

ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Instrumentalization of Orthodoxy: The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a Soft Power Tool in Serbia

Ortodoksluğun Araçsallaştırılması: Sırbistan’da Bir Yumuşak Güç Aracı Olarak Rus Ortodoks Kilisesi (ROK)

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Abstract

This study examines how the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) functions as a hybrid geopolitical apparatus within Russia’s soft power strategy, focusing exclusively on the Republic of Serbia. Historically, Russia’s influence in the Balkans has shifted from traditional military means toward cultural and religious engagement, establishing the ROC as a critical soft power actor leveraging the “Russian World” ideology and Pan-Orthodox solidarity. The Church frames this effort by positioning Russia as an alternative civilization model based on traditional values, directly countering the perceived moral decline of Europe. Beyond its role as a vehicle for state interests, the article argues that the ROC also acts as a strategic partner pursuing its own ecclesiastical leadership. The article analyzes the evolution of church-state relations to frame the ROC’s contemporary mission. The empirical analysis of Serbia reveals a multi-layered strategy designed to convert cultural ties into strategic advantage. First, the ROC exploits the structural constraint created by the NATO trauma (the 1999 bombing) to secure political support via UN Security Council veto support. Second, it provides the ideological foundation by aligning the Serbian Orthodox Church’s canonical claims over Kosovo with Moscow’s broader strategic challenge to the Euro-Atlantic order. Finally, the strategy is executed through a hybrid apparatus involving non-state proxies, including oligarchic finance and nationalist paramilitary groups. Consequently, the ROC’s activities in Serbia are not merely a religious matter but represent a sophisticated mechanism of religious statecraft. This strategy is of critical importance for Russia’s multidimensional goals, such as challenging the rules-based Western order and regaining a sphere of influence in Southeastern Europe.

Keywords: ROC, Soft Power, Balkans, Serbia, Public Diplomacy

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Öz

Bu çalışma, Rus Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin (ROK), Rusya'nın yumuşak güç stratejisi dâhilinde hibrit bir jeopolitik aygıt olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü incelemekte ve özel olarak Sırbistan'a odaklanmaktadır. Tarihsel olarak, Rusya'nın Balkanlar'daki etkisi, geleneksel askerî araçların ötesine geçerek kültürel ve dinî angajmanlarla derinleşmiş, bu durum ROK'u "Rus Dünyası" ideolojisini ve Pan-Ortodoks dayanışmasını kullanan kritik bir yumuşak güç aktörü olarak konumlandırmıştır. Kilise, bu çabayı Rusya'yı geleneksel değerlere dayanan alternatif bir medeniyet modeli olarak konumlandırarak ve Avrupa'da algılanan ahlaki çöküşe doğrudan karşı çıkarak çerçevelemektedir. Makale, Rus Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin devlet çıkarlarının bir aracı olmasının ötesinde, kendi dini liderliğini sürdürmeye çalışan stratejik bir ortak olarak da hareket ettiğini savunmaktadır. Makale, ROK'un günümüzdeki misyonunu çerçevelemek amacıyla kilise-devlet ilişkilerinin evrimini analiz etmektedir. Sırbistan üzerine yapılan analiz, kültürel bağları stratejik bir zemine dönüştürmek üzere tasarlanmış çok katmanlı bir strateji ortaya koymaktadır. İlk olarak, ROK NATO travmasının (1999 bombardımanı) yarattığı yapısal kısıtlamayı fırsat bilerek, BM Güvenlik Konseyi'nde sağlanan veto desteği aracılığıyla siyasi destek sağlamaktadır. İkinci olarak, ROK, Sırp Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin Kosova üzerindeki kanonik iddialarını, Moskova'nın daha geniş bir Avro-Atlantik düzene yönelik stratejik meydan okumasıyla örtüşürerek ideolojik temeli sağlamaktadır. Son olarak, bu strateji, oligarşik finansman ve milliyetçi paramilitar gruplar dâhil olmak üzere devlet dışı vekil aktörleri içeren hibrit bir aygıt aracılığıyla yürütülmektedir. Sonuç olarak, ROK'un Sırbistan'daki faaliyetleri yalnızca dini bir mesele değil, aynı zamanda sofistike bir dinî devlet yönetimi mekanizmasını temsil etmektedir. Bu strateji, Rusya'nın Batı'nın kurallarına dayalı düzene meydan okuma ve Güneydoğu Avrupa'da nüfuz alanını geri kazanma gibi çok boyutlu hedefleri için kritik öneme sahiptir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rus Ortodoks Kilisesi, Yumuşak Güç, Balkanlar, Sırbistan, Kamu Diplomasisi

1. Introduction

Since the nineteenth century, Russia's sphere of influence in the Balkans has not been limited to military and economic means. It has also been profoundly shaped through deep engagement with cultural, historical, and religious mechanisms. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation strategically moved beyond traditional realist policies by systematically utilizing culturally based soft power elements. In this context, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has assumed the role of an effective cultural diplomacy actor in the post-Soviet space. While this strategy draws on Joseph Nye's foundational concept of soft power, defined as the capacity to achieve outcomes through attraction, the ROC acts as a strategic partner that co-constitutes this power through its own institutional ambitions. While this study utilizes the term "tool" to describe the ROC's function within Russia's foreign policy, it conceptualizes this "instrumentalization" as a reciprocal process in which the Church is an active strategic partner rather than a passive subordinate. This empirical focus is justified by the unique symbiotic relationship between the ROC and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which offers the most profound illustration of this strategic synergy in a region of critical importance. The article analyzes the evolution of church-state relations and the ROC's historical presence before assessing its contemporary role in supporting Kremlin policies.

