Main Cathedral of Mutual Legitimation: The Church of the Russian Armed Forces as a Site of Making Power Meaningful

Bojidar Kolov

Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages, University of Oslo, 0315 Oslo, Norway; bojidar.kolov@ilos.uio.no

Abstract: The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces emerged against the background of growing cooperation between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church. A key aspect of that re-energised relationship has been the intensified engagement of State and Church leaders in practices of mutual legitimation. This study examines the case of the new church of the Russian Armed Forces as an illustration of how the Patriarchate and the Russian Government make sense of each other’s power and positions in Russian society. Analysis of the official discourses indicates three key developments. First, both Church and State, in their own right, construct a statist and nationalist normative framework where the well-being and the greatness of “the Fatherland” is of utmost value. The two institutions legitimise each other by representing the other party as acting on behalf of this shared value. Second, the dedication of cathedral to the “Victory in the Great Patriotic War” integrates the Church into this key national narrative and simultaneously incorporates elements of the Soviet past into Russia’s “sacred memory”. Third, the involvement of the Patriarchate and the Kremlin in mutual legitimation constructs a relatively independent Church–State legitimating nexus, making popular support less necessary.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church; legitimation; Church–State relations

1. Introduction

In June 2020, almost twenty years after the consecration of the rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, Patriarch Kirill celebrated the first liturgy of an entirely new monumental edifice: the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces (MCRAF). Located in Patriot Park on the outskirts of the Russian capital, it is officially “dedicated to the 75th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War, as well as the military feats of the Russian people in all wars” (Patriarchia 2020). The Cathedral became the third largest in Russia and its massive construction encompasses an upper and lower church, both richly decorated with “mosaics, sculptures, ceramics, paintings, stained glasses” (Patriarchia 2020) depicting biblical and historical military scenes. In addition, a multimedia museum complex called “Memory Lane” surrounds the edifice. A head (nastoyatel’) of the new cathedral became the Patriarch himself.

Dedicating churches and icons to military achievements is nothing new in Russia. From the massive 16th-century Blessed Be the Host of the King of Heaven icon commemorating the conquest of Kazan by Ivan the Terrible, to the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, erected to honour the victory of the Russian Army over Napoleon Bonaparte, military and ecclesial narratives have regularly fused into an integrated discourse. There is also a long tradition of unity between religious and martial (indeed, the term derives from the Roman god Mars) symbols, going back at least to the times of the ancient templum Victoriae on the Palatine Hill in Rome.

However, the very idea for and the appearance of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces mark a specific development in Church–State relations in Russia. Although indications of the post-Soviet rapprochement between the Patriarchate and the Kremlin were evident already with the “1000th anniversary of the Christianisation of Rus” in
1988, it was after Vladimir Putin took office as president for a third term in 2012 that
closer ties between Church and State intensified. In addition to new policy initiatives
and legislation\(^1\), and greater integration of ecclesiastical and State institutional structures\(^2\)
(Adamsky 2019, pp. 173–195; Köllner 2021, p. 18; Ponomariov 2017), this new stage in the
relations between the Government and the Synod manifested itself in a tight “discursive
fit” (Curanović 2018, p. 260). The Church has not changed its political discourse radically,
although it has become gradually more assertive (Petro 2018; Köllner 2021, p. 11), whereas
the government has markedly shifted towards more conservative, traditional, and Orthodox
political sensemaking (Pavković 2017; Ponomariov 2017, p. 38). The Patriarchate and
the Kremlin have begun to engage systematically in what I call \textit{mutual legitimation}: a
discursive dynamic formed by State narratives about the place and the role of the Church
in Russian society on the one hand and official ecclesiastical articulations concerning secular
governance on the other.

As a manifestation of the convergence between Church and State discourses (Agadjanian 2017),
the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces opens avenues for various
kinds of research. The case of the MCRAF provides grounds for studies as diverse as,
for instance, visual or stylistic analyses of ideologically functioning iconography and
architecture (e.g., Kotlomanov 2020), memory studies focusing on the Church’s interpreta-
tion(s) of the Soviet past (building on Rousselet 2013; Torbakov 2014; Bogumil et al. 2015;
Klimenko 2021), research on Orthodox militarism and Church–Army cooperation (expand-
ing the ideas of Adamsky 2019; Knorre and Zygmont 2020; Köllner 2021 among others),
as well on the securitisation of values and identity (following Payne 2010; Østbø 2017).
This article, however, treats the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces only as a
showcase where the practices of \textit{mutual legitimation} between the Russian Church and State
are clearly displayed.

To be sure, the notion of mutual legitimation does not exhaust the full complexity of
the Church–State relations in Russia today, with the dynamic interplay of different and often
contradictory logics realised on various levels of interaction. As Kristina Stoeckl (2020a)
argued, contemporary relations between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the
Kremlin include elements of all three ideal-type models of Church–State relations: \textit{the state
church model}, \textit{the disestablishment model}, and \textit{the selective cooperation model}. “Depending on the
issues and politics that are at stake”, Stoeckl explains, “the church presents itself as quasi-
state actor and exclusive partner to the state, as one cooperation partner among others of
the state or as antagonist to the state” (Stoeckl 2020a, p. 245). Tobias Köllner (2021) likewise
emphasises the complexity of the Orthodoxy–politics interplay in Russia, describing it as
an “entanglement of authorities” with three main aspects: “(1) personal acquaintances
and connections between individual actors from both fields, (2) institutional connections
between the two fields that have developed at the latest since the end of socialism and
(3) ideological convergences” (Köllner 2021, p. 17). At the same time, Köllner argues, this
multi-level relationship provides several “examples of competition, misunderstandings,
and conflicts” (Köllner 2021, p. 19).

The Church–State relations, in that sense, can hardly be described as static and un-
ambiguous. Only in the last ten years, the Patriarchate and the Kremlin have experienced
series of close cooperation on the one hand and various frictions of different degrees on the
other. Most recently, the 2020 amendments to the Russian constitution made common causes with the State and to achieve
“successful lobbying” (Stoeckl 2020b). Moreover, the inclusion of elements such as “faith in
God”, the “defence of the institution of marriage as a union of man and woman”, and the
“preservation of traditional family values” (Stoeckl 2020b) in the constitution shows that
the political mainstream in Russia is still interested in moral and religious values, albeit
probably not with the same intensity as it was five or ten years ago. At the same time,
the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated various tensions between (parts
of) the Church and the State (Agadjanian 2021), thus revealing the complex and dynamic
character not only of their relationship per se but of their internal interconnections as well.
Indeed, neither the Church nor the State always conduct themselves as monolithic entities. Certainly, there are meaningful variations inside these institutions when it comes to political and moral/spiritual questions. As Anastasia Mitrofanova (2015, p. 108) argued, “[t]he official position of the Church is not the same as the position adopted by its individual or group members, clerical and lay. All possible ideological tendencies, from complete universalism (uranopolitizm) to racist ethnic nationalism, are unofficially represented”. Zoe Knox (2004, pp. 75–76), too, spoke about “official” and “unofficial church” which express different political and social visions, whereas Irina Papkova (2011, pp. 46–70) identified “three competing schools of thought” in the Russian Church, namely, the traditionalists, the liberals, and the fundamentalists. However, despite the relative ideological diversity within the ROC, there is a relatively stable hegemony of statist and great-power nationalist ideas on the level of official discourse. Likewise, although the Russian political establishment often articulates diverse and even contradictory ideas regarding religion and moral values, its discourse remains remarkably entrenched concerning the importance of tradition, Orthodoxy, and the Church in preserving Russia’s uniqueness, unity, and power.

