

DISINFORMATION AND RELIGION ON THE RUSSIAN SCENE: REACTIONARY POLITICS AND ORTHODOX FUNDAMENTALISM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the production of disinformation on Russia's media scene. Religion has played a role in this development. The Moscow Patriarchate, which has backed state decisions about lockdowns and vaccination campaigns, has nevertheless lacked either the capacity or the will to prevent the proliferation of disinformation produced by its more conservative affiliates. These reactionary political groups and fundamentalist monks have thus taken the lead on producing conspiracy theories, highlighting the multiplicity of Orthodox Christian-based perceptions of the world and the complex continuum between the Russian Orthodox Church's official positions and those of its many dissenters.

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INTRODUCTION

Russia has regularly been [accused](#) of being a source of disinformation, but it remains challenging to identify the different layers of production of disinformation and their institutional origins. In this paper, we propose to look at the Orthodox Christian realm and its contribution to disinformation related to the COVID-19 crisis. This Orthodox realm is ideologically heterogeneous: the type of disinformation produced depends on actors and their interests. These actors include the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and its institutional representation, the Moscow Patriarchate, as well as a looser realm of Orthodox “uncivil civil society” and ideological entrepreneurs who have ties to the church but are not part of the ecclesiastical institution per se.

Both the Moscow Patriarchate and Orthodox entrepreneurs insist on Orthodoxy as the spiritual backbone of Russia, yet they should be differentiated from one another. The church’s long-term goals include the re-Christianization of the country and the securing of the privileged status of loyal second vis-à-vis the state. Specifically, under Patriarch Kirill’s leadership, the Moscow Patriarchate has been particularly [involved in the domain of morality](#), promoting legislation to make it harder to divorce or get an abortion, supporting anti-homosexuality laws, reintroducing into the penal code the notion of “causing offense to religious feelings,” and influencing debates on juvenile justice.

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While Orthodox “uncivil civil society” and entrepreneurs focus on similar issues, these groups interpret Orthodoxy as a political ideology more than a faith and are prepared to go up against state structures to advance their beliefs. They therefore push for a more radical agenda, do not hesitate to contradict church rhetoric, and engage more actively in disinformation campaigns. Its reactionary branch calls for the rehabilitation of monarchism and takes a very political view of Orthodoxy, while its fundamentalist wing calls for a literal, and often eschatological, reading of Orthodox theology.

THE ORTHODOX REALM AND ITS IDEOLOGICAL TOWERS

Within the ROC, there are multiple informal political wings or “towers,” which are often [presented](#) in the literature as liberal, conservative, and fundamentalist. Until 2014, the patriarch attempted to bridge the competing trends by counterbalancing [liberal reforms](#) (the division of dioceses into smaller entities closer to everyday parish life, the reintroduction of church courts, etc.) with verbal adherence to right-wing discourse. However, the post-Crimean annexation turn of 2014 had elevated the significance of the conservative wing to the point that the patriarch has retreated from his conciliatory course, ceding the floor to the most talented representative of the conservative wing, Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov). Tikhon emerged from Orthodox fundamentalist circles: he was one of the initiators of the movement against electronic barcodes before coming around to the patriarchate’s view. He now seeks to promote political Orthodoxy within the presidential administration and the political establishment and to make the Russian Orthodox Church the ideological avant-garde of the regime. In tune with the need for a more ideologically engaged discourse, the Russian authorities have been [diminishing](#) the public role of the patriarchate in favor of Shevkunov’s conservative wing, represented by such monarchists as Metropolitan Evgenii (Kul’berg) and Father Aleksandr (Shargunov).

This conservative tower is itself composed of different groups that interact with actors outside the church's official structures. For instance, the ROC online presence offers a more conservative form of politico-religious ideation—and hence more disinformation—than its official channels. Outside of the ecclesiastical structure, the oldest and most respected of the Orthodox online portals close to the ROC is the Russian National Line (Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia, RNL). The RNL is dominated by conservative and reactionary groups that call for the rehabilitation of czarism and do not hide their anti-Semitism. The RNL enjoys close ties to the Moscow Patriarchate, with many members of the latter serving as RNL editorial board members and contributors.

