevoi, "Українська автокефалія: активність нашої дипломатії" [Ukrainian autocephaly: the activity of our diplomacy], Religious Information Service of Ukraine, June 21, 2018, https://risu.ua/ru/ukrainskaya-avtokefaliya-aktivnost-nashey-diplomatii_n91384.

- “1) To renew the decision already made that the Ecumenical Patriarchate proceed to the granting of Autocephaly to the Church of Ukraine.
- 2) To reestablish, at this moment, the Stavropeigion of the Ecumenical Patriarch in Kyiv, one of its many Stavropegia in Ukraine that existed there always.
- 3) To accept and review the petitions of appeal of Filaret Denisenko, Makariy Maletych and their followers, who found themselves in schism not for dogmatic reasons, in accordance with the canonical prerogatives of the Patriarch of Constantinople to receive such petitions by hierarchs and other clergy from all of the Autocephalous Churches. Thus, the above-mentioned have been canonically reinstated to their hierarchical or priestly rank, and their faithful have been restored to communion with the Church.
- 4) To revoke the legal binding of the Synodal Letter of the year 1686, issued for the circumstances of that time, which granted the right through *oikonomia* to the Patriarch of Moscow to ordain the Metropolitan of Kyiv, elected by the Clergy-Laity Assembly of his eparchy, who would commemorate the Ecumenical Patriarch as the First hierarch at any celebration, proclaiming and affirming his canonical dependence to the Mother Church of Constantinople.
- 5) To appeal to all sides involved that they avoid appropriation of Churches, Monasteries and other properties, as well as every other act of violence and retaliation, so that the peace and love of Christ may prevail.”¹⁷

The Ecumenical Patriarchate's decision led to a formal rupture in relations with the Moscow Patriarchate, forcing other Orthodox churches within the global communion to choose between the two centers of ecclesiastical authority. On October 15, 2018, a synod held in Minsk declared that Moscow and Constantinople were no longer in ecclesiastical communion, and smaller Orthodox churches under Moscow's jurisdiction in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan announced that they would not recognize the Ecumenical Patriarchate's decision.¹⁸ On December 15, 2018, a historic unification council was convened at Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, bringing together hierarchs from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), the

17 “Announcement of the Holy and Sacred Synod of 11 October 2018,” Permanent Delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, October 12, 2018, <https://www.ecupatria.org/2018/10/12/announcement-of-the-holy-and-sacred-synod-of-11-october-2018/>.

18 “Moscow-Affiliated Churches in Ex-Soviet Republics Fall in Line over Ukraine Rift,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 18, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moscow-affiliated-churches-in-ex-soviet-republics-fall-in-line-over-ukraine-rift/29550875.html>.

Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), and some members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). The council elected Metropolitan Epiphaniy (Dumenko) as the head of the newly established Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), marking the *de facto* dissolution of both the UOC-KP and the UAOC. However, large segments of the UOC-MP continued to maintain their jurisdictional allegiance to the Moscow Patriarchate, highlighting the enduring ecclesiastical divide within Ukraine.

The October 2018 statement was officially endorsed by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on January 5, 2019, when he signed the *tomos* of autocephaly at the Saint George Patriarchal Cathedral in Istanbul, recognizing the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. On January 6, after Patriarch Bartholomew and Metropolitan Epiphaniy celebrated the liturgy, the *tomos* was formally handed over to Ukrainian officials during a public ceremony attended by President Poroshenko in Istanbul.

The *tomos* of Ukrainian autocephaly had little effect in halting the violence in Donbas. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Ukraine ranked as the ninth-largest country in the world in terms of internally displaced persons, with over 1.7 million people forced to flee their homes.¹⁹ By 2018, the Donbas conflict was described as “among the worst humanitarian crises in the world,” with one-third of all medical facilities in the region damaged, impacting 6.6 million people, or roughly 15 percent of Ukraine’s total population.²⁰ The *tomos* was, in part, a response to the escalating violence and the failure of existing Ukrainian Orthodox structures to adequately support affected communities. The establishment of a united Orthodox Church of Ukraine was both a reaction to the humanitarian crisis and an effort to encourage cooperation among the fractured religious elements within Ukrainian society.

19 See also Crimean Human Rights Group, *Freedom of Religion and Beliefs in Crimea: Analytical Review on Situation Regarding Freedom of Religion and Beliefs in Occupied Crimea (April 2014–January 2018)*, Kyiv, 2018, https://crimeahrg.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Religion_EN.pdf; Luca Mavelli and Erin K. Wilson, eds., *The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Elizabeth A. Wood, William Pomeranz, E. Wayne Merry, and Maxim Trudolyubov, *Roots of Russia’s War in Ukraine* (New York: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Columbia University Press, 2016); Serhy Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). For UNHCR data in Ukraine, see <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/en/%20internally-displaced-persons>.

20 Cynthia Buckley, Ralph Clem, Jarod Fox, and Erik Herron, “The War in Ukraine is More Devastating Than You Know,” *Washington Post*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/04/09/the-war-in-ukraine-is-more-devastating-than-you-know/>.

From a political perspective, the *tomos* underscored the growing international divide between the liberal West and Russia's emphasis on traditional values. From the beginning, Moscow condemned the *tomos*, portraying it as a takeover of church structures in Ukraine, particularly following the transfer of the UAOC's Saint Andrew's Cathedral in Kyiv to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Ukrainian government framed autocephaly as a move that reinforced state stability and international recognition; however, the politicization of religion and the extensive use of the Orthodox issue during the presidential campaign ultimately backfired. President Poroshenko's campaign slogan, "Language, Faith, Army," and Metropolitan Epiphaniy's appeals to the faithful were undermined by corruption scandals involving both the church and the government.²¹ The controversies were effectively leveraged by comedian Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who positioned himself as a political outsider and a unifying figure. In the second round of the April 2019 presidential election, Zelenskyy won a decisive victory with 73.22 percent of the vote, with his campaign emphasizing de-escalation and a peaceful resolution to the Donbas conflict. From a religious perspective, Zelenskyy's Jewish background allowed him to be perceived as neutral in the Orthodox disputes, which may have broadened his appeal. He assumed office on May 20, 2019.

The December 2018 unification council and the January 2019 proclamation of autocephaly did not immediately result in a fully unified Ukrainian Orthodox church. While the newly established Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) gained significant public trust and emerged as one of the most respected institutions in the country, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) continued to retain the largest number of parishes. The disparity became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed a lack of reliable religious leadership to be applied uniformly across the country. In 2021, the OCU had 7,188 parishes, while the UOC-MP maintained 12,406. However, these numbers did not necessarily indicate active religious life, as many parishes were small and only held services a few times a year, often served by the same priest on a rotating basis. The response of both churches to the COVID-19 pandemic reflected their wider international alignments. The OCU adopted public health measures similar to those of other Eastern European religious communities, promoting

21 Nicolai N. Petro, "The Gospel according to Poroshenko: Politics, Religion, and the New Church of Ukraine," *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/the-gospel-according-to-poroshenko-politics-religion-and-the-new-church-of-ukraine>.

social distancing and supporting national healthcare efforts. In contrast, the UOC-MP did not issue a unified pastoral response and instead released politically tinged statements, such as commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Soviet victory in the Second World War, rather than offering clear guidance on health practices.²²

“Help Others—You Need It!”: The Invention of Orthodox Humanitarian Structures, 2014–2024

Russia’s full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had a direct impact on the humanitarian mobilization of religious institutions.²³ The year before, the close involvement of religion in anticipating the Russia-Ukraine conflict was summarized in President Vladimir Putin’s 2021 essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” in which he emphasized that Russia and Ukraine were “the same historical and spiritual space [...] The spiritual choice made by Saint Vladimir, who was both prince of Novgorod and grand

22 Tetiana Kalenychenko, Cyril Hovorun, and Tymofii Brik, “Church Fragmentation and the Pandemic: Analysis of Four Eastern Christian Groups in Ukraine,” in *Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, ed. Tornike Metreveli (London: Routledge, 2023), 20; see also Tymofii Brik and José Casanova, “Thirty Years of Religious Pluralism in Ukraine,” in *From “the Ukraine” to Ukraine: A Contemporary History, 1991–2021*, ed. Matthew Rojansky, Georgiy Kasianov, and Mykhailo Minakov (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2021), 249–82.

23 Alfons Brüning, “‘Project Ukraine’ under Threat: Christian Churches in Ukraine and Their Relations 1991–2015,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 67, nos. 1–2 (2015): 103–42; Nicholas Denysenko, “Explaining Ukrainian Autocephaly: Politics, History, Ecclesiology, and the Future,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 62, nos. 3–4 (2020): 426–42; Nicholas E. Denysenko, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018); Nicholas Denysenko, *The Church’s Unholy War: Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine and Orthodoxy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023); Victoria Hudson, “The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate as a Potential ‘Tool’ of Russian Soft Power in the Wake of Ukraine’s 2013 Euromaidan,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 9 (2018): 1355–80; Sergei A. Mudrov, “The Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church: A New Dividing Line for Ukraine?” *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 27, nos. 2–3 (2019): 271–77; Tetiana Kalenychenko, “Meeting the Other: Peacebuilding and Religious Actors in a Time of War,” in *Dispossession: Anthropological Perspectives on Russia’s War Against Ukraine*, ed. Catherine Wanner (London: Routledge, 2024), 225–42; Liudmyla Fylypovych and Anatolii Kolodnyi, “The Culture of State-Church and Church-State Relations: The Ukrainian Case,” *Roczniki Kulturoznawcze* 12, no. 2 (2021): 9–30; Lucian N. Leustean, “Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: The First Religious War in the 21st Century,” *Religion and Global Society* (blog), London School of Economics, March 3, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2022/03/russias-invasion-of-ukraine-the-first-religious-war-in-the-21st-century/> and Lucian N. Leustean, “Is Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine Still a Religious War?,” *Religion and Global Society* (blog), London School of Economics, February 8, 2023, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2023/02/is-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-still-a-religious-war/>.

prince of Kiev, still largely determines our affinity today.”²⁴ Russians and Ukrainians were presented not only as the same people but also as sharing key religious figures and sacred sites, all of which were fundamental to their identity and state formations. From the start of the invasion, the political ideologization of religion was evident in Russia’s advancement towards Kyiv, perceived not only as a government center but also as a religious site, with Saint Sophia Cathedral, Saint Michael’s Golden-Domed Monastery, and Kyiv Pechersk Lavra representing key sites of ecclesiastical power for both Russia and Ukraine.

The geopolitical dimension of religion became increasingly evident as Russia framed the invasion of Ukraine as a “special military operation” with the stated goal of “denazifying” the Ukrainian government. The narrative, coupled with military occupation, implicitly affirmed that Russia recognized only the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) as the legitimate Orthodox body in Ukraine, a fact which reverberated in the ways in which Russian troops treated religious institutions in the occupied territories. In response, the OCU not only expressed support for Ukraine’s military defense but also leveraged its experience of gaining autocephaly to raise the issue on the international stage. OCU hierarchs argued that the Ecumenical Patriarchate had grounds to revoke the autocephaly of the Russian Orthodox Church, not only because of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine but also due to the Russian church’s establishment of new ecclesiastical structures beyond its canonical territory.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas triggered an unprecedented movement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Ukraine. While in Southeast European countries refugees were typically housed in state-run reception centers, Ukrainian IDPs moved freely across the country. The scale of displacement was staggering. By June 2016, the Ministry of Social Policy recorded 1,786,486 IDPs, making Ukraine home to the ninth-largest displaced population in the world at the time. By December 2023, the number had nearly doubled, reaching around 3,689,000 IDPs, 39 percent of whom had been displaced multiple times.²⁵ Most IDPs relocated from rural areas to urban centers, with the majority settling in regions close to their places of origin, particularly in Dnipropetrovsk and Kharkiv oblasts.

24 Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Office of the President of Russia, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

25 International Organization for Migration, *Ukraine—Internal Displacement Report—General Population Survey Round 15 (November–December 2023)*, February 8, 2024, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-internal-displacement-report-general-population-survey-round-15-november-december>.

In March 2018, a report published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) showed that 48 percent of internally displaced persons (IDPs) had managed to find employment, with the majority working in Kyiv. The report also noted that 40 percent of IDPs were part of the economically inactive population, which included retirees, homemakers, and caregivers for children and the elderly.²⁶ By December 2023, after nearly two years of full-scale military hostilities, a subsequent IOM report painted a different picture. Most IDPs were female (59 percent), 25 percent were children, and 22 percent were elderly. Among IDPs, 64 percent of men and 52 percent of women were unable to find work.²⁷ In May 2024, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported 6,483,500 Ukrainian refugees worldwide, with 5,942,300 residing in Europe. The largest numbers were found in Russia (1,212,585), Germany (1,161,170), Poland (953,895), the Czech Republic (339,305), the United Kingdom (239,760), Spain (202,685), the Republic of Moldova (120,550), Slovakia (120,050), Italy (170,580), the Netherlands (114,120), and Ireland (106,355).²⁸ The figures showed that, prior to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, religious communities and other non-governmental organizations were particularly engaged with the "inactive population," as most IDPs fell into this category, which enabled religious groups to leverage their close relationships with state authorities to provide aid and support.

Humanitarian work was more essential than ever. By the end of 2023, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) offered a bleak overview: 4 million Ukrainians were internally displaced; 3.3 million people lived in frontline communities; 111,500 people resided in collective centers; 720,000 people lacked safe housing (for example, in the Kherson region alone, 30 percent of homes required repairs); 4,000 schools were damaged or destroyed; only half of all children attended school in person; over 1,500 medical institutions were attacked, with half no longer functioning; and around 11 million people received some form of humanitarian assistance, 60 percent of whom were women and girls, and

26 International Organization for Migration, *DTM Ukraine—National Monitoring System: The Situation of IDPs (March 2018)*, January 9, 2019, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-%E2%80%94national-monitoring-system-situation-idps-march-2018>.

27 International Organization for Migration, *Ukraine—Internal Displacement Report—General Population Survey Round 15 (November–December 2023)*, February 8, 2024, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-internal-displacement-report-general-population-survey-round-15-november-december>.

28 "Ukraine Refugee Situation," Operational Data Portal, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), May 16, 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

20 percent were children. The UN Humanitarian Response Plan involved 600 humanitarian organizations, including 430 based in Ukraine. Religious communities played a role in this effort; however, their humanitarian programs often evolved following the initiative of local communities and the broader legal framework of religion-state relations.²⁹

Displaced people received support from a wide range of religious communities. In addition to Orthodox organizations, some of the most visible in the public sphere included Caritas Ukraine, the Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine “Ummah,” the Adventist Development and Relief Agency in Ukraine, and the Jewish community. The Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine “Ummah” and the Congress of Ukrainian Muslims provided *ad hoc* humanitarian aid; for example, Mufti Said Ismagilov, a native of Donetsk who served in paramedic brigades in Bakhmut, launched a volunteer initiative called “Wings of Victory,”³⁰ which delivered humanitarian assistance with financial support from Germany.³¹

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in Ukraine, a division of ADRA International, focused on transporting people from conflict zones. ADRA worked closely with OCHA to coordinate evacuation routes, and according to a 2022 report, 46,000 individuals benefited from travel support, and 2.8 million received humanitarian aid.³² At the start of the war, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Ukraine, which had around 40,000 members, converted 24 schools into shelters and appealed to Adventist communities in neighboring countries to support Ukrainian refugees.³³ Among the Ukrainian population, the church was generally perceived as benefiting from the extensive global support of the international Adventist network, which helped advance its humanitarian programs and missionary activities.³⁴

29 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Ukraine Humanitarian Fund Annual Report 2023*, May 23, 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-fund-annual-report-2023>.

30 “A Truck Minivan from Muslimehelfen Is Already Delivering Humanitarian Aid,” Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine (UMMA), March 30, 2022, <https://umma.in.ua/en/node/3187>.

31 Yevhen Rudenko, “Bakhmut, the Eyes of the Wounded, and the Victorious: How Mufti Said Ismagilov Went to Save Ukraine with a Gun and the Quran,” *Ukrainka Pravda*, January 10, 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2023/01/10/7384102/>.

32 “Food and Financial Assistance, Psychological Support, Social Transportation: the Results of Activities of ADRA Ukraine during the Week,” ADRA Ukraine, October 7, 2022, <https://www.adra.ua/en/food-and-financial-assistance-psychological-support-social-transportation-the-results-of-activities-of-adra-ukraine-during-the-week/>.

33 Alex Aamodt, “Adventists around the World Respond to Ukraine Invasion,” *Spectrum*, March 2, 2022, <https://spectrummagazine.org/news/adventists-around-world-respond-ukraine-invasion/>.

34 Valentyna Kuryliak, “The Adventist Development and Relief Agency in the Conditions of War in Ukraine,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 43, no. 1 (2023), <https://>

In 2015, the Jewish community in Ukraine assisted in the relocation of around 500 people from Crimea to the village of Hnativka, where a synagogue, school, and rehabilitation center were built.³⁵ In 2024, World Jewish Relief, a British charitable organization, reported that it had provided humanitarian aid in 215 locations across Ukraine, reaching 188,000 people, as well as 16,000 refugees in Moldova and Poland, and 300 Ukrainians in the United Kingdom.³⁶ Support from other Jewish communities around the world also reached many people. The Jewish United Fund reported that it had helped evacuate 12,500 people from Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Chernihiv and had supported over 21,000 Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian Jews in relocating to Israel.³⁷

While many other religious communities engaged in various forms of humanitarian support, the two main Orthodox churches in Ukraine—the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP)—established their own humanitarian offices and worked with internally displaced people, often guided by differing narratives. Prior to receiving autocephaly in 2019, the OCU’s Department of Social Service and Charity³⁸ benefited significantly from the expertise and support of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, particularly through Caritas Ukraine, the leading religious organization providing assistance to internally displaced persons.³⁹

digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol43/iss1/6/.

35 Radio Liberty, “War and Ukraine’s Religious Communities,” *Euromaidan Press*, September 12, 2015, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2015/09/12/war-and-ukraines-religious-communities/>.

36 “Support for Ukraine,” World Jewish Relief, 2024, <https://www.worldjewishrelief.org/what-we-do/support-for-ukraine/>.

37 “Ukraine in Crisis,” Jewish United Fund, 2024, <https://www.juf.org/Ukraine/>.

38 “Управління соціального служіння та благодійності” [Department of Social Service and Charity], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, May 2024, <https://diaconia.com.ua/>.

39 Data collated from interviews with officials in the following organizations: 1. National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine; 2. National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine; 3. Department for Religious Affairs and Nationalities, Ministry of Culture of Ukraine; 4. Gender Budgeting in Ukraine Project, Kyiv; 5. Representation of the European Union in Ukraine; 6. Journalist; 7. Humanitarian and Emergency Programmes, Caritas Ukraine; 8. Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate, Priest involved in the Exchange of Prisoners in Donbas; 9. Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate, Department of External Church Relations; 10. Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate, Bishop*; 11. Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate, Priest traveling regularly to Donbas region*; 12. Kyiv Theological Academy; 13. Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyiv Patriarchate, Bishop*; 14. Department of Social and Charitable Work, Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyiv Patriarchate*; 15. Presidential Administration; 16. Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (March 2018).

Caritas Ukraine and Caritas-Spes Ukraine

Caritas Ukraine was established in 1992, shortly after Ukraine gained independence. Initially focused on supporting Greek Catholic communities in western Ukraine, it gradually expanded its humanitarian efforts across the country. Benefiting from external financial assistance, Caritas Ukraine became a member of Caritas Internationalis and Caritas Europa in 1999. Caritas-Spes, the charitable branch of the Roman Catholic Church, has operated in Ukraine since 1995 and managed 80 regional centers nationwide, with a strong focus on supporting children, particularly in areas such as healthcare, homelessness, and services for children with disabilities. In 2014 and 2015, Caritas helped 80,000 internally displaced people, offering legal, financial, and psychological support, as well as material aid to families with children, people with disabilities, orphans, and the elderly.

In February 2015, the Greek Catholic hierarchy launched a national campaign under the motto “East and West Together!”⁴⁰ providing support to those in need regardless of religious affiliation. In April 2016, Pope Francis issued an appeal to churches across Europe to aid the Ukrainian people affected by military conflict, leading to the 2018 humanitarian initiative “Pope for Ukraine,” which raised 16 million euros. The initiative reached 900,000 people in frontline regions and across the country, delivering winter heating supplies, food, hygiene products, and psychological support.⁴¹ Caritas Ukraine emerged as the leading religious charity organization, and by 2024, it operated 40 regional organizations across 20 regions, employing over 1,000 staff and volunteers with work organized into six key areas: “Helping children, youth, and families in crisis,” “Health care,” “Helping people with special needs,” “Social problems of migration,” “Helping in emergency situations,” and “Community building.”⁴²

In 2024, in an appeal to European political leaders, Caritas Ukraine and Caritas-Spes described themselves as “the two charities [that] have helped 3.8 million people [since February 2022],” adding that “Caritas is now the

40 “Синоду єпископів Києво-Галицького Верховного Архієпископства до священників УГКЦ про душпастирство в умовах війни” [Synod of Bishops of the Kyiv-Halytskyi Supreme Archdiocese to the priests of the UGCC about pastoral care in wartime conditions], February 5, 2015, Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church (UGCC), <https://docs.ugcc.ua/1379/>.

41 Data collected in 2018. The website for the “Pope for Ukraine” program was <https://pop-eforukraine.com.ua/en/>. This website is no longer valid. For more see, “Pope for Ukraine” project, Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, 2018, <https://www.humandevopment.va/en/progetti/il-papa-per-l-ucraina.html> and “Pope for Ukraine: datas and Results of a Project Cherished by the Pope,” Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, 2018, <https://www.humandevopment.va/en/news/2018/popeforukraine.html>.

42 Карітас в Україні [Caritas in Ukraine], Caritas Ukraine, 2024, <https://caritas.ua/about/>.

biggest national provider of humanitarian aid and social services.” Drawing on their experience supporting refugees in Ukraine and neighboring countries, Father Vyacheslav Grynevych SAC, executive director of Caritas-Spes Ukraine, emphasized the need for sustained humanitarian efforts: “The war could last a decade. We need to be ready to provide long-term assistance to address the significant humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, which ultimately affects the global community.”⁴³

The Kyiv Patriarchate / the Orthodox Church of Ukraine

Before the 2014 Maidan protests, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate lacked a coherent administrative structure for addressing humanitarian issues. During the clashes between protesters and police in Kyiv, Saint Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery organized an *ad hoc* hospital to treat the wounded and mobilized the faithful in opposition to the Yanukovich government; this early form of humanitarian support soon evolved into a much larger, nationwide effort. During the 2014–2018 war in Donbas, the church actively supported military personnel stationed between government forces and pro-Russian separatists. The extent of church involvement was reflected in the number of military chaplains registered with the Ministry of Defense. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate had 295 clergy serving as chaplains, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church had 123, while the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate had only 9.⁴⁴ Following legislative changes in 2018, the number of military chaplains shifted; however, the trend remained consistent: the Orthodox Church of Ukraine had 59 chaplains, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church had 20, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate had only one.⁴⁵

The significant disparity in the number of chaplains serving in the military reflected a national shift in public perception regarding the role of the Kyiv Patriarchate. Once a minority religious community striving for national and international recognition, the church succeeded in gaining widespread support among the Ukrainian population. Central to its growing public engagement was the support of the government, particularly the

43 “Press Release: Europe Must Continue to Support Ukraine,” Caritas Europa, February 23, 2024, <https://www.caritas.eu/europe-must-continue-to-support-ukraine/>.

44 Viktor Yelensky, “Orthodox Churches, Nation-Building and Forced Migration in Ukraine,” in *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2020), 25–65.

45 Olha Pashkova, “Interaction of the Clergy with the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the Patriotic Education of Service Members: Historical and Legal Aspect,” *Scientific Journal of the Military University of Land Forces* 198, no. 4 (2020): 864–73.

personal involvement of President Petro Poroshenko, who played a pivotal role in strengthening religion-state relations and accelerating the process of obtaining autocephaly.

From the early stages of Russia's takeover of Crimea, the Kyiv Patriarchate mobilized nationally to establish humanitarian programs for internally displaced persons. In the summer of 2014, Father Sergey Dmitriev, a priest formerly with the UOC-MP who was dissatisfied with his church's response to the humanitarian crisis, moved with his parish to the UOC-KP and played a key role in founding the Department of Social Service and Charity. In July 2014, the newly established department launched an ecumenical campaign across the country aimed at "combating discrimination against refugees from the East and activating the army's assistance in the regions."⁴⁶ Working in collaboration with Caritas Ukraine, the Union of Independent Evangelical Churches of Ukraine, and representatives of the Jewish and Muslim communities, the initiative organized social events to help refugees integrate into their new communities. Father Sergey Dmitriev, head of the department, described the public response as follows: "We don't want revenge from one side or another against the refugees, when people of different political views settle accounts [...] Within a week we were able to send 50 tons of aid to the East thanks to the fact that people learned about our initiative. Therefore, it is necessary to unite and do good deeds, laying the foundation for the future."⁴⁷ An innovative example of the church working with civil society organizations was the endorsement of the rock band Haydamaky, known for blending ethnic music from various regions of Ukraine. In October 2014, Haydamaky joined other musical groups in a charity concert in Tallinn, Estonia, which raised 200,000 euros for medical supplies on the frontline, one of the largest sums collected at a charitable event in the country at that time.⁴⁸

46 "Відділ соцслужіння та благодійності УПЦ КП запускає Автопоїзд Миру та Єднання" [The Department of Social Service and Charity of the UOC KP launches the Peace and Unity Train], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, July 30, 2014, <https://diaconia.com.ua/viddil-sotssluzhinnya-ta-blagodijnosti-upts-kiyvskogo-patriarhatu-zapuskaye-avtopoyizd-miru-ta-yednannya/>.

47 "Відділ соцслужіння та благодійності УПЦ КП запускає Автопоїзд Миру та Єднання" [The Department of Social Service and Charity of the UOC KP launches the Peace and Unity Train], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, July 30, 2014, <https://diaconia.com.ua/viddil-sotssluzhinnya-ta-blagodijnosti-upts-kiyvskogo-patriarhatu-zapuskaye-avtopoyizd-miru-ta-yednannya/>.

48 Sven Salumets, "Charity Concert in Estonia Gathers More than 200 000 Euros in Support of Ukraine," *Euromaidan Press*, October 23, 2014, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2014/10/23/charity-concert-in-estonia-gathers-more-than-200-000-euros-in-support-of-ukraine/>.

In September 2014, Father Sergey Dmitriev and Archpriest Oleksandr Trofymlyuk, rector of the Kyiv Orthodox Theological Academy, met with Vitaly Klychko, the mayor of Kyiv, to present their humanitarian work and were encouraged to continue their collaboration, particularly in supporting refugee children.⁴⁹ Activities continued to expand. A few months later, in December, the department organized a seminar titled “The Role of the Priest in the War” at St. Michael’s Monastery in Kyiv, training 22 clergy to engage with military personnel and provide psychological and pastoral support to displaced populations.⁵⁰ Clergy training and direct support for military personnel remained a priority, and in December 2015, the department facilitated treatment and spiritual counseling for Ukrainian soldiers at Vita Park Akvadar in the city of Mankivka, aiding their rehabilitation into civilian life.⁵¹ The church also extended its support to families directly affected by the war. In January 2016, 16 children from the city of Kostyantynivka in the Donetsk region celebrated Christmas in Kyiv as part of the “Christmas with the Patriarch” project,⁵² and a few months later, in August, goods distributed to children of fallen soldiers, displaced families, and those living in frontline villages reached 496 children.⁵³ In August 2016, with the support of Patriarch Filaret, the department launched a nationwide media campaign to assist first-grade students, and as a result, over one million hryvnias (more than 20,000 euros) were raised in just one month, benefiting 800 children across various regions of

49 “Відділ соціального служіння взяв участь у зустрічі з мером Києва Віталієм Кличком” [The Department of Social Services took part in a meeting with Kyiv Mayor Vitaly Klitschko], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, September 19, 2014, <https://diaconia.com.ua/viddil-sotsialnogo-sluzhinnya-vzyav-uchast-u-zustrichi-z-merom-kiyeva-vitaliyem-klichkom/>.

50 “У Михайлівському монастирі розпочався 5-денний семінар ‘Роль священика на війні’” [The 5-day seminar “The role of the priest in the war” began in the St. Michael’s Monastery], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, December 21, 2014, <https://diaconia.com.ua/u-mihajlivskomu-monastiri-rozpochavsya-5-dennij-seminar-rol-svyashhenika-na-vijni/>.

51 “Розпочався проект з реабілітації військовослужбовців, що повернулись із зони АТО ‘Дорога додому’” [The project on the rehabilitation of servicemen who returned from the ATO zone “The Road Home” has begun], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, December 12, 2015, <https://diaconia.com.ua/rozpochavsya-proekt-z-reabilitatsiyi-vijskovosluzhbovtiv-shho-povernulis-iz-zoni-ato-doroga-dodomu/>.

52 “Діти з Донецчини приїхали у Київ зустріти Різдво з Патріархом Філаретом (Анонс)” [Children from Donetsk region came to Kyiv to celebrate Christmas with Patriarch Filaret (Announcement)], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, January 5, 2016, <https://diaconia.com.ua/diti-z-donechchini-priyihali-u-kiyiv-zustriti-rizdvo-z-patriarhom-filaretom-anons/>.

53 “Вже 496 дітей отримали ранці доброти” [496 children have already received goodies], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, August 30, 2016, <https://diaconia.com.ua/vzhe-496-ditej-otrimali-rantsi-dobroti/>.

Ukraine, including Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Chernivtsi, Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Cherkasy, Kharkiv, and Lviv.⁵⁴ In December 2016, an event held at the Kyiv Orthodox Theological Academy, attended by Patriarch Filaret and Metropolitan Epiphaniy (Dumenko) of Pereyaslav-Khmelnytsky and Bila Tserkva, saw more than 1,000 children receive gifts.⁵⁵

In 2016, church and government officials attended a meeting at the United Nations headquarters in New York, where they presented their joint humanitarian initiatives. Ukraine lacked adequate facilities for rehabilitation programs, and the church stepped in to fill gaps in areas where the state had limited expertise, such as supporting individuals with drug addiction and those living with HIV/AIDS.⁵⁶ As a result, in May 2016, the Kyiv Patriarchate established an interfaith center for spiritual and psychological support for people with chronic infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS and chronic hepatitis, called “The House of Martha and Mary” in Kyiv. The opening received significant media attention and highlighted a new, socially engaged religious narrative in Ukrainian society. In addition to providing care to patients, the center also served as a training hub for aspiring military chaplains who would later be deployed to the front lines.⁵⁷ Maintaining contact with villages and populations directly affected by the conflict remained a top priority for the Kyiv Patriarchate. In November 2016, Eleos-Ukraine, a non-governmental platform operating across faith-based communities and led by Father Sergey Dmitriev, launched the “Bread of Life” project. The initiative provided food and hygiene items to 100 families living along the frontline, particularly in the so-called “grey zone” between Ukrainian and pro-separatist forces, such as in the village of Novotoshkyvske.⁵⁸

54 “Понад 800 дітей отримали Ранець Доброти” [More than 800 children received the backpack of kindness], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, November 7, 2016, <https://diaconia.com.ua/ponad-800-ditej-otrimali-ranets-dobroti/>.

55 “1000 дітей отримали подарунки в день святого Миколая” [1,000 children received gifts on Saint Nicholas Day], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, December 20, 2016, <https://diaconia.com.ua/1000-ditej-otrimali-podarunki-v-den-svyatogo-mikolaya/>.

56 “Проблемне питання України в ООН” [The problematic issue of Ukraine at the UN], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, May 8, 2016, <https://diaconia.com.ua/problemne-pitannya-ukrayini-v-onn/>.

57 “Християнські церкви України моляться за людей, які живуть з ВІЛ” [Christian churches of Ukraine pray for people living with HIV], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, May 24, 2016, <https://diaconia.com.ua/hristiyanski-tserkvi-ukrayini-molyatsya-za-lyudej-yaki-zhivut-z-vil/>.

58 “Благодійний проект “Хліб життя” [Charity project “Bread of Life”], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, November 21, 2016, <https://diaconia.com.ua/blagodijnij-proekt-hlib-zhittya/>.

The charitable work received national recognition. On March 29, 2017, at the national competition “Charitable Ukraine—2016,” Eleos-Ukraine was honored with a special award during a ceremony held at the Kyiv City State Administration. The event featured speeches from five religious leaders, underscoring the importance of interfaith collaboration in supporting displaced populations, namely, representatives from the Kyiv Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the All-Ukrainian Union of Christians of the Evangelical Pentecostal Faith, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine, and the Kyiv City Jewish Community. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate was absent.⁵⁹

In a July 2017 interview, Father Dmitriev shared that his vision for developing humanitarian initiatives within the Kyiv Patriarchate was shaped by his experience as a voluntary chaplain with the 30th Mechanized Brigade, which defended Ukraine from a potential Russian invasion in the south. He traveled extensively to the frontline and developed close relationships with many soldiers. Reflecting on his dual role as a clergyman both on the frontline and in Kyiv, he remarked that “in civilian life, the sermon and service will be completely different. I would say that a priest in the army is a ‘border guard’: he serves people who are on the border of faith and unbelief.”⁶⁰ He expressed a desire to inspire altruism across Ukrainian society, saying that if he had the resources, he would place billboards everywhere with the message: *Помогайте другим—это нужно вам* (“Help Others—You Need It!”). He explained the chosen words by stating, “If you do good, it always comes back to you. Today you helped a child, and he will become a doctor, and tomorrow he will save your child’s life. By helping your brothers in Ukraine, you are investing in a society; that means you are helping yourself.”⁶¹ Despite working with a small team—just five salaried staff and five volunteers—Father Dmitriev believed that the Kyiv Patriarchate had managed to reach Ukrainian society in a way no other religious community could. In an ambitious and unprecedented manner, expressing more of an aspiration than a reality, he claimed that

59 “ELEOS-УКРАЇНА серед найкращих благодійників року” [ELEOS-UKRAINE among the best benefactors of the year], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, April 6, 2017, <https://diaconia.com.ua/eleos-ukrayina-sered-najkrashhih-blagodijnikov-roku/>.

60 “Священник в армии—это “пограничник”: Он служит для людей, которые находятся на границе веры и безверья” [“A priest in the army is a ‘border guard’: He serves people who are on the border of faith and unbelief”], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, July 29, 2017, <https://diaconia.com.ua/svyashhennyk-v-armyy-eto-pogranychnyk-on-sluzhyt-dlya-lyudej-kotorye-nahodyatsya-na-granytse-very-y-bezverya/>.

61 “Священник в армии—это “пограничник” [“A priest in the army is a ‘border guard’”].

The UOC-KP has five thousand churches, and we want each priest to perform seven good deeds every day. If you multiply seven deeds by five thousand churches and 365 days a year, that amounts to roughly twelve million good deeds annually. This means that every third Ukrainian selflessly receives a good deed from their native church in the form of some kind of service.⁶²

Most importantly, in his view, the humanitarian work of the church and that of volunteers across Ukraine carried a wider mission, namely, the survival of the state itself:

The Kyiv Patriarchate has always been an oppositional Orthodox church. Our churches are small, our flock was small. I often heard: "Why is such a church needed at all?" Maidan and the war showed why. I completely agree with [Patriarch] Filaret [...]: if there were no Ukrainian church, there would be no Ukraine.⁶³

One of the most pressing challenges faced by the military was the lack of rehabilitation programs for returning personnel. In response, the Kyiv Patriarchate provided practical support by offering office space to the Center for the Defenders of Ukraine ("Axios") and the "Road to Home" project, both of which focused on assisting military personnel and their families in reintegrating into civilian life. In 2017, Axios helped 250 war veterans secure employment and provided psychological counseling to over 2,000 individuals.⁶⁴ Additionally, a rehabilitation center was opened in the city of Cherkasy by Metropolitan Ioann (Yaremenko), head of the Synodal Administration of the Military Clergy of the Kyiv Patriarchate, further expanding the church's role in supporting the recovery and reintegration of those affected by war.⁶⁵

62 "Священник в армии—это "пограничник" ["A priest in the army is a 'border guard'"].

63 "Священник в армии—это "пограничник" ["A priest in the army is a 'border guard'"].

64 "В Києві відбувся перший Форум взаємодії з питань реінтеграції захисників України в мирне суспільство" [The first Forum of interaction on issues of reintegration of defenders of Ukraine into a peaceful society was held in Kyiv], *24 Kanal*, November 16, 2017, https://24tv.ua/v_kyievi_vidbuvsya_pershiy_forum_vzayemodiyi_z_pitan_reintegratsiyi_zahisnikiv_ukrayini_v_mirne_suspilstvo_n890294.

65 "Митрополит Черкаський і Чигиринський Іоан взяв участь відкритті реабілітаційного центру для воїнів АТО" [Metropolitan Ioann of Cherkasy and Chigyrin took part in the opening of a rehabilitation centre for ATO soldiers], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, October 26, 2017, <https://diaconia.com.ua/mytropolyt-cherkaskyj-i-chygyrinskyj-ioan-vzyav-uchast-vidkrytti-reabilitatsijnogo-tsentru-dlya-voyiniv-ato/>.

In 2018, Eleos-Ukraine focused its efforts on five key target groups: “1) people with disabilities and chronic illnesses; 2) internally displaced persons and members of their families; 3) children and adolescents; 4) unattended children; and 5) the armed forces of Ukraine and members of their families.”⁶⁶ The organization expanded its outreach across both eastern and western Ukraine, implementing national projects while also supporting small, local communities. With the support of Bishop Serhiy (Horobtsov) of Donetsk and Mariupol, free meals were distributed daily to 120 people on church premises in Mariupol, with an online advertisement for the initiative stating: “Everyone who needs a hot lunch can come; no documents confirming your need for help and support are asked here.”⁶⁷ According to its annual report, between 2014 and 2018, Eleos-Ukraine provided over 300 tons of humanitarian aid and established nine regional centers across the country (in Dnipro, Donetsk, Kyiv, Luhansk, Odesa, Rivne, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Cherkasy) and eight specialized institutions. Altogether, these efforts reached 1.5 million people as direct beneficiaries of their humanitarian programs.⁶⁸

In March 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America issued a landmark theological document titled *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, which, for the first time, emphasized the importance of social engagement in Orthodox Christianity.⁶⁹ The Kyiv Patriarchate adopted the document and provided a Ukrainian translation for its clergy and faithful.⁷⁰ That same year, humanitarian projects continued to reach military personnel, families of wounded soldiers, and children affected by the war, including those from orphanages and low-income families.⁷¹ On August 20, 2021, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew visited

66 “Eleos в Україні” [Eleos in Ukraine], Eleos Ukraine, <https://eleos.com.ua/eleos-v-ukrayini/>.

67 “Благодійна їдальня у Маріуполі” [Charitable canteen in Mariupol], Eleos Ukraine, <http://eleos.com.ua/blagodijna-yidalnya-u-mariupoli/>.