The aim of the present study, however, is not to conceptualise Church–State relations in Russia as a whole or to theorise on the “overall situation” of the Orthodoxy–politics (or Orthodoxy–militarism) interplay. Nor is this analysis one aiming to examine the complexity of the Church’s relation to the Soviet past or the Second World War in detail. Instead, I focus on mutual legitimisation as a key aspect of the Patriarchate and the Kremlin’s entangled political practices, while recognising that is not the only important one. In that sense, the Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces is indeed not the object of analysis here, but rather only a site, a platform where this aspect of the Church–State in Russia relations unfolds in particularly clear fashion.

I see the mutually legitimating discourses of the ROC and the government as politically significant because they simultaneously enable and restrain the institutional relations between Church and State and, more generally, shape their power positions in Russian society. However, that is not to say that the Church and the State hold equal shares in the “economy” of this interaction or even that they are equally interested in speaking about the other (or about politics and faith/morality, respectively). For obvious reasons, the Church needs the State more than vice versa. Likewise, the Patriarchate speaks more about politics and the State than the Kremlin does concerning moral and religious matters. The apparent symmetry between the Church’s political discourse and the State’s religious/moral discourse presented in this study is only an analytical construction aiming at exploring the entangled mechanisms of making these institutions’ power meaningful.

In addition, although agreeing with Köllner (2021) on the autonomous nature of the ROC’s political actorness—a point made also by Koesel (2014); Stoeckl (2016, 2020a); Ponomariov (2017); Agadjanian and Kenworthy (2021) and others—I am sceptical of the often- implied understanding of the Church as a rational, tactical, calculating player in a game of objective gains and losses. This understanding is problematic, but not because the ROC encompasses various subjects and interests that might contradict each other (as is the case), nor because I regard the Church (or its various agents) as “irrational” or erratic. No, such a view seems limiting because I see all “strategic” undertakings as embedded in particular contingent regimes of rationality. Thus, I hold not only that there are various rationalities in which the ecclesiastical subject(s) operate simultaneously, but also that none of these rationalities is objective “in itself,” let alone objectively and immediately evident to the observer. When the Church speaks and acts, I see this more as a re-production of certain contingent ecclesio-political modalities than a “purely pragmatic” or strategic course of action.

Taking the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces as a case study of the larger interplay of mutual legitimisation between Church and State in today’s Russia, I ask: How is the mutual legitimisation between Church and State in Russia made possible? I approach this by analysing official Church and State statements produced in relation to the new cathedral, and complement this with an examination of statements made in the context of another
ROC edifice: the Cathedral of the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia built in 2017. In addition to being designed, inaugurated, and consecrated by virtually the same persons, this cathedral is a relevant supplementary case, because it is dedicated to the Christian victims of the Soviet anti-religious persecutions—a dedication that, in principle, could represent the State in a slightly different light from a church “commemorating the Great Patriotic War”.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Before moving to the analysis of legitimating discourses, I present the theoretical premises of the study together with the underlying conceptual framework, beginning with my understanding of legitimation.

A good starting point is Thomas Luckmann’s assertion that the “roots of a legitimating processes are to be found in intersubjective action” (Luckmann 1987, p. 110). “We all practice legitimation and we are all subject to it”, he argues (Luckmann 1987). This condition of being subject to something beyond one’s control can also be defined as a state of being under power. However, what kind of power is that? The very term intersubjective implies that this is not the power of a single actor, whether an individual or an institution, but rather a power embedded in the relations between actors. Language is a good example here: it is not the personal creation of any individual, but a relational formation exercising power over how we think and express ourselves (Berger and Luckmann 1967, p. 52), as well as how we perceive the expressions of others. I refer to this “capacity of the intersubjective practices to effect” (Guzzini 1993, p. 471) as structural power. It encompasses socially reproduced norms and identities that guide people’s practices and shape their understandings of the practices of others. Moreover, “social reproduction can be understood as a ritual of power that not only rests on those who benefit from the system but also needs all those who, via their conscious or unconscious practices, help to sustain it. [...] Routine actions can constitute rituals of power that suggest the realm of the possible. They construct the horizon of the thinkable and feasible that continuously enframes agency” (Guzzini 1993, p. 472).

Structural power, in that sense, operates in the forms of social customs, conventions, common narratives, institutions. It is the influence of that which is taken for granted in a given social setting: the power of “common sense” and of that which is considered “normal” or “natural.” Structural power is that into which people are “thrown,” to put it in Heideggerian terms (Stapleton 2010, pp. 44–56), when they come to the world—or when they are “inserted into language,” as Lacan would have it (Stavrakakis 2002, p. 19). It can be described as various types and scales of “hegemony,” “symbolic universes,” “epistemes,” “doxa” and “habitus,” or even as “scientific paradigms.”

All these concepts and the rich theorisations underlying them are extremely useful, but they also carry certain assumptions and theoretical baggage that I am not able to present and critique in this short paper. In order to keep the theoretical framework simple and without unnecessary conceptual overload, while also recognising the impact of these theorisations on my thinking, I will employ the most generic concept possible. In this case, that is structural power.

Structural power is always performed by agents who act on behalf of (enact) the structure (Giddens 1984). These agents’ individual power practices—by which structural power is manifested and reproduced—I call object power. The instances of object power are the specific manifestations of structural power in concrete social situations. Under conditions of structural stability, object power is that which makes the structure intelligible and meaningful. For instance, we “know” that we are part of a nation (a structure) because of our individual (object) participation in multiple recurrent practices, such as national holidays, national elections, national culture, stories about other nations, etc. These largely fixed and regular practices, individual and institutional, which make structural power knowable, I call objective legitimation.
However, as poststructuralist theorists argue, all structures of meaning are constitutively incomplete and can be fixed only partially and temporarily (Laclau and Mouffe 2014; Howarth 2000, 2013). In short, “any social structure involves an exercise of power and is always dislocated” (Howarth 2013, p. 192). The ontological dislocation of all structures, as Howarth points out, is “always” there. However, it is in the event of ontic, specific, that is, dislocation that some of the practices of object power can come across not as “the way things are done”, but as meaningless, and in some cases, even violent actions. For instance, under the conditions of dislocated infancy, holding hands with the caregiver becomes nonsensical and even embarrassing.

Objective legitimation and objective power can only be distinguished analytically. Structural power is knowable only through its objective manifestations/legitimations. We know, for example, that the language we speak limits (and enables) our ways of expression, thus exercising power over our lingual agency, only when we actually communicate in it. The language as such, invisible as “a whole”, becomes “tangible” only as we use it. The language in its use is, in fact, the only language we truly experience just as the legitimations/manifestations of structural power are the structural power as we encounter it. Thus, structural power is simultaneously the “cause” and the “effect” of its manifestations. The latter are the product and the means by which structural power is sustained. Structural power is realised and at the same time legitimised through object power: through institutionalised, ritualised, and habituated agential practices. I call this process objective, for it is exercised by objects, not subjects. The objects’ actions are routine, inertial, and determined (albeit only temporarily and partially) by the structure they embody. In contrast, subjects’ actions are enabled by structural dislocation and represent a degree of overcoming prior determination.