The article's primary contribution lies in analyzing the multi-layered nature of the ROC's influence, which transcends conventional cultural diplomacy. To frame this analysis, the study

first establishes a theoretical framework, examining the concepts of soft power and religious soft power and defining the ROC's function within the context of religious statecraft. Subsequently, it traces the historical perspective of the ROC's instrumentalization, analyzing the evolution of church-state relations from the Tsarist era's Pan-Slavism and the Soviet period's control to today's institutional cooperation under the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) doctrine.

Following this foundation, the empirical analysis in Serbia reveals a multi-layered strategy designed to convert cultural ties into strategic advantages. First, it examines how the ROC exploits the geopolitical constraint imposed by the 1999 NATO bombing, which creates a permissive environment for Moscow's influence. This constraint is reinforced by Russia's provision of UN Security Council veto support, transforming shared religious identity into vital diplomatic leverage. The study then investigates the ROC's ideological apparatus, analyzing how it utilizes Orthodox solidarity and the *Russkiy Mir* discourse to integrate the Kosovo narrative with Moscow's foreign policy goals, promoting traditional values as a bulwark against the perceived moral decline of the West. Finally, the article details the operational deployment of this influence through a hybrid apparatus, revealing the ROC's deep links with non-state proxies, including the financial power of Russian oligarchs and the ideological spread facilitated by nationalist paramilitary groups on the ground.

By focusing on this complex nexus of strategic alignment, ideological convergence, and the instrumentalization of hybrid actors, this study supports the thesis that the ROC acts as a sophisticated geopolitical tool critical to Russia's long-term goal of regaining a sphere of influence in Southeastern Europe and challenging the wider post-Western order. This analysis sheds light on the increasing complexity of religious statecraft and the boundaries of soft power in post-conflict geopolitical competition.

2. Theoretical Framework: Religion as a Soft Power Instrument

The concept of power has been central to International Relations analysis since the time of Thucydides (Rothman, 2011, pp. 50–52). Joseph S. Nye introduced the term soft power, defining it as the capacity to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2011, pp. 9–19; Blechman, 2004, pp. x, 6). In this relational definition, soft power relies on a state's cultural appeal, political ideals, and the perceived legitimacy of its foreign policy actions. If a state can legitimize its power in the eyes of others, it encounters less resistance to its objectives (Nye, 2011, pp. 14, 17).

Soft power is closely related to the ability to frame the agenda through co-optive tools like persuasion and positive attraction. Crucially, the effectiveness of soft power is often decentralized. Since much of it is generated by non-governmental actors, such as churches and civil society organizations, it cannot be fully controlled by governments. Nevertheless, state actions and policies can significantly strengthen or weaken these soft power resources (Blechman, 2004, pp. 10, 16–17).

2.1. Religious Soft Power as a Dynamic Force

Traditional International Relations theories, prioritizing rationality and material gain, long overlooked the role of religion. However, the post-Cold War era has revived interest in religion as a factor that contributes to the construction of actors' identities and interests, aligning better with theoretical approaches like Constructivism. Overlooking religion in foreign policy analysis may result in misdiagnosing issues and distancing global audiences (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 4–5).

Religious Soft Power is a more specific articulation of Nye's original concept, focusing on how actors utilize religion to generate attraction and legitimacy. Religious Soft Power stems from the ability of religious traditions to provide appeal and legitimacy through symbols, narratives, doctrines, and values (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 4–6). Far from being confined to the realm of “low politics” or cultural exchange, Religious Soft Power is increasingly relevant for critical security issues (Mandaville, 2023, p. 63).

Religious Soft Power analysis challenges several traditional International Relations assumptions. First, “Secularism Bias”: it challenges the secular bias in International Relations by showing how states mobilize religion to pursue their global interests. Second, “Material vs. Ideational Dichotomy”: Religious Soft Power studies reject the separation of religion as a purely ideational factor, focusing instead on how religion functions as a distinct instrument of power (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 37, 82). Third, “Post-Liberal World Order”: focusing on Religious Soft Power supports the idea that the international order is moving beyond secular narratives like the “end of history,” toward a post-liberal or post-Western order where religious soft power holds greater weight (Mandaville, 2023, p. 170).

2.2. State Strategy and the Russian Context

While early Religious Soft Power literature emphasized transnational religious movements, contemporary work focuses on the state's role in leveraging religious authority and symbols to serve geopolitical aims (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 19, 236).

States' use of transnational Religious Soft Power can be analyzed through key features. The first feature is “Institutional and Normative Capacity with Civilizational Affinity,” which is the state's ability to manage and utilize religious institutions and authority (Mandaville, 2023, p. 274). A second key feature is “Sociopolitical Circumstances and Aims,” meaning the specific goals underpinning the use of religious soft power (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 273–276).