68 “Звіт Управління соціального служіння за 2014-2018 рр.” [Report of the Department of Social Services for 2014–2018], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, December 27, 2019, <https://diaconia.com.ua/zvit-upravlinnya-sotsialnogo-sluzhinnya-za-2014-2018-rr/>.

69 “For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church,” Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2020, <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos?fbclid=IwAR2RSPrgYRhPfAgT9p2iIQkd9wqtOYJ74Gtjnpmyq9xYdxshwqr6U1FjFiY>.

70 ““За життя світу”: опубліковано соціальну доктрину Православної Церкви” [“For the life of the world”: The social doctrine of the Orthodox Church was published], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, June 12, 2020, <https://diaconia.com.ua/za-zhyttya-svitu-opublikovano-sotsialnu-doktrynu-pravoslavnoyi-tserkvy/>.

71 “Звіт Синодального управління соціального служіння за 2020 рік” [Report of the Synodal Department of Social Service for 2020], Synodal Department of Social

Kyiv; in addition to meeting with church and state officials, he offered words of encouragement to children of military personnel who had lost their parents in the war.⁷²

On February 25, 2022, the day following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Metropolitan Epiphaniy issued an appeal to the faithful. After condemning the attack and calling for international support, he emphasized the role of the church in fostering social solidarity as a means of national resilience during times of crisis: "In these dark times, turn your attention to those around you, support interaction, and help each other conquer your fears. Every action of help, humanity, charity, and care is also a contribution to the victory of good over evil."⁷³ The war directly impacted the church. In March 2022, the headquarters of the Donetsk Diocese of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Mariupol was destroyed by bombing; however, Metropolitan Serhiy (Horobtsov), along with nine others, managed to escape the city.⁷⁴ The Donetsk Diocese had 136 registered parishes, and following the invasion, all churches under the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine were closed, and approximately 30 percent were taken over by the Moscow Patriarchate. Many clergy were banned from serving, imprisoned in detention centers in Donetsk, or taken for interrogation into Russia. Reports emerged that Russian authorities offered substantial incentives—allegedly \$25,000, vehicles, and new churches—to clergy willing to cooperate and transfer allegiance to the Moscow Patriarchate. Meanwhile, faithful who attended closed churches or participated in unauthorized services led by Ukrainian priests were closely monitored by security services.⁷⁵

Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, December 31, 2020, <https://diaconia.com.ua/zvit-synodalnogo-upravlinnya-soczialnogo-sluzhinnya-za-2020-rik/>.

72 "Вселенський Патріарх та Митрополит Епіфаній зустрілися з українськими дітьми" [The Ecumenical Patriarch and Metropolitan Epiphaniy met with Ukrainian children], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, August 23, 2021, <https://diaconia.com.ua/vselenjskij-patriarh-ta-mytropolyt-epifanij-zustrilysya-z-ukrayinskymy-ditmy/>.

73 "УА/ЕН Звернення Митрополита Епіфанія (25 лютого 2022 р.)" [Message from Metropolitan Epiphaniy (February 25, 2022)], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, 2022, <https://diaconia.com.ua/ua-en-zvernennya-mytropolyta-epifaniya-25-lyutogo-2022-r/>.

74 "Управління Донецької єпархії ПЦУ зруйновано" [The office of the Donetsk Diocese of the OCU was destroyed], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, March 15, 2022, <https://diaconia.com.ua/upravlinnya-doneczkoyi-yeparhiyi-pczu-zrujnovano/>.

75 "\$25,000, Cars, and 'Respect' for Switching to the UOC-MP: How the Occupiers are Eliminating Parishes of the OCU, UGCC, and Protestants," Texty.org.ua, December 14, 2023, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/111340/25000-cars-and-respect-switching-uoc-mp-how-occupiers-are-eliminating-parishes-ocu-ugcc-and-protestants/>.

The humanitarian network developed by Eleos-Ukraine in previous years proved essential in mobilizing international support and directly reaching those in need. Volunteers traveled to cities under bombardment, helping residents evacuate to safer areas. In March 2022, over 500 people were evacuated from the Kyiv and Kharkiv regions, along with 50 children from the city of Slovyansk. Eleos-Ukraine opened three shelters for displaced persons in the Ivano-Frankivsk, Rivne, and Chernivtsi regions and continued to provide psychological support, encouraging local parishes to accommodate IDPs.

In Dnipro, it established the Eleos-Dnipro Center, a humanitarian volunteer hub titled *Доброго ранку, ми з Маріуполя* ("Good Morning, We Are from Mariupol"), which provided aid to the displaced population. Operated by 50 volunteers, the center served over 500 people daily, and similar humanitarian efforts were carried out through other regional hubs across the country.⁷⁶ In May 2022, the Eleos-Dnipro Center became the largest humanitarian aid hub for those fleeing Mariupol, assisting up to 3,000 people daily.⁷⁷ Operated entirely by the church, the center responded to the immense humanitarian crisis following the siege of Mariupol, a city that, before the war, had a population of around half a million. Ukrainian officials reported that over 4,600 mass graves were dug for more than 25,000 people during the 2022 siege.⁷⁸ By December 2022, the flow of fleeing IDPs had diminished, and the center continued to assist over 1,000 displaced individuals each day.⁷⁹ In the following year, around 200 displaced families were still receiving humanitarian aid by December 2023.⁸⁰ In its 2023 annual report, Metropolitan Serhiy (Horobtsov), who had assumed leadership of the Synodal Department of Social Service and Charity, highlighted the church's extensive outreach and reported that in 2023, 373,933 people living

76 "35 Days of Eleos-Ukraine Social Service under Full-Scale Invasion," Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, April 13, 2022, <https://diaconia.com.ua/35-days-of-eleos-ukraine-social-service-under-full-scale-invasion/>.

77 "3000 людей на день: як у Дніпрі працює для переселенців найбільший в Україні хаб" [3,000 people a day: How Ukraine's largest center for displaced persons works in Dnipro], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, May 25, 2022, <https://diaconia.com.ua/3000-lyudej-na-den-yak-u-dnipri-pracyuye-dlya-pereselenciv-najbilshyj-v-ukrayini-hab/>.

78 Hilary Andersson, "The Agony of Not Knowing, as Mariupol Mass Burial Sites Grow," *BBC News*, November 7, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-63536564>.

79 "Церква для людей і про людей" [The church is for people and about people], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, December 21, 2022, <https://diaconia.com.ua/czerkva-dlya-lyudej-i-pro-lyudej/>.

80 "Mariupol Residents Help Other IDPs," East Europe Foundation, December 20, 2023, <https://eef.org.ua/en/story/dobrogo-ranku-my-z-mariupolya-yak-mariupoltsi-dopomagayut-inshym-pereselentsyam/>.

in frontline regions received support through the church's humanitarian aid programs.⁸¹

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate

The contrast between the innovative humanitarian approach of the Kyiv Patriarchate (the Orthodox Church of Ukraine after 2018) and that of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) could not be more pronounced. Tensions between Orthodox hierarchs in both churches led to a wave of parishes leaving the UOC-MP, directly influencing the ways in which each church engaged with IDPs throughout the post-2014 conflict. Despite having a broad network of clergy and parishes, particularly in the eastern and southern regions most affected by the war, the UOC-MP's Synodal Department on Social and Humanitarian Matters faced increasing political pressure to distance itself from Moscow's jurisdiction.⁸² The department worked closely with the UOC-MP's Department of External Church Relations, suggesting that its humanitarian efforts were closely tied to its external relations strategy. Most of its aid beneficiaries were parishes in the Donbas region, where the UOC-MP remained dominant. When Ukraine exchanged prisoners with separatist-held territories in December 2017, clergy from the department were prominently featured in both Ukrainian and Russian media as mediators in the transfer. However, the involvement appeared to be more of a public relations exercise, aimed at showcasing the close ties between the Ukrainian and Russian churches, rather than a genuine initiative or operational effort by the department's staff to facilitate the release of prisoners.

After 2014, the Synodal Department on Social and Humanitarian Matters of the UOC-MP launched a series of social initiatives under the banner "Mission of Mercy," mirroring similar efforts by the Moscow Patriarchate, such as a phone line for spiritual support that allowed individuals to speak with priests about spiritual and psychological concerns; the distribution of grocery and hygiene kits following Easter celebrations at the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra; and material aid to parishes affected by the conflict in Donbas. In October 2016, with support from Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, the humanitarian

81 "Річний звіт Синодального Управління соціального служіння та благодійності ПЦУ 2023" [Annual report of the Synodal Department of Social Service and Charity of the OCU 2023], Synodal Department of Social Service of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, May 6, 2024, <https://diaconia.com.ua/richnyj-zvit-synodalnogo-upravlinnya-soczialnogo-sluzhinnya-ta-blagodijnosti-pczu-2023-obyednani-metoyu-dopomagaty-lyudyam-v-bidi/>.

82 The Synodal Department on Social and Humanitarian Matters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, <https://blago.church.ua/>.

aid agency of Protestant churches in Germany, the department delivered humanitarian assistance to civilians living in the “grey zone” between Ukrainian and pro-separatist forces in the Horlivka and Luhansk dioceses.⁸³ By 2018, the department reported delivering 6,741 tons of humanitarian aid, reaching 256,876 IDPs.⁸⁴ That same year, in response to the growing influence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the UOC-MP launched a fundraising campaign to build 40 new churches in western Ukraine, where local communities had begun transferring church property to the OCU,⁸⁵ highlighting the church’s internal tension, caught between its stronghold in the east and its contested presence in the west. Financial resources were severely strained, and the church appeared more focused on countering the OCU than on implementing a cohesive, nationwide humanitarian strategy for IDPs.

The humanitarian programs of the UOC-MP underwent significant changes following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Ukraine’s success in repelling Russian forces highlighted the population’s resistance and shifted the public expectations of religious institutions. In the weeks after the invasion, many UOC-MP clergy stopped mentioning Patriarch Kirill in their sermons, and the church’s leadership came under growing pressure from both the faithful and the government to take a definitive stance. On May 27, 2022, Metropolitan Onufriy, head of the Holy Synod of the UOC-MP, declared “complete autonomy and independence” from the Russian Orthodox Church.⁸⁶ Despite uncertainty about its future status, the UOC-MP remained the largest Orthodox denomination in Ukraine and part of the wider Orthodox communion, and as a result, the church’s humanitarian arm received a significant influx of international donations. In July 2022, 100 emergency food kits were delivered to the Slovyansk frontline from Canada via the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Chernivtsi-Bukovina

83 “Любити справи милосердя ...” [“To love works of mercy ...”], The Synodal Department on Social and Humanitarian Matters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, October 28, 2016, <https://blago.church.ua/2016/10/28/lyubiti-spravi-miloserdya>.

84 Data collected in 2018 from the website “The Synodal Department on Social and Humanitarian Matters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church” listed at <http://pravoslavie.ua/>. In 2024, the website was longer online.

85 Data collected in 2018 from website “The Program 40 Churches” listed at <https://sorok.church.ua/>. The website was replaced by <https://church.ua/>.

86 “Постанова Собору Української Православної Церкви від 27 травня 2022 року” [Resolution of the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church dated 27 May 2022], Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), May 27, 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/05/27/postanova-soboru-ukrajinskoji-pravoslavnoji-cerkvi-vid-27-travnya-2022-roku>.

Diocese.⁸⁷ With financial support from the Canadian charity “Global Medic,” the church’s humanitarian center in Kyiv distributed hygiene products, clothing, and food packages to 350 people daily.⁸⁸ In September 2022, to mark the start of the academic year, Metropolitan Onufriy personally donated 100 “Rucksacks of Mercy” to children from displaced families. The funding came from a charity called “Peace to You,” established on his personal initiative rather than through a coordinated effort by the wider church.⁸⁹

In Kyiv, with the support of volunteers, the Department of Social Service and Charity distributed food packs to approximately 150 displaced people daily in October 2022 and provided free meals to the homeless every Friday at the South Railway Station.⁹⁰ In November 2022, following the withdrawal of Russian troops from Kherson, Archpriest Andriy Dvorovy, head of the department, organized a humanitarian aid mission that delivered generators, clothing, and food to the region.⁹¹ The church’s focus on Kherson continued into February 2023, supported by the charitable foundation of Vadym Novynskyi, one of Ukraine’s wealthiest individuals, a former member of parliament,

87 “Київ—Слов’янськ: допомога людям на лінії фронту” [Kyiv—Sloviansk: Help to people on the front line], The Synodal Department on Social and Humanitarian Matters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, July 22, 2022, <https://blago.church.ua/2022/07/22/kijiv-slovyansk-dopomoga-lyudyam-na-liniji-frontu>.

88 “Центр гуманітарної та соціальної допомоги УПЦ встановлює рекорди!” [The Center for Humanitarian and Social Assistance of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church sets records!], The Synodal Department on Social and Humanitarian Matters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, July 25, 2022, <https://blago.church.ua/2022/07/25/centr-gumanitarnoji-ta-socialnoji-dopomogi-upc-vstanovlyuje-rekordi>.

89 “Предстоятель УПЦ Митрополит Онуфрій передав дітям із сімей вимушених переселенців близько 100 Рюкзаків милосердя” [Metropolitan Onufriy handed over 100 “Rucksacks of Mercy” to children from families of displaced persons], The Synodal Department on Social and Humanitarian Matters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, August 31, 2022, <https://blago.church.ua/2022/08/31/predstoyatel-upc-mitropolit-onufrij-predav-dityam-iz-simej-vimushenix-pereselenciv-blizko-100-ryukzachkiv-miloserdya>.

90 “У столиці Соціальний відділ УПЦ передав 150 продуктових наборів для родин переселенців” [In the capital, the Social Department of the UOC handed over 150 food kits to families of immigrants], The Synodal Department on Social and Humanitarian Matters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, October 10, 2022, <https://blago.church.ua/2022/10/10/u-stolici-socialnij-viddil-upc-predav-150-produktovix-naboriv-dlya-rodin-pereselenciv>.

91 “Священники Української Православної Церкви dopravili гуманітарний вантаж до деокупованого Херсону” [Priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church delivered a humanitarian cargo to de-occupied Kherson], The Synodal Department on Social and Humanitarian Matters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, November 30, 2022, <https://blago.church.ua/2022/11/30/svyashhenniki-ukrajinskoji-pravoslavnoji-cerkvi-dopravili-gumanitarnij-vantazh-deokupovanogo-xersonu>.

and since 2020, a deacon in the UOC-MP.⁹² That same month, the Vadym Novynskyi Foundation enabled Archpriest Kostyantyn Dvorovy, deputy head of the department, to travel to the Donbas region, where he delivered food aid to both civilians and military personnel, including settlements near Kurakhove and Svatove, just kilometers from the frontline.⁹³ In the months that followed, Archpriest Kostyantyn Dvorovy and small groups of clergy made regular trips by car to frontline areas. In September, they provided medical supplies and food to six combat units in Bakhmut and Kurakhove, two of the most active zones of military engagement.⁹⁴ Much of the humanitarian aid was made possible through *ad hoc* donations from the faithful and, in the summer of 2023, reached both military units and frontline villages.

In September 2023, the Department of Social Service and Charity of the UOC-MP issued a public appeal for donations, stating that funds had been depleted. Since the beginning of the year, over 3,200 food kits had been distributed to displaced people, supporting approximately 200 families each week. Each kit included “three types of cereals, pasta, canned meat, oil, sugar, tea, condensed milk or sweet jam, washing powder, soap, and shampoo. Pensioners and sick people often apply for diapers, urological pads, and first aid supplies. [...] We ask for your help. For many families, this is an opportunity to live.”⁹⁵ A similar appeal was issued in January 2024, underscoring the ongoing need for humanitarian assistance across large segments of the Ukrainian population. Despite continued charitable activity, the church’s humanitarian outreach was increasingly constrained. Political pressure, the arrest of several clergy by Ukrainian security services, and the transfer of parishes and church property to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine

92 “Charitable Foundation in Honor of the Intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos Sent 2.5 Tons of Food to Residents of Kherson,” Vadym Novynskyi Foundation, February 17, 2023, <https://fondpokrov.org.ua/en/fond-vadima-novinskogo-vidpraviv-25-tonni-produktiv-kharchuvannya-zhitelyam-khersonu/>.

93 “The Foundation in Honor of the Intercession of the Holy Theotokos Sent Humanitarian Aid to the Armed Forces of Ukraine and Civilians of Donbas,” Vadym Novynskyi Foundation, February 3, 2023, <https://fondpokrov.org.ua/en/fond-vadima-novinskogo-vidpraviv-cherhovu-dopomogu-zsu-ta-mirnim-zhitelyam-donbasu/>.

94 “Місія Милосердя на Донеччині” [Mission of Mercy in Donetsk region], The Synodal Department on Social and Humanitarian Matters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, September 2, 2023, <https://blago.church.ua/2023/02/09/misiya-miloserdyia-na-donechchini>.

95 “Просимо підтримати родини переселенців: необхідні кошти на закупівлю продуктів” [Please support the displaced families: The funds are needed to purchase food], The Synodal Department on Social and Humanitarian Matters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, September 20, 2023, <https://blago.church.ua/2023/09/20/prosimo-pidtrimati-rodini-pereselenciv-neobxidni-koshti-na-zakupivlyu-produktiv>.

significantly complicated operations, and the UOC-MP's humanitarian efforts became more localized and fragmented, lacking a cohesive national strategy. Decentralization was also reflected in the church's limited engagement in interfaith relations. A persistent challenge for Ukrainian society remained the lack of verifiable data on church membership. According to an article in the *Kyiv Post*, between February 2022 and December 2023, 589 UOC-MP parishes transferred to the OCU, most notably in the Kyiv region (138 parishes), Khmelnytskyi (125), and Vinnytsia (67) in western Ukraine. Despite these changes, the UOC-MP claimed to maintain 8,193 institutions nationwide, continuing to hold nominally the largest number of religious communities, though the OCU was rapidly approaching parity at the national level.⁹⁶

96 "Data Reveals Progress of Moscow Patriarchate Churches Switching to Orthodox Church of Ukraine," *Kyiv Post*, December 26, 2023, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/25983>.

4. Orthodoxy, Humanitarian Entrepreneurship, and the Refugee Crisis in Serbia

Abstract: The chapter investigates the entrepreneurial response to humanitarianism in the Orthodox Church in Serbia, focusing on its engagement with the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2015 and Ukrainian refugees in 2022. It examines the humanitarian response of the Serbian Orthodox Church and state interference in religious matters.

Keywords: Serbia; Orthodox Church; Refugee Crisis; Humanitarianism; Forced Displacement

The breakup of Yugoslavia, which led to the 1991–1995 Croatian War of Independence and the 1992–1995 Bosnian War, became synonymous with violence, ethnic cleansing, and mass forced displacement. Throughout the conflicts, Serbian, Croat, and Bosnian factions frequently invoked religion, not only to demonize the enemy but also to provide identity, support, and comfort to war-torn and displaced populations. The instrumentalization of religion revealed its ambivalent power, justifying violence while also playing a role in fostering resilience, reconciliation, and conflict resolution. Two decades later, in 2015, scenes of violence along the Serbian-Croatian-Hungarian border once again captured global attention. The response unfolded on multiple levels: domestically, through the engagement of religious and political hierarchies; and internationally, through diplomatic networks and geopolitical alignments.

As refugees crossed state borders in Southeastern Europe, they encountered a range of social and cultural responses from predominantly Orthodox communities. Not all countries along the Balkan route expressed solidarity or support; however, Serbia stood out as an unusual case, with the government,

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civil society, and the Serbian Orthodox Church all issuing statements in support of the refugees. Along the Croatian border, Serbian clergy members established shelters and distributed essential supplies, offering critical assistance to those in need, with humanitarian support continuing even after refugees became stranded in reception and asylum centers, unable to continue their journey. What made the Serbian case particularly notable was that religious organizations mobilized before local authorities and the government had implemented a coordinated national response. By providing humanitarian aid, the Serbian clergy positioned themselves as protectors of the nation, at times implicitly challenging state authority in a dynamic that reflected historical patterns of religion-state relations going back to the communist period. The humanitarian mobilization of the Serbian Orthodox Church, largely an *ad hoc* initiative rather than part of a coordinated national policy, demonstrated the ways in which religious humanitarianism could serve as a vehicle for the church to strengthen its societal role and influence.

Serbian Orthodoxy, Ethnic Identity, and Political Nationalism

At first glance, the adaptation of the Serbian Orthodox Church to atheist communism appears comparable to that of other Orthodox churches behind the Iron Curtain; however, the Yugoslav context was distinct.¹ While Soviet troops played a decisive role in securing communist regimes across much of Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia experienced relatively limited foreign military presence. During the Second World War, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia appointed Josip Broz Tito as the leader of the partisan resistance, in a role that portrayed him as a military commander and national liberator, earning widespread public support. Tito was able to consolidate power after the war, serving as prime minister from 1944 to 1963 and then as president of Yugoslavia from 1953 until his death in 1980. His leadership shaped a unique form of socialism that was independent of Soviet control, which in turn influenced the relationship between the state and religious institutions, including the Serbian Orthodox Church.

In 1948, Yugoslavia had a population of approximately 15,772,000, with Serbs and Montenegrins making up around 41.5 percent of the total. Patriarch

1 For a comparative analysis with Romania, see Lucian N. Leustean, "Orthodox Churches and Political Strategies in Romania and Yugoslavia," in *Church Reckoning with Communism in Post-1989 Romania*, ed. Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 69–90.

Gavrilo (Dožić) was imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp and released in 1945. Across the country, the Serbian Orthodox Church sought full reinstatement, from the hierarchy down to the parish level. The church was in a lamentable state, with nearly a quarter of its clergy dead, while the Orthodox faithful in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Montenegro were left without leadership.

Both the senior hierarchy and the church as a whole were significantly affected by Tito's personal leadership and his vision of national communism. Born in Croatia and raised as a Catholic, Tito was perceived by many hierarchs in the Serbian Orthodox Church as anti-Serb. He launched anti-religious campaigns comparable to those of other communist regimes, while simultaneously engaging the Serbian Orthodox Church in efforts to strengthen Yugoslav social patriotism.² The 1946 Constitution and the 1953 Law on the Position of Religious Communities established a formal separation between church and state. Religious education was banned, financial support for the church was withdrawn, and church lands and properties were nationalized. To advance communist ideology, the regime encouraged the formation of clerical associations for both Christian and Muslim communities to represent the faithful. The Serbian Orthodox Church established the Association of Orthodox Priests, which was infiltrated by agents of the State Security Administration and used as a bargaining tool between the church and the regime.³ Religious services and the construction of new churches were strictly regulated, and hierarchs who maintained ties with the West were closely monitored or imprisoned.⁴

In June 1948, Tito's refusal to take orders from Stalin led to the country's expulsion from the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform). The split was framed as Tito's commitment to preserving state independence and developing a national form of communism, rather than becoming a Soviet satellite. The break with the USSR had long-term consequences, contributing to Yugoslavia's leading role in the establishment of the Non-Aligned

2 I am grateful to Sabrina P. Ramet for her comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript, in which she pointed out that "The Yugoslav communists did not promote 'Yugoslav nationalism.' Dušan Dragosavac, President of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (1981–82), among others, was keen on intoning 'Svaki nacionalizam je opasan'—'Every nationalism is dangerous.' What the Yugoslav communists promoted was what they chose to call 'jugoslovenski socijalistički patriotizam'—'Yugoslav socialist patriotism.'"

3 Klaus Buchenau, "The Serbian Orthodox Church," in *Eastern Christianity and the Cold War, 1945–91*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2010), 60–78.

4 Srdjan Cvetković, *In the Name of the People! Political Repression in Serbia, 1944–1953* (Belgrade: Evro Giunti and the Association of Political Prisoners and Victims of the Communist Regime, 2014), 98–100.

Movement in 1961, alongside Egypt, India, Indonesia, and Ghana, collectively known as the "Initiative of Five." The movement appealed to developing nations seeking an independent path between the two dominant ideological blocs of the Cold War. Tito became the first secretary-general of the Non-Aligned Movement, enhancing Yugoslavia's international standing.

Political tensions between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union also reverberated in the relationship between their respective Orthodox churches. During the Tito-Stalin split, Patriarch Gavrilko made an unusual move by publicly condemning Moscow for taking control of Serbian parishes in Czechoslovakia. At the 1948 Pan-Orthodox meeting in Moscow, held to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Russian Orthodox Church's autocephaly, Gavrilko stood out as a dissenting voice among Orthodox leaders and asserted that not all Orthodox churches were obliged to follow directives from Moscow. While other participants signed a resolution condemning the West and calling for Christian unity in "good understanding, unity, peace, and brotherhood," Gavrilko argued that issues such as the atomic bomb and criticism of the West were political, not religious, matters. His stance had an impact on church jurisdictions, with Moscow refraining from appointing a bishop over Serbian parishes in Hungary, placing them instead under an administrator, a position which remained unchanged until 1990.

When Patriarch Gavrilko died on May 7, 1950, the regime attempted to install its preferred candidate. On July 14, 1950, Bishop Vikentije (Prodanov) was elected patriarch, and his leadership aligned with the country's path of national communism. Under his tenure, the Association of Orthodox Priests assumed a new role; rather than challenging the church hierarchy, it became an instrument for rewarding clergy who followed the party line, offering benefits such as pensions and healthcare, while those who opposed the politicization of the association and the church were imprisoned. Following Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and the dissolution of the Cominform in 1956, Patriarch Vikentije was able to travel to the Soviet Union and other communist countries. In October 1956, on his return to Belgrade, he stopped in Bucharest for a day and met with Patriarch Justinian, a meeting that reflected the warming of political relations between their respective governments and the wider advancement of national communism.

Patriarch Vikentije died on July 5, 1958, under unclear circumstances, at a time when the Serbian Orthodox Church was under increasing pressure to recognize the rise of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, an issue that would grow in significance in the years to come. The vacancy in the patriarchal office quickly became a matter of political contention. Most hierarchs favored Bishop Hrizostom (Vojinović) of Braničevo, who was openly critical

of political interference in church affairs; however, the regime ensured that its preferred candidate was elected. On September 14, 1958, Bishop German (Đorić), a hierarch who had studied in Paris during the interwar period and had been consecrated by Vikentije in 1951, was installed as patriarch. German's leadership and his close association with Tito's regime were controversial, and in a manner comparable to Patriarch Justinian (Marina) in Romania, he came to be known as "the red patriarch." In the years that followed, Patriarch German was frequently seen attending state functions and appearing alongside party officials. At the same time, he managed to secure financial support for the restoration and construction of churches, with the church acquiring a new press, while a younger generation of theologians was granted permission to study abroad.

Patriarch German's calls for religious unity across Yugoslavia were increasingly challenged by the Macedonian issue. On October 4, 1958, a Macedonian assembly of clergy and laypeople convened in Skopje and appointed two bishops under the leadership of Metropolitan Dositej (Stojković) of Ohrid and Macedonia, marking a significant step toward ecclesiastical independence. In July 1967, the assembly formally proclaimed autocephaly (independence) from the Serbian Orthodox Church, a move fully supported by the Macedonian communist leadership. It was only in 2022 that the Macedonian Orthodox Church was officially recognized as autocephalous and part of the Orthodox communion, with both the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Serbian Orthodox Church acknowledging its *de facto* self-governing status in North Macedonia.

During the Cold War, religiosity remained strong at the parish level throughout Serbia, supported in large part by the Богомољачки покрет (*Bogomoljci pokret*, or "God-Worshippers" movement), a grassroots peasant revival. Two of the most influential figures associated with the movement were Bishop Nikolaj (Velimirović) of Ohrid and Žiča (1881–1956) and his disciple, Archimandrite Justin Popović (1894–1979). Both Bishop Nikolaj and Justin Popović were vocal critics of atheist communism in Eastern Europe as well as the secular, individualistic values of Western societies. Their teachings significantly influenced not only a new generation of Serbian theologians but also interfaith relations in Serbia and the wider Orthodox world. Justin Popović, in particular, was known for his staunch opposition to the ecumenical movement, which he regarded as heretical; his writings, especially Православна Црква и екуменизам (*Pravoslavna Crkva i ekumenizam*, *The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism*), published in Thessaloniki in 1974, were widely circulated in conservative Orthodox circles.

In 1962, during the Second Vatican Council, the communist regime pressured the Serbian Orthodox Church to send observers to Rome, making it

the only Orthodox church behind the Iron Curtain to attend the council's debates. Although it appeared to signal openness to international dialogue, the Serbian hierarchy remained deeply divided over the ways in which to engage with its diaspora communities. That same year, the American-Canadian Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church, under the leadership of Bishop Dionisije (Milivošević), broke away from Belgrade in protest against the communist government, leading to a series of lawsuits over church property.⁵ Tensions escalated further in 1964, when Serbian communities in Australia also severed ties with Belgrade and established their own ecclesiastical body under the name Free Serbian Orthodox Church. Ironically, in that same year, the Serbian Orthodox Church joined the World Council of Churches, largely because all other Orthodox churches were already members.

On May 4, 1980, at the time of Tito's death, the Serbian Orthodox Church's newspaper Православље (*Pravoslavljje*, Orthodoxy) published an article suggesting that his legacy was under scrutiny. Paradoxically, while the Serbian Orthodox Church was the most unrestricted among Orthodox churches behind the Iron Curtain, internal divisions and cooperation between the hierarchy and communist authorities fostered a climate of religious conservatism. The church's leadership framed atheist communism as a divine test meant to purify the Serbian nation, drawing parallels with the survival of the Russian Orthodox Church during periods of intense persecution. Throughout the Cold War, long-standing ties between Belgrade and Moscow ensured that many Serbian hierarchs continued to view the Russian Orthodox Church as a close and enduring ally.

In 1986, Slobodan Milošević was elected president of the League of Communists of Serbia, promoting a platform that linked Serbian national mythology with political rights, often at the expense of the predominantly Albanian population in Kosovo, and his use of religious and mythological symbolism had a significant impact on the Serbian Orthodox Church, which was no longer relegated to the margins of public life. During the early 1990s, amid the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, the Serbian Orthodox Church became closely associated with national trauma.⁶ Both religious and political leaders invoked historical narratives, declaring, "The Yugoslav crisis began in Kosovo, and it will end in Kosovo,"⁷ making

5 Stella Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 280.

6 Klaus Buchenau, "The Serbian Orthodox Church," in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2014), 67–93.

7 Noel Malcolm, "The Battle of Kosovo," *Prospect Magazine*, May 19, 1998, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/essays/55673/the-battle-of-kosovo>.

references to the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, a mythologized event in which Prince Lazar was said to have chosen sanctification and martyrdom over military victory against the Ottoman Empire.⁸

After Patriarch German became incapacitated due to ill health, he was succeeded by Pavle (Stojčević), who was installed on December 1, 1990. Patriarch Pavle led the Serbian Orthodox Church until his death in 2009, during a period marked by the fragmentation of the Yugoslav state, legal and political transformation, rising nationalism, and a widespread religious revival. Among the former Yugoslav territories, the Republika Srpska, established during the 1992 Bosnian War, stood out for its distinctive religion-state relationship. Serbian Orthodox hierarchs worked closely with state authorities and benefited from state subsidies in areas such as education, property restitution, and military affairs, while the majority of Croat and Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) populations were forcibly displaced. The church's central role in ethnic identity was codified in Article 28 of the 1992 Constitution, which declared that "the Serbian Orthodox Church shall be the church of the Serbian people and other people of Orthodox religion. The state materially assists the Orthodox church; it cooperates with it in all areas and especially in preserving, cherishing, and developing cultural, traditional, and other spiritual values."⁹ Radovan Karadžić, president of the Republika Srpska (1992–1996), described the war as "holy," and clergy were frequently seen blessing troops and military equipment, while the majority of mosques and Catholic churches in the region were destroyed or damaged.¹⁰ In 1995, more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were executed and 20,000 expelled by Bosnian Serb forces in what became known as the Srebrenica massacre, one of the worst instances of ethnic cleansing in Europe since the Second World War.¹¹

8 Radmila Radić, "The Church and the Serbian Question," in *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis*, ed. Nebojša Popov (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000), 247–73; Radmila Radić and Milan Vukomanović, "Religion and Democracy in Serbia since 1989: The Case of the Serbian Orthodox Church," in *Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe: Challenges since 1989*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), 180–211; Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić, eds., *Politicization of Religion, the Power of Symbolism: The Case of Former Yugoslavia and Its Successor States* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

9 European Commission for Democracy through Law, "Constitution of the Republika Srpska," June 12, 1996, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL\(1996\)048-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL(1996)048-e).

10 Marcus Tanner, "Karadzic's 'Holy War,'" *The Guardian*, March 2, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/mar/02/karadzic-holy-war-bosnia>.

11 Paul Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).

The explicit reference to the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 1992 Constitution of the Republika Srpska was not mirrored in Serbia. The 2006 Constitution of the Republic of Serbia affirmed the country's secular character, with Article 11 stating that "Churches and religious communities shall be separated from the state."¹² The formal separation of church and state was not only a rebuttal to the extensive use of Orthodoxy in the Republika Srpska but also an acknowledgment of the clergy's growing political influence. Despite the constitutional secularism, anti-Western sentiment remained prevalent in theological circles, and the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War further intensified these sentiments, shifting religious grievances into political and societal discourse. While some Orthodox hierarchs initially supported interfaith dialogue and democratic reforms, the aftermath of the bombings led to a widespread mistrust of the West and a strengthening of ties with Russia, which became the dominant trend in religion-state relations.

On October 5, 2000, the government of Slobodan Milošević was overthrown following general elections and mass protests. The so-called "Bulldozer Revolution" was welcomed by the Serbian Orthodox hierarchy as an opportunity to reset its relationship with both political authorities and the faithful. Patriarch Pavle publicly called on Milošević to resign and supported the peaceful transfer of power to Vojislav Koštunica, who assumed the presidency.¹³ After Pavle's death on November 15, 2009, the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church elected Patriarch Irinej (Gavrilović) as his successor. Irinej was installed on January 23, 2010, and led the church until his death on November 20, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the beginning of his tenure, Irinej sought to present himself as a religious diplomat. He engaged in dialogue with Josip (Bozanić), the Catholic archbishop of Zagreb, to address the role of their communities in supporting Serbian and Croatian refugees. In 2012, Irinej even expressed openness to a visit by Pope Benedict XVI to Serbia for the 1700th anniversary of the Edict of Milan, to be commemorated in the city of Niš.¹⁴ Although the visit never

12 "Constitution of Republic Serbia," President of the Republic of Serbia, 2006, <https://www.predsednik.rs/en/documents/constitution-of-republic-serbia>.

13 Steve Crawshaw and Vesna Peric-Zimonjic, "Orthodox Church Tells Milosevic to Hand over Presidency to Rival," *The Independent*, September 29, 2000, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/orthodox-church-tells-milosevic-to-hand-over-presidency-to-rival-699599.html>.

14 "Serbian Patriarch Irenaeus Welcomes Visit by Pope," *La Stampa*, July 10, 2012, <https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2012/07/10/news/serbian-patriarch-irenaeus-welcomes-visit-by-pope-1.36391561/>.

materialized, similar messages promoting a potential papal visit continued under his successor, Patriarch Porfirije (Perić), in 2022.¹⁵

Disillusionment with political uncertainty and economic decline has led to a significant increase in Serbian emigration to Western Europe. The pace of emigration accelerated after 2014, when Serbia officially began accession negotiations with the European Union, and by 2020, approximately 51,000 people had moved abroad, largely due to a lack of professional employment opportunities, placing additional pressure on the country's aging population and social welfare systems.¹⁶ According to the 2022 census, Serbia's population stood at 6,623,183, with nearly one-quarter (22.3 percent) aged 65 or older, compared to 7,500,031 in 2002, when 16.6 percent were over 65.¹⁷ From a religious perspective, the 2022 census reported that 81.1 percent were Orthodox, 4.2 percent Muslim, 3.9 percent Catholic, 0.8 percent Protestant, and 2.5 percent did not declare a religion, while 1.1 percent declared themselves atheists and 0.1 percent agnostics.¹⁸

Aleksandar Vučić, who served as prime Minister from 2014 to 2017 and as president from 2017 onward, has pursued a balancing act between pro-European reforms and maintaining close ties with Moscow. He frequently appealed to both Serbian and Russian Orthodox hierarchs to support his political agenda, as evident in June 2020, during a visit to Belgrade by Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, when he called on the Russian Orthodox Church to exert its influence in the Balkans. The appeal came amid rising tensions in the region, particularly following Montenegro's 2019 Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief, which sparked protests from the Serbian Orthodox Church. The church feared that the law would allow the state to transfer its properties to the newly emerging Montenegrin Orthodox Church. Milo Đukanović, president of Montenegro from 1998 to 2002 and 2018 to 2023, was widely criticized by Serbian officials and clergy for promoting a national Orthodox church independent of Belgrade's authority, drawing

15 Jovan Tripkovic, "Why Pope Francis Could Make His First Papal Visit to Serbia," *Religion Unplugged*, July 8, 2022, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/6/22/will-pope-francis-make-the-first-papal-visit-to-serbia>.

16 "Why Population in Serbia Keeps Declining?," UNDP, February 6, 2020, <https://www.undp.org/serbia/stories/why-population-serbia-keeps-declining>.

17 "Estimated Population 2023," Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, January 7, 2024, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/vesti/statisticalrelease/?p=15196>.

18 "16.06.23. — Mother Tongue, Religion and Ethnic Affiliation," Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia June 16, 2023, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/vesti/20230616-st/>.

comparisons to the establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which had sought independence from the Moscow Patriarchate.¹⁹

Aleksandar Vučić's populist rhetoric and growing support from Orthodox hierarchs steadily increased during his leadership. Just a few months after assuming the presidency, in December 2017, he traveled to Moscow, where he was welcomed by clergy at the Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul at the Yauza Gates, the official representation of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Russia.²⁰ In 2019, Vučić backed the Serbian government's decision to allocate one of the largest state donations, over 10 million euros, toward the interior decoration of Saint Sava Cathedral in Belgrade.²¹ In response, Vučić was awarded the Order of St. Sava of the 1st Degree, the church's highest honor, during a ceremony marking the 800th anniversary of the Serbian Orthodox Church, in recognition of his "love of the Church and tireless struggle for the integrity of Serbia."²² Further reinforcing religious and national ties, in April 2024, Vučić met with Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska, and Patriarch Porfirije, announcing the creation of an "Easter Assembly of the Republic of Serbia and the Republika Srpska" and the initiative was framed as a joint effort to ensure "the survival of the Serbian people in their hearths, their economic progress, the preservation of the Serbian language and the Cyrillic alphabet and common cultural heritage."²³ The move marked another step in blending religious and political messaging to promote and defend Serbian interests in the region.

Serbian Orthodoxy and Humanitarian Entrepreneurship

In 1991, the Holy Synod, the highest ecclesiastical authority in the Serbian Orthodox Church, established the Човекољубље (*Čovekoljublje*, Philanthropy)

19 "Vučić Says Asked Russia to Protect Orthodox Church in Balkans," TASS, June 18, 2020, <https://tass.com/world/1169165>.

20 "Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić Visits Moscow Representation of Serbian Orthodox Church," Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, December 25, 2017, <https://old.mospat.ru/en/2017/12/25/news15109/>. The website of the Representation of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Moscow is <http://serbskoe-podvorie.ru/svidetel-istorii/>.

