

## Contemporary Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church Within the “Autocephalous” Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia



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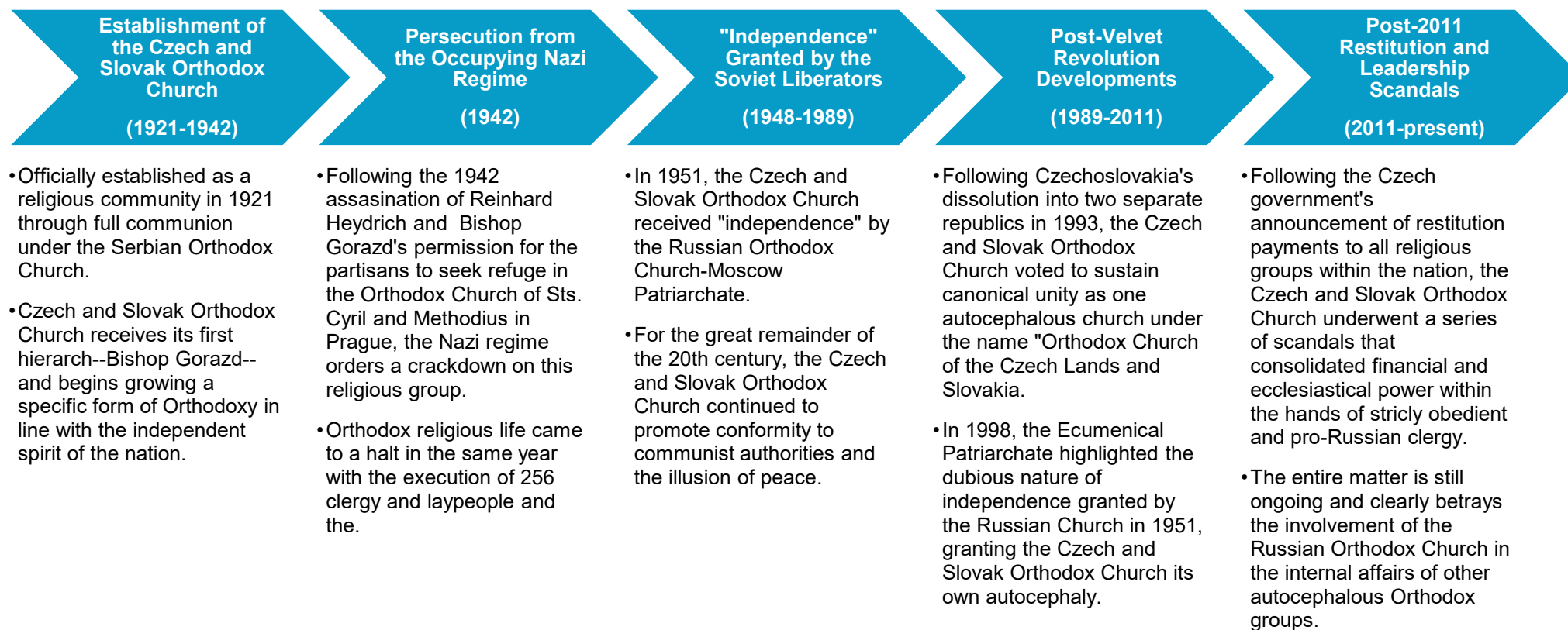
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Kremlin Watch is a strategic program which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

## Executive Summary

- A general inquiry into events surrounding the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia reveals almost nothing within the realm of Western academia, and the very little information that exists in the Czech language necessitates a thorough compilation of information to bridge the literary gap.
- Despite its allegedly independent legal and religious status, the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia continues to remain a victim of the ecclesiastical hegemony of the Russian Orthodox Church—an institution that has become extremely political and militant and seeks to extend the soft power and geopolitical influence of the Kremlin.
- The Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia has acted as an extension of its Russian counterpart ever since it was hijacked by Soviet “liberators” following WWII. It continues to receive support from numerous Russian organizations and itself promotes a pro-Kremlin and anti-Western worldview in line with the concept of *Russkiy Mir* and Russian disinformation efforts aimed at presenting the Putin regime as an open and legitimate government.
- Starting around 2012, the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia underwent a series of administrative and financial scandals that divided its leadership and betrayed the strong presence and infiltration of Russian elements within this religious group. The goal of this Russian interference was to reaffirm the ecclesiastical superiority of the Russian Orthodox Church.
- Long-term implications of such collusion are quite alarming given Russia’s revamped aggression and the fragile geopolitical landscape of Europe. The Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church continues to promote pro-Russian candidates to the clergy and mold the ideologies of its adherents into a worldview critical of any further cooperation and integration with the West.
- Overall events associated with the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church represent a security risk and should be a great concern for Czech counter-intelligence and counter-disinformation operations.
- Any attempts to limit the presence of the Russian element within the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church will prove to be difficult. To resolve this situation, the following mechanisms could be utilized:
  - The education of Orthodox Christian clergy within the Czech Republic and Slovakia to help overcome their common misconceptions associated with the EU;
  - The promotion of Czech and Slovak individuals familiar with other Slavic languages to the status of clergy, thereby reducing the influence of other clergy groups associated with pro-Russian movements and either past StB or current FSB connections;
  - The introduction of mechanisms of transparency to this religious entity by the Czech state itself in order to prevent financial mismanagement and further associations with Russia;
  - Further monitoring of this situation, pinpointing any Kremlin involvement through either civil, media, or business initiatives associated with the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church.

## Developments Within the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia (Figure 1)



## Objectives of the Russian Orthodox Church’s Hegemony Over its Czech and Slovak Proxy (Figure 2)

### Russian Orthodox Church

Working together with the Kremlin to promote the concept of *Russkiy Mir* and spread Russia’s geopolitical influence abroad

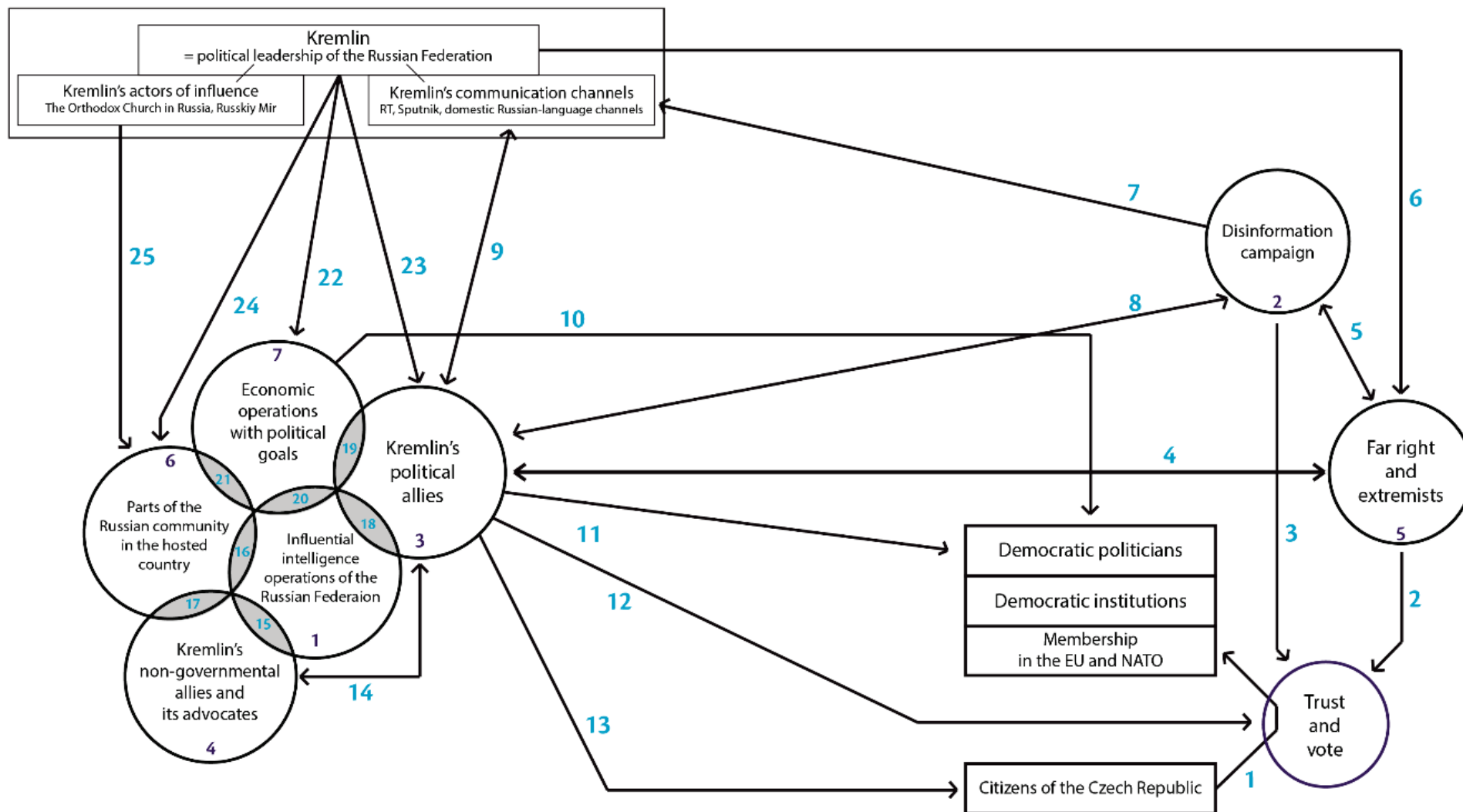
### Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia

- Real control of administrative and financial matters is overseen by the Russian Church
- Infiltration of clergy ranks by former StB and current FSB members
- Participation in events glorifying Putin and closer relations with Russia
- Promotion of a pro-Kremlin and anti-Western narratives through public sermons and church life

### Negative Long-Term Geopolitical Implications

- Developing crisis similar to the situation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church
- Prolonged spread of Russian disinformation and “Orthodox unity” amongst former Eastern Bloc nations
- Sowing of discord and confusion within the European electorate
- Legitimate security risks through the greater presence of foreign agents

## The Russian Orthodox Church as an Actor of Influence (Figure 3)



# 1. Introduction: Threat of the Russian Orthodox Church

## 1.1. Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing

In his 1990 article for *Foreign Policy* entitled “Soft Power”, notable American political scientist Joseph S. Nye, Jr. coined the eponymous term as the ability of a country to achieve the outcomes it desires from other nations without force or coercion.<sup>1</sup> Now widely applied within the realm of international affairs,<sup>2</sup> the concept of “soft power” has become a highly-utilized mechanism of regional powers to effectively alter the long-term behavior of foreign citizens through the use of culture, political values, and foreign policies.<sup>3</sup> Most notably, since the late 2000s, the Russian Federation has emerged as one of the largest operators of soft power. Indeed, the need to uphold regional dominance, polish its international image, and obtain supporters abroad have encouraged the Kremlin to rapidly familiarize itself with this concept.<sup>4</sup> It is within this framework that the Russian government has formed a symbiotic relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (ROC-MP) and continues to use the religion as a platform to further exert global influence.<sup>5</sup>

Much scholarly inquiry has been conducted within this field of study, focusing on such issues as the Russian Orthodox Church acting as the diplomatic and foreign-relations wing of the Russian government<sup>6</sup> and a platform for normalizing sentiments of nationalism, authoritarianism, xenophobia, and intolerance towards anything “Western”.<sup>7</sup> Other studies have touched upon the issue of the Church being utilized as a tool of revitalizing Russian imperial ambitions<sup>8</sup>, as well as its role in strengthening fraternal coexistences amongst all Slavic peoples and elevating Russia over the allegedly more corrupt cultures of Western Europe and North America.<sup>9</sup> All these examinations unanimously emphasize the threatening mission the Russian Orthodox Church plays in whitewashing the actions of the Russian government and providing a “human face” to the Putin regime.

However, while much has been written about the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church as a soft power tool within Russia and the former Soviet Union, very little has ever been mentioned about its role within former Eastern Bloc nations closer to the heart of democratic Europe; namely, the Czech Republic. In fact, a simple online search about the activities of the Church or the Orthodox Christian faith there reveals next to nothing, apart from the occasional news article detailing events pertaining to a religious celebration. Given the Church’s role in spreading Russian propaganda and disinformation, such startling revelations are quite serious if one is to consider security risks and long-term implications. Thus, the

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Samuel Nye Jr., “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, (Autumn, 1990), p. 166.

<sup>2</sup> John G. Ikenberry, “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics-A Review,” *Foreign Affairs*, (May/June, 2004), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2004-05-01/soft-power-means-success-world-politics>

<sup>3</sup> Andis Kudors and Robert Orttung, “Russian Public Relations Activities and Soft Power,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, (June 16, 2016), p. 2, <https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/handle/20.500.11850/26212>

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin, “Understanding Russia’s Soft Power Strategy,” *Politics*, (2015), p. 359.

<sup>5</sup> Nicolai N. Petro, “Russia’s Orthodox Soft Power,” *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Relations*, (March 23, 2015), [https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles\\_papers\\_reports/727](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/727)

<sup>6</sup> Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin’s Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, (2016), p. 137-138.

<sup>7</sup> Juliet Johnson et al., *Religion and Identity in Modern Russia: The Revival of Orthodoxy and Islam*, Ashgate Publishing Company, (2005), p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> Dmitrii Sidorov, “Post-Imperial Third Romes: Resurrections of a Russian Orthodox Geopolitical Metaphor,” *Geopolitics*, (2006), p. 335.

<sup>9</sup> Sergei Chapnin, “A Church of Empire,” *FirstThings*, (November 2015), p. 40-41.

purpose of this paper is to highlight the parasitical influence that the Russian Orthodox Church has upon its allegedly autocephalous Czech counterpart—the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia. Additionally, the goal of this paper is to construct a coherent and authoritative document that compiles together all the relevant events of Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church, especially the events of post-2012 that revealed the depth of the Russian Orthodox Church’s presence in the Czech Republic.

Taking into consideration historical strife involving the Hussites and the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the antireligious campaign of the communist era, it is certainly true that citizens of the Czech Republic have a negative perception of religion altogether. In truth, a survey conducted as part of the International Social Survey Program in 2008 revealed that 63.3 % of all Czechs classify themselves as having no religion, thereby distinguishing the Czech Republic as one of the most irreligious countries in the world.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the size and scope of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia itself is quite minimal. According to a 2001 survey, this particular Church consisted of 50,363 believers in Slovakia<sup>11</sup> and just 23,000 in the Czech Republic,<sup>12</sup> thereby making this religious group the smallest autocephalous Orthodox Church in the world. Considering the influx of immigrants from the former Soviet space, it is likely that the Czech and Slovak Church presently consists of about 100,000 faithful in total. Yet, despite the small number of members within its fold, the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church, unbeknownst to many, continues to be a hostage of the Russian Church—a factor that shapes the public opinion of Czech Orthodox strictly in favor of Russia and keeps the Czech and Slovak Church under Kremlin control.

As part of an internship sponsored by the European Values Think-Tank and the University of Toronto’s Center for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, I conducted six semi-structured and personal interviews in the Czech Republic, with notable stakeholders that were qualified to speak on these issues. I am certain that both my work and qualitative research I obtained will, through the lens of soft power understanding and Orthodox “political theology”, contribute to the lack of literature on this topic.

## 1.2. The Russian Orthodox Church as a Weapon of the Kremlin

Before addressing the modern developments of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church, it is crucial to further highlight the role that the Russian Orthodox Church itself performs as a political entity of the Russian government. For the purposes of this paper, historical developments of the Russian Church will not be noted, for such an effort would necessitate volumes. Rather, the focus is to identify what the modern Russian Church stands for and what it means for another Orthodox jurisdiction to be under its dominion. Only by understanding this current wave can one begin to conceptualize the gravity of contemporary issues taking place within the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church.

Like its Soviet predecessor, the Putin regime has learned the value that the Orthodox Church preserves as a vehicle for conformity, social control, and civil mobilization behind sentiments of Russian nationalism, authoritarianism, and imperialism.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as the Russian state under Putin became

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<sup>10</sup> Zdeněk Nešpor, “Attitudes Towards Religion(s) in a Non-Believing Czech Republic,” *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, (2010), p. 69-70.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald G. Roberson, “The Orthodox Church in Czech and Slovak Republics,” (February 24, 2015), <http://www.cnewa.org/default.aspx?ID=26&pagetypeID=9&sitecode=hq&pageno=2>

<sup>12</sup> “Number of Believers-1991, 2001,” Ministry of Culture Czech Republic, <https://www.mkcr.cz/number-of-believers-1991-2001-936.html?lang=en>

<sup>13</sup> Michael Radu, “The Burden of Eastern Orthodoxy,” *Orbis-Religion in World Affairs*, (March 1998), p. 288.



progressively more imperial in its geopolitical ambitions, the Russian Orthodox Church has emulated the same rhetoric and is only continuing to shape Russian national identity in accordance with government propaganda.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the Russian Church has been instrumental in solidifying the Russian state as the global antithesis to the Western world and such values as democracy, liberalism, and humanism; thereby facilitating the development of a “backwards” society and plunging the nation into an uncertain future where Russian ethnic superiority runs rampant and criticism of the Russian state is non-existent. In fact, during the 2016 Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete, Archbishop Chrysostomos II of Cyprus officially condemned the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church for blatantly promoting the heresy of “ethnophyletism”<sup>15</sup>; that is, the arrogant idea that the true Orthodox faith is somehow contained only within the “superior” Russian language and Russian ecclesiastical traditions, while the prayers and customs of other Orthodox jurisdictions are “less worthy”. Indeed, it is no secret that the modern Russian Orthodox Church has sacrificed whatever genuine spiritual authority it possessed in its pursuit of commercial success and political power, with Roman Lunkin—the director of the Institute for Religion and Law at the Russian Academy of Science—noting that the Church has transformed into an “authoritarian and totalitarian structure”.<sup>16</sup>

In October 2014, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church—Patriarch Kirill—told a meeting with Orthodox media that it was fundamentally wrong to view the Church as a vehicle of Russian foreign and state policy.<sup>17</sup> Yet, such public gestures are mere wordplay and only represent the attempts of state dignitaries to further veil the dangerous symbiosis between church and state within a constitutionally secular nation. The same Patriarch Kirill has referred to the rule of Vladimir Putin as a “miracle of God”<sup>18</sup> and has called his support to increase the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate over all Slavic and Eastern Orthodox communities.<sup>19</sup> Putin himself has referred to the Russian Church as an “ideological unit” that must increase the prestige of the state and support its status as a “beacon of traditional values”.<sup>20</sup> Needless to say, the desire to expand the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church specifically equates to the enlargement of the hegemony of the Russian faith and Russian state interests over other nations.