Such overcoming constitutes another kind of power: subjective power. This is defined by the subject’s capacity to expose the incompleteness of the existing structures and to articulate new meanings. Usually, the latter is a prerequisite for the former and vice versa. One can hardly undermine an existing system without articulating (however vague) an alternative, just as one cannot construct a new system without, willingly or unwillingly, undermining an existing one.

However, does the proposition of non-structural norms and identities or exposing the incompleteness of the existing ones automatically affect the relevant social order? How does the capacity of subjective power to change structural power come into being?

In order to affect structural power, subjective power must make sense. It has to relate to these elements of structural power which are still relatively fixed. Subjective power must resonate with what is already there: it has to be “adequate to things” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 138). Likewise, for a dislocated structure to overcome the visibility of its incompleteness, for it to acquire meaning anew, it has to be linked to new representations of reality, new norms, and identities which can stabilise its overall edifice.

This relationship between structural and subjective power I refer to as subjective legitimation. Unlike its passive objective counterpart, subjective legitimation makes non/sense of power in a dynamic and creative way, modifying both structures and subjects in the process. That is why, although I call it subjective, this interaction should be considered as only led, not controlled, by subjects. Moreover, because this subjective leadership is itself always partially embedded in the structure it transcends, it is always partially defined in structural terms as well.

In the extreme, subjective legitimation can be understood in a way similar to what neo-Gramscian analysts call “hegemonic operation” (Biegon 2017, p. 40). That is a process whereby a given representation of reality becomes dominant and “assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality” (Laclau 2005, p. 70). In my use of the term, however, subjective legitimation can denote a much less radical undertaking. The non-structural norms and identities that a subject seeks to put into force need not occupy such a totalising position: they may “simply” fill a gap in an existing “hegemonic formation” which has been somewhat dislocated at the margins.
Importantly, making power meaningful, whether through objective or subjective legitimation, is not just an aspect of power or even a necessary condition that enables it. Legitimation is power in the making and power is always in the making. Making sense of power is an exercise of power—and power is power only if it makes sense. There is “no power relation,” Foucault asserts, “without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge” (Foucault 1995, p. 27). It is in knowledge that power becomes meaningful or meaningless; that a given rule appears as “justice” or as “coercion”, or, indeed, as a “rule” at all. (De)legitimation is where rulers emerge as “tyrants” or “servants of the people,” and everything in-between. Regardless of whether it is considered “imperfect but currently the only viable option” or “heaven on earth”, legitimate order is order that makes sense in the double sense of the term: it appears meaningful, and it makes—produces—meaning. Thus, power and legitimation are not to be understood as two ontologically distinct phenomena, as has been suggested (see Gilley 2009; Beetham 2013). No, they should be recognised as consubstantial.

Having outlined the general framework, I can now define mutual legitimation as a process of maintaining/producing entangled meanings between several agents, who make sense of and thus enable each other’s power. To make sense of the other’s power means to (re)produce a meaningful representation of the position and role of the other in society. Furthermore, mutual legitimation also entails articulating a specific representation of society (family, community, nation, international society, etc.), in which the legitimated other stands as meaningful. Put differently, mutual legitimation is a sui generis entangled identity construction practice. However, unlike conventional identity construction analysis, which investigates the “uses of the other” for constructing one’s own subjectivity (see Neumann 1999), the study of mutual legitimation would focus on how actors construct subjectivities for one another.

(Re)producing knowledge about (1) the society or the world of the other, (2) who the other is in that world, and (3) what in that world the other does, affects the other’s capacity to effect. Thus, legitimating the other is the power to empower. This power is defined, as argued above, by the construction of coincidence between concrete agential representations, on the one hand, and structural commonplaces and patterns of cognition, on the other. In this paper, however, I am not interested in “measuring degrees” of such coincidences. I do not aim to “calculate” how empowering certain legitimation discourse is or was. Indeed, given the dynamic character, contingency, and non-fixity of both structural and agential constructions, any such calculation would be highly problematic. What I intend to do is to analyse how legitimation discourses operate, and identify their mechanisms for making the power of the other meaningful.

Unlike critical “text analytical perspectives on legitimacy,” my approach does not aim to uncover legitimation “strategies” (Schneider et al. 2007, p. 131). Recognising that language can be used strategically, I assume that the aims and goals of a strategy can never be taken as rational or objective from some Archimedean point. Rather, I see both the “strategies” and their analyses as embedded in structural power—be it a “strategic culture” or a “scientific paradigm.”

3. Methodological Framework and Materials

Thus far, I have defined legitimation by its capacity to construct dialectical links between structural and agential power, links that not only connect the two but, indeed, put them both into effect. I have also conceptualised the construction of these links as a form of production of knowledge about social relations. Such knowledge, I have argued, simultaneously makes sense of and (re)produces social relations, thus making them both possible and meaningful, albeit only partially and temporarily. I have further described mutual legitimation as practice, whereby particular actors make sense of and thus enable each other’s power by constructing worlds and identities for one another. The following paragraphs outline my approach to analysing the mechanisms of meaning production and identity construction in the case of the mutual legitimation between the ROC and
the Russian Government as it unfolded in relation to the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces.

My focus here is on the mutual legitimation between Church and State on the top official level. Acknowledging the plurality of voices and positions in both the ROC and the State\(^1\), I maintain that the official ecclesiastical and governmental discourses are the most relevant for studying mutual legitimation. They are the most influential in terms of producing knowledge and power, and, simultaneously, are the most influenced in terms of being embedded in and dependent on structural power. In the case of the MCRAF, official discourses could be derived from both statements articulated by people in positions of formal authority (Hansen 2013, p. 74) and from the official means of communication of the respective institutions. That is why, for the purposes of this analysis, I have examined all the relevant news pieces, articles, reports, interviews, etc., related to the Cathedral that have been published in the official websites of the Church, the Kremlin, and the Ministry of Defence, as well as in websites of the TV channels Spas (owned by Moscow Patriarchate) and Zvezda (owned by the Russian Ministry of Defence).

The statements cited in this study\(^12\) have been articulated on three main occasions: the foundation stone-laying ceremony on 19 September 2018 (Kirill 2018; Putin 2018), the consecration of the Cathedral on 14 June 2020 (Patriarchia 2020; Kirill 2020a; Kirill 2020b; Shoygu 2020b), and the Day of Remembrance and Sorrow on 22 June 2020 when President Vladimir Putin visited the cathedral for the first time and, together with the Patriarch, addressed the attending military personnel (Kirill 2020c; Putin 2020). Additionally included in the analysis are interviews given by Minister Sergey Shoygu (Shoygu 2020a) and Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces and first Deputy Defence Minister (Gerasimov 2020), as well as statements of lower-echelon officials (Narochnitskaya 2018) and clerics (Stefan 2020). Furthermore, as explained earlier, the analysis is complemented with an examination of statements made in relation to the consecration of the Cathedral of the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia (Kirill 2017; Putin 2017).

To show how these texts represent the world of the legitimated other, and how they articulate the other’s place and role in that world, I examine the texts’ meaning-production mechanisms. Generally, meaning production can be described as an operation of two processes: the “process of linking” and the “process of differentiation” (Hansen 2013, p. 17). Representations become meaningful when they are positively attached and/or negatively juxtaposed to other representations.

