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The Mandate of the World Russian People's Council and the Russian Political Imagination: Scripture, Politics and War

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Abstract: The Mandate of the XXV World Russian People's Council of 27 March 2024 framed the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine as a “holy war”. This paper presents an in-depth textual analysis of the Mandate followed by an extended thematic and contextual analysis. The findings indicate that the Mandate's mainstream discourses of eschatological–apocalyptic holy war and katechon state were not previously expressed at the level of official church leadership. They contribute to the ideological escalation of the Russian confrontation with Ukraine and the West around declared traditional values and the holy mission of the Russian people, while the involvement of Orthodoxy in the Russian ‘holy war’ narrative is neither exclusive of other religious referents nor of disbelief in ecclesial doctrine. The main referent of the Self (and correspondingly, of the sacred) is the (Russian) ‘nation’ or ‘people’, for which ‘spiritual’ and ‘civilizational’ are comprehensive religious markers of cultural identity. While two religious adversaries of the Russian geopolitical agenda of Ukraine—the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Ukrainian Orthodoxy—are not directly mentioned in the Mandate, it nevertheless attempts to re-formulate an Orthodox ‘just war’ theory, intensifies antagonistic inter-Orthodox relations in the Russia–Ukraine dimension and strengthens the resolve of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Russian Federation to retain Ukraine's Orthodox Church as an exclusively Russian space.

Keywords: international relations; national identity; war; Russian Orthodox Church; Kirill; Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus'; katechon; holy war; Russian world; inter-Orthodox relations; traditional values



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1. Introduction

On 27 March 2024, the Mandate of the XXV World Russian People's Council (WRPC) entitled “The Present and Future of the Russian World” (Sobor 2024) was published under the chairmanship of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev). The first Section of the document described the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine as a “holy war” by stating that:

“From a spiritual and moral point of view, the special military operation (*специальная военная операция*) is a holy war (*священная война*), in which Russia and its people, defending the single spiritual space of Holy Rus', fulfil the mission of the ‘Restraining One’ [*katechon*], protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism” (Sobor 2024).

This quote alone refers to an attempt by the authors of the text to shift the discourses of Russian national identity to a level of a global holy war. Such an attempt requires a renewal of the state–society agreement and a changed ‘social purpose’ (Ruggie 1998), which,

in order to be legitimate, has to be intersubjectively endorsed by relevant social and political actors in Russian society. If such an elite-mass agreement occurs in Russia, the ideology of the Russian state will be in accordance with cultural common sense. If there is a general consensus that Russia's war against Ukraine is a holy war preventing the end of the world, then "any destruction, no matter how horrific, is justified; any amount of violence is acceptable in the fight of the absolute good (i.e., Russia) against the satanic evil (i.e., the West)" (Gavrilyuk 2024).

We study the text of the Mandate as the text of Patriarch Kirill, although the text is not single-authored and WRPC is formally not an ecclesiastic organization. Nevertheless, Patriarch Kirill is the main author of the Mandate and is the main representative of the WRPC (Kilp and Pankhurst 2023). Patriarch Kirill is the initiator and the head of the WRPC; he introduced the Mandate document before 488 delegates, including "more than 30 bishops and more than 60 ROC-MP priests" (Shumylo 2024), who voted on it.

We admit that the attribution of the text of the Mandate to Patriarch Kirill and to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) can be contested, but we consider the Mandate to be a message delivered by Patriarch Kirill, as does Kristina Stoeckl, who has argued that the Mandate "represented a new level of inflammatory language from the side of Patriarch Kirill" (Stoeckl 2024, p. 10). Similarly, Paul Gavrilyuk studied the Mandate as Kirill's theology of holy war and found it to be an outright heresy (Gavrilyuk 2024).

We also assume that the Mandate represents the positions of the ROC as an institution. The Mandate was publicly introduced in an event taking place in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, but more importantly, the messages of the ROC and the WRPC show an 'elective affinity' (Kilp 2024). In this regard, our approach is similar to that of Hanna Kulahina-Stadnichenko and Liudmyla Fylypovych, who argue that, with the Mandate, Patriarch Kirill has turned the ROC into "an anti-Christian servant of Putin's fascist state" (Kulahina-Stadnichenko and Fylypovych 2024, p. 31). Their argument is not based on attributing 'fascism' to Putin's regime (for the related academic controversy see Laruelle 2022) but on the attribution of authorship of the Mandate to Patriarch Kirill. In addition, Kristina Stoeckl claims that the Mandate indicates that katechon-state nationalism (the idea that the Russian nation holds off the evils of Western liberalism and secularism) "has now become the official position of the Moscow Patriarchate" (Stoeckl 2024, p. 10).

Moreover, Patriarch Kirill has elaborated his personal commitment to the agenda of this Mandate by publishing in October 2024 a book entitled *For Holy Rus': Patriotism and Faith* (Kirill 2024c). Each chapter of *For Holy Rus'* starts with a highlighted quote from Russian President Vladimir Putin, followed by the Patriarch's explanation of themes representing the joint socio-political program of the ROC and the Russian state. Patriarch Kirill claims (repeatedly) that Holy Russia is (militarily) invincible with the help of God (Kirill 2024c, p. 6) and ends the book with his "Prayer for Holy Rus'" (Kirill 2022c). This prayer is mandatory in Orthodox Church services since September 2022; it calls on God to give victory in the "military operation" against Ukraine, and it repeats Kirill's promise of absolution of sins for soldiers dying in battle: "To all who are killed in these days, and from wounds and diseases who have died, grant forgiveness of sins and give blissful rest!" (Kirill 2022a).

On the other hand, the audience and institutions addressed by the Mandate encompass the whole of Russian society, including political institutions and secular authorities. The Mandate is the program document of the XXV WRPC (which took place on 27–28 November 2023) "as well as a mandate addressed to the legislative and executive authorities of Russia" (Sobor 2024).