Given the recent rise in Russian aggression and disinformation efforts and the symbiosis of church and state, the expansion of the global influence of the Russian Orthodox Church represents a real threat to the stability of democratic development. At risk are countries that comprised both the former Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, as well as any “European party or country that feels victim of the European Union technocracy”<sup>21</sup> and that sees in Russia the “last spiritual hope of the world”<sup>22</sup> and the “solution” to

<sup>14</sup> See: “A Church of Empire,” p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Олег Чеславский, “РПЦ на Всеправославном Соборе Обвинили в Ереси Этнофилетизма,” *Русь Украина*, (June 22, 2016), <http://rusukraine.com/news/rpts-na-vsepravslavnom-sobore-obvinili-v-eresi-etnofiletizma>

<sup>16</sup> Mansur Mirovalev, “Russian Orthodox Church Wields Growing Political Influence,” *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Gabriela Baczyńska and Tom Heneghan, “The Russian Orthodox Church Acts as Putin’s Soft Power in Ukraine,” *Business Insider*, (October 6, 2014), <https://www.businessinsider.com/r-how-the-russian-orthodox-church-answers-putins-prayers-in-ukraine-2014-10>

<sup>18</sup> Gleb Bryanski, “Russian Patriarch Calls Putin Era Miracle of God,” *Reuters*, (February 8, 2012), <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-putin-religion/russian-patriarch-calls-putin-era-miracle-of-god-idUKTRE81722Y20120208>

<sup>19</sup> “Moscow Using the Orthodox Church to Expand its Influence?,” *Stratfor*, (July 26, 2011), <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/moscow-using-orthodox-church-expand-its-influence>

<sup>20</sup> Andrey Pertsev, “President and Patriarch: What Putin Wants from the Orthodox Church,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, (December 19, 2017), <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75058>

<sup>21</sup> David C. Speedie, “Soft Power: The Values that Shape Russian Foreign Policy,” *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, (July 30, 2015), [https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles\\_papers\\_reports/740](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/740)

<sup>22</sup> See: “РПЦ на Всеправославном Соборе Обвинили в Ереси Этнофилетизма.”



their problems. Being under the grip of soft power that is the Russian Orthodox Church thus entails the promotion of Russian nationalist and imperialist ambitions, as well as the sowing of propaganda, pro-Russian sentiments, discord, and destabilization within the European populace and its democratic foundation. Despite the claims of the Russian Orthodox Church that it does not promote political submission to Russian interests and does not interfere in the internal affairs of other autocephalous Orthodox jurisdictions, the exact opposite is true, as will be made evident through the outline of the scandalous events that have recently rocked the autocephalous Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia.

## 2. Orthodoxy in Czech Republic—A Victim of Russian Religiopolitical Hegemony

### 2.1. Historical Developments of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church

Being the smallest autocephalous Orthodox Church in the world, very little information exists regarding the development of this religious entity in the Czech Republic, especially within the realm of Western academia. To fully understand the severity of both recent events and the involvement of Russian elements within this Church, some background information on the general matter is required.

According to historical tradition, the history of the Orthodox Christian Church in the Czech Republic dates to 863 A.D., when missionaries Cyril and Methodius—later canonized as saints of the Christian faith—spread the religion to Great Moravia.<sup>23</sup> However, for most of the next millennium, the Latin rite and the Roman Catholic Church was the dominant religious force within the area; the Eastern Orthodox tradition survived mostly in eastern Slovakia due to the nearby influence of Kievan Rus. Only after the creation of the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 did the Orthodox Christian faith see a revival of interest and growth, with the leaders of the heterogeneous Orthodox communities being originally received into full communion by the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1921.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, Roman Catholic priest Matěj Pavlík converted to the Orthodox tradition and was consecrated as Bishop Gorazd of Moravia and Silesia in Belgrade by the Serbian Patriarch Dimitrije, receiving jurisdiction of the Czech Lands and becoming the first bishop of the Czechoslovak Orthodox Church.<sup>25</sup> Given the negative experience of many new Orthodox believers with Roman Catholicism, the new Orthodox leadership sought to avoid the mistakes of religion wrought in the past. Thus, up until the outbreak of WWII, the move of the Orthodox community was towards pioneering a specific form of Czech Orthodoxy in line with the independent and national spirit of the nation.<sup>26</sup>

However, the years under Nazi Germany occupation were marred by persecutions and the genuine independence of the Orthodox body in the Czechoslovak Republic was perhaps lost forever in 1942. After the May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1942 assassination of Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich, Czech partisans

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<sup>23</sup> “More and More People in Czechia and Slovakia Are Giving Preference to the Orthodox Church,” *Orthodox Christianity*, (October 4, 2011), <http://orthodoxchristian.com/49048.html>

<sup>24</sup> Ludvík Němec, “The Czechoslovak Heresy and Schism: The Emergence of a National Czechoslovak Church,” *American Philosophical Society*, (January 1, 1975), p.43.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Pehanich, “Martyr Gorazd of Prague, Bohemia and Moravo-Cilezsk,” *Orthodox Church in America*, <https://oca.org/saints/lives/2017/09/04/102375-martyr-gorazd-of-prague-bohemia-and-moravo-cilezsk>

<sup>26</sup> Petr Balcárek, “Church-State Relations in Czechoslovakia: A Case Study on the Orthodox Church,” *Altarul Reîntregirii*, (2013), p. 442.

responsible for carrying out the mission took refuge in the crypt of the Sts. Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Church with the permission of Bishop Gorazd of Prague but were discovered and killed. In response to the provocation, the Nazi occupation government of the region prohibited the Orthodox Church from operating and executed 256 clergy and laypeople—including its only hierarch—thereby bringing Orthodox religious life to a halt.<sup>27</sup> With the establishment of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in 1948, the remaining Orthodox communities began a process of unification with the Russian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate, the latter itself receiving permission to function within the Soviet Union only as a concession of Joseph Stalin in his attempt to intensify patriotic support for the counter-offensive against invading Nazi forces.

It should be noted that the transfer of the Czechoslovak Orthodox Church to the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church was not a voluntary choice made by the Czechoslovak Orthodox community; rather, it was a top-down process that enforced control over the religious entity simply due to the geopolitical weight and influence of the Soviet “liberators”. The same fate befell the Greek-Catholic Church in the region, with the Czechoslovak government transferring control of this Church and all its property to the Czechoslovak Orthodox Church,<sup>28</sup> thereby ensuring conformity to Soviet state interests and the religious hegemonic power of the Russian Orthodox presence. Thus, the Czechoslovak Orthodox Church “officially” received autocephalous status or independence from its dominating Russian counterpart on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1951,<sup>29</sup> and was completely headed by bishops of the Russian Church, with Czech and Slovak candidates only being accepted for the hierarchy during the political cooling of the late 1980s.<sup>30</sup>

With the establishment of the Czechoslovak Orthodox Church under the real authority of the Moscow Patriarchate, the religious group preached unity with the Soviet state and was the only Orthodox Christian entity that received numerous benefits from the communist government. Apart from receiving financial assistance from the Soviet Union, the Czechoslovak Orthodox Church was sponsored financially by the state—a factor that was enshrined within part 222/1949 of the Czechoslovak constitution.<sup>31</sup> Overall, the genuine spiritual activity and missionary work of the Czechoslovak Orthodox Church was quite limited as its fate was closely associated with communist domination. This negative impression was strengthened when, during the Warsaw Pact invasion of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in 1968, Orthodox priests—in full vestments and carrying crosses—actually welcomed the invaders.<sup>32</sup> Needless to say, the claim that the Czechoslovak Orthodox Church was truly an independent religious entity was a complete farce, especially when one considers that the Soviet Union would never run the geopolitical risk of permitting the authentic revival of any nationalist, separatist, or democratic sentiments within a satellite state.

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<sup>27</sup> Coilin O’ Connor, “The Czech Orthodox Church-A Community With a Long and Rich History in Bohemia and Moravia,” *Radio Praha*, (November 8, 2006), <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/czechstoday/the-czech-orthodox-church-a-community-with-a-long-and-rich-history-in-bohemia-and-moravia>

<sup>28</sup> Serge Keleher, “Orthodox Rivalry in the Twentieth Century: Moscow Versus Constantinople,” *Religion, State & Society*, (1997), p. 130.

<sup>29</sup> “В Чехии и Словакии Растёт Взаимодействие Автокефальной Православной Церкви с РПЦ,” *ТАСС*, <http://tass.ru/obschestvo/5006651>

<sup>30</sup> See: “Church-State Relations in Czechoslovakia: A Case Study on the Orthodox Church,” p. 445.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 446.