In addition to analysing how representations are linked and differentiated, I will examine the meaning-production of the abovementioned texts by looking at the operation of four textual mechanisms proposed by Dunn and Neumann (2016, pp. 110–15). The first one is presupposition or “the creation of background knowledge” (Doty 1996, quoted in Dunn and Neumann 2016). Presuppositions can take various forms, but all involve the construction of unquestioned truths by simply assuming them implicitly. The second mechanism is predication, i.e., the attribution of characteristics to a subject. The third one is subject positioning: the placement of a subject within a web of relations with other subjects. The fourth one is metaphor or the transference of meaning from one subject/object to another. In addition, I will pay attention to metonymies—“the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated”\(^13\)—as well as to the use of passive and active voice.

Taken together, these textual operations represent some of the principal modes whereby discourses can construct and maintain links between structural and agential power. In other worlds, these mechanisms literally (re)produce meaningful rule.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The State in the Discourse of the Church

The Russian Orthodox Church rarely refers directly to the State as such, whether in the form of gosudarstvo/derzhava or government (pravitel’stvo, upravlenie). However, when I
say that the ROC engages in making sense of State power, I mean precisely the legitimation of government (understood as both governance and the executive). Additionally, by government in Russia, I mean the current regime, i.e., the State institutions and their policies, and the more general norms and identities they enforce.

Although the Church rarely mentions specific government institutions, actors, or policies explicitly, it legitimates the regime mainly through (re)producing certain knowledge about Russia and the world in general. Such knowledge makes the regime meaningful only by implication and by indirect references to the State. The preferred representations in Patriarch Kirill’s discourse are country (strana), Fatherland (Otechestvo), and Homeland (Rodina), which, in principle, do not necessarily imply the government. All three are generic terms with spatial and territorial connotations (i.e., they can function as denoting objects) but they may be vaguely anthropomorphised or animated (i.e., representing subjects). Moreover, country (strana) frequently appears together with people/nation (narod), as in the following examples:

In that terrible and fateful time, we as a country and as a people have endured. (Kirill 2020b)

[Speaking to the military personnel] Remember the whole nation and the whole country stands behind you (Kirill 2020b)

Such context leaves little doubt that by country is meant a political subject, “an organized political community under one government”14. Country and Fatherland, as we shall see later, often function as metonymies for the State. How, then, does the State’s world look according to the Church?

4.1.1. World

The Russian State inhabits a world characterised by the constant threat to its own existence lurking in the background. The history of Russia is one of resistance, a continuous sequence of foreign attacks and victorious repulses. The country appears to be in an almost natural position of self-defence: “We know that Russia never fights and has never fought wars of conquest (Kirill 2018), but “difficult times” (Kirill 2018) occur repeatedly, almost akin to meteorological events. The perpetual menace for Russia is indeed largely taken for granted, as in the following example:

May the Lord protect all those who, in the words of the Apostle Paul, bear the sword (Romans 13:4) and who are able to draw that sword only when danger comes to the beloved Homeland. (Kirill 2020b)

Here, the phrase “only when danger comes” (tol’ko togda, kogda nastupaet opasnost’), without a conditional clause, implies that such danger will inevitably come. Moreover, whereas Russia is depicted as always defending itself, the Patriarch does not hesitate to express hope for new victories:

May […] the historical path of our people continue in peace and well-being. May God grant that on this path, there will be new victories, new achievements and no defeats (Kirill 2020b)

The apparent contradiction between the wishes for peace on one hand and “new victories” on the other demonstrates the degree of naturalisation of the defensive position. Russia can remain safe only by sustaining its capacity to repel inexorable dangers from without. The attacks on the State are articulated as attacks on the Russian people as a whole, as well as assaults on the faith. More generally, in the Patriarch’s discourse, nation, State, and faith are characterised by a high degree of overlap, where the defence of any of these three amounts to the protection of all the rest. For instance, in the Litany for the Departed pronounced during the consecratory service of the new cathedral, Patriarch Kirill prayed “for the repose of the souls of the departed servants of God, the leaders and soldiers who gave their lives for the faith and the Fatherland and all those who died prematurely during
the Great Patriotic War from hunger, cold, wounds and illnesses, who suffered terrible pain, torture and martyrdom in captivity […] (Kirill 2020b, emphases added)

The conjunction and between those “who gave their lives for the faith” and those who died in the War provides some room for not interpreting Stalin’s Red Army as a defender of Orthodoxy. However, the description of the dead prisoners of war as “martyrs” links the two representations, framing the Russian/Soviet soldiers indeed as “servants of God”. Thus, by linking two established knowledges, i.e., two types of structural power (namely, the ecclesial, which calls for service to God and praises sacrifice for one’s faith, and the Soviet Patriotic, which demands service to the State and honours sacrifice for one’s “Fatherland” and “people”), the Patriarch’s discourse engages in subjective legitimation. The knowledge that this discourse construct effectively transforms the meaning of both service to God and service to “the Fatherland” and by fusing them creates a hybrid deontology where the duty to one of them is to be understood as duty to the other.

In the perennially hostile world depicted by the Patriarch, faith is represented not only as one of the primary pillars of Russia; it is also articulated as one of Russia’s three hypostases: as a national substance, together with the unity of the people and the sovereignty of the State. Articulations of this triad can be traced back to the 19th-century doctrine of “official nationality” (Neumann 2013, p. 25), but what is significant here is that the articulation comes from the Church and not from the State. The Patriarch, however, adds slightly more emphasis on faith: “The Orthodox faith” is to be “preserved as the spiritual foundation of the nation’s life” (veru pravoslavnuyu kak dukhovnuyu osnovu zhizni naroda) (Kirill 2020a).

Even more revealing for this fusion of spiritual and political meanings is the representation of Victory in the description of the new cathedral, as stated on the Patriarchate’s official website:

The upper church, dedicated to the Resurrection of Christ, the main Christian feast, is particularly splendid and solemn. The dedication of the church was not chosen by chance: in the feast of the Resurrection sounds the eternal joy of Christ’s victory over the devil and death, a Victory to which all soldiers who fell for a righteous cause—for the defence of the Fatherland on the battlefields—are partakers. (Patriarchia 2020)

Here, faith is depicted as “inspiring the great exploits of our people throughout the ages” (Patriarchia 2020) and as “charging our lives […] with great power”. “A power, which”, the Patriarch (Kirill 2020a) continues, “according to the word of the Apostle crushes kingdoms and defeats foreign armies [Hebrews 11:33–34]”.15

The representation of faith as a source of national inspiration is also one of the major aspects of the State’s discourse on the Church, which I will discuss in the next section, but here I want to stress the function of faith as articulated by the Patriarchate. This articulation is pivotal for the construction of the world of the Russian State because it represents faith indeed as functional in supporting the former. Such representations imply certain subordinationism, i.e., hierarchy, in the triad of faith, nation, and state. As mentioned above, faith is described as the basis “of the nation’s life” and likewise as a means for “bringing new, ever more perfect and wonderful things into the life of our Fatherland” (Kirill 2020a). In a similar fashion, Bishop Stefan, Chairman of the Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies at the time, underlines that the new cathedral “will be open not only to those who wear epaulettes but to everyone who wants to pray and at the same time touch the history and spiritual culture of Russia” (Stefan 2020, emphasis added). The most pertinent example of this subordination, however, is as follows:

And the duty of the Church is to pray for you [the military] [and] for the Fatherland. [In order to achieve] peace and prosperity, may the historical path of our people continue in such harmony between the Armed Forces and the spiritual forces of the Church […] a harmony between the spiritual and the material,
between [what is] state (gosudarstvennogo) and [what is] ecclesial (cerkovnogo).

