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Charity and War The Russian Orthodox Church in Britain

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Executive Summary

This report examines the intricate relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), including its branches abroad such as the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), and the Russian state under President Vladimir Putin. It highlights how this relationship extends beyond spiritual guidance into the realms of political influence and propaganda, particularly concerning Russia's military actions in Ukraine. The report raises concerns about the activities of the ROC and ROCOR within the United Kingdom, questioning their compliance with UK charity laws that mandate political neutrality and operation for the public benefit.

Key Findings:

1. **Unified Ecclesiastical Structure:** Since the 2007 Act of Canonical Communion, ROCOR has been officially unified with the ROC under the leadership of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. This unification places all branches, including those in the UK, under the jurisdiction and authority of the Moscow Patriarchate.
2. **Patriarch Kirill's Political Involvement:** Patriarch Kirill has publicly supported the Russian government's military actions in Ukraine, framing the conflict in religious and moral terms that align with Kremlin propaganda. His endorsement of the war has led to sanctions against him by the UK government.
3. **Contravention of UK Charity Laws:** UK charity law requires organisations with charitable status to remain politically neutral and prohibits them from advancing political agendas. The ROCOR's alignment with Patriarch Kirill and the Kremlin's policies suggests involvement in political activities, potentially violating these regulations.
4. **Promotion of State Propaganda:** The ROC, including ROCOR, has been actively disseminating Kremlin-backed narratives regarding the war in Ukraine. By portraying the conflict as a holy war and supporting the concept of the «Russian world,» the Church legitimises Russia's geopolitical ambitions under the guise of spiritual duty.
5. **Influence of Key Figures:** Leaders of ROCOR in the UK maintain close ties with Patriarch Kirill. Their statements and actions reflect the Moscow Patriarchate's positions, further entangling the Church with Russian state interests.
6. **Use of the Church as a Soft Power Tool:** The Russian government leverages the ROC as a means of extending its influence abroad, using religious institutions to promote its imperial agenda and undermine the sovereignty of neighbouring nations.
7. **Ethical and Legal Implications:** The continued operation of ROCOR and affiliated entities in the UK under charitable status allows them to benefit from tax relief and social legitimacy while potentially engaging in activities that conflict with the principles of public benefit and political neutrality required of charities.

Recommendations:

- **Independent Investigation:** An independent inquiry should be conducted into the charitable status of ROCOR and affiliated organisations in the UK to assess compliance with charity regulations.

- **Suspension of Charitable Status:** Pending the outcome of the investigation, the charitable status of these organisations should be suspended to prevent potential misuse of charitable privileges.

- **Review of Trustees and Funding:** An examination of the trustees' influence and any connections to the Kremlin should be undertaken, alongside a review of public funds or tax benefits received by these organisations.

The report underscores the problematic nature of the ROC and ROCOR's activities within the UK, highlighting their alignment with the Moscow Patriarchate and, by extension, the Kremlin's political objectives. By engaging in the dissemination of state propaganda and supporting Russia's war in Ukraine, these organisations appear to contravene UK charity laws that demand political neutrality and operation for the public good. The close ties between the Church's leadership and sanctioned individuals raise serious ethical and legal concerns. It is imperative for UK authorities to reassess the charitable status of these entities to ensure compliance with national laws and the preservation of the integrity of the UK's charitable sector.

The Russian Orthodox Church in Support of the Kremlin's Imperialistic War Against Ukraine by Taras Kuzio

The Russian Orthodox Church was revived by Joseph Stalin in 1943 and was thoroughly controlled by the Soviet secret police throughout its existence in the USSR. Senior Russian Orthodox Church clerics cooperated with the KGB. The Russian Orthodox Church occupied Ukrainian Greek-Catholic and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church parishes after these two Churches were destroyed and their clergy murdered in the 1930s and 1940s.

In 2007, President Vladimir Putin engineered the re-union of the domestic and foreign branches of the Russian Orthodox Churches. This step reinforced the influence of Russian imperial nationalistic denial of the existence of a Ukrainian state and Ukrainians as a people distinct from Russians. In 2014, and 2022, the reunited Russian Orthodox Church supported the Kremlin's goal of destroying the Ukrainian state and genocidally transforming Ukrainians into Little Russians.

The Russian Orthodox Church is a loyal ally of Putin and supporter of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. Although a few Russian Orthodox clergy have protested Russia's genocidal war these have been in a decided minority within Russia and in the foreign branches of the Church.

Patriarch Kirill is an outspoken and vocal champion of the Kremlin's war of aggression against Ukraine. Describing it as a 'holy war,' Patriarch Kirill has told Russian men they are fighting for Russia's survival against a perfidious West intent on destroying Mother Russia. With Russian casualties approaching three quarters of a million, Patriarch Kirill has advised his flock that dying in the Kremlin's illegal war of aggression will 'wash away their sins.'

The Russian Orthodox Church is the religious arm of Putin's hyper nationalistic Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church is xenophobically hostile to the West and to what it considers to be Western influences in Russia and Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church supports Russia's dictatorship and views Western liberal democracy as incompatible with Russian identity.

Since 2014, in Russian-occupied Crimea, the Russian Orthodox Church has worked with the Russian army and security services to close other Churches and repress their clergy. The Russian authorities have targeted Crimean Tatars for harsh forms of political and religious repression. The Russian Orthodox Church has supported repression of other Christian denominations in Russia, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, accusing them of being US agents of influence.

In Russian occupied regions of Ukraine, the Russian Orthodox Church is the only Church which is legally registered and able to function. In Crimea and the Donbas since 2014 and occupied south-eastern Ukraine since 2022, the Russian Orthodox Church has worked very closely with the Russian occupation authorities to destroy Ukrainian national identity and Ukrainian Churches and Russify these regions. The Ukrainian Greek-Catholic,

Orthodox Church of Ukraine and Protestant religious confessions have been closed, their premises confiscated, and their clergy imprisoned, tortured and in some cases murdered.

The Russian Orthodox Church has strongly supported Russia's 2014 military aggression and annexation of Crimea and 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian Orthodox clergy bless Russian troops who are invading Ukraine and are committing war crimes and missiles fired at civilians and non-military buildings, such as hospitals and schools, in Ukraine.

German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier condemned the Russian Orthodox Church at the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches:¹

'The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church has aligned itself with the crimes of the war against Ukraine. This totalitarian ideology, disguised as theology, has led to the complete or partial destruction of so many religious sites on Ukrainian territory – churches, mosques, synagogues, educational and administrative buildings belonging to religious communities. No Christian who is still in possession of their faith, their mind and their senses will be able to see God's will in this. It all fundamentally contradicts the third symbol of the Assembly logo, the cross.'

Steinmeier added:

'The heads of the Russian Orthodox Church are currently leading their members and their entire church down a dangerous and indeed blasphemous path that goes against all that they believe. They are justifying a war of aggression against Ukraine – against their own and our own brothers and sisters in the faith. We must speak out, also here in this room, in this Assembly, against this propaganda targeting the freedom and rights of the citizens of another country, this nationalism, which arbitrarily claims that a dictatorship's imperial dreams of hegemony are God's will. How many women and men and children, too, in Ukraine have become victims of this hatemongering, this hatred and this criminal violence!'

The Russian Orthodox Church is an ally of Russia's dictator, Vladimir Putin, and accomplice in the Kremlin's genocidal war against Ukraine.

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1 https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2022/220831-VV-OeKR.html?fbclid=IwAR2IdFN5uiA9Abk4QnnWMwVqn0gNQ0l7Vd9E5qA_udRBILo2iHiJ4y2bXGc

Foreword by Ilya Ponomarev : The Russian Orthodox Church: From Spiritual Pillar to Kremlin Propaganda Tool

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) once held a significant spiritual role in Russian society. During the Soviet era, being a parishioner of the ROC was a courageous act. The finest individuals in the country regarded the Church as a moral authority. Works of leading theologians were meticulously copied and passed from hand to hand, preserving spiritual wisdom despite state suppression. Today, however, educated people often conceal their church attendance, and many intellectuals have begun to refer to Orthodoxy as «the curse of Russia.»

Over the past two decades, the ROC has increasingly become an instrument of state propaganda under Patriarch Kirill, aligning closely with the Kremlin and promoting narratives that justify Russia's aggressive actions, especially the war in Ukraine.

This alignment is not mere cooperation but a systematic integration into the state's machinery of control. The ROC's endorsement of Kremlin policies, including the illegal annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine, undermines its spiritual integrity and fuels conflict and suffering. The Church has evolved into a cult of personality for Putin, promoting Kremlin-propagated «Russian values» that have nothing to do with genuine service to God.

Beyond Russia's borders, branches like the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) operate in the United Kingdom. While benefiting from democratic freedoms, they propagate the Kremlin's agenda and exploit their charitable status to disseminate state-sponsored propaganda, undermining the principles of political neutrality and public benefit that underpin the charitable sector.

As someone who has witnessed firsthand the corrosive effects of the Kremlin's manipulation of religious and cultural institutions, I am deeply concerned about the implications for both Russian society and the international community. The use of the Church as a tool for political ends erodes trust, fosters division, and legitimises actions that contravene international law and human rights.

This report shines a necessary light on the complex and troubling relationship between the ROC, its overseas branches, and the Russian state. It calls into question the suitability of these organisations operating under the guise of charity while actively supporting a regime engaged in aggression and oppression.

I urge policymakers, regulators, and all those committed to justice and peace to consider the findings of this report carefully. It is imperative that we hold to account those institutions that, wittingly or unwittingly, become conduits for propaganda and conflict. By re-evaluating the charitable status of these organisations and ensuring strict compliance with laws designed to protect the public interest, we can take a stand against the misuse of religious institutions for political purposes.

The path to a peaceful and democratic Russia lies not in the consolidation of power through manipulation and aggression but in the genuine separation of church and state, the upholding of international norms, and the respect for the sovereignty of all nations. It is only through these means that we can hope to see an end to the current hostilities and the beginning of a new chapter founded on mutual respect and understanding.

Ilya Ponomarev

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Introduction

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) are two branches of the same religious entity, sharing a common spiritual and doctrinal foundation under the leadership of the Russian Patriarch. Despite their historical separation, which was rooted in the political upheavals of the early 20th century, the two branches have been officially united since 2007. This unification reaffirmed their shared ecclesiastical identity and brought ROCOR under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. As a result, both the ROC within Russia and its branches abroad, including ROCOR, are governed by the same religious authority, the Patriarch of Moscow. The two organisations are, in all but name, the same entity and should be treated as such.

The current Patriarch, Kirill of Moscow, has been a central figure in this unified church structure. However, his tenure has been marked by significant controversy, particularly concerning his public support for the Russian war in Ukraine. Patriarch Kirill has been vocal in endorsing the Kremlin's aggressive policies, including the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing military conflict in Ukraine. His rhetoric has aligned closely with the state's nationalist and militaristic narratives, framing the conflict in religious and moral terms that justify Russian aggression. This alignment has not gone unnoticed internationally, leading to sanctions against Patriarch Kirill, including those imposed by the United Kingdom, which highlight his role in supporting and legitimising Russia's war efforts.

