

DEFENDER OF THE FAITHS: HOW THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT USES RELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY

BY DR JADE MCGLYNN



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By Dr Jade McGlynn

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About the Author

Dr Jade McGlynn is an Associate Fellow of the Russian and Eurasian Studies Centre. She holds a DPhil in Russian from the University of Oxford, an MA by research in Russian and East European Studies (University of Birmingham), and a BA in Russian and Spanish (University of Oxford).

She has published in various media outlets (*Foreign Policy*, *The Spectator*, *The Times*) and leading academic journals (*Memory Studies*, *Nationalities Papers*). She is also the author of a forthcoming book on the politics of memory in contemporary Russia, *The Kremlin's Memory Makers*, contracted with Bloomsbury for release in 2022. She has co-authored two edited volumes (*Rethinking Periodization*, De Gruyter, 2021; *Researching Memory and Methodology*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

Jade is frequently called upon to contribute her expertise on Russian political culture and foreign policy, as well as soft power and public diplomacy, by government institutions (FCDO, MOD), think tanks and NGOs (*Instituto Real Elcano*, *CSIS*, *British Council*) and the media (*MSNBC*, *Times Radio*, *The Telegraph*, *Business Insider*, *BBC Russian Service*). Her work is informed by her experiences living and working in Russia for five years. Jade has also held research fellowships in Spain, Serbia, the USA, and Ukraine. As well as fluent Russian, Jade has language skills in Spanish, French, Serbian, and Ukrainian.

Transliteration and translation

Throughout this report, I have transliterated Russian into English using the British Standard (BS 2979:1958, as modified in Oxford Slavonic Papers). All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

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Contents

About the Author	2
Transliteration and translation	2
Acknowledgments	2
About The Henry Jackson Society	4
About the Russia & Eurasia Studies Centre.....	4
Executive Summary.....	5
Glossary	6
1. Russian Values under Attack	7
<i>1.1: Chapter Overview</i>	<i>9</i>
2. Demonstratively Defending the Feelings of Religious Believers	10
<i>2.1: Methodology</i>	<i>10</i>
3. The Role of Religion in Russian Doctrine	12
<i>3.1: National Identity: Multiconfessionalism versus Multiculturalism</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>3.2: Cultural Sovereignty, Spiritual Values, and Existential Security</i>	<i>14</i>
4. Russian Uses of Religious Diplomacy	15
<i>4.1: Christianity.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>4.1.1. Defender of Conservative Christian Values</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>4.1.2. Protector of Christians</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>4.1.3. Case Studies: Montenegro and Ukraine.....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>4.2: Islam.....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>4.2.1. Russia as a (partly) Muslim Country and the Use of Surrogate Diplomacy</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>4.2.2. Protecting the Feelings of Religious Believers from Offence</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>4.3: Judaism.....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>4.3.1. Russia as Defender of Jews.....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>4.4: Buddhism</i>	<i>31</i>
5. False Foundations	33
6. Conclusion.....	36

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About The Henry Jackson Society

The Henry Jackson Society is a think-tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances which keep societies free, working across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world.



About the Russia & Eurasia Studies Centre

The **Russia and Eurasia Studies Centre** undertakes in-depth, analytically-focussed research into domestic and foreign policy issues in Russia and the other post-Soviet states. Established in 2010 as the Russia Studies Centre, the programme's geographical scope has widened since 2014, mirroring the high level of importance attached to the region.

Executive Summary

Over the last decade, the Russian government has depicted itself as a counterrevolutionary force, leading a global crusade against the malign forces of Western cultural colonisation. Central to this has been the Kremlin's self-anointment as a defender of not only traditional values, but specifically religious ones, protecting the feelings of those of faith from insult and offence.

To promote this narrative abroad, the Russian government has used religious diplomacy (i.e., the use of religion in foreign policy),¹ a form of public diplomacy.² This report interrogates which narratives the Russian government uses in service of religious diplomacy, and how. It does so by employing discourse and keyword analysis to elucidate how Russian state actors, in speech and written doctrines, promote a vision of Russian religious values as domestically unifying and globally stabilising.

The report then examines how Russian state actors operationalise these conceptualisations internationally, within bilateral and multilateral fora. In so doing, it shows how the Kremlin uses each of Russia's four official religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism) in different ways and to different ends to bolster its influence among target audiences abroad. To illustrate the narratives and tactics deployed, examples are cited from an original database comprising almost 1,000 examples of Russian religious diplomacy, compiled through keyword analysis of the online archives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The report also draws attention to the false foundations on which Russia's religious diplomacy is based, namely by documenting the divergence between the Kremlin's self-proclaimed religious tolerance and the repressive reality for many believers living in Russia today.

Public diplomacy is a legitimate avenue for any government to advance its country's interests; however, the poor state of relations between Russia and the UK, as well as Russia's deliberate positioning of itself in opposition to (what it conveys as) core Western values, means that Western nations must be aware of Russian tactics and respond accordingly. The report concludes by suggesting several appropriate policy responses that can counter Russian religious diplomacy narratives and advance arguments in support of values that are conducive to open and inclusive societies.

¹ Alicja Curanovic, 'The Religious Diplomacy of the Russian Federation', *Russie NEI Reports*, 12 (June 2012), IFRI, <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifrirnr12curanovicreligiousdiplomacyjune2012.pdf>.

² Jarol B. Manheim, *Strategic Public Diplomacy & American Foreign Policy: The Evolution of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 1994), p.4.

Glossary

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

EU – European Union

FCDO – Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (United Kingdom)

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

MENA – Middle East and North Africa

MFA – Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation

NSS – National Security Strategy

OIC – Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

OSCE – Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

ROC – Russian Orthodox Church

SOC – Serbian Orthodox Church

UAE – United Arab Emirates

UK – United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

UN – United Nations

UNHRC – United Nations Human Rights Council

UOC – Ukrainian Orthodox Church

USA – United States of America

1. Russian Values under Attack

At the end of 2020, Vladimir Putin tasked the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) with setting up a “United Nations for believers”.³ This body would ostensibly prevent or punish anyone who had offended the feelings of religious believers and/or fuelled inter-religious enmity and conflict. As yet unrealised, this initiative is just one of several efforts by Russian politicians to use religion as a vehicle for expanding the Kremlin’s influence abroad.

These initiatives need to be set within the geopolitical context whence they emerged: from the Middle East through Latin America, the Russian government is competing against the West for allies and influence.⁴ Yet Russian religious diplomacy is also an extension of the Kremlin’s securitised conception of culture. Russia’s 2021 National Security Strategy (NSS) describes the country’s traditional moral and spiritual values as under “active attack from the USA and its allies” who propagandise for a society where “anything is permitted”.⁵ The Strategy’s Dostoevskian tone is in keeping with the rhetoric and argument throughout, as the authors seek to mobilise the Russian people, and Russian identity itself, against the West.⁶ According to the NSS, in the coming years, Russia will have to grapple with the destabilising influence of the USA and its allies, who desperately seek to preserve and reimpose their disintegrating global hegemony and (allegedly) outdated liberal mores.

The July 2021 NSS is only the latest word in the Russian government’s enduring invective against the West’s alleged failure to defend traditional spiritual or religious values.⁷ Such arguments have been prominent since at least the start of Vladimir Putin’s third term, which heralded the embrace and promotion of conservative values. Since 2012, Putin and his ministers have actively sought to position Russia as a bastion of tradition, and a counterweight to Western proselytising of liberal, multicultural values that ostensibly undermine sovereignty and authentic local culture.⁸

This contradistinction is a core element of Russian ‘religious diplomacy’, framing Russia’s actions in opposition to an anarchic West, cut loose from its moral, ethical, and religious foundations. Alongside this, Russia has also taken an increasingly assertive global stance since 2015, embracing messianic narratives and new forms of soft power,⁹ including anti-Westernism, memory diplomacy,¹⁰ and religious diplomacy, the focus of this paper.

³ Kira Latukhina, ‘Putin Poruchil Podnyat’ v OON Vopros o Zashchite Cuvstv Veruyushchikh’, *RGRU*, 11 December 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/12/11/putin-poruchil-podniat-v-oon-vopros-ob-oskorblenii-chuvstv-veruiushchih.html>.

⁴ Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, Second Edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2012); Vsevolod Samokhvalov, *Russian-European Relations in the Balkans and Black Sea Region: Great Power Identity and the Idea of Europe* [Electronic Resource], Ebook Central (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/login?url=http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=4880767>; Kari Roberts, ‘Understanding Putin: The Politics of Identity and Geopolitics in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse’, *International Journal* 72, no. 1 (2017): pp.28–55.

⁵ ‘Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii Ot 02.07.2021 № 400. O Strategii Natsional’noi Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii’, *Pravo*, 3 July 2021, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202107030001>.

⁶ ‘The West’ is a notoriously broad term, but it is used here with reference to the Russian understanding (*Zapad*) and the ‘imagined West’ referenced by Alexei Yurchak, broadly meaning those countries aligned with the USA and/or liberal democratic values. For more on the ‘imagined West’, please see Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁷ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vladimir Putin: Rossiya: Natsional’nyi Vopros’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 2012, http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html?insidedoc.

⁸ Nicolai N. Petro, ‘How the West Lost Russia: Explaining the Conservative Turn in Russian Foreign Policy’, *Russian Politics* 3, no. 3 (2018): pp.305–32, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-8921-00303001>.

⁹ Anna A. Velikaya and Greg Simons, *Russia’s Public Diplomacy: Evolution and Practice* [Electronic Resource], Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

¹⁰ Jade McGlynn, ‘Moscow Is Using Memory Diplomacy to Export Its Narrative to the World’, *Foreign Policy* (blog), 25 June 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/25/russia-puting-ww2-soviet-ussr-memory-diplomacy-history-narrative/>.

The Russian government's religious diplomacy should be understood as a form of public diplomacy,¹¹ or "efforts by the government of one nation to influence public or elite opinion in a second nation for the purpose of turning the foreign policy of the target nation to advantage".¹² Public diplomacy is often confused with soft power,¹³ but although the former relies on a fount of soft power, public – and religious – diplomacy is not directly equivalent thereto.

Some scholars have argued that authoritarian nations, such as Russia and China, do not really *understand* soft power,¹⁴ but this report starts from the opposite assumption, arguing that Russia possesses considerable soft power resources which it can and does use effectively. In its recent Integrated Review, the UK government drew attention to the increasing use of soft power by authoritarian states, signalling this arena as a battleground for geopolitical influence.¹⁵ To advance in this battle, the UK and the broader West must first understand what their rivals are doing, so they might adequately and pro-actively respond. After all, the Russian government's use of religion in public diplomacy is not unique: the US government often uses religious diplomacy in its international communications¹⁶ and China is also active in this field.¹⁷

To examine religious diplomacy, this report also relies on the conceptual lens of what Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid term "religious soft power" or "the phenomenon whereby states incorporate the promotion of religion into their broader foreign policy conduct".¹⁸ In answering the question of how Russian state actors use religious diplomacy to bolster their nation's influence and image abroad, this report will detail the tactics and tales used by Russian politicians to depict their nation as a multiconfessional, religiously tolerant society centred on defending the rights of believers. Within this wider discourse, references to spirituality (*dukhovnost'*) are understood as part of religious diplomacy, although not as interchangeable with references to 'religiousness'.

While much work on Russian religious diplomacy has focussed on the close relationship between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC),¹⁹ the latter's significance

¹¹ Curanovic, 'The Religious Diplomacy of the Russian Federation'.

¹² Manheim, *Strategic Public Diplomacy & American Foreign Policy*, p.4.

¹³ To read more about soft power, please see: Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004); Joseph S. Nye, 'Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept', *Journal of Political Power*, 2021, pp.1-13.

¹⁴ Matt Johnson, 'What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power', *Foreign Policy* (blog), 29 April 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/>; Michael O. Slobodchikoff and G. Douglas Davis, 'Roots of Russian Soft Power: Rethinking Russian National Identity', *Sravnitel'naâ Politika* 8, no. 2 (2017): pp.19-36, <https://doi.org/10.18611/2221-3279-2017-8-2-19-36>; Victoria Hudson, "'Forced to Friendship'? Russian (Mis-) Understandings of Soft Power and the Implications for Audience Attraction in Ukraine", *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): pp.330-46, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12106>.

¹⁵ The Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, March 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/969402/The_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence__Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf.

¹⁶ Peter S. Henne, 'The Geopolitics of Faith: Religious Soft Power in Russian and U.S. Foreign Policy', *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs*, 6 June 2019, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/the-geopolitics-of-faith-religious-soft-power-in-russian-and-u-s-foreign-policy>.

¹⁷ Juyan Zhang, 'China's Faith Diplomacy' in Philip Seib (ed.), *Religion and Public Diplomacy*, Palgrave Macmillan Series in Global Public Diplomacy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), pp.75-97, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137291127_5; Yihua XU, 'Religion and China's Public Diplomacy in the Era of Globalization', *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* 9, no. 4 (2015): pp.14-35.

¹⁸ 'The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power', *Brookings* (blog), 24 October 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/product/the-geopolitics-of-religious-soft-power/>.

¹⁹ John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent: Faith and Power in the New Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=646755>; Sener Akturk, 'Five Faces of Russia's Soft Power: Far Left, Far Right, Orthodox Christian, Russophone, and Ethnoreligious Networks', *PonarsEurasia – Policy Memos*, 11 November 2019, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/five-faces-russias-soft-power-left-right-orthodox-christian-russophone-ethnoreligious>; Robert C. Blitt, 'Russia's "Orthodox" Foreign Policy: The Growing Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Shaping Russia's Policies Abroad', *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1725522>.

has occluded the Russian government's more general uses of religions and religious beliefs.²⁰ In part this stems from the foundations of the Russian Federation itself. The preamble to the Federal Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (1997) recognises the "special contribution" of Russian Orthodox Christianity to Russian history and the ROC enjoys certain privileges, including financial benefits.²¹ However, the law also gives special respect to three other religions, namely Islam, Judaism and Buddhism and this report will show how the Russian government uses all four religions, individually and jointly, to extend its influence and position Russian civilisation as a superior alternative to that of the West.²²

1.1: Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 – the current chapter – provides a brief introduction to the topic of Russian religious diplomacy and an overview of the report.

Chapter 2 details the ways in which Russian political actors depict their nation as being at the vanguard of defending religious faith and religious believers. It also explains the methodological considerations used to compile, analyse, and illustrate the data cited in support of the report's core arguments.

Chapter 3 examines the official government language used to describe religious and spiritual values in terms of Russian national, security, and foreign policy interests. This includes a discourse analysis of key terms relating to religion in major government interviews, doctrines, strategies, and concepts.