The ROC serves as a prime example of a religious institution positioned by the Russian Federation as a primary soft power instrument to support its foreign policy, which advocates for traditional values and multipolarity (Sandal, 2016, pp. 287, 288). Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that the ROC is not a mere passive instrument of the Kremlin but acts as a strategic partner within the traditional framework of Symphonia, which means the Byzantine-Slavic ideal of harmonious cooperation between church and state. While the state utilizes the ROC to project influence,

the Church simultaneously leverages state power to advance its own institutional prestige and its historical claim as the “Third Rome.” This symbiotic relationship implies a co-constitutive process in which ecclesiastical interests often shape, rather than just follow, the ideological boundaries of Russian foreign policy (Antonov, 2020). It is essential to note that the ROC is not merely a passive subordinate to the Kremlin’s directives. Instead, the relationship is co-constitutive, defined by a strategic partnership in which the Church leverages state power to advance its own institutional prestige. For the ROC, supporting the state’s foreign policy is often a means to fulfill its long-standing ecclesiastical ambition of establishing Moscow as the primary center of global Orthodoxy, independent of the Russian state’s immediate geopolitical needs. This collaborative framework between church and state is operationalized beyond national borders through transnational networks and religious communities. The efficacy of religious influence is achieved through these networks (Sandal, 2016, pp. 288–289). States can use these networks, often via diasporas, religious leaders, or institutions, to exert influence (Sandal, 2016, p. 290). This process occurs at multiple analytical levels, from the individual level (where shared beliefs shape perceptions of foreign policy) to the state/sub-state level (where local religious actors shape societal narratives), up to the international/transnational level (where states engage global communities through religious diplomatic relations) (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 122, 147, 290).

Ultimately, religion is a powerful soft power resource that deserves a central place in theoretical analysis (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 6–7). Although the state’s instrumentalization of religion can be used for geopolitical ends, it poses a double-edged sword risk, potentially leading to manipulation or a loss of credibility due to internal contradictions (Mandaville, 2023, p. 236). The following case study on the ROC in Serbia examines how Russia leverages the ROC for its foreign policy objectives through the lens of this Religious Soft Power analysis.

3. The Historical Role of the ROC in the Balkans

3.1. From the Synodal System to Pan-Slavism: The Pre-20th Century Period

Prior to the eighteenth century, the ROC’s influence on state affairs and political issues was significantly limited as a result of Tsar Peter I’s strategy of distancing the church from politics and keeping it in a position that supported rather than directed state policies. In line with this, the patriarchate was abolished in 1721 and the Holy Synod was established. In this new structure, known as the synodal system, a figure close to the Tsar was appointed as ober-procurator (high representative of the church), and control over the church was transferred to this representative. The Synodal period in Russia continued until the 1917 revolution (Antonov, 2020, pp. 477–479; Gülseven, 2019).

In the eighteenth century, with the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, Russia officially assumed the role of protector of the Orthodox population in the Balkans. By the nineteenth century, the influence of the ROC in the Balkans had taken on a more systematic character as a result of the

Russian Empire's Pan-Slavic policies. Pan-Slavism emerged as a movement advocating for the cultural and political unity of Slavic peoples, with Russia positioning itself as the natural center of this political union. Russia supported the Balkan Slavs in their struggles for independence against the Ottoman Empire, building the legitimacy of this support on Orthodox solidarity. Throughout the nineteenth century, Russia carried out intensive activities through diplomatic missions and instruments such as the Slavic Benevolent Committee with the aim of consolidating its political influence in the Balkans and bringing the Orthodox and Slavic population in the region under its political control. Following its defeat in the Crimean War of 1853, the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 further cemented Russia's role as protector of the Orthodox peoples of the Balkans. Following the war, Russian influence increased significantly in Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania, which had gained independence, and the ROC established close ties with the Orthodox churches in these states. However, with the rise of nationalist movements during this period, the Balkan nations began to lean toward establishing their own national churches. This development was not welcomed by Tsarist diplomacy (Gülseven, 2017, pp. 332–348).

3.2. The Transformation of the ROC in the Soviet Union

From the October Revolution to the end of the Cold War in 1991, a complex relationship structure was observed between the ROC and the Soviet communist regime. In the early years of the regime, the goal was to eliminate religion based on ideological principles (Lupinin, 2010, pp. 37–57). However, the severe suppression of the Church experienced during the interwar period radically changed with the outbreak of World War II. Stalin shifted from elimination efforts to strategic instrumentalization, aiming to mobilize patriotic sentiments and allow the Church to prove its loyalty by reopening closed institutions (Leustean, 2010, p. 33; Reese, 2014, p. 134).

This reorganization was formalized in 1943. On June 5, a secret decree brought religious institutions under the scope of Soviet foreign policy, and on September 5, Stalin appointed NKVD colonel Georgii Karpov to head the newly established Council for ROC Affairs (SDRPTs) (Kalkandjieva, 2015, p. 253; Reese, 2014, p. 141). Under this controlled framework, Stalin permitted a church council (sobor) to elect a new patriarch, while simultaneously using the ROC as a tool for expansion into Eastern Europe. The ultimate goal was to elevate the Moscow Patriarchate to a universal status to challenge the primacy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and neutralize the Vatican's international influence, even providing financial subsidies to Eastern patriarchs by 1946 (Kalkandjieva, 2015, pp. 309–313; Vasileva, 1998).

After Stalin's death, concerns grew among the Church's religious leaders, and questions about the Church's future began to arise (Chumachenko et al., 2015, p. 136). During Nikita Khrushchev's leadership, especially after 1959, Soviet policy toward religion underwent further changes. During this period, the policy of purging religion gained momentum within the framework of de-Stalinization policies (Chumachenko et al., 2015, pp. 149, 165–166, 171–172). In response to Khrushchev's repressive policies, Russian nationalist elite groups became increasingly insular

throughout the 1970s, and a group from the church leadership began to form underground organizations in opposition to government policies. The “Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organization Act,” adopted on October 1, 1990, provided the Church with a clear legal and judicial status (Lupinin, 2010, pp. 37–57). The Glasnost and Perestroika reform policies implemented during the Gorbachev era also transformed policies toward the Orthodox churches. In 1986 and 1988, Gorbachev legitimized even the most dissident voices within the Church by holding open meetings with Patriarch Pimen, who had been operating underground during previous periods (Leustean, 2010, p. 6).