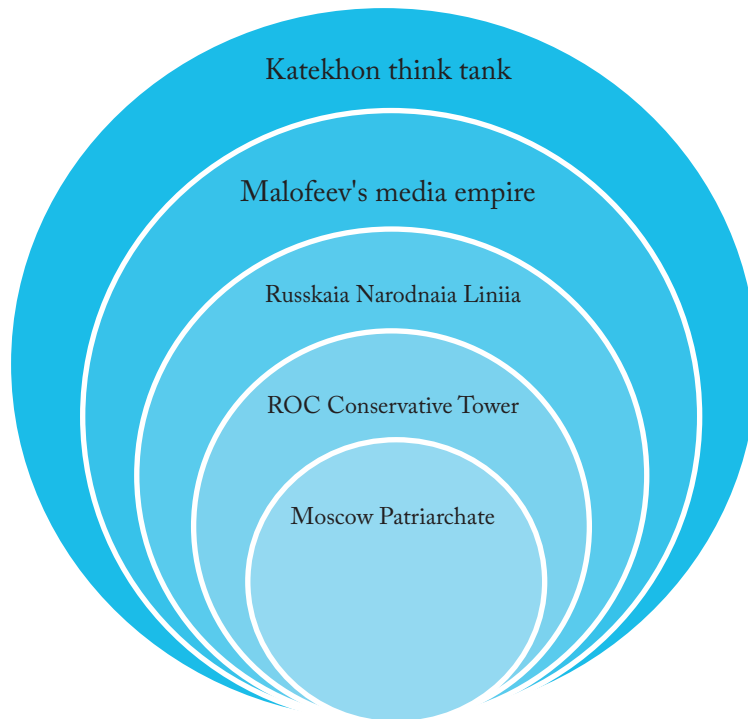
Another important non-clerical representative of the conservative tower, and one with close ties to Shevkunov, is the Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, the owner of the Tsargrad media corporation, which has a monthly audience of 7 to 10 million. Arguably, Malofeev's TV and radio channels, think tank, and internet resources are the most important platforms promoting Orthodox monarchism in the post-Soviet space and among European aristocrats and far-right groups abroad.

Among the Orthodox “uncivil civil society” one may mention the Sorok Sorokov movement, an association of Orthodox vigilantes that claims about 10,000 supporters in Moscow alone and fights (both figuratively and literally) to spread an “Orthodox Orthodoxy.” Its founder, Andrei Kormukhin, calls for Russia's “second Christianization”; he seeks to defend Orthodox churches against desecration and Western “post-Christianity” and to reconnect society to the church's values. The movement has concentrated on fighting LGBTQ+ communities, regularly disrupting gay pride parades, and going up against secular groups that oppose the erection of new churches. Kormukhin's “street Orthodoxy” is permitted by the ROC's Moscow office but heavily criticized by provincial dioceses. Despite its close relations with the patriarchate, Sorok Sorokov espouses ideas unacceptable to the official church: it vehemently criticizes the current authorities, praises Stalin, and calls Catholicism heretical. Indeed, the movement is so far from ROC discourse that even its largest anti-abortion street meetings have received almost no coverage in the ROC press. Yet it nevertheless exists within the ROC's orbit—Kormukhin has met with the patriarch on several occasions—and enjoys the support of the most radical parishes.

The degree to which a particular Orthodox conservative media actor engages in disinformation increases in proportion to that actor's distance from the official Moscow Patriarchate (see Table 1). At the lowest level of disinformation is the patriarchate as represented in its official resources, including its core document (Fundamentals of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church, issued in 2000) as well as Spas TV channel. As part of its strategy of supporting the state authorities, the Russian Orthodox Church rapidly positioned itself in favor of the first COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020 and then in favor of mass vaccination. Spas channel has invited pro- and anti-vaccination advocates to debate, offered a Christian take on how to cope with the pandemic (fear not and love God), and suggested that vaccines are a godly creation. Spas TV's discourse may express skepticism about the origin of the virus and its significance, but this skepticism is not articulated in the form of determined disinformation. Even Shevkunov issued consistent calls for people to get vaccinated, albeit while declaring ambiguously that “the virus was delivered to us together with information warfare.” Meanwhile, the further right actors are, the more disinformation appears in their outlets.