<sup>32</sup> See: “Orthodox Rivalry in the Twentieth Century: Moscow Versus Constantinople,” p. 131.

## 2.2. Post-Velvet Revolution Developments

When Czechoslovakia separated into two separate republics in 1993, the Czechoslovak Orthodox Church, fearing the implosion of its structural integrity due to low numbers in both members and clergy, voted to sustain canonical unity as one autocephalous church under the official title of “Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia”.<sup>33</sup> The existence and function of this religious group was quite humble during the 1990s, as is witnessed by the fact that it officially consisted of just 48 clergymen in 1993.<sup>34</sup> Yet, already in the 1990s, a point of contestation was developed between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate when, in 1998, the latter highlighted the dubious nature of independence previously granted by the Moscow Patriarchate and officially provided the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia with its own autocephaly.<sup>35</sup> The event left a stain on the legitimacy of past independence granted by the Russian Church and would prove to be a controversial action, especially when considered in context of the events that would plague the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia starting 2011.

Interestingly enough, in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, several Russian communities in the Czech Republic were permitted by the Czech government to register under the name of the Russian Orthodox Church—a factor that runs contrary to the Christian Council of Chalcedon of 451 A.D., which stipulated that no autocephalous church should interfere in the territory of another autocephalous church.<sup>36</sup> However, perhaps such a development was to be expected, considering that the Russian Orthodox Church continues to maintain a permanent administrative center in Karlovy Vary and never genuinely relinquished control of the Czech and Slovak Church.

In fact, The Czech Ministry of Culture lists both the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church as well as the Russian Orthodox Church—Moscow Patriarchate as two separate Orthodox religious societies registered within the same territory of the Czech Republic.<sup>37</sup> While independence of the Church is publicly proclaimed, the Russian Orthodox Church is still heavily involved in ensuring the propagation of pro-Russian sentiments within the Czech and Slovak Church and is quite active in taking part in the decision to appoint its leaders—a necessary factor of independence. Serious evidence of the latter was made known through the events that encapsulated the Czech and Slovak Church starting in 2011, when questions surrounding religiopolitical allegiance, financial matters, and divisions within the Church leadership led to an ongoing crisis.

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<sup>33</sup> “Православная Церковь Чешских Земель и Словакии,” *Православие.Ru*, (June 20, 2001), <http://pravoslavie.ru/39544.html>

<sup>34</sup> “Number of Clergy Personnel and the Amount of Provided Funds,” Ministry of Culture Czech Republic, <https://www.mkcr.cz/number-of-clergy-personnel-and-the-amount-of-provided-funds-935.html?lang=en>

<sup>35</sup> “Metropolitan Herman Concludes Official Visit to the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia,” *Orthodox Church in America*, (October 11, 2004), <https://oca.org/news/archived/metropolitan-herman-concludes-official-visit-to-the-orthodox-church-of-the->

<sup>36</sup> See: “Church-State Relations in Czechoslovakia: A Case Study on the Orthodox Church”, p. 445.

<sup>37</sup> “Rejstřík Církví a Náboženských Společností,” *Ministry of Culture Czech Republic*, [http://www3.mkcr.cz/cns\\_internet/](http://www3.mkcr.cz/cns_internet/)

## 2.3. Post-2011 Developments and Church Leadership Division

If the events within the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia before 2011 signified a period of relatively peaceful religious operations, the scenarios that followed presented a clear departure towards matters of a completely bewildering nature. Indeed, the theatrical scandals that befell this Church only reveal the sad reality of how financial ambitions and power struggles could easily deprive a religious group of any rational thinking and spiritual legitimacy. However, warning signs of events to come were made visible even before the announcement of any restitution payments.

In 2011, the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia, together with a representative body from the Department for External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church, celebrated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the autocephaly “granted” by the Moscow Patriarchate in 1951. Acting as the head of the Czech of Slovak Orthodox Church at the time, Metropolitan Christophoros of Prague—himself a former State Security (StB) agent<sup>38</sup>—wrote a letter to the Ecumenical Patriarchate citing pressures from Moscow to take part in the celebration as a method of further legitimizing the historical “independence” granted by the Russian Church. In a bold move, the Ecumenical Patriarchate officially published Christophoros’ letter—an event that earned the Metropolitan much criticism for his “disloyal” statements against the Russian “Mother Church”<sup>39</sup> and commenced the process of his eventual removal from the leadership of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church as an “unreliable element”. The move to oust Metropolitan Christophoros gained even more force when the Czech government announced its decision to provide financial reimbursements for religious groups within the Czech Republic.

In an effort to facilitate the complete financial independence of religious groups from the state, the Czech government, in November 2012, adopted its restitution program as law 428/2012— “On Property Settlement with Churches and Religious Societies”.<sup>40</sup> The entire restitution program provided 75 billion crowns (3.1 billion dollars) through the return of ecclesiastical property and 59 billion crowns (2.5 billion dollars) as financial compensation for lands that cannot be returned, to be paid throughout the course of 30 years.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the Czech state was to lower its annual contribution to religious groups by 5 % annually, so as to ensure that the government would eventually never have to pay salaries and social security dues to any religious group.<sup>42</sup> However, the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia, being a relatively small religious body when compared to other prominent groups such as the Roman Catholic Church, received a small percentage of this restitution payment totaling 1.1 billion crowns (50 million dollars).<sup>43</sup> Still, to many clergymen within the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church, the lure towards such “free money” was quite powerful, especially when Metropolitan Christophoros declared that the restitution money will go strictly towards charitable causes and church restoration efforts.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Stb Online—Detail Osoby,” [http://petr.cibulka.com/cgi-bin/det\\_os.exe?id=W82897](http://petr.cibulka.com/cgi-bin/det_os.exe?id=W82897)

<sup>39</sup> “Константинополю не Удалось Поставить Под Свой Контроль Чехословацкую Церковь,” *Русская Народная Линия*, (February 13, 2014),

[http://ruskline.ru/news\\_rl/2014/02/13/konstantinopolyu\\_ne\\_udalos\\_postavit\\_pod\\_svoj\\_kontrol\\_chehoslovackuyu\\_cerkov/](http://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2014/02/13/konstantinopolyu_ne_udalos_postavit_pod_svoj_kontrol_chehoslovackuyu_cerkov/)

<sup>40</sup> Pavol Minarik, “Church-State Separation and Church Property Restitution in the Czech Republic,” *Global Society*, (August 22, 2017), p. 459.

<sup>41</sup> “Czech Republic 2016 International Religious Freedom Report,” p. 4, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269050.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> See: “Church-State Separation and Church Property Restitution in the Czech Republic,” p. 464.

<sup>43</sup> “Минкульт Чехии Приостановил Выплаты Православной Церкви,” *Пражский Экспресс*, (November 20, 2014), <https://www.prague-express.cz/society/49-religion?start=15>

<sup>44</sup> Сергей Комков, “Чешский Православный Театр Абсурда,” *ИА Русские Новости*, (December 20, 2013), <http://ru-news.ru/cheshskij-pravoslavnyi-teatr-absurda/>

Concurrently, many individuals within the Czech and Slovak Church knew about Metropolitan Christophoros' own shortcomings (it was evident he had sexual relations with numerous women) but simply did not care,<sup>45</sup> for he was considered a genuinely charismatic and pragmatic pastor—something quite rare within the general Orthodox Christian Church. However, Christophoros' decision to use the restitution money honorably placed him at odds with the other leading forces of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia, who began an informal process to remove their own spiritual head from power. It was at this point that numerous women, including the wives of certain priests, wrote public letters confessing their activities with Christophoros, forcing the Metropolitan to voluntarily resign from his post as the head of the Czech and Slovak Church in April 2013.<sup>46</sup> In his place, 87-year old Archbishop Simeon of Olomouc and Brno was established as the *locum tenens*—interim administrator—before a new Metropolitan could be officially chosen.