21 Milenko Vasovic, "Serbian Patriarch Irinej: Religious Leader or Political Cheerleader?," Balkan Insight, April 4, 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/04/serbian-patriarch-irinej-religious-leader-or-political-cheerleader/>.

22 "Serbian President Awarded Top Church Order," *N1*, September 8, 2019, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/a532888-serbian-president-awarded-top-church-order/>.

23 "President of Serbia Met with Dodik and Porfirije," *Sarajevo Times*, March 18, 2024, <https://sarajevotimes.com/president-of-serbia-met-with-dodik-and-porfirije/>.

department to coordinate humanitarian programs, and its creation reflected the evolving role of religion-state relations and nationalism during the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia.²⁴ All funding and social activity programs were approved by the Holy Synod, and Philanthropy was able to collaborate with the Commissariat for Refugees and other religious organizations, providing aid without discrimination based on religious affiliation.²⁵ In 2021, the official website stated that “Philanthropy is [the] Charitable Foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church, performing emergency (humanitarian) and development programs” [...] “Philanthropy is governed by the Board, consisting of five Bishops [...] [The] Director of Philanthropy manages the work of six eparchial/regional offices, four in the Republic of Serbia, one in Banja Luka (Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina) and one in Podgorica (Montenegro). [The] Belgrade office is the headquarters and coordinates the work of all offices.” In 2000, Philanthropy expanded its outreach to include “children, elderly, people living with HIV/AIDS, terminally ill, persons with disability, etc., providing psycho-social support, educational programs for the unemployed, economic empowerment programs, agricultural development, and local communities’ capacity building programs.”²⁶ The website listed six main types of programs:

1. “Humanitarian assistance,” such as “in Kosovo in March 2004, during floods in Serbian northern province Vojvodina in 2005, earthquake in Kraljevo in 2010” [...] In May 2014, after floods affected the country, the

24 Lucian N. Leustean, “When States Fail: The Politics of Orthodox Churches, Forced Displacement and Humanitarian Structures in Serbia and Ukraine,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 2 (2021): 1923–45; Bojan Aleksov, “The Serbian Orthodox Church: Haunting Past and Challenging Future,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 10, nos. 2–3 (2010): 176–91; Klaus Buchenau, “What Went Wrong? Church-State Relations in Socialist Yugoslavia,” *Nationalities Papers* 33, no. 4 (2005): 547–67; Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nihil Obstat: Religion, Politics, and Social Change in East-Central Europe and Russia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

25 For a discussion of faith-based organizations in Serbia, see Marta Stojić Mitrović and Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović, “The Humanitarian Engagement of Faith-Based Organisations in Serbia: Balancing Between the Vulnerable Human and the (In)Secure (Nation)State,” in *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2019), 207–28; Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović and Marko Veković, “State, Religion and Refugees in Serbia: Responses of Faith-Based Organisations, 1991–1996,” in *Religion and Forced Displacement in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia*, ed. Victoria Hudson and Lucian N. Leustean (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 85–108.

26 “About Philanthropy,” Philanthropy: The Charitable Foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church, undated, <https://covekoljublje.org/en/about-us>.

Department reached out to “more than 200,000 persons in 20 municipalities in Serbia and Republic of Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina).”

2. “Health care and social welfare programs” with a particular focus on “children and youth deprived of parental care,” “elderly,” and “terminally ill.” For example, “within the St. Sava Classroom programme, initiated in 2001, [it] trained volunteers to assist children in learning process and obtaining life skills necessary for independent living. This programme is being implemented in Belgrade, Sremska Kamenica, Nis, Kraljevo and in Banjaluka.”
3. “Agriculture,” with a focus on “rural development and agricultural development programmes.” For example, “in cases when rural population was affected by emergencies (floods and earthquakes), Philanthropy has designed and implemented series of humanitarian agricultural programmes, providing vulnerable rural population with assistance in a form of cash, seeds, seedlings, fertilisers, cattle food, etc.” The Department worked with the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Belgrade, and “organised trainings for socially vulnerable rural population on breeding of egg-laying hens, chicken breeding, distribution of fruit and vegetable seeds and seedling [...] Several hundred green houses have been distributed, now used for production of vegetables and flowers, courses for cultivation of mushrooms organised, beehives and bees have been donated to hundreds of families, projects for artificial insemination of cattle implemented.”
4. “Education.” The Department engaged in providing “courses and workshops” in “Computer literacy; Foreign language courses: English, German, Italian, Greek and Russian; Bookkeeping and accounting courses; Old crafts workshops: woodcarving, weaving, sewing; Seminars and training on labour market accessibility; Accredited programmes for teaching and social welfare care-taking staff on prevention of violence, HIV transmission and addiction diseases.” In 2018, refugees residing in Serbian reception centers were given the opportunity to attend Serbian language classes. With financial support from the European Union and the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia, language instruction was offered to forty migrants from the Tutin Asylum Centre and fifty from the Šid Reception Centre.²⁷
5. “Organisational development and cooperation” by “organising seminars and training of volunteers, in order to raise their capacities to provide the best quality services to vulnerable beneficiaries.”

27 “ALMIT—Education Is the Strongest Strength!,” Philanthropy: The Charitable Foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church, undated, <https://www.covekoljublje.org/en/news/17/2019/05/20/almit-education-is-the-strongest-strength.html>.

6. And, "Voluntary work." The Department registered as "an organiser of voluntary programmes by the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs since 2011, and has been regularly providing reports on the results of voluntary programmes."

There was no doubt that the department implemented a wide range of programs that reached people in need; however, what distinguished the Serbian case from others in the region was the perception of the refugee crisis as a national trauma rooted in the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. As a result, the church has assumed a protective role not only within Serbia but also in nearby disputed territories. The church fulfilled a dual function by exerting pressure on the government and state institutions not to abandon the Serbian faithful while simultaneously becoming susceptible to nationalist influence from political parties. For example, Serbian political leaders frequently attended religious festivities, and nationalist parties often incorporated religious symbols into public discourse, particularly when criticizing the West. Despite instances of radicalization, the Serbian case has been notable for the collaboration between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in supporting refugees. Philanthropy has also become a member of the ACT Alliance (Action by Churches Together), a global coalition of 146 humanitarian and development agencies active in more than 100 countries, and through the membership, the department shared and learned from international experiences in humanitarian work. Collaboration with other religious organizations and participation in international bodies have enhanced transparency and improved public perception of the church's efforts in supporting refugees.

The 2015 refugee crisis presented both a challenge and an opportunity for the Serbian Orthodox Church. On one hand, as reflected in its diverse list of programs, the department was able to engage with a wide range of people in need. In some cases, a single phone call from Belgrade to clergy near the border made a significant difference in the ways in which refugees were received and treated. The church possessed the means and resources to provide support to conflict-affected populations in ways that local authorities were often unprepared to handle. Most importantly, the church did not act independently or in opposition to the state; instead, it cooperated with government authorities, working within the legal framework to address the crisis, demonstrating a model of religion-state collaboration rather than confrontation.

The refugee crisis also posed internal challenges for the Serbian Orthodox Church, particularly because, despite the active social work of Philanthropy,

several senior hierarchs expressed dissatisfaction with the church's engagement in the crisis. In this context, the department could be seen as representing a more liberal faction within the church, as reflected in the public statement issued by the Holy Synod in support of refugees. The statement was an unusual move, shaped by four main factors: first, the church's own historical experience with refugee trauma, particularly during the nineteenth century and after the dissolution of Yugoslavia; second, the controversy surrounding Kosovo, which remained a sensitive and unresolved issue; third, the internationalization of the church's public image, which benefited from aligning with global humanitarian norms; and, fourth, the church's intention to position itself as a central moral and social actor in Serbian society. The connection between these four factors—historical trauma, the Kosovo issue, international visibility, and the Church's societal role—has been evident in the wider national and international mobilization supporting the Serbian Orthodox Church's engagement with the refugee crisis.

In October 2016, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby met with Patriarch Irinej (Gavrilović) in London in a rare and symbolically significant meeting,²⁸ recalling the Serbian church's endurance during the communist period and serving as a platform to convey a political message, namely, the church's continued support for Kosovo. Although the European refugee crisis was not officially on the agenda, it remained a recurring theme in interchurch relations. Two years later, in May 2018, the Conference of European Churches, "a fellowship of 114 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, and Old Catholic Churches" in Europe, held its General Assembly in Niš, Serbia, where the topic of the European refugee crisis was presented as a matter of significant concern. Holding the meeting in Niš had a particular resonance for Patriarch Irinej, who had served in the city before being appointed Metropolitan of Belgrade-Karlovci. Furthering the dialogue, in September 2018, a conference titled "Theological Refugees in Oxford" was held in Oxford, bringing together scholars and clergy from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade and the Church of England.²⁹

Relations with churches in Western Europe, which advocated that religious communities had a moral duty to do more for refugees, highlighted the internal division within the Serbian Orthodox Church between its liberal and traditionalist branches. While church structures showed a willingness

28 "Archbishop Welcomes Patriarch of Serbia to Lambeth Palace," Eastern American Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church, undated, https://easterndiocese.org/news_t61017_2.

29 Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in London, undated, <http://www.london.mfa.gov.rs/news.php>.

to engage with sensitive social issues, the openness was contradicted by the 2017 high-profile controversy involving eleven faculty members from the Faculty of Theology, who were condemned for signing a petition that encouraged students to learn not only the church's interpretation of Genesis but also the theory of evolution. The act was deemed an "error" by church authorities, and several scholars reportedly lost their positions as a result. The incident cast the Serbian Orthodox Church in a negative light among other religious communities, particularly those advocating for academic freedom and interfaith cooperation.

Despite its wide range of programs, Philanthropy does not enjoy the full support of all senior clergy within the Serbian Orthodox Church, with only 5 out of 44 bishops serving on its board. Since the fall of communism, public dissatisfaction with the church has grown, particularly in the context of property restitution, where some members of the clergy have been accused of enriching themselves. The phenomenon is not unique to the Serbian church and has been observed across other Eastern Orthodox countries, as overall, Orthodox churches in the region have become wealthier, gaining political leverage during national elections and increasingly acting as diplomatic players in international affairs.

For example, in February 2018, Patriarch Irinej, alongside President Aleksandar Vučić, welcomed Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov to Belgrade for the inauguration of a new mosaic in the main dome of the Church of Saint Sava. The mosaic, produced in Moscow, was installed at a cost of four million euros, a donation from Gazprom, Russia's largest energy company. A few months later, bilateral relations strengthened further when President Vladimir Putin visited Belgrade and delivered a public speech outside the Church of Saint Sava. During these high-profile meetings, Serbian officials did not publicly address the European refugee crisis or the situation of those stranded in state-run reception centers. Instead, the events highlighted the political influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which officially supported Serbia's pursuit of European Union membership while simultaneously cultivating a special relationship with Russia.

Humanitarian work has received support from the Serbian Orthodox Church, particularly when aligned with its nationalist stance, such as raising awareness about the plight of Serbians living in Kosovo and neighboring countries.³⁰ International humanitarian aid has also been

30 "Assembly of Bishops of Serbian Orthodox Church States That Any Change in Status of Kosovo and Metohija Is Inadmissible," Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, undated, <https://mospat.ru/en/2019/05/28/news174642/>.

welcomed, especially in border regions affected by the refugee crisis, where the Serbian Orthodox Church collaborated with Roman Catholic organizations working with refugees. In my discussions with refugees at the Principovac Reception Center, even a small financial incentive, resulting from the Orthodox-Catholic mobilization, was perceived as life-saving, providing essential support for daily survival. However, in conversations with academics based in Belgrade, a more skeptical view emerged, with many expressing concern that humanitarian aid directed toward churches and NGOs was increasingly seen as a business opportunity, with doubts raised about whether the assistance truly reached all those in need.³¹

The Serbian state has allowed and even encouraged the involvement of religious communities in supporting refugees, largely because it lacks the capacity to provide adequate assistance to the large numbers of people crossing the Balkan route. When I raised the issue that media headlines often showed refugees refusing to register with local authorities in state-run reception centers and asked why the church did not support those living in informal conditions, such as under bridges, I was told that doing so would be against the law. All refugees were required to register in official reception centers, where they can access state-provided support, and by extension, benefit from the assistance of religious and civil society organizations. According to Philanthropy's website, its work in reception centers was carried out "in cooperation with its international partners [and...] working closely with national and local authorities, as well as with the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration," providing "food, water, hygienic items, clothing, and cash assistance to refugees and asylum seekers."³²

In April 2019, Philanthropy became the 50th member of Eurodiaconia, a network of churches and Christian organizations focused on "social and health care services and advocat[ing] for social justice." The membership application stated that "Philanthropy firmly believes in the power of joint work and networking" and that at the time, it operated in Serbia, Bosnia and

31 Data collated from interviews with officials and refugees in the following organizations: 1. Philanthropy Department of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Belgrade; 2. Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Belgrade; 3. Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Belgrade; 4. Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade; 5. Representation of the European Union in Serbia, Belgrade; 6. Journalist, Belgrade; 7. Orthodox Priest near the Principovac Reception Center in a village on the Croatian-Serbian Border, Serbian Orthodox Church; 8. Refugee from Iran in the Principovac Reception Center; 9. Refugee from Afghanistan in the Principovac Reception Center (February 2018).

32 "Humanitarian Assistance," Philanthropy: The Charitable Foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church, 2018, <https://www.covekoljubljje.org/en/humanitarian-assistance>.

Herzegovina, and Montenegro with a small team which included 6 employed staff, 30 external associates, and 150 volunteers.³³ In November 2019, its openness to interfaith dialogue led the leadership team to collaborate with the Catholic Relief Services on a project focused on the rehabilitation of prisoners in Serbian society. In the months that followed, the start of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the organization's national outreach. Despite the challenges, Philanthropy continued its work by establishing a shelter for homeless individuals in the city of Kragujevac, and with financial support from the Swiss government, it distributed food aid and hygiene items to 950 families affected by the pandemic in Belgrade, Kragujevac, and Kraljevo.³⁴

In September 2021, Philanthropy received funding from the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care, and Consumer Protection of the Republic of Austria, as well as from Brot für die Welt (Bread for the World), the aid organization of Protestant churches in Germany, to support the elderly in both urban and rural communities. The results of the project published in its "Gender-Based Violence in Families in Rural Communities" report indicated that "the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the increase in domestic violence" and that, among recommendations to state institutions, it also emphasized that it was important to "encourage clergy for greater proactive action in the promotion of gender equality, promotion of non-violent conflict resolution in partner and family relationships and intensify their work with perpetrators of gender-based violence in the partner/family context, including work with convicted perpetrators, in order to change violent patterns of behavior and reintegration into the community."³⁵ Providing humanitarian aid to the elderly, supporting people with HIV/AIDS, and strengthening civil protection in local communities at high risk of natural disasters continued to be Philanthropy's main projects, largely funded by international organizations from Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States.³⁶

33 "Welcome to our 50th member Philanthropy! ДОБРОДОШЛИ У Eurodiaconia!," Eurodiaconia, April 16, 2019, <https://www.eurodiaconia.org/welcome-to-our-50th-member-човекољубље-philanthropy-дочекати-се-на-eurodiaconia/>.

34 "Humanitarian Assistance to Persons Exposed to Higher Risk of COVID-19 Infection," Philanthropy: The Charitable Foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church, 2020, <https://www.covekoljublje.org/en/news/17/2020/06/22/humanitarian-assistance-to-persons-exposed-to-higher-risk-of-covid-19-infection.html>.

35 "Gender Based Violence in Families in Rural Communities," Philanthropy: The Charitable Foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church, undated [2023/2024], <https://www.covekoljublje.org/en/publications>.

36 "Lucani DRR Civil Protection Simulation," Philanthropy: The Charitable Foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church, 2022, <https://www.covekoljublje.org/en/news/17/2022/11/25/>

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led not only to the arrival of over 18,000 Ukrainian refugees in Serbia but also to a significant brain drain, with more than 104,000 Russians, mostly highly educated and under 35 years old, relocating in protest against military mobilization.³⁷ The preference of Russian citizens to settle in Serbia reflected the long-standing ties between the two countries, with the Belgrade government maintaining direct flights to Moscow. The influx of Russians and Ukrainians drove up rental prices in the capital, and tensions with local communities soon became apparent.³⁸ Some Serbian citizens traveled to eastern Ukraine to fight alongside pro-Russian separatist forces, while at home, far-right leaders publicly praised the Wagner mercenary group.³⁹ The Serbian government's refusal to impose sanctions on Russia, along with ongoing regional tensions involving Kosovo and the Republika Srpska, did little to foster stability or present a welcoming image to Ukrainian refugees.⁴⁰ By February 2024, official figures indicated that around 150,000 Russians were living in Serbia; however, despite Serbia's geographic proximity to the European Union, they were unable to travel freely to EU countries. In contrast, over 80,000 Ukrainians transited through Serbia and continued their journey to Western Europe.⁴¹

Close ties between the Russian and Serbian Orthodox hierarchies directly influenced the refusal of the Serbian Orthodox Church to grant ecclesiastical recognition to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The political mobilization of Serbian authorities in response to the arrival of Russian and Ukrainian citizens significantly affected the humanitarian work of religious organizations. Since 2022, Philanthropy has not organized any public events or humanitarian projects aimed at supporting Ukrainian refugees or Russian citizens residing in Serbia. Its activities remained focused on Serbian

lucani-drr-civil-protection-simulation.html.

37 "Relocating to Serbia: Russians and Ukrainians Have Been Moving in Since War Broke Out," *Euronews*, November 16, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/11/16/relocating-to-serbia-russians-and-ukrainians-have-been-moving-in-since-war-broke-out>.

38 Dimitar Belyaev, "Uncomfortable in Serbia, Ukrainian Refugees Look to Move On," *Balkan Insight*, May 8, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/05/08/uncomfortable-in-serbia-ukrainian-refugees-look-to-move-on/>

39 Joe Inwood and Albana Kasapi, "Serbia Nationalist Protests Spike Tensions over Russia," *BBC News*, February 18, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-64674133>.

40 "Russia Seeking to Exploit Ethnic Tensions in Western Balkans, U.S. Warns," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 13, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-western-balkans-ethnic-tensions/33034985.html>.

41 "The Plight and Hope of Ukrainian and Russian Refugees in Serbia," *Euronews*, February 21, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/02/21/the-plight-and-hope-of-ukrainian-and-russian-refugees-in-serbia>.

communities, reflecting the church's policy of prioritizing engagement with the local faithful. As a whole, Orthodox communities largely remained silent, and even Caritas Serbia, the Catholic humanitarian aid agency known for its emergency response efforts, did not implement any programs targeting newly arrived refugees.⁴²

A 2022 migration report issued by the Holy See's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development highlighted that Serbia's primary migration challenge was emigration rather than forced displacement. According to the report, 1,003,962 Serbian citizens had moved to Western Europe, primarily to Germany, Austria, France, Italy, and Switzerland. It also noted that 22,019 refugees were registered with local authorities in Serbia and Kosovo, with around 6,000 residing in reception centers. Serbian legislation placed refugees in 14 reception centers and 4 asylum centers.⁴³ However, those in reception centers lacked legal recognition, and most did not intend to remain in Serbia, instead planning to move abroad. By 2023, only around 3,000 individuals continued to live in these centers.⁴⁴ While Caritas Serbia, the Jesuit Refugee Service, and the Order of Malta operated programs in reception centers, the report did not mention any initiatives specifically targeting Ukrainians.⁴⁵ Instead, Ukrainian refugees in Serbia received support primarily from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which provided materials and services in Serbian, Russian, and Ukrainian to ensure accessibility, focusing on child protection and psychological assistance.⁴⁶

Religion and Forced Displacement: Being a Refugee in Belgrade and on the Serbian-Croatian Border

In 2018, interviews conducted in Belgrade consistently highlighted two recurring themes: the role played by the church in society and widespread dissatisfaction with the political regime. Many interviewees expressed skepticism about democracy, suggesting it might not be the most suitable form of governance for Serbia, and noted that the church operated within

42 News, Caritas Serbia, 2024, <https://caritas.rs/news/?lang=en>.

43 "Asylum and Reception Centers," Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, Republic of Serbia, 2024, <https://kirs.gov.rs/eng/asylum/asylum-and-reception-centers>.

44 "Serbia Records Just over 3,000 Migrants at Reception Centres," *Info-Migrants*, February 6, 2023, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/46611/serbia-records-just-over-3000-migrants-at-reception-centers>.

45 "Migration Profile: Serbia," Migrants and Refugees Section of the Holy See, 2022, <https://migrants-refugees.va/it/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2022/11/2022-CP-Serbia.pdf>.

46 "UNICEF Supports Children and Families on the Move," UNICEF Serbia, undated, <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/unicef-supports-children-and-families-move>.

a sociopolitical environment that lacked the full support of the faithful. Criticism was directed at Serbia's pursuit of European Union membership, largely due to perceived economic stagnation and limited opportunities. For example, respondents pointed out that Bulgarians, despite over a decade of EU membership, often crossed into Serbia in search of employment. Prosperity was seen as closely tied to democratization, and many felt that the post-Milošević period had failed to deliver meaningful change. Although mass protests had led to the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime, the country remained internationally isolated, and many of the same political figures continued to dominate the landscape. Russia capitalized on public discontent and the lack of political reform by promoting a religious and political discourse that reinforced nationalist narratives. The influence extended beyond Serbia, affecting regional dynamics; for example, religious tensions between orthodox Serbia and catholic Croatia were perceived as politically manufactured rather than rooted in theological disputes. The controversy surrounding Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac's legacy was cited as an example in this regard, an issue that according to some could have been resolved through religious dialogue had political actors not interfered.

Most importantly, interviewees expressed criticism of the social role played by religious communities. It was evident that at the start of each discussion, the topic of migration was uncomfortable for many. While religion across the Eastern Orthodox world is generally perceived as closely tied to national identity, in Serbia—and most broadly in former Yugoslavia—interviewees described religion as a particularly sensitive subject and related that ethnic tensions were often mirrored by religious divisions. Numerous national and international organizations have attempted to address divisions through reconciliation programs; however, skepticism toward these efforts was evident. One respondent noted that people no longer wanted to hear the term “reconciliation,” which was seen as overly vague and even counterproductive. Reconciliation should not be the primary objective; instead, efforts should focus on transforming public perceptions of the “other.”

Despite their active online presence and a wide range of programs, the humanitarian work of religious communities had little impact on the Serbian population as a whole. Humanitarian projects in Serbia that dealt with migrants were largely unrelated to religion. Serbia had a developing civil society, with many organizations competing for projects at both national and international levels, and there was a general perception that involving religion in humanitarian efforts could lead to politicization. The concern was particularly significant in the context of Serbo-Albanian relations in

Kosovo, as the allocation of humanitarian funding or material support could easily be interpreted as following ethnic or religious lines. One interviewee highlighted the contentious practice of collecting material aid for Serbs living in Kosovo, arguing that such projects implied a lack of local resources. The initiatives were often organized on an *ad hoc* basis, without considering the potential to utilize resources within Kosovo rather than sourcing them from other parts of Serbia.

As a general rule, civil society organizations approached humanitarian projects based on their own priorities and the availability of financial resources. For example, one project focused on organizing logistics to provide food to people in need, while another involved analyzing the theoretical and policy perspectives of human rights in the country. In many cases, the same individuals were responsible for managing projects that had little in common. Interviewees generally perceived that civil society organizations treated humanitarian work as a business and that foreign funding played a crucial role in securing employment in impoverished regions, while at times, ethical boundaries were blurred. For instance, transparency in maintaining receipts and justifying all sources of income was often a contentious issue, with larger organizations benefiting from access to international networks, which strengthened their ability to attract external funding. The Serbian Orthodox Church was perceived in a similar way to other civil society organizations. As a whole, interviewees raised three key points.

First, they noted that the clergy appeared detached from society; as one interviewee remarked, the clergy seemed critical of anything outside theological discourse. The rhetoric was strictly theological and did not engage with secular perspectives, while in several instances, events organized by civil society groups were expected to be disrupted by far-right groups that drew ideological support from theological narratives. The overlap between theological discourse and far-right ideologies was a recurring concern. One interviewee criticized the ministry's Office of Religious Affairs, stating that its officials were often seen as underqualified and rarely engaged with academic circles. Based on my own experience, having the endorsement of a key humanitarian representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church enabled me to visit a refugee camp (officially referred to as a reception center) on the Serbian-Croatian border. Many academics have expressed a similar view that gaining access to refugee reception centers and establishing dialogue with ministry officials was extremely difficult and lacked transparency.

Second, despite the public online presence of Philanthropy, most interviewees noted that the church lacked a coherent policy toward refugees and displaced populations. Philanthropy was the only Orthodox organization

that reached a broad audience across the country; however, the church as an institution held divergent views on the most appropriate ways of engaging with refugees. For instance, the discourse of the church hierarchy and clergy often differed from that of laypeople. Senior and lower clergy frequently referred to Kosovo as “our Jerusalem,” a narrative that many perceived as conflicting with Serbia’s aspirations for European Union membership. In a more extreme example, some senior clergy adopted rigid positions, denouncing any interaction with non-Orthodox Serbs, such as Bishop Artemije (Radosavljević) of Raška and Prizren (Kosovo), who condemned ecumenical dialogue with non-Orthodox Christians and refused to engage with Albanians and Muslims. Nevertheless, one interviewee expressed optimism that change might come in the long term with a new generation of Western-educated hierarchs. During the communist era, most church leaders studied in Moscow, and in recent years, an increasing number have pursued studies in Germany—a trend perceived as part of Germany’s wider soft power influence in both religious and secular spheres.

Third, the official discourse of the church hierarchy did little to challenge Serbia’s close ties with Russia, which was widely regarded as an ally and friend, largely due to historical connections. One interviewee noted that many Serbs were aware of Russia’s geographical distance—a fact that was met with quiet relief. Some feared that if Russia were geographically closer, Serbia might face a similar fate to that of Ukraine. In recent decades, Russia has increasingly been portrayed as a friend, largely due to the enduring legacy of the NATO bombings and a prevailing anti-US sentiment.

During the 2015 refugee crisis in Serbia, the Serbian Orthodox Church was largely present in public discourse, although civil society organizations played a more dominant role. When refugees arrived in Belgrade, several students from the Faculty of Theology offered assistance to those in need at the Central Bus Station; however, the grassroots mobilization was not welcomed by all religious circles. At the official level, the Holy Synod issued a statement in 2015 expressing support for the refugees, which stood in contrast not only to the position of the neighboring Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which condemned the arrival of refugees, but also to the silence of other churches in Southeastern Europe. One interviewee noted that although the Serbian church’s statement appeared unusual and might suggest a shift toward a more liberal stance, it actually reflected the influence of a small group of clergy who managed to persuade senior church leaders. A similar statement had been issued a year earlier, during the

widespread flooding and humanitarian crisis in Serbia. The experience of providing aid during that disaster was replicated during the 2015 refugee crisis. While the statement demonstrated that the church continued to hold an important voice in society, it did not translate into a concrete shift in religious policy toward migration. According to an interviewee, there were no immediate or tangible outcomes visible at the national level. As later interviews conducted along the Serbian-Croatian border revealed, the statement, although not a primary driver of local mobilization, did embolden humanitarian efforts at the parish level. Clergy directly involved with refugees were able to mobilize their communities without fear of reprimand from higher church authorities and coordinated their efforts with Philanthropy. The significance of the statement was further underscored by another interviewee, who remarked that the church suffered from poor public relations. In their view, the patriarch and bishops should be making more frequent and visible statements in support of vulnerable populations, following the example of Pope Francis, who regularly addressed major social issues directly; such communication would enable a more coordinated response and improve the visibility of church-led humanitarian programs involving refugees.

The fact that the church leadership was able to issue a public statement also signaled a subtle challenge to secular authorities in their handling of the refugee crisis. One interviewee criticized the lack of transparency surrounding EU funding, remarking that “villages could have been built with so much funding.” Meanwhile, state authorities were perceived as turning a blind eye to acts of violence against refugees, fearing that prosecuting Serbian citizens might encourage refugees to remain in the country longer. In several instances involving serious crimes such as rape and forced prostitution, legal action was pursued through the courts.

Criticism of the state authorities’ response was accompanied by growing dissatisfaction with the European Union. The national enthusiasm that had once driven large demonstrations following the fall of Milošević’s regime, fueled by the promise of rapid EU integration, gradually faded. Instead of tangible economic progress, ordinary citizens remained impoverished, while EU membership was repeatedly postponed, with 2025 offered as a tentative target. The EU’s insistence on Serbia recognizing Kosovo as an independent state further fueled public discontent and clashed with the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In northern Kosovo, Serbia continued to pay the salaries of local officials, reinforcing its claim to the region. Public opinion became increasingly polarized, shaped by conflicting narratives from Russia and the European Union—a tension also reflected in divisions within the

church leadership. The environment eroded trust in public institutions, as politicians were perceived as making promises merely to gain power, only to reverse course and blame external pressure from European institutions. Meanwhile, the rise of far-right groups that appropriated religious symbols met with little resistance. For example, an electoral poster for Vojislav Šešelj—the leader of the nationalist Serbian Radical Party, who had been charged with war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia—featured his image in front of the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade. No church official or hierarch publicly condemned the political use of religious symbols, highlighting the existence of competing visions regarding the role of religion in shaping Serbian national identity.

In contrast to the European Union, Russia maintained significant economic interests in Serbia, particularly through investments in the energy sector. Serbian citizens were not required to obtain visas to travel to Russia and similarly benefited from visa liberalization agreements with China and North Korea. One interviewee lamented the growing divide between Russia and the EU, stating emotionally, “There is no hope in people’s eyes.” With over 300,000 people emigrating annually and a persistently low birth rate, many feared a bleak demographic future, predicting a significant decline in Serbia’s population in the coming decades.

The presence of Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) in Belgrade and his powerful appeal for Serbian Orthodox faithful to choose between the European Union and Russia resonated deeply with many. His message encouraged closer church-state cooperation, reinforcing mutual support between the hierarchy and the government, aligning with the positive image of the Russian patriarch in Serbia, in stark contrast to the mistrust directed toward Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. The joint visit of Bartholomew and Pope Francis to Lesbos in support of refugees received limited media coverage and failed to resonate with the Serbian faithful. It was therefore unsurprising that, during the 2016 Holy and Great Synod in Crete, the Serbian Orthodox Church initially declared its intention to attend, then withdrew under pressure from Moscow, and ultimately reversed course to participate. The wavering reflected the tension within both the church and the country, torn between allegiance to Russia and aspirations toward the West. One interviewee noted that despite Serbia’s eventual attendance, the 2016 Holy and Great Synod had little impact domestically, mainly due to Russia’s absence and to the ambiguity of the document on interchurch relations. The interviewee concluded that only a future holy and great synod capable of clearly defining the concept of the “church” as an institution and

as a community of the faithful would have a meaningful impact on Serbian society and the faithful.

At the regional level, relations with neighboring countries remained contentious. The Romanian Orthodox Church established its own jurisdiction in northern Serbia, specifically in the Vojvodina region, to serve the Romanian ethnic community, and priests were sent to Serbia without seeking permission from the Serbian Orthodox Church. One interviewee warned that if this situation persisted, it was highly likely that the two churches would break communion. Religion-state relations in Serbia differed significantly from those in Romania, both in terms of religiosity and state support. One interviewee contrasted the Serbian church, which operated only one online TV channel, with the Romanian church, which maintained a much stronger media presence. Following the fall of communism, Romania saw not only the construction of a large number of churches but also numerous crosses in nearly every village—something that would likely surprise a tourist—in contrast to Serbia, where the church maintained a more restrained public presence. A symbolic comparison was also evident in the positioning of the most important theological institutions in both countries. In Romania, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology remained in central Bucharest throughout the communist period. In Serbia, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology was relocated to the outskirts of Belgrade in the 1990s and only later reintegrated into the city as it expanded.

Data collection in Belgrade was supplemented by interviews with clergy, officials, and refugees at the Principovac Reception Center on the Serbian-Croatian border—a visit made possible with the support of Philanthropy, which applied for and secured permission from the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration. In general, interviewees at the border confirmed the perspectives gathered in Belgrade: namely, that the intersection of religion and migration was perceived as controversial. One notable difference emerged: namely, that while interviewees in Belgrade described Syrian migrants as largely invisible, moved discreetly by buses across the country, those at the border reported daily interactions between local communities and refugees. The center allowed residents to leave freely, and many took the opportunity to visit nearby villages to purchase food and other necessities. Unlike a militarized facility, the center was managed by state officials with expertise in humanitarian work, emphasizing a more civilian and service-oriented approach.



Photo 2. Entrance to the Principovac Reception Center, 2018. The center, situated only a few hundred meters from the Serbian-Croatian border, was located in a former children's rehabilitation center. Refugees were able to leave the premises and travel to the nearby village. The following year, Serbia's Commissariat for Refugees and Migration reported that the center was accommodating 373 refugees in 20 rooms. Copyright: Lucian N. Leustean.

Religion and ethnicity formed an unspoken bond that connected those living near the refugee center with those residing within it. During the Yugoslav wars, religious identity often marked the dividing line between ethnic communities. One interviewee imagined that Serbia had experienced nine wars in the twentieth century and carried its own trauma from dealing with refugees from Bosnia and Croatia.⁴⁷ The interviewee, who had fled Croatia during the war, shared that returning to his birthplace was no longer possible. Now working in a local community in Serbia, he expressed pride in having helped restore a village school and sports facility with funding from Western religious organizations. The village had received financial support from religious organizations even before the refugee crisis began,

47 The exact number of wars remains disputed. During the twentieth century, Serbia was engaged in the following conflicts: First Balkan War (1912-1913); Second Balkan War (1913); World War I (Serbian Campaign) (1914-1918); World War II (Yugoslavia/Serbia, 1941-1945); Ten-Day War (Slovenian Independence) (1991); Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995); Bosnian War (1992-1995); Kosovo War (1998-1999); and the Insurgency in Preševo Valley (1999-2001).

and the support served as a reminder that engaging with people in need could awaken a shared sense of humanity, both among the villagers and the refugees arriving at the reception center.

A particularly controversial topic was the actual number of refugees in the country. Interviewees in Belgrade expressed skepticism about the official figures provided by both the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration and the European Union Office, suggesting that the true number was unknown. One interviewee even estimated that as many as 15,000 refugees were present in Serbia, far exceeding the approximately 4,000 officially reported as residing in reception centers. In 2018, there were 18 such centers across the country.

During my visit to the Principovac Reception Center, it became clear why these figures were disputed. The center was overcrowded, with people living in cramped rooms where privacy was limited to bedsheets hung as makeshift partitions. Families shared small spaces, and a local officer noted that, in previous months, the courtyard had been filled with temporary tents. Many of those who had left the center were thought to have continued their journey to Western Europe. The Serbian-Croatian border was frequently in the news due to reports of violence, while the Serbian-Hungarian border to the north was considered nearly impenetrable following the construction of a two-meter-high barbed-wire fence. The reception center was not open to the general public, and local residents could not visit without an appointment. Refugees were free to leave at any time, and many took advantage to shop in nearby villages or to move on entirely.

In my conversation with a refugee from Afghanistan, who lived in a small room with her mother and father, sharing the space with several others, she mentioned that her sister and her sister's children had managed to cross the border illegally and reach Germany. The three of them had been living in the same reception center for the past two years, holding onto the hope that one day she would be able to reunite with her sister. She appeared to be in a state of limbo, unwilling to return to Afghanistan, unable to travel to Germany, and uncertain about how much longer she would remain in Serbia. Day after day, for two years, she lived in a cramped room, entirely dependent on others for food, medicine, and shelter. She did not speak the local language, and the Croatian border, just a few hundred meters away, symbolized both hope and frustration. The proximity of that border, which could lead to reunion with her sister, only deepened her sense of entrapment and took a toll on her mental health. She had attempted to cross several times, but each time she was caught and sent back. An interviewee who worked with refugees remarked that everyone in the camp "lived in denial."

There was little the local authorities could do beyond keeping people in the center. Refugees did not want to stay permanently and had no choice but to adapt. Some signs of resilience emerged, with children beginning to learn Serbian with the help of local volunteers, offering a small glimmer of continuity and hope.

In many cases, refugees left the center under the pretext of taking casual strolls to a nearby village to buy food. If they did not return, it was generally assumed they had successfully crossed the border, reinforcing the idea that the actual number of refugees residing in the country must be treated with caution. Upon arriving at the reception center, the first sight that greeted visitors was a group of people sitting outside the building, all absorbed in their phones, connected to the internet. Most likely, internet access allowed them to stay in touch with family back home or simply pass the time; but more than that, it served as a window into another world—a way to dream, to plan, and to coordinate their next move, whether that meant attempting another border crossing, returning to their country of origin, or seeking refuge elsewhere.

In a conversation with a young man in his twenties who had traveled from Iran, the theme of denial surfaced once again. He explained that he left his country following a quarrel with his family over religious issues. Holding an undergraduate degree from Tehran, he took advantage of Serbia's visa liberalization policy to reach Belgrade. After staying in Serbia for a while, he attempted to continue his journey westward but was apprehended and sent back from the border. Now without money and unable to return to Iran, he feared facing capital punishment. He had declared himself an atheist and, by openly denouncing Islam before leaving Iran, had severed any possibility of returning safely. His situation reflected a profound sense of isolation and uncertainty, caught between borders, both physical and ideological.

References to religion also emerged in a conversation with another refugee from Syria, who was living in the reception center with her husband. She explained that they had initially reached Austria, where they registered with local authorities; however, for reasons that remained unclear, they were deported to Serbia and now resided in the reception center. They had appealed the decision and were awaiting a response from the Austrian consulate in Vienna. She believed there had been a mistake in the paperwork and said that local officials had encouraged them, suggesting that a favorable decision might eventually be made. Despite this, she had been living in the center for nearly a year, with no clear explanation for the delay. She also shared that she had converted to Christianity while still in Syria. When asked to specify which Christian denomination, she was unable to provide a clear

answer. Local officials noted that many refugees claimed to be Christian in hopes of receiving more favorable treatment; however, it was also possible that some had genuinely converted without formally affiliating with a specific religious community.

The refugees I met expressed deep gratitude for the support provided by religious communities. Collaboration between Orthodox and Catholic charitable organizations ensured that local residents regularly engaged with the refugees, and small monthly financial allowances enabled them to buy essential items like food and clothing. Though modest, the support was described as lifesaving and offered a sense of hope. When asked what kind of material support would be most helpful for a future visit, the Afghan refugee responded simply: "A fridge." Having a place to store food for herself and her parents would be, in her words, "the most treasured possession." It remained unclear whether local officials were even permitted to approve such a request for a single room, assuming there was space for it at all.

The direct impact of religious communities on the lives of those in the reception center was also visible in the courtyard. In the car park, a minivan bore an inscription indicating it had been donated by a religious group. Local officials admitted they were unfamiliar with the organization, which originated from an Asian country, possibly Hindu or Buddhist. The center had only been informed by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration that the minivan was a gift, and they accepted it as such. Other local religious communities involved in the center's activities also had no further information, indicating that religious support came in many forms. While Orthodox and Catholic communities were the most visible, others, including groups from countries unfamiliar to those working at the center, also contributed. For instance, although not mentioned by refugees in this particular center, Protestant communities have been especially active in Belgrade, with humanitarian mobilization particularly prominent during the Yugoslav wars.