(Kirill 2020b)

Much has been written about the concept and “practice” of symmetry between Church and State in Russia (e.g., Bodin 2012; Hovorun 2017; Ponomariov 2017). Here, I only want to underline the direction, the telos of the “harmony” about which the Patriarch is speaking. The “historical path of our people”, the whole discourse implies, would not only be impossible without the State, but is in fact epitomised by it.

The instrumentalisation of faith in the official Church discourse also emanates from the inclusion of “strong spirit” (sil’nyj dukh) in the military arsenal:

And apart from the necessary technical equipment, it is important that the spirit of our soldiers should always be invincible and strong, that the awareness of the need to lay down one’s life for the Fatherland should be present in the minds and hearts of everyone who takes the oath. Only such determination, such courage and such loyalty to the country, multiplied by contemporary technical capabilities and ultramodern powerful weapons, will guarantee the security of our country for years to come. (Kirill 2020c, emphasis added.)

The source of the spirit is God; therefore, buttressing one’s spiritual strength is primarily realised through prayer. [...] That is why we build churches in multitudes today across the face of the Russian land. (Kirill 2018, emphasis added.)

In the Patriarch’s discourse, faith, prayer, and spirit are all harnessed to strengthen national security. When employed by the State, such discourse can be seen as a “secular ideological legitimation” of religion (Karpov 2010, p. 256). Vyacheslav Karpov argues that, since the 1990s, Russian leaders have “emphasized the importance of Orthodoxy and other traditional religions for improving Russia’s moral climate, curbing crime, solving demographic problems, and enhancing national security” (Karpov 2010). Karpov also recalls Pitirim Sorokin, who “calls the mentality expressed by such a rhetoric ‘cynical sensate’, meaning that it cynically seeks spiritual means to achieve persistently materialistic goals of a sensate culture” (Karpov 2010).

However, here we observe not State narratives of faith and religion, but the Church’s own self-representation. By presenting faith as instrumental to the well-being of the nation/state, the head of the ROC constructs a world in which the “Fatherland” is of utmost value. In turn, the State can be represented as important because of its function to protect faith and the faithful—but this, too, would amount to a statist discourse, albeit from another angle. At any rate, the world that Patriarch Kirill depicts is clearly state- and nation-centric. Here, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government share a common political horizon, a common telos towards the well-being and greatness of Russia and the Russian people. In order for Russia to be well and great, it must first of all be “independent”—which, according to the Patriarch, means “freedom from all foreign influences” (Kirill 2020b).

4.1.2. Position

The place of the State in this world is defined by its relation to other actors. We have already seen how the official Church assumes a subordinate role vis-à-vis the nation and the State. Another important actor is the enemy. The perpetual danger facing Russia is embodied by the abstract figure of the “external enemy.” Tellingly, in all his statements related to MCRAF—a church “dedicated to the Victory in the Great Patriotic War”—the Patriarch does not refer to Nazi Germany even once. Instead, he describes an enemy “armed to the teeth, relishing and proud of its total superiority over our country, violated the sacred borders of our Homeland with complete confidence that in the shortest possible time it will achieve total victory and crush our state [derzhavu]” (Kirill 2020c).

The anonymous depiction of the enemy, and especially the portrayal of its affective state of enjoyment, make this representation flexible and transferable to other, not necessarily historical, foes. In other words, the focus here is not on the historical figure of
the Wehrmacht or Nazi Germany more generally, but on the image of the ever-present hubristic enemy who desires to put an end to the Russian statehood. Another flexible notion are the sacralised borders of the Soviet Union \(^{17}\) (and of Russia in general). The boundaries of “the Fatherland” are, by definition, undefined; the only thing that matters is that they are “sacred” and, therefore, that they will be protected as such. In addition, with the phrase “thousands and thousands, and thousands of lives were given on the altar of Victory” \((\text{Kirill 2020c, emphasis added})\), the metaphor of the altar transfers the latter’s meaning of a podium for worship and sacrifice to the space of the battlefield, deifying, at the same time, the image of “the Victory” (always capitalised). Thus, the figure of the enemy becomes constitutive for Russia’s identity as victimised, sacrificial, but also a “holy” and triumphant historical subject.

The adjective “external” indicates, by implication, that there are also domestic enemies. Indeed, the Patriarch repeatedly speaks of the need to protect the Fatherland from “internal and external enemies” (twice in Kirill 2020a). This phrase has at least two distinct connotations. The first one stems from the pre-1917 expression “internal enemy” \( (\text{vnutrennij vrag}) \), which denoted “the opponents of the existing order, revolutionaries” \(^{18}\). The second one stems from the resemblance between “external and internal enemies” and the ecclesial locution “visible and invisible enemies” \((\text{vidimye i nevidimye vragi})\), whereby “invisible” means daemons. Thus, Patriarch Kirill’s message provides a discursive basis for both the villainisation and demonisation of all those who oppose the State. This is underscored by the reiteration of the importance of the “loyalty to the country” \((\text{Kirill 2018, 2020c})\).

The emphasis on loyalty was articulated in addressing military personnel—but the line between the abstract (political) “us” and the military proves to be rather blurry in the Patriarch’s language:

> [...] for our historical development to continue, we must keep our gunpowder dry, the Armed Forces must always be at the height of their calling. (Kirill 2020b, emphases added)

The same applies for several types of specified civilians:

The Cathedral of the Resurrection became a place of achievement \([\text{podvig}]\) of the architects, artists and clergymen, who, risking their lives and health every day, worked under almost combat-like conditions, and fulfilled their task, demonstrating courage and desire to serve the Fatherland without sparing themselves, like our great ancestors, the warriors of Holy Rus’ (Patriarchia 2020)

This brings us to the representation of the next and most significant Other that defines the position of the State: the people \((\text{narod})\). Prima facie, “the people” are the most active agent in Patriarch Kirill’s discourse. It is the people who accomplished the great feats in Russian history and who, together with the soldiers (or rather, at one with them), achieved the Victory. It is “us”, in the present, who should be “capable of both protecting the country and transforming [the nation’s] life for the better” \((\text{Kirill 2020a})\). Additionally, the nation’s “future generations” are called on to “preserve the Orthodox faith” and to “defend the Fatherland” \((\text{Kirill 2020a})\). The official Church discourse exhibits a subtle militarisation of the entire national “us”, with the virtues of “determination, courage, and loyalty to the country” \((\text{Kirill 2020c})\) applying not only to the army. The agency of the people as well as their greatness entail not much more than “protection”, “service”, and “loyalty” to the country.

However, there is one key condition that enables this greatness, and that is unity:

Today we, as one nation, remembering the exploits of our soldiers, have prayed in this church for our Fatherland, that the Lord protect our country from enemies, both external and internal. That the Lord unite our people with the strength of faith and love for the Fatherland \((\text{Kirill 2020a, emphases added})\).

Here, unity appears as a state of the present day—a state, however, which is simultaneously somewhat deficient, for the Lord is petitioned to yet “unite our people”. Thus, the meaning of unity operates in the logics of what Derrida calls \textit{differance} (Porter and Robinson
2011, p. 202): on the one hand, it differs from division and, on the other, it is deferred, i.e., its full realisation is always being postponed. Thereby, the sign of unity simultaneously describes the political community—for it is under one government—and prescribes loyalty to the latter, for edinstvo is an ever-moving target.