However, the architects of Christophoros' removal were already heavily involved in the process of seeking support from the Russian Orthodox Church in their mission to have dominance over financial matters and the new leadership of the Czech and Slovak Church.<sup>47</sup> Yet, Archbishop Simeon understood the situation quite clearly, knowing specifically what kind of conniving interests were behind such recent turbulent developments. In an effort to preserve the dignity of the Church and ensure that the restitution money will remain safeguarded under his authority, Archbishop Simeon convened a meeting of the Synod on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013, inviting Metropolitans Emmanuel of France and Arsenios of Vienna (both members of the Ecumenical Patriarchate) to support his official election to the leadership of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, without any invitation from the interim administration of the Czech and Slovak Church, the Synod meeting was interrupted by the arrival of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk—the chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church—who proceeded to take charge of the Synod meeting. Following Archbishop Simeon's protests at such a clear involvement in the matters of other autocephalous churches without any formal invitation, the *locum tenens* was removed from his position—an act he deplored as the reaffirmation of domination under the Russian Church and an uncanonical violation of the independence of the Czech and Slovak Church.<sup>49</sup>

It is interesting to note that Russian media outlets referred to the event as the “special operation of the enemy” to take over control of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia,<sup>50</sup> which failed due to the direct involvement of Russian Orthodox Church. The same belief is officially expounded by the administrative presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Karlovy Vary, which praised the events of December 2013 as a victory over an “attempted takeover”.<sup>51</sup> Of course, it is not difficult to see that the intrusion of the Russian Orthodox Church into the matters of the Czech and Slovak Church represented a thinly-veiled reaffirmation of the Moscow Patriarchate's authority and the safeguarding of only the intentions of those dubious clergymen who are sympathetic to Russian interests and openly welcomed

<sup>45</sup> Ondřej Soukup, Personal Interview, June 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Сергей Комков, “Цена Предательства,” *ИА Русские Новости*, (March 27, 2015), <http://ru-news.ru/tsena-predatelstva/>

<sup>47</sup> Vladimír Ševela, “Herman Zasáhl Pravoslavným Možná Nepřijdou Restituce,” *Echo24*, (October 28, 2014), <https://echo24.cz/a/wFAh9/herman-zasahl-pravoslavnym-mozna-neprijdou-restituce>

<sup>48</sup> Сергей Комков, “Крестовый Поход Против Чехии,” *ИА Русские Новости*, (December 12, 2013), <http://ru-news.ru/krestovyy-pohod-protiv-chehii/>

<sup>49</sup> Сергей Комков, “Откуда Берутся Провокаторы в Рясах?,” *ИА Русские Новости*, (December 12, 2013), <http://ru-news.ru/otkuda-berutsya-provokatory-v-ryasah/>

<sup>50</sup> See: “Константинополю не Удалось Поставить Под Свой Контроль Чехословацкую Церковь,”

<sup>51</sup> Administrator of the Karlovy Vary Russian Orthodox Church “Podvorye”, Personal Interview, July 2018.



the Russian “assistance”. Furthermore, in Prešov on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the same Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk—together with a delegation from the Russian Orthodox Church—was present at the enthronement of Metropolitan Rastislav as the new primate of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia.<sup>52</sup>

The Ecumenical Patriarchate refused to recognize Rastislav’s enthronement in connection with “canonical violations” during his election for several years and only in 2016,<sup>53</sup> for the sake of restoring church unity and through the realization that no other alternatives are possible, did the Ecumenical Patriarchate recognize him as the primate of the Czech and Slovak Church.<sup>54</sup> As to be expected, ever since Rastislav’s appointment as the head of this Church, relations with the Moscow Patriarchate have been completely smooth. In fact, since then, the Czech and Slovak Church has been solidifying its connection to the administrative center of the Russian Orthodox Church in Karlovy Vary and appointing officials that serve strictly Russian interests. For instance, the original clergy of Czech Republic and Slovakia are gradually being replaced by immigrating clergy from Ukraine, Russia, and Moldova who are “obedient” and pro-Russian and are oriented more towards the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>55</sup> In essence, this connotes the preaching of a gospel that is in-line with the degradation of Western values and the promotion of pro-Kremlin geopolitical interests.

## 2.5. Restitution Scandal

In regard to the restitution, one of the original conspirators against Metropolitan Christophoros and the only individual within the entire Czech and Slovak Church with signatory rights to the financial payments—Archimandrite Marek Krupica—was removed from this notary position in 2014 by then-Minister of Culture of the Czech Republic Daniel Herman on suspicions of fraud.<sup>56</sup> The move was lauded by the representatives of the Olomouc and Brno diocese of the Czech and Slovak Church as a step in the right direction, with Ondřej Chrást, former secretary for Archbishop Simeon and Metropolitan Christophoros, noting that: “We welcome the interpellation because it reveals who is behind the efforts to control the Church. People connected to the StB and the KGB”.<sup>57</sup>

However, since 2015, Marek Krupica’s replacement has been Archbishop Michael Dandár of Prague—a former representative to the Moscow Patriarchate and member of the StB<sup>58</sup>—who harbors serious pro-Russian sympathies. Thus, the individual responsible for directly overseeing the restitution funds possesses strong connections with pro-Russian elements, making it next to impossible for individual clergymen that do not support the pro-Russian agenda to receive any funding, let alone keep their ecclesiastical positions. Such a reality only further paints a bleak picture regarding the genuine

<sup>52</sup> “Delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church Takes Part in Enthronement of the New Primate of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia,” *Mospat*, (February 10, 2014), <https://mospat.ru/en/2014/02/10/news98182/>

<sup>53</sup> Natalya Mihailova, “The Patriarchate of Constantinople Does Not Recognize the Election of the New Head of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia,” *Pravmir*, (April 4, 2014), <http://www.pravmir.com/patriarchate-constantinople-recognize-election-new-head-orthodox-church-czech-lands-slovakia/>

<sup>54</sup> “Communique of the Ecumenical Patriarchate Regarding the Restoration of Unity in the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia,” *Pravoslavie.Ru*, (January 15, 2016), <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/89713.html>

<sup>55</sup> Vladimír Ševela, “České Restituce Tunelují Rusové, Ozývá se z Pravoslavné Církve,” *Echo24*, (October 14, 2014), <https://echo24.cz/a/i5wnc/ceske-restituce-tuneluji-rusove-ozyva-se-z-pravoslavne-cirkve>

<sup>56</sup> Vladimír Ševela, “Komunista Ondráček se Kvůli Pravoslavné Církvi Obul do Hermana,” *Echo24*, (November 6, 2014), <https://echo24.cz/a/w3Wtb/komunista-ondracek-se-kvuli-pravoslavne-cirkvi-obul-do-hermana#disqusAnchor>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Vladimír Ševela, “Spolupracovník StB Zvolen Pražským Šéfem Pravoslavných,” *Echo24*, (November 25, 2014), <https://echo24.cz/a/iyyGF/spolupracovnik-stb-zvolen-prazskym-sefem-pravoslavnych>



independence of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church, revealing how the Russian Church easily influences its money transfers<sup>59</sup> and ensures the ideological submission of its clergy to the supreme authority and commands of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Overall, taking into consideration the development of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia, it is clear that:

- The Czech and Slovak Church was forced to be incorporated into an institutional structure heavily monitored and coordinated by the Russian Orthodox Church to ensure the ideological conformity of the occupied populace.
- Despite officially being an autocephalous church, control was never genuinely relinquished by the Moscow Patriarchate, as is evident by its permanent uncanonical administrative presence in the Czech Republic and continued use of the Czech and Slovak Church as a soft power.
- Contrary to its claims that it does not interfere in the internal affairs of other Orthodox Churches, the Russian Church was heavily involved in efforts to keep control of money and power in the hands of easily-manipulative and strictly pro-Russian church leaders. In fact, it is 100 % clear that all the post-2011 events were just an attempt of the Moscow Patriarchate to continue its exertion of influence over the affairs of the Czech and Slovak Church.<sup>60</sup>
- Instead of being used for genuinely noble purposes, the restitution funding granted by the Czech government is being completely squandered by questionable individuals on lavish personal expenses and funding pro-Russian clergy. It is very possible that, within 10 years, the Czech and Slovak Church will financially collapse due to mismanagement.<sup>61</sup>

It remains to be noted how the involvement of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church with the Moscow Patriarchate and other pro-Russian forces acts as a method to further strengthen the geopolitical allegiance of local citizens to Russian interests.

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<sup>59</sup> See: “České Restituce Tunelují Rusové, Ozývá se z Pravoslavné Církve,”

<sup>60</sup> Ondřej Chrást, Personal Interview, July 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

### 3. Security Risks Posed by Russian Presence

#### 3.1. Cultural and Media Affiliations

As a tool that facilitates the soft power activity of the Russian Orthodox Church, the “autocephalous” Czech and Slovak counterpart is heavily promoted by pro-Russian cultural and media organizations within the Czech Republic in a broader attempt to propagate the perception of the Putin regime as an open and legitimate government. Thus, public matters that involve the presence of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church are always effectively masked as opportunities to promote radical geopolitical thought, such as the deprecation of anything “Western” and the exaltation of Russia as a global “savior” figure.

For example, the Czech and Slovak Church is promoted by such organizations as the *All-Slavic Union* (Всеславянский Союз) and the *Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots* (Координальный Совет Российских Соотечественников в Чехии). The former is a pan-Slavic organization striving for the “spiritual unity and reciprocity” amongst all Slavic nations; yet, interestingly enough, the head of this group is Oleg Platonov<sup>62</sup>—the general director of the Institute for the History of Russian Civilization, an ultranationalist, and author of such works as “The Jewish Question in Russia”. The latter, apart from promoting religious news and events, openly publishes online articles on such virulent topics as the comparison of the expansion of the European Union to that of Nazi Germany,<sup>63</sup> and the emigration of EU citizens back to Russia due to their “disappointment with European life.”<sup>64</sup>

Aside from the *All-Slavic Union*, the Czech and Slovak Church is associated with the *Slavic Committee* (Славянский Комитет)—based in the same building in Prague as the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia—and the *Intergovernmental Committee* (Межправительственная Комиссия). The latter is subordinated to a Moscow-based association of the same name and betrays the desire of Russia to maintain control over Slavic societies within the Czech Republic.<sup>65</sup> The situation is further exacerbated when one notes that the Czech and Slovak Church is also promoted through other venues directly funded by *Russkiy Mir*,<sup>66</sup> such as the *Russian Center for Science and Culture* (Российский Центр Науки и Культуры в Праге) and the online newspaper *Prague Express* (Правжский Экспресс). The Prague Express itself, apart from covering news regarding the Orthodox faith, is notorious for publishing content that is overtly pro-Putin, pro-Zeman, and anti-Western in nature.