The Mandate presents the main discourses and tropes in Russian strategic thought discussed in academic works dealing with the ideology of Putin's (wartime) regime (Laru-

elle 2024, 2025; Suslov 2024). For example, all elements that Marlene Laruelle (2024, 2025) lists as key constellations of Russian state ideology—civilization state, catechon state, defender of traditional values, anti-fascist power, leading anticolonial force, conservative-civilizational rejection of Western universalism—are represented in the text.

The scholarly contribution of this article stems from a comprehensive analysis of the Mandate. We argue that the Mandate:

(1) *mainstreams two discourses*—eschatological–apocalyptic holy war (Pynnöniemi and Parpei 2024, pp. 849, 851, 852) and catechon state (Engström 2014; Lewis 2020, pp. 194–214; Shnirelman 2021)—previously not expressed at the level of official church leadership *in expressis verbis*, although Patriarch Kirill framed the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine as an existential and metaphysical struggle between forces of good and evil already in March 2022 (Kirill 2022b).

(2) *is a step further in the ideological escalation* of the Russian confrontation with Ukraine and the West. On the one hand, the Mandate reiterates the justification of the war of aggression in Ukraine using the narrative of the defense of traditional values. Traditional values are to be understood as *declared* values because the related orientations are neither interiorized nor passionately followed by a majority of Russian people; according to the Mandate, these values are seriously challenged in Russian domestic politics as well. On the other hand, the Mandate revives several 19th-century discourses of Russian national identity by laying increasing emphasis on an anti-Western orientation, on moral and spiritual culture over the materialistic culture, on the holy mission of Russian people, and on the superiority and uniqueness of the Russian culture “by virtue of their preservation of traditional values” (Lebow 2012, pp. 172, 181). The merging of the ROC and Russian military (Adamsky 2020, 2023; Curanović 2019, 2024) has persistently developed across several decades, while reverting back to the ideas of pre-Soviet Russian state ideology is mostly a recent (post-2012) development (Zevelev 2016).

(3) *interprets the involvement of Orthodoxy in the Russian ‘holy war’ narrative as neither exclusive of other religious referents nor excluding disbelief in ecclesial doctrine*. On the one hand, Orthodox Christianity is involved in defining the religious marker (catechon) of Russian (state) identity and in providing religious meaning to the “Russian World” (Russkii mir) and “Holy Rus’”, as the latter concepts encompass the canonical territory of the ROC and the ROC guarantees entry into paradise to all soldiers dying in battle. Thus, Orthodoxy is among the common markers of identity of the community in whose name the ‘holy war’ has been proclaimed. Simultaneously, however, Russian community identity is also defined as the multi-religious, multicultural and multi-ethnic nation of shared spiritual and moral values of Russian civilization. The main referent of the Self (and correspondingly, of the sacred) is the (Russian) ‘nation’ or ‘people’, for which ‘spiritual’ and ‘civilizational’ are comprehensive religious markers of cultural identity. In this manner, the involvement of religion in the sacralization of the holy war in the name of the Russian state and nation demands everyone’s faith in the state and nation, while it does not require a religious worldview of those who support and fulfill the sacred warfare. From this perspective, ‘disbelievers’ are those (Orthodox) believers who reject the political rule of the Russian state over Ukrainian statehood and the subordination of Ukrainian Orthodoxy to the ROC.

(4) *intensifies Orthodoxy’s role as a component in the Russia–Ukraine antagonistic inter dimension* by strengthening the resolve of the ROC and the Russian Federation to retain Ukraine’s Orthodox Church as an exclusively Russian space (Denysenko 2024; Kulahina-Stadnichenko and Fylypovych 2024, p. 31; Petrov 2024).

Last but not least, the ideology of wartime Russia is not comprehensively expressed in any single *key* document. The text of the Mandate is not a Bible, but it does not only rep-

resent a summary and synopsis of the XXV WRPC but also summarizes the public agenda of more than three decades of WRPC convocations which first gathered in 1993.

This article explores the text of the Mandate in three parts. First, the focus is on the specific articulation of three discursive formations—eschatological holy war, Russian World, and katechon state—presenting first their representation in the text of the Mandate followed by an extended thematic and contextual analysis. The second part explores the Mandate through the lenses of the interaction of the religious and the secular in Russian domestic and geopolitical national identity discourses focusing on the involvement of religion in the sacralization of the secular (state, identity and nationalism). The third part examines the function of religion in identifications of Self and Others in the Russian national identity discourse and the weaponization—in the sense of an instrumental (ab)use—of traditional values. The article ends with a discussion of the findings and their implications for studies of wartime church–state relations in Russia and inter-Orthodox relations. In conclusion, we discuss our findings from the perspective of two questions: has Patriarch Kirill succeeded in re-formulating an Orthodox ‘just war’ theory? And, if so, will its impact last beyond the phase of active warfare?

2. Results

The Mandate summarizes the discussions of XXV WRPC, “The Present and Future of the Russian World”, where ‘Russian world’ is the concept framing the document as a whole.

The document consists of 85 sentences (including headings) divided into eight thematic sections. In quantitative count, most of the sentences of the document are devoted to domestic politics of family and demography (birthrate), not to foreign policy, ideology or religion. Section 4 of the Mandate, which is devoted to “Politics of family and demography”, is the longest (28 sentences) in scope. This topic is covered more widely than that of the first three sections devoted to international relations (26 sentences) and is also repeatedly discussed in other sections. For example, the “Spatial and Urban Development” section claims that Russia needs to attain conditions of comfortable living needed for families in order to realize the ideas of the Russian World, and the section on economic development argues that the main goals of the domestic economy should be the real wellbeing of Russian families and “an increased birthrate” so that “80% of the population in Russia should live in their own individual houses”.