The influence of religious communities was evident not only within the Principovac Reception Center but also in the lives of those in the nearby village. The mobilization of local clergy and parishioners was notable and somewhat unusual. When refugees began crossing the Bulgarian-Serbian border and moving northward, Philanthropy, working in direct coordination with state authorities in Belgrade, contacted the local parish priest in the village to inform him that refugees were expected to arrive and cross the border. Philanthropy requested assistance with the logistical organization of aid distribution, and in response, the local priest arranged for a provisional tent and, with the help of local volunteers, ensured that aid was distributed

promptly and efficiently. Once the border was closed and refugees became stranded in the reception center, religious mobilization shifted in form, adapting to the new, more static reality of long-term displacement.

The priest not only visited the reception center on several occasions to provide material assistance but also offered spiritual support. He identified 15 Christians from Syria and invited them to attend the liturgy at his local church. On that particular Sunday, only ten people from his village were present. Most members of his congregation were surprised to see so many refugees who not only listened attentively to the service but also participated like any other Christian, making the sign of the cross and joining in prayer. At the end of the liturgy, one local parishioner approached the priest and admitted he had been surprised to see the refugees there, having assumed they were all Muslim. He added that the day had been very special for him, saying, "I have never prayed so hard in my whole life." The contrast between the statements of some religious leaders who condemned the arrival of refugees and the heartfelt response of ordinary believers who prayed alongside them could not have been more striking.

Religious mobilization in response to the refugee crisis in Serbia has been shaped by two key factors. First, the legacy of religion-state relations during the communist period has continued to influence access to resources and connections with state authorities. Second, the entrepreneurial nature of religious organizations has played a significant role. In many cases, providing support to people in need has come to resemble a form of business enterprise. The Serbian case was distinctive in that the politicization of religious humanitarian programs has been closely tied to the concept of state failure. When refugees began arriving in Serbia, they were met with a swift response from Orthodox humanitarian structures. Philanthropy, for example, emerged in the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and became a key actor in humanitarian efforts, with religious mobilization largely being driven by national interests rather than by grassroots initiatives from individual parishes or clergy. At the height of the refugee crisis, the Serbian Orthodox Church mobilized its resources and ensured that clergy stationed at the border were able to provide support, often before the government had even issued a national strategy.

The interviews conducted in Belgrade and at the Principovac Reception Center on the Serbian-Croatian border showed that when state authorities failed to adequately support those in need, religious communities often stepped in to fill the gap in public services. In times of crisis, cooperation between state and religious actors tended to occur on an *ad hoc* basis, lacking formal partnerships or strategic planning. Generally, the principle of

separation between church and state remained evident in public discourse. Politicians frequently responded critically when the church hierarchy issued statements on secular matters, particularly when those statements carried political implications. The tension underscored the fragile and often improvised nature of collaboration between religious and state institutions in addressing humanitarian challenges.

The politicization of religious discourse was particularly evident in the use of religious symbols by far-right politicians during local elections. More broadly, the Serbian Orthodox Church was often perceived as an ally linking Russia's geopolitical interests in the region with Serbia's aspirations for European Union membership. While the Serbian prime minister officially declared that EU integration was a national priority, the issue of recognizing Kosovo's independence remained deeply contested. Patriarch Irinej regularly spoke of tolerance and reconciliation in meetings with religious and political leaders from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina; however, tangible progress remained limited. Meanwhile, the presence of Russian leaders in Belgrade, and their encouragement for Serbia to choose between East and West, highlighted the ambivalence of political elites who frequently employed religious rhetoric to navigate competing alliances. Religious networks and the invocation of a shared historical narrative played a significant role in shaping public sentiment. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov's visits to Belgrade exemplified the politicization of religion. While he met with Serbian officials, his participation in the unveiling of the mosaic at Saint Sava Cathedral served as more than a ceremonial gesture; it became a platform for wider public engagement. For the first time, Lavrov delivered a public speech at the University of Belgrade, directly addressing an academic audience and emphasizing Russia's geopolitical ambitions in the region. In this context, the future of Kosovo, viewed by the church as inseparable from Serbian identity, was framed as both a religious and political issue. Lavrov's visit demonstrated that a religious event could evolve into a public and media-driven opportunity to shape national discourse. Similarly, Metropolitan Hilarion of the Moscow Patriarchate advanced a political message by condemning the arrival of refugees in Serbia and asserting that the country's pursuit of EU membership amounted to "a betrayal of Orthodoxy."

The Orthodox Church's humanitarian activity during the refugee crisis helped shift public perception among the Serbian faithful, challenging the notion of refugees as the "other," as many of those arriving shared the same Christian faith, which fostered a sense of solidarity. Beyond the shift in public perception, the crisis also demonstrated the tangible impact of

joint efforts by Orthodox and Catholic representatives working together on humanitarian programs. The collaboration, grounded in shared compassion rather than theological agreement, had a direct and meaningful effect on those stranded in reception centers; however, the success of the national interfaith collaboration also revealed its limitations. In what may be seen as an unexpected finding, other Eastern Christian churches in Syria or the Middle East did not reach out to Philanthropy or local Serbian churches to inquire about their own faithful who decided to emigrate. There were no joint aid initiatives between Serbian and Middle Eastern religious organizations. More significantly, there was a lack of coordinated humanitarian programs among Orthodox churches in neighboring countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, such as Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania. The Serbian case stood out as a compelling example of social and political entrepreneurship emerging amid escalating geopolitical tensions between Russia and the European Union, demonstrating the ways in which religious communities, in times of crisis, assumed state-like functions by delivering direct support to vulnerable populations.

5. Orthodox Conservatism and the Refugee Crisis in Bulgaria and Moldova

Abstract: The chapter investigates the concept of religious failure in relation to forced displacement in Bulgaria and the Republic of Moldova. In both countries, churches held significant influence on political outcomes, with the Bulgarian church being characterized as a “state within a state,” while the Orthodox Church in Moldova positioned itself between Romanian nationalism and Russian geopolitics.

Keywords: Bulgaria; Moldova; Orthodox Churches; Humanitarianism; Nationalism; Geopolitics

As previously mentioned, in 2015, at the height of the European refugee crisis, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church issued an unusual and strongly worded statement condemning the government’s migration policy, describing the arrival of refugees as a “true invasion.” A year later, during the presidential election debates in the Republic of Moldova, the issue of migration became a decisive factor when the Orthodox Church, under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, endorsed fake claims that 30,000 Syrians were about to enter the country. No other Orthodox church in Eastern Europe issued such overtly hostile statements against refugees, which stood in stark contrast to the Christian precept “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:39).

While, at first glance, the responses of the Orthodox churches in Bulgaria and Moldova may initially appear unusual, they reflected a wider pattern of an internationally connected religious conservatism in Eastern Europe. In Catholic-majority countries, such as Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, several

high-ranking religious leaders issued statements supporting right-wing politicians and opposing liberal Western migration policies. The Catholic response differed from the Orthodox stance in its scope and international dimension. While Hungary and Poland have faced repeated criticism from European institutions, the Catholic opposition to liberalism and the refugee crisis was largely driven by domestic political agendas. In contrast, within the Eastern Orthodox world, criticism of the liberal West often aligned with internationally coordinated narratives that served the geopolitical interests of dominant regional actors. Since the fall of communism, Orthodox traditionalism and conservatism have frequently been promoted by clergy and politicians as ideological alternatives to liberalism, democratization, and human rights,¹ while across the region, Orthodox clergy have positioned themselves as “moral entrepreneurs,” offering policy guidance on issues related to family, national identity, and state-building.² Bulgaria and Moldova share several important characteristics that help explain their similar responses to migration and religious discourse.

First, the legacy of atheist communism and religious persecution has left a lasting impact on social structures in both countries. Bulgaria has one of the highest percentages of atheists and agnostics among predominantly Orthodox nations in the region (22 percent); however, the number of people identifying as Orthodox has risen significantly in the past decade, reaching 75 percent. Moldova, by contrast, has the highest percentage of Orthodox believers in Eastern Europe, with 90 percent of the population identifying with the faith.³ In both countries, public trust in religious institutions has consistently surpassed trust in political structures.⁴ Second, both nations

1 Tobias Köllner, ed., *Orthodox Religion and Politics in Contemporary Eastern Europe: On Multiple Secularisms and Entanglements* (London: Routledge, 2019); Victor Roudometof, Alexander Agadjanian, and Jerry G. Pankhurst, eds., *Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age: Tradition Faces the Twenty-First Century* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005); Kristina Stoeckl and Kseniya Medvedeva, “Double Bind at the UN: Western Actors, Russia, and the Traditionalist Agenda,” *Global Constitutionalism* 7, no. 3 (2018): 383–421; Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga, eds., *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe* (London: Routledge, 2018); Aleksandr Verkhovsky, “The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Nationalist, Xenophobic and Antiwestern Tendencies in Russia Today: Not Nationalism, but Fundamentalism,” *Religion, State, and Society* 30, no. 4 (2002): 333–45.

2 Kristina Stoeckl, “The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur,” *Religion, State & Society* 44, no. 2 (2016): 131–51.

3 “Recensământul populației și a locuințelor 2014” [Population and Household Census 2014], Biroul Național de Statistică al Republicii Moldova, 2014, <https://recensamant.statistica.md/ro/dissemination/person/da56d057fe1371851e819d9be266cf5>.

4 “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe,” Pew Research Center, May 10, 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/>

have been deeply affected by emigration, with a significant number of their populations moving abroad, primarily to the European Union and Russia, for economic reasons. Bulgaria has been described as “the world’s fastest shrinking nation,” with two million out of a population of nine million having emigrated.⁵ Moldova, one of Europe’s poorest countries, has been labeled as “the most migration-affected country in the world,” with estimates ranging from 850,000 people in 2016⁶ to between 1.1 and 1.25 million out of 2.9 million living abroad in 2021.⁷ Third, in both countries and throughout the region, Russia has exerted “soft power” not only through cultural cooperation, energy, and military contracts but also through religious diplomacy directly involving Orthodoxy in foreign affairs.⁸ Fourth, the comparison between Bulgaria and Moldova has wider implications for understanding the rise of illiberalism and populism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet space.⁹ Despite experiencing different waves of refugees—from the Middle East in 2014–2015 and from Ukraine after 2022—the public discourse of both churches has followed a similar pattern, with both the Bulgarian and Moldovan Orthodox Churches promoting an internationally aligned Orthodox conservatism, often accompanied by populist rhetoric and geopolitical messaging.

religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/.

5 Daniel McLaughlin, “Welcome to Bulgaria, the World’s Fastest Shrinking Nation,” *Irish Times*, October 13, 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/welcome-to-bulgaria-the-world-s-fastest-shrinking-nation-1.3658819>.

6 Daniel McLaughlin, “Crisis-Hit Moldova’s Youth Look Abroad for Their Future,” *Irish Times*, January 27, 2016, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/crisis-hit-moldova-s-youth-look-abroad-for-their-future-1.2512570>.

7 The 2021 estimates were included in a report issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration and was available at https://mfa.gov.md/sites/default/files/pro-punerile_maeie_privind_constituirea_celor_191_de_sectii_de_votare.pdf (the estimates were published in a number of publications but weblink was no longer active in 2025). See Eurasian Research Institute, “Emigrant Moldova and the Changing Concept of Migration,” 2022, <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/emigrant-moldova-and-the-changing-concept-of-migration/> and Dorina Baltag and Eugeniu Burdelnii, “Mid-Term Evaluation of the National Strategy Diaspora-2025, Republic of Moldova,” https://brd.gov.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/raport-strategia-nationala_eng.pdf.

8 Richard Sakwa, *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

9 Adam Hug, ed., *Traditional Religion and Political Power: Examining the Role of the Church in Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine and Moldova* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2015); Adam Hug, ed., *The Rise of Illiberal Civil Society in the Former Soviet Union* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2018).

Bulgaria: “The Orthodox Church is a State within a State”

Before 1953, Bulgaria found itself in a unique ecclesiastical situation, with the headquarters of its church located not in Sofia but in Istanbul. The arrangement stemmed from the rise of churches organized along ethnic and national lines in the nineteenth century, which led the Ecumenical Patriarchate to condemn ethno-phyletism in 1870. The Bulgarian faithful were administered by elites appointed in Constantinople under the so-called Bulgarian Exarchate—a development with long-term consequences. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Bulgarian church struggled, unsuccessfully, for recognition as an independent ecclesiastical body. The process of Bulgarian state-building unfolded with minimal influence from religious institutions, contributing to Bulgaria’s emergence as the most secular state within the Orthodox world. The spread of communism in the region reinforced the secular trajectory, and Article 78 of the 1947 Constitution formally declared the separation of church and state. Two years later, Article 6 of the Communist Law on Religious Denominations stipulated that political authorities held the final authority in granting or revoking the legal status of religious organizations.

The co-optation of the Orthodox Church for political purposes in Bulgaria followed a pattern similar to that of other religious communities behind the Iron Curtain. The Bulgarian church’s long-standing struggle for independence and international recognition, particularly in opposition to the Western-backed Ecumenical Patriarchate, eventually found support in Moscow; and with the assistance of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Patriarchate was officially recognized as an autocephalous church in 1953. In the decades that followed, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church maintained close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church and other Orthodox communities, as evident in 1961, when the Bulgarian, Russian, and Romanian Orthodox churches all joined the World Council of Churches (WCC), signaling a coordinated effort to assert Orthodox solidarity on both religious and political fronts. The alignment between the Bulgarian and Romanian churches was also reflected in their shared practice of canonizing religious figures to promote national unity. Following the 1955 canonization of Romanian saints, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church declared two national figures as saints—Paisii Hilendarski in 1962 and Sofronii Vrachanski in 1964, both

leading figures at the beginning of the Bulgarian National Revival—the only canonizations carried out by the Bulgarian church during the Cold War.¹⁰

In 1971, Patriarch Cyril (Konstantinov) passed away and was succeeded by Metropolitan Maxim (Minkov) of Lovech. Patriarch Maxim's appointment was likely influenced by his personal connection to General Dobri Dzhurov, who served as Bulgaria's minister of defense from 1962 to 1990 and had been Maxim's classmate at the Sofia Orthodox Seminary during the interwar period. Internationally, Bulgaria became increasingly isolated following the 1981 assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II, in which Bulgarian security agents were implicated. Despite the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's close cooperation with state authorities, affording it a relatively privileged position, the larger trends of secularization and religious repression had a more profound impact, as reflected in the significant decline in clergy numbers, from 2,179 in 1956 to just 1,320 by the 1970s.¹¹

After the fall of communism, Bulgaria experienced one of the most complex and unusual divisions between the secular and religious spheres. Article 13(3) of the 1991 Constitution recognized Eastern Orthodox Christianity as "the traditional religion in the Republic of Bulgaria"; however, the social and political consequences of the concept of "traditional religion" proved controversial due to a major split within the church. The institutional crisis began in March 1992, when a group of Orthodox Church elites challenged the legitimacy of Patriarch Maxim's 1971 election, arguing that it violated canonical norms due to his appointment by the communist regime. On May 25, 1992, dissenting clergy established a rival ecclesiastical body, appointing Metropolitan Pimen (Enev) of Nevrokop as chairman of the Provisional Synodal Government. Patriarch Maxim condemned the move and appealed to Bulgaria's Supreme Court, which declined to intervene, ruling that the organization and activities of the Provisional Synod fell outside its jurisdiction. The legal ambiguity, coupled with political interference, led to the emergence of two competing Orthodox churches in Bulgaria. The former communist party lent its support to Patriarch Maxim, while the Union of Democratic Forces backed the Alternative Synod, and over the following decades, religious disputes increasingly mirrored political divisions. Tensions escalated further in July 1996, when Pimen was elected patriarch—a title

10 Daniela Kalkandjieva, "The Bulgarian Orthodox Church," in *Eastern Christianity and the Cold War, 1945–91*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2010), 37–38.

11 Kalkandjieva, "The Bulgarian Orthodox Church," in *Eastern Christianity and the Cold War*, 37–38.

traditionally reserved for the highest ecclesiastical authority—deepening the schism and complicating efforts at reconciliation.¹²

A significant shift in the political role of the church became evident in 1997, when President Petar Stoyanov (1997–2002) took his oath of office before Pimen of the Alternative Synod, rather than Patriarch Maxim, in an act symbolizing the deepening entanglement of religious divisions with national politics. In an effort to reconcile the two factions, a pan-Orthodox council was convened in Sofia in 1998, attended by leading hierarchs from across the Orthodox world, including the patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Moscow, Romania, and Serbia. Despite the high-level participation, the council failed to produce a resolution to the schism. Following the death of Patriarch Pimen in April 1999, Metropolitan Inokentiy (Petrov) of Sofia was appointed as his successor, continuing the leadership of the Alternative Synod.

Following the appointment of former Bulgarian king Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha as prime minister in 2001, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Maxim gained a significantly stronger position. The government denied the Alternative Synod the right to use the name “Bulgarian Orthodox Church,” which had immediate implications for its ability to officiate religious services and claim ownership of church property. To further consolidate Maxim’s authority, the Bulgarian Parliament passed a new Religious Denominations Act on December 29, 2002. The legislation explicitly favored the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, often at the expense of religious minorities, and, although the act was challenged before the Constitutional Court, the appeal was unsuccessful.¹³ In 2007, the dispute over property ownership and state recognition reached the European Court

12 John Anderson, “The Treatment of Religious Minorities in South-Eastern Europe: Greece and Bulgaria Compared,” *Religion, State & Society* 30, no. 1 (2002): 9–31; Janice Broun, “The Schism in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church,” *Religion, State & Society* 21, no. 2 (1993): 207–20; Janice Broun, “The Schism in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Part 2: Under the Socialist Government, 1993–97,” *Religion, State & Society* 28, no. 3 (2000): 263–89; Janice Broun, “The Schism in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Part 3: Under the Second Union of Democratic Forces Government, 1997–2001,” *Religion, State & Society* 30, no. 4 (2002): 365–94; Janice Broun, “The Bulgarian Orthodox Church: The Continuing Schism and the Religious, Social and Political Environment,” *Religion, State & Society* 32, no. 3 (2004): 209–45; Carsten Riis, *Religion, Politics, and Historiography in Bulgaria* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2002); Marat Iliysov, Victoria Bogdanova, and Liliya Yakova, “Governing Religion in Russia and Bulgaria: Between Religious Diversity and Religious Nationalism,” *Ethnicities* 24, no. 2 (2024): 219–37.

13 Peter Petkoff, “Church-State Relations under the Bulgarian Denominations Act 2002: Religious Pluralism and Established Church and the Impact of Other Models of Law on Religion,” *Religion, State & Society* 33, no. 4 (2005): 315–37.

of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg, which ruled that the Bulgarian state had violated Article 9 of the ECHR, which guaranteed freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The ruling did not address the issue of property restitution, nor did it determine which faction was the legitimate successor to the pre-1992 Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

On January 17, 2012, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church faced a new crisis. The Committee for Disclosing the Documents and Announcing Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens to the State Security and the Intelligence Services of the Bulgarian National Army during Communism (commonly known as the Dossier Committee) issued Decision No. 298, revealing that eleven metropolitans from Patriarch Maxim's synod had served as agents of the security services during the communist period. Although the disclosure did not provoke condemnation from state authorities, its impact became evident a few months later. Following the death of Patriarch Maxim on November 6, 2012, the church elected Neophyte (Dimitrov) as the new patriarch. Neophyte was widely regarded as relatively untainted by associations with the former regime, and his election was seen as a deliberate effort by the church to distance itself from its communist past and to heal internal divisions.¹⁴

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church distinguished itself among Southeastern European churches by being the only one to continue holding public Easter services. In contrast, Greece limited services to clergy and cantors, while churches in Romania and Serbia complied with government bans. Similarly, many churches in Ukraine and Russia, particularly in densely populated areas, were also closed. The only other country to adopt a similar approach to Bulgaria was Georgia, where the Georgian Orthodox Church refused to follow government health directives.¹⁵ The Bulgarian Orthodox Church's decision to proceed with Easter services was closely aligned with the government's use of religious symbolism to bolster its public image and policies. The early months of 2022 were marked by widespread uncertainty

14 Kristen Ghodsee, "Symphonic Secularism: Eastern Orthodoxy, Ethnic Identity and Religious Freedoms in Contemporary Bulgaria," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 27, no. 2 (2009): 227–52; Daniela Kalkandjieva, "The Bulgarian Orthodox Church," in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2014), 114–39; Maria Schnitter and Daniela Kalkandjieva, "Teaching Religion in Bulgarian Schools: Historical Experience and Post-Atheist Developments," in *Religious Education and the Challenge of Pluralism*, ed. Adam B. Seligman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 70–95.

15 Daniela Kalkandjieva, "The Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Refugee Crisis," in *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2019), 229–50. Jenia Pateva, "Church and State in Bulgaria," in *Law and Religion in Post-Communist Europe*, ed. Silvio Ferrari and W. Cole Durham, Jr. (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 37–56.

over the ways in which to respond to the pandemic,¹⁶ as exemplified by Metropolitan Gabriel (Dinev) of Lovech's controversial remarks, claiming that only those with weak faith were susceptible to infection and asserting that "in no way has the contagion been transmitted and spread in churches where sacraments are performed! There have never been epidemics in the church."¹⁷

When on December 27, 2020, Bulgaria officially launched its COVID-19 vaccination program in Sofia, the first recipients of the vaccine were two prominent figures, namely, Kostadin Angelov, the minister of health, and Bishop Tikhon (Ivanov) of Tiberiopolis, a 75-year-old vicar of Patriarch Neophyte.¹⁸ The inclusion of a senior church figure in the launch event was symbolically significant; however, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church quickly clarified that Bishop Tikhon's vaccination was a personal decision. The synod emphasized that his choice was informed by his prior medical training before entering the church hierarchy and not part of a coordinated religious policy. Beyond the brief statement, the church made no further public comments regarding the national vaccination campaign. Bulgarian theologians later defended the church's limited involvement, arguing that it sought to avoid being perceived as "an instrument of state policy."¹⁹

The election of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov in December 2021 marked a notable shift in state policy toward the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. For the first time in two decades, the newly elected prime minister did not invite Patriarch Neophyte to attend his swearing-in ceremony at the National Assembly, reflecting dissatisfaction with the close ties between the church hierarchy and the previous administration, as well as the church's lack of public support for the refugee crisis and the national COVID-19 vaccination

16 Daniela Kalkandjieva, "Global and Local in the Response of Orthodox Churches to the First Wave of the Coronavirus Pandemic: With a Special Focus on the Case of Bulgaria," in *Liberals, Conservatives, and Mavericks: On Christian Churches of Eastern Europe since 1980 (A Festschrift for Sabrina P. Ramet)*, ed. Frank Cibulka and Zachary T. Irwin (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2024), 223–46.

17 "БПЦ: Човек може да се зарази в църквата само ако вярата му е слаба" [BOC: A person can be infected in the church only if his faith is weak], *Club Z*, March 11, 2020, https://www.clubz.bg/95435-bpc_chovek_moje_da_se_zarazi_v_cyrkvata_samo_ako_vqrata_mu_e_slaba.

18 "Костадин ангелов стана първият имунизиран срещу covid-19 в България" [Kostadin Angelov became the first person immunized against Covid-19 in Bulgaria], *Boulevard Bulgaria*, December 27, 2020, <https://boulevardbulgaria.bg/articles/kostadin-angelov-stana-parviyat-imuniziran-sreshtu-covid-19-u-nas-tova-e-spasenieto-koeto-ochakvame>.

19 Georgi Lozanov, "БПЦ се държи по-достойно от много светски институции" ["The BOC behaves more dignified than many secular institutions"], *DW*, February 27, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/bg/църквата-и-пандемията-бпц-се-държи-по-достойно-от-много-светски-институции/a-56722060>.

campaign.²⁰ Later that year, the national census reported a total population of 6,838,937 in Bulgaria,²¹ with 59.40 percent of the population identifying as Orthodox, followed by Sunni Islam (7.41 percent), Protestant communities (0.88 percent), the Catholic Church (0.66 percent), and Shia Islam (0.32 percent). Additionally, 5.67 percent of respondents declared no religious affiliation, while 3.7 percent identified explicitly as having no religion.

Religion and the Refugee Crisis

Migration to Bulgaria is not a new phenomenon.²² The first wave occurred during the Cold War period, when Bulgaria, as a member of the Warsaw Pact, strengthened its ties with the Soviet Union. The second wave followed shortly after 1990, as migrants from neighboring countries and the Middle East were encouraged to settle due to economic incentives. New communities began to form, including the Syrian community, which is considered one of the most successful. The third wave of migration took place in response to the 2011 Syrian crisis and the displacement caused by the 2022 war in Ukraine.²³

In 2015, at the peak of the European refugee crisis, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) recorded 1,059,044 migrants arriving in Europe. The majority were in Greece (857,363 people), while 31,174 were in Bulgaria, with most refugees arriving in Greece traveling north along the Balkan route and aiming to reach Western Europe. After border closures, a significant number of people became stranded in Southeastern Europe, and mass media frequently reported scenes of violence along the Croatian-Serbian and Serbian-Hungarian borders. In February 2016, thousands of refugees were trapped at the Bulgaria-Serbia-Greece border, which *Politico* described as

20 Georgi Milkov, "Патриарх и премиер още не са се 'запознали'—тиха враждебност от лоши съвети" [The patriarch and the prime minister have not yet "met"—quiet hostility from bad advice], *24 chasa*, April 18, 2022, <https://www.24chasa.bg/novini/article/11388417>.

21 "Population and Demographic Processes in 2021," National Statistical Institute (NSI) of Bulgaria, <https://nsi.bg/en/content/19506/прессъобщение/population-and-demographic-processes-2021>.

22 Data collated from interviews with officials in the following organizations: 1. The International Organization for Migration; 2. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Representative in Bulgaria; 3. The Representation of the European Union in Bulgaria; 4. The Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria; 5. Volunteer at Caritas and Teacher, Secondary School; 6. Volunteer at Caritas and Academic, Bulgarian Academy of Science; 7. Academic 1, the Bulgarian Academy of Science; 8. Academic 2, the Bulgarian Academy of Science; 9. Academic 3, the Bulgarian Academy of Science; 10. Academic 1, the New Bulgarian University; 11. Academic 2, the New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria (February 2019).

23 Lucian N. Leustean, "Orthodox Conservatism and the Refugee Crisis in Bulgaria and Moldova," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 54, nos. 1–2 (2021): 83–101.

“Europe’s most hostile port of entry.” By 2018, two years later, 60,083 people remained stranded in Greece, while Bulgaria reported only 690 migrants living in state-run refugee centers. Conditions in these camps were dire.

On September 25, 2015, in an unprecedented gesture, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church issued an “Extraordinary Address of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church-Bulgarian Patriarchate on the Refugee Crisis” (Извънредно обръщение на Св. Синод на БПЦ-БП по повод кризата, *Izvŭnredno obrŭshtenie na Sv. Sinod na BPTS-BP po povod krizata*), becoming the first religious body to openly condemn both its own government and the European Union’s policies on migration and asylum and calling on the authorities to reject the intake of refugees.²⁴ The church’s position was based on three main arguments.

First, following the fall of communism, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church positioned itself as the sole guardian of the Bulgarian nation, often at the expense of other religious communities.²⁵ Church leaders have regularly participated in political events—a dynamic symbolized by the physical proximity of the Bulgarian Patriarchate’s headquarters to the National Assembly, just a few meters apart. Decisions regarding the refugee crisis reflected a blend of religious and political considerations. Most interviewees noted that by 2019, the number of refugees in Bulgaria was significantly lower than during the peak of the 2015 crisis, with many having already moved on toward Western Europe. Over the past four years, refugees have been consistently portrayed in a negative light by mass media. Those arriving at the border were typically escorted by police and placed in either detention centers or open reception facilities.

Initially, the refugee reception centers in Bulgaria were in poor condition, and financial support from the European Union arrived only in 2016, leading to gradual improvements. Refugees who later reached other European countries often described their stay in Bulgaria, particularly in detention centers such as those in Busmantsi (near Sofia) and Lyubimets (in the south), as akin to imprisonment. Unlike other countries along the Balkan route, Bulgaria did

24 “Извънредно обръщение на св. синод на БПЦ-БП по повод кризата с бежанците” [Extraordinary address of the Holy Synod of the BOC-BP on the refugee crisis], Bulgarian Patriarchate, November 26, 2016, <https://bg-patriarshia.bg/news/izvanredno-obrashtenie-na-sv-sinod-na-bpts-bp-po-povod-kriza>.

25 Daniela Kalkandjieva, “The Bulgarian Orthodox Church,” in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2014), 114–39; Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu, “The Orthodox Churches and Democratisation in Romania and Bulgaria,” in *Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), 263–85.

not witness large-scale movements of refugees on foot, such as the march from Budapest's train station to the Austrian border. Nor were there visible encampments in urban areas, like those seen in Belgrade's public parks; for most Bulgarians, the refugee crisis was experienced primarily through mass media. Only a few local communities, mostly near the southern border, encountered the new arrivals directly, and in some cases, local authorities even refused to register refugees. The far-right Patriotic Front—a coalition including Ataka (led by Volen Siderov), the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (led by Valerii Simeonov), and the Bulgarian National Movement (led by Krasimir Karakachanov, minister of defense)—framed the arrival of refugees as a threat to Bulgaria's religious and cultural identity. In February 2019, the coalition organized a controversial march in Sofia honoring a Nazi general, despite protests from the Jewish community. The far-right discourse capitalized on the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's portrayal of itself as the protector of the nation, reinforcing nationalist narratives and resistance to refugee integration.²⁶

Second, the refugee crisis provided the Bulgarian Orthodox Church with an opportunity to advance a conservative agenda, reinforcing its authority in society; following its 2015 public statement, the Holy Synod refrained from initiating any social programs to support refugees. The stance had a twofold impact. First, the Bulgarian government declined to sign the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (commonly known as the Istanbul Convention). Several interviewees suggested that the decision was likely influenced by pressure from the Orthodox Church, with one interviewee remarking that “the Orthodox Church is a state within a state,” while another observed, “The Bulgarian Orthodox Church is very political and close to the government. The government says something today, and the church says the same thing the following day.” Second, the presence of far-right parties in government intensified pressure on minority religious communities. A notable case was that of Catholic priest Paolo Cortese in the village of Belene, who was forced to leave the country after receiving death threats for sheltering a Syrian family that had been granted legal residence and had sought accommodation in his parish.²⁷

26 Tom Junes, “Far Right in Bulgaria is no Laughing Matter,” *Balkan Insight*, May 30, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/05/30/far-right-in-bulgaria-is-no-laughing-matter-05-30-2017/>; Angel Krasimirov, “Far-Right Activists Stage Torchlit March in Bulgarian Capital,” *Reuters*, February 16, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bulgaria-far-right-march/far-right-activists-stage-torchlit-march-in-bulgarian-capital-idUSKCN1Q50PG>.

27 “Roman Catholic Priest Who Sheltered Syrian Refugees at Belene Is Leaving Bulgaria,” *The Sofia Globe*, March 10, 2017, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2017/03/10/roman-catholic-priest-who-sheltered-syrian-refugees-at-belene-is-leaving-bulgaria/>.



Photo 3. Tourist souvenirs with traditional folk motifs and insignia of Russian president Vladimir Putin highlighting cultural affinities between the two countries, Sofia, Bulgaria, 2019. Copyright: Lucian N. Leustean.

Third, the refugee crisis highlighted the close ties between the Bulgarian and Russian Orthodox churches. Since the fall of communism, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has remained a relatively insular institution, consistently avoiding participation in international religious dialogues with Western counterparts. It has aligned itself with Russia's narrative regarding the

conflict in the Donbas region; for example, on December 15, 2015, Patriarch Neophyte sent a letter directly to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, protesting what he described as the persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate. This was an unprecedented move that defied diplomatic protocol, as religious institutions typically communicate through embassy channels rather than addressing heads of state directly. In 2016, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was one of only three churches to follow Russia's lead in boycotting the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in Crete, a historic gathering intended to unite all recognized Orthodox churches. As one interviewee noted, the close relationship between the Bulgarian and Russian churches was evident not only in the fact that many Bulgarian hierarchs were educated in Moscow but also in the absence of any public or academic criticism of Russia's actions.

The church's official condemnation of the government's migration policy did not receive unanimous support, either among the general population or within the clergy. In September 2016, Metropolitan Naum (Dimitrov) of Ruse publicly diverged from the Holy Synod's position by posting a message on his diocese's website and Facebook page, stating that "we are obliged to lend a hand to those people who need empathy and attention."²⁸ A similar stance was taken by Father Stefan Stefanov, also from the Ruse diocese, who argued in an interview that the church should be open to refugees, stating, "I'm afraid many people now think that being xenophobic is Christian. Not only is it not so, but it is also anti-Christian to be a xenophobe."²⁹ The contrast between the official church discourse and the grassroots mobilization of volunteers, particularly from Catholic and Muslim communities, highlighted growing public dissatisfaction with the Orthodox Church's stance. Interviewees reinforced the perceived disconnect between the church hierarchy and ordinary believers with statements such as "I am Orthodox, but the church does not do anything for the refugees"; "Refugees do not choose the country to live in"; "The Bulgarian Orthodox Church is like an unidentified flying object moving between scandal and scandal"; and "I am embarrassed by the position of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church." One interviewee recalled that in 2015, an Orthodox priest in a Sofia parish preached during a Sunday liturgy that people should welcome refugees. His

28 "Да бъдем човеколюбиви към нашите събратя-друговерци" [Let us be philanthropic towards our fellow believers], September 11, 2016, https://dveri.bg/component/com_content/Itemid,100723/catid,14/id,23054/view,article/.

29 "Йосиф и Мария също са били бежанци" [Joseph and Mary were also refugees], *Dveri of Orthodoxy*, June 20, 2016, <https://offnews.bg/analizi-i-komentari/josif-i-maria-sashto-sa-bili-bezhantci-631269.html>.

words, though spontaneous, surprised the congregation as they contradicted the official church position. However, despite the words of encouragement, no further action was taken by the priest or his parish. Although the Bulgarian Patriarchate did not publicize its social programs, one interviewee mentioned that two Orthodox parishes in Sofia were quietly providing free meals to people in need, possibly including refugees.

The humanitarian activism of a small number of volunteers stood in stark contrast to the public discourse promoted by intellectuals associated with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. One interviewee noted that public attitudes toward refugees were largely shaped by the church's prevailing message, summarized as follows: "The church is about the salvation of the faithful; social services are the duty of the state." The perception that the church remained distant from wider societal concerns was a recurring theme in interviews. Many participants expressed the view that the church had become detached from the realities faced by ordinary people, particularly in times of humanitarian need.

Caritas Bulgaria, the Catholic humanitarian organization, stood out among religious communities for its participation in international programs supporting refugees. According to its website, in 2018 it provided assistance to 2,747 refugees through the Saint Anna Integration Center in Sofia and the "Refugee Project," which brought together a local network of volunteers. In 2017, Caritas also published an online "Bulgarian Language Guide for Refugees," offering Level 1 translations from Arabic into Bulgarian.³⁰ The praise for Caritas's activism was not universal. One interviewee noted that although Caritas was the most active faith-based organization in the country, there were instances where it only assisted refugees after pressure from other NGOs. Caritas did not participate in any joint programs with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and the absence of interfaith programs was reflected in Bulgarian society. National surveys indicated that most people were unwilling to have refugees as neighbors, with one interviewee suggesting that the limited resources allocated by the state to refugees were part of a hidden agenda to discourage them from settling in Bulgaria.

In addition to Caritas, the local Muslim community also provided support to refugees; for example, a Syrian businessman based in Sofia was contracted by the state to supply halal food to refugees in state-run camps. According to one interviewee, refugees received assistance from the local mosque in

30 "2017 Учебно помагало по български език за бежанци" [Bulgarian language guide for refugees, 2017], Caritas Bulgaria, January 4, 2018, <https://caritas.bg/documents-2/izdania-bezhantsi/2017-balgarski-ezik-za-bezhantsi/>.

Sofia, although the support was discreet and handled on a case-by-case basis, with no public acknowledgment. The mosque's involvement became more apparent when Arabic was introduced into some of the prayers—a change that was not welcomed by all members of the congregation. In Sofia, most Muslims traditionally attend prayers conducted in Turkish or Bulgarian, and the introduction of Arabic created a sense of unease among some worshippers. Similar linguistic shifts were observed in other Bulgarian cities, such as Varna, where prayers were predominantly in Turkish rather than Bulgarian, prompting complaints from locals who said they could not understand the language.

Volunteers who worked in refugee camps reported that they did not encounter any Orthodox clergy. Instead, several Protestant pastors had visited the camps, and there were a few isolated instances of refugees being baptized in a river near the open camps. Conditions in the open camps varied, with each Syrian family accommodated in a single room, while individuals of other nationalities shared beds in larger rooms housing up to 40 people. Men were grouped together, while teenagers and children were housed separately. As a general rule, Muslim muftis were not permitted in the camps, and individuals prayed alone on prayer carpets.

While religious mobilization to support refugees has remained limited, civil society organizations have stepped in to fill the gap in both spiritual and material support, running programs such as providing free legal assistance and establishing bread-making workshops for refugees, which brought together people from different religious backgrounds. One interviewee noted that, overall, Bulgarian society has become more open to humanitarian engagement. A significant number of businesses were willing to help those in need, although many chose not to publicize their charitable efforts. For example, one interviewee recounted that following a televised appeal encouraging donations for refugees living in dire conditions, an anonymous company unexpectedly sent a truck carrying 5,000 glasses to a refugee camp near the Greek border. The interviewee emphasized that not only did the volume of donations exceed expectations, but it also demonstrated that businesses were deliberately avoiding publicity to prevent potential political backlash. Another interviewee expressed surprise at the European Union's lack of a more active stance against the political instrumentalization of the Orthodox church and the use of nationalistic religious rhetoric.

Two issues were consistently raised in most interviews, namely, the lack of transparency in church finances and the church's nationalistic rhetoric. Transparency, or the absence of it, has become a major topic in public debate, particularly in light of repeated calls for the state to fund the restoration

of Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia. The cathedral, which was confiscated during the communist period and returned to the church after 1990, was expected to be maintained by the church itself. The church was perceived as possessing significant assets, including property and land both in Bulgaria and abroad; however, its financial resources remained largely opaque. In addition, the church has requested that the state cover clergy salaries, fueling further concerns about financial accountability. Another point of contention was the government's failure to initiate a public discussion on the "Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration," which some interviewees interpreted as a result of pressure from the Orthodox church.