Having seen how the Others of the State are constructed, we can conclude that the structurally established images of the enemy and the people, as well as the related norms of protection, service, and loyalty to the country, are indirectly harnessed to make sense of the subjective power of the current regime. The latter is subtly integrated into the larger historical whole that Russia is depicted to be and, as a legitimate agent of that transhistorical Russia, appears to have the right to demand popular unity under its auspices.

4.1.3. Role

One obvious conclusion from the representations discussed thus far is that the main role of the State is to defend itself. We have also seen how the rearmament of the Russian military (with “ultramodern powerful weapons”) is legitimated in the name of “national security”. Although there is nothing particularly interesting in these more general articulations about defence, which simply replicate the State’s security discourse, the Patriarch’s metaphorical depiction of “the defender” (zashhitnik) deserves more attention:

[Y]ou [to the soldiers] are our defenders [zashhitniki]. We all know from experience what that [zashhitnik] is. A strong comrade who stopped the fist that was raised against us as children. Our parents who shielded us from doing the wrong thing. The law enforcement agencies who protect us from crime. Finally, the Armed Forces, who protect our Homeland from external enemies (Kirill 2020b).

This collage of subjectivities does two main things: on the one hand, it infantilises and objectivises the collective “us”; on the other, it endows the law enforcement agencies and the army, i.e., the State, with the agency to “shield” people “from doing the wrong thing”. Thus, the role of the State is not only to defend “the country” from external threats and to “preserve the freedom from all foreign influences” (Kirill 2020b), but may also be to protect the citizens from themselves.

However, the State appears to lack agency when it comes to negative historical experiences:

It is remarkable that after decades of hardship and stagnation [bezvremen’e: timelessness] following the absurd atheism that has been imposed on our country, our people […] have turned [back] to faith. This majestic cathedral is one of the symbols of the historic turn of the people […] from faithlessness to faith, from a meaningless existence to a meaningful existence (Kirill 2020a, emphasis added).

The passive voice of the verb to impose creates the impression that the oppression of religion in the Soviet Union involved no agent, it simply happened. In turn, the people are subjectivised—they “returned” to faith. However, in this latter process of returning to faith, the State does acquire agency:

I thank Sergey Kuzhugetovich cordially for this historic initiative [the Cathedral’s construction], through which the huge shift that has taken place in the consciousness, in the history, in the destiny of our people [the return to faith] is truly being realised in a visible way (Kirill 2020a).

The lack of clear subjectivity in relation to the persecution of Christians after 1917 in the Church’s discourse is precisely why I chose to examine the texts related to the consecration of the Cathedral of the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia, which is officially dedicated to the faithful who lost their lives at the hands of the Soviet authorities. The Patriarch’s narrative was as follows:

It was with great emotion that I have consecrated this church today. It was built not far from Lubyanka, where many people, including our hierarchs, priests and laypeople, were sentenced unjustly. Often at this place, death sentences were carried out; it was a symbol of the suffering of our people (Kirill 2017, emphases added).
Here, again, the passive voice indicates no active subject involved in causing “the suffering” and, thus, no responsibility. However, the State is clearly in charge of some things. In addition to the assertion that “nothing [read: nothing positive] in the Armed Forces” and “the entire country” is done “without the command of the Commander-in-Chief” (Kirill 2020a), the Patriarch also mentions several slightly narrower aspects of governance:

Today, we are living in a time of peace. This time of tranquillity is the result of both the wise foreign policy pursued by our government and the availability of formidable weapons in the hands of our Armed Forces (Kirill 2020c).

In this statement, too, the link between the structural element peace on the one hand and the subjective power of the State (materialised as rearmament and given foreign policy) on the other is rather straightforward. Moreover, peace, similarly to unity, operates in the logic of difference: peace is here, present because Russia has a wise government; however, it is not quite complete, which justifies the need for “formidable weapons”.

To conclude, the State’s subjective power to re-arm the army, to pursue its current foreign policy, to control its population, and to demand dedication and sacrifice is linked to the structural power of the images of Victory, historical path, and sacredness. In addition, strength, unity, faith, prosperity, peace and security form a web of widely accepted structural elements which, by being attached explicitly or implicitly to the representations of the State, make the power of the regime meaningful. In turn, the meanings of all these elements undergo modification, which accommodates the centrality of the State in the constructed symbolic order.

4.2. The Church in the State’s Discourse

The statements produced by State officials are much more succinct and condensed, but no less significant with regard to making sense of the place and role of the Church in Russian society. As with the State in the ecclesiastical discourse, the representation of the Church here is often overlapping, if not interchangeable, with the representations of Orthodoxy, faith, and spirituality. Interestingly, Orthodoxy as such or the Russian Orthodox Church are not the preferred signs. Given the multi-religious character of Russian society, faith is the favoured term, for its more general denotation. However, in my view, the regime’s “multiculturalism” is, at best, hierarchical: there is room for all “traditional religions” (which are superior to the largely excluded “non-traditional”), but the central position is reserved for the Orthodox Church. The very construction of the MCRAF is a testimonio to that. In 1995, in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the end of the War, the Russian Government opened the Victory Park memorial complex on Poklonnaya Hill. Three different places of worship found a place in this park: a small Orthodox church, a mosque, and a synagogue, the latter two commemorating the Muslims and the Jews who died during the War. In 2020 came the massive Orthodox cathedral, testifying to the ROC’s position in the current power constellation in Russia. Despite its more general meaning, however, faith remains a frequent metonymy for the Church and its function in society.

4.2.1. World

The world of the Church as constructed by State officials is markedly national. Faith is confined in the symbolic boundaries of the community and makes sense entirely within this framework. As mentioned above, Vyacheslav Karpov argues that this “cynical-sensate” understanding of religion was already common for the Russian elite in the 1990s. However, starting from around 2011–2012, when Vladimir Putin was preparing to be elected president for a third term against the background of massive protests, the official State discourse shifted. Russia’s declining economic performance made the hitherto predominant developmentalist discourse hard to maintain, and gave way to a more pronounced “traditional values” narrative. In other words, the growth narrative that legitimated the regime prior to Putin’s third term became acutely dislocated. It was the subjective legitima-
tion associated with the “traditional values” discourse inter alia that helped the Kremlin to stabilise its power.

Unlike in previous decades, when history and tradition were represented as important but never pivotal, the political discourse after 2011–2012 made them central indeed. Much can be said about this “conservative turn”, but of relevance here is the context in which the Church is situated. The Church inhabits a world filled with the spirit of continuity and respect for customs, where the memory of the past is “absolutely sacrosanct” (Putin 2020).

The unity–division dichotomy is constitutive for State discourse as well. Putin (2017) uses the ecclesial term *raskol* (schism, division) to explain to origin of the “revolutionary events” of 1917, the 100th anniversary of which became the occasion for the construction of the Cathedral of the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia.

We know how fragile civil peace is—we know this now—we must never forget this. We must never forget how hard the wounds of division [*raskol*] heal.

And that is why our common duty is to do everything in our power to preserve the unity of the Russian nation, to maintain social and political harmony through constant dialogue and, based on our traditional values, on the values of our traditional religions—Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism—to prevent any animosity and any division (Putin 2020).

This unity of the Russian nation is not based on a single unifying creed but on the fact that all these religions are *traditional*. Tradition, in that sense, signifies everything that *unites* Russia. In other words, tradition here functions as power. If there were a “state religion” in Russia, surely it would be (United) Russia itself.