The UK branch of the ROCOR remains part of this broader ecclesiastical structure, placing it under the leadership of Patriarch Kirill. Despite the Patriarch's sanctioned status and his overt political involvement, the UK branch has maintained its charity status, a situation that raises serious concerns. Under UK charity law, organisations that hold charitable status are expected to remain politically neutral and are prohibited from engaging in activities that promote political agendas. However, the ROCOR, through its governance by the Moscow Patriarchate, is intrinsically linked to a leadership that has publicly supported a war, promoted state propaganda, and aligned itself with the political objectives of the Kremlin.

Given these circumstances, there is a growing argument that the UK branch of ROCOR should, at the very least, lose its charity status. The continued operation of this branch as a registered charity contradicts the guidelines set out by the Charity Commission, which mandate that charities must operate for the public benefit and not serve political purposes. By maintaining its affiliation with a governing body and leader that are actively engaged in supporting and promoting the Russian state's war efforts, the UK branch of ROCOR is effectively participating in political activity.

The situation involving the UK branch of the ROCOR highlights a troubling double standard in the application of sanctions. While the leader of the organisation, Patriarch Kirill, has been sanctioned for his support of Russia's war against Ukraine, the organisation itself remains unsanctioned and continues to benefit from tax relief reserved for charities. According to the internal canons and laws of the ROC, all branches, including ROCOR,

are bound to follow the decisions and directives of the Patriarch. This creates a paradox where the leader, who is sanctioned for his political actions and support of the war, exerts control over an organisation that is still considered a charity under UK law. This discrepancy allows ROCOR to function as a vehicle for implementing the Patriarch's decisions while avoiding tax and benefiting from the social status associated with a charity. Such a situation not only undermines the intent of sanctions but also raises ethical concerns about whether organisations with direct ties to sanctioned individuals should continue to receive benefits intended for entities that are genuinely working for the public good and the benefit of humanity.

UK charity commission rules on political activity

Charities in the United Kingdom that aim to advance religion are required to operate within the legal framework applicable to all charities, particularly when engaging in political or campaigning activities. According to the Charity Commission's guidance in *The Advancement of Religion for the Public Benefit*:

«Charities whose aims include advancing religion should, like all charities, operate within the framework of the law that is applicable to them, for example in campaigning on political or other issues. **Religion cannot be used as a 'cover' to express opinions which would not be for the public benefit if expressed by a non-religious organisation.** There must be a link to a religion and the opinions must emanate from that belief system and observe the law of England and Wales.»²

This emphasises that religious charities must not utilise their platforms to promote opinions that lack public benefit or that would be inappropriate if expressed by secular organisations. Any opinions or activities must be intrinsically linked to the charity's religious beliefs and must comply with the laws of England and Wales.

Further elaboration is provided in Section C6, which specifically addresses whether a charity can have political aims:

«To be a charity an organisation must be established only for charitable aims, which are for the public benefit. A charity cannot exist for a political aim, which is any aim directed at furthering the interests of any political party, or securing or opposing a change in the law, policy or decisions either in England or Wales or in other countries. **An organisation will not be charitable if its aims are political.**

Campaigning and political activity can be legitimate and valuable activities for charities to undertake. Charities can campaign for a change in the law, policy or decisions where such change would support the charity's aims. Charities can also campaign to ensure that existing laws are observed.

2 Charity Commission for England and Wales. *The Advancement of Religion for the Public Benefit*. PB4 ISBN 978-1-84922-004-0. December 2011. p. 9. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/652541d72548ca0014ddf04e/advancement-of-religion-for-the-public-benefit1.pdf>.

However, political campaigning, or political activity must be undertaken by a charity only in the context of supporting the delivery of its charitable aims. Unlike other forms of campaigning, it must not be the continuing and sole activity of the charity.

There may be situations where carrying out political activity is the best way for trustees to support the charity's advancement of religion aims. A charity may choose to focus most, or all, of its resources on political activity for a period.

The key issue for charity trustees is to ensure that this activity is not, and does not become, the reason for the charity's existence.

An organisation cannot be established with the aim of calling for changes in the law because of its interpretation of religious beliefs. This would be regarded as a political aim and therefore not charitable.

Religion cannot be used as a way of advancing a political viewpoint which happens to be held by a religious person.»³

From this guidance, it is clear that while charities may engage in political activities, such activities must be directly supportive of their charitable aims and cannot become their primary or sole focus. Political campaigning is acceptable only insofar as it assists in delivering the charity's objectives and must not be the charity's *raison d'être*. Establishing a charity with the principal aim of effecting legal or policy changes based on religious beliefs is prohibited, as such aims are considered political rather than charitable.

In the context of advancing religion by encouraging and facilitating religious practice, the Charity Commission permits activities that raise awareness and understanding of religious beliefs and practices. However, these activities must not be conducted with the intention of achieving political purposes:

«Advancing a particular interpretation of a religious doctrine, or advancing particular religious tenets, **provided the charity is not doing so in order to achieve a political purpose.**»⁴

This means that while promoting specific religious doctrines or tenets is acceptable, it must not serve as a means to further political agendas.

A more definitive position is provided in the *Analysis of the Law Underpinning The Advancement of Religion for the Public Benefit*, particularly relevant to organisations like the ROCAL. Section 2.25.c.vii states:

«Religion may be advanced either by promoting the totality of the religious and spiritual teaching of a religious body or by particular reference to some of its tenets or to the religious teachings of a particular individual or group. However, the **promotion of a single or a limited number of tenets cannot be used as**

3 *ibid*, p. 10.

4 *ibid*, p. 24-25.

a cover for a purpose to advance a particular non-charitable (particularly a political) agenda of any individual or group.»⁵

This clarification reinforces the principle that charities must not utilise the promotion of specific religious tenets as a façade for advancing non-charitable or political objectives. The overarching aim must remain charitable, focusing on the advancement of religion for the public benefit without diverting into political activism that does not directly support the charity's aims.

In summary, the Charity Commission imposes specific limits on political actions undertaken by charities registered as religious organisations in the UK:

- Religious charities must operate within the legal framework applicable to all charities, ensuring compliance with the laws of England and Wales.
- They must not use religion as a cover to express opinions lacking public benefit or to advance personal political viewpoints.
- Charities cannot be established with political aims, such as changing laws or policies based on religious interpretations.
- Political activities are permissible only when they support the delivery of the charity's charitable aims and must not become the charity's sole or continuous focus.
- Promotion of specific religious doctrines is acceptable provided it is not intended to achieve a political purpose or advance a non-charitable agenda.

Adhering to these guidelines ensures that religious charities contribute positively to the public benefit while maintaining their charitable status and integrity under UK law.

The question remains, do the charity organisations of the Russian Orthodox church in the UK adhere to these rules?

5 Charity Commission for England and Wales.. Analysis of the Law Underpinning the Advancement of Religion for the Public Benefit. December 2008. p. 16. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d5924e5274a2af0ae3120/lawrel1208.pdf>

Russian Church, propaganda, and people

The Russian state owned polling agency, Russian Public Opinion Research Center (RPORC) stated in 2023 that 57 of russians, 65% of Russian women and 47% of men⁶, consider themselves as Russian Orthodox Chrstians.

Creating the portrait of an Orthodox Russian, a person most likely to follow the teachings and canons of the ROC, RPORC wrote:

It is a woman, over the age of 35 (60% in the 35-59 age group and 67% in the 60+ age group), with vocational education (62%), and an average income level (60%). She resides in a town with a population of up to 100,000 people or in a village (62-61%). She is an active television viewer (71%) or equally prefers both television and the internet (68%)⁷.

The independent Russian survey agency, Levada Centre, in 2023, identified a greater number of Russians who see themselves as Orthodox Christians, 72%, with of people 40% stating that religion plays an important part in their life and 45% identifying themselves as religious⁸. This is a stark contrast to the 70% of respondents identified as atheists in the Levada Centre poll in 1989.

Over the past two decades, Russian society has experienced a marked resurgence in religious observance, particularly within the Orthodox Christian tradition. This revival is not merely a grassroots phenomenon but has been significantly shaped by the close relationship between the ROC and the state. The intertwining of religious and political spheres has led to a deepening of Orthodox Christian influence across various aspects of Russian life, contributing to a broader cultural and ideological shift.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a turning point for religion in Russia. After decades of state-enforced atheism, the ROC emerged as a symbol of national identity and continuity. Over the last twenty years, the Church has regained much of the prominence it enjoyed before the Bolshevik Revolution. This resurgence has been characterised by an increase in church attendance, religious education, and the restoration of religious holidays and rituals. Surveys indicate that a growing number of Russians now identify as Orthodox Christians, and there is a noticeable increase in the participation in religious practices, such as baptism, weddings, and the observance of religious feasts.

A significant factor in this religious revival is the close alignment between the ROC and the Kremlin. This relationship has been carefully cultivated by the Russian government, under Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin has consistently portrayed the Church as a guardian of Russian values and traditions, aligning its religious authority with the state's political objectives and narratives. This has been evident in the Church's support for key government

6 VTSIOM. "Религия и общество: мониторинг [Religion and Society: Monitoring]." <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/religija-i-obshchestvo-monitoring>

7 ibid

8 Levada Center. "Религиозные Представления [Religious Beliefs]." May 16, 2023. <https://www.levada.ru/2023/05/16/religioznye-predstavleniya-2/>

policies, including the promotion of “traditional family values”, opposition to Western liberalism, and endorsement of Russia’s geopolitical ambitions.

The symbiotic relationship between the Church and the state has also been instrumental in shaping public perception and reinforcing the legitimacy of the current political regime. The Church’s endorsement of the Kremlin’s policies lends a moral and spiritual dimension to the state’s authority, which resonates deeply with many Russians. This is particularly important in a society where religious identity is increasingly seen as a cornerstone of national identity. The proximity of the Church to the Kremlin has allowed it to influence not only the private lives of individuals but also the broader societal values, promoting a vision of Russia that is closely tied to Orthodox Christian ethics and beliefs.

Moreover, this alignment has facilitated the Church’s involvement in various state initiatives, including education, social services, and even foreign policy. For instance, the Church has played a significant role in promoting the idea of the «Russian World» (Russkiy Mir), a concept that ties Russian identity to Orthodox Christianity and justifies Russia’s influence over neighbouring countries with significant Russian-speaking populations.

The Russian Orthodox Church and the State

The Russian military and security forces have long recognised the use of the ROC as an unofficial arm of the state. The use of the “opiate of the people” for the benefit of the Soviet Communist party is a documented fact from Stalinist era⁹ and the transgressions of the people’s confidence in revealing their internal monologues to the state security services is well documented.

The Putinist era of Russia has continued this long standing practice. The stark example of the close bond between then two institutions is the Cathedral of St. Sophia of God’s Wisdom (*Храм Софии Премудрости Божией*), which was reopened on Lubyanka, the home of the FSB, as the departmental church of the agency. Patriarch Aleksey II himself blessed its opening in a ceremony, in the presence and under the watchful eye of the then FSB chief, and subsequent supporter and architect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Nikolai Patrushev¹⁰.