Chapter 4 shows how the Kremlin operationalises its conceptualisations of tradition and spirituality in the service of religious diplomacy. It examines how the Russian government's religious diplomacy tactics and narratives differ depending on which religious group is targeted. There are numerous illustrative examples, sourced from the author's database of 975 entries of religious diplomacy. To provide ample detail and interesting examples, the MFA content is supplemented by additional research into Russian state-affiliated media coverage of events.

Chapter 5 comprises a literature review on religious discrimination in Russia. The research cited contradicts the narratives promoted within the Kremlin's religious diplomacy and the chapter argues that portrayals of Russia as a nation of religious harmony and tolerance rest on (partly) false foundations.

Chapter 6 concludes by considering how Western liberal democracies should respond to Russian religious diplomacy, what other countries might learn from Russia's approach, and how they might counter those narratives designed to denigrate the West.

²⁰ There is also a growing literature on Russia's use of religious diplomacy with Islamic countries. For example, see: 'Russia's Islamic Diplomacy', *Central Asia Program* (George Washington University, June 2019) and other studies cited in chapter 4.2 of this report.

²¹ Wallace L. Daniel and Christopher Marsh, 'Editorial: Russia's 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience in Context and Retrospect', *Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 1 (2007): pp.5-17.

²² For some existing studies of religious diplomacy – by Russia and others – please see: 'The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power', *Brookings* (blog); Curanovic, 'The Religious Diplomacy of the Russian Federation'; Nozar Shafiee and Ehsan Fallahi, 'The Church and Religious Diplomacy in Russia's Foreign Policy', *Journal of Iran and Central Eurasia Studies* 1, 1 (Spring 2018), p.13; Akturk, 'Five Faces of Russia's Soft Power'; Henne, 'The Geopolitics of Faith'.

2. Demonstratively Defending the Feelings of Religious Believers

Russia's core religious diplomacy narrative centres on the idea that Russia represents an alternate civilisation to the West, which has set itself adrift from tradition, history, and spiritual considerations. A failed OSCE resolution, put forward by Russia in 2015, functions as a sort of origin myth within this narrative.²³ This failed resolution was borne out of the 2014 OSCE Declaration on Enhancing Efforts to Combat Antisemitism, which received unanimous support.²⁴ At that time, Russia, supported by the Vatican, Hungary, Armenia and other countries, argued that if there was a resolution to combat antisemitism, there should also be one to combat Christianophobia and Islamophobia. In December 2014, participants in the OSCE ministerial meeting stated in their resolution that two separate declarations denouncing Christianophobia and Islamophobia would be passed at the next OSCE ministerial meeting.

However, the declaration was never passed, despite continued Russian efforts to bring the motion back to the table. Since then, the MFA has cited this failure on more than 40 occasions,²⁵ in bilateral and multilateral fora alike, using it as proof of Russia's ongoing battle for the rights of religious believers against Western "militant (*воинствующий*) secularism targeted at destroying those with faith".²⁶ While illustrative, this example belongs to a much wider political discourse and set of religious diplomacy practices. This report's efforts to sample both are relayed in the following section.

2.1: Methodology

To answer the main research question of how Russia uses religious diplomacy to bolster its influence, image, and alliances abroad, this report first examines official conceptualisations of the role of religion in Russian society, identity, values, and foreign policy. This takes the form of a close textual analysis of official Russian national security and foreign policy documents and speeches by the Russian President and Minister of Foreign Affairs (Sergei Lavrov). The documents were selected for their relevance and significance to or within Russian foreign policy and diplomacy. Each document was searched for keywords²⁷ relating to religion and spirituality (Russian: *духовн**).²⁸ The author then collated all relevant findings and used close textual analysis to provide an illustrative overview of how such documents portrayed religious diplomacy in terms of Russian national security and foreign policy aims.

The second step involved creating a database of religious diplomacy examples using the MFA online archive, which comprises the MFA's official statements, press releases, briefings, speeches, and so on. The author searched the archive between 1 January 2012 and 31 December 2020 for religious-related keywords.²⁹ However, the number of returns was much larger than

²³ 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks at the 26th OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting, Bratislava, December 5, 2019', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3935535.

²⁴ OSCE Ministerial Council, 'Declaration on Enhancing Efforts to Combat Anti-Semitism', *OSCE*, 5 December 2014, <https://www.osce.org/mc/130556>.

²⁵ 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Opening Remarks during a Meeting with Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Athens, October 26, 2020', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/4406354; "'World at a Crossroads and a System of International Relations for the Future" by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov for "Russia in Global Affairs" Magazine, September 20, 2019', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/un/-/asset_publisher/U1StPbE8y3al/content/id/3792556.

²⁶ Konstantin Dolgov, 'Rol' religii v sovremennom mire', *MID*, 1 June 2016, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/humanitarian_cooperation/-/asset_publisher/acpY620dyC5B/content/id/2299046.

²⁷ Keywords in Russian: *духовн**, *религ**, *христиан**, *ислам**, *мусульман**, *православ**, *католи**, *евре**, *иуди**, *будди**. The asterisk here denotes the end of the root.

²⁸ Documents comprise the Foreign Policy Concept; National Security Strategy 2015; National Security Strategy 2021; Vladimir Putin 2021 Interview with *Nezavisimaya gazeta* on Russia's National Question; and five separate interviews with Sergei Lavrov.

²⁹ The keywords here are the same as above.

the number of *relevant* returns, which necessitated the manual sorting of entries into “relevant examples of religious diplomacy” and “irrelevant entries”. Assisted by two research assistants, the author selected relevant entries according to whether they met the following criteria:

- Is the term used in a meeting or discussion with a representative of a foreign country or used during a meeting of a multilateral international or regional body?
- Is the relevant speech directed at foreigners, as opposed to those with ethnic or cultural ties to Russia (compatriots)?
- Is the term being used to refer to religion or spiritual matters relating to Russia and/or the target country?
- Does the language used suggest that the speaker is trying to positively influence or appeal to the addressee(s)? OR
- Does the language used suggest that the speaker is praising Russia’s own religious strengths or identity (i.e., exporting pro-government narratives on this topic)?

To be included, the example had to meet the first three criteria as well as at least one of the last two. There were a number of limitations to this method. First, although each coder worked to the same criteria, they could have discounted a case that was a genuine example of religious diplomacy. To mitigate this, coders were asked to include any example of which they were unsure and then, after data collection had ended, all three coders checked the others’ entries. Where two out of three coders agreed, the majority decision was taken. The other limitation to this method stems from the source base, as all the examples were taken from the MFA, largely for reasons of scope.

Chapter 4 outlines these findings by first providing a brief quantitative overview of the data, followed by a more qualitative analysis, reliant on aforementioned additional research into Russian media coverage of religious diplomacy (using the EastView database) and interviews with relevant experts in their fields. This supplementary research somewhat mitigated the overreliance on the MFA as a source since it meant that additional research could be carried out into examples deemed worthy of investigation but that featured relatively infrequently in the MFA archive. Finally, this report contextualises religious diplomacy narratives and tactics within a literature review of studies on religious tolerance in Russia today.

3. The Role of Religion in Russian Doctrine

From the early days of his ascension to the presidency in 2000, Putin tried to reinforce Russia's use of religion as a tool for influence abroad. At first, he appeared to focus his efforts primarily on compatriots,³⁰ setting as a priority the reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad,³¹ a feat achieved in 2007.³² Since 2012, he and many other Russian politicians and officials, including the authors of the Russian state's core doctrines, concepts, and strategies, have strained to depict their nation as a spiritual and/or religious leader. They have cited religious values in their efforts to colour a certain image of Russia, one in which the nation's strength lies in a deep spirituality. This notion gives succour to the Kremlin's geopolitical aims, even while Russian economic, cultural, and political life stagnates. However, as well as a strength, Russian doctrine depicts these spiritual qualities and values as under external threat from Western countries that are proselytising alien liberal values in an orchestrated attack on Russia's way of life. If we accept that the Kremlin does perceive Western secular and liberal values as a threat to Russian spiritual and religious values – or at least is willing to act as if it does – then it follows quite logically that Russian government bodies and actors should engage in religious diplomacy counternarratives beyond its borders.

3.1: National Identity: Multiconfessionalism versus Multiculturalism

In its most recent definition, the Russian Foreign Policy Concept (2014) cited its aims as: strengthening Russia's national security; developing the Russian economy; strengthening Russia's position as one of the influential global centres of power; attaining world peace and stability; creating good neighbourly relations; promoting multipolarity; popularising Russian culture; defending Russian citizens abroad; strengthening Russian communications and media abroad; and creating constructive international partnerships.³³ The concept of religiousness relates to several of these aims insofar as it is presented – in this and other documents – as a core and foundational element of Russian culture. Talking shortly after the annexation of Crimea at a concert dedicated to it, Putin argued: “We are talking about the historical origins, about the sources of our spirituality and statehood. It is about what makes us one people and one united nation.”³⁴

The official conceptualisation of Russian national identity, as it emerges from state doctrines and in official speeches on Russian identity, is predicated on a particular understanding of Russia's multiconfessionalism that places it in opposition to Western multiculturalism. The Russian government depicts the country as inherently multi-ethnic and multiconfessional, rather than

³⁰ Compatriots (Russian: *соотечественники*) is a broad term, used to refer both to Russian citizens abroad and to those with ties to Russian culture and heritage. At times it is used in an even broader sense, for example by Rossotrudnichestvo (the Russian government agency responsible for cultural exchange) to denote “transmitters of Russian culture, values, language, intermediaries of humanitarian ties and relations between Russia and foreign countries”. The term is used in this report to refer to those who are Russian citizens living abroad or those with Russian heritage, as opposed to Armenians, for example. The Rossotrudnichestvo definition is available here: <https://rs.gov.ru/en/activities/5#:~:text=Russian%20compatriots%20are%20transmitters%20of,between%20Russia%20and%20foreign%20countries>.

³¹ This success stemmed in no small part from Putin's personal investment in uniting and connecting with the Russian diaspora, using the Church's authority, and establishing organisations, such as *Russkii mir*. However, this report is focussed on the Kremlin's use of religiousness in foreign policy targeted at non-Russians.

³² The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad was established following the civil war as a *de facto* independent jurisdiction of Eastern Orthodoxy by white emigres to the West. In 2007, this split was healed with the signing of the Act of Canonical Communion with the Moscow Patriarchate, although this did result in the formation of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad – Provisional Supreme Church Authority which remained independent of the Moscow Patriarchate.

³³ Konsult'ant Plyus, ‘Kontseptsiya Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii’, *Konsul'tant.ru*, http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_27822/.

³⁴ ‘Kontsert, posvyashchennyi vossoedineniyu Kryma i Sevastopolya s Rossiei’, Prezident Rossii, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47878>.

an ‘imported’ multicultural one, as is supposedly the case for Muslim communities in Western European countries.³⁵ This contrast of authenticity with artificiality is central to the Kremlin’s positioning of itself against the West and a key point of differentiation between the supposed failure of Western multiculturalism and the alleged success of Russian multiconfessionalism.³⁶

In a wide-ranging interview in 2012, Putin explained how “Polyculturalism and polyethnicity are in our consciousness, our spirit, and our historical DNA”, enabling Russia to provide an alternative system to Western multiculturalism and liberalism. Describing the importance of religion to this system, the Russian President explained the significance of:

the active participation [...] of Russia’s traditional religions. In the foundations of Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism – for all their differences and specificities – lay base, general moral, ethical, and spiritual values [...] these orientational values cannot be replaced with just anything and we need to strengthen them.³⁷

Putin also praised the influence of Russia’s four official religions on the education system, social sphere and armed forces, all while insisting on the secular nature of the Russian state. Quoting Vasilii Klyuchevskii, the 18th-century Russian historian, he explained how Russia as a country has been saved by the “moral will of its people” during various “Times of Troubles”, a term used to denote periods of political upheaval and instability, such as the 1917 Revolutions or the fall of the USSR.

The traumatic experiences of the Soviet collapse and the anarchy and poverty of the 1990s have left deep scars on Russian society that Putin is deft at exploiting.³⁸ The threat posed by Western culture to Russians looms large in the government’s retellings of the 1990s and also colours the language it uses to describe the West. Apparently in many European countries, “people are shocked by the aggressive pressure against their traditions” and efforts to impose certain values.³⁹ This alleged crisis is attributed to multiculturalism but the language carries connotations of the imposition of hyper-liberal economic dogma during the 1990s.⁴⁰ Although they argue that Western countries want to impose their system on others,⁴¹ Russian leaders are quick to assure the population that their nation is now strong enough to prevail over such external pressures because it is uniquely attuned to, and capable of, embracing religious diversity and harmony. In the words of Sergei Lavrov:

Genuinely shared moral foundations of international relations must be the product of the dialogue of equals and rely on a spiritual-moral shared denominator, which has always existed in the main world religions. Turning your back on the traditional values honed over millennia, tearing away from your own cultural and spiritual roots, the absolutisation of individual rights and freedom – this is a recipe for losing any sort of orientation in both internal as well as foreign policy.⁴²

³⁵ ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with RT France, Paris Match and Le Figaro’, *MID*, 18 October 2018, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/fr/-/asset_publisher/g8RuzDvY7qyV/content/id/3377331.

³⁶ ‘Interview between Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, and the Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Moscow, 19 November 2013’, *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/87526.

³⁷ Putin, ‘Vladimir Putin: Rossiya: Natsional’nyi Vopros’.

³⁸ Olga Malinova, ‘Framing the Collective Memory of the 1990s as a Legitimation Tool for Putin’s Regime’, *Problems of Post-Communism*, Online First (1 June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1752732>.

³⁹ Putin, ‘Vladimir Putin: Rossiya: Natsional’nyi Vopros’.

⁴⁰ ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s address and answers to questions from students and attendees of the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Moscow, February 27, 2015’, *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/971662.

⁴¹ It is worth noting here that Russia has one of the highest immigration rates in the world.

⁴² Sergei Lavrov, ‘Vneshnepoliticheskaya filosofiya Rossii’, *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn*, 2013, <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/826>.

This idea is central to the official conceptualisation of Russia as an alternative political system, even civilisation, one that is simultaneously superior but under grave existential threat from external and internal malign influences.

3.2: Cultural Sovereignty, Spiritual Values, and Existential Security

The 2014 Foreign Policy and 2015 National Security Concepts set the tone for much of Putin's third presidential term, depicting a situation in which "traditional Russian spiritual and moral values [were] in renaissance" yet also in grave peril.⁴³ In order to realise Russia's interests as a "great power" and to enhance its "political, economic, intellectual, and spiritual potential", the government and population would need to reinforce these values as the foundation stone of Russian life.⁴⁴

The more recent 2021 National Security Strategy continued from where the 2015 Security Concept ended, namely by securitising almost every aspect of Russian culture, decrying alleged "cultural westernisation" efforts as deliberate assaults on the very essence of Russian identity. Pitted against these threats, Russian politicians have sought to depict Russia's global role as almost counter-revolutionary, leading the defence of the true Europe, of traditional values, and of "cultural sovereignty". This last phrase peppers the 2021 NSS, especially the section entitled "The Defence of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values, Culture, and Historical Memory". The emphasis here is on fighting back against the West's campaign to destroy the moral health of the Russian people by defending spiritual values at home, and by setting an international example of how to promote respect for tradition, the family and religion globally. Once again, Russia's supposed religious or spiritual qualities are cited as evidence of its right to great power status.