However, the general messages are found, and the key tone of the text is expressed, in three sections devoted to International Relations—‘1. Special Military Operation’, ‘2. Russian World’ and ‘3. Foreign Policy’—which consist of a total of 573 words (25.6% of total word count). The quantitative comparison of thematic sections of the text is of secondary importance because all the text is about ‘the Russian World’. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that the text was mainly addressed to a domestic audience. It also indicates the relatively marginal relevance of (the ecclesial) religion, which is directly referred to only in the first quarter of the text and is mostly referred to as an identity marker of cultural community identity with concepts like ‘spiritual’, ‘civilizational’ and the like. When the focus shifts to practical domestic policies required for the implementation of the Russian World agenda, both direct and indirect references to religion tend to cease.

2.1. Core Discursive Formations

2.1.1. Eschatological Holy War

Both ‘holy war’ and ‘Holy Rus’ are mentioned only once in the Mandate (in Section 1 titled ‘Special military operation’): “From a spiritual and moral point of view, the special military operation is a holy war, in which Russia and its people, [are] defending the single

spiritual space of Holy Rus'..." (Sobor 2024). Nevertheless, due to this single quote, the Mandate was condemned by the World Council of Churches (WCC 2024) within weeks after its release. The World Council of Churches (WCC) confronted the ROC and its leader for the statement that "the special military operation [in Ukraine] is a holy war" because the general secretary of WCC and Patriarch Kirill had agreed during a May 2023 meeting that no war or armed violence can be 'holy' (WCC 2024).

The proclamation of 'holy war' by any Orthodox leader is particularly controversial because the Orthodox Churches have never justified war at a pan-Orthodox level (Simion 2017, p. 6). Unlike the medieval Catholic Church, the medieval Byzantine Church neither promulgated wars nor released warlike declarations (Kolbaba 1998, pp. 199, 208; Stoyanov 2009, p. 178). Only emperors could do so.

The ROC seems to have altered this Orthodox tradition of aversion to religious warfare by publishing in 2000 *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Church* (DECR 2000), where the list of war-related norms "borrowed, reproduced and reworked" several "of the traditional *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* conditions of the Western Christian just war tradition" (Stoyanov 2024, p. 4). In particular, chapter VIII on War and Peace stated (controversially) that also "the security of neighbours" and "the restoration of trampled justice" can serve as legitimate causes of just war:

VIII. 2. While recognising war as evil, the Church does not prohibit her children from participating in hostilities if at stake is the security of their neighbours and the restoration of trampled justice. Then war is considered to be necessary though undesirable ... In all times, Orthodoxy has had profound respect for soldiers who gave their lives to protect the life and security of their neighbours. The Holy Church has canonised many soldiers, taking into account their Christian virtues and applying to them Christ's world: "Greater love hath no man but this, that a man lay down his life for his friends". (Jn. 15:13)

The participation of the ROC in present and historic wars of the nation is not a novelty. During the Russian Civil War (1917–1922), Patriarch Tikhon (1918–1925) neither called the "anti-Bolshevik" war a holy war nor did he justify the war on the principle of "the restoration of trampled justice". However, similar to the Basis of the Social Concept principles, Patriarch Tikhon called upon soldiers not to abandon the battlefields and the defense of the motherland (and hereby endorsed the war of defense) by quoting the same scripture passage (Jn. 15:13). He also condemned civil wars as the worst kind of fratricidal violence (Stoyanov 2009, p. 199).

Regarding Patriarch Kirill, March 2024 was not the first time he named Russian military operations abroad a "holy war". In May 2016, he called Russia's involvement in the war in Syria a "holy war" (Govoritmoskva 2016), although he quickly abandoned such characterization because of the negative reaction from Syrian Christians and in order not to alienate Muslims and Russia's regional allies (Adamsky 2019, p. 57).

From his side, Patriarch Kirill has promoted narratives of 'Holy Rus'' that have transformed the previous religious understanding of this concept into a political narrative of geopolitical unity of the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (Suslov 2014). Before March 2024, Patriarch Kirill's messages had stirred up (international) reactions in two particular instances. The first instance occurred on 6 March 2022, when Patriarch Kirill argued in a sermon that the people of Donbas are involved in a metaphysical struggle because they reject the "so-called values that are proposed today by those who claim world power". The latter was allegedly demanding "gay pride parades" as a test of loyalty from peoples of the world and imposing "by force a sin condemned by God's law" (Kirill 2022b). With this message Patriarch Kirill framed the Russian 'special military operation' as an anti-Western counter-revolution against Western cultural universalism, attributed a metaphysical signif-

icance to the struggle and argued that the geopolitical conflict is about sin and salvation rather than about geopolitical power and security (Stoyanov 2024, p. 12).

The second shift in Kirill's discourse occurred on 25 September 2022, when in a sermon devoted to the elevation of the profession of soldiers and to the promotion of the culture of self-sacrifice, he claimed that the Russian soldier dying in battle made a sacrifice "that washes away all sins". Patriarch Kirill said:

... the Church realizes that if someone, driven by a sense of duty, by the need to fulfil an oath, remains faithful to his vocation and dies in the performance of military duty, then he undoubtedly commits an act equivalent to a sacrifice. He sacrifices himself for others. And therefore we believe that this sacrifice washes away all the sins that a person has committed. (Kirill 2022d)

While the Medieval Byzantine Orthodox Church and Eastern Orthodox cultures mostly rejected military battlefield martyrdom and lacked the practice of remission of sins awarded in exchange for military service (Stoyanov 2024, p. 19), the ritual absolution of sins administered by priests before or after the battle is not unprecedented among Eastern Orthodox Churches other than the Russian Orthodox Church. For example, Serbian Orthodox priests gave advance absolution to Bosnian Serbian troops by blessing their army banners during the Bosnian war (1992–1995) (Ramet 1998, p. 335). Yet, as a rule, Eastern Orthodox Churches have delegated the justification and practice of warfare to secular governments (Stoyanov 2014, p. 168).