The states established after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 had to redesign their own state systems. As for the Church’s reintegration into the system, the reforms implemented by Gorbachev in the 1980s to integrate the Church into the system were assimilated within the newly established states (Leustean, 2010, pp. 33–34).

3.3. Post-Cold War Identity Construction and the Crystallization of the Russkiy Mir Discourse

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation experienced a profound ideological vacuum. The erosion of the collective identity, which had been previously anchored by communist doctrine, necessitated the urgent construction of a new national narrative. The increase in perceived Western threats throughout the 2000s, particularly the geopolitical shock triggered by Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, prompted the Putin administration to prioritize this redefinition of Russian identity. The ROC emerged as a central component of this identity project, leveraged as a strategic tool to preserve and strengthen Russian influence in the former Soviet space and maximize its soft power potential (Simonova, 2014, pp. 21–26).

This strategic decision led the national identity project to crystallize around the concept of the Russkiy Mir (Russian World), which gained momentum in the 2000s, defined by the Russian language and the Orthodox faith. This modern ideological construction has deep historical roots in the Tsarist era. Historically, the state’s emphasis on Russian nationalism and control over the church became prominent in the nineteenth century, particularly under Nicholas I. This was bureaucratically formalized in the tripartite ideology of “Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationalism” (Samoderzhaviye, Pravoslaviye, Narodnost). This framework established Russia as a unique model of civilization, a narrative built on solid foundations—distinct from the perceived social and religious “degeneration” of Europe (Riasanovsky, 1959, pp. 21, 73–74, 81; Udalov, 2006, pp. 73–81; Gülseven, 2019). This historical narrative is central to the modern Russkiy Mir soft power policy.

The ROC asserts that the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian peoples form a spiritually single nation and an inseparable whole (Mospat, 2019b). This religious-historical claim is mirrored by President Putin, who in 2019 stated that Russians and Ukrainians are a single nation, emphasizing their common history and Orthodox faith as the basis for the incorporation of present-day Ukrainian territories into Russia (Russkiy Mir, 2019b). Putin has repeatedly leveraged this

historical narrative, making systematic references to Orthodox values in his foreign policy discourse (Kremlin.ru, 2024b).

The resulting Russkiy Mir discourse serves a dual purpose. It legitimizes geopolitical claims concerning Ukraine while functioning as a vital instrument of soft power in the Balkans. To support this, Patriarch Kirill has utilized the concept of “Holy Rus” (Svyataya Rus’) to provide the spiritual framework needed to strengthen ties with other Orthodox communities. In his 2024 book, *For Holy Russia: Patriotism and Faith*, Kirill explicitly confirms the Church’s supportive role for state objectives, viewing patriotism and faith as inseparable and calling for the mobilization of all churches in coordination with Russia’s political forces (Patriarchia, 2024b).

However, this spiritual mobilization is driven by more than just state-aligned goals. It is also a central part of the ROC’s independent ecclesiastical strategy. This involves an intensifying rivalry with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople over leadership in the Orthodox world. While Constantinople holds the status of *primus inter pares* (first among equals), the ROC uses its demographic and political weight to challenge this spiritual primacy (Curanović, 2007, pp. 302–303). This ecclesiastical “Cold War,” which peaked with the 2018 schism over Ukrainian autocephaly, has transformed the Balkans into a primary front. For Moscow, maintaining a solid alliance with the SOC is therefore a survivalist necessity to prevent further isolation and to assert its leadership independent of the Kremlin’s immediate policy (TheGuardian.com, 2018).

3.4. Civil Society and the Church in the Construction of Russian Identity

Following the implementation of glasnost policies during the Gorbachev era, civil society organizations began to emerge in Russia (Weigle & Butterfield, 1992, pp. 1–23; Remington, 1989). By the 2000s, the redefinition of Russian identity became a fundamental state policy. In 2007, President Putin officially established the “Russian World Foundation” (Fond Russkiy Mir), giving the project an institutional framework (Russkiy Mir, 2007a; Gülseven, 2019, pp. 39–41).

President Putin personally emphasized this project, frequently invoking the Russian World and Orthodox values in his foreign policy speeches since the 2000s (Kremlin.ru, 2007a). Notably, the ROC and Patriarch Kirill were positioned as the most crucial supporters of the Russkiy Mir Foundation (Bovt, 2017, p. 89; Bulekov, 2009, pp. 29–43). In 2004, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov confirmed this coordinated relationship, stressing that the government and the ROC cooperated to fulfill the foundation’s mission. He further noted that the ROC significantly influenced civil society and was key to the diplomatic task of communicating with the diaspora (Mospat, 2006a; Gülseven, 2019, p. 44).

The project to instrumentalize the ROC in foreign policy received a formal institutional structure in 2003 with the creation of the Working Group on Interaction between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the ROC. This working group focused on issues related to the national interests of the Russian Federation. Following a 2007 meeting, Foreign Minister Lavrov underscored the

strategic alliance between the ROC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asserting that Orthodox values formed the foundation of Russian culture and statehood (Mid.ru, 2007a).