We cannot but admire the dedication to Putinist piety and restraint of the FSB, traits they combine so masterfully with corruption, disregard for human life and an approach to

9 Corley, Felix. “How Stalin Enlisted the Orthodox Church to Help Control Ukraine.” Aeon, November 17, 2021. <https://aeon.co/essays/how-stalin-enlisted-the-orthodox-church-to-help-control-ukraine>

10 Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation. “Патриарх Московский и всея Руси Алексий II освятил храм Софии Премудрости Божией на Лубянке.” March 6, 2002. <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/comment/ufsb/single.htm%21id%3D10311826%40fsbComment.html>

the “love thy neighbour” commandment that would make the devil quince¹¹. Or perhaps the Russian Orthodox Church was aiming to transform the ruthless successors of the KGB into devout Christians? What of the Church’s other affiliations?

The FSB, of course, is not the sole entity whose values are as divorced from christian ideals, as its desire to feign their compliance is strong. The Russian Army officially invited the church into the ranks in 2010¹², introducing the institution of military priests, or chaplains, with salaries paid by the army. Since, involvement of the church within the military has increased over time, leading to the construction of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Moscow in 2020¹³. This magnificent monument to corruption, Purinist larges and cult of personality is the largest Orthodox church in Russia and was once described by the late Russian opposition politician, A. Navalny, as resembling a temple to the Roman god of war, Mars¹⁴.

The Cathedral symbolises the strengthened relationship between the church and the military and enshrines the cult of personality of the main actors of the Putinist regime. Although later removed, a mosaic was planned, depicting Putin and his closest allies in a space traditionally reserved for saints and martyrs¹⁵, in a clear display of the unity between Church and state, and a visual display of who the church worships and serves.

Preachers of the Kremlin

Russian Orthodox priests have increasingly echoed Kremlin propaganda in their sermons and public statements, reinforcing the government’s narratives among their congregations. This alignment is particularly evident in the clergy’s support for Russia’s geopolitical actions, including the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in Ukraine, which are often framed as divinely sanctioned or necessary to protect Orthodox Christian values, as well as domestic policies, such as the decision not to impose lockdown in the early

11 Aris, Ben. “FSB Officers Always Get Their Way.” Open Democracy, August 7, 2018. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/fsb-officers-always-get-their-way/>; Žalalis, Lukas. “‘Nobody Will Ever Find You’: An FSB Torture Survivor Tells His Story.” The Moscow Times, April 12, 2024. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/04/12/nobody-will-ever-find-you-an-fsb-torture-survivor-tells-his-story-a84775>

12 Lucas, Edward. “Putin’s Security Forces Find God.” Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), February 8, 2022. <https://cepa.org/article/putins-security-forces-find-god/>

13 Roth, Andrew. “‘A Church for Our Sins’: The Russian Cathedral’s Barely Hidden Propaganda.” The Guardian, October 20, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/20/orthodox-cathedral-of-the-armed-force-russian-national-identity-military-disneyland>

14 Россия Будущего [Russia of the Future]. “Навальный о главном храме Минобороны [Navalny on the Main Temple of the Ministry of Defense].” YouTube video, June 23, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSVoAxJoo3U>

15 Gershkovich, Evan. “Russia Ditches Putin Mosaic in Army Church.” The Moscow Times, May 1, 2020. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/05/01/russia-ditches-putin-mosaic-in-army-church-a70168>

stages of the COVID pandemic¹⁶ despite deaths among the clergy and church attendees¹⁷. By presenting state policies as consistent with religious teachings, these priests not only legitimise the Kremlin's agenda but also deepen the influence of state ideology within the Church. This blending of religious discourse with political propaganda serves to bolster the state's authority, portraying the government's actions as not merely political choices but as moral imperatives endorsed by the Church. Consequently, the Church has become a key vehicle for disseminating state-sanctioned messages, reinforcing the close ties between religious and political power in Russia.

Andrei Tkachev, a 53-year-old cleric now based in Moscow, was asked in November 2022 on the Spas (Спас) TV channel, funded by the Russian Orthodox Church, about the Russian bombing of Ukraine's civilian infrastructure, he said: "We live in the world of infrastructure, and it is much better to knock out some equipment rather than 40,000 people along with it. We are waging war according to Christian principles, ... because we are destroying transformers, not people who have an immortal soul."¹⁸

Holy War

The concept of a «Holy War» within the context of the Russian Orthodox Church is a complex and multifaceted subject that intertwines religious, historical, and cultural elements. Unlike the Western concept of *bellum sacrum*, more colloquially referred to as crusades, which were explicit military campaigns sanctioned by the Church, the idea of a Holy War in Eastern Orthodoxy, and particularly in the Russian Orthodox Church, after the schism, carries distinct theological and historical connotations.

The notion of defending the faith and the Christian homeland has been deeply embedded in the consciousness of Russian Orthodoxy. This is especially evident in the narratives surrounding the defence of Rus' against external threats, such as the Mongol invasions, the Teutonic Knights, and later, the Napoleonic Wars.

For instance, the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380, where the forces of Grand Prince Dmitry Donskoy defeated the Mongol-Tatar army, has been imbued with a sense of divine mission. Although not officially declared as a Holy War, it was perceived as a battle for the preservation of the Orthodox faith and the Russian land. Similarly, the Russian Orthodox Church played a significant role during the Time of Troubles (1598–1613), blessing the militia that eventually expelled the Polish forces from Moscow.

From a theological standpoint, the concept of a Holy War in Russian Orthodoxy is more nuanced and spiritualised compared to its Western counterparts. The idea of warfare in Orthodoxy is often metaphorically linked to the spiritual struggle against sin and evil,

16 Fontanka.ru. "В РПЦ сочли «неуместным» ограничивать число людей на богослужениях в Петербурге." Фонтанка.ру, December 5, 2020. <https://www.fontanka.ru/2020/12/05/69603116/>

17 Fontanka.ru. "Патриарх Кирилл: Ответом на ложь о коронавирусе является тяжелейшая правда о наших почивших отцах и братьях. Но закрывать храмы РПЦ не планирует", Фонтанка.ру, 8 December 2020

18 Lucas, Edward. "Putin's Security Forces Find God."

known as spiritual asceticism. This spiritual warfare is considered the primary «Holy War» that every Christian must wage within themselves, striving for purity, righteousness, and union with God.

The Russian Orthodox Church has previously publicly emphasised peace and the sanctity of life, echoing the teachings of Christ who advocated for love and forgiveness. Nevertheless, the Church has also recognised the necessity of armed defence when the faith, the Church, and the homeland are under existential threat. In such cases, the defence of the Orthodox faith could take on the characteristics of a Holy War, where the soldiers are seen as protectors of the divine order and the Christian community.

The concept of a Holy War also found resonance during the 20th century, particularly during World War II (in the chronological limitations, preferred by Soviet and Russian propagandists, of the Great Patriotic War). The Russian Orthodox Church, which had been severely repressed and infiltrated by security forces under Soviet rule, was partially rehabilitated and restructured as the state sought to galvanise the population against the Nazi invasion. The war was framed not only as a struggle for survival but also as a defence of the Russian land and its Orthodox Christian heritage. The Church's leaders at the time, such as Patriarch Sergius, framed the conflict as a righteous battle against evil, thus imbuing it with the characteristics of a Holy War, in line with the Soviet propaganda message.

In contemporary times, the idea of a Holy War remains largely symbolic within the Russian Orthodox Church. It is invoked more in the sense of defending the faith against secularism, moral decay, and perceived external cultural threats, aligning the church narrative with the propagation of “traditional values” message preferred by the Kremlin. The Russian Orthodox Church today often speaks of a «spiritual battle» that the faithful must engage in, which aligns with the traditional Orthodox understanding of life as a constant struggle against sin and the forces of evil. However, the large scale invasion of Ukraine, and especially the prolonged war, termed the special military operation by the Kremlin, has led to a reassessment of this position and, supported by the aforementioned state support through military integration, has extended its understanding of the “Holy War” into an armed struggle against the foes of the state.

During the 25th World Russian People's Council Assembly, titled «The Present and Future of the Russian World», which took place on March 27, 2024, in the Hall of Church Councils at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, under the chairmanship of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, the decree was approved, stating:

“From a spiritual and moral standpoint, the special military operation is regarded as a Holy War, in which Russia and its people, by defending the unified spiritual space of Holy Rus, are fulfilling the mission of the «Restrainer,» protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the triumph of the West, which has succumbed to Satanism.”¹⁹

19 Moscow Patriarchate. “Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора «Настоящее и будущее Русского мира» [Mandate of the 25th World Russian People's Council ‘The Present and Future of

The presence of the Patriarch and his approval of the degree is backed by the publication of the decree on the official website of the Moscow patriarchate. This stance unequivocally aligns the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church with the war raged by the Kremlin in Ukraine.

Sanctioning Patriarch Kirill: Rationale, Implementation, and Implications

On 16 June 2022, the UK Government sanctioned Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, citing his prominent support for Russian military aggression in Ukraine²⁰.

The primary reason for sanctioning Patriarch Kirill was his unequivocal endorsement of the Russian large scale invasion of Ukraine. The UK Government identified him as a significant enabler of Putin's war efforts, leveraging his religious authority to justify the invasion. Kirill has consistently portrayed the conflict as a holy war, aligning closely with Kremlin propaganda that frames Ukraine as an inseparable part of a greater Russian world and denies its independence. His sermons have frequently echoed Putin's narrative, thus playing a critical role in bolstering domestic support for the war.

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss expressed a part of the reasoning behind the sanctions by stating that Kirill "repeatedly abused his position to justify the war"²¹.

The sanctions against Patriarch Kirill included an asset freeze and a travel ban²². An asset freeze prevents any UK citizen or business from dealing with Kirill's funds or economic resources, effectively immobilising any assets he might hold within UK jurisdiction. The travel ban prohibits him from entering or remaining in the UK. These measures aim to limit Kirill's international movement and economic capabilities, thereby diminishing his ability to support and propagate pro-war sentiments²³.

Additionally, these sanctions were part of a coordinated effort that also targeted other key figures and entities linked to Russia's military activities and human rights abuses. For

the Russian World'].” Официальный сайт Московского Патриархата [Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate], March 27, 2024. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html>

20 UK Government. “UK Sanctions Russians Linked to Forced Transfers and Adoptions.” GOV. UK, June 16, 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-sanctions-russian-linked-to-forced-transfers-and-adoptions>; Kuzio, Taras. “Unholy War: UK Sanctions Putin's Patriarch for Backing Ukraine Invasion.” Atlantic Council, June 17, 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/unholy-war-uk-sanctions-putins-patriarch-for-backing-ukraine-invasion/>

21 Associated Press. “UK Sanctions Russian Orthodox Head; Decries Forced Adoption.” AP News, June 16, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-liz-truss-donetsk-3f39170924078c29ce70e6bd6de96043>; UK Government. “UK Sanctions Russians Linked to Forced Transfers and Adoptions.”

22 UK Government. “UK Sanctions Russians Linked to Forced Transfers and Adoptions.”

23 Associated Press, “UK Sanctions Russian Orthodox Head, Decries Forced Adoption,” Voice of America (VOA), June 16, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/uk-sanctions-russian-orthodox-head-decries-forced-adoption-/6620033.html>

instance, alongside Kirill, the UK sanctioned Russian Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova for her involvement in the forced transfer and adoption of Ukrainian children, as well as various military commanders and arms dealers associated with the conflict, highlighting the company and association of the Moscow Patriarch in the context of the war.