Patriarch Kirill, however, read on 25 September 2022 a "Prayer for Holy Rus'" (Kirill 2022c), which calls on God to give victory to "His people", refers to Ukrainians and Russians as "one people of Holy Rus'", and repeats the message promising absolution of sins for soldiers dying in battle. Thereafter, the "Prayer for Holy Rus'" was mandated for liturgical use at church services and priests who either refused to read the prayer or exchanged the prayer for 'victory' with a plea for 'peace' have been subjected to punishment (including defrocking) (Stoyanov 2024, p. 19). Earlier, from 4 March until 25 September 2022, the mandated prayer read in the Russian Orthodox Churches emphasized the spiritual unity of the Ukrainian and Russian peoples and accused external forces of causing the war.

The last major shift in Kirill's public messages occurred with the Mandate of March 2024 declaring the 'holy war' against Ukraine and the West in explicitly spiritual terms. The Mandate added a new layer to the religious legitimization of the Russian invasion of Ukraine by shifting the Kremlin's justification of the invasion from a pragmatic response to the growth of NATO into an eschatological–cataclysmic war with a sacred mission aiming at full destruction of Ukraine.

Pynnöniemi and Parppe (2024, p. 13) explain the predictable outcomes of the shift to an eschatological approach in the Russian strategy of war as follows:

... explicit and implicit advocacy of the total destruction of Ukrainian society and state is a specific feature of the eschatological philosophy of war. In this context, ending of the war in Russia's terms means total subjugation of Ukraine under so called Russian world and return of Ukraine's civil society back to its alleged 'Russian roots'.

The 'eschatological holy war' approach, which is closely connected to the concept of 'katechon state' (which will be discussed in detail below), was articulated in Russian public discourse widely since autumn 2022, thus pointing toward an emerging ideational consensus among Russian social and political elites. For example, Valentin Lebedev, chairman of the Union of Orthodox Citizens, commented the following in the portal *Materik* on 4 October 2022:

The current situation leaves Russia with no other option than a complete, unconditional victory over the truly antichrist Kiev regime, sharpened by its globalist masters to destroy Russia, which is a katechon-state, whose mission is to save the world from the construction of a globalist anti-Christian new world order, which is being carried out by leaps and bounds, which, according to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, will lead to the reign of the totalitarian power of the Antichrist. Therefore, for us, Orthodox Christians, this war, which has long outgrown the framework of a local special military operation, is not only a Patriotic war, but also a Holy War. (Lebedev 2022)

Before March 2024, the 'holy war' concept was also promoted in institutional forums less visible and prominent than WRPC. In January 2024, the Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies, together with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, organized a conference in Moscow titled "Holy War: Transfiguration of Russia", within the framework of the XXXII International Christmas Educational Readings. Among the topics discussed were the civilizational development of society and the study of the history and traditions of the Christ-loving army and military clergy. The chair of the conference, Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol and Nevinnomysk, chairman of the Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies argued the following:

The Church has always been, is and will be with its people, with its army. To date, 707 priests of the Russian Orthodox Church have carried out more than 2000 visits to the zone of the special military operation. On the front line, a meeting with priests is awaited like air. It is clearly seen how the spiritual state of servicemen on the front line is changing, many of them are revealed in their best qualities. In the trenches, they are no longer ashamed of Christian symbols. (ROC 2024)

The Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation, Sergei Shoigu, greeted the participants of this conference with a statement about how those who have defended the Motherland in the Great Patriotic War and in the Special Military Operation have fulfilled their military duty "sacredly and courageously (*свято и мужественно*)". The Deputy Mayor of Moscow Alexander Gorbenko added: "It is the sacred duty (*священный долг*) and honourable duty of every citizen to serve the Fatherland" (ROC 2024). Thus, the Mandate *mainstreamed* the previously existing discourse of the 'holy war' and strengthened the sacralization of the war conducted in the name of the Russian state and nation.

In the discourse of both President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill, both state and war are related to Orthodoxy, but not exclusively. Kirill's book *For Holy Rus'* starts with a quote from Vladimir Putin, who claims that the Russian world unites all "who feel spiritually connected" to the Russian state and consider themselves as carriers of Russian language, history and culture "irrespective of nationality or even religious belonging" (Kirill 2024c, p. 4). Kirill offers an explanation saying that "[t]he Russian world is based on the Orthodox faith...", but the holiness ideal and shared national values unite the Russian World as peoples of different cultures, ethnic origins and religions (Kirill 2024c, pp. 7, 8, 12). Thus, in order to be on the Russian side of the 'holy war', one does not need to be an Orthodox person. In Summer 2024, Russia's Chief Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin called Muslims to join Russia in the war he described as a holy jihad (Mathers 2024). Moreover, it is not necessary to be a religious person at all.

At the same time, the 'holy war' discourse sanctifies and legitimizes emergency rule and extraordinary means of government and transforms those who are against the war into enemies of the state (Lukes 2017, p. 108). The functional 'atheism'—the kind of un- and disbelief in a situation where the role of mandatory belief is the loyalty to the state and

the belief in its declared mission—of the so-conceived ‘holy war’ consists in principled pacifism, not in any religious disbelief. Those who are perceived to violate the sacred warfare can then be anathematized as persons having performed “a sacrilege that could not go unpunished without weakening the cohesion of society” (Lukes 2017, p. 110).

In this manner, Ukrainian nationalism (or state independence) has been framed as ‘Ukrainian apostasy’ in historic Russian state narratives. When Ukrainian Cossack leader Ivan Mazepa sided with King Charles XII of Sweden and against the Russian army during the Great Nordic War (1700–1721), the ROC laid an anathema on Mazepa’s name in 1708 (Zabirko 2022, p. 20). Similarly, in the case of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the war for the purity of Holy Rus’ is a war of annihilation of apostates (Zabirko 2022, p. 20). The ‘apostates’ are not those who do not believe in Orthodox doctrine but those who reject the political rule of the Russian state over Ukrainian statehood and the subordination of Ukrainian Orthodoxy to the ROC.