The ROC's diplomatic mission is critical for establishing bilateral relations with Orthodox countries, as Russia emphasizes shared values and highlights the incompatibility of Western cultural codes with Orthodox values. The narrative that Western values pose a threat not only to Russia but to all Orthodox states has been consistently maintained by Russian bureaucratic circles since the 2000s. This strategic alignment allows the ROC to conduct vital diplomacy and diaspora policies in regions like the Balkans (Mospat, 2006a). As Putin stated in his interview with Tucker Carlson, the ROC emerges as an essential element in the foreign policy approach shaped around culture, history, and religion. Indeed, in the policies formed around the concept of the Russian World (Russkiy Mir), the ROC is observed to play a supportive role in the Russian government's policies (Kremlin.ru, 2024b).

4. Case Study: The ROC' Soft Power Mechanisms in Serbia

The ROC establishes its soft power strategy in the Balkans primarily through religious institutions and spiritual ties. By activating its existing historical ties with Orthodox churches in the region, it aims to create a basis for cooperation and a network of solidarity in line with Russia's geopolitical interests. Monasteries, churches, and religious educational institutions play an important role among the operational elements of this strategy, while the ROC also maintains direct communication with Balkan Orthodox communities through its own media outlets and digital platforms. These communication channels serve as platforms for legitimizing Russia's regional policies.

Orthodox Churches in the Balkan region are intertwined with national identity through their organic ties, conservative value systems, and nationalist rhetoric (Ramet, 2019, pp. 3, 12). Thanks to their capacity to define national identity and mobilize collective feelings of belonging, these churches fill social voids and become an effective power center in the political arena (Ramet, 2019, pp. 25, 33, 249, 251).

While various Orthodox churches across the Balkans benefit from the ROC's material and spiritual support, the SOC stands out due to its unique level of institutional and ideological proximity to Moscow. Rather than a one-directional flow of influence, this relationship is a strategic symbiosis in which the SOC acts with significant agency. The Serbian Church proactively cultivates ties with the ROC to secure a powerful ecclesiastical and diplomatic shield for its own interests. Specifically, by aligning with Moscow, the SOC gains a significant ally in safeguarding its canonical jurisdiction over Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia against potential autocephaly movements, challenges it perceives as existential threats supported by Western-aligned actors. Given this mutual dependency, this part of the study focuses specifically on the Serbian case to analyze how the ROC's presence serves both Russian foreign policy and the SOC's own institutional goals.

The historical ties between Serbia and Russia date back to the early Middle Ages, when both nations embraced Orthodox Christianity. From the fifteenth century onward, Russia emerged as an influential political and cultural power in the Orthodox Christian world, and its religious and cultural influence in the Balkans, particularly in Serbia, grew steadily. From the eighteenth century onward, Russia's strategy of systematically expanding its influence in the region became apparent, and in the nineteenth century, Western powers defined Serbia as Russia's traditional sphere of influence. Throughout history, Russia's diplomatic and political support has always been decisive when Serbia faced geopolitical crises. Russia's diplomatic support in Serbia's struggle for control over Kosovo is one concrete example of this (Djokich, 2020, p. 235).

Russia-Serbia relations are characterized by a unique quality shaped by Slavic identity, Orthodox faith, and historical-cultural ties, defined by the rhetoric of "brotherhood." Policy alignment is observed between the two countries even on controversial political issues. Russia uses the ROC as an element of soft power to develop its relations with Serbia, while trust in Russia among the Serbian public remains at a very high level (Zorić & Holzer, 2008, pp. 16–17). For example, according to the results of a public opinion poll conducted in Serbia in 2019, 88% of Serbs reject NATO membership, 44% do not want EU membership, 84% oppose economic sanctions against Russia, and 55% support the Open Balkans initiative, which Russia also supports (CEAS Survey, 2019). This confluence of emotional and political alignment constitutes a critical background for Serbia's foreign policy strategy, as the country's problematic historical relationship with the West creates a permissive environment for Moscow to sustain its influence.

4.1. Geopolitical and Strategic Alignment: The NATO-Imposed Constraint and Diplomatic Leverage

The discourse of brotherhood between Russia and Serbia and the high level of trust in Serbian public opinion impact Belgrade's maneuvering space in foreign policy. However, to better understand this unique relationship and the pro-Russian inclination in the public sphere, the geopolitical ground created by Serbia's problematic historical relationship with NATO and the West in general must be analyzed.

Indeed, Serbia's foreign policy is characterized by a deliberate "hedging" strategy or a state of non-alignment, aiming to maintain diplomatic flexibility by avoiding irreversible choices between competing global pressures (Vuksanovic, 2023, p. 106). This approach is fundamentally rooted in Serbia's problematic historical relationship with NATO and the West in general (Jovic-Lazic, 2025, pp. 410–411). The roots of the conflict lie in the Yugoslav civil wars and, most significantly, in NATO's 1999 humanitarian intervention in Kosovo, which involved a 78-day bombing campaign targeting military objectives in the former Yugoslav Federation (Kutlllovci et al., 2024, pp. 3–8, 115).

This military action, executed without UN Security Council approval, is perceived in Serbia as aggression and a violation of international law (Kutlllovci et al., 2024, pp. 8, 115; Proroković, 2023, p. 189). This traumatic memory has created a structural constraint on alignment with the

West, leading to a deep negative perception in which most citizens view NATO as a force devoid of justice (Guzina, 2023, p. 1593; Jovic-Lazic, 2025, pp. 421–422). Reflecting this public opinion, Serbia has officially maintained a position of military neutrality since 2007 and openly rejected NATO membership (Kutllovci et al., 2024, pp. 4–5, 115). Polls consistently show that over 80% of the Serbian population opposes joining the Alliance, revealing that membership is a goal that is barely featured in national security strategies (Proroković, 2023, p. 186).