In turn, under the guise of diplomatic and cultural development, the aforementioned organizations promote not only hateful, radical, and generally questionable content, but contribute to the establishment of an atmosphere that both legitimizes and glamorizes Russia as the solution to the woes of the world. By associating itself with such institutions, the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church does not hide its geopolitical allegiance and continues to act as an effective tool to mold the ideologies of its adherents into a worldview that is critical of cooperation and integration with the West, favoring Russia and its allies instead. Yet, perhaps this should not come as a surprise, for the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church is,

<sup>62</sup> “Президиум Международного Славянского Движения Всеславянский Союз,” <https://vseslav.su/kontakty/>

<sup>63</sup> “Евроцивилизаторы 1941-2018,” КСРС, (June 26, 2018), <http://ksros.eu/evrotsivilizatoryi-1941-2018/>

<sup>64</sup> “Разочарование в Европе. Эмигранты Возвращаются в Россию,” КСРС, (July 21, 2018), <http://ksros.eu/razocharovanie-v-evrope-emigrantyi-vozvrashhayutsya-v-rossiyu/>

<sup>65</sup> Vladimír Ševela, “Pod Dozor Moskvy se Dostávají i České Slovanské Spolky,” *Echo24*, (February 9, 2015), <https://echo24.cz/a/iq3G5/pod-dozor-moskvy-se-dostavaji-i-ceske-slovanske-spolky>

<sup>66</sup> “Каталог Организаций При Поддержке Фонда Русский Мир,” <https://rusскиymir.ru/catalogue/catalog.php?country=61>

by default, unable to naturally develop an independent spirit and is a proxy of the Moscow Patriarchate and its “political theology”.

### 3.2. Intelligence Risks

Furthermore, given the machinations of the Russian Orthodox Church within the Czech Republic, as well as the implications that a successful candidate for the clergy within the Czech and Slovak Church must be unapologetically pro-Russian, a clear security risk concerning political allegiance emerges. For instance, several years ago, Pavel Polhoš, an ethnic Roma who grew up in a south Bohemian orphanage, lost his job as the priest of a small community in Moravia due to an influx of Orthodox clerics from Russia.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, in 2014, Oleg Mahnev—a Russian citizen and priest within the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church—was denied Czech citizenship on suspicion on working with foreign secret services and deemed “an unsafe element for the state”.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps the practice of security operations within the ecclesiastical domain is merely a continuation of the “old tradition”; indeed, almost all of the hierarchs<sup>69</sup> and prominent priests in charge of large parishes of the Czech and Slovak Church were genuine members of the StB.<sup>70</sup> In any case, such developments are a cause for concern regarding the real number of clergymen within this church that simultaneously act as employees of the current FSB or other foreign state security organs. A private inquiry into this matter is long overdue.

As a result, through its involvement in the promotion of Russian culture and notions of “Slavic unity” with pro-Russian entities, the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church facilitates the blending of its own ecclesiastical life with Russian disinformation and propaganda. It is quite evident that such practices are part of a covert effort to keep the Czech and Slovak Church within Russian influence and prevent it from becoming more liberally-oriented towards the West. Along with serious concerns regarding the political allegiance of both its clergy and adherents, the Czech and Slovak Church is thus found in a worrisome circumstance that not only threatens its own future existence but exposes the disturbing reach of the Russian Orthodox “Mother Church”.

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<sup>67</sup> Jan Richter, “Unemployed Priest Offered Requalification as Butcher,” *RadioPraha*, (October 11, 2011), <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/news/unemployed-priest-offered-requalification-as-butcher>

<sup>68</sup> Ирина Шульц, “Чехия Сочла Священника Небезопасным,” *Gazeta.Ru*, (October 24, 2016), <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2016/10/24/10268513.shtml>

<sup>69</sup> “Skandál V Církvi--Spiknutí Bývalých Estébáků A Současných Defraudantů,” (2014), [http://pravoslavi.wz.cz/Obcasnik\\_3.htm](http://pravoslavi.wz.cz/Obcasnik_3.htm)

<sup>70</sup> See: “Spolupracovník StB Zvolen Pražským Šéfem Pravoslavných,”

## 4. Greater Long-Term Implications of Russian Involvement

### 4.1. Ukrainian Orthodox Church 2.0

Given the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church as a soft power through its spiritual counterpart within the Czech Republic, it is crucial to understand the long-term effects this situation entails. Of course, the obvious results include the continued promulgation of pro-Russian rhetoric and sympathy among the adherents of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church, as well as the serious possibility of the Church’s collapse stemming from financial negligence. Yet, the reality is more profound and involves far greater geopolitical implications that effectually benefit the Kremlin.

To begin with, the situation of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia is quite similar to that of Orthodox Church in Ukraine and represents the desire of the Russian Orthodox Church to uphold the concept of *Russkiy Mir* and its own ecclesiastical dominance within the strategic region. Since its independence in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has been striving to establish its own Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kievan Patriarchate) as the sole canonical Orthodox entity within the nation. Theoretically, Ukraine’s status as an independent nation effectively negates the necessary presence of any other Orthodox jurisdictions within its borders. Yet, it is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)—part of the Russian Orthodox Church itself—that continues to be identified as the sole canonical Orthodox Church in Ukraine by the world’s Orthodox community.

In April 2018, Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko commenced formal talks with the Ecumenical Patriarchate to either grant autonomy for Ukraine’s Orthodox Church (Kievan Patriarchate) or form a unified local church that eliminates the presence of the Kremlin in the country through the other Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with Russia.<sup>71</sup> As to be expected, the attempted negotiations resulted in a diplomatic firestorm from Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church that forced Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to temporarily decline the granting of any autonomy to a Ukrainian Orthodox Church independent of its allegiance to Moscow. The famed Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk— chairman of the Russian Orthodox Church’s Department for External Church Relations, which essentially acts as a proxy of the state’s own Foreign Relations wing—himself noted that no legitimation would ever be provided.<sup>72</sup>

Recently, on September 7<sup>th</sup>, the Ecumenical Patriarchate announced that it has appointed two special representatives to Kiev<sup>73</sup> to officially solidify the implementation of autocephaly for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church has condemned this agenda, with Vladimir Legoida, head of the Synodal Department for Church, Society, and Media Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, noting: “The appointment by the Patriarch of Constantinople of his episcopal representatives in Ukraine...is nothing but an unprecedentedly gross incursion into the Moscow Patriarchate’s canonical

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<sup>71</sup> “Will Ukraine Get Its Own Unified Orthodox Church?,” *Hromadske International*, (May 1, 2018),

<https://en.hromadske.ua/posts/will-ukraine-get-its-own-unified-orthodox-church>

<sup>72</sup> “Metropolitan Hilarion: Patriarch Bartholomew has Very Clearly Stated that There Will be No Legitimation of the Schism,” *Patriarchia.Ru*, (June 28, 2018), <http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/5228461.html>

<sup>73</sup> “Ecumenical Patriarchate Sends Legates to Ukraine,” *Ecumenical Patriarchate Permanent Delegation to the World Council of Churches*, (September 7, 2018), [https://www.ecupatria.org/2018/09/07/ecumenical-patriarchate-sends-legates-to-ukraine/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=kremlin\\_watch\\_briefing\\_french\\_experts\\_recommend\\_decisive\\_governmental\\_steps\\_against\\_disinformation&utm\\_term=2018-09-17](https://www.ecupatria.org/2018/09/07/ecumenical-patriarchate-sends-legates-to-ukraine/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=kremlin_watch_briefing_french_experts_recommend_decisive_governmental_steps_against_disinformation&utm_term=2018-09-17)

territory. These actions cannot be left unanswered.”<sup>74</sup> In addition, the Russian Orthodox Church has already even instigated an ecclesiastical rift of medieval proportions by cutting official ties with the Ecumenical Patriarchate.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, it is worrisome to think how the Kremlin will respond to these recent developments. Already in 2014, it used the pretext of “defending the rights of Russian-speaking Ukrainians”<sup>76</sup> to annex Crimea and to spur the ongoing insurgency within the Donbass region. Taking into consideration the great long-term implications of the autocephaly project, one can only hope that such events will not serve as a motive for a geopolitical cataclysm that may include renewed Russian aggression in Ukraine under the guise of protecting Orthodox Christians “loyal to Moscow”.