2.1.2. Russian World

According to the Mandate, the Russian World is “a spiritual, cultural and civilizational phenomenon ... much wider than the state borders of both the present-day Russian Federation and the greater historical Russia”; it unites “all those for whom the Russian tradition, the shrines (*святыни*) of Russian civilization and the great Russian culture are the highest value and meaning of life”; it is defended and supported by the Russian state, and with the latter it shares the mission “to defend the world from evil” (Sobor 2024).

In addition, the bulk of the text of the Mandate is devoted to two issues. First, the protection and promotion of family, which is described as “the inner bulwark of the tradition of the Russian world,” is paramount. Second, the Mandate describes the domestic threat of the “influx of migrants and foreign labor” causing “deformation of the country’s single legal, cultural and linguistic space”. They are a threat in that they “do not speak Russian and do not have a proper understanding of Russian history and culture, and therefore are unable to integrate into Russian society” (Sobor 2024).

The Russian World concept has different meanings for varying contexts and targets. In peacetime, the Russian world may take the form explained by Patriarch Kirill in his speech before the adoption of the Mandate: “... the Russian world ... is a community of ideals and values, a common cultural space of all peoples who have been living, creating and working peacefully for centuries for the sake of our united Fatherland” (Kirill 2024b).

Geopolitically, the idea of the Russian World refers “to a supranational community united by Russian culture and language, by historical memory and traditional values, by the Orthodox faith and loyalty to the Russian state” (Zhurzhenko 2014, p. 9). It follows that, for the Ukrainian nation, citizens and Orthodox believers, the Russian World demands the loss and denial of distinctive national identity, sovereignty and statehood (Vasin 2024, p. 110; Zhurzhenko 2014, p. 9).

The Russian World concept has religious meaning and utility for the religious legitimization of the Russian military campaign for cases where targets of Russian foreign policies are Orthodox living within the proclaimed canonical territory of the ROC. Hence, the Russian World concept has been used by the ROC and the Russian state against Ukraine (but not against Georgia in 2008) because the ‘canonical territory’ of the Russian Orthodox Church includes, besides Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and diaspora communities. On all this territory “the potential strategic goals of Russian political, military and ecclesiastic authority” tend to blend and mingle (Stoyanov 2024, p. 10). Accordingly, on 27 September 2022, Patriarch Kirill called everyone in Russia to a “spiritual mobilization” in order “to mobilize all the forces of our Fatherland” to complete the “reconciliation of Russia and Ukraine, which constitute a single space of the Russian Orthodox Church” (Kirill 2022c). Thus, the

narratives of the Russian World regarding the Ukrainian state and the Orthodox Church rely also on the territory and theology of ‘the church’, as those called to battle serve the Russian national interest *and* their battling will also guarantee their entry into paradise (Pankhurst and Kilp 2024).

2.1.3. Katechon State

The notion of katechon state is mentioned in the Mandate twice. First, in the quote defining the ‘holy war’ mission of the Russian state and Russian people to defend “the single spiritual space of Holy Rus’, [and to] fulfill the mission of the ‘Restraining One’” in order to protect the world from “the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism”. Thereafter, the second quote expands the explanation of the concept:

The supreme *raison d’être* of Russia and the Russian world it has created—their spiritual mission—is to be the world’s “Restrainer”, protecting the world from evil. The historical mission is to bring down time after time attempts to establish universal hegemony in the world—attempts to subordinate humanity to a single evil inclination. (Sobor 2024)

Similar to the ‘holy war’ concept, the idea of a katechon state preceded the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and was *mainstreamed* into Russian strategic narratives by 2024. Thus, in her recent works on Russian state ideology, Marlene Laruelle has identified the idea of Russia as a katechon as one of five main strategic narratives of the Russian state (Laruelle 2024, p. 14) and ‘katechon as part of counterrevolution’ (against the West) as one core basis of ideology and meaning-making under Putin (Laruelle 2025).

The idea of katechon state was publicly articulated by Patriarch Kirill at least by Autumn 2022. In November 2022, in an oration addressing Russian Orthodox hierarchs, Patriarch Kirill entreated the hierarchs to fulfill their role as the core of spiritual resistance against the powers and movement of the Antichrist and called upon the military to join the struggle against the global evil, the ‘Antichrist movement’ unleashed on Russia, a struggle which would decide the future of the world (Stoyanov 2024, p. 20).

In an address delivered on 11 July 2023, Patriarch Kirill said:

Today, many people, including in the West, look with great attention and hope to Russia as the last stronghold. Speaking in biblical language, Russia is becoming a deterrent (*υδερζυβαίουσι*) (2 Thess. 2:7) from the total domination of evil, that is, the coming of the Antichrist. And we must realize that it is precisely at this time that our Church has been entrusted with a tremendous spiritual responsibility for its people, for its country, and for the whole world. (Kirill 2023)

The term ‘katechon’ (in Russian “*υδερζυβαίουσι*”, in Greek τὸ κατέχων, “that which withholds” or ὁ κατέχων, “the one who withholds”) goes back to the New Testament (2 Thessalonians 2:2–3, 6–7). In medieval interpretation, the “Restraining One” used to refer to the political power and the related “restraining” of acts of the secular state. Katechon was protecting the world from “the powers of the world” or from the coming rule of lawlessness, that is, the rule of the Antichrist or of Satan (Hovorun 2023, p. 301).

Historically, when the concept reached the Orthodox Russian Empire as the Third Rome, its first geopolitical ideal was a protected and protecting Russian Orthodox empire-katechon (Sidorov 2006, p. 323). The idea that Moscow (or Russia) is a Third Rome (after the fall of Constantinople as a Second Rome in 1453) and an Orthodox empire originated in the 16th century. Thereafter, the katechon-state idea was not of much interest until the second half of the 19th century, when the Russian Empire took upon itself a mandate as the protector of Eastern Orthodox communities in the Ottoman Empire (Stoyanov 2024, p. 3). The 19th-century version of ‘the Third Rome’ was pan-Orthodox and “most often

interpreted as the ideal of taking over Constantinople, spiritual leadership in Orthodox Europe and the establishment of a Panslavic union” (Sidorov 2006, p. 323).