This strong and widespread anti-NATO opposition creates a primary opportunity for the Russian Federation to assert its influence in the Western Balkans. Russia, described as a “disruptive force,” aims to keep Serbia out of Western alliances and maintain the current status quo. Moscow exploits this anti-Western sentiment not through coercion but by relying on strong soft power elements. Specifically, it solidifies the image of Russia as Serbia’s sole ally by utilizing shared history, cultural ties, and the Orthodox Christian faith (Vuksanovic, 2023, p. 116). Russia’s engagement is motivated by pragmatic interests. It uses the Balkans as a stage to counter the West and to regain its status as a European and global power (Vuksanovic, 2023, p. 111). The narrative that Russia is Serbia’s only ally, reinforced by the lasting trauma of the 1999 conflict, persists (Jovic-Lazic, 2025, p. 410).

This cultural and religious matrix is strategically utilized by Russia through tangible diplomatic instruments, most critically, by providing continuous veto support in the UN Security Council for Serbia’s non-recognition position on Kosovo. This backing constitutes a vital political leverage that makes alignment with Moscow advantageous for Belgrade’s fundamental national interest calculation, thereby sustaining Serbia’s orientation toward Russia as a direct consequence of its problematic relationship with NATO and the West. Furthermore, significant political figures, such as former President Vojislav Koštunica, have historically privileged the SOC as the protector of the collective experience of the Serbian people and state, directly linking religious identity to national political continuity (Guzina, 2023, p. 1601). Russia actively nurtures these ties with the Orthodox Church and nationalist groups within Serbia.

The permissive environment created by this cultural and political matrix allows the ROC to instrumentalize the Kosovo narrative and support the Kremlin’s geopolitical goals with concrete actions.

4.2. Orthodox Solidarity and the Instrumentalization of the Kosovo Narrative

In 1999, Russia opposed NATO’s intervention in Kosovo and used its permanent membership status in the UN Security Council to block the recognition of Kosovo’s independence. Parallel to this foreign policy stance, the ROC actively supported the SOC’s thesis that views Kosovo as its historical and spiritual homeland. The participation of representatives from both churches in high-level Russian-Serbian talks following the removal of Slobodan Milošević from power in 2000 is significant in that it demonstrates the extent to which political dialogue is intertwined with religious discourse (Vukomanović, 2024, pp. 10–11).

This institutional engagement on the Kosovo issue has a strong historical basis. In 1999, while still a Metropolitan, Patriarch Kirill actively participated in peace actions for Yugoslavia and visited Belgrade, underscoring the ROC's decades-long effort to play a constructive role in the Kosovo crisis (Mospat, 2025d). Furthermore, this alignment is continuously reinforced through high-level church diplomacy. Patriarch Kirill regularly meets with members of the Serbian Church hierarchy, such as Montenegrin Metropolitan Ioanniky, in Moscow. Following these meetings, the Patriarch often emphasizes the theme of preserving the spiritual unity of Holy Rus' in his sermons, demonstrating the ongoing ideological coherence with the SOC (Patriarchia, 2022a).

The dialogue between the ROC and the SOC has moved beyond purely religious content and taken on a political function. By reproducing Russian foreign policy rhetoric on religious platforms, the SOC both legitimizes Russia's policies and contributes to the continuation of the bilateral political partnership (Zorić & Holzer, 2008, p. 24). This synergy manifests through the theological securitization of the Kosovo conflict, which reframes the issue through a spiritual lens. By positioning the dispute as a fundamental element of Orthodox identity rather than a strictly territorial concern, the ROC provides a normative framework that reinforces the SOC's traditional stance. This dynamic functions as a strategic deadlock by acting as a structural constraint: pragmatic diplomatic shifts often appear inconsistent with these deeply held religious values, thereby shaping the parameters of state engagement. While Moscow provides diplomatic support at the UN, the ROC's influence helps maintain a consistent domestic consensus. Ultimately, this partnership increases the political and electoral complexity for Serbian leaders considering a significant strategic pivot.

To sustain this domestic consensus, the ROC utilizes institutional vehicles such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation. Through this cooperation, the Church carries out projects in Serbia aimed at promoting Russian conservative values and traditional culture. The "Supporting Orthodoxy in Serbia and Kosovo" project, launched in 2012 and supported by the Russkiy Mir Foundation, can be considered within this scope (Šćepanović, 2023, p. 1066). This strategic alliance was formalized by the 2009 memorandum of understanding between the president of the Russkiy Mir Foundation and Patriarch Kirill. By providing a structured framework for cultural and religious diplomacy, these initiatives translate theological support into a widespread public narrative that legitimizes the Serbian position on Kosovo under the banner of defending traditional Orthodox values.

The position of the ROC largely supports the SOC's official thesis that Kosovo is an inseparable part of Serbia. The ROC endeavors to legitimize this thesis on international religious and political platforms. The statements issued by the SOC generally emphasize the importance of Serbian heritage in Kosovo. The ROC frames this narrative within the defense of values brought from the historical roots of Orthodox civilization, asserting it stands against the "corrupt" values of the West, thereby emphasizing unity with the Serbian Church on the basis of "traditional values" (OSCE, 2019).