Overall, the response of the Orthodox church toward displaced populations followed a similar pattern to the limited material support from state authorities. In 2018, Bulgaria operated two detention centers, and refugees were provided only with food and accommodation and received a monthly allowance of 20 lev (approximately 10 euros). Upon leaving the detention centers, refugees were given just 14 days to find employment, secure housing, and provide for themselves. After this period, the state offered no further assistance, leaving only nongovernmental organizations to support those in need, with the lack of public engagement raising concerns among international organizations. One interviewee claimed that, unofficially, it was highly likely that around 18,000 migrants were still living in Bulgaria in 2019. The figure represented the discrepancy between those who had arrived and those who had officially left the country since the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011. The absence of reliable data was also reflected in the behavior of officials at the Bulgarian-Turkish border; according to one interviewee, over 70 cases of violence against refugees occurred in 2018, and when confronted with evidence, authorities reportedly denied any wrongdoing.

Moldova: Orthodox Churches between Romanian Nationalism and Russian Geopolitics

The Republic of Moldova declared independence in August 1991. For the past two centuries, the region, historically known as Bessarabia, has stood at the crossroads of Romanian nation-building and Russian expansion in Eastern Europe. The 1812 Treaty of Bucharest, which ended the war between the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire, resulted in Bessarabia being separated from the Principality of Moldavia and placed under Russian

control. Meanwhile, the western part of Moldavia followed a different national trajectory, uniting with Wallachia in 1866 to form the foundation of modern Romania. In 1918, Bessarabia and other predominantly Romanian-speaking territories united into Greater Romania—a political union that lasted until 1940, when Soviet forces reoccupied the region. During the Second World War, Romania briefly regained control of Bessarabia; however, in 1944, the territory was again incorporated into the Soviet Union.

Territorial exchanges between the Principality of Moldavia, the Russian Empire, Greater Romania, and the Soviet Union have significantly shaped Moldova's ethnic and religious composition. According to the 2014 census, the country had a population of 2,804,801, with 54.6 percent identifying Moldovan as their primary language, 24 percent Romanian, 14.5 percent Russian, 2.7 percent Ukrainian, 2.7 percent Gagauz, and 1.7 percent Bulgarian.³¹ The 2024 census recorded a decrease to 2,401,200 people, with one-third of the population residing in the capital, Chișinău. The census also revealed that 15.6 percent of Moldova's population held dual citizenship—an increase from 5.6 percent in 2014. Most significantly, 77.2 percent identified as Moldovan, 7.9 percent Romanian, 4.9 percent Ukrainian, 4.2 percent Gagauz, 3.2 percent Russian, 1.6 percent Bulgarian, and 0.4 percent Roma.³² The promotion of either the Moldovan or Romanian language has been a persistent point of political contention throughout the first two decades following independence, reflecting deeper questions of national identity and geopolitical orientation. In a landmark decision in March 2023, the Moldovan Parliament officially recognized Romanian as the country's official language.³³ Linguistic disputes have also influenced Moldova's religious composition and ecclesiastical structures. The country is predominantly Orthodox, with 96.8 percent of the population identifying as Orthodox Christians according to the 2014 census. Other religious affiliations included 1 percent Catholic, 1 percent Baptist, 0.7 percent Jehovah's Witnesses, 0.4 percent Pentecostal, 0.3 percent Seventh-day Adventist, and 0.2 percent agnostic,

31 "The Population of the Republic of Moldova at the Time of the Census Was 2,998,235," National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, March 31, 2017, https://statistica.gov.md/en/the-population-of-the-republic-of-moldova-at-the-time-12_896.html.

32 "Rezultatele preliminare ale Recensământului Populației și Locuințelor 2024" [Preliminary results of the 2024 Population and Housing Census], National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, January 30, 2025, https://statistica.gov.md/ro/rezultatele-preliminare-ale-recensamantului-populatiei-si-locuintelor-2024-10077_61626.html.

33 "Moldovan Parliament Approves Final Reading of Romanian Language Bill," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 17, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-parliament-approves-final-reading-romanian-language-bill/32321571.html>.

while 6.9 percent of respondents did not declare any religious affiliation. In 2024, the figures remained largely unchanged, with 95 percent of the population identifying as Orthodox.

In January 1991, the Moscow Patriarchate officially recognized the Metropolitanate of Chișinău and All Moldova; in response, the Bucharest Patriarchate reestablished the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia in December 1992, drawing on its interwar ecclesiastical structure—an autonomous body that retained the use of the Julian calendar.³⁴ The two Orthodox jurisdictions became aligned with opposing political factions, pro-Russian and pro-Romanian. The Metropolitanate of Bessarabia positioned itself as a defender of Moldova's national identity, while both churches became entangled in political debates over whether Moldovans and Romanians constitute one or two distinct ethnic communities.³⁵ The debates often reflected competing visions of Moldova's future, either as an independent state aligned with Russia or as culturally and politically integrated with Romania.³⁶

In July 1989, the Russian Orthodox Church appointed Vladimir (Cantarean), an ethnic Romanian born in Ukrainian Bukovina, as bishop of Moldova. In 1990, two additional Romanian-speaking bishops, Petru (Păduraru) and Vichente (Moraru), were also appointed. Following the 1992 civil war between Chișinău and the self-proclaimed Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria), 52 Members of Parliament appealed to both the Bucharest and Moscow patriarchates to “recreate the church unity of the Romanian people.”³⁷ Metropolitan Vladimir (Cantarean) condemned the initiative, accusing political elites of pursuing Romanianization policies. In contrast, Bishop Petru (Păduraru) opposed Vladimir's stance and was subsequently defrocked. Later that year, together with ten priests, he reestablished the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The move was met with strong opposition. The Russian Orthodox Church denounced the reinstatement and called for a pan-Orthodox council to condemn the decision. The Serbian Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate

34 Mircea Păcurariu, *Geschichte der Rumänischen Orthodoxen Kirche* (Erlangen: Lehrstuhl für Geschichte und Theologie des Christlichen Ostens, 1994).

35 Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu, *Religion and Politics in Post-Communist Romania* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

36 Monica Heintz, “Tolerance, Conformity, and Moral Relativism: Cases from Moldova,” in *The Postsocialist Religious Question: Faith and Power in Central Asia and East-Central Europe*, ed. Chris Hann and the “Civil Religion” Group (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), 193–212.

37 Patriarhia Română, ed., *Adevărul despre Mitropolia Basarabiei* [The Truth about the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia] (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1993), 22.

of Jerusalem also voiced their disapproval, further highlighting the geopolitical and ecclesiastical tensions surrounding the issue.³⁸

The argument that Bucharest was merely continuing its interwar ecclesiastical structure, rather than establishing a new jurisdiction outside canon law, ultimately prevailed; in 1993, the Ecumenical Patriarchate recognized the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia as an integral part of the Romanian Orthodox Church.³⁹ The decision was also influenced by a religious precedent in Estonia, where two Orthodox jurisdictions coexisted—one under the Moscow Patriarchate and another claiming autonomy within the Orthodox communion. The Ecumenical Patriarchate had originally recognized the autonomous Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church in 1922, which administered the faithful until the Soviet occupation. In 1944, the Estonian senior clergy went into exile in Sweden and contested the incorporation of the Estonian church into the Russian Orthodox Church. By the end of the communist period, two parallel churches existed: one asserting continuity with the interwar autonomy granted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the other aligned with the Moscow Patriarchate. In 1993, the Estonian church in exile registered as a legal entity and, in 1996, received official recognition as the legitimate successor to the interwar autonomous Estonian church.

The Moldovan case closely mirrored the ecclesiastical competition in Estonia, with two rival Orthodox churches each claiming to be the true guardian of national identity and statehood. In Moldova, the pro-Russian communist authorities sought to curtail the influence of the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia by limiting its ability to communicate with the faithful. In 1991, the state had reestablished the Faculty of Theology in Chișinău and the Theological Seminary at Căpriana (later relocated to Noul Neamț Monastery) to train future clergy. Following the emergence of the pro-Romanian Metropolitanate of Bessarabia in 1993, the government replaced the faculty with a pro-Russian Theological Academy, placed directly under the control of the Metropolitanate of Chișinău and All Moldova. In June 1993, Metropolitan Vladimir sent letters to Prime Minister Andrei Sangheli and Interior Minister Constantin Antoci, urging them to initiate criminal proceedings against the clergy of the newly established Bessarabian structure. Tensions escalated in September 1993, when the Bessarabian church opened

38 Patriarhia Română, ed., *Adevărul despre Mitropolia Basarabiei* [The Truth about the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia], 59.

39 Dumitru Cotelea, "Relațiile inter-confesionale în Republica Moldova. Câteva aspecte de geo-teologie aplicată" [Inter-confessional relations in the Republic of Moldova: Aspects of applied geo-theology], *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai—Theologia Orthodoxa* 2 (2010): 269–78.

the Veverița Monastery in Ungheni, which was subsequently vandalized by pro-metropolitanate clergy and believers. Religious tensions and sporadic violence persisted throughout the decade—a period marked by political instability and the rule of eleven successive communist governments between 1989 and 2002.

The Metropolitanate of Bessarabia received official accreditation only under international pressure, following a case brought before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) on December 13, 2001.⁴⁰ The ECHR acknowledged that the Republic of Moldova was a democratic and multireligious state that professed to uphold freedom of religion and belief. According to Section 1 of the Religious Denominations Act, published in the *Official Gazette* no. 3/70 of 1992, “The State shall guarantee freedom of conscience and freedom of religion within Moldovan territory. Everyone shall have the right to manifest his belief freely, either alone or in community with others, to propagate his belief and to worship in public or in private, on condition that such worship is not contrary to the Constitution, the present Act or the legislation in force.” The active resistance by both religious and state authorities to the recognition of the Bessarabian church was found to be in clear violation of Article 9 of the ECHR, which stated that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching practice and observance.”⁴¹

The ECHR's ruling did not result in a fundamental shift in religion-state relations in Moldova, and in the following decade, communist-led governments continued to favor the Moldovan Metropolitanate. In 2009, President Vladimir Voronin openly stated that the Ministry of Justice should not recognize Bessarabian parishes and that the government had a duty to annul the pro-Romanian Church. Despite his opposition, in October 2007, the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia reorganized itself into four ecclesiastical entities modeled after the interwar Romanian religious structure, namely, the Archbishopric of Chișinău, the Bishopric of Bălți, the Bishopric of Southern Bessarabia, and the Bishopric of Dubăsari and All Transnistria. Tensions between the two Orthodox jurisdictions persisted, particularly over church property and the recognition of new parishes. By 2010, the Bessarabian

40 *Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia and Others v. Moldova*, no. 45701/99, European Court of Human Rights (First Section), judgment of December 13, 2001.

41 *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, Rome, November 4, 1950, https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG.

Metropolitanate had grown significantly, accounting for nearly one-fourth of all religious entities in the Republic of Moldova, alongside the establishment of new communities in the Moldovan diaspora.

In 2009, the Alliance for European Integration, a coalition of anti-communist parties, won the national elections, and Vlad Filat, founder of the Liberal Democratic Party, became prime minister. In response to the political shift, the Communist Party sought to reassert its influence by leveraging Moldova's historically close ties with Russia. In May 2010, Valeriu Pasat, former minister of defense and the first director of the Security and Information Service, in collaboration with Metropolitan Vladimir, proposed introducing a compulsory school subject titled "The Basics of Orthodoxy." Pasat went further, suggesting that Metropolitan Vladimir should be elected president and arguing that Moldova's future was inseparably linked not only to Orthodox education but also to strengthening economic ties with former Soviet states through the Eurasian Customs Union. Prime Minister Filat rejected the proposal, opting instead for a more inclusive and optional course titled "Religion." In a sign of close relations between Moscow and Chișinău, in August 2010, Patriarch Kirill received Metropolitan Vladimir and other Moldovan hierarchs, namely, Bishop Savva (Volkov) of Tiraspol and Dubăsari; Bishop Anatolie (Botnari) of Cahul and Comrat; Bishop Petru (Musteață) of Hîncești; and Bishop Marchel (Mihăescu) of Bălți and Fălești. During the meeting, Patriarch Kirill emphasized that Moldova was an integral part of Holy Rus'—a concept with both spiritual and political implications—and in support of his arguments, Patriarch Kirill pointed out that

When we pray together with our brothers and sisters from Moldova, we do not feel any difference—we are one people before God. This community of values and community of spiritual orientation forms our spiritual unity, which transcends all political boundaries; and no political parties that threaten to break us can break this unity. We pray today for Moldova, for the prosperity of the Moldovan people, that the political orientation of Moldova will contribute to the preservation of the unity of Holy Rus.⁴²

In October 2011, one year after his initial visit, Patriarch Kirill returned to Chișinău for a pastoral visit. During his stay, he met with both government and opposition officials and conferred only one religious distinction—the

42 "Святейший Патриарх Кирилл: Молдова—неотъемлемая часть Святой Руси [His Holiness Patriarch Kirill: Moldova is an integral part of Holy Rus'], Moscow Patriarchate, August 21, 2010, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/1254808.html>.

Order of Saint Prince Daniel of Moscow—awarded to former president Vladimir Voronin, leader of the Communist Party in the Moldovan Parliament. The visit also marked the launch of the Romanian-language version of the Moscow Patriarchate's official website, ensuring that all decisions and news were translated into the predominant language spoken in Moldova. The move was regarded as a strategic effort to increase the patriarchate's influence among Romanian-speaking Orthodox believers. Offering religious distinctions to political leaders was a tactic used not only by Patriarch Kirill but also by Metropolitan Vladimir (Cantarean) and Bishop Savva (Volkov) of Tiraspol and Dubăsari, who legitimized pro-Russian authorities in the internationally unrecognized Transnistrian territory during Igor Smirnov's presidential terms between 1991 and 2011.

Metropolitan Vladimir positioned himself as a staunch defender of the Moldovan Orthodox Church's alignment with Moscow; as a member of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church since 2000, he consistently linked the church's fate to Russian ecclesiastical authority. He was also a controversial figure, known for exerting pressure on political leaders who supported a multifaith environment in Moldova. In 2009, he publicly protested the decision of the Chişinău mayor to authorize a concert organized by Adventist Christians in the city center, and in 2011, he condemned proposed changes to religious legislation introduced by the liberal government, which ultimately led to the legal recognition of the Islamic League. These actions underscored his resistance to religious pluralism and his commitment to preserving Orthodoxy's dominant role in Moldovan public life.

Religion and the Refugee Crisis

As in Bulgaria, debates over the status of refugees and displaced persons have challenged the Orthodox church's central role in shaping religion-state relations. Since the fall of communism, Moldova's two competing Orthodox jurisdictions—the Metropolitanate of Chişinău and All Moldova and the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia—have developed distinct narratives on migration, reflecting their alignments with either Romanian nationalism or Russian geopolitical interests.⁴³ In particular, political parties have framed the prospect of unification with Romania as an inevitable consequence

43 Davide N. Carnevale, "A Context-Grounded Approach to Religious Freedom: The Case of Orthodoxy in the Moldovan Republic," *Religions* 10, no. 5 (2019): 3–18; Tiberiu C. Popescu, "L'Église moldave entre les patriarchats de Moscou, Constantinople et Bucarest," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 35 (2004): 191–98; Lucian Turcescu and Lavinia Stan, "Church-State Conflict in Moldova: The Bessarabian Metropolitanate," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 36, no. 4 (2003): 443–65.

of Moldova's pro-European Union orientation. Two decades after gaining independence, Moldova's foreign policy has remained entangled not only in its allegiances to Romania or Russia but also in questions of national sovereignty, given that more than half of the members of Parliament reportedly held Romanian passports. The discourse of the Orthodox churches has become increasingly politicized, and clergy have frequently issued public statements in support of political authorities, aligning themselves with either pro-Russian or pro-Western factions, reinforcing the intersection of religion, identity, and geopolitics in Moldova's public life.⁴⁴

As a general rule, both Orthodox churches in Moldova have shown limited social engagement with displaced populations, whether those arriving from other former Soviet states following the Transnistrian conflict in the 1990s or during the 2015 European refugee crisis.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, both churches have developed nascent humanitarian structures. The Moldovan Metropolitanate has maintained ties with its Russian benefactors and has regularly benefited from state financial support. In contrast, the Bessarabian Metropolitanate has implemented social aid and community services through the "Diaconia Social Mission" and the "Filantropia Federation" of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Following the 2013 visa liberalization agreement with the European Union, the Moldovan government, in collaboration with international organizations, launched initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between emigrants and their home communities. In 2018, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) introduced a participatory model that engaged members of the diaspora in determining which local communities should receive financial support through the creation of hometown associations. The associations developed 55 local development projects, including initiatives such as street lighting, park construction, and waste management; in several

44 Eduard Țugui, *Policy Brief: Geopolitica Ortodoxiei și Relația Stat-Biserică în Republica Moldova* [The Geopolitics of Orthodoxy and Church-State Relationship in the Republic of Moldova], Policy Brief no. 6 (Chișinău: IDIS "Viitorul," 2012), <http://www.viitorul.org/files/Policy%20Brief6%20Cult.pdf>; Ovidiu Voicu, Jennifer Cash, and Victoria Cojocariu, *Biserică și Stat în Republica Moldova* [Church and State in the Republic of Moldova] (Chișinău: Fundația Soros-Moldova, 2015), https://www.soros.md/files/publications/documents/Studiu_Biserica%20si%20Stat%20in%20RM.pdf.

45 Data collated from interviews with officials from the following organizations: 1. the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Bessarabia; 2. Caritas Moldova; 3. The Islamic League of the Republic of Moldova Official 1; 4. The Islamic League of the Republic of Moldova Official 2; 5. The Migration and Local Development Project, the United Nations Development Programme in Moldova; 6. The Institute for Policy and European Reforms; 7. Member of Parliament; 8. The Foreign Affairs Board, Action and Solidarity Political Party; 9. Journalist, National Television; 10. Academic 1, State University of Moldova; 11. Academic 2, State University of Moldova (February 2019).



Photo 4. A street in Chișinău, Republic of Moldova, 2019. One-quarter of the population had emigrated abroad. The graffiti reads: "Moldova is Switzerland. Yes, Bro." Copyright: Lucian N. Leustean.

cases, Orthodox clergy became active members, working directly with local institutions. The involvement was welcomed by the diaspora, who viewed the clergy as trusted and authoritative figures within their home communities.

The mobilization of Moldovans living in Western Europe became increasingly important to the state, not only for the substantial financial remittances sent back home but also for electoral purposes. The diaspora was viewed by political authorities as a valuable voting bloc, with religious communities playing a direct role in supporting specific candidates. During the national elections in February 2019, polling stations were set up near Baptist churches in the United States to encourage believers to vote for Valeriu Ghilețchi, a former leader of the Baptist church in Moldova.⁴⁶ Similarly, Orthodox communities in Italy, home to one of the largest Moldovan diasporas and

46 "Drumul crucii în alegeri? Majoritatea secțiilor de votare din SUA sunt în apropierea bisericilor baptiste: Care este legătura cu candidatul Valeriu Ghilețchi" [Stations of the Cross in elections? Most polling booths in the USA were near Baptist churches: What is the connection with candidate Valeriu Ghilețchi], *Agora*, February 8, 2019, <https://agora.md/stiri/54268/drumul-crucii-in-alegeri-majoritatea-sectiilor-de-votare-din-sua-sunt-in-apropierea-bisericilor-or-baptiste--care-este-legatura-cu-candidatul-valeriu-ghileitchi-foto>.

largely under the jurisdiction of the Moldovan Metropolitanate, tended to support pro-Russian candidates.

Orthodox churches exerted influence not only abroad but also within the disputed territory of Transnistria. The Moldovan Metropolitanate remained the predominant religious authority in the region, while the Bessarabian Metropolitanate established a diocese in name only—the Bishopric of Dubăsari and All Transnistria—without appointing a hierarch. According to an interviewee, to avoid tensions, Catholic parishes in Transnistria were administered partly by Moldovan or Romanian clergy and partly by Polish clergy. As in other countries in the region, the Catholic Church, though a minority, was among the most active religious communities in addressing social issues. In the early years following the 2011 Syrian crisis and the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, Moldova did not experience a significant influx of refugees. In 2018, an interviewee noted that only a single Syrian refugee was known, who had opened a restaurant, and three families from Donbas had arrived in Chişinău. Although the exact figures were disputed, it was estimated that around 500 refugees from Donbas were living in Chişinău that year. Many remained unreported, partly because the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate had its own church premises in the capital; and as both Ukrainians and Moldovans fell under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, they were able to attend services in either church without distinction.

Moldova has long been a destination for migration, particularly during the Soviet era, when students from the Middle East came to study in Chişinău. Many of them remained, and a significant Muslim population continued to reside near the University of Medicine. In the 1980s, demographic shifts were also marked by the emigration of a large portion of the Jewish population to Israel; however, after the 1990s, many Israelis began returning to Moldova or visiting frequently, offering active support and launching social programs for the local Jewish community. Although small in number, the Jewish community became one of the most visible in the public sphere, particularly through its charitable work and social initiatives. In contrast, the Orthodox churches, despite their wealth and close association with political power, were often perceived as disengaged from social issues. A notable example was Bishop Dorimedont (Cecan) of Edineţ and Briceni, a member of the Moldovan Metropolitanate, who reestablished the New Neamţ Monastery in Chiţcani during the 1990s. Locals observed that while the bishop's residence and the monastery were lavishly refurbished, with “expensive cars and foreign delegations” making frequent visits, the surrounding parish and community remained impoverished. The monastery came to symbolize

the contradictions of post-communist Moldova, and the case drew national attention when Bishop Dorimedont died in a car crash.⁴⁷

While the Moldovan Metropolitanate maintained a regular presence in mass media, the Bessarabian Church remained largely silent. The lack of public visibility was likely influenced by the meeting between the Romanian and Russian patriarchs in Bucharest in October 2017, which may have encouraged a more cautious approach from the Bessarabian side. In contrast, the Moldovan Metropolitanate was perceived as internally divided, particularly due to tensions between two of its leading hierarchs—Metropolitan Vladimir (Cantarean) of Chișinău and Bishop Marchel (Mihăescu) of Bălți and Făleşti, who was widely seen as Vladimir's potential successor. Metropolitan Vladimir enjoyed police protection and various state privileges, and in a manner comparable to other officials, he required formal permission from state authorities to travel to Transnistria, underscoring the complex interplay between church leadership and state control.

Tensions between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria were regularly amplified by Russian media. Although the Moldovan Parliament passed a law in 2018 to restrict Russian propaganda channels, narratives surrounding the European refugee crisis continued to portray Muslim migration as an imminent threat to national identity. When the government officially recognized the Islamic League in 2011, the Moldovan Metropolitanate organized protests in four cities: Chișinău, Bălți, Ungheni, and Cahul. Metropolitan Vladimir denounced the legislation as “a humiliation” for the country, while demonstrators chanted slogans such as “Moldova—Orthodox Country” and “The Church is the Mother of Our People.”⁴⁸ Efforts by the Islamic League to build a mosque were met with persistent obstruction from local authorities, who cited reasons ranging from a lack of suitable land in Chișinău to protests by nationalist Orthodox associations such as Saint Virgin “Mother Matrona” and “Pro-Orthodoxy.” When the Muslim community eventually secured a place of worship, the building was registered not as a mosque but as “an entertainment facility”; it was located on the outskirts of Chișinău and prohibited from displaying any visible religious symbols. In sermons, Orthodox clergy invoked historical narratives, encouraging the faithful to

47 “În memoria Episcopului Dorimedont (Cecan)—cel care a aprins în multe inimi focul credinței” [In Memory of Bishop Dorimedont (Cecan)—the One Who Lit the Fire of Faith in Many Hearts], *Moldova Ortodoxă*, February 12, 2018, <https://ortodox.md/in-memoria-episcopului-dorimedont-cecan-cel-care-a-aprins-in-multe-inimi-focul-credintei/>.

48 Mircea Ticudean, “Conservatives Angered By Moldova’s Recognition Of Muslims,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 17, 2011, https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova_recognition_of_muslims_angers_conservatives/24177283.html.

emulate Saint Stephen the Great, who ruled medieval Moldova and built churches after each battle with the Ottoman Empire, and the nationalist rhetoric contributed to a climate of fear among the Muslim community. Women were reportedly afraid to wear the hijab in public, and incidents of physical violence were documented. In one case, a Muslim man was forcibly removed from public transport due to his skin color; in another, a family changing a flat tire was threatened at gunpoint by a passerby who demanded they leave the country.

Direct confrontation extended beyond the Muslim community to other minority groups. In 2009 and 2010, nationalist Orthodox associations, supported by clergy, staged demonstrations in Chișinău against the public display of a menorah during the Hanukkah festival. In one instance, protesters forcibly replaced the menorah with a cross, while Father Anatol Cibric, who led the demonstration, declared, "We are an Orthodox country. Stephen the Great defended our country from all kinds of kikes, and now they come and put their menorah here. This is anarchy."⁴⁹ State authorities failed to respond until the Moldovan delegation visiting Washington, DC, was denied meetings with American counterparts. The incident underscored the ability of the Moldovan Metropolitanate to mobilize groups capable of violent action; similar to protests against the LGBT community in Georgia, Moldovan clergy regularly opposed planned marches and public expressions of non-Orthodox values. In 2013, when Parliament debated legislation concerning LGBT rights, the Moldovan Metropolitanate organized protests. However, the demonstrations were not widespread and, as one interviewee suggested, reportedly ceased after state authorities offered the church hierarchy an expensive new car and a substantial financial incentive.

Close ties between church hierarchs and political leaders have been a consistent feature of Moldovan society. In 2019, just days before the national elections, Vlad Plahotniuc—leader of the Democratic Party of Moldova and a key figure in government—attended Old Style Christmas services at Curchi Monastery, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate. During the service, Bishop Siluan (Șalari) of Orhei praised Plahotniuc as a model worthy of emulation.⁵⁰ To avoid direct confrontation, President Igor Dodon, leader of the Socialist Party, chose to attend religious services

49 Elana Kirsh, "Priest Leads Attack on Moldova Menorah," *Jerusalem Post*, December 14, 2009, <https://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Priest-leads-attack-on-Moldova-menorah>.

50 Mădălin Necșuțu, "Politica și biserica își dau mâna în alegerile din Moldova" [Politics and church go hand in hand in Moldova], *Sinopsis*, January 24, 2019, <http://sinopsis.info.ro/2019/01/24/politica-si-biserica-isi-dau-mana-in-alegerile-din-moldova/>.

with Metropolitan Vladimir (Cantarean) of the Moldovan Metropolitanate. The political rivalry between Plahotniuc and Dodon also had religious implications. In autumn 2018, Plahotniuc reportedly blocked a planned visit by Patriarch Kirill to Chişinău, fearing it would bolster Dodon's electoral support. Bishop Siluan was also regarded as having close ties with another controversial political figure, Ilan Şor, the mayor of Orhei. Şor founded the Republican Socio-Political Movement "Equality" (commonly known as the Şor Party), which gained popularity by offering subsidized bread and daily necessities through a network of shops he personally financed.

Most interviewees expressed concern regarding the instrumentalization of the church in electoral politics and described oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc as the *de facto* ruler of Moldova. He was widely perceived as having the power to bribe deputies and officials, building a political network that appeased both pro-Russian and pro-Western factions. Plahotniuc portrayed Moldova as a unique case within the former Soviet Union, claiming that his leadership was the only safeguard against Russian occupation. In 2018, when Andrei Năstase, founder of the Dignity and Truth Platform Party, was elected mayor of Chişinău, Plahotniuc's party intervened to annul the election results, claiming that Facebook posts originating from Romania had allegedly influenced and rigged the vote.⁵¹

Most interviewees believed that President Igor Dodon was not personally religious, yet he frequently leveraged religious symbolism for electoral gain. Alongside his inner circle of politicians and businessmen—primarily from the Socialist Party—Dodon made regular pilgrimages to Mount Athos, often carrying the flag of Saint Stephen the Great to project a national image as a defender of the Orthodox faith. He also maintained close ties with Patriarch Kirill, making frequent visits to the Moscow Patriarchate. Moldovan media often joked that Dodon seemed ready to relocate to Moscow, highlighting that his repeated trips to Russia were seen as a reflection of his lack of acceptance by Western European leaders. Within Moldova, President Vladimir Putin was widely regarded as one of the most trusted political figures, and Dodon appeared to seek an "image transfer" by aligning himself with both Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church.

The most controversial intersection of religion and politics in Moldova occurred during the 2016 presidential elections, when both Orthodox churches became actively involved in supporting opposing candidates. The

51 Armand Goşu, "Invalidating the Rightfully Elected Mayor of Chişinău Threatens the Regime of Oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc," *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 18, no. 2 (2018): 293–314.

Moldovan Metropolitanate backed the pro-Moscow candidate Igor Dodon, while the Bessarabian Metropolitanate leaned toward the pro-Western candidate Maia Sandu, leader of the Party of Action and Solidarity. After Sandu received public support from German Chancellor Angela Merkel during a brief meeting at the European People's Party summit on October 20, 2016, in Maastricht, the Netherlands, fake news began circulating in media outlets controlled by Dodon and oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, claiming that Sandu had agreed to accept 30,000 Syrian refugees if elected president. The disinformation campaign was accompanied by a wave of xenophobic rhetoric from the Moldovan Metropolitanate. Bishop Marchel (Mihăescu) of Bălți and Fălești publicly attacked Sandu, declaring that she was not a true Christian because she did not have children. Meanwhile, Dodon was regularly praised by the church, and his campaign materials featured references to Saint Stephen the Great, reinforcing his image as a defender of Orthodox values. The smear campaign had a measurable impact. Dodon won the election with 52.11 percent of the vote. According to several interviewees, Bishop Marchel and clergy in his diocese were directly involved in mobilizing voters, organizing buses, and touring parishes to discourage support for Sandu. In December 2016, Sandu filed a petition with the Constitutional Court, contesting the election results and citing numerous irregularities, including the direct involvement of the Orthodox church.⁵² The petition was ultimately rejected.

In June 2019, political tensions in Moldova escalated when the rival parties failed to form a government, ultimately leading to the removal of Vladimir Plahotniuc from power through a temporary alliance between Maia Sandu and Igor Dodon. Sandu assumed the role of prime minister—a position she held until November 2019, when her government was dismissed following a vote of no confidence. Public dissatisfaction with the leadership of both Plahotniuc and Dodon, combined with growing support for Sandu's pro-European reform agenda, played a crucial role in shifting public sentiment, which became instrumental in her victory in the December 2020 presidential elections, marking a significant turning point in Moldova's political landscape.

After Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, Sandu's presidency marked a significant shift in Moldova's political orientation, culminating in the country receiving European Union candidate status in June 2022. Moldova's deepening ties with the EU, alongside Russia's military invasion

52 Curtea Constituțională, *Hotărîre no 34 din 13.12.2016* [Decision no 34 from December 13, 2016], <https://www.constcourt.md/ccdocview.php?l=ro&tip=hotariri&docid=602>.

of Ukraine, reverberated through the Orthodox church, intensifying the divide between the Moscow and Bucharest jurisdictions. In November 2023, clergy from 30 parishes sent a letter to Metropolitan Vladimir, requesting that the Moldovan Metropolitanate be placed under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church, increasing tensions between the two Orthodox bodies. The Moldovan Metropolitanate claimed to oversee 1,300 parishes, while the Bessarabian Metropolitanate reported having 300. Moldovan clergy drew parallels with Ukraine's ecclesiastical realignment, asserting that since the war began, 50 priests had joined the Bessarabian Metropolitanate, with more expected to follow. In contrast, the Moldovan Metropolitanate insisted that only 15 priests had defected. Uncertainty over the future of religious jurisdiction was compounded by internal doubts about Metropolitan Vladimir's intentions—particularly as he was born in Chernivtsi, Ukraine, to a Romanian-Ukrainian family—and due to the fact that many Moldovan clergy held Romanian passports. Many clergy expressed concern over Patriarch Kirill's rhetoric, which incorporated Moldova into the "Russian world." Furthermore, financial factors complicated ecclesiastical loyalties as clergy under the Bessarabian Metropolitanate received monthly salaries of 250 euros, along with medical insurance and pensions funded by the Romanian Orthodox Church. In contrast, clergy under the Moldovan Metropolitanate were required to pay around 48 dollars per month to the ecclesiastical center and to cover the costs of visits from senior clergy from Moscow.⁵³

Adding to the confusion among the clergy was the publication of a confidential letter sent by Metropolitan Vladimir to Patriarch Kirill in September 2023, which described the perception of the Moldovan clergy of Russia's military advance. The existence of Vladimir's letter was first revealed in an online post by Sergei Chapnin, a senior fellow at the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University in New York and a former deputy editor-in-chief of the Moscow Patriarchate, and a week later, the letter was published online by *Ziarul de Gardă* [The Guard Newspaper]. In his letter, Vladimir complained that relations between Moscow and Chișinău had been severely affected by the war in Ukraine as follows:

How can we maintain close relations with the Russian Orthodox Church when the geographical link is almost destroyed, when we can no longer

53 Paula Erizanu, "A Church Divided: Russia's War against Ukraine Fuels Tensions in Moldova's Main Orthodox Church," *Meduza*, March 8, 2024, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/03/08/a-church-divided>.

purchase church objects made in the Russian Federation, because there are almost no trade routes between our countries? What should we do in the context of the increasingly evident consolidation of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the Republic of Moldova and what should we do when the Russian Orthodox Church, which considers itself our Mother, behaves towards us, in our opinion—to put it delicately—disrespectfully?⁵⁴

Vladimir's words resonated with the Moldovan clergy, most of whom had ceased mentioning Kirill in their prayers. The church began to operate as an independent institution while still maintaining ecclesiastical ties to Moscow. Vladimir remained critical of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and although he supported pastoral support to Ukrainian refugees in the country, he continued to affirm the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church, acting in a comparable manner to the senior clergy leading the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate.

54 "Behind-the-Scenes Revelations from the Orthodox Church: The Metropolitanate of Moldova Confirms the Authenticity of the Letter Addressed to Patriarch Kiril of Moscow by His Eminence Vladimir: 'We Are in a Situation of Institutional Bankruptcy,'" *Ziarul de Gardă*, October 21, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/en/behind-the-scenes-revelations-from-the-orthodox-church-the-metropolitanate-of-moldova-confirms-the-authenticity-of-the-letter-addressed-to-patriarch-kiril-of-moscow-by-his-eminence-vladimir-we-are/>.

6. Religious Mobilization, Ethnic Identity, and Forced Displacement in Georgia and Armenia

Abstract: The chapter investigates religious mobilization and ethnic identity in shaping Georgian and Armenian politics and civil society. It provides examples of state failure and religious failure in relation to forcibly displaced populations after the post-1994 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. Despite the exceptionally high number of people declaring themselves religious in both countries, Catholic minorities have been more active in supporting forcibly displaced populations than their Orthodox and Oriental counterparts.

Keywords: Georgia; Armenia; Orthodox and Oriental Churches; Catholic Church; Forced Displacement; Ethnic Identity

The religious and political interplay between Armenia and Georgia goes back to the Kingdom of Iberia in the fourth century, when the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch held jurisdiction over the region and appointed the clergy. At the end of the fifth century, the archbishop was raised to the rank of catholicos in a sign of increasing prestige and ecclesiastical significance. The exact date of the independence (autocephaly) of the Georgian Orthodox Church remains disputed, with various sources claiming it took place either in 467; during the reign of Emperor Zeno (474–494), in 484; or even only later during Arab rule, with Melchizedek I (1010–1033) as the first catholicos-patriarch. The adoption of the Georgian alphabet was linked to

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the conversion of the local population to Christianity in the fifth century and has remained a mark of ethnic identity.¹

A major division between the Armenian and Georgian churches took place after the Council of Chalcedon (451) when the interpretation of the relationship between the human and divine natures of Christ divided Christian communities. The council debated whether Christ had two natures, human and divine, and if these natures should be seen as separate, as claimed by Nestorianism, or as only divine, as claimed by Monophysitism. The council rejected both interpretations and stated that the hypostatic union of the human and the divine natures in Christ was “united with neither confusion nor division.” The Oriental branch of Christianity, to which the Armenian Apostolic Church belongs, condemned this view by emphasizing that Christ was human and divine in “one nature” (Miaphysitism). The division between the Oriental and Orthodox branches of Christianity took an ethnic and religious identity shape, with communities emerging on the fringes of the Roman Empire.

The Georgian Church placed strong emphasis on Christian mythology and claimed that its territory had a unique position in ecclesiological terms, as the land was directly protected by the Virgin Mary and that Saint Andrew, one of Jesus’s apostles, had traveled there and converted the local population. In the church mythological narrative, on the day of Pentecost, when the apostles mapped their future conversion trips, Mary drew Georgia’s lot. When Jesus told his mother that she would die soon, she instructed Saint Andrew to convert the inhabitants of the Georgian lands. Thus, the Georgians not only were converted by one of the apostles but also held a unique place in connecting their ethnicity directly with Christ through the Virgin Mary and Saint Andrew, inhabiting a mythical land which linked the sacred and the profane: the “Lot of the Theotokos.”²

The Third Council of Dvin in 607 confirmed the separation between the Armenian and Georgian communities, with their churches following distinctive ecclesiastical and political trajectories. The Georgians looked back to the period between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries as the golden age, with the church and the political rule closely aligned, both advancing Orthodoxy and condemning the Armenian Miaphysitism.

1 Stephen H. Rapp Jr., “Georgian Christianity,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, ed. Ken Parry (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 137–55; Tamara Grdzeldidze, “Georgia, Patriarchal Orthodox Church of,” in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, ed. John Anthony McGuckin, vol. 1 (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 264–75.

2 Paul Crego, “The Georgian Orthodox Church,” in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2014), 140–60.

Georgia: “Heavy Orthodoxy” in the “Lot of the Theotokos”

The South Caucasus was occupied by the Ottomans and the Persians until the Russian Empire annexed the Kingdom of Kartl-Kakheti—a territory now divided among Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Russia—in 1801. Under Russian control, the autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church was abolished in July 1811.³ Catholicos-Patriarch Anton II (Prince Teimuraz) (1788–1811) was removed from his position and sent to St. Petersburg, and his title was replaced by that of an archbishop under an exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church.⁴ In a manner comparable to other Russian-occupied territories, a process of Russification led to major transformations. Church Slavonic replaced the Georgian liturgy, Russian-speaking clergy were appointed, Georgian feast days were replaced by Russian ones, and the church property was taken over by state authorities.⁵ In preserving national identity throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Georgian clergy and debates on mass education played a key factor in resisting Russification.⁶

In 1905, at the time of the Russian Revolution, Georgians lamented the poor training of the clergy and the loss of autocephaly, claiming that only the restoration of the patriarchate would enable nationhood.⁷ Tensions between Russian and Georgian clergy took a dramatic turn with the assassination of the Russian exarch Nikon in 1908, and the subsequent fall of the tsarist regime in 1917 marked the beginning of the restoration of the patriarchate. On March 12, 1917, Georgian hierarchs met in one of the most sacred places in the country, the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta, the ancient capital, and declared that autocephaly had been restored, with Kirion II (Sazaglišvili) proclaimed the first catholicos-patriarch, in a sign of the

3 Tamara Grdzeldze, Martin George, and Rev. Lukas Vischer, eds., *Witness through Troubled Times: A History of the Orthodox Church of Georgia, 1811 to the Present* (London: Bennet and Bloom, 2006).