A third version of the katechon-state ‘holy war’ legitimated a pan-Orthodox and pan-Slavic war against Muslim domination. Thus, the Russian–Turkish War of 1877–1878 and the Russian conquest of Turkestan in Central Asia (accomplished in 1882) were considered in Russian society as holy wars of liberation of Orthodox Slavic peoples from the Turkish Islamic domination (Kopanski 1998, p. 195). In contrast, in the recent Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, Russian war propaganda has used the idea of katechon to also mobilize Muslims in the alleged fight against the Antichrist, and katechon has ceased to be exclusively a Christian (or Orthodox) concept (Kordochkin 2024).

An important promoter and importer of the katechon-state idea has been Alexander Dugin, who is a member of the Presidium of the WRPC and one of the ‘godfathers of Russian conservatism’ (Engström 2014, p. 359). He has imported to Russia Carl Schmitt’s key ideas of the world—besides katechon, also the concept of politics based on the distinction between friend and enemy and the concept of sovereignty and war as a meaning of human life (Kordochkin 2024). He has personally elaborated the katechon-state conceptions of Russia in detail (see, e.g., Dugin 2023, pp. 409–33).

The katechon ideas of Orthodoxy justifying Russian imperial messianism started to rise and circulate already by 2006 in parallel with the renaissance of Russian geopolitical thought (Sidorov 2006, p. 325). Importantly, despite also being emphatically articulated by Patriarch Kirill, faith in the katechon state demands belief in and loyalty to the secular (imperial) Russian state and is other-identified—i.e., it has identified and categorized the relevant external Others of the Self (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p. 15). The Self is, first of all, against ideological secular adversaries, where a believer in Russia as a katechon state “can believe neither in Christ nor in the Antichrist and in general not be burdened by a religious worldview” (Kordochkin 2024). Patriarch Kirill expressed this kind of faith in the katechon on 8 May 2024, on the eve of the Victory Day celebration:

Today, Russia plays a unique civilizational role in the world, because we are a challenge to those terrible trends that are aimed at the destruction of morality, at the destruction of the most sacred and cherished that lay at the heart of the creation of human civilization. In a surprising sense, Russia today is a factor that keeps the whole world (*удерживающим весь мир*), the entire modern civilization from a terrible degradation that could lead to the end of human history. Russia has always had a special responsibility for the world, for the existence of people, for the existence of the world. And our country so valiantly fulfilled this responsibility during the Great Patriotic War, playing a decisive role in the defeat of fascism and in the liberation of Europe and the whole world. (Kirill 2024a)

2.2. *Religious and the Secular in Domestic and Geopolitical National Identity Discourse*

This section explores the text of the Mandate with a focus on the following questions: To what extent is religion related to a discourse of Self and oppositional/adversary Other? Is religion involved in the Russian national identity discourse as a religious Self and religious Other (institution or actor that is religious)? Has religion occurred as a rhetorical device in the form of religious Othering of secular institutions and actors? Has the involved religion been religion as a marker of *community* (identity), religion as an *ecclesiastical institution* or religion as a *type of speech* (Latour 2001)?

2.2.1. Sacralization of the Religious and the Secular

According to the Mandate, the main actors in the conflict are secular (the Russian state and its people vis-à-vis the Ukrainian state and nation, “the criminal Kiev regime

and the collective West behind it"). Holy or sanctified is the secular/political (undivided) space/land. The sacralized space (of the Russian World) is three times referred to as secular—'post-Soviet space', 'vast Russian space' and as a 'single legal, cultural and linguistic space'—and just once with a religious adjective as 'the single spiritual space of Holy Rus'. The term 'land' is mentioned four times without any religious references. 'Borders' are 'spiritual' when they are borders of the Russian World, and without religious adjectives when referring to the borders of the Russian state.

Civilizational identity—emphasizing the uniqueness and superiority of the Russian civilization (also as civilizational culture and values) in the form of the Russian World—is mentioned nine times. During the 'Special Military Operation', Russian people are claimed to defend "their lives, freedom, statehood, civilizational, religious, national and cultural identity" (Sobor 2024). Similar to the term 'spiritual', 'civilizational' encompasses also religious/Orthodox, but not exclusively. In the book *For Holy Rus*, Patriarch Kirill identifies Orthodoxy as the basic unit of the Russian World capable of "supporting the unity of different cultures" and thus guaranteeing "the coexistence of different cultures and religions that accept the same social values, but retain their religious identity" (Kirill 2024c, p. 8).

The main aims of the Mandate are secular, not religious: Section 3 on "Foreign policy" presents as purposes of the Russian state to "become one of the leading centers of the multipolar world" and be "the geopolitical center of Eurasia", and states that Russia should "act as a bulwark of security and a fair world order in the new multipolar world" (Sobor 2024).

2.2.2. Self and Other

The Mandate mentions religious markers (e.g., katechon) of Russian (state) identity, and also markers (such as civilizational and spiritual) that can have both religious and secular referents, but the key marker of Self is (Russian) 'nation' or 'people'. As a rule, the discourse of 'Us' (Self) refers to the Russian nation or Russian people. Russian statehood is dependent on "Russians as a nation". Consequently, the division of the Russian people is argued to lead to the crisis of the Russian state, and the unity of the Russian people is the key condition for the survival of the Russian state. The 'Special Military Operation' is first of all a 'national liberation struggle' (Sobor 2024).