Apart from denying Ukraine the opportunity to establish its own Orthodox Church free of Russian influence, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) has been diligently working to prevent the development of any European integration in the nation. Indeed, this Moscow Patriarchate aligned church is notorious for its anti-Western stance and its impact upon the Ukrainian electorate to uphold strong ties with Russia. For example, among many similar incidents, Metropolitan Agafangel of Odessa (UOC-MP) has repeatedly warned his religious flock that “NATO is the bloc hostile to Russia” and that a pro-European orientation is another manifestation of the “masonic and godless West’s attempt to separate Ukraine from the unity of the global center of the Orthodox Church—Moscow.”<sup>77</sup>

From the perspective of Russia, the formation of an Orthodox Church in Ukraine that is free of Russian influence is a huge geopolitical risk that threatens its neo-imperial ambitions and the concept of *Russkiy Mir*. If the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was to receive autocephalic status, the Moscow Patriarchate would not only lose its ecclesiastical domination over Ukraine but would also set a precedent for other “autocephalous” Orthodox Churches in communion with Moscow to seek genuine independence from the hegemony of the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>78</sup> Such developments would shatter the structural integrity of the Russian Orthodox Church and its effective use as a soft power tool abroad—a development that the Kremlin would never permit. If full domination is unattainable, it is preferential for the Kremlin to keep Ukraine stuck in a “gray zone” of ambivalence between the Russian geopolitical model and further European integration.<sup>79</sup> In turn, Ukraine has essentially become a geopolitical hostage of its eastern neighbor and it should be no surprise that Petro Poroshenko recently addressed the situation, calling the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine a *national security threat*.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>74</sup> “Russian Orthodox Church Warns About Response to Appointment by Ecumenical Patriarch of His Exarchs in Ukraine,” *Interfax*, (September 7, 2018), [http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=14450&utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=kremlin\\_watch\\_briefing\\_french\\_experts\\_recommend\\_decisive\\_governmental\\_steps\\_against\\_disinformation&utm\\_term=2018-09-17](http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=14450&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=kremlin_watch_briefing_french_experts_recommend_decisive_governmental_steps_against_disinformation&utm_term=2018-09-17)

<sup>75</sup> Peter Foster, “Russian Orthodox Church Cuts Ties with Constantinople Patriarch in Bitter Row Over Ukraine,” *The Telegraph*, (September 15, 2018), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/09/15/russian-orthodox-church-cuts-ties-constantinople-patriarch-bitter/>

<sup>76</sup> Peter Dickinson, “They Speak Russian in Crimea but that Doesn’t Make it Part of Russia,” *Atlantic Council*, (June 14, 2018), [http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/they-speak-russian-in-crimea-but-that-doesn-t-make-it-part-of-russia?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=kremlin\\_watch\\_briefing\\_french\\_experts\\_recommend\\_decisive\\_governmental\\_steps\\_against\\_disinformation&utm\\_term=2018-09-17](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/they-speak-russian-in-crimea-but-that-doesn-t-make-it-part-of-russia?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=kremlin_watch_briefing_french_experts_recommend_decisive_governmental_steps_against_disinformation&utm_term=2018-09-17)

<sup>77</sup> Michał Wawrzonek, “Between the Russkiy Mir and Europe,” *East European Politics, Societies and Cultures*, (2014), p. 767.

<sup>78</sup> Alicja Curanovic, “The Attitude of the Moscow Patriarchate towards Other Orthodox Churches,” *Religion, State & Society*, (December 2007), p. 304.

<sup>79</sup> See: “Between the Russkiy Mir and Europe,” p. 758.

<sup>80</sup> Kait Bolongaro, “Russian Orthodox Church a National Security Threat to Ukraine, says President,” *Politico*, (July 28, 2018), <https://www.politico.eu/article/petro-poroshenko-ukraine-russian-orthodox-church-a-national-security-threat-to-ukraine-says-president/>



Drawing from the events in Ukraine, it could easily be noted that the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia finds itself in a similar position. It is clear that this Church, despite its “autocephalic status”, is heavily infiltrated by the Russian Orthodox presence and is under severe pressure to act as an outpost for disseminating a pro-Russian stance towards global matters.<sup>81</sup> As seen through the events surrounding the Czech state’s restitution and the internal division of leadership within the Czech and Slovak Church, any attempts to loosen the real ideological grip of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Czech Republic have been swiftly obstructed. Should the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church decide to further isolate itself from Russia, seek warmer relations with other Orthodox jurisdictions such as the Ecumenical Patriarchate, or establish genuine independence, the response of the Russian Orthodox Church would be one of condemnation and diplomatic row. As with Ukraine, it is simply geopolitically unprofitable for Russia to lose the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church as a soft power, especially in such a strategically important Central European region.

## **4.2. Resurgence of a “Bloc” to Rival the West**

To continue with, another serious long-term implication of the Russian Orthodox presence within the Czech Republic involves the Moscow Patriarchate’s general attempts to unify numerous European nations that share the same Orthodox Christian tradition into an “Orthodox bloc” that rivals Europe and the West. Profiting off the divisions and disappointment of some European citizens towards the European Union, this geopolitical shift seeks to establish a supranational entity that eerily resembles the former Soviet Union, with religion and “Slavic unity” acting as the unifying factors instead of communist ideology. In fact, most people in this “Orthodox bloc”, which includes EU and NATO states Bulgaria, Romania and Greece, as well as EU-aspirant states such as Georgia and Serbia, believe Russia should act as a “buffer” against the West and should “protect” them if the need arises.<sup>82</sup>

Given its Slavic roots, the presence of the Orthodox Church, its past membership within the Eastern Bloc, and its strategic position within Central Europe, the Czech Republic is definitely a target of this broad geopolitical scheme to reestablish European “order” under the hegemony of Moscow. As Russian disinformation, propaganda, and use of soft power in Europe continue to develop, geopolitical rifts within the continent will only escalate and make this division more evident. The Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church would contribute to this trend by promoting unity with the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church and by gradually downplaying liberal developments and continuing to instill anti-EU beliefs amongst its parishioners. The Russian Orthodox Church itself, in its quest to facilitate such a reality, would rather “perish in a global nuclear holocaust to prevent ideas hostile to the concept of Orthodox civilization from prevailing.”<sup>83</sup>

The situation acquires an even more frightening connotation when it becomes evident that the antics of the Russian Orthodox Church have helped the Kremlin attract the support of numerous right-wing parties across Europe that wish to see a revival of “traditional values” within their own nations. Such enthusiasm has been shared by entities like Austria’s Freedom Party, Hungary’s Jobbik Party, and France’s National Front, with Mr. Chauprade—National Front devotee and member of the European Parliament—referring

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<sup>81</sup> Czech Scholar, Personal Interview, June 2018.

<sup>82</sup> Andrew Rettman, “Orthodox Believers Form Pro-Russia Bloc in Europe,” *EuObserver*, (May 11, 2017), <https://euobserver.com/foreign/137865>

<sup>83</sup> Boris Knorre, “The Culture of War and Militarization within Political Orthodoxy in the Post-Soviet Region,” *Transcultural Studies*, (2016), p. 26.



to Russia as “the hope of the world against the new totalitarianism”.<sup>84</sup> Given Prague’s use as a hub for Russian intelligence operations,<sup>85</sup> as well as fears of the Czech Republic slipping away from the West’s embrace due to classic Kremlin “divide and conquer” strategies,<sup>86</sup> the possibility of further developing pro-Russian and far-right ties are quite real, especially should the nation see a rise in Euroscepticism. Perhaps it is difficult for one to accept the role of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church in destabilizing peace and security in Europe. Yet, given its position under the ecclesiastical control of the Moscow Patriarchate, it is evident that this Church will continue to act as a “fifth column” for pro-Russian developments—a reality that paints a bleak picture of future democratic developments to come.

## 5. Conclusions: A Difficult Road Ahead

### 5.1. Overall Summary

Given both the recent and long-term developments within the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia, it is clear that:

- Despite its alleged “autocephalous” status, the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church is really a proxy for its parent organization—the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). The involvement of Russian ecclesiastical power within the restitution scandal and the appointment of new leadership, as well as its ongoing interference in the selection of only pro-Russian clergymen is a testament that the Russian Orthodox Church takes its ecclesiastical dominion over the Czech and Slovak Church quite seriously.
- The Czech and Slovak Church continues to be heavily involved in pro-Russian ceremonies and organizations, some of which are of dubious nature and represent yet another soft power extension of the Kremlin working abroad to mold a more positive image for Russia.
- The Russian Orthodox Church cannot afford to relinquish its influence upon its Czech and Slovak counterpart within such a geostrategic region. Any attempts by the Czech and Slovak Church to seek greater independence from Russia would be met with hostility and a betrayal of the *Russkiy Mir* concept.
- The Czech and Slovak Church is part of the Kremlin’s broader scheme to expand Russian geopolitical influence in Europe, promote the concept of “Orthodox civilization” and “Slavic unity” against the “godless” West, and sow discord and anti-EU sentiment within the faithful populace.