Describing the ostensibly destabilising role of the West across the globe, the 2021 NSS (not unjustifiably) accuses the USA and its allies of provoking internal instability and conflicts around the world. It also draws attention to the domestic impact of these conflagrations and depicts Russia as a current and future counterweight to this turbulence. In this sense, Russia's internationalist approach to religious diplomacy also provides convenient window dressing for the Kremlin's intention to reinforce the stability of regimes that are often highly authoritarian. Many of them rely on religion and tradition as sources of legitimacy, including, of course, the Kremlin itself.

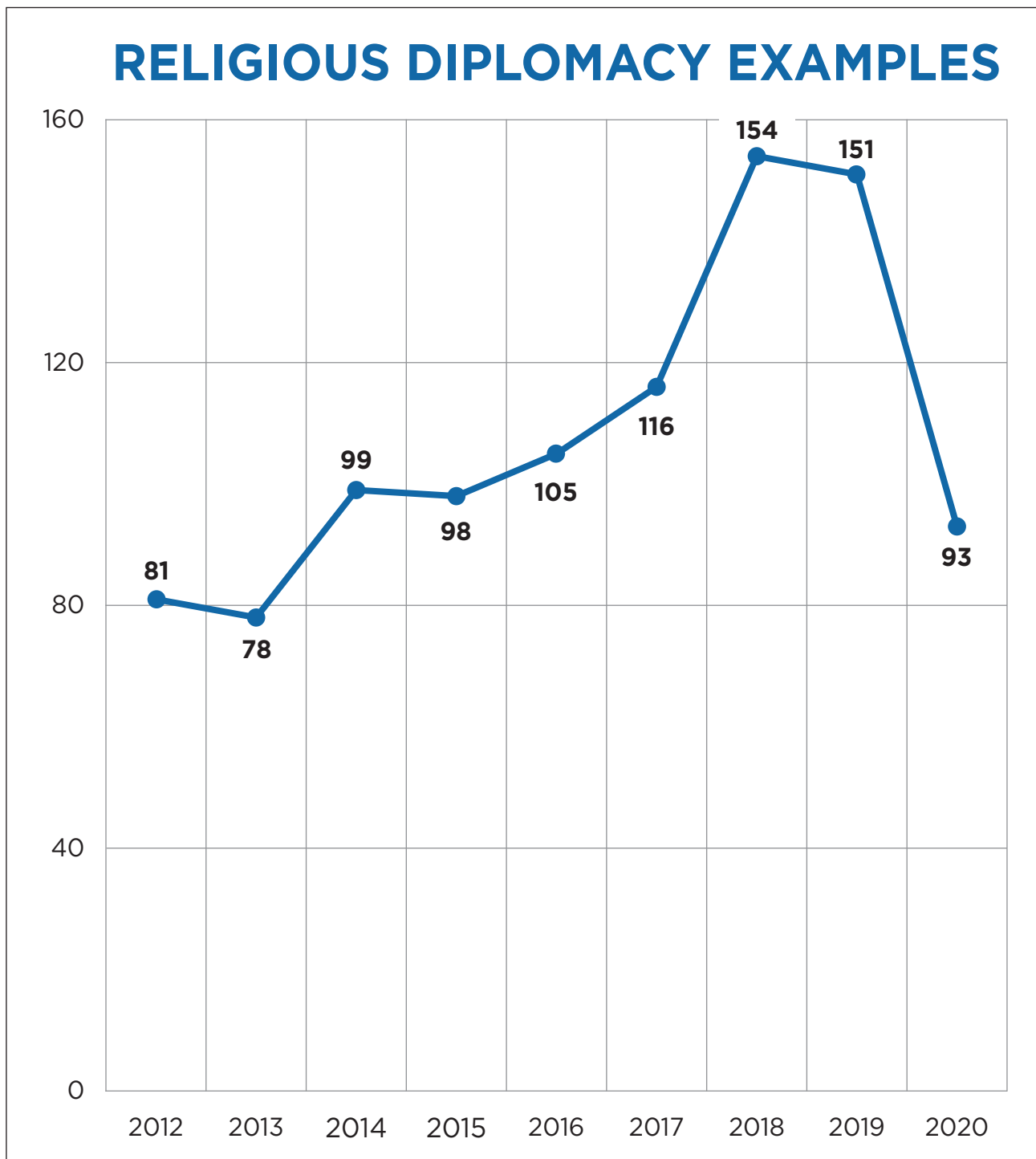
⁴³ Prezident Rossii, 'Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii Ot 31.12.2015', *Kremlin.ru*, 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391>.

⁴⁴ Konsult'tant Plyus, 'Kontseptsiya Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii'.

4. Russian Uses of Religious Diplomacy

To domestic audiences, the Russian government not only appeals to religious and spiritual values but also depicts itself as an active defender of these qualities at home and abroad. The Kremlin then exports these – or similar – arguments with the purpose of either building alliances with countries that share these values or of undermining its rivals, namely liberal Western democracies. Table 1 shows the number of religious diplomacy examples found within the MFA database between 2012 and 2020, suggesting a growth in this type of diplomatic practice until the end of 2019:

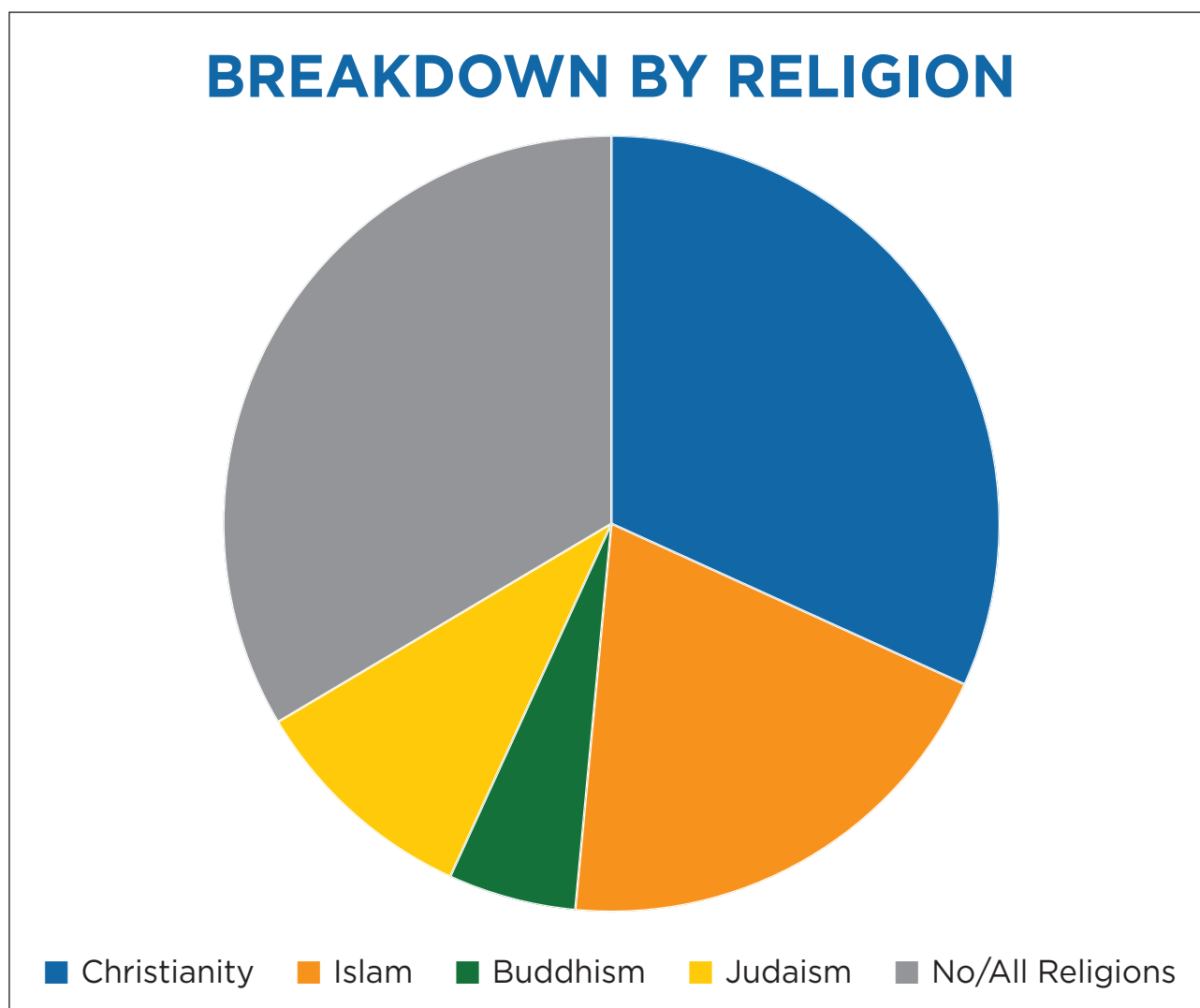
Table 1: Breakdown of Russian religious diplomacy by year



The increasing trajectory of Russian religious diplomacy efforts was especially marked between 2015 and 2018. A decrease in activity at the end of 2019 led to a slight drop from 2018 to 2019 before the debilitating impact of the pandemic made itself apparent in 2020. However, this rather crude visualisation hides important differentiations in terms of how Russia's narratives and activities differed by region and religion.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of religious diplomacy categories by the (main) religion referenced. In keeping with most scholarship on this topic, not all religions are equal and the Orthodox Church's special role, or role as first-among-equals, is reflected in the breakdown of references:

Table 2. Breakdown of religious diplomacy examples by religion(s) referenced



That said, the largest section of all was the 'no/all religions' segment, in which Russian state actors made references to: religious faith and belief in general (and no particular religion); all four official religions; or at least three of the four official religions. Where more than one religion was mentioned, the reference was either attributed to the religion that was the main focus or divided between the relevant faiths. Mainly this affected references to Islam and Christianity, especially to fighting Christianophobia and Islamophobia. By comparison, the number of references to Judaism and especially Buddhism was much lower.

Given the emphasis on Christianity, it is perhaps unsurprising that eight of the fifteen countries most targeted by Russian religious diplomacy were majority-Christian countries, as shown in

Table 3. Countries that experienced the most Russian religious diplomacy (2012–2020)

Rank	Country	Number
1	France	52
2	Serbia	33
3	North Macedonia	30
4	India	29
5	Greece	25
6	Spain	24
7	Israel	21
8	Bulgaria	18
9	Turkey	14
10	Ukraine	14
11	USA	14
12	Belarus	12
13	Albania	11
14	Armenia	10
15	Syria	10

Table 3. Of these eight nations, five were majority-Orthodox. There were also three Muslim-majority countries, although this number masks the true extent of Russian religious diplomacy as targeted at Muslim states, given so much of this activity is outsourced to regional actors, as discussed in Chapter 4.2.1. Israel, a majority-Jewish state, also features in the top 15. There is a clear focus on Europe and the Balkans, but the inclusion of other non-European countries points to the breadth of Russia's use of religious diplomacy. This is in keeping with Russia's efforts since 2015 to pursue a more global role, while still fixing its primary gaze on Europe.

The USA's presence in the top 15 is connected to religious diplomacy examples that occurred during the presidency of Donald Trump, some of which are explored in Chapter 4.1.1. The most frequently targeted country is France, but it scores so highly because Russian MFA officials were always quick to exploit tensions arising from the nation's secular form of *laïcité*, including after terrorist attacks. There were also more than 20 references to the importance of the Russian Spiritual Cultural Centre, a point of contention explored further in Chapter 4.1.1.⁴⁵

India also ranks highly, despite being a majority Hindu country; however, textual analysis of the examples of Russian religious diplomacy in India showed that eight references out of 29 were to India's Buddhist population. A further 17 out of 29 were very general comments about shared religious or spiritual values and multiconfessionalism. Although just outside the top 15, Cuba was ranked relatively high, given that it is an atheist country. However, the nine references to

⁴⁵ Only Russian state actors' references to the centre that focussed on Franco-Russian relations were included. Some 40 references that were targeted only at compatriots were excluded.

Cuban-Russian relations were discussions of spiritual as opposed to religious values, reflecting the increased flexibility of using a term like *dukhovnyi* over *religioznyi* (religious). This word was also employed in relations with China, where there were seven uses, all since 2015, by which point Russia's 'pivot' towards Asia had become more pronounced.

However, while it provides a useful snapshot of activity, Table 3 does not include regions to which religious diplomacy was addressed nor does it show the breadth of countries targeted: some 88 in total. There were also numerous examples that targeted the international community rather than a foreign nation; for example, if the UN and OSCE were included, they would stand first and fourth, respectively, in Table 3.

Russia uses multilateral organisations as platforms on which to practise religious diplomacy; for example, since 2014, Russian representatives have spoken at the OSCE on 17 occasions, making direct references to the need to defend religious faith, most of which mention the failure to pass a declaration against Christianophobia and Islamophobia. Russia has also used the UN in similar ways, especially to raise the issue of Christianophobia, including pushing for the adoption of a 2015 Joint Statement of 65 states: "Supporting the Human Rights of Christians and Other Communities, particularly in the Middle East, initiated by Russia, the Vatican and Lebanon".⁴⁶

The Russian government uses the meetings of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to relay similar narratives; for example, at a 2017 meeting of the CIS Council of Foreign Ministers,⁴⁷ the Russian delegation pushed for a joint statement by the foreign ministers on the need to prevent discrimination and intolerance against Christians, Muslims, and followers of other religions. The statement condemned religious intolerance and violence in all forms and reaffirmed each country's commitment to observe human rights and freedoms regardless of religious beliefs. The Russian delegation then explicitly contrasted this statement with the failure of the draft OSCE resolution against Christianophobia and Islamophobia at the Basel Ministerial Meeting in December 2014.

More process-driven arguments, accompanied by somewhat generalised narratives, have functioned well at the multilateral level, but in bilateral relations, Russian state actors often employ narratives specific to the majority religion of the target country. The following section will look at these tailored approaches.