Furthermore, Patriarch Kirill's "sacred sacrifice" rhetoric used in his sermons concerning the war in Ukraine, and the principle that Kyiv territories are inseparable from Russia in a historical-theological context, exhibit a strong theological correspondence with the SOC's discourse concerning the 1990s wars and Kosovo. This correlation confirms the depth of the ideological affinity between the two churches (Pravoslavie, 2024).

The Kosovo issue is a key area where the ROC is used as a soft power instrument to advance Russia's strategic interests in the Balkans. The ROC operates as a non-state actor that faithfully supports the Kremlin's regional objectives through direct discourse and activities. Russia pursues calls based on historical, cultural, and religious ties with Serbia, fueled by its continued opposition to Kosovo's independence. The Kremlin's stance is reinforced by the lingering resentment over NATO's bombing of Serbia and the ongoing opposition to Kosovo's independence. Russia even views the 1999 Kosovo crisis as a humiliating event that challenged its great power status (Blitt, 2024, pp. 58, 62).

The ROC enthusiastically promotes the Kremlin's narratives through diplomacy and religious engagements (Blitt, 2024, pp. 67, 68). For instance, Patriarch Kirill has emphasized the efforts of the former Serbian Patriarch on behalf of the "long-suffering flock in Kosovo and Metohija," supporting the narrative that Serbs are under attack. Kirill also stated that Russia suffered alongside the Serbian people during the NATO bombing and that it continues to empathize with and assist the Serbian population in Kosovo to the extent possible (Blitt, 2024, pp. 74, 79). The ROC has supported the SOC and Serbia's claim to their "historical canonical territories, which undoubtedly include Kosovo" (Blitt, 2024, p. 120). Furthermore, Russia accelerated its efforts to regain the loyalty of Slavic and Orthodox believers in the Balkans following the 1999 Kosovo bombing (Kanin, 2019, pp. 33–34).

The Church also disseminates its messages through indirect, remotely controlled organizations. For example, the ROC-affiliated NGO, the "Centre for Monitoring the Rights and Freedom of Orthodox Christians in Europe" (CMRFOCE), echoed Kremlin objectives by opposing Kosovo's bid for UNESCO membership in 2015 (Orthodoxrights, 2015). Furthermore, members of the ROC-supported "Night Wolves" motorcycle club have drawn parallels between the "enemies" who separate Kosovo from Serbia and those seeking to deprive Russia of Ukraine. Through these actions, the Kremlin aims to fuel ethnic tensions against the West, increase regional instability, and present Russia as the natural alternative to the West (Cheresheva, 2016; Blitt, 2024, pp. 69–74, 119).

Following the 1999 Kosovo bombing, Russia accelerated its efforts to regain the loyalty of Slavic and Orthodox believers in the Balkans (Kanin, 2019, pp. 33–34). The ROC successfully harnessed the deep anti-Western sentiment rooted in the NATO intervention, effectively positioning Russia as the Orthodox world's primary ideological patron by aligning the SOC's canonical claims on Kosovo with Moscow's foreign policy goals. This ideological dominance is further sustained and translated into geopolitical action through tangible institutional and financial soft power

mechanisms, as evidenced by Moscow's strategic deployment of initiatives like the Russkiy Mir Foundation.

4.3. Non-State Proxies and Financial Diplomacy: Oligarchs and Nationalist Groups

The ROC may also be an indirect or direct party to discussions between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Serbian state institutions. Russia's financial and technical support for the restoration and construction of religious sites in Serbia is among the concrete manifestations of soft power (Mid.ru, 2020b). This approach serves as a practical mechanism for building public support from the ground up. A key example is Russia's financial role in completing the Saint Sava Temple in Belgrade (In4s.net, 2019). By turning financial aid into a permanent and visible religious symbol, Moscow embeds the narrative of "brotherhood" into the daily lives of Serbian citizens. This religious visibility makes it politically difficult for Serbian leaders to distance themselves from Russia without facing domestic backlash. In an environment where these symbols are so prominent, shifting away from Moscow can be framed as an attack on national identity, which significantly limits the government's options in foreign policy.

These symbolic efforts are sustained and expanded through formal institutional frameworks. Russkiy Mir (Russian World) is a broad initiative used by the Kremlin to advance Russia's foreign policy interests, and the ROC is a central component of this initiative (Russkiy Mir, 2007a). The ROC plays a significant role in facilitating the Kremlin's broader "compatriots" strategy and the Russian World initiative, thereby spreading Russia's soft power and influence globally.

As a concrete manifestation of this initiative, Russkiy Mir centers are present in the Western Balkans, including at the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade, the University of Montenegro, the University of St. Cyril and Methodius in North Macedonia, and a university in Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Šćepanović, 2023, p. 1067). These institutions typically work in collaboration with the ROC and local churches such as the SOC, focusing on the mission of preserving Orthodox values and promoting brotherhood with Russia (Blitt, 2024, p. 71).

In line with Russkiy Mir objectives, the ROC conducts informational and outreach activities such as "Days of Russian Spiritual Culture," and Patriarch Kirill participates in high-level political events like the 15th Russkiy Mir Assembly (Blitt, 2024, pp. 91, 95). Furthermore, ROC-affiliated organizations also disseminate this narrative. For example, the World Russian People's Council has condemned "discrimination and persecution" against individuals associated with the Russian World in the European Union (Blitt, 2024, p. 69). Church leaders also use this concept in their messages. SOC Patriarch Porfirije has accused the Ukrainian government of engaging in "horrific state terror" against ROC-affiliated churches and the broader Russian World (Blitt, 2024, p. 86).

