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When God supports your war

The Russian Orthodox Church appears to display ever closer links to Putin's regime and the war — losing followers in the process

On 13 January, the Moscow Diocesan Court dismissed Archpriest Alexey Uminski, who had served as head of the city's Trinity Church for more than 30 years. Perjury was the reason given. On the evening before Orthodox Christmas, his suspension had already caused a stir. Father Alexey is one of the most famous clerics in Russia and is considered to have liberal views. He was one of the few priests to refuse to say the Prayer for Holy Russia during the Divine Liturgy. The prayer is assumed to have been composed by Patriarch Kirill himself, who, in September 2022, instructed it to be read out in all churches. It includes the words: 'let your power give us victory'.

The Uminski case is a perfect example of a trend whereby clerics not toeing the Church leadership's political line are suspended or dismissed. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as many as 300 Russian priests and deacons signed an open letter condemning the war. Most of them are no longer living in Russia. The project 'Christians against the war' recorded dozens of cases of orthodox clerics being persecuted for their anti-war stance. The Church structure is thereby reflecting the state machinery's methods precisely by systematically removing dissenters from its ranks. Patriarch Kirill has established a so-called Power Vertical within the Church that resembles the one constructed by Putin throughout the country.

A sacred legitimacy

The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church is unconditionally supporting the war against Ukraine by presenting it as a defence of the homeland and a crusade for Christian values that are being trampled on by the 'degenerate West'. In countless sermons, the head of the Church emphasises the war's capacity to protect Russia from its enemies. His rhetoric closely resembles Putin's litanies of a betrayal by the West, which is supposedly attempting to impose its values on Russia. 'Our people and

our leaders have recognised that such values contradict those of our country. We thank God that our Holy Russia adheres to Christian values that have been integrated into the system of national values', maintains the Patriarch.

The regal gifts that Kirill has received from the State have not gone unnoticed. For example, the 600-year-old Holy Trinity Icon by Andrei Rublev (the work is considered a masterpiece of icon painting and the most famous traditional Russian icon of all) was handed over to the Moscow Patriarchy despite vehement protests by the museum curators at the Tretyakov Gallery. It was then exhibited at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour during Christmas, at outdoor temperatures of minus 20 degrees Celsius. Last year, the relic was also brought to the Trinity Lavra of Saint Sergius for three days. Following this 'official trip', 61 defects were identified on the icon. Does Kirill need the most famous Russian icon as a symbol of his power?

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Either way, the intention was to convey a clear message that the Trinity 'protects' Russia and, at the same time, that it does not belong to the State but to the Church. The website of the Moscow Patriarchy reports that Putin himself issued instructions for the icon to be handed over. The Ministry of Culture opposed this move because they feared irreparable damage to the masterpiece. Patriarch Kirill does not appear, however, to require government consent to assert his own interests.

Xenia Luchenko, the journalist and author of the Telegram channel 'Orthodoxy and Zombies', has expressed her suspicion that the initiative may not have come from Kirill but was an order from the Kremlin: 'take the Trinity and kindly do what you're supposed to — pray.' Putin's regime is desperately trying to concoct an ideology, for which orthodoxy provides the ideal foundation. Its traditional values, about which the propaganda machinery constantly brags, allow Russia to differentiate itself from the West, which remains 'submerged in sin'. According to Luchenko, the Church offers an 'orthodox design, an attractive packaging', thereby providing the regime with a kind of sacred legitimacy.

A loss in faith or in the institution?

In return, it receives gifts and protection from the State. As a result, the Russian Orthodox Church appears to display ever closer links to Putin's regime and the war. In an interview with the online news publication in

exile *Verstka*, a priest who wished to remain anonymous claimed that Church and State have come to adopt almost identical views since the start of the war and that diocesan assemblies have been transformed into party-political events. According to Dmitry Sobolevsky, the archpriest of the archbishopric in the Western European Russian orthodox communities, most Russians now regard the Church as just another state machinery organ.

It is, however, debatable whether these close links with the State represent a genuine long-term advantage for Russian Orthodoxy. In a sermon last November, Kirill stated that people could not claim to be Russian if they did not go to church. This contradicts numerous studies that portray Russia as a country that is not excessively religious. According to the 2017 globally administered World Values Survey, as many as 77.4 per cent of Russians identify as religious — yet, most of them do not attend church and do not even know the most basic religious rules.

Religion does not represent a form of spiritual guidance for them: the focus is rather on church rituals that fulfil 'mystical needs'. These might include the belief that a newborn baby needs to be baptised to avoid illness or that a burial without a priest is not a proper one, comments Luchenko. Whether the Patriarch supports or opposes the war is of no importance to those who only occasionally light a candle before an icon. Patriarchal statements that Russian soldiers killed in action would go directly to heaven are not compatible with the faith of religious people.

The danger of divisions within the Church is also growing with the formation of two separate camps among the clergy: whilst some are defending the Kremlin's decisions, others have retreated to a kind of 'internal exile' or have even left the country completely.

According to the Russian interior ministry's official statistics, 1.4 million people attended orthodox Christmas services this year, compared with 2.3 million in 2020 and 2.6 million in 2019. Moreover, fewer people are answering the call to join the priesthood. Last year alone, three seminaries had to close their doors. Seemingly wielding power like never before and having almost amalgamated with the Kremlin, the Church is increasingly losing esteem in Russian society. The danger of divisions within the Church is also growing with the formation of two separate camps among the clergy: whilst some are defending the Kremlin's decisions, others have retreated to a kind of 'internal exile' or have even left the country completely.

More than 12 000 people have signed a letter to Patriarch Kirill in support of Uminski. So far, they have not received a reply. The Trinity Church's orthodox Christmas service was conducted by its new head, Archpriest Andrei Tkachov, one of the most zealous war hawks among the Russian clergy, who is known for his obscurantist statements. The symbiosis between the Russian Orthodox Church and the State may offer some short-term benefits — in the long term, however, questions remain about the Church's spiritual legitimacy and its reputation in Russian society.



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