4.1: Christianity

There are estimated to be more than 100 million Russians who identify as Orthodox Christian.⁴⁸ According to its constitution, the Russian Federation is a secular state in which all religious associations are equal before the law. The constitution also guarantees freedom of religious choice but the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) plays an important and outsized role with(in) the state.⁴⁹ For example, there is a foreign policy working group between the ROC and the

⁴⁶ 'Sovmestnoe zayavlenie 65 gosudarstv "V podderzhku prav cheloveka khristian i drugikh obshchin..."', *MID*, 13 March 2015, https://www.mid.ru/pravozasitnye-social-no-ekonomiceskie-gumanitarnye-voprosy-deatel-nosti-on/-/asset_publisher/Z02tOD8Nkusz/content/id/1092273?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_Z02tOD8Nkusz&_101_INSTANCE_Z02tOD8Nkusz_languageId=ru_RU.

⁴⁷ 'Sovmestnaya press-konferentsiya po itogam zasedaniya SMID-SNG', *MID*, 7 April 2017, https://www.mid.ru/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/2720804?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_xK1BhB2bUjd3&_101_INSTANCE_xK1BhB2bUjd3_languageId=ru_RU.

⁴⁸ 'Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century', *Pew Research Center*, 8 November 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century/>.

⁴⁹ Although beyond the scope of this report, the function of the Orthodox Church as a lever of state and in realising and justifying the state's messianic qualities is worth noting and can be read about here: Emily Belle Damm and Skye Cooley, 'Resurrection of the Russian Orthodox Church: Narrative of Analysis of the Russian National Myth', *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol.98(3) (September 2017): pp.942-957.

MFA.⁵⁰ The ROC plays an active role in soft power promotion through organisations like the Russkii mir foundation and through its networks with other Orthodox and Christian groups, from the Balkans to Syria, where the Church has been active in rebuilding churches.⁵¹

The role of the ROC as a soft power tool has been the subject of numerous studies.⁵² Rather than looking at the ROC's own public diplomacy efforts, this chapter is concerned with how the Russian government uses the ROC to further its own ends and to portray Russia as a Christian country. There are strong messianic overtones to the Russian government's understanding of its Christian Orthodox identity, building on earlier historical conceptualisations of Moscow as the Third Rome. This is reflected in the two key narratives that dominated Russian religious diplomacy as targeted at Christians; first, Russia as a defender of conservative (Christian) values against an onslaught of Western secular liberalism; second, Russia as protector of Christians, especially Orthodox Christians.

4.1.1. Defender of Conservative Christian Values

The Russian government and the ROC have vociferously denigrated illiberal values in the name of upholding tradition, with examples ranging from so-called anti-gay propaganda laws to weakening legislation against domestic violence.⁵³ The Russian government also uses this illiberalism as a way of building bridges with target audiences abroad, including conservatives and far-right groups who espouse similar values, positing tradition or a mythologised past as a bulwark against liberalism and multiculturalism.⁵⁴

Russian state actors appear most comfortable embracing such narratives in those countries with which Russia enjoys particularly close relations. For example, in May 2018, Lavrov assured students and professors of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of Belarus that Russia would make every effort to defend Orthodox Christian values against attempts to normalise same-sex relations. In so doing, he also correlated homosexuality and paedophilia, an offensive and unfounded tactic used to denigrate the LGBT community.⁵⁵

The Kremlin has also conveyed its religious diplomacy messages to disgruntled EU members, in particular Hungary. Building on existing divisions, Russian state actors have tried to convince target populations that their values and norms are under threat from liberalism, migration, and multiculturalism, and that Russia offers an alternative path.⁵⁶ Pew Research Center found that Central and Eastern Europeans were more likely to agree with the statement that a strong

⁵⁰ 'Working Group for Cooperation between Russian Orthodox Church and Ministry for Foreign Affairs Holds Its 20th Meeting', ROC: Department for External Church Relations, 9 June 2015, <https://mospat.ru/en/news/50359/>.

⁵¹ Details of these efforts can be found here: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/>.

⁵² Blitt, 'Russia's "Orthodox" Foreign Policy'; Brandon A. Davis, 'Holy War: How Putin Weaponized The Russian Orthodox Church' (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2019), <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/63444>; Vladimir Liparteliani, 'Does Russia Use the Orthodox Church as a Tool of Influence?', *Journal of Political Sciences & Public Affairs* no. 369 (2019): p.4; Akturk, 'Five Faces of Russia's Soft Power'; Amy Liedy, 'The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics', Wilson Center, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-orthodox-church-and-russian-politics>; Garrard and Garrard, *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent*.

⁵³ Caroline Hill, 'Framing "Gay Propaganda": Morality Policy Arguments and the Russian Orthodox Church', *Contemporary Russian Conservatism*, 26 September 2019, pp.379–97, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004408005_016; 'Russian Orthodox Leader Rails Against "Foreign" Domestic Violence Law', *The Moscow Times*, 7 January 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/01/07/russian-orthodox-leader-rails-against-foreign-domestic-violence-law-a68829>; 'The Russian Orthodox Church now formally opposes new legislation against domestic violence', *Meduza*, 4 December 2019, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2019/12/04/the-russian-orthodox-church-now-formally-opposes-new-legislation-against-domestic-violence>.

⁵⁴ Own interview with Anton Shekhovtsov, 10 March 2021.

⁵⁵ 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions during a meeting with students and professors of Academy of Public Administration under the President of Belarus, Minsk, May 29, 2018', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3236795.

⁵⁶ 'Remarks and answer to media question by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during a joint press conference following talks with State Secretary for External Economic Relations and Foreign Affairs of Hungary Peter Szijjarto Moscow, October 3, 2018', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3366384.

Russia is a necessary counterweight against Western influence if they also believed that there was a conflict between Western values and their own country's traditional values.⁵⁷

Russian religious rhetoric has also won the support of ultra-conservative groups in the USA,⁵⁸ despite (or perhaps because of) Putin's promotion of Russia as a "moral counterweight to the United States".⁵⁹ *The Christian Post* reported positively on Putin's "vows to defend Christianity", noting that Putin has "long been a supporter of Christianity and Christian values within Russia".⁶⁰ Sympathy for Putin among evangelicals, who constituted an important voting base for former US President Donald Trump, shows points of convergence between Russia and target audiences within traditionally rival states. For example, prominent evangelical preacher Franklin Graham defended Putin and Russia from US media criticism over the former's lax domestic violence laws.⁶¹

In the UK, Russian parliamentarians have also made inroads with self-declared devout Christians on the far-right; for example, Paul Golding, the leader of Britain First, travelled to Russia in 2019, following which a Britain First press release declared that Russia is "a patriotic, nationalist country that promotes all the traditionalist, Christian and Western values".⁶² He was invited to speak at the Russian Parliament, albeit not by the ruling party but by Vladimir Zhirinovskii, leader of the misnomered Liberal Democratic Party of Russia. It is very unlikely that Zhirinovskii would have extended such an invitation if it would have upset the Kremlin.

4.1.2. Protector of Christians

In its religious diplomacy, Russia also actively promotes itself as 'protector of Christians' – especially Orthodox Christians. This narrative has considerable historical depth, drawing on the concept of Moscow as the Third Rome, according to which Russia's rulers should have a leadership role over Christian Eastern Orthodox nations.⁶³ With the merging of the ROC and the Russian Orthodox Church Overseas, Putin oversaw the growth of the former's – and his own government's – influence, but the impetus to expand religious influence did not stop there.

Within this narrative, over 74% of all Russian MFA references focussed on the need to defend either Christians in the Middle East or Orthodox Christians specifically. The need to defend the first group was especially prominent during the first three years of Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War. The Russian media, politicians, and the ROC at times justified intervention in Syria as a way of protecting Christians in the Middle East; for example, Putin pointed to the presence of Syrian Christians and claimed Russia would rebuild Christian communities affected by the fighting.⁶⁴ By framing the intervention as part of a religious mission, the Kremlin has attempted to derive legitimacy and international support for its global ambitions.

⁵⁷ 'Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe', *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), 10 May 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

⁵⁸ 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the 27th Assembly of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, Moscow, April 13, 2019', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3613993.

⁵⁹ Alexei Anishchuk and Steve Gutterman, 'Putin says Russia's power is moral as well as military', *Reuters*, 21 December 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-idUSBRE9BB0TM20131212>.

⁶⁰ Clare Morris, 'Vladimir Putin Vows to Defend Christianity Worldwide', *The Christian Post*, 12 February 2012, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/vladimir-putin-vows-to-defend-christianity-worldwide.html>.

⁶¹ Franklin Graham, 'Putin's Olympic Controversy: Morality & Nations in a Changing World', *Decision Magazine*, 28 February 2014, <https://decisionmagazine.com/putins-olympic-controversy/>.

⁶² Lizzie Dearden, 'Britain first leader Paul Golding convicted of terror offence', *The Independent*, 20 May 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/britain-first-conviction-news-paul-golding-terrorism-act-a9524351.html>.

⁶³ For a history of the vision of Moscow as the Third Rome and its impact on Russian messianic thinking, please see: Peter J.S. Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism and After* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁶⁴ Cristina Maza, 'Putin Vows to Rebuild Christian Syria, Restoring Churches and Bringing Refugees Home', *Newsweek*, 12 May 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-putin-rebuild-christian-syria-churches-735539>.

This positioning intersects with domestic narratives centred on restoring Russian great power status and is derived from messianic visions of Russia's historical role in the region.⁶⁵ Russian leaders have also accentuated historical analogies and parallels in their speeches, recalling Imperial and Soviet-era Russian support for Christians in the Middle East and Balkans.⁶⁶

Yet, while there is justifiable concern at the treatment of Christians in the Middle East, Russian actors often use this narrative to excite rather than alleviate tensions. They have apportioned blame for the situation of Christians to Western countries, as when Sergei Lavrov argued at the 2020 Mediterranean Dialogues international conference that Christians in the Middle East:

[...] are paying an unacceptably high price for the irresponsible geopolitical games played by Washington and its European allies, who have decided to test the unipolar world order on the people of the Middle East and North Africa, and to force on them the development formulas that disregard these nations' values.⁶⁷

Similarly, Russian politicians have organised joint events and conferences with EU member states dedicated to articulating – but not necessarily meeting – the need to protect Christians in the Middle East.⁶⁸

On occasion, this condemnation has been even more explicit with Russian diplomats arguing that the Western partners are not fighting but supporting terrorist groups who victimise Christians.⁶⁹ Ramzan Kadyrov, the high-profile and highly authoritarian Kremlin-backed leader of Chechnya, even claimed that ISIS leader Al-Baghdadi was a CIA agent.⁷⁰ This notion of the West backing ISIS was also propagated by Russian media at home and abroad, with some success in countries like Iraq.⁷¹ While it is legitimate to draw attention to the suffering of Christians, and the inadequacy of European countries' responses, the Russian government undermines its own stated aims by geopoliticising the question, inviting suggestions that its intentions are far from peaceable.

As well as conveying its messages through the media and official channels, the Kremlin has also employed proxy civil society groups, including the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society (IOPS), an organisation resurrected from the times of the Tsars. According to *The Times*, IOPS has set up offices around the world and has extensive connections within governments. It uses these networks to preserve “traditional Christian values in an increasingly decadent age” and to promote Russia's foreign policy aims.⁷² The Russian government has worked jointly with the IOPS at the UN and the UNHRC to promote the question of Christians in the Middle East.⁷³

⁶⁵ For example, the Eastern Question presented significant challenges to Russian foreign policy during the reign of Nicholas I and was a factor contributing to the Crimean War (1853–1956).

⁶⁶ 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's speech at the opening of the exhibition devoted to the 140th anniversary of Russian-Bulgarian diplomatic relations, Moscow, July 5, 2019', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3712304.

⁶⁷ 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement at the Rome Med 2020 – Mediterranean Dialogues international conference Moscow, December 4, 2020', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/4466824.

⁶⁸ 'Remarks and Answer to Media Question by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during a Joint Press Conference Following Talks with State Secretary for External Economic Relations and Foreign Affairs of Hungary Peter Szijjarto Moscow, October 3, 2018'.

⁶⁹ 'Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, November 14, 2019', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3899676.

⁷⁰ Robert Service, *Russia and Its Islamic World: From the Mongol Conquest to The Syrian Military Intervention* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 2017), p.90.

⁷¹ Liz Sly, 'Iraqis think the U.S. is in cahoots with the Islamic State, and it is hurting the war', *The Washington Post*, 1 December 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqis-think-the-us-is-in-cahoots-with-isis-and-it-is-hurting-the-war/2015/12/01/d00968ec-9243-11e5-befa-99cee6cbb272_story.html.

⁷² Andrew Gilligan, 'Establishment flocks to dine at Kremlin-linked Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society', *The Times*, 3 March 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/establishment-flocks-to-dine-at-kremlin-linked-imperial-orthodox-palestine-society-2zmg8dbkbk>.

⁷³ 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's greetings to the participants in the meeting devoted to the 135th anniversary of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society', *MID*, 2 June 2017, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2774747.

In the UK, the Society has held events at the Cavalry and Guards Club in Piccadilly, hosting British businessmen and aristocrats, as well as a senior member of the Queen's ceremonial bodyguard, Christopher Mackenzie-Beevor. At one such event, the latter gave a speech about how proud his father would have been to see him defending values that were under attack in the West. This speech ties in perfectly to the narrative analysed in the previous sub-chapter, namely that Russia defends religions and traditions under assault by Western multiculturalism,⁷⁴ which has made the West a much worse place to live - not only for minorities but also for majorities.⁷⁵

As seen in the example above, Russian actors are spreading anti-multiculturalism arguments not only about the West but *to* the West, all while suggesting their system is superior. To reinforce this argument, the Russian government has built supporting physical infrastructure, including churches and cultural centres that attest to its spirituality. For example, in 2016, the Russian Spiritual and Cultural Centre opened in Paris, projecting an image of Russian soft power in close proximity to sensitive French government compounds.⁷⁶ The ROC has also created or reclaimed hundreds of parishes abroad since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. While this was partly a necessary response to the growing Russian diasporas in Western Europe and the USA, original parishioners whose roots date back to the post-revolutionary émigré community have sometimes been hostile towards these takeovers.⁷⁷ There has been little media coverage of these struggles but the Moscow Patriarchate's active role in supporting Putin's authoritarian rule suggests that Western countries could mount a more spirited defence of individual churches' autonomy, should the original parishioners desire this.⁷⁸

4.1.3. Case Studies: Montenegro and Ukraine

To provide more detailed examples of how Russian actors promote and deploy these two aforementioned narratives in practice, I will provide two short case studies of Russian religious diplomacy efforts in Montenegro and Ukraine. These two examples, notably both in Orthodox countries, demonstrate that the Russian government stands ready to intervene - successfully or otherwise - when it feels that its influence is threatened. In Montenegro, Russia was successful at exacerbating tensions around Milo Đukanović's Law on Freedom of Religion and the takeover of Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) property. In Ukraine, on the other hand, the Kremlin's use of religious diplomacy ultimately rendered it unable to prevent the decision by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) to declare autocephaly (independence from the ROC).