The ROC further extends its sphere of influence by supporting other non-state proxy actors of the Russian World initiative. One such prominent group is the "Night Wolves" motorcycle club,

which follows the “Russian Balkans” route and aims to restore Russia’s historical heritage in the region (Blitt, 2024, pp. 72–73). In parallel with this cultural activism, Russian nationalists have attempted to utilize the idea of Orthodox ecumenism through paramilitary initiatives involving leaders such as Viktor Zaplatin of the “Balkan Cossack Army.” Zaplatin organizes and establishes ties with local fighters in Serbia and Montenegro within the framework of religious-nationalist discourse and Orthodox solidarity.

Declaring that “the Orthodox world is one world,” Zaplatin has called for the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina through representatives from Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Greece, and the Serb entity in Bosnia. This demonstrates Russia’s desire to establish a pan-Orthodox hegemony among the Orthodox population in the Balkans (Kanin, 2019, pp. 34–35). In this context, Viktor Zaplatin organized Serbian volunteers to fight with pro-Russian forces in Ukraine in 2014. Additionally, as part of Russia’s efforts to increase its influence in the Balkans, he took charge of a new Cossack organization established in the port city of Kotor, Montenegro, in 2016. Through such activities, Zaplatin has assumed the role of a paramilitary proxy actor, carrying Russia’s military influence and nationalist ideology to the Balkans via Serbian volunteers and Cossack organizations (Obrenovic, 2020).

Yet, Russia’s institutional and paramilitary soft power strategy has not been limited solely to state-backed actors; it has also been reinforced through private financial resources, media power, and philanthropic activities provided by Russian oligarchs connected to the ROC. Russian nationalist philanthropist Konstantin Malofeev plays an important role in spreading the influence of Russia and the ROC in the Balkans through his activities related to Orthodoxy. Malofeev is the founder of the St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation, Russia’s largest Orthodox charity. He is also the founder of the television channel Tsargrad, which broadcasts nationalist news and religious programs and is focused on promoting Orthodox values and building Orthodox churches (Sctvasilij.ru, 2025; Tsargrad.tv, 2025). Malofeev also organizes activities and charitable works related to Orthodox solidarity in the Balkans. For example, in 2015, during Orthodox Easter, he provided financial support for bringing the “holy fire ritual” to Belgrade. In addition, Malofeev commissioned a monument to Tsar Nicholas II in the Serbian Republic of Bosnia (Šćepanović, 2023, p. 1067).

In the post-2000 period, while the Serbian government sought to make progress in the European integration process, the SOC criticized the secularism clause in the EU constitution as a deviation from Orthodox Christian roots, creating additional areas of tension in Serbia’s relations with the West (Vukomanović, 2024, p. 13).

Pro-Russian rhetoric in Serbia has a significant impact on the media and political institutions. The ROC reinforces its legitimacy in society by supporting the Serbian position on issues that directly coincide with Serbia’s national interests, such as the Kosovo issue. Furthermore, Russian cultural centers and institutions offering Russian language education in Serbia play an important role in increasing Russia’s cultural influence.

The ROC operates as a hybrid geopolitical apparatus and an autonomous actor, leveraging its partnership with the state to advance its “Holy Rus” vision.

Conclusion

The ROC operates as a hybrid geopolitical apparatus and an autonomous actor, leveraging its partnership with the state to advance its “Holy Rus” vision. Rather than providing passive cultural outreach, this dynamic role allows the Church to translate Orthodox solidarity into tangible diplomatic and operational leverage across the Balkans. In this capacity, the ROC provides the ideological core for the Russian World (Russkiy Mir) project. This doctrine successfully positions Russia as a solid civilization built on traditional values, directly challenging the perceived social and religious decline of Europe.

The analysis of the Serbian case provides clear evidence of this instrumentalization through three interconnected layers, demonstrating the transition from classic soft power to strategic influence. The strategic foundation of the ROC’s influence relies on exploiting the deep, pervasive anti-Western trauma resulting from the 1999 NATO intervention, which creates a structural constraint on Serbian policy. Russia successfully converts this shared religious identity into vital diplomatic leverage through actions such as providing continuous UN Security Council veto support. This ideological mechanism is further realized by the ROC’s utilization of Orthodox solidarity to align the SOC’s foundational canonical claims (Kosovo as canonical territory) with the Kremlin’s anti-Western geopolitical agenda. Crucially, the final layer of this strategy is achieved through tangible, hybrid mechanisms, whereby the ROC extends its influence by leveraging private oligarchic finance and utilizing paramilitary nationalist groups as proxy actors to disseminate the ideological narrative on the ground.

Ultimately, the ROC’s influence is conditional. It works fully in environments like Serbia, where historical sympathy for Russia is extremely high and the political constraints are severe. The success of this approach confirms the theoretical notion that Religious Soft Power goes beyond simple attraction and involves strategically channeling identity politics to establish networks of loyalty. The ROC’s role, therefore, relies on building these networks by mobilizing religious affiliations and historical ties. Crucially, the ROC’s effectiveness in Serbia depends on the active agency of the SOC, which instrumentalizes Russian support to protect its jurisdiction in Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Church struggles in the Balkans, as evidenced by this case study, are thus not merely religious or cultural disputes but are a critical component of Russia’s multidimensional strategy to establish a geopolitical sphere of influence in Southeastern Europe and challenge the wider post-Western order. Understanding Russia’s regional policies requires consideration of the ROC’s activities as an advanced, hybrid mechanism of modern religious statecraft.

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