Similarly, in Section 3 on Foreign Policy, the religious concept of 'trinity' (*троица*) is applied to "the trinity of the Russian people" and to "the reunification of the Russian people", meaning "Great Russians, Little Russians, and Byelorussians, who are branches (sub-ethnoses) of one people". According to the Mandate, such a concept of trinity (or a triune nation) "should be included in the normative list of Russian spiritual and moral values and receive appropriate legal protection" (Sobor 2024). This is a case of the application of the *religious concept/speech* of trinity to essentially secular national identities.

The Mandate mentions the 'Kiev regime' and 'the collective West behind it' as adversarial Others. Section 6, which deals with education, seeks the cleansing of domestic educational programs "of destructive ideological concepts and attitudes, primarily Western ones". Other goals include the critical revision of Western scientific theories and schools (primarily in the field of social sciences and humanities), restructuring scholarly standards, assessments and methodologies "without international (in fact, imposed by the West) criteria and models" (Sobor 2024).

In the cases mentioned above, the sacred encompasses "symbolic forms and communal practices supportive of collective identity" (Zabirko 2022, p. 1), relying mostly on secular national identities or on religion as a marker of community identity (Bagge Laustsen and Wæver 2000, p. 709) rather than the Christian idea of salvation. It is a political agenda articulated in religious terms (Horsford 2024, p. 369), making the Russian World

“more a political/imperial and ethnocultural project than an ecclesial or theological one” (Kalaitzidis 2022, p. 148). The outcome is a combination of the politicization of religion and sacralization of the militarily aggressive state. In a Durkheimian view, this combination gives rise to a distinctively novel circumstance in which one is “forced to conceive of these phenomena as residing, not in the elements, but in the entity formed by the union of these elements” (Durkheim [1895] 2013, p. 10). Emilio Gentile called ‘political religion’ an exclusive and integralist form of sacralization of politics, which excludes other political ideologies, prescribes obligatory observance and participation in a mandated political cult “and sanctifies violence as a legitimate arm of the struggle against enemies, and as an instrument of regeneration” (Gentile 2005, p. 30).

The text of the Mandate resembles the kind of ‘political religion’ that seeks to sacralize the secular and the political with instrumental use of the religious, mainly in the form of the ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘ecclesiastical’. Accordingly, the term ‘spiritual’ is used eleven times in the Mandate and always with reference to national values, national mission, national identity and to ‘vital forces’ and ‘vital potential’ of the Russian people. The term ‘spiritual’ refers indirectly to ecclesiastical religion only in one phrase—“the single spiritual space of Holy Rus’”. Orthodoxy or the Orthodox Church is not mentioned at all.

Two quotes about the katechon state are the only direct references to the ecclesiastical religion. The application of the (Orthodox) Christian concept of ‘trinity’, which ecclesiastically refers to the three persons of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), to the three nations allegedly constituting Russia, is an instrumental application of the religious concept on secular referents.

Finally, even the concept of Holy Rus’ has both a partly religious meaning (as it encompasses the alleged canonical territory of the ROC) and a partly secular meaning, when it refers to the multi-religious, multicultural and multi-ethnic nation of shared spiritual and moral values of the Russian civilization.

A significant bias toward the secular meanings of the Russian World can also be recognized in Patriarch Kirill’s speech before the adoption of the Mandate, where he mentioned Russia’s need to preserve its “spiritual and cultural identity”. However, his core argument stressed the need to fight “for Russia’s true sovereignty”, for a ‘true sovereignty’ that less than ten “countries on the globe” enjoy (Kirill 2024b).

Both Putin and Kirill have utilized instrumentally the religious Othering of the West and claimed God to be on their side. The ROC has been the key promoter of an anti-Western discourse in Russia (Curanović 2024, pp. 8–11). In his 30 September 2022 speech about the annexation of several regions of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin accused Western countries of having abandoned traditional faith and values and being dominated by “a religion in reverse—pure Satanism” (Putin 2022).

But both President Putin and Patriarch Kirill have used religious demonization of the West for the sake of sacralization of secular imperial nationalism. They have done it with the purpose of eliminating the autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodoxy (ecclesial and religious target) and the independent Ukrainian nation-state (secular target). They may cease doing it after this mission fails or is accomplished. At its core, their struggle is not about the political theology of Orthodoxy or religious salvation, but about the status of the ROC and the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

In sum, the Mandate speaks of a religiously sanctified mission of a sacred (and imaginary) political community of the Russian World without an explicit religious aim to convert the world. Two explicitly religious adversaries on the Russian geopolitical agenda for Ukraine—the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Ukrainian Orthodoxy—are not directly mentioned in the Mandate. However, implications that result from the conditions of the Mandate affect these adversarial relationships.

The global Eastern Orthodox community of churches is a loose confederation of ethno-national churches, each headed by a patriarch, metropolitan or archbishop. Eastern Orthodoxy has been especially stressed as an organization with high rates of international migration coupled with modern theological conceptions that complicate the ecclesiology of the community (Pankhurst 2023). The honorific head of Eastern Orthodoxy is the Ecumenical Patriarch (who is historically the Patriarch of the ancient church of Constantinople), and there has been long-term conflict between the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus' over the position of "first among equals" within the Eastern Orthodox Church and jurisdiction over certain national churches. This established pattern of conflict is especially exacerbated by the confusion of boundaries of jurisdictions that is so widespread in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While this confusion and conflict has a long-standing history, the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2018–2019 by the *tomos* of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which went against the established domination of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) by the Moscow Patriarchate, raised the stakes for both Constantinople and Moscow (Kouremenos 2024). Since May 2022, the UOC, which had been an autonomous subdivision of the Patriarchate of Moscow—i.e., the ROC—has disconnected itself from the ROC, although the Moscow Patriarchate continues to claim it as a part of the ROC. The declaration of the ROC's control of the expansive Russian World as its 'canonical territory' oversteps in several ways the traditional and authoritative territory of the Ecumenical Patriarch both in Ukraine itself and elsewhere (Kolstø and Kolov 2024).