Case Study One: *Litijas* and the Law on Freedom of Religion in Montenegro

In the second half of 2019, the Russian Orthodox Church worked closely with the Serbian Orthodox Church to bring together Montenegrin citizens angered by then-president Milo Đukanović's Law on Freedom of Religion. This law would have nationalised any Church property for which the SOC could not provide evidence of ownership before 1918. The Montenegrin government framed this law as an identity issue - as a further means of separating Montenegrin identity from Serbian identity. Its aim was to give legitimacy to the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which has no official recognition of its independent, or autocephalous, status. The SOC is a highly influential institution in Montenegro and provided considerable political opposition

⁷⁴ Gilligan, 'Establishment flocks to dine at Kremlin-linked Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society'.

⁷⁵ 'Remarks by Konstantin Dolgov, Foreign Ministry Special Representative for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, at the international conference Religions Against Terrorism, Moscow, October 6, 2016', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/humanitarian_cooperation/-/asset_publisher/acpY620dyC5B/content/id/2490847.

⁷⁶ Marlene Laruelle, 'Le "Soft Power" Russe En France: La Para-Diplomatie Culturelle et d'affaires', 8 January 2018.

⁷⁷ Jonathan Luxmoore, 'French Orthodox resist Russian takeover bid', *Church Times*, 4 December 2020, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/4-december/news/world/french-orthodox-resist-russian-takeover-bid>.

⁷⁸ See Chapter 6 for further details on how countries like the UK and France could respond to parishioner complaints.

to Đukanović's government, including through the use of protests. It perceived the law as a direct affront to its own influence and mission.⁷⁹

Perturbed by the SOC's potential loss of influence, the Serbian government officially 'requested' Russia's help and support on this matter; several Russian officials, including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Kremlin spokesperson Maria Zakharova, were vociferous in their condemnation of the proposed law. According to Mira Milosevic-Juaristi, an analyst with expertise on Russian influence in the Balkans, the ROC threatened that, if the state of Montenegro nationalised any SOC property, then it would demand the return of Russian relics given by the ROC to Montenegro in the 16th and 17th centuries. Russian state media (Sputnik and RT) provided extensive positive coverage of the *litijas*, the religious street protests against the law. Ultimately, the Russian and Serbian state and churches were successful in rallying these *litijas* into a vote of discontent with Đukanović's corrupt government, uniting the opposition. In this way, Russia was able to use religious diplomacy to connect with pro-Serb groups and to undermine its rivals in Montenegro.

Case Study Two: Ukraine

Approximately 78% of Ukrainians identify as Orthodox and, until 2019, the Ukrainian Orthodox population accounted for about 30% of all Orthodox Christian believers under Moscow's Patriarchate.⁸⁰ Russia deployed its religious soft power resources to great effect in the Donbas and Crimea during its armed interventions in Ukraine after the 2014 Revolution of Dignity. In Crimea, Russian forces deployed both local and imported Orthodox priests to negotiate the surrender of Ukrainian military units. Priests also served as chaplains in detachments of pro-Russian separatists fighting in Donbas. These priests publicly blessed troops and weapons, capitalising on the trust which both combatants and much of the local population placed in religious authority. Arguably, this religious legitimisation ultimately made it easier for Moscow to arrange the transfer of power to pro-Russian forces.⁸¹

However, through these activities, the ROC also undermined the trust of pro-Maidan Ukrainians, many of whom no longer distinguished between the ROC and the Kremlin. This contributed to the UOC's decision to issue a *tomos*, or special decree on autocephaly, in 2019 despite efforts by the Kremlin and ROC officials to dissuade the Ukrainian Patriarch from such an act. When it was clear that religious diplomacy had failed, the Kremlin employed more underhand tactics, including allegedly sending hackers to target the Patriarch's staff, stealing thousands of emails.⁸² The Russian government also issued unspecified threats and denounced the Patriarch as an agent of the United States and the Vatican – all to no avail.⁸³ Writing in 2021, hundreds of parishes have already switched to the Ukrainian Church. Moscow has lost millions of the faithful, untold millions of dollars in Church property, and considerable influence over Ukraine's believers.

* * *

When dealing with Orthodox-majority nations, Russia's dominant historical position within Orthodoxy affords it greater freedom of manoeuvre in terms of both diplomatic entreaties and

⁷⁹ With thanks to Mira Milosevic-Juaristi for her detailed explanations on this topic, provided during an interview and in response to follow-up written questions.

⁸⁰ David Masci, 'Split between Ukrainian, Russian churches shows political importance of Orthodox Christianity', 14 January 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/14/split-between-ukrainian-russian-churches-shows-political-importance-of-orthodox-christianity/>.

⁸¹ Kadri Liik, Momchil Metodiev and Nicu Popescu, 'Defender of the faith? How Ukraine's Orthodox split threatens Russia', European Council on Foreign Relations, 30 May 2019, https://ecfr.eu/publication/defender_of_the_faith_how_ukraines_orthodox_split_threatens_russia/.

⁸² Michael Khodarkovsky, 'Opinion | Putin's Dream of Godliness: Holy Russia', *The New York Times*, 22 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/22/opinion/putin-russia-orthodox-church.html>.

⁸³ Liik, 'Defender of the Faith?.'

the cruder, heavy-handed tactics described above. However, when it comes to other religions, Russian state actors have to deploy different, more subtle, tactics, even if doggedly pursuing similar aims.

4.2: Islam

As of 2016, there were around 15 million Muslims in Russia (slightly over 10% of the total population of 146 million people), a figure that is probably an underestimate since it does not include undocumented migrants from Muslim-majority countries in Central Asia.⁸⁴ Following the bloody Chechen wars of the 1990s and early 2000s, the Russian government has actively sought to prevent wealthy Arab Gulf states or transnational Islamist organisations from supporting Muslim opposition against the Kremlin in Chechnya and other Muslim-majority autonomous republics in the Russian Federation.⁸⁵ The Russian government has also taken a dim view of political instability in the Middle East, vehemently denouncing the Arab Spring, mindful of its impact on both the region and, potentially, Muslim communities within Russia.⁸⁶

As such, the Kremlin conducts its religious diplomacy in Muslim-majority countries with an eye to its own domestic context, aiming in part to undermine external extremist or unwelcome influences over Russian Muslims. To protect against unwanted external influences, the Russian authorities use domestic Muftiates as the main vehicles for Islamisation (alongside some unofficial structures and networks). However, Russian religious diplomacy in the Islamic world is also about wielding political influence and building useful networks. Russian state actors achieve this by portraying their country as partly Muslim and totally committed to defending religious believers' rights.⁸⁷ To convince others of these arguments, a range of tactics are deployed.

4.2.1. Russia as a (partly) Muslim Country and the Use of Surrogate Diplomacy

In its self-portrayals to the Islamic world, the Russian government attempts to portray itself as a partly Muslim country. To this end, since 2005, Russia has actively tried to join the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), although so far it is only an observer state rather than a full member. To bolster its efforts in this sphere, Russia has turned to its own Muslim-majority regions, creating internal bodies that help to realise these aims; for example, the MFA has collaborated with local politicians in the Republic of Tatarstan, which has a robust national identity and previously harboured strong separatist tendencies, to promote and grow the Russia-Islamic World Group of Strategic Vision.⁸⁸ Tatarstan's capital, Kazan, is used to host fora and summits for Islamic Cooperation countries, including the OIC Young Diplomats forum, an annual event bringing together young employees of foreign ministries from Muslim countries.⁸⁹

Samuel Ramani, a specialist in Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East, views the Kremlin's regional approach as a dexterous response to the difficulty of expanding Russian religious soft power at the federal level:

Due to severe disagreements over Syria, which were exacerbated by Russia's military intervention in 2015, and Russia's support for counter-revolution during the Arab Spring,

⁸⁴ Marlene Laruelle, 'How Islam Will Change Russia', 13 September 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/marlene-laruelle-how-islam-will-change-russia/>.

⁸⁵ 'Russia's Islamic Diplomacy', p.18.

⁸⁶ Yulia Nikitina, 'The "Color Revolutions" and "Arab Spring" in Russian Official Discourse', *Connections* 14, no. 1 (2014): pp.87-104.

⁸⁷ Service, *Russia and Its Islamic World*.

⁸⁸ 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's answer to a question by the Novy Vek TV and Radio Company as part of the Tatarstan Today. Open to the World Project, Moscow, May 18', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/vnesneekonomiceskie-svazi-sub-ektov-rossijskoj-federacii/-/asset_publisher/ykggrK2nCl8c/content/id/4129952.

⁸⁹ 'Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Yalta, April 18, 2019', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3619482.

Russian soft power in the Middle East dwindled. Yet Vladimir Putin still was determined to embrace Russia's identity as part of the Islamic world and expand Russia's influence in the MENA region. Muslim-majority regions were useful for advancing that cause. Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya and Rustam Minnikhanov in Tatarstan were used as surrogates for Putin with particular frequency and established close friendships with members of the ruling families in the MENA region.⁹⁰

The Russian regions with majority Muslim populations make a tangible contribution to their country's cooperation with the Islamic world. Tatarstan has forged a close partnership, and especially close trading relationship, with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The types of goods being traded may be of interest to Russia's and Iran's strategic rivals in the West, many of whom have paid little attention to Russian regional or paradiplomacy; for example, the Tatarstan company KAMAZ⁹¹ supplies Iran with a range of vehicles and engines. Many of KAMAZ's vehicles are designed for military use and, while there is no evidence it has supplied these to Iran, there is no detailed information as to exactly which products have been supplied. The same is true for the Kazan Helicopter Factory, which also produces military and civilian-use output, some of which is sent to Iran.⁹² These deals are agreed at the regional level and are not afforded the same (external) scrutiny as Russian foreign policy and trade on the federal level.⁹³ This is an oversight, especially given that another prominent Tatarstan business, the oil company Tatneft', has signed a memorandum of understanding with Iran on identifying new oil fields in Dekhloran, despite sanctions on such or similar activities.⁹⁴

There have even been concerns that the Kremlin is using Tatarstan to influence Iranian affairs; for example, in 2017, Iranian presidential candidate Ebrahim Raisi met with Rustam Minnikhanov, President of Tatarstan, giving rise to fears that Russia would interfere in the Iranian elections.⁹⁵ By using Minnikhanov as a proxy to conduct (some aspects of) foreign relations with Iran, it could be argued that the Kremlin is deftly minimising the possibility of undermining its ongoing relations with Iran's Sunni rivals, particularly Saudi Arabia. However, in practice, Tatarstan also has close ties with the UAE, and there are important Emirati investments in Kazan. At the recent IDEX Abu Dhabi defence expo, Minnikhanov even attended meetings with Mohammed bin Zayed as Putin's substitute.⁹⁶ As such, it is unlikely that Iran views Tatarstan as 'its' region in Russia.

Chechnya also provides numerous examples of paradiplomacy, with Head of the Republic Ramzan Kadyrov functioning as a 'surrogate' for Putin and forming close relationships with the leaders of the anti-Muslim Brotherhood Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis. In many ways, Kadyrov is a natural ally for the Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis.⁹⁷ He is experienced in crushing domestic Islamist

⁹⁰ Quotation provided by Samuel Ramani in an email to this author on 15 May 2021.

⁹¹ KAMAZ (Kamskiy Avtomobilny Zavod) is a factory producing Russian trucks and engines, including military vehicles.

⁹² 'Prezident Tatarstana Provel Vstrechnu s Poslom Irana v Rossii', *MID*, Kazan, 11 October 2017, https://kazan.mid.ru/news/-/asset_publisher/tDgFNFZWOccE/content/prezident-tatarstana-provel-vstrechu-s-crezvycajnym-i-polnomocnym-poslom-irana-v-rossii?inheritRedirect=false.

⁹³ 'Delovoe Partnerstvo Dvukh Respublik – Tatarstan i Iran', *Invest Tatarstan*, 20 April 2017, <https://invest.tatarstan.ru/ru/news/delovoe-partnyerstvo-dvukh-respublik-tatarstan-i-iran/>.

⁹⁴ 'Tatneft' zaklyuchila dogovor ob issledovanii mestorozhdeniya Dekhloran na Zapade Irana', *Kommersant*, 9 October 2016, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3111975>. This article provides some detail on the deal; although the deal itself was not commented upon by the MFA, visits and trade partnerships generally were.

⁹⁵ Rohollah Faghihi, 'Is Putin Interfering in Iran's Presidential Elections?', *Al-Monitor*, 26 April 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/04/iran-tatarstan-president-raisi-meeting-russia-interference.html>.

⁹⁶ 'Rustam Minnikhanov attends the International Defence Exhibition and Conference (IDEX) in the UAE', Integrated Portal of Government and Local Self-Government Authorities, *Official Tatarstan*, 21 February 2021, <https://tatarstan.ru/eng/index.htm/news/1934192.htm>.

⁹⁷ Pavel Luzin, 'Ramzan Kadyrov: Russia's Top Diplomat', *RIDDLE Russia* (blog), 19 April 2018, <https://www.ridl.io/en/ramzan-kadyrov-russias-top-diplomat/>.

opposition in Chechnya, where he has managed to impose his authority and control over religious activities.⁹⁸ Moreover, he has voiced both anti-Iranian and anti-Shi'a positions and he took the side of the axis in their conflict with Qatar.⁹⁹

In 2016, Chechnya hosted an International Conference on Sunni Islam which had been co-organised with Egypt and the UAE. Some 200 Sunni scholars attended the conference, which was designed to revitalise Egypt's Al-Azhar mosque and institution, a central component of the Saudi-UAE-Egypt effort to combat political Islamism.¹⁰⁰ The highest religious authorities from Egypt directed the conference, including Ahmed al-Tayeb (Grand Imam of Al-Azhar), Shawki Allam (Grand Mufti of Egypt), Ali Gomaa (former Grand Mufti of Egypt), and many others. The conference "identified Wahhabism, Salafism, and the Muslim Brotherhood as 'misguided' interpretations of Islam, much like the Islamic State" and those present "concurred that Russia should establish a satellite channel to convey 'a truthful message of Islam' to counter Al Jazeera's support for the Muslim Brotherhood".¹⁰¹

Since then, Kadyrov's engagement with the Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis has continued to go from strength to strength. He attended the visit of Saudi Arabia's King Salman to Moscow in 2017 after which Riyadh agreed to stop funding mosques in Russia.¹⁰² In 2018, the Saudi government invited Kadyrov for Eid al-Adha and presented him with full diplomatic honours. They even gave Kadyrov access to the Prophet Muhammad's room.¹⁰³

In addition to these diplomatic engagements, a Special Forces Training School was opened in Chechnya in 2019, with the aim of training individuals from the UAE and Saudi Arabia.¹⁰⁴ The Russian government, through Kadyrov, has used these informal bonds and personal relationships to improve perceptions of Russia amongst the ruling authorities in those countries and to facilitate Moscow's re-entry into the MENA region and the Gulf in particular.