From the perspective of this normative framework, the Church is empowered only with object power: with the agency to act on behalf of the structures of unity and tradition. In the President’s discourse, these structures do stem from Orthodoxy (among other religions), but what is significant here is that the Church is equated with its own customs, continuity, and oneness. Thus, the State does not leave much room for a subjective power of the Church in its relationship with society, i.e., for novelty and change in the Church’s public role.

4.2.2. Position

In its service to Russia, the Church occupies a privileged but not a monopolistic position. The place of Orthodoxy, in that sense, is *along with* the other religions.

We are attending a very important and historic event in the spiritual life of Russia: today, the foundation stone of the Cathedral of the Resurrection will be laid. Dedicated to the Victory of our people in the Great Patriotic War, it will become the main church of the Armed Forces, another symbol of the inviolability of our national traditions, our loyalty to the memory of our ancestors and their accomplishments for the good of the Fatherland. (Putin 2018)

This statement maps spirituality, the people’s military exploits, tradition, memory, and the good of the Fatherland in a hierarchical constellation, whereby the gravity of the latter pulls all else into its orbit. The adjective “spiritual” here covers not only the event of initiating a religious edifice, but also the object to which the church is dedicated, the (“holy”) Victory, that is. Thus, as Knorre and Zygmont (2020, p. 9) point out in relation to the MCRAF project as a whole, “[h]ere, the militaristic element is not as something ‘external’ that needs the Church’s blessing, but an autonomous object that sacralizes the world and human existence just like the Church does. Instead of being a passive object of sacralization, the militaristic element becomes an active agent.” This is underscored by the fact that the laying of the foundation stone is performed on Gunsmith’s Day (*Den’ oruzhejniki*), celebrated since 2012 on Putin’s initiative. The date of the holiday, 19 September, was chosen because this is (one of the days) when the Orthodox Church celebrates the Archangel Michael who, in the Book of Revelation, leads the heavenly armies against the forces of Satan.
Similarly to the Patriarch’s articulations, the State discourse represents the nation ostensibly as the central historical agent. Here, too, the subjectivity of the people is linked primarily with allegiance to and protection of the “homeland”:

The ordeals of the wartime period showed the incredible strength and resilience of our people, [as well as] the unfading examples of courage, true patriotism and devotion to the ancestors’ command [nakaz] to preserve and defend one’s native land. (Putin 2020)

In this context, the representation of the Church’s place is explicit: “vsegda ryadom s narodom”—“always there for the people/alongside the nation” (Putin 2017). In his retrospective on the place of the Church in history, Valery Gerasimov (2020) makes a similar, albeit more elaborated, point: During the war years, in spite of the repression and persecution of the clergy, the Church provided help to the front. Clergymen fought in the ranks of the army and assisted partisan groups and the local population in the occupied territories.

This brings us to the role of the Church in the State discourse.

### 4.2.3. Role

The role that State officials assign to the Church is rather straightforward. Here, we may recall the importance that Putin ascribes to unity, and the main remedy he prescribes for division. This is where the role of the Church lies: to serve as an apparatus for the preservation of memory and tradition, with the principal purpose of uniting the nation.

In his speech at the Cathedral of the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia, Putin depicted the Church as both an example of unity and a means to achieve it:

The Russian Orthodox Church here in Russia, while suffering and undergoing great losses, has always been close to the people. And the Russian Orthodox Church abroad has always helped our compatriots who found themselves far from their Homeland, not only to keep their faith, but also to feel their close connection with their Homeland, with Russia, with its traditions, with its language, with our culture (Putin 2017).

Back in 2007, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia and the Moscow Patriarchate, which broke apart in 1927 as a result of the latter’s pledge of allegiance to the Soviet authorities, solemnly signed an “Act of canonical communion”, an event widely publicised and celebrated by the State. At the signing ceremony, Putin noted, “today is a historic day, and it has significance not only for the Russian Church but also for Russian people all over the world.”

Ten years later, commemorating this event in the Cathedral of the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia, he stated: “both churches, with a sincere desire to strengthen Orthodoxy, to strengthen our common Homeland, have managed to walk this path [of disunity] with dignity (Putin 2017).

Both the anti-revolutionary, monarchist émigré Church and the Patriarchate, which (for most of the time) cooperated closely with the Soviet regime, served the Homeland. The important element here is not the prima facie inconsistent logic of Putin’s statement but the message concerning the Church’s expected “desire”, its duty to Russia, that is.

However, exactly what does “to strengthen the Homeland” mean? We may note Minister Shoygu’s vision of the purpose of the new Cathedral of the Armed Forces: “I am absolutely certain that all those who will come here will remember the deeds of the past and prepare for the future” (Shoygu 2020b).

Here, the State discourse develops one step further, beyond the articulation of a mnemonic and unifying roles of the Church, and represents the space of the latter as a space of national and martial inspiration. Indeed, Shoygu and his team wanted to do something special. I would very much like this Cathedral to be a place where everyone can come and not only to confess but also to be inspired. Both for service [sluzhba] and for military affairs [ratnye dela]. I would really like it to be that way. There are even individual
awards on the stained glass windows [in the Cathedral] that say “For Faith and Allegiance”. They [the awards] all refer to faith (Shoygu 2020a).

The instrumentalisation of faith in service to the State is most explicitly articulated in a statement made by Natalya Narochnitskaya (2018), a former representative in the State Duma and a current member of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, to which she was appointed by the President:

It is faith that has always driven people to make self-sacrifices for the sake of high ideals. Faith, Fatherland, honour, duty, love—these are the things for which the great [people], including Europeans (when Europe was still Christian), gave their lives and thus set an example worthy of emulation for the whole world, creating great powers and great culture.

Leaving aside the representation of “Europe” (for extensive discussions, see Neumann 2013; Morozov 2015), what makes Narochnitskaya’s statement remarkable is her last point: “creating great powers” (velikie derzhavy). Here, we can see clearly the State’s understanding of religion: its purpose is ultimately to inspire and maintain “greatpowerness” (velikoderzhavnost’).

This role of faith, albeit subordinated to a higher cause, provides the Church with immense importance. By linking the Church to what the State values the most—itself—the latter endows the former with a significant symbolic power:

It is impossible to imagine our country and Russian statehood itself without the spiritual and historical experience of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is passed down from generation to generation through the word of the pastor (Putin 2017).

Finally, although importantly, the figure of the pastor (read: the Church leadership) is affirmed as the central agent that performs and exercises this power. Despite the significant agency ascribed to the Church and its leadership, however, the State discourse does not construct the Patriarchate as a subject capable of overcoming its assigned structural role. Therefore, the Church’s power is limited to that of an object, indeed, an agent, which is supposed to act on behalf of the structures it embodies.

5. Conclusions

The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces is a site where power is made meaningful. The knowledge that the State has produced with regard to the new Cathedral links the authoritative position of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Russian society and its claims for moral leadership with the commonplace of “national achievements”, as well as with more general concepts such as security, peace, and prosperity. The Church, excluded from the Victory narrative not so long ago, has now become fully integrated into one of the central stories that forms Russian national identity. The Victory, in turn, has acquired an even more sacred character, making the fallen soldiers of the Red Army not only national heroes, but also martyrs.