A loyalty test for the many Eastern Orthodox hierarchs and their churches has been their acceptance in liturgy (the formal prayers of the churches) of the authenticity of the autocephaly of the OCU and its hierarchy, the Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Ukraine. Patriarch Kirill and the Russian Holy Synod are continuing communion only with churches that do not accept the OCU. In this regard, the ROC is also disregarding canonical jurisdictions of patriarchs who accept the OCU. A prime example is the expansion of the ROC into Africa, a territory of jurisdiction historically assigned to the Patriarch of Alexandria (Kouremenos 2024) who has accepted as legitimate the autocephaly of the OCU. This is a major rift that undermines the entire structure of Eastern Orthodoxy.

2.2.3. Weaponization of Traditional Values

Traditional (and moral) values and family values are repeatedly mentioned in the Mandate. The Russian World section of the text links them both: "The family is the foundation of Russian national life and the inner bulwark of the tradition of the Russian world" (Sobor 2024). However, Section 4 on "Family and Demographic Policy" also identifies 'demographic catastrophe' and the poor status of both traditional large families and traditional family values (as both are claimed to be in need of revival) as domestic threats undermining "the existence and development of Russia" (Sobor 2024). In particular, the status of family values is poor regarding "the attitude of Russian society to abortion", which should be more strictly limited by the state (Sobor 2024).

Hence, while Russian propaganda claims Russia to be a bastion of traditional values in the present world and Russian strategic thought legitimates the war of aggression in Ukraine with the defense of traditional values, these are mostly *declarative values*. These values are popularly endorsed in the official narrative of Russian national identity but are neither interiorized (as indicated by high levels of divorces and abortions) nor considered "as the guiding lines" by a majority of Russian people (Suslov 2024, p. 32). The Russian society is more conservative than the European average in terms of "declared values on issues such as heterosexuality, abortion, divorce, and transgenerational links, but is simultaneously a dysfunctional society with high rates of single-parent families, drug and alcohol

consumption, and suicide” (Laruelle 2024, p. 18). It is clear that the protection of traditional values is, in the Russian geopolitical discourse, an instrumental declarative value, while at the level of domestic politics, these values are still a “work in progress”: “All national culture, especially mass culture, should work to create in society the cult of the family, large families, marital fidelity, responsible parenthood, as well as the attractiveness of family life” (Sobor 2024).

3. Discussion

This paper offered a comprehensive textual analysis of the Mandate of the WRPC. A careful reading of the document demonstrated that its predominant language, the core subject identity of Self and main adversaries are secular, not religious, if by religious we mean institutional ecclesiastic religion. Thus, on the one hand, the holy war is being conducted in the name of the secular state and nation without an exclusive or necessary relationship to or involvement of Orthodoxy. However, on the other hand, Orthodoxy’s role is indispensable in its eschatological–apocalyptic proclamation of the sacred mission of Russia as a katechon state, in religious framing of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine as an existential and metaphysical struggle between forces of good and evil and in providing religious meaning to the Russian World and Holy Rus’ as proclaimed canonical territory of the ROC. ‘Traditional’, ‘spiritual’ and ‘civilizational’ are the attributes that describe comprehensively the Russian state and nation in the name of which the ‘holy war’ has been proclaimed.

The text of the Mandate did not mention Orthodoxy in *expressis verbis*, but its ideological stance tends to intensify antagonistic inter-Orthodox relations in the Russia–Ukraine dimension by strengthening the resolve of the ROC and the Russian Federation to retain Ukraine’s Orthodox Church as an exclusively Russian space and widen further the gap between two centers of Orthodox life—the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Moscow Patriarchate (Kulahina-Stadnichenko and Fylypovych 2024, p. 33). Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has repeatedly denounced the ROC’s legitimation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has labeled this war ‘unholy’ and ‘evil’ (Bartholomew 2022) and has been critical of Patriarch Kirill, particularly since 2016, when, before the Holy and Great Council of Crete, the Patriarchate of Moscow wanted to insert a provision on ‘holy war’ in the text of the Council (Efthimiou 2024).

We argue that the Mandate of the WRPC was an attempt by Patriarch Kirill to mobilize the Russian nation into a higher level of sacred, cosmic, eschatological and apocalyptic war. Such a project of re-construction of the national identity needs to be acceptable in identity terms for both ordinary people and social elites in Russia (Hopf 2013, pp. 322, 324). The Mandate also presented a list of expectations for the domestic policies to be fulfilled by the Russian state. Further studies and more evidence are necessary for an evaluation of which of the ideas and proclamations presented in the Mandate will remain agreed upon or sought after in the future.

Has Patriarch Kirill, as a ‘moral norm entrepreneur’ (Stoeckl 2016), succeeded in reformulating an Orthodox ‘just war’ theory with an impact that lasts beyond the phase of active warfare? Contextually, Patriarch Kirill has exercised a ‘practice theory’ (Adler et al. 2024) in the sense that his theorizing has taken place in a context, where he himself has been involved in the practice of war-making. Comparison of the Mandate and other war-related discourses of Patriarch Kirill with historic patterns of Orthodox and Russian Orthodox wartime practices demonstrated novelties (e.g., a religious proclamation of ‘holy war’) as well as patterns of discourse and behavior (e.g., remission of sins when dying in the battle) that have been in use historically. However, our findings after the textual analysis of the Mandate indicated that references to ecclesial religion were marginal, and religion-related

terms that were in use considered religion mostly as a marker of political community and of secular political culture. This set of multivocal findings allows us to conclude that the ‘just war’ attempt inherent in the ‘holy war’ discourse has been mainstreamed in Russia’s wartime strategic narratives, and in this dimension, its impact is likely to last. Yet, it risks being seen as heretical or inauthentic for the (Russian) Orthodox tradition because it has been excessively stimulated by secular concerns in the given geopolitical context. Consequently, despite the widespread use of the ‘holy war’ discourse in the arguments about the Ukraine war, it is less likely to remain a lasting feature of the social doctrine of the ROC.

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