Samuel Ramani clarifies how Russia uses its regions in different ways to achieve sometimes contradictory objectives:

Russia's Muslim-majority regions advance its strategy of maintaining positive relations with all major regional powers in the Middle East. Due to its experience with counterinsurgency and the establishment of the Special Forces University in Gudermes, Chechnya has been an appealing partner for Arab countries facing insurgency, such as Jordan. Chechnya's opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and support for authoritarian stability resonates strongly with the agendas of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the al-Khalifa family in Bahrain. As a result, Chechnya has helped smooth tensions over Syria and historical mistrusts between Russia and these three Gulf monarchies. Tatarstan, due to its focus on cultural diversity, aligns closely with the UAE's "tolerance agenda" while its emphasis on Islamic finance and Pan-Islamism is appealing to Saudi Arabia. Finally, Ingushetia's tolerance for Islamist civil society is appealing to Qatar. The presence of diaspora communities, such

⁹⁸ Neil Hauer, 'Russian diplomacy in Syria bolstered by Muslim minority outreach', *Middle East Institute*, 6 February 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russian-diplomacy-syria-bolstered-muslim-minority-outreach>.

⁹⁹ 'Russia's Islamic Diplomacy'.

¹⁰⁰ Giorgio Cafiero, 'Islam in the UAE's Foreign Policy', *Politics Today* (blog), 6 March 2019, <https://politicstoday.org/islam-in-the-uaes-foreign-policy/>.

¹⁰¹ Samuel Ramani, 'Russia and the UAE: An Ideational Partnership', *Middle East Policy* 27, no. 1 (2020): pp.125-40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12479>.

¹⁰² Hassan Hassan, 'Moscow's Little-Noticed Islamic-Outreach Effort', *The Atlantic*, 5 January 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/01/russia-promotes-politically-pacifist-islam/579394/>.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ 'Russia's Islamic Diplomacy', p.30.

as the Chechens in Jordan, kinship ties, such as between Tatarstan and Turkey, and the use of religious soft power, such as Tatarstan's Iran strategy, augments these links.¹⁰⁵

If Tatarstan's paradiplomacy is not designed to add balance to Russian foreign policy or exclusively shore up one relationship over another, then the same cannot be said of other regions. For example, Yunus Bek Evkurov, President of Ingushetia (2015–2019), worked hard to reinforce Russia's ties with Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood specifically (e.g., through establishing investment working groups and cultural festivals),¹⁰⁶ even as Kadyrov deepened links with the anti-Muslim Brotherhood axis.

Sometimes, there is competition for influence among regional proxy diplomats, as seen in the case of Libya, where Kadyrov's close relationship with middleman Lev Dengov has been viewed as central to Russian involvement in, and efforts to control, the ongoing conflict.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, Tatarstan's oil company, Tatneft', has signed a number of Libyan oil exploration deals, with Tatar specialists already working in the country.¹⁰⁸

Taken together, the three regions of Ingushetia, Tatarstan and Chechnya allow Russia to maintain good relations with a diverse range of countries, some of which are in conflict with one another. The Russian government then expands on this by trying to present itself as a peacemaker and to position itself as an honest broker in conflict resolution. As early as 2013, Lavrov claimed that Russia had given priority attention to the settlement of conflicts in Islamic countries, closely interacting with their international partners, such as the OIC, to do so.¹⁰⁹

Russia's self-characterisation as a peacemaker is somewhat ironic given that it also uses its Muslim populations to wage war. Following the Kremlin's success in cementing President Bashar al-Assad's power in Syria and in retaking Aleppo in 2016, the Russian government at first claimed it would reduce its presence before instead sending new Chechen and Ingush brigades from the North Caucasus region to Syria.¹¹⁰ In an attempt to encourage integration, Chechen soldiers were provided with handbooks to help them form relationships with locals.¹¹¹ On one occasion, Salakh Mezhev, a notorious Mufti of the Chechen Republic, publicly and demonstratively converted an ethnic Russian soldier to Sunni Islam in front of numerous Syrian onlookers by asking him to repeat the Shahadah (the Muslim declaration of faith).¹¹²

The Russian Ministry of Defence's deployment of Chechen troops into Syria demonstrates a varied and calculated use of religious identity by the Russian state. If successful, the forging of military, economic and cultural relationships may well provide Russia with increased leverage

¹⁰⁵ Quotation provided by Samuel Ramani in an email to this author on 21 May 2021.

¹⁰⁶ 'Ingushetiya i Katar dogorovilis' o sozdanii rabochei gruppy po prodvizheniyu investproektov', *TASS*, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/4934413>; *rusembassyqatar*, 'Uvazhaemye damy i gospoda!...', Tweet, *@rusembassyqatar* (blog), 6 February 2018, <https://twitter.com/rusembassyqatar/status/960752545131106304/photo/1>.

¹⁰⁷ Alla Hurska, 'Lev Dengov: Ramzan Kadyrov's Middleman in Libya', *The Jamestown Foundation*, 29 October 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/lev-dengov-ramzan-kadyrovs-middleman-in-libya/>.

¹⁰⁸ 'Tatneft Ready to Resume Oil Production in Libya at the Earliest Opportunity — CEO', *TASS*, 27 July 2021, <https://tass.com/economy/1318299>.

¹⁰⁹ Please see here Russian MFA content on the OIC: 'Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)', *MID*, <https://www.mid.ru/organizaciya-islamskogo-sotrudnichestva-ois->; 'O meropriyatiy Postoyannogo predstavitel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii pri Organizatsii islamskogo sotrudnichestva', *MID*, 8 September 2020, https://www.mid.ru/organizaciya-islamskogo-sotrudnichestva-ois-/-/asset_publisher/km9HkaXMTium/content/id/4328769; 'Rossiya – Organizatsiya islamskogo sotrudnichestva', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/diverse/-/asset_publisher/zwl2FuDbhJx9/content/rossiya-organizaciya-islamskogo-sotrudnichestva.

¹¹⁰ 'Khankala. Chechentsev Otppravlyayut Sluzhit' v Siriyu', *Kavkaz Radio Freedom*, 6 October 2016, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/hankala-chechentsev-otpravlyayut-sluzhit-v-siriyu/28159413.html>.

¹¹¹ Elena Milashina, 'Siriiskii desant', *Novaya gazeta*, 13 January 2017, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/01/12/71115-siriyskiy-desant>.

¹¹² 'Rossiiskii voennyi v Sirii prinimaet Islam', *Islam News*, 30 January 2017, <https://islamnews.ru/news-rossijskij-voennyj-v-sirii-prinimaet>.

in the wider Muslim community in years to come, particularly when compared to the waning influence of the West in the Middle East and Central Asia. Moreover, Russia sees Muslim-majority countries as natural allies in its confrontation with the West and makes use of its access to the OIC (as an Observer Nation with a Muslim minority) and the 'Russia and the Islamic World' Group of Strategic Vision, which was established in 2006 to promote cultural cooperation between Russia and Muslim countries.¹¹³

In trying to present itself as a (partly) Muslim country, the Russian government must rely on regional or paradiplomacy and surrogate actors. This reliance begs the question of whether successful religious diplomacy in this region depends on ideational concerns or on personal connection. If Tatarstan's partnerships seem to be more cultural or business-oriented and could endure regardless of the President, the same may not be true of Ingushetia and Chechnya. Yet, despite their powers of attraction, employing figures like Kadyrov to function as surrogate diplomats can also carry negative consequences, especially when his interests diverge from those of the Kremlin.

4.2.2. Protecting the Feelings of Religious Believers from Offence

By emphasising its moral alignment with many Islamic societies, the Russian government seeks to build bridges with the former, in part by disparaging so-called Western values. Russia has been at pains to present itself as prioritising religious believers' rights over those of individual expression, at home and abroad. As seen in 2012 with the Pussy Riot affair, the Russian authorities can be swift to punish those it accuses of offending the feelings of religious believers, an action which is a criminal offence in Russia.¹¹⁴ The Kremlin has extended this attitude to Islam and Muslims, banning and condemning cartoons or other depictions of the Prophet Mohammed, for example.¹¹⁵

Following the Charlie Hebdo terror attacks in France in 2015, President Putin immediately offered Russia's condolences and readiness to provide assistance; however, absent from his speech was any condemnation of the attack on – or importance of – free speech and the right to offend.¹¹⁶ The Russian media sought to use the attacks as a means to reassert its opposition to multiculturalism and the core values of liberalism, claiming that the attacks were demonstrative of how liberal values had caused and inspired this political environment.¹¹⁷ Rather than focusing on the issue of free speech or individual rights – or even terrorism – Russian media instead sought to inflame anti-liberal (or anti-Western) sentiment by presenting Islamist terrorism as a consequence of liberalism, rather than as its own ideologically complex issue.¹¹⁸ By responding in this way, the Russian media refocussed the discussion from Islamic terrorism to the failures of liberalism.

There was less unanimity five years after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, when an 18-year-old terrorist murdered French history teacher Samuel Paty after he had shown students cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in class. President Putin immediately described the attack as a

¹¹³ 'The Group of Strategic Vision "Russia – Islamic World" presents the updated development strategy', 11 June 2019, <https://islam-russia.com/en/novosti/the-group-of-strategic-vision-russia-islamic-world-presents-the-updated-development-strategy/>.

¹¹⁴ 'Answers of the Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesman A.K. Lukashevich to the questions of mass-media regarding the judgement on the case of Pussy Riot', *MID*, 22 August 2012, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/146230.

¹¹⁵ Elena Teslova, 'Russia Will Not Allow Anti-Islam Media', *AA*, 29 October 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russia-will-not-allow-anti-islam-media/2023858>.

¹¹⁶ 'Mezhdunarodnaya Reaktsiya Na Terakt v Redaktsii Parizhskogo Zhurnala Charlie Hebdo', *TASS*, 7 January 2015, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1686691>.

¹¹⁷ 'Mezhdunarodnaya Reaktsiya Na Terakt v Redaktsii Parizhskogo Zhurnala Charlie Hebdo'; Georgiy Mirskii, 'Boinya v Parizhe i svoboda slova', *Ekho Moskv*, 7 January 2015, https://echo.msk.ru/blog/georgiy_mirsky/1469780-echo/.

¹¹⁸ Mirskii, 'Boinya v Parizhe i svoboda slova'.

“barbarous murder” and reaffirmed his commitment to the “fight against international terror”.¹¹⁹ Despite Putin’s expression of solidarity, the French government’s decision to not only draw attention to the attacker’s birthplace in Chechnya but also to warn French citizens against travelling to Muslim countries elicited anger among some Chechens. In response, Kadyrov angrily condemned what he perceived as the French President’s continued aggravation of the Islamic community. In a Telegram post, Kadyrov claimed that Macron was wrong to characterise the display of cartoons as free speech and insisted that this attitude was “forcing people into terrorism” and extremism.¹²⁰ The MFA was deafeningly silent, leaving this controversy to Dmitrii Peskov, the President’s personal spokesman, who invoked the notion of Russia as a partly Muslim country in an effort to both mollify the Chechen leader but also to explain the difference in approach between Russia and a country like France.¹²¹

4.3: Judaism

There are an estimated 600,000 Jews in Russia, largely concentrated in the two metropolises of Moscow and Saint Petersburg. In Russian, there are two words for Jewish: *evrei* and *iudei*. The first denotes Jewish ethnicity while the second denotes Jewish religion (for ethnic gentiles and non-gentiles). This distinction has largely been lost in recent years and the control word here was *evrei*, although the coders also searched for *iudei*.

Jewish people faced well-documented persecution under the Tsars and the Soviet Union, leading to waves of emigration. After outbursts of antisemitism during and following the collapse of the USSR,¹²² Vladimir Putin’s rule has been markedly free from official government antisemitism. Of course, antisemitism is also an issue of racism, not just one of religion, but many of these issues arguably arise in similar forms with Islamophobia and it would be odd to exclude Judaism, or Russian government calls to act against antisemitism, when the latter also emerged as a topic of discussion in over 20% of references to Christianophobia and Islamophobia. By way of example, Lavrov argued that “for many years, we have promoted the initiative within the OSCE to recognise not only anti-Semitism, but also Christianophobia and Islamophobia as utterly dangerous.”¹²³ Moreover, the language used by the Russian government to depict itself as a defender of the Jewish people had much in common with its self-portrayal as a defender of Christians and religious believers generally.

4.3.1. Russia as Defender of Jews

On the international stage, Russian politicians have tried to present Russia as a defender of Jewish people, a position it argued was in stark contrast to the increasingly blatant forms of antisemitism found in Europe and the USA. For example, at a conference on the role of religion in the modern world, the Foreign Ministry Commissioner for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law claimed that “American sociologists qualify 15-20 per cent of the population as blatant xenophobes. An Anti-Defamation League study revealed that 15 per cent of Americans (about 35 million) are radical antisemites.”¹²⁴ This statistic was provided with no context or

¹¹⁹ ‘France Teacher Attack: Students “paid €300” to Identify Samuel Paty’, *BBC News*, 21 October 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54625270>.

¹²⁰ ‘Telegram: Contact @RKadyrov_95’, https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/1011.

¹²¹ ‘Peskov Zayavil, Chto v RF Ne Mog by Sushchestvovat’ Zhurna; Charlie Hebdo’, *Gazeta.ru*, 29 October 2020, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2020/10/29/n_15148843.shtml.

¹²² Sergey Sukhankin, ‘Anti-Semitism in the Late Soviet Union: The Rise and Fall of Pamyat Movement’, *Tiempo Devorado: Revista de Historia Actual* 4, no. 1 (2017): pp.39–60.

¹²³ ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Opening Remarks during a Meeting with Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Athens, October 26, 2020’.

¹²⁴ ‘Statement by Foreign Ministry Commissioner for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law Konstantin Dolgov at the conference, The Role of Religion in the Modern World’, *MID*, 1 June 2016, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/humanitarian_cooperation/-/asset_publisher/acpY620dyC5B/content/id/2299046.

source, perhaps because the Anti-Defamation League's own figures tell a somewhat different story and put the highest number of Americans to hold antisemitic views at 24 million (10.13% of the adult population). This was the figure in 2015¹²⁵ when, by contrast, they put the number of Russians holding antisemitic views at 35.9 million (30.95%).