On the other hand, dedicating a patriarchal cathedral to the Victory in the Great Patriotic War signifies an endorsement, on the highest ecclesiastical level, of a major Soviet and later Russian State-legitimating narrative. Furthermore, the Patriarchate’s discourse links practices such as the State’s rearmament programme, its foreign policy, and government paternalism with the structurally established ideas of historical destiny, defence of “the sacred”, and parental care.

Both the Russian Orthodox Church and the State—in my view, independently from each other—employ a thoroughly statist and great-power nationalist discourse. The Patriarchate and the Kremlin depict a world in which “the Fatherland” is of utmost value, and which therefore requires protection, dedication, and loyalty from the people.

The idea of a strong and globally significant State, besides being useful to the current regime, has long been embedded in Russian political discourse (Neumann 2008): it exercises a priori structural power on both State and Church actors. In that sense, the current
political and ROC leaderships appear simultaneously as objects of this intersubjective power and as its active agents. They exercise object power by reproducing the general idea of greatpowerness inherited by the Tsarist and Soviet periods, but modify it by adding elements such as rearmament with “ultramodern weapons” and hierarchical multiculturalism. Thus, the Church and State engage in objective and subjective legitimation of one another. By doing so, they help enable each other to pursue certain policies or enhance their overall authority in society. However, the entangled discourses of mutual legitimation also restrain the Patriarchate and the Kremlin from, for example, being more active in the mainstream ecumenical dialogue (for that would be too “liberal” for the current conservative Church–State consensus) or from relaxing the legislation on religious freedom, respectively.

Moreover, whereas both Church and State remain dependent on public opinion and strive to appeal to the populace, their engagement in mutual legitimation somewhat displaces the conventional dependence on the people as granters of legitimacy. The support that the Patriarchate and the Kremlin give to each other often appears to substitute for the impact of typical legitimating factors such as widespread religious adherence or high levels of political participation. Indeed, the involvement of Church and State in practices of mutual legitimation constructs a relatively independent legitimating nexus, which makes the fading national pro-Orthodox consensus (Uzlaner 2018) less of an immediate issue, at least for the time being. Nonetheless, the figure of “the people” remains a nodal point in both official discourses, which demonstrates the Patriarchate and the Kremlin’s inevitable dependence on the structural power of democracy.

In conclusion, I offer a hypothesis to be developed in future research. The statist discourse of the Patriarchate, which obviously accommodates the regime’s power, is nonetheless not a product of State control. I do not regard the Church as a passive tool in the hands of the regime, as is often suggested. The Patriarchate systemically legitimates the Kremlin, but I believe that it does so in its right. The Church’s political imaginary is in a sui generis postcolonial situation. Three hundred years after Peter the Great “made members of the Most Holy Synod acknowledge that the benefit of the State was actually the utmost goal of their service” (Ponomariov 2017, p. 100) and three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Patriarchate has re-acquired its own political voice. Its discourse, however, remains subordinated to the great-power ethos.

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Notes
1 For instance, the Law against propaganda promoting non-traditional family values and non-traditional sexual relations among children and under-age and the Law against offending the religious feeling of believers, both from 2013.
2 It is worth noting that the close collaboration between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Defence dates as far back as the Joint Declaration on Cooperation signed in 1994 (Adamsky 2019, p. 35). For a detailed overview of the Church–State partnership in the military sphere, see Dmitry Adamsky’s comprehensive book Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy Religion, Politics, and Strategy (2019).
3 Located in the Sretensky Monastery in central Moscow. Its chief architect, Dmitry Smirnov, was also the main figure behind the MCRAF project.
4 In his paper, “Structural Power: The limits of neorealist power analysis” (1993), Stefano Guzzini uses the term “governance”. I prefer the concept of “structural power”, because it preserves the coherence of my conceptual framework.
5 “Hegemony is an operation that universalises a particular, contingent representation of the reality: an order established by an act of power comes to be accepted as true and natural by most members of the community.” (Morozov 2021, p. 8)
6 “[B]odies of theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality.” (Berger and Luckmann 1967, p. 113)
7 “In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice.” (Foucault 2005, p. 183)

8 “[D]oxa refers to pre-reflexive, shared but unquestioned opinions and perceptions […] which determine ‘natural’ practice and attitudes”. (Grenfell 2014, p. 119) “Habitus, to put it simply, are these practices and attitudes constructed by the doxa” (Schaffer 2004, p. 113). For a good review of Bourdieu’s key concepts, see Grenfell (2014).

9 “… universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions” (Kuhn 2012, p. xliii)

10 A term borrowed from Luckmann (1987, p. 112): “Legitimation as a process of making sense of power implies its corollary, a process of making nonsense of power, or making sense of a different distribution of power.”

11 I employ Gilley’s (2009, p. 8) definition of State: “The state can be defined as the basic institutional and ideological structures that maintain dominance over the use of coercive force in a given territory. The former cover the organizations, agencies, departments, customs, norms, laws, electoral and legislative systems, public policies, and processes of a political community, as well as the particular holders of state power (‘the government’).”

12 All translations are mine.

13 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metonymy

14 “State”. Concise Oxford English Dictionary (9th edn.), ed. D. Thompson (1995).

15 The exact wording of Hebrews 11:33–34 is “through faith conquered kingdoms” (“veroyu pobezdali carstva”) and “routed foreign armies” (“progonymali polki chuzhix”) (ENG, RU)

16 As in the following example: “A very important idea was present—the protection of the Christian minority [in the Middle East]. Back in 2013, when the heads of the Local Orthodox Churches came to Moscow to celebrate the 1025th anniversary of the Baptism of Russia, when they met with Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, one of the strongest messages was precisely to request that Russia take part in protecting Christians in the Middle East. And I am happy that this has happened. Russia’s involvement has prevented a genocide of Christians.” Patriarch Kirill 2018, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5095439.html

17 Metropolitan Sergius Stragorodsky also performed this operation in 1941: “The Church of Christ blesses all Orthodox Christians by the ROC and the other “traditional religions”.

18 “Doxa refers to pre-reflexive, shared but unquestioned opinions and perceptions [.. .], which determine ‘natural’ practice and attitudes”. (Grenfell 2014, p. 119) “Habitus, to put it simply, are these practices and attitudes constructed by the doxa” (Schaffer 2004, p. 113). For a good review of Bourdieu’s key concepts, see Grenfell (2014).

19 To continue the economic metaphor, instead of Orthodox monopoly, in Russia, there is a state-sanctioned religious cartel formed by the ROC and the other “traditional religious”.

20 V hrame Hrista Spasitelj sostojalos ‘ podpisanie Akta o kanonicheskom obshhenii v edinoj Pomestnoj Russkoj Pravoslavnoj Cerkvi https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metonymy

21 As in the following example: “A very important idea was present—the protection of the Christian minority [in the Middle East]. Back in 2013, when the heads of the Local Orthodox Churches came to Moscow to celebrate the 1025th anniversary of the Baptism of Russia, when they met with Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, one of the strongest messages was precisely to request that Russia take part in protecting Christians in the Middle East. And I am happy that this has happened. Russia’s involvement has prevented a genocide of Christians.” Patriarch Kirill 2018, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5095439.html

22 Although Narochintskaia herself is currently not in a position of significant formal authority and is perhaps not among the most representative members of the Russian political mainstream, her statement published by the official Zvezda TV is certainly a paradigmatic example of how the political elite in Russia thinks of faith and Church in relation to politics.

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