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TABLE 1. The Concentric Circles of Orthodox Media and the Disinformation Issue



Source: authors

THE REACTIONARY LOBBY AND ITS DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

While Tikhon has followed cautiously the ROC official position, another representative of the conservative tower, Yekaterinburg Metropolitan Evgenii (Kul'berg), behaved more audaciously. He called on believers to break the COVID-19 restrictions on in-person gatherings and join the Cross Procession dedicated to the anniversary of the death of the last czar's family, stating that love of God should overcome the fear of death.

The RNL has moved further in trying to promote conspiracy theories while staying in line with the ROC pro-vaccination position. RNL's chief editor, Anatolii Stepanov, has, for instance, consistently explained that the coronavirus was created as an instrument to change the world through lockdowns and gain a new means of control over sick members of the population. According to him, the only way to resist this conspiracy is to get vaccinated and stay healthy. In other words, Stepanov promotes a pro-vaccination conspiracy theory that sees the pandemic as having been orchestrated by a powerful world lobby (the anti-Semitic tone here is often explicit) that sought a global redistribution of wealth and power that could only be achieved with a sick/unvaccinated population.

The RNL spreads pro-vaccination, anti-Western conspiracies, which go along with the ROC policy of supporting state vaccination efforts while simultaneously preserving the conspiracy-oriented discourse of the global right.

The RNL also republished a [text](#) by St. Petersburg ROC priest Sergei Chechanichev, who claimed to have intercepted a CIA report from Moscow to William Burns that described U.S. plans to disrupt the vaccination campaign in Russia. The publication assumes that the CIA promotes the anti-vaccination movement for the above-mentioned reasons and lists the ROC among the major obstacles to sabotaging the vaccination campaign in Russia. The RNL thus spreads pro-vaccination, anti-Western conspiracies, which go along with the ROC policy of supporting state vaccination efforts while simultaneously preserving the conspiracy-oriented discourse of the global right.

Malofeev's Tsargrad TV, for its part, has tried to spread anti-vaccination views while avoiding openly contradicting the ROC. At the beginning of the pandemic, Tsargrad TV published the views of anti-vaccination experts, which led to it becoming a [subject of the fake news law](#) adopted in 2019. The court fined Tsargrad's editor, Darya Tokareva, and demanded that the outlet delete all fake content from its website. Once the Russian Orthodox Church and state authorities closed ranks in their pro-vaccination effort, Tsargrad TV began to conceal its anti-vaccination position using a discourse on the geopolitical competition happening around vaccination. Instead of [stories](#) about Bill Gates' manipulation of the World Health Organization, Tsargrad began to [discuss](#) the "COVID corporate mafia" that was ignoring the commercial potential of Russian vaccines. Malofeev himself has [condemned](#) mandatory vaccination as inhumane but has refrained from criticizing vaccination per se.

Things are different at Malofeev's think tank, Katekhon, co-founded with the famous fascist geopolitician Aleksandr Dugin and presidential advisor for Eurasian affairs Sergei Glaziev. Although each of Katekhon's board members has strong connections to the ROC, Katekhon does not publish texts written by clergy and does not republish articles from the Moscow Patriarchate's websites. Thanks to its institutional distance from the ROC, Katekhon has been able to engage in more open disinformation campaigns that contradict the patriarchate's pro-vaccination discourse. Katekhon's leadership has, for instance, been [spreading](#) conspiracy theories about coronavirus being a U.S. biological weapon that represents just the latest in a series of assaults on traditional values with a view to the destruction of humanity. Woven throughout these conspiracy theories are classic anti-Semitic narratives about "Zionist cryptocracies." Katekhon also has refreshed old conspiracy theories about AIDS by substituting the new disease.

THE FUNDAMENTALISTS' ESCHATOLOGICAL DISINFORMATION

In the 1990s, the ROC lived through multiple internal schisms that resulted in the centralization of the Russian Orthodox Church structure and the elimination of all elements outside of direct patriarchal control. Considering such independent Orthodox civil organizations as the Transfiguration Brotherhood, the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods, and the "Divine Will" movement, as well as the elders—monks whose spiritual leadership allows them to create small communities largely autonomous from the traditional ecclesiastical power—to be potential sources of dissent, it contributed to their withering.