Just as Russian politicians claim the West is antisemitic, so too do they depict pro-Western people as antisemitic. In a 2012 Russia Today television interview, Putin claimed that: "First, in case you never heard of it, a couple of years ago one of the punk-band Pussy Riot members put up three effigies in one of Moscow's big supermarkets, with a sign saying that Jews, gays and migrant workers should be driven out of Moscow."¹²⁶

In reality, the purpose of this protest had been to draw attention to discrimination in Russia against minorities, including Jews, but Putin removed the context to fit his own narrative, one in which antisemitism was a Western vice. On other occasions, Russian actors have argued that the problem of antisemitism is being deliberately ignored in Western and, in particular, in Eastern Europe.¹²⁷

In the case of Judaism, more than with any other religion, the Kremlin's religious diplomacy narrative was often blended with memory politics and specifically with memory diplomacy, whereby Russia also attempts to use (its version of) history to paint itself in a positive light compared to other actors.¹²⁸ For example, 41% of references to antisemitism in Putin's speeches and 43% of references in MFA documents between 2012 and 2020 referred in some way to World War Two and the need to defend the historical truth (i.e. pro-Kremlin view) of what happened then if we are to avoid history, and Nazism, repeating itself.

Despite this apparent concern for Jews, Russian politicians, including Putin, used discussions of antisemitism and/or World War Two to try to equate Soviet suffering with the Holocaust or to limit discussions of the Holocaust to the suffering of Soviet Jews. For example, when commenting on the Israeli elections in 2019, Putin stated: "we are united by a common approach to the challenges of the past, those of World War II. The Jewish nation suffered probably more than any other with the exception of Russia – we lost 25 million. These are serious losses."¹²⁹

Extending the analogy within this claim, Putin has also equated Russophobia with antisemitism as when he responded to a question about Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections by arguing:

The other team [Hillary Clinton] lost. They are reluctant to acknowledge the mistake. They do not want to admit that they did not get it, that they miscalculated. It is easier to say, "We are not to blame, the Russians are to blame, they interfered in our election, but we are good." It reminds me of antisemitism: the Jews are to blame for everything. The halfwit cannot do anything but the Jews are the ones who are to blame.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ 'Updated for 18 Countries in 2019: ADL's Global 100TM Anti-Semitism Index', *ADL Global 100*, <https://global100.adl.org/country/usa/2015>.

¹²⁶ Official Website of the President of Russia, 'Interview to Russia Today TV Channel', 6 September 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/16393>.

¹²⁷ 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions at a news conference following the 23rd OSCE Ministerial Council meeting, Hamburg, December 9, 2016', *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/2556212.

¹²⁸ Jade McGlynn, 'Moscow Is Using Memory Diplomacy to Export Its Narrative to the World'; Jade McGlynn, et al., 'Constructing Memory Alliances: How Russia Uses History to Bolster Its Influence and Undermine Rivals Abroad', *The Diversity of Russia's Military Power* (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26533.7>.

¹²⁹ Official Website of the President of Russia, 'Meeting with Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu', 12 September 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61517>.

¹³⁰ Official Website of the President of Russia, 'St Petersburg International Economic Forum plenary meeting', 2 June 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54667>.

As seen here, the comparison is about appropriating the victim status of the Jews for Russians. This ties into a broader effort by Russian politicians to depict their nation and people as victims, fuelling grievance narratives familiar to scholars of memory politics in Eastern Europe.¹³¹

While Russian state actors do use these narratives during bilateral meetings with Israeli colleagues, such instances constituted only 12% of total references to Judaism and antisemitism. Instead, these narratives were used to promote Russia to Europe, and the world, as the only nation brave enough to tackle and acknowledge antisemitism. As such, as in previous examples, the use of religions has been aimed at the multilateral but also the bilateral scene, to bolster ties with set countries; in the case of Judaism, this is more of a global narrative, with more in common with the multilateral aspects of Russian religious diplomacy.

4.4: Buddhism

There are approximately 1.5 million Buddhists in Russia, concentrated in three ethnically Mongol republics: Buryatia and Tuva in Siberia, and Kalmykia in the North Caucasus.¹³² The main denomination of Buddhism in Russia is the Gelukpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, which has led to some diplomatic tensions with China. Domestically, however, Buddhists do not feature prominently on the Russian political agenda and even internationally it cannot be said that Russia has pursued a specific narrative to promote religious diplomacy among Buddhist nations. Instead, the focus has been a tactical and mercantile one.

Russia has been particularly active in using its Buddhist minorities to improve its relations with other Buddhist-dominated nations in South-East Asia, thereby differentiating itself from other European countries. For example, in an interview with *Rossiia Segodnya*, the Russian Ambassador to Thailand drew attention to Russia's special appeal to Thai visitors because of its "cultural historical aspect, which is spiritually close to them" thanks to the presence of Buddhism in Russia.¹³³ The Russian Ambassador to Vietnam has made similar remarks.¹³⁴ Russia's Buddhist-majority republics, Kalmykia, Tuva and Buryatiya, have also developed their own relations with foreign nations, especially Mongolia, including by taking part in Buddhist fora.

However, despite their relative lack of prominence in Russian federal politics, the Buddhist republics have inadvertently presented unexpected challenges to Russian foreign policy, suggesting limitations to Russia's expansive religious diplomacy efforts. First, there is the issue of the Dalai Lama, whom the Kremlin has barred from visiting Russia's Buddhist areas, despite pleas from regional officials to rescind this prohibition.¹³⁵ Regions such as Kalmykia continue to take part in Dalai Lama-organised exercises, to China's displeasure.¹³⁶ The Russian government's efforts to forge closer ties with Buddhist-majority Myanmar have also caused internal difficulties.

Myanmar represents a very simple example of how Russia is able to use its multiconfessionalism to build trade links but also how this religious diversity introduces obstacles to the Kremlin's

¹³¹ Jelena Subotic, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism [Electronic Resource]*, University Press Scholarship Online (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/login?url=https://dx.doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501742408.001.0001>.

¹³² Fred Weir, 'Buddhism flourishes in Siberia, opening window on its pre-Soviet past', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 8 October 2018, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2018/0810/Buddhism-flourishes-in-Siberia-opening-window-on-its-pre-Soviet-past>.

¹³³ 'Interv'yu Posla Rossii v Tailande K.M. Barskogo', *MID*, 10 February 2018, https://www.mid.ru/maps/th/-/asset_publisher/UhQB5xrATSUO/content/id/3071965.

¹³⁴ 'Privetstvennoe slovo Posla Rossii vo V'etname K.V.Vnukova', *MID*, 1 February 2017, https://www.mid.ru/maps/vn/-/asset_publisher/a6q3L9Hzzxu2/content/id/2618229.

¹³⁵ Dmitri Tremin, *True Partners?: How Russia and China See Each Other* (London: Centre for European Reform, 2012).

¹³⁶ 'O mezhdunarodnoi i vnesheekonomicheskoi deyatel'nosti Respubliki Kalmykiya v 2018 godu', *MID*, 6 June 2019, https://www.mid.ru/vnesheekonomiceskie-svazi-sub-ektov-rossijskoj-federacii/-/asset_publisher/ykggrK2nCl8c/content/id/3674168.

freedom of manoeuvre. Over the last decade in particular, Russia has expanded its arms trade with Myanmar, to which it has sold approximately \$800 million-worth of arms, ranging from combat helicopters to armoured vehicles and artillery.¹³⁷ It has also provided several thousand Myanmar officers with Russian language and technical training.

Following the eruption of conflict there against the Rohingya community in 2017, Putin swiftly condemned the violence but,¹³⁸ apparently eager to preserve relations with the Myanmar government, Russia (along with China) also blocked a short statement from the UN Security Council on reports of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya.¹³⁹ These actions provoked the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov to come out in open opposition to the Kremlin, stating that “If Russia is supporting these *shaytans* [devils] who are committing crimes, then I’m against Russia’s position.”¹⁴⁰ Kadyrov also took part in large demonstrations in Grozny in support of the Rohingya. While the dispute eventually waned, its occurrence once more signalled the limitations of paradiplomacy and of an overly expansive religious diplomacy that attempts to have several diplomatic cakes and eat them all.¹⁴¹

Three years later, further escalation occurred in Myanmar, with a military coup unfolding in which the military accused Suu Kyi’s party of widespread fraud during November’s elections. One week prior to the coup, Russia finalised further arms deals to the Myanmar military, and Russian military vehicles were used in the coup.¹⁴² China and Russia once more blocked a UN Security Council statement condemning the Myanmar military coup.¹⁴³ The Kremlin’s continued commitment to Myanmar is the result of a close trading relationship that has been bolstered by personal ties and, in part, by the religious diversity within Putin’s government. Under President Putin, Sergei Shoigu, who comes from a Buddhist background, has worked closely with General Min Aun Hlaing to tighten relations between Russia and Myanmar over the last decade. When Min Aun Hlaing travelled to Moscow, Russia Today flattered him by suggesting that the general might one day ascend to “a higher level, including in its [Myanmar’s] most senior position”.¹⁴⁴

Beyond Myanmar, there are also many examples of Russian religious diplomacy with Buddhist countries, especially Thailand and India, where Russian state actors cite the existence of Buddhism in Russia as constituting a special bond with Buddhist countries. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that Russia has developed any strong form of surrogacy diplomacy, as with Islam, or core narratives, as for its diplomacy on Christianity and general religious affairs. Instead, this is a more bland and opportunistic application, although it is interesting to consider what would happen if China were to apply more pressure on Russia to sever ties between its Buddhist regions and Tibetan Buddhism. The fact that Russia has already been willing to demand religious sacrifices from its Buddhist population, under relatively light pressure, undermines its argument that Russia is a country that defends and promotes religious belief, a claim that is interrogated further in the following section.

¹³⁷ Pyotr Sauer, ‘Myanmar Junta Imported \$15M Worth of Russian Radar Equipment in February’, 21 June 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/04/20/myanmar-junta-imported-15m-worth-of-russian-radar-equipment-in-february-a73672>.

¹³⁸ Official Website of the President of Russia, ‘Meeting with President of Egypt Abdel Fattah El-Sisi’, President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55521>.

¹³⁹ Bill Bostock, ‘China and Russia Blocked the UN from Condemning Myanmar’s Military Coup’, *Business Insider*, 3 February 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-russia-block-un-security-council-condemn-myanmar-coup-2021-2>.

¹⁴⁰ Alexey Kovalev, ‘Putin’s surprise Myanmar challenge from Chechnya’, *Coda Story* (blog), 4 September 2017, <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/information-war/putin-s-surprise-myanmar-challenge-from-chechnya/>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Marwaan Macan-Markar ‘Myanmar Embraces Russian Arms to Offset China’s Influence’, *Nikkei Asia*, 9 February 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Crisis/Myanmar-embraces-Russian-arms-to-offset-China-s-influence>.

¹⁴³ Bostock, ‘China and Russia Blocked the UN from Condemning Myanmar’s Military Coup’.

¹⁴⁴ Shibani Mahtani and Timothy McLaughlin, ‘In Myanmar Coup, Grievance and Ambition Drove Military Chief’s Power Grab’, *The Washington Post*, 9 February 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/myanmar-coup-military-suu-kyi/2021/02/09/ac385fca-675b-11eb-bab8-707f8769d785_story.html.

5. False Foundations

As shown in the examples and studies above, the Kremlin has frequently used religious diplomacy with the aim of bolstering its influence internationally and in selected states. The Russian government can take advantage of the nation's multiconfessionalism, highlighting different 'native' religions depending on its foreign policy goals and needs. In what can often be a highly centralised state, the Russian federal authorities can sometimes provide certain regions – especially Chechnya – with remarkable freedom to conduct foreign policy. This allows a certain degree of deniability but also unpredictability.

However, public diplomacy relies on an extant foundation of soft power to function effectively, and while Russia's religious diversity is real, its religious tolerance is often more of a mirage. In recent years, there has been an increase in restrictions on religions that fall outside the four official religions. This is particularly noticeable when it comes to Christian denominations. In the last few years, the ROC has laid claim to the exclusive right to a close relationship with the Russian state, citing the Federal Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations. It has also begun accusing Catholics, Protestants, and other minority Evangelical groups of proselytising in the canonical territory that it considers its own.¹⁴⁵

In 2016, the Russian Duma passed a package of legislative amendments dubbed the Yarovaya Law. The first amendment in this package allowed, among other things, for the "regulation of missionary activity (with 'mission' defined in the broadest of terms) and penalties for religious organisations preaching in public places without permission".¹⁴⁶ Yuri Sipko, the Russian Baptist Union's one-time president, claimed that: "This measure destroys the constitutional right to freedom of conscience ... the political establishment has demonstrated its ignorance and its choice of force as the primary instrument for destroying the constitution."¹⁴⁷ The systemic repression of minority Protestant and Evangelical groups through the passing of this law has meant that religious communities are unable to practise their faith in legitimate venues of worship (since the law restricts the ability of churches to lease or buy land) or even within their own homes. If they are caught practising their faith, these groups are deemed to be guilty of "breaking the spiritual unity of the Russian people" and can face large fines or imprisonment.¹⁴⁸ Ironically, the Russian authorities are repressing domestically the same evangelical groups it supports and promotes in the USA.

The Jehovah's Witnesses – a Christian denomination that is nonviolent, eschews subservience to the state, refuses military service, does not vote and views God as the only true leader – have been at the sharpest end of the Yarovaya Law. In 2017, a Russian Supreme Court ruling classified them as an "extremist group" and, as of 2020, 31 Jehovah's Witnesses are in prison, "a total of 170 have served time in pretrial detention; and 23 are under house arrest".¹⁴⁹ Moscow has faced considerable condemnation from various international actors and independent groups for this perceived persecution of minority religious groups. In 2017, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) listed Russia amongst other Tier 1 "countries

¹⁴⁵ Vladimir Rozanskij, 'No foreigners in Russian churches. Problems for Catholics too', *AsiaNews.it*, 23 July 2020, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/No-foreigners-in-Russian-churches.-Problems-for-Catholics-too-50635.html>.

¹⁴⁶ Roman Lunkin, 'Religion and Forced Displacement in Russia', *The Foreign Policy Centre* (blog), 23 July 2020, <https://fpc.org.uk/religion-and-forced-displacement-in-russia/>.

¹⁴⁷ William Yoder, 'Protestant developments in Russia during 2017', *Evangelical Focus*, 4 January 2018, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/europe/3152/protestant-developments-in-russia-during-2017>.

¹⁴⁸ Rozanskij, 'No Foreigners in Russian Churches. Problems for Catholics Too'.