Sanctioning a religious leader like Patriarch Kirill represents a significant and vital step for Britain internally. They highlight the extent to which the UK is willing to go to undermine support networks for the Russian war effort. Kirill's sanctioning is also a reflection of Russia's broader geopolitical strategy that utilises religion and corrupts institutions that form the basis of daily life for many people and warps their narrative in favour of the propaganda message of the day.

Expectedly, the reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church to the sanctions imposed on Patriarch Kirill by the UK was one of strong condemnation. The Church described the sanctions as absurd and baseless, asserting that they were part of a broader effort to intimidate and silence the Church's stance on the conflict in Ukraine. Patriarch Kirill himself viewed these actions as an attack on religious freedom and an attempt to undermine the spiritual and moral support provided by the Church to the Russian people during the ongoing conflict²⁴. Such reactions, and the illogical and unchristian desire to support a war that is defined as fratricide by Russia's own bizarre insistence on a brotherly relationship between Russia and Ukraine, underscore the deeply entrenched positions held by Kirill and his close alignment with Putin's policies.

The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad

The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) has played a significant role in maintaining Orthodox Christian traditions among the Russian diaspora since its establishment in the early 20th century. Formed in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing civil war, ROCOR served as an apparent spiritual haven for Russians who fled the communist regime, preserving religious practices and cultural identity in exile and freedom from Soviet repressions. For decades, ROCOR operated independently from the Moscow Patriarchate, largely due to ideological differences and concerns over the Soviet government's influence on the church within Russia. This separation symbolised a broader rift caused by the tumultuous political landscape of the 20th century, reflecting deep-seated tensions between exiled communities and Russia.

The unification of ROCOR with the Russian Orthodox Church within Russia in 2007 marked a historic reconciliation, healing a division that had persisted for nearly 80 years. This reunification was the culmination of prolonged dialogues and negotiations aimed at bridging theological and political differences. Key issues addressed included the assessment of the Soviet period and the autonomy of ROCOR within the unified church structure.

24 TACC [TASS]. "Легойда: патриарх никак не реагирует на санкции, волнуется лишь о зарубежных приходах [Legoyda: The Patriarch Does Not React to Sanctions, Only Worries About Foreign Parishes]." July 6, 2022. <https://tass.ru/politika/15146951>

The Act of Canonical Communion²⁵ was signed on 17 May 2007 in a solemn ceremony at Moscow's Christ the Saviour Cathedral, attended by high-ranking clergy, state officials, and thousands of believers. The event was celebrated as a restoration of spiritual unity among Orthodox Christians globally, symbolising the end of historical antagonisms and the beginning of renewed cooperation and mutual support²⁶.

For Vladimir Putin, this unification represented a significant triumph during the closing days of his second term in office. Putin played a pivotal role in facilitating and endorsing the reconciliation process, recognising the profound cultural and political implications of a unified Russian Orthodox Church²⁷. The successful reunification bolstered his image as a leader committed to restoring Russia's traditional values and strengthening national identity. It also underscored his strategy of leveraging the church's moral authority to promote social cohesion and project Russia's soft power on the international stage. By supporting the healing of this ecclesiastical schism, Putin reinforced the narrative of Russia's resurgence from the turmoil of the post-Soviet era, showcasing the country's ability to overcome historical divisions and reassert its cultural and spiritual legacy.

The unification had far-reaching consequences, enhancing the Russian Orthodox Church's global influence and fostering closer ties between the Russian state and Orthodox communities worldwide. It enabled centrally coordinated missionary and charitable activities, cultural exchanges, and a unified response to contemporary moral and social issues. Moreover, the reconciliation served as a potent symbol of national reconciliation, resonating with broader efforts to address the fractures left by decades of communist rule and diaspora separation. In this context, the reunification not only affirmed the enduring resilience of Orthodox Christianity but also highlighted the intricate interplay between religion and politics in shaping Russia's national identity and international relations under Putin's leadership.

“The Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, conducting its salvific service in the dioceses, parishes, monasteries, brotherhoods, and other ecclesiastical bodies that were formed through history, remains an indissoluble part of the Local Russian Orthodox Church.”

“The First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia is elected by her Council of Bishops. This election is confirmed, in accordance with the norms of Canon Law, by the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church.”

25 Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, Diocese of Great Britain and Western Europe “The Act of Canonical Communion” Orthodox Europe. <https://orthodox-europe.org/english/rocor/act/>

26 Moscow Patriarchate. “Определение освященного Архиерейского Собора Русской Православной Церкви (Москва, 24–29 июня 2008 года) «О единстве Церкви» [Resolution of the Holy Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow, June 24–29, 2008) ‘On the Unity of the Church’].” Официальный сайт Московского Патриархата [Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate], June 27, 2008. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/428916.html>

27 Президент России. “Выступление на торжественном приеме по случаю восстановления единства Русской православной церкви.” Website of the President of Russia, May 19, 2007. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24266>

“Decisions on the establishment or liquidation of dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia are made by her Council of Bishops in agreement with the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church.”

“The bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia are members of the Local Council [Pomestny Sobor] and Council of Bishops [Arkhieireiskij Sobor] of the Russian Orthodox Church and also participate in the meetings of the Holy Synod in the prescribed order. Representatives of the clergy and laity of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia participate in the Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in the established manner.”

“The supreme instances of ecclesiastical authority for the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia are the Local Council and the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church.”

“Appeals on decisions of the supreme ecclesiastical court of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia are directed to the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia.”

“The Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia receives her holy myrrh from the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia.”²⁸

According to The Act of Canonical Communion, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) is intrinsically connected and subservient to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Russia and its Patriarch, as established by the Act of Canonical Communion signed in 2007. This Act reconstituted the unity between ROCOR and the Moscow Patriarchate, highlighting several key aspects of their relationship that underscore ROCOR’s integration and subordination within the ROC.

Firstly, ROCOR «remains an indissoluble part of the Local Russian Orthodox Church.» This phrase emphasises that ROCOR is not an independent entity but is inherently linked to the ROC’s ecclesiastical body. The use of «indissoluble» indicates a permanent and unbreakable connection, reinforcing the idea of a unified church despite geographical separations.

Secondly, the election of ROCOR’s First Hierarch requires confirmation by the highest authorities of the ROC: «The First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia is elected by her Council of Bishops. This election is confirmed, in accordance with the norms of Canon Law, by the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church.» This process ensures that ROCOR’s leadership aligns with the broader directives and approvals of the ROC, showcasing a hierarchical structure where the Patriarch holds significant influence over ROCOR’s governance.

Additionally, any organisational changes within ROCOR are subject to agreement with the ROC’s central authority: «Decisions on the establishment or liquidation of dioceses

28 Russian Orthodox Church. Act of Canonical Communion. Moscow Patriarchate, 2007. <https://old.mospat.ru/en/documents/act-of-canonical-communion/>

of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia are made by her Council of Bishops in agreement with the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church.» This stipulation means that ROCOR cannot unilaterally make significant administrative decisions without the consent of the Moscow Patriarchate, further indicating subservience.

ROCOR's bishops also participate in the broader councils of the ROC: «The bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia are members of the Local Council [Pomestny Sobor] and Council of Bishops [Arkhieireiskij Sobor] of the Russian Orthodox Church and also participate in the meetings of the Holy Synod in the prescribed order.» Their inclusion signifies that ROCOR's hierarchy is integrated into the ROC's overall ecclesiastical framework, aligning their activities and decisions with those of the central church authority.

The supreme ecclesiastical authority for ROCOR is the same as that of the ROC: «The supreme instances of ecclesiastical authority for the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia are the Local Council and the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church.» This means that ROCOR is ultimately governed by the same bodies that oversee the ROC, placing it under the direct authority of the Patriarch and the central councils.

Moreover, judicial appeals within ROCOR are directed to the Patriarch: «Appeals on decisions of the supreme ecclesiastical court of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia are directed to the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia.» This appellate process underscores the Patriarch's role as the highest ecclesiastical authority, even in matters concerning ROCOR.

Finally, the sacramental life of ROCOR is linked to the Patriarchate: «The Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia receives her holy myrrh from the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia.» The holy myrrh is essential for various sacraments, and receiving it from the Patriarch symbolises spiritual unity and dependence.

Through the provisions outlined in the Act of Canonical Communion and the established ecclesiastical structures, ROCOR is intrinsically connected to and subservient under the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia and its Patriarch. The hierarchical and administrative arrangements ensure that ROCOR operates within the canonical and spiritual framework of the ROC, reinforcing the unity and cohesion of the Russian Orthodox faith globally.

ROCOR mirroring Patriarch Kirill and Kremlin views

The Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROOR), including the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad - London (ROCAL), was deeply critical of the Church of Constantinople's decision on 11 October 2018 to grant autocephaly (independence) to the Eastern Orthodox Church in Ukraine. This decision outlined several key actions: the reestablishment of a stauropegion in Kyiv, a church body directly subordinate to the

ecumenical patriarch; the revocation of the 1686 «Letter of Issue» which had allowed the patriarch of Moscow to ordain the metropolitan of Kyiv; and the lifting of excommunications on the clergy and faithful of two unrecognised Ukrainian Eastern Orthodox churches, namely, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP). These churches, unrecognised by the Moscow Patriarchate, were seen as «schismatics» by Moscow, which considered them illegal segregated groups competing with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (UOC-MP).

The formation of an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church reflected the desire of many in Ukraine to distance themselves from the Moscow Patriarchate under Patriarch Kirill, who is a key ally of President Putin. Kirill's support for Putin's view that Ukraine is part of the Russian world is fundamentally opposed to Ukraine's independence and its right to determine its own future.

In response to the Church of Constantinople's actions, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church prohibited all members of the Moscow Patriarchate, including clergy and laity, from participating in communion, baptism, and marriage at any church under the Church of Constantinople or the independent Ukrainian Orthodox churches. ROCAL endorsed and implemented this decision, underscoring its allegiance to the Moscow Patriarchate, which is its ultimate authority, revealing its lack of independence.

On 18 October 2018, the Synod of Bishops of ROCOR, including ROCAL, expressed «profound sorrow at the uncanonical undertakings perpetrated by the Church of Constantinople,» particularly concerning the Message of 11 October 2018. They declared complete support for the position taken by the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Moscow following its meeting on 15 October 2018.

ROCOR further stated on 18 October 2018 that anyone who, following the «lawless decision» of the Church of Constantinople, entered into communion with these schismatic individuals would depart from Orthodox canonical unity, thus entering into schism and the mortal peril it represents to the soul. ROCOR maintained that the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, under the Archpastoral care of His Beatitude Metropolitan Onuphry and his co-Archpastors, remained the sole canonical body within Ukraine since the Act of 1686.