4 Catholicos Patriarch Anton II (1788–1811) was canonized as a saint and martyr in July 2011.

5 Gregory L. Freeze, “Russian Orthodoxy: Church, People, and Politics in Imperial Russia,” in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 2, *Imperial Russia, 1689–1917*, ed. Dominic Lieven (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 284–305.

6 C. J. Peters [Stephen F. Jones], “The Georgian Orthodox Church,” in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Pedro Ramet (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), 286–308; C. J. Peters [Stephen F. Jones], “Religion and Nationalism in Soviet Georgia and Armenia,” in *Religion and Nationalism in the USSR and Eastern Europe*, ed. Pedro Ramet (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 171–95.

7 Stephen F. Jones, “The Georgian Orthodox Church,” in *Eastern Christianity and the Cold War, 1945–91*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2010), 99–120; Stephen F. Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors: The European Road to Social Democracy, 1883–1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

enhanced status of the Georgian Orthodox Church. One year later, in May 1918, the Georgian Democratic Republic proclaimed independence, and in 1920, the Russian exarchate was disbanded. The democratic path and state independence were short-lived, and in February 1921, Tbilisi was occupied by the Soviet army, and Georgia was incorporated into the Soviet Union. Under Soviet rule, atheist communism significantly affected church life, religious education suffered across the country, churches were closed, and the clergy was persecuted.⁸

Major changes in religion-state relations affected not only the lower clergy but also directly impacted the hierarchy. In 1923, Catholicos-Patriarch Ambrosius (Khelaia) was arrested and sentenced to eight years in prison; he was released in 1925 and died in 1927. In 1932, Kallistrate (Tsintsadze), who was educated in the same seminary in which Joseph Stalin studied, assumed leadership of the church. Similar to the Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union, the Georgian Patriarchate became involved in the patriotic war against the Nazi regime, as evident in a 1942 telegram to Moscow, when Catholicos-Patriarch Kallistrate asked Stalin to “break the spine of the enemy” and defend “the sacred borders of our great homeland.”⁹ In October 1943, the Moscow Patriarchate recognized the autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church and confirmed that Russian and Armenian communities within Georgia should be included under its jurisdiction.

After its recognition of autocephaly, all leading Georgian hierarchs were co-opted by the Soviet authorities into the propagandistic peace movement and became important players in international ecclesiastical affairs. In 1948, Kallistrate attended the 500th anniversary of the autocephaly of the Russian Orthodox Church; in 1952, Catholicos-Patriarch Melchizedek III (Pkhaldze) was a member of the International Peace Conference in Moscow; and, in 1962, Patriarch Eprem II (Sidamonidze) ensured that the Georgian church became a member of the World Council of Churches headquartered in Geneva. From 1979 until 1983, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II (Shiolashvili)

8 Silvia Serrano, *Orthodoxie et politique en Géorgie postsoviétique* (Paris: Karthala, 2018); Sophie Zviadadze, “The Unbearable Lightness of Being Muslim and Georgian: Religious Transformation and Questions of Identity among Adjara’s Muslim Georgians,” *REGION: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia* 7, no. 1 (2018): 23–42; Tornike Metreveli, “An Undisclosed Story of Roses: Church, State, and Nation in Contemporary Georgia,” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 694–712; Tornike Metreveli, “The State’s Guardian Angel? The Georgian Orthodox Church and Human Security,” in *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2020), 106–25; Tornike Metreveli, *Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition: Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia* (London: Routledge, 2020).

9 *Pravda*, November, 7 1942, p. 5 quoted in Jones, “The Georgian Orthodox Church,” 2010, 106.

served as one of the six presidents of the World Council of Churches, and in 1980, the church became a member of the Conference of European Churches.

Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II's leadership, which began in December 1977, encouraged religious nationalism as a means of religious renewal and survival. Under Soviet rule, the decline in religious life was dramatic. At the start of the century, the Georgian church counted 1,700 clergy and 2,055 parishes, mainly in rural communities. By 1962, the church had only 105 clergy and 80 parishes, while a decade later, in 1972, it had only 44.¹⁰ Ilia II's emphasis on nationalism and his active international work ultimately proved effective. In 1980, the church counted 200 parishes, and by 2014, it had nearly 1,000 clergy.

In April 1989, Soviet violence against pro-independence protesters in Tbilisi set the stage for a national referendum two years later, in March 1991, with an overwhelming 99.50 percent of voters supporting independence. In May 1991, Zviad Gamsakhurdia—a human rights activist and one of the founders of the 1974 Initiative Group for the Defense of Human Rights in Georgia and the 1977 Georgian Group to Assist the Implementation of Helsinki Agreements—was elected president of Georgia. The regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia demanded independence from Georgia, and the country moved towards civil war. In January 1992, Gamsakhurdia was forced into exile, fleeing to Chechnya, and, under unresolved circumstances, died in December 1993. He was replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze, former first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party and Soviet minister of foreign affairs during Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership, who headed the country until 2003.

At times of political uncertainty, violence, and civil war, the Georgian Orthodox Church offered a source of stability that transcended social unrest. Advancing independence and nationalist programs, political leaders were often associated with Georgian hierarchs; for example, Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze regularly appeared together with Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, involving the church in national reconciliation. Shevardnadze was even baptized by the patriarch, adopting the Christian name of Giorgi, and supported the reconstruction of Saint Nicholas Church in the ancient Nariqala Fortress in Tbilisi.

The 1995 Constitution offered the church a prime position in its framework of religion-state relations, with Article 8 stating that

10 Jones, "The Georgian Orthodox Church," 2010, 110.

Along with freedom of belief and religion, the State shall recognize the outstanding role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia, and its independence from the State. The relationship between the state of Georgia and the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia shall be determined by a constitutional agreement, which shall be in full compliance with the universally recognized principles and norms of international law in the area of human rights and freedoms.¹¹

Furthermore, Article 52(b), which provided a list of the “powers of the President of Georgia,” declared that one of the key prerogatives was to “conclude a constitutional agreement with the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia on behalf of the state of Georgia.”¹²

The Constitutional Agreement, divided into 12 articles, was signed by Patriarch Ilia II and President Shevardnadze on October 14, 2002, in a ceremony held at one of the holiest places in the country, the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta (also known as the Cathedral of the Living Pillar). The cathedral is the main site in the Eastern Orthodox world associated with the alleged mantle Christ wore during the crucifixion. The agreement emphasized the role of the church in nation-state building and offered significant tax exemptions, compensation, and restitution of property confiscated during the communist period.¹³ By offering a privileged position to the Georgian Orthodox Church, the agreement endorsed the connection between Orthodoxy and nationhood at the expense of religious minorities. By 2005, only two other religious minorities—the Muslims and the Mormons—received state recognition, with the general perception that they were not Georgian citizens. To circumvent state pressure, religious communities resorted to adopting paradoxical approaches in dealing with property, such as the case of the main Armenian cathedral in Tbilisi, which was owned “personally by the archbishop” rather than the Armenian Apostolic Church.¹⁴ In Soviet

11 “Constitution of Georgia,” Legislative Herald of Georgia, August 24, 1995, <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=36>.

12 “Constitution of Georgia,” August 24, 1995, Legislative Herald of Georgia, <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=36>.

13 Dimitry Gegenava, “Church-State Relations in Georgia: Legal Frames and General Overview,” *Teka Komisji Prawniczej PAN Oddział w Lublinie* 11, no. 2 (2018): 121–30; Paul Werth, “Georgian Autocephaly and the Ethnic Fragmentation of Orthodoxy,” *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 23 (2006): 74–100.

14 Felix Corley, “GEORGIA: Religious Minorities Still Second-Class Faiths?,” *Forum* 18, November 25, 2005, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=696.

Georgia, the Armenian community had 23 churches, and with the exception of one, all were closed.¹⁵

In 2004, Mikheil Saakashvili—a Western-educated jurist who previously served as a member of parliament and minister of justice—won two consecutive terms as president on a pro-European political platform, which ended the post-Soviet leadership following the 2003 Rose Revolution. His radical neoliberal reforms, followed by mass protests and the 2008 war between Georgia and the self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (supported by Russia), had a dramatic impact on social and political institutions.

Saakashvili seemed to have little interest in religious affairs, making only general references to the historic role played by the Georgian Orthodox Church in a united Europe. In July 2011, Parliament amended the Civil Code, which offered the status of “legal entities of public law” to other religious minorities. The move aimed to alleviate tensions between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church regarding property restitution and state funding. In an attempt to distance himself from Saakashvili’s neoliberal policies and what was perceived as an authoritarian style of government, Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili—Georgia’s richest person and founder of the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia Party—offered a different view of religion-state relations. On October 5, 2012, he attended the Shabbat Hanukkah celebrations with the Jewish community in Tbilisi, stating that the country should place an emphasis on tolerance as follows: “I am committed to making Georgia a place where all Georgians, regardless of their faith, are treated equally and with respect.”¹⁶

One year later, while serving as prime minister, he declined the Georgian Orthodox Church’s initiative to ban abortions; however, despite his public stance on the matter, Ivanishvili did not face criticism from the church, being regarded as one of the most important donors in building the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi (Sameba Cathedral), the third-tallest Orthodox cathedral in the world. In 2021, although he claimed that he was retiring from politics and focusing exclusively on business affairs, Ivanishvili retained considerable influence. In June 2022, the European Parliament passed a resolution that decried the “violations of media freedom and safety of journalists” and that was “deeply worried by Ivanishvili’s exposed personal and business links

15 Hratch Tchilingirian, “The Armenian Apostolic Church,” in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lucian N. Leustean (London: Routledge, 2014), 471–97.

16 US Department of State, *Uzbekistan 2012 International Religious Freedom Report* (Washington, DC, 2012), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/208528.pdf>.

to the Kremlin, which determine the position of the current Government of Georgia towards sanctions on Russia.”¹⁷

Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II's leadership, which promoted religious nationalism and state independence, influenced the ways in which the church engaged with counterparts around the world. In 1997, the Georgian Orthodox Church rescinded its membership in the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches, denouncing ecumenism and claiming that Orthodoxy was not fully represented in these organizations.¹⁸ Only the Bulgarian Orthodox Church followed suit in 1998, while other Orthodox churches increased participation and, on the contrary, opened offices in Brussels. As other Orthodox churches did not follow the Georgian decision, in 2004, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II declared that he was willing to retain contact with the World Council of Churches, working “in the areas of social witness and service of the churches, as well as in response to the challenges of globalization and European integration.”¹⁹

While critical of international religious organizations, the Georgian Orthodox Church ensured that its autocephaly was recognized by the wider Orthodox communion. The Moscow Patriarchate granted recognition of the Georgian autocephaly in 1943. To strengthen its position, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II appealed to the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios (Papadopoulos), who issued his recognition on March 4, 1990, in a sign that the church aimed to distance itself from Moscow in line with Georgia's pro-independence movement. Subsequently, relations with Moscow remained tense, particularly in relation to church jurisdiction in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as evident when Ilia II retained in his official title the two main geographical sites with significance for Georgian state identity, namely, “Archbishop of Mtskheta-Tbilisi and Metropolitan Bishop of Bichvinta and Tskhum-Abkhazia.”

The societal influence of the Georgian church has been visible in national education through the training of the clergy at the Tbilisi Spiritual Seminary, an educational establishment founded in 1755. After the abolition of autocephaly, the seminary was closed, and pastoral training resumed

17 European Parliament, “P9_TA(2022)0239 Violations of Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists in Georgia (2022/2702(RSP)),” https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0239_EN.pdf.

18 Andrey Zolotov, “Georgian Orthodox Church to Leave WCC and CEC,” Orthodox Christian Information Service, May 26, 1997, http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/georgia_wcc.aspx.

19 “Georgian Orthodox Leader Willing to Resume Collaboration with WCC,” World Council of Churches, June 30, 2004, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/georgian-orthodox-leader-willing-to-resume-collaboration-with-wcc>.

in Mtskheta from 1963. In 1988, a theological academy was founded in Tbilisi and later merged with the seminary. More importantly, the church's influence in secular education was acknowledged with the founding of Saint Andrew the First-Called Georgian University of the Patriarchate of Georgia in 2008. The university presents itself as Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II's own personal project and is divided into the School of Humanities and Law and the School of Business, Computing, and Social Sciences, catering to around 4,000 students.²⁰ In addition to overseeing educational institutions, in 2008, Ilia II launched a program of mass baptisms which aimed at boosting demographic changes. Four times a year, he organized baptism ceremonies, personally blessing and performing the sacrament for the third and subsequent children of Orthodox families. In January 2019, he had become the godfather of more than 37,200 children; at a ceremony held at Sameba Cathedral, he summarized his work over the years as follows: "Today is a happy day. More than 500 children have been baptized and joined the army of Christ. I congratulate you on this happy day. You know that Georgia is the lot of the Most Holy Theotokos. These children and all of Georgia are under the protection of the Theotokos."²¹ The vision of Georgia as a mythical land and the church's main duty to connect the secular and the divine appealed to the population and ensured religious renewal.

The interplay between Orthodox mysticism and religious nationalism has been at odds with the Georgian government's legal advancement of human rights in the context of the European Neighborhood Policy and the country's accession negotiations for European Union membership. Several Orthodox parishes have grouped together in promoting right-wing nationalism and condemning civil rights movements. For example, the organization "Saint David the Builder Orthodox Parish Union" has decried attempts to change Orthodox values and traditions both at home and abroad, such as "ecumenism, schism, the introduction of a new calendar and all kinds of innovations into the church," and will "expose [the] clerics and laymen who violate the teachings of the Church [...] and hinder and tempt others with immoral behavior."²² The union has regularly made controversial statements, including the refusal to recognize the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and has promoted conspiracy theories

20 The official website is <https://sangu.edu.ge/geo/article/universitetis-istoria>.

21 "Patriarch Ilia of Georgia Baptizes 630 Children in 57th Mass Baptism Ceremony," *Journey to Orthodoxy*, January 22, 2019, <https://journeytoorthodoxy.com/2019/01/patriarch-ilia-of-georgia-baptizes-630-children-in-57th-mass-baptism-ceremony/>.

22 "About," Saint David the Builder Orthodox Parish Union, <https://religia.ge/about.html>.

in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, equating the vaccine with “the seal of the Antichrist.”²³

Another conservative organization, the “Union of Orthodox Parents,” founded in 1995 and claiming the support of the catholicos-patriarch, has employed pressure tactics and organized acts of violence against civil society groups advocating for interfaith dialogue and gender equality.²⁴ In September 2016, conservative clergy claimed Pope Francis’s visit to Georgia was “a spiritual aggression by the Vatican and an attempt by the Catholic Church to colonize Georgia.” The Georgian Patriarchate did not condemn the clergy and protestors who held signs stating, “Pope Arch-Heretic. You are not welcome in Georgia” and “Stay far away from Georgia Antichrist,” and even attempted to prevent the pontiff from entering the Cathedral of the Living Pillar in Mtskheta.²⁵ Furthermore, in July 2023, nearly 2,000 anti-LGBT protestors, including Orthodox clergy, incited violence and clashed with police and the gay pride festival participants. The government and the church hierarchy did little to condemn the violence.²⁶

Religion and Forced Displacement

Since the early days of state independence, Georgia has faced significant internal displacement. The 1991–1993 civil war and the 2008 Russo-Georgian war in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia led to between 273,000 and 311,000 displaced people—nearly ten percent of the total population—moving to other parts of the country.²⁷ In January 2023, the National Statistics Office reported that Georgia had a population of 3,736,400 people, one-third of whom lived in Tbilisi. Although Georgia experienced a steady population decline after 1990, following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the country saw a small but significant 1.3 percent population increase compared to the previous year. In 2022, a total of 179,778 people arrived in

23 “News,” Saint David the Builder Orthodox Parish Union, <https://religia.ge/siaxleebi.html>.

24 Crego, “The Georgian Orthodox Church”, 2014, 140–60.

25 Nicholas Waller, “Radical Nationalist Groups, Georgian Orthodox Priests Protest Papal Visit,” *Georgia Today*, September 22, 2016, <http://gtarchive.georgiatoday.ge/news/4708/Radical-Nationalist-Groups,-Georgian-Orthodox-Priests-Protest-Papal-Visit>.

26 “Georgia Pride Festival in Tbilisi Stormed by Right-Wing Protesters,” *BBC News*, July 9, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-66145898>.

27 The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre in Geneva counted 311,000 IDPs in Georgia in 2023 (<https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/georgia/>). Metreveli suggested 273,411 IDPs quoting data published in 2007. Tornike Metreveli, “Forgotten by Many and Remembered by Few: Religious Responses to Forced Migration in Georgia,” in *Religion and Forced Displacement in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia*, ed. Victoria Hudson and Lucian N. Leustean (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 273–300.

the country, with the largest population movement coming from Russia (62,304 people) and Ukraine (20,716).²⁸

The Georgian Orthodox Church was an active national player during periods of population displacement. In 1994, after a ceasefire agreement was reached between Georgia and Abkhazia, which allowed the deployment of Russian peacekeeping military forces in the region, the church launched its own humanitarian response by establishing a social service organization, the Lazarus Foundation, in Tbilisi.²⁹ In the first years, the foundation ran a wide range of programs, directly reaching displaced people. In 2000, it became a nonprofit legal entity and expanded its outreach to development programs. With the financial support of the Swiss Church Aid (HESK/EPER), Lazarus developed international programs with the Armenian NGO Syunik, such as the “Camps for Peace in South Caucasus,” aimed at young people from Georgia, Abkhazia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan between 2007 and 2014.³⁰ Tensions between the Georgian and Armenian communities in the country persisted, particularly in relation to state funding and property restitution. For example, the Georgian Orthodox Church received 149,190,000 GEL (around \$52 million) between 2004 and 2013, while, in contrast, the Armenian Apostolic Church—the second largest Christian community in the country—received only 35,624 GEL (around \$12,000) between 2009 and 2012.³¹ Although official data is difficult to obtain, the Georgian Patriarchate operates 16 charity foundations, most of which deal with education and the construction of churches. In addition, the church administers between seven and nine orphanages for around 1,500 children, while around 90 educational institutions employed 2,000 people, serving 18,000 children.³²

While the Georgian Patriarchate has been widely acknowledged as one of the most influential societal actors, its humanitarian programs remained obscured.³³ In my discussion with state officials, academics, and religious practitioners in Tbilisi in 2019, it was widely perceived that the Georgian

28 National Statistics Office of Georgia, *Number of Population as of January 1, 2023* (Tbilisi: Geostat, 2023), <https://www.geostat.ge/media/53004/Number-of-Population-as-of-January-1%62C-2023.pdf>.

29 The “Lazarus” Charity Foundation’s website is <http://www.lazarus.org.ge>.

30 “Charity Foundation ‘Lazarus’ of the Patriarchate of Georgia,” Peace Insight, December 2017, <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/lazarus/>.

31 Metreveli, “Forgotten by Many and Remembered by Few.”

32 Metreveli, “Forgotten by Many and Remembered by Few.”

33 Data collated from interviews with officials working in the following organizations: 1. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Representative in Georgia; 2. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee Representative in Georgia; 3. Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University; 4. Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University; 5. Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi

Patriarchate did not organize joint humanitarian initiatives with other religious communities. While the church was active in providing support to displaced people during the civil war and the Russo-Georgian war, the clergy mobilized primarily out of a sense of “moral duty” rather than a systematic program of humanitarian engagement. The church did not have an official policy on how to deal with refugees and displaced populations. An interviewee mentioned that the clergy most likely understood the lack of public engagement with displaced populations due to the religious precept discouraging the advertisement of charitable and missionary activities, referencing Matthew 6:3: “But when thou dost alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doth.”

The church was recognized for its important contribution to social life, particularly for supporting the poor and actively participating in national education. An interviewee expressed surprise that despite such a widespread role in society, the church had no program to administer refugees from separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. State authorities regularly claimed that the “territories were occupied” and that returning them to Georgia was achievable. The two territories were not considered separate state entities—unlike, for example, Transnistria, a breakaway state which remained part of the Republic of Moldova. The vision that the “territories were occupied” was counterproductive and detached from political and social developments. The catholicos-patriarch’s title, which retained reference to the territories, did little to alleviate political tensions. Despite critical remarks, the church, as a whole, was not regarded by state authorities as an obstacle to the integration of the displaced population. On the contrary, in most cases, refugees integrated into host communities, while the church seemed somewhat detached and focused on spiritual matters.

Displaced people suffered significant economic hardship. Official state policy was that IDPs were offered housing and land ownership; however, most of them lived in derelict properties from the Soviet period, which required extensive renovation. Housing was one of the most pressing issues, as many people arrived with limited resources. The state appeared unable to provide adequate financial support for IDPs or facilitate their social integration. In 2019, a displaced person received a symbolic amount of 45 Lari (around 15 Euros) per month. There were many cases of people born after the 2008 war who registered as displaced persons solely to enable their families to receive social benefits and alleviate economic difficulties. People

showed innovative ways of dealing with economic hardship, and there was an urgent need to review housing policy as several IDPs started to sublet their properties to other IDPs, while others owned multiple properties simultaneously.

There were two types of IDPs, namely, those who moved to family connections they already had before the conflict and those who illegally occupied buildings. In many cases, state authorities tried to remove IDPs from the buildings they occupied; however, as no alternatives were offered, they were not always successful. The occupation of the Radisson Blu Iveria in Tbilisi during the 1990s remained in public memory. The 22-floor hotel, with panoramic views across the capital, was built in 1967 and was considered Georgia's most coveted tourist accommodation. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the hotel became derelict and was occupied by IDPs who made it their home for a decade; in 2003, IDPs were offered financial incentives and moved out. An interviewee claimed that "the first generation of IDPs was lost," meaning that the people who left Abkhazia and South Ossetia failed to adapt to new social realities. At the same time, "the second generation of IDPs who were born in Georgia was now fully integrated," as they did not experience the trauma associated with leaving their homeland behind. The interviewee stated that the narrative of imperial Russia reflected the ways in which people remembered the past and understood their future: "We cannot forget the Soviet Union; Russia does only what is good for the empire first and then what is good for local people." The Georgian narrative that Abkhazia and South Ossetia were occupied by Russia and could be returned by military and political means affected public perception. Many IDPs wished to return, although it remained unclear how many would do so if the opportunity arose. Public data on IDPs and social integration was limited and controversial. From a gender perspective, women were regarded as integrating into society more quickly, while men found it more difficult due to the loss of the social status they had enjoyed before their arrival. There were over 100,000 IDPs in Tbilisi alone, and the government authorities engaged with IDP issues mainly during electoral campaigns.

Visa liberalization between Georgia and the European Union led to a large number of people moving to Western Europe, contributing to a growing trend of population decline. An interviewee pointed out that, on the surface, Georgia had made substantial progress in aligning with European values; however, deeply rooted social structures which developed during Soviet times remained prevalent. Another interviewee indicated that "as a tourist it was nice to live here for a week; however, people's behavior and mentality have not changed." The church was regarded as part of the social fabric, with little desire to

advance societal changes in line with European values. Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II encouraged citizens not to overstay their visas in the European Union, which would affect the lives of people at home; however, he stopped short of criticizing far-right circles which condemned gender equality and sexual liberalization. As a whole, anti-migrant rhetoric in Georgia was prevalent. Yet another interviewee claimed that “the church was a source of intolerance against migrants, refugees, and others” and senior clergy did not have a positive attitude towards Euro-Atlantic values. Anti-migrant rhetoric mirrored populist discourse in other Western countries and was adapted to Georgian specificities.

Despite the absence of official policy on engaging with displaced populations, clergy most likely helped migrants and displaced people on an individual basis, and their acts were not reported in the media to avoid controversy. One public criticism of the church was visible in 2014, when an Iranian family which converted to Orthodoxy received a letter from the patriarchate asking the judge to stop issuing a deportation order. The patriarchate’s unusual public stance in defense of a single family was criticized by the press as an example of endorsing proselytism among Georgia’s Muslim population. When fake news started to circulate on social media claiming that the church welcomed and provided accommodation to homeless people in the capital, the catholicos-patriarch issued a rebuttal. The duality between providing support to one family and denying stronger involvement in alleviating public hardship caused public dissatisfaction and uncertainty about the ways in which to deal with refugees. In 2018, after German chancellor Angela Merkel visited the country, fake news circulated on social media that the government agreed to take in Syrian refugees, leading to protests from far-right groups, some of which included members of the Orthodox clergy.

One interviewee pointed out that the catholicos-patriarch’s response to social challenges was to provide a spiritual alternative shrouded in mysticism. Ilia II made references to the medieval tradition that despite war and economic hardship, Georgia was the allotted land of the Virgin Mary and the last country to stand before God at the Last Judgment—a religious discourse that was constantly politicized by state authorities. On December 27, 2018, the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church declared May 12 as a national holiday celebrating the Day of the Allotment of Georgia to the Holy Virgin Mary.³⁴ The church’s decision was endorsed by Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze and approved by Parliament the following

34 “May 12 Declared National Holiday to Mark Day of Georgia’s Presence under Auspices of Virgin Mary,” December 28, 2018, *First Channel (ITV)*, <https://itv.ge/lang/en/news/may-12-declared-national-holiday-to-mark-day-of-georgias-presence-under-auspices-of-virgin-mary/>.



Photo 5. An alms box chained to Metekhi Bridge overlooking the glass-made Peace Bridge over the Kura River in Tbilisi, Georgia, 2019. Copyright: Lucian N. Leustean.

year. In 2019, Sopo Kiladze, chair of Parliament's Human Rights Committee, announced changes to the Labor Code by reinforcing the same religious discourse, stating, "It is important that we officially make Georgia a country dedicated to Mother Mary."³⁵ Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of the

35 Giorgi Lomsadze, "In Times of Trouble, the Georgian Government Turns to Mother Mary," *Eurasianet*, May 28, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/in-times-of-trouble-the-georgian-government-turns-to-mother-mary>.

Georgian Dream Party, adopted a similar position and offered considerable financial resources in advancing the new celebration, such as building the Cathedral of Mother of God of Iveria in the town of Zugdidi and paying for fresco decoration at Sameba Cathedral in Tbilisi.³⁶ On the whole, financial practices and the ways in which the church collected money from the faithful remained controversial. Small church metal boxes attached to bridges and key locations in urban centers, such as markets and tourist sites, encouraged the faithful to donate funds to build new churches. The church donation boxes were not part of an official policy of collecting funds for church buildings and people in need; however, they reflected social norms and were easily prone to exploitation. In some cases, the boxes were found to be placed by charlatans, who pretended to represent the church.

While the interviewees emphasized that the Georgian Orthodox Church was not publicly visible in working with displaced populations, they also highlighted the experience of other religious communities. The Jewish community in the country was too small to receive national attention for its humanitarian engagement. The Muslim community, which accounted for nearly 10 percent of the population, was divided on ethnic lines between Sunni and Shia—mainly based in and comprising the autonomous region of Adjara, near the Turkish border, and Chechens in the northeastern part of the country. In 2011, the Parliament recognized the Muslim community when it passed legislation allowing religions with “historic ties to Georgia” to operate. An interviewee indicated that Muslim engagement with the displaced population was sporadic and only a few local Muslim members issued statements in support of Iranian refugees. On the other hand, the top Muslim leadership was perceived by the general society as behaving similarly to the Orthodox hierarchy and was controlled by the state.

In contrast to the lack of an Orthodox policy on humanitarian issues, the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia and Caritas Georgia have been extremely active in providing support for displaced populations, although on a considerable scale, given their small religious membership. The Evangelical church, a small minority of around 5,000 people mainly based in Tbilisi, has been a strong advocate for the freedom of religion and belief, not only in relation to its own community but also in recognizing the right to worship for the Muslim community. An example of interfaith dialogue was the project “Peace Academy,” which brought together Evangelical, Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, and Yezidi faithful. In an unusual sign of interfaith cooperation, Evangelical leaders organized joint liturgies with members of other faiths,

36 Lomsadze, “In Times of Trouble, the Georgian Government Turns to Mother Mary.”

the most symbolic being Maundy Thursday which involved the foot-washing ritual. In 1999, the church established a humanitarian organization, “Beteli,” which cared for elderly people. After the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the Church became involved in providing teachers and free tuition to students in the village of Tserovani, which housed refugees from South Ossetia.³⁷ In 2014, for her exceptional work on promoting interfaith dialogue and tolerance, Bishop Rusudan Gotsiridze was awarded the International Women of Courage Award by the US State Department, an event hosted by First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama.³⁸

Similarly, the Catholic Church membership has been diverse among ethnic Georgian and Armenian communities, counting around 1 percent of the population (around 37,000 people), based mainly in Tbilisi and in the southern part of the country. A small Georgian Byzantine-Rite Catholic community resided in the town of Gori, while a community of the Chaldean Catholic Church was present in Tbilisi. In 1994, Caritas Georgia registered as a charitable foundation, providing support for populations in need. From the start, Caritas worked with volunteers who received a small financial incentive. The number of volunteers varied depending on the projects, ranging between 200 and 300 people. By 2020, it employed 367 people and had 120 volunteers in 10 centers around the country. Caritas ran a wide range of programs aiming at disadvantaged populations, offering medical and social care, psychological training, support for homeless families and children, and providing emergency aid in response to disasters.³⁹

An interviewee noted that Caritas did not provide support to displaced populations based on ethnic or religious affiliation. On the contrary, it recognized that it operated in a “heavily Orthodox country” and that religious sensitivities were essential. For example, Orthodox spirituality was important and shaped the ways in which volunteers worked. In running projects, Caritas became aware that people were not comfortable if non-Orthodox prayers were introduced at the end of their humanitarian work, leading in some cases to volunteers not returning. On the other hand, Caritas’s work was widely acknowledged as establishing a direct connection between people in need and a new generation of professionals who were

37 Tolerance and Diversity Institute, “The Church that Women Saved,” undated, <https://tdi.ge/en/page/church-women-saved>.

38 “Georgian Bishop of Evangelical Baptist Church Awarded by Michelle Obama,” *Georgian Journal*, March 5, 2014, <https://georgianjournal.ge/society/26503-georgian-bishop-of-evangelical-baptist-church-awarded-by-michelle-obama.html>.

39 “1994 Caritas Georgia,” Caritas, <https://www.caritas.org/where-we-work-country/georgia/>; The official website is <https://www.caritas.ge/>.

able to provide humanitarian work. It expanded and drew on the expertise of socially minded local businesses across the country, which were eager to provide support to displaced people. Local businesses were thus engaged in administering programs throughout the entire process, from small- to large-scale projects, such as the construction of a water pipeline benefiting a local community in response to humanitarian disasters.

Caritas worked with Orthodox clergy; however, only on a personal level. Over nearly two decades of assisting the displaced population, Caritas observed that IDPs were not concerned with the religious identity of humanitarian organizations. In contrast to the early 1990s civil war, Georgian civil society was better prepared to deal with the displaced population following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. An interviewee mentioned that the main difference between the 1990s and the 2008 wars was that people felt disenfranchised, unsure of why the war happened to them at a personal level. Dramatic political changes after President Saakashvili won the elections resulted in local authorities not knowing how to react and engage with state officials in the capital. People thought that there was a sudden transition from dictatorship to democracy, which was particularly difficult at the rural level. Caritas adapted its work to take into account social and political changes as IDPs were unsure what to do to integrate into their new communities. For example, in assessing local needs and providing modest relief, Caritas volunteers baked bread for IDPs living in a hospital. These small gestures were important and touched the lives of many.

The contrast between the structured humanitarian support of Evangelical and Catholic organizations and the failure of the Georgian Orthodox Church to establish similar programs at the national level reflected the latter's overwhelming confidence in maintaining its dominant position in religion-state relations. The Evangelical and Catholic organizations engaged with humanitarian programs as part of their work with society at large, while the Orthodox church failed to do so by emphasizing that the church was a mystical space and that the country held a unique place in eschatological terms. This dual perspective—either engaging in humanitarian work or refusing to organize programs—was evident in the ways in which religious communities connected with international organizations working with displaced populations. An interviewee mentioned that, despite working in the country since 1993, no religious community approached the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representative in Georgia. When delivering humanitarian work, religious communities worked independently, with little or *ad hoc* contact established due to circumstantial needs.

Public perception of faith-based humanitarian work mattered. An interviewee pointed out that the Georgian Orthodox Church was regarded as the primary beneficiary of financial support from the state, largely due to its “patriotic role” rather than a need to justify the use of funds. Another interviewee claimed that religion was a social institution which favored those who hold political power. State authorities were prone to challenge from religious leaders and were treading a thin line when implementing policies, and at times had to justify their decisions directly to the Orthodox hierarchy. For example, in December 2014, after Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II condemned the mining technique used at Sakdrisi Gold Mine—which affected the contracts signed by the government—Mikheil Giorgadze, minister of culture and monument protection, immediately responded, “The patriarch’s opinion is of great importance to me, and I will definitely inform him about the details.”⁴⁰ Church opposition to state projects could affect the government’s ability to invest and implement national programs. In May 2019, as Azerbaijan was preparing to host the UEFA Europa League Final in Baku, thousands of Georgians mobilized by the “Anti-Occupation Movement of Georgia” went to Davit Gareja Monastery (known as Keshikchidag Reserve in Azerbaijan) situated on the Georgian-Azerbaijani border. The monastery complex was part of both countries and demonstrators were allegedly aiming to prevent Azerbaijani forces from occupying the entire monastery. The border closure and highway blockade had the potential to escalate quickly, and tensions ended only after Catholicos Patriarch Ilia II issued a statement encouraging discussion between state authorities in both countries.⁴¹ An interviewee mentioned that it was highly likely that political authorities promised Ilia II that the state would provide financial support for the building of new churches in the region in exchange for the patriarch issuing a reconciling statement.

Building new Orthodox churches at the expense of social engagement with people in need was a constant feature in most interviews. The church hierarchs were criticized for living what was perceived as lavish lifestyles, with little accountability for undisclosed financial support from the state for church properties. An interviewee mentioned that the hierarchy’s influence affected the ways in which business was conducted. For example, contracts

40 “Mining Resumes at Controversial Sakdrisi Gold Mine,” *Agenda.ge*, December 15, 2014, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2014/2863>. [The website was shut down by the Georgian government in 2025].

41 Giorgi Menabde, “Azerbaijan and Georgia Narrowly Avoid Fresh Border Conflict,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 84, Jamestown Foundation, June 6, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-and-georgia-narrowly-avoid-fresh-border-conflict/>.

between Georgian-Azeri companies were awarded only after the church received a subsidy, which benefited the Orthodox community in the region.

As these examples have demonstrated, the politicization of Orthodoxy in Georgia was encouraged by religious and state authorities due to the church's extensive influence in society and more widely in the region, with the church being perceived as a defender of the country's independence, which aligned with national interests. An interviewee pointed out that relations between Georgia and neighboring countries remained tense, not only politically but also religiously. With the North and South Caucasus remaining a zone of conflict, the church was a major player able to navigate between opposing state entities. Most Orthodox hierarchs studied in Moscow, and the church was instrumental in conveying geopolitical messages and adapting to state pressure from both home and abroad.

Armenia: “We need to spend money on real people, not on bricks and water.”

In a comparable manner to the role played by the Georgian Orthodox Church in preserving ethnic identity, the Armenian Apostolic Church holds a prime position in the state-building process. The 2022 census in the Republic of Armenia confirmed a population of 2,932,731 people, a figure which reinforced its demographic decline. The 2011 census counted 3,018,854 people, while the 2001 census counted 3,213,011 people. In 2022, the largest segment of the population, 1,086,700 people, lived in the capital, Yerevan.⁴² What differentiates the Republic of Armenia from other countries is its significant diaspora—one of the largest in the world⁴³—as evident in its effort to link Armenians abroad with the country and entice many to return and reverse the demographic decline by establishing the Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs in 2019. A description of its work gives an insight into the complexity of the ways in which Armenian communities, and their religious entities, are present around the world,

42 “Armenia Population Drops,” December 15, 2023, *NEWS.am*, <https://news.am/eng/news/797938.html>.

43 For the history of Armenia see, Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Anne Elizabeth Redgate, *The Armenians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993); Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, 2 vols. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1997).

with the largest communities based in Russia, the United States, France, Germany, Georgia, and countries in the Middle East:

Today, an estimated 7 million Armenians live in more than 100 countries around the world. There are dozens of pan-Armenian and spiritual organizations, hundreds of community and patriotic groups, around 1,000 daily and weekly schools, scientific and educational institutions, sports and cultural associations, charities, and socio-political entities actively working in the Diaspora. The Diaspora is diverse and complex, spread through 24 time zones, living in countries with different political systems, languages, and cultural traditions. Each community adds to the vibrant makeup of the Armenian nation.⁴⁴

Armenian communities have been united over centuries and across geographical regions not only due to their shared ethnic identity but also due to a unique form of organized Christianity that dates back to the fourth century. The Armenian Apostolic Church is part of the Oriental Orthodox, or “non-Chalcedonian,” churches, maintaining many similarities with the Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church. The Armenian Apostolic Church claims that Saint Thaddeus and Saint Bartholomew, two of Jesus’s apostles, were the first to preach and conduct missionary work on its territory, thus linking the country with apostolic times. Early Christian institutions developed only in the fourth century, when, as part of expanding Roman influence on the border between the Roman and Sasanian empires, Emperor Diocletian (284–305) restored Tiridates III (ca. 298–ca. 330) as king of Armenia (ca. 287/288 and ca. 299). In order to secure his position and to distance himself from Sasanian rulers, Tiridates III introduced Christianity as the state religion; however, the date of conversion is debatable, with sources claiming that it took place in 301 or around 314.⁴⁵ From the start, Tiridates III’s conversion was achieved by Saint Gregory the Illuminator (ca. 240–325), one of the most revered saints in the Christian world. Accounts of the mass conversion depict a spiritual battle between the king and the saint, with Saint Gregory thrown into a deep pit by the king, where he lived for 14 years. After the king repented, Saint Gregory founded the Armenian Apostolic Church. The story of Armenia’s conversion

44 “Armenian Diaspora Communities,” Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs, undated, <http://diaspora.gov.am/en/diasporas>.

45 Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, *Armenian Church Historical Studies: Matters of Doctrine and Administration* (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1996).

to Christianity continues to hold significance today as, despite territorial changes and population movement in the South Caucasus, the Khor Virap Monastery, where Saint Gregory the Illuminator was imprisoned, is located just a few meters away from the Armenian-Turkish border. The Kingdom of Armenia was the first geographical entity to convert to Christianity, taking place before Emperor Galerius (305–311) issued the Edict of Toleration (311), which ended the persecutions of Christians, and, most significantly, before the Edict of Thessalonica (380) issued by Emperor Theodosius the Great (379–395), which made Christianity the state church of the Roman Empire.