But in the 2010s, the weakened position of the patriarch and the growing power of the conservative tower resulted in the reemergence of both phenomena. Among these new Orthodox associations outside of the church, the deeply fundamentalist Sorok Sorokov still [claims](#) that it does not share anti-vaccination or COVID-dissident sentiments. Instead, it argues that the ongoing vaccination campaign is a medical experiment that must not be enforced. Yet Sorok Sorokov's contention that it is not against vaccination is belied by [statements](#) that the vaccination campaign is conducted by "satanist-neocons" and "digital-vaccine fascists" that seek the "destruction of the Russian people." Sorok Sorokov has even [launched a project filing court cases](#) on behalf of individuals who have been obliged to get vaccinated. Sorok

Sorokov's campaigns have been acknowledged as disinformation by VKontakte, the Russian equivalent of Facebook, which has added a warning about disinformation and materials dangerous for health to the movement's page.

Yet another source of potential dissent has been the elders. In the 1990s, these elders often gained prominence by becoming the spiritual teachers of high-level criminals and businessmen, which allowed them to distance themselves from the ROC and even create their own Orthodox sects. This trend re-emerged unexpectedly during the first months of the pandemic. A former colleague of Kul'berg in the Yekaterinburg diocese, Schema-Hegumen Sergii (Romanov), launched a reckless anti-COVID-19 campaign that targeted even President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill. Sergii claimed that the Antichrist will take the form of Putin's "botox face" and that the pandemic is a plot organized by the "Jewish-communist world community"—the classic anti-Semitic Protocols of the Elders of Zion—which includes Bill Gates' chip implantation project, represented in Russia by [German Gref](#), the former economy and trade minister who is now chairman of the executive board of Sberbank, the largest Russian bank. Indeed, Sergii—who promised to reconstruct the monarchy in three days after gaining power—anathemized everyone who believes in COVID-19, even going so far as to call the patriarch and the episcopate apostates. Some of his speeches were accompanied by [songs about Stalin performed by nuns](#).

Arguably, no one would pay attention to an insane—and previously convicted—hegumen were it not for the fact that he appeared to be a typical elder with his own sect at a female monastery in the Urals. His spiritual children, such as former Detroit Red Wings player Pavel Datsuyk, actress Maria Shukshina, and (allegedly) pre-2014 Crimean Prosecutor General Natalia Poklonskaia, [called on the Kremlin](#) to defend Sergii, causing a media furor.

The patriarch excommunicated the rebellious hegumen, but Sergii refused to leave the monastery voluntarily and mobilized radicalized nuns, parishioners, and [a dozen Cossacks-Donbas veterans](#) to protect him from the Russian special forces storming the monastery, whereupon he was eventually arrested by law enforcement. Yet even though both the official church and [official Cossackdom](#) have excommunicated Sergii, the former cleric's disinformation campaigns have stuck to the image of the ROC and appear difficult to whitewash.

CONCLUSION

As in many countries around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the production of disinformation on Russia's media scene. Religion, broadly defined, has played a role in this development. While heavily centralized around the Moscow Patriarchate, the Orthodox theater, especially online, features a vivid myriad of ideological entrepreneurs competing to offer radical messages. The patriarchate, which has itself backed state decisions about lockdowns and vaccination campaigns, has nevertheless lacked either the capacity or the will to prevent the proliferation of disinformation produced by its more conservative affiliates. These reactionary political groups and fundamentalist monks have thus taken the lead on producing conspiracy theories, highlighting the multiplicity of Orthodox-based perceptions of the world and the complex continuum between the Church's official positions and those of its many dissenters. On November 25, 2021, figures affiliated with Malofeev's Tsargrad TV channel [organized the storming](#) of several regional administrative buildings to protest against the introduction of QR codes, confirming that online disinformation and social protests related to COVID-19 are intimately connected and led by the same ideological entrepreneurs.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

With support from the Henry Luce Foundation, from spring 2021 through spring 2022 the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting has partnered with the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University to host a series of private workshops and public events examining how nationalist populist leaders consolidate political power by suppressing the rights and identity of marginalized religious and cultural groups. The closed-door workshops bring together scholars and journalists to discuss short papers circulated in advance and are followed by public events addressing the same theme. This paper was produced for the December 2021 workshop.

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