This unwavering stance of ROCAL demonstrates its alignment with the Moscow Patriarchate's political and ecclesiastical policies, which are intertwined with Russian imperialism and the support of the Kremlin's regime. Therefore, ROCAL's status as a charity in the UK should be reconsidered, given its clear connection to and support of an institution that propagates divisive and harmful ideologies. The charitable status of an organisation should align with values that promote unity, peace, and humanitarian efforts, which is questionable in the case of ROCAL due to its political affiliations and actions.²⁹

29 ROCAL, New York: October 18, 2018 - Statement of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, 24 October 2018, <https://www.russianchurchlondon.org/en/nyu-jork-18-oktyabrya-2018-g-zayavlenie-arhierejskogo-sinoda-russkoj-pravoslavnoj-tserkvi-zagranitsej-2/>

This demonstrates that ROCAL's loyalty aligns with the Moscow Patriarchate's perspective that Ukraine is part of the «Russian world,» recognizing only the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate's authority. This perspective was solidified during the ceremony that officially reestablished full communion between the Moscow Patriarchate, led by Patriarch Alexei II, and ROCOR, including ROCAL, headed by Metropolitan Laurus.

The signing of the Act of Canonical Communion integrated ROCOR and its branches, including ROCAL in the UK, into the episcopate of the Moscow Patriarchate. This communion was proudly announced on the Kremlin's website, with Russian President Vladimir Putin attending the ceremonial signing. The event highlighted the Kremlin's support for consolidating ROCOR and ROCAL under the Moscow Patriarchate's ultimate authority.

Since Putin took office in 2000, the Moscow Patriarchs, especially Patriarch Kirill, along with the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia, have been staunch supporters of Kremlin's policies. The Kremlin's statement described the significance of the communion, stating, «Signing the Act on Canonical Communion implies that the Russian Church Abroad will return to the Moscow Patriarchate as well as the entire Orthodox community that, so far, has never recognized the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. As of today, as part of the Mother Church, parishioners of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad will be able to take communion in all Orthodox churches in the world and its clergy will have the right to conduct services together with the hierarchs and clerics of the 15 local Orthodox churches.»

Speaking at the ceremony, Putin emphasised the role of the Church in uniting the Russian world: «The restoration of unity in the Church is an essential prerequisite for the restoration of the lost unity of the entire Russian world, a world in which the Orthodox faith has always acted as a spiritual foundation. Everywhere, wherever fate has dispersed our people, their first concern has always been building a cathedral. And today it is precisely the Church that acts as a unique, island Motherland for so many of our compatriots that live far away from Russia. This invisible bond will help them preserve their national culture and traditions, native language, and make them aware of their solidarity with events in their Fatherland.»

Putin further articulated the strategic significance of the Church's unity, saying, «We well understand and appreciate the power of the pastoral word that unites the people of Russia. And for that reason the restoration of the Church's unity helps realise our common goals.»

These events underscore ROCAL's integration into the Moscow Patriarchate's sphere of influence and its alignment with the Kremlin's geopolitical agenda. Given this alignment, the status of ROCAL as a charity in the UK warrants reconsideration. The connection to an institution that propagates political ideologies and supports an authoritarian regime raises significant ethical and legal questions. Charitable status should be reserved for organisations that promote humanitarian values and peace, not those intertwined with

divisive political agendas. Therefore, re-evaluating ROCAL's charitable status is not only prudent but necessary to ensure alignment with British values and laws.^{30 31 32}

As highlighted in his speech, Putin emphasised the concept of uniting the Russian world. This idea is central to Putin's imperialist outlook, which has driven his aggressive actions, including the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the 2014 invasion of Eastern Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing invasion of Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022. These actions are rooted in the belief that these regions are integral parts of the Russian world, and Putin seeks to reintegrate them, thereby attempting to suppress their independence. In 2007, Putin explicitly stated that the Russian Orthodox Church serves as the spiritual foundation of his vision of the Russian world.

The influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on this imperialist agenda cannot be overstated. It provides the ideological and spiritual justification for the Kremlin's expansionist policies. This connection raises significant concerns about the role and status of ROCAL as a charity in the UK. ROCAL's alignment with the Moscow Patriarchate and, by extension, with the Kremlin's geopolitical ambitions, challenges the principles that underpin the designation of charitable status. Charitable organisations are expected to operate in a manner that promotes peace, unity, and humanitarian values. However, ROCAL's loyalty to the Moscow Patriarchate and its support of an ideology that justifies territorial aggression and undermines the sovereignty of independent nations are antithetical to these principles.

Given this context, it is imperative to reconsider whether ROCAL should continue to be recognized as a charity in the UK. The organisation's activities and affiliations suggest that it operates more as a political entity supporting a specific national agenda rather than as a neutral charitable institution. The charitable status should be reserved for organisations that contribute positively to society and adhere to values that foster harmony and international cooperation. Therefore, re-evaluating ROCAL's status is not only justified but necessary to ensure alignment with British values and laws.

The Russian Orthodox Church in the UK

The Russian Orthodox Church in the UK (Russian Orthodox Church Abroad - London) (ROCAL) operates as a trust and is recognised by HMRC for gift aid purposes. ROCAL's charitable objectives are centred on the promotion in England of the tenets of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

30 Russian Orthodox Church Australian and New Zealand Diocese. "The Act of Canonical Communion Has Been Signed." May 18, 2007. <https://www.rocor.org.au/?p=228>

31 Президент России. "Signing the Act on Canonical Communion Is the Event That Affects All Russians, Is of Historic Proportions and Has a Huge Moral Significance." Website of the President of Russia, May 17, 2007. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/39556>

32 Президент России. "President of Russia's Speech at the Ceremonial Signing of the Act on Canonical Communion of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad." Website of the President of Russia, May 15, 2007. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24258>

Charity number: 234203

What the charity does - Religious Activities

Who the charity helps - People Of A Particular Ethnic Or Racial Origin

How the charity helps:

- Provides Buildings/facilities/open Space
- Other Charitable Activities

Where the charity operates - 'Throughout England And Wales'³³

As of 18 December 2022, ROCAL's report of activities claims its activities are primarily religious and that it assists people of particular ethnic or racial origins.

On its Charity Commission page, ROCAL describes itself as a religious community with the objective of promoting the religious life of the Parish and the tenets of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as Orthodox Christianity in general. However, the tenets of the Russian Orthodox Church, under the leadership of Patriarch Kirill, are deeply intertwined with Russian imperialism. This includes the demonisation of Ukrainians and the support of Putin's regime, both domestically and internationally. Such ideologies were instrumental in justifying and fuelling the invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, the illegal annexation of Crimea in the same year, the installation of pro-Kremlin proxies in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022.

Given these factors, it is imperative to critically assess whether the Russian Orthodox Church in the UK should continue to enjoy the benefits and recognition of a charity.

The association with a regime known for human rights abuses and aggressive expansionist policies raises significant ethical concerns. Allowing ROCAL to operate as a charity potentially provides it with resources and legitimacy that could indirectly support or propagate harmful ideologies and activities.

Bishop Irenei

The leader of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Western Europe is Bishop Irenei. Appointed as Bishop of London and Western Europe by the decision of the Holy Synod of Bishops on 7th / 20th September 2018, Bishop Irenei oversees the institutions across eleven countries and principalities within the Diocese, with his base at the Diocesan Cathedral in London.

Before this appointment, Bishop Irenei served as Bishop of Sacramento (California) and Vicar of the Western American Diocese. He was also the Administrator of the previously separate Diocese of Great Britain and Ireland from 2017. In his current role, he leads the

³³ Charity Commission for England and Wales. "Charity Details: The Parochial Church Council of the Ecclesiastical Parish of St. Aldate, Oxford." <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/en/charity-search/-/charity-details/234203/contact-information>

Synodal Secretariat for Inter-Orthodox Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR). This position makes him a regular member of the Holy Synod of Bishops, where he is responsible for fostering relations between the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and other Local Orthodox Churches and their jurisdictions worldwide.

Bishop Irenei's position within the Russian Orthodox Church and his roles in inter-orthodox relations underline the extensive influence the Moscow Patriarchate holds over ROCAL and its activities. This influence aligns ROCAL with the broader objectives of the Russian Orthodox Church and, by extension, with the geopolitical agenda of the Kremlin. The close alignment between ROCAL and the Moscow Patriarchate, as well as the ideological support for the concept of the «Russian world,» raises serious concerns about ROCAL's role and status as a charity in the UK.³⁴

An interview with Bishop Irenei in October 2022 provided revealing insights into the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) and the Moscow Patriarchate. The Bishop confirmed that ROCOR, including its British and Western European branches, adheres to protocols established by the “Act of Canonical Communion” signed in 2007. This protocol dictates that significant decisions, such as the election of a First Hierarch, are communicated to the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate for canonical confirmation, ensuring that all actions align with the Holy Canons and practices of the Church. This process highlights the ultimate authority of the Moscow Patriarchate over ROCOR, including its charitable arm in Great Britain.

When asked about ROCOR's relationship with the Moscow Patriarchate amid the current geopolitical situation, Bishop Irenei characterised the relationship as unwavering in terms of canonical unity and integrity, and deeply fraternal and familial on a practical level. “I would personally characterise our relationship with the Patriarchate as being unwavering at the level of canonical unity and integrity, and deeply fraternal and familial”³⁵. This response underscores the strong, enduring bond between ROCOR and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, indicating no signs of strain or division.

In another interview on 26 September 2022, Bishop Irenei expressed his deep sorrow over the war in Ukraine, lamenting the fratricidal nature of the war in which Orthodox Christians are pitted against each other. He noted the broader impact of the conflict, causing divisions not only within Ukraine but throughout the global Orthodox community.

These statements and interviews elucidate the close and loyal relationship between ROCOR, including ROCAL, and the Moscow Patriarchate. They also reveal the significant influence and control exerted by the Moscow Patriarchate over ROCOR's activities and

34 Diocese of Great Britain and Western Europe (ROCOR). “His Grace Bishop Irenei, Ruling Bishop of the Diocese of Great Britain and Western Europe.” Diocese of Great Britain and Western Europe. <https://orthodox-europe.org/english/hierarchy/#:~:text=Bishop%20Irenei%20is%20a%20Professor,especially%20St%20Irenaeus%20of%20Lyons>

35 Zlodorev, Dmitry. “‘Our Relationship Is Unwavering, Familial, and Deeply Fraternal’: Interview with Bishop Irenei of London and Western Europe.” *Orthodox Christianity*, October 20, 2022. <https://orthochristian.com/148848.html>

decisions, aligning them with the geopolitical and ideological goals of the Kremlin. The strong fraternal ties with Patriarch Kirill, who has been a staunch supporter of Putin, further complicate the charitable status of ROCAL in the UK.

Given this alignment with an institution that actively supports and propagates ideologies justifying territorial aggression and undermining national sovereignty, the charitable status of ROCAL should be reconsidered. Charitable organisations are expected to operate in a manner that promotes peace, unity, and humanitarian values. ROCAL's deep ties to the Moscow Patriarchate and its alignment with the Kremlin's expansionist policies raise serious ethical and legal concerns. Therefore, it is necessary to re-evaluate ROCAL's status as a charity to ensure it aligns with British values and laws, fostering harmony and humanitarian efforts rather than political agendas.³⁶

Bishop Irenei's language in his interviews is telling. He avoids blaming the aggressor, Russia, and instead creates a false moral equivalence, suggesting that both sides are equally responsible for the conflict. This stance overlooks the fact that Ukraine is defending itself from Russian aggression. There is no moral equivalence in this situation; Ukraine is under attack and responding to preserve its sovereignty.