At the same time, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what could be done to alleviate such a troublesome situation. Since the events of the past few years, the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church has made a few steps that could be interpreted as an attempt to showcase its independence. For instance, during the 2016 Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete, the leadership of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church was present at the event despite the absence of the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and

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<sup>84</sup> Andrew Higgins, “Far-Right Fever for a Europe Tied to Russia,” *The New York Times*, (May 20, 2014), <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/21/world/europe/europes-far-right-looks-to-russia-as-a-guiding-force.html>

<sup>85</sup> Daniela Lazarová, “Political Scientist: Prague Has Become a Hub for Russian Operations in Broader Central Europe,” *RadioPraha*, (March 19, 2018), <https://www.radio.cz/en/section/coraffrs/political-scientist-prague-has-become-a-hub-for-russian-operations-in-broader-central-europe>

<sup>86</sup> Adam Ereli, “Is the Czech Republic Falling Under Putin’s Shadow?,” *Foreign Policy*, (October 10, 2017), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/10/is-the-czech-republic-falling-under-putins-shadow/>

their criticism towards the entire meeting.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, in May 2018, the leadership of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church took part in a meeting at the Vatican with Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church without any prior consultation with Moscow.<sup>88</sup> Yet, while some of these actions may be considered a move of the Czech and Slovak Church towards distancing itself from the Russian Orthodox colossus, it is difficult to say whether the motives behind such events are genuine or if the Moscow Patriarchate clandestinely permits them to create the illusion of Russian-dominated Orthodox groups being open and welcoming social institutions. This dualism is being witnessed by the fact that, despite the aforementioned events, the head of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church—Metropolitan Rastislav—fully supports the Moscow Patriarchate in its opposition towards the concept of autocephaly for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and has, ironically, even noted that “any participation of state officials in Church matters is unacceptable in a democratic society.”<sup>89</sup>

The Russian Orthodox Church, acting as a geopolitical weapon of the Kremlin, has absolutely no intention of seeking any genuine democratic cooperation with the West or aligning itself with any other political platforms<sup>90</sup> that undermine Russian authoritarian and revanchist ambitions. In its mission to once again integrate the Soviet and Eastern Bloc nations underneath the Kremlin hegemony, the Russian Orthodox Church will utilize all assets it could exploit, including the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church. Yet, for the purposes of countering such draconian developments, we are compelled to suggest some mechanisms that could effectively hinder such a situation within the Czech Republic.

## 5.2. Recommendations for Improvement

A start in the right direction could involve the education of Orthodox clergy to help them understand the genuine benefits of the West and the dangers of the geopolitical intrigues that they are currently a part of. Such scenarios have already taken place within the Georgian Orthodox Church, which previously sent delegations to Brussels that laid the foundation for a communicative bridge between East and West and helped the Georgian Orthodox clergy diminish their previously held misconceptions regarding the “dangers” of NATO, the EU, and European integration policies so often propagated through Russian disinformation efforts.<sup>91</sup> It is quite possible that similar efforts within the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church could undermine Russian dominance and lead to diplomatic rows with the Moscow Patriarchate that threaten the canonical status of the Czech and Slovak Church. Yet, perhaps such a move would be for the best, as it is better to be genuinely focused on spiritual matters and be deemed “uncanonical” by those in support of tyrants than to be obsessed with everything but religion and act as mere pawns within Russia’s geopolitical chessboard.

In addition, the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church could introduce a momentum that seeks to promote national Czech and Slovak individuals as clergymen, thereby gradually returning a “national spirit” to the

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<sup>87</sup> Andrew Higgins, “Orthodox Churches’ Council, Centuries in the Making, Falters as Russia Exists,” *New York Times*, (June 14, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/15/world/europe/orthodox-church-council-russia.html>

<sup>88</sup> Hannah Brockhaus, “Pope Francis to Meet with the Head of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church,” *Catholic News Agency*, (May 9, 2018), <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-to-meet-with-head-of-czech-and-slovak-orthodox-church-80141>

<sup>89</sup> Sviatoslav Galan, “What Local Orthodox Churches Think About Ukrainian Autocephaly,” *Union of Orthodox Journalists*, (July 6, 2018), <http://spzh.news/en/zashhita-verj/54524-cto-dumajut-pomestnyje-pravoslavnyje-cerkvi-ob-ukrainskoj-avtokefalii>

<sup>90</sup> M.D. Suslov, “Holy Rus: The Geopolitical Imagination in the Contemporary Russian Orthodox Church,” *Russian Politics and Law*, (2014), p. 68.

<sup>91</sup> “Georgian Orthodox Church Visits EU Institutions in Brussels,” *European External Action Service*, (November 11, 2016), [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/14633/georgian-orthodox-church-visits-eu-institutions-brussels\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/14633/georgian-orthodox-church-visits-eu-institutions-brussels_en)

Church and reducing the influence of the “old guard” that still harbors pro-Russian sympathies, as well as former StB or current FSB connections. Concurrently, given the presence of many immigrants from the former Soviet Union in the Czech Republic, it is understandable that a demand for Russian or Ukrainian-speaking clergymen is extensive. However, the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church could move to provide its own clergy that understand numerous foreign languages to serve within different ethnic communities. Not only that, but the general education of clergymen within the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church should be extensive, based on international EU standards, and should include an overall focus upon Czech-related matters, and not on Russian history or Russian ecclesiastical developments. This path could be achieved by seeking closer connections with the Ecumenical Patriarchate Orthodox Mission in Geneva, Switzerland—a move would help the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church lose its image as a “foreign element” within the Czech Republic<sup>92</sup> and would certainly make it less politically oriented in general. Such tasks are difficult given the grasp of the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian state interests; yet, they are not impossible and will be quite effective in limiting Russian involvement.

Furthermore, given the drastic state of affairs within the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church, the Czech state itself could introduce mechanisms that seek to promote transparency and efficiency within the institution. Indeed, the Czech state could require this religious group to provide official documentation concerning its administrative responsibilities and the spending of restitution funding—a factor that would contribute to the Church’s long-term stability and make it difficult for the group to possess an overly biased Russian presence. Perhaps such transparency mechanisms should be applied to the Russian Orthodox Church presence within the Czech Republic as well. Such pressure from the state is required and is completely justified, as was stipulated in article 17 of the 2009 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which laid the platform for a “regular, open, and transparent” dialogue between Churches and European institutions.<sup>93</sup> Eventually, all religious groups will become completely independent from the Czech government; thus, the need for the promotion of transparency initiatives within this Church is extreme, especially while the opportunity exists.

Such a development would also naturally reveal a more hidden dilemma; that is, the contributions and impact of Russian NGOs and the concept of *Russkiy Mir* upon both the Czech Orthodox faithful and the Russian diaspora community living in the Czech Republic. Of course, the goal is not to label all Orthodox Christians as hypothetical foreign agents or to persecute this religious group; rather, it will be to pinpoint the presence of any Kremlin involvement through either civil, media, or business initiatives. The 2017 Kremlin Influence Index noted that the “activities of the Orthodox Church are basically non-existent within the Czech Republic.”<sup>94</sup> However, taking into consideration the general scope of recent developments within the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church, it is evident that further investigation into the matter is required. The Kremlin’s use of culture and religion as soft powers is quite real and should be a cause for great concern for counter-intelligence organizations within the Czech Republic. It goes without saying

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<sup>92</sup> Olga Nešporová and Zdeněk R. Nešpor, “Religion: An Unsolved Problem for the Modern Czech Nation,” *Czech Sociological Review*, (December 2009), p. 1224.

<sup>93</sup> Sergei A. Mudrov, “The European Union and Christian Churches: The Patterns of Interaction,” *Institute for European Integration*, (July 2014), p. 5, <https://europa-kolleg-hamburg.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/MUDROV.pdf>

<sup>94</sup> “Kremlin Influence Index 2017: Joint Research Report,” *Detector Media*, (2017), p. 55, [http://ms.detector.media/content/files/dm\\_iik\\_engl\\_pravka-compressed.pdf](http://ms.detector.media/content/files/dm_iik_engl_pravka-compressed.pdf)

that the Czech state should seriously consider overseeing the protection of the whistle blowers and interviewees included in this paper.

Overall, taking into consideration the strong political elements at work and the financial state of the Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church, it is difficult to say how future matters will develop. Unless this Church seeks greater independence from the Moscow Patriarchate, it is quite possible that financial complications will lead to its ruin and will, ironically, force it to seek even more cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church. It is also possible that the Moscow Patriarchate will continue to remain the dominant ecclesiastical figure within the region, especially as the number of Orthodox Christians within the Czech Republic are slowly rising due to both the general interest of the Czech populace and immigration from the former Soviet Union nations.<sup>95</sup> Thus, any attempts to develop greater cooperation between Europe, the West, and Russia would prove to be extremely problematic. Eventually, the global community will have to acknowledge the role that the “political theology” of the Russian Orthodox Church plays in orchestrating “Orthodox terrorism”<sup>96</sup> through the destabilization of democratic growth in Europe. Until then, even though the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia is a rather small entity, its general situation is rather bleak and will require thorough monitoring in the years to come.

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<sup>95</sup> See: “More and More People in Czechia and Slovakia Are Giving Preference to the Orthodox Church,”

<sup>96</sup> Mykhailo Cherenkov, “Orthodox Terrorism,” *FirstThings*, (May 2015), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/05/orthodox-terrorism>

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Ondřej Soukup, Personal Interview, June 2018. Very Reverend Nikolai Lischenyuk, Personal Interview, July 2018.

Vladimír Ševela, Personal Interview, June 2018. Vojtěch Merunka, Personal Interview, June 2018.

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