¹⁴⁹ 'Christians Are Being Unjustly Imprisoned. Where Is Bible-Toting Trump?' *The Washington Post*, 12 June 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/christians-are-being-unjustly-imprisoned-where-is-bible-toting-trump/2020/06/12/529c8974-ab30-11ea-a9d9-a81c1a491c52_story.html.

of particular concern”.¹⁵⁰ In addition, in 2018, the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights stated that the current “situation evokes associations with the Soviet period, when Jehovah’s Witnesses were subjected to unjustified repression on the basis of religion”.¹⁵¹ In response to the criticism, Putin stated that: “It is true we should treat representatives of all religions the same, but it is also necessary to take into account the country and the society in which we live.”¹⁵² The ambiguity of these comments has ensured that the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other religious groups continue to be subjected to repressive treatment.

Another new law forbidding religious leaders from having been educated abroad has placed a particular strain on the Catholic and Anglican Churches practising in Russia, as must have been foreseen.¹⁵³ This applied further pressure to those of Protestant faith as religions have been banned from worshipping in houses, meaning they need to find a centre. However, finding an appropriate centre means receiving official permission to create such a centre, and this is highly unlikely amid regional hostility and accusations that non-Orthodox forms of Christianity are destroying the unity of the Russian people.

Christians are not the only target of these measures. The Yarovaya Law, for example, has been applied in a similarly uneven and unfair way to any forms of Islam deemed to be un-Russian or ‘not-traditional’. While the long and complex history of Russia’s relations with its Muslims lies far beyond the scope of this report, some cases must be cited to draw attention to the discrimination faced by some Muslims in Russia. For example, there has also been much criticism of Russia’s treatment of Crimean Tatar civil and religious activists. The year 2019 saw the largest number of criminal cases against Crimean Tatars since the start of the occupation. Many languish in prison for crimes that were never committed. The authorities actively employ the highly suspect practice of ‘group cases’, whereby charges are brought against several persons at once. The most infamous was the ‘Hizb ut-Tahrir’ case, which was criticised by the European Court of Human Rights. This case involved “Ukrainian Muslims receiving sentences of up to 20 years’ imprisonment almost entirely on the testimony of such anonymous ‘witnesses’”.¹⁵⁴

The Russian authorities appear especially sensitive to unapproved, or ‘un-Russian’, Islamic materials. In early 2019, a court in Samara outlawed a popular translation of the Quran. As the Turkish broadcaster TRT explains: “This version of the translation by an Azeri theologian named Elmir Kuliyeu is one of several available in the country, and for more than ten years it was used as ancillary literature in Muslim educational institutions.”¹⁵⁵ The prohibition of this translation marked a deliberate constriction of the field of Islamic education in Russia and in Russian.¹⁵⁶

As well as battling official repressive measures, there are societal attitudes with which minorities must contend. Between 2015 and 2019, Russia has seen an 8% increase in antisemitic attitudes (23% in 2015 as opposed to 31% in 2019). Specifically, half of the respondents in 2019 indicated that “Jews still talk too much about what happened in the Holocaust” and “Jews have too much power in the business world”. Neither of these attitudes were held by a majority of

¹⁵⁰ ‘Review of the U.S. Government’s role in protecting international religious freedom’, 11 October 2017, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115hhrg30292/html/CHRG-115hhrg30292.htm>.

¹⁵¹ Sovet prosit Genprokuraturu proverit’ zakonnost’, 20 June 2018, <http://www.president-sovet.ru/presscenter/news/read/4729/>.

¹⁵² ‘Zasedanie Soveta po razvitiyu grazhdanskogo obshchestva i pravam cheloveka’, Prezident Rossii, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59374>.

¹⁵³ Olga Sibireva, ‘Freedom of Conscience in Russia: Restrictions and Challenges in 2020’, *SOVA Center for Information and Analysis*, 29 April 2021, <http://www.sova-center.ru/en/religion/publications/2021/04/d44133>.

¹⁵⁴ Jade McGlynn, ‘Renewing the Resistance: The UK’s Role in the Crimea Platform’ (London: Henry Jackson Society, April 2021).

¹⁵⁵ Aruuke Uran Kzy, ‘Is Russia on the path to marginalising its Muslim population?’, *TRT World*, 6 February 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/is-russia-on-the-path-to-marginalising-its-muslim-population-23927>.

¹⁵⁶ Rustam Dzhaliyov, ‘Sud o Zaprete Tolkovaniya Korana’, *Kavkazskii uzel*, 22 January 2019, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/330645/>.

respondents in 2015. Other sentiments that received more than 40% support included ideas such as “Jews don’t care what happens to anyone but their own kind” and “Jews have too much power in international financial markets”. These sentiments were also more prevalent in 2019 than they were in 2015.¹⁵⁷ The ROC has also pushed antisemitic narratives, although it should be noted that Vladimir Putin himself has been active in calling out antisemitism, for example in Russian newspapers.

Nevertheless, despite Russia’s criticism of others forgetting history, little is done to enhance knowledge of historical antisemitism at home or abroad. Instead, the suffering of the Soviet Union (often reduced to Russia) is privileged almost completely over the Holocaust. Isabel Sawkins, a PhD student working on the treatment of the Holocaust in Russia, notes that “the topic of the Holocaust is explicitly mentioned in the state history curriculum, being taught in Russian history classes within the remits of the Great Patriotic War. However, alongside the many moments identified as important in that tumultuous historical period, very little time and attention can be dedicated specifically to the Holocaust.”¹⁵⁸

The Kremlin’s double standards are on ample display in this area. When the EU condemned Russia’s human rights record in July 2019, the MFA press department put out a statement:

We would like to point out that the EU continues to increasingly actively exonerate Nazism with the connivance of national authorities of certain member countries and the tacit consent of Brussels, which facilitates the spread of racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism.¹⁵⁹

This is not entirely incorrect. The EU has been lax in allowing certain countries to exonerate Nazi heroes of yore;¹⁶⁰ however, the claim is disingenuous given that Russia has close connections to many far-right parties who have made comments widely perceived to be antisemitic. For example, it has promoted as election observers Evgenia Hilden Jarvenpera, Vlaams Belang, and Jobbik, all individuals or parties with histories of advocating extreme right-wing views. United Russia is linked to the Liga (formerly Lega Nord), which has far-right origins and has celebrated Benito Mussolini.¹⁶¹

As such, while there are European countries that are seeking to whitewash the history of Nazi collaborators to make national heroes out of them, Russia’s dislike of them is connected to geopolitical questions rather than a self-proclaimed mission to defend historical truth or fight antisemitism. If it were otherwise, then the Russian government would not have pursued links with the Slovak Revival Movement or the People’s Party Our Slovakia, both of which actively seek to rehabilitate the Nazi-aligned regime that ruled Slovakia during World War Two.

The emptiness of the Kremlin’s rhetoric is also on display when it comes to the question of resisting external cultural ‘colonisation’ to defend religious believers. While the Russian authorities may be able to resist Western pressure, they are seemingly willing to concede the rights of their own citizens when Chinese pressure is applied. The Russian government’s double standards were exemplified by its reaction to proposed pastoral visits from the Dalai Lama. Since his last visit in 2004, the Russian Government has consistently denied solicitations for visas for the Dalai Lama, clearly bending to pressure from China in a way that infringes severely on its own Buddhist citizens’ ability to practise their faith freely.

¹⁵⁷ All data available at <https://global100.adl.org/map>.

¹⁵⁸ Own interview with Isabel Sawkins, 3 April 2021.

¹⁵⁹ ‘Comment by the Information and Press Department on a statement about Russia by a European Commission member at a European Parliament plenary session, July 18, 2019’, *MID*, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/kommentarii_predstavatelya/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdqBY/content/id/3733535.

¹⁶⁰ Subotic, *Yellow Star, Red Star*.

¹⁶¹ Own interview with Anton Shekhovtsov, 10 March 2021.

6. Conclusion

Russia's religious diplomacy efforts slot into a broader foreign policy goal of spreading Russian influence, building alliances, and promoting a multipolar world. This is most evident in the types of activities targeted at Christian countries but also at Muslim-majority countries, where Russia has used surrogates to develop relationships with different parts of the Muslim world, including simultaneously working with regions that have longstanding conflicts. Moreover, the latter countries include traditional allies of the West, such as Saudi Arabia. By compartmentalising its regional engagements, Russia has been able to (for now) largely sidestep the vociferous regional rivalries plaguing the region.

However, the UK and like-minded nations should remain clear-eyed as to the limits of Russia's religious diplomacy, as seen in Ukraine, where the Church opted for autocephaly. Likewise, distrust of Russia in France has meant that the ROC has been unable to obtain permissions for its Spiritual and Cultural Centre, which is increasingly viewed as a vehicle for state interests and influence. Like any form of public diplomacy, religious diplomacy can only work if there is a genuine fountain of soft power upon which to draw. In this case, as shown in Chapter 5, this soft power is highly flawed.

Generally, the West is in a much stronger position when it comes to soft power, but Western countries need to pay more attention to Russia's ability to attract others by undermining the West and its system. Countries like the UK must accept that Russian actors can take advantage of a sometimes-well-grounded dislike of the imposition of so-called 'Western' values. Moreover, it should expect such behaviour from the Kremlin. This is not because Russia's efforts are necessarily illegitimate or malign (in some cases they are, in other cases they are not) but because Russia's foreign policy interests are often at odds with those of Britain and its allies. An increase in Russian influence in the Middle East, for example, is unlikely to be a net positive for British interests and influence.

This raises the question of how to respond to the types of narratives and practices mentioned in this report. Russian religious diplomacy relies on stories, personal charisma, paradiplomacy, and target audiences' disengagement from Western visions. It is a complex product that requires a complex response from Russia's strategic rivals. Any such response should differentiate between the elements of disinformation, anti-Western propaganda, and legitimate public diplomacy efforts. For example, it is important to not only respond but also to listen to what Russian narratives are telling audiences. Religion and tradition remain important institutions that give form to people's lives and meaning to societies, and politics, around the world.¹⁶² Russian diplomatic actors have understood this and responded accordingly. It is necessary for the UK to include an adequate and nuanced understanding of religion in any effort by public officials to engage the world as it is lived by the majority of people.

Britain should emphasise its own value for tradition within strategic communications campaigns, make more reference to its own religious communities, from the Anglican Church to the Muslim communities. It should celebrate its own religious diversity and tolerance in PR and advertising campaigns abroad, especially in countries targeted by the Kremlin for religious diplomacy. For example, the Department of International Trade's next 'Britain is Great' campaign could focus on traditions and diversity as key concepts. This could also be promoted by StratComms teams within the FCDO. Naturally, this should be conducted with humility, given that the UK is a democratic country with a free press, where people can easily

¹⁶² Seib, *Religion and Public Diplomacy*, p.9.

discover religious tensions should they wish. The UK could also use its embassies to promote campaigns about British religious diversity and tolerance and share these with the British Council and BBC World Service, both of which are well-respected vehicles of traditional British soft power.

Certain aspects of Russian religious diplomacy are harder, and perhaps even undesirable, to recreate, such as the regional approach to foreign policy. For example, it seems unlikely that the UK could (or should!) use Wales as a proxy actor to engage with Iran while maintaining its current ties with Saudi Arabia. However, the UK could instead focus its efforts on uncovering more about Russian diplomatic surrogates and regional diplomacy as current knowledge is lacking. This might involve the FCDO hiring an external consultant or tasking a staff member to investigate this growing area of Russian activity, especially with countries such as Iran.

As a next step, given the Moscow Patriarchate's close role in supporting Putin's authoritarian rule, Western countries, including the UK, should be more active in defending the autonomy of Orthodox Churches when and if the original parishioners desire this. This would mean supporting any parishioners of the Diocese of Sorouzh (the name for the Orthodox parish of the UK) who do not wish to be merged under the Moscow Patriarchate. However, such steps must be taken cautiously as, while we need to be open and honest about the proximity of the ROC and the state, we should not ban or unduly prevent the activities of the ROC. This would be perceived, with justification, as an attack on religious freedom.

Next comes the question of how to counter those negative elements of Russian religious diplomacy, which rely not on soft power but on a false depiction of both Russia and the West. The UK could use its strategic communications efforts in embassies abroad to tackle any false and/or biased narratives, particularly insofar as they discredit the UK and/or its allies. It could also use its own media and communications channels in countries targeted by Russian religious diplomacy to draw attention to the lack of religious freedom in Russia. It could use multilateral bodies, such as the UN, OSCE and UNHRC, to publicly criticise and table resolutions on religious discrimination in Russia. In so doing, the UK should still be careful to differentiate between Russian influence operations and Russian public diplomacy.

In performing such activities, the UK should not play into Russian narratives or restrict its own freedoms. A warning can come from the case of Tsargrad TV, which Google services banned on Russian Baptism Day, leading MFA spokeswoman Maria Zakharova to claim that this was a direct attack on Russian Orthodox identity and values.¹⁶³ The UK should not ban these sites (not least because new ones will simply appear in their wake), but rather work harder to arm our citizens with the critical thinking skills to assess sources and disempower propagators of disinformation.

Finally, the UK should reach out to the Russian people themselves. Russian politicians and state-aligned media constantly tell them that Western nations hate Russian culture, people and values, that it wants to brainwash Russians with alien values and to destroy everything about their culture. It is important that the UK begins to construct a counternarrative to this, by organising celebrations and festivals of Russian culture and inviting Russian artists to the UK, even waving visa restrictions for young people. Building on the work of the British Embassy in Moscow to promote awareness of the Chevening Awards, the FCDO should expand the number awarded to bright Russian students who do not have the government connections needed to pay our tuition fees: why should only the Kremlin elite children study here? Finally,

¹⁶³ 'Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on the blocking of Tsargrad TV Channel on Google services', *MID*, 28 July 2020, https://www.mid.ru/kommentarii_predstavitelya/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdqBY/content/id/4261968.

we should play a leading role in financing and finding logistical support for the idea of a new Eastern European university for Russians unable to work or study at home.¹⁶⁴ This extended hand will show that the West celebrates rather than despises Russian culture.

* * *

This report has outlined how the Kremlin's religious diplomacy functions as an adaptable tool for promoting Russia as a bastion of religious and spiritual values, which are contrasted against Western immoralism and discrimination. The intertwined nature of Russian soft power with political warfare can make it all too easy to disregard Russian actions as malign or hostile, but in so doing, Russia's rivals unwittingly underestimate the attractiveness of the country and (some of) its narratives. Such a response places the UK in particular at a disadvantage. Instead, as listed above, the UK and its allies would do better to acknowledge and celebrate what actually makes Russia attractive, as opposed to the tired illiberalism trotted out by the Kremlin. The UK could and should embrace the Russian people, while defending itself against Russia's leaders. Yet, as well as promoting a more honest portrayal of the repressive realities of Russian life for many religious believers and anyone brave enough to dissent, the British government should also try to disseminate a different, more positive, story about its values, beliefs, and potential.

¹⁶⁴ 'Open Letter: We need a new university for eastern Europe'. *Open Democracy*, 14 June 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/open-letter-we-need-new-university-eastern-europe/>.

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