Notably, Bishop Irenei refrains from calling the conflict a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. He does not mention the numerous documented war crimes committed by the Russian Army in regions such as Kharkiv, Kherson, and Kyiv. He also omits the context of the war's origins, which began eight years ago when Russia invaded Eastern Ukraine, installed pro-Kremlin puppets in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk, and illegally annexed Crimea. Without this context, his comments mislead the audience, implying that both sides are equally culpable for the war and the resulting division. However, it is Russia's actions, driven by Putin's vision of the «Russian world» and his refusal to accept Ukraine's independence and democratic path, that have caused the violence and division.

Bishop Irenei's comments are not isolated. In an October 2022 interview, he reiterated his problematic views on the invasion of Ukraine and the establishment of the independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is not under the control of the Moscow Patriarchate. He described these independent churches as «false and uncanonical,» implying that they were created to divide the faithful. This statement disregards the key role played by Patriarch Kirill and the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church in demonising Ukraine and justifying the 2014 invasion of Eastern Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing invasion.

Bishop Irenei also criticised laws aimed at clergy, the seizure of church properties, and media portrayals of the Church as being linked to state interests, arguing that such actions serve to divide and weaken the Church. He asserted that the Church is not a political instrument, cannot support bloodshed and fratricide, and will not become a mouthpiece for political commentary.

36 Dominick, Jesse. “‘Vladyka Nicholas Loves God, Deeply’: An Interview with Bishop Irenei of London and Western Europe on the Election of the New First Hierarch of ROCOR.” *Orthodox Christianity*, September 26, 2022. <https://orthochristian.com/148424.html>

These statements attempt to distance the Church from its evident political ties and the support it has provided to the Kremlin's agenda. Bishop Irenei's portrayal of the Church as apolitical is contradicted by the actions and statements of its leaders, especially Patriarch Kirill's open support for Putin's policies.³⁷

It is evident that the leadership of ROCAL fails to recognise that the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian refugees no longer wish to hear Patriarch Kirill commemorated as the head of their Church. This sentiment underscores the need for their own independent parishes, free from the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate. On 9 December 2022, Bishop Irenei, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Western Europe, attended a meeting of bishops from abroad. At this meeting, a statement was issued claiming that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which remains under the Moscow Patriarchate, is facing persecution and politically motivated agitation.

This narrative, propagated by the bishops, reflects their discontent with the fact that many Ukrainians do not want to be part of a church that, under Kirill, serves as an extension of the Russian state. They also stated that the religious freedoms of Metropolitan Onoufryi, who leads the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate, are under threat. This claim is frequently echoed by the Kremlin and Patriarch Kirill to portray the Ukrainian government as the aggressor and to paint themselves as defenders of religious freedom. However, it is evident that Russia launched an aggressive, unprovoked, and imperialist invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

In reality, many Ukrainians have flocked to join the independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church, rejecting the Moscow Patriarchate's influence. It is not the leaders of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate who are facing persecution, but all Ukrainians who are suffering from the aggression of the Russian state. The alignment of ROCAL with the Moscow Patriarchate and its failure to recognize the legitimate desires of the Ukrainian people further calls into question its status as a charitable organisation in the UK.³⁸

The Orthodox Parish of St. Nicholas the wonderworker in London of the Diocese of Sourozh: Of the Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland

The Orthodox Parish of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker in London is part of the Diocese of Sourozh, within the Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. ROCAL is not the only charity under the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church based in the UK; the Diocese of Sourozh is another such entity. The affiliation of the Diocese of Sourozh with the Moscow Patriarchate is undisputed as it is **directly subordinate to the**

37 Zlodorev, Dmitry. 'Our Relationship Is Unwavering, Familial, and Deeply Fraternal'

38 Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. "A Regular Session of the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia Convenes." The Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, December 9, 2022. https://www.synod.com/synod/eng2022/20221209_ensynodcommunique.html

Patriarchate³⁹.

On the Charity Commission page for the Diocese of Sourozh, their activities and financial expenditures are detailed as follows: «Religious activities in London, holding of prayer meetings, liturgies, lectures, public celebrations of religious festivals, producing and/or distributing literature on Russian Orthodoxy to enlighten others about the Russian Orthodox religion.»

The Diocese of Sourozh is registered as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) - foundation, having been registered with the Charity Commission on 15 August 2017. Its charitable objectives are articulated similarly: «To advance the Russian Orthodox religion in London for the benefit of the public through the holding of prayer meetings, liturgies, lectures, public celebration of religious festivals, producing and/or distributing literature on Russian Orthodoxy to enlighten others about the Russian Orthodox religion.»

The charity raises funds from the public but does not collaborate with professional fundraisers or commercial participants, as per the Charity Commission. The Diocese of Sourozh operates with three trustees and three volunteers.⁴⁰

In his speech on 16 March 2022, Patriarch Kirill stated: «Today we are going through a difficult historical period: all our thoughts, worries, and prayers are connected with the ongoing events in Ukraine. But even in the most difficult times of trials, our people sought help from the Most Holy Mother of God, who has always been a zealous intercessor and defender of Holy Rus.»⁴¹

The concluding sentence of Patriarch Kirill's statement is particularly significant as it implies that God is on the side of, and a defender of, Holy Rus. This suggests that Kirill is implying divine support for Russia in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022.

Notably, similar to Putin, Kirill refrains from referring to the situation as a war, conflict, or invasion, despite it clearly being such. He uses vague and neutral terms like «events in Ukraine,» which could imply anything. This choice of language mirrors the Kremlin's approach when discussing the invasion of Ukraine.

While Kirill later calls for the restoration of peace, his invocation of Holy Rus and previous statements about Ukraine since 2014 suggest that he envisions peace on Russia's terms while Putin remains in power. This would entail the subjugation of Ukraine by

39 Diocese of Sourozh. "STATUTES OF THE DIOCESE OF SOUROZH of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)." Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow. http://www.sourozh.org/diocesan_statutes/?SSScrollPosition=114

40 Charity Commission for England and Wales. "Sourozh Overview." <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/-/charity-details/5099062/charity-overview>

41 Diocese of Sourozh. "Address of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill Dated March 16, 2022 Regarding the Events in Ukraine." Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, March 16, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/3/16/address-of-his-holiness-patriarch-kirill-dated-march-16-2022.html>

Russia, undermining Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and interfering in its democracy. Furthermore, Kirill's calls for peace omit any mention that Russia has brought war, destruction, and death to Ukraine since 2014, nor does he condemn Russia's invasion or war crimes.

The fact that Kirill delivered this speech to the Russian Orthodox Church abroad, over which he holds ultimate authority, including Sourozh and ROCAL, indicates their alignment with his message on Ukraine. This alignment is further evidenced by Sourozh highlighting his statement on their website and Bishop Irenei's comments on Russia's invasion of Ukraine in two interviews.

Patriarch Kirill's support for the war underscores the role of the Russian Orthodox Church as a central pillar of Putin's new Russian imperialism. As Taras Kuzio wrote on 17 June 2022, «For much of Putin's 22-year reign, the Russian Orthodox Church has served as a key soft power tool and source of ideological inspiration for his imperial agenda. Since being appointed in 2009, Patriarch Kirill has been an enthusiastic supporter of the Kremlin's revisionist foreign policy. He has preached a doctrine of imperial expansion in the former Soviet space while championing domestic authoritarianism and describing Putin's increasingly dictatorial rule as 'a miracle of God.' »

Bishop Matthew of Sourozh

Bishop Matthew of Sourozh has emerged as a prominent figure within the Russian Orthodox Church, with a career that reflects deep ties to its highest echelons, including Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. Born on 18 May 1971 in Tambov, Russia, Bishop Matthew's ecclesiastical journey and continued involvement in significant religious ceremonies suggest a close association with the Patriarch, who has been sanctioned by the UK government since June 2022 due to alleged support for the Kremlin's policies.

Bishop Matthew's academic pursuits in foreign languages at the Tambov State Pedagogical Institute and subsequent theological education laid the foundation for his ordination as a deacon and then a priest in 1998. His early service in various churches across Tambov expanded his pastoral experience. In 2009, the Holy Synod assigned him pastoral duties in the Diocese of Sourozh, and by 2015, he was tonsured a monk, adopting the name Matthew, and was elevated to the rank of Archimandrite. His consecration as a bishop was presided over by Patriarch Kirill himself, indicating a significant level of trust and recognition within the church hierarchy.

The timeline of events from March 2022 onwards illustrates Bishop Matthew's active participation in key religious services in Moscow, often alongside Patriarch Kirill and other high-ranking clergy. Notably, his visits to Russia continued unabated even after the UK's imposition of sanctions on Patriarch Kirill in June 2022. For instance, on 15 May 2022, Bishop Matthew led a Divine Liturgy in Moscow under the Patriarch's blessing. His presence at ceremonies in July and November 2022 further underscores his ongoing involvement at the heart of the Russian Orthodox Church.

These activities highlight Bishop Matthew's role as an integral part of the church, which is widely acknowledged to have close links with the Kremlin. The Russian Orthodox Church has historically held significant influence in Russian society and politics, and Patriarch Kirill is known for his support of government policies. By maintaining a strong association with the Patriarch and participating in prominent religious events in Russia, Bishop Matthew appears to align himself with the church's leadership and, by extension, its connections to state power.⁴²

Timeline - Bishop of Sourozh in Moscow before and immediately after sanctions on Kirill

27 March 2022, “the Sunday of the Cross, a solemn hierarchical service was celebrated in the Church of St. Zosima and St. Savvaty of Solovki in Golyanovo, Moscow, with a large gathering of worshippers. Two bishops co-served at the Divine Liturgy: Bishop Panteleimon of Vereya, Vicar of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, and Administrator of the Eastern Vicariate of Moscow; and Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal Parishes in the USA and Canada”.⁴³

April 22, 2022, “Easter Friday, a day dedicated to the remembrance of the Holy Saving Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, Patriarch Kirill celebrated Vespers with the procession of the Shroud of the Saviour at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow.

He was assisted by Metropolitan Dionysius of Voskresensk, Chancellor of the Moscow Patriarchate and the first vicar of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia for the city of Moscow; **Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal Parishes in the USA and Canada**; Archpriest Mikhail Ryazantsev, Dean of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour; Archimandrite Alexy (Turikov), personal secretary to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill; and other Moscow clergy”.⁴⁴

24 April 2022, “during the feast of the Holy Resurrection of Christ, Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal Parishes in the USA and Canada, led the procession, Easter Matins, and Divine Liturgy at the Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord in Bogorodskoye, Moscow.

42 Diocese of Sourozh. “Diocesan Hierarchy: Bishop Matthew of Sourozh.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow. <http://www.sourozh.org/archbishop-of-sourozh/>

43 Diocese of Sourozh. “His Grace Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Celebrated the Liturgy at the Church of St. Zosima and St. Savvaty of Solovki in Golyanovo, Moscow.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, March 29, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/3/29/his-grace-bishop-matthew-of-sourozh-celebrated-the-liturgy-a.html>

44 Diocese of Sourozh. “On Great Friday, Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Co-Served with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at Vespers with the Procession with the Shroud of the Savior in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, April 22, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/4/22/on-great-friday-bishop-matthew-of-sourozh-co-served-with-his.html>

After the Communion verse, the Paschal Message from His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia was read in Russian to the archpastors, pastors, deacons, monastics, and all faithful members of the Russian Orthodox Church”.⁴⁵

15 May 2022, “Bishop Matthew of Sourozh travelled to Russia once again, nearly three months following the onset of Russia’s comprehensive invasion of Ukraine.