In contrast to Eastern Orthodox churches, which have one center of religious power—usually a national church headed by a patriarch or archbishop—the Armenian Apostolic Church is structured into two catholicosates and two patriarchates. The Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, known as the Catholicosate of All Armenians and based in Vagharshapat (Etchmiadzin) near Yerevan, is the spiritual and administrative headquarters of the church, holding preeminent supremacy in all spiritual matters. The other three ecclesiastical entities are self-governing and independent, namely, the Armenian Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia (established in the thirteenth century; in 1930, it was located in Antelias, Lebanon); the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem (established in the seventh century and located in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem); and the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople (established in 1461 when Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II, who implemented the millet system, brought a church leader to administer the Armenian faithful in the capital). The four ecclesiastical entities, known as hierarchical sees, together form the Armenian Apostolic Church, and they all share the same dogma, liturgy, and theology, each holding jurisdiction over communities in their respective countries and abroad by appointing clergy and bishops.⁴⁶

The Republic of Armenia declared independence from the Soviet Union on August 23, 1990, and a referendum on September 21, 1991, endorsed the political decision.⁴⁷ The date marked the second time the Republic of Armenia

46 For Armenian church history, see Papken Catholicos Gulesserian, *The Armenian Church*, trans. Terenig Vartabed Poladian (New York: The Gotchnag Press, 1939; 2nd ed., New York: AMS Press, 1970); Hratch Tchilingirian, "The Catholicos and the Hierarchical Sees of the Armenian Church," in *Eastern Christianity: Studies in Modern History, Religion and Politics*, ed. Anthony O'Mahony (London: Melisende, 2004), 140–59; Krikor Maksoudian, *Chosen of God: The Election of the Catholicos of All Armenians from the Fourth Century to the Present* (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1995).

47 For religion, politics and society in the independent Republic of Armenia, see Vigen Guroian, "Faith, Church and Nationalism in Armenia," *Nationalities Papers* 20, no. 1 (1992): 31–40; Vigen

has declared independence in its history. Following the 1915–1916 Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire and the end of the First World War in 1918, an independent First Republic of Armenia existed between 1918 and 1920, before its territory was occupied by the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the Turkish National Movement.⁴⁸

In a comparable manner to other Soviet states, Armenia witnessed dramatic religious persecution. In 1938, Catholicos Khoren I (Muradbekian) was assassinated by NKVD agents in Etchmiadzin, and church property was confiscated and closed down. In 1940, only nine Armenian churches were open throughout the territory of the Soviet Union. From 1955 to 1994, the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin was headed by the Romanian-born Catholicos Vazgen I (Baljian), leading to major transformations in church life. Vazgen studied in Bucharest and Athens, and when he moved from the leadership of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Romania to the highest position of ecclesiastical power in Yerevan, he brought with him an emphasis on strengthening contacts with the Armenian diaspora. During his leadership, he focused on rebuilding churches and sending clergy for education abroad, with some studying in Western Europe. In the late 1970s, 40 churches were functioning in the country, and the Armenian church was encouraged by Soviet authorities to establish contacts with religious

Guroian, *Faith, Church, Mission: Essays for Renewal in the Armenian Church* (New York: The Armenian Prelacy, 1995); Ani Sarkissian, "Religion in Postsoviet Armenia: Pluralism and Identity Formation in Transition," *Religion, State & Society* 36, no. 2 (2008): 163–80; Hratch Tchilingirian, "In Search of Relevance: Church and Religion in Armenia since Independence," in *Religion et politique dans le Caucase post-soviétique*, ed. Bayram Balci and Raoul Motika (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2007), 277–311; Nicola Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-Cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008); Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jödicke, and Evert van der Zweerde, eds., *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (London: Routledge, 2015); Ansgar Jödicke, ed., *Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus* (London: Routledge, 2018); Tsypylma Darieva, Florian Mühlfried, and Kevin Tuite, eds., *Sacred Places, Emerging Spaces: Religious Pluralism in the Post-Soviet Caucasus* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018).

48 For religion and politics in the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, see Claire Seda Mouradian, "The Armenian Apostolic Church," in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1, *Christianity under Stress*, ed. Pedro Ramet (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), 353–74; Alexander Agadjanian, ed., *Armenian Christianity Today: Identity Politics and Popular Practice* (London: Routledge, 2014); Felix Corley, "The Armenian Church under the Soviet Regime, Part 1: The Leadership of Kevork," *Religion, State & Society* 24, no. 1 (1996): 9–53; Felix Corley, "The Armenian Church under the Soviet Regime, Part 2: The Leadership of Vazgen," *Religion, State & Society* 24, no. 4 (1996): 289–343; Felix Corley, "The Armenian Church under the Soviet and Independent Regimes, Part 3: The Leadership of Vazgen," *Religion, State & Society* 26, nos. 3–4 (1998): 291–355; Martin Tamcke, ed., *Leben nach Völkermord und politischer Pression: Armenien* (Göttingen: Universitätsdrucke im Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2015).

counterparts in the West. In 1962, the catholicosates of Etchmiadzin and Cilicia, representing the whole Armenian faithful, became members of the World Council of Churches in Geneva.⁴⁹

The end of the 1980s brought significant challenges to state integrity. In 1988, the Karabakh Movement advocated for the unification of Armenian ethnic communities in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (then part of Soviet Azerbaijan) with Soviet Armenia. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence, and a full-scale war, which lasted until 1994, led to the expulsion of over 700,000 Azeris from Armenia and half a million Armenians from Azerbaijan.⁵⁰ In addition, in December 1988, a devastating earthquake caused major damage to buildings and economic infrastructure across the country, killing nearly 50,000 people and placing considerable strain on state functions.

From the start of the Nagorno-Karabakh movement, the Armenian Apostolic Church was an active player in the region. If, before the 1917 Russian Revolution, Nagorno-Karabakh was scattered with medieval religious sites— numbering 208 churches, 14 monasteries, and 236 priests—as part of the Soviet Union, all church properties were closed.⁵¹ It was only in 1988 that the church was able to establish the Diocese of Artsakh under the leadership of Archbishop Pargev (Martirosyan), and the diocese was able to reopen churches, including the Gandzasar Monastery, one of the oldest Armenian religious sites, built in 1240.⁵²

Similar to Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict recognized the *status quo* without offering a political solution, as an independent Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (the Republic of Artsakh) failed to achieve state recognition, with international

49 Friedrich Heyer, ed., *Die Kirche Armeniens: Eine Volkskirche zwischen Ost und West* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1978).

50 For ethnicities, minorities and post-Soviet nationalism in the South Caucasus, see Krista A. Goff, *Nested Nationalism: Making and Unmaking Nations in the Soviet Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

51 Tchilingirian, "The Armenian Apostolic Church," 2014.

52 For religion and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, see Kimitaka Matsuzato and Stepan Danielyan, "Faith or Tradition: The Armenian Apostolic Church and Community-Building in Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh," *Religion, State & Society* 41, no. 1 (2013): 18–34; Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Ohannes Geukjian, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in the South Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh and the Legacy of Soviet Nationalities Policy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); Andreas Müller, Harutyun G. Harutyunyan, Dagmar Heller, and Martin Tamcke, eds., *Das kulturelle Erbe von Arzach: Armenische Geschichte und deren Spuren in Berg-Karabach* (Kiel: Universitätsverlag Kiel, 2024).

organizations decrying human rights violations and the land occupation by Armenian forces. Between September 27 and November 10, 2020, the conflict escalated, resulting in Azerbaijan—with Turkish military support—occupying most of the territory; more than half of the Nagorno-Karabakh population was displaced, with 90,000 people moving to Armenia and 40,000 to Azerbaijan.⁵³ The war has led to the desecration of many religious sites, with 1,456 monuments—most of which were Armenian—coming under Azeri control. A resolution of the European Parliament in March 2022 denounced “the destruction, changing of the function of, or damage to other churches and cemeteries during and after the conflict.” It stated that “the long-running conflict has had a catastrophic impact on the cultural heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh and the region” and assessed that “89 Armenian churches, 20,000 graves and more than 5,000 headstones have been destroyed.”⁵⁴ In response to diplomatic negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and territorial exchanges, Archbishop Bagrat (Galstanyan) from the Tavush region organized a protest march to the capital, where he was welcomed by thousands of people demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. In May 2024, the “Tavush for the Homeland” movement put forward Archbishop Bagrat as a prime minister candidate.⁵⁵ In response, Pashinyan claimed that the political ambition of a senior clergyman was nothing more than spiritual failure, stating, “We are not in conflict with the church. The church conflicts with us [...] I’m afraid, at the highest level, it was the spiritual leadership that failed.”⁵⁶

The process of nation-state building in a young democracy, jurisdictional changes between four ecclesiastical sees, the influence of diasporic communities, and trauma associated with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have shown that religious authority is diffuse in Armenian society. Rather than being concentrated solely in the hands of one religious figure, as in many predominantly Orthodox countries, the extent of the political

53 “Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Bachelet Warns of Possible War Crimes as Attacks Continue in Populated Areas,” Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), November 2, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/11/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-bachelet-warns-possible-war-crimes-attacks?LangID=E&NewsID=26464>.

54 European Parliament, Resolution of March 10, 2022 on the Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh (2022/2582(RSP)), March 10, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0080_EN.html.

55 “‘Tavush for the Homeland’ Movement Names Arch. Galstanyan as Prime Minister Candidate,” *Horizon Weekly*, May 26, 2024, <https://horizonweekly.ca/en/archbishop-bagrat-galstanyan-has-been-nominated-as-the-candidate-for-prime-minister-of-armenia-by-the-opposition-movement/>.

56 “I’m Afraid the Spiritual Leadership at the Highest Level Has Failed,” *Radar Armenia*, May 7, 2024, <https://radar.am/en/news/politics-2630144179/>.

influence of the Armenian catholicos has regularly been challenged by state authorities. During the Cold War, political divisions between Soviet Armenia and Lebanon, which served as the respective headquarters of the two Armenian catholicosates, were paralleled by religious tensions. After the death of Vazgen in 1994, the Holy See elected Karekin I (Sarkissian) as Catholicos of All Armenians. Karekin I was previously Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia (1983–1994), and the election was regarded as an opportunity to bring the two sees together; however, he died in 1999 without being able to unify the two catholicosates. Despite the short tenure, in 1997, Karekin I started the construction of a monumental Saint Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral in Yerevan, which, at 60 meters tall, is one of the largest in the South Caucasus. It was built with funding from the diaspora and completed in 2001, in time for the 1700th anniversary of Christianity in the country.⁵⁷

In October 1999, Karekin II (Nersessian), who previously administered Armenian communities in Germany, was elected catholicos at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. Catholicos Karekin II was regarded as a close supporter of Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan and was widely criticized for benefiting financially and being involved in corruption scandals. When in May 2018—following peaceful mass protests known as the “Velvet Revolution”—Sargsyan resigned and was replaced by Nikol Pashinyan, leader of the opposition, some clergy called for political renewal to be accompanied by changes in the church hierarchy, stating that Karekin II had to resign, accusing him of misusing public funds and church relics.⁵⁸ The political use of relics was particularly poignant as, according to tradition, Apostle Thaddeus brought with him from Jerusalem the Holy Lance (Longinus's spear), which pierced Christ on the cross. The legend stated that the person who held the spear was “destined to rule the world.”⁵⁹ Religious mysticism and political revolution had an impact on how Armenian society regarded the church. In contrast to his predecessor, Pashinyan emphasized the need for separation between church and state and offered his own example, pointing out that, despite being a member of the Armenian Apostolic Church, he did not have a church ceremony when he married. Pashinyan visited Karekin II only in November 2018, recognizing that the church played an important role

57 “Armenia Consecrates New Cathedral,” *Azatutyun*, September 24, 2001, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/1567049.html>.

58 Vladimir Rozanskij, “Yerevan, Katolikos Karekin II Resigns,” *AsiaNews.it*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Yerevan,-Katolikos-Karekin-II-resigns-45030.html>.

59 Stepan Kocharyan, ed. and trans., “Armenian Church Offers Rare Public Viewing of Holy Lance at Mother See,” *Armenpress*, July 7, 2018, <https://armenpress.am/en/article/940150>.

in Armenian society.⁶⁰ Despite a number of protocolar meetings, tensions between the two leaders persisted and became publicly visible when, as the result of the tragedy of the 2020 war, in April 2023, Karekin II demanded that Pashinyan resign. Pashinyan rejected religious pressure on his government, declaring, “I will make a loud statement: if the church’s relations with the government are bad, then the church’s relations with God are bad.”⁶¹

Despite the ups and downs of relations between religious and political leaders, the church has enjoyed a prime position in religion-state relations. Article 18 (1) of the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Armenia (amended in 2005) stated that “the Republic of Armenia shall recognize the exclusive mission of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church, as a national church, in the spiritual life of the Armenian people, in the development of their national culture and preservation of their national identity.”⁶² In 2015, the church sanctified up to 1.5 million people who died in the 1915–1916 genocide in recognition of collective suffering and in a celebration of one of the largest gatherings of canonized people in Christian history.⁶³ The ceremony, which took place in Etchmiadzin, was officiated by Catholicos Karekin II and attended by President Sargsyan and foreign religious and political leaders, including the French president, François Hollande, and the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. For Hollande, the event was an opportunity to put into practice the 2001 legal recognition by the French National Assembly and the Senate of the 1915 Armenian genocide, while, for Putin, it was a political occasion to decry military clashes between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas by claiming that Ukraine was ruled by neo-fascists.⁶⁴

The favored legal status has had implications for the recognition of other religious minorities in the country. The 2022 population census showed that the Armenian Catholic Church and the Armenian Evangelical Church

60 “Pashinian Lauds Armenian Church,” *Azattyun*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.azattyun.am/a/29600908.html>.

61 “Catholicos of All Armenians Calls on Pashinyan to Resign; Pashinyan Compares Himself to God,” *Caucasus Watch*, April 22, 2023, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/catholicos-of-all-armenians-calls-on-pashinyan-to-resign-pashinyan-compares-himself-to-god.html>.

62 “Constitution of the Republic of Armenia,” The President of the Republic of Armenia, December 6, 2015, <https://www.president.am/en/constitution-2015>.

63 “Armenian Church Makes Saints of 1.5 Million Genocide Victims,” *France 24*, April 23, 2015, <https://www.france24.com/en/20150423-armenia-church-turkey-canonization-sainthood-genocide-victims>.

64 “Putin in Yerevan for 100th Anniversary of Armenian Genocide,” *The Moscow Times*, April 24, 2015, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/04/24/putin-in-yerevan-for-100th-anniversary-of-armenian-genocide-a46075>.

each account for around 0.6 percent; however, the number of the faithful in the diaspora is considerably higher.⁶⁵ In October 2023, Prime Minister Pashinyan received the Knights Grand Cross of the Order of Pope Pius IX, awarded by Pope Francis, as a sign of strengthening relations between the two countries and outreach to the Catholic diaspora.⁶⁶ In 2016, Pope Francis visited the Republic of Armenia, meeting religious and political leaders not only in Yerevan but also in Gyumri, ending his pastoral trip at Khor Virap Monastery.⁶⁷ Pope Francis's visit was notable for his strong affirmation and recognition of the Armenian genocide, in line with other Western European countries, while attracting condemnation from Turkish authorities.⁶⁸ In addition, the Republic of Armenia hosts one of the largest Yezidi communities in the world. At the 2022 census, 0.5 percent of the population declared themselves Yezidi; however, informal estimates suggest as many as 50,000 people, a number supported by mixed marriages and by the fact that Armenia is home to the largest Yazidi temple in the world, built in the village of Aknalich. In recognition of the 2014 mass killings of Yazidis in Iraq by the Islamic State, in 2018, the Armenian parliament designated the massacres as akin to genocide.

Religion and Forced Displacement

The 1915–1916 Armenian genocide has dramatically shaped the narrative of forced displacement and the ways in which religion has been linked to ethnic identity. The number of Armenians deported from the Ottoman Empire far exceeded the local population in camps scattered across the country's current territory. Etchmiadzin, near Yerevan, was transformed into a refugee town that housed 60,000 people and 3,000 orphans in 1915 alone, while Catholicos George V (Surennyants) (1911–1930) refused to relocate the Holy See and instead focused on organizing humanitarian efforts. Church support for refugees was also evident in the other ecclesiastical

65 Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia (Armstat), *Population of the Republic of Armenia as of January 1, 2024* (Yerevan: Armstat, 2024), <https://armstat.am/file/doc/99542773.pdf>.

66 "Prime Minister Pashinyan Receives the Medal Awarded by Pope Francis," The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, October 24, 2023, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2023/10/24/Nikol-Pashinyan-meeting/>.

67 "Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Armenia," The Holy See, June 24–26, 2016, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2016/outside/documents/papa-francesco-armenia-2016.html>.

68 Associated Press in Yerevan, "Pope Francis Denounces Armenian 'Genocide' during Visit to Yerevan," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/24/pope-francis-denounces-armenian-genocide-during-visit-to-yerevan>.

sees in Constantinople and Jerusalem. Despite its significant humanitarian engagement at the start of the twentieth century, the church did not demonstrate a comparable level of mobilization after the 1988 earthquake and during the early 1990s civil war. The Armenian Apostolic Church focused extensively on building new churches and strengthening links with the diaspora. Instead, in 1995, 61 institutions and 46 civil society organizations were involved in providing humanitarian support with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), one of the largest humanitarian organizations in the country.⁶⁹

Initially, *ad hoc* aid programs were initiated by Catholic and Evangelical communities. In 1996, an institutional framework was set up—the Armenia Round Table Foundation (ART)—between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the World Council of Churches, which also involved the Armenian Catholic Church and the Armenian Evangelical Church; in 2003, it was officially registered as a legal entity under the name the “World Council of Churches Armenia Inter-Church Charitable Round Table Foundation.” ART remained the church’s sole official humanitarian aid organization and had limited national outreach. For example, in 2012 and 2013, it provided food and hygiene vouchers, helping around 4,000 refugees in Yerevan. In 2015, it worked with local NGOs in Aleppo and Yerevan and provided social and psychological support to around 2,000 people. In 2017, it ran a program with Theatre 8 in Yerevan, including a performance titled “At Home among Strangers,” raising awareness of social obstacles faced by Syrian Armenians.⁷⁰ In 2024, its official website stated that since its foundation, ART had completed over 40 programs, which reached 3,700 people during the COVID-19 pandemic and over 13,000 people during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War.⁷¹ As evident from the numbers of people receiving humanitarian aid, large segments of the population in need remained largely without support.

In the early 1990s, refugees found support either through relatives, by taking over derelict buildings from the Soviet period, or by occupying properties left behind by the Azeri population. The UNHCR reported that between 1988 and 1993, 360,000 Armenians moved from Azerbaijan. The 1995 Citizenship Act provided clarity and incentives for Armenian refugees to acquire naturalization and the possibility of replacing their Soviet passports

69 Jasmine Dum-Tragut, “Welcoming Refugees? The Armenian Apostolic Church and Forced Displacement,” in *Religion and Forced Displacement in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia*, ed. Victoria Hudson and Lucian N. Leustean (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 301–36.

70 Dum-Tragut, “Welcoming Refugees?”

71 Armenia Round Table Foundation (ART), undated, <https://roundtable-act.am/#>.

with new travel documents; by 2004, over 65,000 refugees from Azerbaijan had acquired Armenian citizenship.⁷² Naturalization was also a means of enabling immigration to other countries with a large Armenian diaspora; for example, between 1991 and 1995, 5 percent of the entire Armenian population relocated to Russia—one of the highest immigration numbers in the former Soviet states, surpassing migration rates from Central Asian or Baltic states.⁷³

In 2011, the start of the Syrian civil war against the rule of Bashar al-Assad gradually engulfed the region. The rise of the Islamic State, which controlled eastern Syria and western Iraq, led to the movement of forcibly displaced populations affected by violence. By 2015, nearly 4 million people were displaced from their homes and lived in camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq. In response to the humanitarian crisis and in actively promoting Armenians from the diaspora to return to the country, the government set up consular offices in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, issuing citizenship and passports to Syrian Armenians. The state presented its immigration policy toward the large Syrian Armenian community as defending the descendants of Armenians who were able to escape the 1915–1916 genocide. The immigration policy had an immediate impact. If in 2012, 6,500 people arrived in Armenia, by 2015, arrivals had reached 15,000. The arrival of a high number of people posed a significant challenge to state institutions, particularly in the provision of accommodation and job opportunities, and many were encouraged to move to Nagorno-Karabakh.⁷⁴ In total, between 2012 and 2016, around 22,000 Syrian Armenians arrived in the Republic of Armenia, with around 15,000 people settling in the country. It is notable that not all Syrian Armenians decided to remain in the Republic of Armenia, with many emigrating to other places. If in 2012, the Syrian Armenian community numbered 100,000 people, four years later only 20,000 people remained in Syria. At the same time, Armenian authorities reported that 15,465 Syrian Armenians received Armenian citizenship between 2012 and June 2015.⁷⁵

72 Jennifer Clark, "Some 65,000 Refugees from Azerbaijan Gain Armenian Citizenship," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), February 6, 2004, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/some-65-000-refugees-azerbaijan-gain-armenian-citizenship>.

73 Liesl A. Riddle and Cynthia Buckley, "Forced Migration and Destination Choice: Armenian Forced Settlers and Refugees in the Russian Federation," *International Migration* 36, no. 2 (1998): 238.

74 "Syria's Armenians Look to Ancient Homeland for Safety," *BBC News*, September 10, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34210854>.

75 Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC)-Armenia, *Economic Integration of Syrian Armenians in Armenia: Needs Assessment Report* (Yerevan: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, 2017), https://www.crrc.am/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/EISRA_Needs_Assessment_Report_Final.pdf.

The discrepancy between the number of arrivals and the number of people receiving citizenship was due to the fact that not all Syrian Armenians registered as refugees and sought support from the state.

In interviews collected in May 2019, the Syrian Armenians were regarded as both a challenge and an opportunity for religious communities and state authorities.⁷⁶ The displacement of Syrian Armenians brought painful memories to Armenian public life, with identity questions in mass media on what it meant to be Armenian and what could be done to help those who suffered persecution abroad. In addition to economic challenges brought to society by the arrival of Syrian Armenians, many wondered if the arrival of diasporic communities would alter local traditions by imposing their own cultural norms. An interviewee claimed that state statistics were notoriously unreliable, as many people from the diaspora regularly traveled to Armenia before the Arab Spring. The number of Syrian Armenians in the Republic of Armenia was estimated at 50,000 to 70,000 people, which would explain the discrepancy between the large community in Syria and the remaining population. An interviewee thought that it was difficult for Syrian Armenians to integrate immediately into Armenian society due to linguistic changes and their own traditions. In many cases, people stayed for a short period of time in the country and then left for other destinations. Some of them had family connections in Armenia and did not register with authorities, while others found accommodation in the suburbs of Yerevan, which witnessed a rise in ghettoization. The government did not provide accommodation, and civil society organizations offered some help in this regard. Finding employment opportunities was particularly difficult, with many working in local businesses and the catering industry.

The Armenian Apostolic Church has acted as a mediator in enabling Syrian Armenians to travel, as Syrians could prove their Armenian ethnicity by showing a Syrian passport and a document from the church—in most cases, the baptism certificate—which was sufficient to enable the consulate to provide travel documents. The consulate also received applications from Muslims in Syria; however, these were not welcome. With the exception

76 Data collated from interviews with officials in the following organizations: 1. International Organisation for Migration, Yerevan; 2. Assyrian Church of the East in Armenia, Yerevan; 3. International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Yerevan; 4. National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, Yerevan; 5. Yerevan State University; 6. Yerevan State University; 7. Armenian Apostolic Church, Bishop, Gyumri; 8. Caritas Armenia, Gyumri; 9. Caritas Armenia, Gyumri; 10. Caritas Armenia, Gyumri; 11. Armenian Apostolic Church, Bishop, Ijevan; 12. Institute of Migration and Social Changes, Yerevan; 13. Yazidi community, Yerevan; 14. State Migration Service, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development, Yerevan (May 2019).

of providing baptism certificates, the church seemed detached from helping the Syrian Armenians once they arrived in the country. Civil society organizations, which had international funding, were present in the media, and their activities were widely known compared to those of religious communities. At the official level, the church did not issue statements in support of humanitarian programs across the country; however, it has regularly used the language of uniting “all Armenian brothers and sisters” and that society had the duty to preserve its identity, ethnicity, language, and traditions. Syrian Armenians were able to receive naturalization relatively quickly and, despite many not knowing the laws and tax regulations, as a general trend, women found it easier to integrate into Armenian society by finding low-skilled employment.

The Republic of Armenia was also a transit country for refugees from other countries; however, the numbers were small, with around 200 people each year. Many of them were young men or families with young children and arrived without documents at the Iranian border. The government adhered to international migration legislation and, as a whole, did not seem to know how to approach these cases. An interviewee pointed out that, despite state encouragement for Syrian Armenians to relocate, in practice, authorities differentiated between mixed Syrian Armenian marriages. In one case, a half-ethnic Assyrian and Armenian family from Aleppo was not allowed to enter the country for “not being fully Armenian.” The Assyrians numbered a few thousand people, the third largest ethnic community in Armenia, with most living in rural areas. Despite the small numbers, the Assyrian community expressed support for welcoming Assyrian refugees; however, only Syrian Armenians were able to relocate. An interviewee pointed out that the reluctance of the government to engage with Assyrian refugees stood in contrast to the reality on the ground; for example, during the 2016 four-day Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, an Armenian family was sheltered in the Assyrian-populated village of Verin Dvin for two months.

There were no tensions between Armenian and Assyrian communities; however, the Assyrian Church of the East was not recognized by the Armenian Apostolic Church. In 2015, Mar Gewargis III, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, moved the headquarters back from Chicago to Erbil in Iraq, where they were previously located until 1933.⁷⁷ In Armenia, the church was too small to establish its own humanitarian

77 In 2021, Mar Gewargis III Sliwa resigned due to health reasons and was succeeded by Mar Awa III. Dilan Sirwan, “The Assyrian Church of the East Elects New Patriarch in Erbil,” *Rudaw*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/o80920216>.

programs and appealed to the government for financial support to rebuild a kindergarten and churches. An interviewee mentioned that when the community approached state authorities with concerns that one of their churches was in urgent need of renovation and was about to collapse, the answer was that there were more important churches which needed state funding. The response was particularly disconcerting since, whereas most buildings were church property, those buildings classified as state monuments were state property and required permission to renovate them.

The same interviewee mentioned that the church was key to preserving the Assyrian community and that population movement had an impact on ethnic identity. After the closure of factories following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many Assyrians from the Arzni village, which had around 12,000 Assyrians, moved to Russia in the 1990s. Scattered across Russia rather than in just one community, Assyrians found it difficult to preserve their language and local traditions. In the diaspora, the largest communities were in Australia, the Nordic countries, and the United States, and as a whole, the Assyrian community in Armenia witnessed a trend of depopulation, with many people intending to leave the country. One interviewee thought that there were 5,000 Assyrians in Armenia in 2019; however, not all of them belonged to the Assyrian Church of the East.

The lack of a national humanitarian program run by the Armenian Apostolic Church toward refugees was decried by most interviewees. One interviewee even claimed that the general perception in society was that “the Armenian Apostolic Church is removed from the people” and that “Armenia is Christian only in name.” Much of the population was not aware of religious dogma; on the contrary, the country saw an increase in pagan practices. The church was regarded as too closely connected to state institutions and as following political decisions, as evident during Serzh Sargsyan’s presidency, when the catholicos attended meetings of the Security Council of Armenia.⁷⁸ The catholicos’s presence in the council was criticized as nothing more than just approving state policy and providing a better image for controversial governmental policies.

Armenia stood between two major political blocs: the European Union and Russia. From a religious perspective, political emphasis on family and traditional values was not just propagated by Russia but also found support in Armenian society. Annual ceremonies celebrating Victory Day on May 9

78 “President Serzh Sargsyan Invited a Meeting of the National Security Council in the Extended Format,” The President of the Republic of Armenia, September 8, 2009, <https://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2009/10/08/news-746/>.



Photo 6. People laying flowers on May 9, Victory Day, at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in the Haghtanak Park Memorial Complex, Yerevan, Armenia, 2019. Copyright: Lucian N. Leustean.

brought together large segments of the population visiting the Haghtanak Park (Victory Park) Memorial Complex in Yerevan, which displayed images of the role played by the church in preserving Armenian nationhood.

Both the political elite and general society favored Armenia's closer relations with the European Union; however, many politicians used the topic of traditional values as a tool to attract votes. In April 2019, when a transgender woman, Lilit Martirosyan, gave a speech during a hearing on human rights in the Armenian Parliament, the mass media praised her courage and determination to present a different voice. The historic speech was quickly marred by accusations that members of Parliament who invited Martirosyan were not aware of her sexuality; three days after the speech, protests involving a few priests took place outside the Parliament. Some even suggested that the parliamentary floor should be cleansed, blaming instead "aggressive propaganda and spreading of European values."⁷⁹ Martirosyan received xenophobic messages on social media, and her home address and the identities of those working for Right Side—the organization she

79 Giorgi Lomsadze, "Armenia Roiled by Transgender Woman's Speech in Parliament," *Eurasianet*, April 10, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-roiled-by-transgender-womans-speech-in-parliament>.

established in 2016—were leaked online. Far-right groups gathered outside her house, and online groups incited violence, saying, “Kill them if we find them,” while Vartan Ghukasian, from the Eurosceptic Prosperous Armenia Party, encouraged continued protests by declaring, “[Imprisonment] is not enough. They should be burned in the square.”⁸⁰

Another interviewee suggested that religion played a diminished role in Armenian society, which became more secular. During the Cold War period, the geographical location of the two catholicosates led to religious tensions, with the Holy See of Etchmiadzin being regarded as playing a more cultural role in the country while the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia was seen as more spiritual and revered—mainly because it was based in the diaspora and detached from direct government control. In the first years of state independence, Armenian religious revival made headlines, with cases of mass baptism involving hundreds of people; however, religious enthusiasm decreased over time. Despite the Armenian Apostolic Church broadcasting its own television channel, “Shoghakat TV,” since 1995, Armenian society was not religious and merely followed the “Christian tradition of lighting candles.” The interviewee pointed out that the church was “only a place to go to light candles or to perform traditions as part of Armenian culture.”

The transition from atheist communism to democracy has had an impact on church structures and social mobility; in particular, the construction of new churches revealed an unusual link between ethnicity and immigration. After working seasonally in Russia, several Armenians who returned to their villages and wanted to become more involved in church life built new churches with their own funds. Building a church raised one’s social status in the local community, unlike investing in a social project benefiting the poor. The new church was regarded as “lasting forever,” while religious welfare programs caused only administrative and bureaucratic problems. Soviet urbanization left many villages without churches and clergy. The clergy were seen more as preachers than as providers of pastoral support. For this reason, the parish character of churches, as evident in East European countries, was different. There were no parish communities, and the faithful attended the church and the priest they preferred. The clergy lamented that local people did not attend local services and instead traveled far away just because they preferred a charismatic preacher. In contrast to other Orthodox countries,

80 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Armenian MPs Call for Trans Activist To Be Burned Alive after Historic Speech,” April 26, 2019, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/apr/26/armenian-mps-call-for-trans-activist-to-be-burned-alive-after-historic-speech-lilit-martirosyan>.

priests did not perform religious services in the homes of the faithful and were thus detached and had little social engagement.

All monastic centers in the country were closed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to their perception as challenging secular and religious authorities and constituting places of potential dissent. The survival of the church during Soviet Georgia and the religious revival in the 1990s has made Catholicos Vazgen a nearly mythical figure in national consciousness. During the first two presidencies (Levon Ter-Petrosyan, 1991–1998, and Robert Kocharyan, 1998–2008), the church focused on national recognition and religious revival; however, during Serzh Sargsyan's term (2008–2018), church hierarchs were criticized for closely following state directives and being associated with controversial business links and oligarchs. Changes in religion-state relations took place only after the 2018 Velvet Revolution and democratic reforms under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. For these reasons, belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church was more important than believing in religious dogma. As an interviewee pointed out, church membership was an integral part of "identity, ethnicity, and cultural memory" for the entire country.

When presented with criticism received from most interviewees regarding the lack of humanitarian programs in support of refugees, a senior member of the clergy replied in an interview that, first of all, churches were places where Armenians met regularly. The church provided humanitarian aid to Syrian Armenians mainly in Syria. First, Armenian dioceses were asked to collect funds, which were then sent from Etchmiadzin directly to churches in Aleppo and Damascus. Second, the church encouraged Syrian Armenians to relocate to Armenia and receive help from the state or the Armenian General Benevolent Union—a nonprofit organization with headquarters in New York that is aimed at preserving Armenian identity. Third, the Holy See of Etchmiadzin had an Office for Social Work, which provided some assistance. The interviewee pointed out that the church helped refugees "according to our pastoral possibilities" and that "we have our limits. We are not a rich church." The church was primarily providing pastoral support, and the state bore the prime responsibility for providing guidance and material aid. In regard to the humanitarian work carried out by other religious organizations, the interviewee indicated that there was no collaboration between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Catholic Church. During the Soviet period, Catholic presence was limited and proselytism fears impeded cooperation. Caritas, the Catholic humanitarian agency, which benefited from international funding, was inaccurately regarded as helping only Catholic parishes and that its main task was to

revive the Armenian Catholic Church, not to support the local faithful. The interviewee highlighted an unexplored area, namely, the lack of public data on the number of people who decided not to emigrate simply due to the lack of an Armenian church abroad. As the interviewee indicated, the church was suffering from negative public relations rather than opposing the arrival of refugees, stating, “We have persuaded many people to remain by offering them jobs. How many people did not leave the country because of the church?” In the interviewee’s opinion, looking ahead and considering the future of Armenia, it was thought that many Indian and Iranian citizens arriving in the country sought baptism, and missionary work was necessary to preserve Armenian society—a view which disregarded the possibility of building a multifaith society.

In contrast to the comments of the senior Armenian Apostolic clergy, Caritas was engaged in a wide range of humanitarian programs working with refugees and Armenian returnees. Armenian Caritas has operated since 1995, employed local staff, and relied on the work of volunteers. The numbers increased gradually, having 200 staff members and 80 volunteers in 2024. The work reached 125 communities with 50 programs divided into five areas, namely, “social protection and care” (working with children and the elderly); “public healthcare”; “community development”; “migration, integration and prevention of trafficking”; and “emergency preparedness and response.”⁸¹ In particular, what differentiated Caritas’s work from other religious and civil society organizations was the social, medical, and legal assistance provided to Armenian returnees in three projects: the Sustainable Reintegration after Voluntary Return program for Armenians in Belgium, supporting 472 people since 2006; the Returnees from Netherlands, Austria, and Denmark program, supporting 163 people since 2016; and a third program, Frontex “Joint Reintegration Services,” with European Union funds to cover both voluntary and forced return of Armenian citizens who overstayed their visas in all EU countries from 2022 to 2025.⁸² Another innovative initiative was the provision of small financial support to displaced populations who moved from conflict zones to other parts of the country. Following similar initiatives in previous decades, in 2023, it launched the program “Emergency assistance for the most vulnerable households forcibly displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh,” which offered vouchers and

81 “Caritas Armenia”, Caritas, undated, <https://www.caritas.org/where-caritas-work/europe/armenia/>. The official website is <https://caritas.am/>.

82 “Caritas Armenia”, Armenian Caritas, undated, <https://caritas.am/category/mi/prevention-of-illegal-migration-and-integration/>.

psychological counseling. In addition to supporting local refugees, Caritas welcomed Syrian Armenians, and in 2019, around 50 families sought refuge at the premises of the Catholic Armenian Ordinariate in Yerevan.

Caritas offered support without regard to religious affiliation. Its programs were designed to help both forcibly displaced populations and those returning from abroad, in addition to providing a stimulus to the local economy by encouraging entrepreneurs to invest in local communities rather than emigrate. It even provided small loans to local businesses. Shirak Province and Gyumri, the second-largest city in the country, were particularly affected by the 1988 earthquake and economic uncertainties, resulting in the highest rates of poverty and unemployment in Armenia. Before 1988, Gyumri had a population of over 200,000 people who worked in 45 factories. Demographic decline accentuated with the 2011 census, which showed that 121,976 people lived in the city, while the 2022 census counted a slight decline to 112,301 people. An interviewee pointed out that the 1988 earthquake had a dramatic effect on people's lives and infrastructure. The government was completely unprepared in the face of a humanitarian catastrophe, and the lack of civil society organizations meant that support was extremely limited. After the Republic of Armenia declared independence, civil society organizations stepped in where the government failed to provide assistance. Caritas thus played a prime role in the development of civil society by reaching out to populations in need, carrying out programs that government or international secular organizations were unable to support. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Gyumri saw an increase in tourism and the mobilization of the younger generation, who engaged in development programs for the region.⁸³ Caritas's work fit the new development pattern, working with UNHCR, Frontex, and other international organizations and religious bodies abroad by providing humanitarian support in domains in which local authorities lacked expertise and financial backing. As a whole, Caritas did not face difficulties in approaching local authorities and engaging with the local population.

An innovative approach to humanitarian work took place in the Diocese of Tavush of the Armenian Apostolic Church, a region that shared the largest border zone with Azerbaijan (approximately 300 kilometers) and about 40 kilometers with Georgia. The diocese was run by a bishop and 11 priests who administered 62 communities (23 villages were situated directly on the border) with a population of around 30,000 people. An interviewee depicted

83 "A Tale of Three Cities: Armenian Municipalities Take Ownership of Their Development," United Nations Development Program (UNDP), March 20, 2024, <https://www.undp.org/european-union/stories/tale-three-cities>.



Photo 7. Poster in Gyumri, a reminder of the 2016 visit of Pope Francis and Catholicos Karekin II of the Armenian Apostolic Church, 2019. The poster reads "I love my Gyumri." Copyright: Lucian N. Leustean.

a similar economic situation to other parts of the country, as many factories and mines were closed; after the first Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a few villages with Armenians from Azerbaijan appeared in the region. For example, Debedavan village was settled by ethnic Armenian and Udi refugees (a small Caucasian tribe with its own language that had adopted Christianity) who left the Vardashen village in Azerbaijan. Many refugees took over the empty Azeri houses and properties left behind, and as the interviewee claimed, due to its remote location, there were no Syrian Armenians in the diocese. Most Syrian Armenians were present in Yerevan, where they attended the Zoravor Surp Astvatsatsin Church in the Araratian Pontifical Diocese, headed by Archbishop Navasard (Kochoyan). The local church was known for its generosity towards the Syrian Armenians through offering shopping vouchers and organizing community celebrations.⁸⁴ The work was carried out at the initiative of the local clergy rather than as part of a coordinated humanitarian policy of the church.

The interviewee pointed out that the Armenian Apostolic Church traced its social programs back to the life of Catholicos Nerses I the Great (d. 373), who built schools, poorhouses, and churches. To follow its social mission,

84 Dum-Tragut, "Welcoming Strangers?"

the diocese cooperated with the NGO “Bridge of Hope,” which provided humanitarian assistance to around 1,000 children in the cities of Dilijan, Ijevan, and Yerevan. The diocese intended to expand its work by building a sanatorium in the region aimed at bringing young children and teenagers together. The interviewee lamented the lack of financial support from the government and pointed out that more centers to train social workers were required. The interviewee stated that the country had to rethink fully its approach to social care, which was passionately summarized as follows: “We need to spend money on real people, not on bricks and water.”