On this date, the Church of the Holy Venerable Princes of Russia, Passion-Bearers Boris and Gleb in Zyuzino, Moscow, marked a patronal feast.

Under the blessing of Patriarch Kirill, Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, who also serves as the Temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal Parishes in the USA and Canada, led the Divine Liturgy commemorating the 950th anniversary of the transfer of the relics of the Holy Martyrs Princes Boris and Gleb. He was joined by the church’s Rector, Archpriest Sergiy Zvonarev, along with other clergy and guests”.⁴⁶

28 August 2022, “with the blessing of Patriarch Kirill, Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, Temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal Parishes in the USA and Canada, led the patronal celebration at the Church of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God on Mogiltsy, Moscow”.⁴⁷

19 September 2022, “on the day of the Commemoration of the Miracle of the Archangel Michael at Colossae, with the blessing of Patriarch Kirill, Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal parishes in the USA and Canada, celebrated the Divine Liturgy at the Church of the Life-Giving Trinity in Starye Cheryomushki in Moscow. He also performed the rite of consecration of new crosses and domes in the church of St. Luke of Crimea (Voyno-Yasenetsky), which is under construction on the grounds of the clinical hospital named after V.V. Vinogradov in Moscow”.⁴⁸

45 Diocese of Sourozh. “On the Feast of the Holy Resurrection of Christ, Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Celebrated the Easter Service at the Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord in Bogorodskoye, Moscow.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, April 25, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/4/25/on-the-feast-of-the-holy-resurrection-of-christ-bishop-matth.html>

46 Diocese of Sourozh. “Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Headed the Patronal Celebration in the Church of Holy Venerable Boris and Gleb in Zyuzino, Moscow.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, May 17, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/5/17/bishop-matthew-of-sourozh-headed-the-patronal-celebration-in.html>

47 Diocese of Sourozh. “Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Headed the Patronal Celebration in the Church of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God on Mogiltsy, Moscow.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, August 28, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/8/30/bishop-matthew-of-sourozh-headed-the-patronal-celebration-in.html>

48 Diocese of Sourozh. “Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Celebrated the Liturgy at the Church of the Life-Giving Trinity in Starye Cheryomushki and Consecrated the New Domes in the Church of St. Luke of Crimea (under Construction) on the Territory of the Clinical Hospital Named after V.V. Vinogradov.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, September 20, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/9/20/bishop-matthew-of-sourozh-celebrated-the-liturgy-at-the-hurc.html>

28 October 2022, “the feast of the Iberian Icon of the Most Holy Mother of God, with the blessing of Patriarch Kirill, Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal Parishes in the USA and Canada, celebrated the Divine Liturgy at the Church of the Resurrection of Christ in Sokolniki, Moscow”.⁴⁹

November 5, 2022, on the eve of the 21st Sunday after Pentecost, Patriarch Kirill celebrated an all-night vigil at the Cathedral Church of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. He was assisted by:

- Metropolitan Dionysius of Voskresensk, the first vicar of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia in Moscow, and Chancellor of the Moscow Patriarchate
- Metropolitan Victorin of Izhevsk and Udmurtia
- Bishop Victor of Glazov and Igra
- **Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal parishes in the USA and Canada**
- Bishop Thomas of Odintsovo and Krasnogorsk
- Bishop Theoktist of Pereslavl and Uglich
- Protopresbyter Vladimir Divakov, Secretary of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia in Moscow
- Archpriest Mikhail Ryazantsev, Deputy Dean of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour
- Archimandrite Pavel (Belokrylov), cleric of the Izhevsk diocese, elected Bishop of Sarapul and Mozhga
- **Archimandrite Peter (Pruteanu), cleric of the Spanish-Portuguese Diocese, elected Bishop of Caffa, Vicar of the Patriarchal Exarch of Western Europe**
- Archimandrite Khrisanf (Konoplev), cleric of the Astana diocese, elected Bishop of Chimkent and Turkestan
- Archimandrite Alexy (Turikov), personal secretary of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill
- Clergy of the capital.⁵⁰

49 Diocese of Sourozh. “On the Feast of the Iberian Icon of the Mother of God, Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Celebrated the Liturgy at the Church of the Resurrection of Christ in Sokolniki, Moscow.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, October 28, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/10/28/on-the-feast-of-the-iberian-icon-of-the-mother-of-god-his-gr.html>

50 Diocese of Sourozh. “Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Concelebrated with Patriarch Kirill at the All-Night Vigil at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, November 5, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/11/5/bishop-matthew-of-sourozh-concelebrated-with-his-holiness-pa.html>

November 6, 2022, “following the all-night vigil in the Throne Hall of the Cathedral Church of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia led the rite of naming Archimandrite Pavel (Belokrylov), cleric of the Izhevsk diocese, as Bishop of Sarapul and Mozhgino, Archimandrite Peter (Prutyan), cleric of the Spanish-Portuguese Diocese, as Bishop of Caffa, Vicar of the Patriarchal Exarch of Western Europe, and Archimandrite Khrisanf (Konoplev), cleric of the Astana Diocese, as Bishop of Chimkent and Turkestan.

He was assisted by:

- Metropolitan Dionysius of Voskresensk, Chancellor of the Moscow Patriarchate and the first vicar of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia in Moscow
- Metropolitan Victorin of Izhevsk and Udmurtia
- Bishop Victor of Glazovo and Igra
- **Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal parishes in the USA and Canada**
- Bishop Thomas of Odintsovo and Krasnogorsk, Head of the Administrative Secretariat of the Moscow Patriarchate
- Bishop Theoktist of Pereslavl and Uglich.⁵¹

The ceremony during Bishop Matthew’s visit to Moscow in November 2022 demonstrated the significant role the Bishop of Sourozh played in supporting the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, even after Kirill was sanctioned by the UK Government in June 2022”.

November 10, 2022, “on the feast day of St. Dimitry, Metropolitan of Rostov (1709), His Grace Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, temporarily Administrator of the Patriarchal Parishes in the USA and Canada, celebrated the Divine Liturgy at the Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord in Bogorodskoye, Moscow”.⁵²

November 12, 2022, “on the eve of the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, His Grace Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal Parishes in the USA and Canada, celebrated an all-night vigil at the Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord in

51 Diocese of Sourozh. “Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Took Part in the Ordination of Archimandrite Pavel (Belokrylov) as Bishop of Sarapul, Archimandrite Peter (Prutyan) as Bishop of Caffa, and Archimandrite Khrisanf (Konoplev) as Bishop of Chimkent.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, November 6, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/11/6/bishop-matthew-of-sourozh-took-part-in-the-ordination-of-arc.html>

52 Diocese of Sourozh. “On the Day of Remembrance of St. Dimitry of Rostov, Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Celebrates the Divine Liturgy at the Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist in Moscow.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, November 14, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/11/14/on-the-day-of-remembrance-of-st-dimitry-of-rostov-bishop-mat.html>

Bogorodskoye, Moscow”.⁵³

November 13, 2022, “on the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, His Grace Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal Parishes in the USA and Canada, celebrated the Divine Liturgy at the Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord in Bogorodskoye, Moscow”.⁵⁴

July 15, 2023, “on the eve of the 6th Week after Pentecost, His Grace **Bishop Matthew of Sourozh**, Temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal Parishes in the USA and Canada, while on a working visit to Russia, **with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow** and All Russia, celebrated an all-night vigil in the Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord in Bogorodskoye, Moscow”.⁵⁵

July 16, 2023, “on the 6th Sunday after Pentecost, the feast of the transfer of the relics of St. Philip, Metropolitan of Moscow and All Russia, miracle worker (1652), His **Grace Bishop Matthew of Sourozh**, temporary Administrator of the Patriarchal parishes in the USA and Canada, while on a working trip to Russia, **with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow** and All Russia, celebrated the Divine Liturgy at the Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord in Bogorodskoye, Moscow”.⁵⁶

July 17, 2023, “on the eve of the feast of finding the honest relics of St. Sergius of Radonezh (1422), His Holiness **Patriarch Kirill of Moscow** and All Russia celebrated an all-night vigil on the Cathedral Square of the Holy Trinity - St.Sergius Lavra.

His Holiness was assisted by Metropolitan Yuvenaly (Poyarkov); Metropolitan Vikenty of Tashkent and Uzbekistan, head of the Central Asian metropolitan district, Metropolitan Varsonofy of St. Petersburg and Ladoga, Metropolitan Pavel of Krutitsa and Kolomna, Patriarchal vicar of the Moscow Metropolis; Metropolitan Veniamin of Minsk and Zaslavl,

53 Diocese of Sourozh. “On the Eve of the 22nd Sunday After Pentecost, Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Celebrates an All-Night Vigil at the Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist in Moscow.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, November 14, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/11/14/on-the-eve-of-the-22nd-sunday-after-pentecost-bishop-matthew.html>

54 Diocese of Sourozh. «On the 22nd Sunday After Pentecost, Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Celebrates the Divine Liturgy at the Church of the Nativity of John the Baptist in Moscow.» Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, November 14, 2022. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2022/11/14/on-the-22nd-sunday-after-pentecost-bishop-matthew-of-sourozh.html>

55 Diocese of Sourozh. “On the Eve of the 6th Week After Pentecost, His Grace Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Celebrates an All-Night Vigil at the Church of All Saints Whose Relics Rest in Moscow.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, July 16, 2023. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2023/7/16/on-the-eve-of-the-6th-week-after-pentecost-his-grace-bishop.html>

56 Diocese of Sourozh. “On the 6th Sunday After Pentecost, His Grace Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Celebrates the Divine Liturgy at the Church of All Saints Whose Relics Rest in Moscow.” Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, July 16, 2023. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2023/7/16/on-the-6th-sunday-after-pentecost-his-grace-bishop-matthew-o.html>

Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus; Metropolitan Dionysius of Voskresensk, Administrator of the Moscow Patriarchy, First Vicar of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia for the City of Moscow; Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, **Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, temporary administrator of the Patriarchal parishes in the USA and Canada**, host of bishops who arrived at the Lavra.

The divine service was attended by N.Yu. Chaplin, member of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, churchwarden of the Patriarchal Dormition Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin, S.G. Malyshev, Senior Vice President and Financial Director of Norilsk Nickel Group, and S. Yu. Rudov, Head of the Secretariat of the World Russian People's Council".⁵⁷

It is worth noting that N.Yu. Chaplin, attendee of the vigil, has also been sanctioned by the UK government since the 11th of March 2022, yet the Diocese of Sourozh website proudly boasts of his attendance.

Comments

Bishop Matthew of Sourozh has maintained a consistent and active relationship with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, suggesting that he continues to operate under the patriarch's authority and influence. Despite the UK's imposition of sanctions on Patriarch Kirill in June 2022, Bishop Matthew has frequently participated in significant religious services in Moscow alongside the patriarch and other high-ranking clergy.

Proximity and Collaboration with Patriarch Kirill:

- **Consecration and Elevation:** Bishop Matthew's consecration as a bishop was presided over by Patriarch Kirill, indicating a significant level of trust and recognition within the church hierarchy.
- **Continued Participation in Moscow Services:** The timeline from March 2022 onwards shows Bishop Matthew leading or co-serving in numerous religious ceremonies in Moscow. Notably, he was present at events both before and after the sanctions were imposed on Patriarch Kirill.
- **Joint Ceremonies:** Bishop Matthew has been involved in key liturgical events, such as all-night vigils and Divine Liturgies, often with the direct blessing of Patriarch Kirill. These services frequently included other senior figures of the Russian Orthodox Church, emphasising the collaborative nature of their ecclesiastical duties.

⁵⁷ Diocese of Sourozh. "On the Eve of the Feast of the Finding of the Relics of St. Sergius of Radonezh, Bishop Matthew of Sourozh Celebrates an All-Night Vigil at the 'Trinity-Sergius Lavra.'" Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. Diocese of Sourozh. Patriarchate of Moscow, July 19, 2023. <http://www.sourozh.org/maineng/2023/7/19/on-the-eve-of-the-feast-of-the-finding-of-the-relics-of-st-s.html>

Indicator of Influence and Control:

The ongoing collaboration between Bishop Matthew and Patriarch Kirill suggests that the Diocese of Sourozh, under Bishop Matthew's leadership, remains closely linked to the Moscow Patriarchate. Several factors support this inference:

- **Hierarchical Structure:** In the Russian Orthodox Church, bishops typically operate under the guidance of the patriarch. Bishop Matthew's activities, especially those conducted with the patriarch's blessing, align with this hierarchical framework.
- **Shared Ceremonial Duties:** Regular participation in significant religious ceremonies in Moscow indicates that Bishop Matthew is not only in proximity to Patriarch Kirill but also actively involved in the central functions of the church.
- **Uninterrupted Relations Post-Sanctions:** Despite the sanctions against Patriarch Kirill, Bishop Matthew's continued collaboration may reflect a prioritisation of ecclesiastical unity and obedience over geopolitical considerations.

The consistent involvement of Bishop Matthew in religious activities alongside Patriarch Kirill points to a direct influence and control of the patriarch over the Diocese of Sourozh. This relationship underscores the interconnectedness of the Russian Orthodox Church's global operations and suggests that Bishop Matthew's church operates within the patriarch's sphere of authority. While the sanctions against Patriarch Kirill might have been expected to impact such associations, the maintained proximity indicates a strong adherence to ecclesiastical hierarchy and traditions within the church.

Other charities of the Russian Orthodox Church and affiliated groups

Trust Property in connection with the Patriarchal Russian Orthodox Parish in London (Russian Orthodox Church in London)

The Russian Orthodox Church in London supports and promotes the religious life of the Russian Orthodox Christian community in the UK. It is registered as a charitable trust in the UK by the Charity Commission. It is recognised by HMRC for gift aid. The trust owns and/or leases land or property.⁵⁸

The Orthodox Parish of St Nicholas the Wonderworker in London of the Diocese of Sourozh: Of the Russian Orthodox Church in Britain and Ireland

St Nicholas the Wonderworker Parish holds religious activities in London, including holding prayer meetings, liturgies, lectures, public celebration of Russian Orthodox festivals and producing and/or distributing literature on Russian Orthodoxy to enlighten people

⁵⁸ Charity Commission for England and Wales. "Trust Property in Connection with Patriarchal Russian Orthodox Parish in London Charity Overview." <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/254025/charity-overview>

about Russian Orthodoxy.⁵⁹

St Nicholas the Wonderworker Parish in Oxford

The Parish of St Nicholas the Wonderworker in Oxford maintains a full schedule of Russian Orthodox church services, as well as engaging in numerous other activities relevant to parish life, such as a Sunday School and Youth Group, social and fundraising activities (such as a monthly parish meal and yearly food fair), and the oversight of an Orthodox summer camp for children.⁶⁰

St Gregory's Foundation

St Gregory's Foundation is a UK registered charity founded in 1991, Charity number: 1002469. It is also registered as a Private Limited Company with Companies House. Their goal is to help charities in Russia and the former Soviet Union. They work directly with local partners in Russia and Georgia.⁶¹

Recommendations

In light of the undeniable links of the ROC, ROCOR and the Patriarch to the Kremlin and with the Church being used as a vehicle of Russian propaganda, in apparent contravention of the Charity commission's regulations the following actions is proposed:

- **Conduct an independent investigation into the charity status of ROCOR** in the UK, providing an in-depth analysis of whether their actions have contravened the Charity Commission regulations.
- **Conduct an investigation into the trustees** of the aforementioned charities to establish their influence on the organisations, establish their relationship with the Kremlin and if any such exists, whether they pose or have posed a danger to national security or contravene Charity Commission regulations.
- **Investigate whether public funds have been erroneously provided**, whether as grants, gift-aid, tax relief or any other means, to the investigated charities in lieu of the ROC and ROCOR links to the Kremlin and potential for political activity.
- **Suspend charity status of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad** (London), Charity number: 234203, for the duration of the investigation.

⁵⁹ Charity Commission for England and Wales. "St Nicholas the Wonderworker Parish Charity Overview." <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/-/charity-details/5099062/charity-overview>

⁶⁰ Charity Commission for England and Wales. "St Nicholas the Wonderworker Parish in Oxford Charity Overview." <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/-/charity-details/4029651/charity-overview>

⁶¹ Companies House. "St Gregory's Foundation." <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/02589926>; St Gregory's Foundation. "Who We Are." <https://stgregorysfoundation.org.uk/st-gregorys-foundation-who-we-are/>

- **Suspend charity status of the St Gregory's Foundation, Charity number: 1002469**, for the duration of the investigation.
- **Suspend charity status of the St Nicholas the Wonderworker Parish, Charity number: 1174260**, for the duration of the investigation.
- Suspend charity status of the Trust Property in connection with the Patriarchal Russian Orthodox Parish in London (Russian Orthodox Church in London), Charity number: 254025, for the duration of the investigation.

Conclusion

The evidence presented delineates a complex and troubling relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), particularly its UK branch, and the Moscow Patriarchate under Patriarch Kirill, who is closely aligned with the Kremlin. This relationship extends beyond mere spiritual affiliation and enters the realm of political collusion, which contravenes the regulations set forth by the UK Charity Commission. The ROCOR in the UK, through its unwavering loyalty and operational subservience to the Moscow Patriarchate, appears to be engaged in activities that are political in nature and supportive of a foreign state's aggressive policies, specifically Russia's war in Ukraine.

The Russian Orthodox Church as a whole has been actively engaged in disseminating Kremlin-backed propaganda regarding the war in Ukraine. Under the leadership of Patriarch Kirill, the Church has practically endorsed Russia's military actions, framing the conflict as a defensive measure to protect Orthodox Christianity and traditional values against Western influences. Through sermons, official statements, and religious ceremonies, the Church has echoed and amplified the Russian government's narratives, portraying the invasion as a justifiable or even holy endeavour. This alignment involves justifying the war on spiritual grounds and legitimising the Kremlin's geopolitical objectives under the guise of religious duty. By interweaving religious authority with state propaganda, the Russian Orthodox Church has overstepped its spiritual mandate and entered the realm of political activism. Such actions contravene the expectations placed upon religious institutions to remain apolitical, especially when operating under charitable status in countries like the United Kingdom. The Church's role in propagating state-sponsored messages not only undermines its ethical responsibilities but also raises serious concerns about its compliance with regulations that prohibit charities from engaging in political activities.

Under UK charity law, organisations granted charitable status are required to operate for the public benefit and remain politically neutral, especially in international conflicts. The Charity Commission explicitly prohibits charities from advancing political agendas or serving as instruments for foreign state policies. The ROCOR's alignment with the Moscow Patriarchate, an institution that has legitimised Russia's military actions in Ukraine, raises significant concerns about its compliance with these regulations.

Patriarch Kirill's sanctioned status by the UK government for his support of the war underscores the severity of the issue. Despite this, the ROCOR in the UK continues to

function under his leadership, effectively participating in disseminating state propaganda and promoting narratives that justify Russian aggression. This is evident in the statements and actions of key figures within the UK branch, such as Bishop Irenei and Bishop Matthew of Sourozh, who maintain close ties with Patriarch Kirill.

Moreover, the ROCOR's stance on the independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and its support for the concept of the «Russian world» align with the Kremlin's imperialist ambitions. This alignment is not limited to theological discourse but extends to active participation in events and ceremonies that bolster the Kremlin's agenda. The ROCOR's refusal to recognise the legitimacy of independent Ukrainian Orthodox churches and its portrayal of the conflict as a fratricidal war without acknowledging Russia's role as the aggressor further illustrate its political entanglement.

The unification of ROCOR with the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007, facilitated and celebrated by President Vladimir Putin, solidified this relationship. Putin's emphasis on the Church as a unifying force for the «Russian world» indicates the strategic importance of the ROC in promoting Russian state interests abroad. The ROCOR, including its UK branch, functions within this framework, potentially serving as a vehicle for foreign influence and propaganda on British soil.

The activities of the ROCOR in the UK, therefore, appear to exceed the permissible boundaries of charitable operations as defined by the Charity Commission. By engaging in political activities, supporting a foreign government's military actions, and aligning with an individual sanctioned for undermining international peace and security, the ROCOR may be in violation of its obligations to operate solely for charitable purposes and public benefit.

Given these findings, it is imperative for the relevant authorities to re-evaluate the charitable status of the ROCOR and associated entities in the UK. An independent investigation should be conducted to assess the extent of their compliance with charity regulations and to determine whether their activities serve the public interest or contravene the principles of political neutrality and public benefit. Until such an investigation is completed, suspending their charitable status may be a necessary precaution to uphold the integrity of the UK's charitable sector and to prevent the misuse of charitable privileges for political ends.

The collusion between the Russian Orthodox Church in London and the Moscow Patriarchate, under the aegis of the Kremlin, presents a clear challenge to the regulatory frameworks designed to ensure that charities operate in the public interest and remain free from political influence. Addressing this issue is crucial not only for maintaining the integrity of charitable organisations in the UK but also for safeguarding national security and upholding international norms against aggression and unlawful interference in the affairs of sovereign nations.

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Dr Stepanenko is a former British political activist and candidate for elections to the London Borough of Barnet. Stepan was a member of the Belarusian opposition representative body, the Coordination Council, where he sat on the foreign affairs committee.

Stepan has given evidence to a number of UK parliamentary committees, including on the war in Ukraine, implications of the war for the UK, UK's stance on Iran, UK Defence, the Wagner group, and other subjects, as well as writing policy briefs and research papers on the topics of defence procurement and British engagement in Eastern Europe and the Pacific.

Stepan is a correspondent for the Kyiv Post, and has also written and commented for the Daily Express, the Mail Online, Epoch Times, the US Sun, Jerusalem Post, and Times of Israel, among others. He also appeared on British national TV and radio, including the BBC, GB News, TalkTV and LBC Radio, commenting on the war in Ukraine, and a range of defence and national security issues.

In August 2024, Stepan was sanctioned by the Russian Federation