Supporting the local population, particularly those who lived near the border, was an important task for both the church and the state. The interviewee indicated that border clashes took place regularly and that it was not possible to cross the border; at that time, an Armenian citizen who lived near the border was kidnapped and appeared in a court in Baku. The diocese was not engaged in interfaith relations, mainly because most of the population belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Jehovah’s Witnesses conducted missionary work in the region and found little support from the local population, mainly because the denomination’s refusal of military service clashed with the harsh reality of living on the border. The interviewee claimed that the state had the duty to invest more in the region, mainly because people committed themselves to living in a disputed territory which witnessed regular violence. The interviewee pointed out that the social and pastoral work done in the diocese was welcomed by authorities and did not face any restrictions: “I don’t own anything; everything I do is for the church. Entering any public place, I see my own people.”

The interviewee’s suggestion that the state had to do more for the region took on a national mobilization dimension in 2024 when the government agreed to return four villages occupied by Armenia during the first war in Nagorno-Karabakh (1988–1994). In May 2024, Archbishop Bagrat Galstanian, who headed the diocese, together with 500 people, organized a protest march to Yerevan. Reaching the capital, Galstanian was welcomed by thousands of protesters and became the leader of the “Tavush for the Homeland” movement, calling on Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian to resign.⁸⁵

The social work carried out in the Tavush diocese was singular in the church. Another interviewee confirmed that the Armenian Apostolic Church did not sign any cooperation agreements with the State Migration

85 Faustine Vincent, “Armenian Protestors March against Territorial Concessions to Azerbaijan,” *Le Monde*, May 10, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/05/10/armenia-protestors-march-against-territorial-concessions-to-azerbaijan_6670971_4.html.

Service of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development. State authorities emphasized the need for religion-state separation, and the general perception was that the church was not interested in providing humanitarian programs to refugees. Its main work was pastoral and missionary. In the religious realm, the only exceptions were Caritas and the Evangelical Church, which ran programs aimed at refugees. With the exception of Caritas, which was involved in large-scale humanitarian programs, other religious communities faced discrimination and threats of violence, and their work and outreach were limited to their congregations. In 2013, Pastor Levon Bardakjian of the Yerevan Evangelical Church stated that unidentified armed young men entered his church looking for him. A few days later shots were fired at his car.⁸⁶

An interviewee claimed that the term “migration” was contested and caused controversy and misunderstanding in Armenian society. The Republic of Armenia faced new challenges moving from being a country where large segments of the population wanted to emigrate to one experiencing immigration. In the last decade, faced with a shortage of low-skilled workers and visa liberalization, Armenian society faced a gradual increase in the number of Indian citizens. In 2023, 54,582 Indian citizens were in Armenia, 34,687 of whom entered the country on a tourist visa; however, most likely they were seasonal workers in the shadow economy.⁸⁷ The presence of Indians in the Republic of Armenia raised questions regarding the meaning of nationality, causing social tensions in a population not used to foreigners and more widely questioning the role played by the church in Armenian identity.

Tensions in the ways in which interviewees perceived church membership contrasted with and contributed to the wider social narrative. One interviewee claimed that the real church was only in the diaspora, as people were not interested in theological divisions between catholicosates and patriarchates. In the diaspora, people often gathered at the church after the service had ended to socialize. While the churches remained largely empty during the early hours of worship, attendance surged towards the end. For many, the church was a social hub rather than a spiritual place, where

86 US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, “Armenia 2013 International Religious Freedom Report,” <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/222399.pdf>.

87 Arshaluis Mgdesyan, “Indian Migrants Reshape Armenia’s Labor Market,” *Eurasianet*, February 21, 2024, <https://eurasianet.org/indian-migrants-reshape-armenias-labor-market>.

jobs were found, social services were coordinated, and religious networks facilitated community cohesion.

Almost everyone knew someone who died during the civil war or who served in the army. An interviewee stated that “in Armenia, being a refugee, or being a victim is always embarrassing,” mainly because the country aimed to move away from the victimization of the past and build a new future. Another interviewee emphasized the same public perception by claiming that the Armenian Apostolic Church was a major promoter of group identity. The human rights of an individual, such as a refugee, mattered only as long as the group identity was preserved. From this perspective, the church did not feel threatened by other non-Christian communities, as they did not affect the Armenian identity.

The Yazidis, the second largest ethnic group in the country, held a unique place with a strong link between their own religion and ethnicity. Yazidis moved to the territory of Armenia in the nineteenth century from northern Iraq. The 2022 census counted 31,079 people; nevertheless, the actual numbers were regarded as much higher—most likely around 50,000 people. There were no ethnic tensions between Armenians and Yazidis, as both groups were persecuted and suffered together in the 1915–1916 genocide. Many Yazidis migrated to Russia and Georgia in the 1990s and to the European Union after 2000; however, tradition required that all persons return to their homes in Armenia at least once per year to commemorate the dead and visit ancestral shrines. Yazidis remained a separate ethnic group, and state authorities did not attempt to impose civil rights on them. Marriage was allowed only in the Yazidi community, with girls usually married at 13 and boys at 15. Gender and education were regarded as the most challenging and followed ethnic traditions rather than the state legal system; early marriage meant that girls were taken out of education. For example, an interviewee pointed out that if a girl married at a young age, the state did not interfere; however, if a boy did not join the army at the age of 18, he would have been punished.

In 2019, Yazidis opened their largest temple in the world, Quba Mêrê Dîwanê (“All Will Come Together”), in the village of Aknalich, 35 kilometers from Yerevan. The temple, 25 meters high, was built with funds from a Russian businessman, Mirza Sloyan, a native of the Armavir region in Armenia. The temple followed Armenian architecture and seemed to resemble a church.⁸⁸ It was built to commemorate the 2014 Yazidi massacre by Islamic State militants in Iraq and as a place for bringing together the local community and stopping emigration. On September 29, each year—the official

88 Maxim Edwards, “Armenia to House World’s Largest Yazidi Temple,” *Eurasianet*, July 6, 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-to-house-worlds-largest-yazidi-temple>.

pilgrimage day—the temple gathered Yazidi religious leaders from across the world. Yazidis longed to visit Lalish, in northern Iraq, which held the holiest temple; however, as an interviewee pointed out, Armenian Yazidis did not want to live there. There were voices among the young Yazidi population demanding Yazidi autonomy in the Sinjar province in northern Iraq, which could help the resettlement of refugees. The anticipated move was regarded with suspicion and as causing a rise in further secession movements.⁸⁹

Being a member of the Yazidi community was possible only through birth, not conversion. As an interviewee stated, “Yazidis, first of all, feel themselves to be Yazidis, longing for their families and tribes. Their families are very important for them; it is difficult for them to migrate. We are an ethno-religious group; however, when we speak to each other, we are a nation.” The close link between religion and ethnicity, which excluded conversion, had wider social ramifications. An interviewee recalled a personal story, stating that “my grandmother said that during the 1915–1916 genocide, if Yazidis found a young child, they raised him/her and returned them to the Armenian community; if Kurds or Turks found one, they raised him or her as one of them.” The public perception of the most appropriate ways of engaging with ethnic minorities returned to public discourse after the 2014 persecution, with the Yazidi community divided regarding the children conceived during the Islamic State occupation of Iraq. The mothers were allowed to return to villages and tribes; however, their children were not considered Yazidis. After 2014, some families from northern Iraq sought refuge in Armenia, received language training and humanitarian aid, and were encouraged to remain in local communities.

89 Albert B. Wolf, “An Autonomous Yazidi Regional Government Could Help to Save Iraq,” Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), April 23, 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/autonomous-yazidi-regional-government-could-help-save-iraq>.

Conclusion: Is Eastern Christianity a Failed Religion?

Abstract: The conclusion addresses the hypothetical question of the conditions under which Eastern Christianity, as a world religion in its institutionalized forms, could be perceived as an instance of “failed religion.” It offers a policy blueprint for engaging with Orthodox structures to prevent religious failure while also presenting several points for reflection on the future of Eastern Christian churches, politics, and society in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Eastern Christianity; Religious Failure Index; Russia; Eastern Europe; South Caucasus.

At first glance, this question may seem somewhat anachronistic and unusual. Eastern Christianity, in a comparable manner to other world religions, is vulnerable to institutional failure; however, its deep societal involvement, often extending beyond state governance, can also promote human security in ways that state structures cannot.

Religion is not only a connection to the otherworldly but also a social system that, in its institutionalized form, provides meaning, mobilization, and support to populations in need. Religious failure, therefore, is a gradual process best understood through an analysis of four key indicators: namely, social, securitization and legal, economic, and geopolitical. In the Eastern Christian world, the strong emphasis on the concept of the nation, which encourages the politicization of religion and the advancement of geopolitical agendas, is a major contributor to religious failure.

The decree of the XXV World Russian People’s Council, “The Present and Future of the Russian World” (Moscow, November 27–28, 2023), signed by Patriarch Kirill on March 27, 2024, supports the notion that the

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conflict in Ukraine is nothing less than a “holy war” between Russia and the liberal West. The decree represents a striking example of religious failure, one that promotes a civilizational paradigm while prioritizing ethno-national state interests over compassion and the pursuit of peaceful solutions to conflict and violence affecting vulnerable populations. The statement has been a long time in the making, as evidenced by the evolution of the Moscow Patriarchate in the post-Cold War period and the ways in which state authorities have politicized religion. Russia’s ideologization of Orthodoxy has advanced five key areas that support the projection of global power, namely, (1) promoting a distinct Orthodox civilization and the concept of a “Russian World” as a counterpoint to the liberal West; (2) mobilizing Orthodox actors within the European Union; (3) incorporating the Russian Orthodox Church’s perspectives into national security strategies; (4) leveraging the 2016 Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church; and (5) expanding the church’s influence in the Middle East and Africa. In all of these areas, religious and political leaders have collaborated to advance Orthodox exceptionalism and to present Russia as a distinct civilizational model that other countries might emulate.

Religious organizations fail not only when political authorities exert direct influence over them but also when internal dynamics erode their integrity over time. Failure occurs when leaders, invoking divine right and spiritual authority, impose their personal views on social and political matters as absolute, without consulting or considering the wider religious community. Authority concentrated in the hands of a single individual is more prone to failure than systems where multiple voices engage in consultation on both secular and spiritual issues. Religious authority and governance take many forms, from the ways in which leaders are appointed within church structures, to the ways in which state power manifests itself in society, to the exercise of religious rights and the application of societal pressure on state institutions at both national and local levels.

When do Eastern Christian institutionalized structures fail? The following examples can be observed in predominantly Eastern Christian countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states, with some cases being more deeply rooted and publicly visible:

1. Electing (or appointing) religious leaders under the close scrutiny or direct involvement of the political authorities—in particular, by the state security services in the communist period and post-Cold War authoritarian regimes;

2. Advancing ethno-phyletism for geopolitical reasons, namely, the close connection between Orthodox spirituality, ethnicity, and nationhood;
3. Exercising governmental prerogatives, such as conveying diplomatic messages on behalf of state authorities when visiting religious counterparts or political leaders in other countries;
4. Refusing to speak on behalf of marginalized and persecuted people in society or caring for people in need, regardless of their religious affiliation;
5. Denigrating the arrival of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers, and emphasizing the concept of the “other”;
6. Excluding and persecuting minorities on gender, ethnic, or minority criteria as not conforming to Christian teachings;
7. Denigrating other religious communities in their own country and in the diaspora in order to achieve religious advantages and personal benefits;
8. Bypassing courts and exerting legal pressure in relation to church property restitution;
9. Purchasing positions in the church, ranging from a priest in a local parish to achieving a position in the senior hierarchy;
10. Politicizing religious symbols, festivals, ceremonies, and relics for financial gain and political influence in state organizations both at home and abroad;
11. Imposing and collecting excessive taxes to the detriment of local clergy and local communities in order to build megalomaniac church projects;
12. Controlling local clergy in order to demonstrate hierarchical authority rather than pastoral care and support of the faithful;
13. Managing the church as a business corporation or non-governmental organization in which all decisions are vested in the hands of the highest religious leader;
14. Emphasizing the concept of the “invisible” or “triumphant church” at the expense of the “material church,” excluding interfaith and ecumenical dialogue, and directly or indirectly promoting the idea that “there is no salvation outside the church” (*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*);
15. Placing national state interests to the detriment of embracing the fellowship of communion and the diversity of faith and religious practice across geographical spaces in the Eastern Christian world.

What can be done to overcome religious failure in the Eastern Christian world? Religious failure is a gradual process that unfolds over time, in a comparable manner to the process of state failure, without a single immediate

solution that can provide a remedy. Eastern Christian communities have long nourished the hungry, offered support during times of turmoil, and assumed state functions when government structures were absent or ineffective. However, the excessive emphasis on portraying themselves as the sole defenders of the concept of the nation has left Eastern Christian churches vulnerable to the politicization of religion and, more broadly, to exploitation for geopolitical purposes.

Promoting the concept of freedom of religion and belief within the framework of international organizations remains the primary means by which states ensure that their citizens are protected under both national and international law. The legal frameworks established by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHRC)—all of which have addressed religious issues and have provided guidance—recognize states at the core of the international system. Religious communities do not always see themselves as bound by state structures, and for this reason, identifying commonalities that address religious failure should be approached as a gradual process.

The following policy recommendations are intended not only for state authorities but also for religious leaders and the communities they represent.

1. *Recognize that a religious community is not only part of a wider world religion but also deeply embedded in the functioning of the state.* Each religious community in the Eastern Christian world, and beyond, has emerged at a specific historical moment, under circumstances shaped by the boundaries and power structures of the state, which impact religious demographics, traditions, norms, and values. Such institutions, power structures, and religious communities are not static but change over time.¹
2. *Acknowledge that no religious community is immune to political pressure simply because all states operate within an international system of states.* From a realist perspective, states compete for power, resources, and influence in an international system of states to advance their interests and ensure survival. States often draw, both directly and indirectly, on dominant and minority religious structures to strengthen their geopolitical standing. Religious leaders must understand their societal role as mediators between the spiritual responsibilities entrusted to

1 For the relationship between religion, modern state and the idea of Europe, including a chronology and comparative statistical data, see Grace Davie and Lucian N. Leustean, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

them by their communities and the secular demands of the state. In the Eastern Christian world, rather than aligning with geopolitical agendas, religious leaders should prioritize engagement with local communities and advocate for marginalized and vulnerable populations. There remains an urgent need for both spiritual and material care for those affected by violence and displacement—needs that must take precedence over the pursuit of geopolitical influence.²

3. *Reform hierarchical leadership structures to place emphasis on community service over institutional stability.* In Orthodox and Oriental Christianity, senior hierarchs—such as patriarchs, metropolitans, archbishops, and bishops—are typically appointed for life. Introducing a system that allows hierarchs to retire at a certain age or serve fixed terms could shift the focus from maintaining institutional authority to addressing the needs of local communities. Such a reform would encourage hierarchs to serve their grassroots communities first, rather than seeking positions of religious power. Leadership rooted in humility and service can strengthen the spiritual and social fabric of the church.
4. *Embrace interfaith and interorganizational dialogue as a path to mutual understanding, social cohesion, and engaging with the “other.”* Religious leaders should actively seek dialogue with counterparts from other faith-based communities and secular organizations. Orthodox communities that have worked together with Catholic and Protestant counterparts, as well as with secular organizations, have been more successful in directly reaching refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and marginalized populations. In the Eastern Christian world, interfaith and ecumenical dialogue is often viewed with suspicion, criticized for causing confusion among the faithful or serving as a platform for proselytism. However, this perception has not always been the case.³ A structured dialogue at both the parish and national levels can foster mutual recognition and respect. Engaging with others should be seen not as a threat but

2 For other examples of religion and forced displacement, see Victoria Hudson and Lucian N. Leustean, eds., *Religion and Forced Displacement in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

3 Constantin G. Patelos, ed., *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement: Documents and Statements, 1902–1975* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1978); Georges Tsetsis, *Orthodox Thought: Reports of Orthodox Consultations Organised by the World Council of Churches, 1975–1982* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983); Gennadios Limouris, ed., *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism: Statements, Messages and Reports on the Ecumenical Movement, 1902–1992* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994); Todor Sabev, *The Orthodox Churches in the World Council of Churches: Towards the Future* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996).

as a meaningful step toward building an inclusive society. Dialogue is the first step toward understanding differing perspectives, identifying common ground, and working together to support people in need.

5. *Promote financial transparency and accountability in religious fundraising and resource management at home and in the diaspora.* Religious groups often compete for financial resources from both state institutions and their own communities. In managing funds, whether for building churches at home or in the diaspora, religious leaders should prioritize transparency and accountability.⁴ Fundraising efforts should reflect and recognize the work carried out at the grassroots level by local clergy and volunteers, with the primary goal of supporting marginalized and underserved communities.
6. *Reimagine sacred spaces as inclusive places of shared spiritual and cultural heritage, bringing together religious and non-religious people.* Sacred sites should be open to all. Religious communities and their leaders must reconsider the ways in which the sacred and the secular interact within their societies. Rather than excluding individuals perceived as outsiders to local identities, religious leaders should open sacred spaces as symbols of communal participation in religious life. When sacred sites are viewed not as exclusive domains but as expressions of humanity's shared multi-religious experience, political leaders are less likely to justify the use of military force to seize them. Inclusivity in sacred spaces can foster peace, mutual respect, and a deeper sense of shared belonging.
7. *Establish a permanent international framework for regular inter-Orthodox and interfaith dialogue that transcends political pressure.* Religious leaders should convene regularly within a newly established institutional framework designed for this purpose at the international level. In the Eastern Christian world, there is a pressing need for consistent dialogue, which could initially be organized under the leadership of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, as *primus inter pares*, and later rotate among other national churches. The gatherings would provide a platform to address urgent pastoral and trans-societal issues, and the 2016 Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church offers a model that could be replicated through a

4 Giuseppe Tateo, *Under the Sign of the Cross: The People's Salvation Cathedral and the Church-Building Industry in Postsocialist Romania* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020); Marco Guglielmi, *The Romanian Orthodox Diaspora in Italy: Eastern Orthodoxy in a Western European Country* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

permanent religious body meeting annually or biannually.⁵ Regular assemblies involving leaders from all Orthodox and Oriental churches, with the participation of the clergy and laypeople, as well as other Christian denominations and world religions, would allow for the exchange of best practices in supporting populations affected by violence and displacement. Such a framework would strengthen the ability of religious communities to resist political pressures at home. Rather than operating as an exclusivist project, as is the case with the Committee of Representatives of Orthodox Churches to the European Union, a pan-Orthodox institutional body could collaborate with ecumenical organizations such as the Conference of European Churches (Brussels)⁶ and the World Council of Churches (Geneva).⁷ A unified stance through religious diplomacy would empower national churches to resist being weaponized for political gains.

8. *Re-evaluate and promote the inclusion of women in religious leadership and decision-making.* Across the Eastern Christian world, women are often the most active members of local religious communities, caring for the poor, supporting the elderly, and assisting those in need. Despite their vital contributions, women remain largely excluded from leadership roles and decision-making processes within religious institutions. A long-overdue process of inclusion should begin with gradual but meaningful steps, such as granting women physical access to worship spaces traditionally reserved for male clergy, as well as ministerial recognition and participation in religious governance.⁸
9. *Adapt to global change through innovation, openness, and community-centered leadership.* The world is rapidly changing. Technological innovation, digitalization,⁹ population movements, public health

5 Elizabeth Prodromou, "The Ambivalent Orthodox," *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 2 (2004): 62–75; Lucian N. Leustean, "Eastern Orthodoxy, Geopolitics and the 2016 'Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church,'" *Geopolitics* 23, no. 1 (2018): 201–16.

6 "CEC Visits Ukraine, Accompanying Churches in Their Struggles for Peace," Conference of European Churches (CEC), April 9, 2024, <https://ceceurope.org/cec-visits-ukraine-accompanying-churches-their-struggles-peace>.

7 "WCC Statement on 3rd Anniversary of Russian Invasion of Ukraine," World Council of Churches, February 21, 2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-statement-on-3rd-anniversary-of-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>.

8 Elizabeth Prodromou and Nathanael Symeonides, "Orthodox Christianity and Humanitarianism: An Introduction to Thought and Practice, Past and Present," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2016): 1–8; Helena Kupari and Elina Vuola, eds., *Orthodox Christianity and Gender: Dynamics of Tradition, Culture and Lived Practice* (London: Routledge, 2020).

9 Dragoș Șamșudean, *Eastern Christianity in the Digital Space: Why Romanian Orthodox Bloggers Post Online?* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2024).

challenges,¹⁰ and advanced cross-cultural and artificial intelligence communication are bringing people into contact on an unprecedented scale. Religious communities that fail to adapt to these shifts risk stagnation, decline, or even collapse. Religious leaders who focus exclusively on the otherworldly, while neglecting the real-world challenges faced by their communities, are more likely to resist innovation and align with extreme political ideologies. To remain relevant and resilient, religious leadership must embrace change, engage with contemporary issues, and guide their communities with both spiritual insight and practical honesty.

10. *Demonstrate that institutionalized religion can be a force for social progress through direct action and engagement with people in need.* Religious leaders should actively show, and emphasize in their interactions with state authorities, that religion can contribute meaningfully to social progress.¹¹ By supporting vulnerable populations, welcoming others, developing non-politicized humanitarian programs, and addressing the social needs of marginalized groups, religious communities can help fulfill societal functions that local authorities may be unable or unprepared to manage. Such engagement not only reinforces the relevance of religion in public life but also positions religious institutions as constructive partners in building more just and compassionate societies.

These examples are not exhaustive and should be viewed as part of a wider, evolving process of reflection and reform. Examples of areas that may lead to religious failure, and potential solutions, must be examined within a better understanding of evolving religion-state relations. Since 1989, the legacy of communism has remained visible in the ways in which the concept of *symphonia* has shaped these relations in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states. On the one hand, persecuted churches have been officially

10 Tornike Metreveli, ed., *Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic* (London: Routledge, 2023).

11 Erin K. Wilson, *Religion and World Politics: Connecting Theory with Practice* (London: Routledge, 2022); Jeffrey Haynes, *Religion and Development: Conflict or Cooperation?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017); Grace Davie, Nancy T. Ammerman, Samia Huq, Lucian N. Leustean, Tarek Masoud, Suzanne Moon, Jacob K. Olupona, Vineeta Sinha, David A. Smilde, Linda Woodhead, Fenggang Yang, and Gina Zurjo, "Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships," in *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel for Social Progress*, vol. 3, *Transformations in Values, Norms, Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 641–76.

re-established, while traditional centers of religious authority have sought to strengthen their ties with state structures. On the other hand, religious communities that cooperated with communist authorities during the Cold War have often emerged in advantageous positions. While maintaining public support from the faithful, they have also gained access to state funding at both domestic and foreign policy levels.

The primary actors in the Eastern Christian world remain the Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church, between whom jurisdictional tensions and deep divisions persist. The Moscow Patriarchate has promoted the idea of a distinctly Orthodox civilization grounded in “traditional values,” positioning itself in opposition to the secularism of the European Union and Western liberalism. More importantly, Orthodox churches have maintained an ambivalent stance toward the political project of European integration. While many church leaders have supported their countries’ accession to the EU, they have also expressed concern over the spread of secular values among the faithful and the potential erosion of ecclesiastical authority. Russia’s endorsement of a unique Orthodox civilization and its defense of the “Russian World” concept serve to bolster its geopolitical influence and reticence in engaging with the West.¹²

The political theology of Orthodox churches has become increasingly assertive in the public sphere. Clergy involvement in national elections, appointments to parliamentary positions, exemption from lustration processes, and the elevation of “nation” and “nationalism” as central ecclesial concepts have all shaped the post-communist Orthodox political theology. These developments are not anomalies in religion-state relations but reflect a larger pattern of Orthodox engagement with political culture and state-building. The democratization process has incorporated the church’s presence in the public domain, not only because of its societal influence but also due to the legitimacy that political engagement confers.

The decision to convene the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church in 2016, agreed upon by the heads of the autocephalous churches shortly after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014, had both religious and political consequences. The synod failed to address the contentious issue of overlapping church jurisdictions in Ukraine, while Russia’s takeover of Crimea was not unanimously condemned by the Orthodox churches. The

12 John T. S. Madeley, “Enigmatic Variations: Russia and the Three Secularities,” in *A Secular Age beyond the West: Religion, Law and the State in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Mirjam Künkler, John Madeley, and Shylashri Shankar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 265–94.

lack of consensus persisted during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as Orthodox leaders remained divided, with some aligning with Moscow and others with Kyiv. The failure to present a unified moral stance has further exposed the fractures within global Orthodoxy and underscored the complex entanglement of religious authority with geopolitical loyalties.¹³

Interchurch relations have shown that Orthodoxy has moved closer to Catholicism than ever before. At the same time, its relationship with Protestantism remains more complex. While there was significant engagement between Orthodox and Protestant churches during the interwar and Cold War periods, the ordination of women in many Protestant denominations has created a major theological and ecclesiological divide. Additionally, differences in leadership structures have further distinguished Orthodox churches from their Catholic and Protestant counterparts. The Catholic Church, in an unprecedented move, signaled a shift in its understanding of papal authority with the retirement of Pope Benedict XVI, introducing the concept of a pope emeritus. In many Protestant traditions, such as the Church of England, the highest ecclesiastical authority, like the archbishop of Canterbury, is appointed for a limited term rather than for life. The Catholic and Protestant evolving models of leadership contrast with the Orthodox tradition, where senior hierarchs typically serve for life, highlighting a key area of divergence in inter-Christian relations.

The number of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental faithful remains disputed and continues to have a long-term impact on religion-state relations. For example, the combined jurisdictions in Ukraine—between the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate—may include as many as 30 million faithful, making it the second-largest church in Eastern Christianity. The Russian Orthodox Church currently claims this figure under its jurisdiction. In January 2024, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine reported 8,295 communities, while the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate had 10,919 communities—and tensions between these two Ukrainian churches are expected to persist.¹⁴ Although religious affiliation is not officially recorded by state authorities, the national Orthodox Church of Ukraine has significantly expanded its membership and institutional presence. Additionally, in Russian-occupied

13 Jerry G. Pankhurst and Alar Kilp, "Religion, the Russian Nation and the State: Domestic and International Dimensions: An Introduction," *Religion, State & Society* 41, no. 3 (2013): 226–43; Katherine Kelaidis, *Holy Russia? Holy War? Why the Russian Church is Backing Putin Against Ukraine* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2023).

14 Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), "Religious Freedom in Ukraine Under Moscow's Rule and Kyiv's Rule," *Kyiv Post*, January 12, 2025, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/45251>.

territories, religious freedom remains a sensitive issue, with many clergy reportedly detained and pressured to participate in state propaganda.¹⁵

Similarly, the number of Eastern Christians in the Middle East remains uncertain. For instance, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, based in Syria, unofficially claims over 4 million faithful, compared to only half a million reported by Syrian state records. Political challenges in the region continue to be closely tied to the survival of Eastern Christian churches both at home and in the diaspora, affecting not only the very existence of these churches but also the future of interreligious dialogue.

Forced displacement remains one of the most pressing challenges facing the Eastern Christian world; as a whole, Eastern Christian churches maintain only limited humanitarian initiatives and lack comprehensive national programs to engage with refugees and vulnerable populations. For example, despite belonging to the same recognized fellowship of Orthodox churches, there was virtually no contact between the humanitarian departments of churches in the Middle East and those in Eastern Europe. In Serbia, refugees housed in reception centers received support from local organizations, and no religious institutions from their own countries inquired about them. Surprisingly, despite sharing the same word, “Philanthropy,” in their official titles, there was no contact between the humanitarian offices of the Serbian and Romanian Orthodox Churches—two neighboring communities. That collaboration between religious communities reached the lives of many was evident in Ukraine, where the Orthodox Church of Ukraine benefited from the expertise of Caritas and from interfaith dialogue. When Russia launched its full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it was the humanitarian department of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine which stood out as one of the key supporters of displaced populations. In May 2022, the Eleos-Dnipro Humanitarian Center became the largest provider of aid for those fleeing Mariupol, assisting 3,000 people each day. Most importantly, the center was entirely run by the church, demonstrating that gaining expertise through long-term interfaith collaboration can effectively support people in need and provide support, especially when state structures are unable to do so. In contrast, humanitarian aid from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate remained limited to *ad hoc* initiatives.

The weaponization of migration has led to a redefinition of jurisdictional boundaries within the Eastern Christian world. As a general trend, the rise

15 Vira Kravchuk, “Obey to Pray: Russia’s Ruthless Crackdown on Faith in Occupied Ukraine,” *Euromaidan Press*, April 23, 2024, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2024/04/23/obey-to-pray-russias-ruthless-crackdown-on-faith-in-occupied-ukraine/>.

of far-right political movements has been mirrored by religious discourses condemning the arrival of refugees and displaced populations, as visible in Bulgaria, Greece, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Serbia. In Bulgaria, refugees were described as “a true invasion,” while in the Republic of Moldova, senior clergy were able to influence electoral outcomes. Instead of investing in humanitarian programs, Eastern Christian churches have focused on constructing some of the largest religious structures in the world, including the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, the National Cathedral of Romania (People’s Salvation Cathedral) in Bucharest, the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade, the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi (Sameba Cathedral), and Saint Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral in Yerevan. In the Republic of Armenia, clergy have expressed concern over the substantial funds allocated to these monumental projects, lamenting that they reinforce ethnic and national divisions rather than promote inclusion, interfaith dialogue, and care for people in need. In contrast to the stance taken by many other leaders, a senior member of the clergy has poignantly captured the current situation, stating, “We need to spend money on real people, not on bricks and water.”

Despite the lack of a unified international stance on forced displacement, there have been encouraging instances where religious leaders have played a constructive role in addressing humanitarian needs. In the Catholic world, Pope Francis has set a powerful example by visiting refugee camps and engaging with displaced communities. His July 2013 visit to Lampedusa was particularly impactful, as he called for a reassessment of the ways in which refugees and migrants are perceived—not as burdens but as human beings:

Has any one of us wept for these persons who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who were looking for a means of supporting their families? We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion—“suffering with” others: the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!¹⁶

His words echoed those of Raphael Lemkin, a Polish lawyer who escaped Nazi persecution and whose pioneering work led to the coining of the term “genocide” and its recognition in international law. In a speech delivered at Duke University, where he found refuge in 1941, Lemkin asked: “If women,

16 “Visit to Lampedusa: Homily of Holy Father Francis,” The Holy See, July 8, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html and Howard Chua-Eoan, “A Pope for the Poor,” *Time*, July 29, 2013, <https://time.com/archive/6596286/a-pope-for-the-poor/>.

children, and old people were being murdered a hundred miles from here, wouldn't you run to help? Then why do you stop this decision of your heart when the distance is five thousand miles instead of a hundred?"¹⁷

Three years after Pope Francis's trip to Lampedusa, in April 2016—following the arrival of refugees on the island of Lesbos from the Middle East—Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, and Archbishop Ieronymos II of Athens visited the Mória Refugee Camp in a powerful gesture of solidarity that transcended interfaith divisions. The belief that religious leaders have a moral duty to engage with displaced populations has been consistently emphasized by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. He condemned the violence in Ukraine, invoking the lessons of former Yugoslavia, particularly the 1992 Berne Declaration¹⁸ and the 1994 Bosphorus Declaration,¹⁹ which warned that “crime in the name of religion is the greatest crime against religion” and that “appeals and exploitation of religious symbols to further the cause of aggressive nationalism are a betrayal of the universality of religious faith.” In his address at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, Patriarch Bartholomew stated:

As a Christian, to love our neighbor is not a preference, recommendation, nor even an option, but it is a command [...] For we all know that, in a large or a small way, all the same, we have caused these crises, we have benefited at the expense of others suffering [...] Therefore, let us look beyond the terminology, refugees-migrants-asylum seekers-internally displaced peoples; let us look beyond the colour of their skin, the creed or faith they adhere to; and let us see the eyes of God's human creation, transforming these crises to an opportunity for building bridges, for practicing solidarity, for changing hearts.²⁰

As a whole, from the grassroots level to senior leadership, the Eastern Christian world encompasses a diverse array of churches and religious communities, some of which are in communion with one another, while

17 Raphael Lemkin, *Totally Unofficial: The Autobiography of Raphael Lemkin*, ed. Donna-Lee Frieze (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 103.

18 “Berne Declaration,” Appeal of Conscience Foundation, November 26, 1992, <https://appealofconscience.org/berne-declaration/>.

19 “Bosphorus Declaration,” Appeal of Conscience Foundation, February 9, 1994, <https://appealofconscience.org/bosphorus-declaration/>.

20 “Address by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Global Refugee Forum, Geneva,” World Council of Churches, December 14, 2023, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-the-global-refugee-forum>.

others are gradually forming new religious structures shaped by state power, ethnic identity, and national boundaries. Emphasizing interfaith and secular dialogue, while acknowledging the constraints of the international system of states, could enable Eastern Christian communities to play a more dynamic role beyond the reach of state control and political influence. As a world religion, Eastern Christianity does not promote religious and political exceptionalism and is not defined solely by ethnic or national lines. In fact, it is deeply local. By rejecting state interference and instead prioritizing social welfare, interfaith relations, and the wider fellowship of churches, Eastern Christianity can begin to move away from the politicization of religion.

With its rich variety of practices and institutional frameworks, Eastern Christianity offers one of the most fascinating examples of religion-state relations in the modern world. New Orthodox communities will continue to emerge, while others may gradually disappear or merge over time. It is this religious and political diversity, both within traditional centers and across the diaspora, that will shape the future of Eastern Christianity.

References

The web links to mass media publications, datasets, and policy reports from international organizations are included in individual chapters. All web links listed in the book were available in June 2025.

Mass media

Adevărul (Romania)
Agenda (Georgia)
Agenția de presă (Republic of Moldova)
Agora (Republic of Moldova)
Armenian News
Armenian Press
Balkan Insight
Berkley Center
BBC
Bloomberg
Boulevard Bulgaria
Caucasus Watch
Catholic Herald
Catholic News Agency
Catholic World Report
Censor.NET (Ukraine)
Church Times
Club "Z" (Bulgaria)
CNN
Deutsche Welle
Euromaidan Press
Euro Weekly News
Euronews
Eurasia Daily Monitor
Eurasianet
Financial Times
First Things
Foreign Affairs
Foreign Policy
Forum 18
France 24
Georgian Journal
Georgia Today
Georgian Public Broadcaster
Horizon Armenian Weekly
Kyiv Post (Ukraine)
La Stampa (Italy)

Le Monde (France)
LB (Ukraine)
LSE Religion and Global Society
Meduza (Russia)
N1 Srbija (Serbia)
Novaya Gazeta Europe (Russia)
Nezavisimaya Gazeta (Russia)
OffNews (Bulgaria)
Public Orthodoxy
Pravda (Russia)
Prospect Magazine
Radar Armenia
Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
RBC-Ukraine
Religion Unplugged
Religious Information Service of Ukraine
Reuters
RIA Novosti (Russia)
Rudaw Media Network (Iraq)
Sarajevo Times (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
Sofia Globe (Bulgaria)
Spiritual Front of Ukraine
TASS – Russian News Agency
Talk About
The Economist
The Guardian
The Huffington Post
The Kyiv Independent
The Irish Times
The Jerusalem Post
The Moscow Times
The New Voice of Ukraine
The New York Times
The Times of Israel
The Tablet
The Washington Post
Time Magazine
Ukrainska Pravda
Ziarul de Gardă (Republic of Moldova)
Yale Journal of International Affairs

Datasets

Rosstat, Federal State Statistics Service, Russia
Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Switzerland

International Organization for Migration. Datasets on Europe on Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Yearly Overviews
 Pew Research Centre. 2017. "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe"

International organizations

Conference of European Churches
Council of Europe
European Court of Human Rights
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
The European Parliament
UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund)
United Nations Development Programme
United Nations General Assembly
World Council of Churches

List of Interviews

*The interviews were conducted in English, except in the Republic of Moldova, where they were carried out in Romanian. The interviews marked with * were conducted with the assistance of a local translator.*

Belgrade and the Principovac Reception Center (Municipality of Šid), Serbia (February 2018)

1. Philantropia Department of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Belgrade
2. Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Belgrade
3. Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Belgrade
4. Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade
5. Representation of the European Union in Serbia, Belgrade
6. Journalist, Belgrade
7. Orthodox Priest near the Principovac Reception Center in a village on the Croatian-Serbian Border, Serbian Orthodox Church*
8. Refugee from Iran in the Principovac Reception Center*
9. Refugee from Afghanistan in the Principovac Reception Center*

Kyiv, Ukraine (March 2018)

10. National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine
11. National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine
12. Department for Religious Affairs and Nationalities, Ministry of Culture of Ukraine
13. Gender Budgeting in Ukraine Project, Kyiv

14. Representation of the European Union in Ukraine
15. Journalist
16. Humanitarian and Emergency Programs, Caritas Ukraine
17. Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate, Priest involved in the Exchange of Prisoners in Donbas*
18. Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate, Department of External Church Relations*
19. Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate, Bishop*
20. Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate, Priest traveling regularly to Donbas region*
21. Kyiv Theological Academy
22. Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate, Bishop*
23. Department of Social and Charitable Work, Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate*
24. Presidential Administration
25. Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople

Chişinău, Moldova (*February 2019*)

26. The Orthodox Metropolitanate of Bessarabia
27. Caritas Moldova
28. The Islamic League of the Republic of Moldova
29. The Islamic League of the Republic of Moldova
30. State University of Moldova
31. State University of Moldova
32. Migration and Local Development Project, The United Nations Development Programme in Moldova
33. Member of Parliament
34. Foreign Affairs Board, Action and Solidarity Political Party
35. Journalist, National Television
36. Institute for Policy and European Reforms

Sofia, Bulgaria (*February 2019*)

37. International Organization for Migration
38. Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria
39. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Representative in Bulgaria
40. Representation of the European Union in Bulgaria
41. Volunteer (Caritas) and Teacher, Secondary School, Sofia
42. Volunteer (Caritas) and Academic, Bulgarian Academy of Science
43. Bulgarian Academy of Science
44. Bulgarian Academy of Science
45. Bulgarian Academy of Science
46. New Bulgarian University
47. New Bulgarian University

Tbilisi, Georgia (*May 2019*)

48. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Representative in Georgia
49. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee Representative in Georgia
50. Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

51. Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University
52. Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University
53. Caritas Georgia
54. Caritas Georgia
55. Tolerance and Diversity Institute
56. Tolerance and Diversity Institute

Yerevan, Gyumri and Ijevan, Armenia (May 2019)

57. International Organization for Migration, Yerevan
58. Assyrian Church of the East in Armenia, Yerevan
59. International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Yerevan
60. National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, Yerevan
61. Yerevan State University
62. Yerevan State University
63. Armenian Apostolic Church, Bishop, Gyumri
64. Caritas Armenia, Gyumri
65. Caritas Armenia, Gyumri
66. Caritas Armenia, Gyumri
67. Armenian Apostolic Church, Bishop, Ijevan
68. Institute of Migration and Social Changes, Yerevan
69. Yazidis community, Yerevan
70. State Migration Service, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development, Yerevan

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